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# Prostitute or Artist? Stereotype and Authenticity in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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## **Abstract**

This essay will explore the writer Arthur Golden's attitude towards the figure of the geisha in the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Does he present a positive view of a geisha or is his attitude critical? In addition, I will attempt to answer the question of whether the novel challenges or reinforces the received stereotypes about the geisha and their unique way of life. For these purposes, a comparison to John Gallagher's research on the history of the geisha and Davidson O'Connell's sociological insights about prostitution and brothels. This essay will show, that Golden does not entirely follow the stereotypes the West has of this unique culture. Rather, he surprises the readers by including some accurate historical facts about the geisha and their unique lifestyle in his novel. In this sense, arguments occurs, of Golden playing around with the received stereotypes.

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## **Glossary:**

**Danna:** A *danna* is similar to a husband to a geisha without marrying her.

**Ekubo:** This is an exotic sweet-rice cake that an apprentice geisha gives to men before her *mizuage* ritual.

**Ge-iko:** This is another term for a geisha which means “arts-child”.

**Mizuage:** This ritual is the coming-of-age ceremony of an apprentice geisha before entering womanhood.

**Odoriko:** This term means “dancing girls”.

**Okiya:** A house where a geisha lives during the length of her contract.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 *Memoirs of a Geisha*

*Memoirs of a Geisha*, published in 1997, is the first novel by Arthur Golden, an American writer who majored in Japanese culture. It is a story about the nine-year-old girl Sakamoto Chiyo, who is sold by her parents to a geisha house in the city of Gion. There she eventually becomes a permanent resident of the *okiya* house (a geisha's house). When Chiyo is old enough, Mameha (a former geisha) becomes her big sister and trains her skills in art, music and dance, to help her seduce a man that will acts as her *danna*, providing for her economically. When Chiyo's training is complete, she is required to change her name to Nitta Sayuri and from then on, she leaves her past behind her along with her name. The novel is a tragic story about a young girl's struggle rising from poverty to eventually becoming one of Gion's most recognized geishas. In addition, the reader gets to experience Golden's imaginative mid-19th century Japan from a non-Asian writer's perspective.

## 1.2 Aim and Structure

One of the main points of debate surrounding the figure of the geisha, and which is at the root of many stereotypes, concerns the question of love. As popular notions have it, a geisha is committed to her profession and cannot show any real feelings. However, a geisha is free to love if she wishes to, according to the former geisha Mineko Iwasaki. Her argument for this statement is quite simple: a geisha is a free human being and can choose to love whomever she wishes to. Others, however, have different impressions, citing a geisha's dependent situation and lack of power. To explore and have a broader knowledge on this issue, the need to conduct a thorough background research on the geisha is essential. In the methodology section that follows, where there will be a presentation of the tools and theories, which will be useful in my reading of the novel. Then, in the next section about the history and the life of a geisha, there will be an accurate background of their luxurious lifestyle in order to compare it with Golden's description of the life of a geisha in his novel. Then, a discussion on the received stereotypes about the geisha in the West will be presented, after which turns to Mineko Iwasaki's thoughts and criticism about the novel's description of the geisha. The subsequent section concerns relevant theories, such as Lois Tyson's idea about gender difference, which will help to analyze the representation of female characters in Golden's novel. In the theory section, Julia O'Connell Davidson's study of prostitution and brothel is also brought up, as the mechanisms she discusses there share certain similarities with those present in the geisha's *okiya* house.

## 2. Theory, Methodology, and Background

This essay draws on a number of different perspectives to approach and engage with *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Among the secondary literature on Golden's novel itself, the focus will be special be on an article by *Mutiara Intan Permatasari*, which deals with the idea of a geisha being a half-wife to her *danna*, while the *danna* is already married to someone else. Permatasari's study will help me to understand Golden's depiction of the relationship between a geisha and her *danna* in the novel. This will in turn allow me to compare that relationship to sociologist Julia O'Connell Davidson's study about prostitution and brothels. Her work is a theoretical inquiry into prostitution, revealing it to be a complex relationship between economics, power, gender, and class. Both figures, a geisha and a prostitute, are also controlled by a third-party, which could be the reason why that connection is often made in the popular mind. But how true or relevant is that connection? Through Davidson's study, a comparison can be made, to see if there are any meaningful connections between a geisha and a prostitute.

In *Critical Theory Today* (2006), Lois Tyson discusses patriarchal law as well as gender and power. Her ideas are useful for this essay in that they can help shed light on the relationship between a geisha and her male customers. Tyson also discusses the Cinderella Syndrome, which most girls and women go through: namely, the idea that one day her Prince Charming will come and rescue her.

In *Geisha – A Unique World of Traditions, Elegance and Art* (2003), John Gallagher provides a brief history of the life of a geisha and how the profession began. This historical background from Gallagher is important in order to receive objective information about the geisha and their way of life. It is interesting to compare Gallagher's and Golden's respective accounts of the geisha – one in history, the other in fiction.

Finally, in 2005 Sheridan Prasso interviewed the former geisha Mrs. Iwasaki, who assisted Golden in the writing of *Memoirs of a Geisha*. This interview represents her side of the story and her reasons for why she feels that Golden misrepresented the culture of the geisha.

### 2.2 The Geisha

#### The History of a Geisha

The origins of the geisha are to be found in the pleasure quarters in Japan; prostitution was legal early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and there were several women known as *odoriko*, “dancing girls”, who were trained in the art of dancing. Because of their financial difficulties they were dependent on selling their body illegally because they did not want to be defined as such and thus they were not officially known as prostitutes. The government discovered this illegal activity and they were required to obtain a license if they wished to continue working as a prostitute. The license they obtained branded them as prostitutes

and this term was not acceptable because they did not see themselves as prostitutes; instead, they referred to themselves as *ge-iko* which means “arts-child” (Gallagher 110). They started their motto in the nineteenth century, which was: “We sell art, not bodies” (Gallagher 114).

