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**MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA: A COMPARISON  
OF THE NOVEL WITH ITS FILM ADAPTATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

With the mounting interest in multimedia, over the years, many literary works like novels and plays have been adapted into films. When an author relies on his words and the imagination of his readers while narrating a story, the filmmakers through the combination of a number of factors like visuals and audio along with the dialogues bring alive the story that is being narrated. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is Golden's 1997 historical novel that took him to heights of fame. Directed by Rob Marshall, the book was adapted into a film that won numerous awards, and was released in the United States in 2005. Both the novel and the film take the readers and viewers back in time to the Japan of the twentieth century. The story is the memoir of a fictional character named Sayuri who as a child is sold into slavery by her family and is thus plucked from a little fishing village and brought to an okiya in Gion, a prominent geisha district in Kyoto, Japan. This paper is an attempt at a comparative study of the novel and its film adaptation. A study has been done with its focus on the plot which has been altered at certain points, the constraint of time which brings about a difference in the time span involved, the settings and the different ending of the novel and the film.

**Keywords:** Narrator, Plot, Time, Settings, Geisha

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In the context of media, adaptation can be defined as “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now esp) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on stage from a novel or similar literary source” (<https://lucian.uchicago.edu>). Film adaptation is a form of derivative work and the term is used to describe the transfer of a part or a whole of any written literary work like a novel or a play into a film. A novel usually forms a basis of a cinematic transfer. Mc. Farlene quotes two famous statements, one made by Joseph Conrad about his “novelistic intention: my task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel- it is before all, to make you see it” and the other by D.W. Griffith on his cinematic intention which echoes Conrad's remark: “the task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see” (3-4). Práce borrows the following questions put forward by Timothy Corrigan while evaluating an adapted work- “1) is the plot accurately retained? 2) are the settings accurately

recreated? 3) to what extent are the characters attributes depicted? 4) to what extent are the ideas and themes preserved?" (theses.cz/id/ufku1y/Bakalsk\_prce\_ustkov.pdf).

Arthur Golden is an American writer whose fame pivoted with his 1997 novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. It is the only novel authored by Golden and is an outstanding piece of fiction which remained in the *New York Times* bestseller list for a period of two years. This novel was translated into thirty two languages around the globe and four million English copies have been sold over the years. Golden took over six years to complete this historical novel and he did extensive research and interviewed many geisha including Mineko Iwasaki for background information regarding the enchanting world of geisha. Golden later was sued by Mineko Iwasaki for breach of contract and character defamation for he revealed Iwasaki's name in the acknowledgement. She had agreed to tell him about her life as a geisha if he protected her anonymity, for geisha are deemed to follow a code of silence about their clients. Golden's publisher eventually settled the lawsuit outside court in 2003.

Set in Japan in the late 1920's and early 1930's, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is the memoir of a fictional character, Sayuri who was known as Chiyo prior to her days as a geisha. Chiyo and her sister Satsu are sold into slavery by their family and brought to Gion in Kyoto from the little fishing village of Yoroido. Satsu is perceived as less attractive and sold as a prostitute in Kyoto's pleasure district while the nine year old Chiyo with her startling translucent blue-gray eyes is brought to a boarding house of geisha, known as an okiya. She reluctantly begins her life in Nitta okiya with another little girl named Pumpkin, Mother, who owns the okiya and is obsessed with money, Auntie, who is a failed geisha, Granny, the oldest member of the house who disapproves of everybody, and Hatsumomo, a beautiful yet wicked geisha who is renowned in Gion. Knowing Hatsumomo's nature, Mother had not named her as heir to the okiya and so Hatsumomo sees Chiyo as her potential rival and does everything to make her life more miserable in the okiya. Soon Chiyo begins school to learn all the skills required to become a geisha but when she learns about Satsu's whereabouts she meets with her and plans to escape. Her plan is foiled and Mother puts an end to her schooling and shoves her into the role of a maid, for a girl who runs away cannot be trusted.

