

The Alienation and Manipulation of Geisha in Cultural Structures of Japan with Special Reference to Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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Abstract:

Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* is an account of Geisha's life; a life of struggle, and surrounded by various artistic practices where Geisha have no time for themselves. Their life seems glamorous and exciting to the outside world, however, in reality, it is pathetic and an isolated one. The aim of this paper is to focus on the origin of Geisha tradition, which is considered as a cultural heritage of Japan. Simultaneously, the paper throws light on various issues such as the role of tradition, culture, history, economy, and prostitution which contribute to the marginalisation of Geisha in personal as well as social arenas. The paper also deals with the reasons which blur the distinction between Geisha tradition and prostitution. To facilitate the interpretation of Geisha tradition, cultural construction of gender roles has been taken into account.

Keywords: Geisha, Tradition, Prostitution, Economy, Culture.

Introduction: Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1998) is a fictional account of Geisha's life set in the Gion district of Kyoto between the 1930s and 1950s. Golden wrote this novel after interviewing a Geisha named Mineko Iwasaki and her experiences as a Geisha in Japan. As depicted in the novel, Geisha are traditional Japanese female entertainers, who spend years in learning various art forms and entertaining in different tea houses hired by Okiya. They also participate in various festive events and yearly dances prevalent in Japan. "She was to have four classes that morning – *shamisen*, dance, tea ceremony, and a form of singing we call *nagauta*" (Golden 57). This line of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, minutely expressed the importance and place of music and dance in Geisha's life and tradition, a tradition which is considered as a cultural heritage of Japan. At the very early age, these girls start learning various art forms which are necessary to be a Geisha.

According to Stephen Longstreet, Bohemian lifestyle of some women in the Nara Period (710- 794 A.D) gives way to the origin of Geisha tradition. These women give their pleasant hours to reputed officials and travellers who being far from their respective capital are feeling alone and depressed. These Nara women with their meager knowledge of poetry, music and dance use to entertain them. Longstreet opines that both men and women who belong to the class of Geisha at that time are called as 'Otoko Geisha' or male- geisha and 'Onna Geisha' or female geisha. Later, the term 'Otoko Geisha' gets replaced by Hokan and 'Onna Geisha' becomes simply Geisha.

Looking at the history of Geisha tradition, it seems that, the term Geisha has come into use during the seventeenth century, in the trade of singing and dancing entertainment. As far as the historical depiction of a Geisha is concerned, there is no resemblance between her and a courtesan of Yoshiwara, a famed pleasure center of Tokyo. In fact, Geisha are trained as entertainers, not as prostitutes. They are not easily available to everyone and are costly to hire. However, Geisha can have lovers and favours of rich men. The significant functions of their profession are to bow and smile.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden throws light on the fact that the life of a Geisha is not as fascinating as a *Kimono* (their traditional dress). The circumstances which force women into the profession of a Geisha are minutely depicted by the character of Chiyo, the protagonist, in the novel. So, the depiction of gender exploitation holds a firm ground in this novel. At the same time, the economics of the profession of Geisha and their degradation into prostitution have been vividly portrayed by the author. By employing the tradition of Geisha as a medium, Golden represents the value system, practice and culture of a particular period of time in Japan.

Mentioning the social position of a Geisha outside Japan, Golden in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, states that Geisha is a woman who is treated or considered as a prostitute by the people of West. When Sayuri, a Geisha, on which the novel is based, shares her experience when she leaves Japan to New York. Here, she is called as a prostitute because of being a Geisha. "My goodness . . . I'm talking with a prostitute . . ." (333). Thus, this line of the novel represents the finest example of a Geisha's social position in the West. While in Japan, Geisha is treated as a revered artist.

It is the time of wars which profoundly affected the profession of Geisha and made them mere sexual partners, rather than artists. It is the cost of their profession that leads them into debts. Therefore, Geisha always have a rich lover or a protector on their side to pay their expenses. However, Geisha trade is not similar to prostitution. In the sense that, Geisha are free to choose their respective men while courtesans have to take whatever comes in. During the World War II, Japanese government forced to close down all Geisha districts in Japan like Gion, Gion Higashi (East Gion), Pontocho, Kamishi Chiken and Miyagawa-Cho in Kyoto. As a result, a significant fall in the number of Geisha took place. In the mid 1970s, there have been only 17,000 Geisha across Japan. And, by the 1999 only 200 Geisha have been left in Japan. While

referring the plight of Geisha after the war, Golden writes, “A few years after the war, I heard she was making a living as a prostitute in the Miyagawa-cho district” (380). In this way, Geisha have been driven into the profession of prostitution that makes them mere sexual partners rather than an object of admiration.

