

ESSAYS

Book Essay

Memoirs of a Geisha

Arthur Golden

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997

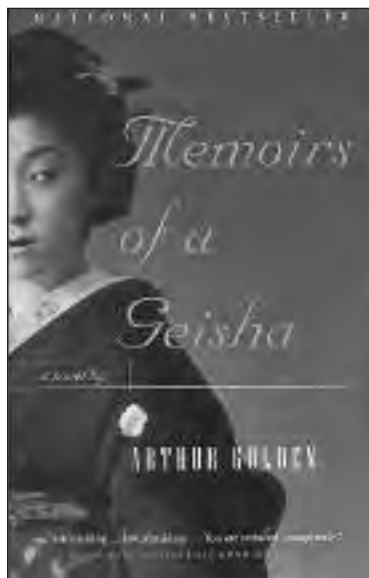
434 pages

By Anne Allison

“The very idea!” he said, with another laugh. “You, growing up in a dump like Yoroido. That’s like making tea in a bucket!” And when he’d laughed again, he said to me, “That’s why you’re so much fun, Sayuri-san. Sometimes you almost make me believe your little jokes are real.”

So starts Arthur Golden’s best seller, a novel written in the guise of personal memoirs by a geisha whose story begins in 1929 when, as a nine-year-old girl, she is taken from her rural home in Yoroido and sold to a geisha house in Kyōto. The book traces the tumultuous path of the girl Chiyo’s transformation into a geisha (Sayuri), which is laden with incredible hardship but also the sublime aesthetics of a disappearing world. As the amazing popularity of this book attests, Golden’s story of Gion, set mainly in the three decades between 1929 and the mid 1950s, has touched a chord in U.S. audiences whose fans (more female than male) range from students and professionals, to housewives and workers (manual, office, and retired). To consider the merits of *Memoirs of a Geisha* for classroom instruction, it is imperative, I believe, to take account of this popular reception. If *Memoirs* is taught as a mass phenomenon as well as a text, it allows us to explore not only what *Memoirs* says about Japan, but also what its reception reveals about American audiences and the ways in which Japan gets read through the prism of the fictional Sayuri-san.

Without question, the success of *Memoirs of a Geisha* has been phenomenal. Currently under contract as a Hollywood film by Steven Spielberg, the book spent an amazing fifty-eight weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list and has sold four million copies in English, been translated into thirty-two languages, and circulated prominently in book clubs, literary circles, and public readings across the country. What about *Memoirs* is so riveting to readers, we might ask? Is it the exposure to Japan or the story about Sayuri? Fans I have interviewed and reviewers repeatedly answer that it is both; the book is powerful in conveying the intricacies of what readers often describe as an alien, foreign world (by which they mean both Japan and the geisha world within Japan) as



well as the life-drama of a fascinating woman, Sayuri. Readers say that they both learn from *Memoirs* and are “carried away” by the story. It is an entertaining, as well as instructional read; in other words—what one fan has felicitously called “an authentic fiction.” Given that authenticity is so important to many of the book’s fans, it is critical to ask not only how accurate is the world *Memoirs* portrays, but also why is it that fans (who mostly seem to have little prior

knowledge of Japanese history or culture) are so convinced that Golden “got it right”?

Addressing the latter question first, there are a number of authenticating strategies the author uses in structuring the book. First, his academic credentials (B.A. in art history at Harvard, master’s in Japanese history at Columbia) have been well reported in the mass media blitz surrounding the promotion of *Memoirs*. Giving the author a scholarly sheen, the book, too, is wrapped in scholastic intentions; Golden notes in his acknowledgments how he studied Gion and Japanese history to write this book and how indebted he is to Iwasaki Mineko, a retired geisha and family friend, for guiding his portrayal of geishas. (Interestingly, Iwasaki has recently denounced Golden as having gotten it “all wrong” when she read the translated version in Japanese. While Golden has replied that the mistakes she refers to are insignificant, Iwasaki has countered that Golden has made geishas out to be prostitutes—willing to contract money for sex—which, in her case, she claims, is absolutely false.)

Coupling the fictional Sayuri to the real-life geisha, Iwasaki, and his own role as author to that of academic, Golden also writes the book in a voice that is as authoritative as it is personal. Indeed, the book starts out with a prelude written by (the fictional) Professor Jakob Haarhus, the Arnold Rusoff chair in Japanese history at NYU, who introduces the book by telling us how he met Sayuri as a retired geisha in New York, and how she entrusted her memoirs to him, the foreign academic. As Golden says in his acknowledgments about (the real) Iwasaki, the geisha revealed her life to him in “candor” and “intimate detail”—unusual in a world well known for its code of silence. This literary technique serves to further anchor *Memoirs* in a mode of authenticity; it also feeds the sense of adventure and discovery—penetrating a “mysterious, veiled world”—that readers often associate with reading the book.

Once the main text of the book begins, the voice shifts from the professor to Chiyo/Sayuri, who starts relating, in first person,

the story of her life. The tone is now personal and testimonial, and the tale told has all the elements of what fans have variously called a “fairytale,” “juicy memoir,” and “pornographic harlequin romance.” For all the sizzle, though, Sayuri recounts not only the personal but also the professional details of her life as a geisha, giving us a cascade of explanations in everything from geisha make-up, hairstyles, and kimono design to Japanese sumo, samisen, and tea ceremony. It is in this area—of description laced with intimacy of detail—that the author and the book

Life couldn’t be worse, and the ability of Chiyo to merely survive these early years at the okiya is remarkable. But through the miraculous intervention of an older, unrelated geisha (Mameha) who is willing to take her on as “younger sister,” Chiyo is allowed to re-embark on the path of becoming a geisha. Meanwhile Chiyo has met the man of her dreams (the “Chairman,” a highly successful executive about three decades her senior) who makes such an impression in their brief encounter that Chiyo is fueled with a passion and hope that sustain her for

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appear most knowledgeable, and the general consensus is that the portrayal of geishadom in *Memoirs* is both sound and realistic. (Liza Dalby, for example, the anthropologist who spent a year as a trained geisha herself, has commended Golden’s account. It should be noted, though, that few Japanese have yet weighed in with their opinions, and if Iwasaki’s reaction is at all indicative, the reports here may be far less praising.)