The life of a geisha is quite expensive: the make-up, luxurious kimonos, lavish accessories and financially providing for the *okiya*. The only income a geisha could earn at that time was payment from entertaining at tea-parties (geisha’s entertaining men) or occasionally prostituting, but this small income would not be enough to cover all expenses, which is why an income from a *danna* would make it easier to maintain their luxurious lifestyle. A geisha could have more than one *danna* if she or her Mother wishes in order to bring in more money to the *okiya* house. At some occasions, she could have sleepovers at teahouses and occasionally they would have intercourse with the men at the party, even though she was mistress to another man (Gallagher 114-115).

The era of geishas began in the mid-1800s, and before World War II, the profession was incredibly admired and the number of geishas was up to 80 000 in 1920. Today in modern Japan, there are approximately 5,000 geishas left. The war’s end had devastating consequences on their life; one of them was the closing of numerous of *okiya* houses and the girls had to work in factories to survive. Due to the war, prostitutes started to call themselves geishas to the Americans and their reputation was lost. They never recovered after the war since the damages were heavy.

### The Life of a Geisha

Mutiara Intan Permatasari has conducted research on a geisha’s love life and her being the half-wife and a mistress to a married man. She discusses Dalby’s experiences (a non-Japanese woman who lived in Japan as a geisha), and her thoughts on how a geisha is not permitted to marry. A geisha’s solitary purpose is to entertain and not fall in love with anyone and is not allowed to start a family; otherwise, she would have to leave her profession. Instead of a husband, a geisha is allowed to have a *danna*, one that can provide for her financially as a husband, but they do not marry and thus he does not need to divorce his current wife. The *danna* does not only provide for her financially but buys her luxurious gifts such as kimonos and lavish accessories. Some *dannas* occasionally provide her *okiya* too. In return, the *danna* receives special treatment from his geisha and the *danna* can even ask for intercourse if he wishes. Before a man can be a *danna* to a geisha he must go through a ceremony. When the ritual is complete, he sits down with her Mother to discuss the contract deal between her and his geisha and to come to an agreement about how much he must pay or what he is able to do for the *okiya*. Even though a geisha is accounted for by a *danna* she can still continue with her profession and entertain other men at tea-parties.

A geisha starts her training at a very young age and they receive a teacher who is like a “big sister” to assist them for their tough journey. She is supposed to help them to improve their skills in their dance movements, how to paint, manners and the art in seducing a male so that one day he will become her *danna*. When her “big sister” or her Mother considers her to be well educated and through with her teaching, she is then allowed to entertain the opposite sex at social events such as tea-parties in order for her to start earn a living for herself and the *okiya* house she belongs to. At these events she attempts to develop a relationship with the customers and she attempts to improve her skills in how a geisha should converse and deal with men. An apprentice is not allowed to speak much at these tea-parties due to their role; they accompany the men to the toilet, show them out and pour *sake* into their cup and have a dance performance until their time is up. As for a senior geisha, she is hired for her company by sharing stories and dancing to keep the customers in a good mood by always being polite, smiling and is also patient towards the customer even if they are rude.

When the apprentice is at a certain age she must go through with the *mizuage* ritual: this experience changes them from a girl to entering womanhood. The experience is naturally horrible because they are not allowed to decide who they should lose their virginity to, thus her first experience with a stranger can feel unnatural.

The appearance of an apprentice geisha is distinctive, especially with her hair: she has her hair in a *split peach* style to provoke men to increase her *mizuage* value. This is why an apprentice hair style is different from a senior geisha, who wears her hair in a red silk band and her own choice of styling.

A geisha strives to stand out with her appearance in order for her to not appear like a prostitute, with her expensive and beautiful kimono, her unique hairstyle and accessories. This is why a prostitute’s and a geisha’s kimono differs: the kimono worn by a prostitute is cheap and can easily be opened, while a geisha’s is very expensive and tricky to put on and take off (Permatasari, 5, 7-11). A geisha’s way of life seems a bit like capitalism, their main goal is to be on top and make profit. In order to make as much profit as possible, they try to look luxurious and unique to stand out.

The *okiya* is the house where a geisha grows up and the house becomes her permanent home, and even if she decides to have a place of her own, she is required to share her income with the *okiya*. The Mother of the *okiya* takes care of the house, is in charge of managing financial transactions, “maintains” order and arranges a *danna* for each geisha that lives in the house. A geisha is vital for the *okiya*, since she is responsible for providing the house financially and therefore, the choice of *danna* is carefully thought out by the Mother. The girls enter the house at a young age and the Mother invests in their training as soon as possible in order for them to become successful geishas. Every morning the girls must go to a special school for geishas, where they are trained in the art of dancing, singing, playing traditional Japanese instrument and painting. These lessons are quite expensive and thus each apprentice

is obliged to take a loan from their *okiya* to continue with their training. This puts the girls in a deep debt to the house and when she is a geisha, it is then required of her to pay back her loan to be free of her debt. A quick way for a geisha to repay her credit is through the *mizuage* ritual. Her “big sister” helps her to arrange a bidding war for her virginity and the highest bidder has the honor to spend the first night with her and the money she receives is used to pay off her debt. The *mizuage* process is one way to her freedom but if she would have a wealthy *danna* that is willing to pay off her debt is an alternative way for a geisha to gain freedom and be free of her debt.

It is vital for a geisha to be adopted by her Mother and if she is chosen to be the daughter of the *okiya* house than her independence is earned and she does not need to be anxious about her future. The disadvantage of being adopted is that the *okiya* obtains all of her profits, but in return she is treated with respect and with special treatment in the house (Permatasari 2, 6-7).

### The Stereotype of a Geisha

The view of the geisha has often been characterized by stereotypes; if one does not have the knowledge of the culture then it would be difficult to view a geisha as an artist rather than a prostitute. The West has always portrayed geishas as luxurious prostitutes because of their lack of knowledge of the culture: they are known for being hired by the hour to entertain men through dancing, singing, their conversation skills and sexual relationship with their customer. This image of a geisha is prevalent not only in the West since even Japanese citizens can be confused when the subject is brought up, whether or not a geisha is considered to be a prostitute. The reason for this confusion is their lack of background information about traditional Japanese art to completely understand the exotic life of a geisha (Gallagher 26).

