



Research on the Oriental Female Characteristics in Western Operas from the Perspective of Feminism -- Taking Opera *Madame Butterfly* as an Example

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Abstract

Background and Aim: From the 19th to the 20th century, European opera was significantly influenced by the ideological undercurrents of Orientalism. Within this context, the image of Eastern women was frequently constructed through an “Othering” narrative grounded in Western cultural centrism. However, existing scholarship has largely overlooked the embedded issues of cultural power dynamics in such representations. This study centers on Giacomo Puccini’s canonical opera *Madame Butterfly*, employing feminist theory and qualitative research methods to examine how colonialism and patriarchy intersect in shaping the representation of Eastern women.

Materials and Methods: This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining libretto textual analysis, musical thematic analysis, and academic synthesis. It also incorporates a case study analysis of contemporary reinterpretations of *Madame Butterfly* to validate the proposed theoretical model.

Results: Findings reveal that the representation of Eastern women in *Madame Butterfly* is a product of the dual oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. The protagonist, Cio Cio San, is positioned under the Western gaze as a “mysterious Other.” Her suicide is aestheticized as a metaphor for the self-destruction of Eastern civilization, and she is simultaneously disciplined by patriarchal norms into the role of the “faithful concubine.” Her subjectivity is systematically effaced through both vocal and stage elements.

Conclusion: This study constructs a dual-oppression framework—colonialism and patriarchy—to uncover the deeper mechanisms behind the portrayal of Eastern women in Western opera. The research offers new insights for cross-cultural artistic studies. Future research could further assess the applicability of this framework and explore how emerging technologies might enhance audience perception of Eastern women’s subjectivity, thereby fostering a more equitable and reciprocal model of cultural exchange.

Keywords: Opera; Feminist Theory; Representation of Eastern Women

Introduction

During the 19th and 20th centuries, European opera entered a golden era of development, with composers drawing inspiration from diverse cultural sources. Among them, Giacomo Puccini and other musical masters were particularly influenced by the ideological trend of Orientalism (Budden, 2005). As a multidimensional art form that integrates music and theatrical performance, opera’s character construction is not only an artistic presentation but also a vehicle for cultural ideology. However, when shaping images of Eastern women, Western opera frequently employs an “Othering” narrative based on Western cultural centrism—a phenomenon that reveals underlying issues of cultural power dynamics demanding further scholarly inquiry (Bayri, 2019).

Although a considerable body of research exists, most studies tend to focus on the musical aspects of opera or provide generalized portrayals of female characters (e.g., He, 2016; Wang, 2025). There remains a lack of in-depth analysis of how Western opera employs an integrated approach—through musical narrative, stage visuals, and character design—to construct Eastern female imagery, and how this construction is intertwined with colonialist and patriarchal discourses.

In response to this gap, the present study focuses on Puccini’s iconic opera *Madame Butterfly*, set in late 19th-century Japan. The opera tells the tragic love story between the Japanese geisha Cio Cio San and the American naval officer Pinkeldon. As a quintessential example of Western operatic representation of Eastern women, *Madame Butterfly* offers fertile ground for analysis. The soft elegance of Cio Cio San dressed in a kimono, her sorrowful and exotic arias, and the dominant persona of Pinkeldon collectively weave a narrative of the “innocent Oriental girl awaiting Western redemption”—a trope rich in symbolic and scholarly value.





Therefore, this study takes *Madame Butterfly* as its primary case, employing feminist theory and qualitative research methodology to examine the mechanisms through which colonialism and patriarchy co-construct the image of Eastern women from the perspectives of musical narrative and character functionality. It delves into how operatic details—melody, rhythm, harmony, stage design, and physical gestures—serve to objectify Eastern women as passive, eroticized spectacles, ultimately negating their subjectivity. At the same time, the study seeks to identify the potential within contemporary artistic practice to deconstruct this dual oppression and explore pathways for Eastern women to articulate decolonial feminist narratives within intercultural dialogues. This approach contributes to new perspectives in cross-cultural arts research and extends the boundaries of feminist theory across multidisciplinary artistic contexts.

Based on these aims, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does *Madame Butterfly* construct the image of Eastern women through its libretto, musical elements, and stage performance? (2) In what ways do colonial and patriarchal discourses intersect to shape these artistic representations? (3) How might contemporary reinterpretations of *Madame Butterfly* challenge or transform these representations from a feminist perspective?

