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***Sarashina Nikki* and the Travel Diary of Medieval Japan**

Mellisa Pascale

Sarashina Nikki (or *Sarashina Diary*) is a Heian-period diary written by Sugawara no Takasue no Musume in 1060. Born in 1008 in the capital (present-day Kyoto), the author and her family lived for several years in Edo (now Tokyo) in the eastern province. The first part of *Sarashina Nikki* acts as a travel diary that narrates their return to the capital. Setting out in the summer of 1020, the author's family and their entourage traveled west over the famous Tōkaidō route, with the sea on their left and mountains on their right. The author crossed rivers and passes, stayed in makeshift shelters or huts, and encountered storytellers and entertainers. During the course of her ninety-day journey, she watched the leaves change and fall as autumn came and went.

The travel diary of medieval Japan was not merely a report of one's journeys, but an ornately layered piece of literature that experimented with perspective and intertextuality. Typical of this genre, the travel account in *Sarashina Nikki* is less of a record of everyday happenings and more of a memoir, and sometimes even a novel. Writing four decades after her travels, the author's retrospective point of view sometimes emerges alongside the perspective of her younger self, creating tension. She also carefully crafts the narrative with the eye of a novelist, paying attention to scene and the progression of time. Additionally, as an educated woman from the aristocratic class, the author was well-read in the literature

of the Heian period, and she followed the conventions of the medieval travel diarist in weaving established place names and their literary allusions into her work.

This paper will use *Sarashina Nikki* as a source for understanding the roles of authorial identity and textual allusions in the travel diary of medieval Japan. Because we do not know the author's real name (Sugawara no Takasue no Musume means "daughter of Sugawara no Takasue"), this paper will refer to her as "the author." Excerpts from *Sarashina Nikki* are from the edition translated into English by Sonja Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki (2014), printed with commentary in their book *The Sarashina Diary: A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan*. The travel account begins at the start of the diary and ends with the author's arrival at Sanjō Palace in the capital (pp. 90-108).

Diarist, Novelist, and Memoirist

In his paper "Japanese Travel Diaries of the Middle Ages," Herbert Plutschow identifies two common reasons why travelers set out in Japan: to undertake a trip in an official capacity, perhaps as a nobleman or a warrior, or they set out to lead an intrepid life, usually as a "hermit" seeking seclusion in nature (1982, pp. 29). The author of *Sarashina Nikki* does not directly fall into either of these categories, but her diary is constructed to contain elements of both. Her travels were in a sense official, being ordained by her family's decision to return to the capital. At the same time, the written account of her journey displays a private, wandering mind. The

connective tissue of her narrative is built on an adjustable lens, sometimes widened to include social interactions, at other times focused on her isolated internal experiences with the landscape and with her emotions. As a result, the author possesses multiple identities. She is a traveler on official business, a solo wanderer, and also an author of a piece of literature.

The Heian period, which lasted from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, was marked by a renaissance of literature, with the capital at the center of this. The most famous work produced during this period was *The Tale of Genji*, a novel by Murasaki Shikibu written in the early eleventh century. The author of *Sarashina Nikki*, whose travels began around the time when *Genji* would have first been circulated, was aware of that and other novels. While her return travels were ordained by her family, the author had a personal reason for wanting to undertake the journey as well, which was to live in the capital surrounded by these stories:

As a girl raised in the back of beyond, even farther than the end of the road to the East Country, how rustic and odd I must have been. But however it was that I first became enthralled with them, once I knew that such things as tales existed in the world, all I could think of over and over was how much I wanted to read them. At leisure times during the day and evening, when I heard my elder sister and stepmother tell bits and pieces of this or that tale or talk about what the Shining Genji was like, my desire to read these tales for myself only increased... (pp. 90)

A novel is meant to be read, and Arntzen and Moriyuki (2014, pp. 6) as well as Plustchow (1982, pp. 63) all assert that the purpose of composing a travel diary was the same. In the opening lines of *Sarashina Nikki*, the reader can observe a correlation between the Heian period obsession with the novel and the design of the travel diary. As a writer attuned to *The Tale of Genji* and the novel structure—a chronological narration that hooks the reader with thrilling episodes of love, adventure, and courtly life, some drawn out for theatrical effect—the author of *Sarashina Nikki* constructs her travel account with similar techniques. While she narrates her travels sequentially, the written time spent on her experiences does not necessarily correlate to the real time they took up. The author pauses to expand on select moments, conscious of what will appeal to a reader's interests and emotions.

