

Postcolonial Theory and Ecocriticism in *Memoirs of a Geisha*: Beauty and Oppression

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 17 December 2025	This study examines the relationship between beauty, oppression, and cultural representation in Arthur Golden's <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> through a postcolonial ecocritical perspective. The study aims to analyze how Japanese beauty standards are represented through Western narratives and how physical attributes such as kimonos, makeup, hairstyles, and cultural spaces function as symbols of power, commodification, and social control. This research employs a descriptive qualitative design with thematic analysis. The primary data consist of narrative passages and dialogues from <i>Memoirs of a Geisha</i> , which are analyzed using the postcolonial ecocriticism framework of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. The analysis focuses on recurring representations of beauty, women's bodies, nature, cultural aesthetics, and power relations. The findings reveal that beauty in the novel is not presented as a neutral cultural expression but as an aesthetic construct closely connected to patriarchal, economic, and colonial power. Kimono, makeup, and hairstyles function as mechanisms of bodily discipline that transform women into visually desirable cultural commodities. The study also identifies nature-related imagery, particularly water and landscapes, as metaphors for women's restricted agency and their inability to determine their own paths. Furthermore, the novel's portrayal of geisha culture reflects an orientalist tendency to aestheticize and exoticize Japanese femininity for Western consumption. Through postcolonial ecocriticism, the study demonstrates that the aestheticization of women's bodies and cultural environments can conceal structural oppression and normalize unequal power relations. The study contributes an interdisciplinary perspective by connecting postcolonial, ecocritical, and feminist concerns in examining beauty, cultural representation, gender, and power in literary narratives.
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1. Introduction

In the world of postcolonial literature, women are often represented as beautiful aesthetic objects, yet they lack power over their own bodies and voices. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a novel by Arthur Golden set in post-World War II Japan, depicts the life of a geisha as an elegant figure, full of etiquette, and closely tied to symbols of Japanese cultural beauty. However, behind that image, there lies a form of oppression and limitations on freedom in expressing feelings and determining one's path in life (Duschinsky et al., 2018).

The main character in the novel, Sayuri, describes how the beauty she possesses actually becomes a tool to uphold the system that confines her. She states, "We don't become geisha so our lives will be satisfying. We become geisha because we have no other choice. (Golden, 1997, p. 113)" (Golden, 1997). This quote reflects how geishas are not subjects with freedom, but rather objects shaped by the social and economic system. Even in another narrative, Sayuri reveals, "Would I really have to take each of my hopes and put them away where no one would ever see them again, where not even I would ever see them? (Golden, 1997, p. 125)" (Golden, 1997), which shows the loss of hope and dreams as a form of erasing a woman's agency.

This research aims to examine the relationship between beauty and oppression in the life of geishas using postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. In this context, the postcolonial ecocriticism concept proposed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin serves as the main analytical framework. They state that "postcolonial ecocriticism explores how landscapes, animals, and the natural world are often aestheticized, commodified, or instrumentalized in the service of colonial or neocolonial power" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 12). This research examines how elements such as clothing, living spaces, and the cultural landscape of geishas are also made aesthetic objects that reinforce patriarchal power and the colonial system.

Furthermore, the aesthetics in this novel are often used to cover up forms of oppression. Huggan and Tiffin also convey that "Why celebrate nature when it has been systematically taken away from you, or when its beauty has been routinely invoked to mystify... the ideological conditions under which you were originally dispossessed?" (2010, p. 132). In this case, the beauty of the body and the environment shaped within the geisha culture is used as a form of diversion from the structural reality that oppresses women. For example, when Sayuri describes how she has to wear makeup and clothing as part of her job, she mentions: "She looked like the demon she was, but even so, I was sick with jealousy and shame... in an hour or so, men would be gazing with astonishment at that face. (Golden, 1997, p. 144)" (Golden, 1997). This shows how appearance is used as a tool for producing value in a patriarchal society.

