

## The Politics of Gender:

### Feminist Implications of Gender Inversions from *M. Butterfly*

#### LA POLITIQUE DE GENRE:

#### IMPLICATIONS FÉMINISTE DES INTERVERSIONS DE SEXE CHEZ MADAME PAPILLON

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**Abstract:** The issue of gender has been discussed in terms of postcolonial feminism as a political tool, and the intervention of race makes the problem more complicated. The Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang makes a self-conscious move and inverts the gender identities of his characters Gallimard and Song. This paper analyzes the inversions and the corresponding implications from various viewpoints: the stereotype and fetishism, the problem of discourse power, and Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space and Woolf's androgyny vision. Oriental women have long been fetishized into a stereotype; they are depicted as submissive and passive, and are silenced by the double pressure from race and sex. In *M. Butterfly*, the stereotype is crushed by gender obscurity and inversion, and the articulation power is handed over to a person in the "third space" with hybrid identity. This masquerade can be seen as a process of self seeking and re-identification, in which Hwang installs his philosophy in feminism and provides his method for females, especially Oriental females, and this paper recovers the philosophy and exploration his contribution to postcolonial feminism in detail.

**Key words:** Gender Inversion; *M. Butterfly*; Stereotype; Discourse Power; Third Space; Androgyny

**Resumé** La question de genre a été discutée en termes du féminisme postcolonial comme un outil politique, et l'intervention de la race rend le problème plus compliqué. Le dramaturge sino-américain David Henry Hwang fait une démarche de conscience de soi et inverse les identités de genre de ses personnages Gallimard et Song. Cet article analyse les interversions et les implications correspondantes des points de vue différents: le stéréotype et le fétichisme, le problème du pouvoir de discours, la théorie du troisième espace d'Homi Bhabha et la vision androgyne de Woolf. Les femmes orientales ont longtemps été fétichisées dans un stéréotype; elles sont dépeintes comme soumises et passives, et sont réduites au silence par la double pression de la race et du sexe. Dans Madame Papillon, le stéréotype est écrasé par l'obscurité et l'inversion des sexes et le pouvoir d'articulation est remis à une personne dans le "troisième espace" avec l'identité hybride. Cette mascarade peut être vue comme un processus de recherche de soi et de ré-identification, dans lequel Hwang installe sa philosophie dans le féminisme et fournit sa méthode pour les femmes, en particulier les femmes orientales, et cet article reprend la philosophie et l'exploration de sa contribution au féminisme postcolonial en détail.

**Mots-clés:** Intersion Des Sexes; Madame Papillon; StÉRÉOtype; Puissance de Discours; Troisième Espace; Androgynie

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## **M. BUTTERFLY: A SELF-CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT OF RE-IDENTIFICATION**

Oriental woman, as Said (1979) states in *Orientalism*, is usually viewed “with sexist blinders” and serves as “the creatures of a male power-fantasy.” (p.207) Alienated by the in-between socio-cultural disparity and postcolonial psychology of the West, the Asians as a whole are considered to be inferior and emasculated, easy targets for exploitations and dominance. Asian woman, always caged and subordinate both in the patriarchic society and in the Oriental rhetoric tradition, are natural subjects for the White’s desire. Marchetti (1993) points out in her observation that “Asian females are often depicted as sexually available to the white hero.” (p. 2) The narcissistic psychology drives the “white hero” to construct the image of Asian females in a self-conceited, arrogant manner. In their picture, Oriental women are modest, timid, passive, naïve and innocently dependent; they are delicate dolls always at service of their white master, even with violent treatments; they are good at bearing physical pains and mental sufferings, and willing to do so as a sacrifice for the master, which is deployed by the white to justify their brutality and remove, if any, their feelings of guilt. This is a “portrait” of Oriental woman instead of a realistic description: it exists only in the white *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975), and is directly related to the asymmetry of power relations, both ideologically and sexually. Fictive as it is, this image is prevalingly and largely distorted and misrepresented, and is rooted deep into the popular unconscious and the western values, as a biased *stereotype* of the Oriental woman.

