

discovers her not long after discussing the merits of middle status woman—daughters of men of fourth or fifth rank—with his friends.⁴ Sama no Kami tells him, “Anyway, the really fascinating girl is the one of whom no one has ever heard, the strangely appealing one who lives by herself, hidden away in some ruinous, overgrown old house.”⁵ At this point, Genji is still relatively naïve and is greatly impressed by the thought that wonderful women might exist in a place he had never considered. By no coincidence, with this advice, Genji soon finds Yugao in an old house in the Fifth Ward. Only after her death does he discover that she actually was the daughter of a senior noble. Yugao appears to be of nobility, whereas her residence tells Genji otherwise. In the end, since he cannot assign her a class, Genji has to decide whether or not to love Yugao independently of the official hierarchy. Because of Yugao, Genji learns that unsanctioned romances can fill the emotional gap left by his loveless political marriage to Aoi.

Yugao, unafraid of the future, chooses when she has a lover. She has the courage to forsake a comfortable life with To no Chujo two years earlier, and runs away with their daughter, leaving Yugao without support from either parents or lover. When she believes To no Chujo has returned, Yugao violates proprieties of the time by sending the first letter.⁶ When she realizes her mistake, that To no Chujo is actually Genji, Yugao surrenders to Genji’s charm. The attraction becomes overwhelming: “She found him handsomer than her poem suggested, indeed frighteningly handsome, given the setting.”⁷ The situation is entirely surreal: Genji conceals both his name and rank; they meet by a case of mistaken identity; and, a courtier like Genji has no reason to stop by a middle-class house and fall deeply in love. Yugao, who controls the direction of her relationship with To no Chujo, can no longer maintain the upper hand in her relationship with Genji. Nevertheless, she plays the role of the wooer in this relationship,

and does not give thought to the long-term implications of the affair.⁸

Tragically, a murderous spirit cuts the relationship short. We never learn what might have happened to Yugao once passion receded from her relationship with Genji. Even so, there is reason to believe that she would have won treatment worthy of the finest women. After Genji sets up his Rokujo estate, “Ukon could only think with regret that if her own lady had lived she would now be honored with treatment similar at least to that accorded the Akashi lady.”⁹ Since Yugao is of higher birth than Lady Akashi, Ukon believes that Yugao would have been one of Genji’s principal wives. After all, even Hanachiru Sato, for whom Genji never feels strongly, lives in her own quarter of Rokujo-in and receives the east lodge at Nijo when Genji dies.¹⁰ It is significant that Genji assigns Ukon to serve Murasaki, his principal wife. Ukon is a living memento of Yugao. Genji’s principal wife would undoubtedly receive his favorite serving lady, indicating that Yugao remains dear to Genji even after her death.

Even though her entire story is enveloped by passion, Yugao establishes a promising future as well. Tamakazura, the daughter she leaves behind, is a legacy of which she can be proud. News of Tamakazura’s existence is enough to stop the flow of the novel and threatens the stability of both Rokujo-in and the court, since nearly every man becomes consumed by thoughts of her. Hence, the eight chapters that follow her discovery are commonly dubbed the “Tamakazura chapters.” Tamakazura ends up as the favorite wife of Higeuro, the third most powerful man in the country. She holds the position of Wardress of the Ladies’ Apartments, which is remarkable for someone who was nearly lost in Kyushu.¹¹

There is also reason to believe that Yugao was on the way to a life of religion. Genji Monogatari is full of parallels and strange coincidences. Not surprisingly, Yugao’s life

⁴ Ibid. 23.

⁵ Ibid. 24.

⁶ Doris G. Barga, *A Woman’s Weapon: Spirit Possession in the Tale of Genji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) 33, Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 59.

⁷ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 70.

⁸ A portion of the above is from my essay on the portrayal of Yugao in Noh entitled “Yugao.”

⁹ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 387.

¹⁰ Ibid. 736.

¹¹ Ibid. 488. Spending a long period of time in a rural area such as Kyushu was believed to make someone boorish and unfit for the refinements of the capital.

could easily lead into that of Ukifune. In all likelihood, since few of Genji's affairs remain private, To no Chujo would have found out about Yugao. The resulting rivalry might have affected Yugao much as the Kaoru-Niou affair changed Ukifune. Also, before meeting Genji, Yugao attempts to separate herself from the world; according to Ukon, when Yugao flees To no Chujo's wife, she wants to run off to the hills and presumably take religious vows. We can only speculate as to what would have come of Yugao if she had lived, but the above is strong evidence that her life was more than a tragedy.

