

# **A Contrapuntal Reading of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha***

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## **Introduction**

### *Historical overview of prostitution in Japan*

Until the enactment of Anti-Prostitution Law in 1956, prostitutes were safely operating as the brothel districts had been licensed since 1589. Thus they were somewhat under the Japanese government's protection (Leupp, 2003). However, even in previous centuries before the Anti-Prostitution Law enactment, sexual variability in the form of the sexual services the brothels offer, or the prostitutes' personal business engagements were considered completely normal and a large part of daily life (Downer, 2001). Saburuko (serving girls) is the first ever documented sex workers in Japanese history which dates back to the 759 AD as found in the ancient Japanese book Ma'nyōshū which translates to "A Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves". According to this record, the Saburuko (described as wanderers) came from displaced families because of factional struggles that took place in Japan during the late 600s. They wandered and resorted to prostitution for survival (Stephenson, 2018).

Prostitution in Japan is said to have transformed in different styles throughout the ancient time to modern time, between the Heian Period to Azuchi-Momoyama Period (795-1603) came Murasaki Shikibu's Tale of Genji (world's first novel) which made mention of the pleasure women, described as sex-workers that welcome travelers at seaports of different cities for profitable marketing of themselves. During the Edo Period (1603-1868) licensed pleasure brothels were established under the military regime; this gave the room for a historical multiplicity in the number of Japanese prostitutes. Prostitutes working as indentures contracts reeled through the period from the Edo period. Between the two wars, the moral climate of Japan became more corrupted due to Western influence. With the American invasion of Japan, came the amplification of sexual services in various forms (Leupp, 2003).

### *American promiscuity in Japan*

The occupation of Japan by American troops came with a threat that Japanese women could be raped, so, brothels were set up for the occupation troops which harnessed mass recruitment of prostitutes (Kristof, 1995). The availability of different sexual services such as themed bathhouses, peeping clubs, tea houses among few others, Japan's sex culture is perceived as one of the most unique in the world, 400 years older than those of other nations, more fascinating and exciting to the Westerners (Sinclair, 2006). The presence of American soldiers in Japan during World War II contributed to the considerable rise in the number of prostitutes (Moon, 2009). This event gave birth to increase in sexually transmitted diseases among the American soldiers which triggered series of failed prostitution bans, until the enactment of the

prostitution prevention law of 1956 which gave a total end to open prostitution and brothel operations (Stephenson 2018).

### *Orientalism in Arthur Golden's Memoir of a Geisha (1997)*

Though a very well explored aspect in criticism, Said's theory of Orientalism (2003b) remains a yardstick in validating oriental arguments in literary criticism. Golden's publication of *Memoirs of a Geisha* in 1997 remains a noteworthy development in the history of American orientalism, as it made a remarkable achievement in the American reading culture. The book sold more than four million copies in the first four years of publication (Tegler, 2001), it got translated into twelve languages and was adapted into a movie by Woolf in 2001. Meanwhile, the same book didn't get this much reception back in Japan.

Through the eyes of Sayuri, Golden takes the readers on a journey into the deepest of geisha's life, the tradition and more of the Japanese as well as the war and post-war experiences. His projection of the culture, art and life of the Japanese subscribes to the common discourse of orientalism; it is without further argument that most Japanese do not concede to his fictional account of them (Akita, 2006). The real author of the biography which Golden translated and fictionalised was disappointed in the outcome of the project to the extent that she filed a lawsuit against him.

Present literature shows that, the character and role of a true Japanese geisha has been misrepresented as that of a prostitute and Japanese culture have been Orientally portrayed in Golden's work (Akita, 2006; Allison, 2001; Jin, 2011; Okada, 2003), that American soldiers were highly promiscuous during their occupation of Japan (Blumlo, 2004; Maeda, 2001; McLelland, 2003).

## **Methodology**

The study will be done through a thematic study of Arthur Golden's text *Memoir of a Geisha* (1997) using Said's theories of Contrapuntal reading and Orientalism. As proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 6). Hence, this process of analysis would be used in answering the research objectives as well as interpreting the various aspects of the study.

The themes of Geisha's sexual objectification, the commodification of their virginity, their total enslavement and the mysteriousness of the Japanese "orient" in Golden's *Memoir of a Geisha* (1997) will be identified. Edward Said's notion of "otherness", which explicates the concepts of "self" and the "other" loosely deciphered as the familiar versus the mysterious, as means of orientalism, would be employed as the theoretical method of identifying these themes.

Contrapuntal reading of a text is a counter-narrative which penetrates beneath the surface of a text to elaborate the presence of Orientalist attitudes of the author in canonical literature to reveal the political worldliness of the text (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). In this approach, the critic provides the affiliations of the text, its origin in social and cultural reality rather than its mere canonical criteria in a literary text, so that the critic can uncover cultural and political implications that are not explicitly addressed in the text (56). Edward Said's theory of contrapuntal reading would thereby be utilized as a method of resisting the traits of American Orientalism of the Japanese history and lifestyle earlier identified in the first part of the analysis.

This study would reread Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* to emphasise the promiscuity of American soldiers with the Japanese geishas which are presumed to be marginally silenced by Golden. To do that, the study starts with a historical overview of

prostitution in Japan, a brief exploration of Orientalism of Japanese culture in the novel which has preoccupied Golden's narration and an investigation of American soldiers' patronage of the Japanese prostitutes.

## Results

It is found that despite all indications of American soldiers' promiscuity engrained in history, Golden's novel silently veiled the "truth" by not giving emphasis to the American soldiers' promiscuity in Japan but rather, applauding the heroism of his countrymen and debunking the fact speculated of their flaws through the narrator's voice.

## Discussion

According to Japanese history, there is mane evidence which proves that during World War II, the American invaders engaged in sexual activates with the Japanese prostitutes and Geishas. In some other reports, there were cases of rape by the American soldiers, but in the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden has not vividly projected any American character in an intense sex scene, rather, the characters involved in consuming and sexualising the women are all orient themselves. This reveals that the persistence of Orientalism is quite evident in Golden's choice of characterisation and plot development. As an American, he shows a very positive image of the American military. In Sayuri's reflection, "All the stories about invading American soldiers raping and killing us had turned out to be wrong; and in fact, we gradually came to realise that the Americans, on the whole, were remarkably kind" (Golden, 2005, p. 349). Golden's attitude towards Japan is entirely Oriental in that he flatly denies the tendencies of ascribing flaws to the Americans. As Said puts it, the Occident rejects and denies its weakness by dressing it upon the Orient.

Golden's portrayal of *mizuage* gives a dispiriting impression to the readers about the Japanese Orients. He awkwardly presents the feelings and emotions of Sayuri while she undergoes the *mizuage*. This account is considered erroneous and misleading by most Japanese. More reason why the novel didn't sell in Japan and why Mrs. Iwasaki is disappointed with the outcome of Golden's project with her. In describing *mizuage*, he has faultily interpreted it as a common and mandatory practice in all classes of the geisha community, whereas, Mrs Iwasaki says she as a former Geisha had never been through such kind of ritual, therefore considers his efforts as stereotypical.

## Conclusion

The work of a critic, according to Said (2003a), is to "speak truth to honour," the long-lasting effects of Orientalism still exist in present-day racial or ethnoreligious stereotypes that have infested humanity. This is an attempt to delimit the effect of American Orientalism in Golden's novel. Further studies should focus on other aspects of Orientalism and postcolonial feminism, which is yet to be explored.

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