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Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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Abstract

The fictional *Memoirs of a Geisha*, published in 1997, and its movie adaptation, released in 2005, were received with greater popularity in the United States than they were in Japan. Western audiences found the story of the fictional *geisha*, Sayuri, believable while Japanese audiences were not as enthralled. The binary of fact and fiction used by book author Arthur Golden and movie director Rob Marshall made the story appealing to Western audiences. Golden treated Japanese culture and *geisha* as an object to be sexualized, exoticized, and romanticized. In this article, I apply Edward Said's (1978) idea of Orientalism to the study of the fictional devices Golden used in telling the *geisha* story in print and which Marshall used in translating the story to film, with the American/Western as preferred reader of these texts. Their success not only signifies the success of these devices with the target audience but also tells us something about American cultural tastes for the Orient.

This article analyzes the binary of fact and fiction in the book and film *Memoirs of a Geisha* and argues that these texts as cultural phenomena signified the Oriental as a sexualized and exoticized object to be commodified by the West. Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, published in 1997, sold 4 million copies in America in four years and stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for 58 weeks (Tegler, 2001). The book's movie adaptation, directed by Rob Marshall and produced partially by Steven Spielberg, was released in 2005 and has grossed more than \$57 million in the United States. These numbers help demonstrate that the book and movie were a far greater hit in the West, particularly the United States, than they were in Japan, where copies remained on shelves in the back of bookstores and where screenings played to empty seats. *Memoirs of a Geisha* did not create a "geisha boom" in Japan. Mineko Iwasaki's autobiography, *Geisha, A Life*, was published in 22 different countries and sold 500,000 copies ("A Former Geisha," 2006), not nearly as many as the four million copies of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Hanawald, 2000; Shoji, 2005). This article will demonstrate that part of the reason for the geisha phenomenon is that Golden and Marshall used fiction appealing to American audiences but not Japanese audiences. Former real-life *geisha* Mineko Iwasaki's story was cannibalized and distorted in the making of the book and the movie. Golden had interviewed her "extensively" at her Kyoto home for two weeks in 1992 ("Geisha Guy Seeks," 2006) and credited her by name in the book's acknowledgments, for which she sued, claiming she had agreed to assist him as an anonymous party. Golden defended himself by arguing that his book was fiction and not a retelling of Iwasaki's factual life story (Morrison, 2002).

Golden's book was indeed fiction, but its publication, and the distribution of the movie, created an intercultural commotion and incited interest because Western audiences found the story of the fictional *geisha*, Sayuri, believable. Beyond the illogical and unbelievable aspects of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which this article will expose and analyze at length, the movie version provoked

outcry in Japan because most of the leading Japanese characters were played by Chinese actors and because the characters' make-up, movements and deportment, as well as the settings and scenes, were culturally inaccurate ("Geisha Guy Seeks," 2006; Shoji, 2005).

Memoirs of a Geisha, like much popular fiction, required some factual basis to give it credence. After learning about her life as a *geisha* by interviewing her, Golden discarded an early fictional account of a *geisha* he had written in the third person, and settled instead on a fictionalized memoir form, borrowing heavily, but altering in unflattering ways, facts from Iwasaki's true story ("Geisha Guy Seeks," 2006; Italie, 2001). He never could have created, solely from his imagination or from second-hand information, the story he eventually wrote. Golden did credit Iwasaki as indispensable to his ability to tell the story of *geisha*. Golden's fictionalized memoir and the facts of Iwasaki's life that influenced it were symbiotically related. Just as Golden's fiction relied on some factual information, the true facts of *geisha* life (Iwasaki's life) as surviving cultural truth depended on Golden's fictionalizing technique. This creates a binary between fiction and fact.

Fiction has the potential to be more entertaining than fact. Golden's novel sold much better than Iwasaki's subsequent autobiography. Whereas non-fiction seeks to inform as well as entertain, fiction seeks to stimulate the senses, to excite and to entertain the audience. In Golden's case, his book's target audience was Western. Golden treated *geisha* as an object to be sexualized, exoticized, and romanticized by the West. I will explore the fictional tools, techniques, and devices used to craft a fiction such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* for an American/Western audience.