Objectives

1. To analyze the musical composition, libretto, and stage imagery that shape the portrayal of Oriental women in the opera *Madame Butterfly*.
2. To investigate the mechanisms through which the opera transmits identity, gender roles, and power relations via its female characters.
3. Building upon these analyses, to explore contemporary narrative approaches that could open space for feminist ideas to be reflected and reimaged through opera in today's cultural context.

Literature Review

1. Studies on the Opera *Madame Butterfly*

Madame Butterfly, composed by the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, is a landmark opera that narrates the tragic love story between the Japanese girl Cio Cio San and the American naval officer Pinkerton. Its profound themes and emotionally evocative music have secured its place as an enduring masterpiece on the world opera stage.

Existing scholarship on *Madame Butterfly* primarily falls into two categories. The first centers on musical analysis, with a particular focus on Puccini's incorporation of Japanese folk elements (e.g., Liu, 2014). The second category emphasizes narrative interpretation, often from the perspectives of romantic tragedy or East–West cultural conflict (e.g., Degabriele, 1996). However, critical studies have pointed out that such analyses tend to overlook the ideological dimensions of character construction (Sheppard, 2005). For instance, He Fengxian (2016) argues that Cio Cio San's characterization as “submissive” and “faithful” reflects a cultural strategy through which the West encodes the Eastern woman as an “ideal Other.” This narrative both satisfies colonial fantasies through the trope of the “innocent girl awaiting salvation” and reinforces patriarchal discipline through her ultimate act of “self-sacrifice.”

At present, research in this area lacks interdisciplinary integration. Few studies effectively combine the opera's musical narrative and stage visuality with postcolonial and feminist theories. As a result, much of the existing analysis remains at the level of surface description and fails to uncover the deeper entanglements between artistic form and the discourse of power.

2. Orientalism and Cultural Construction in Western Opera

Edward Said's (1977) theory of “Othering” in Orientalism exposed the mechanism by which the West constructs the East as a cultural Other through discourse, thereby asserting hegemonic control. This theoretical framework provides a crucial lens for analyzing the colonial discursive logic underlying the representation of Eastern women in *Madame Butterfly* (Bayri, 2019).





During the 19th and 20th centuries, Western composers such as Puccini appropriated elements of Eastern culture—such as the pentatonic scale, kimono, and folding fans in *Madame Butterfly*—fragmenting and aestheticizing them to serve Western-centric imagination (Deng, 2014). Scholars have pointed out that such exotic embellishments reinforce stereotypical portrayals of the East as “mystified” and “infantilized.” For example, Song Fangfang (2011) contends that Western opera frequently distorts Eastern cultural values through “theatrical reproduction,” enacting cultural hegemony under the guise of “representing difference.”

Nevertheless, most studies remain at the level of surface-level semiotic identification—for instance, interpreting the kimono merely as a decorative symbol (Wang, 2025). These works often fail to engage with the underlying semiotics of musical narrative or stage design. Questions such as how melodic structure disciplines feminine affect, or how ritualized body movements are encoded with cultural meaning, remain insufficiently explored. Without a deeper deconstruction of the operative power mechanisms, current research has yet to adequately reveal how colonialism deploys artistic forms to dissolve the subjectivity of Eastern women.

3. Research on Opera Characters from a Feminist Perspective

From the theoretical development trajectory, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1998) laid a crucial foundation for the study of gender and power dynamics. Subsequent research in postmodern feminism has expanded the scope, addressing intersectional issues such as the dual oppression faced by women in the Third World and women of color (Wang, 2019). Wang Yanfeng (2019) points out that these theories provide multidimensional analytical tools for deconstructing gendered power relations in opera.

In the field of feminist music criticism, existing studies have confirmed that traditional opera tends to objectify female voices and representations. Song Fangfang (2011) observes that women's subjectivity in opera is often diminished through techniques such as vocal range restrictions and functional role assignments. Taking *Madame Butterfly* as an example, Wilcox (2024) analyzes how Cio-Cio-San's aria “*Unbeldi vedremo*” employs pentatonic progressive phrasing and other “softened” melodic treatments, reinforcing the patriarchal logic that “Oriental women require salvation by Western men.”

However, despite these contributions, significant limitations remain. Both He (2016) and Wang (2025) note that most existing studies focus narrowly on gender as a singular dimension, seldom integrating colonialism and patriarchy in their analyses. This tendency results in insufficient exploration of the overlapping oppressive mechanisms of Cio-Cio-San's “Oriental identity” and “female identity”, leaving interpretations of the character's tragic fate largely confined to superficial readings of cultural conflict or romantic tragedy.

