

# A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN THE NOVEL, 'MEMOIR OF A GEISHA'.

Siti Masitah Binti Md. Zin

Faculty of Management and Muamalah  
Selangor International Islamic University College

[sitimasitah@kuis.edu.my](mailto:sitimasitah@kuis.edu.my)

## ABSTRACT

*Geishas are part of unique Japanese culture that has tapped into people's curiosity for centuries. It is a secluded, almost untouched world even for the Japanese themselves. Geishas are bounded by their ancient code of ethic which differentiates them from the ordinary Japanese women. Geishas are said to represent the ideal grace and beauty of Japanese women. On the contrary, the geishas have paid a big amount of sacrifice in order to survive in this unique world. In most cases, they become geishas out of pressure from their families and society, especially the males. They are being commodified as objects in order to please the men and create an 'ideal image' of a Japanese woman. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to portray various forms of patriarchal oppressions faced by the geishas in their own society through the feminist lense.*

**Field of Research:** *Feminism Theory, Patriarchal oppression, Commodification*

---

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Women in Traditional Japanese Society

The traditional Japanese culture was actually matriarchal before it turned into a patriarchal society from the influence of Buddhism, Confucianism and the Samurai Ethic. According to Lebra (1976), Japanese women's freedom was represented by Izanami, Japan's creator goddess, who was strong and free spirited. She was represented as spontaneous and strong. *"She tells him she cannot return with him to heaven, and instruct him not to look for her...she threatens to strangle one thousand of his people each day if he divorces her"*. The description about the goddess's relationship with her husband shows how a woman during the early period was free to point out her opinion.

The emerging of Confucianism in Japan has brought several changes in old Japan society. Confucianism established a patriarchal system where females are viewed as less significant than males. Lebra further explained that Confucianism has made the women to act in the Confucian manner and women are discriminated in matters of property, marriage, and divorce.

The influence from Buddhism also oppressed the Japanese women. *"Buddhism taught that a woman's nature was inherently evil"*. Lebra emphasizes this notion from the Tale of Genji, written by Lady Murasaki. Women are considered as evil and Japanese women during this time were also been warned that they were devilish and sent to prevent men from following the way of Buddha.

When the Samurai ethic emerged in Japan, it was thought as advantageous for women. Samurai ethic is a feudal practice which emphasizes on courage, strength, and absolute loyalty to feudal lord. *"Girls learned to use weapons...the Samurai's wife went to live with her husband and helped him manage the property."* The wife can also inherit the land when her husband died. However, as equal inheritance was neglected, women's rights had declined which led to patriarchal system afterwards. (Lebra, 1976)

The traditional ideal women of Japan is one who unquestioningly and dutifully follows the old Japanese rule of 'obedience to a father when yet married, and to a son when widowed.' Japanese women have been taught that they exist to serve men faithfully and well as they have been carefully indoctrinated with the idea that women are subordinate to men. (Welty, 1984) Clearly, it shows that Japanese women are being bounded by the traditional culture which glorifies the men rather than women.

The thought of women subordinated to men is implied in many social attitudes and practices in the Japanese culture. Undeniably, in traditional Japanese society, boys are more valued or appreciated than girls. It is common that the boys are often spoiled by the parents while the girls are treated with affection but firmly disciplined in order to prepare them as good wives or mothers in the future. In traditional Japanese society, good wives are dependent and meek. They also walk several paces behind her husband on public streets and frequently carry packages. This situation reflects the traditional attitude towards women.

The unchangeable characteristics of Japanese women, according to Bisignani (1993:43), *"are because of societal training and very strong role modelling. Japanese women are usually reluctant to voice an opinion, even in a seemingly trivial matter."* It shows that the Japanese women have great influence by their social training and role modelling. They are thus to be voiceless in every matter or thing in order not to offend others. More specifically, their attitudes are based on group decision rather than individual's decision.

## 1.2 Traditional Geishas

Other than the movie, *Memoir of a Geisha*, there are a lot of researchers or authors who specifically writing books about geishas. One of them is Liza Dalby. She is an anthropologist and also the writer of the book entitled *'Geisha'*. Dalby is also well known as the world first and only American geisha. She decided to be a geisha and lived with the geisha community in Pontocho in order to complete her book. Liza Dalby has explained the role of the geisha as opposed to a wife as , *"Geishas are supposed to be sexy where wives are sober, artistic where wives are humdrum and witty where wives are serious."* Geishas are supposed to have the passion about being a woman which is different from a wife's perspective of being a woman. They create a whole different world where men are treated with grace and humour.

According to Dalby (1998), geisha is a term that refers to *'one who practices or lives by their art.'* Generally, they are artistes in a Japanese context. *Gei* refers to the arts of playing the shamisen, drums, traditional dancing and singing, tea ceremony, calligraphy, and the art of conversation.

The history of geisha is surprisingly originated from the males. These male geishas were musicians who played drums and also comedians. Their job is to entertain the high class prostitutes and the customers at the brothels during parties. However, this trend soon to be changed. In 1751, some customers in a Shimabara brothel were surprised when a female drum bearer came to their parties. A few years later, in Edo, similar female entertainers appeared. They were referred to as onna

geisha or female geisha. By 1780, female geishas outnumbered male geishas and by 1800, a geisha, unmodified, was a woman.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Based on the objective of this study which is to portray various forms of Patriarchal Oppressions faced by the geishas in their own society through the feminist lense, the researcher chose the Femisnism theory or more specifically the Marxism Feminism theory. Marxism Feminism concerns with the issue of economic inequality that will lead to unhealthy social interaction between men and women. This theory is relevant in this study as the geishas are being oppressed not only socially but also economically.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Patriarchal Oppression**

Patriarchal oppression is the result of male domination over female based on the traditional belief that males are superior to females. Warren J.F in *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san* (1992) believes that the patriarchal system in traditional Chinese and Japanese society is the main reason of oppression among women in terms of financially, physically, sexually, and emotionally. Basically, patriarchal oppression is imposed on women by men in a form of various cultural restrictions in order to control them. Women's feminity is viewed as weakness and exploited by men based on the traditional belief that men are in control of every aspect of a woman's life.

