

**TRANSFORMATION OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN KONJAKU
MONOGATARISHŪ (VOLUME 28, TALE 1): FOCUSING ON MALE PERSPECTIVE
AND DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION**

Gulnoza Kurbonova

Faculty of Oriental Languages, Samarkand State
Institute of Foreign Languages, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Samal Borankulova

Faculty of Oriental Studies, The Al-Farabi Kazakh
National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract

This paper examines the first tale of volume 28 of Konjaku Monogatarishū, “近衛舎人共
稻荷詣重方値女語” focusing on how the image of a woman is differently represented when she
is perceived as a “wife” and when she is perceived as an “unknown beautiful woman.” In
particular, the study analyzes concrete narrative descriptions such as clothing, actions, and
lexical expressions, and investigates how female imagery is constructed through a male
perspective. The analysis reveals that the image of the woman is not fixed; rather, it is shaped by
male perception and can be represented either as an idealized aesthetic figure or as a negative
image depending on the way she is perceived.

Keywords

Konjaku Monogatarishū, setsuwa literature, female representation, depiction of beauty,
perceptual difference, disguise, male perspective, Heian literature.

1. Introduction

Konjaku Monogatarishū is regarded as the largest collection of classical setsuwa in
Japanese literary history, believed to have been compiled in the late Heian period. The title
“Konjaku Monogatarishū” (今昔物語集) derives from the formulaic opening phrase “今八昔”
(Now it is the past), which appears at the beginning of each narrative. The authorship of the work
remains uncertain; various theories have been proposed since ancient times, including attribution
to Minamoto no Takakuni (源隆国) and the monk Toba Sōjō Kakuyū (鳥羽僧正覚猷), but none
has been definitively established (Note 1).

The work consists of 31 volumes containing both Buddhist tales and secular narratives;
however, volumes 8, 18, and 21 are no longer extant. In total, the collection is said to include
more than one thousand tales.

In addition, the structure of Konjaku Monogatarishū is broadly divided into three regional
sections. Volumes 1–5 contain tales set in Tenjiku (天竺, India), volumes 6–10 in Shintan (震旦,
China), and volumes 11–31 in Honchō (本朝, Japan).

The detailed structure of Konjaku Monogatarishū is as follows. The work can be broadly
divided into two groups of volumes: those depicting the world of Buddhist history and those

depicting what may be called the secular world outside Buddhist history. First, volumes 1 to 4 describe the birth of the Buddha, the establishment of Buddhism, and the instruction of sentient beings, as well as the state of Indian Buddhism after the Buddha's passing. These volumes portray the world of Buddhist history in India. Next, volumes 6 to 9 (with volume 8 missing) describe the transmission and establishment of Buddhism in China, along with various miracle tales and karmic retribution stories, thereby depicting the world of Buddhist history in China. Furthermore, volumes 11 to 20 (with volume 18 missing) present the introduction and establishment of Buddhism in Japan, together with a variety of miracle tales and karmic retribution stories, thereby depicting the world of Buddhist history in Japan (Note 2).

As outlined above, volumes 1-4, 6-9, and 11-20 constitute a group of books that depict the world of Buddhist history. In contrast, the remaining volumes, namely volumes 5, 10, and 21-31 (with volume 21 being a missing volume), are set in India, China, and Japan respectively, and contain a wide range of setsuwa concerning kings, wise ministers, consorts, philosophers, warriors, and commoners. These volumes present a secular world in opposition to the world of Buddhist history (Note 2).

In addition, the figures and beings appearing in the text are highly diverse, including nobles, monks, samurai, peasants, physicians, courtesans, thieves, and beggars, as well as birds, animals, and various supernatural beings such as *yōkai* (妖怪, Japanese folk monster) and other transformed or supernatural entities.

2. Female Representation in “The Tale of Shigekata, a Konoe valet, Who Meets a Woman on an Inari Pilgrimage”

Research Content and Methodology

In setsuwa literature, female representations are generally classified into several types, including the beautiful woman type, the chaste wife type, the jealous woman type, the devout (faith-based) type, the wise woman type, and the transient (無常) type. In *Konjaku Monogatari*, tales such as “The Tale of the Woman-Demon of Mino Province” (美濃国の女鬼に値ふ語) in volume 27 and “The Tale of a Jealous Woman Who Becomes a Demon” (女嫉妬して鬼となる語) in the same volume have been widely studied as representative examples of female depiction.

