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Miss(ing) Saigon (1) : Reshaping the Memory of a Lost War

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# *Miss(ing) Saigon* (1) Reshaping the Memory of a Lost War

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*Miss Saigon*, a musical written by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Allan Boublil, and produced by Cameron Mackintosh, was premiered in London in September 1989. The trio who had collaborated in a successful musical, *Les Misérables*<sup>1</sup>, based their new work upon Belasco/Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* transplanting its settings to Saigon, Vietnam in the final days of the Vietnam War. After its successful 2-year-run in Britain<sup>2</sup>, *Miss Saigon* made its way to Broadway, New York.

The journey of *Miss Saigon* to Broadway and the enthusiastic acceptance it enjoyed there itself are hardly surprising. In the decade preceding the arrival of *Miss Saigon*, the musical scene in Broadway had been dominated by the so-called British musicals such as *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *the Phantom of the Opera*. With all the controversy *Miss Saigon* threw itself in before its Broadway premier<sup>3</sup>, it was welcomed warmly, at least for the large part, by the theatergoers of the United States as "the most anticipated show in U.S. stage history."<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, there are two factors that make *Miss Saigon* not another popular musical from Britain and thus make it deserve our attention. First, *Miss Saigon* was conceived, deliberated, and performed with particular emphasis on Americans as its chief audience. In a sense, it is understandable for Mackintosh or for any musical producer for that matter to seek success in Broadway. After all, Broadway is not only the biggest market of musical production, but also the success there is a prerequisite for the success world over. However, what is important to consider is that

Mackintosh's determination to make *Miss Saigon* particularly American seems to indicate more than just a desire for commercial success. Even in the earliest stage of stage production, Mackintosh was determined to make *Miss Saigon* a piece of work that would capture American minds. In an essay titled "Journey to Saigon," Mackintosh recalls the first impression he had in hearing what would be the first Act of *Miss Saigon*: "... its subject matter made me feel this could be the first musical I could seriously contemplate premiering in America."<sup>5</sup> In order to put his desire of premiering *Miss Saigon* in the United States into materialization, Mackintosh included two Americans, Richard Maltby, Jr. as a co-lyricist and Nicholas Hynter as a director in his production team. Of the two, inclusion of Maltby, Jr. is of particular interest. In *Les Misérables*, Claude-Michel Schönberg, a French, wrote original lyrics in French and also English lyrics for the British and the Broadway production. At that time, Mackintosh did not have any second thought in employing English lyrics written by Schönberg for the Broadway production. Now, in *Miss Saigon*, Mackintosh collaborated with the same French lyricist who had proved that he had enough English command to write lyrics in English and that his English was good enough to make *Les Misérables* one of the most commercially successful musical in the Broadway, but this time, Mackintosh thought that the lyrics should be implemented by an American lyricist<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the deliberation Mackintosh made is all the more significant when we consider the status Mackintosh occupied as a musical producer when he presented *Miss Saigon* in the Broadway. Cameron Mackintosh had produced most of the British musicals that had dominated the Broadway musical scene in the early 1980s. In other words, by the time he produced *Miss Saigon*, Mackintosh had already established his fame as a hit maker in Broadway and he had already acquired the status that would grant him to follow his own way

in the Broadway<sup>7</sup>.

These factors reveal that what drove Mackintosh into deliberation he had made in producing *Miss Saigon* is not just desire for commercial success. He knew all too well that the new musical of his would be a hit in the United States without changes he *did* make. Rather, what Mackintosh's deliberate efforts do indicate is Mackintosh's desire to establish direct dialogue with American audience and thus to deliver messages directly to them through *Miss Saigon*. In other words, he chose American audience as a chief addressee of *Miss Saigon*. When we discuss the addressivity of *Miss Saigon*, Mikhail Bakhtin offers an interesting point of view.

発話は、社会的に組織されたふたりの人間のあいだにうちたてられるのであり、たとえ現実の話し相手がいないばあいでも、話し相手が属している社会グループのいわば標準的な代表者というものが話し相手として前提とされている。言葉は話し相手に向けられている。(中略)抽象的な話し相手などはありえない。<sup>8</sup>

Bakhtin talks about the addressivity of utterance here. Any form of utterance (be it spoken or written) presuppose its audience, that is, those who “utter” presuppose how his utterance will be contextualized socially and ideologically even before they utter. Words that uttered are carefully selected and sentences are deliberately constructed in a way that they can produce certain meanings that will be understood in the particular cultural context of the chosen addressee. Thus, without presupposing its addressee, any form of utterance is not made possible. *Miss Saigon* is, and so are other artistic products, a kind of “utterance,” an attempt to establish dialogue for artists/producers. Thus, when Mackintosh made efforts to make *Miss Saigon* particularly American, it shows that Mackintosh wished to address to American in particular; he expected and presupposed the new play of his would be decoded and contextualized in American cultural context.