This article applies Edward Said's (1978) idea of Orientalism to the study of the fictional devices Arthur Golden used in telling the *geisha* story in print and which Rob Marshall used in translating the story to film, with the American/Western as preferred reader of these texts. The book and movie were well-received in America but not in Japan, signifying the success of these devices with the target audience, and demonstrating America's appetite for the Oriental, known as *postmodern American Orientalism*. Golden and Marshall's interpretations of Japanese culture and *geisha* and demonstrate Orientalism: "The Oriental [Japanese culture] is *contained* and *represented* by dominating [American] frameworks" (Said, 1978, p. 40).

Orientalism and Fiction

Said (1978) traces the current period of Orientalism to about 1870, when most colonial expansion into the non-Western and non-European world began, culminating in World War II. Europe and the United States regarded the non-Western world as the Orient, a place with people who that could be described as strangers, others, and outsiders. The word *Orient* is not only a Western word, but also a Western construction. Although some people of the Orient have since gained independence and power, the experiences of racism, exploitation, colonization, and oppression continue (Said, 1989). A social mechanism exists that sustains the hierarchal colonial power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and between the West and the Orient:

The status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord" (Said, 1989, p. 207).

Since the colonial age that preceded World War II, the West has held the privileged position of interpreting the world through Western eyes, of constructing and controlling the dominant reality. The colonized have had to accommodate and to assimilate to live in this world ordered and defined by the West.

Since the earliest colonizing contacts between the West and the Orient, the West has developed romantic yet ambivalent feelings toward the Orient. Said (1978) argues that the Orient was a place unknown to the West and therefore, a place to be explored and colonized. It has been described as “antiquity, a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (p. 1). The West describes the Orient by romantic, exotic expressions, but Orientalism hides the context beneath its scholarly and aesthetic idioms (Said, 1989). Orientalism tells us about American culture by how the Orient is represented.

Golden’s devices present the Orient as a commodified Western object: a fiction of the West, by the West, and for the West, yet received by the West as reality. Fiction is engineered by commercialism, and what commercialism offers is always the real thing (Mitchell, 1989). Thus, Golden sought to make the *geisha* story as realistic as possible. A white man born and raised in the United States, Golden never experienced the *geisha* world first hand. Although his story was fictional, to acknowledge Mineko Iwasaki’s contribution was crucial for Golden since it helped establish the veracity of his research and knowledge. During Iwasaki’s lawsuit, Golden argued that his book was fiction; yet, he could not escape the reality that his fiction relied on facts provided him by Iwasaki. Orientalism was at work below the surface of Golden’s project. Through exoticization and sexualization of Japanese culture and *geisha*, Golden created a distance between the Orient and the Western target audience. But the plausibility of the information and the historical allusions made the story more accessible to those readers. Thus, Golden’s project suited Western (i.e., capitalist) commercial needs and goals, ensuring that the West would continue to view the Orient as exotic and the Oriental as Other. I will discuss the concept of *geisha* in the West vs. *geisha* in Japan to show the power and pervasiveness of Orientalism and to demonstrate that a stereotype of *geisha* exists throughout the Western world.

Geisha in the West

European missionaries and traders had been traveling to Japan since the 16th century, but the West’s fascination with *geisha* arose during the 19th century. In 1853, U.S. Naval Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Edo Bay, now known as Tokyo, as an emissary from President Millard Fillmore, to open Japan to trade and diplomatic contact with the West. Two years later, Townsend Harris followed as U.S. emissary to Japan. Harris asked that the Japanese offer him a woman while he was to be stationed there. Under diplomatic pressure, the government offered a 17-year-old *geisha*, Okichi (*The Secret Life of Geisha*, 2000). According to Dalby (1998), Okichi was not really a *geisha*. Okichi fell in love with Harris and supported him, although she was initially expected to act as a spy for the Japanese government. After a five-year stay, Harris returned to the United States without Okichi. Denounced as profane for having an affair with a foreigner, Okichi drowned herself. Their story was romanticized about a century later by Hollywood, with John Wayne starring in the role as Harris.

Two popular accounts of Westerners’ romance with *geisha* were published in the late 19th century, though neither of the Japanese women was actually a *geisha*. Rather, the women were “stock examples of the women of alleged easy virtue who are assumed by foreigners to typify the *geisha*” (Dalby, 1998). Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysantheme* became a bestseller in French and English in 1888, and John Luther Long’s 1895 short story “Madame Butterfly” was popularized as an opera and adapted as a musical in the late 20th century (Downer, 2003). Western audiences in the 19th century began to romanticize about *geisha* as pretty, submissive creatures wearing exotic robes and hairstyles.

