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**ORIENTALISM IN AMERICAN NARRATIVE AND CINEMA: THE  
CASE OF *MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Orientalist thoughts are a heritage from the colonialist era that still permeate today's society; examples can be seen in media such as movies, books or TV shows that portray the Eastern world as the West views it: as something exotic and strange which the West has power over. In this dissertation, different theories of Orientalism are discussed, the main base being Edward Said's work on Orientalist culture, which has been the work of reference for every theory since its publication. Through these theories, the work will analyze Japan and America's place within them, and it will be contextualized in the work of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997), written by Arthur Golden, and its movie (2005) directed by Rob Marshall. With this, the author aims to prove the extent to which Orientalism is present in either text and whether what is presented in them is Japan or what Americans think Japan is.

**Key Words:** Orientalism, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, America, Japan.

## **RESUM**

El pensament orientalista és una herència de l'època colonial que encara forma part de la societat actual; es pot veure en el cinema, la literatura o la televisió, que mostren el món oriental de la manera que occident se l'imagina: un lloc exòtic i estrany sobre el qual l'occident exerceix el seu poder. En aquest treball, es tracten diferents teories de l'orientalisme, majorment basades en l'obra d'Edward Said sobre la cultura orientalista, que ha sigut la base de tot el que se n'ha escrit. A través d'aquestes teories, s'analitzarà quina postura tenen Japó i Amèrica dins l'orientalisme, i es contextualitzarà en l'obra de *Memòries d'una Geisha* (1997), escrita per Arthur Golden, i la seva pel·lícula (2005), dirigida per Rob Marshall. Amb això, la intenció de l'autora és demostrar si l'orientalisme hi és present i si el que se'ns hi presenta és Japó o el que els americans pensen que és Japó.

**Paraules clau:** Orientalisme, *Memòries d'una Geisha*, Amèrica, Japó.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) by Arthur Golden, an American writer, remained in the New York Times bestseller's list for 58 consecutive weeks, being a great hit in America and other Western countries in Europe, for its exotic appeal and the fact that the readers took it as a true story. A few years later, a movie was made about the book with Rob Marshall as the director, with a brilliant cast of famous actors and actresses, both in Hollywood and in Asia. However, both the movie and the book raised a lot of controversy regarding the (mis)representation of Japan and Japanese customs through an obvious American eye. The novel narrates the story, set in Japan, of a little girl who is taken forcefully from a little village to Kyoto and ends up becoming one of the most famous *geisha*<sup>1</sup> in Gion, which is the *geisha* neighbourhood of Kyoto. The world of *geisha* is very secretive even to the Japanese, and from the first instance the West interacted with Japan, it was attracted by Japan's mysteries and longed to discover them.

The East has long been stereotyped through Western narratives and through Hollywood movies, and Hollywood has not always offered a positive image of Asian people (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 1). There are common stereotypes such as the "inscrutable Oriental" like Charlie Chan or Dr Fu Manchu, which have given the idea that all Asians were somehow "mysterious, exotic and cunning" (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 1-2). Particularly regarding Japanese culture, the term *geisha* is widely misunderstood as the term for a Japanese prostitute, except in Japan, where a *geisha* is not regarded as a prostitute but an artist, as they do not sell their body, so Japanese people are always worried about the misrepresentation of their own culture when Hollywood or other Western media portray it. As society is more and more worried about cultural representations in media, more people want to raise awareness of the misrepresentations that Western media gives of Eastern culture.

Taking into account these misrepresentations of Japanese culture in media, I will link them to Orientalist theory and will try to answer how Orientalism affects these stereotypes, both racial, cultural and in the aspect of gender. I will do so through different theories and will focus on the book and movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a story about a Japanese woman both written and directed by American men, analysing all the different stereotypes and Orientalist thoughts portrayed in the novel and movie.

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese term for a woman that is trained to entertain guests with music, conversation and dance.

## 2. WHAT IS ORIENTALISM?

Edward Said (2003/1978), author of the book *Orientalism*, which has served as the base of all Orientalist theories since its publication, defines Orientalism in a variety of ways, depending on what point of view we desire to take but all of them end up being interdependent; there is the Academic view of Orientalism, in which every scholar that studies the Orient is called an Orientalist, though the term is not being so widely accepted today due to its link with the colonialist era. Another definition would be Orientalism as a “style of thought” based on the distinction between the West and the East, that is, the Occident and the Orient, which, as Said states, is the base for a lot of theories, novels and social descriptions concerning the East and a lot of theorists, writers and philosophers have accepted this as a basic distinction. The third meaning is a more historical one and Said describes it as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” The origin of such theory is, of course, Europe’s colonialism over its Eastern colonies such as India, and Said argues that this Orientalism is so powerful that no one writing about the Orient could do so without taking into account the thoughts that have previously been imposed.

The Cambridge Dictionary describes Orientalism as: “Western ideas about the Middle East and about East and Southeast Asia, especially ideas that are too simple or not accurate about these societies being mysterious, never changing, or not able to develop in a modern way without Western help.” This definition, albeit being more general than the one Said gives, portrays the same idea, which is basically Western thoughts on the East, even though the Cambridge Dictionary does not mention anything about the Occident ruling over the Orient.

Orientalism finds its origin in the Colonialist era, when Europe started ruling over its colonies in the East, but that does not mean it stopped when the colonialist era finished: as we commented before, Orientalism is powerful, powerful enough that, despite the East not being ruled over by the West anymore, Orientalism persists in thoughts. Ward (2018) explains in his article that Orientalism was created by French writers mainly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to justify Europe’s rule over the area (p. 7). Some filmographic examples such as the movie *300* (in which the enemies are the Persians, ruled over by exotic and effeminate kings) are used to show how Orientalism over the Middle East is still very alive and well nowadays, especially how Americans view it (2018, p.8). The East is something exotic, something for the West to oppose to and to triumph over. Ward (2018)

also mentions how recent academics reject this bipolar construction of the world, since the shifting of borders between what is the East and what is the West is too blurry to define it (p. 9).

