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Literature Examined under the Diasporic Lens: Emotional Diaspora Present in *Madame Butterfly*

Doyeun Kwak¹, Junggyung Song²

ABSTRACT

The typical myth of a Caucasian man and an Asian woman's romance ends with tragedy, and this story is well versed in literature including *Madame Butterfly* by John Luther Long. In this story, Cho-Cho San, a young Japanese girl waits patiently for her American husband who betrayed her. However, the novel contains more than such myth in the aspect that it portrays emotional diasporic experience of an individual not falling directly into conventional diaspora criteria. Traditionally, diaspora mainly revolves around the notion of a home land, senses of alienation, maladjustment and communally shared experiences in foreign land. However, with the increase in international dislocations, there is paradigm shift in defining diaspora. It does not only envelop people in geographical displacement but in emotional, situational displacements. In this study, I hope to review the point that diaspora can occur to individuals who might not be geographically apart from their home land but are emotionally displaced due to different situational circumstances, which can be termed "emotional diaspora". In *Madame Butterfly*, emotional diaspora occurs in Cho-Cho San who is displaced from Japanese society and confined in the walls of Pinkerton's house which creates a particular diasporic experience for her. Therefore, through *Madame Butterfly* it can be suggested that the key stone of diaspora is the emotional displacement from whichever society one is in, not only confined by home land/ foreign land segregation or communal experiences of people in the same circumstance.

Keywords: Diaspora studies, emotional diaspora, geographical/emotional experiences, madame butterfly.

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¹ Department of English Literature, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, Email: pinkwabbit@hanmail.net.

² Department of English Literature, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, Email: sidof@daum.net.

1.0 Introduction: Madame Butterfly

Madame Butterfly is a love story between a Caucasian man and an Asian woman. The man leaves the woman, the woman waits for the man who will never return. It is a familiar story to the point of a cliché, just as Pinkerton protests that he has heard Sayre's story of the Pink Geisha—which foreshadows the story of *Madame Butterfly* - “a thousand times” (Long, 2002, p.29). Indeed the story has been told a thousand times, from Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysantheme* (2006) to the various butterfly narratives that John Luther Long has started. Pierre Loti whose real name is Julian Viaud was a French novelist and navy officer who was stationed in Nagasaki after the Japanese treaty with America to open up their ports. Here, he had a relationship with a geisha which became the main plot of *Madame Chrysantheme* (2006). This book is significant in the aspect that it has been the very first mentioning of a relationship between Western man and Asian woman (Rij, 2001, p.33).

Long's *Madame Butterfly* (1898) is said to be inspired and stem from the major themes from *Madame Chrysantheme* (2006). The numerously adapted short story describes the life of a Japanese geisha after her marriage with an American lieutenant who has left her. This was the time when there were fanaticism about Orientals (Columbia edu, 2015) especially about the exotic Japanese and people ate it up as “hot cakes” (Rij, 2001, p.74).³ Interestingly, Long has never set foot in Japan or been near Asia at all, but has heard stories of letters from his sister Jennie Correll who has been to Japan with her husband over a missionary project.

For these reasons, the novel has been frequently argued by post-colonialists and feminists that it is merely a depiction of a Western male phantasy on the submissive Oriental woman.⁴ On the other hand, it might just have been a mere depiction of the cruel reality of colonialism and that Long was simply telling the “real” story told by his sister on the reality of Westerners in Japan, as supported by various evidences of added elements in the story (Rij, 2001, p.74).⁵ Critics such as Rij (2001) support the view that *Madame Butterfly* might have been intended as a moral story and have been trying to assess the depiction of Western male and Asian female relationship.

The female protagonist, Cho-Cho San, is a young Japanese girl who is waiting for her American husband Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton who promised her to return. Although the tragic story of the mythicized relationship of Caucasian and Asian is what makes *Madame Butterfly* famous, the “emotional diasporic sensibility” experienced by Cho-Cho San is another interesting feature worth examining. Diaspora encompasses different people in different situations and the notion is widening, hence a deeper insight into the diasporic sensibility and its specification is necessary. Therefore, as a section of diaspora, this paper aims to do detailed research into emotional diaspora and its causations, signs and results in *Madame Butterfly*. I will first look into theories about diaspora, then analyze the work with focus on her diasporic sensibility rather than her location. Such study will not only widen diaspora discourse but deepen the understanding of *Madame Butterfly*.

2.0 What is Diaspora? Expanding studies of Diaspora

Diaspora, as mentioned earlier is a concept that has its roots in the famous dislocation of Jews from Israel. Now, the term has widened to include any kind of movement of scattered population into a

³ As opposed to the Chinese who were more associated with the poor laborers.

