

The Naïve, the Perplexed and the Subjective Narrator in the Cinematic Adaptation of Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha

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Abstract

Postmodernism, with its core principle, breaking with tradition, has had an immense effect on the world. In literature, it has caused myriads of changes. Hence, the concept of the unreliable narrator emerged as a consequence. This article explores the types of unreliable narrators in the cinematic adaptation of Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha. There are three different reasons for the narrator's unreliability: Naivety, perplexity, and subjectivity. Reaching the conclusion that the reason for the unreliability of Sayuri's account is not out of malicious intent but rather out of purely human limitations that occur in some instances and cannot be surpassed in narrating an autobiography. Thus, making the exception that although the narrator is unreliable, the narrative can still be considered reliable.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the dawn of time, human beings passed down stories as a form of experience-sharing or as myths and legends to their offsprings to thrust them towards progress. These stories usually came in an oral form, and each person handed them down differently until the invention of writing and scripture. After the invention of scripture, ideas, thoughts and the stories that carried them were wrapped in a straightforward, trustworthy narrative. All authors accepted this mode (novelists, poets, playwrights, movie script writers) in the pre-modernist era.

By the time structuralism had emerged, the novel was the most dominating genre out of all the existing literary genres, for the simple reason that the novel could vehicle stories far better than any

other literary form. Therefore, storytelling or narrating is nearly solely linked with the novel, as Monika Fludernik affirms (2009, p. 2). Hence, deconstructing the novel was a primary and necessary endeavour to understand what makes a story.

Therefore, the first objective of this article is to examine whether the narrator can be trusted in delivering a truthful narrative or not. Logically, it is crucial to start with E.M Forster's storytelling, since this concept exists in all the recognised genres (poetry, novels, theatre) and the yet-to-be-recognised ones (movies, videogames, music). Then moving to a definition of what narration is and then a synopsis of the postmodern era since these notions were important in the emergence of the concept of the unreliable narrator, in more or less chronological order.

There are many reasons why a narrator could be considered such, and therefore, they will be surgically studied on the novel's narrator to see which ones fit and which ones are to be disregarded. However, before that, the movie's plot is to be provided to facilitate its comprehension and bring the reader closer to understanding the narrator's function.

The theories that are used are mainly by poststructural/postmodern theorists and critics which are concerned with mostly narration and narrator. These theories are usually used when referring to the novel. Yet in most of their work these theorists, with the exception of E.M Forester, all consider text as more than just the written words; videogames, movies and whatever expressive arts there are that could be seen as literary. Therefore the theories are referred to the concept of the novel yet they are employed on the case study, which is a movie.

Furthermore, although this scientific undertaking deals with the movie adaptation of *Memoirs of a Geisha* with the same title by Arthur Goldern, quoting from the novel will be employed since the screen script writer is the same author of the original novel, in terms of faithfulness. To add to that, narration and the narrator in the novel and cinema employ the same textual meta- position of analysis when dealing with the 'text' (movie or a novel); So in order to support the arguments in this article the novel is to be relied upon heavily.

Consequently, the second objective of this article is to tackle the different reasons for the narrator's unreliability, should he/she be, in fact, unreliable and whether that clarifies if his narrative is to be rejected entirely based on the premise that he/she is unreliable. But before reaching that, the idea of unreliability can only be understood in understanding narrative and storytelling.

2. E.M Forster and Storytelling

As a structuralist, E.M Forster pioneered in deconstructing the novel. In his book *Aspects of the Novel*, he took apart each criterion of this particular genre and attempted an explanation as far as his era allowed. One of these aspects, which is considered to be the most important, is the act of 'storytelling'.

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E.M Forster focused on story because common sense dictates that it is the core of human life and, by extension, literature. Without a story, there would be no urge to communicate, neither in the oral or written form. The concept of story stands thus as the pillar of all novels, poems and plays. In short, the story is the cornerstone of literature. Therefore, E.M Forster defines 'story' as: "a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence" (1990, p.22), the emphasis falling on the word "narrative" since later on, the structure of the narrative is experimented with, in terms of time.

However, this concept is relatively malleable since it defies one fixed definition; hence the essential question is: how is a story narrated?

3. Definition of Narration

Several definitions have been ascribed to the act of narration since it is a concept as old as time. However, not until the beginning of the 20th century this concept was introduced to formal and academic concerns.

