

Miss Saigon: The Asian Experience in the Perspective of the White Man
Stacey Jung

Abstract

Stuart Hall defines stereotyping as a way in which mediamakers separate and exclude groups of people, a hegemonic practice that works to maintain a social order (Hall, 1997). The producers and writers of the musical film *Miss Saigon* aim to show a tragic love story between a Vietnamese woman and a white GI soldier during the Vietnam War; however, the mediamaker's narrow perspective on the war causes the musical to feel limited in showing and understanding various experiences of Asian immigration. While mediamakers believe that *Miss Saigon* encourages Asian representation, by framing the immigrant experience through the perspective of white male producers, the musical film depicts Asians as exotic and inferior and creates lasting stereotypes. This form of "othering" creates and maintains fixed differences between the "insiders" and "outsiders" as the experiences of minorities are told by people in positions of power.

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Mediamakers as a part of the creative process believe that the musical does encapsulate a true experience during the Vietnam War; however, many Vietnamese Americans continuously protest against the show and its stereotypes. Lea Salonga, the actress who starred as the role of Kim in the original debut of the show in 1989, responded to the controversial nature of the show in an interview. She believes that the musical is not necessarily an inaccurate portrayal of Asian relationships with GI soldiers based on her own observations when she was growing up in the

Philippines. She claims that as long as there are other media texts that show Asian experiences, the musical is not problematic but is rather another text that shows one story (Lengel, 2017).

However, Diep Tran, a Vietnamese American viewer, responded to the musical by claiming that it portrayed Vietnamese people as victims rather than survivors and failed to accurately portray her parent's story as Vietnamese immigrants as well as the nuanced experiences of the people she grew up with (Tran, 2017). In an email she received from Viet Thanh Nguyen, writer of the book *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen wrote:

“I thought it was terrible, fulfilling every Orientalist trope that I had studied and was opposed to. The cross-racial casting issues aside, it fits perfectly into the way that Americans, and Europeans, have imagined the Vietnam War as a racial and sexual fantasy that negates the war's political significance and Vietnamese subjectivity and agency.”

Viet Thanh Nguyen continues Tran's sentiment on the musical through his own opinion piece about his experience during a recent showing in Los Angeles. He warns that the musical idealizes the white man as the benevolent hero who “saves” a child by taking him to the U.S. (Nguyen, 2019). Despite the overall positive responses the musical elicits, both Tran and Nguyen protest against the musical due to the stereotypes that are present throughout the narrative.

Because of the producers' narrow scope about the experiences of Vietnamese people, the way in which the musical portrays Vietnamese folk enables the stereotypes of Asian exoticism and inferiority to Westerners. Claude-Michel Schonberg, the composer for the musical, mentions in the original program that his inspiration for the work came from a magazine photograph that depicts a Vietnamese mother being separated from her child as the GI father takes the child to America. Schonberg then proceeds to describe his feelings towards the sacrifice made by the

mother in the photograph, a glamorized snapshot of the trauma that Vietnamese people experienced during the war. He lacks the understanding of the woman's identity and experience and instead creates a musical from his own perception of a single photograph without considering the varied nuances and circumstances of the woman's position (Degabriele, 2005). These privileged perceptions of Vietnamese people initiate the labels of "exotic" and "inferior," which is shown from the content and caricatures in the musical. Examples of the exoticism are embedded in the lyrics themselves. During a scene between Chris, the white GI soldier, and Kim, the Vietnamese woman, Chris tells Kim how different his life is from hers: "You are here like a mystery // I'm from a world that's so different from all that you are" (Schonberg, 1989, Track 7). By comparing the difference between Kim's life in Vietnam and Chris's life in America to a difference in worlds, the writers of the show emphasize the foreign nature of Kim in comparison to Chris. The idea of her being a "mystery" also adds to her perceived alienness, adding to the exoticism placed on Vietnamese people through the white perspective. Along with this stereotype, the idea that Vietnam is inferior to the U.S. is a consistent theme throughout the piece: the main desire that is used to drive the entire musical is the hopes of moving or returning to America in order to escape the "unideal" Vietnam. According to Maria Degabriele from her journal article on orientalism, America is put on a pedestal throughout the entire show as each character constantly expresses their intense desire to leave Vietnam. She writes about a scene where one of the main characters sings about his vision of the American dream: "Although American culture is parodied in this segment of the musical, in the end America is still represented as the 'logical' or 'natural' place for anyone to desire to be" (Degabriele, 2005, p. 109). This underlying theme creates a racial hierarchy as the U.S. is viewed as a superior land of the free.