⁴ Perhaps this could be argued because on the later editions of the book, *Butterfly* does develop a sense of sexuality and seduction, whereas in the earlier versions, it is said to be more of a moral tale.

⁵ Long includes various pieces to alert the American conscience on the treatment of Japanese women and also the reality at the opening of the ports in need of abolition of unequal treaties between US and Japan. For instance, the vice-consul's indignation on Pinkerton's misleading behavior and trying to help Cho-Cho San deal with the situation.

smaller area and the movement of people from their original home land. As Band (1996) and Brubaker (2005) explains, diaspora focuses on the feeling of the individual—such as Band (1996) focuses on the “otherness” felt in the nation-land and Brubaker (2005) says diaspora is more of a border over people rather than people over borders. Diaspora proliferated in history through different purposes; through slavery in imperialism, trading of manual labor and the diaspora of intellectuals after eras of post-colonialism. There are many discourses on the topic of diaspora but one key notion that pops up in every discourse was the notion of the “home land” as that four of six criterion produced by Safran (1991) revolves around the notion of the home land. The criteria include other aspects as well; a sense of displacement, memories/yearning for the home land, wishes to assimilate into the host land, communally shared experience so on. This is especially visible in the diasporic experience of the Chinese immigrants in America where they have created Chinatown in their need for a sense of the home land and share communal experiences.

3.0 Transition in Diaspora theories: Traditional studies to modern studies

However, the multitude of diasporic studies have widened due to increase in international relocations, travelling and the improvement of transportation. For instance, as Berns-McGown (2007) says “to be in the diaspora is to perceive oneself as linked to multiple places and to hold a complex identity that balances one’s understanding of those places and the way one fits into each of them”. The notion of diaspora has moved from the original, strict form of definition into a more linear definition that can encompass more variety of “conditions” (Brubaker 2005, p.4) and more toward the experience and feelings of an individual “that exceeds any causal link to travel, movement, or displacement” which is “a defining component of contemporary diaspora scholarship” (Campt & Thomas, 2008, p.2).

With these widened definitions, diaspora can be inclined so far as a person might not necessarily be in a geographically displaced situation but rather feel an emotional displacement so strong that it is a diaspora in itself. Even in the old diaspora discourse, another thing besides the notion of a home land—which actually not always present, as four out of six criterion of Safran’s (1991) criteria shows—that always declared a diasporic condition was a person’s emotional condition, one’s sense of diaspora that makes one feel alienation and isolation from one’s current society which may or may not be a different nation. Some may say that this is can be simply termed displacement, however, one key difference from simple displacement is that in diaspora, the individual is put in a special setting that is completely different from their previous place in some aspects which creates the feeling that one is displaced in different place, with their true home nation somewhere else. Emotional diaspora can occur to individuals who may not have necessarily left the nation but put in a spatial dimension that makes them feel displaced in a different nation.⁶ The feeling that shares similarities with displacement and also a person in diasporic sensibility could be named “emotional diaspora”.

The feeling of diaspora occurs to people of weaker, minority and unfamiliar nature to one’s new geographical situation which leads to maladjustment to the local environment. Emotional diaspora is the same, but without the necessity of having to leave the literal home land, but feel as if one is misplaced in a foreign space. Causation of both classic diaspora and emotional diaspora show that the one under diasporic sensibility is in an inferior position in at least one aspect. A superior person would seldom be under diasporic sensibility because those unfamiliar inferior others would serve him, following the natural power dynamics. It is the weaker one placed in an environment where it is not only unfamiliar but also placed under the rules of the new environment, which inevitably results in a feeling of alienation, maladjustment into the new environment defined as emotional diaspora.

⁶ Such as Cho-Cho San’s moving into Pinkerton’s house which creates a different space from that of Cho-Cho San’s home in Japan.

4.0 *Madame Butterfly* and modern Diaspora theories

Madame Butterfly in this sense, is a novel that captures the essence of modern diaspora theories well. Interestingly, *Madame Butterfly* captures such diasporic experience of not Pinkerton—who is actually the alienated—but Cho-Cho San. Following the traditional terminology of diaspora, it should be Pinkerton who feels diaspora in the foreign land of Japan, without friends or adequate assimilation to Japanese culture. However, he cannot be more comfortable in Japan to the point he is arrogant. The way he thinks of Japan is evident in his treatment of the other characters. “He could not understand how important this concession was to her. It must be confessed that he did not try to understand” (Long, 2006, p.32). Also Pinkerton disdains upon his wife by calling her an American refinement of a Japanese product, an American improvement on a Japanese invention (Long, 2006, p.36). She is just an entertaining product for him, just as their marriage was.

