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Unmaking An Oriental Romantic Myth:
Postmodern Perspectives on *M. Butterfly*

By

Hongyu Zhou



*The thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.*

Department of Drama

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 1995



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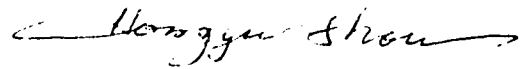
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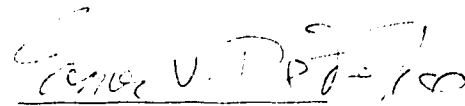
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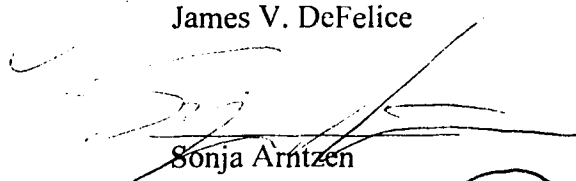
In the eyes of the West, the Eastern culture is quite another kind of the feminised and negative culture since it stresses implicit, submissive, modest, gentle and harmonious.

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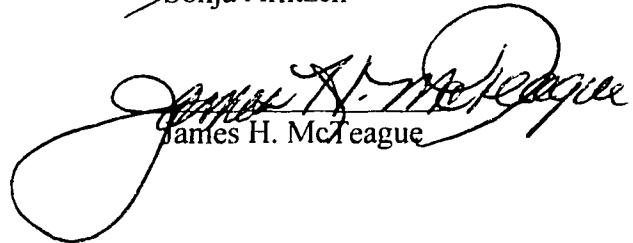
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled UNMAKING AN ORIENTAL ROMANTIC MYTH: POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES ON *M. BUTTERFLY* submitted by Hongyu Zhou in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.



James V. DeFelice



Sonja Arntzen



James H. McTeague

23 June 1995

In Memory of My Mother

Abstract

Within a framework of intertextual study, this thesis situates David. H. Hwang's "deconstructivist" *Madame Butterfly* , a play which criticizes the sexual and racial stereotypes by politically re-visioning the archetypal East-West romance perpetuated by Puccini's opera, at the intersection of Postmodern perspectives, Feminist theory, Orientalism discourse and Reception theory. The thesis organises my argument as follows: Hwang's realistic subversion of romance fragments and resists the romantic and ideal patterns of Puccini's opera; Hwang uses the indeterminate sexual and gender identity to express the repressed "oppositional voice" against the Western stereotypes of Orient; and Hwang's innovations exploring new theatrical reception of postmodern aesthetic in *M. Butterfly* are frequently followed by a mode of synthesis, incorporating both past and present discourses within "hybrid" compositions. The strong subversive will of *M. Butterfly* has broken down the myth of Madame Butterfly.

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Introduction

The Postmodern Condition and Theatre

Whether we like the ancient Chinese cures, “May you be born into an era of change!” or not, our culture and society are in an era of change. And the change is not reversible as per our willingness.

The event of the Broadway year was certainly *M. Butterfly*, a play by Chinese-American David Henry Hwang as one the brightest young playwrights in America, which was a Broadway hit in 1988 and worldwide success, won a Tony Award for Best American Play of 1988, along with many other awards (Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, John Gassner Awards, and 1991 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award), and became the longest-running Broadway play since 1980. As an international theme set in China and France, *M. Butterfly* was called as “a brilliant play of ideas, a visionary work that bridges the history and culture of two worlds.”(*The New York Times*); *USA Today* commented: “just when you’ve seen every possible romantic coupling, *M. Butterfly* presents one of the most provocative and touching of all.” The play was staged on Broadway and London's West End in a Brechtian yet elegant John Dexter production. The play has also gone on to subsequent productions in over 30 countries, and the film version of *M. Butterfly* (scripted by Hwang, directed by Canadian David Cronenberg) was released in 1993.

The phenomenal success of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* has been one of the most talked about plays ever since 1988. The play seems to divide audiences into those who love it and find it brilliant and bizarre, and those who don't like it and feel it uncomfortable and surface. The critics gave the new play a mixed reception. Many commentators interpreted *M. Butterfly* as an allegorical exploration of gender, self-delusion, and East-West relations. Quite a few reviews are to extract certain basic qualities, moods or states of mind from the play--which brings the review of the play improperly close to being a psychological puzzle game. Such reviews smother the play with abstractions. I think that *M. Butterfly's* reading should not be restricted to traditional theatrical theory and aesthetics but ought to apply contemporary artistic thoughts and the theatrical practices. As Johannes Birringer suggests that "any theatre practice worth thinking about in the context of postmodern culture has been fundamentally concerned not only with recovering the meaning and boundaries of performance in the theatre (in distinction to what is meant by "performance " and "theatricality" just about anywhere else in contemporary mass culture) but, specifically, with the transformation of visual space and the difference in attention to the perceptual process produced by scenographies of visual and acoustic images that no longer recreate the appearance of dramatic realism."¹ In this

¹Johannes Birringer, *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), 31.

sense, "*M. Butterfly* comes to us as a gift, for it is available as a practical test for much of recent theoretical speculation."²

When I was beginning to seek a topic for my thesis research, I considered that my background offers a mixed notion between my Oriental interpretation of a cultural and political understanding of theatre, and my North American study of the expanding power of postmodern consumer society. When I decided to choose to work on David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* as my thesis subject, I felt that the play was, like much contemporary drama, reacting against the modernism of Theatre of the Absurd, the last form of modernism in the theatre since Ibsen. For his play *M. Butterfly*, Hwang has said that he set out to be do a "deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*."³ There are many versions and aspects of postmodernism in the play. To me, this is a thesis that addresses a tremendously delicate and complex subject. I have found that it is very challenging to me as well as exciting in many different ways.

Hwang has developed a more universal theatre in *M. Butterfly*. The play "uses many forms of theatre to present an anti-modernist view of human complexity in a

²Robert Skloot, "Breaking the Butterfly: The Politics of David Henry Hwang" *Modern Drama* (March 1990), 59.

³David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, with an afterward (New American Library, New York, 1989), 95.

format employing theatrical and even operatic complexity.”⁴ Obviously, Hwang's *M. Butterfly* set out to dispel stereotypical perceptions of Orient. The play demonstrates the postmodern deconstructive characteristics: Uses of parody, disjunctive, open, playful, displaced, or indeterminate forms, ambiguity, a discourse of fragments, an idea of double-meaning, an ideology of fracture, uses of irony, hybridization, and a will to unmaking. According to *Contemporary Literary Criticism*,

*Hwang's blending of diverse theatrical styles and techniques places M. Butterfly within the postmodern movement in art. For example, Hwang makes use of kurogo, the "invisible" stagehands of Asian theatre who make scenery changes during the action of the play; elements of character, plot, and theme are developed through musical motifs, a device of European opera; and Hwang's extensive use of flashback and flashforward rather than linear chronological progression is a common feature of modern drama. While some critics questioned the effectiveness of Hwang's social observations, most applauded his inventive manipulation of factual material. Clive Barnes stated: M. Butterfly sizzles with the immediacy of theatre at its most challenging and entertaining.*⁵

Historically, the growth of Postmodernism has followed a sinuous, even tortuous, path. Until now, its meaning is still in dispute because of the change in human condition and thought. The rapid spread of the term “postmodern” in recent years witnesses an increasing sense of growing dissatisfaction with modernity. Today postmodernism is hypertrophied and unstable term that is fought over and selectively

⁴ John L. DiGaetani, *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), xii-xiii.

⁵ Robert Cohen, “The Year in Drama” *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Yearbook* (Vol.55, 1988), 13.

appropriated on behalf of various theoretical projects. As a new cultural and social trend, the concept of postmodernism, however, has become entrenched in contemporary culture and society.

The thesis does not offer a definition of 'postmodern' forms, nor does it attempt a 'comprehensive' address to 'postmodern' theory or practice. Instead, the thesis seeks to in a deliberately partial way, interpret Hwang's *M. Butterfly* as a reading of the postmodern. That is to say, the purpose of this thesis is to examine *M. Butterfly* closely from the contemporary postmodern perspectives. To set the scene for this, in the introductory chapter I shall merely introduce, without comment and with a large measure of conceptual overlap, selected key issues which currently inform discussions about postmodern culture, society and art. Its purpose is just to give the reader some ideas of the current scope of the concept "postmodernism" and main influential constructions of postmodernism as a literary-critical concept.

The term "postmodernism" was first used in reference to architecture as early as 1947. Literary critics began to use the term in the 1960s to distinguish the post-World War II experimental fictions, and others from the classics of high modernism. Over the 1970s and 1980s the postmodern new style emerged, which is fundamentally different in approach and aesthetic values, and challenges the standard ways of seeing conditioned by the traditional modern art. Thus, discussions of postmodernism considered not only changes in artistic style but also the extent to

which society itself had changed and the fact that the contemporary artwork's relation to politics and culture was problematic in new ways. To some extent that in talking about postmodernism today we can agree upon the fact that we are discussing an important cultural transformation.

The attempt to define postmodernism is linked to consideration of modernism, its limits and deficiencies. Charles Jencks's *What is Post-Modernism?* of 1986 had made a clear distinction between the post-modern and the modern:

For Modernists the subject of art was often the process of art; for Post-Modernists it is often the history of art.

Postmodern art as overturning the idea of progress in art which was formerly geared toward conceptual abstraction and as going back to older style as well as forward. It had 'returned value to the image' while also being aware of the problematic character of representation; played with meaning so that it often used irony; countered the analytic character of modern art with a new synthetic character; replaced the 'puritanical' elements in modernism by a new opulence, decorativeness and plurality of styles; and had gone beyond nihilism towards a more open cultural exchange, interbreeding and eclecticism.⁶

The distinguished postmodernist theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard's presentation of his concept of the postmodern in his 1982 text may be summarized in the following way:

The postmodern would be "that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for unattainable; that which

⁶Margaret A. Rose: *The Post-modern and the Post-industrial* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 122-3.

*searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher, the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.*⁷

Lyotard has argued that Modernism's rigid categories and striving for efficiency and control have an ultimately authoritarian outcome. On the contrary, the complexities and pluralism of postmodern culture are anti-authoritarian in impulse. Every distinguishing feature of postmodernism can be located in an era prior to our own. Within such a view, what is distinctive about postmodernism is not something new but our attention to and interest in features of the past that until recently were most often ignored. Postmodernism, then, is just a part of the very complex rereading of history taking place in the current climate of a critical questioning of the Western tradition. But there is also a concomitant interest in non-Western voices that offer different perspectives on the western image of itself and its past. For most commentators on postmodernism, its unique contribution is the recognition of difference. Pluralism and marginalism are involved in postmodern debates. In other words, postmodernism is grounded in the historical, the social, and the political, and

⁷Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984), 81.

highlights the potential of the local and the limited, the multiple, and the provisional. And the postmodernism opened the door to heterogeneous voices, mixed genres, and other breaches of decorum. In this sense, the postmodern trends can transform or liberate the social imagination in our culture. As Bryan S. Turner concludes,

*Briefly, postmodernity refers to the extension of the processes of commodification to everyday life and the impact of mass consumer cultures on cultural systems, blurring the distinction, for example, between high and low culture. Postmodernism means the use of simulation in cultural production, and in stylistic terms it involves self-parody and irony. Now much of the postmodern debate has been concerned to assert the importance of difference and otherness, so there is a connection between a postmodern critique of universalistic categories and the process of indigenization.*⁸

These Postmodernism debates revolve around the relation of artwork to social context, the relation of art and of theory to political action and to the dominant social order, the relation of an image-dominated consumer society to artistic practice, and the future of a Western tradition that now appears more heterogeneous than previously thought even while it appears insufficiently tolerant or open to multiplicity. While the modernist exploits master narratives as tools to liberate individuals from tradition, the postmodernist chooses to reveal the political instability of these narratives, exposing the ideological dimension of all style or representation. Many Postmodernists not only insist on the fragmentariness of their own products, but also make these products contiguous with the most common, most

⁸Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* (Routledge, London, 1994), 9.

banal and vulgar objects and experiences available in their own culture. By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of the movement, it can be called deconstructive postmodernism.

The Postmodern Literary criticism, as well as its new literary theory, began to explore the complex relations between the work and its social contexts. Generally speaking, the formal analysis of the artwork in isolation yielded to the exploration of the social determinants of the work and to the ideological impact the work had on its audience. Postmodern artwork is open to any connection to an audience. The new art and the new politics ignored the old distinction between high and low art. As Gerhard Haffmann stated that "modernism seems to stress the relationship between the creative sensibility and the work of art, between addresser and message, postmodernism that between message and addressee."⁹ Postmodern artists not only accepted some formal aspects of non-Western arts as is often assumed, but also raised a more substantial question about the idea of art and culture. Postmodern art is experimental, formally complex, containing elements of decreation as well as creation, with notions of cultural apocalypse and retrospect. Beyond art's specialized enclave, conditions of crisis are evident: cultural cohesion lost, perception pluralized, tradition reinterpreted.

⁹Gerhard Hoffmann, Alfred Hornung, Rudiger Kunow, "'Modern,' 'Postmodern,' and 'Contemporary,'" (*Amerikastudien*, 22, no. 1, 1977), 40.