The second factor which makes *Miss Saigon* worthy of our attention is

that it has the Vietnam War as its settings. The Vietnam War stands different from other wars the United States had waged before it in many ways. It was the longest war in which the United States engaged; the United States' direct intervention into Vietnam lasted for over ten years. At the same time, it was quite a consuming war and had a serious impact upon American society politically, economically and socially; not only many lives of Americans were lost in Vietnam, but also astronomical amount of money were poured into the war efforts, which led to stagflation in the late 1970s. The War in Vietnam was unprecedented in the media coverage of war at home, too; utilizing the new media, TV, vast amount of visual images of war flowed into American home, which eventually redirected the course of war itself<sup>9</sup>. Lastly, it was the war that the United States did not win. It was the first war that the United States lost and Americans struggled to come to terms with the fact in the following years.

However, what makes a critical difference between the War in Vietnam and other wars is that the Vietnam War brings a various, often-conflicting sentiments to American minds. This "nation-dividedness" of the Vietnam War is quite decisive in understanding the connotation of the Vietnam War in the United States. In the wars preceding Vietnam, Americans have absorbed the memories of war into a single, standard narrative and thus have succeeded in creating the collective memory of the war<sup>10</sup>. Even bitter and painful past of the Civil War, the war in which the United States was literally divided into two and in which Americans killed each other, has been in a sense purified and transformed into a memory which contributes to the construction of national identity; that the Civil War was like an initiation for a young nation like the United States to be a truly democratic nation. In short, the wars that the United States has waged have been used culturally and functioned as a device to create a collective

and strongly unifying memory of the nation. It is particularly important to a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and thus multi-cultural nation like the United States where people have virtually nothing in common except the fact that they live in the same state pledging royalty toward the same flag. With the shared memory of the wars, various groups of people living in American soil can find ties that bind them together as Americans. The collective memory produced through the wars thus plays a significant, if not decisive, role in creating a nation-state in the United States.

Then came the Vietnam War. More than 50 thousand Americans fought and died in a foreign land believing what their country told them; As many veterans attests to, it is an act to pledge royalty to their country<sup>11</sup>. Many others protested against the war believing that raising their voice against the war, which was repressing the movements for self-determination in Vietnam, was suited for the constitutional ideal of their country and thus was ultimately good for their country. As a result, many Americans who struggled through the years of the Vietnam War tell their own stories reflecting their positions toward the War and there seems no story of the Vietnam War that Americans as a whole can agree upon. In short, there is no collective memory of the Vietnam War. It was in such a social circumstance that Mackintosh presented a musical dealing with the nation-dividing Vietnam War. Now, the next questions we inevitably ask are what is a view on Vietnam War expressed in *Miss Saigon*, and why it should be addressed to American public in the early 1990s. Answers to these questions are what we hope to find in this paper.

This paper is the first part of the project to locate *Miss Saigon* in overall cultural, social, and political landscape of the United States in the late 1980s and thus to inquire the cultural impact *Miss Saigon* had on American minds in the era between the Vietnam War and the War in Iraq.

This paper includes the first section, in which we will discuss about Kim, the protagonist of the musical.

### **SECTION I: Do We Really Know Kim?**

Kim, a 17-year-old Vietnamese girl, is the central character of *Miss Saigon* and the entire plot evolves around her. To experience Miss Saigon firsthand in the auditorium is to identify with Kim and to see Kim's fate through her eyes. We observe/experience her love affair with Chris, the turmoil which twists the fate of two lovers and finally tragic death of our protagonist at the end. The identification we are made to feel with Kim is so strong that majority, if not all, of those in the auditorium cannot forbid their tears as they watch Kim's fate is spinned and twisted by the time and place. As a matter of fact, the producers of the show admit that, since too much focus are placed upon Kim, the numbers to be sung by Kim are extraordinary many and it makes playing the role of Kim vocally quite demanding<sup>12</sup>.

Let us start this section with seemingly strange question; do we really know Kim? For more than two hours we identify with Kim and observe the process of her turning from a prostitute to a mother who sacrifice herself so that she can provide her son a better (at least so she thought) future. After experiencing all that, the question is yet to disappear. Do we really know Kim? The reason the question remains is that there is something peculiar in the way Kim is depicted in the narrative. Now, let us examine Kim's depiction.

When Kim's depiction is concerned, the very first moment Kim appears on stage is worth attention. It is the first day for Kim to work in a bar/whorehouse called the Dreamland run by Engineer, a slick half-French, half-Vietnamese. Here comes Kim:

*(A new girl. KIM, is trying to stuff cotton on her bra.)*

KIM: Is this the way you make a chest?

