

9.3 Diary of Lady Sarashina

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarashina_Nikki; <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/diaries/diaryall.html>;
<http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/sample-08.html>

Background: Sarashina Nikki or the Sarashina Diary is a memoir of life in feudal Japan written by a Japanese noble woman who lived from 1009 (?) to 1059 AD. Lady Sarashina loved reading and writing romantic poetry. She appears to have married in her thirties and become a “lady-in-waiting” or assistant to a higher-ranking noble women in the imperial court. Her surviving memoir actually dates to a version produced two hundred years after she died. In feudal Japan women of the samurai or warrior class were expected to manage household affairs and supervise the education of their children when their husbands were absent and many were literate. What is amazing about this memoir is the ordinariness of Lady Sarashina’s concerns.



From an illustrated Japanese scroll c. 1100 AD

Question: In your opinion, is a document like this useful for understanding life in feudal Japan and the status of women? Explain.

A. I was brought up in a distant province which lies farther than the farthest end of the Eastern Road. I am ashamed to think that inhabitants of the Royal City will think me an uncultured girl. Somehow I came to know that there are such things as romances in the world and wished to read them.

B. While I had lived in the country, I had gone to the temple from time to time, but even then I could never pray like others, with a pure heart. In those days people learned to recite sutras and practiced austerities of religious observance after the age of seventeen or eighteen, but I could scarcely even think of such matters. The only thing that I could think of was the Shining Prince who would some day come to me, as noble and beautiful as in the romance.

C. On the moon-birth of the Rice-Sprout month my sister died after giving birth to a child. From childhood, even a stranger’s death had touched my heart deeply. This time I lamented, filled with speechless pity and sorrow. While mother and the others were with the dead, I lay with the memory-awakening children one on either side of me. The moonlight found its way through the cracks of the roof and illumined the face of the baby. The sight gave my heart so deep a pang that I covered its face with my sleeve, and drew the other child closer to my side, mothering the unfortunate.

D. Princess Yuko, daughter of the Emperor Toshiyaku, who had heard about me through a distant relative called me to her saying it would be better to be with her than passing idle lonely days . . . My old-fashioned parents thought the court life would be very unpleasant, and wanted me to pass my time at home, but others said: ‘People nowadays go out as ladies-in-waiting at the Court, and then fortunate opportunities for marriage are naturally numerous; why not try it?’ So I was sent to the Court against my will.

E. I felt awkward in Court in everything I did, and I thought it sad, but there was no use in complaining . . . Those who were familiar with the court life seemed to be at home there, but I, who was not very young, yet did not wish to be counted among the elderly, was rather neglected, and made to usher guests. However, I did not expect too much of court life, and had no envy for those who were more graceful than I.