The postmodern theatre is very different from postmodern literary criticism. In literary criticism, the term Postmodernism is well established. In theatre and drama, "postmodernism" is less clearly defined than in other arts, in part because of the distinction between literary text and performance. Rather, drama has a long and involved history of its own in the twentieth century and played a significant part in the rise of modernism, especially in Europe. But, for whatever reason, drama's modernism seems to have been muted, or at least long delayed, at least until Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht and, in some accounts, until the emergence and successful critical promotion of the Theatre of the Absurd in the 1950s. None of this has inhibited the migration of the postmodern narrative to drama, but it has made that narrative more various in its manifestations. Most importantly, the critical pluralism (both cultural and political) is deeply implicated in the field of postmodern theatre.

The postmodernist theory might cast a vivid light on the genius and the art of different writers, as well as on the change of sensibility in their public. The postmodern theories of drama have laid great stress upon this contingency of performance. Indeed, postmodern theatre is often dated from the upsurge of performance art during the decade of the 1960s, with its happenings, spectacles, dance-theatre, etc. One strain of radical theatre theory at that time and afterwards sought to free performance from its degrading subservience to the pre-existing script. The postmodern theatre is characterized by its disposability, its disdain of the score

or text which guarantees the survival and repeatability of a performance at the cost of cramping its spontaneity. During the last two decades, a feminist perspective has been established in the arts, with theoretical and artistic practices in theatre, in the visual arts, in film and video.

There are some certainly identified characteristics of the postmodern theatre-- fragmentation, indeterminacy, spontaneity, theatricality, pluralism, paradox, performance--that urge us toward a definition of the postmodern. That is to say, in postmodern theatre form dominates over content; fragmentation seems to be the aim; there is no linear narrative; time and place are indefinite as in a dream; it is a polyphonic theatre; heavy use is made of visual images, stylized movements and groupings; it presents a society which accepts suffering and aggression. Its stance is definitely a deconstructionist one.¹⁰ At the same time, a distinctly postmodern dramatic aesthetic has developed in response to the need for a postmodern form for dramatic expression.

In these senses the theatre, or theatrical form, encompasses many of the themes that we have already encountered in the postmodern debate, especially the refusal of notions of essential form, the dispersal of the identity of the work of art, and its immersion in social and political contexts. In facing the future of theatre we are already facing the changing realities of our fundamentally multicultural,

¹⁰See, Jacqueline Martin, *Voice in Modern Theatre*, (Routledge, London, 1991),119.

multilingual, and socially polarized societies. And in view of a “postmodern theatre”, we should accommodate the emergence of ethnic theatre, the spectacle of intercultural productions, the significant impact of feminist performances and the radical political theatre.

An essential task of this research thesis thoroughly explores David Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* in the postmodern view. Many ideas for this thesis took shape in my extensive research. This thesis centers on an intertextual study of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* and Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* in order to examine how the romantic motif, meaning, characters and aesthetic reception of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* has been subverted through the dynamic of romance and politics, the ambivalence of sexuality and gender identity in *M. Butterfly*. Chapter One outlines the life and works of David Hwang, as an established playwright. Chapter Two provides the conceptional and interpretive framework from the postmodern dual idea that is related to *M. Butterfly*. An attempt is made in Chapter Three to examine the relationship between romance and politics in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* and Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. Chapter Four deals with the function of the ambivalent sexual and gender identity in *M. Butterfly*. The question of theatrical approaches in *M. Butterfly* is analyzed within Chapter Five. Finally, in Chapter Six, the aesthetics of audience’s reception of *M. Butterfly* is explored.

Chapter 1

A Search for a Fluidity of Identity

Through *M. Butterfly*, David Hwang has brought a special perspective to bear on the majority culture and has established a larger international reputation as a eminent playwright. "More significantly, he was the first to successfully transcend the theatrical boundaries between white and Oriental without compromising his own concerns and dramatic themes. His awards have been meted out by predominantly white panels; his box-office success has been from predominantly white theatergoers."¹¹

Traditionally, the predominant images of the Asian and the Asian-American in popular culture have been created and exploited by Westerners. Unlike black drama, Oriental culture seems alien to long held Occidental values. Hwang's first play, *FOB.*, like most of his works, is based on a real incident. The play is a study of a Chinese exchange student's relationship with two Chinese-Americans, and won the Obie Award for the best off-Broadway play of 1981. Critics and audiences alike found more universal, cross-cultural values and messages formulated within the play. At 23, Hwang established himself as one of off-Broadway's brightest playwriting talents. He continued his off-Broadway success with *The Dance and the Railroad*,

¹¹ Douglas Street, *David Henry Hwang* (Boise State University, Boise, Idaho, 1989), 7.

about Chinese workers building the railroad through the Sierras in the 1860s. The play draws upon folklore, history, and myth to celebrate Chinese culture. It is a unique and lovely piece of theatre with beauty and simplicity. One critic praised the play for being "exquisitely balanced on the borderlines of history and fantasy, realism and symbolism, East and Westernization, speech and dance or mime, comedy and high seriousness..."(*New York Magazine*, 24 August 1981). The play's device foreshadows the technical bravura of his award-winning *M. Butterfly*. *Family Devotions*, a black comedy about a Christianized Chinese-American family in conflict with a visiting "pagan" relative. *FOB*, *Family Devotions* and *The Dance and the Railroad* are heralded as Hwang's Chinese-American trilogy.

David Hwang studied early on with playwrights Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes (who was born in Cuba). Their theatrical thoughts obviously affected him as a writer and were later to exert one or another kind of influence on his own dramas. In their works, Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornes isolate the quiet aspects of behavior that often go unnoticed in the rush to climactic events. Rather than making generalizations about "psychology", they concentrate on limited, highly private zones of memory and thought. And, they follow the instincts of the imagination. In a sense, each of their plays seems a testimony to self-doubt.

Shepard emerged in the 1960s as one of the America's most brilliant and most exciting contemporary playwrights. Quite a few critics have claimed that Shepard is

first totally postmodern voice in American drama. Shepard's technique is to ransack native myth to create a new and viable system of symbology and belief. His drama "converts the causal structure that so long dominated American drama into 'explosions and contradictions,' 'disruption,' 'simultaneity,' 'anomalies.'"¹² Hwang was particularly taken with the power and drama of Sam Shepard's avant-garde pieces. In Shepard, he found a role model who could combine human interaction and Western American mythmaking into explosive theatre. Like Shepard, Hwang reaches for a mythic dimension. The impact of Shepard's influences seemed clear to Hwang in his first play, *FOB.*, as in his later *M. Butterfly*. As a student of Maria Irene Fornes, Hwang derived his resistance to simple realism. He focuses on the telling detail, perhaps dredged from his unconsciousness. At same time, Irene Fornes's idea for the body's role in theatrical representation also influenced Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. As Hwang recalled, "I think I'm looking for work which addresses contemporary social themes and deals with the fabric of the world we live in but does it with a certain amount of theatricality."¹³

All of Hwang's succeeding plays are centered on diametrically opposed characters. In *Family Devotions* the main conflict is between two Americanized

¹² June Schlueter, "Theatre", *The Postmodern Moment*, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg, (Greenwood Press, Westport, London, 1985), 216.

¹³ Jackson R. Bryer, *The Playwright's Art-Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 126.

Chinese matriarchs and their brother visiting from the People's Republic of China; in *M. Butterfly*, between a French diplomat and the Chinese actor with whom he is in love." To some degree, in all of Hwang's plays a great deal is at stake in the conflict between characters and ideologies. Most crucial is self-identity, as defined by one's relationship to one's family and heritage, like *Family Devotions*.

Hwang is one of the strongest voices speaking out on Asian-American themes today. He is fascinated by the crosscutting of Asian and American stereotypes and the conflicts that arise from assimilation into the mainstream. In *FOB*, Hwang exposes a ruthless caste system within the Chinese-American subculture, where social climbing means abandoning one's roots. As Hwang said,

*One of the things I've been trying to do over the past few years, M. Butterfly being one example, is to explore the larger implications of earlier themes that still concern me as an Asian-American. To some extent, the issue of assimilation versus remaining "true to your roots" can be considered an issue of individuality versus conformity, or Chinese versus American. I want to remain true to the issues that concern me, but I also try to locate them on different canvases.*¹⁴

Hwang is one of a number of Asian American artists who are exploring what he calls "the mystery of our identity." Since historicization of the political unconscious and elaboration of cultural erasure, Chinese-American artists and writers have suffered from an intensely paradoxical ambivalence toward "the other". The crisis of identity always makes their feelings of inferiority stronger between the Self

¹⁴*Opera News* (Oct. 1992), 16.

and the Other. The search for cultural identity has been major theme in Asian American theatre since its emergence in the early 1960s.

Although most of Hwang's plays deal with the collision between the East and the West, his work is perhaps best understood in terms of questions that have long haunted American drama: how, in a land of immigrants, does one deal with one's heritage and construct a sense of identity? In 1982 Hwang stated that American theatre is beginning to discover Americans, and "the American theatre's attempt to acknowledge the multi-cultural nature of American society was the artistic expression of a political transformation, a transformation which began outside theatre but which theatre both reflected and facilitated."¹⁵ To consider Hwang simply a spokesperson for a particular ethnic theatre is to misunderstand American culture. To the extent that he is a playwright working from a comparative perspective and incorporating elements of the eastern consciousness, Hwang can be seen as a particular ethnic voice, but an insistence on this perspective obscures his contribution to postmodern drama. As Hwang himself has pointed out, that which passes for universal is simply the portrayal of "a relatively homogeneous society, with white males as the centers and prime movers--in other words, the theatre of a particular

¹⁵ C.W.E.Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945--1990* (Cambridge University Press, 1992),328-9.

ethnic group. The term 'ethnic theatre' is really a misnomer."¹⁶

David Hwang had always been interested in Japanese Literature and art. His later plays *The House of Sleeping Beauties* and *The Sound of a Voice* (both in 1983) were inspired by Japanese stories. Like Sam Shepard, Hwang was keenly interested in problems of identity, especially male/female identity, in postmodern culture. As Hwang stated:

*I wrote **Sound of A Voice** when I was very pessimistic about the state of male-female relationships. I think there's a sense in it of an almost inherent mistrust between the man and the woman, which symbolizes the way, in general, we don't really know one another.*

*one theme I trace through all my work is this kind of fluidity of identity. In a lot of my plays, from **FOB** to **M. Butterfly**, people become other people. It has a lot to do with the nature vs. nurture question. To what degree do you have an inherited identity, and to what degree is your personality shaped by the influences and environment around you?¹⁷*

Obviously, Hwang's idea for the relationship between man and woman is also influenced by Sam Shepard's. As Shepard stated, "it always seemed to me that there was more mystery to relationships between men, and just now it's coming to a

¹⁶David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 119.

¹⁷David Henry Hwang: *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, ed. Misha Berson (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), 93-4.

territory where I'm finding the same mystery between men and women."¹⁸ To some degree, Hwang drew his inspiration in *M. Butterfly* from Shepard's idea about the heterosexual male privilege and homophobic discourse.

M. Butterfly originated in a scandalous news about Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat and his Chinese lover, Song Liling, a star of the Beijing Opera. Both of them were found guilty by a French court in 1986 of spying for China. The trial revealed, to the apparent surprise of the diplomat, that the presumed mother of his child was in fact a man. The French man never suspected his real motives or identity. It is characteristic that *M. Butterfly* uses an established theme and the true story from news. It is Hwang's imaginative construction of characters and events, filtered through the memories, the prejudices, the longings, the dreams of the French diplomat. The play displays the intercultural approaches to an international theme for which he first became known. Hwang incorporated the plot of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* into his play and interpreted this modern "Madame Butterfly" differently from the point of view of the new fact.. In addition to channeling Puccini's writings into his own play, Hwang also digested the historical and cultural facts. Yet, for all the real-life authenticity of the play, the fictional Gallimard - who liberally quotes from the source of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* is clearly a product of Hwang's

¹⁸Kakutani, *The new York Times*, 29 January 1984, 2:26, quoted in Ron Mottram, *Inner Landscapes: The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984),155.

imagination. In *M. Butterfly*, then, the fusion of reception, influence, and originality would seem to be almost perfect. The plot of *M. Butterfly* turns on an unusual conjunction of sexual and racial determinism, an association which also includes the issue of politics. How Hwang could actualize the old and lovely image of Madame Butterfly at all after the story that had given the stereotyped figure its epochal stature. For an audience, *M. Butterfly* is an exotic, tragic tale of a white western male's illusion-shattering encounter with the mysterious Orient. As Robert Skloot stated, Hwang "forces the audiences of his play into complicity with the discovery, dismantling, and re-establishment of theatrical illusion, while at the same confronting them with challenges to traditional cultural and gender assumptions. *M. Butterfly* is a highly political play precisely because it is so thoroughly subversive on so many levels and of so many issues." "Hwang's inquiry into how the assumptions of culture, gender, and theatre structure our lives certainly provides an extraordinarily wide field for political and aesthetic investigation."¹⁹ In the case of Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, not only the relationship between men and women but also the involvement of culture and sex is explored.

¹⁹Robert Skloot, 59-60.

