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## ABSTRACT

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* tells about a French diplomat, Gallimard, who has a 20 year relationship with his Chinese lover, Song, who turns out to be a male spy. Gallimard, representing the West, has the western rape mentality toward the East represented by Song, who is positioned as the submissive other. *M. Butterfly* plays with the notion of gender by presenting the relationship between Gallimard and Song that destabilizes gender and the binary of not only masculinity and femininity but also power and susceptibility. It also challenges the binary opposition between the East and the West.

Key words: gender, the other, western rape mentality, the East, the West

### A. Introduction

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* had its premiere on February 10, 1988 at the National Theater in Washington D.C. The play received numerous awards, including the Tony Award for Best Play of the Year, the New York Drama Desk Award for the best new play, and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Broadway play. The play was inspired by the trial of a French diplomat who was accused of espionage for China. Bouriscot, the French diplomat, lived together with Mr. Shi Pei-pu, a Chinese opera singer, for twenty years. He found out in the court that Mr. Shi Pei-pu, who he thought was a woman, was actually a man. Hwang recalls: "I was driving down Santa Monica Boulevard one afternoon, and asked myself, 'What did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?' The answer came to me clearly: 'He probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly'" (95). For those who have not heard about Madame Butterfly, what Hwang refers to is the Puccini opera *Madame Butterfly* that tells about a Japanese woman who sacrifices everything, even her life, for her American husband who abandons her. *Madame Butterfly* presents a cultural stereotype of an Oriental woman who is submissive to and ill-treated by a cruel Caucasian man. Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, however, reverses the said cultural stereotype.

The play *M. Butterfly* opens with the ex-diplomat Gallimard in a French prison. Gallimard walks the audience through his life, and he comments on himself. Gallimard tells his story, in a narration which jumps back and forward in time, about his relationship with Song Liling, a Chinese

ing after she performs the excerpt from *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard is impressed by Song's performance. They soon become lovers. Believing that he is a Western man succeeding in conquering an Oriental woman, Gallimard convinces the French Ambassador Toulon that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (46), asserting that the Vietnamese will welcome the Americans and submit to American will. Gallimard is proven to be wrong, and he is sent back to Paris. Bringing their supposed son, Song reunites with Gallimard in Paris. They live together for twenty years, at the end of which Gallimard finds out that Song is a Chinese spy and a man. Tried for espionage, Gallimard is sent to prison. The play ends with Gallimard in his prison cell committing suicide with Song standing as a man in Armani slacks and smoking a cigarette.

Gender and race intertwine in the play and are represented by the relationships between male and female characters. Wilchins defines gender as "a system of meanings and symbols and the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use for power and sexuality: masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness" (25). *M. Butterfly* plays with the notion of gender by presenting the relationship between Gallimard and Song that destabilizes gender and the binary of not only masculinity and femininity but also power and susceptibility.

## **B. Gender and Power Relations in *M Butterfly***

The first encounter between Gallimard and Song happens after Song performs the excerpt from *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard comments on the beauty of the story:

GALLIMARD. Of her death. It's a . . . a pure sacrifice. He's unworthy, but what can she do? She loves him . . . so much. It's a very beautiful story.

SONG. Well, yes, to a Westener.

GALLIMARD. Excuse me?

SONG. It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man (17).

is the power relation between a man and a woman: the man being the active and dominant while the woman being passive and submissive. On the other hand, it represents the power relation of the West and the East with the West represented by the man and the East by the woman. Song points out to Gallimard that if the story happened the other way around, with an American homecoming queen being fooled by a cruel Japanese businessman, Gallimard would not find it beautiful. Yet it does not stop Gallimard from living the fantasy in his relationship with Song.

Because Song is performing Madame Butterfly and is wearing a dress when she meets Gallimard, Gallimard seems to take it for granted that Song is a woman. When Song invites Gallimard to watch her at a Peking Opera, however, Gallimard should have known that Song is a man. Men playing women is common to Western theater tradition: men played women characters in Shakespeare's plays. In Eastern theaters such as Chinese opera, Japanese Kabuki, and Indonesian Ludruk, men also play women. Yet Gallimard is not only ignorant of the fact but also captivated by the fantasy of a dominant Western man and a submissive Oriental woman in his relationship with Song.

After their first meeting, Gallimard visits Song in the Beijing Opera for fifteen weeks consecutively. Song keeps the meeting short which results in Gallimard's intense attraction. Gallimard is then determined to experiment with his belief of the stereotype of Madame Butterfly:

GALLIMARD. Over the next five weeks, I worked like a dynamo. I stopped going to the opera, I didn't phone or write her. I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call, and, as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt for the first time that rush of power – the absolute power of a man (32).

Gallimard's experiment strengthens his belief of the superiority of a Western man over an inferior Oriental woman. He succeeds with his experiment as Song keeps on writing letters begging him to come, finally saying that "I have given you my shame" (35). His intentional refusal to meet Song and Song's plea to meet him gradually make Gallimard perform the masculine dominant role.

