

ENGL 114 23 (The Racial Imaginary)

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Representasian: Should We Settle for *Miss Saigon*?

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It is hard to remember another musical that has generated as much controversy as *Miss Saigon*. Written in 1989 by French composers Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, *Miss Saigon* is a doomed love story between Kim, a Vietnamese bargirl, and Chris, an American GI, set during the Fall of Saigon and post-Vietnam War period. The musical is both beloved by those who view the musical as gloriously, tragically romantic and scorned by those who view the musical as outdated, racist, and sexist. However, with all of the negative commentary surrounding it, *Miss Saigon* is still overwhelmingly well-received both across America and internationally; it is the fifteenth highest grossing musical in the world (Harding). The musical's merits have been debated, and the issues surrounding it are complex. While *Miss Saigon* promotes, to an extent, Asian representation by giving the Asian acting community more roles and is a historically accurate story of the Vietnam War, the musical also perpetuates the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, as well as the "Lotus Flower" and "Dragon Lady" tropes, narratives that impose harmful derogatory stereotypes of hypersexuality and exotic otherness on Asian women.

### **The History Behind the *Madame Butterfly* Myth**

From the musical's inception, there was the presence of orientalist ideas about Asian women and the way they acted in relation to their husbands and children. As Maria Degabriele writes, the directors of the musical were inspired by a photograph of a Vietnamese mother sending her child to live with its ex-GI father it had never met (113). Schonberg was quoted saying that this mother had made "the most staggering example of the ultimate sacrifice" (Schonberg as qtd. in Pao 31). This idea of the "ultimate sacrifice" was first enshrined in

*Madame Butterfly*, an opera written in 1904 by Giacomo Puccini about the doomed love affair between an Asian woman and a white man. *Madame Butterfly* is problematic because it is the source of the “*Madame Butterfly* Myth,” which cements the opera’s plot, especially its ending, as a fact. The Asian woman waits years with her child for her white husband to return, but he only returns to take the child back to America to live with him and his new white wife. Because the Asian woman cannot live without her husband, she makes the “ultimate sacrifice” by agreeing to give her child to the man who used and left her, before committing suicide. Each new adaptation of this myth entrenches this single narrative about a weak and inferior Asia deeper into Western consciousness.

Since the romanticization and widespread circulation of this narrative hides its sexism and racism, the trope is easy to perpetuate since audiences view the plot as normal. The myth is racist since it implies that the life of this “tragic” Asian woman was worthless without a white man (Degabriele 113). Most egregiously, the myth is justification for the West’s colonization of the East. The myth “symbolically [resolves] colonial conflicts through the willing subjugation of the Asian female body associated with the conquest of the land” (Chung 62). The characterization of the Asian woman as dependent, submissive, and faithful to her white husband symbolically translates to characterizing all of Asia as feminine, and thus weaker and inferior to the masculine West. Since the Asian woman did not oppose being subordinate to her white husband, the myth implies that Asian people also did not oppose, and even welcomed, colonization efforts. Furthermore, the characterizations of the Asian woman reinforce white savior syndrome, the idea that the white man feels obligated to “save” this “helpless,” exotic creature, who is eager to learn and please him (Degabriele 111). “Salvation of the Asian-woman-as-victim by the Westerner can be seen as a disavowal of his complicity in her situation”

(Degabriele 111). By removing complicity, the West can continue with conquering the East without feeling guilty.

The birth of the *Madame Butterfly* Myth is unsurprising given Puccini's context as a white, Italian male writing an opera during a time where colonization was advocated for. The composer is part of a much larger historical trend in which the colonizer tells particular narratives of the people they are colonizing in order to maintain power. The *Madame Butterfly* Myth's current form is in *Miss Saigon*, and Boublil and Schonberg are repeating Puccini's mistake – they are Frenchmen, yet are telling the story of Vietnam, a French colony that only achieved independence after years of war. The musical's context within the war enables it to grapple with racism and sexism, yet for all the attempts to address these issues in its own story, it is clear from protests of the work that these issues are still present in theater and on stage.

