Pleasure Women

*Court Ladies, Courtesans and Geisha, as seen through the eyes of female authors.*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Svanhildur Helgadóttir

Mai 2011
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Leiðbeinandi: Gunnella Þorgeirsdóttir
Maí 2011
Abstract

Murasaki Shikibu and Masuda Sayo, though not born in the same century, have a common thread, of writing about pleasure women. The term “pleasure” is used loosely, as the women Shikibu wrote about, were aristocratic girls whose parents highest goal, was to get them accepted at court, preferably in service for the Emperor. Although having an honourable position at court, the services the ladies of court performed for the Emperor or noble men were not unlike the services of the “yujo” (or courtesan / prostitute during Edo period (1600-1868) and “geisha” (women entertainers and sex partners, first seen in the late eighteenth century), who appeared later unto the scene. The possibility that these women were in any way alike was perhaps unthinkable then, but in today’s modern societies the question may be valid, considering all the sexual innuendoes in advertisements and music videos. This question as well as other topics, such as the women’s regard for the profession, how society viewed them and their feelings about their status in life, regarding all three professions, the court lady, the yujo and the geisha
I. Introduction

During my exchange year in Japan, I took an interesting class at Waseda University in Tokyo, called “Women Writers in Japanese Literature” taught by Prof. Gaye G. Rowley. The many books and articles read in that class, as well as the enthusiasm of Rowley, were the inspiration for my topic.

Through the portrayal of female authors, I will discuss the many attributes “pleasure women” (women of court, courtesans and geisha) in Japanese society from Heian (794-1185) until mid-twentieth century, needed as well as their feelings toward the profession. Furthermore, I will look at the way the society perceives these women and if said society reflects the society at the time when those stories were written. I did find a quote in the tale of Genji (1007-8), about what seems to be prostitutes, but that may just be the translation and I did not notice it in a different translation, which is why I decided to exclude this fact.

Around a thousand years ago, a literary cannon, was written, by a court lady, servicing an Empress, describing the Heian (794-1185) court and its inhabitants in detail. The lady was Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部), and the narration is named “Genji monogatari”, which loosely translates as “The Tale of Genji”. The book is translated by Royall Tyler (1936), an American born Japanologist born in London.1 Nine hundred and fifty years later a poor country woman wrote the story of her life as a geisha, which was first published in a Japanese women’s magazine, and later translated by Rowley from Japanese, first in United States in 2003, and then in Great Britain two years later.2 This woman’s name was Masuda Sayo (増田小夜), and her story “Autobiography of a Geisha”, was written a decade after she worked as a geisha.3 The book is translated by Rowley, who was born and raised in Australia, and currently teaches English and Japanese literature at Waseda University.4

These stories have been chosen to reflect the society’s attitude. The tale of Genji, despite being a romantic story set in Heian era (794-1185), and focusing on court life, also presents a fairly accurate picture of real court life during that time. Furthermore Shikibu’s tale has become such a cannon that people today are in awe of

the book, and it has been translated into various languages such as, German, French, Russian, Chinese and Korean, as well as being turned into movies, plays, dance, modern novels, comic books (manga), musical theatres and opera.\(^5\) Masuda’s story on the other hand depicts her own inspirational story of surviving the world of prostitution and poverty. In the prologue of the book the translator, draws the reader’s attention to the fact, that Masuda is one of very few geisha who wrote an autobiography using her real name, and who also happens to be a very candid description of the life for poor women in the rural regions of Japan.

Without a doubt, many articles and books, are available about various kinds of pleasure women, however the idea of portraying the pleasure women through the works of Japanese female authors, was my first choice, though ideas of Western female authors, like Gaye Rowley and Liza Dalby, were greatly appreciated.

This purpose in mind, the Masuda story was an obvious choice, mostly because it is based on true facts about geisha, and their society during a tumultous time in Japanese history. Shikibu’s story was simply one of the best sources of Heian (794-1185) aristocratic women, whose position in society, albeit be it honourable, was tainted by the fact that their image is close to that of a reproductive organ or a sex slave. Therein lies the common factor of the two stories which I will strive to bring into light. The subject shall be viewed, by looking at the two societies and periods, which closely represent the two books. The standard ideology of Heian society (794-1185) and the intervention of Edo (1600-1868) period’s government on the sex industry.

II. Methodology

My primary sources are “Genji Monogatari” (The Tale of Genji) and Masuda Sayo’s “Autobiography of a Geisha”. Among other texts used, were an extract from Sei Shonagon’s (清少納言) “Makura no Soshi” (The Pillow Book), Michitsuna no haha’s (道綱の母) “Kagero Nikki” (The Gossamer Years), military stories by a samurai’s daughter named O’An, Nun Abutsu’s “Izayoi Nikki” (The Diary of the Sixteenth Night Moon), Izumi Shikibu’s (和泉式部) Diary, Higuchi Ichiyo’s (樋口一葉) “Takekurabe” (Child’s Play), along with various other stories about pleasure women. An extract from Liza Dalby’s book “Geisha”, Liza Dalby’s article “Courtesan and Geisha: The Real Women of the Pleasure Quarter”, an article by J. Mark Ramseyer called “Indentured Prostitution in Imperial Japan: Credible Commitments in the Commercial Sex Industry”, as well as Rowley’s “Prostitutes Against the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956”, also provided necessary background information.

The books and texts were read focusing on the society’s view on pleasure women, as well as their own feelings for their jobs and the men they were serving. In the beginning I wanted to specifically focus on Japanese women authors, but realized, that the Japanese pleasure women, or prostitutes, geisha, and court ladies of yore, were of equal fascination to women in other cultural societies which ultimately made me read different works and texts, not depending on the gender of the author. I wanted to figure out if there was a connection between the work and feelings of Heian court ladies, courtesans from the Edo period, and geisha.
II. Japanese female authors and their role in Japan’s cultural society

Female authors have played an important role in Japanese society for centuries. Many, while treasured during their lives, became even more honoured as authors after their deaths. In order to fully understand their influence on Japanese society, a closer look is necessary. This chapter is dedicated to the authors who played their part in advancing the status of the literary works in Japan, starting with Heian period (794-1185) and ending with Meiji period (1868-1912).

Heian period produced several women authors of subsequence, although none as influential as Murasaki Shikibu (973-1014?) who wrote “Genji monogatari” (The Tale of Genji, 1007-8?), which became a cannon of Japanese literature. Her peers of Heian and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods include Sei Shonagon (966-1017?), who wrote the Pillow Book (Makura no soshi, 993-1001), which is not unlike a behaviour manual for women of aristocratic descent. Also of note is Michitsuna no Haha (936-995?), an extremely apt poet from the 11th century who was commissioned by her husband Fujiwara no Kaneie (929-990), a very noble man, to write a diary “Kagero nikki” (The Gossamer Years, 974), in which she was to portray his sensitive character. In her prologue, she hints at after having read the old tales, she found them mere fabrications and wanted to do better.6

“Yet, as the days went by in monotonous succession, she had occasion to look at the old romances [monogatari], and found them masses of the rankest fabrication [sorogoto]. Perhaps, she said to herself, even the story of her own dreary life, set down in a journal [nikki], might be of interest;”7

The book is certainly very interesting, although not a literary feat like “Genji monogatari” (The Tale of Genji, 1006?), it conveys the loneliness that women experienced, while waiting for their loved ones, and having to share them with other women. A few of those women, as all three stories allude, had the opportunity to become acquainted with each other and even start a friendship, but more often, the women, especially those not living in the Palace or at court, spent their lives waiting.

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While the diaries are a compilation of exceptional poetry from those days\(^8\), women also wrote different kinds of stories, such as nun Abutsu’s (1222-1283) “Izayoi Nikki” (Diary of the Waning moon/ The Diary of the Sixteenth Night Moon, 1283). Nun Abutsu was adopted as a child by her mother’s husband, who was a provincial governor named Taira Norishige (unknown). Through his connections she was able to serve at court and learned the prose of “waka” (tanka), a verse poem made out of 31 sound units, which are divided into 5/7/5/7/7 units\(^9\), and other scholarly attributes, which helped Abutsu to become a major court poet later in life. She may be most famous for her relationship with the poet Fujiwara Tameie (1198-1275). Although he was married at the time, they lived together for twelve years and had three sons. After the death of Tameie, she fought with his son of former marriage about the Hosokawa Estate, which she said belonged to one of her sons. The diary is a travel journal and one of the earliest examples of such, according to professor Christina Laffin, in her translation of the diary\(^10\).

At the beginning of Edo period (1600-1868) stories of men who had battled for unification were extremely popular. “Oan Monogatari” (O-An’s Stories after 1600) was of this calibre, about a teenage girl and her participation in the battle of Sekigahara.\(^11\) When O-An (before 1600-Kanbun era 1661-1673) wrote the story she was already an old woman, but she seems to have had a vivid memory of the incident, as well as surviving it when the Ogaki Castle fell with Ishida inside. What can be gathered from her story is that, the women had specific jobs, like making bullets and sorting through the heads of men who had fallen during the battle. The sorting was to decide whether the man was of high rank or not, which then was made even clearer by blackening his teeth, a sure sign of high rank in those days.\(^12\)


\(^11\) Tokugawa Ieyasu, the leader of the forces in the East, defeated Ishida Mitsunari (1560-1600), the leader of the forces in the West, in a decisive battle at Sekigahara in Mino Province (Gifu). Following his overwhelming victory, Ieyasu united the country and became shogun three years later. (Harue Shirane, ed., Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 39.

One of the most influential women writers of Meiji period (1868-1912) was Higuchi Ichiyo (1872-1896), with her awareness raising political short story “Takekurabe” (Child’s Play, 1895-96). The story is set on the outskirts of Yoshiwara, and the children depicted in the story, clearly reflect the grown-up world. The main characters are, the priest’s son Nobuyuki and the outside girl Midori, whose parents help out at a brothel the Daikokuya, where the older daughter has become a popular “oiran” (the highest rank a courtesan at a brothel can achieve, before that they are “yujo”, meaning women who play). They have a sort of relationship, where Nobu clearly likes Midori but in keeping with his social status, ignores her because he is extremely shy. She likes him, whether it is because of his quiet demeanour or the fact that his status in life is likely to become better than hers. The other characters are children who play with them and who go to the same private school as they do. There is Chokichi, not a bad kid, but tends to bully his friends. Then there is the gang from the public school, which in those days was considered better. The leader of the gang is a kid named Shota, who is always extremely well dressed and his parents are pawnbrokers, so they have money. Despite living in the same neighbourhood, Shota feels that the others are beneath him in dignity. He is very taken with Midori and has high hopes about their future, which come crumbling down when he finds out about her already-decided future. When the gangs go to war, Chokichi gets help from Nobu against Shota and his friends. Of course near the end, each knows exactly what they will be doing in the future, whether it is taking care of the pawnshop, becoming a yujo or a priest.

The story is extremely intriguing and not only because it attacks the ideas of the Meiji government, but also because it depicts the life of yujo during a time when they were becoming less high class and more like low prostitutes. The diaries and stories grasp the society of each period, and depict the culture fairly accurately, but to further investigate their feelings and portrayal of the societies, it is necessary to look more closely at two very important female authors of different genre. A high standing gentlewoman of the Heian (794-1185) court, and a 1950’s low class geisha at a hot-springs-resort in Suwa Japan.

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III. Murasaki Shikibu vs. Masuda Sayo

In this chapter the emphasis is on Murasaki Shikibu, a Heian (794-1185) lady in waiting, who wrote “Genji monogatari” (The Tale of Genji, 1007-8?), and Masuda Sayo a modern author who worked as a geisha at a hot-springs-resort in Suwa, Japan. Furthermore a brief explanation is needed, as to what their stories depict, as well as the question of the common threads in their lives.

