

**Becoming Geisha: Art,  
Self-definition and  
Objectification**

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**“We don’t become geisha so our lives will be satisfying. We become geisha because we have no other choice”.**  
Arthur Golden

As much as art is a sublime manifestation of human achievement and a means of self-definition, with an unfaltering liberating potential, as much as it is liable to be a means of human objectification. This paper sets out to examine one notorious example of the deleterious potential of art as manifested in the geisha world of the Japanese culture. Though the enigmatic geisha realm had been extant since the dawn of Japanese history, recent interest in it, what may be described as a “geisha boom” (Bardsley), has been kindled with the publication of Arthur Golden’s novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997), and its ensuing 2005 movie adaptation. Arthur Golden is an American writer who received his education at Harvard College, earning a degree in art history and specializing in Japanese art. In 1980 he earned an M.A. in Japanese history from Columbia University, where he also learned Mandarin Chinese. Spending some time at Beijing University, he worked in Tokyo, and, after returning to the United States, he earned an M.A. in English from Boston University (“Golden”).

The events of the novel unfold as follows: Chiyo, a young Japanese girl whose family is unable to provide for her, is sold into a geisha house in Kyoto in the 1930s. Chiyo is subjected to all forms of abuse at the hands of a malevolent geisha called Hatsumomo. One day, as Chiyo weeps by a stream in the city, a wealthy man stops and consoles her; an affectionate act that Chiyo never forgets. Two years later, a kind geisha called

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Mameha takes Chiyo under her tutelage. Chiyo, now renamed Sayuri, becomes a successful geisha, renowned for her beauty. Eventually, and after a most arduous odyssey, she meets the man who had comforted her by the stream.

With its publication in 1997, *Memoirs of a Geisha* became a bestseller, selling more than four million copies in English, besides being translated into thirty-two languages around the world. Background information was culled from a number of interviews Golden conducted with some renowned geisha, among the most important of whom was Mineko Iwasaki who later sued him for defaming her character after the release of the Japanese translation of the novel. Luckily, the lawsuit was settled out of court in February 2003 (“Golden”). A recourse to Golden’s novel, coupled with a cursory look at some notable scenes from the movie at the end of the paper, will form the basis of examining the subterranean geisha world along the lines of objectification theory.

In its broadest sense, objectification theory provides a theoretical framework that “places female bodies in a sociocultural context with the aim of illuminating the lived experiences and mental health risks of girls and women who encounter sexual objectification” (Fredrickson and Roberts 174). The dehumanizing impact of sexual objectification can be clearly evinced in the following definition: “Sexual objectification is when a person is seen as a sexual object ... when their sexual attributes and physical attractiveness are separated from the rest of their personality and existence as an individual, and they are reduced to instruments of pleasure for another person” (Cooper). Based on the assumption that bodies are embedded within social and cultural contexts, and are thus shaped by sociopolitical practices and discourses,



objectification theory is primarily concerned with how this perspective begets “habitual body monitoring”, which on its part, exacerbates feelings of “shame and anxiety, reduce[s] opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish[es] awareness of internal bodily states” (Fredrickson and Roberts 174). It is the aim of this paper to examine the objectification of Chiyo/Sayuri, the retrospective narrator of Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*, as emblemizing the experiential repercussions of objectification; in her case an experience that is set against an artistic backdrop.

The actual events of the memoirs start in the year 1929, span World War II and extend into postwar Japan. As for the introduction, it is presumably penned by the interviewer of the retired Sayuri who narrates her odyssey in hindsight. Having grappled with many setbacks, she eventually becomes a renowned geisha whose life story is crowned by her being united with the Chairman, the man of her dreams. She finally leaves Japan to live an affluent life in Manhattan. Originally named Chiyo, Sayuri is born into the impoverished fishing village of Yoroido. Turning nine, she is sold into an *okiya*, a geisha abode situated in Gion, the most famous *hanamachi*, or geisha district, in Kyoto, then the capital of Japan. In terms of objectification theory, the *okiya* may be viewed as the spawning ground that ushers her into more dehumanizing “contexts of sexualized gazing”; that is milieus wherein she is countenanced only as an object of pleasure for others (Frederickson and Roberts 175).

Presided over by three women, Granny, Mother and Auntie, the *okiya* incarcerates Chiyo as she begins her training as a geisha, along with Pumpkin, another apprentice geisha of her age. Also living in the *okiya* is the renowned but malevolent



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geisha Hatsumomo. Within the confines of successive objectifying contexts, Chiyo will be constantly reduced to an artistic spectacle that must gain her spectators' approval. "[A] geisha must be very careful about the image she presents to the world", contends Mameha, one of the most famous and successful geishas who agrees to adopt Chiyo as her "little sister" and gives her the name Sayuri as her geisha name<sup>1</sup> (Golden 162). Paradoxically, despite the over-visibility of her body as a spectacle, a geisha's existence as a human being is totally obliterated. Right from the outset, Sayuri comes to the realization that to be a geisha is to be perpetually objectified in those "contexts of sexualized gazing". An understanding of the literal meaning of the term "geisha" and a cursory look at its intricacies may help reveal the objectifying potential of art.