As Said (2003/1978) says, “Since World War II, and more noticeably after each of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture” (p. 284) and this figure is not flattering at all as it feeds the prejudices that taint the Western mind towards Eastern civilizations. This can be seen in Disney’s movies, on how the villains’ voices used to have an Arab accent while the heroes had either a British or American one, as after 1973, the Arab seemed more of a menace than a joke, as it had been seen since then (Said 2003/1978, p. 285). European imperial politics shifted to America, and with them all the thoughts of the colonialist era became linked to America in a variety of ways, so nowadays “a wide variety of hybrid representations of the Orient now roam the culture [...] their representations have had, and continue to have, wide repercussions, and they have been discussed in many places for obvious reasons. [...] Thus, if the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is a negative value.” (Said 2003/1978, p. 285). After 9/11, this misrepresentation of a vilified Middle Easterner proliferated even more, and we cannot discuss this kind of Orientalism without talking about racism in a way, since it seems to be connected: East and West are different, the latter being the superior one over the former in Western dominant discourses. As Allison (2001) says, “playing with Orientals reconfirms the power and dominance of the orientalist” (p. 386), that way, even though they can be seen as dangerous and menacing, the West can still play with them and ridicule them, thus asserting their superiority.



### 3. ORIENTALISM IN THE FAR EAST

#### 3.1 *Different types of Orientalism*

As we said before, and as Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, there are different kinds of Orientalism. The one we will focus on and the most problematic one is Orientalism known as a way for the Occident to dominate over the Orient, to restructure and have authority over it and manage it in every way: politically, socially, religiously, etc. This can be easily applied to Europe's rule over its colonies, but can American Orientalism be viewed in this way? Or is it the case, as Said argues, that this Orientalism was rooted so deeply that no matter if there was actual rule over the East or not, one could not write about the Orient without taking into account Western thoughts on it? This is what Orientalist theory leads us to believe is the case of America, since, after all, America's own beliefs were imported from Europe. As Rosen (2000) says, "[Orientalism] is an integral part of modern consciousness," (p. 17) and it is not just a thing of the past, linked to Europe's colonial era; Orientalism is a form of ethnocentrism, of understanding another culture through one's own, assuming that one's view is superior.

Rosen separates Orientalism as a cultural myth, in which the East is emphasized as the Other, the different one, the strange one – taking into account West superiority, and Orientalism as a romanticized idea, in which culture is mystified because of its exoticism (pp. 18-19). However, Rosen argues that the romanticized idea is greatly obscured by the feeling of superiority over the East, which is why in the West we have so many generalizations about the East. The East goes from Arab countries to Japan – it is impossible to homogenize them under a single stereotype since there are hundreds of cultures within those parameters; however, the West sees them as a whole – as the stranger, the inferior East.

#### 3.2 *Japan's Place in Orientalism*

Japan and China have its own unique place in Orientalism. While they are unarguably in the Orient, they have acted like "Western" countries with their neighboring Asian countries. As Minear (1980) puts it, "the historical relation between 'the West' and Japan was very different from that between 'the West' and Said's Orient" (p. 508). Said understands Orientalism as a relationship of power based on a colonialist mindset that

started in Europe and in recent times predominates in America; however, America did not have any colonies as Europe did, so is it really that type of Orientalism that we are looking at when we talk about the East and America? Furthermore, Japan was never a colony of the Old Continent, though, Minear (1980) argues that we can assume that by the time America and Europe had come into contact with Japan, the colonialist mindset was already ingrained as an inflexible state of mind and this Orientalist attitude did not need actual domination (p. 515).

According to Nishihara (2005), Said's *Orientalism* did not evoke antipathy in Japan as it did in the West, for the Japanese saw it as a confirmation of what they had felt all along; not only that, it evoked feelings of guilt as Japan itself had been a colonizer of fellow Asian territories like Manchuria, Taiwan and Korea (p. 243). Japanese intellectuals were very much enthralled by Said's ideas and studied them to apply them to Japan. They condemned Japanese colonialism and pre-war attitude.

Edward Said, however, never considered Japan part of "the West" or talked about Japan's westernized attitude during its colonialist years. Japan is considered the Orient because it is place there, but as Nishihara (2005) says, "Japan has characteristics of both the Orient and the Occident" (p. 244). Japan tried to become a Western country when faced with its Asian neighbors but adopted an Oriental attitude when it was necessary to "insist in the uniqueness [of Japan]" (Nishihara 2005, p. 245), as Orientalism promotes the difference between "the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Minear 1980, p. 507). Also, in the general Western mindset, Japan is always compared and grouped with the East or at least with its neighboring countries, Korea and China.

Another example of Orientalism, is Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935), from British origin, who traveled to Japan for his health and became "one of the giants of nineteenth century Japanese studies" (Minear 1980, p. 508); however, all his books regarding Japan such as *The Classical Poetry of Japan (1880)* and *Things Japanese* (originally published in 1890) make a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them', between East and West, and excels the Western world and treats all of the Far-East as if it was the same country and the same culture. He treated Japan as a paradise, stressing its exotic culture, praising "the Old Japan", which, according to him has vanished and the new Japan has nothing to do with it and it is not to be praised since, as he says in *Things Japanese*, the positive things about Japan such as "cleanliness, kindness, and a refined artistic taste" (1891, pp. 240-241) are a thing of the past. As Minear (1980) says, "Like

Said's Orientalists, Chamberlain exalts the past and castigates the present; his enthusiasm for things Japanese pales before his greater respect for things Western." (pp. 509-510).

While another professional student of Japan, George B. Sansom (1883-1965) argues in his book, *The Western World and Japan* (1949), that there is no such thing as typical Asian culture, he says that Japan has conformed to a general Asian pattern of growth and both ancient and modern times have followed "in general a common Asiatic course" (p. 9). In other books Sansom warns against intolerance however, he ends up falling in the same category as Chamberlain as he only shows interest and praise for "the Old Japan" and denies any relevance for the modern times.

All in all, Minear (1980) says that "even in the absence of overt Western domination, the attitudes manifested in the discourse on Japan seem to resemble closely those of Said's Orientalists" (p. 515); however, Said argues that this domination is a key point in Orientalism, thus, Japan's relation with the West and this kind of Orientalism makes us question the whole theory of Said's Orientalism. As said before, it can be argued that the colonialist mindset was already ingrained, but we can also take another approach, as Minear suggests, in which it is done in the pursuit of knowledge, thus, the culture studied becomes an object and the one who studies it tries to appropriate it in an aggressive way to know it better.

