

Chapter III

The Social Background of Japan

A. History of Japan

Heian Age in Japan began in 794 A.D. when the Fujiwara clan ruled Japan to the fall of the Taira family in 1185 A.D. This age is known as the aristocrat age, because at this time, the aristocrat ruled the country with the Tei as their leader. The Tei led the monarch until his death. The Tei had asked for his resignation many times and inherited his crown to the crown prince because of his personal reason, since he wanted to be a monk. During this age, Japan was known as the aristocratic age, that is the golden age of Japanese culture and literature.

1. Japanese Literature

Heian Age is known as Japan's golden age of high aesthetics, sexual politics, and literary brilliance (Dalby 1). The Japanese literary work in this age laid a great stress on blending prose and poetry, life, and art. Many literary works in the Heian age were written in a mixture of prose and poetry, and it had caused some confusion whether it was a prose or poet work. The literary work was influenced by Chinese culture and language. Usually, Chinese loan words were meticulously excluded from poetry written in Japanese language (Tazawa 38). In a literary work, it was possible to find Chinese poetry, literature, and history. The development of native literature was facilitated by

the invention of two phonetic Japanese writing systems, which was derived from the Chinese ideographs (Sansom 240). Although great emphasis was placed on the art of composing Chinese poetry during the early part of the Heian era, the composition of *waka* a Japanese style poem of thirty-one syllables, also gained popularity in the Heian court (Hane 49).

However, the Chinese culture influenced most in the court culture, because this neighborhood was the one that can produce and enjoy the literary work. Japanese poetry also having suffered a temporary eclipse by the vogue of Chinese verse, which flourished at the end of the ninth century (Schirokauer 46). The Chinese language, perhaps inevitably, continued to exercise a baleful influence, and Japanese developed as a hybrid of two conflicting strains. In some literary works – especially in Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* – the Chinese words that is used are not pedantic intruders but seem to be at home in their surrounding (Sansom 243).

2. The Life of the Aristocrats

When the Fujiwara clan ruled Japan, the role of the aristocrats became more important than before. At this time, an aristocratic dictatorship was beginning to take root under the powerful Fujiwara family (Tazawa 40). Their dominant influence broadened until in the area of culture. The courtiers, the main member of the aristocratic group, live in extravagance and leisure. They spent their time in appreciating art, poetry, and the beauty of nature, as well as

cultivate relationship with court ladies and seeking to improve their status at court (Hyo and Harper 66).

The Heian aristocrat was as sensitive in personal relations as in matters of aesthetics: feeling should be as beautiful as dress (Schirokauer 56). This condition made them adore love. Thus, for the aristocrats, having more than one wife and several ladies were a usual thing (Hane 52). Mostly, the ladies used as their status symbol, because only a person who came from high social status can have ladies. They considered that the higher their social rank more, the more they have ladies (Hyo and Harper 68). But to do this required a lot of money. In Heian age, “the ladies dressed in numerous robes, one over the other (twelve as standard), which they displayed at the wrist in overlapping layers, and the blending of their colors was the most importance in revealing a lady’s taste,” (Schirokauer 55).

The Heian aristocrats had an ethos that believed in good taste above everything else. “The Heian court circle was also a society with highly perished aesthetic taste, which was reflected in their acute color and concern about combining proper colors in their dress,” (Tazawa 46). They were also governed by what we regarded as superstitions. They believed that someone’s spirit could go from his / her body and haunted people to whom he or she hated (Hane 48). In *The Tale of Genji*, it is written that Aoi – Genji’s wife – died because of Rokujo lady’s jealous spirit.

In Heian aristocrats, men admitted the women’s role. The women held a position where they were neither subordinate nor repressed nor weighed down

by barren learning (Reischauer 213). In the Heian little world where almost every lady might become the favorite of the emperor and becomes the mother of a prince, they were courted and respected, and within limits of a formal etiquette they could give free play to their emotions, their instinct, and their fancy (Sansom 239). Because they had many spare times, some of these ladies wrote some literary works, such as prose and poetry. Even, most of the Heian authors were court ladies, “and their feminine view of life at the top is unique in the history of East Asia and perhaps the world,” (Schirokauer 53). Although their literary work was influenced by Chinese culture, none of them wrote their work in Chinese characters. Usually they wrote in Japanese using a mixture of Chinese characters and the *kana* syllabary, which now made its appearance (Reischauer 215). To these aristocratic ladies, the common people whose labor made society possible so far removed in manners and appearances as to resemble the inhabitants of another world (Schirokauer 54). “At best, they seemed uncouth. At worst, they were regarded as not quite fully human,” (Morton 55).

