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Orientalism in Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha

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Orientalism in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

by

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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

Memoirs of a Geisha is a 1997 historical fiction novel by Arthur Golden. It is told as the fictional memoirs of the late Sayuri Nitta, a famous former geisha who worked in Gion in the 1930s as one of the most successful geisha in history. Since its publication, *Memoirs* has been criticized for an Orientalist and historically inaccurate depiction of geisha—particularly by Mineko Iwasaki, a real former geisha whom Golden interviewed when writing the novel. The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to an explanation of Orientalism as the problematic, stereotype-driven depictions of the East made by the West, especially as it relates to Japanese women. The first chapter will also cover the circumstances and events that have caused debate on whether or not geisha participated in sex work, as is depicted in the novel.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I argue that although the novel states that geisha are not prostitutes, the debate of whether or not geisha are sex workers is inherent to the history of Japanese women being depicted through a sexual and stereotypical lens by the West. This chapter also focuses on the matter of accuracy in historical fiction, and how much, if any, is to be expected. I conclude that regardless of accuracy, the novel's appeal still lies in its Western audience being unknowledgeable but curious about geisha.

The final chapter is composed of my own analysis of the text, concluding that Orientalism is present. I find that the novel's framing device as the translated interviews of Sayuri Nitta is further used to intrigue the Western reader, and that even outside of the performance of sex work, the behavior and descriptions of the geisha characters are still representative of a highly sexualized image. I also find that, regardless of the novel's accuracy to the role of sex work in a geisha's career, the novel simultaneously criticizes

aspects of sex work and sexual slavery while simultaneously using them as plot devices and more sources of sexual imagery. My conclusion is that the matters of the novel's accuracy and the importance of accuracy itself cannot be objectively answered, but analysis of the text shows that it is another example of female Japanese characters being victimized and sexualized.

Keywords: *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Geisha, Orientalism, Japanese representation, historical fiction, sexualization

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CHARACTERS OF *MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA*

The Baron—Mameha's danna who preys upon Sayuri.

The Chairman—The esteemed chairman of Iwamura Electric, whom Sayuri is deeply in love with.

Dr. Crab—The lecherous buyer of Sayuri's mizuage.

The General—A man who becomes Sayuri's danna.

Hatsumomo—A geisha of the Nitta okiya and the primary antagonist to Sayuri.

Jakob Haarhuis—The professor who has translated Sayuri's memoirs, only present in the opening of the novel.

Mameha—An older geisha, rival to Hatsumomo, who takes Sayuri under her wing.

The Minister—A man whom Nobu despises but needs the favor of to save Iwamura Electric.

Nobu—The dear friend of the Chairman who harbors feelings for Sayuri.

Pumpkin—A former friend of Sayuri's in the Nitta okiya who later betrays her.

Satsu—Sayuri's older sister, who is sold to a brothel while Sayuri is sold to an okiya.

Sayuri Nitta/Chiyo Sakamoto—The protagonist who is sharing her life story to the reader.

Mr. Tanaka—A seemingly kind man who convinces Sayuri's father to sell her to a okiya.

Yasuda Akira—A customer of Sayuri's that she later sleeps with.

INTRODUCTION

Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden, published in 1997, tells the life story of the fictional Sayuri Nitta. Sayuri, originally named Chiyo Sakamoto, spends the first years of her life in a small fishing village with her family on the Japanese coast. At the age of nine, to pay for her ailing mother's medication, Sayuri's father sells her to a man named Mr. Tanaka, who in turn sells Sayuri to an okiya (geisha house). Upon arriving at the okiya, Sayuri is forcibly thrust into rigorous training to become a geisha, an entertainer skilled in traditional arts such as tea ceremony, musical instruments, and dance. From here, Sayuri battles with not only the life-consuming work of a geisha, but also bitter rivalries, insurmountable debts, and the ever-growing threat of World War II. Though her career quickly takes off, Sayuri's true goal is to find a life of freedom and happiness.

When he began writing *Memoirs*, Golden was already equipped with education in Japanese art, culture, language, and history obtained at the universities of Harvard and Columbia. Yet his meeting with Mineko Iwasaki, a former geisha herself, was a vital component to the novel's creation (Foege and Day; Giles). In an interview with *People* magazine, Golden stated, "Mineko took my understanding of a geisha's daily existence and stood it on its head" (Foege and Day). Golden gives special thanks to Iwasaki in the Acknowledgements of *Memoirs*. He states, "[She] helped me build the foundation on which to spin a work of my own imagination. Its flaws are of course my own" (Golden 433). *Memoirs* was an instant hit, selling four million copies by 2001, and only more since (Struck; Tegler). Its popularity would lead to an award-winning 2005 film of the same name, directed by Rob Marshall and produced by Steven Spielberg.

However, controversy came as swiftly as popularity—especially from Mineko Iwasaki. Shortly after the book’s publication, Iwasaki voiced her grievances with the novel, claiming that it is an offensively inaccurate representation of geisha that did not reflect the information she had shared with Golden. The novel, she said, insulted the geisha tradition by claiming that sex work is an inherent part of their career (Parry). To *The Washington Post*, Iwasaki stated, “The book is all about sex. [Golden] wrote that book on the theme of women selling their bodies. It was not that way at all” (Struck). Iwasaki has denounced the novel for devaluing the skills of art and entertainment of geisha to instead depict them as prostitutes (Parry; Struck).

Golden in turn responded that Iwasaki’s outrage stemmed from *Memoirs* being “[close] to the truth” (Struck). In 2001, Iwasaki filed a lawsuit against Golden, claiming that he had not only committed libel against her by basing Sayuri on Iwasaki herself, but that by also naming Iwasaki in his Acknowledgements, he had breached the contract of anonymity that they had agreed to for their interviews. Iwasaki’s inclusion in the novel earned her great scorn in Japan, to the point that a fellow geisha even asked her to commit hara-kiri, a form of ritualistic suicide (Tiefenbrun 339). Iwasaki’s greatest concern, and greatest regret, is that the novel depicts an untruthful image of geisha to the American reader. To *The Independent*, Iwasaki remarked, “[Golden] says it is fiction, but people do not read it in that way” (Parry).

Though it is a very personal matter to her, Iwasaki has been far from the only person to criticize the novel’s depiction of geisha since its publication almost thirty years ago. Despite Golden’s claim that the novel is “not about sex” (Foege and Day), literary theorists have discussed their findings that the novel illustrates geisha as not only

inherently sexual—due in large part to its instances of geisha selling sex to customers—but also as eager to serve lecherous men. In 2001, just four years after the novel’s publication, scholar Anne Allison said of it in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, “[...] it is more tawdry and smutty than cultured and refined [...] geisha appear as prostitutes—more a fantasy of Western men than an accurate representation of Japanese geisha” (391). Jan Bardsley, author of *Maiko Masquerade: Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan*, remarks that for recent Japanese works of fiction about geisha, “learning to wield feminine guile or erotic allure” are not present, “contrary to stereotype [...] as popularized by Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*” (85). Kimiko Akita of *Global Media Journal* wrote in 2006, “Golden [perpetuates stereotypes] about geisha as sexually submissive women who aspire to become mistresses” (8).

Critics such as Allison, Akita, and Bardsley argue that the novel depicts geisha through an Orientalist lens. Orientalism explores ways in which the East is “othered” by the West—made into something bizarre and unseemly—through stereotypes of seduction, exoticism, and violence. Critics believe that *Memoirs* not only enforces the stereotype that Japanese women are as submissive as they are sexual, but by doing so also spreads false and offensive information on the true nature of geisha.

In this thesis, I have two goals. First, I investigate and explain the full context of the debate of whether *Memoirs of a Geisha* is an Orientalist text. To do so, I explain the history of the geisha and the circumstances that have caused confusion, both in the East and the West, of what her work entails. I concentrate on the personal accounts of Mineko Iwasaki, Sayo Masuda, and Liza Dalby. Iwasaki published an autobiography entitled *Geisha, A Life* roughly six years after *Memoirs*’ release. Masuda also wrote an

autobiography, aptly titled *Autobiography of a Geisha*, in 1957. Dalby, an American anthropologist, documented her firsthand experience as a geisha in Kyoto in her 1983 book *Geisha*. I will then discuss the related matter of whether the novel's depiction of geisha who sell sex is accurate, and the complex matter of historical accuracy's place within historical fiction. Second, I give my own argument on the presence of Orientalism within the novel by analyzing the text. By doing so, I argue that even aside from accuracy, the novel's depiction of geisha still exhibits traits of Western stereotypes of Japanese women and encourages the reader to view geisha as an example of the strangeness of the East.

