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Decoding the Oriental Misrepresentation of Geisha Culture: A Critical Study of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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ABSTRACT: The research paper aims to decode the oriental misrepresentation of Geisha Culture in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The critical approach has been taken in this study and is a mixed methodology based on the close reading of the text and the cultural studies approach to analyze the portrayal in broader terms such as perception of beauty, class dynamics, etc. The study explores the nuanced representation through the training of Sayuri as a Geisha and the downside of the said occupation. It sheds light upon the oriental views regarding the Geisha framed by Golden through his novel along with the criticism the novel and the author faced. Geisha are one of the most fascinating parts of Japanese culture. They are well versed with the traditional arts of tea, music, dance and singing. Japan takes immense pride in their culture and Geisha hold a respectable position in the society. Therefore, any type of falsification is unacceptable. This article attempts to evaluate the accuracy of the depiction of Geisha and their lifestyle in Arthur Golden's novel. The paper also sets out to investigate the extent to which the portrayal aligns with reality. It employed a close reading of the text as a cultural studies approach along with the study of interviews, book reviews and published journals and research.

KEYWORDS: Oriental Misrepresentation, Geisha Culture, Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

I. INTRODUCTION OF THE GEISHA

Geisha are female artisans and entertainers who are well-versed in Japanese performing arts, including calligraphy, music, dance and singing. Apart from these, they are also skilled conversationalists and hosts. They have been a significant part of the Japanese society since 1600s. The term 'Geisha' is an amalgamation of two words- 'gei' meaning art and 'sha' meaning a person. This categorizes them as artists. Geisha was popularized by 1920s as their populace added up.

The training starts from the age of 14-15 and by the time, the apprentices, 'Maiko', turn 20, they become a full-fledged Geisha. The trademark feature of Geisha includes their eye-catching makeup. The white foundation covers their face while red makeup is applied around the eyes. They have a wide variety of hair ornaments, which represent their level and seasons as well. The vibrant kimonos are intricate designer pieces. The color, the motifs and the style depend upon the seasons and the events the Geisha are attending.

At present, the population of Geisha in Japan has decreased to 1,000. The most-sought place for their work is Kyoto. However, they can be found in Tokyo and Kanzawa as well. They often attend Tea house gatherings and luxurious restaurants. The exclusive tea houses only allow entry to their trusted customers. Geisha dinners are considered prestigious and high-class events so reservations are to be made in advance. While they are no longer hold the attraction of hospitality, interactions with geisha are an exceptional opportunity to come across Japanese hospitality.

Geisha are one of the most fascinating parts of Japanese culture. They are well versed with the traditional arts of tea, music, dance and singing. Japan takes immense pride in their culture and Geisha hold a respectable position in the society. Therefore, any type of falsification is unacceptable. This study attempts to evaluate the accuracy of the depiction of Geisha and their lifestyle in Arthur Golden's novel.

II. CULTURAL AND SOCIAL LIFE OF A GEISHA

Arthur Golden is an American writer, who is best known for his historical novel '*Memoirs of a Geisha*.' He has lived and worked in Japan for many years. He has received the Golden Plate Award of the American Academy of Achievement.



'*Memoirs of a Geisha*' is a historical fiction, written over a period of six years. It was published in 1997. Sayuri, a young girl sold into servitude, travels captivantly in the mobile as she negotiates the complex geisha society of pre-World War 2 Japan she claims to fame as a geisha through sacrifice and tenacity, overcoming social and personal obstacles in the process. The novel is based on Golden's interview with a retired Geisha, Mineko Iwasaki. In 2005, this historical novel was adapted into a film by Rob Marshall.

The lifestyle of Geisha has been explored in a wide range of novels namely, '*Geisha of Gion*' by Mineko Iwasaki, '*Autobiography of a Geisha*' by Sayu Masuda, '*Snow Country*' by Yasunari Kawabata, '*A Geisha's Journey: My Life as a Kyoto Apprentice*' by Komomo, '*Geisha: A Unique World of Tradition, Elegance and Art*' by John Gallagher and so on.

Mohd Farhan Saiel, in his thesis entitled *Globalization patterns of migration and cultural identity in Amitav Ghosh select novels*, he focuses on cultural identity and says: "Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is a part of a person's self-conception and is related to national, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity." (Saiel, 42).