Literally speaking, *gei* means arts or skills, whereas *sha* means person; hence, artistic person or artisan. The figure of the geisha resulted from centuries of traditional courtesans and dancing girls who were sought by the growing class of businessmen and warrior-aristocrats. Harking back to the earliest kabuki performers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, geisha at the time encompassed both men and women performers who exhibited artistic skills and engaged in sexual liaisons. From medieval times, *gei* had come to connote a wide array of skills, crafts and fine arts, but it was not until the late eighteenth century that "geisha" had come to signify the female performers that Golden's novel features. By then, these women were distinguished by the artistic skills of singing, dancing, conversation, story-telling, and playing the

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<sup>1</sup> From this point onwards in the paper, Chiyo will be referred to as Sayuri.



*shamisen*, a three-stringed musical instrument, rather than being engaged in sexual exploits. The role of geisha was primarily to embellish an evening's entertainment with an artistic hue (Johnston 37-38; Knapp 129).

Historically, the development of the geisha was connected with the popularity of the three-stringed *shamisen* and the *odoriko* (dancers). The *shamisen* was first played by courtesans in Yoshiwara, a famous pleasure district in Edo, present-day Tokyo. Later on, high-ranking courtesans abandoned the task, and accordingly the role of performing music was relegated to professional male geisha. The *odoriko*, in contradistinction, were young dancers who became extremely popular in the late seventeenth-century among upper-class samurai households. They were sent by their parents to dancing teachers who subsequently hired them at parties, without their being engaged in sexual liaisons. Nevertheless, the popularity of the *odoriko* engendered a horde of young girls who deviated from the original purpose of entertainment and became engaged in prostitution. Earning an ever-increasing popularity, they flourished in the Yoshiwara long before the emergence of the female geisha. Though the geisha has come to be inextricably bound with women, the first woman geisha did not appear on the scene until 1751. Until then, all geisha had been male. In due course, however, female geisha were much more in demand, and within thirty years, women had established themselves as a majority and accordingly laid claim on the use of the unqualified term "geisha". The female performers were initially distinguished by gender-specific terms such as *onna geisha* (female geisha) or *geiko* (artistic girls). However, with

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women taking over the scene, the dwindling male geisha had to resort to the gender-specific term *otoko geisha* (male geisha) to distinguish themselves from their female counterparts<sup>2</sup>. *Vis-à-vis* courtesans and prostitutes, geisha distinguished themselves by social sophistication (Henshall 18; Seigel 171-74). Although the line of demarcation between prostitutes and geisha was not always clear-cut, a different licensing system was established for each category. Officially, geisha had not been classed as prostitutes, and were not included in the official ban on prostitution that was issued in Japan in 1956. In practice, however, they had occasionally resorted to providing sexual favours in addition to the entertainment covered by their fees (Henshall 16; Johnston 37-38).

It thus becomes apparent that a geisha's life was first and foremost embedded in the realm of arts. Talented in music, dance and conversation, they were regarded as the most educated women at the time (Condon 246). Yet, in all the artistic activities they undertook, a geisha's demeanour was meant to be enticing; hence the objectifying potential of art in rendering women "acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). In other words, it was how a geisha aesthetically displayed her body to others that determined her life experiences and value. As is mentioned in Sayuri's account of her life, looking pretty was a cardinal geisha "responsibility" (Golden 337). As if this measure of objectification was not enough, when a client's attraction to a geisha's art mounted to a

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<sup>2</sup> The geisha population is steadily declining, partly because of its rigorous training, but more because the profession is too traditional to be attuned to the taste of modern young women.



desire for sexual intercourse, it had to be conducted in conformity with a set of delineated rules and procedures over which she exercised no control. In point of fact, a marked absence of free will was a defining feature of a geisha's world. The *mizuage* was a ceremony undergone by a *maiko*, an apprentice geisha, to signify her coming of age. The patron, or *danna*, who paid for the debut, had the right to the deflowering of the young geisha. A *danna* was typically a wealthy man, sometimes married, who had the means to support the very large expenses related to a geisha's traditional training and other costs. A contract was often signed by him, prescribing the time in which she would be his mistress (Seigel 171). Generally, geisha preferred long-term relationships with their customers, in hopes that some wealthy patron might pay the geisha house to free them from their indentured work and perhaps even marry them (Condon 246).