This novel also shows how Sayuri does not have full control over her life, as seen in the quote: "You may never know [your destiny]! Destiny isn't always like a party at the end of the evening. Sometimes it's cruel. (Golden, 1997, p. 172)" (Golden, 1997). Her life is lived like water flowing to where it can, not where it is desired. As he said, "We lead our lives like water flowing down a hill, going wherever it can." (Golden, 1997, p. 45). In the realm of theory, Huggan and Tiffin (2015, p. 11) also emphasize that "postcolonial ecocriticism... involves an 'aesthetics committed to politics'". Therefore, beauty cannot be seen merely as artistic value, but as a political arena that reproduces power relations.

Although there have been many previous studies discussing the representation of women and Japanese culture in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, this research offers a gap by combining postcolonial and ecocritical approaches, which are still rarely used together to read this novel. Previous studies generally focus on feminist or Orientalist perspectives separately, without considering the roles of the environment, clothing, and cultural spaces as part of the complex aesthetics of oppression (Fuentes Arzate, 2025).

This research starts from the question of how the relationship between beauty, oppression, and cultural representation in *Memoirs of a Geisha* shapes the Western narrative

about Eastern traditions. Using the framework of Postcolonial Ecocriticism by Huggan and Tiffin (2015), this study aims to analyze how Arthur Golden, as a Western author, depicts geisha culture and whether this depiction reinforces stereotypes or reflects historical reality. Additionally, the symbolism of nature such as water, seasons, and landscapes in this novel is also examined as a reflection of strict beauty standards and the relationship between nature, control, and the oppression of women, (Saladin & Rohanda, 2024).

The main question posed is how these novel shapes perceptions of Japanese beauty standards and their impact on women, as well as how the physical aspects of beauty – such as kimonos, makeup, and hair ornaments – serve as symbols of both power and limitation within the framework of postcolonialism and ecocriticism (Savitri, 2024). By answering these questions, this research aims to uncover the Western perspective on geisha culture, examine the connection between nature and beauty with oppression, and explore the broader impacts on cultural authenticity, gender roles, and postcolonial identity in post-war Japan. The focus of this study includes an analysis of beauty standards in novels as a representation of women's physical suffering and submission, particularly how geisha became symbols of male dominance in the post-war Japanese context. Additionally, this study examines the relationship between physical pain, beauty rituals such as binding, the use of white makeup, and intricate hairstyles, and how these practices reinforce male authority in narratives shaped by Western writers.

2. Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design with a thematic analysis approach to examine the themes of beauty and oppression in the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden. The primary data in this study consists of the novel text, which is analyzed using the framework of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, specifically the postcolonial ecocriticism approach as proposed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015).

The analysis was conducted through an in-depth reading of narratives that represent geishas, as well as how the interconnection between nature, beauty, and power relations is depicted in the text. The thematic analysis approach was chosen because it allows researchers to identify recurring patterns and themes related to aesthetics and oppression within the narrative structure of the novel (Qayum et al., 2025)

As one of the analytical foundations, the concept by Huggan and Tiffin is used, which states that the beauty of nature can become a form of prison: "It is as if the beauty of the sea, the land, the air, the trees, the market, the people, the sounds they make [...] were a prison, and as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside it were locked out" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 77).

Data is analyzed with a focus on how elements of nature and aesthetics in the novel are used to reinforce the structure of oppression against women. This research does not use primary data such as surveys or interviews, but fully relies on literary text analysis. To maintain the accuracy of the interpretation, the researcher conducts repeated readings and cross-checks thematic meanings to ensure they align with the theoretical context and the content of the novel.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Representation of Japanese Beauty Standards by Western Narratives in *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Arthur Golden's book "*Memoirs of a Geisha*" provides an interesting and critical Western perspective on Japanese beauty standards. Although the book is often praised for its beautiful descriptions and strong sensitivity to Japanese culture, its analysis through the postcolonial ecocriticism framework shows that the representation is not without value. Beauty, on the other hand, is depicted as a political tool and a visual commodity created to meet the

expectations of Western readers, particularly men.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* emphasize that aesthetics in the postcolonial context are often not neutral. They argue that “postcolonial ecocriticism explores how landscapes, animals, and the natural world are often aestheticized, commodified, or instrumentalized in the service of colonial or neocolonial power” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 12). This concept is highly relevant to the body of the geisha depicted in the novel. Sayuri’s body is considered a symbol of Japanese culture and the aesthetic environment shaped by colonial and patriarchal narratives originating from outside Japanese culture.

