

WILL-BINDING SERVITUDE IN MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA AND THE GIRL FROM THE COAST

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Abstract: Servitude is anathema to human nature, and even with the clear natural aversion of humans towards servitude, most would find themselves practising it under the tyranny of some higher power (Power, 2025). The study aims to compare the will-binding servitude of women in *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *The Girl from the Coast*. The literature includes the research design using textual analysis of the experiences of the female protagonists in each novel, following a close analysis of the word choice in the excerpts through the Repressive Tolerance Theory. The results show that gender and cultural practice are direct components leading to the constriction of female autonomy. Hence, the protagonists of the novel adapt to their harsh lives of servitude by practising repressive tolerance, mainly passive tolerance, whereby they do not question the societal expectations placed on them.

Keywords: female autonomy, memoirs of a geisha, Repressive Tolerance Theory, servitude, the girl from the coast

INTRODUCTION

Servitude refers to enforced service under coercion from a dominant authority (Palumbo, 2024). Although some rights may remain, autonomy is constrained. In modern contexts, workers are protected within a margin of appreciation (Scherz, 2023), but historically, systems such as *chelas*¹ and *sahelis*² reflected nominal freedom alongside slave-like conditions (Sinha & Jha, 2022). Thus, freedom within servitude is inherently ambiguous, aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of conditioned freedom (Berk, 2021), where individuals exercise limited agency within oppressive social structures. To survive such conditions, individuals often adopt strategies to negotiate restrictions and maintain a sense of selfhood (Hoffjann, 2021).

Literature frequently reflects these tensions between autonomy and oppression, particularly in narratives centred on women's experiences within patriarchal societies. However, existing studies on women's servitude often focus on single texts, cultural contexts or feminist oppression in isolation. They neglect the comparative discussion on how women negotiate constrained freedom from the lens of internalised oppression, through psychological consent and adaptive survival, across different Asian patriarchal systems and systems of dependency. Comparative literary analysis is therefore necessary to examine how similar structures of

¹ Chelas: Male servants or slaves

² Sahelis: Female servants or slaves

gendered servitude operate despite cultural differences, and how women exercise agency within these limitations.

Memoirs of a Geisha (1997) by Arthur Golden recounts Sayuri Nitta's rise within geisha culture, a female-led profession centred on performance and social artistry. Artistic traditions like geisha culture provide insight into societal values (Richmond, 2023). The term "gei-sha" means "art-person," referring to women trained to entertain through dance, music and conversation (Fahas, 2020). Despite its artistic prestige, the profession reflects women's dependence on male patronage for financial stability and social security, positioning geishas within a system of gendered economic servitude.

Similarly, *The Girl from the Coast* (2003) by Pramoedya Ananta Toer follows a nameless girl in a patriarchal Javanese society where women are subordinated to male authority (Muhmad Pirus & Nurahmawati, 2020). As a "practice wife," she embodies temporary marital servitude in exchange for protection and social mobility. This reflects the "starter wife" phenomenon, where a woman supports a man before ultimately being replaced (Tate, 2025). Although the two novels emerge from different cultural settings, both portray women whose survival depends on complying with patriarchal expectations while simultaneously negotiating spaces of personal agency. Therefore, this comparative analysis seeks to examine how conditioned freedom operates within systems of servitude and how female protagonists navigate, resist and adapt to male-dominated social structures.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Societies are shaped by philosophical, sociological and psychological expectations (Popovych et al., 2021). Historically, such expectations have disadvantaged women across cultures (Lips, 2021). In Japan, a group-oriented society, women are expected to be submissive and responsible for domestic obligations (Gray, 2022). Similarly, Javanese culture reinforces gender inequality through rigid expectations of women as wives, mothers and caregivers (Puspa et al., 2024). Despite geographical and cultural differences, both societies impose comparable restrictions that limit women's autonomy and reinforce dependence on patriarchal authority.

Harmful cultural practices remain embedded within societal norms (Burayu & Degefa, 2024), particularly those shaping women's identities, duties and social value (Khalid et al., 2025). In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, set during the Meiji Period, geishas were among the limited professions available to women (Aca & Putra, 2019). Although geishas possessed artistic skills and social influence, their survival depended heavily on male patronage and obedience to institutional expectations, creating a form of servitude in which women's choices were constrained by economic and social dependency. In *The Girl from the Coast*, set in colonial Java, women worked in industries such as textiles or entered marriages for social mobility, particularly with aristocrats like the *Bendoro* (Meerkerk, 2019; Andayani & Candrayana, 2025). The protagonist's role as a temporary "practice wife" similarly reflects a system where women's lives are shaped by male authority and social obligation.