### The Real Memoirs of a Geisha

Sheridan Praso is a writer specialized in Asian culture and her articles have appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* for instance. In one of her publications, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*, she interviewed the famous former geisha Mineko Iwasaki. As a former geisha she was his inspiration, and he interviewed her during the writing process. Shortly after the book was published, Mrs. Iwasaki sued Golden, for misrepresenting the figure of the geisha in the novel and for violation of the in contract (BBC News 2001 & 2006). Praso’s intention with the interview was to find out more about the real geisha behind Golden’s novel. In the interview, Praso asked Mrs. Iwasaki about her reaction to Golden’s representation of a geisha’s way of life in the novel. Mrs. Iwasaki explained that people often misunderstand the concept of a geisha and

have prejudices due to the lack of knowledge and confusion between the different types of classes of geishas. She brings up the Gion quarter and how it is divided into different parts: the High Gion or Gion Kobu, which is where Sayuri from *Memoirs of a Geisha* grew up. The pleasure quarters in Gion are located in Otsubu and Higashi, in which the geishas of lower class are willing to sell their bodies in exchange for money. According to Mrs. Iwasaki, this is one of the reasons why a geisha is often linked to prostitutes because a high-class geisha would never degrade herself and stoop that low by offering sexual favors in exchange for money (Prasso 208).

According to Prasso, geishas are not prostitutes because they do have a choice in life: they could take lovers, stay single or get married if they wish to have that kind of lifestyle. They have the choice of having children without being married and they are able to quit their profession if they desire. Prasso discusses her view of what a geisha's role in society is: according to her, a geisha entertains men with her skills in dancing, singing and storytelling and therefore they cannot be considered as prostitutes but should rather be regarded as performers (Prasso 200).

In Prasso's interview with the real life former geisha, she discovers Mrs. Iwasaki's "truth" of the *mizuage* ritual, a geisha would not have set off a bidding war to auction off her virginity to the highest bidder and the reason for that is according to her, a geisha does not have sexual relations with a man she does not care for. Mrs. Iwasaki is referring to Golden's novel, where Sayuri carries out an old geisha tradition called *mizuage*. Mrs. Iwasaki subsequently begins to argue about her that all marriages could be seen as a *mizuage* ritual, as she explains that in Japan it is a tradition for the groom's family to buy a gift for the bride's family and this tradition is similar to a *mizuage* ritual. That means that all marriages could be seen as a *mizuage* ritual. In other words, why should a geisha's *mizuage* ritual be linked to prostitution when a marriage is not? Prasso is curious to know her reflections on Dalby and Downers' recorded conversation with elderly geishas who confirmed that the *mizuage* ritual exists in the flower and willow world (a geisha's world) and that a *danna* would pay the *okiya* house for this special ritual. Mrs. Iwasaki's response was that as a former geisha, she has never performed this ritual and never heard of it ritual among her friends, and she suggests that this could had occurred in the lower part of quarters (where the lower-class lives) and no one in Gion Kobu would lower themselves and perform such an act.

## 2.2 Theory

### Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles dictate that a man must be masculine, rational and strong, while a woman is everything a man is not: irrational, feminine, weak and submissive. This is called a patriarchal

society/law; women have to be subordinate to their husband or man and obey his every need, which is also related to *biological essentialism*. This term refers to the belief in biological differences between men and women. Which has historically been used to argue for the superiority of men over women. Aside from biological essentialism, the *social constructionism* is another barrier for the female sex: one is not born feminine or masculine, but we are culturally programmed as we grow up. When a boy or a girl is born it is already decided: dolls for the girl and guns and cars for the boy (Tyson 85-86).

Lois Tyson discusses the “Cinderella” syndrome, which signifies a weak young girl waiting for Prince Charming to come and rescue her. This pattern encourages women to tolerate abuse in the hope that one day a knight in shining armor will save them from their misery. This prince will without a doubt be “the ideal man,” masculine and wealthy. Stories and fairytale like *Cinderella* and *Snow White* portray “good girls” and “bad girls”, similar to real life women usually categorized as “good girls” and “bad girls”. If a woman abides by patriarchal law and accepts her role then she is considered a “good girl”. If she does not accept, she is considered a “bad girl”. Tyson gives as an example of a “bad girl”, as someone who sleeps around and has multiple partners. According to patriarchal logic, one cannot marry a “bad girl” due to her status in society, a man should marry a “good girl”; a woman that is modest, self-sacrificing and nurturing could be a good wife for a man. In *Cinderella*, the protagonist is considered to be a “good girl” due to her obedience and the fact that she is an innocent maiden. In the story her step-mother is categorized as the “bad girl” because she does not follow the patriarchal law and does as she wishes (Tyson 89-90).

In this section of the essay, is the theoretical model of patriarchal gender roles that are the basis of this analysis paper. By using this theory, one can identify how his characters are portrait in the novel and then comparing the geisha, with the ideal woman within a patriarchal society. Through Tyson’s inquiry on the patriarchal society/law, the important role of a women in a Japanese society and whether Golden is writing a patriarchal text or not will be identified.

### Prostitution and Brothels

A woman can be considered a prostitute when she exchanges sexual favors for money or material items. It is possible to be a self-employed prostitute: all the profits are kept and the choice whether or to continue as a prostitute is decided by oneself. Some girls do not have the opportunity to be self-employed due to social class and status; they could be in debt and thus have to pay off their “pimp” or another third party. The third party usually picks the clients for the girls and all the profit must be shared with them (O’Connell Davidson 16-17).

