

Uncovering the Ambiguous: Sarashina nikki as political discourse

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Introduction

In the late eleventh century a woman recorded the details of more than a forty year period of her life. Of all the words inscribed on the pages of her journal, her name is not one of them. Her journal is called *Sarashina nikki*¹. In the following pages, I will take this piece of literature as my object and peruse the narrator's performance as an ideological subject, locating sites of resistance and acquiescence to the dominant political and cultural discourse. The issues that I am concerned with addressing in this paper are raised from the perspective of postmodernism and contemporary cultural studies which developed and is positioned in a culture, or cultures, much separated in time and space from that of my object, *Sarashina nikki*. Confronting this problem, I align myself with Doris Bargen, Lynne Miyake, Michele Marra, and other historicists and literary critics who defend the possibility to explore the issue of political discourse and ideology in the context of classical Japanese literature. It has been well discussed, for example, among scholars

of Japanese literature and history that it was the political and economic circumstances of the Heian Period which supported the existence of the elite and their lifestyle, and allowed for the emergence of a class of women writers which is unique in the history of the world. A version of that argument aimed specifically at *nikki bungaku* was put forth when a critic declared that *Kagero nikki* was made possible by what is referred to as the “Fujiwara culture-mill.”² In this paper I will continue to pose similar questions, and I will argue that *Sarashina nikki* could not have been produced if it were not for political and cultural environment of the Heian Period and the position of the author in it. The following sections of this paper include an introduction to the author and her personal circumstances in a social and political framework and an analysis of the first section of the text in light of the above methodology.

The author of the text, her class and clan

“Takasue’s daughter,” as the author of *Sarashina nikki* is known to us, was born in 1008.³ Her mother was a Fujiwara, and her aunt was Michitsuna’s mother, the author of *Kagero nikki*.⁴ Her family were members of the *zuryô*, or provincial governor, class, which meant they were of a low - middle rank in the hierarchy of the Heian court. Her father finished his career as a senior fifth rank, having served as governor of Kazusa and Hitachi. Provincial administration entailed some benefits and some provincial

appointments were more lucrative than others because the officials took a share of the local revenues. If the province where a governor was appointed was large or wealthy than of course the financial advantage would be greater, and the income they received permitted members of this class opportunities for education and to pursue the arts. The women played important roles as well and could serve as ladies - in - waiting to high court nobles in the Palace. However, the chance to do so often depended on family relations, in addition to the training in literature or the arts one had received.⁵ The reality of our author's dependence on this system is made clear when she remarks, "It occurred to me that my position in the world would greatly improve if father received a proper appointment" (親となりなば、いみじうやむごとなくわが身もなりなむなど。。。) (M 64; NKBZ 18:318). Her father, in fact, did receive a proper appointment when it was announced in the second month of 1032 that Takasue would become Assistant Governor of Hitachi. This was the highest post available for a commoner and was usually filled by an imperial prince.⁶ After that, his daughter was invited to serve at in the court of Princess Yūshi, the third daughter of the emperor Gosuzaku.⁷ Ironically, Takasue was initially opposed to his daughter's service and the invitation appears to have possibly come through one of her maternal relations (M 75; NKBZ 18:327 - 328).

In considering the social position of Takasue's daughter, two additional points are important to consider. The first is that patrilineally she was a Sugawara and not a Fujiwara of the northern branch at a time when the Fujiwaras controlled all the

mechanisms of government and political influence. On that basis, the members of her family, the men specifically, were kept from positions of power, and like other clans, the Sugwaras were being further and further marginalized by this Fujiwara hegemony.

