

## **“Re-presenting Asian Stereotypes in Hollywood Cinema: an Analysis of Race and Gender Representations in *Memoirs of a Geisha*”**

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### **Abstract**

Asian cultures have recently begun to be fashionable in Western society. Films such as *The Joy Luck Club* (USA 1993) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wò hu cánglóng*; China, 2000), *Hero* (*Ying Xiong*; China, 2002) *The House of the Flying Daggers* (*Shí Miàn mái fú*; China, 2004) or *Red Cliff* (*Chì bì*; China, 2008) had set the mood for Asian (better said, Chinese) cinema. Traditionally, Hollywood has not offered very positive images of Asians or Asian-Americans in its movies. Benshoff and Griffin (2004) have cited the stereotype of the *inscrutable Oriental* as the most common image we find about Asians in Hollywood films. Directed by Rob Marshall, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) is a Hollywood movie that aims at portraying the world of Japanese geishas with apparent neutrality. Following Branston and Stafford's assertion that "however realistic media images may seem [...] they are always a construction, a re-presentation, rather than a transparent window onto the real" (2006: 141), the purpose of this paper is to study the representations that lie behind this apparent neutral cover. The focus of this paper will concentrate on the analysis of the representations of race and gender, as well as to the use of symbols in the film.

### **1 Introduction**

It has been said that one of the consequences of globalization has to do with the reinforcement of local cultures and identities. The spread of the idea of the *global village* has made countries aware of the fact that they have to look for the right position to their cultures in this new plural world. (Ang 1996; Du Gay 1997: 4). A film as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) can thus be read as an attempt to revive the old traditions of a country as Japan, which seems to have in some way lost its most valuable old traditions. This movie does not focus on present-day history but all over the movie there is some degree of nostalgia that constantly evokes a world of mystery and old traditions that remain secret to foreigners. It is this nostalgic remorse for the destruction of old traditions that gives sense to this film. In an attempt to bring this culture somehow back to life, the movie also tries to assimilate these old traditions into the new global culture and make everyone participant of them.

Traditionally, Hollywood has not offered very positive images of Asian or Asian-American people in its movies. According to Benshoff and Griffin (2004) the most common stereotype we find about Asians in Hollywood films is that of the *inscrutable Oriental*. Famous oriental characters such as Charlie Chan and Dr. Fu Manchu spread the idea that Asians were somehow mysterious, exotic and cunning. Films about Vietnam, WWII and The

Cold War helped to perpetuate this stereotype. The globalization process can be said to be one of the forces that helped to change this situation. The improvement in global technologies has made it possible to get access to the Asian market with relatively little effort. Asian cultures have recently begun to be fashionable in Western society. Movies such as *The Joy Luck Club* (USA Wang: 1993) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wò hu cánglóng*. China; Lee: 2000), *Hero* (*Ying Xiong*. China; Yimou: 2002) or *The House of the Flying Daggers* (*Shí Miàn mái fú*. China; Yimou: 2003) had set the mood for Asian (better said, Chinese) cinema. It is important to note, however, that *Memoirs of a Geisha* is not an Asian film. Although most of the actors are Asian or Asian American, the rest of the crew is American –that includes director Rob Marshall and producers. The film has been almost entirely shot in California, with exception of a few scenes of Japanese temples. We may note as well that the film is an adaptation of the best-seller that was written by Arthur Golden in 1997. This evidence shows up to which point this movie was thought by and for Americans.

Both the director and the whole crew had emphasized the fact that they had attempted to represent a period of Japanese history *just as it was*. They did a great job of documentation so as to recreate the world of geishas in the 40's. They had to create their own kimonos and hair ornaments, build the whole *hanamachi* (the geisha district), and train the actresses for several weeks so that they learned how to behave, walk and dance like true geishas. The result is impressive and at first sight it seems that they succeeded in rendering a verisimilar vision of the life of geishas. There are some features that make us think that although this film aims to be neutral and present reality just as it was, it is actually a representation that has been created according to Western/American patterns based on certain stereotypes.