A brothel is a house usually owned by such a third-party and is used for prostitution. The customers may visit these houses to pick and choose a prostitute of their liking. One of the methods that brothels

use to control these girls is so-called *debt bondage*: giving loans to confirm their lifelong loyalty to the brothel and when they cannot repay their debt, their children may inherit it from their parents and as such are forced to work as prostitutes to pay it off (O'Connell Davidson 29-30).

The brothel feeds their employees, providing the girls with clothes and their medical expenses are also taken care of, but they must repay their debt through prostitution because they have no other option. Those who stay at a brothel are frequently mistreated, threatened, and beaten. They are regarded as properties of the brothel and therefore have to obey every demand from the third-party (O'Connell Davidson 32, 35). O'Connell Davidson's theoretical study about prostitution, displays the complex life of a prostitute, and how gender and power has a great impact. The same could be said about the geisha, gender and power is dictating how their life will end up, due to the patriarchal society in Japan. This is a foreground for the comparison later in the analysis of this essay, through this theoretical inquiry, the similarity, and the differences between a geisha and a prostitute would be clear.

### **3. Analysis**

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden opens the secret window to a geisha's glamorous life and tries to illuminate the differences between a geisha and a prostitute. Geisha supporters claim that a prostitute sells her body in exchange for money and a geisha does not sell her body; rather, she is offering her skills. Golden's main critics are feminist and Mrs. Iwasaki, due to his way of misrepresenting and portraying a geisha, because of the comprising of a geisha to a prostitute. The novel is written from a Western male writer's perspective, he exploits the Japanese culture and reducing it to a patriarchal text, therefore one cannot interpret his image of the geisha truly. Golden's female characters is what feminist would describe as, oppressed, feminine and weak, which is the acceptable image of the female gender within the patriarchal society. Due to the negative image of the female characters, feminist does not believe that he has challenged the typical gender view and the Western view of the geisha. Rather than giving a more positive image of the female gender, Golden made them appear as prostitutes, due to several issues in the novel. In one example Sayuri auctioned off her virginity to someone she did not love when her *mizuage* should have gone to The Chairman. As stated earlier, a geisha has no intimate relations with someone she does not care for. Golden misrepresents geishas and links them to prostitutes because that is what sells in West, according to Mrs. Iwasaki, she discusses with Praso the West's view of geishas as being submissive and gentle to men in order to be more successful in their profession and obtain a *danna*. To a certain degree she agrees with this view that the West has of geishas and explains that just like a waitress, they are expected to be nice and polite to their customer (Praso 208-13).

Some of Golden's description of the geisha is accepted within a patriarchal society, they are submissive, and feminine and all of these characters within a geisha intertwine with the patriarchal law. Not all of their behavior could be accepted within the society, auctioning of her virginity to a stranger is a "bad girl" behavior and therefore she cannot be considered a "good girl". With the patriarchal society a man cannot marry a "bad girl" and therefore to be accepted by a man will be difficult.

One must take to account, not all women are feminist and some of them deliberately or unintentionally work to maintain the patriarchal law in society. Mameha or each "big sister", could seem as working for a patriarchal society, by teaching these women how to act correctly, in order to be accepted in the flower and willow world. These women is for the patriarchal society whether they do it knowingly or unknowingly.

### 3.1 The Mizuage Ritual

According to the patriarchy law, and feminism *Memoirs of a Geisha*, has both a positive and a negative view of a geisha's exotic way of living. From a feminist point of view the geisha is oppress and degraded women which has no other choice than accept their position in society. While the geisha being submissive and a "good girl", the patriarchal law views some of the characters in the novel as positive.

Rather than challenging the received stereotypes in the West Golden complies with some of them but simultaneously builds the story around the real historical facts about geishas. Therefore one could say that he plays around with the stereotypes. He raises sensitive points such as the *mizuage* ritual or a geisha having a *danna* for financial reasons.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, we get to experience Sayuri's thoughts and feelings when she goes through the *mizuage* ritual for the first time, as every geisha has to experience this ritual before entering womanhood. When she discovers that the last step from an apprentice to a geisha is through the ritual of auctioning off her virginity to a stranger, she feels anxious because she must lose her virginity to someone she does not love instead of to someone she does, The Chairman (the man Sayuri is in love with). Her hands were tied and she had no voice of her own, but she had to go through with the ritual. It was Sayuri's only way to repay her enormous debt to Mother which she had collected throughout the years when she has stayed at the *okiya* house. The debt was too much for her to pay off, thus it was important for the *mizuage* ritual to be a success or else she would go back to working as a maid in the *okiya* house for the rest of her life. As O'Connell Davidson discussed, this is a typical trap quite a few girls fall into: they are in need of money and have no choice but to borrow from a third-party with a huge interest and afterwards when they are forced to pay off their debt it is impossible for them and they are obliged to use their body as a source of income. As in Sayuri's case she was in need of money for

medical care and her school expenses because she had no other who could support her, thus she had to turn to the *okiya* house for financial support and over the years she was in debt to the house (29-30).