Arthur Golden has depicted the traditions and rituals of Geisha through Chiyo's training and her journey of becoming a full-fledged Geisha. The place where the geisha reside is called okiya. Young girls of 14-15 years old began their apprentice period as a maiko. According to Chiyo, one of the obstacles of becoming a geisha is finding an older sister, onee-san, who serves as a mentor to them. Mameha was Chiyo's onee-san and guided her to become a successful geisha.

Geisha is highly proficient in aesthetically pleasing artistic skills. This aspect of their profession has been highlighted by Sayuri's reminiscence of her lesson with Teacher Mouse- He says that "And in fact, the 'Gei' of 'Geisha' means 'arts' so the word 'Geisha' really means 'artisan' or artist." (Golden 12).

Being artisans, a Geisha is supposed to be well-versed in several art skills. The paramount being dancing. Mameha calls dancing as "the most revered of a geisha's arts" (Golden, 12). In addition to dancing, Geisha learnt a variety of musical instruments namely, *shamisen*, a three-stringed guitar, and Japanese flutes. The novel depicted Geisha as the artists who have impressive singing skills. Their songs include famous ballads, stories from Kabuki Theatre and poems. Additionally, they should possess the skill of *cadou*, Japanese tea ceremony. Usually, Geisha brew tea and serve the guests who came to watch the seasonal dances at Gion. Apart from that, the Geisha are talented models as Sayuri modelled for Sumitomo Bank in Osaka. The apprentice period ends with the "turning of collar" (Golden 25) ceremony. The maiko wears a red collar while a Geisha wears a red one. Sayuri went through her collar turning in 1938 when she turned eighteen.

Geisha's transformation is a center of attraction through their makeup and glamorous kimonos. Chiyo experiences this transformation herself later only to realize that the process distances them from reality. When Hatsumomo intricately puts on her makeup, a young girl comments on the ordinariness of a Geisha. She states that "When a geisha wakes up in the morning, she is just like any other woman ... but in every other respect she's a woman like any other, and not a geisha at all." (Golden 5). Their entire face and neck are painted white while only their lower lip is brushed rouge. The kimonos are described as lavish and vibrant garments adorned with unique symbols and nature motifs. The examples range from Chiyo's first kimono of "a dark blue silk covered with a design of tiny carriage wheels in shades of brilliant yellow and red" (Golden 13) to Mameha's "simple black robe bearing a crest but its pattern of green and gold grasses sweeping around the hem was so rich-looking." (Golden 10). Becoming a Geisha changes, one's identity to a greater extent. Chiyo went from being Chiyo Sakamoto to Sayuri Nitta. The new name had completely eradicated her past identity and replaced it with something else and replaced it with something else. As depicted here: "My name back then was Chiyo. I wouldn't be known by my Geisha name, Sayuri, until years later." (Golden 1).

Geisha's social life is jovial, hospitable, and friendly. From their schooling to retirement, they are supposed to interact and help other Geisha, entertain customers, and often set up their own businesses. During the apprenticeship period, Maiko are taught by older sisters. They guide them in their journey of becoming a full-blown Geisha. As the time passes, their mentor-mentee relationship becomes familial. Older sisters pass down their knowledge of right ways and traditions to the Maiko. It is her task to introduce her younger sister to her guests and make them familiar with the atmosphere. The Maiko performs the lessons she has been taught by her older sister skillfully. The novel portrays Mameha's helpful character as she teaches Chiyo bowing for the first time. Japanese citizens pay special attention to their bowing posture. The deeper the bow is, the more submissive and respectful it becomes. As Mameha describes:

"That would be a lovely bow if only you were a farmer visiting Kyoto at the first time...But since you want to appear cultivated, you must do like this. Look at me; move farther away from the table. All right, there you are on your knees; now straighten out your arms and put your fingertips onto the mats in front of you. Just the tips of your fingers; not your whole hand. And you mustn't spread your fingers at all; I can still see space between them. Very



well. Put them on the mats... hands together... there! Now that looks lovely. Bow as low as you can, but keep your neck perfectly straight, don't let your head drop that way. And for Heaven's sake, don't put any weight onto your hands or you'll look like a man! That's fine now you may try again." (Golden 10).