“The Tale of Genji” is a story told by Murasaki Shikibu, born around the year 973 into a mid level aristocratic family. She was connected to the great Fujiwara family, but her surname comes from a post her father once held. Murasaki took this name in honour of her heroine in Genji, the lady of Genji’s east wing, after he moves to the Rokujo estate. Her father’s name was Fujiwara no Taketoki (died in 1029), a scholar of Chinese and also the governor in the provinces of Harima, Echizen and Echigo. Shikibu married around the year 998 and had a daughter, Daini no Sanmi, the following year, which lived until she was 82, but Shikibu’s husband unfortunately died three years after their marriage vows. In 1006 Shikibu was given a position with Empress Akiko (Shoshi), no doubt because of her talent in fiction writing.

In the 2001 Penguin Unabridged translation of “Genji” Tyler briefly touches on the subject, about the authentication of the book, in his introduction. The number of scholars and readers who have read “Genji” is increasing even in modern society. None of them doubts that Murasaki Shikibu wrote the story, although there have been rumours within the scholarly community, which point to her daughter as the author of some of the fifty-four chapters. Whether this is true, the sources about the author, her daughter, and the original script, are buried in the past, and unlikely to be recovered today. Therefore no one knows, but the poet Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) claims that the difference in writing style stems from Murasaki Shikibu’s daughter writing the last chapters of the book.

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14 Members of the Fujiwara family, who controlled the Imperial line as regents by marrying their daughters to Imperial heirs, dominated the court. Their influence reached its peak under Fujiwara Michinaga, who dominated the court from 966-1027, but then declined as a succession of non-Fujiwara emperors came to power. A new centre of authority emerged in 1086 when Emperor Shirakawa retired early and established a cloistered regime (insei) to rule behind the throne, a system continued sporadically by later emperors. (Conrad Shirokauer, David Lurie and Suzanne Gay, A Brief History of Japanese Civilization, Second Edition (United States of America: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006) 50-51.


Although told like a love story, the book really describes the Japanese medieval court life. The main character is Genji or “Minamoto” (the shining one), born to an Emperor and his mistress. People adored him, and even as a child, he was very talented with whatever he undertook. Later in life people thought him even more distinguished than the Emperor himself. The story is a detailed description of Genji’s life and his colourful love life.

Masuda on the other hand was born in 1925 near the town of Shiojiri in one of the poorest prefectures of Japan at that time. Her mother gave birth to her out of wedlock, which was frowned upon, and therefore left Masuda’s father. Seeing as her mother was unable to care for her, Masuda’s uncle looked after them and helped her mother until she was around six years old. He then sent her to work as a nursemaid (komori) for a landowner he was acquainted with. The experience she was put through at the landowner’s estate had a strong influence on her character and also taught her never to trust other people. At the age of twelve, her mother, now married with four small children and in need of money, sold her to a geisha house (okiya) in the hot-springs resort of Suwa in Nagano Prefecture. Although Masuda writes about her years before and after this major life change, the book focuses on her years as a hot-springs geisha, the definition of which will be explained in chapter seven. Moreover she describes her later years when reunited with her younger brother and the dreams she had for them, her acceptance of the life she led in the middle of twentieth century, as well as her options of work and her strong opinion about the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956, which will be discussed in detail in chapter eight.

Although Masuda and Shikibu came from two different periods, they are both considered groundbreaking in modern society, as well as having had profound influence on Japanese literature. Genji is a novel so well written that according to modern day scholars it is “the great predecessor to the “realistic novel” (shajitsuryu shosetsu).” Masuda on the other hand is marvelled for being among the very few geisha to write about her story, which showed extreme bravery on her behalf, considering the prejudice she probably had to endure after being published. Despite Murasaki Shikibu having an extensive knowledge in the Chinese language, it was considered a language for men only, which is why “Genji” is written in

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“hentaigana” (a historical variant of the modern day hiragana writing system). Furthermore, due to the fact that Masuda, who was illiterate for a better part of her life, wrote in simple “hiragana”, which had developed from the older hentaigana, the two authors most likely wrote with the same script. The writing systems of men and women shall be introduced briefly in the next chapter, along with the history and society in Heian times (794-1185).
IV. Historical facts surrounding the Heian period (794-1185) – The Heian court

Inasmuch as the tale of Genji was written during Heian period (794-1185), the question is whether it is truthful to its era and the people living in the society at that time. It is therefore necessary to take a brief look at history.

After fighting with other landowners of the Soga clan\(^{19}\), who as it happens were of immigrant origin, the reigns of society fell into the hands of the Kamatari family, which as a result was given the name Fujiwara (meaning “wisteria plain”\(^{20}\)). The family was composed of aristocrats, whose life’s work consisted of gaining control over land, which in turn increased their status among other aristocrats of society. They became a dominant power in society when Nakatomi no Kamatari managed to successfully join the Imperial household through marriage and became one in a long line of regents\(^{21}\) (“sessho”, regent to a minor emperor, “kampaku”, regent to an adult emperor)\(^{22}\). During their rule, the Emperor became almost void, without any real control in the society, and was seen more as a “decoration”.\(^{23}\)

Later the Imperial family regained control and established a system called “insei”\(^{24}\), were the Emperor abdicates, but keeps his powers and machinates the society from behind the supposing Emperor. Having witnessed the power, the Fujiwara family got by acquiring land for themselves, the retired Emperor’s main activity was therefore to gain as much land as he could, because with land comes money and of course societies thrive on good economics. Later in history the Taira family, a family, which existed of warriors, took control, although the Fujiwara family kept asserting their power in the society.\(^{25}\)

Religion was very important to aristocrats during Heian period (794-1185), although due to their worldview, will be discussed later in this chapter, they did not


travel much, but took leisurely trips to Buddhist temples near Kyoto city. However, when someone close died, travel was not considered good, as well as travelling on days considered to be ominous. Furthermore, if a person became sick, priests who were good at exorcism were asked for a visit. A good example is when Genji becomes very sick and is suffering from an incessant fever, which he cannot seem to shake.

“Genji, who was suffering from a recurrent fever, had all sorts of spells cast and healing rites done, but to no avail; the fever kept returning. Someone then said, “My lord, there is a remarkable ascetic at a Temple in the Northern Hills. Last summer, when the fever was widespread and spells failed to help, he healed many people immediately”.

Men and women wrote in different languages during Heian period (794-1185); while men wrote mostly in Chinese, women wrote in Japanese, but there were examples of men writing in Japanese, although when doing so they used women’s names as aliases. According to an article by John R. Bentley, the Japanese people in ancient times were “illiterate, and everything was committed to memory, and then transmitted orally.” Bentley is thus trying to establish that the Chinese script, which came to Japan during the Tomb period (250-592) from the Korean peninsula, may be a script called “man’yogana”. Another article by Aileen Gatten mentions, a classical Japanese kana script, called “hentaigana” which in some form is an advance from the man’yogana, at least what can be gathered from both Gatten’s and Bentley’s article. The hentaigana script was easy and simple, and therefore suited women and children very well, but later this script became know as “hiragana”, the Japanese phonetic script used in today’s society. During Heian period (794-1185) the women wrote in hentaigana, because the Chinese language was for men only, and it was considered perilous of women to read or write in Chinese. Despite this fact, the period produced several literature cannons, mostly written by female authors, in the hentaigana script. The aristocratic women, had ample time to write, while waiting for

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court events or their lovers, but the men were pioneers as well, since the Heian period (794-1185) produced the beginning of men writing texts and poems in the Chinese script.  

As mentioned above the Heian (794-1185) aristocrats were not much for travelling, having mostly to do with religious beliefs. However there was another reason, which was that aristocrats saw the countryside as kind of dirty, with people of no consequence, whom they wanted nothing to do with. “The provinces were viewed as an uncultured hinterland where even the governing classes were hopelessly vulgar”. Shonagon is less polite in her Pillow book, where she describes the poor people by criticizing their use of the language, as well as shining a very unflattering light on them.

“Commoners always use too many words when they speak”. 

“They looked like so many basket-worms as they crowded together in their hideous clothes, leaving hardly an inch of space between themselves and me. I really felt like pushing them all over sideways”. 

Even though aristocrats remained firmly in their beautiful abodes, priests and merchants of the Heian period (794-1185) continued to travel in China and other Asian countries. 

An aristocrat during Heian period (794-1185) quickly developed a keen sense of fine aesthetics, on account of being taught about them from an early age. Ladies at court were supposed to dress in layers of robes, usually twelve in count. The robes intertwined at the wrist of the lady’s arm, each with a different colour, making the order in which the lady wore them, very important. During this period, men were not supposed to look at women directly, which meant that the only part they saw, were the hands, often sticking out from under curtains. The source does not specify whether the men were only courting the women or if they were relatives, but however, when Genji’s son Yugiri (the Captain, 15) is walking around the veranda in

his father’s Rokujo Estate, he happens to see his father’s lady of the South-East quarter (Murasaki, 28), but moves away after hearing his father come.

“He was making off again for fear of being noticed when Genji, returning from his daughter’s, opened the inner sliding panel and entered the room. “What a horrible, maddening wind! Get your shutters down. There must be men about, and anyone could see you”. 

Apparently, the etiquette were similar for women, except, they were allowed an inconspicuous glance at men, but only if they were related. “The Mistress of Staff (Tamakazura, 23 or 24, Genji’s adopted daughter, but really To no Chujo’s daughter) noted his (Kashiwagi, To no Chujo’s son, early 20’s) presence beside the Commander’s eldest (The Intendant of Watch, Murasaki’s half brother) and allowed her eye to rest on him, since he was kin”. (To no Chujo was son of the Minister of the Left, but he and Genji sort of grew up around the Palace together and then later Genji married To’s sister Aoi, but she died after giving Genji a son, Yugiri. To and Genji were good friends but quickly became adversaries in various matters, one being the affections of To’s father and mother. The truth of it was that growing up with Genji was hard, since most people adored him and held him of the highest respect).

According to Shirokauer, the features of men and women were also standardized at court. Both genders applied make-up to cover their faces and the women were then as now, very agile in primping and pruning their hair, which was always long except when they took vows and became nuns. Perhaps the most astonishing beauty tip of court was the blackened teeth with a mixture of substances called “hagurome”, contrary to modern day, but practiced by both genders after coming of age, according to Genji. Aesthetics were applied to everything around and inside houses, as well as to everything related with art and craft. Although the emphasis on beauty was greatly appreciated, other attributes were required as well. Music was of the utmost importance and the ability to play well, whether alone or with others was greatly appreciated along with dancing, which was pleasing for the eye. Sense of smell was also important and many aristocrats fused together their own

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perfumes and incense. When Genji’s daughter with the Akashi Lady was about to don the train, a ceremony where children were to enter into adulthood, he spent long hours making incense for her.

The Heian (794-1185) aristocratic women and men were supposed to apply the aesthetics of beauty to their intimate lives, which was of course the main ingredient in all the diaries written during this period. Aristocratic men generally had one main wife, called a consort, and about two or three other wives, as well as multiple love affairs with other women of high standing. The reason for the multiple partners, has been argued, was due to the lifespan of a person not being long and men, especially those who were in high positions needing heirs. For the Emperor a son was necessary to keep the lineage going strong and more than one was required since the death of newborns was high. This resulted in rather a high number of wives, where ten was the normal number. Ordinary aristocrats were happy with either gender, although a daughter might have been more welcome, since they could hope to send her off to court or to marry well, so as to increase their own political and social standing. The same sort of thinking was still prevailing in the low societies of Meiji era, specifically for poor families. In “Child’s Play”, Ichiyo includes this fact into her story: ‘Night and day, it’s the daughters that you hear of. A boy is about as useful as a mutt sniffing round the rubbish’.

