

A World That's So Different From All That You Are: Miss Saigon and Orientalism

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Gender, Ethnicity and Cultural Critique

Introduction

Only a grainy picture of a Vietnamese woman being taken away from her child and Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* (1904) were needed to create a musical that would become a world phenomenon: *Miss Saigon* (1989), a critically acclaimed success written by Alain Boubil and composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg, tells the story of the Vietnamese woman Kim who falls in love with American sergeant Chris during the last days of the Vietnam war. They lose each other when the Vietcong attacks Saigon, and Kim tries to survive with her new-born son for three years, waiting for Chris to come back. The musical has its history of the criticism, which includes a point made by Western-Asian women¹ during the premiere. which focussed on the portrayal of Kim as a weak and suffering Vietnamese woman.

Miss Saigon had a rerun in 2014 (West End). While the story has not changed from the original, the interpretation of the role of Kim as a Vietnamese woman has changed. This paper will focus on this re-interpretation of Kim in 2014 played by Eva Noblezana, comparing it with the performance of the original Kim in 1989 played by Lea Salonga answering the question "How is the re-interpretation of *Miss Saigon*'s main character Kim connected to Western interpretation of Orientalism of the 21st century?". This paper will give insights on how Western proclaimed progressive art still portrays an Orientalist view, therefore wrongfully generalise non-Western cultures. Lyrics, performance, and music will be analysed to answer this question. The concepts that will be discussed regarding this analysis will be intersectionality, Orientalism, and representation.

¹ Tsu-I Chung, "The Transnational Vision of Miss Saigon: Performing the Orient in a Globalized World," MELUS 36, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 61-89. https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/stable/23048513?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents

Concepts

First, there will be a brief introduction of the concepts that will be discussed within this critical analysis. Intersectionality is an analytical tool which focusses on different axes that intersect and have influence on the oppression a certain person might experience.² In case of this paper, intersectional analysis will focus on Kim as a woman and Kim as a Vietnamese person.

Orientalism is a term defined by Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) as a concept to critically describe the Western generalised portrayal of the East or the Orient.³ This includes Vietnam, which interpretation is rooted in the France colony era. Yet, this was forty years ago, and the criticism on Orientalist views has changed the idea of Orientalism in the 21st century. Yoshiko Nozaki explains how this neo-Orientalism in Western media has become more educated compared to Said's Orientalism, but is still criticised on the remaining stereotypes of the Orient, which will be discussed later on.⁴

The explanation of representation in media can be divided in two sub-concepts: representation and re-presentation. Representation discusses the people who are 'speaking for', e.g. the production team behind a film, while re-presentation is about the actual aesthetic portrayal, so the artwork itself.⁵ In this paper, re-presentation will be discussed more in depth.

The Music in Kim: Orchestration and Melody

As music is a pivotal component in musical theatre to emphasize certain points in the narrative, we will first analyse Kim's character portrayed in the music. To start with the orchestration and tonality, *Miss Saigon* has an overall Western symphonic character. There are certain moments around Kim where there is use of Asian instruments, such as the Vietnamese Dan Tranh (Strings) and the Chinese Dizi (Bamboo flute), and the pentatonic scale.⁶ The entire music department is of Western descent, and there is no evidence found that

² Gloria Wekker, "The arena of borders: Gloria Anzaldúa, intersectionality and interdisciplinarity," in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture: A Comprehensive Guide to Gender Studies*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate and Kathrin Thiele (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 72-74.

³ Sandra Ponzanesi, "The arena of the colony: Phoolan Devi and postcolonial critique," in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture: A Comprehensive Guide to Gender Studies*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema, Liedeke Plate and Kathrin Thiele (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 97-98.

⁴ Yoshiko Nozaki, "Critical Teaching about Asia: Orientalism, Postcolonial Perspectives and Cross-cultural Education," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 30, no. 2 (2009): 141-155.

⁵ Ponzanesi, "The arena of the colony," 100.

⁶ Found in Miss Saigon 2014 full score partiture: "This Money's Yours" and "Thuy's Death".

<https://onedrive.live.com/?authkey=%21ACYz1ub60C39kh0&cid=1B7A5449366FE0C3&id=1B7A5449366FE0C3%2112547&parId=1B7A5449366FE0C3%2149552&o=OneUp>

research is done on these specific instruments and their Organology.⁷ While both the pentatonic scale and the Dan Tranh have a connection to nature in Vietnamese culture,⁸ they are solely used to give Kim an exotic sound, as the targeted Western audience would only receive that message with the use of Asian instruments. There are no certain themes conveyed by the usage of Asian instruments, so the generalisation of the image of the Vietnamese culture is found in the uneducated use of orchestration.