A large number of literatures, in the meantime, facilitate the establishment and infusion of the stereotype. Said (1979) notices the uniform association between the Orient and sex among writers, and cites Flaubert as an example. According to Said, Flaubert’s descriptions of the Oriental woman contribute to a “remarkably persistent motif” of the Western attitudes to the Orient, which is “singularly unvaried”; and he “was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance” of this rigid motif. (p. 188) Another prominent instance that serves as the prototype of Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, is Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. As a typical imperialistic text, it depicts a stereotyped Japanese geisha Cio-Cio San (Madame Butterfly), who falls in love with an American sailor Pinkerton, becomes his “Asian wife” and has his child, devoting all her love and giving up her cultural identity, only to find herself deserted by the white husband who messes with Asian girls just for fun. Finally, after knowing the fact that Pinkerton marries a white woman, she realizes the tragic fate of her love and ends her own life. However, in *M. Butterfly*, Hwang intentionally subverts the original relations between gender and race, therefore deconstructs its imperialist nature and recreates a fresh text. Rene Gallimard, a French civil servant dispatched to China, meets the “perfect woman” Song Liling at her performance as Madame Butterfly. He is obsessed and keeps the extramarital relationship with his dreamy woman Song, who turns out to be a male spy, masqueraded as a girl to deceive him. In the final Act, Song exposes his male identity, and Gallimard is sent to prison for leaking confidential information. In the cell, he commits suicide dressed in a kimono, and exclaims himself to be “Madame Butterfly”. According to Hwang, it is the Frenchman who has been butterfly, in that he has been deceived by love; the Chinese spy, who exploits that love and extracts messages from him, is therefore the real Pinkerton.

Despite the fact that there is almost no prominent female in the play (Madame Song is a Monsieur in essence), the clues are rich for feminists to interpret: the deliberate sexual inversions which are marked by the cross-dressings elicit consequential issues—the fetishized and deconstructed stereotype of Oriental female, the politics of gender and the transfer of discourse power, the “third space” and the hybridity within, and the “androgyny” metaphor and the problematic gender relations. The following section will give an analysis on Hwang’s self-conscious subversions of racial and sexual relations, as well as its further implications and contributions to the research of postcolonial feminism.

## **INVERSIONS OF GENDER IDENTITIES**

The subversion and deconstruction of the gender-and-race convention in literature have long been the focus of feminist research. This play shows its first implicit deviance in the title: the “M” in *M. Butterfly* can be seen as an abbreviation of Madame as well as Monsieur, and therefore blurs the real gender of the mysterious “butterfly”. In the play, there are two characters undergoing sexual transformations: Song, who has been taken by the audience as an actress, reveals the real sexual identity as a man. By confessing the true sexual identity and then stripping, he reoccupies the masculinity, which is confirmed by Gallimard’s remarks: “You are a man” (p. 65) This female-to-male transformation, as well as the corresponding shift of overt personality from being modest and tender to being “a cad, a bounder” (p. 68), is largely achieved in a physical way, for Song only considers the masquerading as a deceptive disguise, “the greatest acting challenge” (p. 49).

However, Gallimard’s inversion is different in nature. Sinking deep into imagination, he puts on female clothes to release his inner frustration for a waken dream, inhibition for the lost reputation and anguish of a false lover. The visual

cross-dressing reflects his mental change of sexual identification, thus implies a psychological inversion from a white man to an Oriental woman.

