

Book Review

Memoirs of a Geisha

by Arthur Golden.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997. 434 p.p.

Reviewed by Cindy Chen

About the Author:

The *Memoirs of a Geisha* is written by American writer Arthur Golden, who earned a degree in art history at Harvard University, specializing in Japanese art. According to the author, it takes him six years to revise the entire novel and finally settle on the first person point of view before publishing it. The background sources of the novel are collected through interviews with former Geisha, including one of the most famous Geisha of all time, Mineko Iwasaki.

Plot Summary:

The story mainly evolves the life of a fictional character Chiyo (later known as Sayuri), who becomes a successful Geisha, detailing her childhood, apprenticeship and the process of emerging as a shining star in the Geisha world and her romantic relationships. Chiyo was born in a poor fishing village as the youngest member of the family, with an older sister named Satsu. Financially incompetent of raising the two kids after the mother passed away, Chiyo's father decides to lay the future of the siblings in the hands of a local businessman who later settles Chiyo in an okiya in Gion, where the Geishas live and as we all know, Chiyo herself later becoming one. Her sister Satsu however, is promptly put in a brothel and later escape. In Nitta Okiya, Chiyo is perceived as a lovely girl with startling gray eyes when she first meets the Mother, who is in charge of the finance in Okiya. She also gets to meet the girl of her own age, Pumpkin, her caretaker Auntie, retired Geisha Grandma who is grumpy, and the stunning Geisha Hatsumomo, who, out of jealousy, tries to make Chiyo's life as

miserable as possible. After the failure of attempting escape Chiyo is punished and downgraded to maid in the household as Mother sees her as a bad investment. During that period she meets the love of her life, a businessman called Chairman, who gives her the compassion she needs in the darkest time. Later on comes the Geisha Memeha, who is then the rival of Hatsumomo and who, voluntarily takes Chiyo under her wing and prepares her the road to becoming the Geisha. While Chiyo finishes her apprenticeship and converts her name to Sayuri, she gains wide recognitions for her debut dance performance and attracts men such as Nobu, Dr. Crab and The General, wanting to bid for her first night and become her Danna who can have a right to take her as mistress. The secret love for the Chairman makes it hard for Sayuri and suffers a lot because her destiny is controlled by others, she cant decide the man she desires to be her Danna. She obeys the decisions made by Memeha and throughout the years of performing in tea house and entertain officials comes the World War II. To save herself from the destruction of war she works at a factory in the countryside for years. When coming back from war she realizes Gion is not as it used to be and there she reunites with Nabu, Chairman and Pumpkin. After experiencing ups and downs to this stage, Chairman finally declares his love for Sayuri, they later immigrate to the United States and Chairman remains Sayuri's Danna till his death.

My Reflection:

Memoirs of a Geisha is definitely a page turner. At first I'm a bit confused with all the Japanese terms and names used in the book like Shamisen, Kimono, and Obi, but as I gradually get used to the description and the writing style, an amazingly mysterious world of the ancient Japanese Geisha culture uncovers in front of me. First of all, about the writing style, I believe the author did a lot of research when writing the book because it feels so real, like Golden himself has really experienced the life of Geisha before. For a western male, this is indeed a difficult mission, even if assisted by former Geishas for background references. Writing from a first person point of view also makes it more convincing to the readers. I am amazed on how I can connect the inner feeling of Sayuri, like her thoughts and emotions are pouring out like a river

endlessly. Especially when describing her feeling toward the Chairman, it is just so delicate and authentic and readers come to know her heart really flutters and skips beat for him. She describes her first encounter with the Chairman as follows:

[The man who'd addressed me there on the street had this same kind of broad, calm face. And what was more, his features were so smooth and serene, I had the feeling he'd go on standing there calmly until I wasn't unhappy any longer. He was probably about forty-five years old, with gray hair combed straight back from his forehead. But I couldn't look at him for long. He seemed so elegant to me that I blushed and looked away.] (pp.111)

Furthermore, many sentences are beautifully written, as opposed to written in a dull and flat style, portrait a lively image to the readers. For example, when Chiyo first meet Hatsumomo, who back then is one of the most renowned Geisha, and pictures her appearance and kimono in a very vivid way.