This study focuses on the first tale of volume 28, “The Tale of Shigekata, a Konoe valet, Who Meets a Woman on an Inari Pilgrimage” (近衛舎人共稻荷詣重方値女語). In this narrative, the same woman is perceived in two entirely different ways: as a wife from the male perspective, and as an unknown woman with whom the protagonist is mistakenly confronted. The author pays particular attention to the significant differences in female representation that arise from such variations in perception.

The research method employed in this study centers on an analysis of concrete narrative descriptions and lexical expressions within the text.

Results and Discussion

The first tale of volume 28 of *Konjaku Monogatari*, “The Tale of Shigekata, a Konoe valet, Who Meets a Woman on an Inari Pilgrimage,” is a setsuwa narrative in which Mamuda no

Shigekata, a valet of the Konoefu, Imperial Guard Office, encounters a beautiful woman on his way to the Inari shrine pilgrimage.

Since ancient times, it was customary for people to visit Fushimi Inari Shrine on the first horse day (hatsu-uma) of the second month. In one particular year, the valets of the Imperial Guard Office also set out together on such a pilgrimage. On their way, they encountered a strikingly beautiful woman. Shigekata, one of the valets, becomes attracted to her and attempts to court her. However, the woman rebukes him, stating that she cannot trust the words of someone who speaks to her so lightly.

In response, Shigekata confesses that he already has a wife but is dissatisfied with her and would prefer to replace her if he finds a more suitable woman. Hearing this, the woman attempts to confirm his true intentions, but suddenly strikes him on the cheek. When he looks up in surprise, he realizes that the woman is actually his own wife in disguise. The wife then angrily reproaches him, saying that she has long been aware of his unfaithful nature. The companions witnessing the scene burst into laughter, and the incident soon spreads throughout society, causing Shigekata to become a figure of ridicule.

The above is the outline of the narrative. This study focuses in particular on the depiction and expression of the beautiful woman in this tale, and conducts an analysis based on this aspect.

The events of the narrative are said to take place on the “hatsu-uma day of kisaragi” (衣曝の始午の日). The term “kisaragi” (衣曝) refers to the second month of the lunar calendar, while “hatsu-uma day” denotes the first horse day of the month, an annual Japanese observance. For example, in 2026, the first horse day falls on February 8. This day is widely known as an occasion for venerating the deity Inari, and festivals and pilgrimages are held at Inari shrines throughout Japan.

There are approximately 30,000 Inari shrines across Japan, making them the most numerous types of Shinto shrine in the country. They are widely recognized for their rows of red torii gates. The head shrine is Fushimi Inari Taisha in Kyoto. It should be noted that there are various theories regarding the so-called “Three Great Inari Shrines” of Japan. The term “Inari-sama” is generally considered to derive from the idea of “ine ga naru” (稲が生る, rice growing). Originally worshipped as a deity of agriculture, Inari is now also widely venerated as a god of business prosperity. The fox is commonly regarded as the messenger of Inari (Note 3).

The protagonist of the story is Mamuda no Shigekata. He served as a toneri (valet, footman) in the Konoefu Imperial Guard Office. “Konoe no toneri” (近衛舎人) refers to lower-ranking officials attached to the Konoefu Imperial Guard Office, who were responsible for palace security and serving in close attendance to the emperor, members of the imperial family, and high-ranking nobles (Note 4).

Shigekata encounters a woman on his way to the pilgrimage, who is described as “艶装ぞきたる女,” wearing “濃き打ちたる上着に、紅梅・萌黄など重ね着て、生めかしく歩びたり。” In other words, she is depicted as wearing an indescribably beautiful outfit, with layers of clothing in red plum and light green beneath a dark outer robe, moving with a sensuous and graceful appearance.

The expression “打ちたる上着” refers to neriginu (練り絹, refined silk). This is a type of textile made by processing silk to remove impurities, resulting in a smooth, glossy, and soft

texture. Accordingly, *neriginu* denotes high-quality, lustrous silk fabric, typically used to describe the clothing of women of high social status or formal attire.