One of the first encounters between the Europeans and *geisha* may have taken place in a public bathhouse. Japanese bathing customs fascinated the early Europeans. In the 1850s, toward the end of the Edo Era, a Dutch medical doctor and other Westerners were shocked to see Japanese men and women in the same bathing area (Matsudaira, 1997; Yoshida, 1995). What shocked them even more was that the bathers walked back to their homes “naked” (Matsudaira, 1997; Yoshida, 1995). Yoshida and other researchers use the word “naked” to describe the

Japanese bathers in this episode. This may be a Western perception. During the Edo Era, most men wore loincloths (*fundoshi*) and most women wore a wrap-around skirt (*koshimaki*) as underwear. On top of this underwear, men and women likely wore *yukata* (thin cotton kimonos). Some men may have walked home wearing only loincloths with their kimonos in hand or they wrapped their kimonos around their waists because of the heat. These half-dressed people must have appeared as “naked” to the early Westerners. In those days, the only women who could afford to go to a public bathhouse were wealthy women such as *geisha*, samurai, or merchants’ wives and daughters (Akita, 2005). The European men who saw “naked” *geisha* inside or outside public baths might have thought Japanese *geisha* or Japanese women were sexually available.

In 1897, Otojiro Kawakami, a leader and an actor of the Kawakami troupe, and his wife, Sadayakko, *geisha* “Madame Yacco,” arrived in the United States. The troupe performed Japanese short plays and danced at venues across America, then traveled to Europe for the 1900 World Exposition in Paris. Despite her original intention to become a housewife, Sadayakko joined her husband’s troupe for financial reasons. She captivated American and European audiences, and people raved about her beauty and movement. In Paris, the Kawakami troupe mixed plays with *kabuki* and faked *hara-kiri* (committing suicide) scenes. Instead of sitting on the floor, actors performed *hara-kiri* standing up. Beyond *hara-kiri* and *kabuki*, what drew the crowds into the theater was Sadayakko’s beauty: “She was beautiful, she was exotic, she breathed life into the woodblock prints that they adored and collected” (Downer, 2003, p. 167). The Japanese government sent *geisha* abroad for the first time to represent their country at the Expo. Men fantasized about *geisha*, and Japanese *kimono*-like robes became a fashion rage in Europe.

All along, the West has believed itself to be more culturally advanced and sophisticated than the Orient. At best, the West has considered the Orient as its cultural opposite, always trailing developmentally. Japanese culture and *geisha*, in particular, have appeared very exotic to the West. *Geisha*, whom early Europeans encountered in Japan as well as in Europe and America, appeared sexual, exotic, and promiscuous. This fascinated and puzzled Westerners, who could not have imagined such a proud and highly respected occupation as *geisha*. *Geisha* are artists who entertain their clients at a formal banquet with traditional music and dance and without sex. The teahouses in which *geisha* worked were exclusive. One could not become a customer without a proper referral. Western anthropologists and historians have been drawn to Japan because of this fascination with *geisha*.

Another inscrutable feature of *geisha* for the West is their liminal position (Turner, 1969). One abandons her or his social identity and social role while she or he is in the liminal space. According to Goffman (1959), a teahouse is a *backstage*:

a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (p. 112)

Lebra (1976) argues that the Japanese distinguish one situation from another according to the dichotomy of *uchi* and *soto*, saying, “*Uchi* means ‘in, inside, internal, private,’ whereas *soto* means its opposite, ‘out, outside, external, public.’” (p. 112). Lebra conceived that the Japanese can have intimate interaction only when their social status is removed and they can have social equality. One achieves intimate interaction in *uchi* space, being away from work, and by going out to eat and drink in a private room in a restaurant or a hotel. Social scientists tend to equate *uchi* space with Goffman’s (1959) *backstage*. Western researchers tend to assume that what happens in a private space is opposite of what happens in a public space and that something is kept hidden in the *backstage*. As Akita’s (2005) research discovered, however, other strict rules and hierarchal relationships govern the behaviors of people involved in a liminal space. These

rules could be even more severe than rules outside, in public. The West has fantasized about Japanese culture and *geisha* for centuries. Golden's work perpetuates stereotypes that have been formed out of these fantasies.

