

## The Portrayal of Geisha as Japanese Culture in *Memoirs Of Geisha* Movie Directed by Rob Marshall

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### Abstract

This study focuses on the analysis of the Portrayal of Geisha in “*Memoirs of Geisha*” Movie Directed by Rob Marshall. It aimed to study how geisha are portrayed in this Movie as part of Japanese Culture. In this study, the writer uses the descriptive method, by applied the Multicultural Feminism respective in analyzing this *Memoirs of Geisha* Movie. Geisha was born from a movement of women who tried to live independently in the Meiji period. Geisha was a profession among Japanese women at that time and was one of the best jobs for a woman at that time. This study illustrates how Geisha plays an important role in improving the quality of life for women in Japan. Even so, Geisha have a very bad controversy because of the cultural differences that occur between Japan and western culture. Japanese tradition that seems taboo to be done by common people, makes Geisha as one of the controversial cultures. Despite Geisha having a bad value in the western view, Geisha herself has a firm ideology of culture and themselves.

**Keywords:** *cultural differences, geisha, japanese woman, multicultural feminism*

### INTRODUCTION

Japan is a country with many cultures and traditions that have developed over the centuries. The life of Japanese women is also never out of controversy at once. Women in the past felt how they were exploited and suppressed by Japanese government regulations in the past that made them under the control of men. Also, there are many things that need to be considered to discuss about women in Japan, because they carry the norms that are specifically applied by Japanese society, about how they behave and are cultured in their own country. In interviews with Japanese housewives in 1985, Sugiyama found that socialized feminine behavior in Japan followed several patterns of modesty, tidiness, courtesy, compliance, and self-reliance. Modesty extended to the effective use of silence in both daily conversations and activities. Tidiness included personal appearance and a clean home. Courtesy, another trait, was called upon from women in domestic roles and in entertaining guests, extended to activities such as preparing and serving tea (Takie Sugiyama: 1985).

Geisha is one of the first jobs that women can do which began in the Meiji period. But before a female Geisha appeared as it is known now, men were Geisha workers at first. The first male geisha appeared around the year 1730. But, everything changed in the 18th century, it was only about 20 years later that female geisha began to appear in the forms of *Odoriko* (meaning dancers) and *Shamisen* players, and they quickly took over the profession, dominating it by 1780. Where the first Japanese woman who worked as a Geisha appeared and replaced the man who was originally a Geisha. The first geisha run by women is the Furukawa prostitution, in about 1750 (Tiefenbrun, 2003). She was a skilled singer and shamisen player named Kikuya who was an immediate success, making female geisha extremely popular in 1750s Fukagawa (Gallagher, 2003). When they became more widespread throughout the 1760s and 1770s, many began working as entertainers (not prostitutes), often in the same place as male geisha.

For women around the 1800s, the meaning of Geisha was changed, as time went, for them being Geisha is a form of pride for Japanese women of their time, where, being a geisha means that they are women with high social status, because they can meet people who has big names, such as government, successful entrepreneurs, and others. In width terms, Geisha are Japanese women who entertain through performing the ancient traditions of art, dance and singing, and are distinctively characterized by traditional costumes and makeup. In the early stages of Japanese history, there were female entertainers: *Saburuko* (serving girls) were mostly wandering girls whose families were displaced from struggles in the late 600s. Some of these *saburuko* girls sold sexual services, while others with a better education made a living by entertaining at high-class social gatherings. After the imperial court moved the capital to Heian-kyō (Kyoto) in 794 the conditions that would form geisha culture began to emerge, as it became the home of beauty-obsessed elite. Skilled female performers, such as *Shirabyōshi* dancers, thrived (Gallagher, 2003). The geisha who worked within the pleasure quarters were essentially imprisoned and strictly forbidden to sell sex in order to protect the business of the oiran. While licensed courtesans existed to meet men's sexual needs, *machi* geisha carved out a separate niche as artists and erudite female companions

By 1800, being a geisha was considered a female occupation (though there are still a handful of male geisha working today). Eventually, the gaudy Oiran began to fall out of fashion, becoming less popular than the chic ("iki") and modern geisha (Downer, 2006). By the 1830s, the evolving

geisha style was emulated by fashionable women throughout society. There were many different classifications and ranks of geisha. Some women would have sex with their male customers, whereas others would entertain strictly with their art forms. Prostitution in Japan was legal up until 1908, so it was practiced throughout Japan (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). *Memoirs of Geisha* Movie by Rob Marshall also tells about how hard training to become a Geisha. Rob Marshall also shows what a Geisha means from the Geisha's point of view. How they describe themselves as an artist. Geisha are not prostitutes, for them. However, it is a dilemma because of seeing the field of work of those working in the men's area. And that's make a bold opinion for the world, that Geisha is a prostitute at that time. In World War II, American soldiers directly hired Geisha to serve them for their satisfaction during the war. And start from that, the spread of news about the Geisha a prostitute began to develop.