### **3.2 Commodification of Women**

Commodification is a term which refers to the devaluing a human to objects or merchandise that is profitable. In this study, women are seen as merchandise with a specific price tag on their back. A woman's self value has been downgraded when they are seen as nothing but objects that can please men's sexual need.

## **4. Analysis and Discussion**

### **4.1 Patriarchal Oppression**

*"Fishermen are terribly superstitious, you see. They especially don't like women to have anything to do with fishing. One man in our village, Mr. Yamamura, found his daughter playing in his boat one morning. He beat her with a stick and then washed out the boat with sake and lye so strong it bleached streaks of coloring from the wood. Even this wasn't enough; Mr. Yamamura had the Shinto priest come and bless it. All this because his daughter had done nothing more than play where the fish are caught."* (page 15)

The excerpt above reflects the concept of patriarchal oppression in a traditional Japanese society. Living in a male-dominated society, fathers have the power to punish their children especially the daughters even for the simplest mistake. In the case of Mr. Yamamura, it is clear that his punishment towards his daughter is a form of oppression. Problem arises when society cannot differentiate oppression from culture. When certain behaviour is practiced for generations, it will soon develop a concept of hegemony where it is generally accepted as a culture. The idea of women as bad luck is also another example of oppression. It shows the opposite image of women as 'evil'

compared to men who are 'noble' through superstitious belief in Japanese society. Clearly, the men in a patriarchal society do not value their women in a respectable way.

#### **4.2 Commodification of women**

*"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."* (page 283)

The quotation above refers to the old ritual of a geisha which is called mizuage. According to Downer (2000), mizuage is a transitional ceremony which upgrade the apprentice geisha to a full fledged geisha. In other words, it is the deflowering ceremony of an apprentice geisha or a maiko. Before the 1960s, mizuage was a common practice in a geisha community. One cannot be a full fledged geisha without undergoing this ritual. This is because, a virgin geisha is considered as odd as a virgin wife. This practice is a form of commodification as a woman's virginity can be traded for a certain price. Besides that, it also contains the element of patriarchal domination as rich men can buy the maiko's virginity. The maiko whose virginity was sold to the highest price will have the potential to be a famous geisha and the man who paid for it can gain their own personal pleasure or pride. Clearly, it shows male domination over women. The women have to sacrifice her own self value in order to please men. The sexual aspect of mizuage is purely ritual based unlike as it is just a 'passage' in becoming a geisha. The profit from this ritual will also benefit the owner of the tea house where the maiko belongs to but not the maiko herself. Undoubtedly, the notion of women's commodification is very apparent in this context.

#### **5. Conclusion**

There is a strong element of patriarchal domination in the novel where men have the power to control women. As described in the story, people accept the unequal treatment against women because it is considered as a normal practice in the Japanese culture. Women are considered as a burden economically and socially. As the result of this, traditional Japanese women are vulnerable to patriarchal domination in their family and community. Fathers can sell their daughters to brothels or tea houses in order to lessen their financial burden. Thus, the circle of oppression will continue at the hands of other people like the brothel or tea house owners and the customers.

The geishas in the novel are also the same conflict even though through the eyes of outsiders, they are the symbols of elegance and beauty. Most geishas become a geisha because they are forced by their family. People are using these women's femininity in order to bring benefits for the tea house owners and the clients. The fact that the geishas are burdened with a huge debt is also a form of oppression. There are many restrictions that are implemented on the geishas that limit their freedom because of the debt system. Besides that, the geishas must also sacrifice their pride and dignity in the mizuage ritual. The true indication of a geisha's success is when she has paid all her debt. However, it is not easy for them to cover all the debt in a short amount of time unless they have a danna who will cover everything for them. The relationship between a danna with his mistress, the geisha will benefit each party. The relationship will give the men a sense of masculinity and pride as they 'own' the geishas totally. On the contrary, a geisha needs a danna to free her from her debt.

In general, patriarchal domination in the traditional Japanese society can lead to various social oppressions to women. As the result from patriarchal domination, women are becoming voiceless

and dependent on the men to make decision and so on. Women will also being commodified as valuable items that can bring profit and other benefits to people in their circle

## **6. Future Recommendation**

The findings of this study show the concept of patriarchal domination and commodification of women based on the feminism theory. However, there are still many areas that can be studied on. The current study utilizes only one main corpus which is the novel itself. It will be beneficial for future researchers to do a comparative study between the novel and the movie. Future researchers can also explore the sense of agency among the geishas on how they resist the oppression by men.

## **7. References**

Dalby, L. (2000). *Geisha*. London: Vintage

Golden, A. (1998). *Memoirs of a Geisha*. London: Vintage.

Lebra, J., Paulson, J., Powers, E. (1976). *Women in Changing Japan*. America: Westview Press.

Warren, J.F. (1992). *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*. Murdoch University.

Welty, P. T. (1984). *The Asians: Their Evolving Heritage*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. New York: Harper & Row.

Some women inspire her independent spirit while other contrast sharply with Jane's free-spirited attitude. Though Jane does not announce to the world that she is trying to begin any type of feminist movement, her actions and decisions nevertheless could set a model for any forward-thinking woman in the mid-nineteenth century. St. John's opinion that her "words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue" (Bronte 363) seem to be Bronte's hint that indeed, Jane's actions were not typical of a woman in that era. Works Cited. Bronte, Charlotte.