GIGI: Hey, give that virgin act a rest.<sup>13</sup>

Believing the bigger chest would meet the taste of her predominantly American customers, Kim makes herself up by “stuff(ing) cotton on her bra.” What is significant to note here is that in her very first appearance, Kim is depicted not as what Kim really is, but, with cotton stuffed in her bra to make a fake chest, as in disguised form. The fact that Kim is in disguise is reemphasized when her colleague, Gigi, sarcastically tells Kim to “give that virgin act a rest.” Gigi’s statement serves as a device to remind us that Kim is in disguise. As the story evolves, that Kim is in disguise is even more stressed. In the scene that follows, Kim and other Vietnamese girls parade around inside the Dreamland. One of the customers there is Chris, accompanied by his friend John. Chris instantly falls in love with Kim, and John makes an arrangement with Engineer so that Chris can spend a night with Kim. They spend a night, fall in love, and the story gets going. In this very moment the love affair between Kim and Chris takes place, we are once again told that Kim on stage is Kim in disguise. Realizing Kim hesitates to sleep with Chris, Engineer says to Kim half-threateningly:

You said you needed a job

*You said you’d turn a trick*

You better prove it and quick. (Emphasis Added)

Engineer tells Kim to “turn a trick” to seduce Chris. In the scene follows, Kim takes Chris by his hand and calls him by his first name, just as Engineer instructs her to do<sup>14</sup>. Her involvement with Chris starts not out of her love, but as “a job.” Furthermore, Kim herself makes a clear statement that the one who is spending a night with an American marine is not her subjective self:

I will not cry, I will not think

I'll do my dance, I'll make them drink

*When I make love, it won't be me* (Emphasis Added)

Kim's words stand as a clear testimony of the fact that Kim whom we see on stage is not what she really is. While the love affair between Kim and Chris is the central factor of the whole plot, we are told that Kim whom Chris is interested in and with whom Chris has an affair is Kim who is in disguise, Kim who "turns a trick," and, as Kim herself testifies, Kim who isn't her.

As the story develops, the doubts concerning Kim's subjectivity also develop. In more than one occasion, Kim's subjective self is questioned, and sometimes even neglected. Take, for example, the scene in which Chris decides to live with Kim. It is the morning after their first affair and the following conversation takes place:

KIM: I've not done this before.

CHRIS: That can't be true.

KIM: *Why would I lie?*

CHRIS: Look, everyone lies.

They just want to get out of here

Okay! You're not like that

*But I don't know who you are* (Emphasis Added)

When he is told, "I've not done this before," Chris answers "that can't be true," thinking Kim is lying. Here we can see Kim's first appearance paraphrased and Kim is viewed as acting. If Chris were Gigi, he would say, "Give that virgin act a rest!" Chris's doubt toward what Kim has said is once again stressed (lest we should not miss his doubt on Kim's subject) by his statement "I don't know who you are." Chris's statement indicates that we have two Kims, one is Kim with whom Chris spends a night together, Kim who is in disguise, the other is who she really is, or Kim as a subjective self.

That Kim is subjective self is not depicted in the *Miss Saigon* narrative

is no coincidence. Rather, the whole narrative is deliberately constructed to obscure Kim's subjective self. In one point, we are even told not to inquire Kim's subject any further. Three years after Chris's departure, Kim learns Chris comes to see her in Bangkok. Believing he comes to save her, Kim rushes to a hotel Chris stays in. There she finds Ellen, Chris's new wife. In the course of their showdown, Kim pleads to Ellen:

Please, tell me you're not married  
You don't know, you can't know, what  
I've done to be here.

Given what Kim has undergone in the three years during which Chris has deserted her, Kim's claim is quite understandable; she killed her cousin, Thuy, to protect her son, crossed the Mekong bay as a boatpeople, and has sold her body in Bangkok to survive. As Kim insists, Ellen who comes from nowhere and takes Kim's husband, can possibly *know* the agony Kim has gone through. However, another important question to ask is to whom Kim is speaking. The reason this question deserves our consideration lies in the fact that *Miss Saigon* is a theatrical art. The theatrical stage on which theatrical arts are performed has a peculiar structure. It is closed in three directions by walls. The surrounding walls can be a part of the fictional world performed on stage by acting as backgrounds. However, in one direction, it does not have a wall to close the stage and from this wall-less open direction, audience in the auditorium can see the fictional world on stage. As the stage on which theatrical arts are performed is directly connected to audience in the auditorium, the fictional world on the stage is not completely independent to the real world in the auditorium. Through the wall-less open space, two worlds in a theater can have closer relationship than, say, those in film arts, and direct dialogic relationship between the two worlds is made possible in the theatrical arts<sup>15</sup>. The wall less-ness

of the theater offers an important perspective when we think of the addressivity of lyrics spoken on stage. While they form a dialogue between actors and actresses on stage, since the fictional world on the stage is directly open to the auditorium, the lyrics spoken on stage are addressed directly to the audience as well. That is, Kim is in dialogic relation with the audience as well as Ellen. Thus, when Kim says “you can’t know what I’ve done to be here,” her words are directed to two addressees. The pronoun “you” can refer not only to Ellen but also to those in the auditorium. The auxiliary verb “can’t” can actually convey two different meanings. For Ellen, it tells the impossibility for her to understand Kim’s past. However, for those in the auditorium, it is a prohibition to know what Kim has done, or Kim’s subjective self.