### **The Problematic Original Casting of *Miss Saigon***

While the directors' intent was to “to tell this very real story [of the mother and her child] authentically,” the musical still ended up perpetuating historical tropes about Asian women, not because the directors wanted to reproduce a racist narrative, but because they genuinely did not realize how they were propagating these problematic ideas. The directors, “both admirers of Puccini, wrote *Miss Saigon* in an attempt to ‘modernize and rework’ *Madama Butterfly*” because they loved the opera, not because they wanted to reproduce the racist themes in their own musical (Chung 63). The two men viewed the opera as beautifully tragic, falling into the myth's trap by being unable to see why it was problematic. The two men did not comprehend “the circumstances [of colonialism] that put this Asian woman in such a predicament” (Degabriele 113). Boublil and Schonberg's inability to see the problem with reproducing the *Madame Butterfly* Myth is the root cause of all the controversy over the musical; by telling a story that

was not theirs, the directors were espousing one narrative of Asia that was inherently racist because of Western perception and subsequent colonization of the East.

The directors actively perpetuated oriental stereotypes in the process of casting the “perfect” Kim, a girl with “an ‘Asian voice that could sing Western music’” (*The Making of Miss Saigon* as qtd. in Chung 66). The team tasked with finding such a girl believed that an Eastern girl couldn’t sing Western music, unless brought up in “Western fashion.” In other words, East and West were incompatible, an idea supported by the *Madame Butterfly* Myth; the directors believed that only an Eastern girl could understand and portray Kim’s tragic and romantic ultimate sacrifice. Moreover, although the directors wanted very badly to tell the authentic story of a Vietnamese woman, “[no] differentiation was made among Asian, Asian American, or Vietnamese bodies” (Behr and Steyn as qtd. in Chung 66). All Asian people were viewed the same, bolstered by a myth that views the entire Asian continent (the “East”) as inferior. Instead, auditions were held in the Philippines, because Schonberg believed that Filipinos had “‘singing [...] in their blood’” (Behr as qtd. in Ty 18). He failed to notice the context of American imperialism that allowed Filipinos to be able to sing English music (Ty 18). The directors’ quest to the perfect girl to play the tragic heroine in their musical was rife with perpetuations of the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, because they espoused the belief of inherent differences between the incompatible East and West.

### **The Myth Within the Musical**

The *Madame Butterfly* Myth was perpetuated before the show began and is clearly present throughout the musical. The myth is part of a larger issue of categorizing Asian women into particular stereotypes; the Asian woman in *Madame Butterfly* is portrayed as docile and weak, but other texts portray Asian women as the opposite: sexually voracious and evil.

According to Sheridan Prasso's book *The Asian Mystique*, Asian women either are categorized as the "Lotus Flower" or "Dragon Lady" (87). While these labels were primarily used to classify East Asian women, they have since become applicable to all Asian women who are "often viewed as homogeneous" (Patel 118). Historical Western perception of the East made little to no difference between distinct Asian ethnicities, and instead perpetuated the single *Madame Butterfly* Myth or the opposing "Dragon Lady" stereotype on all Asian women. In *Miss Saigon*, all the Vietnamese women fit into a category: Kim is the archetypal "Lotus Flower," and the rest of the bargirls are portrayed as "Dragon Ladies" (Prasso 87).

These tropes are more accurately explained by the term "racialized sexism, the racial dynamics that coexist and intersect with gendered experiences for women of color" (Patel 117). The competing stereotypes of Kim versus the other bargirls upholds the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, which emphasizes submissiveness as a positive trait and dominance as a threatening trait in Asian women. The directors deliberately juxtaposed Kim with the other girls because she is the main character of a show based on the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, which means her honorable, noble qualities (necessary attributes for her later suicide) must be set in front of a backdrop of vice, shame, and other immoral acts. Kim's opposition to the others further implies that Asian girls should be demure and beautiful, rather than sexually voracious and manipulative. Kim is "good"; the other girls are "bad."

Hence, Kim's contrast is emphasized wherever there are other prostitutes present. She is younger and more innocent than everyone else. She is dressed in a traditional Vietnamese *ao dai*; her conservative clothes starkly contrast all the flesh on stage. Her voice is a higher register and her voice is pure and clear. She sings quietly. Her lyrics are idealistic: "I'm seventeen and I'm new here today/The village I come from seems so far away/All of these girls here know much

more what to say/But I know/I'm so much more than you see/A million dreams are in me." Kim is a delicate flower who only turns to prostituting herself because she has no other options. Meanwhile, Gigi, a veteran prostitute, walks around in lingerie, gyrating her hips. She sings in a low, sultry voice, "If I'm your pin-up, I'll melt all your brass/Stuck on your ball with a pin in my ass/If you get me you will travel first class/I'll show you, we will make magic, *cheri*." The implication is that Gigi has degraded herself because she actually enjoys having this sinful job, whereas Kim has retained her pureness because she was forced into sex work. Kim's "Lotus Blossom" trope endears her to the audience while Gigi as the "Dragon Lady" is feared and loathed. In showing the two opposing stereotypes, the musical implies that there is a right and wrong way to act as an Asian woman.