When Sayuri turned fifteen, whether she was ready or not, it was time for her to become a woman and begin the process of her *mizuage* ritual. Mameha instructed Sayuri to give away special boxes to men she wished as a *mizuage* patron (the man that will be taking her virginity). This box is an invitation for the bidding and contains *ekubo* (an exotic sweet-rice cake that has a dimple on the top of the cake with a tiny red circle in the middle to tempt men and increase her *mizuage* value). When an apprentice geisha is ready for her *mizuage* ritual; she presents several of these boxes containing *ekubo* to the men who patronize her and want to become a part of her first night with a man. In the novel Sayuri gave her boxes away to the men she knew would have a great interest in her *mizuage* and would offer great amount of money for her virginity: Dr. Crab and also her close friend Nobu-san, who were excellent candidates for her bidding war. Before one could become a geisha, the girl has to go through her *mizuage* ritual, and thus Sayuri was still considered an apprentice and therefore she had a special hairstyle known as the *split peach*. According to Permatasari this style is for a geisha apprentice to look more exotic and it also symbolizes a subtle eroticism to the men around her to increase her *mizuage* value. When the geisha has gone through the ritual she then changes her hair to whatever style she wishes to (5). With the *split peach*, Sayuri was able to provoke and stand out to increase her *mizuage* value, which she managed to accomplish and her *mizuage* was a success throughout Gion. The conqueror of Sayuri's *mizuage* and the man who gave her success was Dr. Crab, who paid ¥ 11,500; this was the highest paid *mizuage* at the time. With the money she received from Dr. Crab, Sayuri was able to finally pay off her debts to Mother and others permanently. The bidding war was a triumph and Dr. Crab was now ready to collect his prize but he had to go through a ceremony before he could spend the night with his prize, because he would be Sayuri's *mizuage* patron for the rest of her life and a ceremony was necessary to be performed. Once the ceremony was completed Sayuri was now ready to spend the night with Dr. Crab and lose her virginity so that she could finally achieve her goal to become a geisha. Due to the fact that she was in love with The Chairman and that this was a business deal between her and the winner Dr. Crab, Sayuri had no feelings for her patron. When the night eventually arrived Sayuri regarded it as work and did what she had to do. She was instructed by Mameha to behave professionally because this was just a onetime business deal with Dr. Crab and Sayuri stayed quiet and obeyed him throughout the entire night: "Mameha instructed me to behave very sternly, as though I no sense of humor at all" (Golden, 320). The reader senses the awkwardness between Sayuri and Dr. Crab and Sayuri's action on this night appears as someone that exchanges sexual activity for money, just like a prostitute would have. As we read we experience a glimpse of Sayuri's thoughts and her behavior through that special night.

Now that it was over and I was able to catch my breath, I probably looked as though I were in the middle of being operated upon, but I felt such relief I broke into a smile. Something about the whole experience seemed so utterly ridiculous to me; the more I thought about it, the funnier it seemed, and in a moment I was laughing. I had to keep quite because the Doctor was in the next room. But to think that the course of my entire future had been altered by this? [...] How strange it would have been with Nobu, since I was beginning to think of him as a friend. I didn't even want to wonder what it might have been like with the Baron. (Golden 325).

We notice as we read that this night is not very significant for Sayuri, as she feels like being operated on which is not surprising because she is forced to give away her first night to a stranger that has paid for it. It is strange that Sayuri finds it humorous that her future was altered by just sleeping one night with Dr. Crab and does not find this experience degrading or devastating that she just sold her body to a stranger. The connection between this significant night and a prostitute is very high, as she is exchanging her body for money to a stranger. One of Sayuri's other bidders was Nobu-san; they had become close friends and therefore she would find it strange to spend the night with him. Mameha appears to be the one in charge of the entire *mizuage* and Sayuri has no choice in the process. Sayuri cannot follow her heart and give the man she loves her virginity; she must offer it to the highest bidder, exactly as a prostitute would have done: a high paying customer matters the most. The customers are not chosen by these girls as the third-party owns and controls them without their consent, like in Sayuri's case being controlled by Mameha. Golden decides not to challenge the stereotype of a geisha being forced to something she does not enjoy, as it seems that Mameha and Sayuri's Mother made the decision for her regarding Sayuri's *mizuage* ritual and he makes it seem as if Sayuri had no voice of her own while being controlled by a third-party. Sayuri's own choice of men for her first night is obvious for us as readers and Mrs. Iwasaki as well. She stated if it was up to Sayuri the choice would have been obvious: The Chairman would have been the conqueror of her *mizuage* instead of Dr. Crab. The choice was clear because in the novel there is a part where Sayuri thinks to herself: "I felt sad, in a way, that I wouldn't give them to the Chairman; but on the other hand, the whole thing seemed so distasteful, I wasn't entirely sorry he would be left out of it" (Golden 272). With "give them" Sayuri was referring to the boxes she was handing out to the candidates. Sayuri has been in love with The Chairman since she first laid eyes on him as a child and for that reason it would be only natural that she would like offer him one of these boxes to him. It is amazing that we hear a bit of Sayuri's voice and thoughts concerning her *mizuage* ritual in the novel to have a better understanding of how she is feeling towards this ritual. Sayuri views it as something distasteful and yet she is going through with the ritual. As a reader that will

make one question whether she is doing it willingly or being forced in to it? Golden allows the reader to participate, be complicit and question her choice. This is one of the reasons Mrs. Iwasaki is upset with Golden's description of Sayuri's *mizuage*: it is incorrect and misleading to the reader. As a former geisha she has not come across this kind of ritual and thus this stereotype is incorrect in her opinion. According to her, a geisha has the freedom to do as she wishes and would not easily have intercourse with a man whom she did not love, but the recording from Dalby and Downers research confirms that this tradition exist among geishas (Prasso 208-13). Some may even argue that she has the freedom to say no, but Permatasari speculates that she may have the freedom to not go through the ritual, but then she will be in huge debt to the *okiya* and cannot repay it by earning small fees through entertaining at tea-parties; therefore she must go through with the ritual whether she is in favor of it or against it. A geisha has no choice in the case of her *mizuage*; she has to pay back her huge debt to the *okiya* and the only way for her to earn that kind of money is through the *mizuage* (2, 6-7).

As Gallagher explains, geishas (*odoriko*) were in the past dancing's girls, yet due to poverty they were forced to sell their bodies to survive. So how is that different from today's geisha? They may exchange sexual favors in a different way, but still they do the same thing (110). Back then they needed a license for prostitution and therefore they committed these act in secret because they refused to be defined as prostitutes. Geishas today commit the same acts but differently, through the *mizuage* ritual and having a *danna*. They are sleeping with these men in exchange for money through these "rituals" and can thus justify their act without being called a prostitute. Obviously they are well educated women in art and dancing and can thus call themselves "art-child" which is the meaning behind ge-iko, but their actions are similar to a prostitute.