A dichotomous perception of women had long been a hallmark of Japanese culture. On the one hand, among the samurai and aristocratic classes, issues pertaining to women's sexuality were strictly circumscribed, thus yielding the prototype of the domestic woman for whom virginity before matrimony and chastity thereafter were unflinchingly venerated. On the other hand, societal codes were less stringent among the urban working classes and rural peasantry, thereby begetting a class of much-coveted erotic women: "Whether the geisha sang, danced, gestured, or indulged in clever talk, her demeanour was suggestive and enticing, offering the man everything he could not find at home--everything his suppressed and enslaved wife was forbidden to give him" (Knapp 129). The strictures of Confucianism expected the wife to act with the

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utmost sense of propriety in the domestic realm<sup>3</sup>. The geisha, by contrast, was “a creature of levity crafted to compensate for this dullness. The wife and the geisha [were], in this sense, complementary” (Henshall 17-18).

Be it a wife or a woman of pleasure, evidently a woman’s sense of selfhood was subsumed in concerns about bodily expectations. If this means anything, it lends credence to the status of the Japanese culture back then as a “sexually objectifying environment” (Szymanski et al. 20-21). From the standpoint of objectification theory, the core criteria for these environments are a strict abiding to traditional gender roles; a high probability of male predominance; women’s inferior status; a high degree of attention directed to sexual/ physical attributes of women’s bodies, and an acknowledgement of the authority of the male gaze (20-21). It is against a similar background that Sayuri’s objectification unfolds. Since sexual objectification occurs whenever “a woman’s body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Fredrickson and Roberts 175), the realm of art in which she is indoctrinated degenerates from being a means of self-definition to become a potent vehicle of self-annihilation. Art becomes a mandate to which she has to succumb. A most revelatory fact she has to come to terms with is palpable in her proclamation: “We don’t become geisha so

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<sup>3</sup> The system of ethics, education and statesmanship propagated by Confucius and his disciples, and calling for love for humanity, veneration of ancestors and reverence for parents among many other ideals.



our lives will be satisfying. We become geisha because we have no other choice” (Golden 344).

As such, public glamour and genuine artistic accomplishment did not in any way mitigate the fact that being a geisha entailed the subjugation and exploitation of women. Living as quasi-slaves, they grappled with a restrictive mode of life under the surveillance of male employers and ruthless female supervisors. Even a geisha’s feelings had to be monitored to serve the demands of her profession to the extent that certain sentiments were denied to her: “A good geisha can’t be sad. She must be gay and bright. She must be a person who likes learning the arts. A good geisha has to be able to drink in order to create a good atmosphere, and she must be able to stay up late. She can’t become sleepy because there is no time limit” (Uchiki qtd. Condon 259). In short, the basic human needs were kept at bay in the name of artistic expertise.

Compelled by dire destitution, and as exemplified by Sayuri’s case, parents frequently sent, or more accurately sold, their daughters to geisha houses so as to acquire the skills of a set of prescribed arts:

Although the entertainment industry may be seen as a source of employment for women ... it also has a less respectable past reputation. In times of economic hardship, it has been a well-known practice for a struggling family to ‘sell’ a daughter to a brothel, or *geisha* house, in order to feed the rest of the family. An outright payment would be made which would represent several years of training and service for their daughter who would live in the house, but be literally expected to pay off her own debt to the brothel through her work. (Hendry 201)

The commodification of the geisha emerged primarily from their inability to secure sufficient economic resources; a

commodification that is exacerbated by the regimented mode of life imposed on them in the name of artistic indoctrination. Rather than providing them with a venue for self-actualization, the artistic skills they were entailed to learn were geared towards rendering them “*bodies-* and in particular ... bodies that exist[ed] for the use and pleasure of others” (Fredrickson and Roberts 175). Together with her sister Satsu, and right after they are being sold by their father to Mr. Tanaka, a fortune-teller subjects them to an act of scrutiny that results in their objectification. Yet, for all the oppression she will be subjected to, Sayuri’s predicament is less woeful than that of her sister’s. The latter is sold outright into prostitution. Even worse than that, needy families sometimes went as far as killing their own infants. The official justification for these dehumanizing practices was Confucianism which hailed daughters who sacrificed themselves for the welfare of their families as paragons of filial duty (Henshall 17). The Japanese perception of filial duty mandated a daughter to become a geisha, or even a prostitute, to relieve the financial distress of her parents (Street 135). It is against such an objectifying background that Sayuri embarks on her career as a geisha.