The novel, which was first made by Arthur Golden, became an adaptation of the story which was later produced by Rob Marshall. There is no striking difference in the two series between the novel and this movie, but in the Movie it shows how the original reaction and how the process of running the daily life performed by the main character is seen. The reason is because there is a visual that can be seen directly so that the audience will be easier to understand because of the actions that can be seen clearly. The writer then sees that the movie has a more real impression. The geisha's purpose was to entertain their customer, be it by dancing, reciting verse, playing musical instruments, or engaging in light conversation. Geisha engagements may include flirting with men and playful *innuendos*; however, clients know that nothing more can be expected. In a social style that is common in Japan, men are amused by the illusion of that which is never to be (Henshall, 1999). In this study shows how culture influences the ideology of Japanese women who become Geisha. In the eyes of the westerners at that time, Geisha was a symbol of Japanese prostitution with the imitation of art. But in this movie it shows how Geisha undermined their bad image in the eyes of the west by displaying their side of art and spirituality and their traditional culture.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The method of analysis is done by applying a qualitative descriptive method. In describing the result of findings and analysis, some of the analysis results will be analyzed into frequency. The

use of figure or number in qualitative research is known as *enumeration*. Enumeration is the process of quantifying data, and it is often done in qualitative research. The use of enumeration in this study to find out what logical fallacies are the most violated of the structural criterion by the arguments proposed by Sigmund Freud by enumerating frequency of illogical argument that violated. Through a descriptive analysis method, the writer intends to analyze the arguments of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis viewed in terms of structural principles in logical fallacy. Descriptive method is used to solve the problem by previewing, coding, presenting, describing, interpreting, and identifying the data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This Study uses Feminism Multicultural as the Theory. Feminism is a movement that demands emancipation and equal rights of men and women. According to June Hannam (2007: 22) in the book *Feminism*, the word feminism can be interpreted as recognition of the imbalance of the power of sexes, with a woman's subordinate role to men (Recognition of the imbalance of power between two sexes, with the role of women under men). As a profession, Geisha certainly develops and has its initial appearance. Women in Japan's past have had several changes. Because of that change was precisely what caused the appearance of the first female Geisha in Japan.

### **Geisha as Changing Life**

This movie tells the story of how Chiyo, the main character, experienced a struggle in her family, forcing his father to do something unexpectedly. His father who was very old, required to sell his two children in hope that they could both have a decent life. Being a Geisha for Chiyo is not easy. She had to be a servant at Nitta's Okiya house, as a favor to Nitta who had released her from life's suffering. After meeting with Nitta, Chiyo is taken by Auntie to go to the upper room. Where the room is a narrow attic which has Pumpkin inside. Pumpkin is a girl who has the same fate as Chiyo. In this part, Pumpkin explained that if Chiyo followed what Nitta said, she could become a famous Geisha like Hatsumomo, who was one of Nitta's Okiya's proud geisha. Hatsumomo was a Geisha who was very important in financial matters from Okiya. Because Hatsumomo was Okiya's moneymaker, Nitta had never curbed Hatsumomo in any way. Except for one, related to a man because Geisha are not freely to love. While at Okiya, Chiyo and Pumpkin did all the homework like a maid. They do work such as washing clothes, sweeping, and even feeding the

oldest grandmother at Okiya's house. However, Nitta still sent them both to the Geisha school to find a successor to Hatsumomo later. Chiyo and Pumpkin are small every day going to Geisha school and getting dance lessons, playing musical instruments, etc to develop their talents to become a reliable Geisha when they grow up later. Because Chiyo still didn't want to separate from her sister, she did everything she could to meet her sister after they were separated when they were sold. The next day, Chiyo, who remembers the words of her sister that this night is their last chance to run away, trying to escape by climbing onto the roof. Chiyo with her courage, tried to meet her sister so they could go together. However, bad luck for Chiyo she fell and then returned to Okiya. After receiving treatment from a doctor, Nita said that all of the costs she incurred for Chiyo's treatment were overwhelming. Nitta also gave news that Chiyo's mother had died and then her father died a week after her mother. Nitta said that Chiyo's only family is now Okiya. Nitta also said that Chiyo didn't have to bother looking for her sister again, because her sister had left her forever. And the money used for medical expenses must be replaced by Chiyo. In a way, Chiyo must work as a maid at Okiya, not as a candidate for Geisha anymore.