Thus, as the woman who teaches Genji about love free from social obligations, Yugao is arguably Genji's greatest affair before Murasaki becomes his unchallenged wife. During this time, Genji has numerous lovers. However, Yugao even manages to divert Genji's affections away from the immaculate Rokujo Lady, and makes him temporarily forget about Fujitsubo. Yugao is vital to the story because she causes Genji to associate lower-ranking women with true love. Evidence of this is that fact that his relationships with Lady Rokujo, Fujitsubo, Asagao, and Aoi are ultimately disastrous, yet Genji remembers Yugao fondly for the rest of his life. It may have seemed unrealistic to women of the Heian era, but Yugao does not worry about her economic security and follows her impulses. Reckless as her actions might seem, Yugao still bears a successful daughter and seems to have planned a retreat into religion if necessary. The only unattractive element of Yugao's relationship with Genji is that he does not officially recognize Yugao. In the end, however, Genji learns from Yugao to never again hide a woman because of her rank.

Lady Akashi as Aristocratic Wife and Mother

Lady Akashi exemplifies the Heian period gentlewoman. She excels at music, calligraphy, and poetry.¹² Although Lady Akashi is not

Genji's principal wife, she possesses artistic talents worthy of an imperial consort. As far as music is concerned, Genji compares her koto to that of Fujitsubo, who in his mind, is perfect beyond description.¹³ Having mastered more than one instrument, Lady Akashi's dominates the concert at Rokujo-in when playing the biwa. At the concert, "Once the instruments were tuned and the ladies were playing in concert, the biwa rang out with a marvelous skill, superb in touch and limpid in tone, that lifted its music above the rest."¹⁴ The other performers—Murasaki, Onna Sannomiya, and Genji's daughter—are also very good, but they had the benefit of being trained in the capital. On the other hand, Lady Akashi learned to play while in Akashi, and in light of the prejudice against the provinces, contemporary readers must have seen her talents as nothing short of a miracle.¹⁵

Parallels with Lady Rokujo, the paragon of the refined noblewoman, establish Lady Akashi's character. The first time Genji converses with her, he immediately recalls the bearing of Lady Rokujo.¹⁶ Moreover, Lady Rokujo and Lady Akashi are the only women with outstanding calligraphy. Murasaki initially resents Lady Akashi as an unworthy rival, but has no choice but to accept Lady Akashi after seeing her penmanship.¹⁷ In contrast to his behavior towards proud Lady Rokujo, Genji treats Lady Akashi in a manner befitting one of the highest birth. For example, this is how Genji attempts to appease Murasaki's jealousy of Lady Akashi:

"Then there is the lady off in the hills of whom you have such a low opinion. She is more sensitive and accomplished than one might expect from her rank. She demands rather special treatment and so I have chosen to overlook a tendency not to be as aware as she might of her place in the world."¹⁸

¹² Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* 209.

¹³ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 266.

¹⁴ Tyler, *The Tale of Genji* 640.

¹⁵ Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* 81.

¹⁶ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 263.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 278, 233.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 358. Royall Tyler's translation suggests that Genji speaks of Lady Akashi in a derogatory fashion. I have used Edward Seidensticker's translation here because I believe that Genji uses such language in his effort to convince Murasaki that she still comes first in his affection, not out of sincere disdain for Lady Akashi. Tyler, *The Tale of Genji* 374.

While Genji admits to originally thinking of Lady Akashi as no more than a diversion, he later learns that “on the surface she yields and seems mild, but within she has such imposing dignity that she can be quite forbidding.”¹⁹ Lady Akashi’s nature is such that she commands the highest respect even as the lowest-born woman at Rokujo-in. Therefore, from Genji’s intimate perspective, she strikingly resembles the fearsome Lady Rokujo.

Additionally, contrasts with Murasaki, Genji’s favorite woman, further develop Lady Akashi’s character. Murasaki is nearly the perfect wife aside from two major shortcomings—she sometimes becomes extremely jealous, and she is unable to bear children. Lady Akashi complements Murasaki’s imperfections in many ways. First of all, Lady Akashi is proud to a fault. Even if women of much higher birth covet a relationship with Genji, Lady Akashi refuses to admit it to him, afraid that he will take her lightly on the basis of her rank.²⁰ Genji himself exists both as one meant to “ascend to the highest place and be father to the nation” and as a man of non-imperial status.²¹ Murasaki is his wife for all practical purposes, but she is not quite the aristocrat that Genji’s pseudo-imperial “father to the nation” side demands. Lady Akashi, on the other hand, barely serves in the domestic capacity, but possesses talents that a royal husband requires. As a result of Genji’s dual identity, he needs two women to fulfill the role of his female counterpart. Thus, Lady Akashi wins the spot opposite Murasaki in Genji’s affections.