Significantly, Sayuri’s first encounter with a geisha at a teahouse is not only framed within what objectification theory designates as a “context of sexualized gazing” (Fredrickson and Roberts 175), but it is also underlain with another level of objectification through a male gaze:

Mr. Tanaka’s eyes were fixed on her like a rag on a hook. He went on watching her while everyone else laughed, and when she knelt beside him to pour a few more drops of beer into his glass, she looked up at him in a way that suggested they knew each other very well. (Golden 32)



That his “eyes were fixed” on her, in addition to the ensuing act of “watching” which he “went on” directing to her, assert the stature of the geisha realm as an objectifying environment; one in which women exist to have their bodies “looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified” (Fredrickson and Roberts 177). In this context, Michel Foucault’s appropriation of the term “gaze” to denote the dehumanizing medical separation of the patient’s body from the patient’s identity may be said to express Sayuri’s predicament.

In his groundbreaking *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) Foucault coined the term “medical gaze” to foreground the dynamics of power relations between doctors and patients:

[T]he medical gaze was also organized in a new way. First, it was no longer the gaze of any observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of a doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention. Moreover, it was a gaze that was not bound by the narrow grid of structure (form, arrangement, number, size), but that could and should grasp colours, variations, tiny anomalies, always receptive to the deviant. Finally, it was a gaze that was not content to observe what was self-evident; it must make it possible to outline chances and risks; it was calculating. (89)

From Foucault’s postulation, it becomes evident that the act of gazing transcends its status as an action to be performed, to become more of a relationship between an empowered observer and a disempowered/effaced observed object. Sayuri’s case blatantly exemplifies the latter.

Not long before, Sayuri is ushered into the objectifying near-slave system of the *okiya* where she gets to learn that her existence within its boundaries is contingent upon hard work:



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“It’s an *okiya*”, [Auntie] says. “It’s where geisha live. If you work very hard, you’ll grow up to be a geisha yourself”, Sayuri is informed (Golden 47). Notwithstanding the matriarchal nature of the *okiya*, it is a commodifying backdrop against which a geisha is emotionally, psychologically and sexually stunted rather than providing her with a habitat that would help her “grow”, as Sayuri is misinformed. To “work very hard” is to be trained to become an exquisite hostess, a highly adroit musician, an enchanting singer, a nimble dancer, a most captivating conversationalist, not to mention an object of pleasure that must measure up to others’ expectations. To be more accurately put, an *okiya* may be better defined as an objectifying realm where the burgeoning geisha is divested of any claims to individuality. Relatedly, “being” a geisha connotes being hemmed in an intricate labyrinth of sanctified customs, tradition-honouring bonds of kinship, normative dictates, obligations, strictures and artistic skills that must be acquired and practiced with unfaltering deftness. Added to that is another dense web of human relations among members of the same *okiya*, art teachers, teahouses owners, clients and would-be *dannas*. Tantamount to the objectifying context of the *okiya* is the school in which Sayuri is enrolled to learn the arts of playing the shamisen, dancing, tea ceremony, and singing; a learning experience that is not bereft of corporal exploitation. Aesthetic as they are, these skills serve more to deface the geisha than to endow her with a means of self-definition. The school, very much like the *okiya*, may be viewed as corresponding to Foucault’s view of the prison as an apparatus of power which he expounds in *Discipline and Punish* (1975):



The prison, that darkest region in the apparatus of justice, is the place where the power to punish, which no longer dares to manifest itself openly, silently organizes a field of objectivity in which punishment will be able to function openly as treatment and the sentence be inscribed among the discourses of knowledge. (256)

Gazing thus metamorphoses into surveillance to denote more stringent power relations and disciplinary mechanisms.

Exacerbating her dehumanization in the *okiya* are the gruelling chores she has to undertake, as Sayuri states: “Most of my chores were straightforward. I stowed away the futons in the morning, cleaned the rooms, swept the dirt corridor, and so forth. Sometimes I was sent to the pharmacist ... or to a shop” (Golden 51). That Sayuri sets her heart on doing these tasks to perfection does not in any way endow her with self-satisfaction; instead, she feels all the more vanquished by a gnawing feeling of inadequacy: “But even though I worked as hard as I knew how, I never seemed to make the good impression I hoped to, because my chores every day were more than I could possibly finish” (52). To capture her sense of defeat, no better explanation may be offered than what objectification theory posits as thwarting “peak motivational states” (Fredrickson and Roberts 184). This, in its turn, is likely to “pose a critical hindrance to women’s attempts to become fully absorbed in any ... rewarding activity, whether physical or mental” (183-84). Expectedly, the regimented mode of life imposed on her finds expression in the diet she has to follow: “[O]ur chores kept us so busy we hardly had time even for meals .... [M]aids like us were fed nothing more than rice and pickles at most meals, with

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soup once a day, and small portions of dried fish twice a month” (Golden 60-61). Further elaborating on the backbreaking tasks a geisha is entitled to perform, Sayuri adds:

After spending all morning in lessons, she is still expected to work during the afternoon and evening very much as she always has. And still, she sleeps no more than three to five hours every night. During these years of training, if I’d been two people my life would probably still have been too busy .... [M]ost days I was responsible for more than I could manage, while still being expected to practice shamisen for an hour or more during the afternoon. (167)