In the novel, the beauty standards for geishas are very specific and repetitive, including porcelain-white skin, small bright red lips, meticulously arranged black hair, and an elegant style when walking and speaking. The main character, Sayuri, repeatedly describes the social pressure regarding this beauty. One part states: “She looked like the demon she was, but even so, I was sick with jealousy and shame... in an hour or so, men would be gazing with astonishment at that face” (Golden, 1997). In this sentence, we can see the irony and contradiction between the sad inner reality and the beautiful outer appearance.

Gopal explores the intersections of gender and national identity in postcolonial literature, providing a framework for understanding the commodification of women’s bodies in colonial narratives. Mohanty’s (2003) work on transnational feminism offers insights into the global dynamics of gender oppression, relevant to the portrayal of geishas in a Western context. Boehmer (2005) discusses how gendered narratives shape national identities, which can be linked to the representation of geishas as symbols of Japanese culture. Carrigan (2011) examines how postcolonial literature portrays cultural commodification, paralleling the exoticization of geishas for Western audiences.

The aesthetics described by Golden also show how women’s bodies are tamed to meet visual consumption standards. Sayuri said, “We don’t become geisha so our lives will be satisfying.” We become geisha because we have no other choice” (Golden, 1997). In this quote, it is clear that becoming a geisha is a result of a social and economic system that forces rather than an expression of freedom or personal desire. The concept of aesthetics as a form of oppression proposed by Huggan and Tiffin (2015, p. 132) aligns with this representation: “Why celebrate nature when it has been systematically taken away from you, or when its beauty has been routinely invoked to mystify... the ideological conditions under which you were originally dispossessed?”. In the novel, the bodies of women and the beauty practices of geishas, such as wearing kimonos, applying thick white makeup, and tying their hair, represent a nature that has been “imprisoned” by an aesthetic designed to cover up the oppressive structural reality.

Opara’s (2004) concept of ‘femalism’ connects the female body to national identity, offering a lens to view the geisha’s body as a site of cultural inscription. Kaur’s (2012) article discusses the link between environmental degradation and female oppression, which can be applied to the geisha’s embodiment of aestheticized suffering. Jabeen’s (2016) work bridges ecofeminism and postcolonial theory, providing a framework to analyze the geisha’s relationship with nature and culture.

This argument is supported by previous research findings. For example, Rahayu (2009) in the *Journal of Egalita* states that the femininity of geishas depicted in the novel is more used to satisfy men’s tastes than to distinguish them. Meanwhile, Afsary and Putra (2020) revealed in *Scientia Journal* that Sayuri is considered a sexual object in a system that values physical appearance more than the humanity of the woman herself. However, what distinguishes this research is the interdisciplinary approach that combines ecocritical and postcolonial theories. This approach allows for the understanding that the female body is not only considered a sexual symbol but also as a tamed ecological landscape.

Sayuri’s body in the novel represents the “tamed nature”—a cultural environment manipulated by colonial and patriarchal forces. According to Huggan and Tiffin (2015),

“postcolonial ecocriticism... involves an ‘aesthetics committed to politics’”. In other words, aesthetics is always involved in a chain of ideology and power and are never neutral. Mukherjee’s (2010) analysis of environmental themes in postcolonial literature can inform an ecocritical reading of the geisha’s naturalized beauty.

