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Honors Gender and Literature

31 October 2013

Exploring Sexuality: An Analysis on Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* is consistently reviewed by literary critics to be a work consisting of symbols and metaphors that, together, parallel a relationship between two men (one, a seemingly heterosexual male; the other cloaking themselves in the guise of a female) and the domination of the West over the East. Critics commonly surmise that Hwang was in fact stressing these metaphors to portray this image of a despotic Western culture over the ostensibly docile Oriental culture and, though focusing on different metaphors and giving a variety of connotations to each symbol, still arrive at the same conclusions. While not discounting the validity of these views and theories, my argument instead centers on the notion that the individual homosexual identities of the characters Song and Gallimard play a crucial role in understanding the pressures of gender roles in a predominantly heterosexual world and context.

Hwang starts off the play by allowing Gallimard to give a monologue to the audience about his current predicament and how the title of the play came about. The title, *M. Butterfly*, he notes, comes from Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* in which a white, American man falls for a young Oriental woman of 15. They began to have romantic relations and eventually marry with the young woman bearing a child; the American then leaves for three years, only to return to tell his maiden that he has married

an American woman. Dismayed, the young Oriental commits suicide and leaves her child with the American (Hwang 12-19). Many critics such as Irmscher frame their main argument around this point: Hwang is using this “analogy of Puccini’s opera” with his own tale of homosexual lovers to articulate a stance of Western imperialism over Eastern cultures (623-624). However, there is more at play here than Irmscher recognizes. For instance, Hwang, while using the allusion to signify western dominance, could also imply another purpose for its use: to examine the individual sexualities of Gallimard and Song and the ways they are shaped by a society demanding compulsory heterosexuality.

As the audience is taken back to Gallimard’s earlier life, they learn that Gallimard, a French diplomat in China, has fallen in love with an Asian “woman” by the name of Song while on assignment. He describes her as a “butterfly” due to her playing this role in Asian Theater and becomes infatuated with her, which leads to ultimate desire and a 20-year love affair; “I love you,” he proclaims, “All ecstatic with love, the heavens are filled with laughter,” (Hwang 33-34). Eventually, we learn that Song is actually a spy who has disguised himself as a woman in order to glean information for the Communist Party; Gallimard cannot handle this revelation and commits suicide creating yet another parallel to *Madame Butterfly* (Hwang 69). It is at this moment of death, that the second purpose of that opera’s title becomes significant in connection to the issue of homosexuality. Near the beginning of the play, Gallimard justifies the Oriental woman’s suicide in *Madame Butterfly* quoting, “Death with honor/ Is better than life/ Life with dishonor,” (Hwang 17). This quote can also be correlated with Gallimard’s own suicide as he views homosexuality as a dishonor to himself and to mankind, and feels the only escape is death.

The critical problem that keeps both the reading and the analysis of this play narrowed to the political realm is the subconscious perspective that people (specifically Americans) will view the play in a predominantly heterosexual, white, protestant sphere that creates this type of “tunnel vision” which gives us a limited viewpoint. What is more important, and what most people tend to disregard, is the singular issue of whether Gallimard is a homosexual. In a 1989 interview with Hwang, Don Digaetani asked him this very question. In his reply, Hwang chose to leave the question open-ended saying, “On some level, he knows he’s gay... yet he lived in a homophobic period,” Hwang then goes back to discussing the issue of homosexuality in different cultures and turns full circle into describing a submissive East (Hwang and Digaetani 145). It is interesting to look at why Hwang chose to answer the question this way. The play was released in the late 1980’s, at a time when homosexuality was beginning to become more open, but in many circles it was still a controversial topic. As a result, Hwang likely did not want to risk a blatant answer as it could lead to a drop in audience numbers. Yet, we can still see, through Hwang’s writing, the evidence that presents a gay Gallimard and Song, especially in the stage directions and character descriptions. According to Hwang, when directors are casting Song, they should, “Preferably find a man,” and if they choose a woman to play Song instead they “run the risk of exploiting the very sexual oppression it seeks to condemn,” (Hwang 89).

In his interview with Digaetani, Hwang says that this play is an “American play” when asked if this was written for Americans or Orientals (152). Critics such as Zamora argue that Hwang uses this “American-based theme to instill a political and cultural reformation,” (35). However, Hwang is not only trying to redirect political notions of the

overlapping East/West theme, but likely also to change cultural attitudes towards homosexuality. Several motifs in the play cross-relate these two themes between both East and West and also towards inner sexuality. Song's make-up on stage, for example, is stark white, to represent the western standards of culture and beauty (Eng 139-141). Furthermore, it can also be used to represent the afore-mentioned sphere of thought that represents a white, heterosexual perspective; after all, Song is trying to cover up the pariah of being a homosexual by masking himself with a white, heterosexual body (Saal 631-632). These two motifs are brought almost to a metaphorical cross-road in the line in which Song, in answering a question about why women's roles are played by men in the Peking Opera, states "Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act," (Hwang 49). Not only is Song able to portray an accurate "character" of a woman and further exercise a certain "power" over Gallimard that he normally wouldn't have, but Gallimard is able to put on the persona of a heterosexual male because he knows how that character should act; in reality though, Gallimard is only stifling his inner homosexuality.

Diving further into Gallimard's homosexual nature and character, there are several symbols that lead to the assumption that Song and, more importantly, Gallimard are gay. First, we have the prison cell in which Gallimard is kept. This space represents Gallimard's inner sexuality, as the heterosexual world outside cannot accept his homosexuality, and therefore, he has to confine this "anomaly" to a separate realm of thought. These homosexual thoughts and desires are locked away inside Gallimard just as the physical Gallimard is locked away against the heterosexual world. This symbol relates directly to Glover and Kaplan's analysis of Queer Theory as they try to "define

queer” and categorize it as a “desire *beyond* the regular confines of heteronormativity,” (132-133).

Just as Hwang is confined to this limited heterosexually normed sphere of view in his writing, his characters are as well. Both are trying to live in this ill-fitted sphere when instead they should focus on blending the spheres of homosexuality with these “mainstream” spheres of whiteness and heterosexuality. Gallimard is living in this “fallacy of thought” that refuses to accept his inner sexuality. Hwang states, “In other words, he (Gallimard) had an affair with a man, and never told anyone, not even himself,” (Hwang and Digaetani 145). As a result, we see this constant theme of coldness throughout the play, first, when Song is describing his and Gallimard’s first romantic encounter and how he (Song) becomes “cold” as they begin to undress, “but.... The truth is.... No... Are you cold... Yes. Cold,” (Hwang 34). It is not just physical coldness that Song is experiencing, but instead a moral and cultural coldness as he cannot bear his own inner homosexuality in a heterosexual world. This coldness eventually transfers and perpetuates into Gallimard in the final scene as he commits suicide by plunging a knife into his chest in his prison cell. As mentioned previously, this parallels with the opera *Madame Butterfly* as she commits suicide because she cannot be with her lover. In Gallimard’s case, however, he cannot be with his lover because he cannot accept his own homosexuality and views it as the “one sin that implies all others,” (Hwang 68).

Hwang’s towering theme of Western imperialism over Eastern cultures carries with it the notion of the heterosexual prerogative. As a result, both audience members and critics fail to see the true importance of Gallimard and Song’s relationship. Their inner struggle is a direct result of the heterosexual world’s feminization and dominance of the

submissive homosexual world. Just as Western dominance has led to colonization and submissiveness of the Eastern world, heterosexual dominance has flattened and continues to further collapse the sphere of homosexual culture and closets “queer” sexualities.

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