Kim's "ultimate sacrifice" is the subject of a debate: does her suicide fulfill the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, or does it resist it because it can be seen as an act of strength? At the surface level, Kim seems to be the weakest character; being demure and soft-spoken being the myth's tragic Asian woman. Critics have asserted that Kim kills herself because "living in America isn't an option [...] being dead is better than being Vietnamese" (Tran). Kim's suicide does fulfill the requirements of being the tragic Asian female lead; her rationale behind the action does not. She does not kill herself because she wants to go to America with Chris, or because she views her life as worthless without him. She kills herself to force Chris to take their son to America. The reason behind this act both subverts the myth because only if Tam has no mother will Chris be obligated to care for his child. Chris did not come back to Vietnam with the intention of taking Tam back to America, but rather to see if Tam was actually his child. Kim says, "I alone can tell now what the end will be/They think they decide your life/No, it will be me." Her suicide for Tam is indeed the *Madame Butterfly* Myth's "ultimate sacrifice" since she killed herself for to

see her dream for her child realized, but this is her final act of strength. Her suicide subverts the myth's idea of a weak, worthless Asian woman because she did not kill herself out of despair or worthlessness – it was a deliberate action. The myth is also subverted because Kim's reasoning to commit suicide is a clear departure from other tragic heroines – she knows that her death is the only way for her son's life to be better; Madame Butterfly killed herself because she viewed life as not worth living without her husband and child.

### **A Historically Valid Story Driven by Stereotypes**

Defendants of the musical point out that the story of the Vietnamese prostitute and the American GI was prevalent during the war, and claim that the work is simply portraying a real life story rather than casting Asian women in a racist light. While relationships like Kim and Chris's indeed happened in real life, it does not mean racialized sexism is legitimated; in fact, racialized sexism most likely drove the use of prostitutes. Saigon's wartime sex industry was built around and driven by the presence of American soldiers (Gustafsson 312). Furthermore, “the quintessential image capturing the essence of wartime Saigon is that of the bargirl: the young Vietnamese woman dressed to maximum effect in halter and mini skirt, hawking her wares” (308). Vietnamese prostitutes were used so much that, at the height of the war, there were 400,000 of them in South Vietnam alone, “almost one for every GI” (Gay 34). Defendants of *Miss Saigon* who cite the historical validity of the plotline to justify or excuse the racism perpetuated fail to notice how this racism fed into the extremely misogynistic wartime sex industry that affected real people's lives.

The tropes of the “Lotus Flower” and “Dragon Lady” did not just spring into existence because of the musical; these were stereotypes that were used in the war. “A common image in G.I. folklore was that of the sexually alluring yet dangerous Vietnamese woman, whose danger

was precisely her sexuality” (Stur 40). Almost all GIs viewed Vietnamese women as these “Dragon Ladies” who wanted to use the soldiers either as a ticket out of Saigon or for information to give to the other side. Yet it was thrilling to sleep with and “conquer” such exotic and “threatening” women. Just like the *Madame Butterfly* Myth justified the colonialization of Asia by depicting the Asian woman as weak, GIs used the presence of the evil and manipulative “Dragon Ladies” to justify intervening in Vietnam to save the country from these evil women.

The problem with the musical is not that it is untrue, or that it was deliberately written to cast Asian women in an inferior light. The problem with the musical is that the historical context of racialized sexism during the Vietnam War causes these stereotypes to surface in the musical, and thus reinforce themselves in real life through the subconsciousness of audiences who most likely do not understand how these narratives are harmful. Only someone who is conscious of these stereotypes will be able to see how the musical continues to perpetuate stereotypes of Asian women. The *Madame Butterfly* Myth and the tropes about the “Lotus Flower” and “Dragon Lady” have “dominated popular culture for 25 years” (Combs). The existence of these stereotypes in turn drive history, because the presence of the *Madame Butterfly* Myth justified Western colonization of Asia. As *Miss Saigon* is the one of the most popular and well-known stories about Asians in the entertainment industry and theater, the work becomes a problem because instead of refuting stereotypes the Asian community deals with on a daily basis, the musical continues to recycle them.