Kim’s subjective self is not only concealed but also systematically prohibited to reveal in *Miss Saigon*. In other words, Kim is not subjectively represented. Though she is a protagonist of the show, we are not allowed to know who she really is. What draws our attention in relation to the lack of Kim’s subjective representation is the fact that Kim is depicted as quite an innocent figure. Of all the attributes she may have, innocence is so strongly promoted in her depiction that she is often referred to as “Lolita,” “cocoon” and even “jailbait” by critics<sup>16</sup>. It is hardly surprising that the producers intend Kim to be an innocent-looking girl given the fact that she is a variable of Cio-Cio San of the Madame Butterfly myth. After all, it is Cio-Cio San’s guilelessness that allows her to be “seduced” and eventually “abandoned” by Pinkerton. However, the strong emphasis upon Kim’s innocence is worth noting for it is a clear indication of the fact that Kim’s subjective self is intentionally concealed. If we borrow a term from Robert Brunstein of *New Republic*<sup>17</sup>, her innocence is a cocoon and concealed inside the shell is her subjective self.

That Kim's subjective self is not represented in *Miss Saigon* reminds us the basic fact of *Miss Saigon*, that it is after all a text written and produced by westerners about those in a different cultural world. As Edward Said states in *Orientalism*, the basic premise of Orientalism is its "exteriority," that is:

... the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.... What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact<sup>18</sup>.

Said's discussion on the "exteriority" gives us a clue as to why Kim's subjective self is hidden behind her innocent mask. In order for westerners to represent the Other, in this case, Kim, it is mandatory not to let her speak for herself. Thus, Kim's subjective self is obscured by sealing it into the cocoon of innocence.

Now, we have come to an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section. We do not know Kim. Though Kim is a protagonist of *Miss Saigon*, she is by no means the motivator of the narrative. At the same time, however, it is just a half way. Our next task is to examine an "exterior" factor functioning behind Kim's representation, that is, to understand what Kim is made to represent to American minds. When we attempt to examine Kim's representation, it is important to note that the personae Kim assumes in *Miss Saigon* can be absorbed into two; that of prostitute and of mother. Throughout the show Kim undergoes various experiences and assumes various personae; a peasant girl, a prostitute, a lover, a wife of an American marine, a murderer, and a boatpeople/refugee and a mother. However, the two have such a strong impact as to overshadow others. The story of *Miss Saigon* develops in two settings in time and space. The first part, which consists the large part of Act I, is set in Saigon in 1975 and the latter part

is in Bangkok in 1978. The transition of two dominant personae of Kim corresponds to the shift of settings.

In scenes set in 1975, Kim is portrayed as a prostitute, sexual merchandise for American soldiers to buy, consume and dispose at their will. She works in a bar/whorehouse run by Engineer and there she meets Chris. The transition of Kim from a prostitute to Chris's "butterfly" depends heavily upon her being sexual merchandise. Chris's friend John, recognizing Chris' interest in Kim, arranges with Engineer, or to put it more bluntly, *buys* Kim from Engineer, so that Chris can have a one night stand with Kim<sup>19</sup>, as indicated in the stage directions in unmistakable terms: "JOHN has seen CHRIS's interest in KIM and goes off to *buy her* for the night from the ENGINEER as a surprise for his friend." (Emphasis Added) After he spends a night with Kim, Chris wants to keep her, so he has a business talk with Engineer and purchases her for "the six week income<sup>20</sup>" with a little help from his gun. Thus, it is not too much to say that if Kim were not a sexual commodity available to Chris, their love affair itself would not be possible. While the love affair between Kim and Chris forms the foundation of *Miss Saigon* narrative, Kim's being a prostitute plays a crucial role in establishing the whole plot.

In addition to the fact that Kim's being sexual merchandise is an indispensable prerequisite in the plot of *Miss Saigon*, it also becomes a critical factor in identifying Kim. Throughout Act I, Kim is either referred to or treated as a prostitute by literally everyone with whom she has any kind of communication or interaction. For others, Kim's being a prostitute becomes a central point in identify Kim and other attributes of hers are demoted to play just subsidiary roles<sup>21</sup>. In the first scene of *Miss Saigon*, Kim wears a white wedding-dress-like gown while other dancers wear colorful bikinis. Kim's white dress covering most part of her body functions

as a device to promote her innocence and virginity. Her virginity is all the more emphasized because she is amid the other insufficiently-dressed, more experienced prostitutes. That is, the stage production of *Miss Saigon* is constructed to put so much focus on Kim's virginity. However, when Engineer comes in and sees Kim, her virginity loses its dominant position. Engineer says as follows:

That bridal gown gives you some class  
Lower your eyelids as you pass  
Men pay a lot for virgin ass

Engineer's words reveal that Kim's virginity, once the dominant attribute of Kim, is demoted to a supplementary value of her as a prostitute. For Engineer, her virginity is just a convenient reason to make his customers "pay a lot" more. Furthermore, Kim herself embraces her prostitute-ness as a crucial factor in identifying herself. In answering Chris who wants to see her again, she replies: "I'll be at the club/Selling 'beaucoup amour (many loves)'. "