A glaring example of the injurious impact of art can be discerned in the dehumanizing demands it makes on both Sayuri and Pumpkin:

In winter, both Pumpkin and I were made to toughen up our hands by holding them in ice water until we cried from pain, and then practice outside in the frigid air of the courtyard .... [I]n fact, toughening the hands in this way really did help me play better. Stage fright drains the feeling from your hands; and when you’ve already grown accustomed to playing with hands that are numbed and miserable, stage fright presents much less of a problem. (Golden 167)

Of all the chores Sayuri has to undertake, massaging Granny is the most gruesome, not so much because of the sense



of repugnance it imparts to her as it is because of the way it opens her eyes to one injurious outcome of becoming a geisha:

I almost felt sick the first time she unfastened her robe and pulled it down from her shoulders, because the skin there and on her neck was bumpy and yellow like an uncooked chicken's. The problem, as I later learned, was that in her geisha days she'd used a kind of white makeup we call 'China Clay', made with a base of lead. China Clay turned out to be poisonous which probably accounted for Granny's foul disposition .... [T]he lead-based makeup was very hard to remove; traces of it combined with some sort of chemical in the water to make a dye that ruined her skin.  
(Golden 53)

More scathing than the physical disfigurement is the emotional and psychological laceration that such a career leaves woman maimed with. If Granny has become such a vile figure, it is by dint of her internalizing the bitterness she feels inside. No less deleterious is the way geisha grow distant and alienated from their own bodies and bodily sensations; what objectification theory refers to as "a scant awareness of internal bodily states" (Fredrickson and Roberts 185-86). The way a geisha starts to perceive herself through a double consciousness, and accordingly grows estranged from her own objectified body and bodily sensations can be clearly discerned in Sayuri's words when she explains how when a geisha wakes up in the morning she is just like any other woman. Her face may be greasy from sleep, and her breath unpleasant. It may be true that she wears a startling hairstyle even as she struggles to open her eyes; but in

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every other respect she's a woman like any other, and not a geisha at all. Only when she sits before her mirror to apply her makeup with care does she become a geisha. (Golden 69)

Observing Hatsumomo as she performs the ritualistic preparations that serve as a prelude to her public display, Sayuri gets to see the extent to which a geisha's body is literally treated as a mere object that can acquire substance only through a male gaze:

Hatsumomo turned back to face the mirror ... as she opened a jar of pale yellow cream .... Then she tore a small piece of wax from one of the bars and, after softening it in her fingertips, rubbed it into the skin of her face, and afterward of her neck and chest. She took some time to wipe her hands clean on a rag, and then moistened one of her flat makeup brushes in a dish of water and rubbed it in the makeup until she had a chalky white paste. She used this to paint her face and neck, but left her eyes bare, as well as the area around her lips and nose .... [H]er whole face was ghastly white. She looked like the demon she was .... [I]n an hour or so, men would be gazing with astonishment at that face .... (Golden 70-71)

An act of masquerading is obviously inherent in these preparatory rituals, the inevitable outcome of which is a duplicity of self that heightens a geisha's alienation from her own body. Not only does the impassive white mask curtail her real persona as a human being, but even more inimical is the way it circumscribes her in the way "men would be gazing with astonishment at [her] face". In its essence, this act of watching is a subtle form of sexual harassment; a "targeted tactic of



power” where men use gaze to demonstrate their right to physically and sexually evaluate women (Quinn qtd. in Szymanski et al. 24). The word “astonishment” aptly emphasizes the status of a geisha as one form of exoticized mystique that lures the male gaze into exploration; an exploration that eventually amounts to objectification. Along the lines of Foucault’s appropriation of the “medical gaze” to refer to the fact that it is not just the object of knowledge which is constructed but also the “knower”, the male onlooker is “constructed” as an omniscient observer: “The medical gaze embraces more than is said by the word ‘gaze’ alone. It contains within a single structure different sensorial fields” that endow the gazer with more power (Foucault, *Birth* 164).

