

BEYOND THE KIMONO: REPRESENTATION OF GEISHA CULTURE IN *MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA*



Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature

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I hereby declare that this project titled “Beyond the Kimono: Representation of Geisha Culture in *Memoirs of a Geisha*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Tania Mary Vivera, Professor, Department of English.



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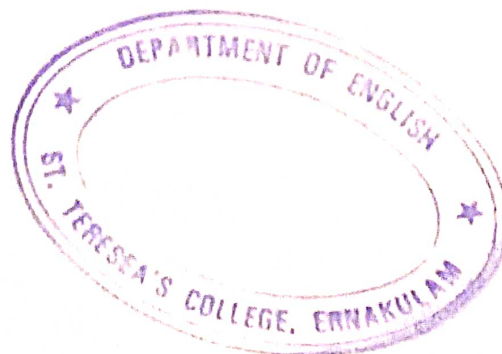
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This project explores the representation of geisha culture in the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* through the lens of Stuart Hall's theories on representation and power. Chapter one provides a foundational understanding of cultural studies, highlighting the work of key scholars like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall. It emphasizes the concept of cultural power imbalances and the role of representation in shaping cultural understanding. Chapter two delves into the rich history and traditions of geisha culture in Japan. It explores the significance of geisha as both custodians of artistic expression and embodiments of core Japanese values. Then it focuses on *Memoirs of a Geisha*, analyzing how the film portrays the beauty and artistry of geisha alongside the strictures and power dynamics inherent in the geisha world. By drawing on Hall's concept of representation, the analysis examines how the film constructs meaning about geisha culture and how audiences might interpret these representations. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the geisha's enduring significance as cultural ambassadors, promoting global understanding of Japanese arts and elegance. Their future hinges on their ability to adapt while retaining their essence, guaranteeing the survival of this cherished art form.

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Introduction

“The very word "geisha" means artist and to be a geisha is to be judged as a moving work of art”

(Memoirs of a Geisha)

Memoirs of a Geisha, an American epic period drama film adapted from Arthur Golden’s best – selling novel, made its cinematic debut in 2005 under the direction of Rob Marshall. The film unfolds the captivating journey of Sayuri Nitta, portrayed by Zhang Ziyi, a young girl who is thrown into Gion okiya (geisha house). Sayuri, coached by the experienced Mameha, played by Michelle Yeoh, undergoes intense training in dance, music, and the art of conversation amidst a fierce rivalry with Hatsumomo, portrayed by Gong Li. While the film’s beautiful graphics have earned it three Academy Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction, and Best Costume Design, its portrayal of geisha society has prompted debate about its historical veracity.

The gripping and tragic tale of a little girl named Chiyo Sakamoto is set in the bright and intricate traditions of Japan during the 1920s in the heart of Kyoto. Her family is forced to make the difficult decision to sell her and her older sister, Satsu, into slavery due to the long – lasting effects of poverty. Chiyo’s hopes of a happy reunion with her adored sibling are dashed when she is forced into the harsh world of the Nitta Okiya, a geisha household headed by the cold – blooded mother. Chiyo’s first challenger is Hatsumomo, a seasoned geisha with a poisonous heart. The young child is subjected to constant abuse, including painful duties and critical remarks. However, she feels a glimmer of hope when she meets Pumpkin, another young girl sharing a similar fate.

Renamed Sayuri Nitta, Chiyo sets off on an arduous metamorphosis. Numerous hours of training are required to become a geisha. She needs to become an expert in calligraphy, traditional dancing, the delicate tones of the three– stringed shamisen, and conversational skills, all while projecting an alluring air of mystery. One fateful evening, a spark of hope emerges from the darkness. A formidable businessman with an air of sophistication, the mysterious Chairman, shows a special interest in Sayuri. Their interactions are rife with unspoken feelings, a ballet of oblique looks and hidden wants. Even though their love is growing, their relationship is unstable because of the strict social order. In the end, Sayuri is a geisha and is expected to satisfy the demands of her affluent clientele. Sincere love does not exist in the geisha culture. Hatsumomo's envy is fed by the Chairman's attention to Sayuri, and it burns relentlessly. Sayuri's mother manipulates her future with coldness, using her brilliance and beauty to further her own financial goals.

Sayuri also meets Nobu, a wealthy friend of the Chairman who is also a patron. He takes on the role of her patron, helping to pay for her education and providing some shielding from the brutal reality of the okiya. Tension arises, though, because of Nobu's possessiveness and dominating personality. He controls Sayuri's social circle and wants her undivided attention. As the year passes, Sayuri takes solace in her strange bond with Pumpkin. But when Pumpkin decides to leave the okiya and consider getting married, their route no longer crosses paths. When she left on her own, Sayuri found strength in the difficult art form; her performances provide witness to her tenacity.

As Japan is engulfed in World War II, their surroundings collapse. The once – vibrant mood of the geisha house has given way to a sense of hopelessness as it fight to survive. Sayuri sees the end of a world that had a glimpse of hope as customs disintegrate and patrons vanish.