According to Shirokauer, the women were not required any more than men, to have only one love their entire life, although some women preferred only one love instead of multitasking. The ladies of court were mostly aristocratic girls of good social standing. Their titles however varied depending on what position they partook in at the Palace. The wives of Emperors or noble men were called consorts, like the Kokiden Consort in Genji’s tale, who so despised Genji, because he was more loved by her husband and she feared that he might become the Heir Apparent. There were

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court ladies, served by gentlewomen or ladies in waiting, who in turn were lower in the social ladder, and equal to nurses it would seem. And at the bottom were the servants who are hardly mentioned in literary works. The aristocratic ladies who were either at court, married or mistresses to noble men, were however not born into their positions, but rather chosen by the noble men, judging by the ladies’ qualities. Beauty was of course deeply appreciated, but while the men were not able to see the women except their hands, they had to rely on other senses in finding a suitable companion.

i. Qualities of a Heian court lady

In medieval Japan, high-society parents were eager to send their young daughters to court. As a result, the girls were brought up in a specific way. As has been mentioned before, they were required to know the art of music and play at least one instrument. During the Heian era (794-1185), those instruments were generally the “biwa” (lute) and the “koto”49, but according to Genji the wagon (a six stringed cithern, tuned like a guitar)50 and kingakki were reserved for the men. The tale includes many lovely scenes of “gagaku” (court music)51 and the evening meetings of noble playing music together, sometimes with a lady accompanying them on the koto. The koto is a long wooden instrument, much larger than the violin and originated with thirteen strings, although the word “koto” was also used for all stringed instruments during in ancient Japan.52 According to Tyler’s notes in Genji, the koto and “kin” are very similar instruments, but the wagon is much smaller and has fewer strings. Although Tyler also mentions that the kin is no longer used in modern Japan.53 Playing those instruments required a great deal of practicing and as with most things, some people were more gifted.

The daughters of the aristocrats were also required to know their literature and poetry, and be able to compose the finest poetry. The poetic form in ancient Japan

seems to have been mainly a “waka”\textsuperscript{54}, which is basically a longer “haiku” (5/7/5 syllable unit), but a haiku must project a mental image to the reader.\textsuperscript{55} Japanese poetry without exception must contain a “season word”\textsuperscript{56} (describes a season without mentioning the season name itself) and the “kakekotoba” (pivot word)\textsuperscript{57}, which allows the poet to put multiple meaning into his/her poems. “Use of the pivot word can be illustrated by the line senkata naku, “There is nothing to be done.” Naku renders the phrase negative, but at the same time it has the independent meaning of “to cry”. Thus, an expression of despair may simultaneously convey the idea of weeping”.\textsuperscript{58} The poems in Genji also convey feelings and constitute a normal part of conversing with others. For this reason, flower stems or tree sprigs were often attached to the poem to emphasize the subject at hand. An example of this is when His Highness of War, Genji’s brother, sends the lady in Genji’s west wing a poem hoping to solicit further relations, and has tied to it a memorably splendid root:

“Has a sweet flag root spurned by all even today, where it grows unseen, hidden beneath the water, no solace but cries of grief?”\textsuperscript{59}

Unfortunately the answer His Highness got was somewhat disappointing to him, mostly because the lady did not compose very good poems, but rather childish ones.

Heian society (794-1185) was all about etiquette and preserving ones honour. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that certain abilities were expected of men and women of aristocratic descent. As mentioned above the focus will be almost entirely on aristocratic women, in other words, the court ladies. The major qualities a Heian aristocratic lady needed to possess in order to get noticed and invited to court, were a good sense of etiquette, knowing literature and poetry, as well as writing with a steady hand. The reason being that the aristocratic men, running around town trying to find a consort, or a mistress, could mainly rely on their sense of smell and hearing, hence it was all the more important for a lady to smell nice, be able to play an

\textsuperscript{54} The waka commonly dubbed a tanka, is a 5/7/5/7/7 verse poem. There are 31 sound units in this poetic form, which are then divided into the forementioned units. The term was coined in the Heian era. (Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), introduction xxiv).

\textsuperscript{55} Professor Adrian Pinnington. Class notes, Classical Japanese Poetry, 2010.

\textsuperscript{56} A season word commonly refers to a specific word connected with a certain season. I.e. The word moon is connected to autumn. (Professor Adrian Pinnington. Class notes, Classical Japanese Poetry, 2010.)

\textsuperscript{57} Paul Varley, Japanese Culture, fourth edition, updated and expanded (United States of America: University of Hawai’i Press, 1973), 44.

\textsuperscript{58} Paul Varley, Japanese Culture, fourth edition, updated and expanded (United States of America: University of Hawai’i Press, 1973), 44.

\textsuperscript{59} “Must you spurn me?” For the Sweet Flag Festival people pulled up sweet flag (ayame) roots in search of especially long ones. The poem’s sentiments and wordplays (nef[“root” or “cry’] and nakare [“weep” or “flow”]) follow convention. (Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), note 8, 458).
instrument well and capable of composing engaging letters. Furthermore because the
men could only see the ladies’ hands, it was necessary for them to dress in coloured
robes and to show all the various layers in a suitably attractive manner. Exhibiting all
the qualities above does not suffice, a lady needed to have a high standing
aristocratic man supporting her.

**ii. Victory is yours, if only…**

It was a basic fact that in order to succeed in Heian society, personal attributes
were not the only requirement. Aristocratic women also needed the support of
influential men. High rank and financial support from the men was important, as well
as knowing that they had someone on their side when fighting to advance. Despite a
woman having had a father of high rank, were he deceased and she only supported by
her mother, she was unlikely to succeed, unless the man she serviced favoured her
above the rest. This is exactly what happened to Genji’s mother during her life at
court, where she was made a laughing stock among the other court ladies.

“In a certain reign (whose can it have been?) someone of no very great rank,
among all His Majesty’s Consorts and Intimates, enjoyed exceptional favor. Those
others who had always assumed that pride of place was properly theirs despised her
as a dreadful woman, while the lesser Intimates were unhappier still. The way she
waited on him day after day only stirred up feeling against her, and perhaps this
growing burden of resentment was what affected her health and obliged her often to
withdraw in misery to her home; but His Majesty, who could less and less do without
her, ignored his critics until his behavior seemed bound to be the talk of all”.

The Emperor obviously favours Genji’s mother, and can hardly do anything
without her, but that is exactly what earns her ridicule as well as the scorn of the other
consorts and ladies who are intimate with him. When it is time for her to give birth,
she is meant to have it at home with her mother instead of the Palace, but such is the
Emperor’s love for her, that he has the newborn brought to him right away. This
causes his advisers some worries, as the Emperor does not attend to his duties very
well. Unfortunately the lady cannot handle the nasty talk of the other women,
becomes ill, and returns home to her mother to die in peace. The short text that

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follows is from that moment, after she is gone and the Emperor is still pining, which again shows that despite her having no traditional social support, feelings are often stronger than formality.

“So, in desolation he let her go. He passed a sleepless night”.61

It is only after the lady is dead that the Emperor bestows upon her the consort’s title, and those consorts of his who are smart realise that she was a nice person and think fondly of her.62

After the death of his favourite the Emperor takes Fujitsubo as his wife, despite her having no parents, she however has the backing of her uncle, who happens to be of Fujiwara clan, the most influential force in Japan for many centuries. Before dying her mother had been reluctant to send her to court, based on the rumours about Genji’s mother. Although after her mother’s death, her uncle and female relatives decide that rather than have her waste away at home, she may gain more from going into service for the Emperor. By this time The Emperor has given up hope to find another like his Haven (Genji’s mother’s name), when the Dame of Staff contacts him about a possible candidate.

“the fourth child of a former Emperor, a girl known for her beauty and brought up by her mother, the Empress, with the greatest care. Owing that Emperor her office as she did, the Dame had served the young lady’s mother intimately as well, and so she had known her, too, from infancy; in fact, she saw her from time to time even now”. (Murasaki writes, but next paragraph is a direct quote from the Dame of Staff herself)

“In all my three reigns of service at court, I have seen no one like Your Majesty’s late Haven,” she said “but the Princess I refer to has grown to be very like her. She is a pleasure to look at”.63

“She was called Fujitsubo. She resembled that other lady to a truly astonishing degree, but since she was of far higher standing, commanded willing respect, and could not possibly be treated lightly, she had no need to defer to anyone on any matter”’.64

Fujitsubo is a descendant from a former Emperor and Empress, which means that she is already more likely to succeed at court than the Haven before her. According to Genji people are rather weak in this period and therefore cannot handle too much adversity. The two, women, although from different backgrounds may be very similar and are certainly both in the spotlight at court, but while the Haven is made fun of, Fujitsubo is admired. Their common factor is that neither has any personal space, they are both being watched closely, not only by their gentlewomen, but also by the whole entire court. Despite being very honoured in her life, Fujitsubo lives in fear that someone finds out that she has had relations with Genji, which result in a child, whom fortunately everyone takes to be the Emperor’s. Her whole life she worries about the truth seeing daylight and after the Emperor dies she becomes a nun and remains one until her death.

Genji is equally taken with Fujitsubo as his father was with his mother before him, and he longs for her so much that he searches for another lady with her attributes and beauty throughout his life. After Fujitsubo’s birth of her son, the first wife of the Emperor Kokiden Lady is worried about her own son with the Emperor, and therefore recites imprecations or in other words, curses upon Fujitsubo. Worried about her honour, Fujitsubo decides to be strong and ignores the curses.

“She personally dreaded the life that lay before her, but reports that the Kokiden Consort was muttering imprecations against her reminded her that the news of her death might only provoke laughter, and this gave her the strength gradually to recover”.65

The women, although servants to a man, are it seems extremely wilful and have resorts when dealing with jealousy and other matters. They show amazing strength when dealing with gossip and other women who threaten them by their very existence. Furthermore, this is a good example of how aristocratic women felt, being in their positions, which will be discussed further in the chapter about the feelings of women during Heian period (794-1185). However, another example of how a support by an important man was necessary, is how the two daughters of To no Chujo, came to the city. They were both from the rural countryside, though Tamakazura, seems to have had better upbringing than Omi no Kimi, which proves to be valuable for her

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later in life, whereas Omi is ridiculed and laughed at, though this time, it stems mostly from the fact that she does not know how to behave at court.

Similar things happen to Tamakazura, Genji’s adopted daughter, who is brought up in the countryside. Her mother’s former gentlewoman, Ukon, having searched for the girl, finds her in a temple and helps bring her to Genji in the hope that he will do right by her. Genji brings her up well and marries her off, despite wanting her for himself, to another noble man. She later becomes Mistress of Staff. The daughter of To no Chujo’s, called Omi no Kimi, is not as lucky as Tamakazura. She comes from the countryside as well, but despite having To no Chujo’s support, is made fun of by his household staff. This of course is entirely owing to her behaviour, which having had a lesser upbringing, is not up to the Heian (794-1185) standards. In truth Tamakazura is To no Chujo’s daughter, but he does not know about this. He and Genji both had affairs with Tamakazura’s mother Yugao in the past, before her untimely death, which prompted her nurse to take the girl (Tamakazura) to her own home in the countryside.

Ukon, who was a lady in waiting for the diseased lady, is sure she would have rivalled the Akashi lady, Genji’s lady from his exile times, with whom he has a daughter. Tamakazura is at this time living in Tsukushi, which is near Fukuoka and the Hakata harbour in modern time Kyushu. She is soon to be married off to an Audit Commissioner named Taifu no Gen, but as he is rather crude she does not want to marry him, an opinion seconded by her nurse. While travelling to a known temple near Kyoto she meets Ukon, who informs Genji of the young lady resulting in her becoming known as his daughter, rather than her father’s, To no Chujo’s. Tamakazura is very demure and upon meeting Ukon at the temple, she is rather embarrassed by her poor clothes. She is also described as having been very beautiful, so much so, that her nurse left her family to take the girl to her real father’s house in the city, as she explains to Ukon when they meet.

“I almost let her beauty go to waste in those thankless surroundings,” the nurse replied, “but that seemed too great a shame. I gave up house and hearth, left the sons and daughters who were my hope for the future, set out toward what for me

66 Naishi no Kami – The senior woman official (third rank) in the Office of Staff. In principle, the incumbent supervised female palace staff, palace ceremonies, and the transmission of petitions and decrees. In practice, she was a junior wife to the Emperor. (Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), offices and titles 1166).
might as well be the unknown, and came up to the City. My dear, do take her straight
to where she belongs. You who serve in so great a house surely have opportunities to
meet His Excellency her father. Please speak to him and see to it that he
acknowledges her''.

