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Memoirs of a Geisha and Orientalism

Orientalism is the way the West perceives the East, but it is much more than a simple perception, for orientalism plays a role in reinforcing the belief that the West is superior to all "others" (ie., the East). Its origins are deeply rooted in the colonial period of Europe, however, the term itself was only first coined later in 1978 by Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism*, in which he asserts that this Western perception is made up of their preconceived notions that essentially stereotype the East and separates them from the West in a prejudiced fashion. These false assumptions put a monolithic notion unto the East, making it difficult for the East to be accurately represented or respected in the West. One such common orientalist view is the sexualization and perception of Asian women as "exotic." Examples of this can be seen in the 2005 film adaptation *Memoirs of a Geisha*, where they depicted the geisha similar to that of a prostitute forced to do sex work, when in actuality, a geisha is simply a trained artist that has the freedom to choose if they would be interested to partake in sex work or not. Geisha, as perceived from the Western eye, gave way to the common feminine and demure stereotype and fetishization of Asian women today, and the film further encourages this perspective to the Western audience. The orientalism in fiction like *Memoirs of a Geisha* allows the West to continue to create further inaccurate representations of the East and overall negatively impact women of Asian origins through the reinforcement of separation and power imbalance between women in the East and white individuals in the West.

Edward Said states,

Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess [the courtesan] physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental.' (Said 23)

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Flaubert is a writer who had written novels about the Orient or the East based on his travels there, and his writings of the Oriental women as submissive to the wealthier foreign male set a precedent for the Western fictional work depicting the East that would come out later, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The 2005 film adaptation of Arthur Golden's novel uses the real-life accounts of retired geisha, Mineko Iwasaki, to tell the story of the protagonist Chiyo, a girl who is sold to a geisha household, and how she grows to become one of the most well-known geishas in Japan during the era of World War II. While the film received mixed to positive reviews in the U.S., it received more negative reviews when released in Japan, due to the inaccurate depictions of geisha throughout the film. One example of such was the way the film seemed to equate the geisha to helpless women forced into doing things they did not want to. In one specific scene, Mameha, a geisha who had taken Chiyo under her wing, tells Chiyo to cut her thigh to present it to a much older doctor as an act of seduction so that he will bid a high price for her virginity. Chiyo has no clue what is going on and states, "My life had turned into a game and only [Mameha] knew the rules." Mameha also tells her at some point, "We don't become geisha to pursue our own destinies; we become geisha because we have no choice." In addition, while the film did not include many explicit sexual scenes, likely due to media censorship, the original adaptation did. In reality, geisha do not partake in sexual activity very frequently and have the right to choose if they would like to partake in such. Geisha are not sex workers at the core; they are simply entertainers trained in multiple arts. These depictions of the geisha, although inaccurate, are not very uncommon in other related Western fiction, for they all fall under a common view of the Oriental woman—that they are generally passive and submissive, especially to their male counterparts and even more so to the foreign man. The general Asian audience, more specifically the Japanese audience, can see that the film is based on a rather Western perspective of geisha. The Western audience that the film targets, however, does not recognize this, for they believe they are seeing the film through the eyes of protagonist Chiyo or more specifically Iwasaki, whom Chiyo's character and story were created through, when in actuality, they do not hold such power. In Flaubert's novels, he is the one who represented the Oriental

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woman he had encountered, and such a model can be found in the production of the film, for the audience is not seeing the story of a geisha through the eyes of a woman of the Orient, but rather of the white director. The Oriental woman, in this case, Chiyo and thus Iwasaki, is therefore not able to tell her story with her own voice, for it has been taken away through the power the West, the white director, holds and replaced with his own retelling of the story instead. The director is then able to tell or change the story in a way that fits his perspective, essentially being able to speak over the Oriental woman and prevent her from representing herself. In addition to the complete possession over the Oriental woman, it is possible for the director to have Orientalist notions of geisha, and such notions, whether intentional or unintentional, were expressed through the previously mentioned brief depictions above, and contribute to the allowance of inaccurate generalizations and harmful stereotypes of geisha, and therefore of the Orient.

