

Memoirs of a geisha: the downside of the "ideal" woman



“...The very word “ geisha” means artist and to be a geisha is to be judged as a moving work of art.” (Memoirs of a Geisha, Movie 2005) How would you feel living in a society that judged you on your physical appearance? How would you feel knowing that something so superficial and shallow determined your worth in the eyes of others? Gender roles have always had great influence in society, and as a major part of traditional beliefs, are the core that Memoirs of a Geisha is based on, and are the driving force behind each character’s actions. Throughout Memoirs of a Geisha, women were seen only as objects to be sold. The submissive beauty and objectification of women were traditional beliefs that Sayuri eventually built her life around.

In the book, we see that women at the time were expected to be very submissive and were favored more when appearing innocent. Through Sayuri’s narration, we see how much she worries about gaining the favor of various officials and important men, as well as how she is taught to showcase herself and exhibit a gentle and obedient demeanor. In the various meetings Sayuri had with different men, we see that her behavior instantly changes to become more demure and meek. For example, she was taught by Mameha that “...men are going to notice your eyes and imagine you’re giving messages with them...” (p. 159), and learns to conduct herself in a graceful but coy way. Furthermore, women were thought to be more attractive when they appear innocent or helpless. In the first meeting between Sayuri and Doctor Crab, Mameha tells her “...We want the Doctor to see you looking as innocent and as helpless as possible. Lie back and try to look weak.” (p. 215) Another instance in which innocence is valued is regarding Sayuri’s mizuage. “ Mameha assured me that a man doesn’t

cultivate a relationship with a fifteen-year-old apprentice geisha unless he has her mizuage in mind.” (p. 233) Sayuri’s mizuage, or her virginity, was valued because it represented her youth and virginity.

The concept of beauty also plays a major part in the story. Sayuri, who was born with unique blue-gray eyes, was perceived as beautiful, which allowed her to live a relatively more fortunate life. We first see signs of this in the separation of her and her sister, Satsu. When their parents became unable to support them and they were sent away, Satsu was taken to become a prostitute, while Sayuri began training to be a geisha. Because Sayuri was “beautiful”, she was given the more “high-class” job, as well as a better future. Furthermore, women were objectified and sold as commodities, and their value was determined by their beauty. This sale of women is especially apparent in the geisha business, in which women are paid for their company and entertainment, and prostitution, in which women are sold for their bodies. In both professions, beauty determined price. This is shown when Sayuri goes to search for Satsu, and the lady at the brothel claims that “If our Yukiyo (Satsu) was as pretty as this one (Sayuri), we’d be the busiest house in town!” (p. 84) This sale of women was also apparent in the bidding for a geisha’s mizuage. Similar to her company, the price of her mizuage went up with her popularity, which was largely determined by her beauty, as men would bid against each other for it. “In the end, Dr. Crab agreed to pay 11, 500 yen for my mizuage. Up to that time, this was the highest ever paid for a mizuage...” (p. 279) Because Sayuri was beautiful, she was highly valued and made profits, which ultimately led to Mother adopting her for her profitability.

The qualities that were important in Sayuri's life as a geisha were reflections of traditional Japanese beliefs. The societal views at the time were that a woman must be submissive and beautiful, while men must be dominant and be able to provide for others. These qualities are shown through the geisha and the men they entertain. Geisha were unable to live on their own, as they had so many debts and fees that they were reliant on a danna to pay for their expenses. Because of this, an apprentice geisha's training and efforts in entertaining men were for the sake of attracting the attention of a rich potential danna. We see this in Mameha, who relied on her danna, the Baron, to cover her expenses, and in return, responded to his beck and call. When the Baron ordered Mameha to replace the scroll in her room with a painting, " Mameha had no choice but to do as the Baron suggested; she even managed to look as if she thought it was a fine idea." (p. 186) This is once again shown when the Baron gets mad at Mameha when she rejects his invitation to a flower-viewing party. "' Why do you have to defy me every single time I ask something of you?' He really did look angry..." (p. 252) These examples demonstrate the traditional belief that women were supposed to obey men. The characters in *Memoirs of a Geisha* embody these beliefs and convey these expectations through their every thought and move.

To be a geisha is to be the Japanese ideal of a woman, someone who is beautiful, submissive, and attractive to men. But to be a geisha is also to be treated as a living doll, someone -something- that can be sold for profit, regardless of personal opinions. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a story that effectively demonstrates the traditional gender roles of the Japanese through

characters who lived by these rules, and as such, were restricted by these expectations.