One device for expanding a moment was the inclusion of poetry. Early in their travels, the entourage in *Sarashina Nikki* comes across the remains of an old structure. While all pass by without incident, the author internally lingers in this moment by composing a poem: “Not rotted away, / if these pillars in the river / did not remain, / how could we ever know / the traces of long ago?” (pp. 92). By inserting a poem, she decelerates this moment and crafts movement according to her internal journey, rather than the external one, offering points of connection for her audience.

Of course, a key aspect of being able to create this “novel” effect was having read novels, and at the

beginning of *Sarashina Nikki*, the author hadn't yet been able to read *The Tale of Genji* in full; it was a story of which she'd only heard snippets. This is where her role emerges as not only a diarist and a novelist, but also a memoirist. In the forty years between the travels and the completed diary, the author finally reads Shikibu's masterpiece, as well as other works. Other than utilizing the literary sensibilities acquired through decades of reading, the author also inserts her older self. An example of this can be found in the aforementioned poem, "Not rotted away...." Arntzen and Moriyuki suggest that poetry was not only a means of halting movement but also of inserting the perspective of a later self, noting that many poems were most likely not composed on the spot (2014, pp. 24). If the poem is viewed as a later addition, then it becomes even more poignant, as an aging woman reflects on longevity and memory.

The insertion of the author's adult perspective is present throughout the narrative, but we will return to the instance in the opening passage where she calls herself "rustic and odd." In looking back on a former self, the memoirist gains a discerning awareness that can be used to create tension. By presenting herself as somewhat rural, the author creates a distance between Edo and the capital that is measured in more than miles. She is about to undertake a personal journey as well, and that internal voyage is shaped in parts by the diarist, the novelist, and the memoirist.

Utamakura: The Third Journey

The travel diary in medieval Japan could be described as a container for three journeys: the literal, the internal, and the textual. As discussed above, the literal journey in *Sarashina Nikki* describes the author's physical movement over the land, while the internal one chronicles her emotional response to her travels. This section will discuss the third type of travel undertaken by the diarist—the textual journey.

The textual journey is marked by a complex system of allusions to significant places and their prior appearances in other written works, such as another diary or a poem. These allusions, called *utamakura*, uniquely fuse place with literature by attaching historical, spiritual, or personal importance to a site (Plutschow 1982, pp. 20). *Sarashina Nikki* contains several *utamakura*, such as Yatsunashi, the Eight Bridges that originally appeared in the famous *Tales of Ise* (Arntzen and Moriyuki 2014, pp. 105-6), and the Ōsaka Barrier, a mountain pass serving as a border of the capital that could be used as a metaphor for departures or meetings (Arntzen and Moriyuki 2014, pp. 108-9). To exemplify the author's use of *utamakura*, we will look closely at her portrayals of the Tōkaidō route and of Mount Fuji, as well as at a later travel diarist's examination of these places.

The author was traveling from Edo to the capital via a course named the Tōkaidō. In *Travels with a Writing Brush*, Meredith McKinney describes the Tōkaidō as “particularly dense in *utamakura*, and few literary

travellers failed to pause at these increasingly famous places and to record their visit and its poem” (2019, pp. xx). In the present day, the shinkansen (bullet train) that travels this route between Tokyo and Kyoto is named the Tōkaidō. It is hedged by sea and mountain, and travel diarists taking this route would have followed certain conventions when writing about their travels.

