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Saeko Kimura

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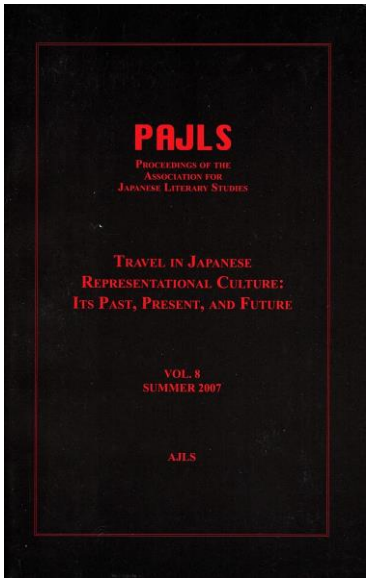

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TRAVELING THROUGH THE NARRATIVES: IMAGINATION OF WOMEN'S SALVATION

Kimura Saeko
Tsuda Women's College

Towazugatari, or *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (completed in 1313), was written by a court lady referred to as Nijō, who served the Retired Emperor GoFukakusa (1243–1304). The work covers a 35-year period from 1271 to 1306, opening when Nijō was 14 years old and coming to an abrupt halt when she was 49. According to her diary, Nijō was born in 1258, but nothing is known about her life after the age of 49.

Towazugatari can be divided into two parts. The first part is about Nijō's life at court and the second part concerns her travels as a nun. Because these two parts have no organic connection, most approaches to *Towazugatari* have focused on linking the two parts.

This paper takes up the second part of the work and considers the significance of Nijō's travels. In particular, I will consider how Nijō's narrative constitutes a performance. First, I will briefly introduce how scholars have linked the two parts of the work. I will then outline the debate over Nijō's sexuality in the first part and how this debate has colored interpretation of the second part, with nunhood and sexuality seen as incompatible. In closing, I will suggest that one reason for Nijō to record her travels was to show ways in which women's salvation was possible beyond the parameters of dominant medieval Buddhist principles.

What motivated Nijō's travels? To answer this, we must look to the first part of the work depicting her life at court. Nijō's actual status remains a key, unresolved question in the study of *Towazugatari*. Much debate has surrounded whether Nijō should be treated as a wife, or *seisai* 正妻, or whether she was merely a concubine, or *meshūdo* 召人. Within the polygamous marital system of the court, a high-ranking man could have a principal wife, who was of superior rank, and other wives of lower rank, who were also officially recognized. A *meshūdo*, or concubine, was excluded from this hierarchy and her children were not considered legitimate heirs.

Sexuality is a recurring theme in the interpretation of *Towazugatari*, but the prevailing approach has been to read the work as representing the decadence of a court in decline. Scholars have assumed that if Nijō was GoFukakusa's wife, then his collusion in her affairs with other men shows him to be sexually perverted. Although not always overtly stated,

this a common reading. But if Nijō was a concubine who was sexually accessible to several men, then her situation was not scandalous, and perhaps even normal in terms of her position.

The perversion of the Kamakura court is a recurring theme in scholarship concerning Nijō's sexuality. The question boils down to whether her sexuality was productive or nonproductive within the system of power supporting the court. Nijō's sexuality was exchanged as an object between men and even used as a gift, similar to the awarding of clothes. As a concubine, her services were sexually nonproductive and were thus situated outside the nexus of court power politics. The first part of the work shows how Nijō gradually loses opportunities for advancement and is forced to relinquish any power she holds at court.

Let us move to the second part. Most scholars do not discuss Nijō's sexuality in the second part of the work, once she has taken the tonsure, or they tend to desexualize her activities. But Nijō's sexuality is a problem that runs through the entire work. It therefore can be seen as a thread of continuity in a work that has usually been divided into two wholly separate parts.

If we see Nijō's sexuality as extending into the second part, how does this affect our interpretation of sexuality and nunhood? In the first part of the work, Nijō's father advises her to renounce the secular world and protect the reputation of her family. He tells her, "It would be shameful indeed if you remained in society only to blacken the name of our great family. It is only after retiring from society that you can do as you will without causing suffering."[1] The Japanese original reads "kami o tsukete kōshoku no ie ni na o nokoshi nado sen koto wa, kaesugaesu ukarubeshi."[2] The potential for shaming Nijō's family is directly related to lechery or amorousness in the secular world. It is possible to interpret Nijō's father's advice as only applying to amorousness in the secular world, and not her life after tonsure. In this case, Nijō's nunhood can be seen as compatible with her sexuality.

During her travels, Nijō meets GoFukakusa at the Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine. While she must have understood GoFukakusa was at the Shrine, she writes as though it were a chance meeting. The careful staging of this reunion belies Nijō's emphasis on its unexpectedness. When GoFukakusa invites her inside, Nijō feels like she is returning to

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[1] Karen Brazell, *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (Stanford University Press, 1973), 25. Hereafter noted as "*Confessions*."