Lady Akashi’s greatest accomplishment is her daughter. A Heian woman’s child was her key to social and political power, especially in a polygamous marriage where competition between wives could be fierce.²² Although Murasaki resents Genji’s affection for Lady Akashi, once she adopts the Akashi girl, “[her] old bitterness had left her. She had the child, and the account was settled.”²³

Until then, Murasaki, in her inability to have children, had failed as a woman. To make matters worse, Genji needs children for the sake of his political future. After gaining possession of Lady Akashi’s child, Murasaki knows that she no longer needs to worry about being supplanted. Lady Akashi is naturally devastated by the loss of her daughter, but can console herself with the knowledge that she has restored the Akashi family’s status. While her grandfather had been a minister, the political failure of Lady Akashi’s father condemns Lady Akashi to a life in the provinces. Once her daughter becomes a consort, however, the social position of Lady Akashi’s progeny is secure, and her family can now successfully escape from the stigmatized class of provincial governors.

Although Lady Akashi primarily appears in the context of the accomplished woman and the mother, her life is not devoid of romantic desire or religion. In truth, she also plays a part in the courtship love story. When Genji leaves Akashi, “the lady did not want anyone to guess the intensity of her grief . . . His image remained before her, and she seemed capable only of weeping.”²⁴ Lady Akashi generally constrains her emotions because she knows that Genji is more than her status deserves, and wants to hide the fact that she is dependent on his charity. Nonetheless, during her moments of sorrow, we learn how deeply she loves Genji. Toward the end of her story, Lady Akashi unobtrusively withdraws from earthly affairs. This occurs partly because Genji becomes more dependent upon Murasaki as the years pass. Even so, once Lady Akashi knows that her daughter will become empress, she ceases to worry about her background and her daughter—her primary worldly concerns. After witnessing the birth of her imperial grandson, Lady Akashi listens to the advice of her father, now a monk: “Whatever pleasures this life offers, do not forget the life to come.”²⁵ With this advice in mind, Lady Akashi realizes that she has accomplished everything

¹⁹ Tyler, *The Tale of Genji* 646.

²⁰ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 259.

²¹ *Ibid.* 14.

²² Haruo Shirane, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of “the Tale of Genji”* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 54.

²³ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 335.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 268.

²⁵ Tyler, *The Tale of Genji* 611.

possible in her life, and turns her thoughts to the next world.²⁶ In accordance with her tendency to avoid ceremony, Lady Akashi does not become a nun. However, her intentions to pray for the next life are no different from the plans of the other nuns in the story.

Ukifune as the Archetypal Nun

Murasaki Shikibu's epic *Genji Monogatari* concludes with the tale of Ukifune. Ukifune, as a woman of no real consequence, holds the unprecedented position of causing a heated rivalry between Kaoru and Niou—the next-generation leaders of Japan. Since Kaoru is To no Chujo's grandson, and Niou is a descendant of Genji, the entire situation is strangely reminiscent of the Yugao affair. When her story begins, Ukifune's trust in herself parallels that of Yugao. Ukifune readily carries on a relationship with Kaoru until she suddenly falls victim to Niou's overpowering charm: "Used to Kaoru's quiet ways, she now found herself with a gentleman who proclaimed himself incapable of tolerating a moment's separation. This must be the sort of thing people meant when they spoke of love."²⁷ Perhaps Ukifune, like other young ladies of Heian Japan, yearns for romance, and equates Niou's poetic speech to love. However, Ukifune is not wholly blinded by her desire for passionate romance. She senses that Niou is more of a lover than a husband, and will one day tire of her. Yet, she is too attached to him to give him up.²⁸

The difference between Ukifune and Yugao is that the former feels personally responsible for her lovers' happiness. Yugao never torments herself over thoughts that her absence makes To no Chujo unhappy. Conversely, Ukifune loves Niou more than Kaoru, but "she could not bring herself to say her final farewells to the man who had so long been her chief source of strength."²⁹ She cannot bear to hurt Kaoru

since he assumes responsibility for her lifelong welfare when she has no one else to provide for her. However, Ukifune is not aware that Kaoru uses her as a substitute for his unattainable first love. Niou, notorious for his weakness for beautiful women, also becomes infatuated by her. All these problems—attractions to appearances, relationships based on passion, and matters of security—stem from worldly matters. In short, everything about her life has only served to make Ukifune unhappy.