In this work I will try to analyze those representations that lie behind this apparent neutral cover. This paper is structured in three basic parts, which cover both thematic and technical aspects. Firstly, I will study to what extent the concepts of representation, typing and stereotyping are important in this context (section 2). Section 3 is concerned with the idea of Orientalism and race and gender issues are analyzed in section 4.

## **2 Representation: typing and stereotyping**

According to Benshoff and Griffin, representation can be defined as a “process of presenting an image of something in order to communicate ideas or tell a story” (2004: 350). Going even further, a representation may be said to have a twofold purpose: it plays the role of the

message in a communication process and it is also a construction that tries to express reality with the help of determined codes of meaning. Media needs to resort constantly to representations to express reality. Branston and Stafford asserted that “however realistic media images may seem, they never simply *present* the world direct. They are always a construction, a *re*-presentation, rather than a transparent window onto the real.” (2006: 141). For Taylor and Willis (1999), representations are combinations of signs that help us make complex abstract concepts significant and understandable. For this reason they can be considered fundamental strategies related to the cognitive processes in our mind (Taylor and Willis 1999: 39). Tied to perception and cognition, we find *types* and *stereotypes*, two of the most recurrent strategies that the media use to represent reality. Types are necessary mental constructs that help us understand the world around us (Taylor and Willis 1999: 42). Cognitive scholars have remarked that our mind is ordered according to categorizations that help analyze and understand reality (Lakoff 1990; Green 1996; Dirven and Verspoor 2000). Stereotypes also contribute to the task of categorizing reality but they usually have other implications as well. Branston and Stanford have listed four characteristics of stereotypes (2006: 142). For them stereotyping is a process of categorization that in most cases implies a negative evaluation of the group that is being analyzed. In *Memoirs of a Geisha* we find both types and stereotypes of the main characters.

This task of encoding and decoding meanings, types and stereotypes so as to create representations of reality has a lot to do with the process of communication. Hall pointed out that the code is fundamental so that the receiver can decode the message in the same way that the sender had created it (1997: 21). These codes of encoding/decoding highly depend on cultural issues. It is highly probable that Japanese people will not perceive the stereotype of the geisha in the film in the same way as European or American people will do. The promotional posters for the movie in America/Europe and Japan reflect this culture-based conflict. The list of differences between the two posters ranges from the name of the movie, the layout colors and the representation of the character, among others, they are the result of a conscious process of representation of the figure of the geisha that has been modified according to the cultural patterns. Both being a close-up of the protagonist, the message they convey is completely opposed. The American/European poster aims at presenting an image of a modern geisha. In it the protagonist geisha is staring directly at the audience; she is an archetype of a modern Western woman. Her racial features have been minimized in order to look more *occidental*: her skin is very pale, her eyes are blue and her lips are typically *Western*. On the other hand, the poster for Japan presents an image of a conservative geisha.

Here, the close-up is not so extreme and there is also room for other complements, such as the umbrella, the kimono and the hair combs. It is striking to notice that whereas one of the most important characteristics of the American poster was Sayuri's gaze, in the Japanese poster she is looking down in a rather submissive position that does not even let us see that her eyes are blue. Not only her eyes but also her dress, her hair style and the whole position of her body is rather relaxed and docile, which clearly contrasts with the tension created in the *Western* poster.

In the case of the posters it is relatively easy to modify the message according to the audience that is going to read it, but this is not the case with movies. Even though the film was released all over the world, no changes were introduced to adapt the message to different audiences. As a result, the final version of the movie includes features that only fit within the American context. An example of this can be found in Sayuri's solo dance. Sayuri's dance is closely related to contemporary dance and it seems as if she was dancing only to please the American/Western audience who could consider the traditional dance of geishas rather anodyne and hardly understandable. Not only her movements and choreography, but also her clothes and hair style are very different from those of a traditional geisha.