CHAPTER I: Orientalism and the History of the Geisha

Orientalism

For centuries, Westerners viewed Asian cultures as exotic but backwards, referring to an entire continent as simply “the Orient.” Edward Said defined Orientalism in his 1979 book of the same name as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1). Scholar Kimiko Akita alternatively describes Orientalism as “only a representation of what the West would hope the Orient to be” (“Bloopers of a Geisha” 12). Orientalism often shows an appreciation of the aesthetic features of Asian cultures coinciding with a damnation of all else that differs from the Western norm. It praises the art but condemns its maker as “barbaric” and “uncivilized.” In this thesis, Orientalism is discussed as the depiction of the East (specifically, Japanese women) as an object of fascination that criticized but also exploited to appeal to the Western audience.

The history of Western Orientalism is a long and complicated one in which Japanese women and geisha are only two of many targets. Though fascination and sexualization of Asian women has been practiced by the West since its first contact with the continent (Prasso 29), it was particularly spurred on in the 1800s by a combination of dramatic accounts of international travels and renditions by artists and writers. The Victorian societal expectation that women were to treat sex as a sacrifice rather than a pleasure only brought further attention to Chinese sexology and Japanese erotica that “promised” to European men beautiful women who were submissive but experienced lovers (Prasso 47-48). Western depictions of Asian women historically encapsulate the definition of Orientalism—“what the West would hope the Orient to be.” American film,

television, and literature have for decades depicted Asian women as alluring beauties of mystery, fierce yet controllable, sexual but submissive (Prasso 92). They are appealing because they are “exotic”—new and unknown in a way that intrigues and invites. Female Asian characters have often been reduced to flat stereotypes, most typically that of a demure and delicate soul, eager to please the men around her.

A common Orientalist view of geisha is that they are a “forbidden fruit,” a high-class and beautifully dressed sex worker that is vied for by all the men around her. Geisha and Asian women represent the allure of Asian cultures while often simultaneously needing to be rescued from them—beautiful enough to be vied for, but not “civilized enough” to be respected (Degabriele). Researcher Shoba Sharad Rajgopal observes a tendency for Orientalist depictions of Asian women to also coincide with Western nationalism: “[They serve] to represent [Asian women] as victims of their own hyper-patriarchal societies, which in turn serves to justify the neocolonial dreams of empire, as these cultures are seen as desperately in need of intervention” (151). Additionally, Yoko Kawaguchi, author of *Butterfly’s Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture*, notes that making geisha out to be victims of their societies may be the West’s means of alleviating them of their “tarnished” image (44). Akita contends that geisha have been made easy targets of Orientalism due to their lack of a Western counterpart (“Bloopers of a Geisha” 14).

Orientalism often denies the truth of the Eastern subject to foist one’s own desires or even prejudices upon it. Author Sheridan Prasso states that Western writers are often encouraged to write about the East in such a way—“Gripping! Exotic! Sex-drenched!”—including herself (393). Such a criticism is often levied at *Memoirs*—that it disregards

historical and cultural accuracy to make its geisha characters appear even more foreign and sexual to the reader. The earliest Western encounters with geisha contribute to this ongoing misrepresentation.

A Brief History of Geisha

The first known geisha appeared at the end of the seventeenth century as drum beaters at parties within Japan's pleasure quarters hosted by prostitutes and their customers (Dalby 58). Although the first geisha were men, over the years, it would become known as an inherently female position. Ironically, the notion that geisha are a "forbidden fruit" is a direct contradiction to the very reason they rose in popularity, as they were seen as "worldly, unlike the caged and sheltered yujo (prostitutes)" (Dalby 59). Historically, geisha were employed in contracts that prevented them from leaving their positions for a certain amount of time, and/or until all their debts had been paid to their employers—albeit debts incurred by virtue of being employed to begin with, and only increased by basic necessities such as food and clothing provided by their employers (Dalby 226; Tiefenbrun 356). Geisha would entertain guests through traditional Japanese arts such as dance, song, and musical instruments. This is where the term originates—*gei* meaning "art," and *geisha* thus meaning "person of the arts." The training that apprentice geisha, or maiko, undertook to achieve these skills was arduous, and often even painful, with physical punishment being common (Iwasaki; Masuda; Dalby 229-230); though Dalby observes that in recent years, training has become more forgiving, and now tends to focus more on encouraging or outright "pampering" a maiko rather than criticizing her—a fact that some older geiko (senior geisha) frown upon (Dalby 47).

Upon the official start of her career, when a maiko became a geiko, her life became no easier. Along with the meticulous upkeep of her elaborate hairstyles and acquisition and maintenance of extravagant but cumbersome kimonos—one of which alone could cost thousands (Iwasaki 235)—a popular geisha could be invited to attend countless events daily. Iwasaki asserts that at the height of her career, her schedule only allowed for a few hours of sleep every evening (164; 257). Geisha were skilled in the art of conversation, offering witty but intellectual discussions with their customers that they could not find in their household, “[and thus embodying] precisely those aspects of femininity that are absent from, or only incidental to, the role of wife” (Dalby 177).

For centuries geisha have served as a cultural icon of Japan. Their position is deeply entwined with traditional arts, which are highly valued in Japanese culture (Dalby 177-178). The very image of a geisha, particularly a maiko (whose manner of dress is more ornate than that of a geiko), is a significant one—a beautiful symbol of tradition (Bardsley 15-17). Indeed, Japan has historically embraced geisha as a personification of its culture. Japanese artists have made geisha their muses for decades, from the woodblock prints of Toyohara Kunichika to the “Nihonga” paintings of Meiji Hashimoto. Geisha have been common figures in advertisements for staples as mundane as beer and sake. So entwined are they with Japanese tourism that in the 1980s, Japanese high school girls would be hired to walk in public in traditional maiko attire to appeal to tourists’ expectations (Bardsley 13). Now, districts across Japan hold annual festivals, *odori*, wherein geisha perform traditional dances for the masses.

Geisha Versus Prostitutes

Critics argue that geisha as talented and respectable artists are not to be found in *Memoirs*. Iwasaki and others condemn it for depicting geisha as prostitutes, furthering a long-lived myth that falls in line with other stereotypes of Japanese women as hypersexual beings (Akita, “Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in Memoirs of a Geisha” 8; Allison 391). Yet, whether *Memoirs* is inaccurate for depicting geisha exchanging sex for money is a question that is not so easily answered. Whether geisha can be considered prostitutes has been discussed and debated by historians and even geisha themselves from their very conception.

The origin of geisha within the pleasure quarters factored into their conflation with prostitutes. In the earliest days of the profession, it was also somewhat common for prostitutes to assume the image of a geisha as a selling point. As Dalby notes, there were different “types” of geisha, and a strict requirement to be skilled in the traditional arts seemed not to have existed yet:

Shiro (white) geisha were purely entertainers, as opposed to korobi geisha, who ‘tumbled’ for guests; kido (gate) geisha stood at the entrance to carnivals, playing their shamisens to attract business, whereas joro (whore) geisha were probably not hired for their musical skills (59).

Even so, historically, Japanese law has made distinctions between geisha and prostitutes. Geisha in the pleasure quarters were outright forbidden from sleeping with the customers of prostitutes (Dalby 59-60). In 1779, geisha were given separate registry offices from prostitutes (Dalby 59-60). A century later, in the early Meiji era, local officials would require prostitutes to conduct regular testing for venereal diseases, yet exempted geisha from the same testing (Stanley 545).

The 1872 “Maria Luz Incident” heightened the controversy surrounding geisha sexuality. A Peruvian ship named the “Maria Luz” stopped in a Japanese harbor, whereupon the Meiji government discovered it to be holding more than two hundred Chinese slaves. After some debating between its members, the Meiji government freed the slaves and sent them back to Hong Kong, declaring that Japan did not recognize slavery—to which the Peruvian government argued that it did, via Japan’s regulated system of prostitution (Iwasaki 161-162; Dalby 67). Although slave trading was formally illegal in Japan at the time, it was still common and legal for prostitutes, courtesans, and geisha to be employed in near-inescapable contracts. With Japan becoming a rising global power, and thus mindful of its perception by other countries, the Meiji government passed the Emancipation of Prostitutes and Geisha Act in 1872, freeing both geisha and prostitutes from contractual employment, chiefly by cancelling all debts that they had incurred (Iwasaki 161-162; Dalby 67).