Three years later in 1978, Kim's role is shifted to that of a mother. Just as her prostitute-ness in 1975, her mother-ness is so strongly emphasized that all the other attributes she might have seem nonexistent. Even her prostitute-ness, which is such a dominant attributes of Kim in scenes of 1975, is overshadowed by her mother-ness in those of 1978. All through the scenes in 1978, Engineer and others hint that Kim is still a prostitute/a bargirl (this time in Bangkok, though)<sup>22</sup>, but we never see her as a prostitute on stage. When she appears on stage, she is always a mother, accompanied by her son, Tam. A song called "I'd give my life for you" best exemplifies the centrality of her mother-ness:

You will be who you want to be-You  
Can choose whatever heaven grants  
As long as you can have your chance

I swear I'll give my life for you.

Again and again she repeats "I swear I'd give my life for you," revealing that her mother-ness forms a central factor in her identity. Kim knows that she lives for her son and she will be happy to throw everything she owns (including her life) away to give him a chance. One of the things she gives up in exchange of her mother-ness is her status as Chris's wife. When Ellen, Chris's new wife, tells Kim that Chris has started a new life without Kim and her son, Kim quickly backs off without insisting her seemingly rightful status of Chris' wife:

I feel walls in my heart  
Closing in  
I can't breathe  
*I can't win.* (Emphasis Added)

Kim's resignation indicated here, "I can't win," forms a clear contrast with strong assertion of her status by Ellen. Showing understanding to Kim's agony, Ellen states:

I know what pain her life today must be  
But if it all comes down to her or me  
I won't wait, I swear  
*I'll fight*

The battle they are to fight here, the one Kim thinks she "can't win" and Ellen "will fight" is between "you and me," that is, over the status of Chris's wife. Given what she has gone through in the three years she waits for Chris to come help her, her quick surrender to Ellen is hardly understandable. At the same time, it is also true that, without her quick resignation, *Miss Saigon* would be a Jerry Springer show-type mess instead of "a tragic love affair comparable to *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>23</sup>." Now, what is important to note is that Kim's renunciation of her status of Chris's wife is followed by her claim about Tam. Kim repeatedly insists that Chris and Ellen must take



Kim: It's what all the girls sing at weddings

They didn't know what else to sing

Kim and the other girls present sing a song at the wedding. Kim's comment "(i)t's what all the girls sing at weddings/they didn't know what else to sing" indicates the indispensability of the song for wedding ceremonies in Vietnam. The song they are singing is so essential to wedding ceremonies that "they didn't know what else to sing." However, Chris do not understand the meaning of the song because it is sung in Vietnamese, as indicated in his "(i)t's pretty but what does it mean?" This small scene is quite significant in that it indicates that the applicability of language is in question between Kim and Chris. When Chris does not understand the language employed to seal the marriage vow, does he really understand the meaning of the vow itself? Or, does he have to abide the vow even though he doesn't understand the words employed there?

The narrative of *Miss Saigon* tells us that Chris does not think he ought to. Because the languages employed in his wedding are different from his own, Chris thinks that the vow he makes in Saigon are invalid once he leaves there. Three years later, Chris unhesitatingly makes the following statement: "That's not how things were, I just/promised her." Chris thinks that the marriage vow he made with Kim and the wedding ceremony to endorse it are all invalid because the ceremony was held in Vietnam where he didn't belong with the language he didn't understand. Thus, once he comes back to his home country, the vow should be expired.

As we have seen, the languages employed in *Miss Saigon* have very limited effect (at least for Chris) because of the difference in languages. Such limited applicability of Chris's languages reminds us of what Peter Hulme calls "colonial discourse." In his discussion about *Pocahontas*, Hulme states as follows:

だがスミスには二つの世界があった。ひとつは文明の（中略）世界。ここでは言葉は固定した言語習慣の中に埋め込まれている。もうひとつは異質の、敵意に満ちた世界。この文明の真空地帯では、言葉も行為と同じく現場の状況に応じて編み出され、いったん現場を離れると、その効力を失うのである。植民地言説は記憶を持たない。言い換えれば、物語を語ることは無い。<sup>24</sup>

Hulme's discussion, which tells us that the colonial languages are valid only in colonial situation, will explain Chris's seemingly irresponsible statement cited above. Chris's words, like other colonialists before him, do not have any memory. Once he leaves the colonial situation, all words of his loses their validity and all the promises he makes expire.

At the same time, what is also worth attention in the wedding between Kim and Chris occurs in its happiest moment.

*(Friends arrive carrying beer and a platter of food. The party gathers around the bed, and GIGI leads a toast to KIM.)*

GIGI: Miss Saigon!

GUESTS: Miss Saigon!

