Memoirs of a Geisha

Arthur Golden

About the author
Arthur Golden was born and brought up in Tennessee, in the southern United States. He graduated from Harvard in 1978 with a degree in art history, specializing in Japanese art. In 1980 he obtained a postgraduate qualification in Japanese History and also studied Mandarin Chinese. He then went to work for a magazine in Tokyo, where he met a young man whose father was a famous businessman and whose mother was a geisha. Golden was fascinated by this, and back in the United States, began a fictional novel about a young man whose mother was a geisha. However, realizing that his real interest was in the secretive geisha world, he resolved to write a novel about a geisha. He did an enormous amount of research and the novel took many years to write. He wrote three versions of the book before it was finally accepted by a New York publisher. The authenticity of the novel brought Golden much-deserved success. The author lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, with his wife and children.

Summary
Chiyo, a young Japanese girl, whose family, unable to support her, sells her to a geisha house in Kyoto in the 1930s. A geisha is a professional female companion for men in Japan, trained in music, dancing, and the art of conversation. The geisha training is a life of virtual slavery, and Chiyo finds herself working as maid to a malevolent geisha called Hatsumomo who, jealous of Chiyo’s beauty, makes her life utterly miserable. One day, as Chiyo weeps by a stream in the city, a wealthy man stops and comforts her. Chiyo, deeply moved by the man’s kindness, knows that she will never forget him. Two years later, a geisha called Mameha, as kind as Hatsumomo is cruel, takes Chiyo under her wing. Chiyo, now renamed Sayuri, becomes a successful geisha, renowned for her beauty. Then one day she meets the man who had comforted her by the stream. But life does not run smoothly for Sayuri and there are powerful obstacles that prevent the two from coming together.

Chapter 1: Born in Yoroido, a small fishing village, young Chiyo leaves her home when her mother falls ill. She becomes a maid to beautiful Hatsumomo in an okiya in Gion, a famous geisha area in Kyoto.

Chapter 2: Chiyo meets Pumpkin, another young girl. They have to please cruel Hatsumomo, who makes her life miserable at the okiya.

Chapter 3: Feeling useless, unhappy Chiyo cries by a stream. A gentleman speaks kind words to her, offers her a handkerchief, and praises her beautiful grey eyes. She falls in love with the Chairman. Mameha initiates her in the geisha culture and protects her from Hatsumomo.

Chapter 4: Chiyo goes to geisha school and after two years of hard work; she learns to pour tea, play instruments and apply makeup. She becomes Sayuri, an apprentice geisha. Pumpkin is a rather slow learner.

Chapter 5: She starts entertaining men at parties in teahouses and soon becomes popular but Hatsumomo tries to ruin her chances. She favours Pumpkin to be adopted by Mrs. Nitta, and thus ensure the continuity of the okiya.

Chapter 6: Mameha introduces Sayuri to Mr. Nobu, a powerful businessman with severe burns and only one arm in the hope that he will become her danna. Sayuri would like the Chairman in his place.

Chapter 7: Nobu gives Sayuri a gold comb in the presence of the Chairman, who realizes Nobu wants her. Hatsumomo sees Sayuri has become a true geisha and does not humiliate her any more. Sayuri cuts on purpose to meet Dr. Crab, who wins the bid for her mizuage.

Chapter 8: Mrs. Nitta adopts Sayuri after she gets a good sum for her mizuage, which angers Hatsumomo. She becomes a geisha but does not see much of the Chairman. Nobu’s offer to become her danna pleases Mrs. Nitta but disappoints Sayuri, who hoped the Chairman would be.

Chapter 9: World War II starts. General Tottori becomes Sayuri’s danna. As her earnings increase; she exchanges rooms with disgraced Hatsumomo, who seems to be losing her mind and finally leaves the okiya.
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Chapter 10: The good times for the okiya come to an end with the General’s arrest. In 1943, the geisha district is closed and Sayuri finds help in Nobu. She survives the bombs that destroy Japan. After the war, life slowly goes back to normal.

Chapter 11: Nobu asks Sayuri to entertain Minister Sato and help Iwamura. She successfully does so with Mameha and Pumpkin, who after a hard life during the war has made up with Sayuri.

Chapter 12: Sayuri tries to forget the Chairman and it seems nothing can stop Nobu from becoming her danna. On a trip to Osaka to entertain the men from Iwamura, Sayuri has a plan: she will seduce Mr. Sato and asks Pumpkin to get Nobu to see this. Instead, she leads the Chairman to the agreed place. Sayuri is devastated.

