

**COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN'S BODY IN *MEMOIRS OF A  
GEISHA* (2005) AND *THE DANCER* (2011)**

**A GRADUATING PAPER**

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Degree in English Department



**By:**

**Naufal Reza Fahlevi**

**20101050091**

**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

**FACULTY OF ADAB AND CULTURAL SCIENCES STATE ISLAMIC  
UNIVERSITY OF SUNAN KALIJAGA YOGYAKARTA**

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## PENGESAHAN TUGAS AKHIR

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yang dipersiapkan dan disusun oleh:

Nama : NAUFAL REZA FAHLEVI  
Nomor Induk Mahasiswa : 20101050091  
Telah diujikan pada : Rabu, 28 Februari 2024  
Nilai ujian Tugas Akhir : A

dinyatakan telah diterima oleh Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

### TIM UJIAN TUGAS AKHIR



Ketua Sidang

Dr. Witriani, S.S. M.Hum.  
SIGNED

Valid ID: 65f24c7011c58



Penguji I

Harsiwi Fajar Sari, SS., M.A.  
SIGNED

Valid ID: 65f27c469417b



Penguji II

Ulyati Retno Sari, S.S. M.Hum.  
SIGNED

Valid ID: 65f277d92c5c9



Yogyakarta, 28 Februari 2024  
UIN Sunan Kalijaga  
Dekan Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Wildan, M.A.  
SIGNED

Valid ID: 65f29adca5451

## A FINAL PROJECT STATEMENT

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Naufal Reza Fahlevi  
NIM: 20101050091

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YOGYAKARTA



**KEMENTERIAN AGAMA REPUBLIK INDONESIA  
UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI SUNAN KALIJAGA  
FAKULTAS ADAB DAN ILMU BUDAYA**

Jl. Marsda Adi Sucipto, Yogyakarta, 55281, Telp./Fax. (0274) 513949

Web: <http://adab.uin-suka.ac.id> Email: [adab@uin-suka.ac.id](mailto:adab@uin-suka.ac.id)

**NOTA DINAS**

Hal: Skripsi

a.n. Naufal Reza Fahlevi

Yth.

Dekan Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya

UIN Sunan Kalijaga

Di Yogyakarta

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Nama	: Naufal Reza Fahlevi
NIM	: 20101050091
Prodi	: Sastra Inggris
Fakultas	: Adab dan Ilmu Budaya
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Pembimbing

Dr. Witriani, S.S. M. Hum.

NIP: 19720801 200604 2 002

**MOTTO**

*“Carpe Diem!”*



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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my parents, their wholehearted and sincere struggles, my wonderful teachers and their dedication to education, and my friends from whom I love to receive honest criticism.





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Yogyakarta, 02/19/2024



Naufal Reza Fahlevi

NIM. 20101050091

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**ABSTRACT**

The films "Memoirs of a Geisha" (2005) and "Sang Penari" (2011) showcase the exciting traditions of two Eastern cultures where practices similar to prostitution become part of a respected social norm. This is a unique phenomenon, considering that Eastern cultures are often known for having high spiritualistic values in their tradition. This research aims to reveal a comparison between these two parallel representations of Eastern culture, examining how the female body and sexuality as elements of prostitution and rituals representing tradition are portrayed through comparative analysis to illustrate the intertwined relationship between the two. Using Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation and Michel Foucault's politics of the body as analytical frameworks, this study identifies how women and, sexuality and rituals are portrayed in the two films. It compares them to get an overview of the two traditions. The data used in this research includes scenes, narrative dialogue, and all aspects of the film. This data was classified according to three topics: the female body, sexuality, and rituals, and then examined about each other. The results found similarities between the two representations of traditions, including the practice of commodifying the female body in the geisha and ronggeng traditions that are organized so that they can be accepted in society. In addition, the research shows that women's bodies are used as political tools, and rituals play an important role in maintaining this system by building discourse and societal beliefs. As such, this research provides a deeper understanding of how representations of the body and rituals shape culture and values in the context of the two Eastern traditions studied.

