

Inabune Tazawa: A Forgotten Woman Writer in the Meiji Period

Subin JEONG

Introduction

Inabune Tazawa was a woman writer in the Meiji Period, an era of Japanese history during the reign of Emperor Meiji that started in 1868 and lasted until 1912. She published literary works mainly from 1894 (Meiji 27) to 1896 (Meiji 29), just before her death. Known for enthusiastically revealing literary works of various genres including short novels and prose poems, she was a renowned figure within the literary circle and also to the public. However, after her unexpected death, Inabune was gradually forgotten by the public, and her name has become unfamiliar. Nevertheless, some scholars have surely attempted to commemorate and reexamine Inabune. One such proof is *The Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa*, published in 1986.¹ However, problems have persisted, such as the low level of awareness and the lack of continuous studies by multiple scholars. For instance, *The Complete Works of Inabune* has not been republished 20 years after it was reedited and published as a collection of Inabune's works in 1996—by the same editor who published the complete works.² Starting from a review of her life, this paper will identify the reasons she was forgotten. It will also explain why Inabune deserves to be remembered and refocused as a literary figure at a time when Japan was beginning to open up to the world.

1. Inabune's Growth

Inabune Tazawa was born in 1874 (Meiji 7) and died in 1896 (Meiji 29). She was born and raised in a wealthy, high-social-status family. The Tazawas, based in Yamaoka-ken Tsuruoka-shi of the Tohoku region, were a family of *Goteni*, doctors for a *daimyo*, for generations. Inabune's father, Kiyoshi, also became a doctor and inherited the family business, while her mother, Nobu, was born into the *Shizoku*, a former samurai family. Unlike other families living in rural areas, both of Inabune's parents accepted Western civilization,³ which allowed her to become familiar with European and American culture from her early years. Because her parents were both busy with their own occupations, Inabune was raised by her grandmother, who doted on her.⁴ As such, she was allowed to do the things she wanted to do, such as playing the koto and painting, without being obligated to perform domestic chores, which were mandatory even for maidens of noble birth.⁵ Inabune was also free to visit

¹ Inabune Tazawa, *Tazawa Inabune Zenshū (Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa)*, ed. Masataka Hosoya (Yamagata: Tohoku shuppan Kikaku, 1988).

² Inabune Tazawa, *Tazawa Inabune Sakuhinshū (The Collection of Inabune Tazawa's Works)*, ed. Masataka Hosoya (Akita: Mumeisha Shuppan, 1986).

³ Seiko Ito, *Sakka Tazawa Inabune: Meiji bungaku no hono no bara (The Writer Inabune Tazawa: The Blazing Up Rose of the Meiji Period)* (Tokyo: Shakai Hyōronsha, 2005), 13–17.

⁴ Ito, 20.

⁵ Ito, 49.

the sole bookstore in her hometown to buy literary magazines and indulged in them.⁶ Inabune's environment highly influenced her tastes.

Inabune grew up to be a greatly defiant and skeptical woman. Brought up in a family receptive to new (Western) values, she became critical of the conventions and customs that were taken for granted during her time. Specifically, she held negative thoughts about mainstream ideas about how Japanese women ought to behave with regard to household work and marriage. In addition, because she was raised in an environment where she was free to do whatever she wished, Inabune refused to adhere to principles that she deemed morally wrong or unjust. Her works significantly highlight such signs of antipathy and criticism of conventions. Inabune's modern mindset was also clear in her path toward becoming an author; she was supposed to marry a man who would be the heir of his family's business, which was considered natural at that time, but she refused to do so. Instead, she moved to Tokyo by herself for a literary apprenticeship and eventually became a writer.⁷

2. Inabune's Writing Career

Inabune was still young when she died from an unknown cause, so her career as an author was extremely short, lasting for only three years from 1894 to 1896. However, within this brief period, she wrote new-style poetry, called *Shintaishi*, and a sung narrative called *Joruri*, which is accompanied by *shamisen*, a Japanese traditional instrument, in addition to short novels.⁸ She especially gained fame after publishing her short novel *A White Rose* on *The Literature Club* N. 12 in December 1895. It was a special issue titled "The Stories Written by Women Writers" (*Keishū Shōsetsu*).