The fact that the movie contains obvious typing and stereotyping mechanisms does not exclude the fact that people that made the film were actually aware of their existence. After all, types and stereotypes are necessary cognitive agents. It is reasonable to expect, thus, that directors and producers would have worked on geisha stereotyping with care. Rob Marshall, director of the film, declared in an interview:

People think of the geisha as a prostitute, because prostitutes started wearing white makeup and silk kimonos and called themselves geishas, and the line became blurred. But the actual word means artist. Yes, they entertain men. But, more important, they're great dancers and musicians and great conversationalists. They were also the fashionistas of their time. They were like supermodels. (Dannenbaum, 2005: min 2)

In this quotation we can see how Marshall tries to change all the negative ideas and prejudices that we (Western people) have about geishas. Throughout the movie there is a latent interest in emphasizing the idea of geishas as moving works of art in a floating world. To do so, Marshall uses an image that is typical of our culture –that of a supermodel. This may be said to be an attempt to *re-categorize* a stereotype to a foreign audience. However, this process is not so easy. Even if this movie is intended to dismantle the common stereotype *Geisha=prostitute*, it is actually creating a new stereotype, that of geishas as slaves. The life of geishas is here portrayed as if they were prisoners that do not have any right to choose how

they want their own lives to be. In this representation there is no mention to the fact that geishas enjoyed much more freedom and received better education than most Japanese women in those days. Being a geisha was the only learned profession that Japanese women were allowed to perform.<sup>1</sup> Geishas earned money and could attend dinners in tea houses where they could take part in conversations with men, something impossible for other women.

### 3 Orientalism

Orientalism is a key term in the study of representations of Asian people made by Western people. The first one to describe this term was the cultural critic Edward Said (2003). He argued that the term Orientalism was not concerned with Asia but with how Westerners imagined the idea of Asia: “The image of the orient became one of exotic people, seductive and sensual pleasures, and potential lawlessness –everything *civilized* Europe was supposedly not.” (Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 117). The most typical stereotype of the Orient is that of *Madame Butterfly*, a docile, weak but beautiful and fragile woman. The implications of this stereotype quickly spread, and affect not only to women’s role within society, but also to the role of the whole society. According to the Western stereotype, the East is submissive and domesticated, as its women are. This, of course, constitutes a perfect excuse to justify colonization, as Cheung explains in the following quotation:

The quiet Asians are seen either as devious, timid, shrewd, and, above all, inscrutable –in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable– or as docile, submissive and obedient, worthy of the label model minority, just as silent women traditionally been extolled. And precisely because quietness is associated with the feminine, as is the East in relation to the West (in Orientalist discourse, Asian and Asian American men too have been feminized in American popular culture). (Cheung, quoted. in Simal González 2000: 180)

Obviously, the term *Oriental* soon acquired negative connotations and it has been replaced by the word *Asian*. The Asian-American writer David Henry Hwang declared in the “Afterword” of his play *M. Butterfly*: “In general, by the way, we prefer the term *Asian* to

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<sup>1</sup> The image of the geisha could be compared to that of the *hetairas* in ancient Greece. *Hetairas* were cultivated courtesans that enjoyed a special status of freedom that made them different from the rest of the Greek women, whose position in life was always subjected to their homes and the men in their families. *Hetairas* administrated their own businesses and were the only women allowed to attend dinners. (Fabregat 2005: 23-36)

*Oriental*, in the same way *Black* is superior to *Negro*” (Hwang 1998: 95). Benschhoff and Griffin (2004: 117) have pointed out at the reductive nature of the term *Asian* since it includes very different cultures and nations as, for instance, Israel, Japan, India and Eastern Russia. For Hollywood movies the differences between Asian cultures and nations does not seem to be relevant. In this sense, concerning *Memoirs of a Geisha*, there has been too much controversy around the fact that the three leading roles in the movie have been played by non-Japanese actresses.<sup>2</sup> Critics have argued that Hollywood’s orientalist view has once more proved to be incapable of perceiving the cultural differences in Asia. Producers and the director of the movie tried to explain their decision of casting three non-Japanese actresses by saying that no Japanese actress attended the auditions and that the actresses received lessons from a professional geisha.<sup>3</sup> The reaction of the audience was heterogeneous: some people minimized the importance given to the ethnicity while others felt offended after watching Chinese actresses playing the role of Japanese geishas.