Chapter 2

The Past in the Present: An Interpretive Framework

For centuries, the westerners have held the crusader's view of the East, seeing a unlimited paradise of riches and mystery. For westerners, the East always means silent, submissive, weak and exotic. One of the many stereotypes that capture the western mind is that of the Japanese geisha. The most famous geisha is Madame Butterfly, the title role in Puccini's much loved opera. Her tale of naive love and self-sacrifice inspired a lot of artworks and novels in the various Western artistic forms (opera, theatre, film) and literature. In 1919, the greatest American film D.W.Griffith himself made one of the few films to deal with racism in *Broken Blossoms*. The film, which Startled the world with a love story between two races, was about a story of a 15-year-old London slum girl and a Chinese man who comes to London hoping to spread his Eastern religion. Disillusionment follows in this tragic and tender story of a doomed love affair. The gentle Chinese man commits suicide for the girl he loves. The film influenced romantic cinema all over the world. Hollywood was once again influenced by Griffith and produced a series of films with Chinese characters. In 1992, film "*The Lover*" based on the novel of same title by Marguerite Duras was directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud. Set in French Indochina during the 1920's, the film centres on a schoolgirl's sensual affair with a young,

wealthy Chinese man. We would find that the characteristics of the stereotyped Chinese image in these films: silent, weak, mysterious. In addition, there is a common phenomenon in all the Western films related to question of the East-West: the Eastern side almost has been portrayed by the female role. The musical *Miss Saigon* (1989) is the familiar Butterfly theme - an Asian prostitute who, hired by an American military officer, falls in love with him, has his baby, is deserted, then kills herself - although she first assures her son's future by sending him off to the newly-repentant Dad. The racial and sexual stereotypes are examined with a the sharp eye in the stage play *M. Butterfly* and the musical *Miss Saigon*.

As a particular art phenomenon and cultural stereotype, the rise of the authentic incident and story about Madame Butterfly occurs in the phase of the development of the aggressive American imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time, American foreign policy was based on the idea that it was destined to lead the world because of the superiority of the white race and the democratic principles of its government and people. In 1898 John Luther Long brought out his short story *Madam Butterfly*, which American playwright David Belasco adapted for the stage in 1900. With his keen eye for an effective melodrama, Belasco adapted the story into a one-act play. His real merit lay in his mise-en-scene,

which for its time was staggering indeed.²⁰ To Belasco, his special line as a producer was the creation of romantic illusions by a cunning manipulation of the lighting and of painted curtains which resulted in almost cinematic effects. Belasco's aim was to create fully a Japanese atmosphere. The great composer Giacomo Puccini had the idea for the opera as soon as he saw Belasco's one-act play during the summer of 1900. After some revision, the opera *Madame Butterfly* was staged in 1904, and Puccini finally had his success. The opera has proven to be one of the most popular of Puccini's operas. To Puccini, the heroine and her fate struck a deep chord in him and the exotic setting fascinated him.

For most operagoers *Madame Butterfly* becomes a sad love and romantic story about a handsome naval officer and a beautiful, exotic little creature. Madame Butterfly Cio-Cio-San falls in love with a white man, thus offering against a sacred custom of their people, and she commits suicide when her lover deserts her to return to his native land. From the standpoint of the late twentieth-century, however, there are cultural and gender assumptions in *Madame Butterfly* that need to be reevaluated. And although very popular in America, the opera is in part an allegory about the subtle devices imperialism uses to exploit the naive colonial. Yet, to some degree that the audiences typically do not perceive the anti-imperialistic, anti-American

²⁰David Belasco, *Six Plays*, An Introduction by David Belasco (Boston, Little, Brown, 1928),6-7.

message within the poignant love tale.

Seeing *Madame Butterfly* has always been a unforgettable experience for an audience, because she is such a fascinating and sympathetic character, and Puccini is so generous with the beautiful music he gives her. It is not easy to interpret her character in a way worthy of the composer, who looked so closely into her heart and expressed her feeling so perfectly in his music. Madam Butterfly is a sentimental creature, for us all she is also very real. She is so naive, yet so passionate. She is so honest to herself, so completely true to Pinkerton, that she cannot believe he could betray her after he has given her such assurances of his love, and she is certain that their child binds them together for ever. She has great strength of character as well as tenderness.

Puccini treats the “international” theme with great psychological depth and maturity. Puccini was able to probe into Madame Butterfly's psyche more thoroughly than he did with his other heroines, bringing the totality of his resources to bear on a musico-dramatic illumination of her innermost feelings and thoughts. The essence of the *Madame Butterfly's* tragedy transcends Japan, woman and time. It exposes a central human issue: self-delusion. I would think that Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* is one part of the long cultural heritage in which we exoticize some of types of relationships, and mix the notion of the erotic and the exotic. They are easily running into each other in a kind of romanticism, which would make us forget the

traffic in prostitution. And one would imagine an interracial love is very special kind of romance.

Based on a real story about a French diplomat and his Chinese "lover," Hwang was tantalized by the theatrical potential of its sexual and racial incongruities. As Hwang said, "The story was like a perfect little jar that could hold all these different subjects." This strange story afforded Hwang a perfect vehicle for treating personal concerns about racism, sexism, imperialism, and broad inherent misconceptions in East/West relations. When Hwang eclectically resorted to the style and image of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, he was using them in a totally detached and self-conscious way, and turns them into an instrument for the creation of his own work, as building blocks for his own work, but without accepting the accompanying explanatory systems of Puccini's work, without any systematic ethical or moral core. Rather, Hwang sought a work which was emotionally disengaged and formally rigorous. He is concerned with the recoverability of the Butterfly image, with the possibilities of making sense of the racial and sexual stereotypes. It is a radical version of the Butterfly myth. By creating a parody of a Western classic, Hwang implies that his target is the West.

M. Butterfly has a complex cultural meaning: it is variant of exotic dream, and reflects a changed time and world. Hwang uses his Chinese man-as-woman to provide a brilliant expose of race and gender stereotyping. The play presents the

startling images to conservative Broadway playhouses, but the reason it has done so well is precisely because it does present startling images. The play aspires to the condition of a universal consciousness. The actual and the possible, the historical and the fabulous, the fact and the fiction, have equal validity in eternity.

The dramatic theme of *M. Butterfly* is embodied in the framework of a French-Chinese love story. It is about the persistence of our fantasies, illusion versus deception, East versus West, Men versus Women. The play also provides an interesting vehicle for exploring our culture's attitudes toward gender and race. *M. Butterfly* simultaneously displays the two features of postmodernist text, namely an effacement of the boundaries between the past and the present (typically given in the forms of pastiche and parody). And the play, which we shall call late-postmodern nostalgia, brings the unrepresentable (sexual fantasy, eroticism, mystery, transvestitism, sex-orientation) in front of the audience in ways that challenge the boundaries that ordinarily separate private and public life.

In *M. Butterfly*, the Butterfly theme is usually the determining factor, and a rather superficial one, not merely because its subject is about an exotic love, but primarily because of the ties of the play to the intercultural and ethnic movements--because of the new feeling about, attitude towards, that past which it implies. Facing the legendary theme, Hwang enjoys less freedom of choice with the pressure of historical fact. However, Hwang takes the Butterfly theme as part of the subject and

makes the theme reach the new level of abstraction proper to problems or ideas. Therefore, in regard to themes, factual relations and cultural unity are indispensable conditions. In the case of Hwang's play, the Butterfly theme became one postmodern theme which is supple, protean, polyvalent. Due to the endless proliferation of phenomena, the new theme is capable of integrating itself into the characteristics of thought, manners and taste of a given time, of adapting itself to all the nuances of contemporary life by embracing all the variations. Hwang has his "Pinkerton" (Gallimard) wandering in Communist China; and his "Madame Butterfly" (Song Liling) displays character traits which differ substantially from those traditionally ascribed to that dramatic figure.

Jean Francois Lyotard noted that Postmodernism would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future and anterior. In other words, postmodernism demands a double view or a "double-coding"(Jencks's words).

On the one hand, by using subject material and techniques from the popular level of the culture it forms part of, postmodern artefacts and texts have a direct appeal as a consumer article to all, even the least artistically or literarily trained, contemporary American. On the other hand, by its parodistic use of earlier--and predominantly Modernist--works of art and literature, and by its ironizing of its popular material and techniques, it also appeals to the artistically and literarily sophisticated. As such, Postmodernism may be a step in the direction of a truly communal art in the sense that it appeals to various 'interpretive communities' at one and the same time, albeit for different reasons.²¹

²¹Theo D'haen, "Postmodernism in American Fiction and Art", in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1986), 226.

The postmodern world is a world of the interweaving of many stories, and a world in which we recognize the positive value of stories in which we do not take part. Whether in politics or religion, we quickly sense a great fear of moving away from the traditional way in which we organized our lives, theoretically at least, around a single story, and dealt as well as we could with the conflicts between the various stories in which we were actually engaged. When we view *M. Butterfly*, we cannot help but feel that the play has a definite background and foreground. For our positive response to the representations of it involves a complex of factors--such as fantasies of power and control, and stereotypes of female sexuality. In *M. Butterfly*, the Gallimard-Song story is foregrounded whereas Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* forms the background. In other words, this is a post-colonial fable of what happens when a white man encounters a mysterious oriental. There is a sexual fable. But if we look at it more deeply, it not only contains within it the reaction to Western imperialism, but it also deepens the tragedy by showing that we are so infatuated with a romantic idea. Hwang does it fresh with a sense of ambivalence. It reinforces the cycle of isolation as insufficiency of the politics of identity. It is not enough to just be an oriental wreaking havoc on a white, there's another world that you have to live in.

It is not just incidental that Hwang contrasted his *M. Butterfly*, as

tragicomedy, with Puccini's tragedy *Madam Butterfly*. It is as if Hwang wanted to demonstrate how antiquated everything has become that had been earnest for his predecessor. The meaning of *M. Butterfly* as a postmodern work is largely left to its audience. "With a postmodern text the issue of meaning shifts from the level of a collective and objective world, functioning according to the metanarratives of history, myth, religion, artistic and literary tradition, psychology, or any other metanarrative external to both the work and the individual to that of the purely private individual. Meaning then no longer is the province of a shared reality, but rather the epistemological and ontological problem of an isolated individual in an arbitrary and fragmentary world."²² This is also the issue thematized in Hwang's *M. Butterfly*.

In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang breaks up the monolithic narrative of Puccini's opera, and uses the resulting fragments to parody. As such, while incorporating the plot of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Hwang also isolates it and make it strange. Moreover, this "alienation" is reinforced by the change in material and medium, between the play *M. Butterfly* and the opera *Madam Butterfly*. Much of the play is played as a struggle between the Opera *Madame Butterfly* and the play *M. Butterfly*. The text of *M. Butterfly* includes passages from *Madame Butterfly*. Thus the play has a dual and

²²Theo D'haen, "Postmodernism in American Fiction and Art", in *Approaching Postmodernism*, edited by Douwe Fokkema & Hans Bertens, 222.

dubious source of inspiration for its audience. There is the juxtaposition of two world views with the ironic reversal of both. Certainly, *M. Butterfly* shows a complex, evolving the ethnic imagination and sensibility, far removed from the ethics of Puccini's day. The play is a symbol of racial reality.

In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang breaks the illusionist fabric of theatre by asides which cannot be attributed to any of the play's voices or characters and which directly address the audience. Hwang constantly mixes fact and fiction, art and reality, and by doing so he casts doubt upon the separability of the two. He has his fictional characters intrude upon reality, and introduces real people. Moreover, Hwang continually metamorphoses himself into his own fictional characters and viceversa. The result is that we are never really sure as to the exact status of any of these characters. The point, if we take his ambiguous approach seriously, is to give both side their due, to choose neither absolutely--neither male nor female, neither life nor art. This results in what Hwang calls a kind of fluidity of identity. The ambiguity of gender is an escape route from the social trap of permanently being a man or a woman; and also it is the maze that leads from the absolute closure of life to the relative openness of art. From the postmodern point of view, the play reveals the androgynous idea which the deconstruction of the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity.

Hwang's *M. Butterfly* has itself turned into something of an synthetic

fragment. His collage of beautifully fused images drawn from myth, history, folklore, Chinese communist revolution, war. One can see the effacement of history and cultural difference that is a major ideological force in postmodernism. The political content in Hwang's material strains against the images that seek to contain them, but if those contradictions erode, then the logic of Hwang's theatre of images unites with the market imperative of late capitalism to produce aesthetic indifference or, rather, to reproduce the fascination of consumption without regard to any particular content or meaning or historical reality.

Hwang created a pastiche of images from different historical periods that levelled history and culture to the representation of a single surface. In *M. Butterfly*, we can notice the feature of multiplicity from its plot, structure, character and idea. At the same time, through "double-functioning," we also can feel an overload of meaning in the play. In other words, it does not offer its audience univalent meanings.

In sum, *M. Butterfly* makes a tremendous impact on our traditional ideas and experience and provides a sense of indeterminacy. And the indeterminacy liberates the imagination from old, outworn categories, and makes a revaluation of such sub-culture and cultural stereotype possible. It leads to all sorts of performative modes of self-expression, as in the contemporary experimental theatre.

Chapter 3

Romantic and Political: An Empty Love

Given the author's idea of doing a deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*, the influence of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* on Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is inescapable and obvious. Yet, Hwang's deconstruction highly involves political and cultural questions. Hwang emphasized the role of the play as an analysis of West-East relations and cultural stereotypes. As Hwang has pointed out:

The play has been taken as a commentary or a criticism about Western attitudes toward the East, and I think that's accurate. But I would like to think that the play was fairly even-handed as well in saying that the East also misperceives the West, and that the East is guilty or equally complicit in the dual form of cultural stereotyping. The West, having had the advantage of being a colonial power and of being the more powerful of the two over the past couple of hundred years, has an attitude of condescension toward the East. But the East has played up to that to its short-term advantage without thinking of the long-term ill effects that reinforcing those racial stereotypes causes. I think both parties are equally guilty. In terms of Western misperceptions of the East, there is a term that Edward Said coined, "Orientalism."²³

In Puccini's description, the conflict of romance in *Madam Butterfly* becomes virtually a struggle between love and death. In a sense, romance dramatizes the struggle of meaning to realize itself. Puccini's definition of romance allows him to see its characteristics as present even in situations where its typical features (such as

²³"M. Butterfly", An Interview with David Henry Hwang, John Louis DiGaetani, *Drama Review*, (Fall, 1989), 141.

a happy ending) are reversed. In *M. Butterfly*, romance is evoked as an absence, not a presence. Hwang marks *absence* at the heart of the secular world. The conflict of romance is present within the mind, where it resonates precisely with echoes of what has been lost. Thus, in my view, in *M. Butterfly*, romance is precisely constituted as a sense of the absence of reality, of the world as stark and bare, which produces a kind of enchantment in reverse.

