

Feminine Writing of Murasaki Shikibu and in The Tale of Genji

Jiaqi Li^{1*}

¹*The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, 1#, Zhongjingji Dao, Xicheng District, Beijing, China*

**corresponding author
gloria947jiaqili@uchicago.edu*

Abstract: Murasaki Shikibu is one of the most famous court lady writers, or Feminine Hand, in Heian Japan. Her work *The Tale of Genji*, usually interpreted as revealing women's sufferings, needs an alternative explanation with a new eye. That is, a feminist voice must exist at that time, as well as unconscious feminist awareness. They have already begun to explore love, desire, and pleasure for themselves. They were even eager to express themselves in their language system, and, most importantly, they were successful in doing it. Helené Cixous's *Écriture Féminine* theory from "The Laugh of Medusa" provides a new lens to look through Murasaki's era and the *Genji*. Indeed, Murasaki can be regarded as a medieval feminist who voiced her thoughts on gender inequality in a new language system. The characters she created are individualized rather than generalized. Murasaki, a representative of many other female writers, heralded an era of female writing and entered the canon of world literature: use her body to write and never stop exploring women's own galaxy.

Keywords: Feminine Writing, Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*

1. Introduction

Murasaki Shikibu is a celebrated court lady author in Heian Japan, known for *The Tale of Genji*, a story that provides "a complex picture of male-female relationships from a woman's perspective" [1]. In her period, "noblemen and emperors are privileged to keep in touch with multiple women after marriage", a phenomenon also reflected in her work [2]. Still, a few female characters, such as Lady Akashi and Hanachirusato, can live their comfortable and superior lives in such an environment. This echoes Helené Cixous's "to write, then her body will be heard", for both Murasaki and the roles she created have their feminine consciousness [3]. While writing, she "opposes patriarchal strictures on women's body and voice" through the projection of herself, just as Helene did through the metaphor of Medusa [4]. This symbolizes the awakening independent consciousness of women.

Generally, previous studies focus on women's sufferings in *The Tale of Genji*, as Bergen believes that "In the *Genji*, the afflicted are invariably women" [5]. Indeed, the ending of women is typical disappearance—either death or tonsure. Only a few survive in court life. In addition, the author of the book, a female court lady Murasaki Shikibu, unveils the picture of royal court from a woman's subordinated perspective. However, there is unconscious feminine awareness to some extent. Women may even obtain extra benefits (i.e. lifting social status, gaining wealth) behind suffering while

preserving some independence. Therefore, this study will draw Helené Cixous' *Écriture Féminine* theory from 'The Laugh of Medusa', to investigate how Lady Akashi and Hanachirusato in the *Genji* behave as active subjects, rather than being passive acceptors, and how they struggle for their own lives with the unperceived feminine consciousness.

This essay will be structured into the following two sections. The first chapter will focus on the female's voices. It will analyze how Murasaki Shikibu create a new language system in Japanese as a female writer, rather than the old Chinese system dominated by men, and how characters in her work complete this system. The second chapter will examine how characters are created individually. They take advantage of their body to obtain higher social status or other benefits. Fortunately, some of the women no longer need to maintain their welfare through sexual relationships. The rationality in desire provides them the benefits and space in unprivileged affairs.

2. A New Language System was Created by the Author and Female Characters, such as Yugao

The proportion of women writers has always been insignificant throughout human history, despite the slight increase from the nineteenth century on [3]. This is also the case in Heian Japan, around the eleventh century to the twelfth century. However, as a female court lady writer, Murasaki Shikibu creates a female language system in *The Tale of Genji*, which is later considered a masterpiece of world literature. Murasaki's effort can be seen as a way to rebel against the patriarchal society, in which male discourse was the dominant power over the faint female one.

2.1. Murasaki Shikibu, as a Female Writer, Stands Out within the Exclusive Discourse Dominated by Males

Murasaki Shikibu, as a female writer, challenges the dominance of the patriarch by expressing her voice through literary works. It is rare in the male dominant Heian Japan, court lady Murasaki breaks the tradition through writing. In Heian Japan, only men were able to get a formal education in Chinese, while women were discouraged to learn, not to mention write. Fortunately, she absorbed some knowledge under the allowance of her father and became literate. Her father, a well-educated man, was always exclaiming " 'Just my luck!' " and " 'What a pity she was not born a man!' " [6]. Nevertheless, female writing itself always has the potential to challenge male dominance besides Murasaki's own talent in writing, whether she is obedient to the authority or not. The reason behind this is simple: "writing is reified thinking" [7].

The *Genji* is considered literary canon, due to its historicity, poetic brilliance, and cultural relevance [8]. Murasaki finally becomes a milestone in world history. With such an educational opportunity and gift, she created one of the most outstanding pieces in world literature *The Tale of Genji*. Later she gets a posthumous honor, for the *Genji* is the worldwide first novel as well as the first introduced novel to the international market, produced by a female author [9]. The achievement perhaps is a sign of transcendence over male writers in Heian Japan, though unconsciously: Murasaki is seen as "an exemplary model for being beautiful, gifted and chaste" [10].

