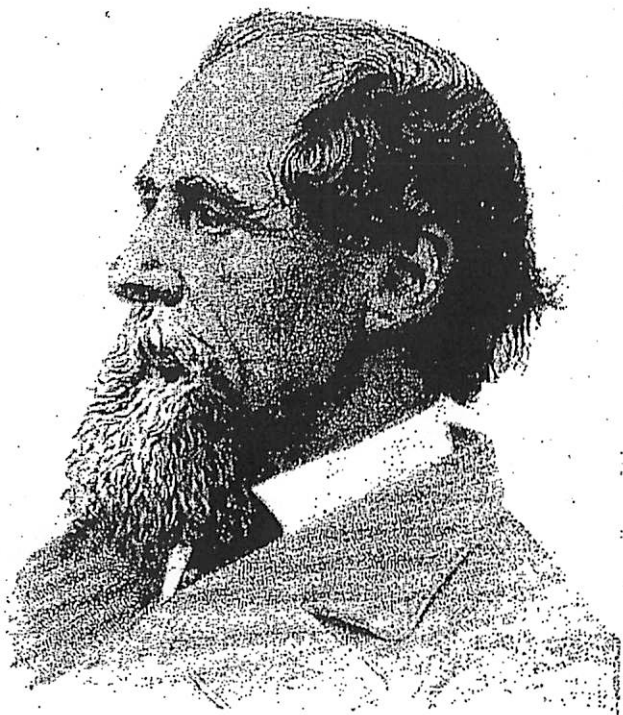




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Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. 434p. \$14.00 (paperback)

When its hardcover edition first appeared, my friend exclaimed, "Don't let a white man write this! This is the kind of novel you should write."

But who is the most appropriate author for a confession of a geisha but a Euro-American man? Who else writes about her any more? The title suggests that the book intends to benefit from the century and a half old fixation on Japanese sexuality (mis)represented by the geisha in the Western male imagination. But I must quickly add that we are fortunate to have Arthur Golden as the author. His earnest interest, cultural sensibility and fully pursued knowledge in the subject matter eloquently reveal themselves in his writing. The names of characters and places, for example, sound very appropriate to the period and its characteristics; the heroine's home village Yoroido (shutters in Japanese) indeed makes me imagine a tiny fishing village on a rocky cliff on the gloomy Japan Sea. Golden has also made the heroine Sayuri's voice and mind convincingly complex: you should notice she is not an innocent woman as she sounds on the surface - her pride, shrewd calculation, cruelty and intellect ooze through her seemingly naive voice. When it comes to history or politics, for example, Sayuri insists on her ignorance, but we know that she knows better than that. Her intelligence is apparent by the way she manages to control her impression of men so successfully.

Upon their mother's death Satsu and Chiyo leave their home village for Kyoto, led by Mr. Tanaka, who sells plain Satsu for

prostitution and blue-gray-eyed, clever Chiyo to an *okiya* in Gion to be trained to become a geisha. There await three businesswomen who run Nitta Okiya, including a beautiful but devilishly cruel geisha, Hatsumomo, who engineers incessant traps for Chiyo, and little trainee Pumpkin.

After an unsuccessful escape attempt with Satsu, Chiyo encounters a kind-hearted gentleman who gives her his handkerchief to dry her tears. This man, the Chairman, was on his way to the theater with a geisha, and this incident convinces Chiyo to become a geisha "for a chance to attract the notice of a man like the Chairman." Shortly, Hatsumomo's rival Mameha takes Chiyo under her wing to transform Chiyo to Sayuri, a top-class geisha in Gion. Mameha plots to set up the highest bidding record for Sayuri's deflowering ceremony, by inducing two patrons to compete with each other, one of whom turns out to be the Chairman's business partner.

Memoirs of a Geisha reads as a literary endeavor similar to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. The most essential similarity is not that both authors perform cross-cultural ventriloquism, but that both vocations represented - geisha and butler - are dying arts and that they both rule one's every behavior and utterance for a person's entire life. Today, our occupations rarely go as far as to perpetually dictate the whole of our existence: our body, our consciousness, our language, and above all our emotional life.

