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## **The Evolution of a Feminist: A New Reading of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji***

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### **Abstract**

*Lady Murasaki Shikibu's 11th century story, Tale of Genji, or The Genji Monogatari, has been taught in Japanese schools for generations, and is recognized as the cornerstone of the Japanese canon. It has been celebrated as a romantic adventure story, detailing the amorous pursuits of a wonderfully handsome and artistic young nobleman, Prince Genji. However, contemporary readers see the tale differently: far from a romantic hero, Genji was a predatory seducer who brought pain, suffering, and even death to most of the objects of his affection.*

*In this paper I look at the negative impact that Genji had on those around him and demonstrate, by showing the slowly darkening attitude of the narration towards the three sets of "rival-buddies" from the three different parts of the book, that the author's own view of male privilege evolved as she was writing the book, and by the end of the tale her sympathies had completely switched from the side of the men to the side of the women whom the men victimize through their amorous pursuits. My argument is that Murasaki, to some extent, disproves Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by showing that, through the power of literary awakening, the subaltern can come to resist dominant and oppressive hegemonic authority.*

**Keywords:** *Genji, Japanese literature, Subaltern, Resistance, hegemony, Spivak*

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—literary production by women was discouraged. The reason for this is well known: women, as the “second” or “colonized” sex, were held in an inferior position by patriarchal hegemonic power; granting women “voice” could threaten the stability of that hegemonic/subaltern power structure. Men absolutely dominated literature in the West (including historical, philosophical, scientific, and political writing) until the early nineteenth century, and in Asia the male grip on literary production was even more monolithic, with some important exceptions. In nineteenth-century Europe male authors still dominated, but a shifting tide could be seen, especially in England and America, and by the early twentieth century women had become a powerful voice in all facets of literary life, an event coinciding, not by chance, with their achieving suffrage and increased political rights. A similar trend can be seen in China, Japan, and other Asian countries.

Why would patriarchal control so fear the female voice? Basing his ideas on Marxist philosophy, Antonio Gramsci famously asserted that no hegemonic dominance is completely stable, but must constantly be reasserted to overcome challenges, real or potential, from the subaltern (Gramsci, 1971). As a result, voices from outside the hegemonic domain must be suppressed, or at least carefully monitored and controlled to be sure that they pose no threat of subversion. However, it is impossible to completely monitor all of the writing by half the population. The threat from female writing always has the potential to become a threat to male dominance, no matter how loyal and committed the author may be to the status quo, because of a simple truism: writing is reified thinking. Even though a female author may begin with an abhorrence of subversion and accept absolute submission to



























