The satiric critique of the Japan fashion by Gilbert and Sullivan in both *The Mikado* and *Patience* are one example; *Madame Butterfly* itself suggests disapproval of Americans who think of the Japanese as “pretty playthings” and of their culture as throwaway and unworthy of consideration. (Xroads.virginia.edu, 2015)

Pinkerton is an older Western male who is a lieutenant and with obvious wealth –enough to buy the house he will only stay temporarily and renovate it to his wishes—and this precludes him from becoming like other diasporic people. Pinkerton has American imperialism covering him up⁷ whereas Cho-Cho San is the ultimate inferior subject in terms of gender, age and race. Their different positions are due to the different power dynamics of “images of binary opposition” (Skloot, 1990, p.60). She is just a teenager who has not experienced the world, her whole world being the geisha society and her family. If those reasons were not enough for Pinkerton to dominate her, the classic division between their gender and race bring her to her knees as to that she has been pushed to feel diaspora within her nation. As Yoshihara (2004) says⁸, Pinkerton is in every way superior to the Japanese, especially Cho-Cho San, who experiences diaspora initiated by him.

Through the examination of the story, diasporic sensibility does not only occur on someplace far from home but its main cause is the feeling of alienation by imbalance in power between the person feeling diasporic sensibility and the person who insinuate it. Modern diaspora theory looks as far as inter-state diaspora and that the geography in diaspora is becoming less of importance. On par with the modern diaspora theory, *Madame Butterfly* can be said to show characters that experience diaspora regardless of their geography or environment but through imbalance in the power dynamics.

As mentioned earlier, diaspora occurs when there is a power imbalance between the person insinuating diaspora and the person who is forced into diaspora. This is the case that is consistently present throughout the classic diaspora studies and the modern diaspora studies. In the classical sense of diaspora a person needs to move to another country where the person is more or less the in the minority group and due to such reasons, is put under diasporic sensibility enforced by the dominant culture. In the modern definition of diaspora as well, a person is put under an inferior position, but the difference is that it needn’t occur in a new country, but in a defined space where a person can be put under diaspora.

5.0 *Diaspora discourse: Diminishing notion of a “Home land” in Madame Butterfly*

According to classic diaspora theory, Pinkerton should feel diaspora but it is Cho-Cho San who

⁷ The unequal treaties were still used during trades between Japan and US, further compromising the power balance that was already unequal.

⁸ “The narrative exemplified the gendered dynamics of East-West relations founded upon unequal power relations (Yoshihara, 2004, p.975).

experience diaspora, more specifically “emotional diaspora”. Although she is physically in Japan, her homeland, she seems to be emotionally displaced in a foreign land. Her displacement is visualized through her home with Pinkerton, which is an interesting space that works to confine Cho-Cho San in an alienated world. The house is designed in a Japanese style but “with their own adaptations of American hardware, the openings cunningly lockable” (Long, 2006, p.31). It acts as a bridge between the West and the East but a closed bridge in the sense that only Pinkerton can “keep out those who are out, and in those who are in” (Long, 2006, p.31). The house is a visual reflection of Berns-McGown’s definition of diaspora as “best defined as a space of connections —connections in two dimensions” (Berns-McGown 2007, p.8). The house acts as the medium of connection- of imaginary America and hostile Japan—in which Cho-Cho San is removed from latter to prior. The fact that Cho-Cho San will experience emotional diaspora is set by the structure of the house where everything is designed and furnished to Pinkerton’s satisfaction not Cho-Cho San’s. The house is a “little America” with American language, American culture, rules and even currency.

In the closed off American house of Pinkerton, Cho-Cho San is alienated as she is disowned by her relatives. As an outcast, “nobody speaks to me [her] no more” (Long, 2006, p.35) and she “cannot go ome at my [her] grandmother” (Long, 2006, p.42-43). Her alienation was initiated by Pinkerton who drove her relatives away by mocking them and shunning them out from the house, but the alienation is internalized within Cho-Cho San when she makes herself the mistress of the house and sets further rules that further isolates her from the Japanese society—such as the only speaking English rule—which in turn makes Japanese society isolate her. Cho-Cho San’s apparent alienation combined with her memories of home land suffices the diaspora criteria of one under diaspora having memories of the home land—not geographically, but emotionally. She voluntarily isolates Japanese culture but since the initiation was involuntary, she cannot help but have self-denied yearnings for the society that she shut out and which shut her out. This yearning is apparent through her English expressions which are seemingly Japanese. She uses expressions such as “the Sun-Goddess sent him straight from the Bridge of Heaven” (Long, 2006, p.38) which follow the typical Asian way of speaking metaphorically. Also the fact that even when she wanted to leave their home she did not want to displease her ancestors shows that her paradigm still contains Japanese culture.