But fate steps in among the Mameha. Through the chaos, Sayuri's paths cross with the Chairman and Nobu again through the confusion. Nobu's affection is more possessive and demanding than the Chairman's, which is a relationship founded on mutual respect and understanding. Sayuri is forced to face her personal goals and the restrictions imposed on geishas in a world about to change as a result of this encounter. This brief time serves as a reminder of the enduring strength of love and loyalty, which is undone even by conflict.

This project is divided into two chapters. The first Chapter of this project explores the intriguing field of Cultural Studies, examining its roots and key ideas, with a particular emphasis on representation. Cultural Studies analyzes the deep connections between society, politics, identity, and the multifaceted concept of culture, with representation as a critical component. Stuart Hall's concept of representation as a "circuit" emphasizes culture as a dynamic environment in which meaning is constantly generated and challenged through representation. Media portrayals can promote prevalent views or provide opportunities to challenge them. Thus, Chapter 1 offers the basis for understanding how Cultural Studies examines representation as a strong instrument for molding cultural perceptions and navigating the complexity of power dynamics in society.

Chapter 2 examines the fascinating relationship between representation and geisha culture. It analyzes how the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* depicts geisha society and reflects the complex reality of this traditional Japanese art form. The chapter explores how the film portrays several aspects of geisha life, including: training and apprenticeship, social constraints, emotional suppression, artistic expression, and internal conflict.

Chapter 1

Power, Discourse, and Cultural Identity: A Stuartian Analysis

Cultural studies are an interdisciplinary field that explores the intricate connections between society, politics, identity, and the broad spectrum of what is defined as ‘culture’. This encompasses both high culture and popular arts, with focus on beliefs, discourses, and communicative practices. Scholars in cultural studies examine the relationship between cultural practices and broader systems of power related to social phenomena, such as ideology, class structures, national formations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation. Rather than viewing cultures as fixed entities, cultural studies view culture as a dynamic and ever-evolving set of practices and processes that constantly interact and change. Cultural studies were established during the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by pioneering scholars like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. By relying on Marxist principles, they challenged conventional views on culture by emphasizing the experiences of the working class, the significance of popular culture, and the impact of power dynamics on cultural creation and consumption. Trained as literary critics, they argued that cultural texts offered insights into social reality that were not accessible through traditional social science. They sought to describe the precise effects of culture on individuals’ lives, which were later referred to as ‘the structure of feeling’ by Williams.

In 1964, Richard Hoggart coined the term ‘cultural studies’, which made him a significant figure in the field of cultural studies. He established the Birmingham Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which became an important center for the development

of cultural studies. Richard Hoggart, in his seminal work, *The Use of Literacy*, asserts, ‘The point... is that certain groups in society have more power than others to define what culture is, and how it shall be practiced and transmitted’ (13). He contends that there are cultural power imbalances that favor certain groups in defining and controlling what constitutes ‘culture’. His focus was on the effect of mass culture on traditional working – class practices and everyday life, especially in relation to Americanization. While, Raymond Williams’ works like *Culture and Society*, 1958 and *The Long Revolution*, aimed to develop theoretical and methodological tools that would enable an understanding of the concrete relationships between cultural practices, social relations, and organizations of power. In his book *Culture and Society*, 1958, he says “A whole way of life involves not only the arts but also a whole complex of patterns and meanings...It is this complex that I am concerned with here, and I use the word ‘culture’ to cover all these aspects of human existence” (16). He argues that culture goes beyond artistic expressions to encompass the entire way of life of a society. This broader definition includes social practices, values, beliefs, and the interpretations that people create in their daily life. William emphasizes the importance and complexity of culture as a fundamental aspect of human existence, demonstrating how culture shapes different aspects of human life beyond just artistic endeavors.

Stuart Hall, a prominent Jamaican – born British sociologist and cultural theorist, is revered as a significant figure in the realm of cultural studies. Alongside Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, he is considered as one of the pioneers in this field. In the realm of cultural studies, Richard Hoaggart and Raymond Williams paved the way for exploring culture from a social perspective. However, Hall distinguished himself by steering the discipline towards an exploration of representation and examining the complex relationship between power dynamics

and culture. Stuart Hall believed that culture was more than just a subject of appreciation or study; it was a “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled” (Procter 1). His main contribution has been to demonstrate the politics inherent in culture, viewing it as a critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are established. Hall’s work concentrated on issues related to hegemony and cultural studies, emphasizing the significance of culture as a space for interpreting. Hall questioned traditional notions of culture, proposing that it is not simply the elite’s tastes, but rather, as Hua Hsu puts it in *The New Yorker*, experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined.

