

Shifting Gender Roles in Japan:
A Study of Gender Performativity Utilizing Literature
Richard Sweet
Japanese Literature

Japanese literature is a great way to gain insights into the mindset of Japanese society at any one given time, so how can we use this with gender? Like all societies the Japanese have a male and female gender, and their roles within society changes as time passes. Literature is like a snapshot into the perspective of Japanese society at any one given time, and I would like to utilize four of these snapshots, spanning over one thousand years, to look into gender roles in society. However, I would also like to apply social theory to Japanese literature as well. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performances, I will analyze *Tale of Genji*, *The Captain of Naruto*, *Hizakurige*, and *Kokoro* to understand how gender roles have transformed over the last one thousand years.

Before I dive into the literature, however, I would like to explain the theory of gender performance. Judith Butler wrote the book *Gender Trouble* in 1990, where she outlined her theories. Sex determines our gender role, but not our identity. We perform our gender role through repeated performances, allowing for a standard gender binary for males and females. However, this theory is intrinsically unstable because gender roles are always shifting within society due to repeated performances. Every performance not only maintains the gender role, but simultaneously transgresses it (Elliott 2009). This creates the idea of the "ideal man" and "ideal woman"; a term used in general feminist theory. The ideal gender is what society shows to us through repeated performances, and we attempt to imitate it. Japanese society is well known for being resilient to individuality, so while this theory was made to be applicable to Western civilization, I feel that this theory can be applied to Japan.

Tale of Genji was written by Murasaki Shikibu around the early part of the 11th century and is considered to be the first novel of the world. In the story, we follow the exploits of a prince who was considered to be incredibly attractive, yet at the same time he was a lovesick

puppy. I will be focusing on a specific chapter called “Yugao” because it clearly shows how both male and female interactions and societal roles work in the beginning of the 2nd millennia. However, it is important to highlight that literature in the Heian period primarily came from the court’s perspective and is not representative of Japanese society as a whole.

Genji’s role as the playboy prince ultimately highlights what I find to be a trend with Japanese males in the Heian period. Constantly interacting with other women, he finds himself to be in love with two girls at the same time, Lady Rokujo and Yugao. While Genji was not married and therefore had no obligations, it still highlights the Heian man’s willingness to have one wife and other mistresses on the side. It was an expected performance that men of the court had to live up to.

Women of the Heian period, on the other hand, were arguably the most submissive at this time. Yugao becomes the primary example of the typical Japanese woman. Genji does not trust Yugao with his identity, hides his face in order to meet her, and ultimately keeps his distance to a girl he believes that he loves. Despite a blatant mistrust on Genji’s part, Yugao is still completely willing to have a secret tryst with the man. Using *Tale of Genji*, the ideal woman was submissive and did not argue when the man takes control.

However, *Tale of Genji* also exposes a black sheep in the form of a strong female character. Lady Rokujo was an older woman Prince Genji was living and sleeping with while having his tryst with Yugao. When Rokujo learned of Genji’s secret nighttime journeys, she went into a jealous rage. Her jealousy manifested itself into the form of a vengeful spirit which took the life of the young Yugao. While most performances for women in Heian literature followed suit with Yugao, the opposite performance also did exist. Rokujo lends herself to the

idea that the strong Japanese woman may have existed in the Heian period, but they were seen negatively and were strongly discouraged.

The Captain of Naruto was written in the 14th century, but was a story about Emperor Gosaga in the middle of the 13th century. Gosaga sees a woman in the court who is incredibly beautiful, yet when he tries to court her, she runs away and he is unable to find the woman. Eventually after a year of searching (and threatening his secretary), Gosaga's secretary finds her and follows her back to her residence where she lives with a Lower Captain as a husband. The Emperor, with his new information, sends her a summons requiring her to have a private audience with him. Despite not being pleased, the Captain allows her to go because he cannot deny the Emperor. Wanting her to live in the castle, he extends the offer out to the Captain's wife. With love in her heart for her husband, however, she declines the offer, but says it is okay for them to meet from time to time.

It is only 300 years after *Tale of Genji*, and so many things have changed. Performing as a man no longer requires one to court many women. Husbands actually live with their wives now instead of having two separate households which already creates a certain trust and disrupts the polygamy performance. Unlike most literature from the Heian period, the Kamakura period shows us there was much more of a connection and love for married couples. What is even more noticeable is that there is a shift in the absolute dominance men had over women. They allowed women to have opinions that were contradictory; there could be conversation between the two genders without domination from the men. This speaks to the progressing role of women in Japan. While still submissive, they were willing to express their opinions even at risk of punishment.

Hizakurige came out in the midst of the Edo in 1802, during the period where it was not necessary to write about the court life. Writing about commoners and their daily lives actually changes the perspective on how we can look at gender. No longer do we have people who we cannot relate to, but the everyday person with typical troubles.

Men are shown in *Hizakurige* as complete buffoons. Yaji and Kita are simple men who have decided to go on a journey. Their journey leads them to an inn where they meet a couple witches. They both become drunk and wanted to sleep with the younger witch. Kita goes in first, and then after a while Yaji follows. As it turns out Kita ended up sleeping with the older witch and Yaji tried to make out with Kita. The men were idiots who tried to realize their physical desires and in the end could not get what they wanted. More specifically with Yaji, it was interesting to see a man that was broken through financial circumstance. A man's ideal performance no longer had to be identified as one who is strong or has many lovers simultaneously. While Japanese society does not give much room for the expression of feelings, it was more possible to express distress if necessary.

Women were no longer required to stay at home. They could go out in an adventure without being tied to another man in their life. Sexual desire also no longer required initiation from the man, but the woman could also want for lust without necessarily feeling ashamed. I attribute a lot of this change in performance based on the shift from royalty and court life to the life of the average being.

My final story and a look at the 19th century come from the story *Kokoro*. *Kokoro* goes backwards from what advancement in gender was made in the Edo period. The wife, Kayo, is essentially stuck at the house. She takes care of the household, but does not go out often. However, the conversations she has with Sensei imply that the ability to express opinions

through conversation still exists. Men, on the other hand, seem to maintain the same status they took from the Edo period. It is okay for them to be weak, yet they must not show it openly. The mysteriousness of Sensei's character makes it difficult to get a good read on the ideal men's performance.

I have encountered three problems with this essay. First, I now understand why gender performance has not been applied to Japanese society. In a society which tries its best to rid itself of individuality, it is difficult to have gender performances which do not meet with the gender. Second, and what is much more problematic, is the lack of material I used for this project. Even if I had taken every story we had read in this literature course, I still feel like this project of identifying the ideal man or woman is impossible. I would need to be well-read in many different genres of literature in different time periods in order to give a comprehensive analysis of the way gender performances was and how it transgressed the norm. If I was writing a paper for my master's thesis or dissertation, then there would be much research done in the subject. I cannot identify the ideal man in a survey class. Lastly, I realized that *Kokoro* was a bad example of gender performances. I feel like it regressed to a certain degree, and I should definitely take the time to read more Meiji era literature.

Nonetheless, I do feel as if I have learned something about gender and its progression in the last millennia. While these four stories were snapshots and nothing more, there was still a sense that the ideal man or woman has definitely changed. Men no longer can partake in polygamy, and their dominance in relationships has ultimately been mitigated to a large degree. On that same token, women are allowed to express their opinions and engage in conversations with statements that do not necessarily agree with the men. I hope to take time in the future to

further my limited knowledge of Japanese literature, and would even be interested in taking a gender studies in Japan course to get a better idea of how to apply gen

Bibliography

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der related issues in Japan.