# The Feminine Ideal in the Heian Period of Japan

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During the Heian period of Japan, which was from 794–1185 CE, there emerged a new feminine ideal. The Japanese view of women began to change with the emergence of a more imperial and structured form of civilization. The evolution of the Japanese government at the time created courts for both governance and aesthetics. The court system created a more structured way of life for women involved, regardless of level of role or stature. Though the Japanese had stressed the importance of a confined and respected hierarchy for their society, this created an entirely new social ranking system, changing the rules of the game. This sequencing of events can be seen clearly though *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, where Murasaki Shikibu recounts her time in the Heian court with great detail. Lady Murasaki proved to be awfully close to the empress, Lady Shōshi since she was one of her attendants. This allowed Murasaki to get incredibly detailed information and up-close recounts of what really happened in court, making this a vital source of historical information as to what happened during this time. During this courtly age, women in Japan faced a greater deal of limitations in all aspects of their lives than previously before.

At the time, the feminine ideal spread across the entire hierarchy of the court from the handmaidens to the empress. Women endured elevated expectations and were not received lightly by the rest of the court when they did not follow such rules. This feminine ideal pertained not only to physical characteristics, but to their actions as well. The women within court life were supposed to be very self-controlled and well-mannered. Lady Murasaki expressed her thoughts about this: "to be pleasant, gentle, calm and self-possessed: this is to be the basis of good taste and charm in a woman."[1] The feminine ideal in Japan also stressed the importance of not partaking in flirtatious behavior with the men on the court. Lady Shōshi allegedly frowned on the "seductive behavior" of the women at the court and saw this as "the height of frivolity."[2] This would not pertain so specifically to the feminine ideal if it were not for this being true of only the women in court and not the men, who were known for regularly partaking in polygamous relationships.

Physical attributes that Lady Murasaki praised as pleasurable to possess include being stylish in dress, having clear skin, pale complexion, slim, thick hair, elegant face shape, and many more.[3] The qualities of women's physical appearance and the way that they present themselves is particularly important to not only the men in charge of society, but to the women as well. Throughout the diary one can see how deeply embedded these ideas of how a woman should look and act are engraved in women's minds as well as based on how harshly Murasaki criticizes some of her fellow women at court. Their attractiveness and especially the way in which they dressed were particularly important to her and also crucial in defining a woman. These standards of beauty can be seen as being equally as demanding in public as well as at the Heian court.

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[1] Murasaki Shikibu, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, translated by Richard Bowring (London: Penguin, 2006).

[2] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, 51.

[3] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, 48.

The rigid manner in which women were controlled and expected to be presented in Japan at the time can be seen in Murasaki's diary, which depicts not only this feminine ideal, but how it affected the women in the court's treatment and their daily lives. In everyday life, politics, art, and education, women were impacted by their social constructs and expectations based on these ideals. Though the feminine ideal during the Heian period empowered women in some ways, it impacted them negatively overall through them through stricter gender roles, higher rates of sexual assault, limited political movement, general lack of education, and hypocrisy of relationships. This hypocrisy can be seen in the religious roles of female renunciation, where women would vow to devote the rest of their lives to pray for the salvation of their recently deceased husbands.[4] This is also reflected in the "patriarchal oppressions" of the Buddhist nuns during the Heian Period who were overseen by the male monks.[5] Women being valued for their ability to produce an heir or their beauty showcases the deep feelings of the Japanese patriarchy. Though women were praised for the carrying and birth of a child, the concern from society for them focused more upon the baby than the mother.

The stricter gender roles for women in Japanese society were mainly defined by their relationships with men and their courtly expectations. In early Japanese culture, the government was structured with pairs of ruler siblings, in part because the Japanese believed that this provided dual "yin-yang" ruling elements to make the kingdom well rounded and stronger.[6] Now, however, the emperor was the main ruler of Japan, with his empress and concubines having far less say and control in the matter of politics, and recognized more as political pawns or a "borrowed womb."[7] It is interesting to consider whether this role was empowering or limiting for women because of how it can be seen in diverse ways. It shows benefits to women due to their ability to possess property and income, which will not always prove true in Japanese history. But on the other hand, this can be seen as quite misogynistic because it puts a great deal of their importance on their sole purpose and value as mothers. Though this was a significant role, the women were not expected to do much more than rear the child, with a great deal of help from the wet nurses, and keep their image pleasing to the Heian court aesthetics. Gender roles also differed within religious institutions during the Heian Period. With the increased spread of diverse religions including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, the political and religious tensions began to amplify. Women often faced the repercussions from male practices where "sex-based proscriptions starkly enacted gender politics by banning women from many of Japan's most sacred sites."[8]

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[4] Lori Meeks, "Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle: Understanding Nunhood in Heian and Kamakura Japan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 70, no. 1 (June 2010): 1–59 at 2.

[5] Meeks, "Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle," 2.

[6] Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 23.

[7] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, xv.

[8] Heather Blair, "Religion and Politics in Heian-Period Japan Religion and Politics in Heian-Period Japan." vol. 7, no. 8 (August 2013): 284–93 at 8.