### **Authentic Representasian?**

The issues that surround the musical are complicated – on the one hand, the stereotypes perpetuated are rooted in, reinforced by, and drive history; on the other hand, the musical continues to perpetuate these narratives instead of resisting them. The musical ironically gives



Asian actors more opportunities on stage, to play leads that are written for Asian people, yet at the same time makes, in taking on the roles, these Asian actors end up being the agents of their own oppression. “[What] kinds of jobs are these? Playing stereotypes [...] whitewashing, yellowface, and the white-savior narrative are still huge problems for Asian-American actors and audiences. And if there is no *Miss Saigon* or *King and I* on Broadway, Asian-American actors rarely get cast as leads, or at all” (Tran). It should be noted that for some actors and their communities, playing the stereotype in such a famous musical is itself empowering (never mind authentic roles) because the chance to see an Asian person that visible on such a large scale is rare. On the other hand, if Asian actors continue to vie for these few spots, then they start to legitimate these stereotypes, because they are willingly competing for the stereotypical role.

Yet if Asian actors protest the perpetuation of the single Asian narrative by refusing to audition for stereotypical roles, they risk being overlooked for a white actor and not having a job, as well as not having as much as an influence on the issues of Asian representation as they may have in *Miss Saigon*. This musical gives actors a wide-reaching platform to be assertive and vocal, resisting the stereotype of a “quiet Asian.” Broderick Chow, who has played the role of Thuy in Canadian productions of *Miss Saigon*, writes that “the theatre itself offers modes of resistance to the dominant ideology even as it attempts to construct it” (512). By being in a role that has the ability to wield power and influence over the promotion of certain tropes, Asian actors feel as if they are able to reclaim their narrative to tell it the way they want to tell it. They are in charge with how their character acts; for example, instead of portraying Kim as an innocent girl who cannot live without Chris, the actress can show Kim’s strength in the way she resists Thuy and delivers her final words before killing herself, thus disproving the “Lotus Blossom” trope.

While casting has gotten better since the original casting of *Miss Saigon*, there are still issues present. “Asian Americans are still fighting an industry that would rather cast white actors to play us and would rather we play sidekicks and prostitutes” (Tran). According to The Asian American Performers Action Coalition, 7.3% of the actors on New York stages in the 2016-2017 season were Asian; the percentage drops to 6.7% for Asian actors on Broadway stages (Asian). The lack of Asian representation means that Asian actors still have very few chances to tell another narrative that refutes the stereotype. Moreover, Filipino actors are still predominately cast, a legacy of Boubil and Schonberg’s search for “Eastern” people who could sing “Western” music, and a testament to the West’s imperial adventures in the Philippines (Chung 66). To date, a Vietnamese person has yet to be cast as in the roles of Kim, the Engineer, or Thuy in major productions of the musical. When considered that Vietnamese Americans “are the sixth-largest immigrant group in America,” this exclusion is made all the more frustrating (Tran). *Miss Saigon* is about Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War, yet they have no say in their own story.

Asian actors are stuck in a difficult position, and the only solution is to have better roles that Asian actors can fill. There need to be more opportunities for Asian directors to write plays and musicals that cast Asian actors in roles that don’t perpetuate stereotypes against Asians. *Miss Saigon* was written by white male directors who come from a country with a long history of colonization; the problems in the musical exist because these men did not demonstrate understanding of the stereotypes they perpetuated. Yet “however grating its stereotypes, *Miss Saigon* was, for too long, one of the few representations of Asians at all on the American stage” (Yu). When Asian actors are casted, their voices become amplified and they have access to more jobs, enabling them to further break down the color barrier. The issue is that these actors have to be cast to make their break, and right now, only a handful have been lucky enough to do that.

Asians are still the least represented in theater, yet a musical about them remains one of the most popular shows of all time. As Viet Thanh Nguyen, author of *The Sympathizer*, writes, “Perhaps those of us who detest the musical would not be so upset if there were other stories about Asians or Vietnamese people that showed their diversity” (Nguyen). Representation is not achieved by one musical that stars an Asian female and an Asian male lead. The result of having one story being told and retold for decades is the perpetuation of single stories like the *Madame Butterfly* Myth, harmful narratives that have over time become socially accepted because no one is stopping it from repeating itself. Preventing people from telling their own story fosters intolerance and discrimination. Asian people are tired of being the doomed lover, the sexually voracious prostitute, the evil sidekick. It is long overdue for the Asian community to reclaim and rewrite their own narrative, change the entertainment industry’s stereotyping of Asian people, and push for more representative work of, by, and starring all kinds of Asian actors.

This is finally the hour for accurate and authentic representation.

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