Romance may provide insight into character and social conditions. But romance need not represent a single political plot, for it may have conservative as well as revolutionary aspects. As a play intended to "link imperialism, racism and sexism,"²⁴ *M. Butterfly* presented two systems of romance---that of the romantic relationship between men and women and the relations of the West and the East. The interest of the play lies in the interaction between the two. These two levels are retained and even fused in *M. Butterfly*, where the love story becomes the political one, a plot of power as well as passion. In comparison, if viewing Puccini's work is romance, Hwang's is realistic. In *M. Butterfly*, an ever harsher satire of the contemporary characters makes Hwang recall Puccini's era with nostalgia. While the psychological realism undoes romantic idealism in Puccini's work, Hwang uses romance to enrich his realism by including awareness of lost exotic and mysterious

²⁴ David Savran. "David Hwang." *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 127.

visions.

We notice that the action of *Madam Butterfly* transpires to a great extent in the minds of the characters, who imagine a more romantic realm than that which actually exists. In *M. Butterfly*, romance exists solely in the characters' imaginings. By emphasizing the discrepancy between their imaginings and reality, Hwang uses romance to heighten realism, emphasizing the bleakness of the world he depicts. Hwang's characters have a romance with politics in two senses. First, they consider it the field of mythic and heroic activity. Secondly, the language of ideology becomes a means of seduction in this play. Whereas in *Madam Butterfly* love subverts the political enterprise, in *M. Butterfly* love becomes the arena of political conflict, a political act, a constant maneuvering for power, which implies that the fulfillment of romantic desire in this realm is impossible.

As a consequence, Hwang uses not only stereotypes in the 1980s but also racism associated with them to highlight Puccini's unconscious prejudice which has been so popular from the turn of the century to the present. One further complication: while Song exposes the Western fallacy of "submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man," that is exactly the game she is engaging in with Gallimard--except with a subtle twist. Song is ensnaring Gallimard the butterfly by pretending to be ensnared himself as a butterfly. It is no longer a romanticized sadomasochistic relationship between man and woman.

Through Hwang's intricate reinterpretation, the "Butterfly" ceases to be a symbol and a specimen of simplicity and innocence, as in the hands of the Italian composer. This duality of Hwang's butterfly is expressed throughout the play in a streak of exacting analysis. To Pinkerton the collector, his bride is an object to be possessed for her surpassing delicacy and vulnerability. Hwang does not use such elegant poetry. The Madame is now the ambiguous and androgynous *M.*. Indeed, Song is not himself; he is playing the transvestite Butterfly. His lengthy, halting confession proves a mere extension of his on-stage performance. "A small, frightened heart" harks back to Puccini's "to torment a trusting heart" and numerous other references to Cio-Cio San's frailty. The innocent Cio-Cio-San who inquires whether robins nest in the same manner in America as in Japan is transformed into Song Liling who only feigns naivete.

The change from Pinkerton to Gallimard further bespeaks the drastic subversion Hwang intended in his play. Pinkerton is the archetypal wandering sailor, self-assured of his lifestyle and perennially light-hearted. Not until the end when he returns to find a Butterfly still waiting after three long years does he feel the pang of remorse.

Pinkerton's counterpart, Rene Gallimard, shares none of the above qualities. Gallimard was a petty bureaucrat in the French diplomatic corps stationed in Beijing. Negligible in his official capacity and sexually-repressed in his private life, he grows

in stature, at least in his own mind, through his imagined domination over the Chinese opera singer. Song appears to be exploited so Gallimard could avenge his crippled male ego. This somewhat pathological mentality could be traced back to Gallimard's teenage years when he became enslaved by the delusion of enslaving women. Cio-Cio-San is an actual physical presence treated almost as a pretty, yet forgettable illusion. In contrast, the grown Frenchman daydreams about a girl stripping and standing naked in front of him "without shame". This habit of self-indulgence takes hold. This last utterance contrasts with Song's proclaimed "shame" in not presenting herself nude.

Hwang summons two stereotypes of women: the Oriental woman plagued with the sense of shame and the licentious Western woman without any. These two opposite images of femininity are juxtaposed throughout the play. Another example of this kind of sensuous and overpowering Western woman is Renee, the Danish student with the same first name as the protagonist's—a device highlighting the theme of transvestism. After their affair, Renee comments offhandedly on Gallimard's "nice weenie." Then she launches into a prolonged musing on the nicknames for penis. Renee's behaviour in general prompts Gallimard to reflect "is it possible for a woman to be too uninhibited, too willing, so as to seem almost too...masculine?"(Act Two, Scene Six) In order to safeguard his masculinity, Gallimard retreats from the sexually threatening stereotype of the Western women.

He marries Helga for her influential family, despite her homely looks and age. He takes revenge upon womanhood by abusing the other stereotype of women - the frail Oriental "geisha." There is the crux of Gallimard's pathology and Hwang's theme of the Eastern and the Western androgyny. Whenever Song's superior, the puritanical, a unsexed Comrade Chin, enters the stage, the Frenchman "backs away". In a rare moment of lucidity, Gallimard even contemplates his true motive in not undressing Song:

Gallimard: Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps. Happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it.

(Act Two, Scene Seven)

"Happiness" is maintained at the expense of truth. This is a pattern of behaviour prescribed by his private fantasies of turning incorporeality into reality. At this point we see that the central feature of *M. Butterfly* is that an ideal happiness is presented in a self-illusive state.

In *M. Butterfly*, love or sexuality has become yet another form of domination. Here the influence of one person over another is almost exclusively sexual, as desire becomes a form of mesmerism. In *Madame Butterfly*, romanticism retains some of its original meaning. *Madame Butterfly* sees each individual as possessing a sphere of influence, almost a field of magnetic force. The use of mesmerism gives a magical element to *M. Butterfly* and even more than to *Madame Butterfly*. Yet

Puccini shows in his opera that despite, or because of, this seemingly supernatural force, the characters' relationships and betrayals have real and disastrous effects. One character in *M. Butterfly*, Comrade Chin, she is mixed with Puccini's figure Suzuki (Madame Butterfly's servant) and a Chinese communist woman. The portrait of Comrade Chin is rather satirical. For Hwang, *Madame Butterfly* imbued its audiences with a consciousness of history. In *M. Butterfly*, continual references to the past provide a counterpoint to the relentlessly contemporary world. Hwang's insight into Puccini's mode of penetration enabled him to analyze the romance of Orient, the personal conflicts and internalization of racial conscience which constituted the political life between the West and the East in the late twentieth century. There is a reconcilable intention in the end of *Madame Butterfly*. The opera begins with both revelation and mystery. Romance is seen as forms of alternate veiling and unveiling. Puccini views the imagination in romance as holy. The tragedy of Madame Butterfly tears the veil of romance to show a bleak reality.

For Hwang, *Madame Butterfly* presents life as seen in a mental mirror. He attempts to link his story more fully than Puccini's to actual time and place. Setting scene in Beijing, Paris, each of those scenes is somewhat romanticized. Hwang also makes several allusions to themes of Puccini associated with the enchantments of romance. Without evoking the mysticism of Puccini's romanticism, Hwang reveals the sexual manipulation romanticism implies, but the elements of coercion and evil

remain. Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* tries to recoup her experience by transforming the characters she remembers into figures in her own mind. Hwang's characters seem largely impenetrable to each other. Memory is a source of revelation in Hwang's play. Memory in *Madame Butterfly* is the light in which characters are ennobled and idealized. In *M. Butterfly*, the atmosphere of strange enchantment is largely absent, though characters try to evoke this atmosphere. The inescapable prosaic modern world makes characters try to romanticize it. Hwang usually provides romantic associations through a "backward view" in another sense, the nostalgic and elegiac bias of the play. While Puccini contrasts romance with history, Hwang turns historical event itself into romance. That idealization of character is fulfilled in *M. Butterfly*, but Hwang's realistic satire depends on romance as embodied by Puccini's generation, an alternative world that is now irrecoverable. Puccini's rather mystical characters with individuality have become in Hwang's work a recognizable type.

Political conflict is expressed by the form of representation as well as its subject. Hwang shows the political dimension of art itself. The transformation of politics into personality is shown in the character Song Liling. The transformation of Chinese social and political life always appears within the mind of Song, which has internalized the Oriental conscience. For Gallimard, Song is much more believable than those huge Western women in bad makeup who used to play the role of *Madame Butterfly*. But for Song, the cultural difference and historical antagonism

between China and Japan are totally denied in Gallimard's fantasy of the submissive Oriental woman and the dominating White man. Moreover, generally true in a world where the distinctions between private and public realm have collapsed. Song's invitation to Rene Gallimard to visit her and heal the wounds of Chinese Communist revolution. Though the Revolution is rarely mentioned specifically, its results are apparent in the play's phenomena: the wasted and wintry landscape, the fracturing of nation, and the disjunction between the sexes.

According to a theatre critic, Comrade Chin is "more stereotypical and cartoonist than the worst of the nineteenth-century stereotypes" and Song is "little more than a disfigured transvestite version of the infamous Chinese 'dragon lady' prostitute stereotype."²⁵ In other words, the play seems to repeat and to deconstruct at the same time the stereotypical representation of Orient. But from my point of view, Hwang's approach to Comrade Chin is not to create stereotypes, but social types. If stereotypes mean immutable, distorted popular images used indiscriminately for specific personalities without accurate references to their true characteristics, then "stereotyping" bases judgments on perceptual and cognitive deficiencies while ignoring valuable truths and important social functions. Conversely, the term "social types" accents positive qualities. Unlike stereotypes, social types unite a society by

²⁵ James S Moy,. "David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly and Philip Kan Gotanda's Yankee Dawg You Die: Repositioning Chinese American Marginality on the American Stage." *Theatre Journal* 42:1 (march 1990), 48-56.

stressing common sense judgments. The focus is on the familiar rather than the unknown, on first hand observations rather than prejudice. In *M. Butterfly*, Comrade Chin's private life has been subsumed in her public role, her public persona is simply herself. She always wears the Mao suit, a communist uniform designed to eliminate the traces of class, gender and cultural differences. Although the Mao suit seems not to function as cultural signifier, it ironically becomes in the play another fetish whose power comes mainly from the Western fascination with Red China. Whether she is perfectly natural or perfectly artificial cannot be determined. The private and public, personal and political, begin to merge in the character of Comrade Chin, whose appeal is based largely on her personal appearance. Here the play reflects the relationship of collective thoughts as expressed in cultural symbols to actual political events. Hwang shows how the personal meanings generated by social changes directly relates to the values and attitudes of a society at a particular time and place. In a sense, Comrade Chin stands for a transcendental identity of China's Communism Utopia.

Historically, the radical type of Comrade Chin emerged from the political movement which was called *Chinese Cultural Revolution* (1966--1976).²⁶ The

²⁶ More precisely known as the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', it represented Mao Zedong's attempt to eliminate the political obstruction of his political career and to prevent the Chinese revolution from degenerating in the way he believed the Soviet one had one. The Cultural Revolution was thus a double operation: the purging of the older generation of Chinese leaders and their replacement by a new generation whose revolutionary zeal would be enhanced by very act of toppling the 'power holders'. Mao mobilized youthful Red Guards

political movement produced many ambiguous and absurd social phenomena in China. At the same time, the political movement also spread to many campuses of Europe. As we can see, Hwang brings one political myth to his audiences. Political myths, like religious myths, have about as much basis in reality as fantasies in general. They can lead men to act in such a way that actual social changes are precipitated through their agency. In other words, political myth is a fantasy which happens to offer fulfilment to the desires of many people. Because the mood of a people led by a political myth is essentially irrational, there is little chance of men becoming free from the powerful myth. Like Gallimard's death from the Oriental Butterfly myth, Chinese people suffered and died from the unrealised political myth, but Mao Zedong gained his power and privilege by the changes that are brought about. As Hwang has suggested, "You can't deal with cultural mystique unless you deal with political mystique, political power."²⁷ The Chinese political myth enhances the cultural/sexual myth in *M. Butterfly*. To the extent, the play has a flavor of epic style.

Gallimard's romantic imaginings are melodramatic and apocalyptic, enabling him to play the role of Puccini's Pinkerton in the twentieth century. As he says,

(the radical political organization for youth) to attack veteran cadres whom Mao accused of "taking the capitalist road." The national political movement produced the civil war, social chaos and violence. The movement was not officially declared terminated until after the death of Mao in September 1976.

²⁷David Saveran, 127.

I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call, and, as I wickedly refuse to do so, I felt for the first time that rush of power--the absolute power of a man. I had finally gained power over a beautiful woman, only to abuse it cruelly.