Therefore, this study will combine Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977) and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory (1998) to construct a dual analytical framework of “colonialism” and “patriarchy”, transcending the limitations of a single theoretical lens. Additionally, it will integrate musical narrative analysis and stage semiotics to address the current research gap regarding “how artistic forms convey discourses of power,” thereby offering new pathways for cross-cultural artistic studies.

Methodology

1. Literature Review Method

The literature review methodology is grounded in academic historiography, aiming to establish a theoretical framework through systematic document analysis. This study focuses on the intersection of feminist and postcolonial theories, drawing on foundational works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1998), while incorporating the latest advancements in contemporary cross-cultural arts research.

The overarching approach follows a logical progression from theoretical (tracing theoretical origins) to critical analysis and finally to identifying research gaps. First, key literature is used to establish the theoretical framework. Next, a comparative analysis is conducted on methodological differences in existing studies on *Madame Butterfly*. Finally, the study clarifies its innovative contributions. The objectives of this





method are to obtain theoretical foundations for 19th–20th-century Western opera's Orientalist narratives and to gather literature on *Madame Butterfly* concerning its music, staging, and character construction.

2. Interdisciplinary Research Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary research approach, integrating Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977) and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory (1998) to construct a dual analytical framework of "colonialism" and "patriarchy." Orientalism reveals the mechanism by which the West establishes cultural hegemony through "Othering" narratives, while feminist theory deconstructs the patriarchal discipline imposed on women's voices and bodies. The intersection of these two theories provides a dual perspective for analyzing *Madame Butterfly*.

In terms of research trajectory, this study follows a three-stage process: theoretical application, multidimensional deconstruction, and practical validation. First, the dual-oppression framework is applied to three dimensions of the opera—libretto, musical composition, and stage performance, to conduct an in-depth analysis of its musical narrative and deconstruct the representation of the Oriental female character. Subsequently, contemporary adaptations are examined to validate the effectiveness of deconstructive strategies in modern practice, exploring how feminist narratives can be integrated into operatic staging in contemporary artistic expressions.

These interdisciplinary methods directly address the second and third research objectives. By intersecting theoretical lenses, they uncover the deep entanglement between artistic forms and ideology, not only enhancing the understanding of the construction mechanisms behind the Oriental female image in *Madame Butterfly* but also providing a methodological model for incorporating feminist narratives into operatic performance.

Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a dual-path conceptual framework that combines literature analysis with interdisciplinary deconstruction, aiming to systematically examine the mechanisms of Oriental female representation in *Madame Butterfly* and its potential for contemporary reinterpretation.

At the theoretical level, the framework draws on Said's *Orientalism* and Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to establish a dual analytical model of "colonialism" and "patriarchy." The former exposes the cultural hegemonic narratives in Western opera, while the latter deconstructs the disciplinary systems governing gendered roles. Methodologically, it adopts a synergistic approach combining literature review and interdisciplinary research. Through systematic literature analysis, the study traces theoretical origins, conducts critical examinations, and identifies research gaps. Simultaneously, interdisciplinary deconstruction strategies are applied to dissect the ideological encoding of the opera across three dimensions—text, music, and staging—with contemporary adaptations serving as validation for theoretical hypotheses.

The research logic follows a progressive sequence of "theoretical construction—multidimensional analysis—practical validation," ultimately achieving three objectives: 1) Revealing the symbiotic relationship between operatic art forms and Orientalist narratives. 2) Elucidating the operational mechanisms through which female characters function as carriers of cultural power. 3) Exploring pathways for integrating feminist discourse into traditional opera as a transformative practice.

This framework not only provides a critical tool for analyzing cultural products of the colonial era but also offers a methodological exemplar for the contemporary reconceptualization of performing arts. (Figure 1)