Omi no Kimi is discovered after, To no Chujo, now his Excellency, the Palace
Minister, has a dream and calls for an expert at deciphering dreams who asks him if
he has lost a child which is now in someone else’s care. After pondering about this
he decides to take matters into his own hands and in the process finds Omi no Kimi.
The girl is from the countryside, and because her mother was of lowly descent, has
not been properly raised, which leads to her being an object of ridicule among the
people of court and around her. Because To no Chujo has at least ten other children,
people wonder why he has taken this one, when she has so little to offer and can only
damage his reputation. The description of her is rather demeaning, which depicts
Shikibu’s own attitude toward women lacking the proper upbringing. This however
does not affect To no Chujo, and their relationship. He seems to embrace her despite
her flaws, or at least he accepts them, whether out of pity or for his own amusement.

The Palace Minister had no sooner learned that his household staff were
ignoring his new daughter and that all the world was treating her as a joke…”.
To no Chujo also finds it sad that everyone thinks he is favouring her above his
children, just because he had her brought to his house from the country. He has heard
from others that Tamakazura is beautiful and is certain she is not even Genji’s
daughter but just another woman he is adding to his large collection of beauties,
which shows how well he knows Genji, even though they are no longer on good
terms. Personality seems therefore to have mattered a great deal, since Tamakazura is
so different from the Omi girl in most everything. What is very obvious from the
book and from To no Chujo’s response to his daughter, is that no one liked to be
laughed at or made fun of.

These extracts from Genji certainly paint a clear picture as to how the ideal
lady was supposed to be, not only her behaviour, like in the chapter before this, but

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also the emphasis on her standing within society. A lady’s attributes, when good, could very well save her from gossip and being made a laughing stock, but to absolutely succeed in the aristocratic society, a lady’s best bet was a high ranking man to support her with decisions of the best candidates to marry and which positions she should seek. This being said, the ladies of the Heian (794-1185) court, are sure to have had their own feelings about their lives, which will be focused further on in the next chapter.

iii. Feelings and perception

From birth, aristocratic girls, were destined to become someone’s consort, mistress or the highest honour, a court lady for the Emperor. The girls’ lives’ were mapped out by people in their lives, who wanted all the best for them, but what their own feelings were about the subject, shall be explored in this chapter. Court ladies’ feelings about their standing in life seem to have been based on their love life, more often than not, whether the attentions were wanted or unwanted. This is revealed through reading Genji and the women’s own diaries.

Women usually had very little to no control over who came to visit, and even less control over men who did not honour the partition and moved all the way next to the ladies without their approval, which granted happened scarcely. Furthermore places were men met their ladies, were usually far off the well-trodden road, were few would venture. 72 The men’s behaviour of breaking these rules is mentioned in many texts, such as Izumi Shikibu’s diary. The lady is approached by a pageboy and given a flower from the Prince (Atsumichi) and they exchange a couple of poems where she tells him it is no use meeting. Nevertheless he decides to visit without sending a note first and only when he is at her door does he send someone in to let her know.

“The lady was extremely embarrassed, but could hardly pretend that she was not at home. She had sent the Prince a reply that very day. There he was, and it was simply too inconsiderate to send him home without seeing him. She decided she would talk with him for a while – nothing more than that - ...” 73

The lady decides to meet with the Prince, which emphasizes the regard for etiquette in Heian society (794-1185). This results in them spending the night together, and thereby starting a tumultuous relationship. It is implied that the Prince had an older brother who became a subject of terrible gossip, so he is naturally careful, which makes him seem very distant to the lady. In addition, his first wife, the Princess is likely to be unhappy, if she finds out about the communications between the lady and the Prince. The relationship is doomed before it begins, due to rumours about the late Prince and the lady, who is not only of low rank, but as gossip has it, frequented by many men. The Prince talks to the lady about this and then asks her to go with him to a place that no one knows about. The lady agrees to come with him the first time but is afraid someone might notice them, which is sure to attract even more bad gossip.

"What a scandalous spectacle!" she thought. "If he should make a habit of this-".

"Oh, how really unbecoming a performance this is" she thought again and again as she crept out and into the carriage".\(^7\)

The lady seems to stop her other suitors after some time, even though the Prince is still uncertain. Later on the Prince does the right thing and brings her to his mansion, which according to Izumi’s diary, is at court, but by that time it is too late for any noble gesture and the lady experiences even more sadness in the mansion than she would have at her own home. The diary is a very sad tale of how relationships can become a hardship for both persons, and especially the lady, if the situation is not right from the beginning. The aristocratic men often fell in love with women who were not right for them in the present, but whom they really wanted to be with, which meant that the relationships had to be conducted in secret, to escape the evil tongues of other people’s gossip. The men were of course mostly thinking about their honour, without thinking about the consequences for the women.

The same is true for the Rokujo lady in Genji’s tale. He approaches her with enthusiasm but when he gets her attention, treats her like a normal woman. Both are a little hesitant at first because she is older than Genji and is a widow. They conduct their relationship for some years but with very few visits from Genji. When her daughter becomes the High Priestess of Ise, she comes to the conclusion that Genji is really unhappy with her, and she therefore makes up her mind to go with her daughter

and become a nun herself. Genji is not happy with this decision and goes to see her and despite her reluctance to receive him she does not want to be considered rude and so they meet for the last time. The text that follows, are her thoughts about this, which convey how Shikibu described the court ladies.

“Oh, dear, she thought, I do not like the spectacle I am making – he can hardly think well of me for it; I would much rather not go out to him at all. She did not have the courage to treat him coldly, though, and at last she emerged amid reluctant sighs, delighting him with the grace of her form.”

(He could see her silhouette through the blind that separated them.)

The reference above is also a good source for the feelings men had toward their would-be conquests. Due to the tradition that men and women were not allowed in the same room, unless there was a partition, the men could only see the hands and wrists of the ladies they were courting. This made it much more difficult for them to actually know if the women were beautiful, their judgement was simply based on their hands, their scent and the way they wrote poems or played instruments. The men were therefore bound to sometimes court women whom they found later to be rather dull and boring. However Genji never forgets his women, and if he makes a commitment he honours it, though sometimes it takes some time for him to do so. It also seems clear that gentlewomen and men, sometimes, had more to do with a relationship, than the woman herself. Which may explain how Shikibu knew so many things about court ladies and Heian aristocrats. Gentlewomen knew everything and had some effect on how things occurred or evolved.

A good example of this is when Genji has been admiring the Safflower lady and her music. Each lady of the court had several gentlewomen referred to as ladies in waiting who took care of a variety of things, like responding to suitors through letters, helping the ladies dress as well as attend to matters of various nature. Genji and To no Chujo are both courting the Safflower Lady (Her Highness daughter of the Prince of Hitachi), which Genji finds out about as To is complaining about the Princess’s aloofness towards the two of them. Genji feigns to be uninterested when he finds out about To no Chujo’s feelings but is really upset with the lady. He talks to her nurse Taifu regularly and she tells him that the lady is just so shy and incapable of speaking to men that she might not be the sort of woman Genji would want to have as a

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mistress. Genji never one to give up on his quests, mostly because he does not want to look like a fool at the court, therefore keeps at it and Taifu having betrayed her lady’s trust by confiding in Genji, decides that if her mistress likes him then no harm is done, and if not that will be the end of that. One night she sends for him and then urges her lady to play her instrument. Genji lets them know he is there and Taifu pretends not to know anything and almost forces her mistress to talk to him. When her lady responds by backing away Taifu reprimands her for her indifference.

“It pains me to see you behaving so much like a child, my lady. It is quite acceptable for the most exalted lady to retain a girlish innocence as long as she has her parents to look after her, but it simply is not right for you in your present unfortunate situation to remain shut up forever in yourself.”

This accentuates the point even further, that women, notwithstanding rank, were supposed to act in a certain manner in order to succeed, especially if they, like the Safflower lady, have no man to support them, with only gentlewomen at their side. Fujitsubo has her uncle and other relatives to make the decisions for her, but the Safflower lady seems to be completely her own master, after the death of her father the Prince. She is also a very secluded person up to the point of being socially inadequate. This fact shames her gentlewomen and her nurse Taifu, but they of course, as is their duty, try to help her with her communications to others. When Genji speaks to her and she sits silent as a rock he becomes furious and scolds her openly in a poem.

“Ah, how many times have I found myself undone by such silences, and sustained by just one thought: you never say, Do not speak!”

“Tell me to go away, if you must. This uncertainty is very painful”.

One of her younger gentlewomen Jiju rushes to answer in her lady’s stead when the silence becomes overwhelmingly embarrassing for everyone present.

“Why, would I never ring the bell as though to say, The debate is closed, but at a loss to reply? – there I find myself surprised”. (The bell is rung to close a doctrinal debate during the Rite of the Eight Discourses (Mi-hako) seems to be a religious rite, the lotus sutras)

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What follows is that Genji moves the panel and ventures closer to Her Highness and finds her indeed rather boring and insipid.

The women in medieval Japan, had worries, when it came to their men. Since it was considered normal to marry at least one lady and have mistresses, the women themselves, were probably sometimes very jealous. Genji’s Murasaki, whom he brings back from the mountains to live with him as father and daughter, experiences many such jealous moments. She of course does not just stay his “daughter” but later becomes his consort. Fortunately he has her brought up well, and she tries not to show too much jealousy around him, once a grown-up. Murasaki feels happy around Genji for a while, but that quickly changes, once she discovers how things are with men and women of the aristocratic society.79

The men had the luxury of sleeping around and lavishing other women with their love, while the women were supposed to sit at home and wait for them. At a certain point when she stops trusting him, although she always understands his motives, she does not agree with all of his actions. Which sustains the theory that women’s feelings were centred on their love relationships.

Genji really feels like himself around Murasaki and he also feels she knows him like no other, which makes him more and more in love with her. The night when he visits the Akashi Lady, she becomes somewhat upset, mostly because she is the mother of the girl, who Murasaki is bringing up like her own. Genji also knows that she will be unhappy about his escapades but spends the night nonetheless, although he leaves really early in the morning.

“She was waiting for him, with what disapproval he could well imagine. “I cannot understand it,” he began in a comical effort to placate her, “I simply drooped off and slept on and on like a boy, and you see, you never did anything about waking me up!” When this got no particular answer from her, he lay down, not knowing what else to do, and pretended to sleep, until he rose at last with the sun high in the sky. He spent the day hiding from her behind everything that had to be done for the special guests”. (Rinji kyaku, Princes and nobles who came to call, generally on the second day of the New Year. They had to be formally entertained).80

Murasaki is not always so jealous, as noted when Tamakazura comes to live at the Rokujo Estate. She clearly thinks Genji’s actions regarding the girl are a bit funny.

“To his lady, who knew him well, this sort of praise betrayed a heightened interest, and she understood. “She may be quick to grasp many things, but I pity her if in her innocence she ever trusts you too far.”

“And what about me should encourage her not to?”

“Oh, come now! Do I no remember the misery your ways have so often caused me?” She smiled. 81

On the other hand Tamakazura, has to endure even more indecent behaviour from Genji, after he has told her father, To no Chujo, about her existence. On the one hand she is very grateful that Genji rescued her from the countryside, and on the other she worries about his growing interest in her.