Relating the musical to Stuart Hall's theory of "splitting," these stereotypes form fixed differences between white Americans and Vietnamese folk as "insiders" versus "outsiders" respectively, showing the power that white producers have in portraying the Vietnam War. Hall defines "splitting" as the division between what is considered normal and what is abnormal, with stereotypes used as a way to separate and exclude certain people (Hall, 1997). The producers continue to use exoticism and inferiority to separate Asians from the normal American in the show; however, there is an instance at the end of the story that shows an intersection between the normal and the abnormal. When Kim and Chris's child is introduced into the narrative, the child is described as dirty and dusty, threatening "the distinction between the West and the East" (Degabriele, 2005, p. 112). According to Ann Laura, writer of *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, the child is a symbol of blurring the line between colonial powers and the colonized (1991). The words used to describe the multi-racial child reflects the negative feelings towards the blending of the "outsider" and "insider" because of its threat of disturbing the separation between the groups. The text's stereotypes not only distinguish groups of people but also show the power inequality between the white producers and minorities. Hall (1997) claims that "stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group" (p. 258). The dominant hegemony is seen through the reactions of the audience and presence of this musical in the media. In Nguyen's experience watching the musical, he was astounded to see the majority of the audience crying in response despite his discomfort with the representations (Nguyen, 2019). Despite the protests from the Asian American community, the musical still plays in the U.S. nationally, and audiences continue to be touched by the "Ultimate Sacrifice," a myth that glamorized the Asian mother sacrificing her life to give her child a "better life" in the U.S. (Degabriele, 2005). The

audience's responses serve as an example of the power that the famous producers have in telling their story.

Ultimately, fixed differences are maintained when the experiences of minorities are told through the perspective of the people in power. *Miss Saigon* was a text inspired by *Madame Butterfly*, a play written in 1887 by David Belasco, which had similar themes of exoticism through the plot and portrayal of Asian people. In the past century, many adaptations of this play have been reproduced into films and musicals, reiterating the same stereotypes through more contemporary settings as time passes (Degabriele, 2005), continuing the representation of Asian people solely based on perception. With *Miss Saigon* being one of the only and most famous representations of Asians on the stage, this text becomes the only perspective of the Asian experience. However, newer media texts that are written and performed by Asian Americans have fought against this fixed difference through the portrayal of their own identities, experiences, and responses on the stage (Yu, 2019). *Allegiance*, a musical composed by Jay Kuo, has a completely different approach to expressing the Asian experience in comparison to the previous texts. Kuo explains that his intention was "writing from the inside out and not the outside in" (Tran, 2015). By claiming ownership of a piece that is written and directed from the Asian American perspective, the producers of *Allegiance* break the previously established "us" vs. "them" model by telling the stories from the point of view of minorities rather than from the people in power.

In conclusion, although the mediamakers of *Miss Saigon* claim that they are representing an Asian experience during the Vietnam War, many Asian Americans protested against the musical and believed that the show perpetuated stereotypes. Because the producers of the musical framed the stories in the perspective of the white man, the musical depicted a racial

hierarchy and separated Asians and white Americans as normal versus abnormal. The producers have the power to represent this difference; however, minorities continue to tell their stories through their own perspectives, fighting back against the differences created by the dominant hegemony.

Sources

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