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Sushree Peacock Writer's Commentary

My opera libretto, *Sushree Peacock*, is an adaptation of Illica and Giacosa's *Madame Butterfly*. Several operatic themes from *Madame Butterfly* are analyzed through a different lens as the setting has changed from Nagasaki, Japan to Kerala, India. The title, gender switching, and exclusion of certain parts contribute to the cultural context of my libretto, and the general theme of being driven by love, both passionate and friendly, give reasons behind the characters' actions.

The title of this libretto is significant because of the animal chosen to represent the protagonist, Maya. I decided to have a peacock represent her instead of a butterfly and the main reason for this change is due to of the different ways women were viewed in Kerala as compared to women in Nagasaki. In Kerala, women were regarded as higher class citizens and were more respected because Kerala is a matrilineal society. In comparison, women in Nagasaki were considered harmless, domestic creatures much like a butterfly. I believed that a butterfly was too innocent and powerless of an animal to describe a woman such as Maya living in Kerala. I chose a peacock for Maya because while they are beautiful and majestic, they would still be considered to be strong-willed animals and powerful protectors. In addition to that, peacocks are the national bird of India.

Related to the animal phenomenon, almost everyone in *Madame Butterfly* refers to Cio-Cio-san, the protagonist, as "Butterfly" during the performance. I changed this trend for my libretto to show that Maya will not be reduced to having the name of an animal. The only character that attempts to call her peacock is William Powers, and this only happens one time.

There is a common theme in literature of men reducing women to animals as a way to assert their dominance. I actively avoided allowing Maya to fall into this trap of overt male dominance.

There is also significance in Maya having a daughter rather than a son. This is related to the fact that Kerala is a matrilineal society, and all of Maya's inheritance, property, and surname would all be passed down to Priya. Since William Powers is not accustomed to the ways of Kerala, he would not know that bringing Priya back to England with him would be detrimental to the lineage of Maya's family, if she was unable to have more children. That is one of the reasons why I changed the ending of the opera. Instead of having a mainstream operatic ending where the female dies, I wanted a more progressive ending. This ending includes not only a female living, but her life is better because of the actions from another strong female role. In *Sushree Peasock*, Sami stand up to Powers, allowing Maya to keep her daughter Priya, who will eventually receive all of Maya's inheritance.

Another common theme found in operas that is represented in my libretto is women being driven mad by love. In *Sushree Peacock*, Maya is so overwhelmed and consumed by her love for Powers that she takes drastic measures because of her affection. For example, she decides to convert from Hinduism to Christianity within the first day of meeting Powers. This is a drastic change in her life, and Maya changing her religion means that she is losing a part of her history and identity. All of the gods that she has spent her whole life praying too are no longer important to her because she thinks that converting will make Powers love her even more. She completely neglects the advice from Sami, who has been Maya's ladies maid for her entire life, just so that she may please her husband.

Areas where my opera libretto diverts off the path of *Madame Butterfly* are the length and number of characters. I cut certain scenes and characters for different reasons. Characters such as

Bonze, Yakuside, and Cio-Cio-san's mother were completely neglected in my opera because I did not feel like they were crucial to the plot, and I was able to make do without them. Other scenes were cut because they did not align with the cultural context in Kerala. For example, there is no act in India that parallels seppuku, so it would not make sense that Maya or her father would have killed themselves by a dagger to the stomach. In addition, the page limit was a constraining factor that limited my ability to include certain scenes. To account for that, I skipped some scenes and sped through others so that I could expand on the elements that captured the meaning, the complex emotions, and relationship strife.

As a character, Maya is motivated by love. She falls too quickly and too hard for William. In the beginning, he seems to be quite keen on the idea of having an Indian bride, but Maya is never let in on the secret that she is only a temporary woman to fill the void of females in his life during his time in India. It seemed as though Powers was in a fleeting sort of love with Maya, however, it becomes clear that his intentions were always to go back to England and find himself a proper British wife.

Sami is motivated by her love for Maya and wanting what is best for Maya. Since Sami has been a ladies maid for Maya's entire life, it is clear that they have a close connection. As seen in other operas, such as *Marriage of Figaro*, there is a special, unbreakable bond between a woman and her ladies maid. This is due to the intimacy and time these women spend with one another. Even when Maya was frustrated with Sami for criticizing her religious conversion, Sami still stayed with Maya and supported her through her mistakes. In the end, Maya's success can be attributed to the actions of Sami and the amount that Sami loved and cared about Maya.