Chapter 13: Pumpkin has had her revenge. She had hoped Mrs. Nitta to adopt her so when she noticed Sayuri’s feelings for the Chairman, she knew how to hurt her. When the Chariman tells Nobu what he has seen and he is terribly upset and gives Sayuri up. Now the Chairman can become her danna because he is not taking her away from his close friend. Finally, he explains his feelings for her and gives her a loving kiss.

Chapter 14: The Chairman pays Mother so that Sayuri is no longer a geisha. He now travels often to wealthy New York on business and in 1956 sets up a teahouse there for Sayuri to run. Her life is happy.

The original text
Published in 1997, the insights that the novel gave into the Japanese world of the geisha created enormous interest and it became a bestseller. A film, directed by Rob Marshall, was released in 2005 and won several awards.

Background and themes
One difference between memoir and autobiography is that memoir is usually concerned with personalities and actions other than those of the writer, whereas autobiography stresses the inner and private life of its subject.

The word geisha is made of two Japanese characters, one meaning art and one meaning person. In the early days of geisha entertainment, courtesans, singers, dancers, samisen players and jesters gathered at theaters and teahouses to perform. In the nineteenth century, geisha were trendsetters in fashion and taste, and their teahouses were cultural centers. In 1940s geisha entertainment was outlawed. Today, less than 1,000 women keep the tradition alive.

The geisha world is traditionally a world of ceremony and masks. Golden’s achievement has been to open this world and reveal it in all its detail, to a fascinated, and sometimes shocked, reader. His first and second drafts were entirely fictional, describing the heroine, Sayuri, and her life from the point of view of an observer. Finally, Golden wrote a third draft in which the narrator is Sayuri herself, bringing the novel triumphantly to life. Sayuri’s story is in many ways a sad one. Uprooted from her family environment, she is treated with great harshness at the okiya (geisha house) to which she has been sold. She learns very quickly that geisha girls have little hope of love and warmth, either from other geisha girls, who are fiercely competitive, or from the men in their lives. A successful geisha will usually have a danna – a permanent lover who acts as her patron and pays her expenses. But Sayuri, right from the start of the story, is driven by her need for love, and in the end she succeeds in becoming the mistress of the man who truly cares for her and has always seen beyond the geisha ceremony to the woman beneath. Sayuri’s journey to happiness is long, and her life undergoes many changes: The hardships of World War II turn geisha life upside down and after the war, many of the old traditions are destroyed forever. But Sayuri has the resilience and intelligence to adapt – she spends the last part of her life in New York, as the successful owner of a Japanese teahouse. Sayuri is a heroine one can identify with. Though intelligent and beautiful, she is not perfect, and deeply hurts several people in her life. This is not done intentionally, but is a result of her desperate attempts to escape from the geisha world, which makes most readers forgive her the pain she causes. Other characters in the novel are boldly drawn: the vindictive geisha Hatsumomo, the beautiful and kind Mameha who acts as Sayuri’s older sister, the ultimately pathetic geisha Pumpkin, once Sayuri’s friend, who turns on her and attempts to destroy her. These characters are all part of the large canvas Golden paints, in a compelling story that will keep you gripped to the last chapters, where a clever surprise awaits the delighted reader!

Discussion activities

Before reading
1 Group work: Ask students in groups to write down the first seven words that come into their heads when they think of Japan. Elicit these words from students and write them on the board. Then point at a word and ask the student who gave it to you to explain why he/she associates that word with Japan.
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Translator’s Note and Chapters 1–3

Before reading

2 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Write the phrase “Translator’s Note” and the titles of the three chapters on the board. Ask students, under these headings, to write down the main points or events of the chapters without looking at the book. Then each pair joins up with another pair and students compare what they have written. They may want to make changes to their notes at this point. Now elicit main points from students and write them up on the board under the chapter headings. Finally, students check the main points against the book itself.

While reading

3 Role play: (page 4) The text reads: “As Mr. Tanaka left, I heard my father crying.” What could he have told Chiyo’s father? Why did he cry? Ask students in pairs to role play this conversation.

4 Guess: Ask students to think of the following: What kind of a life do you think Chiyo will have in the okiya? Do you think she will be happy there? Say why/why not.

5 Discuss: (page 18) Chiyo says: “I knew then that I would always keep the handkerchief and I would never forget him.” Who is Chiyo talking about? Why does she feel she will never forget him, do you think? What part do you think this person might play in Chiyo’s life?