Memoirs is not a history text but a novel, and Sayuri’s character and story are both invented (as Golden notes in his acknowledgments). The questions this raises for teaching *Memoirs* are: What kind of invention has Golden made of Sayuri, what is the relationship between this invention and history in *Memoirs*, and why is this particular story and particular history so resonant with Americans today (in an age when real geishas are becoming obsolete in Japan)?

When the book starts out, Chiyo is a young girl in a poor fishing community with a dying mother, beleaguered father, and disconnected sister. Her life, though familiar, holds little appeal, and she herself is the most exceptional entity around; an innately smart observer of human nature, she dreams of worlds beyond which she “sees” through eyes of a translucently rare color. Abruptly Chiyo is yanked from her home (to which she will never return) and sold to a Kyōto *okiya* (geisha-house). This new home is jarringly disjunctive; on the one hand the beauty of geisha finery such as richly textured kimonos is intoxicating to the country girl. On the other hand, the people at the okiya, save one (her fellow apprentice, Pumpkin), are variously repulsive and savage. Chiyo is thus cruelly treated as a virtual slave and denied even the promise of becoming a geisha as punishment for attempting to escape (in order to reconnect with her sister, who has been sold into prostitution).

years. Renewed in her commitment to do all she can to become a successful geisha, Chiyo now becomes absorbed (as does the book) in all the lessons, trials, rivalries, and business relationships she must navigate to realize this goal. Just as Chiyo (and the reader) learns such lessons as how geishas use nightingale droppings as face cream and leave strands of flesh exposed (in the *sanbon-ashi* design) when applying white make-up to their necks, she is also taught by Mameha how to compete against her arch rival, Hatsumomo (the mean senior geisha in Chiyo’s house) as well as master the skills of erotic seduction.

Chiyo proves an adept student in all areas and becomes an expert in the fine art of geisha performance: crafting oneself as whatever and whomever a customer desires the geisha to be. The girl undergoes the various rituals of geishadom including the selling of her virginity to the highest bidder (*mizuage*) who, in her case, is the repulsive “Dr. Crab.” Now renamed and reinvented as Sayuri, the metamorphosis from rural fishing-girl to famed geisha is complete.

But the story is not yet over. While she has accepted the role of exotic fantasy she performs so exquisitely as geisha, Sayuri retains desires she experiences as her own: a luxury, Mameha clearly informs her, not permitted a geisha. But Sayuri does not give up this quest for individual happiness and, in the end, sacrifices her profession for the love of a man—the elusive and mysterious Chairman whose long years of coolness towards Sayuri are finally explained as his adherence to a male code of honor (which has kept him from competing with his business partner, whose affection for Sayuri is made known early on). This part of the tale, what the screenwriter for the movie version has called a “Cinderella story,” seems to me a particularly Western invention: a plot and character development intended to appeal to readers schooled in the traditions of romantic love, individual

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fulfillment, and happy endings. Fans of *Memoirs* I have spoken to tend to love this turn of events and count the romance as one of the major appeals of the story, along with the characterization of Sayuri as a tough and resourceful woman who survives brutal hardship to beat the odds (and her enemies).

Memoirs of a Geisha is a lyrical book, powerfully written to engender the experience of feeling transported to another world. The story is captivating, and what Golden describes of Gion Japan will certainly teach students something of this particular environment and time period in Japan's past. The greatest danger I see in its storytelling, however, is the orientalist strain with which it is both written and, even more strongly perhaps, received by so many readers and fans in the United States. As Edward Said has defined orientalism, it is the tendency to see different peoples and cultures as resolutely "other," and explicable by essences that, shared by "them," differentiate "us." Though Golden takes pains to explain the culture of geisha in a way non-Japanese can grasp, the world he portrays is still (historically and ethnographically) exotic, which is a big factor in the pleasure and allure the book accords readers. In the descriptions

fans post on the Internet, the most common word used to capture the experience of reading *Memoirs* is as an "adventure": an adventure to a closed, mysterious world that, though enticing, is also brutal and foreign.

Almost no *Memoirs* fans say they identify with Sayuri or can imagine (or desire) ever becoming a geisha (except for Madonna, who has willingly promoted "geisha glam"). It is this attitude of acquiring intimacy with a subject who remains "distant" and "different" in the end that I urge teachers of *Memoirs* to probe with their students. Is this orientalism? Does *Memoirs* advance greater interest in Japan and, if so, is this for Japan as it really exists or a Japan that is preserved in the past of our imaginations? What exactly is it about Sayuri and her geishadom that is so fascinating to Americans? Why is the "Cinderella story" added to this tale? What do the images of Chiyo's abduction and "slavery" evoke in the minds of American readers? Without asking such questions, the teaching of *Memoirs*, while nevertheless promoting a certain interest in Japan, may also encourage readers to exoticize it. Is this the way, I would ask, that we want to teach Americans to see the rest of the world? ■

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