Drawing on thinkers like Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, Hall exposed how power dynamics influence the formation of dominant discourses, which in turn shape how culture is represented. Hall's theoretical concepts are centered on articulating Derridian concepts of representation and deconstruction, as well as Gramscian hegemony, Foucault's theory of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe's works, and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. However, Hall's influence was mainly due to Foucault's approach to discourse. Foucault writes:

Discourse is produced in which concepts of madness, criminality, sexual abnormality, and so on are defined as sanity, justice, and sexual normality. Such discursive formations massively determine and constrain the forms of knowledge, type of normality, and nature of subjectivity, which prevail in a particular period. (Foucault 623)

Due to the influence of Foucault's concept of discourse, Stuart Hall sheds light on the power dynamics. Discourse is the process of representing and creating knowledge through different forms of expression. It often involves the production of knowledge about marginalized cultures

using stereotypes and negative images, which are influenced by unequal power relations.

Through this process, a specific type of truth is created that is deeply connected to the operations of power. To put it simply, discourse impacts our perception of the world and others, and is influenced by power dynamics, often leading to the marginalization of specific cultures or groups. This is a complicated way of indicating that the way we talk about and represent things is not neutral, but is impacted by who has power and who doesn't. This may lead to the unfair and unbalanced views of various cultures and groups.

Cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall, define representation as something that goes beyond just reflecting reality. It involves the ability to describe or imagine, which plays a crucial role in shaping culture through meaning and language. Hall underlines that representation is a crucial component of communication and social interaction, necessary for humans to engage with each other effectively. His classification of representation into reflective, intentional, and constructionist forms focuses on how language and symbols reflect meaning, embody personal intentions, and reconstruct meaning through language. Hall's work highlights the significance of representation as a method of communication and culture sharing in society, stressing its importance in shaping perceptions and interactions among individuals.

Hall's seminal work, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, takes a deeper look at the relationship between representation and culture. He asserts that culture is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic 'circuit' where meaning – making occurs. The role of representation is crucial in shaping and reflecting cultural understandings. Media representations have the potential to either reinforce or enable marginalized voices to challenge dominant ideologies. Hall cites the significance of representation in the construction and contestation of cultural identity, he states that cultural identity is not fixed or essential, but is continually

constructed and contested. He contends that representation is a dynamic process that is influenced by power and discourse. These discourses have an impact on how cultural elements like geisha culture are depicted in films or media. The film is an encoding system that encompasses specific meanings and values about geisha culture are integrated into the narrative, visuals, and dialogue. However, audiences who are positioned as decoders don't merely accept these messages. Their interpretations are based on their cultural backgrounds and experiences. This decoding process can either be dominant– hegemonic (accepting the encoded meanings), negotiated (accepting some and rejecting some), or oppositional (rejecting all the encoded meaning). Through his work, Hall illustrates that representation is not a neutral mirror but rather an active struggle over meaning – making within a society.

According to Stuart Hall's concept, representation can be interpreted in three distinct ways: reflective representation, intentional representation, and constructionist representation. Language and symbols that reflect meaning are referred to as reflective representation; on the other hand, intentional representation emphasizes how language and symbols express the speaker's objectives. Constructionist representation, on the other hand, concentrates on the process of constructing meaning through both language and other means. The importance of representation as a basic component of communication and social interaction throughout society is highlighted by Hall's work, which emphasizes its influence on people's views and interactions with one another. (Hall 15)

Stuart Hall proposed two significant approaches to examine constructionist representation: the semiotic approach and the discourse approach. These approaches are similar to Hall's principles of encoding and decoding in media studies. Encoding refers to how information is packaged by the speaker to create meaning, while decoding refers to how

information is reconstructed during consumption. This approach highlights the dynamic nature of representation in communication contexts, emphasizing the intricate process of how meaning is formed 'in' and 'through' language.

Hall's book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*), contributed to the well-known political concept of representation. There are four stages in the formulation that can be completed to practice representational politics. First, resolve internal tensions. Second, reach a consensus. Third, get to the public space. Fourth, as a result of the previous steps, if the politics of representation fails, every member of the culture must restart at the beginning – the cultural circuit.

Stuart Hall's description of the processes involved in the politics of representation emphasizes that it's important to encourage group integration, define group perceptions, use public places for expression, and reevaluate techniques if intended outcomes are not achieved. This approach differentiates between representation politics and identity politics, as representation politics prioritizes cultural expression over political power, which is commonly the objective of identity politics. While both terms refer to representation for a specific community, there is a major difference between representation and identity politics. Representation politics is focused on ensuring that underrepresented groups are represented in decision – making processes. Minority parties make a concerted effort to ensure that their perspectives are heard and cultural perspectives are acknowledged in the political system. The main objective here is to acknowledge cultural traditions. Identity politics often focuses on the use of group identification to gain political power. To organize support, concerns such as sex, age, race, and ability (SARA) may be highlighted. Critics claim that this strategy can be manipulative, particularly when dominant groups use it to silence minority views.