“Now that her father knew about her, Genji only dealt with her more shamelessly than ever, and this caused her silent anguish. She had no woman relative to whom to disclose even a few of her worries, let alone all of them, and how could she possibly have brought up any hint of her anxiety to either of the two gentlemen whose splendor she found so forbidding? 82

The extracts above certainly show the feelings of some of the aristocratic women, as depicted by female authors. Despite the women trying to bottle up their feelings when dealing with their husbands and other suitors, they did not always succeed in hiding their jealous thoughts. If they were clever though, they never let too much emotions show and hence kept their men content. Men, who discovered that their consorts or mistresses were overly jealous, to the point of crazy jealous, would ignore the women and seek love and companionship from their other mistresses. Again, a good example of this scene, is when Tamakazura is supposed to marry Higekuro (the Commander of the Right, and married to Lady Murasaki’s elder half sister, who was the Emperor’s Consort and had born the Heir Apparent) 83, and his wife who evidently had some flaws, became increasingly erratic, he stops his visits to her, which results in her returning back to her parents house, and taking with her his favourite child, their daughter, whilst he got the two sons. 84 However, whatever their feelings may have been regarding their lives and the men they dealt with, those

feelings may have been miniscule in light of later generation women, which the focus will be on in the next chapter.
V. Historical facts surrounding the Edo period (1600-1868)

In Heian period (794-1185) the ladies of court were honoured for their services, completely synchronous with the society’s views, which, was ruled by aristocrats with their high standards and strict etiquette. During the Kamakura (1186-1333) and Muromachi (1392-1573) periods new religious power was in town, which was influencing the government with its views. The people associated with it, were Buddhist monks, “who were appalled by a certain known profession in town, which proposed a threat to their sacred Buddhist beliefs.” \(^\text{85}\) The profession, which proposed the threat to the monks, “were the prostitutes and they were considered in disagreement with the beliefs, because they defiled themselves by selling their flesh.” \(^\text{86}\) Even though the sources seem to be mostly about the Edo period (1600-1868), the women of pleasure have been around since the Heian period (794-1185), which is mentioned in as the tale of Genji, in Seidensticker’s translation, although forementioned women are not visible in Tyler’s translation, which begs the question, if there really were any at all. \(^\text{87}\)

It is highly likely that due to the opposition the government received from the Buddhist monks, they may have been even more determined in building the “playgrounds” for grown-ups in various cities of Japan. The two largest in the country being Yoshiwara in Tokyo and Shimabara in Kyoto. Both places were licensed and the prostitutes were more or less secure while the government was taking care of them. This arrangement lasted up until 1957 when the laws to abolish prostitution came into act. A law that in some way degraded the prostitutes, and made them seem small and insignificant, because of their profession.

As for the political climate of the Edo era (1600-1868), there was a new hierarchy, consisting of a “bakufu” (meaning tent government) \(^\text{88}\), very similar to the retired Emperor system in Heian period (794-1185). The Emperor was on top of the

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pyramid, with a “Shogun” (highest military leader) below him, who helped control the “daimyo” (regional baron), who got allotted a “han” (one han being the fee for the feudal lords) to control. One of the most famous Shoguns was Ieyasu Tokogawa but the Tokugawa clan, was like the Fujiwara family in Heian society, and ruled for the entire time of Edo period (1600-1868).  

After Ieyasu’s rule the bakufu system was regressing and the daimyo gained more control over their own han. After a minor setback, from Tsunayoshi (1680-1709), a new Shogun, who reinstated the bakufu, daimyo were back in control. Despite the bakufu and daimyo system being against each other, the peace was held, which in turn produced a more economically sound society, in which the merchants grew their businesses, and became upper class, with considerable amount of money to spend. This setting was perfect for the government, when venturing into the prostitution business, managing brothels for big closed off compounds.

The Edo period inherited a lot of aesthetics from the aristocrats of former periods, literature from Heian era (794-1185) and the tea ceremony from Muromachi (1336-1568) period. Highly recommended by the Zen monk Eisai (1141-1215?), it was spread throughout central Japan by artists such as the famous Sen Rikyu (1521-1591), with his approach using the aesthetic term “wabi” (expressing a spiritual mood through the quality of solitude and quietness in art). This “wabi” has been a major element in all Japanese art and the Japanese people try to incorporate it into their daily lives even today. This of course fits the simple yet elegant way of actions and conceptual thinking represented in Japanese culture today. The tea ceremony was not the only thing new in the Edo period (1600-1868), the Noh play (classic Japanese drama), originating from one Shinto priest (Kan’ami, 1333-1384) and his son (Zeami, 1363-1443), which consists of an all male cast, upon a wooden stage, with a chorus who voices the thoughts of the characters. Usually an actor may wear a very stylized mask during the play in order to depict a Heian (794-1185) beauty or a mad demon.

92 Acute observation of the society and culture, while living in Akita, Japan in 1989, visiting in 2000, both times travelling around Honshu and Kyushu, and living in Tokyo, Japan in 2009-2010.
Aesthetically the play is about the masks and the way a tilt of the head while wearing them can express the subtlest mood or emotion.\textsuperscript{93}

Another theatre style originated in the Edo period (1600-1686), within an era called the Genroku era (1688-1704), the kabuki, which also consists of male only actors who act both the roles of women and men. Aesthetically the most important thing about the kabuki is the “\textit{vivid contrasts and startling juxtaposition}”.\textsuperscript{94} The sets resemble woodblock prints, which were also very popular around that time. The most important thing in the plays however is how well the actors can depict the fragile man versus the very masculine villain.\textsuperscript{95} Around the same time as the kabuki came into play, the ukiyo-e followed with its otherworldly feel. It is based on a Buddhist related term about “\textit{evoking images of the evanescence of life, the vanity of human passions, a longing for the idealize afterlife}”,\textsuperscript{96} although later it changed into something less religious and more sensually self-indulgent. As their popularity among the general public grew, the ukiyo-e began depicting the prostitutes of the Yoshiwara compound and places alike.

What with the social position of the merchants being increasingly raised and business blossoming as well as the art and theatre life, there was probably increased demand for entertainment establishments, such as the brothels and geisha houses located near the outskirts of the bigger cities in Japan. According to Shirokauer, even the lowly farmer increased his financial standing, which most likely meant that, the wealthier people of the society needed places where they could spend their money. The setting was ideal for the brothels to thrive in, and just as the men were getting more or less fed up with the common prostitutes, a new breed of pleasure women came to light, the geisha. In the next chapters the focus shall be on the prostitute (courtesan), their origin and dishonoured lives, as well as how they tumbled down from the top into the gutter, when a new entertainment act for men, the geisha, became increasingly popular.

i. Definition of the yujo/courtesan of Yoshiwara

Prostitutes have been a part of the Japanese society in some form since before Genji was entertaining, as stated in chapter five. In this chapter a specific type of prostitute will be looked at, namely the, “yujo” (“jo” meaning woman, “yu” another term for the verb “asobu” to play, meaning women who play)\(^{97}\) of Yoshiwara. The English translation of the term for yujo is “courtesan”, but both will be used in this chapter. The term courtesan seems to have had two definitions, but according to the encyclopedia Britannica, now it is so defined “a prostitute with a courtly, wealthy, or upper-class clientele”\(^{99}\). Although according to other sources, the women in medieval Europe served in similar fashion as the court ladies mentioned above. The definition of the two may seem different but as a matter of fact the court ladies and European courtesans both got paid, just in a different currency. Their reward was the honour bestowed along with financial security for life, while the courtesans of Yoshiwara in Edo period, had little security and certainly did not possess a lot of honour.

The court ladies were also more prominent in society than the modern courtesans. The definition of a courtesan, gives a certain air of a gold-digger, whereas the court ladies were upper-crust people trying to get ahead, by obtaining honourable jobs. The geisha seem to have begun at least as an honourable trait, and been similar to court ladies from yore, who were exceedingly well versed in literature, poetry and played an instrument exquisitely. However later they became more like courtesans or yujo, who had a lot less to do with knowledge and talent, and more to do with faking it for the sake of appearance, besides having intercourse with customers.\(^{100}\)

In Edo period (1600-1868) the business of “yukaku” (Yoshiwara: literal meaning enclosure “kaku” for entertainment or play “yu” a shorter term for the verb

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\(^{97}\) The most common term for a woman who worked at a brothel (yukaku) meaning a woman who plays, but the verb yu stems from the Japanese verb asobu, which means to play. (Liza Chrifield Dalby, “Courtesan and Geisha: The Real Women of the Pleasure Quarter”, in Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton’s The Women of the Pleasure Quarter: Japanese Paintings and Prints of the Floating World, with contributions by Kazue Edamatsu Campbell, Liza Chrifield Dalby and Mark Oshima (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1995), 58.


\(^{100}\) Liza Chrifield Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Random House Group Limited, 2000), 57.
“asobu”) prospered, not only because of the women and their stunning fashion and exiting language, but also because the government wanted to contain them. The government therefore built a suitable playground for the many businesses and had them boxed in like a prison, hence the name “yukaku”, with only one way out. This huge compound was referred to as Yoshiwara and was located on the outskirts of Tokyo, what today is in the low city or Shitamachi. The girls and women who worked there got health inspections and food and shelter in return for selling their bodies, but they were sold to the brothels for at least ten years, being the standard time. For the work they performed, they got pay which was like a down payment for their service of the ten years, but the women tried to find wealthy suitors, who were willing to pay for them to get out, and become mistresses or wives. Most yujo’s succeeded in leaving early, since during Edo the men in society outnumbered women, and so even for the ugly ducklings, finding a man to marry was not a hard feat. Women, who worked through their contract, usually became teachers “yarite” of the new arrivals.

For the yujo of the brothels of Yoshiwara, life of a girl began when arriving at the brothel, where she was examined by a doctor and declared ready to start working. Usually the girls got the title “kamuro” (teenage girls assisting upper-class women) but after being constantly evaluated they got the rank yujo, which meant that they could start their learning, but within that term there were various ranks which were given in an orderly fashion depending on their value for the yukaku. The highest honour of a yujo was to be dubbed “tayu”, a status so high that men competed eagerly for their attention. Just below them were the “koshi” who thought they were also of high rank but were merely one third of the price of what a tayu cost. Next in line were “sancha”, women who used to work as teahouse waitresses but turned courtesans, and their fee was one third of the koshi’s. Women who belonged to any of the three mentioned before could call themselves “oiran” (high-ranking courtesan), but the next step down from them, were the “tsubone”, prostitutes who worked from their own

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rooms and the lowest of the low were the “hashi”, costing so little that it was only about one-hundredth of a tayu’s price.\textsuperscript{105}

While sources do not specify the clothing the yujo wore, they do mention that the yujo wore extremely ostentatious clothes. However the court ladies wore more plain, elegant clothes, which may have been the precedent for the clothes geisha wore.

It may seem that any girl could become a yujo, but the fact of the matter was that looks were very important to the owners of the brothels. In the next chapter there is a rather long description of how a girl should look and a lot smaller and concise description of how she should not look. Furthermore Dalby notes: “The career prospects of a bimbo, no matter how gorgeous, would have been limited”.\textsuperscript{106} This leads to the speculation about the mind of the young girls, apparently they needed to be clever as well as have the right appearance.

\textbf{ii. Qualities or abomination}

The women referred to in the chapters during Edo period (1600-1868) are not in any way court ladies, who were specifically connected with Heian period (794-1185). Furthermore, a courtesan or a yujo are prostitutes, although all three names are used in the above chapters. The term geisha, while explained in a later chapter, keeps reoccurring in these chapters as well, since the two types of pleasure women intertwine for at least a century before the geisha becomes more successful as an entertainer and a pleasure woman, rather than the courtesan. Masuda for example experienced the same fate as the young girls sold to the brothels in the cities, although she had the professional title geisha. The fact that the prostitutes or yujo had so many things in common with the geisha makes the difference between the two professions, all the more intriguing, that is if there are any differences.

Most of the girls in the compounds during the Edo period (1600-1868) brought from the poor countryside, and sold into a brothel in the big cities. As mentioned above a girl needed specific looks to succeed in the world of prostitution,

as well as a clever mind. The prostitution business was clearly no place for someone that did not have her wits about her. This extract is taken from Liza Dalby’s book of what an exemplary yujo should look like:

“Her eyes should be a little large, with dominant black pupils. Eyebrows should be close together, on the smoky side. The face should have the shape of a melon seed. The nose depends on the shape of the face, but is important. Fingers and toes should have delicate nails, fingers tapered and supple, and double-jointed hands are good. Her demeanor can be improved by training. A small waist and legs that are long between the joints are good. Stocky women become worse with age. The top of the head should be flat and not pointed. But it is all too rare to see a woman who has everything perfectly together”.