### 3.2 The Okiya house

A geisha is seen as an empress in the *okiya* house because she brings money to the household, but the Mother is the head of the house and she decides everything: "Whatever any of us may have thought about Hatsumomo, she was like an empress in our *okiya* since she earned the income by which we all lived" (Golden 70). Golden demonstrates outright that a geisha contributes to the *okiya* house financially.

The Mother makes most of the decisions in a geisha's life, who does not have a voice of her own and is obliged to obey because the Mother is the head of the *okiya* house. Every girl in the house is valuable because they supply the *okiya* financially and with expensive gifts; thus they cannot act as they please due to the fact that the *okiya* is dependent on their earnings. As Mother tells Sayuri about her giving away what a man should pay for:

You're a very expensive commodity, little girl. I underestimated you. I'm lucky nothing has happened. But you may be very sure I'm going to watch you more closely in the future. What a man wants from you, a man will pay dearly to get. [...] If you give a man freely what he ought to pay for, you'll be cheating this *okiya*. You'll owe money, and I'll take it from you. And I'm not just talking about this! [...] 'Men will pay for that,' she went on. 'But they'll pay just to chat with you too. If I find you sneaking off to meet a man, even if it's just for a little talk. (Golden 313).

In the beginning, before Mameha discovered Sayuri and transformed her to one of Gion's most highly demanded geishas in town, Mother did not notice Sayuri's value and treated her as a maid. When Mother realized that Sayuri's *mizuage* was of a great value she then discovered that Sayuri was more than a maid and started to pay attention to her. She made sure before her ritual that Sayuri's virginity was intact and from then on she would watch over her to make sure she would not give away her *mizuage* for love when it was such a value for Sayuri and the *okiya* house. In this light Sayuri seems more like a product and a prostitute than a geisha or an artist. Her Mother even threatened her if she decided to skip this ritual and instead give her virginity to the one she loves. If Sayuri decided to follow her heart the consequences would be devastating, as she would be in huge debt to the *okiya*, and therefore she has to be careful before her *mizuage* ritual and cannot have a boyfriend or lovers. When she had gone through the ritual it was still hard for her to have a boyfriend or lover because a geisha is not allowed to love; she is considered an entertainer and thus has to be available to other men. But most geishas do not obey this rule, since several of them have boyfriends in secret, as in Hatsumomo's case, who had a boyfriend that was married; they would occasionally meet at the *okiya* without Mother's knowledge. One day Mother discovered Hatsumomo's secret, and from that day on she was not allowed to come back to the *okiya* anymore and there was no way for them to meet again. Sayuri discovered this strict rule when she was told about Hatsumomo situation: "I knew exactly why Hatsumomo was crying. Her boyfriend had stopped seeing her, now that she'd been barred from bringing him to the *okiya*" (Golden 109). This could be why Sayuri did not encourage her feelings for The Chairman: as a young child she discovered that feelings such as love are prohibited and thus keeping them quiet and hidden was in her best interest or she would have ended up as Hatsumomo.

The typical view of a geisha on everyone's mind is that they are submissive and emotionless creatures. In Golden's novel the reader can notice various kind of emotions such as Hatsumomo crying when Mother forbids her to see her boyfriend. After this, the boyfriend decides to break up with her because he is married and now that he is forbidden to enter the *okiya* they have no place to meet. Hatsumomo has throughout the novel been described as a mean geisha who does not show any kind of humanity, but Golden gives us a glimpse of her emotions when she breaks down because of her

boyfriend. In Tyson's terms Hatsumomo would be considered a "bad girl" because she does not follow the patriarchal law and is being considered evil and emotionless. But Hatsumomo falling in love with her boyfriend and being sad when they breakup is showing that she has a "good" side to her but cannot reveal it since her profession requires her to be emotionless (89-90). Golden is questioning the myth of a geisha being emotionless creatures, he is inviting us to notice their emotional world and showing their human side.

Permatasari explains that when a geisha is adopted by the Mother of the *okiya* all her earnings and everything she owns including herself become properties of the *okiya* because when Mother dies the house belongs to her (6). A great example is when Sayuri receives a kimono as a gift from Yasuda-san whom she regularly met with for three months at the Tatematsu Teahouse. One evening he wants her to wear it for him but as it turns out her Mother had sold the kimono because it was not expensive and attractive enough: "When I found out what she'd done, I said to her boldly as I dared that the robe had been given to me as a gift, not to the *okiya*, and that it wasn't right for her to have sold it. 'Certainly it was your robe', she said. 'But you are the daughter of the *okiya*. What belongs to the *okiya* belongs to you, and the other way around as well' " (Golden 351). Here Golden plays around with the stereotypes: once again Sayuri seems obviously controlled by her Mother and she owns all of her property, thus she does not need to ask for permission if she decides to sell Sayuri's property and telling her that everything she owns belongs to the *okiya* and Sayuri owns everything that belongs to the house because she is now adopted by Mother. Sayuri grew up in a low-class family, because of her social status in society and her gender, she knew where her place was in the *okiya* house. Therefore she needed to be submissive and act as a "good girl" in order to get by. Mother was the head of the house and the girls was her property and they were the financial income for the house. In order for her to keep the profit running, she needed to use her power to control the girls and keep an eye on them, otherwise she could lose her financial income.

An *okiya* house and a brothel have a lot in common, since they treat and control their female occupants similarly. *Debt bondage* is one of the methods the third-party uses to gain control by providing these girls the basic needs in life, such as clothes, food, medical expenses and whatever they need to keep their debt intact. Most brothels and *okiya* houses mistreat these girls by beating them if they do not follow the house rules and essentially trap them into a life of crime to keep these houses going strong financially. In the novel, Golden hints at a link between an *okiya* house to a brothel, since one can notice that Sayuri, Pumpkin and Hatsumomo are being controlled by Mother and they have to obey her laws in the house. The fact that Mother has control over their life this much it is quite similar to a prostitute's relationship with a pimp, since both are controlled by a third-party through debt bondage. As O'Connell Davidson explained, those who are in debt to the brothel it is due to their social status

(29-30). In Sayuri's case she was no longer in debt to the *okiya* because she paid it back with her *mizuage*, but due to the fact she was the daughter of the *okiya* and lived there for that reason she needed to obey Mother's wishes still.

