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Japanese Women's Literature

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Early Modern Response

Many of the readings explored in the early modern section of class hold the same curious spirit in my opinion. Kaibara Ekken's *Onna Daigaku* laid out many expectations for women that in the late 1800 to early 1900 many women began to question. That a woman is simply a pawn is often implied in this text but also it is not a new concept in Japanese society, for example the Fujiwara family marrying their daughters in order to acquire more political power.. Most valuable women are referred to as virtuous, gentle and obedient. A woman is considered unappealing and even ruined if she expresses any personality or autonomy because her existence is led simply to honor her own parents, her brothers and later her in-laws, husband and sons. I can see where there are differences between a rich woman and perhaps a poor woman who is a servant however expectations for their behavior vary, as the a lower-class woman is not expected to behave properly at the loss of her reputation. The idea that expressing one's true opinion, true moods and exercising her self-will brings the image of a woman down makes it no surprise that we see the texts we read from Shimizu Shikin and Hiratsuka Raicho.

Asking for personhood to a modern American woman is a fight that is hard to relate with because most women in my own generation are living with the positive results of second and third wave feminism. Many of the Japanese women in the early modern period of our texts are looking for more education and rights as an individual rather than any type of political gain.

Wanting to belong to society was understandable as even in Onna Daigaku, it reads that “from her earliest youth a girl should observe the line of demarcation separating women from men.” I feel that in the Broken Ring we see a woman who has sought to fulfill her role as a wife and understands the gravity of her separation however she can’t find the words to describe that she has missed a real interactive life. Shimizu shares “as a child I rarely had the chance to meet people other than relatives and school friends. Whenever my father had visitors, my mother would rush me to the back room, telling me to stay out of sight”. This reminds me of the quote in Onna Daigaku where it is shared from Elementary Learning “a woman must form no friendship and no intimacy except when ordered to do so by her parents or middle men”. So in a sense the woman is simply a commodity, Shimizu though she realizes that there is more opportunity for her in life, she is painfully aware of how she was shortchanged in her upbringing and with her husband. Despite this, she still places her worth as a person in what her ex-husbands opinion may or may not be and with her father who has had a change of mind. This leaves Shimizu still in a state of uncertainty about her worth.

I also conclude that women in the early modern period are defined solely by their association with men. They are mere vessels to further a man’s status and birth his offspring, all while overseeing the domestic affairs. It’s no surprise that in a society such as this, where so much is balanced on the institution of marriage, that it ends up being a sensitive often black and white subject. When Hiratsuka Raicho questions what a genuine life is for a woman and what it could be aside from the oppression of patriarchal values and marriage, she is met with instant opposition though she had not even said that she is against marriage. I can see that there is a kindling of thought around what else a woman could be doing; it is a radical thought though

because women are not allowed to think of more than simply entering a domestic life in order to serve the community as a good wife and good mother. Hiratsuka Raicho among other observations, is not actually trying to start a revolution or rather she does not think that this type of open mindedness is an act of rebellion.

It is difficult for me throughout these readings to stomach the way in which women are treated. Though I can empathize with many of their inner thoughts, I can't imagine submitting myself for this type of servitude to a man and men in general. It's silly to think that one could be a good wife and mother without a real perspective on one's self and the world. I wished that Shimizu Shikin had pushed further in her essay about daughters in boxes as I can feel her as I'm sure other women were on the cusp of a great breakthrough in thought.