There were of course also various points, which disqualified a woman from this line of work, such as this text below explains.

“What points would disqualify a woman? They included a low bottom, furtive or droopy eyes, a big mouth, buck teeth, chinlessness, kinky hair, bowlegs, or a flat nose”.

Looks were not everything though, a courtesan had to have a quick wit and be able to keep up an interesting conversation, and above all she was not allowed to use foul languages, so this job was not for those dull of wit.

“With the prohibition on vulgar speech, another parallel with Disneyland comes to mind. There, the staff is drilled to uphold an image of friendly wholesomeness in dress, speech, and manner. The effect of Yoshiwara was not wholesomeness, of course, but the idea of constantly supporting an illusion through behaviour is the same”.

Another quality was that the women, albeit be it yujo or geisha, were expected to fake orgasms, which required them to be good at acting, which may not have suited neither one. Having looked more closely at the yujo and their features, it is time to

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take a closer look at their lives inside the Yoshiwara compound, which was probably among the biggest enclosures for prostitutes during Edo period (1600-1868).

### iii. The life of a yujo/courtesan in Yoshiwara

The girls who were picked up from the countryside did not become courtesans overnight. There was a certain order for newcomers, which the brothels followed to the letter, starting by transforming the girls with a bath and new clothes. As Masuda who was also sold as a girl, albeit to a geisha house, mentioned in her autobiography, her first day, after being washed and clothed was probably the best of the many years to come. The very next day the real world of the geisha house kicked in, an experience, which is likely to have been the same for the girls sold to brothels in the many pleasure districts in Japan.

Upon arriving the girls were washed, clothed and fed, and given a physical examination, it was only after this process was over that the girls could start their duties at the brothels. They started in the lowest possible positions and then worked their way up to the highest standing, which was to become an “oiran”.\(^{110}\) If a girl succeeded to gain the highest status, she was initiated into the ranks of the others by a sexual ceremony, called “mizuage”, which the customer paid an extremely high prize for if the girl was still a virgin. Before going through the initiation itself, the girls got to practice with dildos and were taught to fake orgasm, since they often had several clients a night and needed to conserve their strengths, this seems to have applied to both courtesans only. They were considered the sex professionals.\(^{111}\)

Masuda talks about a “mizuage” but she does not go into detail, the normal Japanese is rather shy when it comes to talking about sex with others, despite the sex industry being huge.\(^{112}\) If a kamuro did not make it as an oiran she would make her debut as a “shinzo” (“a class of teenage proto-courtesan”\(^{113}\)), who could gain a higher rank if she was lucky, but if she was not she was put in the windows of the

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\(^{111}\) Liza Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Vintage, 2000), 56.

\(^{112}\) (Oral source, Matsubaya, Osamu, explaining about phonebooths and love hotels, 1989, Ueno district in Tokyo.)

Yoshiwara for anyone to buy for the the hour or night. They did have an alternate duty, which was to fill in for the oirans if they were occupied and to help them in any way possible, apart from having sex with customers. As it happens the courtesans in those times were better dressed than the geisha, at least according to Dalby’s research, though by better, she may means flashy (see the chapter above). The reality of the situation soon dawned on the young girls, but by then they were a property of some house or another and needed to abide by the rules.

Male geisha started appearing in parties around 1600, which will be elaborated more in later chapters about geisha, but by the year 1800 women geisha had increased in numbers and were already beginning to out-stage the courtesans, so the government and the owners of the brothels had explicit laws put in place, restricting the geisha to entertainment, void of sexual favours, in a feeble vain to keep their prostitution business prospering.

“By a Yoshiwara regulation that was in effect from the time the profession originated, geisha were not permitted to solicit nor compete for a yujo’s clients; they were entertainers, not prostitutes, although there have always been some geisha who have flouted the rule”.

This however did not work and in the end the Yoshiwara became more of a tourist attraction for everyday tourists, of all genders, although today there are some brothels still being run, but as Rowley mentioned in her article, mostly by organized crime. Perhaps the stance the government took right away may have nourished the exquisite aesthetics, which are associated with the profession of geisha. Even today they are still appreciated and have become emblematic for the nations aesthetics.

The information, shared by Dalby, about the young girls, who came from the countryside were similar to Masuda’s own description of herself when she was sold to a geisha house, which is chapter six, two. The lives of those girls, who thought they were being given a chance to do something great with their lives, were without a doubt crushed from day one, not unlike Masuda’s first day. Sure enough they got

clothed and fed, the prize they received, is however dishonour their entire lives. Keeping this information in mind, the next chapters will focus on the life of a geisha, as described by Masuda in her memoirs and in Dalby’s research.
VI. Who were the aesthetically refined women called geisha?

The prostitutes of Yoshiwara, were as mentioned above, girls from the rural countryside, sold to the brothels for money, which was a similar experience for some girls, like Masuda, in the geisha houses. Although the Japanese government, has had a hard time defining geisha, the term translated in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, is likely to be the traditional definition. “A Japanese girl or woman who is trained to provide entertaining and lighthearted company especially for a man or a group of men”.\textsuperscript{117}

The geisha first seen at a party in the 1600’s were men, bearing a drum and acting like the jesters in medieval Europe, which earned them the names “hokan” (jester) and “taiko-mochi” (drum bearer). Much later the first female geisha joined the parties also carrying a drum, hence the name “onna taiko-mochi” (female drum bearer). Although men ruled the geisha scene for more than a century, women were quickly becoming more popular among male customers. Their names changed from onna taiko-mochi to “onna geisha” (female geisha) although in Kyoto they were and will always be called “geiko” (geisha). The onna geisha overtook the profession, which still remains a fact to this day, when the term geisha is mentioned.

As many girls who became yujo in Yoshiwara, Masuda was also sold to the geisha house, but the main difference of the two, was that geisha had more security, as has been argued by John S. Rameyer and which will be enumerated in chapter seven. The life in a geisha house relied on how good a person was in pleasing everyone, especially the mother of the house, referred to as “okasan” by those lower in rank. Furthermore the geisha, had to be careful to stay on the good side of their elder sisters (the geisha who were already there, but the sisters’ rank was normally that of a “maiko” (a girl who has not undergone the mizuage initiation) or simply a fully fledged geisha.\textsuperscript{118} Masuda mentions having been a “novice” when she came to the geisha house, which basically meant she was in the process of learning all about what makes a geisha. After being a “novice”, girls became apprentices, which were also called “hangyoku” (han means half and “gyokudai” was the word for wages), “half a wage”. Later after her initiation she became a fully-fledged geisha, and when

\begin{footnotes}
\item[118] Liza Chrifield Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Vintage, 2000), 5.
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her contract with the geisha house was finished, she became a tip-taker, one who gets to keep her tip, but everything else is profit for the geisha house.

In 1600’s geisha were seen as artists, like in today’s society, but the fact of the matter was that the government was not sure what to do with these artists, and into which category to place them. In late eighteenth century, there were several different kinds of geisha, “shiro” (white) geisha, who only entertained guests, while the “korobi” (tumble) geisha who basically had sex with guests. There were “kido” (gate) geisha who played music at the entrances of carnivals, mainly to attract customers, and then there were “joro” (whore) geisha who “were probably not hired for their musical skills”.119

There were former dancing girls called “odoriko” in feudal times, who were now known as “machi geisha” (town geisha) and their definition was somewhat different. They were entitled to sleep with customers if they so wished or in those days it was really called “grant the pillow”.120 This act put the machi geisha in the same category as the korobi and joro geisha. When the Japanese government abolished prostitution legally in 1957 after having set the Act in ’56 geisha were omitted, because they were unsure as how to define them.121

Despite having been sold to a geisha house, Masuda Sayo strived to obtain a better life for herself and her younger brother. Masuda’s story, while similar to many stories of girls with her background, poor people from the countryside, she was remarkable for the fact that she was prepared to try any work which presented itself to her in order to survive. Which she ultimately did, and wrote about it, making her one of few geisha who have had the courage to write using their own names, many rely on aliases, for their and their family’s protection. The next chapter follows her life from early childhood and until she gained peace with herself and her past.

i. A pioneer and a remarkable woman

Although the geisha in cities seem to have had various functions and social levels, the geisha living in the countryside, known as hot spring geisha, were mostly

119 Liza Chirifield Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Vintage, 2000), 59.
121 Liza Chirifield Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Vintage, 2000), 60.
there to act as “korobi” or “joro” geisha for the customers. Their role, while not quite the same as the court ladies’, they were certainly not used for reproduction, was to try and snag the rich men of society as benefactors, not unlike the court ladies of Heian period (794-1185). When women working in geisha houses or brothels, experience the society as a harsh, prejudiced place, they must become timid and closed off. Which is why when Masuda wrote her story, that must have been an act of courage. In the translator’s introduction of Masuda’s story, she mentions that there were not many women who ventured to write about their past.

“Masuda wrote her autobiography in 1956/1957, more than a decade after she had left the geisha world. Very few geisha have written their memoirs. To the best of my knowledge, Masuda’s is the only full-length autobiography by a former hot-springs-resort geisha in existence. Most such geisha, like the model for the character Komako in Kawabata’s Snow Country, have preferred to disappear into obscurity.”

Masuda was born to her unwed parents, which resulted in her being cared for by her mother’s younger brother. He was equally poor and when a landowner he was acquainted with approached him with a nursemaid job for Masuda, her uncle immediately took the deal. The most important lesson Masuda learned, while taking care of the landowner’s children, was to never trust other people. Some years later she was back on the road with her uncle quite happy, never imagining where he was taking her. She had been sold to an okiya (geisha house) in Upper Suwa, called Takenoya. She had a dark tan from having worked outside in the country for the landowner, which her okasan (mother of the geisha house) immediately mentioned, because like in Genji, this was considered un-refined. In today’s Japanese society, dark skin may still be found undesirable, especially in the Northern parts of Honshu. Nonetheless Masuda had become a novice (the lowest rank in the household) in the geisha house. Masuda’s description of her experience in this new house was akin to what is sure to have been the experience of the girls who were sold to brothels in Edo (1600-18687) cities.

“I was put in the bath, given a change of clothes, and taken to my Elder Sister’s room. I was utterly amazed. Kimono and underrobes more beautiful even than those the daughter of the landowner had worn to festivals were hanging there on

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123 Facts procured from my supervisor Gunnella borgeisdóttir, 2011.
bamboo hangers. Once, when I was a nursemaid, I’d taken a peek at one of the
daughter’s picture books. There was a drawing of a beautiful palace in it, and I’d
whispered to Mii-chan, the tenant farmer, “What’s this?” “It’s the Palace of the
Dragon King,” he told me, “and the pretty princess is Oto Hime.” Now, really, it
seemed as if I’d ended up in the Palace of the Dragon King and so my Elder Sisters
must be Oto Hime. How happy I’d be, I thought, if I, too, could live in such a beautiful
place!124125

The description of the girls who came to Yoshiwara from the poor countryside
is similar and seems to have conveyed their feelings very well.

“The little girls brought in from the sticks no doubt thought they had entered a
fairyland when they arrived in Yoshiwara. Their mouths would have hung open at the
fabulous vision of an oiran parading to her engagement, and their eyes would have
popped at the full dishes of white rice they were given at meals. (Peasants were lucky
to have coarse millet!) They played with the other little girls, received beautiful
kimono to wear, and began learning the language and etiquette of the yukaku”.126

Masuda was quick to reconsider her first impression of the “Palace” the very
next day, when her real work started. She was to clean everything inside and out and
wash the clothes of each member of the house, as well as run errands for her elder
sisters and her mother. Her okasan and elder sisters kept scolding her for everything
and anything, and decided to call her “Low” because they thought she was stupid, and
made constant fun of her. Despite this, Masuda was happy at the okiya because
sometimes, when the women were in a good mood, they gave her sweets and were
rather nice to her. Although a temporary one, kindness that she had not experienced
often in her short life. This may also have been the case of girls at the brothels, where
there was also the hierarchy of elder sisters and mothers.

