

Culture and Custom of Geishas in the Works of Arthur Golden and Mineko Iwasaki

S.P.Soubhagya^a, S. Ambika^b

^aM.Phil. Scholar, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, India

^bResearch Supervisor, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, India

Abstract

Japan, one of the super powers of the world has a mesmerizing and multifaceted culture. Literature being the messenger of society, the cultural aspects of each and every country finds representation through it. Arthur Golden with his creative fecundity tries to break down the stereotypical image of geisha community. His daringness has always put him on the pinnacles of controversy and Mineko Iwasaki's Geisha of Gion can be considered as a reply to Golden. The paper titled "Harrowing and Excruciating Experiences of Geisha: An Insight into the works of Arthur Golden and Mineko Iwasaki" tries to unravel how geisha culture hindered the physical and psychic growth of women folk through ages.

KEYWORDS: Culture, geisha, stereotype, hindrance.

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"Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion—the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater, the passion for making them all prevail". –Matthew Arnold

The term culture derives from the Latin term "cult" or "cultus" which means to cultivate. Culture plays a vital role in moulding the individual psyche of people in all community. Culture cannot be inherently acquired but it must be learned and shared. Culture evolves according to the changing social, political, and economic environments. A country's culture is manifested through its art, symbols, values, rites, literature, sculpture, religion, philosophy, etc. According to Edmund Tylor, "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). Each country has its own culture and each culture has certain widely accredited and commonly accepted values that differentiate it from other cultures. Japan is a country which has mesmerizing and multifaceted culture. Many aspects of Japanese tradition and culture have been widely recognized as symbols of Asian lifestyle. It would be incomplete to speak about Japanese culture without mentioning the geisha culture. Unlike other ordinary Japanese women, geisha world have a peculiar culture that has to be followed by geishas. The works such as *Memoirs Of A Geisha* and *Geisha of Gion* vividly portray these socially accepted culture and custom geishas should strictly follow within their community. In one way or the other they should live according to the whims and fancies of certain people who govern them and it is important for them to

relieve themselves from those clutches. Both the works show how difficult it is to follow this staunch, unrecorded rules and regulations in order to become a geisha.

Geisha of Gion marvelously describes special districts that were allotted to the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure and they were referred to as Karyukai. A geisha should leave her home, her family, her filial gratitude and all other relationships if she is supposed to become a geisha. Traditionally, only people who were born and lived in GionKobucould study all the requisite disciplines that was necessary for a geisha. One cannot become a geisha by living outside the Okiyo. But this is not in the case of the modern geishas. When a proprietress decides to make a geisha their attotori, their successor, she has to leave everything and should be a legal heir to her new family and she has to accept the name of her new Okiyo. It is the key duty of the proprietress to find a proper owner for the Okiyo before she dies. After becoming a member in the Okiyo, they have to be well mannered in order to become a full-fledged geisha. Arthur Golden elucidates through his character Sayuri, how one has to work very hard to remain a geisha and it also reveals the different stages involved in making geishas successful. In the Okiyo, people treat Sayuri almost like a slave during her initial stages and it is said that somehow she survives in the Okiyo along with others. Usually, the children who are trained to be professional geishas officially begin their training on sixth June of the year when they turn six. Likewise, Mineko after being admitted to the okiyo at the age of six went for her training period after which she will be admitted in the school for her further lessons. Mineko was admitted for taking her new lessons at the age of six. This training period plays a very vital role in the learning process of geishas. Sayuri explains how much trouble they have to endure to become a geisha “What makes a geisha’s training so difficult isn’t simply the arts she must learn, but how hectic her life becomes. After spending all morning in lessons, she still expected to work during the afternoon and evening very much as she always has” (144).