(Act One, Scene Eleven)

Politics are internalized, based largely on the romantic convictions in a new revolution, as Gallimard says "I was suddenly initiated into the way of the world." (Act One, Scene Twelve). For Song, the revolution s/he seeks to reinfuse the age with "the great feminine element", which in her/his view will enable her contemporaries to feel and speak more sharply. Gallimard seeks, by contrast, to re-establish "a vision of the Orient" which he sees as the province of the "masculine" and "power". But neither of their solutions seems to correspond to traits distinctive to men or women. *M. Butterfly* plays successfully on the binary system to create a gender parody of the "masculine" woman and the "feminine" man. *M. Butterfly* becomes a metaphor for sexual politics, for the complexities of intimacy and the private hell of shameful secrets. The question of the sexual and gender identity in *M. Butterfly* will be addressed in detail in next chapter.

By showing the personalization of politics, Hwang does not betray the feminist movement but rather underlines one of its themes: that the personal is also political. Hwang treats the effect of public and ethnic politics on individual desires. Hwang shows the discrepancy between imagination and reality by demonstrating the contrast between the feminist ideals and the reality of male-female relations as

defined by socially constructed sexuality. What in conventional terms should be the romantic side of Hwang's play, the love relationship (surrounded by often-ironically erotic imagery), becomes instead the grim reality of an unhappy dream: there is no fulfilled desire, as romance confronts reality. As the play becomes more enmeshed in mythic archetypes, Hwang also draws a link to history, implying that romance and history are not opposed. But Hwang restores us to the present by undercutting romantic archetypes, showing Hwang's realistic subversion of romance to resist its melodramatic patterns. The aspects of Hwang's realism tend not to reproduce reality but to unsettle our sense of its stability. Hwang's reality is achieved through the internalization of experience.

The conclusion of the play, the fall of proud Frenchman Rene Gallimard, is a personal disaster, suffering that is both self-imposed and humiliating. Gallimard is in love with a butterfly, and he is not in love with this Asian man. And consequently, there is such a disjunction that he can no longer continue that relationship because it is not the same relationship on any important romantic level. In the final scene, the ironic death of Gallimard presents the character's inability to accept the tragedy of the exotic love; and sexuality as the implicit theme of the play returns to the surface. A white man is transformed on the stage into an Oriental Butterfly. Repeating Madame Butterfly's last line, "death with honor is better than life...life with dishonor," he imitates further the very Japanese ritual of seppuku to end his own

life, while upstage Song in Western outfits "stands as a man", smoking a cigarette and repeating Gallimard's first two words which begin the play--"Butterfly? Butterfly?". Gallimard casts himself as Pinkerton, the American cad who seduces and betrays Butterfly. And he finds out he has been Butterfly all along. "As a representative male Westerner, Gallimard kills himself to maintain the political image of the world he prefers, and it is likely that the gesture is to be received ironically rather than tragically in the context of the play's political assumptions."²⁸ We emerge from the dream world of *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* into a mode of representation so realistic that it shatters the fiction.

M. Butterfly is political as well as exotic. The Oriental romantic myth is destroyed for Gallimard. Such an ending reinforces the disappearance of romance in the world of *M. Butterfly* and confirms Hwang's realism. The force of that realism depends on the evocation of romantic enchantment, exoticism, erotism, and symbolism, and it finally makes the Butterfly myth broken. In *M. Butterfly*, the images of binary opposition (East/West, Communism/Capitalism, Female/Male, Body/Mind, Reality/Fantasy) are graphically present in the process of opposing social and psychological forces.

In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang uses a nostalgic point of view to depict the politics of romance, but this retrospective orientation is opposed to the plot of romanticism.

²⁸Robert Skloot, 61.

The subversion of romance by realism in the play illustrates the unreality of the romantic dream which projects a shape onto life. Hwang does not seek some absolute revelation in a vision of the future, but reflects on a moment of past crisis. The romantic structure of the Butterfly myth is revealed by Hwang's representation, which uses but subverts romance by showing the discrepancy between ideal and reality. In *M. Butterfly*, the sense of power which comes with love is used not to create a bond of mutual enhancement but to contain racial struggles within private life. For Hwang, the past itself has become romantic, the only locale of a fullness felt to be absent from the present; the meaning of life becomes something which can only be imagined, because it does not exist anywhere. In this sense, *M. Butterfly* presents an empty love.

Chapter 4

A Little Butterfly and a Dragon Lady:

The Function of the Ambivalent Sexual and Gender Identity

M. Butterfly is about the difference between East and West and between men and women. As Hwang said, "that's essentially what the play is about: that the idealization of a woman is false to its core, even to the point of the woman being a man."²⁹ But, is this a real love story or a story in search of love? If we treat this play as a love story, we may restate that old Freudian question, "Why does Song seduce Gallimard, the 'innocent' victim?" By the way of a new one: "What does the transvestite want?" Does Song really want to become Madame Butterfly for Gallimard? No. Because Song initially met Gallimard and told him: "I will never do Butterfly again, Monsieur Gallimard. If you wish to see some real theatre, come to the Peking Opera sometime. Expand your mind." (Act One, Scene Six) Never during the whole affair did Song claim s/he loved Gallimard except that Song once said that s/he loved Gallimard because he adored his/her "acting"(Act II, Scene VII). Why does Hwang create a "bad" Oriental woman? Let's not ask the old tired question about why the Frenchman degrades himself, but rather ask why Hwang chooses this position for his "Butterfly". As Hwang himself said,

Now our considerations of race and sex intersect the issue of imperialism. For this formula--good natives serve Whites, bad natives

²⁹David Saveran, 128.

*rebel--is consistent with the mentality of colonialism. Because they are submissive and obedient, good natives of both sexes necessarily take on "feminine" characteristics in a colonialist world.*³⁰

Hence, Hwang wants to challenge the "good" Oriental stereotypes and explore the Oriental identity through "a crime of a dragon lady". Hwang addresses the instability of ideology as attached to representation and society.³¹ Therefore, as we see, the central figure of *M. Butterfly* is caught in a paradox made up of culture, sex and race. To some extent, the play is just a play (game), which has the playful sexual double meanings. Ideas lack their referents; the past and its meaning are lost. "Play is the vice and joy of postmodernism; play is fatuousness but also fantasy."³² And play is the true agency for liberation.

In this chapter, I intend to argue that in fact the ambivalence of sexual and gender identity is the basic quality shared by feminist concepts of the power struggle of discourses, gender difference and the Postmodern idea of androgyny. I intend to examine the dynamics of identity/difference in *M. Butterfly* and its subsequent cultural and sexual ambivalence.

As a theory of resistance, postmodernism owes a great deal to feminist and

³⁰Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, with an Afterward (New York, A Plume Book),99.

³¹Andrew Ross, *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xv.

³²Ihab Hassan, (): *Finnegans Wake and the Postmodern Imagination*, in *Paracriticisms*, (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, London, 1975), 83

Postcolonial theory and practice. These theories and practices have highlighted history and politics and have also brought to the fore the relationship between racial and gender difference and questions of authority and power which are integral to the postmodern moment. As Bryan Turner states,

*Postmodernism, which has found important allies in feminism and anti-colonialism, condemns the uniform, patriarchal, rationalist and hierarchical structures of Western modernism. While many critics of postmodernism have mistakenly assumed that it has no political message, postmodernism suggests a new vision of justice which gives primacy to difference, to heterogeneity, to paradox and contradiction, and to local knowledge.*³³

The central feminist concept is identity politics in which one's identity is taken as a political point of departure, as a motivation. The feminist critics attempt to understand the female subjectivity and the sexual difference in relation to man. The differences are about sexual or racial, economic, or (sub)cultural issues and remain concretely embedded in social and power relations.

As we can see, contemporary Western drama frequently represents human subjectivity and gender in vastly different ways. With male transvestism as the central complication of the plot, *M. Butterfly* simultaneously allows the reading of gender/sexual identity, for identity is unstable and ultimately undeterminable in the play. As the play based on "a true story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity" (Hwang), *M. Butterfly* can only reach its climax at the very moment when

³³Bryan S. Turner, 11-12.

Song Liling, the Chinese female impersonator, undresses himself in front of Rene Gallimard, who still refuses to face the "true sex" of his lover even after the espionage trial. Song's naked male body is thus displayed on the stage as the final undeniable truth of the sexual identity. Gallimard's identity as Western male, which derived its contours in relief to Song's identity as Eastern female, is compromised. Finally the West becomes the East and man becomes woman. In *M. Butterfly*, gender is inextricably linked with identity. By "authorial self-reflexiveness, by the fusion of fact and fiction," Hwang uses "a new androgyny" and makes "sex as solipsist play".³⁴

Hwang's concerns extend to the politics of gender. It is a wonderful idea to have the confusions of gender which the play presents contained so deftly in its title. Hwang points out that what we assume about gender depends on what we see, or don't see. Gallimard assumes that Song is a woman because to a Western eye he is wearing women's clothing and displaying "feminine" characteristics. Hwang insists that the mysteries of human sexuality allow for more possibilities than most societies sanction.

As a play intended to "link imperialism, racism and sexism", *M. Butterfly* successfully enacts a process of "gendering" imperialism by combining two systems

³⁴ Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, London, 1975), 56-7.

of domination: the West over the East and men over women. "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" (46) just as women will eventually submit to men's sexual power. "The whole world run by a bunch of men with pricks the size of pins."(56) The thrust of Hwang's play is to expose the speciousness of such parallelism, especially the one that sees Orientals as "feminine"(hence weak, requiring domination, but also inscrutably wise, intuitive, and mysterious), in contrast to the Western "masculine" selves. As a metaphor for Western self-delusions about Orientals, Gallimard's odd sexual passion is deftly effective. In Act III Scene I, Song gives the definition of the West's rape mentality towards the East:

*Song: The West thinks of itself as masculine--big guns, big industry,
big money-- so the East is feminine--weak, delicate, poor...
Her mouth says no, but her eyes yes. The West believes the
East, deep down, wants to be dominated --because a woman
can't think for herself.*

(Act three, Scene one)

Political power deployment between the West and the East is depicted here as a sexual relationship between men and women. "Hwang challenges our perceptions of international relations by insisting on their cultural foundation which, in turn, possesses a sexual basis."³⁵ The colonial/sexual association in which the Orient can only be feminine and women submissive explains perfectly Song's culminating courtroom self-parody--"And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man"

³⁵Robert Skloot, 62.

(83) Hwang said that it was very hard to grow up in America as a person of color and not be ambivalent about your race, not to wish in some sense that you were white. Hwang argues that the Western view of the Asian is remarkably like sexist stereotypes of the female: She is a lady--but also a dragon.

The ambiguity of gender in *M. Butterfly* calls into question the "repressive" conceptual link between sex and power. When a white man is transformed on the stage into an Oriental Butterfly, we see that man is no longer the oppressor and the East the victim. According to Foucault, one's "sexual identity" is in fact a function of one's place in the social field at a particular time, not given. One's personal identity is constantly open to change and contestation.³⁶ In other words, one's "sexuality" is a matter of socially and historically specific practices and relationships that are contingent and dynamic, and thus a matter of political struggle.³⁷

Those undetermined identities are nevertheless resisted, expanded and openly contradicted throughout *M. Butterfly*, especially in the figure of Song. He/she is never exclusively female or male, Eastern or Western, a villain or hero. In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang plunges certainty into ambivalence, unity into hybridization, and absoluteness into contradiction by opening a dialogical interaction between a

³⁶Jana Sawicki, "Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom: Foucault and Feminism" *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed., Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 184.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 184.

"dominant" voice and a "dominated" voice--a mocking and subversive parodic double. Here, the dominated is often the marginal woman and the Orient. The Orient, according to Said's book *Orientalism*, was not allowed to represent itself, but had to be represented by the Occident. The Orient was not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other. The orientalism discourse was ultimately about the origins of the West, not the origins of the East. "In fact, the orientalist tradition was often ambiguous in its assessment of oriental cultures, especially where orientalism adopted a romantic perspective on non-Western societies."³⁸ For Westerner, "Oriental" was wonderfully synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the inferior. As Hwang claims that "the East has played into that stereotype by saying, 'Oh, yes, we are helpless,' and therefore trying to manipulate the situation to its own advantage."³⁹ The aim and result of *M. Butterfly* is to demonstrate the inner principles of weakness within Orientalism, or racist ideologies of blackness, in order to challenge the Western stereotyping of Orient.

Therefore, Hwang brings about the repressed "oppositional voice" of Asian desire can thus be revealed in a subversive mode, as Robert Skloot has said," I believe that *M. Butterfly* achieves its political objective 'to fight the religion of the

³⁸Bryan S. Turner, 101.

³⁹John L. DiGaetani, 165.

present in America' by trying 'to link imperialism, racism and sexism [in] a certain historical perspective' skilfully and movingly, an effect all the more surprising because it has proved so accessible to a large and largely middle-class audience."⁴⁰ Gallimard realizes that he has been the submissive Butterfly, manipulated by a cruel and wily Oriental. Hence, the title, M.(abbreviation of Monsieur) Butterfly. In other words, the core of misunderstandings and clashes between cultures in *M. Butterfly* is not European nobility of mind to Oriental villainy but European innocence to Oriental sophistication.

According to Foucault, one's identity is more a matter of political struggle than that of a stable, static and individualistic model.⁴¹ Here the "ambivalent" or "indeterminacy" aspect of Hwang's play should be emphasized in that it not only lays bare the cracks in the unified, fixed, completed, and dominant ideology, but it at the same time through a process of reversal and parody reveals and recognizes a marginalized "otherness." Hwang's attempt is to see the liberation of heterogeneity in the homogeneous system. In *M. Butterfly*, Song gains mastery over Gallimard and becomes masculine. Through this process of reversal and renewal, we can also see the deconstruction of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity, a characteristic intrinsic to the androgynous concept. The dualistic opposition between

⁴⁰Robert Skloot, 64.