Iwasaki considers the Maria Luz Incident to have caused conflation between geisha and prostitutes (Iwasaki 161-162). The Emancipation Act seemed to imply that the two were synonymous to some degree, or that the former was just as “undignified” or “immoral” a position as the latter. Despite the geisha being long upheld as a symbol of Japanese tradition, the Emancipation Act marked the beginning of a period of criticism against her. During this time, when the Japanese government and other influential figures were pursuing the goal of “true civilization,” prostitution was targeted as a social scourge that needed to be overcome. Some prominent thinkers, including many political figures, condemned prostitutes as a detriment to society, and geisha along with them (Stanley 540). Early feminists in this time also criticized geisha for “catering to men’s desires”

and “perpetuating women’s oppression” (Stanley 540). In a time when women were encouraged to pursue paths to become respectable wives and mothers, including education, geisha and prostitutes both were seen by many as irredeemable regardless of any efforts they made (Stanley 541). In 1956, Japan would officially outlaw prostitution in the Prostitution Prevention Act (Masuda 185)—but although activists that had called for such an act contended that the geisha system “provided a kind of loophole for sex work to continue in Japan in the guise of entertainment” (Bardsley 12), geisha nevertheless remained untouched by its passing (Dalby 59-60).

The matter continues to be muddled by “onsen geisha.” Employed within public hot spring resorts (known in Japan as onsen), onsen geisha made up the majority, and were known to typically entertain guests not through the arts, but by fostering a bawdy party atmosphere—which would often culminate in sexual encounters (Dalby 173, 242-243; Masuda 54). Though they bore the title, onsen geisha were “imitations” (Akita, “Bloopers of a Geisha” 13) and were unlikely to bear the artistic skills that true geisha possessed. It was the image rather than the skill of a geisha that was used as a selling point. Sayo Masuda worked at one such onsen as a geisha, and recounts that acting “sexy” and having sex with customers in exchange for payment were always expected of her (54; 56-57). Dalby argues that a contributor to the prostitute-geisha confusion is the indiscriminate joining of all geisha into one category, saying that even comparing onsen geisha to those in Kyoto teahouses in the first place is “ludicrous” (173).

As Kawaguchi writes in *Butterfly Sisters*, “For while [...] the Japanese were remarked upon for possessing a highly sophisticated, even over-refined, system of etiquette, [it had] become commonplace since the sixteenth century to charge the

Japanese with lewdness” (23). Such charges would have been unfortunately vindicated by the “comfort facilities” created by Japan’s Home Ministry at the beginning of the United States occupation during World War II. Here, Japanese women would be “voluntarily raped” by American troops in hopes of preventing the rape of “good” women (Prasso 52). The Recreation and Amusement Association would later discontinue comfort facilities after five months of ghastly results, including rampant abuse of the “volunteers,” a high number of suicides, and many cases of venereal diseases. Perhaps most ghastly of all was the uptick in rape of Japanese women following the comfort facilities’ closure (Prasso 52). The WWII era also saw the emergence of “panpan girls” or “geesha girls”—prostitutes (likely women impoverished and struggling from the plights of wartime) who dressed as geisha when selling their services to American troops (Prasso 52; Masuda 193). Though comfort women and “geesha girls” were not geisha, the fractured economy of Japan at the time would have given few opportunities for Western soldiers to witness the true work of a geisha firsthand.

The very nature of a geisha, whose work focuses on entertaining mostly male clients, was often misrepresented as an indicator of more solacious intent. If a geisha was to be demure and silent, she was likely to be a maiko, observing the work of her senior sisters (Dalby 113). In an interview with Prasso, Iwasaki notes that the idea that geisha are not only wholly subservient to their male guests’ every desire, but also seek to fulfill them with genuine eagerness, seems to disregard that pleasantry is a necessity for a customer interaction in any position (210). A geisha entertaining her customer, she says, whether it be through artistic performance, conversation, and/or flattery, was merely a part of her job and was not to be seen as genuine flirtation or an invitation to a later

sexual encounter (Prasso 210), a notion supported by Dalby (151; 165). Further, as Bardsley explains in *Maiko Masquerade*, it does not go without complaint—some geisha take issue with the need to be “girlish,” and find that it contributes to Japan’s rigid ideas of traditional femininity (31-32).

Even so, appealing to customers also did not require absolute submission in the face of abuse. According to Dalby, a seasoned geisha would be able to expertly deter a customer who had crossed boundaries (159). In her autobiography, Iwasaki describes situations in which she defended herself against patrons and strangers who had assaulted her inside and outside of her workplace (185-186; 189-190)—saying that patrons who openly pawed at or otherwise disrespected her were “bad apple” outliers among the “perfect gentlemen” she usually saw (191). Though Masuda was forced into several acts of sexual slavery in her time as an onsen geisha, and although she describes that putting her customers’ enjoyment over her own comfort was a key aspect of her job (60), she also describes similar situations, such as the mistress of the Ichiriki teahouse (a former geisha herself) running to the aid of a geisha being assaulted by customers (70-71).

Mizuage and Danna

From the previous section, it may appear that prostitutes and geisha have always had a rather bold legal distinction between them, and that any conflation of the two otherwise could be attributed to situational circumstances or misunderstandings. Such is not so easily the case. It appears that, at minimum, a “true” geisha would not regularly sell sex to her customers, and her work and image lay instead in her performances of the arts she had so rigorously trained in. Still this conversation is further complicated by mizuage and danna, the former the ceremonial selling of a maiko’s virginity to the

highest bidder, the latter a wealthy male patron who finances a geisha's career and expenses in exchange for an exclusive sexual relationship. These definitions of mizuage and danna are depicted in *Memoirs*, but whether they are true to life, the accounts of Dalby, Iwasaki, and Masuda on both subjects notably vary.

During Dalby's firsthand study of geisha, she found that according to the younger and older geisha alike that she spoke to, mizuage had indeed been practiced as a ceremonial virginity auction as part of a maiko's initiation in the past, but it has since been left behind as a relic of a "feudalistic" age (114-116). Dalby also emphasizes that regardless, sex was not a service that a geisha would sell to just any customer, remarking that "a man who thinks of a geisha's [art] as rampant eroticism will be disappointed" (116). On danna, Dalby writes that they, too, existed and still did at the time of her writing, but that being a danna was hardly a light, casual undertaking. A man who would choose to pursue such a relationship with a geisha would not do so carelessly, as the financial responsibility alone would be substantial, and his reputation could be damaged if the relationship ended badly (116). Additionally, even some geisha, such as those named Kazue and Korika that Dalby interviewed in her study, were not eager to have a danna, and found the practice to be another instance of rampant patriarchy in Japan (167). Dalby thus concludes that both mizuage and danna existed—but that in any case, she contends that geisha "in some true or best sense of the word are not prostitutes" (60). These findings are supported by Bardsley, who describes the present-day practice of mizuage as a "sartorial transition," and the practices of prostitution that have been left behind as relics of a "prewar" era (11).

Regarding *danna*, Iwasaki writes that one would enter a relationship with a geisha for what it lent to his reputation, and not for a sexual relationship—although it was not unheard of for geisha and *danna* to be attracted to one another and have sex (51-52). It is a myth, she says, that geisha commonly sleep with the customers at teahouses (156). Prasso, after interviewing Iwasaki for *Asian Mystique*, would conclude that “the worst crime [of *Memoirs*] in [Iwasaki’s] mind is confounding the practices of prostitutes or lower-class geisha with those of the geisha of High Gion” (208).

Golden has previously stated that Sayuri selling her virginity for a record price was inspired by Iwasaki (Giles; Struck), but Iwasaki’s rejection of this statement was a primary factor in her eventual lawsuit against Golden—“I never did that. I never sold my body. Men never touched me” (Struck). In her autobiography, Iwasaki writes that she lost her virginity safely, consensually, and without any transaction (247). She later explained that it appeared to have been a miscommunication with Golden, and that she had used the term “*mizuage*” to refer to “the highest number of requests for her presence” (Prasso 209). She similarly describes it as a geisha’s total earnings in her autobiography (187). Iwasaki also confirms in her autobiography that *mizuage* does refer to a coming-of-age ceremony for apprentice geisha, one that involved symbolic hair-cutting, not virginity-auctioning—the latter version, she says, being practiced only by apprentice courtesans (205-206; 253) or perhaps apprentice geisha that were in love with a patron (Massarella).