This description resonates with the preceding phrase “*艶装ぞきたる*,” and functions to further emphasize the woman’s beauty. The term “*en*” (艶) is frequently used in classical Heian literature such as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*, and represents an important aesthetic ideal of the period. It encompasses not only brilliance and elegance but also a sense of delicacy, allure, and refined beauty.

Furthermore, the color “*moegi*” (萌黄, light green) used in the woman’s garments symbolizes youth, freshness, and elegance. Thus, from these descriptions of clothing, one is led to imagine not only brilliance and refined beauty but also high social status and dignified appearance.

In this way, by presenting such an idealized image of the woman, the narrative leads *Shigekata*, a man inclined toward romantic pursuits, to become attracted to her, which ultimately results in the revelation of his unfaithful inclinations.

Furthermore, the woman is described as “*生めかしく歩びたり*”. The term “*namamekashi*” (生めかし) is an archaic expression meaning youthful beauty, elegance, and refinement. According to the “literary concept” section of the *Obunsha Classical Japanese Dictionary*, this term denotes a sense of youthfulness that makes the person approachable and gives rise to an atmosphere that invites admiration and the desire to express praise for their beauty. However, in later usage, it came to be more commonly associated with an erotic or sexually attractive appearance that appeals to the opposite sex (Note 5).

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the term “*en*” (艶) also carries connotations of sensuality. Thus, the woman’s appearance can be understood as embodying not only elegance and refinement but also a degree of erotic charm that attracts the opposite sex.

Moreover, considering the development of the narrative, it is possible to interpret that the woman does not merely possess natural beauty, but intentionally displays a sensual demeanor in order to test *Shigekata*. From this perspective, she can be regarded not only as a figure of physical beauty but also as a character endowed with intelligence and wit capable of controlling the situation.

Furthermore, not only her clothing and movements but also her voice when responding to *Shigekata* is described as “extremely endearingly charming” (極めて愛敬付たり), which strongly emphasizes her cuteness and affectionate appeal.

As outlined above, this tale depicts a scene in which *Shigekata*, originally a man inclined toward romantic pursuits, notices a beautiful woman during a pilgrimage and approaches her. However, in reality, this woman is his own wife, and *Shigekata* is ultimately deceived by her disguise. A key point of interest here is that the image of the beautiful woman encountered outside and the image of the wife, though referring to the same person, are portrayed as entirely different appearances, which is particularly striking.

Shigekata describes his wife as “*賤の者持て侍れども、しや顔は猿の様にて、心は販婦にて有れば*”. This means: ‘I do have an unattractive wife, but her face is like that of a monkey, and her character is just like that of a travelling merchant woman.’ In other words, while

encountering her outside, he fails to recognize her as his wife and perceives her as a graceful, beautiful, and refined woman; however, within the domestic sphere, he regards her as a lowly, coarse, and unattractive figure.

Furthermore, the element “shiya” in “shiya-face” (しや顔) is an honorific prefix used to express contempt or anger (Note 5), indicating that his evaluation of his wife is highly derogatory. In addition, her inner character is also described in negative terms, being likened to that of a “販女” (a female peddler or street vendor), which further reinforces the pejorative nature of her portrayal.

3. Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined how, from a male perspective, the image of a woman is represented in markedly different ways depending on whether she is recognized as a “wife” or as an “unknown woman encountered by chance outside.” The analysis has shown that, despite being the same individual, the female image is not determined primarily by inherent qualities of the woman herself. Rather, it is significantly shaped by how she is perceived and by the nature of the male gaze, that is, the way in which she is “seen.”

Note

1. 精選版 日本国語大辞典「今昔物語集」の意味・読み・例文・類語
2. 改訂新版 世界大百科事典「今昔物語集」の意味・わかりやすい解説
3. 日本三大稲荷はどこか知ってる？全国に3万か所あると言われるお稲荷様から厳選まとめ！ - おすすめ旅行を探すならトラベルブック(TravelBook)
4. デジタル大辞泉「近衛舎人」の意味・読み・例文・類語
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5. Библиографические ссылки