Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden was published in 1997 and quickly became a sensational hit. In 2005 it was made into a film which was directed by Rob Marshall. The story is a fictional tale which tells the life story of a geisha born in 1920. Why has it been so widely read in the United States even though the novel talks about a marginal figure of the society in a Far East country? Has not Japan been underestimated except for its economy? Why does a white male describe the life of a geisha born before World War II, whom most of the Japanese have little to do with? Some researchers say that it is its orientalism that attracts Americans, while others say that it is its fairy-tale plot that fascinates them: they know and love the story of Cinderella.

I would not deny that those elements certainly contribute to the popularity of this book in the United States, but there are other themes in this story which have been treated in American literature: innocence, the American Dream and Exodus.

Innocence has been one of the major themes in American literature and many writers have dealt with it such as Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, and Fitzgerald. In Memoirs of a Geisha, it is embodied in the protagonist, Sayuri. Though Sayuri is sold into near-slavery to be trained as a geisha, she stays innocent and honest to her love no matter what happens. Her geisha name, Sayuri, symbolizes her innocence because Sayuri could be translated as “small lily,” which represents the sinless Virgin Mary. She struggles to be successful as a geisha while her mentor geisha, Mameha, develops underhanded strategies. She seems to fill the role of keeping Sayuri pure and innocent. The antagonist, the geisha Hatsumomo, is described as a serpent and the contrast in character between Hatsumomo and Sayuri further emphasizes the innocence of the heroine.

The American Dream is also portrayed in
the life of the main character. It is deemed to represent mainly three things: material prosperity, freedom, and equality. The Puritan tradition emphasizes material prosperity through hard work and diligence. Martin Luther King talked about freedom and equality in his history making speech. Sayuri’s industriousness and hard work enable her to achieve material prosperity by becoming a successful geisha; she then realizes freedom and equality by immigrating to the United States and managing her own business in New York. Although she was born into a poor fishing family, her “American Dream” is to be realized like Benjamin Franklin, one of the ideal figures for Americans.

Exodus is quite specific to the American tradition, since their ancestors compared themselves to the Israelites, who were led to the Promised Land, Canaan. The protagonist experiences two exoduses: moving out of her hometown and immigrating to the United States of America. The first one, moving out of her hometown, also means the fortunate fall for the protagonist. The author clearly implies this at the beginning of the story and provides the savior, the Chairman Iwamura, who would save her from the fallen world.

With the themes that I mentioned above, the story could be said to have two structures: the deep structure and the surface structure. The surface structure is the story of a geisha living in Japan but the deep structure is a narrative of a typical American heroine. The story is full of Americanisms, which could be the secret of this novel’s success in the United States of America.

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