However, this does somewhat contradict a statement she has previously made to *The Washington Post* that a record bid *was* offered for her virginity—“of about 100 million yen [...] plus a mansion and kimonos” (Struck). Though Iwasaki did not accept the bid and thus did not have sex with the bidder or any other patron (Struck), it does

appear that because such a bid was placed in the first place, mizuage was possibly practiced in Gion at the time Iwasaki was employed. Iwasaki and Prasso discussed the published studies of Dalby and Lesley Downer (author of *Geisha: The Secret History of a Vanishing World*), and Prasso noted that although both “pointed out over and over that geisha were women trained in the arts [...] and most definitely were not prostitutes,” Iwasaki was regardless “upset” that both had also discussed mizuage at all (212). Iwasaki thus contends, in contrast to Dalby, that *Memoirs*’ definitions of mizuage and danna are factually and offensively incorrect.

Iwasaki is not the only one to have voiced disagreements of others’ accounts of what a geisha’s work entailed. G. G. Rowley, translator for Sayo Masuda’s autobiography, cites Iwasaki in her notes as an example of “writers [who] either emphasize unduly the geisha’s artistic accomplishments or deny her sexual duties, or both” (187). As for Sayo Masuda herself—who worked as a geisha at an onsen and not in Gion, as Iwasaki did—she states that the relationship between a geisha and her danna was indeed sex in exchange for patronage, and that a geisha whose danna was not providing her enough may have taken on one or even two more (52-53). While Masuda describes a typical party with geisha as indeed involving performances of dancing and instrument-playing, they were used to build up to a foregone conclusion of sex (54). One such dance that Masuda describes would involve the geisha lifting the hems of their kimonos higher and higher in time with music, as if they were wading into a stream, until their privates were bared (241). Masuda was forced into mizuage four times by her “Mother” (the owner of an okiya who oversees the work and training of its geisha), who lied to each successive buyer that he was the first to gain more profit (60). Masuda would later be

given to a danna she called “Cockeye,” and she describes her time with him as when “the true misery of being a body for sale hit [her]” (65).

However, it appears that Masuda did to some extent believe that art was indeed what separated a geisha from a prostitute. At the resort in which Masuda worked, she says, there were geisha without art—sleep-around geisha, seemingly to be considered an insulting oxymoron (179)—and that geisha who “[slept] with anyone” were disdainfully said to “fall into bed without looking” (52-53). Dalby likewise observes that onsen geisha that were “too flagrant” (242-243) about sleeping with any customer were often scorned by the other geisha around her.

Regardless of any distinction Masuda may have made between geisha and prostitutes, it should be noted that she was strongly against the Prostitution Prevention Act, believing that even if it was a well-meaning attempt to save women from exploitation, its true effect was causing more suffering for women who had no choice but to prostitute themselves for survival, as she eventually did (4; 158). Rowley describes the following conversation with Masuda:

As we walked around Suwa, on our second day together, we passed an alleyway that Masuda recalled had once led down to the licensed quarter (yukaku). ‘We used to hurry past here,’ she said, ‘one of us saying to the other, that’s the prostitutes’ quarter that way,’ as if what we did was so different from what they did!’ And yet, as Masuda saw it, ‘we geisha had pride because we had skills’ (179).

The contradictory statements between these sources (as well as the variety in time periods between them) make it difficult to discern what is factual and what is fictional. We may at least conclude that average customers purchasing sex from geisha was practiced in onsen like that in which Masuda worked at. What is not so conclusive is the matter of sex work in Gion teahouses such as that in which Iwasaki was employed. Dalby’s findings

conclude that if a Gion geisha were to sell sex to a customer, it would be under the specific circumstances of mizuage and danna, and not by the request of just any male guest. Iwasaki instead claims that no Gion geisha would sell sex under any circumstances. Thus, the question of how accurate *Memoirs of a Geisha* is in depicting geisha taking part in sex work becomes very complicated to answer.

CHAPTER II: The Novel and Accuracy

The previous chapter explained the grievances critics have taken with the novel's accuracy, as well as the circumstances that make said accuracy difficult to discern. This chapter objectively describes *Memoirs*' depiction of geisha taking part in sex work, and its comparisons (or lack thereof) between geisha and prostitutes. Though the matter of accuracy has driven much of the novel's controversy, it produces the questions of whether inaccuracy is inherently Orientalist, or how true to life works of historical fiction must be, if at all. As this chapter concludes, perhaps Orientalism lies not in the conflation of fact with fiction, but rather the appeal to the Western audience's fascination with geisha.

The Novel's Stance

Although Jaakob Haarhuis—the fictional professor translating Sayuri's memoirs—once refers to prostitutes as the “lower-class counterparts” of geisha (Golden 3), there are many more instances in which the two are more overtly set apart. After being sold along with her older sister Satsu by her father and Mr. Tanaka, Sayuri (then Chiyo)—who is remarked by several characters to be the prettier of the two sisters—is sent to the Nitta okiya, whereupon she is separated from Satsu. She later learns that Satsu was instead sent to a brothel. This resonates with Dalby's findings that an unattractive, poor girl would more likely be sent to a brothel than an okiya. Her life would likely make that of a girl sold to an okiya look exponentially better by comparison (Dalby 228-230). Sayuri later sneaks out of the Nitta okiya to find her sister in the district of Miyagawa-chō. While there, she observes how the women look like geisha but dress with their obis

(belts worn to keep kimonos in place) in the front rather than the back—“the mark of a prostitute” (Golden 83)—to make undressing faster and easier.

In the latter half of the novel, following the war’s end, Sayuri reunites with her former friend Pumpkin (who had been in the Nitta okiya at the same time as Sayuri) and learns that Pumpkin had become a “geesha girl” when the lens factory she had been working at closed (Golden 366). During a conversation with Mameha, a geiko who had taken Sayuri under her wing, Sayuri explains to the reader a performance called “Dance in the Stream”—sharing in all but name what Masuda refers to as “Shallow River,” in which performers lift the hems of their kimono in time with music until their privates were bared (Masuda 45). Sayuri calls it a “striptease” only performed by “women masquerading as geisha who are really prostitutes” (Golden 358). Regarding geisha selling sexual services, Sayuri says:

A lower-class geisha may be perfectly agreeable to [selling sex]; probably she’s happy to take whatever income is offered her. A woman like this may call herself a geisha and be listed at the registry office; but I think you should take a look at how she dances, and how well she plays the shamisen, and what she knows about tea ceremony before you decide whether or not she really is a proper geisha. A true geisha will never soil her reputation by making herself available to men on a nightly basis (Golden 147).

Sayuri further clarifies that it is not the case that a “true” geisha would never sell sex at all—rather, she would do so only with her danna: “But if the right sort of man is interested in [...] a much longer time—and if he’s willing to offer suitable terms, well, in that case a geisha will be happy to accept such an arrangement” (Golden 148). A danna, Sayuri explains, is a geisha’s greatest hope for repaying her debts to an okiya and gaining her independence. She likens a geisha without a danna, like her rival Hatusmomo, to a “stray cat [...] without a master” (Golden 148). There are two danna-geisha relationships

detailed in the novel: that between Mameha and the Baron, and that between Sayuri and the General. In both, the novel is explicit that the men's patronage is in exchange for an exclusive sexual relationship with the two geisha, and that when the geisha visits her danna or vice-versa, sex is a foregone conclusion (which has led to Mameha terminating several pregnancies). Sayuri regardless insists that this does not make geisha prostitutes—comparing herself to any young woman with an older, much wealthier male partner in that they are both “kept women” (Golden 291).

The only other circumstance that a geisha would sell sex in, according to *Memoirs*, is during her mizuage, in which a maiko's virginity is sold to the highest bidder. Both Sayuri and Mameha are mentioned as having highly competitive mizuage auctions, with both of their mizuages being sold at record prices. Sayuri's mizuage auction and Mameha's machinations to encourage the potential buyers (Nobu, Dr. Crab, and the Baron) to raise their bids compose a major plot point in the novel. Also of note is when Sayuri sleeps with Yasuda Akira, a former guest that she had taken a liking to. No money is exchanged, and Sayuri does so of her own volition. It is a consensual encounter done outside of her occupation as a geisha.