These conditions illustrate will-binding servitude, where women are not always physically forced into submission but are psychologically, socially and economically conditioned to internalise restrictive roles. Rather than relying solely on overt coercion, such systems operate by shaping women's autonomy, beliefs, expectations and survival strategies, thereby making obedience appear voluntary. As a result, women may internalise patriarchal expectations while simultaneously attempting to negotiate limited forms of agency within oppressive structures. Both novels, therefore, demonstrate how servitude extends beyond physical control into the regulation of women's autonomy, identity and decision-making.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: What are the sociocultural mechanisms that constrain female autonomy across diverse cultures in Asia?
- RQ2: What strategies are employed by women to cultivate resilience and survival within the existing systemic oppression?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- RO1: To explore the sociocultural mechanisms that constrain female autonomy across diverse cultures in Asia.
- RO2: To investigate strategies employed by women to cultivate resilience and survival within the existing systemic oppression.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study addresses a gap by comparatively analysing both novels through the ambiguity of freedom and Repressive Tolerance. It highlights how women's autonomy is shaped across cultural contexts, offering insight into a continuing societal issue.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focuses on Sayuri Nitta and the unnamed girl, using selected excerpts without generalising all Asian cultures. Author bias is acknowledged: *Memoirs of a Geisha* is written by a non-Japanese author, while *The Girl from the Coast*, though culturally grounded, may reflect generational bias.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research design, specifically textual analysis and close reading, to examine ideology and identify the survival strategies portrayed in the selected novels. Textual analysis is widely used in cultural studies because it enables researchers to interpret language, symbols and representations while uncovering underlying ideological and cultural assumptions (Arya, 2020). Close reading further supports this analysis by examining specific details within literary texts to develop a deeper understanding of their meaning, function and effects (Ohrvik, 2024).

The primary data consist of 8 selected passages, dialogues and narrative descriptions, 4 from *Memoirs of a Geisha* and another 4 from *The Girl from the Coast*, that depict women's experiences within patriarchal systems. Passages were purposively selected based on their relevance to the study's focus on will-binding servitude, particularly scenes involving explicit representations of dependence on male authority, restricted autonomy, submissiveness, social obligation and women's negotiation of survival within oppressive structures.

The analysis was conducted through thematic coding, where recurring themes such as servitude, submissiveness, women's identity, dependency and agency were identified and categorised. These themes were then interpreted through comparative textual analysis to examine how both novels portray women's constrained freedom and survival strategies in different cultural settings. By combining close reading with thematic analysis, the study is able to explore not only explicit acts of oppression but also the psychological and social mechanisms that normalise women's obedience within patriarchal societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender

Throughout history and into the modern day, gender inequality remains a subject of debate (Palma et al., 2023), particularly regarding the oppression of women under patriarchal systems. This inequality persists in subtle forms, restricting women's lives and careers through invisible barriers such as the glass ceiling (Gurieva et al., 2022; Watanabe & Kwarteng, 2024). Most cultures assign men the role of provider, while women in these patriarchal systems are expected to be caregivers, reinforcing socially accepted norms (Goldstein et al., 2024). Only some cultures reverse these roles, allowing women leadership positions in matriarchal societies (DSocSci & Cook, 2023), such as the Khasi and Garo tribes of India, the Mosuo of China and the Minangkabau in Indonesia (Kooria, 2021; Sangwan, 2025). Although men are increasingly taking on caregiving roles, women still contribute significantly more time and effort, especially in household responsibilities (Barzallo et al., 2024). In modern Japanese society, women have greater access to employment and rights, yet remain subordinate to men (Guo et al., 2024). In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri is subjected to patriarchal exploitation (Bashyas & Rajkhowa, 2022; Effendy & Prautomo, 2024; Fahas, 2020). Similarly, in Javanese culture, women are still more likely to become housewives to meet societal expectations (Muhmad

Pirus & Nurahmawati, 2020). In *The Girl from the Coast*, the unnamed protagonist experienced oppression shaped by both gender and class within marriage (Andayani & Candrayana, 2025; Muzakka & Suyanto, 2020).

