

### Geisha

*Geisha* are something that many people have different opinions about. Different works portray them in different ways. However, these differences are mostly due to the authors background and time period they lived in, their purpose, and the audience they are trying to appeal to.

The melodrama film, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, directed by Rob Marshall and released in 2005, is a film about a girl named Chiyo who is sold to a *geisha* house. The movie takes place from 1929 when Chiyo is sold to a *geisha* house until around 1945 after the end of World War II when the Chairman becomes Sayuri's *danna*. The movie is based on the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which was published in 1997 by Arthur Golden. Using former *geisha* Mineko Iwasaki as a source, his book was supposed to be a view into the hidden and mysterious world of the *geisha* (Golden). However, a journal article written by Kimiko Akita from the University of Central Florida criticized it for romanticizing and sexualizing *geisha* (Akita).

In the film, there was lots of emphasis placed on the selling of the *geisha's mizuage* (specifically Sayuri's.) Additionally, the film focused on drama and the *geisha's* relationships among each other — such as the rivalry between Sayuri and Hatsumomo, the betrayal and jealousy Pumpkin feels after Sayuri becomes the next in line to run the *okiya*, and Sayuri's love for the Chairman (Fisher). Although it presents us with a very superficial image of *geisha*, the director of the movie most likely chose to focus on these aspects in order to create a more appealing film for the targeted audience.

Considering the movie was in English, it can be assumed that the movie is targeted towards Western viewers who may not have much knowledge about *geisha*. Due to the viewers' possible lack of knowledge, the director of the film could focus more on making the film appealing in order to sell more movie tickets and spend less time on ensuring the movie was historically authentic. Another example of the lack of effort on historical accuracy is the director's casting choice of actresses from China and the Philippines in a Japanese movie. This ended up causing controversy since Japanese viewers were upset that Chinese actresses were being cast for Japanese roles, while Chinese viewers were upset that a Chinese actress was in love scenes with a Japanese actor — especially considering the tensions left behind from World War 2 (Gritten). Due to this, the movie lacks credibility and was created mainly to entertain viewers.

Mineko Iwasaki's autobiography, *Geisha, A Life*, which was published in 2002 is drastically different from *Memoirs of a Geisha*. After Arthur Golden revealed Iwasaki as one of the sources for *Memoirs of a Geisha* against her wishes, Iwasaki decided to write an autobiography to refute Golden's novel and tell her story from her own perspective. Mineko Iwasaki (Masako Tanaka at the time) went to an *okiya* in 1954 at the age of 5. One thing that Iwasaki emphasizes many times throughout the novel is that going to the *okiya* was her choice and that her parents did not influence her decision at all. This was emphasized in order to contradict Golden's claim that *geisha* are sold to *okiya*. Another claim that she contradicts is the claim that a *geisha's mizuage*, is her most valuable asset which is auctioned off to the highest bidder in order to determine a *geisha's* value.

---

Asian Con

Mobin Hedayati

Iwasaki describes it as "a ceremony that celebrates a *maiko's* moving up." (Iwasaki p. 205) she mentions how her hairstyle is changed in order to represent her transition into womanhood. However, she does not mention her virginity at all — the closest she gets is when she mentions receiving marriage proposals (Iwasaki 206).

Although the time period was not emphasized by Iwasaki, her autobiography and Golden's novel take place in different times. In Golden's novel, Sayuri had her *mizuage* sold in 1935 while Iwasaki had her *mizuage* celebration in 1970. The importance of these two dates is that Sayuri sold her virginity before the prostitution prevention act of 1957 — but the prevention act had already passed when the time came for Mineko to celebrate her *mizuage*. The differences in time between Sayuri and Iwasaki's stories demonstrate Golden's attempt to tell his own story and Iwasaki's attempt to refute it. Iwasaki's purpose in refuting Golden is to portray *geisha* in a better light and clarify her own personal narrative which she felt that Golden did not do justice to. Considering she wrote her book in English, Iwasaki's audience is likely readers of *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Although Iwasaki was a *geisha* for 8 years, her relationship with Arthur Golden most likely caused some bias in her autobiography. While she is credible, her biases that need to be taken into account.