The woman writer Murasaki "writes woman[women]", as Helené Cixous advocates in *The Laugh of Medusa* [3]. Although *Genji*, *Shining Prince*, seems to be centered on the slutty relationship network with various women, *The Tale of Genji* has been "considered as a novel of women" in recent years [11]. Indeed, the subject of the work is women. Murasaki weaves the delicate thread of every female character, each settling on a different place. The assumed names, which are different kinds of flowers, symbolize their fate. For example, Yugao, or Evening Face, only blossoms ephemerally in the morning. The character of the same name also lives a temporary life. In short, the characters

created by Murasaki share one trait in common: blooming as morning flowers, blurring as evening mist.

2.2. Murasaki Shikibu Wrote in a Type of Kana Called Onnade, or “Feminine Hand”

Murasaki not only writes women, but she also writes for women—as a medieval feminist: “Feminine Hand” is usually considered the direct origination of today’s *hiragana*, which germinated a new language system. She has been regarded as one of “the first feminist writers” in the world [11]. It means that her text can be interpreted from a feminist perspective, although, naturally, she is not expected to have a firm, thorough feminist position in her works—as a court lady [11]. Nevertheless, Murasaki Shikibu vividly pictures the constraints of patriarchal society in the novel. Women in Heian Japan are house-bound. (need paraphrase and citation) Understanding and showing the sufferings of women, she also makes her female characters find ways to resist men [11]. One typical character is Asagao, or Morning Glory. She never accepts Genji’s courtship, nor does she marry anyone. Her independent choice deviates from the normal marriage institutions in Heian patriarchal society. In addition, Murasaki’s perspective on the men’s actions gradually degrades, becomes more critical, and becomes more negative, demonstrating her own progressive discontentment with Japanese patriarchal dominance over women [7]. Therefore, from a modern eye, a feminist lens can be found in Murasaki and her work.

Her unconscious awareness of a feminist is also revealed in the new language system she used, as Murasaki writes in Japanese *kana* used by women and children, rather than in Chinese, which was mastered mostly by men. Since the prevalence of vernacular romance provides a possibility for female expression in Japanese and other medieval cultures, the monogatari (Japanese prose fiction, a genre *The Tale of Genji* belongs to, or *Genji Monogatari*), the main theme of which is romance, is a literary form different from other classical works written in Chinese [12]. Noticeably, many women writers flourished in monogatari, folk-style writing. Perhaps the lack of opportunity to be educated is one of the primary contributors. Women in Heian Japan usually were not taught to write in sophisticated Chinese. Hence, they wrote in the simple, colloquial Japanese *kana* system, which serves a phonetic function. However, many of the women’s “clumsy” works have been preserved and granted as the canon of world literature, while most of the men’s works were renounced by following generations [7]. Although it is unclear whether the new language system contributes to the admirable status of those women writers, its usage indicates an alternative language system for women, in which lies unconscious feminism.

The writer herself can be reflected in the text of *The Tale of Genji*, which echoes what Helené points out, “woman must put herself into text, as into the world and history” [3]. On the one hand, both the author and the characters are “deprived of any kind of authority of their real names” [11]. Murasaki Shikibu is known to us only by her pseudonym— She takes Murasaki from the character in *Genji* and Shikibu from her father’s official title [11]. The characters, named after different flowers, are also void of proper names. Despite their textual namelessness, Murasaki “created[creates] romances of amazing self reflexivity” [12]. For instance, the character Murasaki is Genji’s child-love which tradition has attached to the author herself [12]. On the other hand, the notion of the writer “ ‘a woman should be sensitive but silent’ ” is projected in the work [13]. The similarity of female characters’ endings or fates seems to suppress the visibility of *each* of them, which shows Murasaki “try[was trying] to make themselves as invisible as possible” [6]. Thus, the overlapping of Murasaki herself in the characters of *Genji* suggests that she projects herself into the text— “Write you[her]rself. Your[her] body must[shall] be heard” [3].

2.3. Women Deconstruct Masculine Discourse in poetry writing

Murasaki was a poet at that time. “In her diary, she admitted that she criticized the behavior of men at court through her poetries” [14]. She also gave instructions on how women should behave, unsatisfied with those who managed to please men with their talents. In fact, women are closer to the imaginary and fantasies than their male counterparts as well as far separated from fixed meanings and reasons [4]. Thus, in contrast to the “coded, clichéd, ordinary language,” feminine writing could only be manifested in the genre of poetry [15], according to Cixous [3].