In the same regard, an exuberantly artistic hairstyle metamorphoses into a vehicle of subjugation. Staggering under its oppressive impact, Sayuri explains:

Every young geisha may be proud of her hairstyle at first, but she comes to hate it within three or four days .... If a girl comes home exhausted from the hairdresser and lays her head down on a pillow for a nap ... her hair will be flattened out of shape. The moment she awakens, she’ll have to go right back to the hairdresser again. For this reason, a young apprentice geisha must learn a new way of sleeping after her hair is styled for the first time. She doesn’t use an ordinary pillow any longer .... You lie there on your futon with your hair suspended in the air, thinking everything is fine until you fall asleep; but when you wake up, you’ve shifted somehow so that your head has settled back on the mats, and your

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hairstyle is as flat as if you hadn't bothered to use a tall pillow in the first place. (Golden 191)

Equally debilitating is the prescribed geisha attire. Above all, she must learn the art of arranging her "regalia" - itself a work of art - in the approved fashion. Comprised of an intricate kimono and an obi, it shores up her sense of being objectified into a work of art that must measure up to its spectators' expectations:

Auntie dressed me in the complete regalia of an apprentice geisha and made me walk up and down the dirt corridor of the okiya to build up my strength .... [T]he obi must be so long that it stretches all the way from one end of a room to the other. But it isn't the length of the obi that makes it hard to wear; it's the weight, for it's nearly always made of heavy silk brocade. Just to carry it up the stairs is exhausting, so you can imagine how it feels to wear it - the thick band of it squeezing your middle like one of those awful snakes, and the heavy fabric hanging behind, making you feel as if someone has strapped a traveling trunk to your back.

To make matters worse, the kimono itself is also heavy, with long, swinging sleeves. (Golden 192)

Given the constrictive impact wielded by the geisha costume, one may hypothesize that the most mundane of acts are laden with a commodifying potential. Even the simple act of "sitting" has to be performed in accordance with prescribed rules and strictures, as Sayuri explains: "[A] geisha never really sits while wearing kimono; what we call sitting is probably what



other people would call kneeling” (196). No less laborious is the act of walking in the designated geisha shoes:

Now I had to try walking all around Gion in the shoes we call okobo. They're quite tall and made of wood, with lovely, lacquered thongs to hold the foot in place. Most people think it very elegant the way they taper down like a wedge, so that the footprint at the bottom is about half the size of the top. But I found it hard to walk delicately in them. I felt as if I had roof tiles strapped to the bottoms of my feet. (197)

The deeper Sayuri plummets into the unfathomable geisha realm, the more she realizes that any venture at self-definition can never transcend her status as an object that gains significance only when marveled at by others. Her meeting with the Baron, Mameha's *danna*, normalizes the way a geisha is perpetually objectified through the dominant male gaze. Nowhere is this more evidently expressed than in his words: “For heaven's sake, I'm not going to do anything to you I shouldn't do. I only want to have *a look*, don't you understand? There's nothing wrong in that. Any man would do the same” (Golden 305). His sexual assault on Sayuri makes her all the more woeful in her objectification.

Of the many ramifications of this objectification is the way it splinters the body into diminutive parts, thus engendering a fragmented self-image. Nowhere is this more expressively revealed than in Sayuri's explication of the eroticized perception of a geisha's neck:

Japanese men, as a rule, feel about a woman's neck and throat the same way that men in the West might feel about a woman's legs. This is why geisha wear the collars of their kimono so low in the back that the



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first few bumps of the spine are visible .... It was years before I understood the erotic effect it has on men. In fact, a geisha leaves a tiny margin of skin bare all around the hairline, causing her makeup to look even more artificial, something like a mask .... When a man sits beside her and sees her makeup like a mask he becomes that much more aware of the bare skin beneath. (Golden 70-71)

As an exquisitely enticing work of art, a geisha cannot afford to be negligent of her bodily assets; what objectification theory describes as “habitual monitoring of the body’s outward appearance” (Fredrickson and Roberts 188). “You have a lovely arm; and beautiful skin. You should make sure every man who sits near you sees it at least once” (Golden 197), a piece of advice that reiterates a geisha’s indispensable vigilance of her physical appearance as a means of survival in her objectifying world. In an unequivocal proclamation, Mother bluntly asserts the status of Sayuri as a commodity: “You’re a very expensive commodity, little girl .... What a man wants from you, a man will pay dearly to get” (319). In so reaffirming, Mother underscores the objectifying impact art is likely to beget.

In due course, and as objectification theory postulates, “an observer’s perspective on self might fully supplant a woman’s own first-person perspective” (Fredrickson and Roberts 187). Imperative to a geisha’s success is to make sure she measures up to others’ expectations of her, thereby creating “multiple opportunities to experience anxiety” (182). In this regard, the Japanese culture of the time may be aptly described as “a culture that ... presents women with a continuous stream



of anxiety-provoking experiences, requiring them to maintain an almost chronic vigilance both to their physical appearance and to their physical safety” (183). Even more scathing is the way “chronic attentiveness to one’s own visual image may consume mental energy that might otherwise be spent on more satisfying and rewarding activity” (190). Thus, contrary to the common consensus that art is conducive to a sense of accomplishment and gratification, the dehumanization of the geisha proves it to be endowed with an equally stultifying dimension.