Here, in celebrating Kim who becomes a wife of an American, the wedding guests drink a toast and call her "Miss Saigon." Miss Saigon? Let us have Engineer who coins the term explain what Miss Saigon really means:

Let me stop for a bit  
This was my greatest hit  
Miss Saigon, in her crown  
I made queen of the town  
I got 'em paying more  
For *just another whore* (Emphasis Added)

The Engineer's explanation will tell us how inappropriate it is to use the title to a new bride; it is a fake crown for "just another whore." In the very nature of fakeness of the title "Miss Saigon" we can find another reason Chris can claim the invalidity of the marriage vow he makes with Kim. The use of the fake title in the wedding ceremony is a deliberately constructed

device to claim the invalidity of the wedding itself. In the very first scene, Gigi, the person who leads the wedding toast and calls Kim Miss Saigon, predicts what will happen to Miss Saigon:

GIRLS: Tonight I will be Miss Saigon

GIGI: Tonight you'll be miss jumped upon

GIRLS: I'll win a G.I. and be gone

GIGI: He'll screw you with our crown still on

Gigi makes an ominous prediction of the future of Miss Saigon; she will be sexually abused and she will be screwed. When the same Gigi calls Kim Miss Saigon in the wedding ceremony, we are made to recall the ominous prediction she made at the very beginning. Furthermore, we learn that Gigi's prediction about Miss Saigon comes true to Kim, the one who is titled Miss Saigon. As Gigi says, Kim is screwed by Chris, a G.I., in many ways. She is screwed and is jumped upon by Chris sexually; she was bought to offer sexual entertainment for Chris, and as a result of their sexual intercourse, Kim bears a son. At the same time, Chris also screws Kim's life; he promised to marry her, but he dumped her and left for home. The predictability of the fate of Kim, or someone titled Miss Saigon indicates that the first scene of the musical and the wedding scene are intentionally made parallel. Just as the beauty contest Engineer holds to add extra value to prostitutes is a fake one, the wedding ceremony is also fake. Just as Miss Saigon chosen in the fake beauty contest is a fake title for "just another whore," the new bride, Kim, is also a fake bride.

As we have seen, the marriage vow of Chris and Kim is claimed invalid again and again in *Miss Saigon*, which leads us to believe that Kim do not have a persona of a wife. We can safely say now that Kim assumes only two dominant personae, that of prostitute and that of mother. It is Andrea Dworkin who attests to the fact that the way Kim is depicted in *Miss Saigon*

is a gross caricature of the domination of feminity in malecentric society. She claims that the dominant role women are allowed to play in a malecentric society is the role of prostitute, an organ to entertain male sexually. When she loses her sex appeal from male's point of view, Dworkin continues, she will be assigned to the role of mother. In this way, Dworkin concludes, being a mother stands in antipodes with being a prostitute<sup>25</sup>. Dworkin's argument is quite helpful in understanding the transition of Kim's role. In scenes set in 1975, when Chris is interested in Kim sexually, she is literally a prostitute and Chris can freely exploit her sexually or otherwise. However, in scenes set in 1978, he loses his interest in Kim because he finds a new wife, Ellen, who will offer him sexual service. Thus, the only role Kim can assume in 1978, or when she is no longer an object for sexual pleasure for Chris, is that of a mother.

Dworkin argues that female is subjected to a subordinate position under the dominance of male and the applicability of her argument in *Miss Saigon* indicates that Kim is also subjected to sexual domination by Chris. At the same time, however, Chris's sexual domination over Kim is a microcosm of the larger domination Kim is subjected to. Now let us examine the narrative of *Miss Saigon* from this perspective.

When Chris leaves Vietnam unwillingly (at least so we are told), he leaves two objects for Kim, the one is Tam, Chris's son, and the other a handgun. The two objects left by Chris are quite significant and thus deserve our attention in that both have a sexual implication and both play a crucial role in Kim's behavior after Chris deserts her. It goes without saying that Tam, Chris's flesh and blood, has a sexual implication. He is an outcome of their sexual intercourse and thus symbolizes Chris who invades Kim's body. It is Kim herself who attests to it:

I feel (Chris's) shadow brush my head

But there's just moonlight on my bed  
Was he a ghost? Was he a lie?  
That made my body laugh and cry?  
Then by my side, the proof I see:  
His little one  
Gods of the sun  
Bring him to me.

To Kim, Tam is “his little one,” something that “brings him to me.” We can clearly see here the strong bond Kim feels toward Chris due to Tam’s presence. Furthermore, as we have already argued, Kim’s being a mother of Tam is the chief role she assumes after Chris deserts her. All the behaviors of hers, all she does and all she says, are controlled exclusively by her persona as a mother. In other words, she is entirely controlled by what is left by Chris.