As Murasaki shapes female characters, especially through waka poetry, a new language system is accomplished with poetic elements. According to Helené, “But only poets...” poetry entails gaining strength through the unconscious, and the unconscious, that other limitless country, is where the repressed survive: women, or fairies, as Hoffmann would put it [3]. Then, poetry and poetic language should be a weapon of women. In the case of Genji, we hear a woman’s voice because poetry is shared between the lovers, and she expresses her passion just as the man does [1].

Some contend that “initiation of poetic dialogue (which suggests taking an active role in romantic courtship) is ‘unfeminine’ ” and male poetry communication outnumbers females [16]. Nevertheless, most of the female words are involved in waka poetry. Besides, female poetry is more imaginative and appealing. For example, Genji was once deeply attracted by the waka poetry written by Evening Face on a fan and thought of her all the time.

He[Genji] was still in disguise. She[Yugao] thought it unkind of him to be so secretive, and he had to agree that their relationship had gone beyond such furtiveness.

“Because of one chance meeting by the wayside

The flower now opens in the evening dew.

“And how does it look to you?”

“The face seemed quite to shine in the evening dew,

But I was dazzled by the evening light.”

Her eyes turned away. She spoke in a whisper. [13]

In short, lying under poetic expression, women’s unstable and free flowing language will give her access to her native strength: it will restore her goods, pleasures, and vast bodily territories that have been sealed [4]. As Yugao expresses her authentic affection to Genji, she is merged into the Evening Face flower, which is in contrast to Genji, who simply focuses on his lust, pouring his love straightforwardly out. The metaphorical manifestation allows her to explore, discover and describe her “jouissance” [4].

3. Murasaki Created Individualized Female Characters Rather Than Generalized Ones

Women often have little space in relationships and sex. Even if they were married, men were free to have extramarital affairs with other women. The GM[The Tale of Genji, or Genji Monogatari] depicted this situation clearly. They were not living under the same roof after Genji married Aoi. Genji had his very own court [14]. The privilege, though not restricted to, was owned only by men, though a woman was not required to be loyal to her husband. Still, women characters in Genji are fulfilled with love, desire, and concerns and they are able to convey them freely. Some even have “precise interrogation of her erotogeneity” [3]. The richness of inner self proves the individuality of the female characters, besides outlooks.

3.1. Lady Akashi and Hanachirusato have Precise Interrogation of their Erotogeneity

Admittedly, women are subordinated to power in relationships. In Heian Japan, “women, as the ‘second’ or ‘colonized’ sex, were held in an inferior position by patriarchal hegemonic power” [7]. This is also the case in *The Tale of Genji*, as evidenced by “the absence of proper names” of female characters [17]. Proper names are avoided because aristocracy thought calling real names was not courteous [17]. It is what Morris commented “the fantastic lack of specificity”. However, this is an overstatement because the spontaneous love, desire, and concerns, such individualized feelings are delicately depicted in *Genji*. According to Royall Tyler, some contemporary readers believe the *Genji* is more about the women in it— “their feelings, their experiences, their fates” [18]. Women’s psychological worlds are well displayed to us.

Lady Akashi has a desire for Genji, but she keeps sober from the beginning to the end. It is rare because the “numerically most frequent type of relations between men and women in Heian-kyō were those of a casual and promiscuous nature” [19]. Specifically, Genji sometimes loves “a woman whose identity he does not even know” [20]. She is an average woman at first, living in a remote rural area. Once Genji is expelled to the countryside in Akashi river, he encounters Lady Akashi and falls in love with her. When he wants to have sex with Akashi, she hesitates. To say yes would be unworthy of her; to say no would put Genji, and thus herself, in a difficult position; and to say either would compromise her by demonstrating that she does know what he is talking about.” Her complete innocence demonstrates her supreme worth [21]. The affection is unstoppable, so she finally accepts. During the several months in which they stay together, Genji puts forward the proposal many times. She hesitates again, considering her mismatched social status.

After the departure, Genji goes back again because a fortune teller prophesies that the daughter of Akashi will become queen. He invites Akashi to leave the countryside for Kyoto, to live with him, but due to her indecent social status, Akashi refuses him many times. Finally, he persuades her successfully by considering the future of their daughter. Akashi owns a sober and rational mind all the time. Afterward, she even sends her beloved daughter to Lady Murasaki, the wife of Genji, out of her plea. She continues to do so well in Genji’s service that she obtains the unprecedented (for a Governor’s daughter) rank of the birth mother to an Empress, securing her a dignified, high-ranking place in the imperial court [22].

Another concubine Hanachirusato is the younger sister of a concubine of the king in one of the palaces. After the fall of this palace, she becomes the adoptive mother of the son of Genji and his first wife Lady Aoi. Since Genji had a sexual relationship with her when they were young, he gives her this chance to be an adoptive mother. Hanachirusato has an appropriate manner and a humble mind, so she wins Genji’s heart for a long time. She even becomes the hostess of Rokujo Yard. And even they do not have any sexual relationship afterward, Genji still treats her just as his wife and keeps in touch with her. She finally earns an unusually high status in the court.