⁴¹Jana Sawicki, 184.

the male and female becomes unstable and problematic. Identity politics will call into question the natural, universal essentialism of gender identity.

The ambivalence of sexual identity can further be seen in Song. At the beginning of the play, Song plays the role of a victimized female Madame Butterfly and successfully seduces Gallimard because she/he appears to be the "Perfect Woman" of Gallimard's fantasy: submissive, modest and compliant. Song has to humiliate herself/himself in order to gain the trust and confidence of Gallimard. When Song told Gallimard that she was pregnant, a reversal of the sexual hierarchy occurs in Song's house with Song becoming the oppressor and Gallimard the victim. As Foucault indicates, one's sexual identity is constantly open to dynamic change. In fact, sexual identity is closely connected with the power struggle as we see clearly in the play. Therefore, when we consider the problem of sexual identity, we should also bear in mind the social, ideological discourses within which the identity is shaped and constructed.

In fact gender identity is culturally or socially constructed; it is determined and shaped by different discourses or ideologies. In this play, the social or cultural products or discourses like the dress and especially the performing seem to shape and construct sexual identity. In the power struggle of mastery and control, Song can dominate and control her/his lover becoming the "man". From feminine man to "masculine woman", this is the most interesting part of the play. Song repeatedly

reminds Gallimard that her identity is performative: "I am an actor."

Song: I'm an artist, Rene. You were my greatest...acting challenge. It doesn't matter how rotten I answer, does it? You still adore me. That's why I love you, Rene.

(Act Two, Scene Seven)

We can see that whoever has "skill", which means whoever can control the ideological discourses skilfully, can usually win in the power struggle of mastery and control. "It is important to note Song's status as an actor does not preclude him from engagement with the role, but it empowers her to engage or not engage at will, without divulging her level of involvement."⁴² Therefore, the power struggle, in which Song and Gallimard constantly shift between being the oppressor and the victim, shows that it is not determined by essential gender or sexual identity but by contingent and ever changing discourses or skills.

Another interesting point to notice in the play is that we can also see a reversal of gender role when Song starts to remove his/her makeup and wig in front of a mirror. As Song removes his clothes,

Gallimard: What--What are you doing?

Song: Helping you to see through my act.

(Act Three, Scene Two)

Song's line operates as music and lights have; it cues us to become more thoughtful.

⁴² Karen Shimakawa, "Who's to say?" or, Making Space for Gender and Ethnicity in *M. Butterfly*, *Theatre Journal*, volume 45 (3), (October 1993), 358-359.

The process of his gender transformation is thus achieved when he removes the kimono to show a western suit. Since this well-cut Armani suit still cannot force Gallimard to forsake his illusion, Song decides to strip himself in front of Gallimard to reveal the "nakedness" of his masculinity hidden beneath the covering of clothes. At that moment, Gallimard miserably asks, " Why, Why do you treat me so cruelly?" (Act III, Scene II, p.87). When Song appears naked before Gallimard, his male body arouses Gallimard's disgust. Song's male body "as" readable text, however, parodies and subverts the association between the Oriental female body and its role as sexually evocative signifier. This is a speaking body that creates and deploys a "language."

As the necessary sign of a "naturalized" sexual identity, the gendered surface of the body shifts first from the feminine Kimono to masculine suit and then from costumes as cultural signs of gender demarcation to the genitals as the physiological bedrock of sexual differentiation. Song's naked male body is now taken as the ultimate truth of his sex. The transgression and subversion of patriarchal order and deconstruction of binary opposition in gender and sexual identity reveal the otherness and the difference in contrast to the dominant or Western Oriental ideology or discourse.

However, from a more political perspective, this final transformation seems to blur the line between the master and the slave that is politically necessary for a

critique of colonialist imperialism by making the colonizer a pitiful victim and the colonized a cunning manipulator. Gallimard, the "adventurous imperialist", is now portrayed as an exploited and subjugated victim on the basis of his "ambiguous" sexual inclination. His appropriation of Oriental costumes leads not to a mastery and control of the threat of the Orient/Woman; instead, it leads to a self-imposed humiliation under the feminized and thus castrated appearance. "When *Madame Butterfly* is replayed with the transposition of gender, so that what is the same is also completely different, the political meaning and emotional force of the final moments are combined and mutually increased."⁴³

The play seems to suggest the complexity and instability of human desire which cannot be exactly defined by strict sexual categories. More importantly, this "ambivalent" treatment of Gallimard's sexuality also keeps the sexual imperialist parallels of West/East and men/women at the centre of *M. Butterfly* since the gendering of imperialism functions primarily under the unstated presumption of heterosexuality. "*M. Butterfly*, indeed, addresses the question of the extent to which we require those stereotypes which we agree to treat as archetypes, the degree to which we collaborate in those confusions which bring us to the brink of tragedy. It is a play in which gender no less than racial clichés becomes the basis of personal

⁴³Robert Skloot, 62.

and national psychology.”⁴⁴ Gallimard is finally left on the stage less as a repressed homosexual than as laughing stock who has not even learned about the truth of his lover's sex after twenty years. Gallimard's act is an illustration of the elusiveness of sexual, psychological and ethnic stereotypes.

The question "why do you treat me so cruelly?" or "what does Song want?" seem to have a similar answer: "equality" and "identity". And yet, "equality" and "identity" seem to belong to this bizarre category of performative failures. Surely, neither Song nor Gallimard nor the audience in this play are ultimately free from fantasy, or myth. In *M. Butterfly*, Anti-racism combines with a profound fear of the loss of personal and cultural identity. Hwang wants to force the audiences of his play into the process of ambivalence which reveals the cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism. As Hwang said,

*One of the things that I learned from M. Butterfly is the universality of the other, as it were. Whether we talk about it in terms of race or whether we talk about it in terms of gender or imperialism or whatever, there is a desire to degrade the person who is not like yourself and to feel somehow superior, to feel that you have power over them. The interrelationships of the gender issues and the race issues are really important, and it's something I discovered as I was writing about it.*⁴⁵

Indeed, the force of ambivalence challenges traditional Western cultural

⁴⁴C.W.E.Bigsby, 331.

⁴⁵Jackson R. Bryer, 138.

assumption about the East and the colonial stereotype. In this sense, the play is a story in search of a misconceived identity, not love.

Chapter 5

The Postmodernist Approaches in *M. Butterfly*

Since the end of World War II, the number of Western and Asian dramatists who explore cross-cultural theatre has expanded. The result has been a wide variety of theatrical events that fuse the foreign and indigenous theatrical conventions to create productions classified under the term “intercultural theatre.” From the early 1980s various theatre performances have emerged which can be read against models of the postmodern. At the same time, the multi-cultural influence, the Black theatre, Spanish-American theatre, Asian theatre and other minority theatres have developed rapidly and have brightened the contemporary American theatre. And the Feminist movement also has produced a few good eminent female playwrights and dramatic works.

Hwang is secure in his Oriental and Occidental dramatic roots. Hwang has drawn upon an international cast of actors, employed diverse acting styles and a variety of theatrical modes of representation. There is a full-out commitment in *M. Butterfly* to focus, energize, theatricalize, animate, and alienate (or Brecht-ize). All this experimentation in *M. Butterfly* represents a belief in a syncretic cultural universe, where the stage is all the world. From this perspective, Hwang's *M. Butterfly* shows that cross-cultural work would have to confront the idea of

representing the Other. The multicultural idea is not limited to ethnicity, but includes orientations and ideologies.

M. Butterfly challenges the modernist idea of high art and in some ways prefigures the postmodernist idea of pop culture. Hwang writes with a destructive impulse that continues to disturb the inherited models and definitions through which existing theatre understands the staged relationship between words and images. "What Hwang does provide (and what director John Dexter intensifies) is a marvellous theatricality: two black-suited could-be Kabuki dancers/stage assistants; a gaggle of energetic Chinese Opera instrumentalists, peeking through scrims and shogi screens; an enormous red spiralling ramp. serving as set and vortex; several breathless and high-energy flashes of (dorsal) male and female nudity;...."⁴⁶

M. Butterfly is typical of the postmodern theatre in the use of dreamlike quality and doubled performers, the archetypal nature of the performance with its choreographed movements and repeated use of operatic music, together with images not connected with time or space. "Hwang's artistic conceit--to enlarge this account through parallels to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*--opens this story of an East/West meeting to treatment through the range of theatrical techniques available to opera and drama. *M. Butterfly* uses them all and uses them resourcefully: movement, dance,

⁴⁶Robert Cohen, 15.

music, opera, lighting, costume, character, episode, color."⁴⁷ His style was described in a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* profile as a "blend of slice-of-life realism and yearning spiritualism--scatter shot anger mixed with a sense of fathomless loss."⁴⁸ This indeterminacy is recouped by the familiar emphasis on the compensating plenitude and immediacy of the act of performance. Presentation replaces representation and performance is increasingly about performance itself. In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang stresses the creation in postmodernist drama of 'patterns in space', 'image' and 'tableaux'. *M. Butterfly* is a mixed medium, both discontinuous and whole, visual and auditory, poetic and narrative. As John Dexter noted, Hwang has "an enquiring mind which can turn fact into drama and in doing so makes the same demands of the story--absolute freedom of Time, Space, Place."⁴⁹

American contemporary theatre of the 1980s appears to exemplify precisely this kind of considered "hybrid" creativity. Tradition in postmodern drama becomes a carrier of various particular impulses. It is neither linear nor vertical but moves diversely across a surface. And its principal mode of operation amid its confluence of particulars, as in terms of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, is collage. In

⁴⁷Robert L. King, "Recent Drama", *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1989), 133.

⁴⁸*Opera News* (October, 1992), 14.

⁴⁹John Dexter, *The Honorable East--A Posthumous Autobiography* (Theatre Arts Books, Routledge, New York, 1993), 11.

Hwang's case, *M. Butterfly* involves a complex amalgam of theatrical, operatic, and musical materials coexisting and interchanging within an interactive stage space.

As Hwang stated, "I'm not very interested in subtext or subtleties. I'm more interested in creating interesting layers of a structure that have reverberations, one upon the other." and "I'm always aware of a structure, or some interesting formal question,.... In *Butterfly*, I was aware what the arc of each scene was going to be before I started it. I don't know if, as a process, that's better or worse."⁵⁰ In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang fully employed antimimetic devices, including memory structure, episodic dream structure, lengthy monologues, a play-within-a-play, and clusters of mood-setting music, and visual symbols that enable him to stage the inner visions of his characters. A central theme of *M. Butterfly* is the continued vitality of the past within one's memory. The memory framework allows the protagonist to selectively relive the meaningful events of his twenty-year romance as he perceives them. These theatrical devices come from the theatrical tradition of Tennessee Williams. Williams asserts in the stage directions of *The Glass Menagerie* that "the scene is memory and therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the article it touches, for memory is seated pre-dominantly in the heart."

In *M. Butterfly*, the collage is the conversion of an identity, translating the

⁵⁰ David Savran, 121, 123.

past into the new territory. Hwang holds on to the past now by deracinating it, by shifting it into the present tense. "This makes for a different concept of tradition, one in which continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but to expand the past in the present. In the plural present all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other."⁵¹ The play's structural principles include fragments, symbols, leitmotifs, collages, montages, mythic patterns, operatic effects, game theories, parodies, irony, puns. This is central to virtually all postmodern art--the "presence of the past," or what Jameson calls "pastiche." The latter is defined as: "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language."⁵² Any postmodern style necessarily is parody or pastiche since there is no "real history." Parody is one of the most calculated and analytic techniques in postmodern arts: it searches out, by means of subversive mimicry, any weakness, pretension or lack of self-awareness in its original. As an internal check that art or literature keeps on itself, parody may be parasitic or creative, and is often both. Parody seeks to recreate in a more extreme and accessible form the manner of major writers. It is a mirror of a mirror, a critique of a view of life already articulated in art. Parody is so common

⁵¹Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," in *The Post-modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (Academy Editions, London, 1992), 197.

⁵²Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London, New York: Verso, 1988), 16.

an element in postmodern theatre precisely because it adds this extra level of critical comment. So does Hwang with Puccini's opera in *M. Butterfly*. Like many postmodern works of art, *M. Butterfly* is a highly critical play which is overloaded with a variety of meanings. Hwang addresses a highly 'knowing' and literate audience in his play. Since the contrasting elements are always connected in the mind of the audiences, the images in *M. Butterfly* makes a tremendous impact on them. The performance of the play, however, keeps a certain distance; it requires a viewer, not participant; it is often ironic.

