

Names, Naming, and Nature in *The Tale of Genji*

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The Tale of Genji, written in the early eleventh century by a Japanese woman in the imperial court, is the undisputed masterpiece of classical Japanese literature. Some critics suggest that Japanese fiction owes its existence to **The Tale of Genji** since it is the earliest work in the history of Japanese literature to set the literary standards for the narrative (Rimer 200). In terms of world literature, the presence of psychological introspection in such an early work has prompted Western critics to acclaim **Genji** as the world's first psychological novel (Morris 265), if not indeed "the oldest true novel written anywhere in the world" (Keene 187).

The hero of this novel is Prince Genji whose appearance and abilities are so brilliant that he is called Hikaru Genji, the Shining Prince or the Radiant One. He is by every Heian standard the beau ideal, and his charismatic appeal is far-reaching:

Even persons to whom Genji was nothing were drawn to him. No doubt even rough, mountain men wanted to pause for a time in the shade of the flowering tree, and those who had basked even briefly in his radiance, had thoughts, each in accordance with his rank, of a daughter who might be taken into his service, a not ill-formed sister who might perform some humble service for him. One need not be surprised, then, that people with a measure of sensibility among those who had on some occasion received a little poem from him or been treated to some little kindness found him much on their minds. No doubt it distressed them not to be always with him. (Seidensticker 63)

The first two-thirds of the story recounts Genji's early life, his rise to fame, and his last years. The central focus is on his many amative relationships and his quest for his female counterpart. The last third of the story narrates the lives of his descendants, primarily his putative son, Kaoru, and his grandson, Prince Niou. Both unsuccessfully attempt to play the earlier role of Genji: but "Genji was dead, and there was no one to take his place" (Waley 749). It is not, however, the unforgettable characterizations of Genji or his loves or the complexity of plot and subplots that make **The Tale of Genji** a Japanese classic; rather it is the realistic portrayal of the Heian society that describes not only its manners and customs but reveals its aesthetic and emotional life.

Because of similarities in scope and length and other affinities, **The Tale of Genji** is often compared to **The Remembrance of Things Past**, and its author labelled an ancient Oriental Proust. Unfortunately, we know very little about the author of this world masterpiece. She belonged to a minor though literary branch of the powerful Fujiwara family. Her father arranged for her to enter court as a lady-in-waiting to Shoshi who would later become the Empress Akiko. It was during her court service that she completed **Genji**, chapters of which were widely circulated and read in the imperial court of Heian Kyo (City of Peace, later known as Kyoto). Although she is commonly

called Lady Murasaki, we do not know her real name. Her dubbed or pen name, Murasaki no Shikibu, translates literally as lavender (violet or purple) of the Ceremonials; *Shikibu* refers to the fact that her father served as minister of the ceremonials or Board of Rites. In **The Tale of Genji**, Murasaki is the name of Genji's ideal woman and the major heroine of the novel. The word *Murasaki* also translates as lavender or violet, the color of the fuji or wisteria flower which is the first element in Lady Murasaki's family name – Fujiwara.

The fact that we do not know Lady Murasaki's real name is indicative of a feature of Heian writing and thus **The Tale of Genji**: proper names are rigorously avoided, especially among the Heian aristocracy who thought it discourteous to refer to members of their class by their actual names. The absence of proper names is also partly a result of the most prominent characteristic of Heian writing and that is what Morris calls "the fantastic lack of specificity." According to him, this reluctance to be specific can be traced to the close connection between Heian prose and classical Japanese poetry which relies on imagistic suggestion, allusion, and terse wording. Moreover, the closed nature of the upper-class Heian society (less than one percent of the entire Japanese population) also contributed to the lack of specificity; for those people living in the Heian court "the entire range of experience was so familiar that the briefest hint would suffice to convey one's meaning" (Morris 290). The Heian aristocracy preferred hint, nuance, and allusion to exposition which they found unnecessary and boring. This anecdote illustrates the Japanese distaste for verbose expression, even in daily speech:

There was once a courtier of exalted rank. One day when his son was in attendance on him, the wind blew in and made the light from the lamp flicker. The son called a servant and said, "The wind is blowing in and threatening to blow out the lamp. Put up some partitions." His father was very angry, and reprimanded him, asking him how he expected to compose poetry if he expressed himself in that way. The son, much unnerved, left his father's presence. The next man in attendance, wondering what the point of this lesson was, ventured to ask about it. The courtier replied that one should never express oneself exhaustively on a topic. (Yoshida 11)