[2] 髪をつけて好色の家に名を残しなどせむ事は、返す返す憂かるべし。 *Towazugatari*, (Shin nihon koten bungaku taikei, Iwanami shoten, 1994), 26.

her past. They spend the night together. The scene is described as follows.

> We stayed up the entire night, until all too soon the sky began to brighten. "I must complete the religious retreat I have begun," he said. "We can have a more leisurely meeting another time." Before leaving he took off the three small-sleeved gowns he was wearing next to his skin and presented them to me.[3]

Scholars have questioned whether Nijō and GoFukakusa actually had sexual intercourse on this night. The literary scholar Matsumoto Yasushi claims they did not and points out that GoFukakusa asks her to meet him after his retreat. Matsumoto characterizes the meeting as being romantic, yet not sexual, despite the bestowal of the robes. Nijō writes, "His presence lingered in the fragrance of his scent still clinging to my black robes. The gowns he had given me were so conspicuous they would certainly attract attention. I would have to wear them under my own dark robes, awkward though that was."[4] Scholars have somewhat prudishly assumed that no sexual contact took place because Nijō is a nun, while interpreting similar passages in the first part of the work, before Nijō is tonsured, as sexual encounters.

For example, the first part of *Towazugatari* describes Nijō's relationship with Ariake no Tsuki, a priest of Ninnaji Temple. Ariake dies steeped in passionate love and sexual desire for Nijō. The problem of sexuality and religiosity surfaces throughout Nijō's narrative, yet scholars have tended to avoid examining this continuum within the work. Nijō's relationship with Ariake functions as a meta-narrative to the reunion with GoFukakusa at Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine.

When Nijō hears of Ariake's death, she says, "Life is more fleeting than a dream within a dream."[5] Nijō later alludes to this "dream within a dream" (夢に夢見る心地して) in the Iwashimizu section. After meeting with GoFukakusa, she writes, "It seemed a dream within a dream as I departed with his image futilely contained in the tears on my sleeves."[6]

Similarly, GoFukakusa's gift of robes echoes Ariake's exchange of under robes. When Nijō leaves Ariake, he "forcibly…seized the small-sleeved gown I wore next to my body, giving me his in return as a

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[3] *Confessions*, 208.
[4] Ibid., 208.
[5] Ibid., 149.
[6] Ibid., 208.

memento of our love."[7] Ariake dies wearing Nijō's gown, as his page later conveys to her:

> The boy told me how Ariake had folded up the small-sleeved gown he had taken from me on our first night together and had placed it on his meditation mat. He continued, "On the night of the twenty-fourth he put it on next to his skin and told me he wanted to be cremated in it."[8]

The scholar Mitamura Masako has pointed out that gifts of clothes in *Towazugatari* are actually pledges of economic support given in exchange for sexual intercourse. Ariake sent Nijō money together with the final poem as a memento for her after his death. GoFukakusa's gift of gowns can also be understood as compensation for sexual relations. Whether they actually engaged in sexual intercourse or not, the narrative describes the meeting like a lover's tryst. There is nothing to suggest Nijō did not have sexual relations during her travels. In *Towazugatari*, Nijō's encounter with GoFukakusa and the depictions of sexuality after tonsure demonstrate that nunhood and sexual activity were compatible.

Nijō even admits that others are eager to gossip about her sexual relations while "mixing with common men" at various lodgings: "there is no dearth of people who enjoy starting rumors, whether in the capital or in the countryside."[9] Clearly this is what GoFukakusa fears when he accuses her of not fulfilling her ascetic practices.

> I hope that we can meet again on another moonlit night in this lifetime, but you persist in placing your hopes for our meeting only after the far distant dawn of salvation. What kind of vows are you cherishing? A man is more or less free to travel eastward or even to China, but there are so many hindrances for a traveling woman that I understand it to be impossible. Who have you pledged yourself to as a companion in your renunciation of this world? I still cannot believe it is possible for you to travel alone.[10]

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[7] Ibid., 81.
[8] Ibid., 150.
[9] Ibid., 223
[10] Ibid., 221.

GoFukakusa uses Buddhist rhetoric in pointing out the asymmetry of men and women. Support for his view can be found in doctrinal texts such as the Lotus Sutra. However, there is nothing to suggest that Nijō abandoned her practice and she seems to have chosen her own approach to religious asceticism.

When Nijō makes a brief visit to Hokkeji Temple, a famous nunnery, she writes:

> The next morning, on a visit to Hōke Temple, I went to the cloister, where I met the nun Jakuenbō, daughter of Lord Fuyutada. She talked to me about the relentless cycle of life and death, causing me to consider remaining in the cloister for a while. But realizing that it was not in my nature to quietly devote myself to scholarly pursuits, and aware of the unending confusion that still dwelled in my heart, I decided to leave.[11]

Nijō does not remain at Hokkeji Temple to practice because she knows there is no hope in "scholarly pursuits." What does she espouse as religious practice leading to salvation? Instead of basing her practice at a nunnery, Nijō travels through various provinces. Through her travels, Nijō proposes an alternate path for women's salvation.

