

MOVIE REVIEWS

MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA AND BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., Media Editor, California State University, Long Beach

Memoirs of a Geisha and *Brokeback Mountain*, two movies released in 2005, feature characters who are affected by cultural and societal practices in two different countries: Japan and America. Societal norms on gender and sexual orientation create discriminatory practices which become the source for individual tragedy and collective suffering.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, directed by Rob Marshall and based on Arthur Golden's novel of the same title, we witness the making of a Geisha (a Japanese girl trained to be a professional entertainer and companion for men) in pre-World War II Japan. It is a complex portrayal filled with conflicting human emotions, featuring the transformation of a young country girl from a resilient child to a high status Geisha. The story is narrated in the first person by Chiyo (Suzuka Ohgo), a young country girl who is sold into bondage by her destitute father to a Geisha house in Kyoto. In an environment ruled by temperamental, cruel, status and profit-seeking women, Chiyo perseveres and grows into a beautiful, mature woman, and accomplished geisha. Among her female tormentors, Hatsumomo (Gong Li), the head geisha, is the most cruel. In adolescence, Chiyo's (ZiyiZhang) fate takes a switch as an older geisha Mameha (Michelle Yeoh) takes her under her wing and in a caring way teaches her the practices of the Geisha subculture. The expose of this subculture presents the viewer with poignant examples of multifaceted human behavior. There are numerous instances of graphic child mistreatment and abuse, vindictive and revengeful behavior, and exploitation of the young and dependent for

profit, along with instances of resilience, compassion, sacrifice, self-restraint and love.

In a fairytale-style scenario, Chiyo, is forcefully taken away from her small house in a remote but beautiful coastal spot. In the turbulent years that follow, she is affected by a mixture of abusive and compassionate treatment and grows into a head geisha. As a young child in servitude, yearning for reunion with her older sister, she makes an escape attempt and in the midst of a crowd she encounters the "Chairman" (Ken Watanabe). She, a young child intrigued by the treat he buys for her; he a grown up man of prestige and influence. At this moment, an emotional connection between the two takes place which never leaves them, and which becomes their personal internal turmoil. She learns that her role as a geisha is to entertain men - not fall in love with them. "Geishas do not determine their destiny," Mameha, her mentor, tells her.

Under the critical eye and compassionate approach of her mentor, Chiyo grows into a beautiful and legendary geisha who is sought after by men of wealth and power and is despised by vengeful competitors. She learns how to perform the Geisha craft but never ceases to question her right for independent thinking, self-determination, and love.

Brokeback Mountain, based on Annie Proulx's 1997 short story from the *New Yorker* and directed by Ang Lee, depicts a similar human drama; one that challenges contemporary American societal practices and beliefs about sexual orientation.

Two young men, Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger), a ranch hand, and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), a rodeo cowboy, meet when they

accept summer employment as sheep herders roaming the beautiful ranges of Wyoming's Brokeback mountain. Single and with weak and fractured family ties, they find comfort in each other's company. They also discover that they are sexually attracted to each other. From a wordless sexual encounter on a cold summer night, they develop a long-term relationship, with periodic secret meetings masquerading as fishing trips in beautiful wilderness landscapes. At summer's end, they go their separate ways. Both do what society expects young men to do: get married and start families. In the process, they attempt to suppress their sexual attraction for each other, conceal their love, and suffer the consequences in silence. They handle their same sex orientation differently. Jack is more open and forward. He initiates their first sexual encounter, their first reunion four years after their initial summer together, and the numerous fishing excursions that take place over the years. He is also the one who has a vision of a happy life with Ennis on a ranch. Ennis is more cautious and reserved. "You know, I ain't queer... This is a one-shot thing we got going on here," he tells Jack. Their struggle to conceal and suppress their true feelings for each other and to conform to societal expectations takes a toll on their relationship and on those with whom they are connected: wives, children, girlfriends, parents, and in-laws. As they create opportunities to spend time together they inflict and create conflict in their marital and familial relationships. At the end, each one deals with his internal demons differently and suffers a different set of consequences.

The plots of these two movies take place in two vastly different countries: Japan, an East Asian country, and America, in the Western Hemisphere. The first is an ethnically homogeneous country with a long history, rich traditions, and rigid behavioral protocols.

The second is an ethnically diverse, new nation of immigrants that takes pride in her

democratic system that, in theory, promotes individual freedom, justice, and equal opportunity for all her citizens. In the context of the Japanese culture we see the effects of power, poverty, and wealth, and gender-based discrimination on people's mental health and behavioral manifestations. In the context of the American culture we see the effects of discriminatory practices with a religious, moral and socio-political base on the personal well-being of two young adult gay men and on those who are intimately connected to them. The two scenarios take place at different chronological periods: Japan during the 1930s, and in America during the 1960s. In both cases we witness human efforts to protect the self by conforming to societal expectations and to challenge these expectations to secure personal fulfillment and happiness. The socio-political changes in post WW II Japan seem to allow for the dismantling of the anachronistic geisha trade, and they promise greater freedom for women. The feared public reaction in America to the acknowledgement of one's same sex-orientation is a sign of condemnation and intolerance for difference. The ending of each movie leads to differing conclusions about the direction each country follows on gender and sexual orientation based issues. Changes in Japan reflect a willingness to abandon a practice that subjects women to subservient roles. In America, endorsement of moral and sociopolitical beliefs and practices continue to subject persons with same-sex orientation to humiliation, exclusion and psycho-emotional suffering. An American author chronicles the fictionalized experience of a geisha. A Southeast Asian film maker directs a movie depicting the love of two American men in a hostile social environment. The insights that the author and director reflect through their respective work might be a sign of how, in a globalized environment, we more easily transcend East /West differences and

acknowledge the universal effects of adverse practices on the well-being of people.

In the *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the insertion of Japanese subtitles and accents interferes with the smooth flow of dialogue. The underlying reasons for the characters' behavior do not always become clear until later in the plot. In *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis' words are at times lost as he timidly attempts to explain to Jack his reservations about their relationship.

The cinematography of both movies is impressive. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the natural beauty of Wyoming's mountainous landscape with clear water streams and lakes, the luscious forests and the snow-covered peaks is breathtaking. In combination, both films easily make you promise yourself that you will spend your next vacation there. In *Memoirs of a Geisha* the architecture of Kyoto's dense, low, cedar and bamboo housing structures, beautifully landscaped gardens, and blooming trees in vibrant colors, including cherry trees, country and sea landscapes, create feelings of awe and serenity. In both movies, the sound track and lyrics are penetrating and moving.

Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: aglezako@csulb.edu.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.