

# Roles of female characters in memoirs of a geisha and pygmalion

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Feminist icon Ani DiFranco once said, “ Patriarchy is like the elephant in the room that we don’t talk about, but how could it not affect the planet radically when it’s the superstructure of human society.” Patriarchy’s widespread ideology has resulted in the distorted belief that men are superior to women, affecting the lives of billions. Generations after generations, women could no longer bear society’s oppressive treatment and the discriminative culture they lived in. This gave way for the rise of feminists all over the world, some dedicating their entire lives into fighting for women’s rights and gender equality. In Arthur Golden’s novel, *Memoirs of A Geisha*, he illustrates the hostile life of geishas through the character of Nitta Sayuri, who was taken from her family and sold into an okiya -a geisha house- at the age of nine. A few years later, Sayuri becomes the apprentice of one of the most successful geishas in Gion, Mameha. Mameha introduces Sayuri to her clients and prepares her for geisha rituals such as choosing a danna and the ceremony of her mizuage. Throughout the novel, Golden incorporates multiple commodified relationships where women are exploited by men, to show the hardships faced by women within a patriarchal society. Similarly, in George Bernard Shaw’s theatrical play *Pygmalion*, he uses the character of Eliza Doolittle to illustrate how men objectify women. Eliza was born into the lower class, and due to her status, she is uneducated and lacks in social skills. One day, she meets Henry Higgins, a refined, high-class man and a scientist of phonetics. He proposes to transform her into a sophisticated lady using his knowledge of phonetics. Taking him up on his offer, Eliza becomes the object of Higgins’ experiment. Throughout their relationship, Shaw shows the hostile and degrading treatment of women in a patriarchal society; however,

due to Higgins' objectification of Eliza, she transgresses his power over her later in the play. Therefore, although both Eliza in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Sayuri in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* comply with typical female stereotypes, Shaw does a better job at challenging patriarchy as Eliza transgresses male objectification near the end of the play, resulting in a more satisfying outcome than Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

Throughout history, every woman has been criticized and categorized into stereotypes. From the beautiful, but mischievous femme fatale who deceives men by using their appearance to their advantage, to the classic, noble, damsel in distress who needs to be rescued by the hero archetype. Danielle Aron explains the problems stereotyping women brings into a society within her article, 'We Are Not Damsels in Distress'. She illustrates, "A plethora of narratives and prose depict women as fragile, helpless characters in need of a hero...The knights in shining armor have dominated not just the pages, but pop culture as well...From such an early age, men and women have been programmed to believe about so-called "roles" and the belief that they're too weak to do anything about it... Patriarchy (or perhaps plain insipidness) condemns women to supporting roles in the society" (2). This is evident through the two literary mediums as both Golden and Shaw demonstrate the issues women face within patriarchy through typical female stereotypes, relating back to Ani DiFranco's criticism about the profound effects of male dominance.

In the novel *Memories of a Geisha*, Sayuri is illustrated as the femme fatale and damsel in distress. In the first chapter, Sayuri introduces her memories by saying, "I long ago developed very practiced smile... Its advantage is that <https://assignbuster.com/roles-of-female-characters-in-memoirs-of-a-geisha-and-pygmalion/>

men can interpret it however they want; you can imagine how often I've relied on it" (Golden 8). Throughout her life, she puts on a fake smile that allows men to think whatever they want and hides her true emotions underneath, characterizing herself as a femme fatale. Her smile illustrates a persona of the virgin, a beautiful, pure, and uncorrupted girl. The illusion allows her to lure men in by giving a seductive impression that she is sexually interested in them. Sayuri's ability to frequently hide her true self underneath a mask shows that she uses her facial expressions to deceive and manipulate men, conforming to the femme fatale stereotype. However, she uses her beauty to delude men out of necessity, not pleasure. Her acceptance of being a femme fatale proves Ani DiFranco's statement on patriarchy as it illustrates the oppressive control of patriarchy as Sayuri is forced to deceive men in order to make a living. In *Memories of a Geisha*, Golden represents Sayuri as the love interest of the Chairman, pursuing his affection throughout the novel, conforming her as a damsel in distress. This is evident when the Chairman confronts Sayuri's attempt to betray Nabu by sleeping with Sato - an unattractive, idiotic Deputy Minister who Nabu loathes, forcing Nabu to lose interest in her so she can build a relationship with him. During their conversation, he says, " You seemed so desperate, like you might drown if someone didn't save you. After Pumpkin told me you'd intended that encounter for Nobu's eyes..." (Golden 417). The Chairman considers Sayuri as a hopeless lady in need of rescuing and not as his equal counterpart. Tragically, The Chairman's description demonstrates that Sayuri is unable to be genuinely happy until she has finally earned his affection. She relies desperately on him to save and release her from Nabu's