Orientalism has created types and stereotypes, and while "types are a necessary mental construct that help us understand the world around us" (Taylor and Willis, 1999, p.42), stereotypes are constructs that hold a negative connotation and that poison our way of seeing the world, without helping us. For example, an Asian stereotype is the femininity related to it, both in males (which have been feminized in popular culture) and females, because femininity equals weakness and the West is associated with masculinity, because it is stronger than the East (Cheung, 1993, as cited in Simal González, 2000, p. 180). Thus, when talking about Orientalism we also have to take into account the roles of power between men and women and patriarchy, as they are intertwined. Orientalism is an extension of the white male patriarchy and power over the "lesser" people.

### *3.3. Orientalism in American Narrative and Cinema: A Few Relevant Examples*

Film studies have been largely concerned with the Orientalism present Hollywood films such as the archetypes of the Orient being mysterious and sensuous, and it can be seen from biblical films to historical biopics that take place in the Middle and Far East

(Bernstein and Gaylyn, 1997, p. 99). Here, a few relevant examples of Orientalism in films, that take place or are about Japan or Japanese culture, are presented:

*Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) by Ruth Benedict is said to be a classic work that “established [our] academic understanding of Japan” (Rosen 2000, p. 22), which tries to explain how Japanese society works but ends up accentuating its ‘otherness’ and its ‘weirdness’, convincing the reader of how odd Japanese people are. Benedict paints Japan as an intricate place, impossible to comprehend, that does not follow the West’s morals and democratic values. This book is regarded as one of the most important books written on modern Japan after the Second World War despite the fact that Ruth Benedict had never been in Japan or knew Japanese – meaning, as Lie (2001) says in his article “Benedict ‘imagined’ Japan” (p. 249).

Another story worth mentioning is *Madame Butterfly* (1898) by John Luther Long, a short story written when Japan opened itself and they began trading. America started an all-Japanese craze: people decorated their houses with Japanese art and bought Japanese kimono and crafts. This short story provides the plot for Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* and inspired several films and was satirized, exposing all the racist stereotypes in a play by David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* which was latter made into a film. Puccini’s opera was the foundation of “the Western construction of ‘the Orient’ as a sexualized, and sexually compliant, space that is ripe for conquest and rule.” (Bernstein and Gaylyn, 1997, p. 160).

*The Rising Sun* (1993), a movie directed by Philip Kaufman, was a film that generated a lot of controversy in their depiction of Japanese culture. The movie is about the Japanese taking over corporate America; as Rosen (2000) says, “the Japanese are portrayed as almost entirely immoral” (p. 20) and the enterprises are compared to the *Yakuza*, the Japanese mafia and seem to be working together. A lot of Asians and Asian-Americans complained on how the portrayal made in the movie was racist and how its message was to ‘warn’ the Americans against the Japanese and to watch out.

*Lost in Translation* (2003) directed by Sofia Coppola is set in Tokyo, where the two main characters, both American, meet and try to find themselves amidst their loneliness. They are lonely in an exotic city such as Tokyo (despite the fact Tokyo is as Westernized as a city can be) which only exacerbates this loneliness because everything is strange and different from them, they are the only ‘normal’ ones in the midst of all this ‘otherness’. In the movie focus on the differences of Japanese people from Western

people, accentuating the difference in height, and people's names are stereotypical and what an American would expect a Japanese to be named like Ms. Kawasaki.

*The Last Samurai* (2003) and *The Outsider* (2018) follow a similar pattern: the foreigner is included into Japanese traditions and ends up embodying those traditions and values better than Japanese people. Edward Zwick, director of *The Last Samurai*, said he intended for the movie to pay homage to Japanese culture, however, it has been criticized for valuing only *past* Japan, that is, feudal Japan where the *samurai* reigned, *samurai* who are viewed as loyal and morally superior, and shows modern Japan as “inhabited by feckless politicians and grasping businessmen who are willing to sell Japan’s soul for a quick profit.” (Keirstead 2004, 496). The main white character in *The Last Samurai*, played by Tom Cruise, is originally hired to destroy the remaining *samurai* but instead, he is captured and swept into the unknown world of honor and values of the Japanese warriors and ends up fighting side by side with them. As Keirstead (2004) puts it, it is like a Wild West movie (p.496) of the Americans against the Native Americans, though in this case the American sides with the natives, and among this seemingly cultural appreciation, Western superiority emerges when the white newcomer manages to master the sword in six months, better than the Master himself, who has been practicing it all his life. They fight a final battle where, as to be expected, everyone dies except him. What this movie tries to say is that the “real” Japan is the feudal, country-side Japan, which, as Keirstead (2004) puts it, is a “distinctive Victorian view of Japan” (p. 496); and if we choose to follow the pattern that *samurai* were the soul of Japan, as far as is known, *samurai* lived in urban areas and castles, not in villages like the one portrayed in the movie, since they tended to be higher ups in the hierarchy.

*The Outsider* as said, follows a similar pattern, in which Nick (Jared Leto), an American ex-pat, is thrust into the *Yakuza* world, the Japanese mafia (one of the few remnants of the *samurai* and their values that are left nowadays) and ends up being an essential part of the family and being a better embodiment of what being a true *yakuza* means better than his antagonist, who has been a *yakuza* for way longer.

## 4. ORIENTALISM IN *MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA*

### 4.1. Summary

The story narrates the life of Sakamoto Chiyo<sup>2</sup>, who ends up becoming the famous *geisha* Nitta Sayuri. Told to Jakob Haarhuis, who is the fictional translator of the story, it begins in 1929, when Chiyo lives in a fishing village in the West of Japan, with her old father, her ill mother and her older sister, Satsu. One day, he meets Mr. Ichiro Tanaka, the town's wealthiest man, who, noticing the girl's unusual pale eyes, contacts her father. Chiyo is sold to an *okiya*<sup>3</sup>. There, Chiyo works as a maid and she studies to be a *geisha*, like Pumpkin, the other young girl she shares house with. In the *okiya*, she encounters Hatsumomo, a beautiful but cruel *geisha* that dislikes Chiyo profoundly and tries to make her life more difficult.