The second point relates to the person, or persona, of Sugawara Michizane, the ninth century *kanshi* poet and statesman and the most esteemed ancestor of “Takasue’s Daughter.” Despite the loss of position and exile which ended only in his death, Michizane secured for his descendants professional and social positions in the fields of literature and education. And from the ninth century until Takasue’s time, the Sugawaras were considered specialists in Chinese history and served as heads of the court university and were honored with a title equivalent to that of a doctors of literature.⁸ But as result of the Fujiwara monopoly of power, the university had lost its status and was falling into disrepair by the eleventh century.⁹ The Fujiwara political engine had rendered the education available at the Court University obsolete by reserving in advance the best governmental positions for themselves, thereby eliminating much of the impetus for Fujiwara youth to study there. Moreover, they had removed the rewards of that education for young men of other families by limiting their prospective employment opportunities regardless of their personal achievement. With the increasing importance of claims of heredity in Heian bureaucratic appointments, the incentive for education had been effectively nullified and the status of those associated with the university must have been precariously uncertain. If the scenes in *Genji monogatari*

are any indication of the value Heian society placed on a university education, the Sugawaras could not have been up very high on the social ladder. This is clearly suggested in the scene of Yugiri's entrance ceremony. The real life models for the scholars in this scene could conceivably be Sugawara scholars, and they are portrayed as unfashionable and laughable, out - of - date in a society more concerned with style and rank than serious scholarship.¹⁰

The family of Takasue's daughter was therefore marginal in three ways. First of all, they were of middling rank in a highly class oriented society. Secondly, in being non - Fujiwara, they had limited access to governmental positions and to actual political power. Thirdly, their area of cultural specialization had over time lost its social value. All of these points fostered the creation of a writer who could thus create such a text as *Sarashina nikki* . In the first place, she had a certain access to the elite on behalf of her class connections, but did not have the same constraints as one of them. Therefore, she could observe the different spheres of the world from different angles. Moreover, her family background allowed for her education, which in turn gave her the means to express her worldview in writing, as a political discourse. So what was a peripheral position contributed to her becoming, as other women in her position did, a central and powerful force in the development of Japanese literature.

The Work

Examining the text, it begins at a point which it could not have if it were not for the father of “Takasue’s Daughter” and his rank. From the very beginning, in a sense, this piece of literature is born out of a locus within the specific social and political structure of the Heian Period. She has been raised in the provinces as a daughter of the Assistant Governor of Kazusa, “beyond the Great East Road” (あづま路の道のはてよりも、なほ奥つかたに生ひ出でたる人) (M 31; NKBZ 18:283). Here in Lady Sarashina’s loosely autobiographical text, the author/narrator presents herself in a series of contexts each of which reveals her politically, socially and culturally peripheral position. By virtue of its location at the start of the first person narrated text, it serves the role of the author/narrators self-introduction, and establishes the mode of operation of the narrator’s performance. The narrator creates and re-creates herself in a personal and social order in which she is off-center.

あづま路の道のはてよりも、なほ奥つかたに生ひ出でたる人、いかばかりかはあやしかりけむを、いかに思ひはじめけることにか、世の中に物語といふものあんなるを、いかで見ばやと思ひつつ、つれづれなるひるま、よひるなどに、姉、継母などやうの人々の、その物語、かの物語、光源氏のあるやうなど、ところどころ語るを聞くに、いとどゆかしさまされど、わが思ふままに、そらにいかでかおぼえ語らむ。いみじく心もとなきままに、等身に薬師仏を造りて、手洗ひなどして、人まにみそかに入りつつ、「京にとくあげたまひて、物語の多くさぶ

らふなる、あるかぎり見せたまへ」と、身をすてて額をつき祈り申す
ほどに。。。 (NKZ 18:283)

I was brought up in a part of the country so remote that it lies beyond the end of the Great East Road. What an uncouth creature I must have been in those days! Yet even shut away in the provinces I somehow came to hear that the world contained things known as Tales, and from that moment my greatest desire was to read them for myself. To idle away the time, my sister, my stepmother, and others in the household would tell me stories from the Tales, including episodes about Genji, the Shining Prince; but, since they had to depend on their memories, they could not possibly tell me all I wanted to know and their stories only made me more curious than ever. In my impatience I got a statue of the Healing Buddha built to my own size. When no one was watching, I would perform my ablutions and, stealing into the altar room, would prostrate myself and pray fervently, 'Oh, please arrange things so that we may soon go to the Capital, where there are so many Tales, and please let me read them all.'