A few years later, a dejected Chiyo, convinced of the purposelessness of her life chanced to meet an elegant man who is referred to as the Chairman (in fact Ken Iwamura, Chairman of Iwamura Electric) who cheers her up and buys her shaved ice and a gives her little money wrapped in his handkerchief. Touched by the stranger's kindness and suddenly feeling that her life could have a purpose, she runs to Yasaka shrine where she donates the money praying that one day she would become a geisha for the sole aim of seeing the Chairman again and becoming a part of his social circle. Her prayers are answered a little later when a prominent geisha, Mameha, suddenly takes an interest in her while paying respects to the okiya as Granny passed away. Mother is convinced to send Chiyo to school again for Mameha proposes herself as Chiyo's older sister and even enters into a bet with Mother saying that Chiyo would pay off her debts within six months of her debut as a geisha, which is usually considered impossible. With Mameha's expertise and Chiyo's brilliance she soon becomes an apprentice geisha and is given her geisha name, Sayuri.

Sayuri sees her beloved Chairman again but is forced to conceal her affections, for Nobu Toshikazu, a very good friend of the Chairman and president of Iwamura Electric, takes an interest in her. To win the bet that Mameha made with Mother, Sayuri's mizuage, which is described as a 'deflowering' ceremony, is crucial. A bidding war usually undertakes between wealthy men for the mizuage of an apprentice. For Sayuri, Mameha had Nobu in mind and also Dr. Crab who has gained for himself a reputation as a 'mizuage specialist'. But enraged by Sayuri's success, Hatsumomo started following Sayuri and Mameha to the many teahouses they entertained to taint Sayuri's reputation. She goes to the extent of telling a lie to Dr. Crab that Sayuri has already lost her virginity. Mameha finally convinces Dr. Crab that Hatsumomo is a liar and finally he wins the mizuage for a record bidding amount which prompts Mother to adopt Sayuri as her daughter, naming her heir to the okiya. This estranges Sayuri from Pumpkin for Pumpkin was hoping to be adopted one day for her sole dream was to have financial security and a roof above her head. A furious Hatsumomo finally destroys her own career with a little nudge from the part of Sayuri and Mameha and is sent out of the okiya.

For the success of a geisha a 'danna' plays an important role. The man is entitled to certain 'privileges' but has to invest a huge amount in the geisha that he is danna to. Though Nobu proposes to become Sayuri's danna, Mother chooses General Tottori much to Sayuri's relief for she realized that being tied to Nobu blocks her dream of one day winning the Chairman's affections. During the war the General's relationship benefits the okiya but he is finally arrested and when the geisha districts are declared to be shut during World War II it was Nobu who came to Sayuri's rescue and arranged for her a safe place at the home of Arashino, the kimono maker. At the end of the war, years later, Nobu again convinces Sayuri to become a geisha again, to influence a certain deputy minister of finance who could help revive Iwamura Electrics which was ruined in the war. Sayuri along with Mameha and Pumpkin succeeds in the task at hand and much to Sayuri's dismay Nobu again proposes himself as danna. A dejected Sayuri as a last straw decides to seduce the minister in Amami islands and arranges with Pumpkin to bring Nobu to 'discover' them together for she realized Nobu would never accept her if she gave herself to another man. But Pumpkin knowing Sayuri's affections for the Chairman brings him instead as revenge for taking the okiya from her. A miserable Sayuri accepts her fate and one day when she receives a call in the okiya for her to be entertained at the tea house, she gloomily goes expecting to see Nobu. To her surprise the Chairman shows up, for he had learnt the truth from Pumpkin. They profess their love to each other and Sayuri retires as a geisha and later moves to New York and the Chairman remained her danna till the end.

The novel was adapted into an American film of the same name and was released in United States in 2005. Directed by Rob Marshall, the film was produced by Lucy Fisher, Steven Spielberg, Douglas Wick and the script was written by Robin Swicord. Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li and Michelle Yeoh, all prominent Chinese actresses played the important roles in the film which led to a lot of criticism for geisha are traditional Japanese women entertainers who entertained their clients through a number of arts that they have mastered including music, dance, playing various instruments, hosting games and their skill of conversation. Nevertheless the film went on to win numerous awards including Academy award for Best Art Direction, Academy award for Best Cinematography, Academy award for Best Costume Design, Golden Globe award for Best Original Score, Satellite award for Outstanding Screenplay (adapted), The Antony Asquith Award for Achievement in Film Music, BAFTA Award for Cinematography and Costume Design.

The novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, begins with a "Translator's Note" by a historian and Professor of Japanese History, Jakob Haarhius. Golden mentions in the acknowledgement that Sayuri is a fictional character but the translator's note gives the story an air of authenticity and make the readers feel that Sayuri is in fact real. The historian as a boy once attended a dance performance in Kyoto which created an impact in him. Fifty years later he happened to befriend one of the geisha who performed that day and asks her permission for her story to be told. She replied "Well, Jakob-san, I might, if it's you who records it...I agreed and the manuscript was dictated to me over the course of eighteen months...I was never more aware of Sayuri's Kyoto dialect... from the very start I felt myself lost in her world...when she had doubts about where to proceed, I was the one who steered her" (VII).