A White Rose is a tragic story about Mitsuko, a well-educated girl of high social standing who refuses marriage and takes her own life. The story describes the main character as extremely skeptical of the marriage institution, which is inevitably followed by the physical relationship for reproduction. Based on such a stance, Mitsuko constantly refuses the proposal of an earl's heir, Atsumaro. Mitsuko ends up being sexually abused by her suitor and takes her own life.⁹ Within the storyline, the manner in which Atsumaro violates Mitsuko is especially shocking: he anesthetizes her using chloroform, a chemical substance used in medical surgeries. By explicitly describing the brutality of male characters, who flourish by exploiting women, Inabune criticizes the structure of a male-oriented, patriarchal society.

Although *A White Rose* put Inabune under the spotlight, the reactions to her work were mostly negative. She was accused of writing things that were highly improper and immoral for a woman. This is because of her provocative storyline development, describing male characters as selfish, greedy, and indifferent particularly toward women. The development of the narrative in which the male character violates the main female character using chloroform, leading her to kill herself, shocked readers. Unfortunately for Inabune, most people, including critics and authors within the literary world, most of whom were male, focused only on such a shocking part of the story without paying attention to other interesting features. For instance, in a *The Sun* article published February 5, 1896, Chogyu Takayama wrote an intensive critique of *A White Rose*,¹⁰ claiming that the novel should not

⁶ Ito, 64.

⁷ Ito, 61–76.

⁸ Tazawa, *Tazawa Inabune Zenshū (Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa)*, 501–506.

⁹ Inabune Tazawa, "Shirobara (A White Rose)," *Bungei Kurabu (The Literature Club)*, no. 1 vol. 12(1895): 104–149, accessed October 31, 2021, <https://gateway2.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp:11039/lib/display/?lid=90111V010120064#00673>.

¹⁰ Chogyu Takayama, "Jyosei sakkani nozomu (A Request to Women Writers)," *Taiyō (The Sun)*, no. 2 vol. 3(1896): 97, accessed October 31, 2021, <https://gateway2.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp:11039/lib/display/?lid=90101V020030076#01461>.

be praised as a graceful work in the sense that it might spoil the writer's nature of feminine virtue.

3. The Influence of Bimyo Yamada

What led Inabune Tazawa to become an author? As she grew up in an environment unrelated to the literary world, who helped her publish her works, such as *A White Rose*, to the popular literary magazines of that time? This person was Bimyo Yamada, under whom Inabune went through literary apprenticeship and who supported and enabled her to submit her works to literary magazines. Bimyo was himself a renowned author of the time who had earned a reputation through his attempts to form and apply a colloquial writing style in his novels such as *Butterfly*. Inabune published most of her works through the literary magazine *The Literature Club*, and Bimyo has been presumed to have introduced her to the editors of his magazine.¹¹ From the time Inabune read literary magazines dreaming to become a writer in her hometown, she admired Bimyo and was inspired by his works.¹² Hence, it is not surprising that Inabune visited Bimyo after she arrived in Tokyo to have him as her mentor. However, while Bimyo was a powerful supporter of Inabune, helping her establish her writing career and attract attention, receiving Bimyo's support also deprived Inabune of a favorable public image as well as a chance to be judged purely by the quality of her works.