As for Western conventions in musical components, there are certain characteristics of Kim emphasised in the orchestration and melody. What is notable when observing the orchestration around Kim's character, her parts are supported by mainly woodwinds, more specifically the flute, oboe and clarinet. As musical theatre has taken its conventions from Romantic era opera,⁹ it is easy to guess what the use of the woodwinds convey: feminine characterisation and softness.¹⁰ In contrast to the brass family functioning as the sound of Vietnamese military and war, the woodwinds create a soft character of Kim as a spark of innocence in the tragic scenery. The wind instruments are again supported by the exotic sound of the Dizi solos. In terms of melody, Kim's voice ranges from E3 to D5,¹¹ and so does Kim's parts explore both her suffering from War (*This Money's Yours*), and her literal high hopes and longing for her American G.I. (*Reprise Sun and Moon*). This, together with the orchestration (Western and Asian), goes hand in hand with the description of Orientalism in Western art on Asian Women by John Kleinen: "... to be ruled and whose female needs to be protected from the Asian".¹² This can also be described as the European or White Male's Fantasy: the image of an Orient woman who wants to be saved by a Western male.¹³ Whether or not the Asian orchestration functioned to convey certain themes, it is lost under the Western conventions that put Kim into this stereo-typical representation of a tragic and

⁷ Organology is the science of classifying musical instruments. This includes the history of musical instruments and their cultural value.

⁸ "Let's talk about the Vietnamese Dan Tranh (Zither) Ep. 1," video file, 8:39, YouTube, posted by Tri Nguyen, February 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z4LLfviaR4>

⁹ Millie Taylor and Roberta Montemorra Marvin, "Musical Characterisation in *HMS Pinafore* and *The Rocky Horror Show*," in *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* (Farnham, England: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 17-19. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/reader.action?docID=806868>

¹⁰ Rachel Becker, "'That has a gender? Of course it does.' Rachel Becker on Instruments and Gender," last modified 2019, posted on MinervaFestival.org, post, <https://www.minervafestival.org/post/rachel-becker-on-instruments-and-gender>

¹¹ Found in *Miss Saigon 2014* full score partiture.

<https://onedrive.live.com/?authkey=%21ACYz1ub60C39kh0&cid=1B7A5449366FE0C3&id=1B7A5449366FE0C3%2112547&parId=1B7A5449366FE0C3%2149552&o=OneUp>

¹² John Kleinen, "Framing "the Other". A critical review of Vietnam war movies and their representation of Asians and Vietnamese," *Asia Europe Journal*, no. 1 (2003): 433-451.

file:///C:/Users/nikki/Downloads/Kleinen2003_Article_FramingTheOtherACriticalReview.pdf

¹³ Ponzanesi, "The arena of the colony," 98.

suffering Asian woman.

The words of Kim: Lyrics

The concept of *Miss Saigon* was written by Alain Boublil, who happens to be the original French librettist of the musical. He worked together with Richard Maltby Jr. on what would be the original lyrics and the lyrics of the revival of *Miss Saigon*. As decades have passed since the premiere, lyrics have been changed to re-invent the musical for the revival.¹⁴ In the following paragraph, the lyrics of the 2014 partitures that involve Kim will be analysed.

The general mood of Kim's lyrics can be categorised in four themes: determination, suffering, longing, and innocence. They are all connected to and influence one another, but what is interesting to point out is that especially suffering, innocence, and longing are also found in the music, more so than determination. This may have to do with the fact that there has been put more emphasis on determination in the revival, and to not disrupt the unity of music, lyrics were changed to focus on this theme. The themes innocence and hopeless longing were for example found in the song *Please*, in which Kim is told that her request for an immigration permit for her and her son is answered. These themes were changed to determination in 2014. The verse "Please, don't you see that's all I live for. I have him, and nothing more. Every night, everything that's not him, disappears behind my door." was changed to "Yes, tell me everything I beg you. How I've longed for this to start. All my prayers are finally answered. This is too much for one heart." This new lyrics refers back Kim's determination that was shown previously in *I'd Give My Life For You*, rather than speaking of her life revolved around Chris, as he is not directly mentioned here. Although this is a small change, and there are enough songs that still evolve around Kim's innocence (From Bar 89 in *Heat is On in Saigon*) and longing (*I still Believe* and *Thuy's Death*), it shows that the criticism that the first version got regarding the representation of the Vietnamese woman as a suffering woman who longs for a white male to save her, has been taken into account. This progress in Western interpretation through re-inventing, yet having still the underlay of Orientalism, is exactly what neo-Orientalism can be described as. The woman axis has gotten more depth; beside the point that Kim loves Chris and longs for him, she is now showing her strength as a mother to save her son, but her representation of a Vietnamese person to progress completely past longing has failed.