In a novel of approximately 2500 pages with a cast of over 400 characters (not including members of the servant and working classes) and action that spans three-fourths of a century, how does Murasaki identify characters if proper names are not used? She does it in several ways:

- 1) She assigns names according to geographic location. Thus Genji's former mistress, Lady Rokujo, is the lady of the sixth ward (*Roku* = six, *jo* = ward); that is, she lives in that part of the imperial capital which is designated the sixth ward or district. The Sanjo Lady is Genji's first wife who lives in the third ward (*San* =

three, *jo* = ward). Lady Akashi is from the province of Akashi where her father is governor, and the Akashi Princess is her daughter.

- 2) Men and courtiers are known primarily by their rank in the Confucian bureaucratic system adopted from China. Women may also be referred to by the rank assigned their husbands or fathers: an example of this practice is the author's own dubbed name, Murasaki no Shikibu. Genji's lifelong friend and rival, To no Chujo, who is a member of the Fujiwara clan, is not identified by his proper name; instead he is called First Secretary's Captain in the early chapters. With each new promotion within the government, his name changes from Counsellor to Privy Secretary and finally to Minister of the Left. This system of naming and names tends to confuse the Western reader who expects that fictional characters will have solid names, and therefore, to simplify matters, most translators of Genji have elected to assign permanent titles or ranks to major characters.
- 3) Major characters are frequently assigned a poetic epithet or sobriquet from a poem (800 *waka* or poems are interspersed throughout the narrative) that may have been written to or about them. Chapter titles, key words from incidents in the story, and associated images may serve as names for characters. When Murasaki assigned no name, later readers used these same principles and themselves gave names to characters (Lin Wen-yueh 57).

The following examples illustrate this system of naming. After his first meeting with the young girl who will later be known as Murasaki, Genji composes this poem:

When will be mine this lovely flower
Of tender grace and purple [murasaki] hue?
Like the Wisteria of the bower,
Its charms are lovely to my view. (Kencho 117)

It is because of this poem that the girl will be called Murasaki. In another instance, one of Genji's lovers is named Yugao (evening glory or evening faces) because the flower blooms at the house where he first discovers her. Similarly, To-no-Chujo, another suitor, calls her Tonakatsu (wild carnation or bedflower), the flower he associates with her. After a discussion on the virtues of spring and autumn, the daughter of Lady Rokujo is called Akikonomu (the lady who loves autumn). The name of Genji's putative son, Kaoru Chujo (the Fragrant Captain), and his grandson, Niou Miya (His Perfumed Highness), anticipate the role that scent or perfume will play in their rivalry to take Genji's place:

And there was the fragrance he [Kaoru] gave off, quite unlike anything else in this world. Let him make the slightest motion and it had a mysterious power to trail off behind him like a 'hundred-pace incense.'...Kaoru, however, wished often enough that he might be free of this particular mark of distinction. He could not hide. Let him step behind something in hopes of going

unobserved, and that scent would announce his presence. He used no perfume, nor did he scent his robes, but somehow a fragrance that had been sealed deep inside a Chinese chest would emerge the more ravishing for his presence. He would brush a spray of plum blossoms below the veranda and the spring rain dripping from it would become a perfume for others who passed. The masterless purple trousers would reject their own perfume for his. Niou was his rival in everything and especially in the competition to be pleasantly scented. The blending of perfumes would become his work for days on end. In the spring he would gaze inquiringly up at the blossoming plum, and in the autumn he would neglect the maiden flower of which poets have made so much and the hagi beloved of the stag, and instead keep beside him, all withered and unsightly, the chrysanthemum 'heedless of age' and purple trousers, also sadly faded, and burnet that has so little to recommend it in the first place. Perfumes were central to his pursuit of good taste. There were those who accused him of a certain preciousness. (Seidensticker 739-740)

It is this last category of identifying characters by poetic epithets or sobriquets based upon an incident in the narrative that is of most interest. A survey of the titles of the chapters shows that Murasaki has carefully worked various flowers and other objects of nature into the chapter titles: evening glory, saffron flower, hollyhock, orange blossoms, lavender, morning glory, branch of plum, festival of cherry blossoms, wild carnation, the bell cricket, the first warbler, fireflies, the oak tree. The complete list of chapter titles also hints at the construction of the novel; Murasaki uses a seasonal cycle for its framework, and although the action spans almost a century, the reader is always aware of the time of year and time of day in which some scene takes place. Within this seasonal structure, the many specific descriptions of nature are closely harmonized and interwoven within the story itself.