Another issue in close association with Orientalism and race is how *Western colonization* is portrayed in the film. In the first and second parts of the film the Western presence is not relevant. One of the few allusions to the West is related to the annexation of Austria to the III Reich. It is Mrs. Nitta’s radio that gives us this example of intertextuality between real history and fictional plot. However, this allusion is only anecdotal because it does not anticipate what is going to happen in the future. It is only after WWII that the influence of Americans in Japan is to be considered significant.

Even if the film does not directly echo the real situation, before the war the Western influence in Japan was already very important.

Although Japan was never territorially colonized, its leaders decided to promote a process of *self-Westernization* in order to void the threat of more direct influence. [...] Instead of entering Japan through direct military intervention, the West penetrated Japanese society by becoming part of its cultural imaginary. (Darling-Wolf 2001: 281)

According to this quotation, the film exaggerates the magnitude of the Western cultural colonization after the war. It is true that “the years under U.S. occupation were a period of much more direct Western influence” (Darling-Wolf 2001: 282) but in this film this change is magnified. All the characters and places experience at a higher or lower extent a

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<sup>2</sup> Zhiyi Zhang (Sayuri) and Gong Li (Hatsumomo) are Chinese whereas Michelle Yeoh (Mameha) is originally from Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted that the geisha who lectured the actresses, called Liza Dalby, was a geisha of American origin.

radical transformation after the war. The impression behind this transformation is that the war had destroyed a traditional world that had remained uncorrupted and pure up to that moment. In this sense, it is true that the war meant a radical change but it is not true that the previous world was uncorrupted. This claim is easily ascertained by contrasting any pre- and post-war scenes. Even if characters try hard to recreate the world of geishas before the war, it is very clear that the *mise-en-scène* chosen for after-war scenes is purposely different -not only the setting and movement but also the lighting, costumes and makeup are opposed.

However, in spite of this lack of verisimilitude, some aspects of Japanese culture in the 40's have been considered. Before the war, Western influence affected cultural attitudes of Japanese women regarding female attractiveness. By the time the film is set, the female canons of beauty had little to do with geishas but with the American film stars that were popular in the U.S.: "During this period many women had their hair cut and, in spite of the exhortations of proud *samurai* tradition, waved and curled" (Wagatsuma, quoted in Darling-Wholf 2001: 283). Although it is almost unnoticeable, the film actually mirrors this situation. In the blossom-viewing party there are a few seconds in which we can see women dressed with Western clothes. It is the only time that we see women that are not either geishas or women living in the *geisha world*.

In this film the idea of Orientalism is conveyed mainly in two ways. On the one hand, proper names in Japanese not translated into English give an *exotic* flavor to the dialogs. Words such as *sakura* tree, *tatsumora* silk, *shamisen*, *hataki komi*, *ekubo*, *okiya*, *hanamachi* cannot be translated into English because they stand for cultural meanings. Language has indeed been a matter of controversy in this film. Critics have suggested that it would have been better to present the film in Japanese with subtitles in English<sup>4</sup> since in some scenes it is quite difficult to understand what characters are saying. Not only the lack of language skills of some of the actors but also the fact that all of them had very different accents contributed to this criticism.