Geisha in Japan

The Japanese have always understood *geisha* apart from prostitution. The Japanese know that *geisha* is a highly respected profession. To the Japanese, *geisha* could be objectified only in pictures in which they are photographed with children who are visiting Kyoto or Nara. For Japanese people, this might be the only chance for an interpersonal encounter with *geisha*, who are considered a living treasure.

The Japanese government created a pleasure quarter during the Edo era (1600-1868) and created *geisha* as an occupation different from the profession of the prostitute (Dalby, 1998). Prostitution was legal, but *geisha* were forbidden by law to provide sexual services (Dalby, 1998). Since the Edo Era, people have respected a woman of refined deportment more so than a woman of intelligence (Akita, 2005). Also, since the Edo Era, *geisha* have embodied a feminine demeanor along with sophisticated and well-mannered behaviors admired by Japanese girls and women (Akita, 2005).

Like many other professionals in Japan, *geisha* teach their skills to the younger generation, who learn from observing rather than from reading textbooks (see Iwasaki, 2002). These behaviors and skills may appear peculiar to Westerners though they are part of *geisha*'s social identity. *Geisha* feel power, pride, and dignity in their performances, though they may appear terribly submissive to the eyes of the West.

Objectification: Removing the Author from the Text

The West objectifies the Orient, which is to be viewed, photographed, studied, and consumed. In *Memoirs of A Geisha*, Westerners appear in the story through the eyes of "Sayuri," a narrator constructed by Golden. Any construct of the West is attributed to "Sayuri." Instead of employing his own Western voice as omniscient narrator, Golden let the protagonist, "Sayuri," a former *geisha*, tell her story. While remaining "invisible," "Sayuri" demonstrates Golden's Orientalism:

The representation of the Orient, in its attempt to be detached and objective, would seek to eliminate from the picture [story] the presence of the European observer. Indeed to represent something Oriental . . . one sought to excise totally the European presence" (Mitchell, 1989, p. 230).

This technique engages Western readers, who might believe they are witnessing the authentic and realistic Orient. Actually, this Orient was created by Golden and encourages as assertion of colonialism.

Memoirs of a Geisha opens with a chapter titled, most disingenuously, "Translator's Notes," which consists of a soliloquy by "Jakob Haarhuis," a fictional professor of Japanese history at New York University and the fictional translator of the book. In 1936, the "Haarhuis" family moved from the Netherlands to Japan. Jakob was 14 years-old when his father took him to see a dance performance in Kyoto by the beautiful *geisha* "Sayuri." Thanks to intensive Japanese language lessons, "Haarhuis" could understand fragments of Japanese conversations. Fifty years later, "Haarhuis" reunites with "Sayuri" in New York. Somehow, she has immigrated and agrees to have her life's history recorded.

Arthur Golden, alias "Jakob Haarhuis," detaches and distances himself from the story, which allows him to engage in Orientalizing. Yet, to draw the readers into believing the story, "Haarhuis" must be constructed as knowledgeable about Japanese culture and history. "Sayuri"

(Mineko Iwasaki) agrees to interviews recorded in an elegant Japanese-style suite on the thirty-second floor of New York City's Waldorf Towers, a convenient and familiar location for Golden, for "Haarhuis," and for Western readers. "Sayuri" confides in "Haarhuis" that she would reveal her innermost secrets only to him: "Haarhuis" conducts his interviews as a form of academic research. "Sayuri" insists that "Haarhuis" sit in front of her while she dictates her memoirs into the tape recorder. According to the book, the recording takes eighteen months, long enough for good ethnographic research (even though Golden spent only two weeks interviewing Mineko Iwasaki). "Haarhuis" repeatedly states that "Sayuri" trusts him, as if he were conspiratorially bringing readers into the mysterious and exotic *geisha* world:

But Sayuri never spoke to the tape recorder or to the secretary; she spoke always to me. When she had doubts about where to proceed, I was the one who steered her. I regarded myself as the foundation upon which the enterprise was based and felt that her story would never have been told had I not gained her trust. Now I've come to see that the truth may be otherwise. Sayuri chose me as her amanuensis, to be sure, but she may have been waiting all along for the right candidate to present himself. (Golden, 1997, p. 3).