Food plays a foremost role in the life of the maikos and geikos. There were certain restrictions for them to have their food. According to the different stages, the type of food they have to consume differs. Tea ceremony plays a very major role in the training life of a geisha. Usually in Japanese culture, this ceremony is conducted between two people who use to sit before their guest and prepare the tea in a very traditional manner. Sayuri puts it as:

If you think of it as sitting down to have a nice cup of tea...well, it’s more like a sort of dance, or even a meditation, conducted while kneeling. The tea itself is made from tea leaves ground into a powder and then whisked with boiled water into a frothy green mix we called matcha, which is very unpopular with foreigners. I’ll admit it does look like green soapy water and has a bitter taste. (144)

During the training period geishas have to eat Japanese food such as rice, fish and vegetables and while they are out for a treat they can have western food such as steak and ice cream. They are sometimes forced to accept things that they hate. Some of the geishas like Golden’s Hatsumomo are very much interested in drinking Sake, a kind of alcoholic drink which induces sleep. She is fond of a kind of drink called amakuchi and it is only brewed in winter. During its unavailability Hatsumomo would drink beer. But in the case

of Mineko and Sayuri, they are forced to drink sake because of the wish of their clients. Sayuri with much contempt gulps it as there is no other way for her and if she doesn't obey the wishes of her clients it would be considered a sin according to the geisha tradition and at the same time they are taught that drinking sake is illegal. Mineko also undergoes the same situation when she is asked to drink the sake and she says that she has never tasted anything so awful like sake. She feels ashamed of breaking the law that she wanted to crawl into a hole and die. This shows how restricted and barred the lives of geishas were.

Dance is the major art practiced by the geishas. It is the most respected of the geisha's art but only the most promising and potential artists are allowed to specialize in it. Both *Memoirs Of A Geisha* and *Geisha of Gion* expounds how dance becomes the major art of geisha. During traditional times, there were two theatrical traditions, Noh theatre and the Kabuki theatre. The Inoue School is considered to be the best school for geishas if one has to become a professional dancer. Habitually, Inoue School has lot of dance forms and among them the most favourite and much practiced is Noh. Sayuri illustrates it as:

The Inoue School of dance, practiced by the geisha of Gion, derives from Noh theater. Because Noh is a very ancient art that has always been patronized by the Imperial court, dancers in Gion consider their art superior to the school of dance practiced in the Pontocho district across the river which derives across the river, which derives from Kabuki. (150)

The first dance lesson taught in Inoue School is Kadomatsu and the hierarchical order is revealed when Iwasaki refers to her teachers who were divided into "Big Mistress" and "Little Mistress". Each of them has their own role to play and the major division is based on the way one accepts and performs their lessons. Before becoming an apprentice geisha, one should learn to play tsutsumi, okawa, taiko, etc. In Japan MiyakoOdori is often referred as "dances of the capital" but outside Japan it is known as Cherry Dance and it usually takes place during spring season. Some of the dances an apprentice geisha should learn are Gionkouta (The Ballad of the Gion) Akebono (Dawn)Shakkyou (A Story about a Lion and her Cubs)Matsuzukushi (A Story about a Pine Tree) Shisha (The Story of a Contest among Four Companions of the Emperor Riding in Four Ox carts)Nanoha (The Story of the Butterfly and the Cole Blossom) etc.

In the month of April there is the famous performance called MiyakoOdori. In the month of June there is Rokkagai and the word Rokkagai refers to all the karyukai and is in one time a year when all the karyukai of Kyoto get together and put on group performances that showcase the different styles of dance. During olden times there were six karyukai in Kyoto but it reduced to five because the Shimabara area is not active with such activities. Auntie Oima, Mother Sakaguchi, and Mama Masako decide to make Mineko the Minarai which means an apprentice maiko on 15 February. Both Sayuri and Mineko are eagerly waiting for their debut as a maiko and they are very much pleased to receive the news of their first appearance. Before that, there is a ceremony of binding sisters. Mameha took Sayuri as her sister and it is part of their custom to clasp their hands together in front of Gion Shrine and to announce God that they will soon be sisters. After that there will be a ceremony which is to be held in one of GionKobu's tea houses and the

ritual will last for ten minutes. A maid is asked to bring a tray with several sake cups and both Sayuri and Mameha are made to take three sips from each cup and then from that moment onwards both of them promise to be sisters. In the same way, Mineko clasps her hands with Miss Yaechiyo and become sisters. During the initial stages of apprenticeship a geisha cannot perform without the accompaniment of her sister. The responsibility of becoming an older sister is compared to that of carrying a sake of rice back and forth across the city, because if the younger sister behaves badly in public the reputation of her mentor would be at stake. This formal procedure not only shows the top custom of geishas but also the bond that existed between sisters.