(M 31)

On a literal level, her narration is discreet; she is a truly marginalized and even pathetic creature stuck out in the hinterlands and denied the cultural and romantic redemption she longs for and which only the Capital can provide. But on another

level, the repetitive aspect of these images is hyperbolic and tempts us to see the irony in the narrator's performance and the subject herself as a parody of the Heian outsider. This liminality causes a rupture in the text which resists and challenges the idea of a simple interpretation of the narration and the protagonist. Do we interpret the subject as a genuine social "outsider" (though nothing is really outside) or a suspect simulacrum of one? And is our narrator trustworthy or subversive?

In the first sentence of the initial passage she puts herself even beyond the geographic periphery, "beyond the Great East Road". By a political decision beyond her or her family's control she is relegated not only outside the Capital, which in those times was synonymous with civilization itself, but "beyond the Great East Road." As such, she was seemingly beyond having access to the Capital and, thereby, to civilization and culture. However, at the same time this statement is being made it is being undermined and subverted through an act of intertextual discourse. "It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together,"¹¹ and here our narrator strategically uses her knowledge of the literary canon to shift the power, transform the literary hegemony, and (re) define herself. She produces more power and authority in and through her narration when she appropriates the first line from this late ninth century poem by Ki no Tomonori and makes it her first line.

あづまぢの
道のはてなる
常陸帯の
かごとばかりも
あい見てしかな
Kokinshû 6

Oh, how I long to join you!
The Sash Festival of Hitachi,
At the end of the Great East Road,
Will bring me to your side.
(M 111)

Through this reference, the narrator establishes a link between her work and the poem she alludes to and, consequently, an association between herself as author of the work and the author of the poem, who was not only included in the *Kokinshû* but was its senior compiler. In this movement the author legitimizes her work and herself as an author: she has read, she knows and she can use the classics for her literary (and political) ends. She forcefully posits herself centrally in the culture-power sphere and establishes a direct link with its core. At this point there is a fissure in the text; now she is, traumatically, in the inner circle. She has exposed her power and is turning her work on its head. She is not, or not anymore, the (culturally) ignorant country girl she is masquerading as. By the nature of the narration she can be,

simultaneously, unread (as a girl) and culturally astute (as a woman). According to at least one feminist theorist, this phenomenon is indicative of a female subject: Women are endowed with not one but “a multitude of ‘selves’ appropriated by them, for them, according to their needs or desires.”¹² The narrator projects different “selves” in her narration which has the effect of obscuring the texts ideology and resisting any simplification of reading.

Furthermore, by establishing this intertextual connection with the Tomonori poem, we can glimpse the traces of an association between herself, her family and their position culturally and politically with that of the Ki family. The situation of the Ki family, the most notable member being Ki no Tsurayuki, the author of the preface of the *Kokinshū* and *Tosa nikki*, was similar to the Sugawara’s in that on a cultural level, in the poetic realm, they were eminent, but lost their standing in the Heian Court, being displaced by the Fujiwara in the political arena. Likewise, our Sugawara author is both in the center and on the periphery, and in the text the ambiguous narrator is posing as both, and any interpretation of her as either one or the other self - destructs. Using Foucault’s words “there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy”¹³ and we cannot expect the narrator to tell us what strategy or ideology she is representing in shaping for her audience this simulacrum of herself. The many levels of meaning or non - meaning cause any single interpretation of any single discourse to deconstruct. By nature, discourse exposes power, and in doing so it subverts power and weakens it,

and “makes it possible to thwart it.”¹⁴ In this narration our narrator displays power relations in society and the points of resistance to it.