"Haarhuis" is explaining to his readers that it was "Sayuri's" idea to reveal secrets and that no one (from the West) had coerced her. "Haarhuis" wonders why "Sayuri" had revealed her life openly. "Sayuri," as a colonized subject in "Haarhuis'" project, provides a doltish reply: "What else do I have to do with my time these days?" (Golden, 1997, p. 3). Furthermore, "Haarhuis" continues to gain readers' trust by explaining that he is honoring "Sayuri's" wish to have her story published after her death. Thus, "Haarhuis'" research method appears legitimate, and he appears to care about his informant, "Sayuri"

The novel becomes "Sayuri's" autobiography so that the verisimilitude of the Orient is preserved. But the pretty idioms, expressions, and excuses cannot hide the colonizing nature of the book. "Sayuri's" experience of the Orient is based on a Western perception. The colonized have no power to resist the colonizer's gaze and power of interpretation. The binary between fiction and fact plays a role here. Fact helps bring the reader closer to the Orient, but the writer fictionalizes fact for the sake of attracting readers.

Sexualization of Geisha and Consuming the bodies of the Orient

To provide real lived experience in the text, a writer needs to immerse readers in the story. Mitchell (1989) talks about Orientalism and how "to immerse oneself and yet stand apart" (p. 232). Mitchell argues that the immersion could be accomplished through ethnographic detail. Both reader and writer need to maintain their distance from the Orient. Paradoxically, readers immerse themselves in the Orient to experience the Orient; in this case, *geisha* and Japanese culture. Using Said's (1978) work, Mitchell (1989) explicates colonizers as individuals who maintain a deceptive distance which gives them the experience of "objectivity."

Memoirs of a Geisha includes many detailed sexual scenes which satisfy the Western appetite, as "the desire for this immediacy of the real became a desire for direct and physical contact with the exotic, the bizarre, and the erotic" (Mitchell, 1989, p. 231). The sex scenes are set to titillate readers so they may experience the bodies of *geisha*, who in reality are not available for consumption. Western readers can imagine themselves as the characters who touch, caress, probe, explore, and consume the bodies of the Orient. Readers are invited to weave themselves into the text as sexual objects. At the same time, readers can maintain their distance because the characters in the novel are fictional, either Japanese or American soldiers/occupiers after World War II. Golden creates, for example, unsavory Japanese characters who conduct virginity checks by inserting their fingers into girls' vaginas. He creates other equally undesirable Japanese characters who consume women's bodies in other ways.

Golden sexualizes *geisha* and "Sayuri." Both Golden and Marshall, director of the film *Memoirs of A Geisha* claim to know that *geisha* are not prostitutes though both the book and the movie imply otherwise. Instead of focusing on scenes of the *geisha* life, artistic training, artistic performances, and intellectual conversation, the text and the movie sexualize *geisha*. Translator "Jakob Haarhuis" notes early on:

Like prostitutes, their lower-class counterparts, *geisha* are often in the unusual position of knowing whether this or that public figure really does put his pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Probably it is to their credit that these butterflies of the night regard their roles as a kind of public trust, . . ." (Golden, 1997, p. 3).

Throughout the text, Golden employs the literary device of using the word *water* to connote sexuality. For example, "Sayuri's" mother had "so much water in her personality" (Golden, 1997, p. 11); "What a great deal of water you [Sayuri] have!" (p. 25); and "She [Sayuri] has a great deal of water" (p. 43). "Water" (pronounced "*mizu*" in Japanese), can connote sexuality in Japanese, but only in the context of prostitution, e.g., "*mizu-shobai*" (sexual business). Golden's cultural misuse of "water," however, serves his Orientalist viewpoint. A major plot line in the novel and the movie follow a competition among married male clients intent on deflowering a virgin *geisha* such as "Sayuri." Golden misuses the Japanese word, "*mizu age*," to mean deflowering a virgin *geisha*. To achieve this, Golden creates a sexually psychotic medical doctor, Crab, who auctions off the best virgin *geisha* at exorbitant prices. He deflowers the *geisha* in a one-night stand and collects by cotton swab the blood resulting from her broken hymen. He deposits the blood into tiny glass vials bearing the name of the *geisha* which he carries in a wooden case. The 15-year-old "Sayuri" is advised by her mentor *geisha* to cut her leg to sexually seduce Dr. Crab during the treatment in his clinic. "Sayuri" reflects, "I was half-disgusted and half-fascinated as I tried to imagine what was going on in his mind" (p. 247).