The other strategy used to reinforce that idea of the Orient has to do with the script of the film itself. Behind most of the script we find traces that may suggest that mystery is always present in the film. To illustrate this statement we only have to analyze the first sentences of the film:

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<sup>4</sup> Another possibility would be to have the film dubbed by English-speaking actors. The Spanish version was dubbed and, as a result, the issue of the language is irrelevant.

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 by the current. (Marshall 2005: min. 3; emphasis added)

The words in bold type allude to that idea of Asia being a mysterious place. This very same idea also appears in the very last lines, which are also delivered by Old Sayuri:

You cannot say to the sun, "More sun" or to the rain, "Less rain". To a man, geisha can only be half a wife. We are the **wives of nightfall**. And yet, to learn kindness after so much unkindness, to understand that a little girl with more courage than she knew would find her prayers were answered, can that not be called happiness? **After all these are not the memoirs of an empress, nor of a queen. These are memoirs of another kind.** (Marshall 2005: min. 130; emphasis added)

The implications of this are easy; framing the whole story, Sayuri's discourse is giving us the clue to interpret the whole story as realistic, though mysterious and exotic one. In spite of the explicit interest of deconstructing the myths and stereotypes around geishas, this movie fails in wiping out the oriental stereotype.

#### 4 Gender

*Memoirs of a Geisha* is mainly a women's film in the sense that all its protagonists are women and that it takes place in a women's world. The most common stereotypes used to represent Asian women in the history of American cinema are present in this movie as well. Chiyo/Sayuri, on the one hand, is the protagonist of the film and the most developed character. Camera position emphasizes the fact that she is the hero of the film. She embodies a type of women that can be described as reflexive, silent and elegant. Even before she starts the training to become a geisha it seems that she already has a natural predisposition to elegance and charm. Sayuri fulfills all the *positive* stereotypes of Oriental women; she is submissive, delicate, shy, exotic, mysterious and loyal to her honor. She can be said to be an incarnation of Puccini's Madame Butterfly, one of the most recurrent stereotypes of Oriental/Asian women.

Sayuri's most direct enemy, Hatsumomo, is one of the most fascinating characters in this film. Her image in the movie fulfills the typical stereotype of what Benshoff and Griffin call the *Dragon Lady*. According to these authors, the Dragon lady is one of the most common stereotypes that Hollywood has used to represent Asian or Asian-American people in films:

“The Dragon lady was likely to be a spy or a criminal mastermind in her own right –but along with violence she used her sexual wiles to entrap unsuspecting white heroes” (Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 123). From her very first appearance in the film we know that Hatsumomo is going to play the bad character. In spite of being very talented, she has some of the defects geishas should avoid: she is proud, greedy, rebel and egocentric. However, Hatsumomo is deeply human and this is perhaps her worst fault. This is the reason why Sayuri identifies herself with her when, after the fire, Hatsumomo has to leave the *okiya*. This extreme baudelerian polarization of women –either angels or demons but tied together by a common bond– shows that this movie is not only race-stereotyped, but it also contains a heavy gendered reading. As Juan Moreno (2010) has pointed out, the traditional patriarchal discourse does not acknowledge a balanced mid-term for women; they are always relegated to the extremes of bipolarity. Gilbert and Gubar (1998, quoted. in Juan Moreno, 2010) also refer to this angel/monster bipolarity and go on to assert that the effects of patriarchal discourse define in some way the discourse of women as well.<sup>5</sup>

After the protagonist and the antagonist, Mameha is the third most important character. Being the donor and the helper according to Propp’s spheres of action, Mameha is at the same time a mother and a big sister to Sayuri. She may be seen as the replacement for Chiyo’s lost sister. Sayuri’s tutor is also a mature experienced woman that combines elegance and know-how. Together with the protagonist, she is the only *good* woman in the film. It is quite revealing that Sayuri’s only true friend is the character that is nearer the Western canon in terms of physical appearance. Michelle Yeoh –the actress who plays Mameha– has a rather *Western* look, in spite of being of Malaysian ascendancy. Her English is also by far the most proficient. Not only Mameha’s appearance but also her style of life is associated with the West. If we compare Mameha’s and Mrs. Nitta’s *okiyas*, it is easy to realize that the association Mameha/Western is not a coincidence. Whereas Nitta’s *okiya* is always dark and has a typical Japanese garden, Mameha’s home is very luminous and the furniture and decorations could be found in any Western home today. All these little details seem to point out at the same direction: looking Western in this film has a subtle positive connotation.