The relationship between Inabune and Bimyo was not always platonic; the two were also romantically involved during Inabune's time as Bimyo's apprentice. Given that Bimyo was already an eminent author, print media highlighted their relationship following Inabune's debut as a writer. The two got married in early 1896 after the publication of *A White Rose* but divorced just three months after. Overall, this romantic relationship with Bimyo did not benefit Inabune. Bimyo had already gotten the press's attention through his complicated love affairs and was criticized within the literary circle.¹³ Moreover, Inabune and Bimyo's relationship, from their marriage to their divorce, was highly publicized. Even after their separation, they continued to be the focus of various print media, as Bimyo would soon marry another woman.¹⁴ Indeed, Inabune was adversely affected by free love, Bimyo's love affairs, her short marriage, and their eventual divorce. Above all, however, her biggest problem was that these events were all reported by the press. During the Meiji Period, in particular, the public did not positively accept the notion of free love. In addition, all these reports from the press were regarded as a dishonor not only to Inabune, who must have maintained her dignity as a woman of virtue, but also to her entire family. Even worse was that all kinds of gossip, many of which were unproven, were written as news and spread throughout the country.¹⁵

Under such a condition, Inabune unexpectedly died in 1896, just six months after her divorce. She did not have the opportunity to recover from her damaged reputation or continue her career as an author and potentially receive more praise. Even after her death, rumors about how she died flew around momentarily. Inabune's abrupt death shortly after her divorce as well as the shocking news of Bimyo's remarriage led the public to think she took her own life. Such unconfirmed rumors led to her depiction as a miserable woman who was abandoned by a prodigal husband, exacerbated by all the controversies of her romantic relationship, which diverged from the perceived feminine virtue of the time. Eventually, it became somewhat taboo to overtly talk about her, especially within her hometown, where her

¹¹ Tazawa, *Tazawa Inabune Zenshū (Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa)*, 497.

¹² Shigure Hasegawa, *Kindai Bijinden (The Modern Beauty)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985), 83–88.

¹³ Ito, 123–148.

¹⁴ Ito, 274–275.

¹⁵ Tazawa, "Kyōkaroku (Records on a Flower Reflected on the Mirror)," *The Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa*, 363.

family still lived.¹⁶ Thus, without dispelling the scandalous image, she was gradually forgotten by the public for better or worse.

4. Insights into Living as a Woman and a Woman Writer in the Meiji Period

Inabune Tazawa's unfortunate life as an individual and as a writer provides insights into the life of a woman, as well as a woman author, in the Meiji Period. First, living as a woman in the Meiji Period is not the same as it is today; for one, Inabune was not expected to frankly and explicitly express her desires and opinions. Instead, women were expected to abide by norms and traditions, staying within the domestic sphere as a devoted wife and mother. Such a mindset is clear from Inabune's private life, which became a huge source of gossip and was reviled by the public. People said that Inabune's misfortune of being abandoned by Bimyo Yamada was a result of her selfishness;¹⁷ simply put, the public believed that Inabune was doomed since she enjoyed free love as she pleased and ignored her parents' advice to get married through arranged marriage. The harsh criticism of Inabune's failed marriage implies that people in the Meiji Period may have preferred the conformist woman who marries the man whom her parents selected and who devotes her life to being a housewife. Indeed, people did not favor a woman who marries a man for love, romantically, and who is dedicated to doing the work she desires to do.

Furthermore, considering what it was like to live as a woman writer in the Meiji Period, Inabune had to endure several restrictions and was not evaluated by public readers solely by the quality of her work. Specifically, a woman could hardly become an author on her own to begin with, most of the time requiring a male supporter who is already well-known and holds the power to nourish emerging writers. In addition to this, while guidelines were not explicit, standards did exist as to which were and were not allowed to write and which were and were not accepted.

Let us compare *A White Rose* to Ichiyo Higuchi's *The Thirteenth Night*, published in the same issue of *The Literature Club*.¹⁸ Ichiyo was a contemporary woman author who had just earned a reputation after publishing her short novel *Comparing Heights* in January 1895 through *The Literary World*.¹⁹ *The Thirteenth Night* also raised the issue of a woman who was maltreated by her husband. Like *A White Rose*, this literary work also discusses men's exploitation of women. However, *The Thirteenth Night* garnered praise. Interestingly, Chogyu Takayama, who criticized Inabune's work as deviating from the female virtue, highly evaluated Ichiyo's work in the same issue of *The Sun*.²⁰ Perhaps this was because in *The Thirteenth Night*, the main female character, Oseki, does not explicitly condemn the evil conduct of the male character, her husband Isao Harada, while the main character in *A White Rose*, Mitsuko, overtly expresses the hostility she feels toward the male characters around her. Furthermore, Oseki, who eventually decides to endure the harsh reality since she has a child to raise, evokes sympathy among critics and readers. In other words, Oseki displays a sharp contrast to Mitsuko, who stubbornly refuses to compromise with the reality that she has to marry Atsumaro, her abuser, by taking her own life.