"Sayuri," who was raised in a poor seaside village, turns into an erotic creature who fantasizes about sex and sexually deviant men. Golden transforms "Sayuri" into a sexual object who is willing to be consumed. In the "*mizu age*" competition, Mameha, Sayuri's senior *geisha*, says to "Sayuri," "No man will wish to eat it [Sayuri], if he hears a suggestion that some other man has taken a bite" (Golden, 1997, p. 253). Despite Mameha's warning, "Sayuri" allows herself to be manipulated by Baron, Mameha's *danna* (patron), an old powerful man. In front of others at a party on his estate, she is led to his private room, where he strips off the layers of her kimono in front of a mirror. "Sayuri" reflects, "I'd certainly never seen myself so utterly naked before" (p. 262). Baron's only sexual interest was in probing "Sayuri's" body superficially, touching but not penetrating her. The detailed sex scenes featuring Dr. Crab and Baron are intended to excite readers who maintain their distance from this exotic eroticism.

Japanese women's bodies, including "Sayuri's" (at the tender age of nine) and the grandmother's, are sexualized and commodified in both the movie and the book. Young "Sayuri" meets Mr. Tanaka, a kind old gentleman who is a wealthy merchant. "Sayuri" recalls that meeting:

I lay there on that slimy table while Mr. Tanaka examined my lip, pulling it down with fingers and tipping my head this way and that. All at once he caught sight of my gray eyes, which were fixed on his face with such fascination, . . ." (Golden, 1997, p. 14).

Later, "Sayuri," naked, meets Tanaka again: "I sat before him naked, . . ." (p. 20).

After that, "Sayuri" begins to fantasize about Tanaka. Her feelings about Tanaka are dashed when she learns he sold her into the *geisha* life. But she is able, at age 12, to transfer her feelings toward Chairman, an older man. Like Tanaka, Chairman was married, and at least 30 years older than she is. Golden has the 12-year-old "Sayuri" reflect: "I managed to say my

name, and then he moistened a fingertip with his tongue and touched me on the cheek—to take off an eyelash, as it turned out” (p. 68).

Several scenes are depicted differently between the book and the movie. In the novel, “Sayuri” manipulates the Minister into raping her to get Chairman’s attention. In the movie, however, a U.S. soldier of the occupation is manipulated by “Sayuri” into having sex with her. This change in Marshall’s film must have appealed to American audiences. The use of an American soldier to stake a claim in a fallen *geisha*, to metaphorically plant the U.S. flag in Japanese territory, can evoke nostalgia for U.S. dominance of Japan after World War II.

Amid all this palpable sexual tension in the movie, all *geisha* speak English fluently and act as direct and assertive as modern American women. Joining strange men in a mixed bath, making sexual overtures to soldiers, *geisha* are akin to prostitutes. The colonizer is privileged to sexualize and consume the bodies of the colonized, who welcome their advances. “Sayuri” explains, “All the stories about invading American soldiers raping and killing us had turned out to be wrong; and in fact, we gradually came to realize that the Americans on the whole were remarkably kind” (Golden, 1997, p. 349).

The Orient: An Antithesis to the West

Orientalism recognizes the Orient as an antithesis to the West. If the West is advanced, clean, pretty, and sophisticated, then the Orient must be backward, dirty, ugly, and simple. In their book and movie, respectively, Golden and Marshall have planted the colonial seeds that corroborate the Orient as the antithesis of the West. *Memoirs of a Geisha* reinforces undesirable stereotypes of the Japanese people and culture. When the Orient is engineered by the West and devised as its antithesis, then the Eastern culture will be misrepresented. Golden and Marshall show the Japanese to be silent, stiffly polite individuals, who eat exotic food and slurp noodles. Golden and Marshall also perpetuate stereotypes about *geisha* as sexually submissive women who aspire to become mistresses, bathe with strange men, rest their necks on special pillows to maintain their hairstyles, play *shamisen* (musical instrument) made from virgin kittens, and wear facial powder made from a nightingale’s droppings. These misrepresentations reinforce the idea of Japanese culture and *geisha* as exotic, backward, irrational, dirty, profane, promiscuous, bizarre, and enigmatic. Since Golden’s and Marshall’s target audiences were Westerners, the cultural misrepresentation and misinformation present in *Geisha* might not have been noticeable to most viewers.