Chiyo tries to run away from the *okiya* to join her sister and escape, but she falls off the roof and is caught. Mother, who runs the *okiya*, stops paying for Chiyo's classes to punish her for running away, and uses her like a maid. After years of working as a maid, Chiyo encounters the Chairman, a wealthy businessman, that comforts her when he finds her crying by the stream. Struck by the image of the *geisha* that accompany the Chairman, Chiyo vows to become one so she too can accompany him someday. From then on, she always thinks of the Chairman and keeps the handkerchief he gave her to dry her tears always close to her.

Soon after that fateful encounter, Mameha, a famous *geisha*, asks to be Chiyo's big sister and convinces Mother to reinvest money on her so she is able to become an apprentice *geisha*. Mother agrees, as she sees it as an opportunity to make money. Mameha is Hatsumomo's biggest rival, and Chiyo thinks it is because of that that Mameha wants to take her under her wing.

Over the next years, Chiyo ends up debuting as an apprentice *geisha* under her new name, Sayuri, a year after Pumpkin does under Hatsumomo's apprenticeship. At one event, Sayuri is introduced to Nobu Toshizaku and to Ken Iwamura, who, she realizes, is the Chairman. Mameha pushes her to socialize with Nobu despite Sayuri being reticent about it, but it all seems to be a plan to take Hatsumomo out of Gion. Soon after that,

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<sup>2</sup> In Japanese, the surname and name are inverted in order.

<sup>3</sup> House where *geisha* live.

Mameha introduces Chiyo to Dr. Crab, the other man that Mameha wants to fight for Sayuri. Dr. Crab ends up paying the largest amount ever for her *mizuage*, which is the ceremonial taking of a *geisha*'s virginity, making Sayuri one of the most famous *geisha*. Sayuri is adopted by the *okiya*, securing her position and her life, which shatters Pumpkin's dreams and separates both childhood friends even further.

During the war, the *geisha* district is closed so woman can contribute to winning the war, and thanks to Nobu, Sayuri is sent away to a village outside of Kyoto where she sews parachutes, instead of having to go to the factories.

After the war, Nobu comes to retrieve Sayuri, as he wants her back as a *geisha* to help him entertain the Minister, who is the only one able to save the Chairman and Nobu's company from the Americans. Sayuri asks Pumpkin and Mameha to help too, and they all entertain the minister at the teahouse for a time until the Minister manages to save the business. It is then that Nobu proposes to be Sayuri's protector and she reluctantly agrees, in debt after so many favors, but her heart is broken since she feels she would never be able to be with the Chairman anymore.

To celebrate the company's salvation, they all go on a trip to the Amami Islands, where Sayuri creates a plan for Nobu to catch her and the Minister engaging in sexual intercourse, so he does not want to be her protector anymore. She engages Pumpkin's help, but in revenge, instead of bringing Nobu to the scene, Pumpkin brings the Chairman. Sayuri, deeply embarrassed and crushed, avoids the Chairman the rest of the trip.

When they return to Kyoto, Sayuri is invited by the Chairman to a teahouse, where he confesses his love for her and reveals it was his idea all along that Mameha helped her become a *geisha* but had held his feelings from her because he was in debt with Nobu. The Chairman ends up becoming Sayuri's protector, and over the years, she moves to New York and gives birth to the Chairman's son.

#### 4.2. *The Book*

*Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) was written by Arthur Golden (1956), an American writer born in Tennessee. He attended Harvard University, graduating in Art History and specializing in Japan, and then proceeded to do a MA in Japanese history in Columbia University. He worked in Tokyo briefly after spending a summer in Beijing, China, and then went back to the United States, where he has been living since. He wrote and re-wrote *Memoirs of a Geisha* for six years until he finally settled for the novel we can read

now. As a background for his novel, Golden interviewed the real geisha Mineko Iwasaki, among others, whom he mentioned as the main inspiration for his book. However, when the book was released in Japan, Golden was sued as he had a contract with Mineko Iwasaki stating that he would not mention her or defame her name, as her story was private and could not be shared due to the strict privacy code with geisha and their clients, a world from which she was alienated due to her disclosure.

The book received a copious amount of attention in the West, being in the *New York Times* bestseller lists for two consecutive years and a few years later having a movie made out of it.

#### 4.2.1. The Appeal of the Book in the West

It is the unmistakable allure of the impenetrable *geisha* world, that is nowadays as secretive as it has always been, the hidden Japan that Golden portrays and, as *The New Yorker* review put it, “the social vibrancy and narrative sweep of a much loved 19<sup>th</sup> century bildungsroman” that made this novel so appealing for the Western audience, who were taken to an unknown, far-away land while reading it. And while it holds some part of realism, there is also a lot of creative license taken; it is a novel after all. However, the book begins with a fake translator’s note, signed by a fictional character, Jakob Haarhuis, who tells us how he met Sayuri and how she narrated this story to him. This resource cleverly gives the story this tinge of realism, making it look as if the book is actually a true story, a truthful biography of the *geisha* Sayuri, who never really existed. The book is narrated by Sayuri, a female, a *geisha*, so, as Kimiko Akita (2009) says, the author hides his own thoughts and words behind her character, so they become her thoughts and opinions. It is through Sayuri that we see Golden’s created world (p.12). This technique of detaching himself is in itself Orientalizing the story, making it alien and exotic, making him a mere transmitter; it is giving the reader the chance to be immersed in it yet stand apart. This gave the impression to many readers that everything that was said in that book was the truth, and this novel “not only doubles as a novel and historical text but assumes a status as something in between” (Allison, 2001, p. 387). Golden adds to this feeling of realness with his “Acknowledgments” at the end of the book, where he mentions Mineko, the real *geisha* that gave him an insight into the secret world and told him about her *geisha* life in “intimate detail” (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 494). Most Western readers asked about the book gave an answer akin to “I have learnt a lot about Japan”, this being one of the



main reasons why they liked the book; meanwhile, Japanese people who read it responded that, although they were reading a book about their own culture, they felt as if they were reading something completely foreign (Allison, 2001, pp. 382-383), Which is what brings us to the point: this book, despite being about Japan, is, nevertheless, American, and thus, its qualities and its public are Americans and that was its aim; as Allison (2001) eloquently puts it, “[the] concern was not that Golden, as an outsider, could not or should not write about *geisha*, but rather that the outsider is so central in shaping this story as well as its mass appeal in the United States,” as she goes on to argue that there are plenty of Japanese books written about *geisha* but they have never had the appeal in the West that *Memoirs of a Geisha* did (p. 382)