Chapter 2

Representation and Geisha Narrative

Japan, an island country off the east coast of Asia, boasts a rich cultural heritage that has evolved over thousands of years. Despite its mountainous terrain and historically poor soils, Japan has succeeded to cultivate a variety of crops and sustain a large, homogenous population concentrated on the Pacific coast of Honshu. Since 1950, Japan has been positioned as one of the world's most advanced societies due to its intricate and ancient cultural tradition, which has coexisted with rapid economic and technological advancement. Japan places a high importance on education, which contributes to its global status as one of the most literate nations. Japanese culture is a delicate balance of old traditions and modern influences, which can be seen in cities like Kyoto and through the nation's meticulously designed gardens that show a strong appreciation for natural beauty and harmony. Akira Kurosawa a renowned Japanese filmmaker and painter commented that, "the Japanese see self – assertion as immoral and self – sacrifice as the sensible course to take in life", demonstrates a cultural preference for humility, altruism, and collective well – being over individual assertiveness. This viewpoint illuminates the ancient Japanese attitude of societal peace and the need to sacrifice personal ambitions for the common good. In Japanese culture, it is important to prioritize communal needs before personal goals, which is reflected in the significant focus on modesty, respect for authority, and prioritizing communal needs.

The significance of geisha culture is distinct within the rich tapestry of Japanese culture. Functioning as both custodians of artistic expression, geisha embody core Japanese values such as *asomotenashi* hospitality. Ensuring guests experience moments of harmony and respect. The

cultural emphasis on social cohesion and respect is perfectly aligned with this. Moreover, geisha are essential transmitters of cultural heritage. The term 'geisha' itself derives from two Japanese words: 'gei,' which means art or skill, and 'sha,' indicating a person who practices these skills. In Japan geishas enjoy great respect. They are renowned female entertainers in Japan, historically known for their mastery of traditional Japanese arts such as singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments like samisen (a lute like instrument). Geisha women devote their lives to Japanese traditional arts. The primary purpose of geishas throughout the history and today has always been to provide professional entertainment at tea house and restaurants during social gatherings with businessman and use their talents to entertain customers through their exceptional communication skills and artistic pursuits like ikebana (flower arrangement), chanoyu (tea ceremony), and calligraphy, to enrich their cultural experience. Their mastery of traditional arts like music, dance, and conversation is passed down through generations, keeping these art forms alive. Geisha culture bridges the past and present by preserving Japan's cultural heritage and emphasizing aesthetics and refined beauty through their elaborate kimonos. The kimono, a symbol of Japanese culture, is considered the country's national dress. This traditional clothing consists of a T-shaped robe with large sleeves that is secured with an obi sash and wrapped left side over right. Kimonos are typically V-necked and reach to the ankles. Kimonos are more than just apparel; they represent an important part of Japan's history and culture. Geisha wear specific kimono styles throughout their training and professional journey, demonstrating their ability and artistic expression within a traditional setting.



Fig.1 A statue of geisha in Kimono

Thus geisha culture are crucial in upholding Japan's culture heritage and presenting unique experiences that exhibit the country's traditional arts and values, embodied by elegance , artistry, and the spirit of hospitality that define Japan's cultural identity.

For centuries, geishas have been a significant part of Japan's cultural heritage. The history of geisha is a fascinating journey that began with the emergence of male geishas, known as Taikomochi, around 13th century and then later blossoming into the female art form that we know today. During the Edo Period, there were approximately 500-600 men employed as taikomochi, the male counterpart of a geisha. These men served both as advisors and entertainers for their lords playing a significant role in the social and cultural life of that time. By the 16th century, these individuals had evolved into storytellers who focused on sparking conversations and humor. In the 17th century, female geishas took on the role, and by the 1750s, they had outnumbered male geishas.

The roots of the geisha tradition, renowned for their artistic performances and refined elegance, originated from China's influence during Japan's Heian Period (794 -1185). China's beauty trends and practices contributed to the growth of the geisha profession in the Japanese Imperial Court, where talented female performers like shirabyshi dancers were in a dominant position. In the 17th century, the geisha system, which combined elements of entertainment, social graces, and traditional arts, became a major phenomenon, offering a distinct path for women who wanted to achieve independence and respectability in Japanese society. During this era, beauty held immense significance, it was deeply intertwined the concept of being a good and virtuous person. The aristocracy meticulously created their appearances, aiming for a certain aesthetic. The faces shone with stark white powder, that is a thick white foundation known as Oshiroi, traditionally crafted from rice powder, is used to cover the face and neck, contrasted by the blackened teeth that were a sign of refinement. Women adorned their lips with a small stroke of vibrant red, known as beni, is focused on the lower lip. Beauty was also reflected in the eyebrows, which were often shaved completely is called Tsubushi and meticulously redrawn using black or red pigment in a higher, more stylized position on the forehead.



Fig.2 Geisha's makeup

Geisha hairstyles also have a strong influence on Japanese society, expressing deeply ingrained customs and artistic expression. These complex hairstyles, such as Wareshinobu, Ofuku, and Yakko Shimada, not only show a geisha's level of experience and maturity, but also serve as a visual depiction of their status and place in society. The great care and attention to detail in designing these hairdos demonstrates the importance of aesthetics and precision in Japanese cultural practices. In addition geishas select their hair ornaments based on a variety of factors, including the month, season, hairstyle, and personal preference. Kanzashi, or seasonal ornaments, are deliberately chosen to suit natural events. For example, plum blossoms can be worn in February, while cherry blossoms are popular in April. The selection of hair ornaments is a meticulous procedure that corresponds to the cultural significance and symbolism associated with each ornament, demonstrating the geisha's attention to detail and commitment to Japanese practices.