*Autobiography of a Geisha* is an autobiography written by Sayo Masuda in 1957. Unlike Iwasaki who was a well-off city *geisha* in the district of Gion, Masuda was a country *geisha* who worked at a hot-springs resort and struggled to get by. 3 years after being indentured to a *geisha* house by her uncle in 1937, she sold her *mizuage* 5 times.

---

Asian Con

Mobin Hedayati

Masuda was exactly what Iwasaki was trying to prove *geisha* were not. One of her reasons Masuda's reasons for writing her autobiography is to express her dislike for the prostitution prevention act of 1957. By showing that not all *geisha* were the same as the city *geisha* that Iwasaki demonstrates that she needed to sell sex in order to survive (Masuda). This contributes slightly to Golden's portrayal of *geisha* while completely opposing Iwasaki's portrayal. She mentions two of the claims Iwasaki was trying to refute. The first being the claim that *geisha* are sold to *okiya*, and second claim being that *geisha* sleep with their clients.

The differences between Iwasaki and Masuda's portrayal of *geisha* are due to their different backgrounds. Iwasaki was a well-off city *geisha* who had many repeat clients while Masuda was a *geisha* in a hot springs hotel who mostly had one-time customers. Additionally, she also was in need of money whereas Iwasaki was already well-off and did not need to sell her body.

Unlike the two previous works, Masuda's target audience was mostly Japanese people. This is because the book was not translated into English until 46 years after it was published. Masuda was a very different type of *geisha* than Iwasaki was. This allows her to explain *geisha* life from a different perspective, however, similarly to Iwasaki, she also has biases which need to be taken into account when considering her credibility.

---

Asian Con

Mobin Hedayati

Liza Dalby's book, *Geisha*, seems to be the most balanced of the mentioned works. Dalby chose to do an ethnographic observation by going and living among *geisha*. Her work was targeted to people who wanted to know more about *geisha* which meant it was a lot more historically accurate and focused on educating readers. While Arthur Golden only focused on the sexual aspect of *mizuage* which Iwasaki did not even mention. Dalby's book mentions that the *mizuage* was more about maturity than it was about the sex, however having sex was seen as causing one to become more mature (Dalby). Due to her purpose being to educate readers, Dalby's book seems to be the most credible of the previously mentioned works.

Overall, the different portrayals of *geisha* demonstrate that there is not one true form of *geisha*. Although Dalby's book seems to give the most credible view of a *geisha*, the differences in historical context — such as whether the story took place before or

the differences in historical context — such as whether the story took place before or after prostitution prevention act of 1957, author's background, and purpose means that there is not one specific version of a *geisha* that is "true." Each *geisha* has their own story and play their own role in society. Personally, my biggest takeaway from learning about *geisha* is that "*geisha*" is a term that is more broad than I initially thought.

**Word Count:** 1328

Asian Con

Mobin Hedayati

**Sources:**

Golden, Arthur. *Memoirs of a geisha*. Vintage, 2011.

Akita, Kimiko. "Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in *Memoirs of a Geisha* ." *Global Media Journal*, vol. 5, no. 9, 2006, [www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/orientalism-and-the-binary-of-fact-and-fiction-in-memoirs-of-a-geisha.pdf](http://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/orientalism-and-the-binary-of-fact-and-fiction-in-memoirs-of-a-geisha.pdf).

Fisher, Lucy, et al. *Memoirs of a geisha*.

Fisher, Lucy, et al. *Memoirs of a geisha*.

Gritten, David. "Memoirs of a very controversial geisha." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 2 Dec. 2005, [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3648434/Memoirs-of-a-very-controversial-geisha.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3648434/Memoirs-of-a-very-controversial-geisha.html).

Iwasaki, Mineko, and Rande Brown. *Ouchi. Geisha, a life*. Washington Square Press, 2003.

Masuda, Sayo. *Autobiography of a Geisha*. Columbia University Press, 2003.

Dalby, Liza Crihfield. *Geisha*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.