**Keywords:** *Representation, women's body, sex, ritual, Memoirs of a Geisha, The Dancer*

# COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN'S BODY IN *MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA* (2005) AND *THE DANCER* (2011)

Oleh: Naufal Reza Fahlevi

## ABSTRAK

Film "*Memoirs of a Geisha*" (2005) dan "Sang Penari" (2011) memperlihatkan tradisi yang menarik dari dua budaya Timur di mana praktek yang memiliki kemiripan dengan prostitusi menjadi bagian dari norma sosial yang dihormati. Yang tentu merupakan sebuah fenomena yang unik mengingat budaya Timur seringkali dikenal dengan kecenderungan spiritualitas yang tinggi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan perbandingan antara dua representasi budaya Timur yang sejajar ini, memeriksa bagaimana tubuh wanita dan seksualitas sebagai elemen dari prostitusi, dan ritual yang mewakili tradisi di gambarkan, melalui analisis perbandingan untuk menggambarkan hubungan yang saling terkait di antara keduanya. Dengan menggunakan teori representasi konstruksionisme dari Stuart Hall dan politik tubuh dari Michel Foucault sebagai kerangka analisis, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi bagaimana wanita dan seksualitas serta ritual digambarkan dalam kedua film tersebut dan membandingkannya sehingga didapatkan gambaran umum dari kedua tradisi tersebut. Data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah berupa scene, narasi dialogue, dan segala aspek dalam film. Data ini diklasifikasikan menurut tiga topik: tubuh wanita, seks dan ritual, lalu dilihat kaitannya satu dengan lainnya. Hasil penelitian menemukan persamaan antara kedua representasi tradisi, termasuk praktik komodifikasi tubuh wanita dalam tradisi geisha dan ronggeng yang diatur sedemikian rupa sehingga dapat diterima dalam masyarakat. Selain itu, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa tubuh wanita digunakan sebagai alat politik, dan ritual memiliki peran penting dalam mempertahankan sistem ini dengan membangun diskursus dan kepercayaan masyarakat. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana representasi tubuh dan ritual membentuk budaya dan nilai-nilai dalam konteks kedua tradisi Timur yang dipelajari.

**Kata kunci:** *Representasi, Tubuh Wanita, Seks, Ritual, Memoirs of a Geisha, The Dancer*

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of Study

The exploitation and domination of women by the male are not something new. The issue goes back a long way and has persisted throughout human civilization. It has been mentioned in various records of human civilization throughout and in every region. This inequality of position has even become something that is taken for granted if we do not look at it critically, something that has been embedded in the system around us.

A social order that affirms the hegemony of men over women is recorded from the Pleistocene era when humans developed agriculture, began to settle, and civilization began to develop (Adas, 2001). The relationship between males and females is equal, bound to each other in an interdependent relationship. Males need females who can develop generations, but like no other creatures, humans have to go through a more complex and more painful birthing process due to the large size of a human baby's head. Therefore, males blessed with more power must fulfill the female's living, especially in the birth process. The strength of one man can only protect one woman, thus forming equality based on this relationship of mutual need. Then, the pattern shifted with the development of agriculture, allowing men who had more power and could manage plantations to have greater access to resources for survival than women (Engels, 2022).



Tradition undeniably plays a significant role in the system's perpetuation, either with an iron fist or hegemonies. This covert oppression makes women not feel like they are under domination. At a more extreme level, women feel noble, or at least feel they are doing the right thing even when oppressed. For example, when a Muslim wife accepts polygamy, she may think that allowing her husband to have another wife is a noble act, which is based on religious interpretation.