In summary, the novel depicts that geisha (or rather, “true” geisha, as opposed to onsen geisha) do not regularly sell sexual services to just any male customer who requests them—rather, if she does so, it would be under very specific circumstances, and it is entirely possible for her to seek consensual sex without any payment. This would coincide with Dalby's findings, as well as with a statement Golden made in an interview with *The Washington Post* in the year following *Memoirs*' publication: “One myth is that geishas are prostitutes. That myth is wrong. The other myth is that geishas are not

prostitutes. That myth is wrong, too" (Struck). In other words, though geisha in *Memoirs* do sell sex, it is neither the sole nor the primary purpose of their occupation, and it is thus unfitting to refer to them as prostitutes.

The Question of Accuracy and Authenticity

Given the novel's overt separating of the two, it may appear easy to disregard any criticism that *Memoirs* depicts geisha as prostitutes for being wrong on a factual basis. However, I believe that the matter is deeper than that. For critics such as Iwasaki, the inaccuracy in *Memoirs*' portrayal of geisha selling sex lies in the fact that it is portrayed at all. As opposed to other critics and scholars, she maintains that a geisha who worked in Gion, such as herself and Sayuri, would never sell sex (Prasso 209)—so any depiction otherwise is offensively false. On this matter, as concluded in the previous chapter, finding a factual agreement or disagreement is difficult. Accounts of geisha selling sex—with any customer, under specific circumstances, or at all—vary across time, location, and the position of the person giving the account. Thus, it is unclear if *Memoirs*' illustration of the role of sex in the occupation of a geisha working during the 1930s is an accurate one.

Golden's own statements on the historical and cultural accuracy of *Memoirs* are also not straightforward. In his Acknowledgements, he states that "the character of Sayuri and her story are [his] own inventions. The historical facts of a geisha's day-to-day life in the 1930s and 1940s, however, are based on extensive research" (433). He further states that when he interviewed Iwasaki for the novel, she "corrected his misconceptions about the life of a geisha" (344)—so much so that after meeting her, he scrapped his draft of the novel to start anew with the information she had given him (O'Brien). Even so, Golden

takes responsibility for any inaccuracies in the text (344). Yet he would also state later say that the inaccuracies are “small stuff [...] The kinds of things [he] got wrong don’t trouble [him]” (Struck). Golden has time and again emphasized how thoroughly he researched geisha to write the novel, so it can be reasonably assumed that he did find it important to some degree for the novel to have a level of truth in it.

There are also a few instances in the novel in which the characters themselves bring into question how reflective Sayuri’s account is of the geisha world. In Jaakob Haarhuis’ Translator’s Note, he explains that a memoir is only one’s personal account of the world. To illustrate, he gives the example of a rabbit being asked to describe a field (Golden 2). Yet, so too does Haarhuis say, “There may well be no better record of the strange life of a geisha than the one Sayuri offers” (Golden 2). Haarhuis deems Sayuri’s memoirs both unique and exemplary on the same page. Sayuri remarks on the matter of mizuage, “If you get three geisha in a room, all of them will have different ideas about where the term comes from” (Golden 232). While this could be seen as an admission of possible inaccuracy (and an emphasis to Haarhuis’ foreword that a memoir is only one person’s story), Akita argues that this is instead Golden refusing to take responsibility for misinformation (“Bloopers of a Geisha” 17).

We may also ask whether accuracy should be expected from the novel at all, with it being a work of fiction. Even in historical fiction, which is expected to take place in a past period within the real world, there are of course no set rules for how much of the text must be reflective of reality—and thus no rules for the reader to hold the author accountable for. This raises the debate of which party, if either, is responsible for “spreading misinformation”: the author who wrote the fiction, or the reader who took it

as fact. Iwasaki writes, on the matter of geisha being presented in Western fiction as synonymous with sex workers, that “once an idea like this is planted in the general culture it takes on a life of its own” (156). Marie Orise of the *Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences* argues, however, that fiction “should be read for what it is” and that readers are already aware of the divide between fact and fiction when they read such works (65). True, regardless of the narrations by Sayuri Nitta and Jacob Haarhuis, the front cover of the book denotes that it is a *novel by Arthur Golden*. These questions—“How true to life must historical fiction be?” “Who is responsible for misinformation, the author or the reader?”—have no factual answers. They can only be debated, and these debates are much, much larger in scope than any single text can cover. For Iwasaki, being fictional does not make the novel any less offensive. After Prasso raised the point in their interview that *Memoirs* is intended to be a fictional novel, Iwasaki nevertheless insisted that it is misrepresentation (208).

Whether the novel is accurate or not, and whether it matters if the novel is fictional, it could be argued that part of the book’s appeal lies in the question of whether it is true to life. This is the argument of Modernist scholar Bruce Fleming, who writes in his article “Skirting the Precipice: Truth and Audience in Literature” that Golden is aware that much of his American audience lies in what Fleming calls a “gray area of ignorance” (339)—the average Western reader likely will not be knowledgeable enough of geisha to discern what an accurate representation of them would be. Akita agrees: “Since Golden’s [...] target audiences were Westerners, the cultural misrepresentation and misinformation present in *Geisha* might not have been noticeable to most viewers” (“Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in *Memoirs of a Geisha*” 8). Though this does not necessarily

make readers susceptible to deceit, it does increase the likelihood that they will not be distracted from the story by details that they know to be false.

Thus, even if readers know the novel to be fictional, their uncertainty of where the line between fact and fiction lies allows them to further immerse themselves in the book. They may not know it to be accurate, but they feel that it is authentic. This is why Fleming further claims that a Japanese translation of *Memoirs* would “lose its quality of floating in a vacuum” (355), as it would be unlikely for a Japanese audience to find that the novel appeals to their knowledge of geisha. Fleming also notes that *Memoirs* is unique because most of its content, rather than some occasional details, is a “gray area” to its readers. (357). Tomoyuki Tanaka of *The Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* argues a more serious case that the novel’s framing as a memoir, along with Golden’s credentials, are deliberately used to give the Western reader a reason to indulge in dark fascination:

A tale of ritualized sexual slavery, with lecherous, ugly men (Nobu and Dr. Crab are physically disfigured), and hatred of the Japanese is certainly coarse material. Selling this material to the reader as a feel-good story required multiple, almost-obsessive justifications: the New York Times's PC seal of approval, three levels of deception, endlessly repeated assurances of 'accurate,' 'authentic,' and 'educational' from reviewers and, finally, the internal mechanism that transforms hatred into a morbid pleasure in the psychological alchemy of PC racism (2006).

The notion of authenticity is a complicated and highly subjective one. Theo van Leeuwen, a scholar of linguistics and social theory, gives one definition of authenticity as the state of being “thought to be true to the essence of something” (393). A reader’s limited factual knowledge on a given subject can also be called essential knowledge—they know a few basic facts to construct an idea that they believe is “similar enough” to the truth. The fewer facts that a reader knows on the subject, the larger their essential

knowledge of it is, so they are less likely to notice the work's "bloopers". Thus, a reader may take any work to be authentic if it merely fits their essential knowledge of its subject.

In summary, *Memoirs* hopes to appeal to audiences by using their place in the gray area of ignorance to appear authentic. Presenting the book as a (fictional) historical figure's memoirs only enhances the effect. Whether the book's depiction of geisha selling sex is accurate is unknown—and whether it should aim to be accurate in the first place is only an argument. What is known is that accuracy to a degree was important to Golden, and the possibility of accuracy, if not the delivery, is how *Memoirs* appeals to an unfamiliar Western audience.