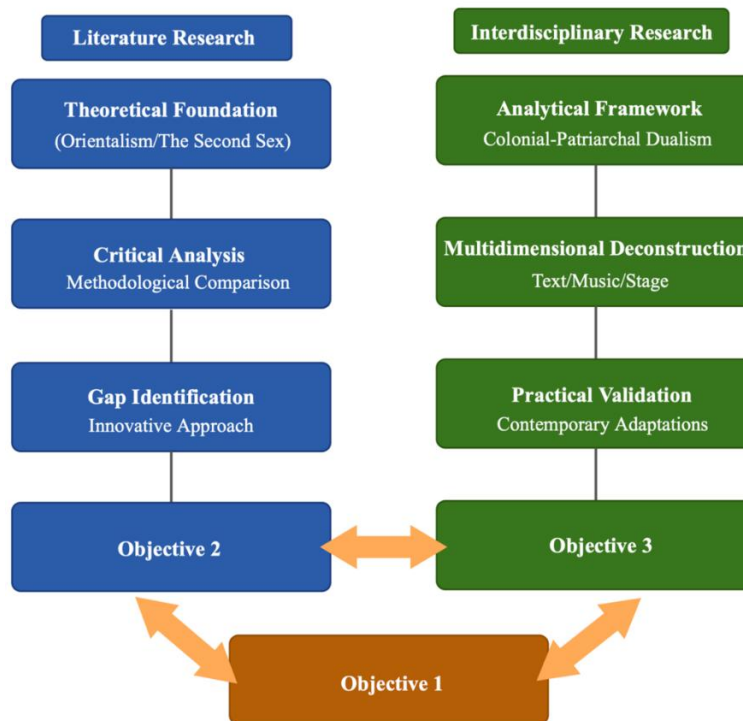


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Note: Constructed by the researcher

Results

1. Analysis of Multidimensional Elements in the Portrayal of Eastern Women in *Madame Butterfly*
 The study reveals that the portrayal of Eastern women in *Madame Butterfly* is not a unidimensional construct but rather an intricate interplay of cultural symbols, emotional narratives, and dramatic conflicts. This multidimensional construction reflects both Western imagination and misinterpretation of the East, while also implicating complex dynamics of gendered power. Based on these findings, the following sections elucidate the research results across multiple dimensions.

1.1 Textual Narrative and Character Symbolism

Set in late 19th-century Nagasaki, Japan, *Madame Butterfly* constructs a quintessential narrative of the "innocent Oriental girl awaiting Western redemption" through the tragic love story between the geisha Cio-Cio-San (also known as *Madame Butterfly*) and the American naval officer Pinkerton.

The plot unfolds as follows: In Nagasaki, a young and beautiful geisha named Cio-Cio-San, affectionately called "Butterfly" before her marriage, is portrayed as vivacious and radiant. Pinkerton, captivated by her beauty and innocence, pursues her ardently, and the two soon marry. Shortly after their union, Pinkerton is called back to America for military duty, leaving behind a pregnant Cio-Cio-San. Before his departure, he promised to return to her. For the next three years, Cio-Cio-San endures a lonely and arduous wait, during which she gives birth to their child, whom she names "Dolore." Every day, she gazes out the window toward Nagasaki Harbor, yearning for her husband's return.

When Pinkerton finally returns to Japan after three years, his arrival brings Cio-Cio-San not joy but devastation. He reveals that he has remarried an American woman, Kate, and has come to take their child back to America. At the gate of her home, Cio-Cio-San witnesses Pinkerton's new wife, Kate. Overwhelmed by betrayal and heartbreak, she retreats to her room, takes the dagger her father once used for seppuku (ritual suicide), and ends her life with a final act of despair and dignity.

The study finds that Cio-Cio-San's abandonment of her familial faith, her three-year vigil, and her ultimate suicide constituted a cultural strategy through which the West encodes Eastern women as "self-

sacrificial Others." Her traits of "docility" and "loyalty" are stripped of historical context and reduced to symbols that fulfill Western colonial fantasies. The libretto reinforces the ideology that "Oriental women require salvation by Western civilization" through the juxtaposition of the illusory "return of the warship" and the tragic "seppuku" finale. This narrative logic resonates with Said's theory of "Othering."

1.2 Power Discourse in Musical Narrative and Stage Visuals

The study further reveals that the musical narrative and stage visuals in *Madame Butterfly* are laden with traces of power discourse. At the beginning of the opera, the musical melody in which Cio-Cio-San appears is lively and full of youthful vigor. The melodic line is primarily composed of smooth steps and small leaps, resembling the brisk steps of a young girl, vividly depicting her innocence and naivety when she first fell in love. For example, in the prelude of "*Unbeldi vedremo* (A Sunny Day)," the music is presented in a bright major key with a slow tempo, creating a peaceful and beautiful atmosphere, foreshadowing her longing and expectation for love. Her singing voice is crisp and bright, like the chirping of birds in spring, revealing her pure kindness and her romantic fantasy of her future married life with Pinkerton. At this moment, the music portrays her as a pure and innocent girl immersed in a dream of love.

The aria "*Unbeldi vedremo*" brings the opera to a climax, highlighting the heroine Cio-Cio-San's firm belief in love. Puccini's opera is distinct from the creations of previous composers, as he places greater emphasis on the human voice in his operas.

This aria appears in the second act of the opera. The servant, Suzuki, sees through everything, cries for her infatuation, and advises her to give up, expressing Pinkerton's voice that he will never return. However, Cio-Cio-San is extremely angry at Suzuki's idea. During their dispute, *Madame Butterfly* sings this famous aria, conveying her belief and persistence, as well as her expectation for a better life.