Although he admires Chekhov who created great emotional momentum from small events and details, Hwang does not use Chekhov's way. As a student of Sam Shepard, Hwang is always interested in Shepard's way. Regarding Shepard's influences, Hwang explains that:

*(Sam Shepard) He's very conscious that there are links to our past and that we, as a country, have a collective history. He attempts to make those connections in his plays. Also, in his preface to Angel City, Shepard talks about character in a different way, in terms of jazz improvisation rather than developing the character's arc in the traditional fashion. You see almost a collage effect, bits and pieces of the character at different points, butting up against one another. That's always interested me.*⁵³

In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang doubles his characters so that there is a constant

⁵³David Savran, 120.

process of recurrence, metempsychosis, and superimposition; and opposites--Song and Madame Butterfly, Gallimard and Pinkerton, even Gallimard and Madame Butterfly, Comrade Chin and Suzuki, Marc and Sharpless--become the other. Hwang's tendency is to fragment character into the anti-character("Player"), like Song is "Madame Butterfly-Player". The Characters of *M. Butterfly* thus become problematic, not given. Like Shepard, Hwang learned the power to be derived from the juxtaposition of reality and myth and the significance of history. Through the use of discordance, ugliness, and juxtaposition--what postmodernists would call rupture, discontinuity, disjuncture, etc.⁵⁴--Hwang is aware of the whole history, context, and reverberations of the Madame Butterfly image in the contemporary world.

The play abounds in wit and irony, in exoticism, ribaldry, and song; the sounds of the alien music, which a critic identifies with postmodern, is never far from the edge of *M. Butterfly*. *Beijing opera's* and Japanese *Kabuki's* compact performance structure provide many opportunities for narrative and performative elaboration on the basic story/text, enhancing the realization of aesthetic ideal of postmodernism. These structural patterns and performance techniques are often juxtaposed with the performance pattern of Western theatre and opera. The Chinese opera and Japanese *Kabuki* involve an intricate fusion of visual and aural aspects into

⁵⁴See, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" in Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 84-96.

a beautiful harmony and economy of essential forms, including operatic music, stylized pantomime, skilled acrobatics, and beautiful rhythmic movement. That is a "symphonic drama".

Hwang's *M. Butterfly* shares with most postmodern works the assumption of nonlinear form, which is always visual and auditory. As designed by Eiko Ishioka in consultation with the director John Dexter, the setting was enthusiastically accepted by Hwang for its ability to convey "the meeting and clash of East and West, of male and female." There is more mental space. There is time to reflect, to think. The setting exhibits a key style of postmodern stage design: "A kind of pan-historical, omni-stylistic view has come to dominate stage design; the world is seen as a multiplicity of competing, often incongruous and conflicting elements and images, and stage design reflects this perspective."⁵⁵

Hwang was vaguely aware of the degree to which musical structures could create dramatic effect, opera presents chances for theatricalism beyond any in the so-called legitimate theatre. In the history of drama, opera plays an important role, and not only on account of the libretto, which forms its literary backbone. Greek tragedy constituted a total work of art, in which music was not simply an ornamental flourish but decisively influenced word choice and word placement in strophic repetition. A Chinese theatre band with traditional instruments performs on stage. Using Western

⁵⁵Arnold Aronson, "Postmodern Design" *Theatre Journal*, volume 43, no.1 (March 1991), 3.

operatic music and Chinese operatic music as a mood builder in *M. Butterfly* is another way of making the invisible present. I deem the play as an attempt at revitalizing tragedy by way of opera. Conversely, in the play the dramaturgy of alienation (Verfremdung) is found in its purest and least adulterated expression in a musico-literary context.

Hwang sees theatre, with its play between the text and production, between history and presentation, as the essential interrogative act of the artist today. As He suggests,

*Theatre demands an application of intellect and is a good forum for new ideas....Because good theatre appeals to the mind, interesting ideas are a prerequisite. Since there are no interesting ideas in the air, the popular theatre has concentrated on spectacle... At least in my own work, I perceive it as a forum for a society to confront itself. In a good play that confrontation should be total, which means that it's not only political, or spiritual, or intellectual, but combines all these elements. When you confront someone totally, you're also confronting them on an emotional level.*⁵⁶

Postmodern theatre is the very space where the critical play of cultural interrogation takes place. It is where the play of representations and simulations of postmodern culture can be called into question. The challenge is to open the space where this intertextual play can occur. Hwang's theatre explicitly acknowledges the play of differences which is the site of both the theatrical and the cultural experience. This theatre is, then, appropriately sited within our postmodern culture. Hwang

⁵⁶David Savran, 130.

approaches the problem of representation in term of the dispersal of meaning through an intertextual, undecidable cultural history.

In the context of the challenging redefinitions of cultural performance, the question in *M. Butterfly* gains a new meaning. The developed visual codes and performance techniques (gesture, movement, dance, chant, song, rhythmic and emotional tonalities, narrative gestures, make up, costuming, etc.) in *M. Butterfly* offers a particularly interesting point of departure from the conventional Western perceptions of psychological realism in acting and theatrical representation. What the textuality and visual representation of *M. Butterfly* has is a more concrete historical understanding of the complex and conflicted relations of text and language in the performance of the play. This production awakens a sense of the endless intertextual play of classic texts within our cultural history in such a way that Artaud's cry of "no more masterpieces" is stilled. In *M. Butterfly*, every performance taking place within an institutional context is always caught up within structures of cultural difference and expectation.

M. Butterfly has the positive, innovative potential of postmodern creativity. It arises against the background of preceding work, reaches the high point of a dramatic period as a successful form. "Hwang carries off the technique in multiple ways with such striking aplomb that it is impossible not to admire his skill."⁵⁷ The

⁵⁷Robert Skloot, 46.

mainstream success of *M. Butterfly* has made Hwang the most prominent Asian-American playwright in contemporary theatre.

Chapter 6

Historical and Productive: Toward a New Aesthetics of Reception

Hwang attempts to explore the unknown aesthetic potential of the postmodern theatre. As we can observe, Hwang's innovations exploring new modes of postmodern aesthetic in *M. Butterfly* are frequently followed by a mode of synthesis, incorporating both past and present discourses within "hybrid" compositions. Such hybrid plays self-consciously interweave past and present aesthetics from the point of view of the most present and postmodern culture. In this respect, *M. Butterfly* is the considered integration of the old and the new within a changing creative realms. In the sense, the Butterfly theme is alive and well in postmodern culture and theatre. I will examine the aesthetics of reception of *M. Butterfly* in this Chapter.

M. Butterfly appeals directly to any contemporary audience by its subject material and its entertainment qualities. It has been a step in the direction toward truly communal art in the sense that it appeals to various "interpretive communities" at one and the same time, albeit for different reasons. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* involves a complex amalgam of theatrical, musical, and operatic materials coexisting and interchanging within a slightly more restrained variant of the interactive space. There are the surprising, the unexpected and unfamiliar in the performance of *M.*

Butterfly for an audience. "Hwang's achievement is due to the density of his texture, his use of the theatre, and to the provocative thematic (but not moral) ambiguity noted above which nonetheless is, at the same time, aesthetically perfect."⁵⁸ It is actually a sort of new theatrical form with profoundly aesthetic rationales. As Fredric Jameson argues,

This is a rich and creative movement, of the great aesthetic play and delight, that can perhaps be most rapidly characterized as a whole by two important features: first, the falling away of the protopolitical vocation and the terrorist stance of the older modernism and, second, the eclipse of all of the affect (depth, anxiety, terror, the emotions of the monumental) that marked high modernism and its replacement by what Coleridge would have called fancy or Schiller aesthetic play, a commitment to surface and to the superficial in all the senses of the word."⁵⁹

From its inception, *M. Butterfly* was involved in the Oriental things as an exotic novelty for Western audience. Rather, it was to serve as an international experiment in production and reception. The audiences are confronted with "an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning."⁶⁰ The intentionally radical disruption of pleasing aesthetic experience is the cornerstone of *M. Butterfly*.

⁵⁸Robert Skloot, 64.

⁵⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Foreword by Fredric Jameson, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984,) xviii.

⁶⁰Charles Russell, "The Context of the Concept," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 192.

M. Butterfly remains high drama: a rousing, searing, well-pointed piece that entertains (concededly, its primary function) by tapping deep into mainstream Western interests: ethnic identity, interracial relations, romanticism, sex-orientation, Asian super-communism and super-capitalism, and the East/West challenges. "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is deliberately seductive in its rhetorical strategies; striking theatrical techniques and a sensational plot gimmick lead audiences on until they are as likely to question their preconceptions about sexual, racial and cultural superiority as they can be in a theatre."⁶¹

A contrast between Puccini's and Hwang's works sheds light on the Broadway hit as unquestionably a cross-cultural and cross-generic reinterpretation of the thwarted love of Cio-Cio-san, the geisha, for Lt. Pinkerton, the "Yankee" naval officer. A central change Hwang makes is to recast the Japanese geisha girl as a female impersonator in Peking Opera, and the American sailor as a French diplomat. Again, Hwang may have little professional knowledge of Peking Opera or diplomacy. But by altering the protagonists' identity, the playwright aptly highlights the motif of Eastern and Western androgyny in his play. The opera's appeal comes from the character Madame Butterfly, her innocence and romanticism, rendered so movingly in the context of Pinkerton's betrayal. The espionage incident, by contrast, is an expose of human greed, of mutual exploitation, of trading sex for

⁶¹ Robert L. King, 132.

secrets. Nothing is romantic about the protagonists' relationship, except a romantic facade set up to hide their true motives. That is to say, Puccini composes in the vein of heartbreaking romanticism; the newspaper story from which Hwang draws for his play is one of naked realism. The answer of Hwang's *M. Butterfly* to newly posed questions of the stereotype about exoticism, concerning the gender, fantasy versus reality, East-West relations, racism, politics, cultures, revolutions and sexual orientations, leaves new problems behind it. Though *M. Butterfly* presents us with a visionary work that bridges the history and culture of two worlds, the production stops crushingly short of finding the gripping human drama that merges Hwang's story with his brilliant play of ideas. These were a suitability to contemporary taste. As Hwang stated, he wrote "*M. Butterfly* as an attempt to deal with some aspects of orientalism. I assumed that many in the audience would be coming to the theatre because they hoped to see something exotic and mysterious, but what exactly is behind the desire to see the exotic East?"⁶²

Hwang's choice of subject is an aesthetic decision, in which the conceptual outlook is a determining part of the structural pattern, that the message is somehow inherent in the medium. It is not just incidental that Hwang contrasts his *Butterfly*, as the mixture of comedy and tragedy although the story itself is tragic, with Puccini's *Butterfly*. What do these comic inversions mean for the meaningful questions that

⁶²John Louis DiGaetani, 141.

the stereotype of Madame Butterfly brings along with it? In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang attempts to represent not just a new “Madame Butterfly”, but rather a final one.

Drama is a means of widening audience’s experience and emotions. The success of *M. Butterfly* lies in the audience’s ability to render emotion into thought, thereby assigning meaning to the work. Like the characters, the audience must individually and subjectively apprehend the play and process it. “The play which communicates to us important lessons about social behavior, which tells us a gripping story, may also open up unknown areas of emotional experience through powerful poetic images.”⁶³ Hwang self-reflexively dramatizes this discrepancy of sources when Song Liling, after playing Cio-Cio-San, says to Rene Gallimard, the French diplomat, in their first encounter:

Song: It’s one of our favourite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.

Gallimard: Well, I didn’t quite mean...

Song: Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three year, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kill herself for a Westerner-ah! -you find it beautiful.

⁶³ Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 117.

Silence.

Gollimard: Yes...well. I see your point...

(Act One, Scene Six)

The absurdity of Puccini's plot and the unconscious racism are unmasked through the contemporary analogy Hwang provides. In so doing, the playwright follows closely Puccini's technique in using stereotypes: the triangle of a vulnerable, self-effacing geisha, a womanizing Western sailor, and an influential, but rejected Japanese aristocrat-suitor becomes the triangle of a voluptuous blonde, a short and obviously undeserving Japanese businessman, and a young Kennedy. The fusion of the stock characters in Hwang's late twentieth-century comparison evokes in American readers a sense of repulsiveness. By contrasting that emotion with the feeling of lost and beauty as a result of *Madame Butterfly*, the audience is able to perceive a two- fold bias within *M. Butterfly*.

We see that Puccini's opera is teetering on the precipice of racism. While the opera never fails move its audience around the globe, its beauty actually grows out of a racist assumption already normalized in the human mind. "Because the geisha and her fate stuck deepest into Puccini's unconscious images, he was able to probe her psyche more thoroughly than those of his other heroines, and to bend his whole resources to a minute musico-dramatic analysis of her shifting emotions and

thoughts.”⁶⁴ According to reception theory, an audience who empathizes with the feeling and experiences of specific dramatic characters often lose track of reality. Since audience empathy with the characters and action relate to similarities and wishful identification.⁶⁵

Hwang treats *M. Butterfly* as the exotic story for a range of related ideas, political, cultural, sexual, racial, philosophic and social; his pioneer Puccini lays more stress on the characteristic images which haunt the romantic imagination. "Hence, in order to understand the particular aesthetic experience of art, we are led first to a philosophy of that experience, then to historical issues implicit in it, and finally to cultural politics."⁶⁶ The Eastern and Western androgyny lies at the heart of Hwang's reinterpretation of *Madame Butterfly*. First of all, female impersonators, exemplified by Song Liling's vocation, are a time-honored convention of Peking Opera in China. This theatrical tradition is built on the ambivalence of actor/actress' gender. Having perfected the stylized performance of a certain type of characters, one is able to transform himself or herself into the opposite sex. While never forgetting the true identity of the player, the Chinese audience is content to suspend

⁶⁴Mosco Cæner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (Duckworth, London, 1992), 416.

⁶⁵Garth Jowett and James M. Linton, *Movies As Mass Communication* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 92-2.