When Nijō visits Itsukushima Shrine, she stops at the small island of Taika. There she finds "women who…fled from lives in prostitution."[12] For a couple of days, Nijō remains with these women who now practice Buddhism rather than the art of love. Nijō includes other encounters with prostitutes in *Towazugatari* and shows sympathy toward them. She appears to empathize with their sexuality as well as their conversion to religious practice.

While traveling through the countryside, Nijō encounters various narratives of women's salvation. At Taimadera (or Taima Temple), she is told the story of the Taima Mandala and Chujōhime. *Towazugatari* records the legend in considerable detail.[13]

In contrast, when she writes about religious rites and prayers, Nijō repeatedly refers to her impure state and lack of dedication. For example, at Ise Shrine, she considers making a *nusa* offering, but writes, "I wondered how that kind of purification could cleanse the taint buried

[11] Ibid., 204.
[12] Ibid., 228.
[13] Ibid., 205.

deep within my heart."[14] Similarly, while watching a festival at Itsukushima, she recites a Buddhist vow and prays for salvation, but at the same time, thinks, "how wonderful it would be if I were pure at heart."[15] Nijō implies that her impure heart prevents her prayers from being fulfilled. Her wanderings appear to be based this belief. If traditional religious approaches to practice cannot help Nijō, then what deeds can she perform that will lead to salvation? Nijō's recording of oral stories hints at one alternative.

The stories contained in *Towazugatari* are drawn not only from literary documents but also oral sources.[16] During her travels, Nijō records numerous stories about women's salvation. She alludes to various oral narratives related to sites that she visits, including many stories which are no longer found in written records. These "invisible" narratives often run counter to dominant doctrinal texts on women's salvation. As such, they offer an alternative approach to women's salvation.

This can be seen in Nijō's description of her pilgrimage to Zenkōji Temple. Close analysis of this section reveals that Nijō could not actually have traveled to Zenkōji Temple.[17] Why, then, did she choose to include this section in her diary? Nijō writes that she wanted to visit the temple because "it was noted for its famous image of Amida Buddha."[18] Since the statue was famous, the story (or *engi*) behind it also must have been well known. The story describes Empress Kōgyoku 皇極天皇 (594–661) falling into hell and being saved. It also describes a servant girl giving alms and later being welcomed into the Tōsotsuten or Tusita Heaven. Nijō's desire to include a pilgrimage to Zenkōji in her diary may be linked to these stories of women's salvation. Though *Towazugatari* does not describe the specific tales that appear in the *engi*, they were well known to women of the time.

The various narratives of women's salvation provide a contrast to GoFukakusa's description of the hindrances faced by women, which he draws from canonical Buddhist texts. Nijō's travel is a form of religious practice, but also an act of seeking and collecting these narratives which show salvation is attainable for her and other women. She collects these

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[14] Ibid., 212.
[15] Ibid., 230.
[16] Shimura Kunihiro, *Setsuwabungaku no kōsō to denshō* (Meiji Shoin, 1982), 311.
[17] Oguchi Rinji, "Nijō no Zenkōji sankei ni tsuite," *Komazawa Kokubun*, vol. 3 (1964).
[18] *Confessions*, 197.

stories and weaves them into the traditional genre of a travel diary by citing various place names and their associations.

Famous sites such as Mino, Mount Fuji, and Yatsuhashi appear in other diaries by women as canonical place names (*meisho*) in the tradition of travel writing. Like *Towazugatari*, the earlier, female-authored *Sarashina Diary* also describes the route traveled and the unique narratives associated with each place. Nijō borrows from this tradition of travel writing and recording of oral narratives. By cobbling together various narratives related to women and by citing examples of female salvation, Nijō provides an alternative landscape for women to travel on the path to salvation. The view of female salvation provided in *Towazugatari* contrasts with the dominant narrative found within Buddhist doctrinal texts.

To conclude, viewed from the perspective of the tradition of oral literature, *Towazugatari* is not so much a confession as a step towards Nijō's salvation, but rather a narrative constructed for the salvation of all other women. Interestingly, it appears that Nijō's visits to some sites never actually took place. Sections of the travel narrative Nijō must be read as fiction. This suggests that Nijō may have been more interested in the act of narration than travel and pilgrimage. The dialogue between Nijō and GoFukakusa shows a clear contrast in strategies for women's salvation. Since orthodox Buddhist texts such as the Lotus Sutra rule out the possibility of female salvation, Nijō proposed alternative narratives. Buddhist doctrinal texts can be seen as central to the hierarchical structure of religious and court life. In contrast, Nijō's narratives of salvation are situated on the peripheries of the Buddhist canon, court-centered literary culture, and the cultural geography of Kamakura Japan. Her travel writing can be seen as part of a process by which central court literature came into contact with other oral sermonic stories, thereby generating narratives of women's salvation.