Gallimard's confident in having "the absolute power of a man" affect his work performance. As Gallimard puts more effort in his job, he performs the best. He is rewarded with a promotion into a

comes to meet Song for the first time after several weeks, is determined to hear Song's submission. To assure his masculine dominant superiority, Gallimard needs Song to be the feminine, submissive, inferior Other. Once Song submits, Gallimard never calls Song with her name, instead he calls her Butterfly.

The notion of woman as "the other" was proposed by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book, *The Second Sex*. Woman is defined as not a man: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute & she is the Other" (xvi). Man sets himself up as the standard, and he defines what it is to be woman. Woman is associated with all the feminine qualities, such as being passive and submissive. The notion of man being the subject and woman the other finds its application in the relationship between Gallimard and Song, at least from Gallimard's point of view. He sets the standard for a perfect woman and imposes it on Song. Gallimard says, on his relationship with Song while they are in China: "She would always have prepared a light snack and then, ever so delicately, and only if I agreed, she would start to pleasure me" (49). It suggests that Gallimard is the Subject who decides what to do, and Song must follow. Even when Song wants to please Gallimard, it should be after he gives his consent. Gallimard also implies that because he works outside, Song has to wait for him at home and is not supposed to complain.

Beauvoir believed that women were constructed to be feminine through social indoctrination. She laid the foundation which distinguished sex from gender when she said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267). This suggests that a woman gradually acquires her gender, a key aspect of her identity, through a socially constructed experience. Schechner echoes Beauvoir's idea when he says, in terms of performance, "Each individual from an early age learns to perform gender-specific vocal inflections, facial displays, gestures, walks, and erotic behavior as well as how to select, modify and use scents, body shapes and adornments, clothing, and all other gender markings of a given society" (131). In this sense, gender identity is a social construct. As Gallimard's lover, Song is always portrayed occupying domestic sphere. Song is the one who serves Gallimard: pouring his tea, serving his food, and pleasing him. On the other hand, Gallimard is constantly portrayed in public

his career improvement in the French embassy. He is out while Song waits patiently at home.

Knowing Gallimard's fantasy of an Oriental woman, Song performs her best to be one for Gallimard, acting as a modest, embarrassed, and timid woman and performing a submissive Oriental woman. Song's performance must have been very convincing that Gallimard says, "I know she has an interest in me. I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education" (27). Thus Gallimard believes that Western education that enables Song to be bold and outspoken due will not able to beat her Oriental nature. The East is believed to be submissive and compliant to the West.

Although *M. Butterfly* suggests that gender, and even sexuality, is a construct, the play also challenges the notion of gender. In a scene between Song and Comrade Chin, the binary between masculinity and femininity is challenged. There is Song, whom the audience knows as a man, wearing a dress and acting feminine. Comrade Chin, the biological female, on the other hand is not wearing a dress, and she does not act feminine. Chin complicates gender because her performance is more androgynous. Answering her own question that she addresses to Comrade Chin about why in the Peking opera women's roles are played by men, Song says, "Only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (63). In her relationship with Gallimard, Song plays the ideal woman that Gallimard has fallen in love with.

The play *M. Butterfly* challenges the binary of masculine and feminine by presenting a Danish student character Renee. Although Gallimard keeps this extra-extra-marital affair with Renee for several months, he comments on Renee: "It is possible for a woman to be too open, so as to seem almost too masculine" (54). Of this scene, Hwang comments, "That the concept of femininity is false to the core. The fact that you have a real woman who acts 'masculine,' and a man who acts 'feminine' is the ultimate irony. So that was one purpose for the scene, to show the difference in what we perceive to be the Western woman and what we perceive to be the Eastern woman" (DiGaetani 148). Renee, the Western woman, is not Gallimard's real object of desire. Gallimard confirms, "I kept up our affair because of Butterfly. It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee" (56). Through his affair with Renee, Gallimard exercises his power over Butterfly.

air, but unlike a Western woman, Song just cries and keeps  
with the stereotypical image of Oriental woman who is  
passive, submissive and obedient.

### C. Gender and the Challenge to the Binary Opposition between the East and the West

*M Butterfly* informs Song's gender identity as a man since the very beginning. However, the play also suggests the ambiguity of Song's identity. Song is always performing. As an actor, Song performs women on stage in the Western opera *Madame Butterfly* and in the Chinese opera. As Gallimard's lover, she plays a submissive oriental woman. As a spy for the Chinese government, Song impersonates a woman to help her conduct her assignment. In the courtroom, Song performs as a homosexual man in a Western suit.