Seymour Chatman defines narrative as the conjunction of discourse and story in stating that: "the fable" (*tabula*), or basic story, the sum total of events to be related in the narrative, and, conversely, the 'plot' (*sjuzet*), the story as actually told by linking the events together" (1978, p. 19-20). To Chatman, a narrative is the intertwining relationship between the discourse and the story; in other words, a combination of speech and an account of causality-related events.

S. Chatman does not limit the scope of narration to purely literary interest, as it should be: "literary critics tend to think too exclusively of the verbal medium, even though they consume stories daily through films, comic strips, paintings, sculptures, dance movements, and music" (1978, p. 9), meaning that narration is anywhere we look. Gerard Genette (1983) takes it even further and defines the narrative act as: "the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place." (p. 27) in other words as the conduit that vehicles all the events and actions that happen within a story be it real or fictional.

Monika Fludernik (2009) concurs on this by stating that narration: "is all around us, not just in the novel or in historical writing. Narrative is [...] to be found wherever someone tells us about something: a newsreader on the radio, a teacher at school..." (p. xi). However, on a more academic note, she defines narration as: "a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and or visual medium" (p. 6). To Fludernik, narration is the depiction of a fictional world by any medium or genre as long as it allows the end-users to immerse themselves in a different world and the central character's life, which brings the novel and movies ever closer in terms of literary similarities.

Although, as mentioned before, this concept is as old as time, it remained relatively the same for centuries after the emergence of the novel. This changed radically with the coming of the modern, and most importantly, the postmodern era.

4. Overview of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is simply the movement that came as both a continuation and an opposition to the movement of modernism. The term itself is explanatory in this sense; however, the tenants of postmodernism are relatively indefinable since this movement stands against any form of labelling, sorting and categorising in all the domains that it reaches: the arts, cinema, videogames and literature in general.

Postmodernism, for its cornerstone, holds the rejection of everything that has to do with sticking to traditions, and therefore, in literature, it rejected all aspects of formality and even reason at some point. It allowed authors and movie script writers alike the freedom to experiment with every characteristic that was held 'sacred' by writers and literary theorists in prior eras. To postmodernists, tradition was a limitation, and it needed to be surpassed.

Writers in this era often referred to as poststructuralists, stood for the notion that could be considered the movement's core principle. It implied that every phenomenon has an infinite number of interpretations to which all of them are supposed to be considered equal in value in the sense that they are all reaching for the truth. So not only postmodernism hold rejection to all traditions only, but it also includes the equal distribution of the value of interpretations given to any phenomenon.

In literature, no genre was off-limits to the postmodern writer. Every aspect was experimented with, be it form as in language and its mechanics. Nor the content of what makes a narrative. Since to postmodern writers, the only essential facet was the content, which was neither relevant nor essential for the absurdist.

Herman at.al (2005) best describe this notion best by stating that "Nothing about postmodernism is uncontroversial...[and everything] is a matter of dispute" (p. 601). The word everything here is a meant in its literal form, as in literally everything from the existence of the devine all the way to the existence of the movement or the era itself.

John Hawkes (1965) stresses that: "... the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (as stated in Bradbury, p.7). To him, the structural norms of the novel were seen as "enemies". This word does not necessarily carry a negative undertone, but he used it to emphasise that to the postmodern novelist, what used to be sacred and unreachable and unchangeable in the former eras is no longer a hindrance to creating a literary work (be it a novel or any other genre).

In in the field of literature "...postmodernism is agreed to be characterised by a disruption in the traditional techniques of the craft of fiction..." (Medjahed & Messaoudi, 2018, p. 17). Therefore many writers experimented with every imaginable aspect of the novel and, by extension, narration giving rise to new narrative techniques, one of which is the unreliable narrator.

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The same set of narrative theories employed by authors during this era were in fact employed in all other visual art forms. One of which is cinematography, or simply in movies. Therefore tracing the techniques employed in the novel carry a huge versimilitude to those used in cinema.

5. The Unreliable Narrator Technique

Postmodernism as a movement stood for the rebellion of every conceivable tradition. Notions of form and norms were seen to postmodernists as an obstacle in seeking the truth and self-expression as well as individualism. No sphere escaped its sceptical gaze, be it in politics, economy, religion or literature.