Therefore, when narrator exclaims, “What an uncouth creature I must have been!” (いかばかりかはあやしかりけむを。。。), we are left as readers to sympathize, to laugh, and/or to doubt her sincerity. Because the adjectival “uncouth,” or strange, (あやし) ends with the particle of past conjecture (けむ), she leaves a window open on the past for (re)interpretation. The narrator leads us to ask ourselves as readers, “Is she really so strange and in whose eyes?” This feeling is reinforced by the particles (いかでか、かは) which are elements used in rhetorical questions that appeal to be answered in the negative. On the one hand, the narrator exposes herself as uncouth and strange having been raised in the provinces, but within the same language she undermines that perception of who she is and what she was, and gives us a cue to reevaluate that image of herself and such “uncouthness” and “strangeness” in general. The meaning of normative expressions like these are determined on a societal level and compromise a discourse of social value and thus they are by nature political. They deal with relationships between people in society. In the context of Heian Japan where aesthetics, behavior, and style was highly codified, this kind of vocabulary was a strong marker of what was acceptable or not, of where the power flowed and where it met with resistance. Therefore, in reading this sentence we see the judgment of society (power) and, simultaneously, a call to question that judgment and perhaps even

that society (resistance).

The narration continues on in another set of seeming contradictions. She reveals that she “somehow came to know that there are things called *monogatari* which exist in the world” (いかに思ひはじめけることにか、世の中に物語といふものあんなるを). This links up to the previous part of the passage with a conjunctive particle (を), emphasizing that what follows is contrary to what came previously and does not follow the normal order of things. The two passages that link up here are the first part of the paragraph about being brought up in the country and being “uncouth,” and this following part about having learned of the existence of *monogatari*. Ivan Morris interpreted the incompatibility of these two facts so strongly he felt compelled to insert “yet even shut away in the provinces” in his English rendering of the text, a phrase which does not appear in the original yet captures its sensibility perhaps more than a literal translation would have. The narrator is establishing a clear dichotomy here. Before, the narrator, on one level, positioned herself on the periphery, having been in the provinces and being strange as a result, but without making clear what, or where, the center exactly actually was. We know from history that in this period Heian - kyō was the capital political and culturally, and in the text there is reference to the “Great East Road” (あづま路の道), which goes “up” and “down”, to and from somewhere, and the Tomonori poem appears as a kind of significant center point of cultural knowledge. However, this is the first time in Sarashina nikki that a name is

attached to the reference point from which she describes herself. The name of that point, the power - center, which is indispensable in establishing the discourse of the other, is called “the world” (世の中). The world and the place where our narrator is are placed at opposite poles. Whether she is outside or inside is a matter of the perspectives inherent in the text. In fact, our narrator is in the world, but she characterizes herself as outside of it and distant from it, so as to be hardly able to approach it. This reveals the extreme of her alienation from what she considers “the world” and what is in it, and, at the same time, bares her connection to it and, as we will see, her desire for it.

In the text, “the world” is something different from the provinces. The narrator tells us “the world” is the place where *monogatari* are. And the inextricable connection between the two, “the world” and *monogatari* and the significance of that link to the development of the *Sarashina nikki* narrative is foreshadowed here in the very first passage. That the protagonist can “somehow” (いかに) hear of them despite the distance and her lack of sophistication imparts a sense of the power of “the world” and of *monogatari*. She makes that power immediately clear when she describes how she is overwhelmed upon only hearing of them, “from that moment my greatest desire was to read them for myself” (いかで見ばやと思ひつつ). Her desire for and attachment to *monogatari* become an integral part of the story that unfolds. Much of the life that is portrayed in this *nikki* shows a conflict between her interest in, even obsession with, *monogatari* and the

idea of religious salvation in the Buddhist paradigm. These two desires are placed at odds but the tension she feels in reading romances overflows into the realm of her spiritual aspirations and influence so much her of her religious conceptions that it becomes impossible to separate her romantic and spiritual longings. This is apparent when the descriptions of her romantic fantasies become almost ascetic and her visions of spiritual beings become quite Genji-like in appearance.¹⁵ Consider the following as examples; both are taken from the same passage in the text.