After a while it was time for Masuda to start learning geisha lessons, because
as a girl sold to an okiya normal school was not optional, instead the girls were sent to
a special geisha school operated and run by the geisha officials. True to form other

124 The Palace of the Dragon King (ryugu) and his daughter Princess Oto (oto hime) appear in the Japanese fairy tale
“Urashima Taro.” The story tells of Urashima, a fisherman, who is transported to the palace and falls in love with the Princess
and lives happily for three years before deciding to return home to old parents. The Princess gives a box, and when he returns
and sees that three hundred years have passed, he opens the box, despite she having forbade him to do so, and instantly becomes
126 Liza Chrifield Dalby, “Courtesan and Geisha: The Real Women of the Pleasure Quarter”, in Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton’s
The Women of the Pleasure Quarter: Japanese Paintings and Prints of the Floating World, with contributions by Kazue Edamatsu
children teased the girls as they went to their special school, calling out abuse to them. “Hey! Here come the geisha kids! What a stink! What a stink!” they’d say, throwing stones at us, making faces, jeering”. Her elder sister, although only by a couple of years, named Hamako, was furious about the double standards the children were showing them, since they knew that their fathers frequented the geisha house and that they were in fact quite taken with the geisha themselves.

The second important lesson Masuda learned during her geisha years, was that she wanted to become beautiful so she could rule over everyone, and succeed in the geisha world. Her elder sister Hamako was beautiful and the other sisters at the geisha house, kept comparing the two of them, which was never good for Masuda. According to her, the studies were quite hard, mostly because the teachers were followers of the physical part of learning, hence bruises and black marks were sure to cover the girls’ bodies. Masuda, because she had a hard time with her studies, did not want to increase the physical pain, and therefore refrained from learning how to write, but she did learn with encouragement from her lover Motoyama in her thirties.

Another part of the education was called “cold practice”128, where the girls sat outside and practiced their “shamisen”129, which proved to be an even greater endurance than the other lessons in school. The elder sisters had them do “cold practice” at home as well and if the girls made two or three errors the elder sisters would scold them and if they cried, they would cast them out into the snow. This proved to be terrible thing, for a girl, who was already bleeding from her hands from playing an instrument, and when Masuda experienced this first hand, she cursed the day she was born, such was her trauma.130

In most societies today, many children are suffocating from too much love from their parents, to the point of being paranoid. This was obviously not the case for children, when Masuda was growing up. Her mother seems indifferent to her and only treated her as a cash cow. The girls who came to the okiya were beaten at the slightest mishap, and sometimes a girl died, due to violent behaviour on behalf of the okasan or

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129 The instrument “shamisen” is made of four pieces of wood. It is covered on the top and bottom with cat skin or dog skin. To protect the top skin from the blows of the plectrum, a sort of wooden spatula with a short handle, a small half moon of skin “bachigawa” was added at the top and centre. The long neck of a shamisen is often made of three pieces of wood which can be disassembled when carried. The thickness of the neck varies according to the type of music, the instrument is meant for. The strings were made of three twisted silk strings, although today they are made of nylon. (William P. Malm, Japanese Music and musical instruments, Chapter eight: The shamisen and its music. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970, 185-6.)
other members, albeit be it accidentally.\textsuperscript{131} This description, gleamed from Masuda’s autobiography, girls all over Japan who were sold to brothels and geisha houses might have experienced during their lives. While in the hospital after being pushed down the stairs by the okasan of the geisha house, Masuda discovers her real name, but up until then Masuda had been called “Crane” or “Low” and at the landowners “nursie”\textsuperscript{132}. Moreover, while staying at the hospital, she experiences some kind of freedom and happiness, because people are kind to her and only want what is best for her.

When Masuda was sold to the geisha house, she calculates it must have been the equal of twenty thousand in today’s society, which roughly equals about two months worth in Japanese Railway commuter pass. Rates of geisha had a specific currency, called “tama” (jewels)\textsuperscript{133}, which was a euphemism for money. As mentioned above Masuda enters the okiya as a novice, which means she takes care of all cleaning and running errands, instead they clothe and feed her. When a novice becomes an apprentice geisha, she is allowed to parties and can dance, but never stay the night. The pay of a geisha was called “gyokudai”, but the apprentices only got “han” (half) and therefore they were usually known as “hangyoku” (half a pay).\textsuperscript{134}

In order for a hangyoku to become a fully-fledged geisha, she needs to take exams, in front of almost everyone associated with the geisha world, including the police and various geisha officials who were most likely government employees.\textsuperscript{135} After becoming a geisha full time, all the pay “marugakae” plus tips, went to the geisha house and the girls got food and clothes instead, but after two years, the geisha got to keep their tips themselves, which was called being a “goshugidori” (tip taker). Furthermore, the geisha house gave the girls their kimonos but they had to take care of their everyday clothes by themselves.\textsuperscript{136}

According to Ramseyer’s article, geisha were bound to the okiya, by a contract, called an indenture. The same applied to the courtesans of Edo period’s (1600-1868) prostitution compounds. Each girl had to service the brothel/okiya for up to ten years, although this varied for each okiya. The girl was stuck, even though a

\textsuperscript{131} An average worker got 2 yen a day. The geisha house on the other hand paid 100yen to the child’s parents as consolation. (Masuda Sayo, Autobiography of a Geisha, trans. Gaye G. Rowley (Great Britain: Vintage, 2004), note 5,176.)
\textsuperscript{133} Masuda Sayo, Autobiography of a Geisha. (Published by Vintage 2004). Translated by Gaye G. Rowley. 43.
\textsuperscript{134} Masuda Sayo, autobiography of a Geisha, trans. Gaye G. Rowley (Great Britain: Vintage, 2004), 44.
\textsuperscript{135} Liza Dalby, Geisha (Great Britain: Vintage, 2000), 59.
patron bought her contract and married her or made her his mistress, a fate equally sad. However to thank the okasan for procuring a patron, the girl would work for one more year, and then leave to be with her patron. 137 Most girls at geisha houses were bought, and became mistresses, others kept working for full pay, and were treated as lodgers at the okiya, and they were entitled the use of the okiya’s name. However if the girls were unpopular, the geisha house stood to lose money and had the rights to “shift” them to another okiya. The Geisha registry office took care of the business regarding every geisha, even the money side. They were like a liason between the okiya and the restaurants and inns, with which they did business. This kind of management was probably very affective, although, they resemble the police, only for geisha. The registry office also had a wall with nameplates of every geisha, who were then divided into two groups, the “free” and the “engaged”, so they knew where they were located at all times. Another of the office’s businesses, was to oversee the “danna” (patron) system, while helping the okasan finding the right danna for a fully-fledged geisha, they also acted as law enforcements, trying to secure that the geisha only slept with her danna. Those geisha who wanted to sleep around with other men, had to be very careful, while lucrative (see point system below), it was preferable to sleep with men from out of town. If a geisha slept with another geisha’s danna, she was likely to be subject to ridicule and humiliation by said geisha. However if the danna found out, he might ask the geisha to leave, or forbid her to see other men.

There was also a point system for a geisha, which stipulated that she got only one point for sleeping with her danna, two points for someone who was not her “danna” and for only sleeping with customers without spending the night, she got ten points. All this being said, there were geisha who were called “fall into bed without looking” or a “sleep-with-anyone-geisha”138, but they were looked down on by the other geisha, who considered themselves to be “first class” geisha, the ones who did not sleep with just anyone.139 In the unlikely event that she did, this may have applied to courtesans as well, and became pregnant, she would usually have an abortion,


Once a geisha became fully-fledged, she had to make the customers think that she was sweet and sexy, and that took some studying for Masuda, but she was a quick to learn the trade.

“\textit{First, you watch a customer’s face and wait until your eyes meet. The moment your eyes meet, you flutter your eyelashes two or three times, then lower your eyes and look at him again. If your eyes meet this time, then you’ve timed it just right...You have to pretend that your cheeks are blushing uncontrollably, put your hands to your face, stand up, and rush out into the corridor”}.”\footnote{Masuda Sayo, Autobiography of a Geisha, trans. Gaye G. Rowley (Great Britain: Vintage, 2004), 56.}

At the age of sixteen Masuda was sold to her first “danna”, named Cockeye, who looked more like her grandfather, but of course okasan sold her virginity four more times, which was quite common in the business of geisha and courtesans. She later became his mistress and moved in with him. Though, after falling in love and being cast out of his house, she found her way back to her uncle’s, where she even met up with her brother, whom she had thought was lost to her forever. The job her aunt got her, was at a mill, and was totally different from her last one. Having never done manual labour in a factory before, she felt that every bone in her body was crushed and her joints ached. Furthermore the food the people ate in the countryside, was unbearable for her, she could not swallow it, even though she was extremely hungry.

“\textit{For lunch they ate boiled sweet potatoes, but with no salt to put on them. For the evening meal they had what they called “grilled rice cake ” (yakimochi), but not even the white sort, made of wheat flour, that you get in town; they were just balls of flour made from barley that had been milled, hulls and all. They roasted them in the hearth, tapping and blowing off the ashes as they ate.” \textit{Until just three days ago, at Cockeye’s house, I’d had nothing but good food to eat.”}”\footnote{Masuda Sayo, Autobiography of a Geisha, trans. Gaye G. Rowley (Great Britain: Vintage, 2004), 100.}

The next year in Masuda’s life were tainted with the hardship of poverty and near starvation. She took on several low paying jobs, such as waitressing at a noodle shop, forageing in the countryside and bonding with a Korean gang, and managed to
put her brother through school. Just as life was becoming as she had dreamed of, her brother became sick of intestinal tuberculosis and had to be moved to a hospital to get treatment in the form of shots, which cost about 600 yen each, so in desperation Masuda found job as a geisha in the local “flower-and-willow” district, called Hasuike.

“By that time, geisha too were no longer what they had been before the war, they had become no more than mere prostitutes.”

Her brother heard about her new job, even though she tried lying to him, and later threw himself off the roof so she would not have to sell herself again for his sake. After his suicide Masuda became listless and deeply distraught for about a month, and hardly eating anything, but managed to pull herself together long enough, in order to bury her brother in Suwa, next to his father.

After her brother’s death she met the love of her life, the man she fell in love with, when staying with Cockeye. His name was Motoyama san, and they spent a pleasant time together, before they had to break it off. This left her distraught and almost suicidal, which did not subside until she met a hermit in the mountains of Shiojirir pass, who helped her overcome her fatal behaviour. She went to Toyoshina, which is north of the Shiojiri pass, north of Lake Suwa, although both are in Nagano prefecture. There she got a job as a waitress at a restaurant, and she started buying books for the children in the streets, and telling them stories. She wanted to give something back, and also to make their childhood better than she had. When the children told her that all her stories were already available at the school library, she started to make up stories, to their enjoyment. The children enjoyed her stories so much that she realised there was another kind of love, one that came from helping others and doing something nice for them. This overwhelmed her so much that she decided she was done with sleeping around and drinking.

Some time later Masuda heard the words “Baishun kinshi rei” (prostitution prohibition ordinance- antiprostitution law that was eventually passed by the Japanese Diet in May 1956 is officially known as “Baishun boshi ho” (the Prostitution Prevention Act.) and “social welfare” in the radio, which shook her

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world up and some of her calmness she had acquired was substituted by anger. Masuda’s view was that no matter if you had the laws preventing prostitution, the problem, would not go away, even though some people wanted to save the prostitutes. Later in life Masuda got a job which paid 350 yen a day, working at a rice field, a job the others were sure she was not cut out for, but this was of course not such a feat considering where she had worked her whole life. After the rice planting was over, she got a job minding children which she was extremely happy with, and she felt finally happy and content in her heart.