Therefore nothing was to be trusted, not even religious scripture which was the holiest and most sacred type of literature. This act created a precedent that if even the word of god or any deity cannot be trusted for what it is, how can we trust blindly any simple author or her/his narrator of what s/he is telling us?

This philosophical notion seeped through the planks of religion and leaked into literature, and created the Unreliable narrator; the idea that a narrator, even if he is the solemn source that narrates the story, cannot be fully and sometimes wholesomely trusted.

A lot of crucial variables create an unreliable narrator, but the concept itself was coined by Wayne C. Booth (1983), who explains: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (p. 9). Chatman clarifies this and said that: "what makes a narrator unreliable is that his values diverge strikingly from that of the implied author's" (1978, p. 149)

Chatman best describes the common traits found in almost all unreliable narrators: "...perplexity and lack of information..." for when he is a character and limited by his scope of vision giving only one side of the story; "...Cupidity" when the narrator is emotionally involved in the events happening (when he is subjective); "...psychological and moral obtuseness" when the narrator seems to be under the effects of drugs, alcoholic beverages and or psychologically unstable simply because his perception of the world (even if the world is fictional) cannot be seen as authentic as well as when he is bound and restrained by morality; "...gullibility... innocence" when the narrator is someone who is easily fooled and or a child; and "...cretinism" when the narrator suffers from anything that can hinder his mental growth (1978, p.233).

The use of the unreliable narrator varies with the way he is spotted since every author (movie script writer) uses the unreliable narrator for a purpose, but the most prominent of these purposes is that it challenges our understanding of reality and fiction. David Lodge acknowledges this by stating that the purpose of the unreliable narrator is: "to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter." (1992, p.154) The unreliable narrator makes the end-user distrust everything he reads, making him pay more and more

attention to the details of the story and its construction. It makes him more sceptical and, therefore, more open to new interpretations of the work and our real world (the one that the author exists in).

6. The Plot of Memoirs of a Geisha

Chiyo Sakamoto and her older sister Satsu live in a small village somewhere in the western parts of Japan with their dying mother and their father, who works as a lowly fisherman. This later sells his two daughters after their mother was indeed on her deathbed to the richest man in the area who noticed Chiyo's water-like coloured eyes. Mr Tanaka was his name, and he wanted to send the two girls to a geisha's boarding house - a place that trains girls from a very young age how to become one of Japan's most symbolic images of entertainment ever since the old samurai times reaching out until the 1920s, and more specifically 1929, the time in which this story took place.

Therefore, the two girls are taken to Kyoto, one of the biggest cities in Japan, at Mr Tanaka's behest. There, they got separated as Chiyo worked as a maid and trained simultaneously to become a Geisha – women trained in the arts of entertainment, dancing, singing and, of course, intriguing conversations. Her sister, however, was taken to an unknown place.

In the okiya, which is the Japanese word for the school that forms geishas, she meets other characters living there. An older girl named Pumpkin who was training to become a Geisha; a meticulously pragmatic and profit-oriented woman they called Mother who runs the okiya; an older woman called granny who was the previous runner of the okiya; and last but not least, the heartless and malicious and yet bewilderingly beautiful geisha of the okiya, Hatsumomo. This unfamiliar setting would be where the protagonist Chiyo Sakamoto would spend the next couple of years of her life.

A couple of months into the routine of working as a maid, Chiyo feels being only 9, felt excruciating homesickness and wanted to run away and go back to her home and small fishing village. However, as she tries to climb off the roof, she falls and breaks her arm. Mother did not look kindly at this. She saw it as ungratefulness. Therefore she stopped the funding for her education as a geisha until she earns it again.

Chiyo would work as a maid without any hope of ever becoming a geisha for the next two years and ends up in an existential crisis as she realises that her life serves no purpose. It was at this time that a new character was introduced to the story. As he is introduced, the chairman would comfort her with a con of fruit-flavoured crushed ice. Being reassured and touched by this man's kindness, Chiyo realises that she has to become a geisha at any cost and sets out to become one.

Good events keep piling up in Chiyo's life as she is discovered by a new geisha that arrived at the okiya on some random occasion and convinces Mother to reinvest in her. Her name was Mameha, and she was to take Chiyo as her little sister. This meant that her training and education in the ways of the geisha would be Mameha's responsibility. Seeing this as an opportunity to make a profit, she

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gave her consent to Mameha's plan. This somehow enrages her older 'sister' in the okiya, Hatsumomo.