Chiyo experienced many trials after trying to escape from Okiya. After this happened, Chiyo's life would not be the same again. She became Okiya's maid until she grew up, where Pumpkin had reached her debut as a Geisha under the guidance of Hatsumomo. When they were growing up, Pumpkin had already debuted, assisted by Chiyo to get ready. It seems that Chiyo, who is helping Pumpkin, looks very different from the current condition of Pumpkin. In the past, they lived as a maid who had the same level. But now, it seems that Chiyo is under Pumpkin level and has already become a Geisha. It is seen that this Geisha has its own role in raising one's view of their level of equality. A Geisha is a job that is highly expected by ancient women in Japan because they can increase their social status. The same case with Chiyo and Pumpkin. After a few weeks, there is a scene where Mameha, a senior Geisha comes to visit Nitta's Okiya. In her conversation with Nitta, Mameha offered to train Chiyo to become a Geisha. Mameha gave a promise that if Chiyo for six months could not pay all of her debts to Nitta, Mameha would pay twice that. Nitta, who was very obsessed with money, seemed to agree to the terms. Mameha also added, if Chiyo can pay all of her debts at the specified time, Nitta does not have the right to all income earned by Chiyo as long as Chiyo becomes a Geisha. Mameha taught Chiyo how to act polite. When Chiyo arrived at Mameha's Okiya, Chiyo was immediately taught how a Geisha

behaved. Starting from how to bow, stand and even walk. Chiyo commented on Mameha's bad behavior. Not yet reflecting a Geisha. Even Mameha commented on the way Chiyo bow looked like a pig farmer. Chiyo doesn't even have to kneel again. Because, someone who kneels especially when opening the door is only a maid. Mameha said, because Chiyo had left Geisha training for too long, which had to be studied for years, Chiyo had to work hard to pursue her delay for only a few months.

In this movie, Geisha is also described as having a tradition called *Mizuage*. According to Metta Wijaya (2015), *Mizuage* is a ceremony to welcome the adult life of a maiko by selling her virginity to the highest bidder to let go of her girlhood. But it was done very sacredly and the maiko's were still respected. Mameha used Sayuri's *Mizuage* procession to win Nitta's heart. Mameha tried to introduce Sayuri to all the men who would later offer Sayuri's *Mizuage*. There was an opposition that Sayuri made this time because Sayuri felt that Mameha had taken her too far. However, Mameha insisted on doing it. Sayuri, in this Movie actually had a crush when she was little. Sayuri meets a chairman who bought her ice cream. Because of the kindness of this chairman, Sayuri prayed to become a Geisha. So if one day they met again, she hoped that the Chairman would recognize her. When she debuted, she again met with this chairman. And, when Mameha explained about the tradition of the *Mizuage* to Mameha, Sayuri had the desire to sell her *Mizuage* to the chairman. However, Mameha refused because Mameha was targeting Nobu to be the bidder of Sayuri's *Mizuage*. The reason why Mameha refused Sayuri's wish was because Nobu and the Chairman were business partners. The two of them will not bid if they both participate in the offer. When it appeared the day Mameha invited Sayuri to meet Nobu and the Chairman at a Sumo match, Sayuri's eyes directly looked at the Chairman. However, because their target was Nobu, Sayuri had to give up her feelings and focus on Nobu. However, Sayuri's task was not easy. Nobu is famous for his dislike of Geisha. Nobu prefers strong things. Nobu argues that Geisha are weak beings who cannot protect themselves.

Geisha do not have the right to love, because they can only follow orders from their teacher, who becomes their guide in becoming a Geisha, In Sayuri's case, Mameha. Sayuri then became the best Geisha who then had the highest *Mizuage* offer defeating the record held by Mameha before. Short story, Hatsumomo, who competed with Sayuri, did not accept her defeat, especially after Nitta left Okiya's house to Sayuri and appointed Sayuri to be her adopted daughter. Hatsumomo

then burned the Okiya to the ground.

### **The Western Views About Geisha**

As a culture, Geisha are a natural thing for Japanese citizens. In fact, Geisha has its own value in its territory. However, it cannot be denied that Geisha remains a taboo thing to discuss because of cultural differences and the differences in moral values of each country. When viewed from this movie, geisha do look very unnatural in their work. For ordinary people, it must be very unnatural to see a woman working to entertain men with their dances and voices and also with little seduction on their services.