Despite the fact that this movie is mainly concerned with women, the male presence still plays a predominant role. Male characters –The Chairman and Nobu San– are totally plain characters; we know very little about them –in fact, we do not even know the Chairman’s first

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<sup>5</sup> Lieberman (1972) and Baker-Sperri and Gauerholz (2003) also deal with the influence of media discourse in the creation of a gendered identity, but they focus rather on children, and girls in particular. It would be very interesting to analyze the effects of movies like *Memoirs of a Geisha* in the creation of a girl identity but, unfortunately this is out of the scope of this paper.

name— and their psychological evolution is not even outlined, as is the case of the female characters. In spite of this, they exert a great influence. Scholars in this field have tried to explain this situation in terms of how the patriarchal culture turns the woman into an object subjected to the *male gaze* (Van Zoonen 1994: 88-104; Price 1998: 284-287; Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 229-247). John Berger and Laura Mulvey are two key authors in order to understand this concept. In *Ways of seeing* (1972), Berger asserted:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, quoted in Van Zoonen 1994: 88)

Mulvey's theory is mainly contained in an essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Price summarizes Mulvey's theory as follows:

Mulvey argued that the male hero in the film acts as the "bearer of the look". This means that he possesses the controlling power of the male gaze and the film "sees" everything in the narrative through his eyes. The male spectator is therefore put in a privileged position, seeing the female characters through the gaze of the hero, sharing as it were in the power of the hero. (Price 1998: 286)

For Mulvey cinema provokes a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in the spectator: "Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey, quoted in Van Zoonen 1994: 90). It is thus a usual convention in western culture and western cinema to turn active women into passive objects. "The act of looking is reserved to men," claims Van Zoonen (1994: 88). In this film there is clear evidence that shows that both Berger and Mulvey were right. Male characters in the film, in spite of being plain characters, are the ones who have the power of looking at women. The dancing scenes in the tea houses and in the theater, the scene at the baron's house, the parties with the Americans, etc., all these scenes are clear examples of how men look at women and they confirm the *male gaze theory*.

Mulvey speaks of *the three gazes*: "the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the characters at each other, and the gaze of the spectator toward the scene" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 235). We can find these three gazes in the film but it would be appropriate to add another kind of gaze that goes further than the gaze of the characters at each other. There are scenes in which the fact that women are passive objects of man's gaze is especially evident, as for instance in the scene in which Sayuri poses under a cherry tree while she is being photographed.

Concerning the *female gaze*, it may be said that here it is completely minimized. However, it cannot be said that it is not mentioned. At one point of Chiyo's instruction, Mameha asserts the "you cannot call yourself a true geisha until you can stop a man in his track with a single look". However, instead of talking about women's power, what Mameha is trying to do here is to test if Chiyo is ready to become a *maiko*. Hence the women's gaze here is nothing but a funny anecdote.

## 5 Conclusion

*Memoirs of a Geisha* is an entertaining movie, although one of its worst defects may be that this is a Hollywood product written according to Western/Hollywood patterns. This does not have to be understood as something negative. The fact that Hollywood films are distributed all over the world does not necessarily imply that they are neutral or better than other minority films because, after all, all media products need to resort to representations to recreate reality. In spite of the efforts of the director and producers, *Memoirs of a Geisha* does contain a great deal of stereotyped representations, ranging from the polarization of the images of women to the perpetuation of stereotypes relating the East with the weak and the West with the strong.

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