affection, letting herself be stereotyped into the classic damsel in distress. Sayuri slips further into patriarchy, does not transgress typical female stereotypes, and promotes the idea that women are unable to live independently, without a male subject present. Unfortunately, this ideology is also present in modern day society. Hit blockbuster films such as *The Dark Knight rises* or *Mission Impossible* all stereotype women and present them as the lesser sex. As Danielle Arcon proposed, Hollywood's projection of women becomes problematic due to its colossal influence on younger generations, who might soon begin to look at stereotyping women as a social norm.

Similarly, Shaw also projects his lead female character as several different stereotypes, condemning Eliza Doolittle to society's projection of gender roles. In Chen Lihua's Canadian Social Science essay, 'A Feminist Perspective to Pygmalion', he explains that, "In Act 1, when the... protagonists first appear, we can easily find the difference: the male character...is an upper-class gentleman, whereas the flower girl is only a 'creature' with visible and distinguishing marks of the lower-class society" (1). Lihua's analysis is accurate as Shaw presents Eliza as an uneducated woman who disregards rules of the English language and lacks manners due to her lower than second-class status. Eliza displays the girl next door and whore stereotypes as she is introduced in the first act as "...the flower girl 'creature'" (Lihua 1), trying to sell flowers to the upper class for money. She meets an elderly military Gentleman who gives her some spare change, but a bystander informs her that there is a policeman taking notes on her actions. Anxious, Eliza begins to protest that she is a "...a respectable girl...a good girl...a poor girl..." (Shaw), not a prostitute accepting payment from a

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customer. She proclaims that she is innocent and did nothing wrong except try to sell flowers to the Gentleman. By accepting change offer from the Gentleman, society automatically perceives Eliza as a whore and degrades her based on their personal judgment due to her class and gender. Thus, she is almost stereotyped into a promiscuous whore for accepting a generous offer from a man, and has to defend herself by becoming another stereotype, the wholesome girl next door. Eliza's forced actions demonstrate that she is oppressed by both society's class structure and patriarchy as she feels the need to prove that she is not a prostitute, projecting herself as a virgin to prove her innocence which supports the idea of gender roles and male dominance. Eliza fails to transgress patriarchy and demotes the second wave of feminism as she condemns herself to the girl next door stereotype and degrades the publicized idea of social equality. Like Golden, Shaw also displays how quickly women are stereotyped and scrutinized, demonstrating Ani DiFranco's concerns about the extensive influence of patriarchy.

Therefore, both Sayuri and Eliza promote discriminative gender roles as they fall short of transgressing patriarchal power, and condemn themselves to typical female stereotypes as Golden displays Sayuri as the femme fatale, the whore, and damsel in distress, and Shaw illustrates Eliza as the virgin and girl next door.

For decades, women have been oppressed within patriarchal societies, becoming objects used for the pleasure of male subjects. This is evident in Golden's novel as he shows the problems with patriarchy through the mistreatment of women. In *Memories of a Geisha*, Sayuri is unable to transgress patriarchy due to her status and desire to be recognized within