Geishas play a major role in the life of every individual in Japanese society. Having a geisha at ones beck and call is an issue of prestige and status in GionKobu. During the seventeenth century, there were taverns known as Mizukakejaya which was setup for the refreshment of the visitors in GionKobu but later it became the Ochaya of today. In each and every step a geisha takes, there are certain rules and policies which curtail their own will. Even the gaze of a geisha plays an inevitable role in their thriving future. She should make a man fall by her gaze before appearing in front of people to become a geisha. Sayuri is asked by Mameha to make a man fall just by her gaze and she succeeds in making a delivery boy collapse with his tray stacked with lunch boxes. She should reveal her arms to create a center of attention in the mind of her clients. The way a geisha pour tea would be different from the way a maid did. Pouring tea to the clients like a maid would destroy all the hopes of the customers. It is clear when Mameha says to Sayuri “You have a lovely arm; and beautiful skin. You should make sure every man who sits near you sees it at least once” (169).

The customs of geisha society is very well apparent through their dressing style and cosmetics. For every season, they wear different clothes. Kimono is said to be the traditional dress of the geishas. Kimono is considered so sacred by these people. They love their kimono so much and were very much conscious about their appearance. They believe that half of their personality is built up by the dress they wore. The dress of an apprentice geisha differs from that of the dressing style of a mature geisha. Each kimono can be considered as a work of art on which reflect its creator’s creativity. Mineko illustrates the importance of kimono as:

In general, we can tell a lot about a person from the quality of the kimono that he or she is wearing: financial status, sense of style, family background, personality. There may be little variation in the cut of a kimono but there is a tremendous variety in the colours and patterns of the materials used to make them. There is an art, too, to matching the choice of kimono to the situation in which it is worn. (73)

The kimono is worn daily by geishas and there are different styles for different occasions such as tea ceremonies, parties, funerals, and other events. Mineko cites examples of nightingales in late March and chrysanthemums in early November. The kimono worn by a maiko and a geiko differs. The kimono a maiko wears is known as hikizuri. It is different than the ordinary kimono because it has long sleeves and a wide train and is worn on the back of the neck. The hikizuri is protected with a long obi usually twenty feet in length and is tied at the back of both ends in a dangling position. Young girls dress

much more richly than mature ones as they wear brighter colours, showier fabrics and longer obi. A mature woman cannot wear very showy fabric and she has to tie the obi on the back side so that it will form a box shape which they usually refer as “drum knot”. Wearing an obi is not an easy job; it takes lot of effort from the side of the dresser to tie the obi. It is usually twice as long as a man’s height and is as wide as a woman’s shoulders. It covers the area from the breastbone to the navel. A half dozen cords and clasps are needed to keep it in place and certain number of padding is used to make shape for the knot. For an apprentice geisha the dararai-obi (dangling obi) is knotted almost as high as the shoulder blades and the ends will be hanging nearly to the ground. The kimono itself is very heavy with two long sleeves. Below the sleeve the fabric hangs down to form a pocket shape and this pocket is referred to as furi. There is an obijime that is tied in the chest to safeguard the obi. The hip wraps used by the geishas are known as koshimaki. After tying it there is a short-sleeved kimono underskirt which is tied tight at the waist. The costumes and dresses are almost similar for the prostitutes and the geishas. They wear kimono and hair an ornament similar to a geisha but their obi is tied in front rather than on the back. When the maikos reach the age of fifteen, the Okiyo will give them an otokoshi (dresser). The dresser plays a key role in the appearance of a geisha and if the dress is unseasonal or if it has any damages the dresser should bear the blame.