If we analyze the plot and how the characters are presented, we will find ourselves surprisingly at home, because it is like the much-known Cinderella story (Allison, 2001, p. 383), especially if we look at the story of Sayuri and the Chairman. It is a typically Western plot, that the Americans especially overuse in Hollywood movies (can we even count how many movies are called *Another Cinderella Story*?) and romance novels. Thus, the Western readers felt transported to this world of the unknown and the exotic but still kept on a safe space where they felt comfortable enough; in addition, it is also written in a seemingly Japanese delicacy and sensibility (such as at the beginning of the book, when Mr. Tanaka sees Chiyo naked, her nakedness is implied but never stated directly) with its flowery descriptions that makes it more authentic: “my mind on the eve of my debut was like a garden in which the flowers have only begun to poke their faces up through the soil, so that it is still impossible to tell how things will work” (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 182). Allison continues on to say that this novel gives the same feeling to the Western reader that other Western romance novels do but “*Memoirs* is granted higher truth value and therefore authority; fantasy collapses into knowledge” (p. 385) and validating the readers’ feelings of feeling superior, of having discovered some of Japan’s best kept secrets and this feeling of discovering something new and mysterious from an exotic culture is “a fantasy that haunts all colonialism” (Allison, 2001, p. 388). It is not the first time either, that Western narrative uses a distant and faraway place to represent their desires and sexuality that can be repressed at home; they use the East as an outlet and image of their own desires without having to “damage” their own cultures reputation (Allison, 2001, p. 397).

However, Iwasaki herself stated that the *geisha* and their world from the book were totally different to the ones she described to Golden, as to her view, Golden had

done nothing but portray *geisha* as mere prostitutes who are forced to selling their body – which is specifically the image the Occident have of them, and this book only fueled those thoughts. She explained how she had even considered taking her own life when reading the book as it was shameful to be related to such an untruthful story so different from what she had explained (Joyce, 2001).

This *geisha* world, however, did not appeal to everybody, since Allison (2001) interviewed several women and some of those, especially the older, said how that world seemed empty to them and that painted an unfavorable image of Japanese men. One reader even said that she found this difference in values “distasteful, even repulsive” (p. 392). Taking into account how everyone thought the novel was historically accurate, this only added to the strangeness of Japan, of how his values differed and were much worse and backwards than Western values.

#### 4.2.2. The American Voice

The story is narrated in the first person narrative voice, from Sayuri’s point of view, also the main character in the story. However, the narrator is put through a filter three times: first, because the Sayuri that explains the story is an old one, so she recalls it from a distance; second, because Sayuri tells the story to the fake translator, Jakob Haarhuis, who is the one that writes it down; and third, the author himself, Arthur Golden, who is neither Japanese nor a woman. So, in the end, the text we have is a strongly filtered version of Sayuri’s story, through the views of two different men who do not share the same culture as the protagonist.

The narrative is undoubtedly affected by the fact that it is a male narrating the thoughts of a female and it is an American narrating the view of a Japanese person, and on top of that, it is a Japanese female from a secretive world during the pre-war and post-war. As said, Golden hides himself behind Sayuri, but in the end, Sayuri ends up becoming an American disguised as a *geisha*.

The first point of analysis is the narrative sequence, which, as commented, follows a very similar pattern to the ever-popular Western Cinderella story. Sayuri, a poor and enslaved girl, finds her Charming Prince in the Chairman:

The man who’s 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. (Golden, 1997/1997, p. 122)

The paragraph above is the first instance Sayuri meets the Chairman and describes him. Despite the fact that Sayuri is just 12 years old when this happens, and the age gap between her and the man is very big, it is already foreseeable that he will be Sayuri's Prince Charming. This is only corroborated a few pages forward:

I prayed they [the gods] permit me to become a geisha somehow. I would suffer through any training, bear up under any hardship, for a chance to attract the notice of a man like the Chairman again. (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 126)

Sayuri, who up until then had been against the idea of becoming a *geisha* changes her mind at the sight of the Chairman. This typical Western plot device of love at first sight is what drives the whole novel onward and what drives Sayuri to do everything she does. Without this onset, there would be no story. As expected, the Chairman and Sayuri end up together despite the fact he is a married man with children; their love transgresses all age difference and problems thrown to them (like Hatsumomo, Nobu or the war), because it is true love and it is meant to be. *Memoirs of a Geisha* in this sense ends up being the plot of a fairy tale, but with the innovation of the princess wearing a kimono instead of a dress, and with Japan as its backdrop (Ito, 2008, p. 45)

Sayuri is also the conventional American novel heroine: she is innocent, she is very beautiful and pretty, but she does not know she is despite the fact that she has been told from an early age and is continuously shy and modest about her looks: "Mamehasan!" I said. 'If I had the power to make a man faint I'm sure I'd be aware of it by now.'" (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 179); and while all the women around her seem to be corrupted at one point or another – with Hatsumomo and her evilness, Pumpkin having to end up as a prostitute in Osaka after the war - she stays pure and innocent in thoughts thanks to her love for the Chairman. She also has a feature that makes her special above anyone else, which in her case is her grey-blue eyes, which are not very common in Japan, just like her virtuousness makes her special in the world around her, full of corrupted men who pay for women.

The overall plot is, apart from a fairy tale story, an American Dream one too: “It is a success story of a geisha who achieves material success and freedom.” (Ito, 2008, p. 21), from her very low beginning to owning a fancy apartment and a teahouse in New York City, Sayuri’s is a story from rags to riches. Golden, being an American, views the ultimate success in achieving the freedom and money American long so much for, and sees America as the land of ultimate freedom, and this translates into the text, as said before, with Japan as its backdrop. Sayuri starts being a poor girl from a fishing village, enslaved as a maid, and progresses slowly, climbing up the social hierarchy until she is at the very top, not even worrying about the money she spends:

I have to confess I don’t know much about money. Most geisha pride themselves on never carrying any cash with them and are accustomed to charging things wherever they go. Even now in New York City, I live just the same way. (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 319)

When she moves to America, she achieves her complete freedom, where she is not confined by all those men any longer, she is no longer a *geisha*, thus, she is able to speak freely about that world: “Sayuri’s circumstances in telling her story were unusual, in that no one in Japan had power over her any longer.” (Golden, 1997/2005, p. viii). She escapes her home country, like those that pursued the American Dream, and moves to New York, where she feels free to enjoy her love with the Chairman without having to hide and thrived with her small business.