### 3.3 A Geisha's Love Life

Among other responsibilities, the Mother of the *okiya* has the duty to pick a *danna* patron for each geisha in the house, which was also shown in Golden's novel when Mother chose Sayuri's *danna* and she had to obey whether she desired or not. One of her pursuers was Nobu-san, who made Mother a generous offer in order for him to become Sayuri's *danna*. This became a problem for Sayuri because she was in love with Nobu-san's best friend, The Chairman, and did therefore not approve when he made an offer. But she did not have a choice to refuse his offer and her only way out of this was for Mameha to try to convince Mother to think differently about Nobu-san. This is an excellent example of how a geisha does not have a voice of her own when it comes to her love interest; rather, she must accept the man her Mother offers her without hesitation.

In Golden's novel there is a quote that explains that those who work as a geisha never marry: "I'd been in Gion long enough to know something of what Mameha meant by a *danna*. It's a term a wife uses for her husband - or rather, it was in my day. But a geisha who refers to her *danna* isn't talking about a husband. Geisha never marry. Or at least those who do no longer continue as geisha" (Golden 164). As one might notice a geisha has a restricted love life: dating is prohibited and having a boyfriend is not allowed, even if a *danna* could be considered a boyfriend with a contract. But it would also be hard to consider a *danna* a boyfriend due to the contract between them. He is supposed to take care of her financially and bring her expensive gifts, so it seems as a trade between the partners: she takes care of him physically and he financially. In the novel Golden gives the reader a clear picture of how a geisha is thinking strategically of how to earn good money in Gion: "Parties and so on are all very nice; but the real money in Gion comes from a *danna* and a geisha without one- such as Hatsumomo- is like a stray cat on the street without a master to feed it" (165). As one might notice the relation between a geisha and her *danna* appears like strictly business: the geisha is dependent on his money and thus a respectable geisha would not settle for any proposition she would be offered because her income seems to be extremely important to her and the *okiya* house. As Gallagher mentioned, a geisha has several expenses such as make-up, luxurious kimonos and as stated earlier she provides for the *okiya*, which means she is in need for a *danna* so that she can afford her expensive living (Gallagher 114-115). As for the *danna*, if he is satisfied with the conversations he has with the geisha at these tea-parties and would like to have more he could then make a generous offer to her Mother. He can cover her expenses or spoil her with expensive gifts in order to persuade Mother to accept his offer to become *danna* to his

chosen geisha. In return, a *danna* has the right to receive special treatment such as having a visit from her whenever he likes and could even demand intercourse from his geishas which others are not allowed. As we read in Golden's novel, Sayuri talks about her night with General Tottori:

I had never seen a man naked before, and I found the General's sagging bottom almost comical. But when he faced me I must admit my eyes went straight to where ... well, to where his 'eel' ought to have been. Something was flapping around there, but only when the General lay on his back and told me to take off my clothes.... I'd been afraid I'd have to find some way of pleasing him, but as it turned out, all I had to do was follow orders. (Golden 349-350).

This is an excellent example of the special treatment a *danna* receives from his geisha: he can order her whatever he wants and do as he pleases, as long as he provides her financially. If he is wealthy enough he is able to have more than one geisha if he wishes to, just as the Baron: "Few men are wealthy enough to afford one geisha mistress, but Baron Matsunaga Tsuneyoshi had two [...] Now that I knew Mameha would be spending the afternoon with her *danna*, I had a much better idea why the futon in her bedroom had been made up with fresh sheets" (Golden 210). The Baron was Mameha's *danna*; he was a wealthy business man and thus able to obtain two geishas. Once again Golden gives the reader a small glimpse of the sexual relationship between a geisha and her *danna*: Mameha is preparing for the arrival of her *danna* by spreading fresh sheets which indicates that intercourse is what will occur when he arrives. Golden connects geishas with prostitutes or the typical stereotype the West has of geishas. O'Connell Davidson defined a prostitute as someone who exchanges sex or sexual services for money or material products (17). Golden's way of describing a geisha's attitude on sleeping with a customer sounds interesting: she is not satisfied with a night's pay but accepts a longer period. Sayuri has been in Gion long enough to know the rules between a geisha and her reputation:

A true geisha will never soil her reputation by making herself available to men on a nightly basis. I won't pretend a geisha never gives in casually to a man she finds attractive. [...] So you see, a geisha of the first or second tier in Gion can't be bought for a single night, not by anyone. But if the right sort of man is interested in something else-not a night together, but a much longer time-and if he's willing to offer suitable terms, well, in that case a geisha will be happy to accept such an arrangement" (Golden 165).

Golden plays around with these characters, by making it look like high-class prostitution: the first and second class geishas cannot be bought just for one night, but a low-class geisha would. Simultaneously

he makes them seem as if a man is interested in engaging to have intercourse with a high-class geisha one must pay for a long period of time to spend with her. A few times in the novel Golden mentions briefly the intimate relationship between a geisha and her *danna*, such as when Mameha changes the sheets when her *danna* the Baron comes to visit or when Sayuri is describing her night with her *danna* the general. Golden's description of the relationship between a man, and a geisha is showing us that the difference between a geisha and a prostitute is not that far.