Inevitably, within the constrictive geisha dominion love is a quasi-blasphemous act that precludes the scope for any “satisfying and rewarding activity”. One reason love is banned is that it chips away at the pecuniary value of the commodified geisha. Hatsumomo’s affair with her boyfriend is a case in point:

The time she spent with him earned no revenue, and even took her away from parties at teahouses where she would otherwise have been making money. And besides, any wealthy man who might have been interested in an expensive, long-term relationship would certainly think less of her and even change his mind if he knew she was carrying on with the chef of a noodle restaurant. (Golden 78)

Sayuri’s proclamation that “geisha have passions like everyone else” is an attempt on her part to reclaim her already usurped humanity (171); an attempt that does little to alleviate the objectification to which she is subjected. In a shattering moment of revelation, she gets to know that being a geisha is incompatible with her seeking love; to use Mameha’s words:

“that is something [she is] in no position to ask” (343). The devastating impact of such a revelation may be best understood by recourse to objectification theory: “At a psychological level, perhaps the most profound effect of objectifying treatment is that it coaxes girls and women to adopt a peculiar view of self” (Fredrickson and Roberts 177). Ultimately, the peculiarity of this view amounts to “self-objectification”; that is, over time, individuals can only perceive themselves as they internalize other observers’ perspective (Fredrickson and Roberts 179). Sayuri’s impassive attitude towards her *mizuage* reveals the extent to which she has come to view herself as a commodity worthy of the highest bidder.

Dr. Crab wins the bid for Sayuri’s *mizuage*, paying a record sum that is enough to repay all of her debts to the *okiya*. This leads Mother to adopt Sayuri, while Hatsumomo is expelled out of the *okiya*, thereby losing her value as an artistic object. Insofar as Sayuri’s passionless encounter with Dr Crab is concerned, it may be best understood as dramatizing what objectification theory refers to as women growing distant and alienated from their own bodies and bodily sensations, and accordingly losing access to their own physical experiences (Fredrickson and Roberts 185). Sayuri’s description of her plight is worth quoting in this regard:

The Doctor’s hands burrowed around for a while, making me very uncomfortable .... Then he lowered himself until his body was poised just above mine. I put all the force of my mind to work in making a sort of mental barrier between the Doctor and me, but it wasn’t enough to keep me from feeling the Doctor.... The lamp was still lit, and I searched the shadows on



the ceiling for something to distract me, because now I felt the Doctor pushing so hard that my head shifted on the pillow .... Soon there was a great deal of activity going on above me, and I could feel all sorts of movement inside me as well. There must have been a very great deal of blood, because the air had an unpleasant metallic smell. I kept reminding myself how much the Doctor had paid for this privilege; and I remember hoping at one point that he was enjoying himself more than I was. I felt no more pleasure there than if someone had rubbed a file over and over against the inside of my thigh until I bled. (Golden 330)

A marked absence of free will is revealed in Sayuri's words, not to mention the physical and emotional agony experienced by her. In addition, the stench of blood evokes a most repugnant setup, thus exacerbating Sayuri's suffering. The way she distances herself from the whole experience is revealed in her description of how there "was a great deal of activity going on above [her]", whilst feeling "all sorts of movement inside [her] as well". In short, "by internalizing an observer's perspective as a primary view of physical self" (Fredrickson and Roberts 185), Sayuri may be said to lose access to her own physical experiences. Foucault's conception of the "medical gaze", from "a doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention" (*Birth* 89), aptly describes Sayuri's objectification.

An epiphanic episode in her life, the *mizuage* serves to tighten the grip of her commodification, rendering her all the more aware of her pecuniary value: "Now ... I had a high price tag on me", she proclaims (Golden 332). More unnerving is Nobu's bidding to becoming her *danna*, thereby shutting out

any scope for her being united with the Chairman since Nobu is the president of Iwamura Electric, the company which they run together, let alone his being a close and loyal friend of him. Though Nobu's losing the bid to General Tottori, an army general, momentarily alleviates her desperation, it subsequently subjects her to more overt acts of objectification, underlain as they are by her aestheticization. Displayed and fragmented, Sauri can only see herself, on the one hand, as a fetishised and aestheticised image of the General's expectations of her, and, on the other, as a means of rescue to the *okiya* against the backdrop of the war. This is clearly evident in the following words:

The General may have brought about very little change in my life, but it was certainly true that his alliance with the *okiya* was invaluable .... He covered many of my expenses just as a *danna* usually does-including the cost of my lessons, my annual registration fee, my medical expenses .... But more important, his new position as director of military procurement was everything Mameha had suggested, so that he was able to do things for us no other *danna* could have done. (Golden 359)

Finally, and after a lifetime of suffering, the narrative ends with Sayuri recounting her subsequent life with the Chairman as her *danna*, and her eventual retirement as a geisha<sup>4</sup>.