¹⁶ "Preface," *Aru Meiji no Seishun: Inabune Tazawa jyoshi ni tsuite (One Youth of the Meiji Period: About Ms. Inabune Tazawa)* (Yamagata: Tsuruoka City Library, 1964), 1.

¹⁷ Hasegawa, 133.

¹⁸ Ichiyo Higuchi, "Jūsanya (The Thirteenth Night)," *Bungei Kurabu (The Literature Club)*, no. 1 vol. 12(1895), 13–41. Accessed October 31, 2021, <https://gateway2.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp:11039/lib/display/?lid=90111V010120029#00668>.

¹⁹ Shōwa joshi daigaku kindai bungaku kenkyushitsu (The Modern Literature Office of Shōwa Women's University), *Kindai bungaku kenkyu Sōsho (Collections of the Studies of Japanese Modern Literature)* (Tokyo: Shōwa Joshi Daigaku Kōbikai, 1956), 81.

²⁰ Takayama, 97.

In sum, although Inabune and Ichiyo wrote about the same issue—men’s abuse of women—their contrasting ways of addressing this problem were one of the reasons why their novels were assessed differently. This indicates the invisible but existent standard for women’s writing, which was applied in a highly arbitrary manner; women writers, therefore, had to regulate themselves when writing to be accepted by readers and the literary world.

5. The Value of Studying Inabune Tazawa

Just like her brief life, the fame Inabune gained as a public figure did not last long. Moreover, that very fame was something she had earned as the lover of a renowned author, Bimyo Yamada, and not as a writer per se. However, Inabune as a woman and as a writer deserves to be reexamined, as she sheds light on the Meiji Period as an era where women writers emerged. In other words, considering the aforementioned issues, it is evident that Inabune shows both the potentialities and limitations of the mid-Meiji Period’s awareness and understanding of women authors.

First, Inabune teaches us that the Meiji Period had many women writers with literary skills other than Ichiyo Higuchi. The special issue of *The Literature Club*, titled “The Stories Written by Women Writers,” through which *A White Rose* was published, was released twice, on December 10, 1895, and on January 20, 1897, showing women writers’ enthusiasm for creative writing. This also implies the increasing interest in women authors, which provided them the opportunity to present their works to public readers. Second, Inabune offers insights into the world of a woman writer in the Meiji Period in terms of not only the hardships they faced when writing specific stories as mentioned above but also the practical benefits they experienced by becoming an author. Inabune, just like Ichiyo, chose to become an author to live on her own although as a daughter of a respected family, she did not have to face the economic difficulties that Ichiyo did. In Inabune’s case, she originally intended to be a writer to live an unmarried life, and this is ultimately linked to the economic problem, as she must have become poor without getting married. She did not have any other financial supporters besides her parents and receiving economic aid from them could not have lasted forever. Nevertheless, this implies that women viewed becoming an author as one of their options for independence.

Finally, the novelty of Inabune’s works deserves more spotlight as well. Again, in *A White Rose*, Mitsuko who rejects the injustice of the male-oriented society, questions the marriage institution, and exposes the problems surrounding heterosexual relationships both from spiritual and physical aspects. Mitsuko also tends to reveal misandry. In this work, Inabune inserted a scene in which Mitsuko contemplates things that come with marriage. Imagining the situation after getting married, Mitsuko believes that as friends, she and her husband might get along well and mutually support each other. However, she does not like the idea of having sex with him to fulfill her duty of bearing a child. She even believes that such a physical relationship with a man is indecent and wondered if there is another way for her to reproduce. Given that marriage and reproduction based on a heterosexual relationship were a matter of course in the patriarchal society of the Meiji Period, it is surprising that a woman author made a bold venture to openly criticize these natural social structures and conventions.

