

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of Study

Geisha have long been a part of history in Japan. They have been portrayed as exotic subjects, especially in western perspective, for a long time as they are very secretive about their community. To the western society, Geisha was introduced in print for the first time in an article on *The Contemporary Review* back in 1891. Throughout the 20th century, as stated by Forman (2007) in his studies, Geisha, both the profession and the term, was already commonly encountered. Other than incorporation of the concept of Geisha in American prose, a number of music groups in early 1920s and 1930s also took the name “geisha” as the group name, or applied the term “geisha” on their musical releases. There has been several attempts about writing Geisha’s life from ‘outsiders’ perspective as well, such as *Geisha* (Dalby, 1983), a recount book written from an American anthropologist who studied about Geisha and tried to live as Geisha for a year, and the most popular historical fiction novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 1997).

*Memoirs of a Geisha* is a story about a Geisha in Kyoto around 1929 until after World War II written by an American author, Arthur Golden. The novel became one of the best selling books in 1997 with four million copies sold and has since been translated into around 32 languages. However in 2001, Arthur Golden underwent a lawsuit against a former Geisha named Mineko Iwasaki for defamation and a contract breach (Struck, 2000, p. Ch01). Mineko Iwasaki, once a Geisha in

Gion district of Kyoto, was one of the subject interviews for Golden's research about Geisha's life for his novel. She agreed to share her experience as a Geisha under an accord of secrecy regarding her identity, which was broken by Golden mentioning her name in the acknowledgement at the end of the novel (Golden, 1997). This caused stirs among the Geisha community, accusing Iwasaki of tainting the image of Geisha in the eyes of people outside Japan and eventually, also caused resentment toward Iwasaki. Hence, Mineko Iwasaki wrote her own auto/biography, *Geisha of Gion* (*Geisha: A life in the US* edition) in 2003, in an attempt to reveal the actual life of a Geisha from her perspective and rebuke the exotic and sensual image of Geisha's life in Golden's novel.

Iwasaki recounted a comprehensive story about several stages in her life: before becoming a Geisha, during her life as Geisha, until after her sudden retirement at the age of 29 to become a business woman. She wrote in detail how Japanese girls can be employed in a Geisha house (*okiya*), the struggles of becoming a Geisha, the complexity of Geisha's art and culture, and the drama behind the curtain between the popular and the unpopular Geishas (Iwasaki, 2003). With the help of Rande Brown as her co-writer, she published the first Geisha auto/biography in English for the world to read in 2003.

The involvement of a third party in the process of creating the novel was partly the reason why the term auto/biography fits Iwasaki's book. While in an autobiography, the main author is the subject who tells us the story from their point of view, the involvement of a second author in *Geisha of Gion* makes this book a hybrid of autobiography and biography. (Stanley, 1992, p.43, Priyatna, 2015)

An autobiography author may also portray themselves in a certain image they want to build in the narration. Smith and Watson (2005, p.375) mentioned the performative nature of autobiography, where the subject, which in this case is also the author, is often represented with contradictions. In defiance of the term “I” used as the actor of the story, the performance of “I” is the result of the author’s, or “self” as Smith and Watson wrote, directing. This results in the performative quality of auto/biography, meaning that the narration has the tendency of being subjective, depending on what kind of role the author wants the audience to see.

As the performative aspect of autobiography allows the author to write beyond the facts, this is usually utilized as a way of addressing social issues such as oppression or gender construction by female writers (Chanfrault-Duchet, 2002, p.61). This aligns with the René Wellek and Austin Warren sociology of literature approach where the author often has purpose and imply her purpose in their writing. The image of Geisha in the western society is also the product of social assumptions; this misunderstood, negatively represented “Geisha” is the subject of argument in Iwasaki’s auto/biography *Geisha of Gion*. Iwasaki’s argument led the writer to analyze the narrative of the book from sociology of literature from René Wellek and Austin Warren approach.

Among the relatively high number of recent studies about feminist auto/biography all over the world, studies on Japanese females’ auto/biography have been absent from them. Taking auto/biography as the basis, and applying Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, the writer aims to find out how the Geisha as a woman in Japan society is portrayed in Mineko Iwasaki’s narrative. As

of now, there have been studies using the auto/biography *Geisha of Gion* by Mineko Iwasaki, but on different subjects. (Suntornirnan, 2016; Alfsdotter, 2004). While Alfsdotter focused on the narratology of Iwasaki's writing, Suntornirnan approached the book from post-colonial perspective and compared it with *Memoirs of Geisha* by Arthur Golden. Also, there have been studies from Priyatna (2016; 2021) applying gender performativity from Judith Butler on the auto/biographies, but with the focus on Indonesian celebrities auto/biographies. However, the writer has found no studies in English on the *Geisha of Gion* auto/biography using the sociology of literature approach, hence the focus of this study.

## 1.2. Research Question

1. How is the social construction of Geisha as Japanese women portrayed by Mineko Iwasaki in the auto/biography *Geisha of Gion*?
2. How is Mineko Iwasaki's stance toward the Geisha system portrayed throughout the auto/biography *Geisha of Gion*?

## 1.3. Purpose of Study

This study aims to provide better understanding about the identity construction of Geisha in Japan by observing how the narrative is written in Mineko Iwasaki's auto/biography *Geisha of Gion* with the basis of gender performativity theory by Judith Butler.

#### **1.4. Scope of Study**

This study analyzes the identity construction of women and Geisha from Mineko Iwasaki's perspective in her auto/biography *Geisha of Gion*. The data was analyzed in the form of words, clauses, phrases, and sentences implying the identity construction of Mineko Iwasaki both as a Geisha and as a Japanese woman.

The analysis is limited, however, by the corpus of the study, which is the auto/biography written by Mineko Iwasaki herself. The results could only be derived from within the edited writing of the auto/biography, not from the subject of the auto/biography in person, and in turn, have the possibility of inaccuracy.

#### **1.5. Significance of Study**

This study is hoped to be able to contribute to existing studies regarding Geisha as a woman and studies regarding Japanese feminist auto/biography, as well as to encourage more studies on social and gender construction studies from sociology of literature perspective. It is also hoped that this study would serve as a helping hand for the society, especially among the university students, to better understand the profession of Geisha.