Furthermore, Cho-Cho San’s wish to assimilate into the host land is a sign of a person in diaspora. The host land being United States of America, she insists that everybody speak “United States’ language” (Long, 2006, p.38) in the house. She aspires that when Pinkerton comes back, he will be so impressed with their English skills that he will take them to America. With this fragile wish, Cho-Cho San keeps the house exactly as Pinkerton left it. Although her efforts are notable, it is futile. Just as with many diasporic people had in the beginning, the aspirations of the host land is wrongly informed and dreamt. It is never the friendly, full of opportunity, new land of hopes but it is just another society just like the one home only with additional hardships. Cho-Cho San’s wish that she will be taken to American castle is futile since there are no castle’s in America and certainly not for “Missus Ben-ja-meen Frang-a-leen Pikkerton” (Long, 2006, p.46). She also tries hard to assimilate into imaginary America represented in Pinkerton’s house as Greenwald notes, “Butterfly’s ties to the house are both inward and cultural” (Greenwald, 2000, p.247). Cho-Cho-San, upon Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton’s demands, adopts Christianity and English, in a sense preparing herself to be not only sexually but nationally absorbed by Americanism (Stanley, 2007, p. 258). As a result, Cho-Cho San is further alienated from the locals to the point that they receive her differently; “with the odious lack of ceremony her independent life with Pinkerton had bred. She was imperially different. The go-between pointed out how sad this was to as beautiful a woman as she (Long, 2006, p.48).

Moreover, as people in diaspora often do, Cho-Cho San tries to fit herself in the host land whilst conjuring up false dreams about life in the host land. She imagines that when Pinkerton take them to America, they will be living in his castle and never leave again. However, in the reality of America, there is no such home, let alone a castle for them. Cho-Cho San thinks she is “Missus Ben-ja-meen Frang-a-leen Pikkerton” (Long, 2006, p.46) but Mrs. Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton already exists. To endure the

life of alienation, seclusion and neglect, she has created a false image of her life in the host land to keep the strength, just as diasporic population do. Cho-Cho San's effort is even more pitiful because she is not even under a literal diaspora but since she is not physically in America she seeks to align her emotional diaspora with her physical surroundings by escaping to America and also escape the people who don't understand her.

6.0 Conclusion

Although Cho-Cho San's wishes to assimilate in American culture are as strong as to adopt all that's American, and such efforts result in placing her in a diasporic bubble away from the locals, it is not enough to actually place her in literal America. Her effort and achievement tragically appears in a heap of broken language she insists in using. Most of the dialogue—which is in fact most of the novella- is in broken, mis-pronounced “garbled pigeon English” that visibly show Cho-Cho San's inability to assimilate fully into the host land while showing her determination and aspirations toward her dream (Wisenthal, 2006, p.60). Her failed efforts to assimilate into the host land also results in ridicule from the locals which further reinforces her diasporic situation in the land of Japan.

Looking at Cho-Cho San, it is seemingly ironic that a person who is in her native land shares the same experience as the Chinese in America or Jews out of Israel. They have been forced to settle in the host land as the diasporic community with failures in their process of adjustment. The Chinese who moved to in America on labor trade for instance, had to suffer discrimination in terms of politics by being put under all citizens including American women, as women's vote was passed before the Chinese citizens'. Signs of racism from host land and even between other diasporic communities persisted for decades. Although much of the discrimination or “othering” against Chinese diasporic community has thawed significantly, it would be mistaken to say it was a simple transition. The diasporic community had to face external and internal struggles that came from settling into a new environment.

External conflicts are nonetheless hard to overcome and provide the prior conditions for diaspora to occur in an individual. However, it is the internal conflicts that truly define a diasporic condition. As Band (1996) says, diaspora is an “emotionally charged” term and in fact only occurs to individuals who feel the particular emotional condition of feeling as if one's home land is somewhere else. The essence of diaspora is arguably the emotional, sensational experience that differentiates one.

The contemporary global societies are no longer confined by territorial boundaries with the rapid development of transportation and more importantly, communication. On the internet the boundary disappears almost completely and we can basically go anywhere we wish territorially. Cultures become merged with each other and there is cultural imperialism as well that makes an increased amount numbers of people diasporic. In addition, there are multiple inter-state migration communities for reasons of education or occupation who are not met with adequate attention. If these communities of people were to be studied in the lens of “emotional diaspora”, it will address their problems in adjustment more efficiently on an individual level. Further studies into emotional diaspora could open wider understanding of social phenomena and reduce possible conflicts related to diasporic communities. In that sense, it is worthwhile to look at literary evidences to trace in what situations and how individuals experience such emotional diaspora, as in with *Madame Butterfly*.

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