Re-presenting Giacomo Puccini’s ‘Vision of the Orient’ in Madama Butterfly

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Abstract
The rising interest in interdisciplinary studies in English Literature departments has brought Opera into the ambit of literature study, and forces one to reassess the usage of literary terms and theory. Giacomo Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, an opera that was first performed in 1904, is a representation of the Orient-Occident relationship. While superficially simplistic, the depiction of this cultural binary is multi-layered and intriguing as a performative form of visual and written texts. This paper is an attempt to analyse the nuances of operatic presentation and its relevance as a socio-cultural text.

Giacomo Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, a remarkable opera in the repertoire of verismo operas, resurrects the discourse of ‘Orientalism’ by means of an intricate linguistic and musical fusion. Music “delivers larger-than-life representations of emotions” (McClary 24) along with a memorable delineation of characters. It creates an adequate atmosphere for the tragedy to unravel and in its course foreshadows the culmination of the cultural encounter. The attitude of Western superiority over the East, through the ‘Butterfly’ trope, has been moulded and re-fashioned in multifarious ways by Pierre Loti, John Luther Long, David Balesco, and David Henry Hwang in their works. The essay strives to analyse how in Madama Butterfly the cultural encounter, through a musical dramatization, entails both the personal and the cultural conflict widening the scope of the opera’s development and interpretation.

It was the beginning of the twentieth century when Giacomo Puccini’s venture with Madama Butterfly’s tale unfurled on the opera stage in front of the audience. Opera at the turn of the century was a widely popular genre in the West. Hence, Puccini’s iconic attempt to choose Japan as his interest certainly is a comment on the socio-cultural element that gradually brought ‘Japan’ to the literary sphere of the European subcontinent.

One cannot think much of ‘Japan’ at such a juncture in the history of English literature. However, Earl Miner, erstwhile professor of Princeton University and a noted scholar of Japanese literature (especially Japanese poetry), identifies the increasing European interest in Japan after its victory in Russo-Japanese War of 1904. Japan was gradually becoming a ‘world’ power. According to Miner, “new understanding of Japan was growing . . . in France and England, among painters and poets, and it was becoming reasonably easy for a poet like Oscar Wilde to adapt the Impressionistic pictorial art, taken in

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part from the Japanese block print” (43). Thus, Japan was influencing wider genres of life in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.

Japan was rather that influence which manifested itself in a variety of extremes. Where Japan bore its footprint on the ‘impressionistic’ pictorial art, it was also the ridiculed East with its exoticism transcending the European logic. The knowledge of Japan was spread through pseudo- Japanese plays of the time. Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert’s Mikado, for instance, “guaranteed a large progeny and a continuance of the Japanese vogue” (Miner 57). Miner also points out to the fact that to the “playgoers of the time, Gilbert’s satire was interesting both for itself and for its pleasing distortions of the popular image of Japan” (56). Japan was thus becoming a celebration of the ‘other’ for the audience too.

The opera though set in Japan, is sung in Italian, and initially was performed by the Italian performers. Thus, the composition and performance of the opera itself becomes an interesting confluence of cultures which is perhaps ironically emblematic of its defining theme of cultural conflict.

Being a part of Puccini’s verismo technique, Madama Butterfly’s thematic composition can be traced back to ‘Japonisme’ -a term referring to the new Occidental fascination for Japan at the end of nineteenth century. Though at that time American markets were flooded with Japanese goods, the inherent failure of the encounter between the East and the West was reflected in the existence of ‘temporary wives’ in Japan. Puccini in Madama Butterfly merges fact and fiction to portray the relationship between America and Japan- B.F. Pinkerton and Cio- Cio San. Cio-Cio San “remains the finest versions of the theme of desertion . . . there is a truly tragic quality latent in Butterfly'd dilemma” (Miner 59). As a play, although Madame Butterfly (David Belasco) might seem to be a melodrama, it is transformed by Puccini though his tender music and implementation of the theme in the operatic technique.

Characters in the opera are defined by consistent use of music. Sustained repetition of musical ideas highlights the traits of a particular character with simultaneously intensifying emotions. The gap between the two cultures is magnified by the musical delineation of two conflictual characters. The proud, imperial, light-hearted, typical Western ‘Yankee vagabond’ B.F. Pinkerton is drawn against the passionate, delicate, dainty, submissive, childish Oriental female Madama Butterfly.