Additionally, nature symbolism often appears in Sayuri’s story, where she describes her life as water: “We lead our lives like water flowing down a hill, going wherever it can” (Golden, 1997, p. 45). In this situation, water cannot choose its own path; instead, it must follow the established structure. This metaphor emphasizes the position of women in the novel as subjects who do not move and are regulated by the social system. The water metaphor is not only humorous but also political when viewed through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. This illustrates how power, gender, and nature interact within the structure of postcolonial domination.

Overall, *Memoirs of a Geisha* tells the story of a Japanese woman’s life in the geisha environment and how the bodies of Japanese women are depicted in Western narratives in an alluring, exotic, and oppressive manner. This representation serves to create an image of the “East” as passive and controllable. This process has long been criticized by figures such as Edward Said in the concept of Orientalism, but it has now become more common within the framework of Postcolonial Ecocriticism.

3.2 Physical Symbolism of Beauty: Kimono, Makeup, and Hair within the Frame Postcolonial and Ecocriticism

Arthur Golden discusses the physical attributes of geisha beauty, such as kimonos, white face makeup, and intricate hairstyles, in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. These elements not only serve as aesthetic markers but also function as representations of cultural conquest, the commodification of women’s bodies, and tools of social control within postcolonial and patriarchal power structures. As a way to tame women’s bodies and create an aesthetic landscape that can be consumed visually and ideologically, these symbols of physical beauty are used within a postcolonial ecological perspective.

According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015), elements of culture and nature are often used in a postcolonial context, namely “aestheticized, commodified, or instrumentalized in the service of colonial or neocolonial power”. This concept applied to the physical features of geishas shows that kimonos, makeup, and hairstyles are not merely traditions or fashions; they are embodiments of aesthetics controlled by external forces, whether from the local patriarchy or Western narratives depicting Asian women.

Geisha clothing is described by Golden as a walking work of art, but also as a heavy burden. In the novel, Sayuri says that appearance is the most important part of her job: “We don’t become geisha to pursue our own desires.” (Golden, 1997). The intricate, heavy, and difficult-to-wear kimono not only demonstrates elegance but also showcases a high level of bodily discipline. Tying the obi, or large belt, and wearing the kimono is a lengthy ritual that forces the body to conform to established aesthetic standards, which is a symbolic form of power over the body.

In addition, the striking white face makeup and red lips depict the body as a visual object. This makeup erases the natural expressions of the face, creating a “mask” that conforms to what people, especially men, expect. Although she was uncomfortable with her appearance, Sayuri also acknowledged the importance of survival: “She looked like the demon she was, but even so, I was sick with jealousy and shame” (Golden, 1997). This quote illustrates the internal conflict shaped by the dominant aesthetics between personal identity and public persona.

Sayuri’s body can be considered a representation of the “domesticated landscape” in the context of postcolonial ecocriticism, given how colonial discourse turned nature into a visual aesthetic. Huggan and Tiffin (2015, p. 132) state, “Why celebrate nature when it has been

systematically taken away from you, or when its beauty has been routinely invoked to mystify... the ideological conditions under which you were originally dispossessed?”. The beauty of women’s bodies, including hair and makeup, here is a form of identity theft and not just aesthetics.

For example, the hairstyle of a geisha is a complex symbol. It takes hours and professional assistance to create different hairstyles for each stage of a geisha’s training. This process is not only exhausting but also painful. Sayuri even said she had to sleep with her head on a wooden neck rest so her hair would stay neat all night. This process demonstrates a physical sacrifice to maintain an aesthetic image determined by external standards. Such practices can be defined in postcolonial theory as the internalization of colonial principles within local culture through imprisoning aesthetics.

Previous studies also emphasize the physical nature of geisha as a symbol. For example, research conducted by Yamamoto (2016) found that the makeup of geishas and kimonos are not only cultural expressions but also serve as tools for social control, limiting the roles and movements of Japanese women. In the same way, the research conducted by Lee (2018) in Asian Cultural Studies emphasizes that the representation of geisha in Western literature is often reduced to symbols of eroticism and exoticism, thereby overlooking the underlying aspects of oppression in that culture.