Chiyo would train in the next year in the ways of the geisha, and since she was already far behind, her training was accelerated, which caused her much more strenuous nights; harder and longer practice hours with the instruments that required her hands to be put in ice-cold water for hours at a time. All of this, including having to deal with Hatsumomo's increased hatred and malicious plots to pull her down since she did not want to lose her position in the okiya. A position that granted her a multitude of privileges, including the master bedroom, being served by the maids of the okiya and not having to deal with anything else except her patron, or as it was referred to back then, her *danna*.

The protagonist of the story finishes her training and makes her debut as a geisha for the first time under the influence of Mameha. Moreover, as tradition would have it, she adopted a new name that goes with her new persona. The name was Sayuri.

On a particular event and as always with Mameha, she met with two men, one named Toshikazu Nobu and the other Ken Iwamura. To her biggest surprise, Ken Iwamura was the chairman that she met long ago who pushed her to become what she has become. On Mameha's orders, and to Sayuri's disdain, she was supposed to nurture a relationship with the wealthy businessman Toshikazu instead of the chairman since this would mean that she would finally have a wealthy patron to herself and in the geisha world, especially Kyoto, that meant success.

Sayuri repressed her feelings and works wholeheartedly on creating the relationship and ends up with a patron and, therefore, a highly desired geisha. She was then adopted by Mother of the okiya as her daughter, meaning that Hatsumomo would be left at the door with not a penny to her name, and the okiya and everything inside it would go to Sayuri after Mother passes away. Reaching success, Sayuri was not satisfied with what she was since Mr Nobu would increasingly ask for her company in the next few years. A time and effort she would have preferred to spend with her beloved chairman.

World War Two broke loose, and the government closed all geisha okiyas and districts to find a suitable job for those women that goes along with the war efforts. Mr Nobu's relationship with Sayuri would come in handy as he seeks her out and finds her a safe job of sewing parachutes in a nearby village close to Kyoto.

After the war was over, Mr Nobu came asking for Sayuri's help since his business was being taken over and yet a man named Sato would be able to use his connections to cease that from happening. Therefore she was asked to return to Kyoto and entertain the man and his entourage. The plan works, and she successfully convinces the men not to allow his business to be destroyed. The downside of the matter was that her affection for the chairman grew ever so strong as he was present in that event. Sayuri had to do something about it.

Feeling the needs to do something about her status quo with the chairman, the sought-after geisha felt very torn between her affection to the chairman and the feeling of guilt she would have should she break her relationship with Mr Nobu since he was of immense help to her in countless ordeals in the past. Therefore she needed to create a situation that would allow her to end the relationship without any confrontation. The plan was to pretend to be in a relationship with Mr Sato and deliberately draw Mr Nobu to discover that she was having a very intimate relationship with him, hoping that he would lose interest when he witnessed that.

She cooks up the plan with her okiya sister, Pumpkin, and agrees with her to bring Mr Nobu at a given time and place. Pumpkin does precisely that, except she does not bring Mr Nobu but the chairman himself. As they entered the intended location, the chairman and Pumpkin stumble upon Sayuri and Mr Sato having intercourse. This crushes any hopes and dreams that Sayuri had to rekindle the relationship with the chairman in Sayuri's mind and leaves her in utter despair.

A fair amount of time goes by, and Sayuri receives an invitation from the chairman to a teahouse. Having lost her danna, Mr Nobu, for disgracing herself with Mr Sato, she thought that the coin would be put to good use. She accepted the invitation with a heavy heart. However, when she arrived, the chairman confessed to her that he was the one who set up Mameha to take her under her wing and that he was the one who paid for her education and training to become a geisha after Mother lost faith in her ever becoming one and finally that he was in love with her ever since he laid eyes on her as a young maid.

Sayuri was taken aback as she was smitten by the unexpected turn of events that her life took. As she stumbles and mumbles to explain why she was sleeping with Mr Sato just in order to allow herself to break free from Mr Nobu and pursue the chairman, this latter pulls her close for a kiss.

A year after, the chairman being her new danna, Sayuri gives birth to her firstborn son. Living happily ever after, all three of them now move to New York, where Sayuri Sakamoto becomes the first geisha that recounts her memoirs to the outside world.