Cultural Practice

Culture refers to shared beliefs, customs and behaviours of a society (Naik et al., 2023) and plays a crucial role in shaping human behaviour (Raef et al., 2020). Within countries, cultural variation arises from differences in ancestry, religion and ethnicity (O'Connor, 2024). Asia contains vast cultural diversity, with South Asia alone comprising over 4,500 distinct groups (Dokuru et al., 2024). Cultures differ because they are shaped by traditions passed across generations, though they evolve over time (Zhang & Mace, 2021). In Japan, practices such as tea ceremonies, flower arrangement and bowing highlight the importance of etiquette (Luo, 2024). In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, these traditions are embodied through geisha culture, including tea ceremonies, *Mizuage* and the *danna* system (Castilaw, 2023; Kadhim, 2025). In Javanese culture, practices such as *batik*, *gamelan* and *wayang kulit* remain significant (Fauzan, 2025). In *The Girl from the Coast*, the protagonist followed norms of politeness and respect towards higher-status individuals, while practising Islam under her husband's guidance (Muyassaroh et al., 2024; Sugiharti et al., 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Repressive Tolerance was developed by Herbert Marcuse in 1965 in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. It explains how apparent tolerance sustains domination (Kelly, 2021). It functions as a social mechanism reinforcing inequality (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Marcuse argued that to amplify the voices of oppressed individuals, more powerful groups need to experience some form of censorship, because only under absolute equality could liberal rights exist (Fenton, 2025). Hence, when such undivided freedom is unachievable due to hierarchical differences and ancestral backgrounds, an intervention is indispensable through suppressing the powerful groups. The theory involves two distinct types: passive tolerance and active tolerance. Passive tolerance involves uncritical acceptance of harmful practices, while active tolerance institutionalises them through compromise (Adelman et al., 2021). Thus, perceived freedom often conceals systemic oppression.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Gender expectations

Memoirs of a Geisha

*"Fishermen are terribly superstitious, you see. They especially don't like **women** to have anything to do with fishing."* (p.22)

Men consider it to be a bad omen when any woman, whether it be their own family or strangers, comes close to things that are considered something tied to masculinity. This displays the stereotypes placed on women, whereby a woman's femininity would negatively impact the masculinity of an item through

presence alone. Bodily fluid, especially menstrual blood, is considered to be so dirty that it taints the area or item it touches (Sugita, 2022). Women are expected to stay in line and keep to whatever activities are considered feminine, such as cooking, cleaning and sewing, rather than going near places where men work. It reflects passive tolerance, where submission is internalised in women regarding their place in men's lives rather than externally enforced, reinforcing Marcuse's argument that domination persists through the apparent consent given by the oppressed. The women silently accepted the superstitious beliefs and avoided lingering near fishing-related areas without fighting back, even feeling guilty if they went against the superstition. This showed how female autonomy is ambiguous; they are free to roam about, yet still limited in where they can be.

*"I'm sure the Doctor felt grand to have two such ornately dressed **women** kneeling at his feet that way." (p.295)*

Obedience is the act of submission influenced by individual, cultural and environmental factors (Kaur & Rani, 2024). Patriarchal systems frequently normalise women's obedience as a marker of masculine authority. It is a primal psychology embedded in the mindset learnt from experiences or family upbringing (Başkan & Alkan, 2023). Hence, women in these patriarchal systems are expected to respect men through submissive gestures, like bowing and kneeling. Any minor disrespect from a woman would be considered shameful to themselves and whoever is connected to them, including family, friends and employers. On the contrary, such expectations are not placed on men, allowing them much leniency in practising accepted behaviours in private and public. This is also another display of passive tolerance, where women obey the system's values built from years of parental teaching since young, supporting Marcuse's discussion that state oppression is maintained through conditioning. Women felt that kneeling is something compulsory, when it actually is a willing performance of subjugation to avoid fighting against the system. Hence, women's rights are ambiguous, with respected careers still controlled by societal male dominance.

The Girl from the Coast

*"You mustn't cry," she scolded her daughter. "You're now the **wife** of an important man." (p.5)*

Women are often seen as "the other" in relation to men, representing them as the extension of men and defined as such rather than as independent individuals (Kislev, 2024). It is similar to how society views people of certain groups based on their leaders' authority, wealth and behaviours. Whatever a woman does will reflect on her father, sons and husband (Senayah, 2025). This leads to strict autonomy restrictions being placed on women to ensure that they maintain the integrity of their families. For instance, women are not allowed to display negative emotions such as sadness, anger or jealousy. In contrast, men have no such performative expectations, as society excuses their negative behaviour more, so men become less careful in their actions. The acceptance by women of such a responsibility and expectation is a passive tolerance, whereby Marcuse

claims the act of a proper woman is internalised in their upbringing and reinforced through self-policing. Women's freedom has conditions, and only actions considered proper were allowed, while acts that displayed weakness or petulance were shut down.

"But where does the Master go for days on end like this?"