Similarly, in the two films featured in this study, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) and *The Dancer* (2011), both female protagonists are entertainers: ronggeng dancers and geishas. They are in a position that is not favorable and could be seen as being taken advantage of, yet they choose to do it willingly. There is even an understanding that what they do as tradition is honorable. In both films, geishas and ronggeng dancers are doing things that can be agreed to refer to prostitution, where the sex transaction happens. However, their images are perceived and responded to entirely differently.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) is a film that tells the life journey of a geisha who fights for her love in a competitive environment. Chiyo is forced to enter the life of a geisha because her father sold her to an *Okiya* (geisha house). Chiyo tries to escape the geisha world with her sister. Nevertheless, her attempt fails. Due to her rebellious nature against the *Okiya*, she must serve as a servant for the rest of her life. Her opportunity for a geisha career is taken from her. The contradictory aspect is that when she falls in love with a man she meets, her path leads her to live the life of a geisha. Her struggle to reunite with her lover is undoubtedly hindered by



the tradition of geisha sexuality, which, ironically, she must embrace as part of the ritual of becoming a full geisha.

The tradition mentioned above is *the Mizuage* ceremony, which requires a young geisha (maiko) to open the auction to compete over her body at a high price. In the movies, Sayuri gains fifteen thousand yen for her *mizuage*. The winner of the auction gets the opportunity to be the first sex partner for a geisha who is just starting her career. This ritual is essential for a geisha to take as part of a geisha's authorization.

In *The Dancer (2011)*, Srintil, obsessed with being a ronggeng dancer since childhood, finds her dream becoming a necessity. Srintil decided to become a ronggeng dancer due to the moral burden carried by her family. Srintil's parents were notorious as ronggeng killers, and only by becoming a ronggeng could Srintil restore her family's good name. This is because ronggeng has a unique position in Dukuh Paruk society's heart. However, with her decision, she must accept the consequences, such as her body being a part of the general public and damaging her relationship with Rasus. A ronggeng must perform sex-related rituals that have become a requirement of the ronggeng tradition.

The *bukak klambu* tradition is similar to the *mizuage* of geisha above. A while after the appointment of ronggeng that goes through several ceremonial rituals, the ronggeng shaman would consider the date of *bukak klambu* where the ronggeng would do the sex relationship as part of her appointment as a ronggeng. This ceremony is organized on *Manis* Friday in the Javanese day system. The bidder

would bring their offering even before the day of the ceremony. They would compete to get this opportunity.

From the brief description of the movies, we can draw an outline that highlights the similarities between the two movies. The body auctioning indeed is identical to prostitution. From a common point of view, we can indeed say that the prostitution practice is something considered harmful, an activity or job that exploits the female body that cannot be justified. However, the traditions of *bukak klambu* and *mizuage* are not regarded as prostitution according to the perspective of the society in both movies. There are attempts to contrast between them. They place the tradition of *mizuage* and *bukak klambu* far away above prostitution and consider prostitution as something different and despicable.

The phenomenon above is interesting because everyday society typically rejects any prostitution practice in Eastern nations' societies. We are familiar with the stereotype of the east nation. The East nation's society is well-known for its strong principle of holding high spiritual values, which is undoubtedly contrary to the practice of prostitution. Japan and Indonesia, where the stories of both movies happen, are Eastern countries that indeed have this principle in their tradition. Moreover, Indonesia is well-known as the most populous Muslim country in the world and claims to be a religious country.

However, in both films, the excellent stereotype is violated, not just by a particular individual but by a tradition known and recognized by the community. The tradition elevates prostitution and is considered a regular thing and is even

believed to bring blessings. It certainly raises the question of what happens in this tradition so that it is accepted in the Eastern society that we are familiar with.

Therefore, this research seeks to see what is behind this unusual tradition through the depictions contained in the film. This research focuses on the women's body and sex as the elements that are strongly related to the prostitution practice and the two traditions of geisha and ronggeng mentioned above. Besides them, this research also takes ritual since it exists in the tradition and has an exciting contrast toward prostitution practice that might reveal some tendencies behind the *mizuage* and *bukak klambu* tradition. This research compares both representations of the ronggeng and geisha traditions. This method allows for a deeper understanding of two similar phenomena separated by different cultural backgrounds by looking at their similarities and differences.

## **1.2 Objective and Significance of Study**

This research studies how the movies represent women's bodies, sex, and rituals in represented society and how those aspects are related to each other. The topic above is broken down into how the women's bodies are shown in those movies physically and symbolically, how they are positioned in the middle of society, and how society sees women's bodies. This research also examines what the movies attempt to show with the sex, how it can relate to the ritual that appears with it, and how the ritual covers the sex in a very different way.

