STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE HEIAN PERIOD (794-1185): A STUDY OF THE LITERARY WORKS OF MURASAKI SHIKIBU AND SEI SHONAGON

Faezah Kassim and Abd. Wahid Jais

Introduction

The period of Heian was the peak in Japanese literary development. The era witnessed the rise of Japanese-based literature and the diminishing of Chinese-based literature. The development of Japanese literature was attributed to contributions of women, particularly from noblewomen and those from the upper class. Two female authors who were often highlighted by historians and writers are Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon. Their literary works were emphasized and studied since their writings represented women's viewpoints during the Heian period. In most cases, literature is a representation of life, and life is a social reality. Observers perceive that writers usually disclose or describe the conditions during their lifetime to reflect the culture and society of that particular era.

According to Ismail Hussein, writers use words to express their feelings, thoughts, emotions, attitudes and ambitions in the context of the society they lived in. In this study, three literature works by the above-mentioned female writers of the Heian period have been chosen as the main reference sources since their literature works have shown great achievement in the development of Japanese prose. To historians, these novels provide a vivid picture of life at court, with clear descriptions of events and real insights into the lives of noble men and rulers during that time. Through these literature works were written by women, the status and role of women as well as their status from the political, economic and social aspects is highlighted by their works. Thus, this study will also analyze the status and role of women during the Heian period based on the perspectives of these two women writers.

The Heian Period (794-1185)

Prior to the Heian period during the administration of the Yamato clan, around 710, Nara was the administration as well as the arts and Buddhist development center. In 784, the political capital city was transferred to Nagaoka. Ten years later, in 794, the 50th emperor, Emperor Kammu of Japan developed Heian-Kyo (Kyoto) to make it the capital city. This new capital city was the center of the imperial government.