Also, in terms of character creation, without portraying conventional or normative female characters pliable to a patriarchal society who must have been viewed by female readers as role models, Inabune described various female characters with different characteristics and features. Besides Mitsuko, who shows some kind of misandry and was reluctant to marry, *A White Rose* also has other female characters. While Mitsuko’s mother supports her refusal to marry, Mitsuko’s nanny, who acted as her second mother, wishes that

she would get married to the earl's son, Atsumaro, and become a countess. Moreover, Mitsuko's maid turned out to be Atsumaro's spy, who would orchestrate Mitsuko's rape. Although not all these characters are agreeable, each female personality had a unique characteristic. The novel deserves to be evaluated highly, as it helps emphasize the agency of women in the Meiji Period, when women like Inabune Tazawa were accused of outwardly expressing their desires or complex identities.

6. Conclusion

Considering all the interesting research subjects and studies on Inabune Tazawa, she surely deserves to be reexamined and reevaluated. However, with regard to refocusing her as someone who is already a historical figure tied to a certain image, a few things must be kept in mind when delving into her life. Particularly, perceptions of her have already been distorted because of the rigid view of women and the media circus during her lifetime. Therefore, without dwelling on the gossip and the images that were formed about her in the Meiji Period, we should try to embrace Inabune as an individual who lived in that era. Research focusing on each of her works must be conducted without prejudice.

In such a process, scholars must exert effort in finding out who else influenced Inabune besides Bimyo Yamada. This would help redefine Inabune not mainly and solely as Bimyo's lover and enable us to purely focus on her literary career as an independent woman. Eventually, the endeavor to unearth Inabune's literary works and achievements and objectively evaluate her as a writer will enhance our understanding of the sociocultural and literary atmosphere during the Meiji Period. This will then make it possible to situate Inabune within the literary history of that era.

Bibliography

- Hasegawa, Sigure. *Kindai bijinden (The Modern Beauty)*. Tokyo: Iwanami Bookstore, 1985.
- Ito, Seiko. *Sakka Inabune Tazawa: Meiji bungaku no honō no bara (The Writer Inabune Tazawa: The Blazing Up Rose of the Meiji Period)*. Tokyo: Shakai Hyōronsha, 2005.
- Sasagawa, Gisaburo and Tazawa, Inabune. *Aru Meiji no seishun: Tazawa Inabune jyoshi ni tsuite (One Youth of the Meiji Period: About Ms. Inabune Tazawa)*. Edited by Tsuruoka City Library. Yamagata: Tsuruoka Shiritsu Toshokan, 1964.
- Shōwa joshi daigaku kindai bungaku kenkyushitsu (The Modern Literature Office of Shōwa Women's University), *Kindai bungaku kenkyu Sōsho (Collections of the studies of Japanese Modern Literature)*. Tokyo: Shōwa joshi daigaku kōbakai, 1956.
- Takayama, Chogyu. "Jyosei sakkani nozomu (A Request to Women writers)," *Taiyō (The Sun)*, no.2 vol.3 (1896): 97. Accessed October 31, 2021. <https://gateway2.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp:11039/lib/display/?lid=90101V020030076#01461>.
- Tazawa, Inabune. *Tazawa Inabune Zenshū (Complete Works of Inabune Tazawa)*. Edited by Hosoya, Masataka. Yamagata: Tohoku Shuppan Kikaku, 1988.
- . *Tazawa Inabune Sakuhinshū (Collection of Inabune Tazawa's Works)*. Edited by Hosoya, Masataka. Akita: Mumei-sya Shuppan, 1986.
- . "Shirobara (A White Rose)," *Bungei Kurabu (The Literature Club)*, no.1 vol.12 (1895): 104-149. Accessed October 31, 2021. <https://gateway2.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp:11039/lib/display/?lid=90111V010120064#00673>.