That the audience never sees Song's penis strengthens Song's ambiguous identity. On stage, Hwang chooses not to show Song's penis because: "At that point in the play it's very important to focus on Gallimard's reaction rather than to focus on Song Liling's penis. So we decided to stage the scene the way we did, with Song Liling downstage and Gallimard upstage where we were basically seeing his reaction, because that really is the important thing at that moment" (DiGaetani 150). In the play, although Gallimard exclaims, "Look at you. You are a man" (88) when he sees Song naked, Hwang means for the audience not to look at Song but rather to look at Gallimard looking at Song

In the play, Song makes a lengthy speech about "a Western rape mentality toward the East" telling the judge and the audience: "You expect Oriental Countries to submit to your guns, and you expect Oriental woman to be submissive to your men" (83). Song goes on explaining that Gallimard was fooled because he believed that he had found his fantasy woman in Song who acted as a submissive Oriental woman. Therefore, without asking any question, Gallimard would do anything for Song, including photographing sensitive documents which Song then passed on to the Chinese government. Song suggests that Gallimard might not understand the extent of his activity. That Song needed the document is enough reason for Gallimard.

Gallimard and Song's genders cannot be separated from the fact that Gallimard represent a Caucasian man and Song an Asian woman. Their relationship represents the relationship between the

is a part of the discourse of Orientalism. Edward Said says that Orientalism is a discourse created by the West to strengthen their hegemony over the East.

He says:

And yet, one must repeatedly ask oneself whether what matters is Orientalism in the general group of ideas overriding the mass of materials ó about which who could deny that they were shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of òthe Orientalö as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction? (1996)

In other words, the West considers the East as the inferior Other. The notion of gender intertwines with that of Orientalism in the play. Gallimard's vision of an Oriental woman is: òWomen willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a manö (92). Song, talking in the court as a man, says: òBeing an Oriental, I could never be completely a manö (83). Believing in his power over an Oriental woman, Gallimard is confident in telling Ambassador Toulon that: òthere is a natural affinity between the West and the Orientö and that òOrientals will always submit to a greater forceö (46). This discourse of Orientalism affects the Western men in the play in conducting their actions, and is used by Song to manipulate them. Song explains to the judge and everybody in the French court:

The West has a sort of an international rape mentality towards the East. . . . The West thinks of himself as masculineóbig guns, big industry, big money ó so the East is feminine ó weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom ó the feminine mystique.

Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated ó because a woman can't think of herself (83).

Song makes it clear how the 20 years affair is possible without Gallimard finding out his true male identity. On the one hand, Song says that Gallimard, representing the West with his òrape mentality toward the East,ö has fooled himself in his belief of having power over an Oriental woman. On the other hand, Song helps to make it happen by performing as an Oriental woman.

In the play, Gallimard assures Toulon that the Chinese: òDeep down, they miss the old days. You know, cappuccinos, men in Tuxedos óö (45) suggesting that the Chinese does not like

Toulon naively associates having an Oriental mistress with having better knowledge about the Orientals. Therefore, Toulon believes Gallimard about the Vietnamese who will submit to the Americans as long as the Americans so their will to power. Their belief turns out to be wrong.

GALLIMARD. And somehow the American war went wrong too. Four hundred thousands dollars were being spent for every Viet Cong killed; so General Westmoreland's remark that the Oriental does not value life the way Americans do was oddly accurate. Why weren't the Vietnamese people giving in? Why were they content instead to die and die and die again? (68).

Toulon also points out that Gallimard is wrong thinking that China is ready to open to Western trade. Gallimard and Toulon believe in the opposition between the West and the East, representing a discourse of Orientalism which puts the West in a superior position towards the East. *M. Butterfly* deconstructs the opposition by showing that what those Western men believe turns out to be wrong. The Orientals, the Chinese and Vietnamese are not submissive at all. Gallimard has to face the consequence of his mistaken analysis.

#### D. Conclusion

Finding out that Song is a man, Gallimard says that Song is "a perfect lie," a woman created by a man. In his Freudian reading, Leighton Grist says:

However, it is a lie that clarifyingly reflects back on the truth denied by his preceding disavowals and hubristic phallocentrism: that Song is a man and that Gallimard whose overconfident Orientalism has been encouraged and exploited by the Chinese; that, in fact, like Cio-Cio San in *Madame Butterfly*, he has sacrifice everything "for the love of a man" (23).

It is indeed Gallimard who sacrifices his marriage, his job, and his life for Song. He calls Song as Butterfly, and the fact is he is the Butterfly.



cell, Gallimard puts on a kimono and commits suicide  
also known as Madame Butterfly (93). Why Gallimard has  
to commit suicide as being Butterfly? According to Teresa de Lauretis:

Butterfly sustains Western man's desire, his capacity to disavow, his narcissistic self-absorption: 'I am a man who loved a woman created by a man. *Anything simply falls short.*' Paradoxically, Rene [Gallimard] must die Butterfly's death so that his desire may live in the consummation of the fantasy, as eros, the vital principle, only ever delays in the inexorable movement toward death (324).

Gallimard rejects Song's offer to continue their relationship with Song being a man, because knowing the difference between reality and fantasy, Gallimard chooses fantasy. In the very last scene of the play, Song is standing as a man, smoking cigarette and staring at the dead Gallimard. Song appears to take pride over her successful deception and Gallimard's uninhibited willingness to believe the said deceit.

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