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“Japanese literature in the Heian and Kamakura periods”

Japanese literature in the Heian and Kamakura periods

During the Heian and Kamakura periods, new types of literature and arts arose in the imperial court life. Literature for the most part was written in the forms of poems and diaries and it was mostly done by women. The pieces written during these periods described the experiences of life at court and imperial life. Aristocrats lived a very fine life; they believed in polygamy, gender roles were clearly distinguished, and most importantly, during these periods poems played an important role in establishing relationships between men and women.

One of the most important authors from the Heian period is Murasaki Shikibu. Shikibu is responsible for writing one of the most important pieces of the 11th century, *The tale of Genji*. In this diary like piece, she describes the events, responsibilities, culture, and lifestyle of women in the Heian court. From praising talents to criticizing love affairs, Shikibu writes these events in her diary. Other pieces of Japanese literature from the Heian covered in class includes, *The Pillow Book*, in which Empress Sei Shonagon also describes her experiences of being a woman at court during that period. In her famously lists of what is expected from a lady in court includes things such as: Things that people look down on, Elegant things, Adorable things, Things that violate our expectations, etc. These pieces of literature are a perfect example of what court life was like during the Heian period, and even though it was unlikely for women of that period to write, Shikibu and Sei Shonagon excelled at it.

Writing poetry was also popular among women in court during this period, it was commonly known as *waka* poetry and it was used mostly to establish relationships among men and women at court. Shikibu also included poetry in her work *The tale of Genji: Young*

Murasaki, where she exchanges poems between herself and Genji expressing a type of relationship among them.

Another important piece of literature from the Heian period discussed in class was *The tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. One of the many themes discussed in this story, was beauty perception during the Heian period, we can see this example during the transformation of Kaguyahime from country girl to a beautiful court lady. In the film, we observed that princess Kaguyahime is dressed in very fine pieces of silk kimonos, her hair is long and dark, her face is painted white, her eyebrows are plucked and replaced with a black line, and her teeth are painted black. She is taught how to act like a proper lady and also how to write poetry and play instruments. These elements were crucial for women at court during this time, although her beauty captivated many aristocrats, she was destined to leave earth on the 15th day of the eighth month. These pieces of literature mentioned from the Heian period examine the life and culture of court life from a woman's perspective written through poetry and diary like entries.

With the fall of the Fujiwara clan, the Kamakura period began and with it, a new movement in literature and art. Control and power over Japan became an issue, which gave rise to the samurai clans. During the Kamakura period, literature took a new form which described mostly warfare among clans. A perfect example discussed in class is *The tale of Heike*, which basically describes the struggles of two powerful families in Japan, the Taira and Minamoto clans, over the control of Japan. The story not only describes samurai clans (warriors) fighting each other over territory, but also examines the rise of the samurai culture in Japan. The beginnings of the samurai clans began in the mid-Heian period as servants for court nobles, and most of them were not warriors. Nevertheless, as the power for control over Japan became an

issue, court nobles needed protection, therefore, samurai warriors became popular.

A typical samurai warrior described during the Kamakura period rode horses, wore armors covering head to toe, and their weapons included bows and arrows, swords, and spears. An example describing a samurai warrior of the Minamoto clan in *The tale of Hike*: “Munetaka was about twenty years old then. He was wearing a suit of green—laced armor over a dark blue tunic, which had lapels and cuffs of red brocade. At his waist, he wore a sword with a silver cord-loop, high on his back, he carried a quiver containing the few arrows left from the day's battle, all ledged with black-banded white eagle feathers, and also a humming-bulb arrow made of deerhorn and fletched with hawk feathers and gray—banded white eagle feathers” (*The tale of Heike*, 420). This example from the story, is a perfect example of what the Samurai warrior's attires were like during this period.

Overall, literature during the Heian and Kamakura periods were essential for their time. One described court and imperial life, the other warfare among clans and introduced samurai warriors of its time. Both types of literature are very important in the 21st century, due to the fact that through them one can visualize and examine the culture and lifestyles of the Japanese aristocracy of those periods of time. Personally, I engaged more with the literature from the Heian period not only because it shows more of an artistic view, but also because it was mostly done by women, whom in other cultures, women were not allowed to accomplish as much as these Japanese women did.