[There on the step of the entryway, just slipping her feet into her lacquered zori, stood an exquisitely beautiful woman wearing a kimono lovelier than anything I'd ever imagined. I'd been impressed with the kimono worn by the young bucktoothed geisha in Mr. Tanaka's village of Senzuru; but this one was a water blue, with swirling lines in ivory to mimic the current in a stream. Glistening silver trout tumbled in the current, and the surface of the water was ringed with gold wherever the soft green leaves of a tree touched it. I had no doubt the gown was woven of pure silk, and so was the obi, embroidered in pale greens and yellows. And her clothing wasn't the only extraordinary thing about her; her face was painted a kind of rich white, like the wall of a cloud when lit by the sun. Her hair, fashioned into lobes, gleamed as darkly as lacquer, and was decorated with ornaments carved out of amber, and with a bar from which tiny silver strips dangled, shimmering as she moved.] (pp.36)

Although it is very elaborative and in great detail, I didn't get annoyed while reading it. On the other hand, it spurred my imagination to shape how an extraordinary Geisha actually looks like. The novel itself has also done a very good job in shaping the personalities of characters. Every character is unique in a way, not only how different they look, but also how they act in different situations. While reading the book, I feel like each one of them have so many things to share, that from the perspective of Chiyo it's not enough to fully get to know them.

As for the setting and the storyline, I would say it is fascinating and intriguing. As a foreigner, I didn't really know much about Geisha, but as I finished reading the novel, I realized that Geisha is not only about the typical white makeup, that it is a long process to debut as a Geisha, and that everything from tea ceremony to dancing to playing instruments requires so much hard work before expertise it. That these amazing women should not be solely related as sexual, i.e. prostitutes, they have so much more to do with their elegance in dancing and singing, their techniques in walking and even conversing. They are the true artists and I totally change my perspective on them after reading the book. Sayuri's life is so dramatic and splendid. Throughout her whole life, there is time full of brightness and hope, there is also time when she walks through the valley of the shadow of death. Eventually, she conquers the hardship and reunite the love of her life. I am deeply moved by her undying love for the Chairman, although I suspect this love has also mixed up with something else like sympathy and affection. In my opinion, Sayuri falls for him not really because of his attractiveness, since he is already a middle-aged man in his forties when they first meet. It is the gratitude she feels toward his kindness when no one else in the world cares about her. Perhaps this gratitude transforms into this powerful thing called love. Undeniably though, the Chairman is the one who gives Sayuri the determination to become a Geisha and a purpose to her life. God grants her with beauty but many tragic events also follows. She is forced to leave her family at a young age and experiences much cruelty when it is supposed to be a merry childhood with candy and dolls. She is terrified for her first night and can't feel the true erotic intimacy between lovers. She is ordered to entertain

the men she doesn't love. She is like a possession added to an individual rather than a human being with autonomy, it is very tragic in that sense. I can't not think of myself in that situation which I don't have the mobility and independence, that my life is subjected to please others instead of pursuing my dream. Despite all the fame and popularity she receives, I would rather be unknown but has my life in my own hand. Geishas are portrayed as Half wives of the men, that they are often taken as mistress by Danna, who in return supports them financially. This also makes me think of the society of Japan nowadays. Granted, Geisha culture has mostly faded away as the times goes by, however, this culture can somehow project as an epitome of Japanese patriarchal society. Even nowadays in Japan, gender stereotype is still deeply rooted. Men expect women to stay at home and be a housewife. As a woman, she is expected to do many things from housekeeping to taking care of children. Income gap between males and females are huge. Gender discrimination is an issue in many countries, but it is more severe in Japan. I always remembered the shock I felt when Shinzo Abe came into office and set up this propaganda about encouraging women to work in order to boost the economy.

All in all, some people suspect the authenticity of the novel, it is a fiction after all. Nevertheless, this book enriches me and exposes me to a culture that is so special. And I am truly glad that at the end Sayuri does get what she has been craving for so long, looking back, it is all but memories that left behind. Just as what the end of *Memoirs* stated, 'our struggles and triumphs, however, we may suffer them, all too soon they bleed into a wash, just like watery ink on paper.' (pp. 434)