昼は日ぐらし、夜は目のさめたるかぎり、灯を近くともして、これを見るよりほかのことなければ、おのづからなどは、そらにおぼえ浮かぶを、いみじきことに思ふに、夢にいと清げなる僧の、黄なる地の袈裟着たるが来て、「法華經五の巻をとく習へ」といふと見れど、人に語らず、習はむとも思ひかけず。物語のことをのみ心にしめて、われはこのごろわろきぞかし。さかりにならば、かたちもかぎりなくよく、髪もいみじく長くなりなむ。光の源氏の夕顔、宇治の大将の浮舟の女君のやうにこそあらめと思ひける心。。。(NKBZ 18:302-303)

Placing the lamp close to where I sat, I kept reading all day long and as late as possible into the night. Soon I came to know the names of all the characters in the book (*Genji monogatari*) and I could see them clearly in my mind's eye, which gave me the greatest satisfaction. One night I dreamt that a handsome priest appeared before me in a yellow

surplice and ordered me to learn the fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra as soon as possible. I told no one about the dream, since I was much too busy with my Tales to spend any time leaning sutras. I was not a very attractive girl at the time, but I fancied that, when I grew up, I would surely become a great beauty with long flowing hair like Yûgao, who was loved by the Shining Prince, or like Ukifune, who was wooed by the Captain of Uji. (M 47)

And. . .

からうじて思ひよることは、「いみじくやむごとなく、かたち有様、物語にある光源氏などのやうにおはせむ人を、年に一たびにても通はしたてまつりて、浮舟の女君のやうに、山里にかくしすゑられて。。」(NKBZ 18:317)

The height of my aspirations was that a man of noble birth, perfect in both looks and manners, someone like Shining Genji in the Tale, would visit me just once a year in the mountain village where he would have hidden me like Lady Ukifune. (M 64)

The development of conflict between the religious and the fantastic and the eventual merging of these two elements is clearly foreshadowed when it states that there are monogatari in the world and her greatest desire is to read them. "The world" is to the

narrator the world of *monogatari*. She wants to have access to that world, and, she eventually wants to be a part of that world, as is shown in the examples above. However, what makes this interpretation come apart is that she is already inside the *monogatari*. She is writing herself into her own text. And she is like Yûgao and Ukifune in that she is an image of a tragic heroine. She is certainly not Murasaki and cannot expect to be so. That she longs to be like Yûgao or Ukifune is also hope that cannot exactly be realized because those characters have no romantic hopes and, in fact, desire to escape from the attention of men - - no matter how desirable they are. Therefore, our narrator can only be a simulacrum of Yûgao or Ukifune in that her desire is to be with a man who will, for the most part, leave her alone to live like a nun. She becomes a parody of those tragic heroines when even those pathetic dreams are frustrated.

What happens in this development is identical to the strategy that is portrayed in the initial narration. The narrator places herself on the periphery, but then establishes herself in the center to shift the power and transform the discourse. She is in a marginal position and longs to be in “the world” and read the *monogatari* she has been so enticed by. She has an image of the Healing Buddha built in order not to pray for salvation but instead to pray for an obstacle to her salvation, “Oh, please arrange things so that we may soon go to the Capital, where there are so many Tales, and please let me read them all.” (「京にとくあげたまひて、物語の多くさぶらふなる、あるかぎり見せたまへ」). When her hopes are realized,

and she returns to the Capital, she loses herself in books and a world of fantasy. Thereby, she again places herself outside the center. This is “the world” she wants, but only to escape from. And, consequently, the world of fantasy she escapes to she turns on its head in desiring to become a tragic heroine and only succeeding in becoming a satirical simulation of one by her own literary devices. A critic comments on the self she succeeds in representing,