Though the Tōkaidō connected Edo and the capital, the diarist would typically place emphasis on how their journey related to the latter. Plutschow notes that most accounts began at the capital and focused on the author’s departure (1982, pp. 2). In contrast, the author of *Sarashina Nikki* was returning to the capital, the place of her birth and early childhood, and as a result she gives her account a unique twist on this convention. While experiencing nostalgia for her home in the east as she departs, the author also longs to return to the capital, where she sees possibilities for her future through the rumor of Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji*. Approaching the Ōsaka Barrier, she claims the utamakura’s function as a border place that could embrace going or meeting. She recalls Edo with the image of a Buddha, which had been mentioned as she set out in the beginning, while going to her next destination: “Close to the [Ōsaka] barrier, from above some temporary screening next to the mountain, we could see only the roughly carved face of the Buddha” (pp. 106). Thus, the author’s account is shaped by both departure from the east and return to the capital in the west, of going to meet a new life in an old place.

One of the most famous utamakura on the Tōkaidō was Mount Fuji, a now dormant volcano and the highest peak in Japan. Interestingly, the volcano was active at the time of the author's travels, and for the medieval travel diarist, "Mt. Fuji was not Mt. Fuji without smoke," as Plutschow puts it (1982, pp. 22). Accordingly, the author of *Sarashina Nikki* writes of Fuji, "It looks like nothing else in the world...from the mountain's slightly flat top, smoke rises. At dusk, one can even see flames shooting up" (pp. 102). Shifting her focus to the sea, she then muses on the image of the smoke: "Might smoke be rising to meet smoke? I thought; the waves at the Kiyomi Barrier seem to be high indeed" (pp. 102). This well-read author would surely have been aware of Mount Fuji's literary associations, and she appropriately hovers over this utamakura in her travel diary. In doing so, she unites contrasting images of fire and water, just as her journey unites ideas of both setting out and returning.

To demonstrate how utamakura function through the ages, we will briefly look at "Nozarashi kikō," or "Bones on the Wayside," by Matsuo Bashō. Bashō was a seventeenth-century poet, and he modeled his work after the medieval travel diaries of old by implementing the second, textual journey. In his travel diary "Nozarashi kikō," Bashō traveled the Tōkaidō in the western direction, toward Kyoto, just as the author of *Sarashina Nikki* does. Attuned to the Tōkaidō's significance and the utamakura that enrich it, Bashō honors their associations, as when he passes Mount Fuji and writes a haiku: "Mist, chill rain – / Fuji hidden / is all the more entrancing" (McKinney 2019, pp. 250). Though Fuji is no longer

active, Bashō evokes the image of smoke with the mention of mist, offering his own tribute to this famous utamakura.

The function of an utamakura in travel diaries is not stagnant, as Bashō's creative means of recalling Fuji's smoke demonstrate. In *Utamakura, Allusion, and Intertextuality*, Edward Kamens discusses how time changes the reader's relationship to an utamakura, saying, "A poetry so designed cannot really bring about such erasures of time's passing; if anything, the attempt reveals most plainly just how much change time does bring about, how impossible it is to dull its force, how deeply we feel that force" (1997, pp. 38). Therefore, the purpose of an utamakura is not to freeze a place in time, but to rather evoke an emotional response in the reader. Bashō accomplishes this by lingering on Mount Fuji with a haiku, draping the mountain in concealment and mystery; the volcano has gone dormant, and this once fiery, now peaceful being elicits a quiet appreciation. The author of *Sarashina Nikki* also creates emotion, connecting the power of the volcano to that of the sea, reminding us that nature has a counter for all. Utamakura offer pathways for connection, for both the diarist and her reader.

Conclusion: Studying the Travel Diary

Sarashina Nikki can be used as a source for understanding the conventions of the travel diary in medieval Japan. The travel diarist was both a novelist, molding the travel account into a compelling narrative with emotional appeal, as well as a memoirist, inserting a later perspective

to create an internal journey alongside the external. Utamakura were employed to engage yet another layer of journeying, one that explores the past associations of a place and the literature written about it. The author of *Sarashina Nikki* uses all of these devices. Fascinated with the contemporary novel *The Tale of Genji*, she crafts time in her travel diary so that engaging moments are expanded, sometimes through poetry. Her older self emerges to retrospectively guide her internal travels, just as utamakura guide the diary's textual journey. The literal travels of *Sarashina Nikki* may have concluded with the author's arrival in the capital, but the diary's literary journey continues.

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