Kapunan in *Everyone is an Artist*, calls Geisha the archetype of night leisure in Japan. By referring the traditional skills of Geisha, including Japanese music and dance, the tea ceremony, calligraphy, the art of wearing a *Kimono*, and the art of communication, Kapunan opines that amongst all, the tea ceremony is considered one of the richest traditional forms of the Geisha world (84). Golden describes the tea ceremony in the novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* as:

A tea ceremony is conducted by one or two people who sit before their guests and prepare tea in a very traditional manner, using beautiful cups, and whisks made from bamboo, and so forth. Even the guests are a part of the ceremony because they must hold the cup in a certain manner and drink from it just so. (160)

These lines of the novel show that besides Geisha, guests also participate in the tea ceremony. As an important part of Geisha culture, the lessons in tea ceremony teach in a holistic way. On the other hand, to support themselves and their art studies, Geisha have to attend evening dance parties organised by *ochaya* (tea houses) in Okiya. “A teahouse isn’t for tea, you see; it’s place where men go to be entertained by geisha” (Golden 86). This brings a clear functioning of tea houses where Geisha use to entertain their customers besides offering and pouring the cup of tea.

In earlier times Geisha’s beauty used to be admired and pictured by the art masters in coloured woodcut prints, wallpapers and in other art forms. As depicted in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, “The poster, which of course was drawn by Uchida Kosaburo . . . showed an apprentice geisha in a lovely green and orange kimono standing on an arched wooden bridge” (303). But with the passage of time it eventually began to collapse. Like, different mannerism from West has been introduced to the profession of a Geisha. So, with the purpose to maintain the respectability of Geisha tradition, Japanese government has taken a severe step. As Johnston in *Geisha, Harolt, Strangler, Star* mentions that in 1872, a law is being made to maintain the dignity of Geisha. He writes:

In 1872 the government liberated all prostitutes and geisha from their debts and allowed them to return to their homes. Many did just that, but a significant number chose to stay in the sex industry, which remained under the control of the prefectures rather than the state until 1900. (39)

Discussing the influence of new art forms on Geisha tradition, Bromfield in “Japanese Art, Monet and the Formation of Impressionism”, states, with time there were number of art forms including *Kabuki*, introduced in the Japanese culture. At the same time, it is the rising need of Geisha tradition to learn varied art forms which are essential for their sustenance. By

referring these new art forms introducing in Geisha tradition Golden writes, "There are many different types of songs . . . but in our lessons we studied five different kinds. Some were popular ballads; some were long pieces from Kabuki theatre telling a story; others were something like a short musical poem" (159). These art forms are liked by the people of Japan in large. So, it is the dire need of time that Geisha have to learn both *Kabuki* dance and its musical instruments that give a new touch in their style.

In this sense, these performers generally symbolise the traditional Japan, which, unfortunately, has often misunderstood and presented in a negative light by the outsiders. The people within or outside Japan has distorted the cultural relevance of this tradition by questioning the existence of Geisha system and their social foundation. For instance, the white face paint, made from crushed rice, used by Geisha is in fact a stage convention, which Westerners think is designed for men to arouse their erotic fantasy. As evident in Golden's, a Westerner, depiction of this convention.

Auntie painted onto the back of Hatsumomo's neck a design called *sanbon-ashi* – 'three legs'. . . . It was years before I understood the erotic effect it has on men; but in a way, it's like a woman peering out from between her fingers. (Golden 66)

Sayuri, assumed by critics as a mouth- piece of Golden, in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, puts this stage convention into a negative light by saying, it is actually used to arouse male erotic fantasy. So, the way they use to paint the woman's neck seems like a woman's leg and wearing the *kimono* collar too low to make spine visible puts the tradition of Geisha in question. Similarly, the practices like '*mizuage*' or 'deflowering' a Geisha that make her a full- fledged Geisha challenge the very notion of this tradition. Presenting the negative side of this ceremony Golden writes that, ". . . an apprentice on the point of having her *mizuage* is like a meal served on the table" (289).

Being a significant part of Japanese culture, Geisha have always been defended by their people. Geisha themselves consider their profession as a cultural heritage of Japan rather than a practice or profession to entertain male customers in the tea houses of Okiya. Arthur Golden in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, describes the duality of the Geisha who as a coin reflects the two sides of this profession, first as a revered artist, and second as a sex slave. While depicting Geishas' artistic skills, Golden calls them preserver of art and culture, as they are trained in various art forms. On the other hand, he portrays Geisha as a sex slave who goes through a ceremony like *mizuage* and their commitment with *Danna*, who pays all her expenses till he wants to carry on with her. At the same time, he portrays the helplessness of a Geisha, when he compares them with beetle that has no control over their own action. As Sayuri says in the novel, "We're affected every day by forces over which we have no more control than the poor beetle has over our gigantic foot as it descends upon it" (Golden 141).

Susan Tiefenbrun is of the view that the main reason behind the forced prostitution, sex trafficking and recruitment of girls in Geisha life is changing social-economic conditions of Japan. Even today, women are forced into sex trafficking and Geisha houses due to poverty and social practices that sets the second stage for women in Japan. Similarly, Golden in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, represents the functioning of socio-economic conditions that forces women into the profession of Geisha. Through the characterisation of Chiyo-chan, Satsu, and other women characters playing the role of Geisha in the novel, Golden highlights the fact that the economy plays a ground role to drag a person into the profession of Geisha. By depicting the plight of a woman, who is sold out by her parents into the market of predators due to poverty, Golden writes, “I came to feel that she must be struggling in that cloudy, old lady’s mind of hers with thoughts of her own mother and father- who had probably sold her into slavery when she was a little girl” (102).