The exotic setting of the opera is designed by a delicate web of melodic contours. The dramatic introduction of characters by Goro is done by clapping hands and sliding the doors which gives the entire act a magical tinge. Puccini also uses the melody of Japanese folk song ‘Sakura’ when Butterfly shows her treasured possessions to Pinkerton. The pentatonic scales evoke the sound of folk tune at Butterfly’s wedding, repeated crashes of gong herald the dramatic entry of the Bonze followed by the condemnation of Butterfly’s marriage, Suzuki’s prayers too bear the quality of an eastern chant. Such delicate and organic mingling of music and drama is beheld in Puccini’s Turandot too. The penetration of the West into this Eastern atmosphere is implicated by Pinkerton’s act of poking a hole in the ‘magical’, fragile Japanese ‘doll’s house’. The ironic repetition of this act, in a
dramatically elevated form, is noticeable at the end of Herbert von Karajan's conduction of the opera. Pinkerton breaks through the house after Butterfly's suicide with a sense of realization which marks his departure from the world of the Orient.

The differences between Butterfly and Pinkerton continuously mount up heightening the cathartic effect of the tragedy. The implicit incompatibility between the characters vis-à-vis the two cultures is implied in the metaphoric presence of thresholds- that between the inside and the outside, the natural and the artificial. Thresholds work in terms of ideology too, as in marriage- Butterfly's seriousness is opposed to Pinkerton's 'easy-going philosophy'.

The opera, from the very outset, builds both implicitly and explicitly the detachment of the two cultures in various ways. Initially the kinaesthetic aspect in the entrance of Pinkerton and Butterfly establishes the sense of contradiction remarkably drawing the audience into the operatic space. Butterfly's slow entrance is accompanied by slight music, limited use of instruments, and a solo voice which ultimately leads to a complete involvement of the orchestra. The gradual rise of music provides an aural impression of a butterfly gradually succeeding, from its infantile stage, to take a flight. Throughout the opera, music carves out Cio-Cio San's plight as “a delicate, fragile fantasy that could be found only in European-made Butterfly” (Kim). A similar animalistic image is evoked optically, in Karajang's conduction of the opera, when Butterfly's relatives gather with their fluttering fans before her wedding. The ‘Butterfly’ hence becomes a symbolic gesture of identifying the Orient. On the contrary, Pinkerton’s entrance with the music is more dynamic. His opening aria is built on the notes of 'The Star Spangled Banner', which delineates his character, evoking not only patriotic emotions related to the American national anthem but also a clarity and forthrightness far removed from Butterfly’s personal emotions. The two opposing movements, Butterfly's slow and steady movement and Pinkerton’s dynamism, becomes a defining characteristic of both their characters and the tragedy born out of such disharmony.

On one hand the West treats the Orient on the basis of its ‘easy going philosophy’ but on the other hand the Orient in succumbing to the Western domination becomes an imitation of the West. Butterfly mimics the West by renouncing her religion and dressing ‘like’ an American lady. She becomes an “icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look” (Mulvey 2188). The audience encounters the diminutive position of the Orient (Butterfly) through the overpowering ‘male gaze’ of the West (Pinkerton).

In the gradual development of the plot there is a revelation of its dual gyre-like movement as there is both the meeting and separation of the two lovers representing the East and the West. The famous aria, ‘Un bel di’ (‘One Beautiful Day’) shows Butterfly's simplicity, ignorance as she broods about her imagined future but this arises from an implicit sense of fear of separation. Later too, the pace of music in ‘Or Vienmi ad adornar’ (‘Now come to adorn me’) conveys Butterfly's mixed feelings of love and separations when she dresses as a bride to meet Pinkerton after years.
The concluding Act presents the ultimate blow to the relation between the two cultures. The climax of the tragedy is effectively built by eliminating any detailed conversation between Kate and Butterfly, which is much detailed in Balesco’s *Madame Butterfly*. Butterfly’s suicide aria is a clear and bold form of self-expression which gives her character the dignity and respect as an individual, as an ‘Other’ who defines the West through her “contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 2).

*Madama Butterfly*, in dealing with the “worldwide hegemony of Orientalism” (Said 328) discloses the stylistic eclecticism born out of a synchronized interplay between Puccini’s music and Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica’s libretto. Alongside this, it is important to notice how re-presentations of *Butterfly* by the Japanese authors told a story of their vision of their nation and people. The “Japanese Butterfly was . . . much more than a Japanese female singer . . . [it] was also a performance of the Japanese nation-state as a modern civilized peer of the Western powers . . .” (976). Though multiplicity in ‘performances’ helps us to go beyond the understanding of the Orient and the Occident as ‘simplistic binaries’, ‘essentialisation’ of narratives and ‘classics’ to some extent overtly emphasizes only the ‘chosen one’ as the canonical-the ‘classic’, which if not the centre of all discussions, becomes the concentrated point of departure and re-visitations for the modern reader.

**Works Cited**