Moreover, the symbolism of hair cannot be overlooked. In Sayuri’s story, hair becomes a symbol of maturity, and how an ordinary girl transforms into a maiko and eventually becomes a full geisha. The change in hairstyle becomes a public ritual reflecting social status. But this ritual is also painful and stressful. Even Sayuri shows her discomfort when she has to cut her long hair. This act marks the loss of her childhood and her entry into a world controlled by male expectations.

Huggan and Tiffin (2015, p. 11) also discuss how postcolonial aesthetics conceal structural violence alongside beauty: “Postcolonial aesthetics... operate as a political field of struggle, not a neutral terrain of beauty”. In this context, the beauty attributes of geishas serve as a “political arena” where women’s bodies function as a battleground between cultural identity, patriarchal power, and colonial expectations.

Although Golden’s story is written with a sympathetic tone towards Sayuri, it is still influenced by colonial ideology. As a Western writer, Golden depicts Sayuri as a passive narrator who accepts and internalizes the structures that oppress her rather than an active subject. By framing physical attributes such as kimonos and makeup as exotic and alluring, the story helps perpetuate the Eastern stereotypes critiqued by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said (1978) emphasizes that the image of the East shaped by the West tends to romanticize suffering and turn it into an object of consumption.

In the perspective of postcolonial ecology, these physical characteristics can be considered as “ecocultural representations” that show how women’s bodies are treated like nature: controlled and exploited by systems of domination, and admired for their beauty. Beautiful kimonos, intricate makeup, and styled hair are instruments of power, not just cultural ornaments.

Therefore, the physical symbolism of beauty in *Memoirs of a Geisha* shows that women’s bodies in geisha culture are never neutral. It is always observed, considered, and constructed through a broader social and political framework, such as colonialism, patriarchy, and cultural capitalism. The complexity of oppression is hidden behind a beautiful surface aesthetic, which can only be addressed through a critical approach that combines ecocritical and postcolonial theories.

3.3 Study Limitations

In order for readers to understand the context and scope of the analysis proportionally, every study, including this one, has limitations. This study uses a postcolonial and ecocritical

approach to examine the representation of oppression and beauty in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. The research focuses on the symbolism of physical beauty and how women's bodies and cultural landscapes are depicted as forms of oppressive aesthetics. However, several significant limitations affect the depth and comprehensiveness of the analysis.

A major limitation concerns the primary source, namely Arthur Golden's novel. It is important to recognize that the novel was written by an American male author who viewed Japanese culture from an external perspective, despite the novel's popularity and its perception of authenticity among many Western readers. This suggests that the representation of Japanese culture in the novel has undergone narrative, cultural, and ideological filtering and therefore does not necessarily reflect the historical reality of geisha culture. Consequently, the findings of this study are primarily concerned with the construction of narratives from a Western colonial and patriarchal perspective rather than with providing an objective historical account of geisha culture.

Another limitation is related to the theoretical and methodological framework employed in the study. The Postcolonial Ecocriticism framework developed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis. Although this framework offers several critical concepts, its application to popular literary works such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* remains relatively underexplored, particularly in East Asian literary studies. As a result, some interpretations necessarily depend on contextual readings and ideological assumptions, although these interpretations are grounded in textual evidence and relevant theoretical perspectives. In this regard, while the framework provides a valuable critical lens, it cannot provide direct access to the complexity of Japanese culture, particularly its local traditions, cultural practices, and values.

The scope of the data also constitutes an important limitation. The study does not employ interviews, ethnography, or other empirical methods to obtain additional historical and cultural data. The analysis therefore relies primarily on the narrative descriptions presented in the novel and theoretical interpretations supported by academic sources. This reliance may restrict the range of perspectives available in the analysis, particularly perspectives from Japanese women and former geishas who have direct experience with the cultural and social context under examination. For instance, although existing criticism has identified potential bias and narrative distortion in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the perspective of Mineko Iwasaki (2002), a prominent former geisha whose life story partly inspired the novel, is not directly incorporated into this study.