According to Koenjoro (2004), Explaining that Commercial Sex Workers are part of extramarital sex activities characterized by satisfaction from various people involving several men is done for money and is used as a source of income. Looking back on how the Mizuage process and the results of the Mizuage itself, a Geisha after selling their Mizuage, they still have to obey someone who has bid high on their Mizuage, commonly referred to as a Danna. The meaning of a prostitute according to Koenjoro himself, prostitute is a woman who satisfies lust of various men. However, this Geisha is only obedient to one man. A culture of its own is also very difficult to question because remembering a culture is the result of the development of thoughts carried out for generations in a country.

The war that occurred in Japan, and America which succeeded in taking over parts of Japan, forced all social life in Japan to change. In fact, even being a Geisha has been very difficult. Local men who have been their Danna have lost all their assets due to war, making all Geisha have to survive in any type of way. Some worked in factories like Sayuri, some opened their own businesses like Mameha, and some became *entertainer's women* for American soldiers like Pumpkin.

America certainly has a different culture than Japanese people. In America, if there is a woman who is gentle with you, then tries to seduce you with dance or gestures, she also indicates that she is easy for anyone to have. Due to how free the association and behavior of Americans is, of course they will assume that a gentle Geisha who skilled in dancing, is a female prostitute from Japan. But, Americans don't know what the Geisha really means. What they want to know is just

how they can be entertained and treated after being tired of war. And this Geisha has no choice but to do so in order to survive their day. Sayuri describes how war changed everything. How a prostitute woman can call herself a geisha as long as they paint their faces white and wear Kimono. The elegance value held by Geisha just disappears. That is why Geisha has a bad meaning in the eyes of western people, because the culture that Geisha do is a culture that is considered bad by western people because it is against their culture.

Many former Geisha then moved their direction in order to survive in this war period. Then the American soldiers, who saw the beauty of these Geisha, fascinated and then made this Geisha as an object for them to relieve from the fatigue of war. Geisha, who's Danna began to be defeated, finally had no choice but to follow the wishes of these soldiers. Because of the language differences, and the fear of these Japanese women towards America after they were defeated by America, they had no other choice. Only a few people can escape to remote areas like Sayuri who still hold the ideological value of Geisha.

**Colonel:** What is the protocol?

**Sayuri:** Excuse me?

**Colonel:** Suppose I wanted to see you in private.

**Sayuri:** I beg your pardon, colonel, that is not a Geisha's custom.

**Colonel:** Don't be coy. I mean, if it's a question of price, I'm sure....

**Sayuri:** If there was a price, you could never afford it.

Sayuri's underlined sentence shows how Sayuri rejected Colonel Invitation "to have fun". This sentence shows how Sayuri still maintains the ideology of a Geisha, unlike Pumpkin who gave up on surviving and then volunteered to be the object of American soldiers' pleasure.

Cultural differences between Japan and the Western are also seen in the Mizuage tradition carried out by a Maiko Geisha. Mizuage is a tradition where a new Geisha conducts an auction of her virginity. For a Geisha, carrying out this Mizuage tradition is a must so that they can become a complete Geisha. However, this tradition has its own controversy. Where a woman sells her virginity is a very strange thing for a woman. In James King's book *Under Foreign Eyes: Western Cinematic Adaptations of Postwar Japan* he wrote on page 142 that there is also sometimes a great deal of confusion about the difference between a Geisha and a prostitute. Ian Littlewood explicated the significance of these differences:



*“For many westerners the image of a Japanese woman starts and finishes with the Geisha. She is demure, remote, artistic, but she also holds out the promise of sexual pleasure. Her elaborate hair, rich kimono, and otherworldly make-up proclaim both her strangeness and according to popular belief, her availability. In a single exotic figure she unifies the principal qualities by which the west has chosen to define Japanese women.”*

King also wrote that in the west, the ideas about Japanese womanhood commonly centered on a fetishistic response to Geisha. However, a Geisha is not a person who loves excessively what they wear, but a Geisha has a tradition in their appearance. Geisha have the characteristic of wearing Kimono silk, wearing thick white makeup, and playing shamisen. Even Arthur Golden, before he wrote his book entitled *Memoirs of Geisha*, still had negative thoughts about Geisha. In King's book, he wrote on page 143 about how Arthur Golden changed his mind about every misconception about Geisha after he managed to interview the celebrated Geisha in May 1922 named Mineko Iwasaki.