## **1.3 Literature Review**

There are some previous research in the same theoretical framework and research object. One of them is the research by Nastya Rahajeng Sekarhayu and Darni (2020), entitled *Representasi Eksistensi Geisha pada Film "Hanaikusa" dan "Memoirs of a Geisha" (Kajian Sastra Banding)*. The topic of their research is to compare the existence of geisha in both films in terms of social and cultural aspects. The research finds that in *Hanaikusa*, geisha are represented as getting a better education and better work than what is represented in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Besides, in both films, the cultural practices are represented similarly. This research is just limited to the topic of geisha.

Muh. Ferdiahlewi Aca and Anshor Putra (2019) also do research in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Here, they focus on the portrayal of geisha as part of Japanese culture through a Multicultural Feminism approach. The research finds that geisha in Japanese culture has lasted for centuries and is considered a decent and noble profession that changes women's social position. However, it is commented on as a controversial cultural performance by the Western view. The research also finds that a geisha is a feminist movement in Japan, for they consider it a form of independence for women that breaks the custom of women's domestication. This research is almost the same as the previous one by Nastya Rahajeng Sekarhayu and Darni, which is limited to how geisha is represented in the movie.

Hendiawan (2016), in his research, studies the symbolic images from the scene in *The Dancer* to conclude it. The finding is that there is a postcolonial sexuality in the movie. The sexual practices performed by Srintil, the main character, are used

as rebellions against the patriarchal system. The rebellion of Srintil became the event of deconstruction that broke the binary structure of central and marginal as ordinary in postcolonial discourse.

The closest research on the topic raised in this article is by Mundi Rahayu, Lia Emelda, and Siti Aisha (2014). This research compares the power relation in *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *The Dancer*. They find that both films have the same pattern in power relations. Chiyo and Srintil are controlled by the senior woman of their occupation, Mother Nitta, in *Memoirs of a Geisha* and Nyai Kertaredja.

This research attempts to fill some space from some previous research mentioned above. Different from the previous one, this research compares Memoir of a Geisha and *The Dancer* in the form of Film. This research tries to see the representation of women's bodies and correlates it with rituals that appear within the body. The novelty of this research also lies in the theoretical approach.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

Comparative literature is a study that compares two or more different works of literature. The difference can be in language or different genres based on some common grounds (Damono, 2015). According to Wellek and Warren (2018, p. 47), Comparative literature studies similar and different problems in two or more literary works.

This research uses Stuart Hall's representation (Constructionism Approach) as a tool to analyze the data in the film. According to Hall, meaning is not something

natural or innate but the result of a process involving language, action, and cultural practices. Therefore, understanding the world and concepts will be relatively the same within a culture because, in representation, humans make meaning and exchange it through language. Language here is not limited to sound but includes all types of language, writing, images, symbols, and others (Hall, 2013, pp. 12–15).

In the constructionist approach of Representation, things do not carry meaning automatically, and we determine the meaning of an object. We construct meaning using a system of representations based on concepts and signs we use daily as language. Constructionists do not reject the material world that surrounds us. However, what gives meaning to objects and individuals within it is not the material world itself. Meaning arises and is shaped by the language system we use to express the concepts in our minds (Hall, 2013, p. 25).

The research focuses on the phenomena of the politicization of women's bodies and all the attempts to legitimize the practice of control over the body. One of the scholars who is concerned in this field is Foucault. Foucault (1995) argues that the body is immediately involved in politics. The power relation has control over it to place them in a performance, to force them to do tasks, and to make them emit signs. A body is docile and may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.

This research applies film theory. Villarejo (2007) outlines the role of mise-en-scène in his book 'Film Studies: The Basics.' Mise-en-scène emphasises how films design, frame, and organise visual elements on the cinematic stage (Villarejo, 2007,



p. 28). Integrating reality into mise-en-scène is crucial as it immerses the audience into the 'real world,' shaping their film experience.