The thematic focus of the research presents another limitation. By concentrating on the aesthetics of oppression and the representation of women's bodies, the study does not comprehensively examine other dimensions of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, particularly its attention to non-human environments, including natural landscapes, animals, and ecological change. Although natural elements such as water, seasons, and landscapes are examined as symbolic or metaphorical devices, the study does not investigate in detail the concrete interactions between human beings and the broader ecological environment in everyday life. Consequently, the more complex material and ecological dimensions of the novel remain insufficiently explored.

The generalizability of the findings is also limited by the study's focus on a single literary work. The findings are specific to *Memoirs of a Geisha* and cannot be generalized to Japanese literature as a whole or to other literary representations of geishas. The novel itself involves cultural adaptation and selective representation designed, at least in part, to make its narrative accessible to Western readers. Therefore, the representations identified in this study do not necessarily capture the diversity and complexity of geisha narratives found in historical sources, Japanese-language literature, or other cultural accounts. Rather, the findings should be understood as contextual interpretations of the particular literary work examined.

The researcher's positionality further constitutes a limitation of the study. The analysis is

conducted from an academic perspective by a researcher whose cultural background differs from that of the subjects and cultural context represented in the novel. This difference may create limitations in interpreting local cultural practices, cultural values, and deeper symbolic meanings associated with Japanese culture. Although the use of critical theory can help identify and reflect upon potential biases, interpreting cultural meanings from an external perspective remains challenging.

Despite these limitations, the study remains valuable because it offers a critical perspective on the relationship between beauty, power, and the environment in postcolonial literary narratives. Acknowledging these limitations also provides opportunities for future research to broaden the scope of analysis, employ richer interdisciplinary approaches, and incorporate more diverse sources and voices, particularly those of Japanese women and former geishas themselves.

4. Conclusion

The Postcolonial Ecocriticism theoretical framework developed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin is used in this research to investigate the relationship between oppression and the aesthetics of beauty found in Arthur Golden's book *Memoirs of a Geisha*. This study shows that beauty features such as kimonos, makeup, and hair are inseparable from the structures of patriarchal and colonial power. This is demonstrated using a qualitative descriptive approach and thematic analysis. In this novel, women's bodies are depicted as controlled, tamed, and showcased aesthetic landscapes—both in the context of local culture and in the way Western readers consume visual content.

This study found that the beauty norms depicted in the stories are not a neutral representation of Japanese culture; they are an aesthetic construct used as a tool of social control. Although geishas are not considered free subjects, they are depicted as objects shaped by aesthetic standards determined by patriarchal and orientalist norms. Despite the fact that it is a fictional story, the golden story depicts a symbolic situation where women's bodies are colonized by institutionalized beauty.

This study shows that beauty is a domain of art, culture, and politics by combining postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. Aesthetics have evolved into an ideological tool to conceal symbolic violence and divert attention from the most fundamental structures of oppression. Therefore, reading *Memoirs of a Geisha* through the lens of postcolonial critical ecology helps us understand the human body and nature as objects influenced by aesthetics.

In geisha culture, beauty is not always considered a glory or an appreciation of tradition; rather, beauty can serve as a form of commodification of identity and the erasure of women's agency. It is very important to revise popular narratives that seem to "glorify" tradition, but actually reinforce exploitative power hierarchies in the postcolonial world.

This study helps fill the gaps in previous research that tends to differentiate between ecocritical, postcolonial, and feminist approaches. This study combines all three to offer an interdisciplinary approach to reading popular literary works and invites readers to question how aesthetics can conceal subtle yet systemic forms of oppression. It is crucial to read this novel, and many similar works, as ideological documents that influence gender and cultural perceptions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Rahayu Puji Haryanti: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing.

Statement of the Use of AI

AI tools were used for translation and language assistance during the preparation of this manuscript. The author remains fully responsible for the content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions of the manuscript.

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