The story in the novel, though narrated by Sayuri, is thus embedded within this translator's note . There is no mention of a translator in the film but the first person narration of Sayuri is retained. It opens with a scene of the ocean and a raging storm as background to a busy fishing scenario. The scene quickly shifts to a little hut where two people are having a heavy discussion in their native language with an ailing woman in one corner. Soon two frightened girls are hurried to a wagon and board a train along with a man. The moving train signifies Chiyo's journey from her little village to the enchanting world of geisha with the narrator, an aged woman's heavily accented voice saying: "A story like mine should never be told. For my world is as forbidden as it is fragile. Without its mysteries it cannot survive. I certainly wasn't born to the life of a geisha. Like so much in my strange life I was carried there by the current" (*Memoirs of a Geisha*) .



Fig. 1 The moving train from afar

Filmmakers face a lot of challenges while turning a novel into a film. Change in the plot is inevitable due to constraints of time and medium. The atmosphere of the okiya as described by Golden has been truthfully captured in the movie. The miserable state of Chiyo, the hostility of Hutsumomo, the activities inside the okiya are all well portrayed. But certain major instances in the plot have been altered considerably in the film. For instance, in the novel, Chiyo is almost twelve years old when she meets the Chairman for the very first time. She has grown taller for Hatsumomo ridicules her for growing a finger's-width taller than her thus, "I think it must be a weed... look how tall it is!" (119). Chiyo walks around Gion and feels that all around her everybody and everything including the Shirakawa Stream seems to move with a purpose and her life lacks one. She expresses the pain and agony within her thus: "I threw myself onto the little stone wall at the edge of the stream and wept. I was an abandoned island, in the midst of the ocean, with no past for sure, but no future either." (121). It was then that she heard a man's voice saying, "Why, it's too pretty a day to be so unhappy" (121). This is the only time that Chiyo saw the Chairman before she became a geisha.

Chiyo meeting the Chairman is a crucial turning point in her life. The film portrays two instances, instead of one, where Chiyo sees the chairman before her debut as a geisha. The first instance is of little Chiyo around nine or ten years standing on the bridge with a heavy heart and the Chairman stopping by and his first words were "Why it's too pretty a day to be so unhappy" (*Memoirs of a Geisha*).

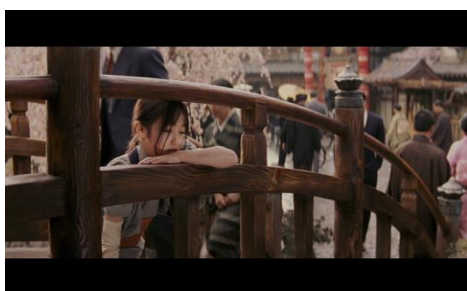


Fig. 2 A dejected Chiyo on a bridge



Fig. 3 Chiyo's first encounter with the Chairman

The novel narrates, "in that brief encounter with the Chairman, I had changed from a lost girl facing a lifetime of emptiness to a girl with a purpose in her life" (125). This is beautifully depicted in the film.



Fig. 4 An ecstatic Chiyo running to the temple to offer prayers

The second instance in the film happens a few years later when Chiyo, being the maid of the okiya, delivers to the teahouse the shamisen that Pumpkin forgot to take with her. The film depicts a taller more womanly Chiyo who peeks into the teahouse out of curiosity when the door is rolled open and she finds herself staring at the Chairman.

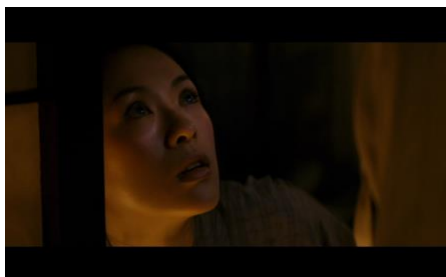


Fig. 5 Chiyo's second encounter with the Chairman

Mameha's interest in Chiyo is also integral to the plot. In the novel Mameha comes across Chiyo, who was just a maid then, for the first time when she visits the Nitta Okiya due to Granny's death for Nitta okiya is a prominent one in Gion and so many people came to pay their respects. She looks at Chiyo and says, "What unusual eyes! I thought I might have imagined it...Now, how many girls in Gion do you think have eyes like that?" (130). A month later Mameha sends a maid to inform Chiyo to find a reason to step out of the okiya and meet Mameha in her apartment the next day. The long conversation at this secret meeting in her apartment gives Chiyo a hope that she might after all be given a second chance. Weeks later Mameha goes to Nitta okiya again and cleverly steers the conversation with Mother into Chiyo's topic:

Mrs. Nitta, I do hope you'll forgive me for disturbing you on such a busy day, but I'd like to talk with you briefly about your maid Chiyo...I noticed that she hasn't been attending the school these past few weeks. I'm so accustomed to running into her from time to time in the hallway... Just yesterday I realized she must be terribly ill! I've recently met an extremely capable doctor. I, wonder shall I ask him to stop by? (147)

The film just mentions Granny's death in passing alone and it depicts Mameha, out of nowhere, striding into the okiya one day with a definite purpose. It gives the impression that she already knows Chiyo but this is not true. The film does have a scene where years ago little Chiyo is made to destroy Mameha's kimono by Hatsumomo and she is also sent to return it. Mameha catches a glimpse of Chiyo but she was just a little girl of nine then.



Fig. 6 Mameha at Nitta Okiya

Alterations have also been made in the conversation that she has Mother. Movie portrays Mameha trying hard to convince Mother to send Chiyo to school again and offers to take her as her younger sister.



Fig. 7 Mameha conversing with Mother

But in the novel Mameha casually mentions that she was hoping to take Chiyo as her younger sister and expertly peeks the curiosity and interests of Mother and even rises to leave at one point. This is a snippet of the conversation:

‘But, Mameha-san, wait a moment before you leave, if you don’t mind. You were saying you’d almost considered taking on Chiyo as your younger sister?’ ‘Well, by now she has been out of training so long...’ Mameha said. ‘Anyway, I’m sure you have an excellent reason for the decision you’ve made, Mrs. Nitta. I wouldn’t dare second guess you’(149).

These are just a few of the many instances in the film in which the plot has been altered.

The importance of time or even its constraint cannot be undermined when it comes to a film adaptation. The viewers are hurriedly taken through all that happened over weeks or even months in the novel. For instance, in the novel, Chiyo informs the readers that her mother has been sick for a long time probably with bone cancer. She is usually sent on errands to the village every now and then and it was during one of these visits to the village that she happened to meet Mr. Tanaka Ichiro. Chiyo slipped and fell on the dirt road and Mr. Tanaka came to her aid. A few days later he visits their home and proposes a deal to their father. Chiyo was under the impression that Mr. Tanaka would adopt her and her sister and she was quite excited about the prospect too. Film gives the impression that the arrangements for them to leave the house were done in a matter of hours and two terribly frightened girls are dragged into the wagon. But in the novel weeks passed when they were finally asked to go to the village and the girls were already pretty accustomed to the idea of moving away from home.

Another example is of Sayuri establishing acquaintance with Dr. Crab. Mameha comes up with a plan and Dr. Crab first meets Sayuri as his patient. Enamored by her beauty he seeks to be entertained by her in the Shirae teahouse - “...we heard from Dr. Crab the next week, and nearly every week afterwards over the following months” (260). Hatsumomo was initially unaware of Sayuri’s acquaintance with him but as soon as she finds out she sets out to destroy this relationship nearly foiling Mameha’s careful planning to lure Dr. Crab into Sayuri’s mizuage bidding. The film portrays the scene in Dr. Crab’s clinic but leaves out the entertaining part. Dr. Crab is won over again, after Hatsumomo’s trick, the next time he meets Sayuri which is after the traditional Spring dance wherein he is convinced of Sayuri’s innocence and accepts the rice cake that Sayuri offers thus agreeing to bid for Sayuri’s mizuage. All of these seem to have happened within a few days in the film though the novel specifically mentions that months passed in between.