Inaccuracy vs. Orientalism

An inaccurate portrayal of the East is not an inherently Orientalist one. Problematic depictions of geisha are also not only found in the West. In the year following *Memoirs*' publication and immediate popularity, Professors Sarah J. Pradt and Terry Kawashima conducted a class at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities entitled "Re-examining 'Geisha Girls.'" Pradt and Kawashima's goal was to investigate how geisha have been depicted in both the East and the West. In describing the course for *Education About Asia*, Pradt and Kawashima write, "Japanese textual discussions of the geisha are not necessarily 'more true' than an American one; Japanese examples manipulate the geisha's image just as often as American texts do" (27). Bardsley describes the many iterations of geisha in Japanese fiction, including some that could be said to be very problematic, in *Maiko Masquerade*. Bardsley maintains that *So Young, So Bright*, directed by Toshio Sugie, uses the impending forced prostitution of the maiko

character Hinagiku as a source of comedy (119-124), while *Omocha*, directed by Fukusaku Kinji, simultaneously condemns mizuage in its narration and fetishizes it in its cinematography (124).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the geisha herself has also not gone without criticism in her native country, even aside from the place of sex within her work. This, too, is evident in Japanese fiction. *A Geisha*, a film by Kenji Mizoguchi, functions as a critique of the harmful traditions of the geisha industry and those who fought to preserve them, depicting several scenes in which a maiko character argues for her right to be respected by customers only to be laughed off by others, including senior geiko. Another film by Mizoguchi, *Sisters of the Gion*, ends with the geisha character Omocha, injured and hospitalized after the film's conflict between selfish danna and spurned lovers, blaming the geisha industry for the exploitation and suffering she and her sister have endured. The tragedy of *Snow Country*, the Nobel Prize-winning novel by Yasunari Kawabata, is that rigid traditions and societal rules prevent onsen geisha like Komoko from seeking healthy romantic relationships.

Outside of fiction, Sayo Masuda's autobiography is perhaps the most damning piece of criticism of the geisha industry. The book details her experiences working as a geisha in the resort city of Suwa after being sold to an okiya by her mother. While there, Masuda endured hardships such as physical abuse by her employers (one instance ending in a broken leg and permanent scarring), harassment from customers and other geisha, sexual slavery, unwanted pregnancies, and more. Masuda explains how she and other geisha like her—sold into contracted labor, with no hope of escaping unless by being bought out by a wealthy man in exchange for an exclusive sexual relationship—were

denied independence, individuality, and pleasures of life as simple as love and marriage (68-69). It was a life so full of suffering that Masuda and other geisha attempted several times to run away from their okiyas, or even commit suicide.

Iwasaki, whose career was certainly less dire than Masuda's, also admits that while her becoming a geisha was out of her own volition, it was not the case for her sisters, who openly resented their parents for selling them to okiya (10). Although Iwasaki takes pride in her former career and holds that geisha are respectable artists of great skill, she willingly left the position at the height of her success, feeling that it was part of an "arcane system" that allowed little to no autonomy for geisha and did not properly compensate them for their public dance performances (276). Some depictions of geisha, fictional and not, have been criticized for being too lenient in discussing the more problematic aspects of the industry. Rowley argues that the lives of geisha are often too "romanticized," and that those who overemphasize the idea that all geisha are artists in pursuit of their passions diminish critical awareness of the fact that many were enslaved and sexually exploited (7).

Certainly, if I knew beyond doubt that the novel's depiction of geisha who provide sexual services was not true to life, I would argue that it contributes to a harmful myth that perpetuates the stereotype that Japanese women and culture are very sexual. Instead, conflicting sources prevent any conclusion on the novel's accuracy. Golden being an American author is not an indicator of the book being inherently problematic, as evidenced by some depictions of geisha within Japan. In fact, scholars such as Rowley argue the case that a romanticized depiction of geisha can be as flawed as a critical one. Even if the novel is accurate, and even if accuracy is altogether irrelevant in fiction,

Memoirs is still clearly intended solely for a Western audience, as it appeals to their fascination with geisha by attempting to appear authentic, if not accurate.

CHAPTER III: *Memoirs of a Geisha* and Orientalism

Accuracy is a complicated matter in historical fiction generally. However, the context of Japanese women being depicted as bold seductresses and/or obedient servants throughout Western media especially is important to keep in mind in analyzing *Memoirs*. In this chapter, I will be conducting a literary analysis of the text to argue that irrespective of accuracy, the novel still sexualizes and others geisha through its geisha characters' behavior and Sayuri's narration, especially the framing device. Although the novel may rightfully condemn the suffering that Sayuri and other geisha go through, so too does it exploit them as a source of drama—particularly in its instances of rape and sexual assault.

The Frame

Memoirs of a Geisha begins not with the famous but retired geisha Sayuri Nitta describing her beginnings in a small fishing village, but rather with a Translator's Note by Jakob Haarhuis, "Arnold Rusoff Professor of Japanese History [at the] New York University" (Golden 4), explaining how he was fortunate enough to interview the now-dead Sayuri and document her story. Haarhuis is, however, just as fictional as Sayuri herself, with both the former's introduction and the latter's tale being the invention of Arthur Golden. The Translator's Note does not impact the plot of the novel and instead functions as a frame story (or framing device), surrounding the main story and guiding the audience's experience with it. In this case, the Translator's Note serves to make Sayuri easier for the reader to empathize with as she describes her life from birth until death. It encourages the reader to imagine that she is a real figure who has endured the following events, rather than a fictional character in a story. It also relates to the novel's

prominent theme of life itself and how it can bring equal parts joy and misery, setting up how fortunate and peaceful Sayuri was at the end of her life, to be followed by the description of the difficulties that she underwent to reach that point.

However, this introduction also influences the reader's experience with the novel by presenting the geisha as "other" from the very beginning. This is evident in Sayuri's narration, wherein she lengthily describes even the most mundane details of her daily life, from the extensive process of dressing in a kimono to the rigid measures it took to maintain her elaborate hairstyles. Haarhuis further contributes to the reader's unfamiliarity when he describes the lives and work of geisha as "strange" and "very secret" (Golden 2). Sayuri's choice to be interviewed is unusual, he says, because geisha unofficially vow to uphold the "singularly Japanese conviction" to keep the public and private parts of life separate. She decided to speak to him because she lived far away from Japan, in the United States (Golden 3). Although Haarhuis implies that it is the events of Sayuri's life that make the following text "extraordinary" (Golden 1), it is her life as a geisha that he uses to appeal to readers. Haarhuis' foreword shows that the intended audience of *Memoirs* is a Western one that finds geisha to be so alien that the book's very premise becomes almost fantastical. At the same time, the knowledge that geisha are real—the familiarity with the word, if not its meaning—leads readers to feel that they are experiencing what scholar William M. Tsutsui describes as a "voyeuristic peek" into a "fairytale world" ("Sunrise, Sunset"). The frame story both humanizes Sayuri to the audience and "[preserves the] verisimilitude of the Orient," as Akita writes in *Global Media Journal* (6).

The novel's text being presented as the translated transcription of an eighteen-month-long series of interviews also explains Sayuri's occasional breaks from the current plot—to share her thoughts, to give context, or to comment on future events. So too do Sayuri's comments influence the reader's experience with the novel, just as Haarhuis' introduction does. At her first proper party as a maiko, Sayuri listens to the crass conversations between the geiko and the customers in attendance and comments to Haarhuis (the reader) that she was surprised that the customers “who had paid so considerably to be there [...] really wanted to hear the same sorts of stories children [...] might have told” (Golden 174). When explaining the practice of giving gifts to potential mizuage patrons, Sayuri remarks that she found it “distasteful” (Golden 238). Sayuri's comments invite the reader's fascination with the “odd” practices of geisha. Regardless of whether such practices have a place in reality, the novel's framing device encourages the reader to find them strange and, in Sayuri's own words, “distasteful.”

Sexualizing the Geisha

For critics against the novel's depiction of geisha as sex workers, such as Akita and especially Iwasaki, their case is not only that it is historically inaccurate, but that by being so, it sexualizes them—turning something that was not inherently sexual into something that is. They argue that the novel forgoes truth for the purpose of turning the geisha into something that she is not—specifically, the seductress that Asian women have long been made out to be in Western media—a staple of Orientalist media.

As with the other aspects of her career, Sayuri describes her training and performances in the arts in thorough detail. A substantial part of Chapter Twelve, for example, is dedicated to explaining her lessons in musical instruments, song, dance, and

tea ceremony (Golden 141-145). Sayuri puts great emphasis on how important the arts are to a geisha, and explicitly states that it is a geisha's skills that make her incomparable to a prostitute (Golden 147). Yet, if Sayuri's intent is to emphasize the admirable aspects and accomplishments of a geisha's career, it seems conflicting to describe at length the "split peach" hairstyle that she adopted after her debut only to end it by noting how customers find it erotic (Golden 163-164). Earlier, when outlining how a geisha puts on her makeup, she takes a minute to explain that geisha keep lines of makeup visible on their necks because "Japanese men, as a rule, feel about a women's neck and throat the same way that men in the West might feel about a woman's legs" (Golden 63).

