FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Con/texts for Viewing Geisha

By Joan E. Ericson

Arthur Golden's 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* remains remarkably popular among college students.[1] Yet far more of our students are likely to have watched the 2005 film version (Rob Marshall, director) than to have read the book.[2] Like the book, the appeal of the film is rooted, in large part, in its claim of authenticity and its capacity to present a complex, exotic world that fuses erotic sensibilities with the rigid conventions of geisha performance art. Anne Allison's thoughtful 1999 review of the novel identified a range of reader-responses, notably her concept of "distanced intimacy," that sought to explain how, despite its misleading claim of historical accuracy, it could engage the interest and attention of so many readers in what is fundamentally an Orientalist fantasy. Similarly, the film's claim of scrupulous accuracy in historical detail, despite the halting English dialogue delivered by a cross-national cast, infuses the contemporary images and stereotypes that our students carry into the classroom.

It is a visually beautiful film, and its representation of the training and tribulations of geisha is a significant improvement over the appalling Hollywood productions (e.g. *My Geisha*, 1962) of previous generations. But does the film, aside from its minor controversies, deserve to be taught?[3] It must be said that geisha, who occupy a rarefied niche, have always been relatively few in number and cannot be considered typical of anything Japanese or female except Orientalist obsessions. Still, the myth of geisha, as embodying aesthetic sensibilities and cultural practices, occupies the pride of place among stereotypic images of Japanese ideals, even within Japan.[4]

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By drawing on the flurry of English-language geisha books, most of which followed in the wake of the novel's success, we can help students develop strategies for a more critical appreciation of the diversity and dynamics of women's experience in this period. These works can offer alternative analyses or counter narratives about geisha, and, more generally, gender and sexuality in mid-twentieth-century Japan.

A common point of departure in the critical discourse is Lisa Dalby's 1983 study, *Geisha*. Dalby's participant-observer strategy allowed her to provide an insider-account—adapted into a made-for-TV movie, *An American Geisha*, 1986—but her work also included considerable historical perspective: the codification of the role of geisha was a relatively modern phenomenon (56–57), and the film's period, the late 1930s, was probably the high water mark for the business (181).

Iwasaki Mineko, who served as a principal informant and the acknowledged role model for Golden's *Memoirs*, acquired considerable notoriety following her lawsuit against him for violating her request for anonymity. She does not directly contest or even address Golden, but her *Geisha, A Life* (2002) disputes (ff. 187, 205) any involvement with the practice of *mizuage* (literally, to give up water—meaning, the sale of the young geisha's virginity) and portrays her experiences at the top of the Gion geisha circles as professional and highly lucrative. A persistent theme is to dispel the association of geisha with prostitution (78), and to show how female-centered was their world. Iwasaki gives great detail about successive ceremonies (most characterized by new hairstyles) and her discrete love interest (although she does describe her deflowering in the Waldorf-Astoria, in New York, shortly after meeting Elizabeth Taylor in the lobby). Her success gave her a position of privilege, and the freedom to retire at age twenty-nine.

Lesley Downer provides an engaging tale in *Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha who Bewitched the West* (2003). The extraordinary transition from geisha to globetrotting actress at the turn of the twentieth century shows how, despite deeply rooted restrictions and social barriers, an exceptional woman could unintentionally break conventions across a wide range of arts and cultures. Sadayakko's encounter with America and Europe helps to situate geisha stereotypes in a global context. Many Japanese know about her through the fine year-long NHK drama (1985), and Downer's biography helps to provide English readers with an accessible, informative portrait of a daring, celebrated talent.

More common were the hard knocks experienced by most geisha who, despite Iwasaki's insistence, often occupied a precarious position close to prostitution. Masuda Sayo's 1957 *Autobiography of* *a Geisha* (trans. Rawley, 2003) depicts an *onsen* (hot springs) geisha who did sell her virginity (five times). Poverty was decisive in pushing Masuda into the field. Forced to work as a *komori* (nursemaid) from age six, she was sold to the hot springs geisha house at twelve. Unschooled, she learned to write in *hiragana* as an older adult, originally submitting her life story to the women's magazine *Shufu no tomo* (Housewife's friend) for a chance at prize money; it was expanded in its current book form. The author also wrote in response to the April 1957 ban on legally-sanctioned prostitution. We might note, in comparison, that the hot springs geisha in Kawabata Yasunari's 1948 classic novel *Snow Country* does not see herself as a prostitute. But her lover, the novel's protagonist, clearly blurs the line between entertainment and sexual services; Masuda's self-portrait holds no such illusions.

William Johnston's *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* (2005) presents the life-in-full of Abe Sada, Japan's notorious 1936 murderer-cum-media sensation. Abe was the subject of a lengthy poem by Sekine Hiroshi (Hibbett, ed., 319–331), and the subject of Ōshima Nagisa's graphic film *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976). But however much her name and her actions remain familiar to the Japanese public, Johnston provides the most historically informed and ambitious work, a social history that allows us to reconsider conventional categories through which women's experience is read. Johnston's biography follows a woman's personal odyssey from geisha to prostitute to mistress, without losing sight of her struggle for independence and love. His restrained, informative account of Abe's life, usually reduced to that most lurid pre-war media event, helps to interrogate women's sexuality and morality in modern Japan.

Memoirs of a Geisha is a Cinderella fable, complete with a *happi endo* of requited love and professional triumph. The range of recent works that might be read in conjunction with the film help remind our students to connect and to contrast the variety of Japanese women's lived experience with fairy tales, however emotionally appealing and visually stunning.

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1. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Golden's novel returned to the top of the list of campus best-sellers in late 2005, and remained at or near that position since then (through March 2006). "What They're Reading on College Campuses." January 27; February 24; April 21: a10.
2. A theatrical box office of over $57 million ($158 million, worldwide), and an additional rental of $30 million, yields a very rough estimate of 8 million theatrical and 10 million couch-potato viewers. In print, *Memoirs of a Geisha* sold over 4 million copies in the US, though the 1999 Japanese translation (*Sayuri*, trans. Ogawa Takayoshi), published by Bungei Shunju, sold 116,000 hardbacks and 222,000 paperbacks.
3. For example, the film was banned in China. Reviews in the US tended to be lukewarm, celebrating the lush production values but faulting the (lack of) dramatic tension, aside from, as the *New York Times* (Dec. 9, 2005) put it, the "one regrettably brief catfight in a kimono."
4. However, some of the best-known Japanese literary portraits of geisha are anything but ideal. In his 1918 novel, *Geisha in Rivalry*, Nagai Kafu harkened back to a fast-disappearing ethos of Edo. The geisha protagonist experienced her social position as something that stifled her dreams of love, even as it provided a living.

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