

Donald Keene essay



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The book "Anthology of Japanese Literature" by Donald Keene is a thrilling collection of stories and poetry from the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century. In particular, Heian era provides a background in which most of the stories were written about the Japanese literature.

Michitsuna and Murasaki Shikibu (drawn from the tale of Genji) are two major stories that were written during the Heian period. This era marks an important division in the Japanese history. Keene states that this period was named after the modern Kyoto. It was the peak of Japanese imperial court (Keene, 130). During this period, Japan flourished in art, literature as well as poetry. Moreover, during this era, various religions, such as Buddhism and Shinto were common. Indeed, religions blend at a higher rate compared with the precedent era of Nara. Buddha was also recognized as a religion by the Japanese during this particular era. Through Shinto gods, this religion was accepted leading to the development of the sect of Buddhism. The period also resulted in the development of various shrines that were used as places of worship by the Japanese.

Keene wrote most of his stories during this era. This is simply, because art had developed. Due to these developments, the Japanese culture started to advance (Keene, 127). In addition, Samurai class rose during this era. The rise of Samurai class precipitated the beginning of feudal period and the rule of the Samurais. Moreover, during this period, Fujiwara was the emperor. Due to the developments that the Japanese were going through compared with their neighbors, they wanted to develop their security systems by the use of guards, soldiers as well as police. Heian period is often described as

the golden age in Japan. Most of the Japanese history was written during this era.

From the book, pages 97 to 105 contain a story titled the "Mother of Michitsuna: Kagero Nikki". Pages 106 to 106, has a story titled "Murasaki Shikibu: Tugao (from the Tale of Genji)". To start with, the story Mother of Michitsuna by Kagero Nikki has several characters whose behaviors and actions evoke several ideas about the history of Japan. Michitsuna, the wife of Fujiwara Keneie is unhappy with her marriage (Keene, 130). This reflects the history of Heian woman and how they were engaged in unsatisfying marriages. As a result, some women were forced to change their attitude towards existence. Most of the marriages during this era were characterized by anti-romantic relationships. Fujiwara was an emperor. However, he could not understand the political potential in their family for succession (Keene, 103). This was the main reason of their marital problems and misunderstanding.

The amorphous nature of many marriages made them to end in undefined divorce. Nevertheless, the main cause of unromantic relationship was often caused by husbands who were engaged in multiple liaisons with other women. Thus, women would not find solace and passion from their husband, when they needed it most (Keene, 99). On the same, marriages were not formalized. The writer states that, when a woman would visit the man three times, the couples were considered married. Consecutively, there were no formalities that were followed, when divorce was taking place. This reduced the instability of most marriages. Unsuccessful love attempts are seen in the story that affects the major characters negatively. However, Kagero does

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not raise an objection that she is a second wife. She defends institutions of marriage as they form the basis of our families (Keene, 102). She argues that our behaviors in a marriage have a direct influence on stability of marriage.

Murasaki Shikibu by Tugao is another story in the book. This story is drawn from the tale of Genji. It was written, when the capital was at Heian-Kyo. The hero of the story is Genji. He is the son of the emperor. Kiritsubo also considered him as his favorite concubine. Genji's mother dies as a result of rivalry (Keene, 120). After the death, the emperor is distraught by the fateful events and loss of his love. Fortunately, the emperor makes Genji a commoner making him a member of the loyal family. Although handsome and gifted, he is feared by Lady Kokiden and her family. Later, the emperor dies and is replaced by Lady Kokiden's son. Meanwhile, Genji is sent away from the capital as he is linked with some scandals in court. However, he is able to return to the capital. Courtesy of Murasaki among other ladies, he is able to influence the court. He is preoccupied with advancing his family at the court (Keene, 130). He is persuaded to marry the Third Princess who later gave birth to a son.

From the analysis of these two stories, it is evident that the most prevailing theme is love and relationships. However, Keene analyses them from a historical point of view. Some of the events involved such as emperors, marrying, divorce, hereditary and leadership depicts the historical development of Japan during Heian period.