Competition is not alien to Geisha. Their whole life revolves around the race to the top. This usually happens when the fame and skills of a Geisha increase in the okiya. Chiyo did not remain unfamiliar with competition. She faced the envy of Hatsumomo who deemed the former as her rival. Chiyo is described as an exceptionally beautiful lady with grey eyes. Adding to her beauty, Mameha, one of the most famous Geisha with a perfect oval face, took her in as her apprentice. For Hatsumomo, society ignores a Geisha who is more attractive than her. Golden says, "She can't bear to have rivals." Mameha went on. "That's the reason she treats you as she does." (Golden 10). Mameha recalls a disappointing incident in which Hatsumomo spread improper rumor about Hatsuoki, a fellow Geisha only because she was jealous of her beauty. An astonishing aspect of Geisha's social life is that marriage is not an option for them. Marriage, emotions, babies, and housekeeping are not a part of their lives. They do not marry because they are not brought up for being a wife, but because they are nurtured to be artisans whose only job is to entertain their guests. Contrary to this, have a *Danna*, a man on whom they must depend on financially and emotionally. *Danna* is a term wives use for their husbands. It is depicted in the novel, "But a geisha who refers to her *danna* isn't talking about a husband. Geisha never marry." (Golden 21).

Golden has portrayed the Geisha constructions through Sayuri, who becomes a half-wife in a false marriage. She did not marry but she acts as a wife in certain situations. The novel throws light upon the arduous life of a Geisha and her relationship with men which must be thoroughly professional.

III. ORIENTAL MISCONCEPTIONS

Edward Said brought up the idea of Orientalism. The Eastern world, with respect to the Western world, is termed as "Orient." Since the colonial age, Westerners dominated the reality of the world. Thus, they were able to distort the representation of the "Orient" through the manipulation of their culture and history as per their satisfaction.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the western audience reads the story through the eyes of Sayuri, the narrator. This technique of narration diminishes the connection between the author and the work. Thus, the western audience believes that they are observing the realistic Geisha. To retain the verisimilitude of the "Orient," the novel becomes autobiographical through Sayuri's narration.

Golden's work went with the West which would continue to view the "Orient" in an exotic light. The Japanese culture of Geisha can never be mixed-up with prostitution since the former hold a respectable position in the society. However, *Memoirs of a Geisha* have numerous, heavily detailed intimate scenes which satiate the occidental appetite. These scenes misguide readers into thinking about Geisha's bodies, which are not for intimacy. Additionally, Golden has repeatedly used "water" to describe both Sayuri and her mother. He depicted: "[Sayuri's mother had] so much water in her personality." (Golden 1). "What a great deal of water you [Sayuri] have!" (Golden 2). Water, in Japanese, connotes to sexuality in context of prostitution only. Taking everything into consideration, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a modern medium for continuing the inaccurate oriental views and satisfying the exotic craving of the Western world.

IV. LAWSUIT BY MINEKO IWASAKI

Memoirs of a Geisha is based on the interview of a popular retired Geisha, Mineko Iwasaki. After the release of the Japanese version of the novel, Mineko sued Golden for the violation of the contract. In one of the later interviews in 2003 by NBC, she shared her opinions on the novel, which was claimed to be a realistic and incognito account of the life a successful Geisha. Mineko stated in her interview about the breach. She uttered: "The condition was that he would not use my name or my family's name in the book. It was based on this that I agreed to talk with him. In the end all those promises were broken" (Mineko 2002). Despite this, he mentioned Mineko in the acknowledgements of the book. According to him: "I am indebted to one individual above all others, Mineko Iwasaki." ("Memoirs of a Geisha: A trainwreck of cultural violation"). Not only did he reveal her identity, but he also defamed her by openly mentioning her 'mizuage.' After the lawsuit, Mineko penned down her autobiography, *Geisha: A Life*, which accounted her experiences as a Geisha. The book was presented as a stark contrast to Golden's twisted fiction.



V. CONCLUSION

The prestigious occupation of Geisha is a victim of distorted representation by the westerners. The cultural study of the novel has led to questions about the Geisha's misapprehension. While the novel narrates the training of Geisha, their social life and appearances, Golden has, undoubtedly, depicted the respected tradition in an exotic light. As per Mineko Iwasaki's statements, the novel implies that Geisha is no different than prostitutes and misogynistic. 'Memoirs of a Geisha' is one of the well-acclaimed novels that explores the arduous lifestyle. However, the Oriental misrepresentation cannot be overlooked. This intriguing issue could be broadly explored in further research. However, the results are disappointing since the novel has become a medium of 'Orientalism.' Golden has shown this vivid and intriguing part of Japan in an exotic light. The result of this study suggests that 'Orientalism' disrespects one of the most prestigious sectors of Japan. Taking these points into consideration, future studies are highly recommended.

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