

# Gender masking in japanese literature term paper sample

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Japanese writing uses both Kanji and Kana. Kana includes both Hiragana and Katakana alphabets. A long time ago, there was no alphabet in Japan, so the characters for writing were borrowed from neighboring China. As ancient China was then ruled by the Han (Kan) Dynasty, all the characters were called Kanji and the Chinese writing is called Kanbun. Because kanji has many strokes, it takes a very long time to write and to memorize. Thus, the Japanese invented the Hiragana and Katakana. Women used the Hiragana alphabet in creating their letters and diaries. An example of the literature written in Hiragana is the Tale of Genji, a novel written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu during the Heian period. Murasaki described the early Japanese court society in her novel. Lady Murasaki was a lady-in-waiting at the royal court at the beginning of the 11th century. Information is that Lady Murasaki's favorite work is the Tosa Nikki by which she thought at first, written by a woman who is also a court lady like her. Little she knew that a man wrote it. Men also use the Hiragana alphabet in their private writings like the Tosa Nikki or known as the 'Tosa Diary' in English. Buddhist monks use Katakana in reading their scriptures whilst Kanji is the official court alphabet. Kanji has both Chinese readings (on) and Japanese readings (kun). Diaries are written to record one's experience, and observations. It also serves as a form of expressing one's emotion through words. Diarists are driven by two motives; the first was a strong consciousness of time the second is the ultimate desire to immortalize their personal experiences. (Miner 38)

Aside from that, diaries also counts as the personal biography of the person who wrote it, revealing details about his or her family backgrounds. In the days wherein technology is not yet present, diaries are the main source of

information whether during court trials or an account of a person's life. Japan is a country with a rich and interesting culture and this culture; paved way to the creations of notable works such as, the Tosa Diary, by Tsurayuki from the Ki family and the other book, Kokin Wakashu or Kokinshu, an anthology of poems that is both ancient and modern; combined and meticulously arranged to tell a story. Helen McCullough, translated both Tosa Diary and Kokin Wakashu, and the poems used in this paper are excerpts based from her translated books.

The Tosa Diary is a record of Tsurayuki's fifty-five days travel from Tosa province to Kyoto. The diary was written in a quiet humor and elegant simplicity and the passages in the diary seem surreal and almost like a time travel. Poetry is the main component of Tosa Diary wherein Tsurayuki was able to express his emotions without the judgment from the society. As a whole, tanka dominates most of the diary. A 'tanka' is a short poem and is a sub-group of 'waka' Tanka is similar to haiku because both poems describe a person's emotions, love for nature, personal thoughts and love for country. The difference between haiku and tanka is that, a haiku is a three-lined poem of seventeen syllables, whilst tanka is a poem of five lines and thirty-one syllables. Early Japanese poets use the tanka in writing mostly their thoughts in an elegant manner. Haiku, is considered more colloquial and is made only by poets outside the royal court. Waka means 'poetry' in Japanese language and the term defines both haiku and tanka as part of Japanese poetry. Tsurayuki shows his love for nature and nostalgic emotion on this tanka.

" Blossoms of the plum nostalgic for their master; at the old dwelling

blooming with the same sweet fragrance as in times now long past.” (Tosa Diary 99).

“ When I gaze far out across the blue-green sea plain, I see the same moon that appeared above the hills of Mikasa at Kasuga.” (Tosa Diary 87).

Tsurayuki wrote the Tosa Nikki (Tosa Diary) in the tenth century. At first, the diary was published anonymously, and everybody thought that the writer was a woman because the whole diary was written in Hiragana characters. In general, Tsurayuki was a nobleman who serves as governor of Tosa during the Heian period. At that time, his only focus is to record the beauty of the nature, his fear of pirates and mostly travel observations, such as this first example when he describes his journey by boat.

“ When a boatman seeks in vain to plumb the sea; thrusting with his oar, even so do we behold the boundless depths of your heart?” (Tosa Diary 76).

Tsurayuki’s keen descriptions make it possible to picture out the whole scenery. The diary was written in the Hiragana, the alphabet used by women in their private journals, so that Tsurayuki’s own gender will not be questioned by the society. In medieval Japan, male is considered the supreme beings while women are only second to men. It is therefore uncanny for him to express his lively emotion on the society. In medieval Japan, a man expressing his emotions openly is a sign of weakness. Below is an example of the vivid charming lines of Tsurayuki’s poem that express a womanly emotion.

“ The rivers of tears on the sleeves of one who goes and one who remains rise until they overflow and make beaches wetter.” (Tosa Diary 80)

**In addition, there are some instances that Tsurayuki assumed the identity of a mother on these following lines:**

“ Ponder as we may the sorrows of this bleak world. We find none more sharply than the grief a parent feels, mourning the loss of a child.” (Tosa Diary 83).

Tsurayuki also co-authored the Kokinshu, (Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times). This ancient book includes the vast collections of Japanese poems from different authors. It was considered as the first anthology, compiled under the Imperial order. Compared to the Tosa Diary, it also includes thousands of poems of varying genres. Some poems are made to express a poet's love for nature, a passionate affection for another person or a love of for the country. Below is an excerpt from the Kokinshu's love poems translated by Helen McCullough:

“ Unable to meet you, I am lost in lonely thought. My sleeves are drenched with tears abundant as the waters of a rain-swollen river.” (Kokin Wakashu 139)

“ If you care for me, please hide your love in your heart and never show it. Like the purple dye shows itself in a random-patterned robe.” (Kokin Wakashu 145)

Kokinshu has two prefaces; the first preface was written in Kana, whilst the second was written in Kanbun (Chinese characters). As I have said earlier, court officials use Kanji characters in reading public documents because the first alphabet of Japan is Kanji. Hiragana was invented later on that period, therefore, only few people could read and write Hiragana. Moreover, Kanji is the universal alphabet of both genders and this alphabet is not restricted for

the use of one gender only unlike in Hiragana. The Kokinshu preface is a little heavy for the readers and one must have a profound knowledge of the culture in order to gain an understanding. Redundancy occurs in the spring poems and the authors of each poem have a thing for word plays. Similarly, both Tosa and Kokinshu contain tanka, a poem that often portrays a certain event or emotion.

### **Tanka from Tosa Diary:**

“ Still, I cannot help looking far into the distance. Towards my homeland, when I think that, there my father lives; there my mother lives.” (88)

### **Tanka from the Kokin Wakashu, by poet Komachi:**

“ In the waking world you must, I suppose, take care, but how it pains me that you should keep out of sight even in the realm of dreams.” (146)

The purpose of poetry in the Japanese literature is only for the authors to express his or her own feelings without getting the subject of ridicule. Poetry serves as the mirror of their soul because this is the only medium wherein poets can express themselves. It is an integral part of the Japanese culture and the Tosa Diary and Kokin Wakashu are truly a creation of supreme genius. As a comparison, both works describes life in medieval Japan, the court environment, and the poet's personal reaction on everyday things. Contrary, the Tosa Diary since it is only a diary, it only serves as a historical account of a person, unlike the Kokin Wakashu. Kokin Wakashu greatly involves the whole emotion of the nation itself. Because of the poems included throughout the anthology, the reader can be able to grasp the emotions of the people who wrote the poems.

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