Golden’s choice of a fishing village as the setting for “Sayuri’s” childhood was an ideal Orientalist device, playing off the idea of “fish” and the “fishy smell” as stereotypical of Japanese. “Sayuri’s” family was described as poor, yet they could afford a doctor to make house calls. Golden included as many bathing scenes as possible, so this poor family had a private, indoor bath in which they bathed the dying mother. Before World War II, only well-to-do Japanese families had a bath at home. To further illustrate how poor her family was, however, Golden describes the daughters’ unruly hair. In the opening scene of the movie, a large, horse-drawn wagon spirits the girl away from her home to be sold in the city as a *geisha*. Such a wide vehicle running along a narrow, meandering, coastal fishing-village path in 1928 Japan is an unthinkable anachronism. The wild wagon ride, however, does evoke nostalgia for a John Wayne movie of the 1930s. The West’s familiarity with a horse-drawn wagon makes sense to the audience.

Marshall felt present-day Kyoto was too modern, so he created a *geisha* district on a movie set in Southern California, complete with tile-roofed houses, wooden bridges, and cobblestone streets (Shoji, 2005). Such tall, tile-roofed structures in congested neighborhoods do not resemble 1930s Kyoto, but rather appear similar to the scenes of congested Beijing in the movie *The Last Emperor*. In addition, the movie shows a whorehouse in a dark street, as the horse-

drawn wagon passes, giving way to a teahouse. Marshall visually sets up the teahouse as an extension of the whorehouse.

The cultural misrepresentations spill off the page as well as the screen. When “Sayuri’s” calls her elder sister “Satsu-san,” she uses a sophisticated honorific suffix, unlikely for a nine-year-old barefoot girl from a fishing village. Throughout the novel, Golden often uses this suffix, which helps exoticize his novel and helps it appeal to the West while distancing the Orient. Likewise, the Chinese-accented English spoken by the Chinese actresses playing the roles of Japanese is almost incomprehensible to Japanese ears. Despite undergoing intensive training in *geisha* body movements before filming, the Chinese actresses’ deportment, demeanor, and dancing appeared odd to Japanese eyes (Shoji, 2005). Westerners would not recognize any differences between the movements or speech of Chinese and Japanese actresses. Asian-accented English might seem fetchingly exotic to Western ears.

“Sayuri” is a poor choice for the protagonist’s name. Japanese people would recognize Sayuri as a common female name that would not be a *geisha*’s name. *Geisha* are high-status artists, living treasures, with special occupational names signifying perhaps the roots or background of a *geisha*, such as where she received her training, or who her teacher is, or for which teahouse she works. “Sayuri” may sound mellifluous to Western ears, like a sweet, pretty girl’s name, but it has no relation to *geisha*, according to Japanese ears.

In the novel, Chairman owes Nobu for having rescued his business and feels obligated to him. But in the movie, Chairman is obliged to Nobu because he saved Chairman’s life when they were in the war together. Marshall perpetuates the stereotype of the loyal Japanese, exploiting the Japanese ideal of obligation to someone who has sacrificed his life. Despite so much cultural misinformation, the fictionalized Orient attracts a Western audience. The application of literary and cinematic devices employed by Golden and Marshall produces enough plausible truth to attract and impress Westerners. Thus, both book and film, reinforce the binary between fact and fiction as it exists in Orientalism.

Memoirs of a Geisha has been adopted for use in literature and other humanities classes at some U.S. colleges and universities. In the Intercultural Communication courses I teach at a large U.S. university, I find myself discussing *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Many of my students readily believe what they have read or seen. I hear questions such as, “Why do Japanese always use ‘san’ at the end of someone’s name?” “What does ‘water’ mean in Japanese culture?” Students also want to talk about why Iwasaki let Golden interview her. I try to explain that Japanese women are beholden to patriarchy and that Iwasaki was culturally coerced by powerful men in her own country to cooperate with Golden, a scion of the world’s most powerful newspaper publishing family, the Sulzbergers of the *New York Times* Company (“Geisha Guy Seeks,” 2006).

Said (1978) writes:

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media’s resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of the “the mysterious Orient.” (Said, 1978, p. 26).

Orientalism continues to be perpetuated, despite technological advances, posing barriers to better intercultural understanding and communication. My hope is that we will strive to critically assess and challenge the representations of the cultural texts engineered by Orientalism and to work toward communicating fuller, richer truths about the world around us.

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