Besides, gender inversions in *M. Butterfly* are much more sophisticated than a gender identity reversing into the other end in a male/ female dichotomy. The rigid division of gender dichotomy is crushed, and the issue of power discourse is also involved. By skillful use of the dramatic technique “play within the play”, Hwang switches the gender roles of Puccini’s opera, and completes the exchange in the final act with the similar scene—Gallimard’s tragic suicide and Song’s utterance “Butterfly? Butterfly?” As is discussed, this marked switch makes Gallimard the Geisha butterfly, and Song the sailor Pinkerton. When Song deliberately shows the feminine submissiveness and weakness, Gallimard feels a rise in power, directly reflected in his confidence boost. On the other hand, when Song recaptures the discourse right and grows more powerful in the racial and sexual competition, Gallimard becomes the feminized one and is silenced by being thrown into jail.

Physical and psychological inversion of gender identities and sexual power is the topic that the play revisits, and this anti-traditional Oriental text opens new windows for feminist methodology and interpretation, making scholars rethink the gender role of Asian woman and the gender relations in the new context.

### **The Stereotype: Fetish and Fetishist**

Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* helps to consolidate the notion of white male dominance and the Oriental woman stereotype “China doll”. (Prasso, 2005) Hwang demonstrates the biased image through a white male Gallimard’s soliloquy:

Gallimard: ... There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life. (p. 68)

Hwang makes it fairly clear, that the “vision” which incites and determines his love is in fact a “fantasy”, an illusion. What bewitches him is the fictive stereotype itself rather than the real person Song. After Song’s confession intervenes in the continuity of illusion, Gallimard immediately denies his original role as his “fantasy” and asks him out of the room; i.e. in his imagination, Song depraves from an object that maintains his fantasy to a devastator, and what matters to him is the role, the “function” of Song. This objectification consists in the nature of white male fetishism.

*Sexual fetishism* sees the object of interest as the “fetish”, and the attracted person the “fetishist”. In terms of postcolonial feminism, the white fetishist Gallimard fancies the whole picture: that an ideal Oriental woman will give up everything for a “not very good-looking, not too bright” man with white skin, and are willing to be victimized. His love for Song is merely a sexual transference, and Song is just a typical representative, a hypostatized object of a stereotype—submissive, passive and harmless—in Gallimard’s “rape mentality.” (p. 62) What he really loves is the “butterfly”, a stereotype represented by Cio-Cio San and the “perfect woman” Song, and his “absolute power of a man” in front of the fetish. The play seems to have victimized him and highlighted his sacrifice—the information sharing, the divorce and the suicide, and depicts his deep affection for the fetish. However, this affection will never serve as the bond between the white male and his “butterfly”, because the butterfly has never existed for real. A love for a false stereotype only shows the fetishist’s self-conceited distortion to the reality.

Apparently, it is Song who has directed Gallimard’s tragedy, but Hwang makes deeper explorations in the play. The shocking truth that Song is a man subverts all the self-deceptive romance of the white fetishist, thus smashes the fetishized stereotype, which is conceived by Gallimard, Puccini and many other white males and manipulated by Song as a convenient tool. Although they have conceived the “portrait”, the white males actually know less about Oriental woman than they pretend, and are rather comfortable with their limited and over-simplified knowledge. Hwang implies in the play that Oriental woman deserves further researches. They are silenced by the double oppressions from race and sex, and hide themselves behind the “butterfly” disguise. However, the intersectionality of racist and sexist themes makes them more than a uniform face; they can be represented neither by the white females nor by the Oriental males. They are confined as a special minor group which has great diversity inside. Besides, the groundless bias of self-superiority to the eastern women is devastating to the white males, who are blinded by the arrogance and reject to listen.

The white males silence the voice of Oriental female by building a stereotype, and Hwang shatters the stereotype by inversions. Besides, he provides another strategy for the silent women to regain their enunciation right, by the transfer of discourse power.

### **The Power of Discourse: The Silenced and Regained Voice**

Basically, the discourse power has undergone a gradual transfer from Gallimard to Song. In Act two, Song takes a leap and regains the control, demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Gallimard: Why do you run away? Can't we show them how we embraced that evening?

Song: Please. I'm talking.