Talking about Geisha, Kelly Foreman in *Bad Girls Confined*, states that Geisha is a woman who is distinct from *yujo* (courtesan), *shogi* (prostitutes), or *jochu* (maids). She mentions that traditionally, Geisha society has been enveloped under secrecy which partly creates many myths and mysteries around this tradition. By differentiating Geisha from prostitute, Sayuri, a Geisha herself in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, says, “They wore kimono and hair ornaments similar to geisha, but their obi were tied in the front rather than the back. . . . it’s the mark of a prostitute” (Golden 88).

There are simply a few texts from the early and mid- twentieth century that show their interest in Geisha culture, such as Adolphe Scott’s *The Flower and Willow World*, Sara Harris’s *House of 10,000 Pleasure* and Akiyama Aizaburo’s *Geisha Girl*. It is only in the recent years, the American anthropologists are keen to peer into the contemporary life of Geisha. Similarly, many Western observers, including American writer Liza Dalby, who personally have the experience of Geisha-hood penetrate into the secret world of Geisha. The American fascination towards the close world of the Japanese Geisha finds expression in *Memoirs of a Geisha* by American author Arthur Golden. Here, he depicts Geisha’s life and her role as a woman of 1920s and 1960s in Japan. At the same time, the dark side of the Geisha’s profession finds space in the novel with the help of various themes such as slavery, exploitation of female gender and classes within society.

If focusing on their way of life, Geisha share a strange superstitious view of life. As depicted in the novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, fortune telling and almanac reading are a big part of Geisha culture. All the major and minor things taking place in a Geisha’s life are decided by following an almanac chart to avoid any hindrance. “Geisha are a very superstitious lot, as I’ve said. Auntie and Mother, and even the cook and the maids, scarcely made a decision as simple as buying a new pair of shoes without consulting an almanac (Golden 140).”

Comparing the position of wives and Geisha in Japanese society, Dalby in *Geisha*, exclaims that Geisha are very different from wives. But, for Japanese man their roles are complementary. With the intention to justify her point Dalby writes, "Geisha are supposed to be sexy where wives are sober, artistic where wives are humdrum, and witty where wives are serious . . ." (xiv). In this way, they are complementing each other; wives do their family affairs and Geisha are supposed to entertain men's other desires. As pictured in Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, where wives are depicted as indulged in household's affairs, "Mr. Arashino's wife taught me how to gather the proper leaves, stems, and bark to make the dyes . . ." (401). On the other hand, Geisha seem to entertain men through sensual activities. As compared to wives, Geisha have a great deal of freedom and attain economic self-sufficiency. On the other hand, mentioning American feminist notion toward Geisha, Dalby states that, westerners are often annoyed by the idea of Geisha tradition, which treats women as a 'plaything'. Feminists have many questions regarding Japanese women, such as whether it's a Geisha or wife who surrenders herself to the absurd practices of societal institutions. They say,

Why can't wives go out with their husbands? Why can't geisha marry and work too? Why are there geisha at all? But Japanese wives and geisha themselves often have a different view of these institutions (xiv)

People, as a member of different institutions, work like a puppet under the guidance of these institutions. Symbolising the dark forces of social institutions Arundhati Roy in *God of Small Things* frequently uses the phrasal expression, "Heart of Darkness". She is in the view that social institutions like parenthood, marriage, religion, tradition, man-woman relationship and so on are the root causes of many ills. Talking about the marital relationship, Gilder in *Men and Marriage*, exclaims that:

For it is only their masculinity, their sexual nature, that draws men into marriages and family responsibilities. When our social institutions deny or disrespect the basic terms of male nature, masculinity makes men enemies of family and society. (x)

So, there is no confusion left behind concerning societal institutions which compel a person consciously or unconsciously to do certain things. The things which make a person's life a living hell and there is no way out from this situation. Similar is the case with Geisha tradition that not only exploits the individual rights of Geisha over their body and life but also gives way to other institutions like prostitution where women find no escape to move in a safe zone. What needs to be changed is the economic condition of a woman so that she is no longer compelled to choose the path against her will like the Geisha in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Also, it is only through education that women like Geisha can be emancipated from the world of pimps, a world where women are still putting their life and body at stake to feed themselves and their families.

In Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the power of different social institutions like marriage, tradition, religion, and culture have depicted through the Geisha tradition. The novel reflects on the twin face of Geisha tradition which makes one wonder over the actual functioning of this tradition where a person would no more suppose to consider Geisha a meagre traditional figure but an entertainer as well who is alienated and manipulated by the cultural structures of Japan. Geisha is a tradition whose definition has been changing with time depending on different social structures and situations. In this way, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is one such novel which portrays the actual picture of Geisha's life and their struggle to sustain themselves and their families.

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