Consequently, Ukifune for the first time begins to exercise decisiveness: she makes up her mind to sever all ties with the world through suicide. Although Ukifune fails to kill herself, her plunge into the Uji River dramatically symbolizes the death of the old Ukifune. When she is rescued, Ukifune refuses to allow anyone to announce that she is still alive because it would only defeat the purpose of her effort to escape the past. She instead feigns amnesia:

"I don't want to keep secrets from you," said the girl [to the nun], choking with tears. "But it is all so strange, that I am alive, that you found me where you did, everything. It is all like clinging to something in a dream. Like being born into a different world, I should think. If there are people who worry about me, I cannot remember who they are. I have only you."³⁰

Here, Ukifune lays the foundations for her new life. She dismisses her entire situation as a dream, which echoes the Buddhist doctrine of the impermanence of the world. Moreover, Ukifune vocally denies the existence of her mother, her ladies-in-waiting, and her lovers. In essence, Ukifune has been "born into a different world."

At this point Ukifune makes her second great decision: with a new, more mature outlook on life, she firmly resolves to take religious vows despite everyone's opposition.³¹ She proceeds to shut out

²⁶ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 580.

²⁷ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 982.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 996.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 1005.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 1056.

³¹ Haruo Shirane, "Denial of Romance," in *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji*, ed. Andrew Pekarik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 135.

the world to a greater degree than anyone else in the novel. As Ukifune further separates herself from worldly things, she becomes stronger and more resilient. To begin with, she declines the lesser pleasures of a possible suitor and brightly colored clothing.³² Then, more importantly, Ukifune steadfastly refuses to acknowledge her brother. Once again, she uses the excuse of a failed memory: “I may have known this boy when we were small—but please, I can’t make myself try to remember...I do not know whether my mother is still alive. If she is I might want to see her – but no one else.”³³ While Ukifune recognizes her brother immediately, she hopes that by constantly denying his existence, she will one day convince herself that her former life was not real. Finally, at the end of the *Monogatari*, Ukifune suggests that her mother may no longer be alive. Up until her attempted suicide, Ukifune had been completely dependent upon her mother. Ukifune’s attempted suicide may even be a response to her mother’s comment that she would disown Ukifune if she somehow causes a scandal in the capital.³⁴ Although Ukifune cannot bear to assign her mother to the grave, she does so nonetheless, severing her strongest tie to her old life.

Even though Ukifune does not have the chance to bear children, there is still evidence that she would have made a much better wife than her provincial status suggests. When Kaoru finally gains access to her rooms and decides to teach her to play the koto, he thinks, “Had she been the loud, garrulous sort of provincial, he would have had to give up all thought of making her a substitute for Oigimi.”³⁵ Kaoru imagines that he can shape her into a princess because she naturally has a graceful and quiet demeanor. To a member of the Heian upper nobility like Kaoru, people from the provinces were generally too coarse for city refinements. While it may seem cruel that Kaoru does not believe Ukifune is quite suitable to serve as his wife, it’s important to note

that he distinguishes between the provincial Ukifune and the royal Oigimi based on upbringing rather than on blood line. Within *Genji Monogatari*, Ukifune is another example of a woman who, if not for the uncontrollable factor of parentage, could have found herself at the pinnacle of society.

Conclusion

A young woman is born into a family of the middle rank and lives in an obscure locale. Possessing accomplishments worthy of any noblewoman, she attracts two courtiers of the highest rank and enjoys the ensuing affairs without concern for her own security. She soon bears a beautiful daughter to the better of the two men and moves into his home as one of his favorite ladies. This daughter eventually rises to become empress. With nothing left to accomplish in this life, the woman becomes a nun, immerses herself in the sutras, and attains a new level of inner peace. Thus flows the combined story of Yugao, Lady Akashi, and Ukifune.

All three of these women initially endure a degree suffering. Yugao has only her serving women to support her, while Lady Akashi has an eccentric father who plans to hide her in the provinces until he can make her an unrealistically good marriage. Ukifune is the least favorite daughter of an uncouth governor. Not surprisingly, when dealing with men of near royal standing, the greatest fear of each woman is to be taken lightly as a consequence of her social status. The power of Yugao, Lady Akashi, and Ukifune is that each gradually overcomes social disadvantage in a world that is dominated by members of the highest ranks. A combination of Yugao, Lady Akashi, and Ukifune—the perfect woman—would have seemed beyond the reach of any Heian girl of Murasaki Shikibu’s position. By dividing the ideal woman into three characters, Murasaki Shikibu creates a tale of glory and court romance accessible to the Heian women of middle rank.

³² Earl Miner, “The Heroine: Identity, Recurrence, Destiny,” in *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji*, ed. Andrew Pekarik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 77.

³³ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 1088.

³⁴ Ivan Morris and Andrew Pekarik, “Deception and Self-Deception,” in *Ukifune: Love in the Tale of Genji*, ed. Andrew Pekarik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 147, Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 998.

³⁵ Seidensticker, *The Tale of Genji* 970.