Regardless of whether these details are true to life or not, one wonders why Sayuri would feel the need to tell the reader, if not to inform them of how they, too, should find these descriptions erotic. In fact, the way such details are relayed seem to intentionally be done as to guide the reader's reaction. Rather than simply stating that the "split peach" style is meant to be sexual, Sayuri gives an anecdote of how a customer told her as much years after she had adopted it—the reader may not find the image erotic from description alone, but because Sayuri's voice is meant to be informational, it is left to a crass, unnamed guest to explain how a man looking at a geisha, "thinking all sorts of naughty thoughts about what [he] might like to do to her" would see "this split-peach shape, with a big splash of red inside the cleft" (Golden 163). Similarly, when describing a geisha's makeup, it is not enough to simply explain that the intention of leaving visible skin is to look erotic. The reader is given the example of how women's legs are considered erotic in the West to inform them of how they, too, should find it erotic—while additionally highlighting how "Japanese" this viewpoint is.

In the novel, Sayuri and other maiko give out ekubo to her potential mizuage buyers as both a sign of good will and an invitation for them to bid. Sayuri explains that the name of these small rice cakes comes from the Japanese word for dimple, as their tops are dimpled with small red dots in the middle—for which Sayuri notes that “some people think they look very suggestive” (Golden 238). This description is identical to Mineko Iwasaki’s description of *ochobo* in her autobiography: “a small, rounded confection with a red tip on top to resemble a budding breast” (Iwasaki 123). According to Iwasaki, to celebrate her “attainment” (her first menstruation), her okiya distributed *ochobo*. These sweets were later distributed again to her okiya’s “families” to celebrate her mizuage, the hair-cutting ceremony to commemorate a maiko “moving up” (Iwasaki 205-206). Akita remarks on the possibility that *Memoirs*’ ekubo are the sexualized counterpart to real-world *ochobo*: “Golden sexualized even a sweet to signify vagina, sexual organ, from the original meaning of breast, non-sexual. [...] It connotes only a sexual meaning” (“Bloopers of a Geisha,” 16). The differences in the usage of *ochobo* and ekubo between Iwasaki’s account and *Memoirs* does raise the possibility that the novel turned a non-sexual gesture of celebration into a gesture of offering sex. In which case, the only purpose of ekubo—the practice that Sayuri refers to as “distasteful” (Golden 238)—is to illustrate that a young girl’s virginity was offered for sale so brazenly that sweets were made just for the occasion.

But perhaps the best examples of geisha being overtly sexualized in *Memoirs* are to be found in the scenes in which they are entertaining guests at event, most instances of which include brazen conversation. In one scene, a geisha tells her customers a story of a wigmaker who had written Mameha, the geisha whom Sayuri is apprenticing, an explicit

letter of his fantasies of her (Golden 173-174). Hatsumomo, Sayuri's rival, embarrasses Sayuri in front of a group of guests with a story of a maiko whose kimono was blown up by the wind, exposing her privates (Golden 177-178). When talking to a shy customer, Mameha flusters him by talking about her nakedness after a bath (Golden 290). At a party held in honor of Arashino, a famous kimono maker, the Baron comments to Sayuri that every man in attendance has imagined her naked, which makes Sayuri deeply uncomfortable—yet, only a few paragraphs before, when another male guest made a similar comment about her disrobing, Sayuri remarked “of course, it was only a joke” (Golden 248).

To some extent, the sexual comments made by and to geisha could be attributed to the geisha characters' role as entertainers who were expected to cater to their clients' wants. Such conversations are also not an invention of the novel: Dalby describes in her book a firsthand experience in which geisha openly discussed and joked about mizuage with a patron and his wife; although afterwards, the geisha apologized to the latter for possibly making her uncomfortable (151-152). However, by so frequently depicting these sexual conversations, and often having them instigated by the geisha themselves, the book puts great importance upon them. Sayuri even compliments Mameha's comment to the shy customer as “clever” (Golden 289-290), which she says is very vital for a geisha to be. Dalby, too, observes how important it is for a geisha to be a good conversationalist, and remarks that it is only one of many skills an apprentice geisha learns by observation (113). Yet, the “cleverness” that Sayuri emphasizes is most often evinced in lewd jokes and stories. In addition, by having Sayuri comment on how surprised she was to hear

such talk (Golden 174), the novel again tells the reader that they should find strange what the other characters find normal.

Pradt and Kawashima remark in *Education About Asia* that given the context of stereotypes about Japanese women, “the American audience’s unquestioning embrace of *Memoirs of a Geisha* might be considered especially problematic” (27). Akita similarly remarks in “Bloopers of a Geisha” that “*Memoirs*’ popularity has commercially validated a socially constructed reality about geisha” (12). John Noell Moore of *The English Journal* praises the novel’s descriptions of a geisha’s work and preparation to do so, and remarks that the description of a geisha’s makeup is “a good example of the subtle eroticism that fills the novel” (144). Roy C. Flanagan of *Magill’s Literary Annual 1998* writes, “Compared to the many apprentice years of learning dance and singing, [geisha’s] actual work can resemble drunken fraternity parties” (1). Keeping in mind Marie Orise’s point that a reader knows when fiction is just that, it can be noted that a common trait between these reviews is that they seem refer to *Memoirs*’ geisha as if they are not characters of fiction, but rather illustrations of reality.

Sexualization and Dramatization of Sexual Assault

Throughout her life, the tragedies that befall Sayuri almost always stem from someone enacting power over her and her body. She is first sold away by her father to Mr. Tanaka, who in turn sells her and her sister Satsu away to the Nitta okiya and a brothel, respectively. From there, Sayuri is forced into the rigorous training to become a geisha, all while suffering constant abuse from the okiya’s owners and the jealous Hatsumomo—the latter of whom also forces her to commit acts ranging from menial tasks to sabotage, such as ruining Mameha’s kimono with ink. In chasing freedom for

herself and her sister, Sayuri instead finds herself worse off than before when she fails, stripped of her chance of becoming a geisha and instead forced into the work of a maid, with seemingly no hope of ever repaying the debts that were also forced upon her by the okiya. Even when Sayuri musters the determination to regain some control of her life, she can only do so by playing into the system and allowing Mameha to control her progression—seeking out influential customers, auctioning her mizuage, and arranging the General to be her danna. To even have a chance of living through the war, Sayuri must seek help from Nobu. To finally be free of the Nitta okiya, she must be emancipated by the Chairman. Although in the present-day, Sayuri takes a level of pride in her career and all else that she has endured, she only became a famous geisha by taking part in the system that she was virtually enslaved in.

This constant pattern of powerlessness is what spurs on Sayuri's objective: not only to survive, but to find something resembling a happy life with the Chairman, whom she fell in love with at their first meeting. Sayuri's story is not one of defeating a system, but of learning how to survive in it. Though Sayuri is unable to properly resist those who overpower her, the novel (her narration) still condemns their actions—and by extension, perhaps condemns practices within the geisha world as a whole. It is difficult to claim that the novel's critiques of geisha are Orientalist simply because the author is a Western man—such an argument would focus on whether Golden and *Memoirs* are adopting an ethnocentric tone as opposed to a culturally relative one, which I would argue lies more in the scope of anthropology than literary theory. Additionally, as explained in previous chapters, the geisha has had plenty of Japanese critics as well. Regarding defamation and how the novel depicts geisha, Dr. Susan Tiefenbrun writes the following:

Arguably, the involuntary abduction of little girls into the geisha world is a variant of sex slavery. Recruitment of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation and slave labor cannot be justified by cultural relativism because slavery in any form is a universal crime that must be universally condemned (330).

It is true that Japan and other Asian countries have historically been portrayed in the West as uncivilized and barbaric, and their women as victims of their own cultures—unfortunate context that may give pause when reading Sayuri’s struggles in the geisha system. However, without confirmation as to the novel’s accuracy, and in agreement with Tiefenbrun’s above comment, I would be unable to criticize *Memoirs* for merely depicting immoral practices as such.