The significant role that nature plays in **The Tale of Genji** and Heian prose in general reflects the sensitivity of the aristocracy to the beauties and subtle changes of nature (Morris 37). At one point in the story, Genji expresses this sensitivity:

Aside from house and family, it is nature that gives me the most pleasure, the changes through the season, the blossoms and leaves of autumn and spring, the shifting patterns of the skies.
(Seidensticker 345)

As Morris explains in his treatise on court life in ancient Japan, sensitivity to nature and its subtle moods was an essential attribute of the upper class, without which it was impossible to develop an aesthetic, as well as moral, awareness (Morris 36). Therefore, in **The Tale of Genji**, "the nature of Heian Kyo and its environs is no mere static background which the author introduces for decorative effect. It is a vital force, exerting constant influence on the characters; and it is in terms of this nature that Prince Genji and others perceive and express their emotions" (Morris 37).

Given the significant role of nature in the life and writings of the Heian aristocracy, it is not surprising to find that characters are frequently described in terms of natural phenomena: “Her noble beauty [Murasaki’s] made him [Yugiri] think of a fine birch cherry blooming through the hazes of spring” (Seidensticker 458). Comparing women to flowers is certainly not unique to Eastern literature, although Lady Murasaki’s intentions for using this technique differ from the Western writer’s. She is able to maintain the lack of specificity in description by conveying an impressionistic picture of the woman rather than providing a detailed objective one that would have been distasteful to Heian readers.

The use of the flower motif extends to the naming of women characters. Lady Murasaki gives names of flowers to many of the important women in Genji’s life: wisteria, paulownia, lavender, evening glory or evening faces, hollyhock, saffron flower. At first glance, the assignment of these names may appear to be random or haphazard. However, close scrutiny reveals that, aside from simply giving impressionistic description, the repeated use of the woman’s name and the corresponding flower image may contribute to a greater imaginative and thematic unity. For instance, in the chapter that describes the love affair between Genji and Yugao (evening faces or evening glory), her name and the repeated references to the flower yugao that is blossoming on the fence beside her house convey impressions about the woman Yugao as well as foreshadow her early death. The association of the yugao flower with this particular woman suggests her humble origins. She is a commoner just as the flower yugao is a common one. Although the yugao was beautiful, it was apparently not highly regarded by the Heian aristocracy since Genji does not recognize it (Ch. 4). The references to the fact that the yugao blooms briefly only at night and then dies foreshadow Yugao’s early and unexpected death, which incidentally occurs at night as does Genji’s first meeting with her.

Sometimes Murasaki identifies women with flowers that have similarities, thus suggesting certain relationships or affinities in the characters themselves. The three most important women in Genji’s life are named after flowers that are lavender or purple in color. His mother’s name *Kiritsubo* literally means Paulownia Pavillion; the *kiri* or paulownia, a tree native to the Orient, has purple or white blossoms. *Fuji*, the first element in the name Fujitsubo (Genji’s first love) means wisteria, and *Murasaki*, as mentioned earlier, means lavender or violet. This color, common to these three flowers, suggests affinity (Seidensticker 102). This affinity is borne out in the three women’s physical appearance; they all bear striking physical resemblances to each other. Kiritsubo and Fujitsubo, though not related, look amazingly alike. In fact, people cannot tell them apart. Although the resemblance between Murasaki and Fujitsubo can be explained (Murasaki is Fujitsubo’s niece), it is nonetheless remarkable.

In conclusion, although Lady Murasaki avoided giving her characters proper names, she devised naming systems that kept track of her complex cast of characters through three-fourths of a century. Moreover, her selection of appellations for many of the characters suggests that even in eleventh-century Japan writers were aware of the many functions of names and used them deliberately to develop characters and motifs and to advance themes.

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