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her society, leading her to be objectified and oppressed by men. Nanang Muhammad Mahfudh supports this idea within his research paper, ' Women's Position in Memoirs of Geisha Written By Authur Golden (1997): A Feminist Approach' when he states, " First...Arthur Golden wants to illustrate how women are subordinated and exploited in patriarchal society. Second... Arthur Golden wants to say that women Right [sic] are not given but must be struggled for" (1). Every apprentice geisha undergoes the dehumanizing ceremony of their mizuage, where their virginity is auctioned off and sold to the highest bidder. Sayuri's objectification is evident leading up to her mizuage, at Mr. Baron's – Mameha's danna – party. During the party, Sayuri tells a story to Dr. Crab – an emotionless wealthy doctor who has a reputation for paying enormous amounts for girls' mizuage, which illustrates an image of her naked. The Baron overhears the story and instantly becomes quite interested in Sayuri saying, " There isn't a man here who wouldn't pay quite a bit of money just for the chance to watch Sayuri take a bath. Eh? That's a particular fantasy of mine, I'll admit... Plenty of men act as if they don't chase women just for the chance to get underneath all those robes, but you listen to me, Sayuri; there's only one kind of man!" (Golden 248). The Baron's clinical perception of men suggests that men are only interested in objectifying women into sexual objects to use for their own personal pleasure. He illustrates that some men are dispassionate and take advantage of women as they do not see them as equals. The Baron's concept is evidence of males being the higher power within their society which displays a patriarchal class structure and the dehumanizing treatment women experience, proving Mahfudh's analysis that women are demoralized

and taken advantage of. On Sayuri and Mameha's way back from the party, she tells her that, "...an apprentice on the point of having her mizuage is like a meal served on the table" (Golden 253). There she compares Sayuri's life to a freshly cooked meal, indicating that she is like food, a powerless object that is ready to be consumed by men. Ironically, it is Mameha who made this comparison, which demonstrates that women within their society comply by patriarchal oppression and do not display significant attempts in transgressing male dominance. Additionally, Mameha's comment connects back to Ani DiFranco's quote as it proves that "Patriarchy is... the superstructure of human society." Furthermore, Sayuri accepts being looked upon as a sexual prize when she agrees with Mameha saying, "Now that I had a high price tag on me..." (Golden 285). Both Mameha and Sayuri are evidence that women are stripped of their personal freedom and independence. Within their society, their lives revolve around entertaining men which relates back to Mahfudh's argument that unlike men, women must earn their rights even though they are misused and objectified by patriarchal power. Sayuri does not transgress being dehumanized, oppressed, or sexually objectified by men, and accepts herself as an object has been stripped of her independence.

On the other hand, Shaw also projects the dilemma within a patriarchal society as Eliza Doolittle is objectified by men and used as a social experiment. Once again, Chen Lihau supports this argument as he writes within his analysis of 'A Feminist Perspective of Pygmalion' as he writes, "The woman character in it is seen only as an object for experiment" (1).

When Henry Higgins meets Eliza, he is appalled by her lack of social manners

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and unladylike ways. He goes on to brag to Colonel Pickering that by using his knowledge of phonetics, in three months he " ...could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party" (Shaw), degrading her into an object of an experiment he would later take on. The next day Eliza shows up at Higgins' house to take him up on his offer of English lessons. To make things interesting, Pickering proposes a wager to Higgins, saying, " I'll bet you all the expenses of the experiment you can't do it. And I'll pay for the lessons" (Shaw). Higgins replies with, " It's almost irresistible. She's so deliciously low—so horribly dirty—" (Shaw). Both men are presented as subjects as they objectify Eliza and treat her like an object for their own experimental amusement. Higgins and Pickering demonstrate Ani DiFranco's concerns about patriarchy as they dehumanize and strip Eliza of her personal independence and freedom. Thus, Eliza demonstrates how women are discriminated, dominated, and treated as property owned by men within a patriarchal society, creating gender inequality. Additionally, during their conversation, Higgins criticizes and mocks Eliza, calling her "...baggage..." (Shaw), and even asking Pickering whether he should "...throw her out of the window?" (Shaw). In this scene, Higgins does not regard or treat Eliza as his equal. Instead, he looks at her as someone who is insignificant within their society and beneath his social status, displaying the tyrannical treatment within patriarchy and between the upper and lower classes. Sadly, Eliza is forced into accepting his insulting treatment and becoming Higgins' experimental toy in his bet with Pickering as she "...wants to be a lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road" (Shaw). For this reason, she fails to transgress male dominance. Like Sayuri, Eliza

falls short of opposing objectification and patriarchal oppression, condemning the notion that men are superior to women and should be given supreme authority within a society.

However, later in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Eliza transgresses the overbearing, oppressive, and objective treatment shown by men, fighting the oppressive patriarchal class structure she was born into. This is evident near the end of the play when Eliza becomes infuriated by Higgins and throws a pair of slippers at him, yelling:

ELIZA: Because I wanted to smash your face. I'd like to kill you, you selfish brute. Why didn't you leave me where you picked me out of—in the gutter? You thank God it's all over, and that now you can throw me back again there, do you?