At the same time, the handgun Chris leaves to Kim has a similar implication and a similar effect upon Kim. When he is order to come back to the base, Chris leaves the handgun to Kim, saying it will certify her status as his wife. As a certification of Kim’s married status to an American soldier, a handgun does not seem to be an appropriate object. In fact, in the crucial moment of the fall of Saigon, Kim shows Chris’s gun to prove that she is married to an American soldier. Another Vietnamese flatly turns down her appeal by saying “out of my way, *if that’s all you’ve got.* (Emphasis Added)” Then, why does Chris choose a handgun among other objects, say for example, his G.I. tag, which will be a better certification of Kim’s marital status? In order to understand this illogical choice of a gun, we have to take two factors into consideration. First, a gun has a sexual implication; Particularly in American society, a gun, with its phallic shape, has been considered as a symbol of masculinity and a gun is used to exhibit the gun-holder’s manliness. Also, we have seen Chris use his gun

before, when he has a business talk with Engineer about Kim. Frustrated by Engineer's slick manner, Chris pulls out his gun to make a deal, in other words, to claim ownership of Kim. From this standpoint, we can explain the significance of the handgun left to Kim. It symbolizes the possession of Kim by Chris. Its shape symbolizes Chris's sex organ embraced by Kim, and it has a record of being used to claim Chris's ownership of Kim.

Our argument indicates that both Chris's son and his handgun is a reminder of the continuing sexual domination of Chris over Kim. What is also important to note is that, when the two emerge hand in hand in the narrative of *Miss Saigon*, they will function as a bridging factor between two kinds of domination Kim is subjected to; one is sexual and personal, and the other is social. The two jointly emerge when Thuy, Kim's cousin to whom she was vowed at thirteen (by her parents) and who turns to be a high-rank officer of the North Vietnamese army, comes into the narrative. Thuy forcibly asks Kim to forget Chris and to be his wife. Kim, introducing Tam to him, refuses:

Look, Thuy, this is my son  
He has kept me alive  
Now you see why  
I must tell you "no"

Realizing Kim gives birth to a child of his enemy and the child is a chief reason he has lost his fiancée, enraged Thuy urges Kim:

You must decide upon  
Which side you're really on  
You whored to make this kid

Thuy sees the fact that Kim has "whored" with Chris and given birth to Tam as a proof of her switching "side," that is, from Vietnam to Chris's "side," the United States. Here we can witness that the sexual and private issue between Kim and Chris symbolized in Tam is replaced by social or

even political issue between Vietnam and the United States. In other words, Tam is viewed as a proof that Kim betrays Vietnam for her belligerent nation. The shift from sexual thus personal issue to political and social issue goes even further when the other object left by Chris has its role on stage. The tension mounts in the heated dialogue between Kim and Thuy. Thuy pulls out a knife and threatens to stab Tam. Trying to defend her son, Kim pulls out the gun left by Chris and shoots Thuy to death. In the very scene of Kim's murder of Thuy, we are reminded that the gun in Kim's hand is the one left by an American: "Of course, you have a gun, and it is a U.S. gun." When we hear Thuy say "a U.S. gun" instead of "Chris's gun" or even "his gun," we can say that once again the personal issues are intentionally replaced to and presented as social issues.

What is striking is the whole picture we can draw on the scene here. In one sense, it indicates that Kim is dominated by Chris sexually and thus in personal level; Kim tries to defend Tam, Chris's flesh and blood, and shoots her cousin with Chris's gun. At the same time, however, the narrative of *Miss Saigon* offers a different explanation of the same scene. Kim, a Vietnamese, is dominated by Chris, an American, and she shoots another Vietnamese with a weapon supplied by the United States to defend the interest of the United States. The picture the narrative of *Miss Saigon* shows us is that Kim plays a role of an agency of the United States. That is, a personal and sexual domination of Chris over Kim is a microcosm of the political and social domination of the United States of South Vietnam.

It is time for us to come back to our initial question, if we really know Kim. We have seen Kim whose subjective self is not allowed to emerge, who is sexually dominated by Chris, and who functions as an agency for the United States. It is interesting to note that what we come to learn about Kim has, for a large part, already implied in a tune called "Movie in My

Mind.” In the song, we are told what American soldiers like Chris is to Vietnamese:

They are not nice, they’re mostly noise  
They swear like men, they screw like  
Boys

Later on in the same song, we are told

They are not nice,  
They’re mostly noise  
They kill like men  
They die like boys

Also, another part of the song tells us:

They give their cash  
They keep their hearts  
But every night  
Again it starts

It is obvious that the song predicts Kim’s experiences with American soldiers. They “kill like boys” Kim’s parents. One of them, Chris, “screw (s) (Kim) like boys.” Chris makes a marriage vow with Kim, but he “keep(s) (his) hearts” by claiming the marriage invalid once he goes back to the U. S. The predictability of Kim’s fate indicates that Kim is made to be a personification of the victimized country of Vietnam. Like Kim, Vietnam has been colonized. Like Kim, Vietnam is torn apart and one side, the South Vietnam, become an agency of the United States and fight against the other side of herself, the North Vietnam. Here is the answer to the initial question. We now know Kim. She is Vietnam.

## NOTES

1. *Les Misérables* is one of the most successful musical in the history of the Broadway. Not only it was one of the longest-running show in the history of

the Broadway, it is said that at the end of its thirteenth year in the Broadway (March 2000), *Les Misérables* had grossed more than \$370 million, with 7.6 million people having seen the show.