After reading

6 Group work: Mother needs to adopt one of the two young girls. Ask students in small groups to debate which she should adopt. Then they report their decision to the class. Who has been chosen most?

Chapters 4–6

Before reading

7 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Ask them to write down ten things that they have learned about Japanese culture. Elicit these things from students and write them on the board.

While reading

8 Discuss: (page 24) The girls call their teacher “Teacher Mouse.” Explain to students what a nickname is. What is behind a nickname? Ask them to compare this practice in their own culture and the one in the novel.

9 Role play: (page 25) Pumpkin does not do very well at geisha school, even though she tries hard. Ask students to imagine they are Teacher Mizumi. They meet Mother to inform her about Pumpkin’s performance at school. What would she say? How would mother feel? Ask them to role play the conversation in pairs.

10 Discuss: (page 27) Ask students to discuss how Pumpkin feels about herself after she has been harshly treated by Hatsumomo. How does she feel about Chiyo? Encourage them to support their opinions.

11 Group work: (page 43) Nobu says “I don’t joke about the three things that matter most in life. Sumo, business and war.” Ask students in pairs or small groups to agree on three things that matter most to them. Then they share their views with the rest of the class. Have they chosen the same three things? Then have a class discussion: How do their choices match their culture?

After reading

12 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Give each pair two or more of the Japanese words in this section. These are: okiya, shamisen, tsutsumi, takamakura, kimono, obi, tatami, mizuage, danna, sake, sumo, hataki-komi. Ask them to define the term in their own words. Then they read their definitions out loud for the rest to guess what the words are.

Chapters 7–9

13 Guess: Ask students to guess what they think is likely to happen in the next chapter. Then write down their predictions on the board.

While reading

14 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following questions:

- How do you feel about the geisha tradition of mizuage?
- Does this tradition and ritual have any positive or constructive purpose for the apprentice geisha?
- What would you say about a man like Dr. Crab, who “specializes” in the practice of mizuage?
- Then they share their ideas with the rest of the class.

15 Pair work: Ask students to work with a partner. Imagine that Hatsumomo is talking to a friend from another okiya and telling her about how Mrs. Nitta has adopted Sayuri and the changes that have taken place as a result. Ask students to make notes and then act out the conversation.

16 Group work: We read, “Tigers walk alone, everyone knows that a wounded tiger is the most dangerous of the big cats,” in a clear reference to Hatsumomo. Ask students to discuss the following in small groups. What are your feelings towards Hatsumomo at the end of Chapter 9? Try and explain why you feel this way. Then they share their views.

After reading

17 Role play: After the embarrassing incident between Hatsumomo and Shojiro, the geisha has a long talk with Mother. Some days later she left the okiya. What do you think Mother said? Was Hatsumomo able to explain the situation? Ask students to role play the conversation between the two women.
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18 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Write the following question on the board for students to discuss:
   - **What, exactly, do geisha do? What don’t they do? Why do men invite them to parties, and what do they expect from them?**
   - **What are the good things about being a geisha, in your opinion? What are the bad things? Does anything shock you? Then have a whole class discussion about the questions.**

**Chapters 10–12**

**Before reading**

19 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to write two or three paragraphs describing Sayuri. Ask students to say whether they like her or not and their reasons for this. Then have a class discussion.

**While reading**

20 **Discuss:** (page 68) Sayuri says “There is a difference between being popular and having friends who can help.” Ask students whether they agree with this statement. Encourage them to give examples from their actual lives.

21 **Group work:** (page 70) In this chapter we read about the effects of World War II on the personal lives of the people in Japan and also how it affects business. Ask students in groups to compare what life was like before and after the war for some of the characters in the story.

22 **Pair work:** (page 80) Sayuri was entertaining some men from the Iwamura Company at the Ichiriki teahouse. She started a game called “Truth and Lies.” Ask students to read the instructions to the game carefully. They have to prepare two stories (a true one and an invented one) tell them to the rest of the class for them to decide which is true and which is not. You can either ask them to pretend they are characters in the story and tell stories about them or ask them to present stories about their real lives.

23 **Discuss:** (page 81) Nobu tells Sayuri that he will be her danna. Divide the class into two and ask one half to think of reasons why this would be good for Sayuri. The other half thinks about the drawbacks. Then have a class discussion.

24 **Discuss:** (page 87) Sayuri compares the afternoon she went into the theater with Minister Sato to the time she cut her leg to visit Dr. Crab. Ask students to discuss how alike these two situations are.