HIGGINS. How the devil do I know what's to become of you? What does it matter what becomes of you? ELIZA. You don't care... You wouldn't care if I was dead. I'm nothing to you—not so much as them slippers...What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?

HIGGINS ...I shouldn't bother about it if I were you...You might marry, you know...You go to bed and have a good nice rest; and then get up and look at yourself in the glass; and you won't feel so cheap.

ELIZA. I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me...

Before you go, sir— Do my clothes belong to me or to Colonel Pickering?...He might want them for the next girl you pick up to experiment on. (Shaw).

By this scene, Eliza comes to a point of self-realization demonstrating that Ani DiFranco's distress concerning the radical effects of patriarchal power is being recognized. This is a turning point for her as she finally understands that Higgins has used her for his own personal amusement and has even made money from the experiment. As a result, Eliza can no longer withstand his objectification. She transgressing patriarchal norms by standing up for herself and fighting with Higgins about the way he objectifies her, and his dehumanizing judgments about her. Furthermore, Eliza recognizes that although she has developed into a lady of the upper class, she has lost certain abilities she once had before. Thus, causing her to remind Higgins that she came to him for help so she could make something of herself and become a person in society that people did not ridicule, not because she wanted to become the object of his experimental game with Pickering. Unlike Sayuri, Eliza displays feminine power, transgressing male oppression by showing Higgins that he no longer dominates or possess any control over her. Therefore, giving Shaw a more effective conclusion as Eliza is deemed a responsible feminist at the end of the play.

Shaw's Pygmalion was well ahead of the feminist ideology present during his time (the Victorian era). As the internet, mass media, and feminism evolved, it has made Eliza's transgressive actions common among women of the 21st century. The third wave of feminism developed the idea of 'universal womanhood' in the mid-90s and has prospered since then. Feminist such as

Cassidy Boon stand up to patriarchal oppression by telling their stories of rape through media forms such as The Portly Gazelle, a feminist news & gossip site. In her article, ' A Man Saved Me from Drowning, But Now I Am Suing Him for Rape Because He Touched Me', she tells her story of her near-death experience, and how her male savior took advantage of the unconscious state she was in and sexually assaulted her. Boon described his actions as "...exerted his Patriarchal power over me and did stuff to my body without my consent"(4). She goes on to suppress male power by saying, "...if we start excusing rape just because our rapists did a nice thing to us, we're really just excusing rape culture" (4). Cassidy demonstrates that women in today's society are still objectified and taken advantage of by patriarchal power but, they no longer stay oppressed and silent about this matter. Like Eliza, twenty-first-century women speak out, transgressing patriarchal norms and male objectification, unlike Sayuri. Thus, making Shaw's Pygmalion have a more enjoyable ending than Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha.

Overall, the lead female characters in both literary mediums surrender themselves to classic feminine stereotypes and male objectification. However, Eliza in George Bernard Shaw's play transgresses patriarchy near the end of Pygmalion, promoting gender equality and producing a more gripping ending than Memoirs of a Geisha. Throughout Memories of a Geisha, Sayuri condemns herself to sexual objectification and the stereotypes of the femme fatale, whore, and damsel in distress. As a result, she is unable to transgress male dominance, showing the prejudice women face within a patriarchal society. On the other hand, despite Eliza's toleration of objectification and male oppression - shown through Higgin's dehumanizing

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treatment, her ability to achieve individualization leads to her ability to transgress male oppression, objectification, and being condemned as the girl next door and whore stereotypes. Both Eliza and Sayuri display the common struggles women face within a patriarchal society. Men objectify and oppress women, believing that they are significantly superior, disregarding the fact that women are just as capable and talented as men. Patriarchy projects gender discriminating roles and the belief that men are better than women. It is still an ongoing issue within the twenty-first century as patriarchal ideologies are still presented within the society, affecting the lives of every person and greatly impacting today's youth. As Ani DiFranco once expressed, patriarchy has become a critical issue "...affecting the planet radically..." and becoming, " the superstructure of human society", but is rarely addressed or talked about.