The Stigma Of Polygamy

In today's society, social status can be interpreted by the income you earn that translates to the materialistic items that represent your status. In the Heian period, a large majority of the people, specifically women, are not in the same social status as women in the Japanese literature texts. In Japanese literature, aristocracy is mentioned and featured prominently, yet the reality of women in the Heian period involves sexual relationships with men. The system of polygamy is seen in the Japanese culture where the upper-class Japanese men were free to take several wives and lovers. It was a male predominate centralized system that had some mixed reactions in today's society. In addition, there was a hierarchy system within each household with the wives and lovers. There was a principal wife, the one who has the most power in the household and is in charge of bearing a son. After that, some secondary wives were chosen by the man himself, and the man could marry any women he desired. Additionally, the noblemen were allowed to have lovers that are for casual sex, as it was considered as the norm for men and women to lose their virginity during this period. Regardless of how the man treated his wives or lovers, the women are expected to completely be faithful to the male. However, these expectations can lead to jealousy within the household of wives due to the feelings that can surface for that one man, as seen in The Tales of Genji. In the first chapter of The Tales of Genji, Genji's mother, The Kiritsubo Intimate, is a perfect example of how the polygamy system impacts the wives' struggles with jealousy within the household. In the first paragraph, the Kiritsubo Intimate was introduced as "no very great rank, among all His Majesty' Consorts and Intimates" and how there was a sense of jealousy within the other consorts, "Those others who have always assumed that pride of place was properly theirs despised her as a dreadful woman, while the lesser Intimates were unhappier still" (3). Even though Genji's mother was most favored by His Majesty, she was never permitted in "…His Majesty's common service" (4). As her rank was not high enough, she is treated like a servant who waits for the Emperors' call. On top of that, she developed a sickness due to the torture of the other consorts, and her sickness continues to get worse, resulting in her death. As you can see in the text, Kiritsubo Intimate was not a high rank and was on top of the sexual hierarchy in the ranks of the Emperor's women. Yet being one of the Emperors' favored secondary wives, it was still extremely hard to maintain high status because she had no influential male relative on her mother's side. As Kiritsubo Intimate was the Emperor's favorite over all the other consorts, it was extremely easy for them to develop feelings of jealously towards the Kiritsubo Intimate and use it as a weapon to manipulate her. This tragic start of the novel shows how the system of polygamy can spark discomfort, jealousy, and conflicts in one household. In the Japanese culture, women are supposed to keep their feelings of jealously to themselves and have it not affect the relationships in the household. The reason for that is because it is believed that jealousy can lead to an evil spirit and an act that is frowned upon. In chapter 9 of The Tales of Genji, parts of the chapter show when Aoi was possessed, people start to blame her; yet she is unknown about this evil spirit. Even though she wants to stop the possession as "she felt that she was not herself and that her horror she had wandered away from her body…the world so unwillingly speaks well of anyone that the rumor of it would embroider upon everywhere with glee and she would, she knew, be talked of far and wide" (173). Lady Rokujo's uncontrollable possession of Aoi eventually killed her during her childbirth. Although Lady Rokujo's status as a woman at that time was higher than most of Genji's lovers, she was not highly ranked in Genji's sexual hierarchy which leads to her rage of jealousy towards Genji's first wife and his

other lovers. Her uncontrollable feeling of jealousy boiled up from Genji's neglect of her and her not being able to be Genji's center of attention. Ultimately, she jealously stemmed from being a part of the structure of polygamy in Genji's life. In conclusion, women in the Heian period were mistreated by other higher-status women in the system of polygamy. The system of polygamy brings about jealously between women in this structure. In The Tale of Genji, jealousy was very prominent between the Emperor's consorts and the Kiritsubo Intimate and between Lady Rokujo and Genji's lovers. Although this is not seen in today's society, the Japanese culture examines how important social status is in women's lives and how acceptable polygamy is in the Heian period. Works Cited Tyler, Royall, translator. "The Paulownia Pavilion." The Tale of Genji, by Murasaki Shikibu, Penguin Books, pp. 3. Tyler, Royall, translator. "Heart to Heart." The Tale of Genji, by Murasaki Shikibu, Penguin Books, pp. 173.