Fictional works like *Memoirs of a Geisha* put Asian women into a monolithic group described to be petite with gentle femininity. Although this does not seem to be a harmful stereotype, it has led to the white man's objectification of Asian women. These works are known as Butterfly narratives, for one of the most famous pieces of fiction depicting Asian women in such a way was the American play *Madame Butterfly* (1898). There were two other prominent countries who produced such plays at the time: France with *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) and Italy with *Madama Butterfly* (1904). The Butterfly narratives do share some differences, but they all center around the theme of a Western man, who is completely separate from the realities of Asia, traveling to the Orient to marry a woman there, and the women all seem to be geisha whose role is to entertain foreign soldiers. In the narratives, "the West is mainly male [and] the Orient mainly female," as depicted through their innocence and petiteness—a rather common Orientalist concept (Wisenthal et al 5) (It is important to note that when these plays were produced, these countries were partaking in the conquests of non-Western nations.) *Memoirs of a Geisha*, like its predecessors, still contains much of the main elements described previously even though the main storyline is about the life of the protagonist Chiyo. For example, Chiyo is still a teenager and a virgin by the time she becomes a geisha apprentice, and it is this 'innocence and

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petiteness' of hers that had made her more desirable, as proven by the scene in which Mameha prepares Chiyo for the bidding of her virginity. Although only implied in the film, it is explicitly stated in the original adaptation that she also ends up leaving her geisha life and essentially Japan, as the chairman she fell in love with helps her settle in America. The West, in this case America, is Chiyo's safe place, while the Orient, Japan, is the place she seems to have escaped from. The chairman, although Japanese, is heavily influenced by the West as he does business in America, so in this sense, it is still a Western man who seems to have "saved" her. The West "saving" the people of the Orient is an indication of the power the West has over other nations and falls under a common imperialist and orientalist mindset that the Orient needs assistance from the West to be considered at an equal footing. In addition, the elements of the Butterfly narratives erase the true meaning of geisha, instead transforming it into a stereotypical representation of all Asian women. Geisha are not helpless and do not need any "saving" from their lifestyle. They are also not as demure as depicted in the narratives; they are simply polite. These characteristics that the West believes to be true of geisha, and by extension, Asian women in general, push Asian women into a monolithic group described to be that of submissive femininity and essentially assert that their worth lies in their sexual roles. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, for example, white soldiers are seen being entertained by geisha and catcalling or leering at the Japanese women that pass by, for the soldiers expected that the women would have sex with them even if they were not geisha or prostitutes. Although the film did not display any forceful sexual scenes, likely because it is a Western film, it was not uncommon for white soldiers to force the women of the Asian countries they were seeking to colonize into sex. In an article on white sexual imperialism, Sunny Woan states, "Filipina sex workers... frequently report 'being treated like a toy or a pig by the American [soldiers] and being required to do 'three holes'- oral, vaginal and anal sex.'" (285) There was a power imbalance between the West and the East, for the West was trying to conquer the Orient and have their people assimilate to Western lifestyle, as they believed that the West was superior and the East inferior. Therefore, the prostitution of Asian women during these wars was different from prostitution of white women

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in the West at the time. With prostituting Asian women, the white soldiers had the intention to ‘conquer’ not only the women individually, but the country in which they reside as well. As previously mentioned, the Orient is often represented by a woman, generally described to be subservient, thus to the white soldier, it is easy to ‘conquer’ the Oriental woman and if the woman is ‘conquered’, the nation is conquered as well. The Oriental woman is essentially molded into nothing but a sexual tool used in power play. The Orientalist stereotypes continue to be maintained through modern Butterfly narratives, further reinforcing white fetishization of Asian women, now commonly referred to as ‘yellow fever.’ While many still argue that fetishization is a simple preference, this ‘preference’ plays a contributing role to the oppression of Asian women today.

...for example, many of the user-submitted entries on ‘yellow fever’ featured on UrbanDictionary are openly derisive in listing interests, e.g., anime and manga, associated with ‘nerds’ and ‘geeks’ or explicitly associating it with ‘male caucasians who haven’t yet been laid or haven’t gotten up to any level sexually.’ (Zheng 411)

Zheng implies that white men with yellow fever are commonly viewed as unattractive, and when considering societal racial hierarchy, they are often men that are not good enough to be dating a white woman. In other words, they are the leftovers that white women do not want, but they seem to think they are, at least, acceptable to Asian women, further reinforcing that the Asian woman is a lesser human being, for their worth seems to only lie in their sexual and domestic roles and cannot be equated to the worth of the average white woman.

The Orientalist stereotype is well established in Western society, as demonstrated in views of superiority of those in the West over the East, and it continues to be perpetuated through various media and in doing so, sustaining the negative perceptions of Asian women in reality. With mainstream Western media having a heavy influence over what views their target audience, who have preconceived notions already, will further develop, films such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which contain unreliable depictions of Asian women, continue to contribute to the oppression of Asian women in the West. Misrepresentations of the Asian woman and their culture, due to the

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Orientalist perspective of those behind these projects, continue to encourage inaccurate generalizations of the Orient in Western audiences. Such will lead to a cycle in which biased portrayals of the Orient leads to the maintenance and further constitution of the large disparity of worth and power that exists between the West and East, ultimately at the cost of the Oriental woman.

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