Initially, geisha employed as attendants for Orian, who were the top-tier courtesans who resided in the pleasure quarters of cities during Japan's Edo period (1603-1886). Japan had enclosed pleasure quarters called 'Yūkaku' in the 16th century. Prostitution was legal and regulated in these areas by the shogunate (the Japan's hereditary military dictatorship) in 1617. Within these districts, Orian were licensed to provide their service. This keeps prostitution within these designated zones and distinguishes it from ordinary courtesans. These pleasure quarters later transformed into vibrant entertainment hubs, providing a range of attractions beyond just sexual services. Over time, this pleasure quarters became more diverse, resulting in the emergence of a distinctly entertaining profession. Thus female geishas made their way to Japan in 18th century, distinguishing themselves from courtesans by their emphasis on artistic skills instead of exclusively providing sexual service. Geisha are different from typical courtesans because they maintain strict boundaries on sexual availability, even though they may form close bonds with their benefactors known as Danna. In 1800, Geisha was officially recognized as entertainers by offering performances of music, dance, and conversation. Although there are misconceptions about geisha in historical contexts, they never primarily functioned as prostitutes.

Geishas lived in a society that was entirely matriarchal. Training to become a geisha typically begins around the age of 14 or 15. At this stage, the young apprentices are known as shikomisan and are required to live together in a lodge called an okiya with their senior counterparts. The majority of girls who entered okiya in the Edo era were often brought there by their parents after being sold. The most prominent figure in an Okiya was the Okaa-san, which means 'mother'. She was the one who purchased the girls, nurtured them, and trained them to become skilled geishas. From there, they acquire skills in behavior, dance, and performance.

After a year of training, if they pass the Shikomi exam, they are then promoted to the rank of maiko, which is the first step towards becoming a fully-fledged geisha. A maiko, an apprentice geisha, begins her formal training as a Minarai, which means ‘learning by watching’. To begin this training, she must find an Onee– san, an older geisha who will serve as her mentor. It is the duty of the Onee – san to take the Maiko to Ozashiki, a traditional Japanese banquet, to observe her work and learn the job. Through this method, Onee – san teaches the maiko proper etiquette, conversation skills, and more. A maiko will be a maiko after making her official debut (misedashi) after the Minarai period. This stage can last for a period of three to five years.

During this period, they gain knowledge from both older trainees and their geisha mentors, with an emphasis on learning from their symbolic ‘older sister’ (onee-san). A maiko’s training encompasses three main elements. Firstly, formal arts training is conducted in specialized geisha schools within each hanamachi (flower town). Secondly, entertainment training can be acquired by observing onee-an at various teahouses and events. Lastly, social skills are honed through navigating the intricate social network of the hanamachi, focusing on formal greetings, gifts, and visits to establish a vital support system for the maiko’s geisha career. The onee-san also aids in the selection of a professional name for the maiko by using kanji or symbols associated with her name. Throughout this training period, which can last for years, maiko are able to progress through various stages of apprenticeship that are marked by distinctive hairstyles and attire that represent their changing status and skills.

Around the age of 20-21, maiko switches to a geisha status through a ceremony called Erikae, which signifies their graduation from maiko status. This transition involves changing the traditional red collar to white and adopting the Sako hair style. After becoming a geisha, they

continue their work until retirement, which may occur in their thirties or forties. Geisha has the option to retire and may transition into roles such as housewives or okiya owners.

This geisha art experienced a significant decrease during World War II due to the departure of many women to work in factories or other roles in Japan. During this period, the reputation of the geisha name was damaged by some prostitutes who falsely identified themselves as 'geisha girls' to American military personnel. Geisha-related establishments such as teahouses and bars were shut down in 1944, resulting in employees being forced to work in factories. After a year had passed, these establishments were allowed to reopen. There were only a few women who returned to the geisha districts, opting to reject Western influences and returning to traditional forms of entertainment and lifestyle. The returning geishas took on the responsibility of keeping traditional standards in their profession, highlighting the value of maintaining the image that was established in Japan's feudal past to preserve the essence of being a geisha while also advocating for more rights within their profession.

An insightful examination into the geisha culture leaves its generic representation in popular culture an inevitable meter of its cultural impact. Building upon the established introduction, the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* presents a visually stunning and narratively captivating exploration of a specific facet of Japanese culture. The film is a glimpse into the world of geisha, highlighting their artistic pursuits, traditional emphasis, and adherence to strict social etiquette.

Sayuri's journey in *Memoirs of a Geisha* goes beyond a simple physical makeover. Chiyo, a young, innocent girl, is thrust into the geisha house and subjected to a harsh training regime that shapes her into Sayuri, the polished geisha. This transformation, however, is a

multifaceted experience distinguished by the loss of innocence and a persistent struggle for agency inside a repressive system.