7. The Unreliable Narrator in Memoirs of a Geisha

The various hints that the narrator can only be the older version of Chiyo/ Sayuri are clear enough to claim that she is recounting events that happened to her in the past as the movie starts in a monologue that discusses the first step of Sayuri to becoming a geisha.

She says: "That afternoon when I met so-and-so... was the very best afternoon of my life, and also the very worst afternoon." (Golden, 1998, p. 7) It is therefore clear that the narrator can only be the protagonist herself. Sayuri was her name, but she also refers to herself as Chiyo, which was her name as a child and before becoming a geisha. Therefore the second logical deduction that could be

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drawn is that the narrator is the older version of Chiyo/Sayuri, who is making a recount of her own life of rising to be one of Kyoto's most desired geishas.

The clear-cut distinction to confirm this claim is that she is speaking to a historian called Jacob Haarhuis about her life. In return, being an academic, he stated it bluntly that she was making an autobiography about becoming one of Japan's most traditional entertainers.

However, in dealing with the text from the perspective of reliability, it could be noticed that there is a mixture of three reasons as to why Sayuri (the narrator) cannot be trusted fully for her accounts; mainly her naiveté, her perplexity and finally her naturally subjective and limited perspective. In the titles to come, this shall be explained in depth.

7.1 Sayuri as the Naïve Narrator

Although the story is narrated in the past by the older version of Chiyo/Sayuri, from New York to the historian Jacob Haarhuis, making her a more mature and hypothetically an omniscient narrator, the *naiveté* of the narrator in question is inescapable. Sayuri would recount her childhood in a fairly pink-hued vision at key moments, not all the time but fairly enough to consider parts of it as unreliable.

Although she was living in a village populated mainly by fishermen, and her mother was dying of bone cancer, and they were poorer than dirt, she still maintained a rather cheerful and content tone throughout the first and second chapter of the movie. As she narrated the stories when she went swimming in the pond, Sayuri shows the reader that she could escape her current circumstances by being a child, meaning a person that does not know much about life or how it works and therefore finds pleasure in the smallest of things such as swimming naked in a pond. Hence the naiveté of the narrator can be spotted in the small fractions when she tries to cheer either herself or the reader into believing that she had some crumbs of happiness at that moment.

She also carries the same tone when she describes her mother in the most beautiful manner possible. She says: "she had her mother's pouty mouth...which gave the impression of a delicate picture... And her lovely grey eyes were surrounded by thick lashes..." (Golden, 1998, p. 9). Although these accounts do seem realistic yet they carry a very positive tone which seems to contradict in a sense with the general atmosphere and tone set by the implied author.

It can be noticed that there is a struggle between the authorial norms and the narrator's version of those norms. One might deduce that the author is creating a reasonably melancholic atmosphere to the whole narrative, yet the narrator's exuberant intrusions seem to smear this particular tone and atmosphere. As stated above, the unreliable narrator is labelled or suspected as unreliable when "his values diverge strikingly from that of the implied author's" (Chatman, 1978, p. 149). Therefore the pink-hued spectres that the narrator uses in order to portray a more cheerful tone to the narrative in the first sections of the movie renders her unreliable.

However, it is practically commonplace to remember one's childhood with an equal amount of nostalgia, homesickness, and yet in cheerful and exaggerated happiness; the narrator in this story is no different as she seems to seep through the narrative cracks her perception of events that resembles a narrative told by a naïve child.

7.2 Sayuri as the Perplexed Narrator

One would think that a narrator in the third person point of view recounting her autobiography about her life, which she knows, supposedly, would have an accurate account of every detail about it. However, Sayuri in the movie seems to be even more perplexed at times than her younger self.

The narrative action in some instances transpires into a doubtful account since she was still wondering why, for example, the chairman (Ken Iwamura) did not just come to her when she grew older and after she became a geisha and waited that long to confess to her after an ample amount of ordeal? Why did she doubt her motives to escape the okiya? Why was Hatsumomo oppressing her and about her whereabouts after she left? Alternatively, Even why their father accepted to send them with Mr Tanaka, who sold them to a greedy Mother who only wanted to profit.

Again the narrator's unreliability seems to be a matter of fractional narration and not the whole narrative itself being taken as untrustworthy. It displays some gaps in it that even she cannot seem to fill even after years have passed since the events occurred. Throughout the story, the narrator would stumble in providing any certainty to what she is narrating. The narrator, Sayuri, doubts certain things and why they happened and even question her motives in some other cases.