All these Western plot devices that the author used - because, despite portraying a Japanese story, he is American and writes for the American public - are what render the novel ultimately an American novel. The author cannot escape his own handicaps (not being Japanese as well as not being a woman) despite rendering a novel that managed to convince the majority of the Western public that it was true to reality, even to the point that some universities, considering the novel authentic, recommended it to students for international or cultural studies as well as feminism (Ito, 2008, p. 1).

#### 4.2.3. Representation of Americans in the Book

In 1945, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered, and the Americans moved their troops to Japan. America had been the enemy for years, it is quite obvious that after the killing of thousands of civilians, that view the Japanese had of them was not going to change any time soon. However, when Sayuri first encounters the Americans in the book, she does not seem unhappy or resentful with them at all: “All the stories about invading American soldiers raping and killing us had turned out to be wrong; and in fact, we gradually came to realize that the Americans on the whole were remarkably kind.” (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 400). Golden, being an American himself, tries to portray the Americans as the good white superhero, the guys that, despite the fact that they defeated Japan, were kind with them; by doing that, Golden denies pure and factual history, because raping and killing did happen during the American occupation (Svoboda, 2009, p.1), to make the West better than the East, because while Japanese men were paying prostitutes and *geisha* to entertain them while they had women at home, American soldiers were good to them. This alone is a giveaway on the fact it is an American narrating it and not a Japanese.

Sayuri remarking on the differences between the Americans and the Japanese also add to this sense of otherness, because the Western reader is most likely to identify with the Americans.

#### 4.2.4. Women and Orientalism in the Book

As Kimiko Akita (2009) puts it, “[the book] and its movie adaptation, assert through words of a patriarchal and Orientalist supremacy by portraying the *geisha* as an irrational and highly erotic creature” (p.12), which is to say, the book was aimed to please the Western reader’s thoughts on how the East is, or “should be”. The novel’s whole world is described, as the lecturer Hiroko Hagino says, “[as] what to America wants to imagine it’s like in Japan” (Hanawald, 2000).

The world of *geisha* is, as said, a secretive one, even to their own country, thus, from the beginning of Western interactions with Japan, and especially after the American occupation after World War II, it has had the allure of the unknown to the travelers that encountered these “mysterious creatures” that dressed and looked nothing like Western woman. However, as Mineko Iwasaki argues in her own book *Geisha: a Life*, most of

what Westerners mostly encountered, especially after the 1920s, were prostitutes passing themselves as *geisha* (or what was known as *onsen geisha*, as they often worked in these hot spring resorts). Thus, the vision of *geisha* travelled West and became known as the fancy word for a Japanese prostitute. Iwasaki also argued that the *mizuage*, which is what Golden calls the ritual in which a *geisha* sells her virginity to the highest bidder, never existed, and the word *mizuage* was alien to the Japanese readers (Akita, 2009, p. 17); Golden responded that she did talk about that ritual to him, but she seemed too ashamed now to recognize it.

Often, the Orientalizing of women implied an objectification that appealed the Western audience, such as we have seen in the case of *geisha*, who in Japan were artists who entertained their guests with no sexual connotation, became an object of desire and refined sexuality, an enticing exotic creature. Golden sexualizes Sayuri since she is a little girl, first when her virginity is checked and afterwards when it is sold to the best buyer. An editor who turned down the opportunity to publish *Memoirs of a Geisha* in Japan argued that his reasoning behind the negative was that it exoticized Japan, and the Japanese were tired of reading about their own culture being exoticized and that “they feel like Western writers focus too much on the seedy, sexy side rather than the cultural side.” (Hanawald, 2000).

While some women who read the book found themselves familiar with Sayuri’s struggles as a woman in a man’s world, they found her character was made less strong and relatable due to her obsession for the Chairman, as it is this obsession for the man that drives her to succeed in life, and when she finds the possibility of being with him is stripped away from her, she falls into complete sadness and finds the world void of happiness (Allisson, 2001, p. 934). Thus, it ends up being not the story of an empowered woman after all, but a woman who gives all her life trying to please and get a man. An opposition to Sayuri’s character is Hatsumomo, the older *geisha* that shares the *okiya* with Sayuri. She is the antagonist, and we see that from the first moment she appears in the film; however, she is also the most human of all. While we grow to dislike her throughout the novel, she is the only one that seems to defy the time of imposed womanhood by their patriarchal society: she gets a lover when she is not supposed to, she wants economic independence instead of taking a protector, like Mameha or Sayuri do. She is everything an oriental woman ought not to be according to Western standards, and for that she is vilified and made into the villain of the story; she seems to be one of the common stereotypes for Asian women, the *Dragon Lady* who uses her sexual appeal to entrap the

hero (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 8-9). Opposite to this vile character we have Sayuri, who is the *positive* Asian stereotype: “submissive, shy, delicate, exotic, and loyal to her honor,” which would be like Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. This heavy gendered polarization of women – either angels or demons – contributes to the stereotypes Orientalism has imposed and the male supremacy that accompanies them (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 8).

#### 4.3. *The Movie*

The movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* was directed by Rob Marshall and produced by DreamWorks Pictures and Spyglass Entertainment. It was released in 2005, the first premiere taking place in Tokyo in the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, under the title *Sayuri*, and the second one taking place in the United States on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December. Marshall decided to place the World premiere in Tokyo in an intent to appease the Japanese audience, whom he wanted to lavish with attention since there had already been a lot of critiques on the casting decisions and the fact that the book had been written by an American author; furthermore, it did not help that the book had not been a hit in Japan as it had been in other countries.

Although the movie portrays breath-taking scenes in the streets of the *geisha* district of Kyoto, Gion, it was mainly filmed in a studio in Los Angeles, where everything was recreated, which was another point of worry for its authenticity:

Both the director and the whole crew emphasized the fact that they had attempted to represent a period of Japanese history just as it was. [...] The result is impressive and at first sight it seems that they succeeded in rendering a verisimilar version of the life of geishas. There are some features that make us think that although this film aims to be neutral and present reality just as it was, it is actually a representation that has been created according to Western/American patterns based on certain stereotypes. (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 2)

That is, what we see in the movie, is what we expect to see and not what we would actually see if we travelled back in time.