*"That's a man's business, Young Mistress, and it would be best for you not to interfere. **Women** don't know about such things. Our work is here in the house. This is our territory, the area under our control." (p.74)*

Women who practise traditional gender roles are discouraged from challenging men (Ali et al., 2020). They are not allowed to question a man's decision, no matter how small the judgment is, because women are socially conditioned to trust that what men do is important and beneficial. In fact, women are usually brushed off by everyone around them when they voice out doubts they have towards a male member of society, even by other women. This displayed the harsh reality of a patriarchal society where women internalise misogyny (Fatima et al., 2025). Women would adopt and enforce patriarchal beliefs, willingly turning against another woman by putting others down or in difficult spots to appease the expectations of men and ensure their own security. This is an act of active intolerance, where retaliation occurs naturally rather than externally triggered by another person, validating Marcuse's argument that retribution surfaces through curiosity. The act may be minor when the girl from the coast inquired about the *Bendoro's* whereabouts, knowing it was none of her business, yet felt curious nonetheless. There was freedom in voicing out questions, but it should be done in private, out of the man's knowledge, to avoid trouble.

Cultural Practices

Memoirs of a Geisha

*"But if these two men found me appealing enough, they might start a **bidding war**, which could put me in the same position to repay my debts as if I'd been a popular apprentice all along. This was what Mameha had meant by "catching Hatsumomo off-balance." Hatsumomo was delighted that Nobu found me attractive; what she didn't realize was that my popularity with Nobu would very likely drive up the price of my mizuage." (p.287)*

Mizuage is an outdated culture in Japan known as the virginity auction (Preskar, 2023). It was practised by Maikos, apprentice geishas, as an important ritual they had to partake before becoming geishas. *Mizuage*, as represented in the novel and some historical accounts, is a ceremony for a maiko to sell her virginity to the highest bidder to let go of girlhood and transition into an adult (Aca & Putra, 2019). This reveals a woman's identity as just an object that can be bought and sold by men. Even respected women with careers in that era were not free from being reduced to an item. The acceptance of Japanese society towards the

practice of men having a bidding war for a maiko's virginity reflects the active tolerance towards a policy that is harmful for women, but serves to satisfy male indulgence. It reflects a society where objectification is welcomed and proactively practised rather than being a commonly internalised rule, supporting Marcuse's claim that domination is maintained through practices. Thus, the freedom of a maiko is ambiguous, as their *Mizuage* is presented as their choice, but in truth, it is a ritual required for them to become an official geisha.

*"Geisha have passions like everyone else, and they make the same mistakes. A geisha who takes such a risk can only hope she isn't found out. Her reputation is certainly at stake; but more important, so is her standing with her **danna**, if she has one."* (p.183)

In the lives of geishas, there is an important man known as a *danna*. The Japanese word directly translates to "husband" or "patron". A *danna* is a man who supports a geisha financially in exchange for exclusive sexual servitude (Davies, 2024). They were usually wealthy men who would pay for a geisha's extravagant, expensive lifestyle through gifts such as kimonos and jewellery. Even though being a geisha is a professional career which brings in money, the income is given to their okiya to finance the occupants living there. This meant that geishas were reliant on men for financial security. It reflects passive tolerance, where submission can also depend on external factors like food, security and money, validating Marcuse's argument that domination can remain in a society through financial dependency. This is especially true for geishas, who accept financial dependency towards men, so long as they can reap the safety and security they need to live comfortably.

The Girl from the Coast

*"Listen to me. There's only one thing that **Allah** wants, and that's for people to be good. That's what religion is for —so that people can turn to Him."* (p.53)

Religion is an important practice in Javanese culture because it preserves social stability and promotes communal resilience, fostering a more harmonious community (Pohan et al., 2025). The focused religion in the plot is Islam, which plays a role in maintaining patriarchal ideology regarding male privileges and domination, such as the right of polygamy and divorce in marriage (Mahmudah et al., 2023). This depicts that men were given more power over women in relationships, especially if the man was upper-class. Women were expected to practice their husbands' religion and believe in a completely new ideology that they may not understand or personally agree with. The embrace of religion, ideology and practices, following the men they served, reflected passive tolerance, where surrender is influenced by religion, reinforcing Marcuse's argument that oppression is manipulated through inflicted fear. Women in Javanese culture were expected not to question the men, including their religious beliefs and practices. The choice to practice and believe in a

religion is ambiguous because externally, the women must show absolute agreement towards men; but internally, they could have their own ideology kept hidden.