All of these untied ends give the impression that the narrator, who is recounting her path to becoming a geisha, does not know everything about the story, and she slips into the limited narrator every now and then since her only privilege is knowing the events that were to come and not the events that happened when she was not present nor the events that took place when she was too young to understand.

Sayuri, in this case, is unreliable as a narrator since she seems to be perplexed about the occurrences, and she still has not found answers to certain loose ends that still manage to put her, as a narrator, in an awkward narrative situation which is: a narrator that does not know all aspects of the narrative, especially when that narrative is an autobiography.

7.3 Sayuri as the Subjective Narrator

In the first few scenes, the fictitious historian, Jacob Haarhuis, notes the limitations of his interviewee (Sayuri). He says: "Autobiography, if there really is such a thing, is like asking a rabbit to tell us what he looks like hopping through the grasses of the field. How would he know? If we want to hear about the field... the rabbit was in no position to observe." (Marshall, 2005)

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The script writer and the original author, in this instance, clarify in an impressive analogy the limitations of the perspective that the narrator of his story seems to be stuck in, namely her bodily limitations. Sayuri, in this case, cannot escape her subjectivity about her own story, which makes perfect sense at this level. If a person is recounting his story, he/she is not aware of all the occurrences or events of the story but mainly his subjective view on it. The narrator being human, is logically limited to her thoughts and has no access to other people's minds.

As the story unfolds, and even though the narrator has all knowledge prior to the start of the narrative act, she still has no idea about what other characters were thinking or how they felt. She could only interpret things in accordance with those characters' actions. Her lack of knowledge and uncertainty seems to draw attention to her perplexity and, by extension, her subjectivity in many situations. Not only that, but she also seems to be unaware of the outside and real-world beyond her okiya and the teahouses that she used to be invited to entertain infrequently. As if beyond those places and Yoroido (her home village), Japan did not exist.

Therefore, Sayuri's narrative mask of omniscience seems to fall as a narrator, and since an account of a narrator that is limited in his/her perception to the confinement of his/her physical presence and mental perception, his/her account cannot be considered as whole and complete. She has no access to all narrative knowledge; she does not know the emotions, feelings and thoughts of other characters except her own; and she cannot escape her subjective take on those events loaded with emotions. The narrator here is, once again, untrustworthy and unreliable.

8. CONCLUSION

The concept of storytelling and narrating has existed ever since the beginning of time. Our daily lives are stories narrated to ourselves, every action taken at a particular point in time is a narrative, whether its cause is known or unknown, and it is still considered such. Novelists, authors, and movie script writers took it upon themselves to frame these everyday stories and portray them in fictional stories narrated through various techniques (films, novels, videogames).

Such techniques were employed straightforwardly since the era of the emergence of the novel did not require a complex approach to narrating events. Postmodernism came and rebelled against all of the literary traditions, amongst which narrative techniques. Postmodern writers questioned the authenticity of the narrator and therefore formed the technique of the unreliable narrator, which is employed to make the reader interact and at the same time be sceptical of both the real world and the fictional one.

This article was an attempt to explain the effects of a postmodernist narrative technique, referred to as the unreliable narrator in the work of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the movie adaptation. Throw out the various steps taken, from E.M Forster's storytelling to the postmodern

narration all the way to the narrative technique of unreliability, concluding that the narrator in this movie is unreliable for several reasons.

The first one being the narrator's naïve view on things that seems to break the melancholic tone and atmosphere that the implied author established by making it joyous and upbeat, knowing full well that the tone is already predetermined. The second one is the narrator's perplexity and uncertainty about specific events that she narrates without knowing everything. The last one being the simple fact that Sayuri is a person telling her autobiography of becoming a geisha, and it is her story, and as a person, she is physically and mentally limited to her body and her mind only and has no access to any other character in her story. Therefore the narrator is unreliable.

With that being said, the unreliability of the narrator in this novel does not spew from a bad place or out of spite to the reader or even out of pure malicious intent, but rather, the narrator is telling a very melancholic, heartfelt and emotional autobiography and therefore she cannot know more than she does. Sayuri cannot be sure of everything she will narrate, and she cannot transcend the limitations of being a human being. Therefore it is out of pure natural and human limitations in telling a story. As a result, although the narrator is unreliable, the narrative can be trusted and seen as reliable to a considerable extent.

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