⁶⁶Paul Crowther, *Critic Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993), 34.

disbelief and accept androgyny as part of the theatre experience. Conversely, the Pinkerton fantasy, crystallized by Rene Gallimard's behaviour in Hwang's play, stems from the Western colonial mentality toward the "Orient." This sexual/racial/political fallacy originates from a deeply-embedded fear of the kind of sexual equivocacy found in the Chinese opera house. Therefore, Hwang posits that certain white males, troubled by their own incompetence and bewildered by the exotic, incomprehensible Orient, defensively inflate their ego so much as to dismiss a country such as China as frail and feminine. On the one hand, the trade of female impersonators is seen exploited by the Communist regime to obtain intelligence information from Gallimard the diplomat. The Eastern tradition of androgyny in theatre is used as a political weapon. On the other hand, the Pinkerton fantasy proves to be a phantasm behind which a white man tries desperately to conceal his fracturing self. According to the presentation of history, "that which was, does not interest us because it was, but because in a certain sense it still is, in that it is still effective because it stands in the total context of things which we call the historical, i.e., moral world, the moral cosmos"⁶⁷ The relationship between theatre and audience can actualize itself in the sensorial realm as an incitement to aesthetic perception as well as in the ethical realm as a summons to moral reflection. As a new play, *M. Butterfly* is received and judged against the background of the opera

⁶⁷ Johann Gustav Droysen, *History* (H. Fertig, 1967), 275.

Madame Butterfly as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life. From *Madame Butterfly* to *M. Butterfly*, we see that the essence of work of art lies not in its representational or expressive function but also in its influence. As Hans Robert Jauss argues, "When the work of art is 'perceived against the background of other works of art association with them,' as Viktor Shklovsky formulates it, the interpretation of the work of art must also take into consideration its relation to other forms that existed before it did."⁶⁸

The audience of *M. Butterfly* has aesthetic as well as historical implications. There is a relativism in aesthetic judgment in the performance of the play. The aesthetic implication lies in the fact that the reception of *M. Butterfly* by the audience includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with *Madame Butterfly* already seen and known. This is a perspective of historical aesthetics. Coming from the cultural heritage of *Madame Butterfly*, the images of *M. Butterfly* are essentialized into interchangeable aesthetic stage. Through this sense, the audience is made aware of human experience. Hwang's focus on process is an attempt to make the audience more conscious of events in the theatre than they are accustomed to. It is the idea of *being there* in the theatre. The artistic forms, double plot and highly critical ideology afford the most vivid combination of pleasures in *M.*

⁶⁸Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 17.

Butterfly. Further, it has vividness of impression in reading as well as in representation.

The audience's appreciation of *M. Butterfly* occurs simultaneously with the perpetual mediation of past and present art and of traditional evaluation and current theatre attempts. And the audience recognizes its individuality. At the same time, *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly* transcend psychological subjectivism and interact in a strictly aesthetic manner. Therefore, *M. Butterfly*'s performance is a process of aesthetic reception and production. In this context, the intention of Hwang do not merely display a revisionist will; they strain toward an aesthetic of Postmodernism.

The title of the play *M. Butterfly* evokes the horizon of of the romantic and exotic expectations of the audience, so that Hwang can then provocatively oppose to the promised stereotype about love a completely unromanesque "true reality". Thus Hwang cites, combines, and mixes a quintessence of well-known romantic and lovely motifs to produce the horizon of expectation of a romantic metamorphosis of the myth only in order to signify his renunciation of the romantic story. The identifications and relationships of the romantic and mythic state that are familiar to the audience dissolve into a reality to the same degree as the attempted private myth of the lyrical "Butterfly" fails, the idealized myth is broken. We characterize as aesthetic distance the disparity between *Madame Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly*, whose reception could result in a "change of horizons" through negation of familiar

experiences and through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness, then this aesthetic distance could be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgment. Hwang's approach brings to view the hermeneutic difference between the former and the current understanding of the stereotype about Madame Butterfly; it raises to consciousness the history of its reception. It also opens to view the temporal depths of art experience, in that it allows one to recognize the variable distance between the actual and the virtual significance of a dramatic work. Hwang believes that he meant 'to link imperialism, racism and sexism. It necessitates a certain historical perspective'.⁶⁹

Through *M. Butterfly*, Hwang has become more conscious than ever of the potential of that tension between illusion and reality in the theatrical experience, and developed new narrative techniques in order to incorporate the open horizon of the future into the story of the past, and to destroy the myth of completeness. "In the historical tradition of art, a past work survives not through the eternal questions, nor through permanent answers, but through the more or less dynamic interrelationship between question and answer, between problem and solution, which can stimulate a new understanding and can allow resumption of dialogue between present and

⁶⁹David Savran, 127.

past.”⁷⁰ The function of the form of *M. Butterfly* depends not only on its relation to a real, lived procedure, but also on its position within a comprehensive symbolic system familiar to contemporaries. In other words, the newness of *M. Butterfly* is thus not only an aesthetic category. It is not absorbed into the factors of innovation, surprise, surpassing, rearrangement, unmaking, or alienation, the new also becomes a historical category.

Some critics have regarded *M. Butterfly* as anti-American play and the abuse of multiculturalism, which may mean attack on the western civilization.⁷¹ As we know, drama may still be our most instructive example. In its illusionary character it is both exhilarating and dangerously deceptive. Indeed, Hwang reverses Puccini's emphasis by focusing on the love relationship rather than the cultural, gender and political discourse. Yet *M. Butterfly* shows the poetic uses that appeal to our semiotic desire for natural sign, with its self-discovery, self-consciousness and attendant scepticism. Hwang says that it is now more critical than ever that Western fantasies and fears about the Oriental not be permitted to overwhelm reality. The French diplomat, he suggests, is an object lesson in the dangers of delusion. Clearly, what is implied in this political trope is an image of drama as an over-regulated body

⁷⁰Hans Robert Jauss, 70

⁷¹Robert Brustein on Theatre, "Use and Abuse of Multiculturalism", *The New Republic*, (September 16&23, 1991), 32.

politics in need of liberalizing, if not of revolution: in need of being free of its bondage to the limited world of sensible representation. I think that Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is a liberal play from a dazzling deconstruction of cross-cultural and sexual delusions, even though with a sharp manner. The idea of the exploratory aspects of art is important. As Herbert Marcuse addresses this question,

*I shall submit the following thesis: the radical question of art, that is to say, her sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in given reality.... The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.*⁷²

Due to the fact that aesthetic experience always demands innovation, the common code has to be constantly destroyed and renewed, a process which leads to the construction of individual codes, valuable for only one work of art. *M. Butterfly* brings a rich spectrum of aesthetic pleasure: *poiesis*, *aesthesis*, *catharsis*. “In *poiesis*, the pleasure is in ‘producing the world as [one’s] own work’; in *aesthesis* it is ‘renewing one’s perception of outer and inner reality’, *Catharsis* names the pleasure

⁷²Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston, 1977), 6-7.

'which can change the listener's - and liberate the spectator's - mind'."⁷³

Hwang recognizes not only the actual aesthetic value, but also the universal aesthetic value. Hwang completely imagines social situations and the characters in *M. Butterfly* and represents the complexity and ambivalence of the real world. The play engenders the sense of exploration which Hwang's aesthetic addresses: it has made his work problematic. The problematic of postmodernism involves both aesthetic and political questions. The contemporary art world needs and desires the spiritual and aesthetic models of postmodern culture without having to experience our political outrage and cultural contradictions. To the extent, *M. Butterfly* produces an aesthetic fascination with exoticism and finality that seems to place it into the mainstream of apocalyptic postmodernist thought and art under advanced capitalism.

⁷³ Denis Calandra, "The Aesthetics of Reception and Theatre", in *New Directions in Theatre*, ed. Julian Hilton (The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993), 17.

Concluding Remarks

The mysterious and exotic Orient also represents the particular simulacrum of the Western curiosity and sexual fantasies. To some extent "Orientalism" also has decadent and sentimental implications. "The Orient" has been feminised under the ambivalence (repressed and infatuated) - she is all male, masculine, reasonable, and dominant attitudes on her reverse is irrational, decadent, and dominated. The inscrutability and the unfathomability of culture, however, is not designed to tease the Other imagination. From a Chinese perspective, they are not inscrutable or impenetrable at all.

David Henry Hwang combines his personal experience with intercultural needs to form the theatrical world in *M. Butterfly*. Hwang's view is so creative that he discovers the involvement of culture and sex. Although Hwang wants to explore the Western popular misconception of the East, his point of view actually conveys the meaning of cultural protest rather than the analysis of human nature. He charges the West with controlling the Orient through its sexual politics and discrimination. Although the play reflects a political perspective, it lacks the spiritual perspective. As a second-generation Chinese-American, Hwang seems to be incapable of portraying what exactly the real Oriental image should be. The international story's dramatic potential is unrealized. It seems that Hwang is too interested in spelling out

his themes to explore the central dramatic questions of this odd relationship. "Hwang's views of imperialism and racism cut an exceedingly wide geographical path. Examined closely, Hwang's images of the East are less central than those of the West and seem less developed in *M. Butterfly*, but they are no more positive."⁷⁴ Hwang just uses "a dragon lady" instead of "a naive geisha". As we can see, the Eastern characters in *M. Butterfly* are still insidious and unexpected. To some extent, the image of Song is a cross-bred creature: male, female, east, west. Historically, the Oriental people themselves are also responsible for the cause of the phenomenon or its improvement. I believe that the positive Oriental image should emerge in the wake of the postmodern and intercultural movements.

M. Butterfly reveals Hwang's sense of anxiety about and resistance to the Western stereotype of the Orient. As Hwang said, "I've had to admit to the fact that probably it did reflect some of my own anxieties, my anger and angst about being Asian in a predominantly Caucasian world."⁷⁵ Hence, Hwang creates a transvestite as his Oriental embodiment. The Oriental gains his/her power and freedom in the change of sexual identity which transformed into "a little Butterfly". As Cronenberg states,

I think that's part of the transformation theme. People want to be forced to come out. I don't only mean sexually, because that is only

⁷⁴Robert Skloot, 66.

⁷⁵Jackson R. Bryer, 124.

*one kind of covert life you can live. Their secret life suggested this possibility of transformations; allowing yourself to become something else and let go of what you are, your past, your culture, your emotional life, everything. It's a scary thing and a incredibly seductive thing too.*⁷⁶

Like the Western Faust myth, we also would have the same significance from *M. Butterfly*: if he had a "magic" power (wizardry), he would obtain a love and freedom. However, that is also very dangerous and tragic. "True, there is enhancement of life in certain anarchies of the spirit, in humor and play, in love released and freedom of the imagination to overreach itself, in a cosmic consciousness of variousness as of unity. I recognize these as values intended by Postmodern art, and see the latter as closer, not only in time, but even more in tenor, to the transformation of hope itself."⁷⁷ Through *M. Butterfly*, Hwang wants the West to understand the real Orient. Hwang notes that,

*M. Butterfly has sometimes been regarded as an anti-American play, a diatribe against the stereotyping of the East by the West, of women by men. Quite to the contrary, I consider it a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings.*⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Cronenberg on Cronenberg, ed. Chris Rodley (faber and faber, London, Boston, 1993), 176.

⁷⁷ Ihab Hassan, POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography, in *Paracriticisms* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, London, 1975), 59.

⁷⁸ Hwang, D. Henry, *M. Butterfly with an afterward* (New York, A Plume Book,), 100.

The role of Song Liling shows that Hwang's potential desire wants to escape from the Western value that has been imposed on the Orient and "aspires to the condition of a universal consciousness" (Ihab Hassan). The westerner, Rene Gallimard, insecure in his manhood and his culture, needs to believe in a woman from an exotic culture who is weaker than he and who will find her fulfilment in being dominated and exploited; the East could offer him that sense of power and freedom. The play does not yield the answer to Gallimard's moral dilemmas because it does not ultimately offer a reconciliation between the racial stereotype and a cruel version of the reality.

Indeed, *M. Butterfly* largely involves Hwang's cultural and racial interests as well as his emotional and imaginative interests between the West and the East. The strong subversive will in the play is breaking down the myth of Madame Butterfly. In this sense, this play can be productively read as a powerful source of resistance to the force of late capitalism's hegemonic discourses.

Yet, no matter how we interpret *M. Butterfly* in terms of the West versus the East, we would better understand the play in terms of humanity that is a tragedy of an unrequited and misunderstood love, and a journey of searching for identity.

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Appendix

The Awards for *M. Butterfly*

The *Tony Awards* 1987-88:

Best play by David Henry Hwang
produced by Stuart Ostrow and David Geffen
Best Featured Actor in a Play: B.D. Wong as Song Liling
Best Direction of a Play: John Dexter
Best Leading Actor in a Play: John Lithgow as Rene Gallimard (nomination)
Best Scenic Design: Eiko Ishioka (nomination)
Best Costume Design: Eiko Ishioka (nomination)
Best Lighting Design: Andy Phillips (nomination)

The Clarence Derwent Awards(1987-88): B.D. Wong of *M. Butterfly*

1988 *Theater World Awards*: B.D. Wong of *M. Butterfly*

American Theater *Wing Design Awards*:

Costumes and Scenery for *M. Butterfly*, Eiko Ishioka

Outer Critics Circle Awards(1987-1988):

Broadway Play, *M. Butterfly*
Debut of an actor: B.D. Wong in *M. Butterfly*

John Gassner Award for the playwright of a new Amerilay: David Henry Hwang for *M. Butterfly*.

Annual *Drama Desk Awards*:

New Play, *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang
Director, John Dexter for *M. Butterfly*
Featured actor, B.D. Wong in *M. Butterfly*