Golden, in the novel while narrating Sayuri’s story, also focuses on the ‘becoming’ a geisha part for he goes to length in elaborating the detailed makeup of a geisha, their hairdo, the various kimono worn by them, the many arts like dancing, tea ceremony, music and the like that they are expected to master in order to become a successful geisha. The readers are never left in the dark for as soon as Golden introduces a new aspect he carefully explains it. The film accounts just the life of Sayuri and focuses more on the relationship she has with the people around her. Film being a combination of visual and audio, of course has its own advantage and does not have to rely so much on words to elaborate. John Williams composed and conducted the music for this film. The captivating orchestra adds to the mood of most of the scenes in the film. A barely five minute soundtrack “becoming a geisha” covers the visuals on the transformation of Chiyo, the maid, to Sayuri, the apprentice geisha, with voices of Mameha and Sayuri in the background. But this single scene gives ample insight into the effort that goes into becoming a geisha. Mameha rightly says, “Remember Chiyo, geisha are not courtesans and we are not wise. We sell our skills, not our bodies. We create another secret world, a place only of beauty. 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*).



Fig. 8 Chiyo training to become a geisha



Fig. 9 Sayuri in full regalia of an apprentice geisha

It is indeed a challenge that filmmakers face to recreate the settings of the novel from which the film is adapted. The makers of *Memoirs of a Geisha* have successfully captured the Japan of late 1920's and 30's. Because contemporary Japan was much too modern the producers created sets and one particularly in a large ranch in Thousand Oaks, which resembled the geisha districts back in time. The busy streets of Gion, the teahouses, okiya and apartments with rolling doors and exquisite furnishing, the traditional dances have all been beautifully represented.



Fig. 10 A Street in Geisha district



Fig. 11 A teahouse where geisha entertained



Fig. 12 Mameha's apartment



Fig. 13 The traditional Spring Dance

But at times individual settings have been altered. This could be to gratify the interests of the audience. This is more potent in the final scene. Novel describes a miserable Sayuri expecting Nobu in a little room at the top of the Ichiriki teahouse. But to Sayuri's surprise the Chairman makes an appearance and she narrates, "...the Chairman was seating himself in the very cushion where I'd expected Nobu to sit" (471). But in the film a gloomy Sayuri awaits Nobu in a beautiful garden overlooking a little stream and there she meets the Chairman instead.



Fig. 14 Sayuri expecting Nobu



Fig. 15 Sayuri with the Chairman

The film leaves the stories of many characters like Satsu, Granny, Hatsumomo and even Sayuri open ended. The film ends after the Chairman confesses his affections for Sayuri and vice versa in the garden. The novel goes further, for a much older Sayuri reflects, “now, nearly forty years later, I sit here looking back on that evening with the Chairman as the moment when all the grieving voices in me fell silent”(482). She narrates all that happened in between. Since Chairman couldn't jeopardize his friendship with Nobu he decided instead to hide his relationship with Sayuri from him and thus Sayuri retired as a geisha for a while. It is heavily implied that the Chairman had an illegitimate son with Sayuri and so to avoid certain circumstances Sayuri moves to New York. There she opens a teahouse and entertained Japanese dignitaries and the Chairman remained her danna forever. The Chairman lived a long life before bidding goodbye to Sayuri and she reminiscences him thus, “Even now that he is gone I have him still, in the richness of my memories.” (492). Instead of showing a “little old Japanese woman standing on the street corner in kimono” (493), the film concludes the narration of Sayuri's memoir at the prime of her age, achieving the one thing that she so craved for and for which she desired to become a geisha- the Chairman's affections.

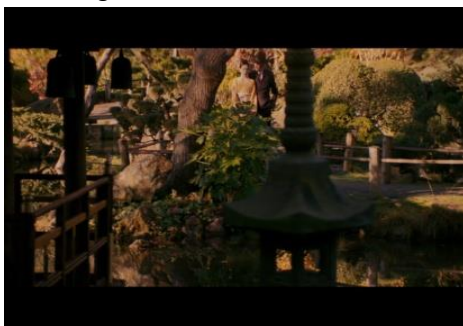


Fig. 16 Sayuri taking a stroll with the Chairman

Adapting this novel into a film was quite a challenge and so a comparative study between the two reveals that though the plot of the film has been true to the original work most of the time, certain instances have been altered here and there. Due to the constraints of time, the film did seem to hurry through a few events in Sayuri's life. While Golden's elaboration of 'becoming' a geisha part runs to pages many a time, the film lays emphasis on the relationship of Sayuri to the people around her. The stories of a few characters, even Sayuri's, are left incomplete when compared to the novel but for the viewer of the film this barely comes across as a dearth. The settings in general have been beautifully recreated by the filmmakers, leaving the viewers entranced. Both the novel and the film, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, have brought alive the Japan of the twentieth century. Through her powerful narration, Sayuri unveils the events in her life little by little and she states, “I've lived my life again by just telling it to you” (492).

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