The two novels reveal how their main characters' callings mold their frame of mind. Thus, in order to explore their existence fully, they have to be a perfect geisha and a butler. But their perfection causes separate endings: a tragedy and a denouement. Stevens' lofty subdual and submission to Lord Darlington prevents him from seeing

the two most fundamental things in his life: his affection for Miss Kenton and the grave mistake his master has made. In Sayuri's case, however, remaining a perfect geisha - proud and subservient, calculating yet demure, beautiful and quick-witted without losing modesty and naivete, sexually provocative and ingenuous - is the key to her career success, and consequently, to her winning the love of her life.

I admire Sayuri's ambivalent virtues subtly realized in Sayuri's intimate voice by Golden's command, but he sometimes becomes too cautious in his literary adventure, for he is very well aware of the risk of masquerading as a geisha. Indeed, the book is carefully structured in every way to corroborate its accuracy and authenticity. The novel opens with "Translator's Note," a fictional preface by a certain Jakob Haarhuis, a professor in Japanese history. According to him, we are about to read the English translation of a confession dictated by a retired geisha, Sayuri. The frame narrative underlines the actuality of the subsequent narrative. And if you know Japan's long-term special relationship with the Netherlands, you may realize how convincing the translator's name sounds - it seems as if his family has been studying Japanology since 1600! Right away, the reader trusts Haarhuis's authority.

The author's acknowledgement - a long list of collaborators in his "extensive research" - is yet another way to authenticate the book. In the Japanese version, veracity is even more fortified with a short essay by Reiko Nagamura who recollects her friendship with "Arthurhan," a special postscript by Golden himself for the Japanese audience and "Translator's Note" by the real Japanese translator, who put the English original *back* into Japanese and the accurate Kyoto dialect.

In his postscript, Golden explains the multicultural sensibility in today's American literature to the Japanese audience. He illustrates that a foreign writer is likely to be criticized severely for a minor factual mistake, with which a native writer could get away. He then stresses accuracy was the priority when writing *Memoirs*. In the end, however, Golden asks the Japanese audience to judge his book based on how they feel in their heart when they finish reading it. After all, he suggests, *Memoirs* is a fiction. The author begs the reader's approval for the story's emotional instead of factual appeal. Unfortunately, the reader might feel that the novel lacks substance inside the perfect facade of accuracy.

I must say the novel's core inside the impeccable whitewashed makeup seems something quite American. As Golden's alter ego Jakob Haarhuis insightfully observes, Sayuri's story would have never manifested without his "foundation." It is a dream-come-true story of a woman with a definite goal in her life and in search of true love. The more Golden keeps up the exotic details and the oriental voice, the more the novel oscillates between the surface Japanese rhetoric and its American plot, structure and theme.

But it is unjust to criticize Golden for having an American heart. We must read *Memoirs of a Geisha* as a fairy tale. It takes place in a fantasyland, not in actual Japan. A prime example is a lullaby that Mr. Tanaka sings with little Chiyo in the second chapter. Golden conscientiously provides its full Japanese lyric followed by its English translation. It is actually the Japanese translation of Mozart's well-known lullaby. It depicts the Western pastoral where a babe sleeps with birds and sheep in the meadows with stars watching over them. Its first line goes like this:

Nemure, yoi ko yo! (Go to sleep, you good child!)

Mr Tanaka's version is altered very slightly:

Nemure yo, ii karei yo! (Go to sleep, you good flounder!)

By merely changing *ko* into *karei*, Golden transforms the entire impression of the landscape: from the pastoral land to the fantastic scenery of a faraway shore where innocent flounders slumber.

This lyric epitomizes the magical touch that Golden exercises on the old-fashioned Western narrative. The novel seduces today's sophisticated American audience into indulging themselves without guilt in the familiar tale of a chaste prostitute (or "kept woman" if you do not wish to call geisha a prostitute), which they might find simplistic and reactionary in a more familiar setting. The historical accuracy, the researched authenticity, the fascinating exoticism provide American readers with the license to suspend their disbelief in the old Cinderella story. They are kindly permitted by a geisha with blue-gray eyes to forget themselves and become enchanted at their own fantasy like children once again.

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