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<sup>4</sup> As the war draws to a close, Nobu requests Sayuri to entertain the Minister whose aid is needed to reconstruct Iwamura Electric. Nobu entertains hopes of becoming her *danna*. To evade such a fate, she asks Pumpkin to bring Nobu to the venue of her meeting with the Minister. Out of jealousy, Pumpkin brings the Chairman. Eventually, Sayuri meets the Chairman who expresses his love for her and reveals that he has found out the truth.



Only then does she feel countenanced as a human being, wherein “becoming geisha” renders her life “satisfying” since it becomes her means of finding a place for herself in the Chairman’s world. A “choice” is ultimately made possible to Sayuri, thereby enabling her to transcend her objectified/aestheticized self to become an individual in her own right. For the first time in her life, she forgets “that a geisha, above all, is an entertainer and a performer” (Golden 166), only to remember that she is a human being. No longer adopting a third-person perspective on herself, Sayuri starts to attend to the voice of love; a basic human passion that has long been denied to her. Tantamount to the metamorphosis she goes through is the change that overtakes the role of art: from a means of self-annihilation to one of self-definition and fulfillment. Deviating from the typical male gaze that has long been objectifying her into a passionless work of art, the Chairman sees her as a woman gifted with love. *Seeing* in this context is supplanted with a *seeing through*.

A loving embrace and a tender kiss come as the concluding scene of the American film adaptation; a scene that captures not only Sayuri’s a moment of emotional liberation, but also her reclamation of her long usurped humanity. Against a backdrop of majestically compelling scenery, the predicament of Sayuri is brought to the screen with all its despondency, suffering, dehumanization, and, above all, manifestations of her being objectified into a work of art. Like the prototypical image of a geisha, the film evokes a world swirling with mysterious exoticism, glamour and exquisite art—all of which mask the

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sense of desolation felt by this commodified caste of the Japanese culture.

Very much like the book, the movie prowls the unfathomable realm of the geisha, bringing to the fore the dichotomous nature of art as both a vehicle of self-definition and objectification. Shrouded in darkness, and with the background accompaniment of most melancholic yet ominous music, the opening scene of the movie sets the tone of Sayuri's traumatic life as she is being separated from her sister. Stepping into the *okiya*, an aura of mystique descends upon the scene to delineate the geisha dominion with all its rituals, laws and strictures. Right from the outset, and as is repeatedly hinted at in both the book and the movie, Sayuri's eyes strike whoever beholds them as being exceptionally enchanting, with "too much water in them". Additionally, her vivaciousness as a child is shown to be gradually curtailed as she is made to fit into the constrictive geisha mould.

In nowhere is the way agony and art are conjoined to punctuate a geisha's life more evident than in those scenes that feature Sayuri's writhing in pain while performing two of the most mundane of acts: sleeping and having her hair combed. In fact, there is hardly a scene in the movie where art is not seeping through; be it in the dances and musical performances practiced and performed by Sayuri and the other geisha, or in the accompanying background music that parallels Sayuri's disposition. Underlying the pervasive presence of art is the way it tightens its grip on Sayuri thereby rendering her one of its marvels; one that serves both to delight and beguile whoever catches sight of her. The movie is accordingly replete with body



images; a zooming in on Sayuri's neck, wrists, fingers and ears. In so highlighting, the status of the geisha as a repository of art and eroticism is invariably underscored. The dance which catapults her into the pinnacle of her career as a geisha shows to what extent she is objectified by a host of male gazers. Performed with exuberance, passion and adroitness, the dance is not bereft of erotic overtones, both in the movements and the music. If this means anything, it lends credence to the paradoxical nature of art as a means of self-definition and objectification. After all, a geisha's job amounts to a fulfillment of male fantasies.

In addition to the way music heightens the sense of mystery and exoticism that pervade the geisha realm, lighting techniques are also employed to serve the same purpose. In contrast to the ambient dimness that prevails throughout, Sayuri's first meeting with the Chairman takes place in broad daylight. Likewise, the closing scene that brings about her reunion with him is set against a most lush and opulent background; a crowning of her release from her objectification.

To conclude, in so humanizing the typically eroticized and exoticised geisha, both the novel and its cinematic adaptation may be viewed as a paean of recognition of their humanity; one that counters their longstanding objectification. In lieu of their stereotypical depiction as impassive entertainers whose source of empowerment resides solely in their delicate faces, pliant bodies and artistic skills, Golden zeroes in on their usurped humanity. Penetrating the white impassive geisha mask, *Memoirs of a Geisha* demystifies an age-old subterranean realm in which art wields a deleterious impact on its



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practitioners. Beneath a geisha's impeccable beauty and adroit aesthetic demeanour, as these memoirs reveal, there runs a gamut of human emotions that have to be bartered for public glamour. To "become geisha" is thus to be both enshrined and annihilated by art.

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