3.2. Varied Concerns are Represented Individually, Exemplified by Fujitsubo and Lady Rokujo

Concerns is a side of female characters emphasized by Murasaki. Given the complexity of relationships, it stirs anxiety in most of them. As Matthew Grubits points out, extramarital relationships, including fornication and rape as they are known today, as well as extramarital, heterosexual, and sexual interactions were common in Heian Japan [20]. Even “marriage”, standing for a legal guarantee of relationships, does not necessarily mean what they are expected to be today. Instead, the term only serves as a shorthand for relatively long-term relationships in the Heian Period [20]. The instability and immorality potentially bring women a lot of stress.

For those who have affairs with Genji, the married status brings concerns to them. They worry about the exposure of the extramarital affair and the consequences awaiting them. Take Fujitsubo, the stepmother of Genji, for example, who is not much elder than him. She is one of the most revered women in the book. Genji's courtship haunts her for a long time until she finds the struggling mind unbearable. She is always burdened by moral condemnation of herself. The poem she delivers as follows:

*"Were I to disappear in the last of dreams
Would yet my name live on in infamy?" [13]*

While "lamenting the burden of sin that seemed to be hers, Fujitsubo was more and more unwell" [13]. "He[the emperor, Fujitsubo's husband] sent a constant stream of messengers[to show care delight for her pregnancy], which terrified her and allowed no pause in her sufferings." Fujitsubo is trapped in a torturing dilemma: loyalty or affection. What strikes her most is the moment she knows she has a baby of Genji's, who is regarded as the emperor's. Everyone congratulates her. The emperor cares for her more. The external blinding delight pierces her heart even more. After all, the rigid social codes were crippling to high born women [22]. Once the truth is exposed, she will be punished and deviated from her blissful life forever. As an aristocratic woman, her disloyalty will hurt her reputation. As far as I am concerned, it is the inequality between men and women that leads to the endless nightmares of Fujitsubo, since "noble men are privileged to maintain extramarital relationships with other women", while women are not [2].

Also evidenced by Rokujo Lady, the coldness and reputation increase her anxiety, which is derived from her lust for Genji's love. She obsesses with him, yet he has no plan to marry her. Women frequently had reason to question the depth of a man's feelings while beginning a relationship with him and to consider whether his desire would last or just be a fleeting whim [22]. Her growing jealousy beneath the dignity pushes Genji far away from her. Despite the obsession, she is always afraid of her affair with Genji known by all people in the court. Although there was not "any unreasonable insistence on purity, virginity, and so on", Lady Rokujo values her reputation a lot under the restricted aristocracy dominant institution [21]. After all, the consequence of the spreading affair can hurt her more, while Genji will not be blamed. She will be possibly teased for her elder age and frivolity. Hence, once she accepts Genji's courtship to be a valentine, she must be stressed by the negative press.

4. Conclusions

In the past, women's sufferings were emphasized when Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* was interpreted. However, with a closer examination both conscious and unconscious feminist voices can also be found through Murasaki and her work. Perhaps, women's power in and of writing itself is stronger than people have expected. Thus, the paper is aimed to look for implicit female power from Murasaki, a representative of Heian Japan court lady.

This essay addresses Helené Cixou's *Écriture Féminine* theory from "The Laugh of Medusa" to discover how Murasaki creates a new language system in her work and how she creates individualized characters. The first chapter shows a new language system created by the author and female characters. Murasaki breaks the tradition that only men could write, manifesting herself by writing various women. She receives slight formal education in Chinese, fortunately, but she still writes in the Japanese pre-kana system, *onnade*, which is mostly for women and children. Her feminist voice also appears in the work when Murasaki gradually put forward negative opinions about slutty Genji, the male protagonist. Waka poetry is also used to strengthen women's imaginative and unlimited nature. Injected her intelligence and experience in such a masterpiece, the Genji finally enters the canon of

world literature, while other male counterparts have been abandoned. In the second chapter, the essay focuses on how she created various characters to reflect the limitations of social institutions as well as women's psychological world, such as love, desire, and concerns. Since men are privileged to have extramarital affairs, women, especially aristocracy, Fujitsobo, and Lady Rokujo as two examples, worry about reputation after their affairs spread. Besides, some women also gain benefits, such as position and wealth, through sexual relationships while maintaining rationale. In short, Murasaki took her intelligence and opportunity to write, as a medieval feminist. She challenged the entrenched patriarchy under the heavy dome.

Murasaki Shikibu's voice, along with other female writers', travels through history, becoming stronger today. While examining *The Tale of Genji* with a new eye, more readers are able to see women's power in her writing which will encourage us to record our history.

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