This renowned aria has become a classic piece that must be performed by many sopranos in concerts. It is a lyrical song with a ternary form structure that includes recapitulation. From the character analysis, it is evident that the song alternates between reality and fantasy. It is a well-structured yet freely handled complex ternary form. (Table 1)

Table 1 The Musical structure of Aria "*Unbeldi vedremo*"

	Section A	Section B	Section C	Section A ¹
Bar	1-18	19-37	38-58	59-70
Key	^b G Major	^b b Minor	^b b Minor	^b G Major

From the score, it can be seen that the piece begins in the key of G flat major, with the starting note placed on G flat², giving the melody a dreamy quality. This melody is used to express Cio-Cio-San's waiting mood, as this scene is merely imagined by Cio-Cio-San herself. Therefore, the composer uses "p" (piano) and "andante" in terms of dynamics and tempo (Figure 2). The lyrics describe a clear day when a wisp of blue smoke rises leisurely on the distant sea, and a warship appears. The lyrics convey a sense of movement from far to near, which is mirrored in the melody.



Figure 2 Music score of "*Unbeldi vedremo*", Bar 1-2

Section A begins with a weak "p" and proceeds in a narrative tone. In the seventh bar, a "poco rall." (slightly slowing down) appears, followed by the B part of Section A. The melody has a dynamic of "p" and a tempo of "un poco mosso" (slightly faster).

Compared to Section A, Section B undergoes significant changes. In the music of Section B, a “2/4” time signature is used. The melodic structure is stable and static. Cio-Cio-San describes how she met her lover, standing on the hillside and watching him approach her step by step. This part mainly depicts *Madame Butterfly's* psychology. From the melodic structure, it can be seen that most of it uses repeated tones and long accompaniment notes. Using such a melody to portray *Madame Butterfly's* simple, innocent, and infatuated character is a basic technique of lyrical style. Subsequently, the melody enters Section C, the recitative part. The rhythm changes to “4/8”, and it is sung entirely in a speaking tone, using compact triplets to express the hostess's inner anxiety (Figure 3).

Section A¹ is a reprise of Section A, but it is a varied reprise, differing from the first part in texture. It consists of two sections and a recitative. The tonality returns to the key of Section A, G flat major. The final vocal climax falls in the recitative, "From now on, I don't have to worry about it anymore, and I will meet again with full loyalty and faith." The lyrics reveal Cio-Cio-San's infatuation and persistence in her beliefs. At the end of the music, it returns to G flat major.



Figure 3 Music score of “Unbeldi vedremo”, Bar 6-8

In the structure of this song, Puccini employs a rare octave interval from G flat² to G flat¹ in Section A. This creative method more effectively expresses Cio-Cio-San's mood at that time. In terms of harmony, common minor chords are used to enhance the lyricism of the melody. The orchestral accompaniment uses extremely simple accompaniment patterns and chords to set off the vocal part, integrating it well with the instrumental part. This musical construction has a dual effect: on the one hand, the combination of progressive pentatonic scales and coloratura techniques creates an auditory image of "a gentle little bird," which resonates with the Western stereotype of the East as "uncivilized." On the other hand, the limited vocal range (such as the octave interval from G flat² to G flat¹) and harmonic design (minor chords enhancing lyricism) confine the female voice within a paradigm of "gentleness and submissiveness," fulfilling the objectification mechanism of the "second sex" as described by Beauvoir.

Research has found that the stage visuals also reflect power discourses. In traditional opera versions, oriental symbols such as silk kimonos, folding fans, and lotus flowers are excessively piled up. For example, the graceful posture of Cio-Cio-San in a complete “kimono contrasts” visually with the rigid lines of Pinkerton's military uniform. The ritualized act of removing the kimono objectifies the oriental body as a spectacle. The stage setting, through the collage of ukiyo-e-style screens and exotic architecture, constructs an "imagined Orient" that is detached from the real Japanese society. This visual strategy, in collusion with the musical narrative, freezes the oriental woman as a cultural consumer product with a primitive sexual allure, completing the aesthetic conspiracy of colonialism and patriarchy.

2. Deconstruction of Power Dynamics in the Construction of Female Characters

The study reveals that the portrayal of Cio-Cio-San in *Madame Butterfly* is essentially a product of the interplay between colonial and patriarchal power dynamics within the Western discourse system. This dual oppression is deeply embedded in every narrative aspect of the character's fate.