Another large distinction between women and men posed by the feminine ideal is the intrusion of men in women's lives and bodies. Murasaki recounts multiple instances of sexual assault from within the court and, moreover, that it was not only allowed, but was encouraged by officials. She recalled when "the wet nurse would be sound asleep; dead to the world, she would wake suddenly to find [His Excellency] rummaging around her breasts."[9] This would occur quite frequently from men in court and would go on as a normality with no punishment or legal action. With even the emperor doing this, men of all levels could as well. Murasaki thought of one of her own experiences as well with a minister within the court, who entered the handmaiden's corridors and "pulled the curtains apart at the seams, nearly ripping them" creating a peephole to stare at and spy on the women.[10] These actions correlate with the feminine ideal because women were seen as these beautiful objects that men could do with what they pleased. This objectification highlighted their value as objects to own rather than as human beings. Their believed political and social superiority led them to believe that they could observe and do as they pleased with the women in court. A sexual assault by a woman upon a man, on the other hand, would have resulted in her removal from the court and the loss of her livelihood. This further highlights the difference between how men and women were perceived at court with women's beauty, bodies, and sex being seen as ready for the taking by men.

The ability for women in court to move politically up in ranking was not a straightforward process. Though it was possible, and happened for many women, there was a disproportionate level of difference between how this happened with men and women. Not only could men rise higher in the ranks of the political regime in Japan, but they did so far easier and faster. Historian Brett L. Walker agrees that "men outmaneuvered in Heian politics" at the time through their mobility and rank.[11] The practice of keeping women out of the main light in politics could be attributed to the insecurities of upper-class men during this period. Women's limitations were believed to have been attributed to "deprecations of menfolk," onset by fear of losing power in society.[12] This is what caused many women to become submissive, hidden, and quiet for fear of retaliation. The taboo nature for women to be outspoken also hindered their governing capabilities. To be quiet and reserved while holding a high rank and running a country is impossible. Even at an early age, the boys at court have higher rankings than most women. Murasaki recalls His Excellency's young sons as "fourth and fifth rank" being higher than those who may have been at the court longer.[13]

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[9] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 21.

[10] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 30.

[11] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan,* 35.

[12] Richard Bowring, trans., *Murasaki Shikibu: The Tale of Genji* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

[13] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 8.

Women in this period of Japanese history were not taught reading and writing of Chinese, creating a social construct that female literacy was not a socially acceptable practice. If a woman were to learn and become literate, it would be seen by society as very "unbecoming" because "the intention was to keep the language of bureaucracy in the male hands."[14] This is an obvious reasoning as to why the ideals of women in Japan at the time were limited in their social mobility. Fortunately for history, Murasaki was taught unintentionally by her father who was a scholar. She learned through overhearing her father teaching her brother Chinese, and even noticed she was picking up on it far quicker than her brother. When her father realized this as well, he exclaimed, "what a pity she was not born a man" because even with her great intellectual capabilities, it was believed that she would not be able to do anything with it because she was a woman.[15] The strong Chinese influence on Japan only accentuated this restriction of women's education. Female prodgies like Murasaki were not so commonly found and typically not celebrated. Women were supposed to be only motherly and serve as a proper wife, unless having other obligations at court, which limited them because they did not receive an education. The social norm that women were not to be educated was not only an idea present in male society, but also was instilled in the minds of the women themselves. Murasaki recalls how other women at the court would talk poorly about her behind her back and scold her for not being lady-like by reading and writing. This concept proves to be quite interesting because although this is true, women had created the kana script which "developed into the principle means of dialogue between the sexes of Heian society."[16] This was quite an incredible feat considering women were never educated in language, but were able to create their own complex and creative system of writing.

The relationship between husband and wife also proved to be extremely one sided and overall unequal. Though women in marriages had certain rights of income and property, they were not seen as equals in marriage. A prime reasoning was that, while most men had multiple wives, it would be incredibly unacceptable for a woman to have more than one husband. Though one might debate whether these polyamorous relationships suppressed women, they were empowering in some circumstances. These relationships allowed women to have more time to delegate as they wished in their own households, spend more time with their children, and be freer to make decisions as they wished. Though it was relatively uncommon for men to have multiple wives, this was not a divorceable condition for women. As a result, women typically owned their own property and lived in their own households. The ideals of women in marriage were centered around motherhood, but this only served as examples of men having greater social stature. It was not enough blatantly to show in social hierarchies that women were inferior to men, but that "male children became highly valued, and a woman's inability to have a male heir . . . qualified as

[14] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* xvii.

[15] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 58.

[16] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan,* 37.

grounds for divorce."[17] Women trying to fit into these picture-perfect ideals that Heian society had created for them lived in fear and worry about everything they would say and do to avoid being outcast. Murasaki claimed that "the safest policy in life is to get by without a major scandal" which is a depressing way to live your life.[18]

During the Heian period of Japan, the feminine ideals of women were based on the main values of looking aesthetically pleasing, being of good stature and attractiveness, and acting quiet and well-behaved. These ideals could enhance women's lives if they followed exactly how society wanted them to be, but was quite limiting if not. To live life as a caged bird, trying not to mess up the lines, can be stressful and harmful mentally by not being able to be your own true person and express yourself. Murasaki claimed that at the time, "[women] try to make themselves as invisible as possible," which is hard to argue as empowering in any way.[19] Seeing throughout *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* how she saw women facing the harsh truth of their social construct gives great first-person information that is not seen anywhere else. The book also gives her account of how these ideals were not simply pushed onto women by men, but were rooted so deeply in their society that the women believed them too.

[17] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan,* 36.

[18] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 51.

[19] Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki,* 52.

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