The costume of a geisha is not only limited to the kimono they wore but there are also so many other things which decide the perfectness of their attire. A kimono is accompanied with either wooden or leather sandals. A maiko usually wear a 6-inch high clog-like wooden sandal known as Okobo. They are quite tall and made of wood with lovely, lacquered thongs to hold the foot in place. Mineko describes it as: “Okobo are difficult to walk in, but the mincing gait they ensure is thought to add to the maiko’s allure” (89). Both maikos and geikos always wear white tabi socks and its toe is separated like a mitten, so that its toes can grip the sandals easily. The socks will be one size smaller than the shoes and it lends a neat and dainty appearance to the foot. The main point of a geikos enterprise is perfection, and the dressers’ important job is to ensure this perfection. Cosmetic plays an imperative task in making the geisha a work of art. Along with these costumes, a geisha should also wear a handbag called a kago which has a basket like base and is made of a tie-dyed silk shibori. Shibori is made by tying silk into a myriad of minute knots with thread before it is dyed. Habitually geishas used to keep their fan inside thekago. A geisha’s fan is often considered as a decorated ornament without which a geisha cannot exist. It is known as maiohgi and a dancer’s fan is slightly larger than an ordinary fan. An ordinary fan is made with bamboo spines and it is twelve inches long.

A maiko in full costume closely resembles the Japanese ideal of feminine beauty. Through the character Hatsumomo, Golden vividly portrays how the geishas apply their makeup. Each geisha has different makeup boxes and in order to make them beautiful they use half a dozen makeup brushes in various shapes. Some of them are like wide fans and others look like chopsticks with some soft hair at the end. There are brushes known as pigment sticks which is about the size of a baby’s finger but hard and smooth as stone. It is used to give a reddish blush on the cheeks. It is used for shading. The dry piece of paulownia wood is used to draw eyebrows. A kind of white makeup plays a significant

role in the exterior look of a geisha. It is applied on their face as well as on their neck. Earlier, people used a white makeup called “China Clay” which was made with a base of lead. But gradually it turned to be poisonous and was very hard to remove. It ruined the beautiful skin of the geishas and so they started to find some other white paint for their makeup. This makeup has a long tradition and its history can be traced back to the pre-modern times. Originally, it was worn by male aristocrats when they have an engagement with the emperor. This makeup made it easier for the king to distinguish who was who. Later the dancers adopted this make up and during that period it contained zinc which was very bad for health. Soon after, geishas started to use a pale yellow cream which was made from nightingale droppings and people believed that it is good for skin. It is very expensive and so geishas use it very carefully that they put only a few dots around their eyes and mouth. Then they use to rub it in their face until it turns chalky colour.

Hairstyle is another major factor that distinguishes a geisha from other ordinary women. A maiko and geiko differs in their hairstyle. Special meaning and seasonality is attached to each hairstyle. Wareshinobu hairstyle is the most worn and most complex hairstyle of a geisha. It emphasizes the prettiness of the maiko. It is the first hairstyle a maiko wears. In this style the hair is swept up and shaped into a mass on the top of the head and is tied with a red silk band which is referred to as kanoko and is decorated with the stick-pin ornaments which is called kanzashi. This hairstyle uses Susuki (August Flower) and also makes use of silver flutters, opal hairpin, kanoko pin, jade hairpin and Tortoiseshell hairpin. Iwasaki describes it as “I had a red silk band called an arimachikanoko in my chignon, and at the crown, a kanokodome band and pins made from coral, jade and silver... and the tortoiseshell ornaments called chirikan. They are only worn once in a maiko’s lifetime, during the first three days of her debut” (172). This style is mainly used in order to showcase the curve of a young girl’s neck and the freshness of her features. The apprentice geisha is to wear the “split peach” hairstyle. There are so many hairdressers in GionKobu and it is very difficult for both the dresser and the owner of the hair to safeguard the beautifully tied hair. Sayuri reveals her agony in tying her hair by her hairdresser. First he makes her sit in a stiff position which itself is a burdensome one. Then he pours a bucket of warm water in her head and begins to scour it with soap. Sayuri explains that it is an awful experience and it is a moment when she hates her geisha life a lot. The dresser rubs her scalp with his fingernails to steer it clear from dandruff. Dandruff is a pressing problem for the geishas as it makes the hair unattractive and unclean. Afterwards by sitting on a mat the dresser tears a wooden comb through her hair until her neck muscles become sore from pulling and pushing. He then combs the hair with camellia oil and then the most aching thing is done to her. With the help of wax which never goes with the hair, the dresser sweeps the forelock back and brings the rest of the hair into a knot as Sayuri puts almost like a pincushion on the top of the head. This pincushion shows as if it has a split in its centre when viewed from backside. Thus this hairstyle got the name “split peach”.