**After reading**

25 **Discuss:** Ask students in pairs to consider these questions: Why do you think Pumpkin brings the Chairman to the theatre instead of Nobu? Can you understand Pumpkin’s action? What do you imagine Sayuri’s feelings are at the end of the chapter?

26 **Role play:** Then ask them to imagine they are Mrs. Nitta. They talk to Pumpkin about her cruel attitude towards Sayuri. Ask students to act out this conversation. Finally, as a class, ask students to discuss the following: What do you think might happen next?

**Chapters 13–14**

**Before reading**

27 **Guess:** The titles of the next two chapters are “The Chairman” and “New York.” Ask students to guess how these two phrases can be related. Challenge them to frame a sentence as complete as possible indicating this relationship.

**While reading**

28 **Discuss:** (page 90) Sayuri says she would try not to spoil Nobu’s celebration for becoming her danna. This reveals the sense of duty that she has. Ask students to mention what things they have had to put aside in the name of duty. Have they ever done something they later regretted in the name of duty? Has this stopped them from doing things they would have liked to do?

29 **Role play:** (page 96) The Chairman refused to allow Mother to control Sayuri’s business in New York. Ask students to imagine the conversation between the Chairman and Mother in which they discuss these financial arrangements. Remind students that they should sound firm yet extremely polite at the same time.

30 **Group work:** (page 97) Sayuri’s little teahouse off Fifth Avenue was successful from the beginning. A number of geisha have come from Gion to work there. Ask students to prepare the text for a radio announcement to advertise Sayuri’s teahouse in America.

31 **Pair work:** (page 97) Sayuri says she never goes back to Gion because she would find the changes disturbing. For example, after Mother’s death, the Nitta okiya was pulled down and replaced by a bookshop with two apartments above it. Ask students in pairs to think of other possible changes that might have taken place in post-war Japan. Then they share their views with the class. If possible, agree on the most significant change.

**After reading**

32 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Ask students to imagine that Mameha comes to visit Sayuri in New York. Ask students to act out the conversation between Mameha and Sayuri.

33 **Discuss:** In the end, the Chairman rescues the girl and runs off with her. Have a class discussion on the ending of the story. Use these questions as a guide: How do you feel about this ending? Is it realistic? How might the story end for the other geisha?
34 **Group work:** Sayuri says, “Whatever our struggles, and whether we sink or swim, our world is no more permanent than a wave rising on the ocean.” Ask students in groups to discuss what Sayuri means by that and if that can also be said about their own lives. Then they write a paragraph or two explaining their position.

**Extra activities**

35 **Discuss:** Divide the class in two and then divide each half into pairs. Ask one half of the class to think of arguments why the geisha tradition should continue in some form in Japan. Ask the other half to think of arguments why it should not continue. Then have a debate about this, choosing one student from one side to speak and then choosing another student from the other side to reply.

(Note: The geisha tradition does still continue in some form in Japan, but the women are free to leave the profession when they wish.)

36 **Discuss:** Several critics made note of the fairy tale quality of this novel, with Hatsumomo as the evil witch, Sayuri as Cinderella, and the Chairman as her knight in shining armor. Think about the fairy tales you know best. What do fairy tales have in common with Sayuri’s story?

In what ways are they different?

37 **Group work:** Ask students in groups to discuss the following questions about Chiyo/Sayuri's life:

- Why would most people find it incredible that Sayuri was born in Yoroido?
- Would you say that her childhood in Yoroido was a happy one?
- Sayuri claims that the afternoon she met Mr. Tanaka was both the best and worst of her life. Do you think that Mr. Tanaka had good intentions for the young girl Chiyo’s future? Did he do her a favor?
- Is Chiyo’s life better than it would have been if Mr. Tanaka had not interfered?

Then they present to the rest of the class a short speech entitled “Sayuri’s life is (better or worse) than Chiyo’s.”

38 **Pair work:** Ask students in pairs to select their favourite quote from the text. Then they share it with the rest of the class. Encourage them to account for their choice and to place it in the context of the story so that it is clear to the rest. You can ask them to write it on a poster and find a suitable picture to go with it. After the activity, the poster can be displayed in the classroom.

39 **Discuss:** Golden says “As an American man of the 1990s writing about a Japanese woman of the 1930s, I needed to cross three cultural divides – man to woman, American to Japanese, and present to past.” Ask students to discuss how successful the author has been in crossing the divides so as to narrate the story. How believable does it come across? Would it have made any difference if a woman had written it? Or a Japanese writer? Or someone who was born at the time Sayuri was a geisha?

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.

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