Masuda was one of the lucky women, who got out of the geisha profession, as well as the prostitution business, before the government passed the Prostitution Prevention Act of 1956. In order to get a better grasp of the effect of the laws on pleasure women, a brief introduction of the Pontocho water business will be included. The Pontocho, although not affected by the laws of 1956, had been subject to similar laws about hundred years before, which goes to show how society repeats itself. Furthermore the women then seem to have responded to the laws back then as the women responded to the Act of 1956.
VII. The Prostitution Prevention Act- Success or Failure

At the end of Masuda’s story the government has introduced the Prostitution Prevention Act, which changed the lives of prostitutes all over Japan for the worse. The main reason being, that what the prostitutes saw as a mere job, the Japanese government saw as a cry for help, and people, especially women of higher classes, were under the impression, that prostitutes were either experiencing with sex or in it for the pleasure. For the prostitutes themselves, this was of course far from true, which is duly noted in this chapter, about the laws and the response from the prostitutes.

In prewar Japan there were many families without the means to support themselves, which made the indenture contracts at the brothels, seem all the more enticing. The parents sold their girls into what is in current terminology referred to as slavery, and the best reference to this, is the Masuda Sayo story. During this period, most of the girls just wanted to honour their families, by helping them get food on the table, not unlike the girls in Edo (1600-1868) society’s Yoshiwara. Most women sold themselves for money, just as the girls were sold for money which here refers to nourishment. The abolitionists’ views were that these women were degrading themselves and therefore needed to be saved. Aside from the abolitionists view, and according to Rowley’s article on the subject, it may be safe to say that the prostitutes were not happy about this turn of events.

In 1924 Japan there were 550 licensed red-light districts, 50.100 licensed prostitutes and 11.500 licensed brothels. At the same time there were 77.100 licensed geisha working in Japan. The number of illegal prostitutes is unclear according to Rameyer a reliable source mentioned the number 50.000 women. The women were badly educated and some had no education, which at this time was interesting, since according to records, ninety nine percent of all Japanese primary-school-age children were in school.147

Masuda, coming from one of the poorest areas, had no education and only learned to read and write, in her late thirties. People who were not educated had very few opportunities to make money, or even get an honest work, which is the reason for

the large number of “working women” during this time. While the work itself was dirty at best, the pay was unarguably good.

According to records from a northern prefecture, women who worked as prostitutes earned 884 yen per year, geisha got 575 yen a year, a bar maid who often solicited sex as well got 518 yen, and waitresses who were often involved in sex got 210 yen, while other jobs paid 130 yen a year. As previously discussed the government built a hierarchy of legal prostitution, starting with licensed geisha who were not allowed to sleep with men, but were mere entertainers who supposedly had some artistic background. Despite being banned from having sex, most geisha performed that act as well, most likely because it simply paid more.148

A cut below the geisha, were the prostitutes. Customers preferred licensed prostitutes to unlicensed, because of three factors, which were, that licensed prostitutes worked under the law, not against it, hence it was much safer, and a police raid was not likely. Secondly their health was checked about once a week, and they all got a full thorough physical when they entered the brothels. Thirdly they were considered more attractive by customers and as a fact, unlicensed prostitutes were usually older than the licensed ones. Prices also varied depending on whether a prostitute was licensed or not, and in which rank as a prostitute she was.149

In 1872 there was an incident with a Russian ship in Yokohama harbour, which was in violation of the human trafficking laws. When the Japanese were trying to help the Chinese men forced to be there, they were confronted by their own slavery, which was a huge embarrassment for them. This resulted in the decree stipulating that women could in fact leave the brothels and return home without a debt, they basically liberated all indentured prostitutes. This decree did however not ban prostitution.150

The courts decided that since prostitution is not sanctioned by religion but is licensed by law, the prostitute had the right to quit her job but she was legally bound

to pay what she had borrowed, although this decision varied according to different cases.\textsuperscript{151}

The interesting thing about the different views people had on the indenture contracts, was that most saw them as a trap for women, which in the end stripped them not only of their self dignity, but also of the money, so all their lives were spent in slavery. According to other sources in Ramseyer’s article, the majority of brothel owners were in fact very honest and dependable in this regard. In the cases of geisha, this was different, whereas the indenture contract was different. The contract ensured the geisha that absolutely no one would try and rob her of her money, and she would receive food and shelter and she would also be free to leave before her time expired.\textsuperscript{152}

The truth, however, is often different than seen in statistics and reports. In Rowley’s piece about the prostitutes’ side she depicts the lives of pleasure women from 1950’s. A woman by the name of Kanematsu Sachiko, retired women’s consultant from the Kabukicho entertainment area in Shinjuku, Tokyo, has a rather accurate number concerning the wages of the prostitutes working in this section.

\textit{“An overnight stay cost between 4,000 and 10,000 yen and a “short time” between 2,000 and 5,000 yen, Kanematsu recalls. Money earned was split 60 percent to the brothel, 40 percent to the women. From the 40 percent the women kept, the brothel also took money to cover telephone calls, bedding, tissue paper, prophylactics, cleaning, and heating; and some brothels also charged for food and room rental. Nonetheless exploited though they surely were, it is certainly no inconceivable, given these prices, that women working in the Kabukicho district could also have cleared 30,000 yen per month.”}\textsuperscript{153}

Masuda worked as a prostitute briefly in 1952\textsuperscript{154}, in one of the smaller red-light districts of Chiba, but her wages were probably a lot less than 30,000 yen per month. Even so she was most likely getting more than her trading on the black market.

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The reason for women turning tricks, was mostly because other jobs paid so little and the Welfare system did not support those who had a “close relative”, which meant no one who had a parent, child, sibling or a spouse, who could make a living.155

In “The Prostitution Prevention Act” which was passed in May of 1956 and went into effect in April of 1957, Article 3 states “Nanbito mo, baishun o shi mata wa sono aitekata to natte wa naranai” (No person shall commit prostitution or become the client of a prostitute). The laws were made to target the licensed prostitution business, which the government sanctioned, but even though they made laws, prostitution was still in bloom, just not the licensed one. The abolitionists were mostly thinking about the social ideals, and started reformatory institutions for the rehabilitation of prostitutes. As one Socialist Diet representative Kamichika Ichiko (1888-1981) said: “We have no choice but to punish the 500,000 some prostitutes in order to protect the way of life of 40 million respectable married women.”156 They naively thought that this could eradicate all prostitution in Japan, and refused to associate the words “poverty” and “prostitution” together. The abolitionists were under the allusion that the women working as prostitutes did this only because their families had indentured them to brothels as children or that they were curious about the profession. They were trying their best to save the women, and as a part of the Act there was a clause that “explicitly prohibited taking advantage of a kinship relationship to encourage, cause, or profit from prostitution.”157 Kamichika named her campaign for abolishing prostitution, “Sayonara ningen baibai” (Farewell to trafficking in human beings), but she strongly believed they had abolished this demon from society.158 This is why Masuda and others in her situation were angry, because, while the government controlled the businesses, the prostitutes at least had medical check-ups once a week and had contracts with the brothels, and were able to practice “safe sex”.

After this campaign, the prostitutes, if caught, were moved to a rehabilitation centre, where they felt that their honour might not be restored, since they would always be considered has-been prostitutes. The women wanted compensation from the

government, for terminating their contracts and casting them out on the streets. They wanted respectable jobs, where they did not have to worry about their families starving while they were in rehabilitation, and were they could just rehabilitate themselves. Whereas this was only done out of poverty, they would have no qualms about taking care of their own rehabilitation. Of course with the laws there came a strong argument from the prostitutes and they formed a union, wrote in newspapers and tried to force their issues with the women abolitionists.\textsuperscript{159}

\textit{“Even if prostitution is prohibited, those women will have nowhere else to go; they’re at their wit’s end. Some people in the business say that all they’ll have to do is turn their houses into inns and have their women work as “maids”.”}\textsuperscript{160}

According to Rowley this may very well have been the case, since in a survey done in Japan in April 1957, about eighty percent of prostitutes said they would keep working as such, despite the law, forty-six percent said they would move to an area where the inns and bars are legal, but prostitution was not. About eleven percent wanted the normal family life, that had nothing to do with prostitution and about twenty percent were going to try living as streetwalkers.

When the government enforced the laws banning prostitution, the brothels did exactly what Masuda talked about in the reference above. They all changed to inns, bars and restaurants, and employed the women as “maids”. One woman who got work as a maid, recalled that she had been happy, despite the maid costume they were made to wear, and even though she owed the inn about 110,000 yen, she got to keep much more of her income, than when the inn was a brothel.\textsuperscript{161}

Rowley goes on to explain that the industry being on the outskirts of law was taken over by organised crime, where it supposedly remains today. When the new laws were established in society, Japanese men began travelling out of the country for sexual relations and as the economy of the country rose, fewer women were forced to work as prostitutes. Some mistresses even turned to tourism and put on shows for foreigner, both of the brothels and the mother’s of geisha houses.\textsuperscript{162}

VIII. Conclusion

The obvious common thread between the three types of pleasure women are the way in which they enter their professions. As Masuda’s story conveys, her childhood consisted of being sold into some form of slavery, for money. According to Dalby’s articles, this is true for the courtesans of brothels as well, but what about the court lady, during Heian period (794-1185) and the fact that she was sold into a similar sex slavery for money and increased status for her family. The only difference being that the court lady was receiving the highest honour according to her society, while courtesans and geisha, only received shame and dishonour from their societies.

As mentioned in the chapter four, Murasaki Shikibu displays the Heian society (794-1185) very accurately, which in turn makes it obvious, how intolerant the aristocrats were towards poor country people, and probably toward each other. Further emphasis is on this point, in the descriptions of how the aristocrats responded to becoming a laughing matter at court, something they tried to avoid at all cost. Within all this restriction, court ladies were forced to honour their contracts to the noble men they either married or became mistresses to, which meant staying loyal, whilst the men slept around, and above all show the right behaviour at all times. Keeping up this facade, must have been stressful at best, which may account for people dying young, that or there could have been various sexually transmitted diseases circulating among the aristocrats. Which ever is true, jealousy and waiting was a part of a court lady’s daily life.

The courtesans of Edo period (1600-1868), were also captured as sex slaves. Sold to dubious establishments by their parents, and whored out to anyone with the finance to pay for a night here, or even a month there. Although less refined than the aristocratic ladies, they were considered on top of their game, in their heyday. As the court ladies, they were not free to make their own decisions, but were left to the mercy of the owners of the brothels, who also owned them, at least for as long as their contract stipulated. Their daily lives consisted of equal jealousy and waiting, while they hardly needed to wait too long for their lover each time, some were waiting for a better life, and freedom.

Almost the exact same thing can be said about the lives of geisha stretching from Edo period (1600-1868) up until mid twentieth century, or at the time when
Masuda was writing her autobiography. Violence seems to have followed the girls every step when, living at the okiya, from the okasan and elder sisters of the houses, as well as aggressive customers. Surely pleasure women of all societies and status, must know some clever tricks to keep a man at a distance, and if not the women probably lay still and waited for things to be over, as Masuda experienced with one of her clients.\textsuperscript{163} Despite pleasure women having patrons who paid for them and secured logdings for them, they were perhaps even more like prisoners or sex slaves. It was one thing for a geisha or a courtesan to have multiple partners, but the idea of having one, whom they might not like, was no different from being indentured at the okiya/brothel.

Therefore the similarities are, that all women were sold for money and increased status in community, which in most cases was expressly for the men’s benefit. Heian (794-1185) court ladies traded for money and social standings, courtesans and geisha, sold to the highest bidding patron, to become his mistress, which was most likely also for his benefit, as well as affecting his social standing for the better.

At the end of this essay more questions came up, as well as a lot more reading material, concerning those questions, for example the essay does not talk much about human trafficking, which seems to have been quite usual and accepted by the government, as was prostitution, although the pleasure women must have been more upset about being sold, than selling their body for a living.

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