Sakko hairstyle is worn for the final two months of a maiko’s apprenticeship. Her hair ornaments at this period must be more subtle and should be more daring than that of a geisha. A maiko changes her hairstyle five times to signify the troubles she encounters in the becoming a geiko. Katsuyama is the name of another hairstyle which is worn for one month after the Gion festival in July. The geishas do not wash their hair ornaments

often due to this hairstyle. Sayuri expresses that wearing someone else's hair ornaments home at night is considered big sin and people who commit this sin will be treated as if they came home with someone else's underwear. Maintaining this hairstyle is a very difficult thing and it is considered as a great burden. Sayuri details this bad event of maintaining hairstyle by saying that young geishas will be very proud of their hairstyle at first but after two or three days they felt as if it is squeezing the whole body. They will be asked to sleep on a futon to sleep on which is made of wood and it doesn't serve as a cradle for sleep like pillows. In order to make the geishas aware of the fact that they should sleep only in the futon, the okiya used a trick that a bag of wheat chaff will be paddled around the futon. If the geisha's hair unknowingly falls in it, the wheat chaff sticks in the wax coated hair and once again they have to run to their hairdresser. Fearing this geishas will be very much conscious about the way they sleep.

Having a danna is another significant custom of the geisha community. A geisha without a danna is considered a "stray cat". The character Hatsumomo shows how hard it is to be a geisha without having a danna. By comparing and contrasting the characters Hatsumomo and Mameha, one can understand the privilege a geisha takes in having a danna. A maiko need not worry about her danna till she is eighteen but when she turns out to be eighteen the first job her ochaya people do is finding her a danna. It is very apparent through Mameha's plans that she would get a danna for Sayuri. Mameha schemes to make Nobu or Dr.Crab fall for Sayuri makes her one of the top geishas of GionKobu. A danna not only covers all the living expenses of geishas like providing her with food, dress, sponsoring dance recitals, paying her registration fees etc, but also pays her usual hourly fee.

Mizuage is another important traditional ceremony that a maiko undergoes. Both Arthur Golden and Mineko Iwasaki give two diverse aspects of mizuage. Arthur Golden says that it is a deflowering ceremony and the other argues that it is only a hair change ceremony. Mineko says that mizuage is a word they use to refer to the total earnings of a geiko to analyze who has received the biggest amount and to appreciate her publically during a ceremony that is to be held during the annual commencement at Nyokoba School on January 7. But Arthur Golden give a different version for it. He says that it a deflowering of a virgin maiko by the highest bidder. The man who gives a large sum will be allowed to take a maiko's virginity. Sayuri is made to surrender herself to Dr.Crab for he bids her the highest amount of money. Iwasaki explains this rite as "The change in hairstyle meant that I had entered the latter stages of my career as a maiko. My regular customers took this as a sign that I was nearing marriageable age and started to approach me with proposals" (233).

Geishas and their rules and regulations have been a great tradition which is deeply rooted in Japanese soil. But due to the challenging lifestyle of the geishas and the pressure exerted by the modern world, the number of teahouses and the number of geishas are declining. Both the works taken for study mourns the extinction of geisha culture. Iwasaki ends her book with the lines: "I am afraid that the traditional culture of GionKobu and the other karyukai will cease to exist in the near future. The thought that little will remain of the glorious tradition beyond its external forms fills me with sorrow"

(334). Geishas play an inexorable role as far as Japanese culture is concerned. With their elegant attitude and behaviour they can be perceived as moving works of art.

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