2.1 Mechanism of Oppression Under Layered Identities

Cio-Cio-San's identity as an "Eastern woman" is subject to layered oppression. As an Easterner, she is objectified by the Western gaze as a "mysterious Other." As a woman, she is disciplined by patriarchal norms into the role of a "faithful concubine." This layering is manifested in the plot as her waiting for Pinkerton, which is not only a love narrative but also a metaphor for the "civilizing mission" of the West over the East. When Pinkerton returns with his American wife, Kate, the act of "taking the child away" symbolizes cultural imperialism over Eastern lineage. Cio-Cio-San's suicide is aestheticized as the "self-destruction of Eastern civilization."

2.2 Logic of Vocal and Bodily Discipline

From the perspective of feminist music criticism, Cio-Cio-San's vocal image is deliberately "feminized." In "*Unbeldi vedremo*," the tempo marking "poco rall." (slightly slowing down) combined with the "andante" rhythm, along with the imagery of "blue smoke rising" in the lyrics, transforms her waiting into a static aesthetic object. On stage, her bodily gestures, such as the fixed posture of gazing at the harbor, further alienate the Eastern female body into a "spectacular symbol." This treatment serves both the colonial imagination of the exotic and the patriarchal expectation of female "submissiveness."

2.3 Dual Oppression Framework of "Colonialism" and "Patriarchy"

The study concludes that Cio-Cio-San's character is a product of the intersection of Western colonial power and patriarchal power. Her fate narrative metaphorically represents the "salvation" and exploitation of the East by the West, while her suicide is aestheticized as the "self-destruction of Eastern civilization." The vocal and bodily treatments both feminize and symbolize her, satisfying Western exotic fantasies and aligning with patriarchal expectations of female demeanor. Based on these findings, this study proposes a dual oppression framework of "colonialism" and "patriarchy" (Figure 4).

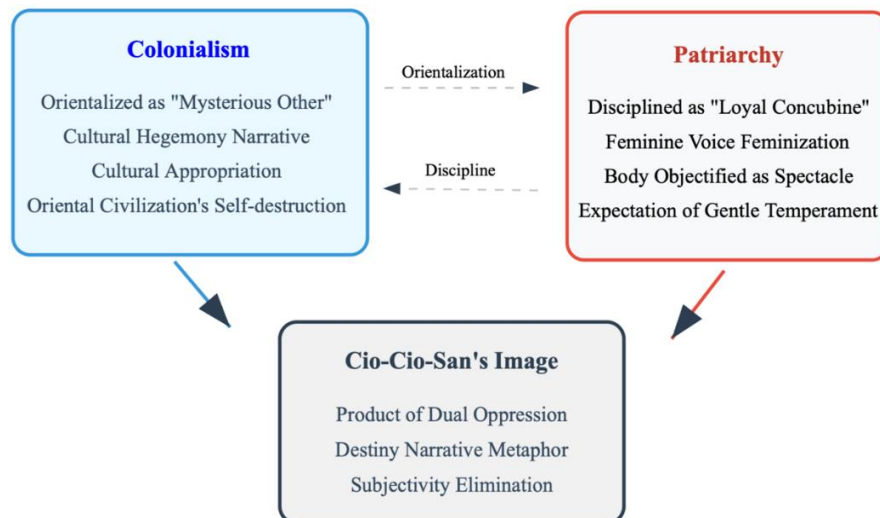


Figure 4 A Dual Oppression Framework of "Colonialism" and "Patriarchy"

Note: Constructed by the researcher

This framework reveals the deep construction mechanisms of Cio-Cio-San's character in *Madame Butterfly*. In the dimension of colonial power, Cio-Cio-San is objectified by the West as a "mysterious Other," with her identity alienated through hegemonic cultural narratives. Pinkerton's act of taking the child away symbolizes cultural imperialism, and her suicide is aestheticized as the "self-destruction of Eastern civilization." These elements collectively construct the West's colonial imagination of the East. From the perspective of patriarchy, patriarchal norms discipline Cio-Cio-San into the role of a "faithful concubine," feminizing her vocal image and alienating her body into a spectacular symbol through stage gestures, thereby reinforcing the expectation of female "submissiveness." Under the intertwined effects of these two powers, Cio-Cio-San's character becomes a product of the intersection of Western colonial and patriarchal



power. Her fate narrative metaphorically represents the “salvation” and exploitation of the East by the West, with her subjectivity erased.

This framework clearly presents the complex mechanisms of oppression embodied in Cio-Cio-San’s character. It highlights the dual disciplining and construction of the Eastern female image under the Western discourse system, and underscores how artistic forms carry and convey ideological discourses. It provides a profound and systematic perspective for understanding the portrayal of Eastern women in Western opera.