Gallimard: You have to do what I say! I'm conjuring you up in my mind!

Song: Rene, I've never done what you've said. Why should it be any different in your mind? Now split—the story moves on, and I must change. (p. 59)

Confronted with Gallimard's questions, Song interrupts with a reminder—that it is her (still a “her” from overt gender) that is speaking, and she allows no distraction or interference. Gallimard responds in a protesting manner; he requests her to do what he says and shows explicit compromise, trying to preserve the power to speak. However, the effort does not help: Song directly rejects him and insists the “change”, both in the overt clothing and the order of power. From a feminine person who seems to be weak, silent, and too timid to speak out her wants (“Please—don't worry about what I may not ‘like’”), to a masculine person who speaks eloquently and boldly, the inversion goes hand in hand with the gender politics.

As is mentioned, Song and Gallimard are at the two ends of a seesaw struggle: when Song plays weak and submissive, Gallimard feels more powerful and makes the rules and gives orders; but as soon as Song refuses to keep low, Gallimard declines in power and loses his dominating position of voice. Song defeats Gallimard in the battle and gains the right to speak at will. However, there is still a problem many would ask: Hwang gives Song the right of voice, but IS THE SPEAKER A MAN OR A WOMAN? And which side does the speaker represent?

Of course many would argue that the innocent female disguise that he picks up is not real, and he is definitely a man. Maybe the answer is not so definite: the antithetic expressions “man” and “women” entail a dichotomy, that male and female are two opposite genders that will never overlap. Feminists (Butler, 1990; Spence, 1985; Burke, Stets & Pirog-Good, 1988) deconstruct the dichotomy by proposing two substitute concepts—masculinity and femininity. Instead of dividing people into two strict categories, they choose a different way to define a person, in regard to the diversity of sexual traits. A woman may be described as tough and masculine, and a man can also possess some femininity in his characteristics, just like Song in the play. He is a man who performs females on and off stage, and seduces Gallimard in a girlish manner (with dances, skin touch, etc.). The female traits are obvious in him, and play along with his masculinity. His gender identity is established socially rather than biologically, and his obtainment of discourse power is a feminist strategy.

Another strategy to articulate in a male-dominated society can be extracted from Shakespeare's famous plays. In five of his plays (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like it*, and *Cymbeline*), heroines—Julia, Portia, Viola, Rosalind, and Imogen masquerade as males in men's attires, and make efforts strategically to win authority in a patriarchic society. The theatrical cross-dressings are interpreted as a strategy in which mimicry is used by females in order to enunciate. In a society overwhelmed by the power of male, the silenced women fight to speak out their wants through the imitation; that is to say, they want to change their adverse condition in the male discourse by the top-down influence from the dominating males. The outcome of the strategy is quite limited, for the method is in fact a confirmation and facilitation of male's dominance over female, and intensifies the confrontation of the two sexes.

By comparison, the strategy of Hwang is more mature. He intentionally obscures Song's gender identity, making him a person in-between. By confirming Song's victory in voice struggle, Hwang puts the two poles aside, and hands over the discourse power strategically to a speaker with traits of both masculinity and femininity. Man or woman, he represents neither and both. In the play, Hwang does not turn the whole situation upside down and bend to the other extreme of female dominance; moreover, he respects the voice of the female and especially the oppressed right of Oriental woman, and drags male off the altar.

The play subverts and deconstructs the binary opposition into a diversified continuum, which means there is still a “grey area” between the poles, and elicits the next discussion—the problem of “third space.”