In the novel, Golden describes the relationship between a geisha and her *danna* in this way: "When a man takes a mistress, he doesn't turn around and divorce his wife" (260). This is one of the arguments for why a geisha is being considered a half-wife or a mistress, since the *danna* is still a married man. Their relationship cannot be considered to be complete if he is still committed to another female whether if it is his wife or another geisha. What is strange is the gender differences: a *danna* is allowed to have more than one female in his life while a female or a geisha has to be pure. In one section in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri discusses how important the reputation of a geisha is if she wants to obtain a wealthy *danna*: "A true geisha will never soil her reputation by making herself available to men on a nightly basis. I won't pretend a geisha never gives in casually to a man she finds attractive. [...] A geisha who takes such a risk can only hope she isn't found out. Her reputation is certainly at stake; but more important, so is her standing with her *danna*, if she has one" (Golden 165) In Golden's novel a geisha lives as a half-wife; she never marries and is a mistress to a married man and fulfills the duties of a wife without tying the knot. A geisha that is committed to an engaged *danna* is considered more as property than a human being. Since she is provided for by her *danna*, which constitutes a necessary financial income for her, he sees her as a piece of property which he can use when and however he wants without any engagement; rather, it is just a business contract between him and her *okiya*. But Golden is also trying to break some of these stereotypes by directing the novel towards a love story between Sayuri and The Chairman, which is not common in a geisha's strict life. The reader can obviously notice that there is no love between a geisha and their *danna* but there are some exceptions of course. Someone might fall in love after spending some time with her *danna* or in Sayuri's case you can fall in love and he feels the same way as you. In the end of Golden's novel, Sayuri finally has her Cinderella story come true, as Lois Tyson described the Cinderella effect: when a young girl is portrayed as weak and in despair while dreaming for her prince to come and save her someday (Tyson 89-90). The novel has a typical Cinderella syndrome, with Sayuri going through horrible events in her life and in the meantime waiting for The Chairman (Prince Charming) to come and save her from her misery. In this Cinderella story Hatsumomo is described as a "bad girl," being everything Sayuri is not and does not follow the patriarchal law and thus she is being punished in the end and does not receive her happy ending.

Golden is in some cases following the typical Western view of geishas, but sometimes he challenges these stereotypes. If we look back briefly to the geisha's history, they began selling their bodies because of their social status. Of course they are skilled in the arts of dancing, singing and art, and yet they exchange their bodies for money, thus they must be referred to as prostitutes. To blame Golden for misrepresenting a geisha's way of living in his work would be harsh because he did break some stereotypes such as a geisha falling in love and at the end there was a relationship between a geisha and a *danna* that was out of love.

Throughout the novel Golden tends to follow the stereotype of what it means to be a geisha. However, there are a few exceptions, for instance when Sayuri falls in love with The Chairman, which is not appropriate for a geisha because she is supposed to be professional. Sayuri is not the only one in the novel that is falling for someone else; Hatsumomo was another great example of a geisha following her heart but in her case did not have a happy ending. By having Sayuri and Hatsumomo challenge this ridiculous rule, Golden is creating a new path of thinking and challenging a stereotype while sending a message to us readers that a geisha is human too and they have feelings like us. Golden decided to give these girls a different kind of path; he could have written Sayuri's story in another direction but he decided to give hope and love to the character in order to change the Western view of The Geisha. Hatsumomo on the other hand, was given the typical scenario if a geisha would have found love and decided to follow through with her feelings. The misperception that a geisha could not love is misunderstood by the West and Golden's creation a loving character like Sayuri and her love story with The Chairman in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, is breaking the stereotype and challenging them to create a different kind of thinking.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this essay has been to examine the attitude towards the figure of the geisha in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and whether or not he challenges the stereotype of the flower and willow world. As we have seen, although Golden does break the stereotype occasionally, his overall attitude seems contradictory.

In the first part of the analysis, the focus was on a geisha's *mizuage* ritual. Golden describes Sayuri's *mizuage* ritual step by step: how the ritual is performed, Sayuri's emotions at the time and Dr. Crab's behavior, making it appear as a business deal rather than a romantic interaction between two individuals. There are mixed opinions about the *mizuage* ritual: some geishas such as Mineko Iwasaki disagree with this practice and opposes this inaccurate image of a geisha auctioning off her virginity. As Dalby has proven with several interviews, senior geishas have come across this kind of ritual and so it would be

inappropriate to criticize Golden for writing about an old geisha ritual that several geishas have admitted to exist.

In the second part of the analysis, I focused on the *okiya* house. Sayuri's Mother was in charge of her life; she dictated all of her decisions and Sayuri did not have a voice of her own. Sayuri and her Mother's relationship in the novel appeared as a relationship between a prostitute and a third-party: by being controlled, and the fact that Sayuri was in debt to the house or the third-party. Sayuri belonged to her Mother as a property because she was adopted by her Mother and thus her freedom was no longer hers and all her possessions belonged to the *okiya* house. In the novel their relationship resembled that of a prostitute and a brothel madam rather than a mother and daughter relationship. Golden could have challenged the image of this relationship between them, but instead he suggests a connection between an *okiya* house and a brothel.

Finally, the third analysis section dealt with a geisha and her *danna*, someone that provides for her and looks after her financially. In the history of geishas, their motto was that they do not sell their skin but rather their skills; however, a *danna* is still akin to a prostitute's customer. In the novel, a geisha is considered to be a mistress to her *danna*, offering him sexual services and company in exchange for money and gifts such as kimonos or jewelry. It is rare for a geisha to have the opportunity to choose a *danna* that she loves because her Mother is in charge of that decision and who her *danna* will be is decided by the amount of money she is being offered. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden made sure that Sayuri's love for the Chairman was strong throughout the novel and then in the end he became her *danna*. In the flower and willow world, it was unconventional for a geisha to fall in love and for the love of her life to become her *danna*, but Golden decided to challenge this stereotype – thus surprising the reader.

In conclusion, Arthur Golden's representation of the geisha figure in *Memoirs of a Geisha* cannot be considered only negative. The only occasion Golden did not follow the tradition and took the novel into another direction was by making Sayuri fall in love with The Chairman, which would not have been appropriate for a geisha. The novel is showing us that these women are the same and what they have in common is that they are at the mercy of a strict patriarchal society. Nevertheless, Mrs. Iwasaki did suggest that a geisha could fall in love – so, in that sense, maybe she and Golden did not have much to disagree about after all.

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