### **Geisha as a Feminism Movement In Japan**

As the development of feminism that happened, Geisha is also a feminist movement. Geisha herself appeared after women in Meiji and Taisho's time began to take action against regulations that required women to work only in the house. Women in the Meiji period had to face the *ie* system, where this system required them to obey their husbands. In this system itself, there are several rules of marriage. If a woman marries a man, the woman will be considered a stranger by their own family. Then this Japanese woman's last name will change to the husband's family's last name. That way, if there is a divorce, these women will find it difficult to return to their parents' homes. That is what makes many women in the Meiji and Taisho times choose to become prostitutes to pay for their lives. However, after all this time, the women who worked as prostitutes began to take over the work that was originally done by men, and it's Geisha. Because of the disgust of women to continue working as prostitutes, they then took over the work of this Geisha and slowly Geisha began to be accepted by the Japanese people until the showa arrived.

This movie also illustrates how Geisha has its own value towards them. If a woman becomes a geisha, she is one degree higher than a woman who is not a Geisha. Or, rough language, women who only become maids. It was clear from how Hatsumomo treated Sayuri and Pumpkin. Seen how when Sayuri and Pumpkin were young, they became servants at Nitta's Okiya house. When

Mameha raised Sayuri to be her student, Sayuri's social class then changed. She did not need to kneel to close a door because it's only done by a servant girl. An encoding occurs here. About how these women classify themselves as a Geisha, and non-Geisha women. A person, who learns about Geisha, behaves politely, softly, gracefully, beautifully, can melt men with just one glance, and is a characteristic of a Geisha who has high social value. Where, being a Geisha means that they already have a high social class and prove that they are also independent women. Whereas the woman kneeling while closing the door, cleaning Okiya's house, preparing Kimono for use by Geisha, is a classification of a servant woman. Geisha also unconsciously is a feminist movement because Geisha herself opens a space for Japanese women who want to be free from the oppression they have experienced so far. Geisha provides business premises such as tea houses, kimono sewing rooms, and Okiya's house. Geisha is also the only profession in Japan that places Geisha in the top position. This profession makes women in Japan a figure valued by Japanese society, which changes the view that women are always submissive and under men. Although this movie shows that Geisha still need men as their customers, Geisha has at least opened the way for women who are oppressed due to the existence of a *system* or government regulation that elevates men to become independent and can work like men who work for money. However, if seen in this Movie too, actually this man also really needs this Geisha because this Geisha is like a fairy tale. They can remove fatigue or problems they experience. When they experienced this, what they were looking for to eliminate it was Geisha. And it's not Geisha who is looking for them, but the man itself who came to see this Geisha. It is a culture that in Japan at this time is still given high appreciation by the government in Japan. Until now there are still many who make Geisha cafes to preserve this Geisha culture. Geisha is indeed known for having a very strong cultural tradition. They stick to their ideology as an entertainer and an artist. One tradition that is very visible in this movie is the Mizuage process that the Maiko Geisha did. The spirituality and sacredness described in this movie illustrates how Mizuage is also an important role in the maturity procession of a Geisha.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As a Culture, Geisha have value that is very important for them to look after. Geisha is a form that was initially chosen by women who at that time was the only choice for them to survive. But

without them knowing it, they have made a movement of change that can change the structure of their lives. Although this Geisha also has a controversial Culture, they have run this culture for centuries. Geisha also has a culture that is certainly very distinctive. In its field, this Geisha has a habit of indulging their customers with the Talent they have. And most of their customers are men. With the softness and elegance that Geisha has, not many men fall in love with them. Even though Western thought sees this tradition as a mistake, Geisha itself is a culture and habit that the Japanese did for centuries. The women who work as Geisha consider that they are a decent profession and a sacred profession. In this movie it is illustrated how westerners saw Geisha as an object by exploiting Japan's defeat in the war at that time. However, even before the war occurred in this movie, it was seen how Geisha became a work and a sacred cultural tradition. How a kimono becomes a spiritual object for them because it has its own value towards Geisha. It also provides employment opportunities for female women in Japan who, during the Heian and Edo periods, experienced oppression and injustice. As a movement itself, Geisha have contributed many important roles in changing the fate of Japan women so they can be free as the women in Japan can be like today. Although their social life changed during the American war, it cannot be denied that Geisha in her role as a platform for Japanese women to work and have work freedom, was very high.

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