3. Feminist Narrative Breakthroughs in Contemporary Artistic Practice

In the contemporary wave of reinterpretation of classic texts, narrative innovation from a feminist perspective has become a key pathway to deconstruct the Orientalist gaze. Through bold transformations of musical expression and innovative integration of diverse elements, artists have successfully subverted the rigid portrayal of Eastern women in traditional opera.

3.1 Musical Deconstruction: From Lyric Illusion to Subjective Voice

In the 2018 production of "*Madame Butterfly*" by the British National Opera, the director made a highly subversive adaptation of the classic aria "A Sunny Day." Cio-Cio-San's performance shattered the "sweet illusion" constructed by traditional bel canto coloratura. The introduction of jazz syncopated rhythms, combined with the unique Sprechgesang (recitation) technique of German expressionism, endowed the originally lyrical melody with a sharp modernist hue. Meanwhile, the shrill interference sounds created by electronic sound effects pierced through the theater space, as if the colonial discourse system had cracked under the cry of female awakening. This fragmented deconstruction not only challenges Puccini's original Orientalist narrative but also, through the aesthetic reconstruction of sonic violence, liberates Cio-Cio-San from the gentle "butterfly" image, restoring her to an angry woman with a subjective consciousness.

3.2 Visual Reconstruction: From Holistic Romanticization to Fragmented Metaphor

The stage design of the 2019 production of "*Madame Butterfly*" by the Deutsche Oper Berlin was filled with subversive ingenuity. The director boldly cut and reorganized the dimensions of time and space. In the core scene, Cio-Cio-San always wore a simple, modern white dress, with smooth cuts and flowing fabric, presenting a Western minimalist aesthetic. Only in the montage-style memory scenes reflecting on past experiences did she don fragmented kimono pieces—faded silk collars, damaged belts, and torn hems. These deliberately deconstructed Eastern clothing elements, like fragments of cultural symbols floating in the river of memory, imply the process of Eastern identity being dismantled, reorganized, and alienated under the Western gaze. This approach breaks the traditional opera's narrative inertia of presenting the Eastern image as a whole and romanticized, instead using fragmented visual language to deconstruct the inherent imagination of Orientalism.

3.3 Exploring Narrative Transformation Pathways for the Contemporary “*Madame Butterfly*”

In the contemporary artistic context, the narrative transformation pathways of “*Madame Butterfly*” demonstrate diverse and profound explorations.

On one hand, from the perspective of a narrative viewpoint, contemporary adaptations often grant Cio-Cio-San greater subjectivity and a spirit of resistance. For example, some versions add more of Cio-Cio-San's inner monologues and flashback scenes, transforming her from a passive figure under the Western male gaze to one who clearly recognizes and resists her fate. Her waiting for Pinkerton is no longer merely infatuation; instead, she gradually discovers the truth of being deceived and ultimately faces the tragedy with a more resolute stance. In some versions, Cio-Cio-San chooses not to commit suicide but to leave the predicament with her child and start a new life, thereby subverting the traditional narrative stereotype of Eastern women as inherently weak and sacrificial.

On the other hand, the expansion of narrative themes is also an important pathway for transformation. Beyond love and betrayal, contemporary works incorporate more reflections on cross-cultural communication and identity. For example, some adaptations set the story in a modern multicultural city, using the relationship between Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton as a starting point to explore cultural





differences and identity conflicts. The audience can see Cio-Cio-San struggling to find herself between two cultures, neither fully adhering to Eastern traditions nor being simply defined by Western culture. This elevates the story beyond its original tragic framework to a profound reflection on individual identity in the globalized era.

Moreover, the innovative integration of narrative media offers new possibilities for transformation. Contemporary art often combines opera with multimedia technology, incorporating elements such as video and animation into stage performances. These media enrich the narrative layers of “*Madame Butterfly*.” For example, video can quickly display the life contrasts between Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton and the societal judgment of Cio-Cio-San, expanding the limitations of the stage space and allowing the audience to more comprehensively understand the complex factors behind the story. This also paves new ways for reinterpreting the image of Eastern women. These pathways have revitalized “*Madame Butterfly*” in the contemporary artistic context, making it a classic that continues to be redefined and interpreted.