The aristocrats in Heian age were well known for their high respect for art. Music played an important part in the lives of the Heian aristocracy, and aural and visual pleasure was often combine in courtly dances (Dalby 2). They also had known as a group who were very concern on their appearance, both women and man. They used cosmetics, applying a white face powder, which in the case of the women was combined with a rosy tint. The ladies took great pride in their long and glossy hair, but plucked their eyebrows and painted it

in a new set (Schirokauer 56). The Heian ladies and gentlemen went to great lengths to blend perfumes, and a sensitive nose was a social asset second only to a good eye and ear. In the aesthetic party contests used to while away the time in polite society, there were even perfume blending competitions (Tazawa 48).

Besides their sensitive feeling, “Heian aristocrats legalized incest to keep their social status, pride and wealth,” (Sansom 241). In some cases, the aristocrat class had an intermarried with the imperial family. “When a son was born out of such an arrangement, the emperor was persuaded to abdicate and the young heir was placed on the throne,” (Hane 45). This circle prevented the crown falls in to the outsiders, and enabling the aristocrats to exercise political authority on their behalf.

B. The Biography of the Author

Lady Murasaki Shikibu was born in 973 AD. She belonged to the Fujiwara family, the daughter of a governor who was also a well-known scholar (www.womeninworldhistory.com/heroine9). Lady Murasaki Shikibu’s real name was never known. The name Murasaki that she got was based on the name of the heroine in *The Tale of Genji* after the novel was published, while the name Shikibu came from the office once held by her father. Beside her name, her date of birth and her death could not be confirm even for her, the leading author for her day (Simpson 1).

Lady Murasaki got her education by joining her brother's lessons. Her father, as a scholar, let her study and learned some Chinese classics, which was considered improper for females at that time (Dalby 1). Unfortunately, she only got her education informally. Because she was a female and therefore expected to content herself with the newly developed syllabaries, her father would not have her a formal lesson (Hines 1). This was a pity, since she was a very bright student. She was even cleverer than her brother in almost every subject. After she did not get her formal education anymore, she studied informally with her father (Dalby 1). Eventually, because her knowledge was broader than what was proper for a woman to know at that time, she was forced to conceal her abilities (Hines 1).

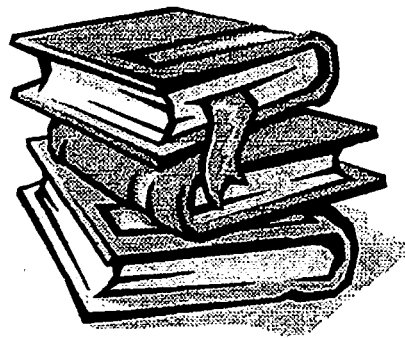
At her early twenties, she married Fujiwara Nobutaka, a distant relative. Her husband was as old as her father and already had other wives. In 999 AD she bore her only daughter. Unfortunately, her happiness did not stay long. Her husband died in 1001 AD leaving her with a daughter and much grief and pain (Simpson 2). To overcome her pain, with her father's agreement, she became an attendant in the imperial family. It was against this background that she began to write *The Tale of Genji* which talked about the relationship of men and women and the unfortunate circumstances in which women find themselves placed (www.linkstoliterature.com).

At court, she was an attendant to the Empress Shoshi / Akiko (988-1074), who was at least 10 years younger than her. Since she did not have a 'court' name, she could not hold an official post even though she was capable to do

that (Tazawa 35). She secretly tutored the Empress in Chinese and read Chinese poetry to her. In her spare time, she continued to write *The Tale of Genji*, and described the way the lady dressed, the characters of the ladies, as well as the stories about various parties, festivals, ceremonies, and scandals in the aristocrat scope (Hall 56). Even though she was a writer, she was well known as a poetess in the court. Although she was well known, she was not very popular. She just gained her popularity after her book, *The Tale of Genji*, was published and the public attention was interested in it (Tazawa 35).

On the other hand, Lady Murasaki was well known as antisocial court lady. She often got critics from the court members who thought that she was a prude woman. They also said that she was too severe and spiteful and that her solitary nature meant that she was too proud and unsociable. In fact, she preferred to have her own feeling that sorrowed over so many deaths in her family – her husband, her mother, and her sister – (Hines 1)

The end of *The Tale of Genji's* writing was unknown. However, many people were sure that the writing of this literary work took twenty years. Lady Murasaki Shikibu's death was uncertain, but she likely had passed away shortly after she finished *The Tale of Genji*, perhaps when she was forty or so (Simpson 1).



CHAPTER IV