Marshall tries to change the Western mindset of *geisha* being prostitutes to *geisha* being artists, however, he paints a quite dreadful image of *geisha* being slaves, subjected to men’s wishes.

#### 4.3.1. Casting

The movie faced fierce criticism when the casting was announced because the major female roles in the movie were played by non-Japanese actresses. Two Chinese actresses played the roles of Sayuri (Zhang Ziyi) and Hatsumomo (Gong Li), and a Malaysian actress played the role of Mameha (Michelle Yeoh). While the main male role, the Chairman, was played by the Japanese heartthrob Ken Watanabe, which pleased the mainly female audience (especially the Japanese one), there was a lot of controversy over the casting of Chinese or Malaysian women in Japanese roles, saying it showed the imperialist and orientalist thoughts in Hollywood that still persist nowadays. The main focus of trouble was Japan, but Japanese-Americans also complained, as John Tateishi, national director of the Japanese American Citizens League stated, “This isn’t a situation like in 1920s, ‘30s or even ‘50s, where there were so few Asian, and Japanese, actors who could play a role. Now there are plenty of Japanese actors who could play a role. This is typical of Hollywood.” (LaPorte, 2005).

The Chinese audience was greatly offended also and criticized the Chinese actresses for playing Japanese roles, re-awakening the grudges the Chinese hold against Japan for their occupation and the movie happening at a time when relationships between both countries were quite bad. It did not help that the Chinese view the *geisha* culture as prostitution, and thought it was a degradation of their actresses to be playing such roles, especially when there were love scenes with Japanese actors (Gritten, 2005).

The director defended his casting stating that no one but Zhang Ziyi could play Sayuri (LaPorte, 2005), and the casting to aid the movie’s success, the director had decided to cast famous actors, and no Japanese actress held the appeal Ziyi or Yeoh had (Gritten, 2005).

All actresses defended that Ken Watanabe and the other Japanese actors helped them on how to move, how to kneel or how to speak in a Japanese fashion and that they had been trained by a professional *geisha* (who is in fact, Liza Dalby, the only Western American *geisha*); throughout the whole movie, the characters fake a heavily Japanese accented English, despite their diverse nationalities. To the untrained ear, it might sound completely valid, but the Japanese public complained on how ridiculous it sounded.



#### 4.3.2. Adaptation from Paper to the Big Screen

The movie was filmed, produced and created in Hollywood, which means it follows a lot of tropes that Hollywood movies tend to follow and is inherently an American movie, despite its cast being from various nationalities and the story being about Japan; it follows the same tropes as other romance movies do, as the Chairman appears very early on in the movie, while in the book it is already a hundred pages in when he makes his first appearance. The movie mostly skips the cultural parts or shows them without an explanation, which again, adds to the exotic aura since the watcher does not know what is happening and *why are Japanese so strange?*

To attract the audience and give them something that they would recognize, the movie makes use of touristic landmarks from Kyoto, such as the *fushimi inari* shrine, or the shrine of the one thousand doors. In a scene we see small Chiyo, who has just met the Chairman, run across the doors to ask the Gods to help her be a *geisha*. The book never mentions what shrine Chiyo went to, but if she did go to the *fushimi inari*, she would not have gone through the one thousand doors since the actual shrine where people pray is before the long passage. However, the dramatic scene was enhanced by the effect of that exotic place, which is a much more powerful image than a simple shrine.



(Photo taken from Marshall, 2005, 00:40:00)



(Photo taken by author)

Just at the start of the movie, Chiyo is spying on his father talking to Mr. Tanaka; they are both talking in Japanese, which adds to the feeling of exoticness. However, the rest of the movie is in English, although with a faux-Japanese accent, with Japanese words

and phrases thrown in here and there: “Pumpkin: Mitte mitte<sup>4</sup>!” (Marshall, 2005, 00:15:30). Then we have a voiceover of Sayuri’s voice as the narrator:

A story like mine should never be told, for my world is as forbidden as it is fragile. Without its mysteries it cannot survive. I certainly wasn’t born to the life of a *geisha*. Like so much in my strange life, I was carried there by the current. The first time I knew my mother was sick, was when my father threw back the fish into the sea. That night, we went hungry, to understand emptiness, he told us. Mother always said my sister Satsu was like wood, as rooted to the Earth as a *sakura*<sup>5</sup> tree; but she told me I was like water. Water can carve its way even through stone, and when trapped, water makes a new path. (Marshall, 2005, 3:42-4:57)

All the allusions to the elements and the way they cleverly use these Japanese terms continue the theme of exoticness despite the fact that they are now talking in English. The viewer might feel the secrets of the Orient are being unveiled before their eyes, as Sayuri talks about a world that is “fragile” and “forbidden”, and that her story should never be told; yet, the viewer is sitting watching it unfold in front of them.

The *geisha* styles of hair are changed to a more Western style throughout the whole movie (as will be dealt later on), and even Chiyo and Pumpkin as kids wear a hairstyle that would suit a Western child nowadays but definitely not an apprentice, who all wear the same uniform hairstyle when they are still *maiko* or *geisha* apprentices.

The movie version skipped the whole ending, choosing to finish the story when the Chairman confesses his love for Sayuri and they kiss. That did not add to the fact that Sayuri lived in New York later or what happened afterwards: the book, although romance is a key part, is the story of the life of a *geisha*, while the movie, with its abrupt ending at the culmination of the romance, is the story of the love between Sayuri and the Chairman. The fact that Sayuri happens to be a *geisha* or that it happens in Japan seems to only be an added benefit.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation (done by the author): Look!

<sup>5</sup> Cherry Blossom.

#### 4.3.3. Representation of Americans in the Movie

Towards the end of the story, set after 1945, the war had finished, and the Americans occupied Japan after their surrender. Of course, the streets of Gion appear full of Americans that catcall Sayuri and seem to have no respect for its surroundings. The change that Japan underwent under the influence of Americans is also greatly exaggerated, and while “the years under U.S. occupation were a period of much more direct Western influence” (Darling-Wolf, 2001, 282), in the movie everything, from characters to places, seems to undergo a radical change. The make-up changes, the lightning and *mise-en-scène* change, everything seems to show that the world that was known previously was now corrupted (Bello Viruega, 2011, p. 7), which brings us to one of the first ideas discussed about Orientalism, the exaltation of the past but the pejoration of the present.