Discussion

This study examines *Madame Butterfly* through a feminist lens, revealing the deep-seated mechanisms by which Western opera constructs the image of Eastern women through musical narrative and stage visuals. It fills the gap in interdisciplinary research and innovatively constructs a dual-oppression analytical framework of “colonialism” and “patriarchy,” systematically analyzing the symbiotic relationship between artistic forms and ideology. This framework, based on Orientalist and feminist theories, provides a new perspective for studying the portrayal of Eastern women in Western art. The study finds that the depiction of Eastern women in *Madame Butterfly* is not merely a cultural misreading but rather the result of the interplay between colonialism and patriarchy. The “feminization” of musical melodies and the “exoticization” of stage visuals jointly dissolve female subjectivity, echoing Beauvoir’s theory of the “second sex” and demonstrating how artistic forms can carry gendered power discourses. This finding alerts us to the potential of artistic creation to inadvertently reinforce cultural biases and gender inequality, and suggests that the cultural and artistic industries should be vigilant about ideological tendencies in their works to avoid perpetuating such stereotypical narratives. Unlike previous studies that focused on a single dimension—such as musical aspects (Liu, 2014) or broad cultural conflicts (Degabriele, 1996; He, 2016)—this research deconstructs the image of Eastern women from textual, musical, and stage perspectives and validates its theoretical value through contemporary adaptation cases, thereby expanding the depth and breadth of feminist and postcolonial analysis. While this study offers rich theoretical interpretations, it does not include empirical audience data, which may limit the generalizability of its conclusions. Future research could therefore incorporate questionnaires or in-depth interviews to explore the cognitive differences of audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, further refining the understanding of the opera’s communicative effects. Moreover, in the context of the digital media age, virtual reality technology and transnational collaborative creations could offer new narrative strategies for opera adaptation, promoting more equal and diverse cultural dialogues. These approaches would open additional pathways for cross-cultural artistic research and advance equality and mutual learning in global cultural exchanges.

Conclusion

This study has conducted an in-depth analysis of the opera *Madame Butterfly* from a feminist perspective, arriving at the core conclusion that the portrayal of Cio-Cio-San as an Eastern woman is a product of the interwoven oppression of Western colonialism and patriarchy. In terms of methodology, this research innovatively constructs a dual-oppression analytical framework of “colonialism” and “patriarchy.” By integrating literature review and interdisciplinary deconstruction strategies, it systematically reveals how musical narrative and stage visuals jointly discipline the image of Eastern women. This approach provides a new pathway for cross-cultural artistic research, effectively addressing the shortcomings of





previous studies in interdisciplinary integration and deepening the understanding of the mechanisms behind the construction of Eastern female images in Western art.

On the theoretical level, this study enriches the intersectional research content of feminist and postcolonial theories, offering an empirical case for exploring how artistic forms carry ideological discourses. In practice, it provides a critical perspective for opera creation and adaptation, alerting creators to avoid reinforcing cultural biases and gender inequality. For instance, contemporary adaptations can empower Cio-Cio-San with greater subjectivity, expand narrative themes to include cross-cultural communication and identity, or integrate multimedia technology to innovate storytelling, thereby breaking the traditional stereotypes of Eastern women.

Future research is recommended to further validate the applicability of this framework to other Western classic artworks and to enhance the understanding of artistic communication effects through audience surveys. Additionally, exploring the use of emerging technologies such as virtual reality to enhance audience perception of the subjectivity of Eastern women can promote equality and mutual learning in global cultural exchanges. This will support the deep integration and innovative development of feminist narratives in the arts, continuously expanding the boundaries of cross-cultural artistic research.

Recommendations

Future research may deepen the study in the following areas:

1. Enhancing Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Future studies should collaborate with disciplines such as sociology and history to comprehensively analyze the evolution of the portrayal of Eastern women. Although this research has constructed a dual-oppression framework of "colonialism" and "patriarchy," there is still room for deeper interdisciplinary integration. For example, collaborating with sociology to survey audience perceptions of Eastern female images across different periods could more accurately identify the mechanisms behind the formation of cultural biases.

2. Optimizing Research Techniques

Introducing big data analysis and artificial intelligence to conduct quantitative analysis and pattern recognition of opera texts, music, and stage elements can precisely identify the patterns of Eastern female image construction, avoiding the subjectivity of pure textual analysis. For instance, using artificial intelligence algorithms to uncover hidden emotional patterns in musical melodies can verify their association with gender power.

3. Expanding Cultural Communication Studies

The portrayal of Cio-Cio-San varies across different cultural contexts. It is recommended to conduct comparative studies across nations, analyzing the dissemination and reception of her image in regions such as Asia and Africa. Additionally, strengthening artistic collaborations with Eastern countries can promote diverse constructions of Eastern female images and foster equality and mutual learning in cross-cultural exchanges.

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