Even in the eleventh century, the diarist Lady Sarashina, who read the Tale with morbid fascination, could sympathize with Ukifune’s lowly station in life, but seems to have been totally oblivious to the heroine’s tragic dilemma. From the envy with which she pictures Ukifune’s complex affairs, we can imagine the unhappiness of this timorous lady’s own drab existence as daughter and wife of provincial governors of middle rank.¹⁵

The Sarashina nikki narrator operates in the discourse on *monogatari* exactly as she does in the text as a whole. She posits herself off center, and then appropriates literary authority in using, for example, the *Kokinshū* poem and the story and images from *Genji monogatari*. She writes her text with herself as center incorporating these powerful elements; she projects herself into these images which she makes her own and transforms them. This device subverts and undermines the discourse of the Heian cultural ideal and gives birth to a new narrative of power and culture resistant to interpretation.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this paper the way(s) in which *Sarashina nikki* is a political discourse. It is not political in the sense of portraying government officials and their activities, but in terms of revealing, however subtly and indirectly, the power relations in Heian society that are founded upon the social and cultural ideal of the elite living in the Capital. Although our author was an outsider and located on the periphery of this world, it was this world that produced her and was indispensable to the creation of her text.

Notes

See the bibliography for complete bibliographical details.

1. There are two English translations of *Sarashina nikki*: Ivan Morris', entitled *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*, and an earlier one by Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Doi. In the introduction to his translation, Morris makes an extensive reproof of the earlier English version. Because the critique is so well-deserved, and putting aside my own criticism of Morris' rendering of the text (for the time being), all page references in English in this paper will be made to the Morris translation (M) and in Japanese to the Inukai Kiyoshi edition in volume 18 of the *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū* (NKBZ).

2. Joshua Mostow, "The Amorous Statesman and the

Poetess," *Japan Forum*, Volume 4, Number 2, October 1, 1992, p. 301 - 315.

3. What can be said of her can be said of most of the female authors of the Heian Period, including the author of the Tale of Genji, because only the highest court noblewomen were granted their own names. The women of this period were "named" referentially, that is they were referred to by their relationship to a father, husband, son, the official positions of those men, the rooms they occupied in attending to a husband or lover, or even by their residence. In the case of Murasaki Shikibu, it is believed her "name" comes from the office of her father's appointment, Shikibu, or Office of Ceremonies, while Murasaki, was a sobriquet taken from the character in Genji. My point is, however, that although the lack of a personal name for the subject under consideration is not unusual, or rather was usual, in the context of Heian Japan, it is a significant fact to bear in mind from the viewpoint of cultural and gender studies.

4. Two translations of *Kagero nikki* are available in English: Seidensticker's *The Gossamer Years*, and Sonja Arntzen's.

5. Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon, the author of the Pillow Book (*Makura no soshi*) are two examples of highly learned women of this class who because of their skill in the literary arts served in the imperial court: Murasaki Shikibu was a lady-in-waiting to Empress Shoshi, the consort of Emperor Ichijo, and Sei Shonagon served the Empress Teishi, another consort of the same Emperor.

6. Morris, note from *As I Crossed A Bridge of Dreams*, p. 127.

7. *ibid.*, p.75, and note, p. 132; Inukai, text and note, p. 327.
8. Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, p. 173.
9. *ibid.*, p. 172.
10. Ikeda, *Murasaki Shikibu, Genji Monogatari*, p. 45-47.
Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji*, pp. 362 - 363.
11. Michel Foucault, excerpts from *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, in Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *A Postmodern Reader*, pp. 339 - 340.
12. Irigaray, p. 17.
13. Foucault, p. 341.
14. Foucault, p. 340.
15. Julia Meech - Pekarik, "The Artist's View of Ukifune," in Andrew Pekarik, ed., *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.212.

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