Chiyo's life takes a drastic turn when she is forced to enter the okiya. Her early sense of hopefulness is quickly dashed by the hard reality of her new life, as starkly demonstrated by Auntie's harsh warning "show your respect for mother. You must not speak. I will answer for you" (00:06:38). This discourse uttered by the aunt in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, dives into the various power relationships and societal conventions that exist in geisha culture and Japanese society. This encounter emphasizes the notion of silence as a kind of submission, with Chiyo's voice muffled, underscoring geishas' restricted agency, particularly during their early training. The focus on respect for authority and adherence to conventional social standards is clear, with Chiyo's quiet interpreted as a sign of deference for her caretaker and the established hierarchy inside the geisha house. This discourse also repeats control and suppression, limiting Chiyo's communication and potentially suffocating her individuality by succumbing to conventional norms. The aunt's authority over Chiyo, urging her to respect and be silent, is comparable to the mother's authority in the film. The aunt's instructions were to "kneel and head down. Never look her in the face" (00 :07:02), establishes the tone for the power dynamics in the geisha home. Similarly, the mother character in the film exercises authority and control over Chiyo, directing her actions and decisions. The emphasis on respect for the mother, as well as the aunt's enforced silence, highlights the film's hierarchical connections and expectation of loyalty to authoritative people. This representation emphasizes the deeply ingrained principles of reverence and submission to authority in Japanese society, which shape the interactions and dynamics of the geisha world represented in the film.

The aunt's line in *Memoirs of a Geisha* "A kimono like this, made of Tatsumura silk...it would take a lifetime to earn" (00:13:54– 00:14:06), has far – reaching implications beyond the expense of the garment itself. Kimonos are an important symbol of wealth and status in Japanese society, particularly in the geisha tradition depicted in this movie. The kimono, made of fine Tatsumura silk, represents richness and prestige, representing individuals' social status within this cultural context. In the film, the exquisitely designed kimonos worn by geishas like Hatsumomo and Mameha are not only clothing, but also emblems of their social standing and duties within the geisha society. Also, the portrayal of kimonos in the film emphasizes the hierarchical structure inherent in Japanese society, where people are frequently appraised based on their clothing, particularly the quality and craftsmanship of their kimonos. Geishas like Sayuri wear elegant and carefully designed kimonos, which represent their higher status and respect to traditional conventions and norms. The movie portrayal of the exquisite Tatsumura silk kimono represents more than a simply a material possession; it also represents cultural legacy, craftsmanship, and the value of devotion and perseverance, all of which are firmly embedded in Japanese traditions and values. This connection demonstrates how the discussion embodies the heart of Japanese culture, where attaining something as valuable as a Tatsumura silk kimono entails more than just financial wealth, but also a lifetime of dedication and commitment to excellence.

When the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* depicts a mesmerizing world of tradition and creativity, its underneath surface is an intricate web of control and sacrifice. This shown in a critical incident in which Mother asserts, "What do you think? A geisha is free to love? Never" (00:30:34 – 00:30:44). On the surface, mother's statement emphasizes unequivocally that geishas are not authorized to love, emphasizing the strict norms and constraints that control their life

inside the geisha society. This clear declaration establishes the tight standards and constraints placed on geishas in terms of personal interactions. Exploring the underlying message of Mother's remarks yields a complicated web of ramifications. To begin, the concept of concealing feelings such as love emphasizes the geisha's duty as entertainers, with a primary focus on improving their artistic skills and enchanting consumers rather than indulging in personal affections. This suppression highlights the sharp contrast between geisha's outer image of grace and charm the emotional constraint they must maintain behind the scenes. It also emphasizes issues of control and power dynamics inside the okiya. Mother's assertion that geishas are not free to love promotes the notion that geishas are not independent individuals, but rather subjects to the authority of the okiya and customers. This control extends beyond their professional responsibilities to regulate their emotional life, highlighting the persistent influence of external pressures on their personal experiences.

The significance of Mother's line, also has a significant and diverse impact on the characters Hatsumomo and Sayuri, changing their thoughts and experiences in the geisha worlds. Hatsumomo sees Mother's statement as a harsh exposure of the geisha system's fundamental paradoxes and inequities. Hatsumomo, a seasoned geisha who has navigated the difficulties of the trade, is well aware of the double standards that govern geishas' lives. The awareness that geishas are expected to fulfill men's wants while being denied the right to pursue their own emotional fulfillment reveals the system's hypocrisy and inequity. This revelation increases Hatsumom's hatred and bitterness, escalating her rejection of the limits put on her personal life and growing her dissatisfaction with the expectations placed on geishas. In contrast, Sayuri sees Mother's line as a painful awakening to the harsh reality of the geisha life. As a young and naïve apprentice geisha, Sayuri may have nurtured romanticized ideals of love and freedom within the

okiya, only to have them dashed by Mother's frank remark. Mother's comments shatter Sayuri's illusions, forcing her to face the hard reality that love is a prohibited luxury in the world she lives in. This insight is a watershed point in Sayuri's development and adulthood, testing her prejudices and causing her to reconsider her view of her duty as a geisha and the sacrifices that come with it. Overall, Mother's line not only exposes the underlying tensions and contradictions within the geisha world, but also causes significant emotional and psychological shifts in both Hatsumomo and Sayuri, shaping their perceptions, motivations, and responses to the challenges they face within the okiya. It serves as a catalyst for introspection, growth, and the reevaluation of their ideas and objectives in light of the harsh reality of their existence as geishas.

The movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* paints a world in which intimacy is a meticulously staged a show. In this movie, Mameha, the seasoned geisha, teaches Sayuri how to keep patrons on their toes. She states that:

“Say I’m entertaining the Baron. Like so many clients, he’s trapped in an arranged marriage. So in the teahouse, when he’s seeking my company instead... I reward him like this: With a glimpse of my wrist. Seeing this demure little trace of naked skin... Well, it gives him pleasure. Or when you’re sitting down... for the briefest moment, press your leg against his. Always by accident, of course” (00:52:36 – 00:53:03)

Her conversation about the skill of discreetly luring guests in a geisha house with gestures such as offering a glimpse of skin or brushing against them is rich in symbolism and importance, diving into the complicated dynamics of desire, control, and performance within geisha world. The deliberate disclosure of a glimpse of flesh indicates more than just physical attractiveness; it signals the revelation of hidden desires and dreams lurking beneath the surface.

Mameha captures the patron's imagination with this tiny suggestion of intimacy, evoking a sense of forbidden passion and mystery. The sight of skin is a symbolic act that feeds the patron's desires and keeps him emotionally committed in the sense of closeness that geishas create. It represents the power of suggestion and allure, transporting the patron to a world where boundaries are blurred and emotions are heightened through precisely choreographed movements. This symbolic act emphasizes not just geishas' skill and seductive prowess, but also complicated interaction of performance, desire, and control within geisha industry. The sight of skin serves as a metaphor for the delicate balance of disclosing and hiding, appealing and withholding that characterizes geisha– client interactions. It represents the subtle technique of seduction and manipulation that geishas use to hold their clients' attention while maintain an air of mystery and intrigue that keeps them coming back for more.

In essence, the symbolism of the glimpse of skin captures the layers of meaning and intention underlying Mameha's guidance to Sayuri, providing a glimpse into the delicate realm of geisha performance, where every motion, every glance is significant beyond its surface appearance. It reflects not just physical appeal, but also emotional manipulation, psychological intrigue, and power dynamics at work in the world of geisha entertainment. The glimpse of flesh becomes into a powerful symbol of desire, control, and illusion, defining the complicated interactions between geishas and their clientele in a society where looks are perfectly produced, emotions are carefully managed, and closeness is both desired and forbidden.

However, in another instance, Mameha presents a stark picture of sacrifice, where 'agony and beauty' are intertwined. Mameha's profound quote: "Agony and beauty, for us, live side by side. Your feet will suffer, your fingers will bleed. Even sitting and sleeping will be painful" (00:55:44 – 00:55:59), delves deeply into the core of the geisha lifestyle, going beyond mere

physical agony to reveal significant truths about sacrifice, perfection, duality, and resilience. Mameha's words capture the profound dichotomy of suffering and beauty that marks the geisha lifestyle. The surface meaning of her statements show the physical problems that geishas encounter, such as having firmly bound feet, bleeding fingertips, and feeling discomfort even when sitting and sleeping. This portrayal focuses light on the arduous training and physical sacrifices that geishas make in their pursuit of perfection and creative brilliance in their field. The underlying message given by Mameha's discourse, and the value of beauty in Japanese culture. It represents the enormous dedication and resilience required by geishas to portray grace and elegance while suffering bodily agony and misery. The juxtaposition of misery and beauty symbolizes the geisha world's delicate balance of exterior charm and internal suffering, emphasizing the deep sacrifices undertaken in the cause of creativity and tradition.

Furthermore, Mameha's statements are consistent with broader cultural ideals in Japan, where concepts of tenacity, endurance, and dedication are strongly embedded. The discourse emphasizes the cultural relevance of discipline and self – sacrifice in the quest of excellence, reflecting the traditional Japanese virtues of hard labor, tenacity, and dedication to one's skill. Mameha's line, which explores the intersection of physical anguish and aesthetic beauty within the geisha profession, provides a sad reflection on the complexity of Japanese culture, where pain and artistry weave together to form a mesmerizing tapestry of tradition and resilience.