### **1.5 Research Question**

The direction of this research will be summarized in the research questions below:

How are the representations of women's bodies, sex, and rituals in the films *The Dancer* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and how are they related?

### **1.6 Research Method**

#### **1.6.1 Type of Research**

The research method in this research is qualitative descriptive. Qualitative research is the method used to identify people's experiences, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. It is a method of inquiry to understand the meaning of social phenomena. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data, such as words, images, and sounds, to gain insights into the subject of study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

#### **1.6.2 Data Sources**

This research's primary data is based on the two movies taken as the objects, *The Dancer* (2011) and *Memoir of a Geisha*. The primary data taken are in the forms of scenes, dialogues, sets, and properties that are in—considering that all elements in the film are deliberate and intended to have specific meanings (Sikov,



2020, p. 6). Moreover, it does not limit the possibility that this research will take quotations from other sources, such as books and previous journal articles. This is needed to strengthen the data and arguments in this study.

### **1.6.3 Data Collection Technique**

The method used to collect the data is closely reading the movie scenes. First, watch the film to get an overall picture of the story, theme, and topic as a unit. Then, list the rough categories related to the topics (women's bodies, sex, and ritual representation, either in the form of direct representation or symbolic representation). Collect as much data related to the scenes in the database as possible, like screenshots, dialogues, time, and description of the scene, by watching closely and repeatedly. Then, choose all the scenes that are suitable and related most to the topics.

### **1.6.4 Data Analyzing Technique**

The data collected and organized in the database is then reviewed by comparing data from the two films. Any patterns that emerge from the discussion points are then interpreted with supporting theories. The theory taken to examine further the depiction of the female body, sex, and ritual is Michel Foucault's theory of body politics. Further deepening is also taken from various previous studies related to the topic of sex and ritual.

### **1.6.5 Paper Organization**

This research includes four chapters: introduction, intrinsic element, analysis, and conclusion. In the first part, the research will show the background of the study, which aims to explain the direction of the research. The primary content of the research analysis is explained in the findings and discussion chapters. The discussion is then broken down into another two sub-chapters, with the primary purpose of breaking down the discussion focusing on the representation of women's bodies, sex, and ritual and how the ritual relates to sex and women's bodies. The last and third chapters, as well as the conclusion, aim to explain the findings of this research.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

#### 4.1 Conclusion

From the depiction of the female body discussed in the previous chapter, we can conclude that there is a practice of commodification of the female body in both films. Both are wrapped in the ritual label, the geisha with her *mizuage* ritual and *The Dancer* with her *bukak klambu*. However, with practices similar to prostitution, geisha and ronggeng dancers still have a good name. Especially what happens to ronggeng dancers who still get respect from the people of Dukuh Paruk.

The sexual acts depicted in both films are benefits that the payers of *bukak klambu* and *mizuage* receive. It is noteworthy that the sexual acts obtained from these two practices are not simply described as sex in general. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, sex with a geisha holds value as a social distinction that can emphasize one's social status. This is also true for the ronggeng tradition depicted in *The Dancer*. However, the sexual aspect of the ronggeng dancer tradition is intended more as a means to achieve a traditionally believed blessing.

Rituals play a central role in continuing the practice of body capitalization. The accompanying rituals during sexual activity in both films are an attempt by those in power to formalize prostitution. The hegemony is particularly evident in *The Dancer*, where people tolerate and sanctify the activity.

#### 4.2 Suggestion

Recognizing limitations and shortcomings is essential for anyone engaged in the intellectual world. Therefore, this research is open to all suggestions and

criticisms. Further research is expected to complement or address any gaps in this study. It is important to note that geisha culture encompasses more than just this aspect. This research focuses on the representation of women's bodies and rituals in the linkup of the ronggeng tradition. Several aspects could be further researched, such as the social conditions depicted in *The Dancer* during the G 30 S / PKI event and *Memoir of a Geisha* during World War II. Postcolonialism could be employed as a theoretical framework for further research. Critical discourse analysis could also be used to examine *The Dancer*, as it satirizes the ruling regime at the time of the original work.

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