One thing that greatly differs from the book, is the addition of an American Colonel in the place of the Japanese Minister Sayuri and Pumpkin entertain on a weekend trip to the Amami Islands. The scene where Colonel Derricks meets Sayuri, he refers to her as “[...] one of the mysteries of the Orient I told you about [talking to his associate]” to which Sayuri answers “A mystery perhaps you can solve.”(Marshall, 2005, 1:57:00); this brings us back to the theory of the East being a mystery for the West to discover, something strange and exotic; Orientalist thoughts of the East and the West being the division of the world. This idea is brought again when they whole party is taking a bath at an *onsen*, a hot spring, and the Americans talk how quick their baths are back at home and the Colonel remarks “But here you make everything a ritual,” (Marshall, 2005, 1:58:53) which might be both a praise and a critique, taking into account that rituals in Western society seem to be a thing of the past, something our ancestors did because they knew no better but society has advanced and no more rituals are needed.

#### 4.3.4. Women and Orientalism in the Movie

Golden always takes care of writing *geisha* as demure and as complying to men’s wishes as possible, as a Westerner would expect an Asian woman to be; however, in the movie we appreciate scenes in which it becomes apparent that the story ends up being Western dramatic romance despite its backdrop being Japan. This can be seen in the scene in the Amami Islands, towards the end, when Nobu is angrily accusing Sayuri of agreeing

to meet the Colonel for a sexual encounter, Sayuri talks back angrily and even shouts at him, which no one would expect a *geisha*, even less if she is talking to her future *danna*,<sup>6</sup> who will have to provide for her (Marshall, 2005, 2:01:24).

The scene when Sayuri dances (Marshall, 2005, 1:20:00) we can see another Westernization of women to appeal the occidental audience. *Geisha* dances might be unappealing to a Western public, being slow and hard to understand so to make it more appealing, Sayuri dances to something more closely related to contemporary dance than the Inoue School of Dance, which is what Sayuri says they dance in the book (Golden, 1997/2005, p. 305). This dance is more erotic to the Western eye than a traditional dance would be, with Sayuri's hair being undone and her kimono more revealing – she becomes an erotic symbol of exoticism. The Western thought turns, and not for the first time, the Kimono into an erotic symbol (Knight, 2015)

Some reviews of the movie also argue that the kimono and hair styles and make up that *geisha* wear are easily perceived as westernized (Smith, 2006). *Geisha* paint their face completely white like a ghost, their eyebrows blacked, their lips accentuated in red slightly and their hairs are done in a big style that hugs their whole face; meanwhile in the movie we appreciate a more Western type of make-up to appeal to the audience, the paleness is very toned down, with Mameha (woman in the middle in the photo) not even wearing any make up; and the hair style is much less big than what a real *geisha* would wear, with clear differences in the hairstyle between the *geisha* in the movie while in reality the differences would be much more subtle. This obvious difference between the American version of *geisha* and a Japanese *geisha* is an easy way to see how the movie is inevitably biased towards the Western audience to please their tastes in woman, while the male cast was chosen to appeal to the Japanese audience.



(Image: Marshall, R. (2005) *Memoirs of a Geisha* [Film].)



(Image: Retrieved from Getty Images.)

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<sup>6</sup> Man, usually rich, who holds a special relationship with a *geisha*, and is required to provide for her in terms of money and pays for her everyday life and in exchange is sometimes allowed to have intimate relationships with her. Protector.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Orientalist thoughts are ingrained in the West to the point that they are part of that culture and are not so easily dismissed. They are present in everyday life, in movies, in TV shows and in all kinds of media, and as Said says, despite the Colonialist era, which was the spark that ignited Orientalist thoughts throughout Europe, being long gone, the West still cannot forget this style of thoughts. This is the case with America, where, despite never having been a Colonial country, its culture is still ingrained with Orientalists thoughts as an inheritance from Europe. These Orientalists thoughts are what allows the West to feel superior over Eastern countries and over their cultures, allowing the West to rewrite them as they please and to understand them in their own terms; it is what asserts their greatness as smarter and civilized and morally superior to those that were colonized. However, Orientalism can also be a romantic way of approaching what is seen as the exoticism and sensuality of another culture, such as is the case with Japanese culture. This historical thinking has brought about too many misrepresentations of Eastern cultures in today's media, from movies to books, that represent the East as the West sees it but maybe not as how it might truly is.

Having analyzed the book (1997) and the movie (2005) of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, this paper aims to prove that Orientalist thoughts are very present in both representations of the story through different theories and critiques, along reviews of the book and the movie; however, as Orientalism is part of a cultural heritage, these misrepresentations were done in a much innocent way, not intending to hurt any culture but only done to appeal to another. Using the East, and especially Eastern women, as an outlet for Western desires has long been done, and through the representation of *geisha* in the book and the movie, a Westernization of Japanese women can be seen, as the work appeals to the Western public instead of being truthful to the culture they are representing and a representation of the East, but only as what the West thinks the East looks like. Arthur Golden, the author of the book, is an American trying to narrate the life of a Japanese woman in the early 1900s but he managed to create a convincing image to its Western readers with his narrative style and various narrative devices, so much so that it was taken for granted that what was explained in the book was reality and not just a plot for a novel. The movie, made in Hollywood and in English, received a lot of backlash for its casting decisions, since the main female roles were given to Chinese instead of Japanese and the

poor representation of the aesthetics of Japan and *geisha*. However, it became a big hit across the World despite the initial fears.

In conclusion, while both works are imbued with orientalism and misrepresentations, we have to take them for what they are, which is, a fictional piece, and an American novel from which an American film was made. The author never claimed the story was real, however, the public decided to believe it since old Japanese culture is still mostly unknown, and the public only knows modern representations through *manga* and anime, which paint a very different picture from the one presented in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Misrepresentation is a big problem in present day society, and a lot of work is being done towards the better understanding and respecting of other cultures. However, since, as said, these thoughts are so part of American still nowadays, it is difficult to escape them, maybe even almost impossible.

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