¹⁴ "An interview with Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil," video file, 21:33, YouTube, posted by WhatsOnStage, May 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpt0bYi9iYI>

The Performing Kim: Eva Noblezana's interpretation

What might have been the greatest change in the revival production is the re-interpretation of Kim by Eva Noblezana. As Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg stated, the 2014 production would be a re-invention. Beside the change in lyrics that lay emphasis on other themes compared to the original production, it was also Noblezana's performance that helped shaking the Orientalist representation of Vietnamese women. To explain this re-interpretation, we will solely look at Noblezana's overall voice techniques that convey a certain character. This will be compared to Lea Salonga's performance in the original production.

The changes can again be categorised in certain uses of technique, which are colour of voice, use of vibrato, and rubato. As with instruments and orchestration, the voice can be used to bring out specific tone to fit the narrative. The CTV singing theory brings these tones to four general 'modes': Neutral, Curbing, Overdrive, and Edge.¹⁵ These modes have everything to do with colour of voice, whereas Neutral is gentle and mellow (Jazz), Curbing has a sharper edge, Overdrive is often associated with shout-singing, and Edge is used to hit belting high notes. The differences in modes that Noblezana and Salonga use are clear: Noblezana experiments with using Curbing to bring out a character that is angered and confident about her actions, while Salonga sticks to Neutral and creates this innocence and softness that we have known to be connected with Orientalism. This can for instance be heard in *Thuy's Death*,¹⁶ where Noblezana even uses Overdrive to come across as determined to protect her son, but Salonga keeps the hopeful soft tone until her son is in real danger. Although Noblezana also has moments where she uses Neutral to convey her innocence (*Sun and Moon*), she brings depth in her character by switching between the different modes.

Determination is brought out even further with the steadier use of vibrato. The vibrato is often used to support the voice on held notes and bring emotion to the sound by creating semi-tone intervals periodically.¹⁷ Both Noblezana and Salonga use vibrato, however, there is a difference in excessiveness that either supports or creates a whole character with vibrato. As with the performances of *I'd Give My Life for You*,¹⁸ Noblezana touches certain notes with

¹⁵ Cathrine Sadolin, "Vocal Modes," in *Complete Vocal Technique* (Copenhagen, Shout Publishing: 2000), 74-112.

¹⁶ Lea Salonga's performance: "Miss Saigon – Thuy's Death /You Will Not Touch Him," video file, 3:37, YouTube, posted by Elina_Chrys, July 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlvhRE_FELs

¹⁷ Renee Timmers and Peter Desain, "Vibrato: Questions and Answers From Musicians and Science," in *Proceedings of the sixth ICMPC* (Nijmegen: 2000). <https://cf.hum.uva.nl/mmm/papers/mmm-35/mmm-35.pdf>

¹⁸ Lea Salonga's performance: "Lea Salonga – I'd Give My Life for You (Miss Saigon in Manila)," video file, 5:11, YouTube, posted by LSFP, December 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwB3Zxh2gSE>

vibrato where it is needed to put emphasis on emotion, and Salonga uses it with most of her notes. Her vibrato creates a shaky voice, which conveys an image of a fragile character. This use of vibrato is what she has done with the role of Éponine in *Les Misérables* as well to create a fragile character.

At last, Noblezana creates a confident character with her use of rubato, meaning that her tempo is interpreted freely while she sings. Salonga's performances are more loyal to the score, keeping rhythm and tempo cleaner, which again implies her pure innocence. This difference is also noted in *I'd Give My Life for You*, where Noblezana makes great use of rubato, literally rebelling against the score. This changes her character from a follower to a more confident woman.

Conclusion

To conclude, the answer to the question "How is the re-interpretation of *Miss Saigon*'s main character Kim connected to Western interpretation of Orientalism of the 21st century?" is found in the three components that were analysed. The image that 21st century Orientalism in art has is a newly, more educated form of Said's Orientalism, that tries to avoid stereotypes and criticise previous researches on the Orient. However, it also has difficulty to let go of generalisations and often fails to see the problematic images that it conveys. The 2014 production of *Miss Saigon*'s Kim is clearly showing these two observations of neo-Orientalism. First, since the history of criticism on the original production was partly about Kim's Orientalist portrayal of a Vietnamese woman, the production team has re-invented the musical by changing the lyrics and letting Eva Noblezana re-interpret Kim's character. This meant putting more emphasis on the determination rather than the longing in Kim's character, which was helped by changing some lyrics. Noblezana's performance focussed on this characteristic as well by using sharper colours of voice, thus creating depth in her character, and by freeing her melody from the score and bringing out a more confident character than the original production has portrayed. Yet, the music, and thus the core of Kim's story remains unchanged, not only using Vietnamese instrumentation as a general representation of the Vietnamese culture, but also using Western musical conventions that force Kim's character into this Orientalist view on Asian women, which is mainly longing, exotic, and suffering. This White Male's Fantasy is deeply sated in the character of Kim, as the production has only tried to deepen Kim's portrayal as a woman, yet failed to strengthen the educated representation of Kim as a Vietnamese person. While *Miss Saigon* has changed in many ways, the core of Kim has yet to be re-invented.

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