2. In the two years in Britain, *Miss Saigon* has grossed over \$33million.
3. In his review of *Miss Saigon*, Frank Rich claims as follows: “Here is a show with something for everyone to resent—in principle, at least. Its imported stars, the English actor Jonathan Pryce and the Filipino actress Lea Salonga, are playing roles that neglected Asian-American performers feel are rightfully theirs. Its top ticket price of \$100 is a new Broadway high, sprung by an English producer, if you please, on a recession-strained American public. A loose adaptation of *Madama Butterfly* transplanted to the Vietnam War by French authors, the *Les Misérables* team of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, *Miss Saigon* insists on revisiting the most calamitous and morally dubious military adventure in American history and, through an unfortunate accident of timing, arrives in New York even as the jingoistic celebrations of a successful American war are going full blast.” Frank Rich, “‘Miss Saigon’ arrives, from the old school,” *the New York Times* (4/12/91)
4. *Time* (4/8/91) Vol.137, Issue 14, p.3.
5. Cameron Mackintosh, “The Journey to Saigon,” *Miss Saigon Program* (the Broadway edition) (New York: Dewynters, 1991).
6. In “the Journey to Saigon,” Mackintosh explains that Maltby, jr. plays more than just a co-lyricist role: “Richard contributed not only his considerable dramatic experience and nuance of language but also his essential American point of view on the Vietnam conflict.” Cameron Mackintosh, “The Journey to Saigon.”
7. The biggest controversy the production team of *Miss Saigon* involved in New York was the confrontation with the Actor’s Equity. The Equity claimed that the role of Engineer, half-French half-Vietnamese, should be played by Asian American actors in the Broadway productions while Mackintosh stuck to Jonathan Pryce, an actor who played the role in England. The confrontation reached even to a point that Mackintosh declared the cancellation of his Broadway contract, and the Equity backed off.
8. ミハイル・バフチン『マルクス主義と言語哲学 言語学における社会学的方法の基本的問題』, 桑野隆訳 (未来社, 1989), pp.128-29.
9. American military officials often pointed the American media as their chief enemy in the Vietnam War, which would best signifies the role media played in opinion building toward the war.

10. The best example is the narrative on the use of Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Though its validity has been questioned in many ways, many Americans supports the official explanation of the Bomb; that the Bomb was essential to save many lives of Americans as well as Japanese.
11. The most recent example is an account of the experiences as a U.S. navy patrol boat captain of Senator John F. Kerry. The book, authored by a historian Douglas Brinkley and titled *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War*, will be released on January 2004.
12. In their hunt for an actress who will star as Kim in his new musical, Cameron Mackintosh half-jokingly claims that the person who will play the role of Kim needs to have “lungs of steel.”
13. *Miss Saigon* Script of the original London performance attached to the complete recordings of *Miss Saigon*. The recordings are produced and released by Geffen Records in 1989. All the quotations from *Miss Saigon* text rely on this script.
14. Knowing Chris’s interest in Kim, Engineer instructs Kim as follows: “You stay with him until he goes/Call him Chris/He’ll like that.”
15. Robert Stam offers an important perspective in making comparison between the theatrical arts and the film arts. See Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures; Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Washington D.C.: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989).
16. Mackintosh and his production team held a worldwide audition tour in New York, LA, Honolulu and Manila in search of an actress who would star as Kim. A video titled *The Making of Miss Saigon* included scenes from the auditions and it shows that one of the important criteria for the role of Kim was innocence.
17. Robert Brunstein introduces Kim in his review of *Miss Saigon* in the following manner: “Butterfly — the Boublil-Shönberg version she’s more like a cocoon — is no longer a guileless Japanese geisha. Now she’s a guileless Vietnamese Lolita from the countryside named Kim.” Robert Brunstein, “The Schlep Part II: Escape from Saigon,” *New Republic* (5/13/91).
18. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp.20-21.
19. In his telephone conversation with John, Chris says as follows: “You’re the one who bought the girl for me after all.”
20. That Engineer and Chris have a business talk over Kim is best exemplified in the following dialogue:  
     Engineer: We had a deal for Kim/But that’s on ice

Chris: What d'you mean?

Engineer: I'm sorry, Sergeant/But I've changed the price

I need a visa/from you embassy

You get me that/You'll get the girl for free

Chris: Cut the crap/This money's all I got

21. The way Kim's prostitute-ness is dealt with in *Miss Saigon* reminds us of the discussion Jacob Raz has about stigmatization. See for detail, Jacob Raz, *Anthropology of Yakuza: Japan as Seen from Its "Back Door"*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996).
22. For example, when Engineer whines about his low salary, he states: "Ten cents an hour — And I stand all day/I could sell Kim for ten times my pay."
23. *Time* (4/8/91) Vol.137, Issue 14, and p.3.
24. Peter Hulme, 『征服の修辞学』 (法政大学出版社, 1992), p.220.
25. See for detail Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: The Women's Press, 1981).