Mameha also distinction between geisha and courtesans. In her statement “Remember Chiyo, geisha are not courtesans, and we are not wives. We sell our skills, not our bodies, we create another secret world. A place only of beauty” (00:54:11– 00:54:30), highlights the distinct position of geishas in Japanese society, emphasizing their artistry and the construction of a separate universe where beauty rules. Mameha emphasizes the essential difference between

geishas and sex workers by stating that they do not sell their bodies. Geishas follow a stringent code of behavior that values creative expression and entertainment over sexual closeness, setting them apart from courtesans and prostitutes in Japanese culture. The emphasis on selling ‘skills’ rather than bodies emphasize the creativity and craftsmanship that distinguish a geisha’s career. Geishas are respected for their knowledge of ancient skills including as music, dancing tea ceremony, and conversation, and their performances demonstrate a commitment to maintain Japan’s cultural legacy. The term ‘secret world’ refers to the geisha house’s magical and meticulously managed atmosphere. Geishas immerse guests into a world of beauty, elegance, and refinement, providing an escape from the dull realities of everyday life with their skill and grace. In the geisha culture, beauty is considered a sort of art in its own right. Geishas represent an idealized image of beauty and grace, enticing customers with their poise, charm, and visual appeal. Their physical appearance and temperament are commodities to be valued and adored in the framework of traditional Japanese entertainment. This representation not only explains geishas’ unique function as artists and entertainers, but it also emphasizes the cultural importance of their skill in preserving Japan’s rich artistic heritage. It depicts the rigorous attention to detail, discipline, and dedication required to excel as a geisha, emphasizing geishas’ tremendous impact on Japanese society as providers of beauty, artistry, and tradition.

At the end of the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Mameha says, “We don’t become geisha to pursue our own destinies. We become geisha because we have no choice” (2:04:17 – 2:04:22). The line ‘we become geisha because we have no choice’ strikes through the romanticized picture of the geisha culture. This direct statement is a sobering reminder of the restrictions imposed on many geisha, especially with regard to their autonomy and sense of control over their life. Mameha’s statements emphasize the societal restraints that women suffered during that time

period. Becoming a geisha, while providing some measure of security and artistry, frequently came at the sacrifice of pursuing personal goals. Many geisha come at the sacrifice of pursuing personal goals. Many geisha come from humble homes and were sold into service at the okiya because of family debts. Their destiny was decided by these commitments, leaving little opportunity for personal aspirations. This sentence indicates the innocence that is frequently lost along with the life of a geisha. Pursuing one's own destiny becomes a luxury they cannot afford. Its lives are dedicated to meeting the demands of the okya and its customers. This underlines the system's power over the geisha, molding them into performers rather than allowing them to determine their own futures.

Thus the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*, shatters whatever romanticized assumptions viewers may have about the geisha culture and reveals the underlying injustices. It evokes a empathy for the geisha, raising questions about the power dynamics of the okiya system and the sacrifices required of these women.

Conclusion

The film *Memoirs of Geisha*, despite its historical debates, offers a glimpse into the evolution of the geisha world. The geisha profession in Japan has evolved in unique ways, balancing tradition and modernity in order to remain relevant in today's culture. Geisha must preserve their art form while adapting to shifting cultural dynamics and the needs of rapidly changing environments. Even though the number of geisha has decreased, they still hold a crucial role as cultural ambassadors and guardians of Japan's artistic heritage. Geisha are now performing at top – tier locations, focusing not only on traditional arts but also on intellectual pursuits and captivating talks to cater to modern audiences.

The decline in the geisha population over the last few decades can be linked to a variety of factors, including the rigorous training, strenuous lifestyle, and financial restraints associated with this profession. The film portrays the grueling training and disciplined lifestyle, which remain true even today. Geisha have been trained in traditional skills like dance, music, and tea ceremony from a young age. Unflinching attention and discipline are necessary for their apprenticeship. However, current issues such as decreased demand, changing socioeconomic dynamics, and contemporary entertainment have led to changes in the geisha vocation.

The geisha culture has evolved by adapting new features while maintaining its basic ethos and achieving a careful balance between tradition and innovation. Similar to Sayuri's personalized training under Mameha, geisha has now expanded their services to match evolving expectations, delivering personalized experiences such as private gatherings and one - on – one instruction. In spite of these modifications, there are concerns about the commercialization of geisha and the deprivation of their traditional role as cultural ambassadors. To ensure its

relevance and survival, it is crucial to preserve the authenticity of the geisha tradition while it evolves. Collaborating among stakeholders, such as the Geisha Association, government agencies, and cultural groups, is vital for resolving difficulties and conserving the geisha heritage for future generations. The future of the geisha industry is uncertain, with discussions about whether it will decline or adapt to changing demands.

As depicted in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri becomes a cultural ambassador through performances and interaction with patrons. In the real worlds, geisha continue this legacy. Their elegance, artistic mastery, and dedication to preserving cultural heritage foster understanding and respect for Japan on a global scale.

In conclusion, geisha's fascination is rooted in their embodiment of grace, creative mastery, and cultural preservation. Just like Sayuri persevered through her challenges, the geisha tradition can ensure its continued success by adapting without compromising its essence. Despite obstacles such as declining demand and misinformation, geisha maintain a delicate balance between tradition and innovation. The longevity of the geisha tradition depends on their capacity to adapt without compromising their essence, ensuring that this beloved Japanese art form thrives for decades to come.

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