“But now, in this house, she had to be silent; there was no one willing to hear the sound of her voice. All she could do was whisper. And in this prayer room, even her movements had to follow a prescribed script.” (p.31)

According to common spousal roles, a woman must live with her husband and his family after marriage, making her own family of secondary importance (Ali et al., 2020). However, this unfortunately places women in vulnerable positions because they have no immediate support system around them in their effort to develop trust and connection with their husband’s family members. Not only that, but women must also learn the rules and practices of their new home, regardless of whether they agree with it or it conflicts with their own morals. Men, on the other hand, are rarely expected to make such sacrifices in a marriage. Such acceptance of the culture for women to belong to their husbands’ families discloses the passive tolerance of women to employ a self-governance strategy to obey without needing active coercion, reinforcing Marcuse’s claims that obedience is born from subjugation. Hence, the freedom of women in relationships is ambiguous, as they have internalised the need to appease their husbands, which forces them to act accordingly rather than risk ostracism.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The most prominent observation across both novels is the overwhelming employment of passive tolerance by the female protagonists in societies under patriarchal control. The assigned gender roles forced women to internalise set expectations, even to the point that they deploy self-policing and self-discipline to uphold these expectations. Such a phenomenon is caused by the frequency of traditional gender roles messages from their caregivers, revealing how the environment and upbringing of a person strongly affect their perceptions of the responsibilities of different genders (Bozkur & Şahin, 2022). This form of passive tolerance leads women to accept harmful practices and ideologies naturally, without needing external coercion.

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Sayuri displayed passive tolerance towards things involving men, showing that endurance of unjust systems and practices is deeply gendered. It highlights that both men and women collectively reinforce the societal norms of a patriarchal system rather than being forced by men alone (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2024). Firstly, there is the superstition that women bring bad luck with their bodily fluids or their presence alone. It is a belief created and enforced by men in an effort to distinguish gendered spheres of labour and influence. Secondly, the act of kneeling in a man’s presence. The performative display aimed to feed male dominance requires female participation to complete. Thirdly, the institution of the *danna*, whereby mistakes or private passions of a geisha must be hidden. Women were controlled by the fear of losing status rather than direct punishment. However, the plot also revealed an active tolerance of Japanese society

towards *Mizuage*. The bidding war is an active event aimed to provide a compromise for maikos to make an income in exchange for their virginity, allowing them a sense of choice in the matter.

In *The Girl from the Coast*, the girl mainly practised passive tolerance alongside the women around her because she belonged to a lower-class background, mirroring some of the instances present in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. It revealed that women are often the ones who reinforce other women in the system through advice or reprimand due to implicit bias and reverse discrimination (Russen et al., 2025). Firstly is the berating she received from her own mother for her emotional display of crying. It shows that women were expected to suppress negative emotions to uphold the reputation of the man who owns them. Secondly, the lecture from another woman about religion. It shows a rigid belief in a religion that the man of the house practices without questioning the accuracy of the preachings. Thirdly, the reflection of the girl's relationship with her own body and space, where she felt that her actions needed to follow an unseen script. Women learnt to plan their actions through self-surveillance without the correction from an external factor, as they learnt to speak and move to an unspoken but rigid script. However, the plot also revealed an instance of active intolerance by the girl when she questioned the man's actions in an attempt to maintain a boundary, but was immediately shut down by another woman. An attempt was made to actively intolerate a man who was actively tolerated by others, who would police the behaviour of other women who did something out of the expected roles.

The difference between the two characters is the fact that Sayuri's compliance was an act of calculated conformity, aimed at utilising the system to her benefit. On the contrary, the girl from the coast tolerated the unjust societal expectations with quiet endurance to avoid trouble. By comparing and contrasting the two novels, a deduction can be made on the sad reality of women's lives in the past, and perhaps the present. Freedom is not absent for women, but rather rationed. The protagonists are not entirely powerless in the society they live in, but the autonomy they are allowed to exercise is dependent on their own willingness to conform or counter. In the case of Sayuri and the girl, they chose to passively tolerate the practices while manipulating them to their benefit. The survival strategies they employed were a contributing factor in preserving patriarchal systems rather than dismantling them. Hence, Marcuse's theory of Repressive Tolerance is evident in the societies in the plot, whereby the freedom permitted to women serves as a mechanism to pacify possible retaliation by providing an illusion of choice.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the researcher finds that the will-binding servitude experienced by the protagonists of *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *The Girl from the Coast* – Sayuri Nitta and the unnamed girl – can be characterised by the complex ambiguity of freedom. The protagonists' servitude reflects the ambiguity of freedom, shaped by internalised expectations, cultural practices and social structures in Japanese and Javanese cultures. Repressive Tolerance explains how superficial freedom masks continued oppression. Sayuri adapts through strategic manipulation, while the girl relies on silence and observation. Both demonstrate resilience within

constraints rather than resistance. Ultimately, the study reveals that female autonomy is systematically limited across cultures, reinforcing patriarchy while offering only the illusion of choice.

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