### **The “Third Space” and “Androgyny” Metaphor**

Together with “*hybridity*” and “*mimicry*”, Bhabha (1996) proposes the term “*third space*” in his postcolonial theory, referring to an interstitial and “indeterminate space in-between subject-positions that are lauded as the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices.” (qtd. in *Hybridity in the Third Space*, Meredith, 1998, p. 2) In other words, it is a dynamic space between the *Self* (in the context of postcolonial feminism, the white males) and the *Other* (the Oriental females), within which the racial and sexual identities of all people involved are hybridize by the cultural imperialism of the colonizers as well as the mimicry from the colonized. Law (1997) interprets this spatial concept as a tool useful for analyzing the enunciation, transgression and subversion of dualistic categories going beyond the realm of colonial binary thinking and oppositional positioning. By racial and sexual hybridization, the antagonistic relations between the extremes—white male and Oriental female—are replaced by an ambiguous “third space”; besides, the gender identity of every participant in the political discourse is

largely intermixed: they are not simply identified as “a white man” or “a Chinese woman”, but are put in a larger discourse of the third space, with interwoven characteristics.

Down to the play *M. Butterfly*, the existence of the third space can be explicitly perceived in the character Song. The problem of Song’s gender identity has been discussed in the previous part. By the divisional definition of male/ female dichotomy, he is a man, but also preserves obvious feminine traits in character and sexuality (including sex orientation). The third space gives feminists a chance to reassess the inversion of gender identities from a new perspective. In *M. Butterfly*, Song and Gallimard are no sexual perverts. Maybe their external dressings have been in contrary to their overt sexual identities (both have been dressed in women’s garment), what they show in the cross-dressing behavior is an outcome of self-seeking and re-identification of race and sex, and this re-identification is not definite in the third space context. This space is a theoretical and fatal punch to the power structure established and dominated by white male, and provides the ground for Oriental female to protest against the notion of their inferiority and to reassess their position within the space. It is notable here, that what they protest is the bias, is the mindset that brings them the oppression, rather than the white male, because this will again fall into the trick of binary opposition and arouse the conflict.

Another group of feminists devote themselves to the research of a harmonious gender relationship. Cixous (1999) argues that bisexuality entails the co-existence of two sexes, thus represents the most harmonious interaction. Woolf (1929) blends Carl Jung’s psychological concepts “anima” (the feminine inner personality in the unconscious of a male) and “animus” (the masculine inner personality in the unconscious of a female) into her proclamation, and states in her works that independence does not mean alienation, and androgyny does not mean the self-sufficiency of a woman. The self-identification should be transcendent over the gender disparity. Similarly, she advocates the great diversification of personalities, and encourages the development toward the equality and harmony of sexes. It challenges the hegemony of male in a phallogocentric society, and can be interpreted as a “sexist myth in disguise.” (Harris, 1974) In *M. Butterfly*, the androgyny is obvious in the personality of Song and Gallimard. Hwang sets the inversions strategically to depict the ideal relationship between the two sexes: the real harmony lies in the complementarity of two genders, and females should stop judging themselves with rules made by men, and hold their own gender identity.

## CONCLUSION: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Hwang echoes with postcolonial feminists in the play *M. Butterfly*. He makes a deliberate attempt to subvert the gender identities of Song and Gallimard, and conceives the masquerade tragedy: the actress Song is revealed a man, and Gallimard dies in women’s attire. Although there is actually no impressive heroine, the play is a feminist one in nature. The stereotype of Oriental woman is explicitly demonstrated and smashed—the submissive and docile Song Liling becomes the dominate one who plays an important role in Gallimard’s tragedy; the binary opposition between male and female is shattered—the gender identity of Song is in fact not as definite as being a “man”, and he preserves traits of femininity in character as well. This in-between gender is a kind of androgyny in essence, and falls into Bhabha’s “third space” in theory. It can also be seen as a strategy of female’s articulation.

However, what Hwang adopts in his play is a deconstruction that has not been completely operated. Reader’s acceptance is important for a literary work, and as a representative of the “model minority”, Hwang has to write in a cultural discourse that dominates the right of voice. Again, this incomplete deconstruction is one of his strategies to be heard and noticed, and the problem on how to advance the deconstruction remains unsolved and deserves future efforts of writers.

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