In her memoirs, Sayuri mentions that there have only been two men with whom she willingly, non-transactionally, and enthusiastically had sex with: Yasuda Akira and the Chairman. In all other instances, Sayuri is either forced to do so because her job as a geisha requires it (with Dr. Crab for her mizuage, and the General as her danna) or because it is an unfortunate step in pursuit of a goal (seducing the Minister to upset Nobu). When consensual, Sayuri having sex is described quickly and simply, with vague metaphors such as “like a meal after a long spell of hunger” and “[feeling] like a child running freely down a hill” (Golden 307). By contrast, the non-consensual sex in the novel is described very graphically across multiple paragraphs. Sayuri’s mizuage takes place across three pages (Golden 281-284), her seduction of the Minister across roughly two altogether (402-404), both providing every detail from beginning to end. It is true that the intent behind such description could be (and likely is) to make the reader feel as uncomfortable as Sayuri. Yet it also brings to mind Tsutsui’s comment that the novel is “voyeuristic” (“Sunrise, Sunset”). Because these scenes are directly tied to Sayuri being a

geisha (unlike her consensual encounter with Yasuda), they are as “unique” as, and thus as detailed as, the descriptions of kimono-dressing, hairstyling, and musical training. The mizuage specifically has five paragraphs of preamble merely to describe the ceremonial steps that lead up to it.

Sayuri is also sexually assaulted by the Baron following a party he had specifically requested her attendance at. After demanding that she come to a private setting so that she can dress in a kimono that he intends to gift her, the Baron strips her himself, ignoring her protests all the while. Sayuri in the present-day interview with Haarhuis describes her immense terror, but she also gives in detail the Baron’s every move—up to and including how the Baron looked at her “plum-colored” nipples and the “darkness that had bloomed between her legs,” i.e. her pubic hair (Golden 262). Sayuri’s narration is immensely descriptive and almost lyrical throughout the novel, filled with countless poetic metaphors. Additionally, being in an interview with an American scholar, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, explains why Sayuri would describe the details of her life at such length. Yet, while the novel’s framing device also intends to humanize Sayuri to the reader, it also raises the question of why a sexual assault victim would verbally describe her trauma in such detail, and in such sensual prose. Recall Bardsley’s criticisms of the film *Omocha* for simultaneously condemning and fetishizing an act of sexual assault (124). *Memoirs* does the same in this scene. The severity of what is happening is undermined when describing Sayuri’s discomfort comes second to describing the act itself, and in such an erotic way. Allison notes a comment on this scene from an unnamed interviewee: "...two things are going on at once—a sort of male-

seduction point of view mixed in with Sayuri's supposed resistance. Golden is [...] pretending to tell his character's truth but he's actually up to something else" (395).

Near the novel's end, after the war has ended and Sayuri has returned to her role as a geisha, she discovers that Nobu intends to propose himself to be her new *danna*. Although she considers Nobu to be a dear friend, especially after his help during the war, Sayuri despairs at this: she feels that it would destroy any hope she had had to be with the Chairman, whom Nobu is incredibly close to. Desperate, Sayuri decides that she must ruin Nobu's trust in her. To do so, she seduces the Minister, knowing that Nobu's hatred of him will successfully make him lose all respect for her and thus keep him from becoming her *danna*. Sayuri's unenthusiastic and disgusted seduction of the Minister is not detailed in same erotic language as her assault by the Baron. Rather, the descriptions in the scene clearly illustrate Sayuri's discomfort and disgust throughout. It is presented as the only resort to gain control of her life that Sayuri has left, however reluctant she is to do so. Sayuri is both disgusted by the act and upset by the knowledge that she will be hurting Nobu, whom Mameha had instructed her to pretend to have genuine feelings for. Yet her career and its control over her life has left her no other choice if she wants even a chance to be happy with the Chairman.

Even with this justification, however, this act of desperation does not make much sense within the novel's parameters. Although Sayuri never outright asks Nobu not to become her *danna*, the novel has previously informed the reader that a geisha must have one to make real profit. Moreover, now that Sayuri has been officially adopted by the Nitta *okiya*, it has more control over her than ever before. So it is not a "plot hole" that Sayuri does not simply ask. Yet the novel has also previously informed the reader that a

geisha who is discovered to have a sexual relationship with someone besides her danna will suffer great damage to her career and reputation. Sayuri narrates that her only intended outcomes of Nobu discovering her seduction of the Minister are that Nobu would neither be her danna nor her friend—other consequences of being discovered are unmentioned.

This may be because Sayuri intends to go through with what she considers to be her last resort to be with the Chairman (and through taking control of her own body for once) even if it is still under the oppression of her career. Yet, when it is the Chairman who discovers her and the Minister together instead (Sayuri having been betrayed by Pumpkin, whom she had asked to bring Nobu), Sayuri is so shocked that she all but loses consciousness. She believes that she has forever lost her chance to be with the Chairman—“All my life in Gion, I’d imagined the Chairman before me, and now I could not have him” (Golden 409). Nobu’s proximity to the Chairman is why Sayuri is determined not to let him become her danna, and thus why she seduces the Minister. Yet, her reaction implies that even if it had been Nobu who had discovered her, she had not predicted that the Chairman would find out about it. With how close the Chairman and Nobu are, it seems highly improbable that he would never discover from Nobu that she had slept with the Minister.

Although *Memoirs* depicts Sayuri’s seduction of the Minister as a tragic, desperate last resort of a woman who has time and again been denied control over her own life and body, it does so by disregarding preestablished facts. Sayuri is essentially raped once again to portray her powerlessness, which the novel had already portrayed time and time again. While not written as erotically as her assault by the Baron is, it

further contributes to the abundance of sexuality in the novel—an abundance that Golden denies: “It’s not a racy novel. There’s remarkably little sex in it” (Struck). While treated with more gravity than a work such as *So Young, So Bright*, this instance of rape in the novel is used as a direct lead to Sayuri’s long-awaited happy ending with the Chairman. After the two have confirmed their feelings for one another, the Chairman explains that witnessing Sayuri with the Minister led him to finally intervene in her relationship with Nobu, and thus allow them to be together (Golden 417). The novel thus dismisses the rape as a plot device. By condemning the aspects of a geisha’s career that derive her of freedom or even entail sexual slavery, while also using the same circumstances as sources of eroticism and/or drama, the novel contributes to the longtime Orientalist view of geisha and Japanese women by the West: both victimized and erotic. It simultaneously criticizes the geisha and sexualizes her.

CONCLUSION

Memoirs of a Geisha was published nearly thirty years ago. In the time since, the novel has achieved immense popularity, but has also become a commonly cited source in the debate on Orientalist fiction. Critics such as Kimiko Akita, Anne Allison, and especially Mineko Iwasaki have denounced the book for depicting geisha as sex workers. They argue that by doing so, the novel creates another in a long series of depictions of Japanese women being hypersexual beings, and gives the Western reader a fantasy of beautiful, “exotic” women being available for sale. When compared to academic or personal accounts, it becomes unclear whether the novel is accurate to history or not. Even then, whether accuracy is to be expected from a fictional work in the first place is a debatable matter.

What I have found in *Memoirs* is first and foremost a story intended for the West that is fascinated with the East. With its framing device, narration, and the author’s research, the novel promises an inside and extensive look into “the unknown.” Whether or not accuracy is present, an emphasis on *appearing* accurate is. By doing so, the novel others the geisha as a source of intrigue. The reader understands its protagonist to be a geisha first and a person second.

I have also found that the depiction of geisha in the novel is not exemplary of Orientalism simply because they engage in sex work, but in how sex is shown in connection with them. Geisha are described as accomplished artists and masterful entertainers, yet just as much emphasis is put upon their sexual appeal to their customers. The protagonist’s enslavement into the geisha world being so severe that she does not have control over even her own body is both criticized and used for melodrama to further

illustrate how strange and even “backwards” her world is. At times the novel forgoes its preestablished rules to further appeal to the Western reader, whether that be by having a sexual assault victim recount the experience in poetic detail to an interviewer, or by disregarding logic to ensure a final scene of unwanted sex.

In studying this novel and its criticisms, I encountered several reasons behind the accusations of Orientalism levied at it: that its author is an American man telling the story of a Japanese geisha, that it is not accurate to history, that it is maliciously spreading false and harmful stereotypes of Japanese women, and more. Using Akita’s definition of Orientalism as the West representing the East in what it would hope the East to be (“Bloopers of a Geisha” 14), I find that *Memoirs* indeed uses its Japanese setting and characters to tell a classic story of an underdog overcoming the odds in a strange (but real) world of barbaric customs and rampant sexuality. It presents geisha as achieved artists, victims of sexual slavery, and erotic seductresses all at once.

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