

Theatrical Deception: M. Butterfly and Hwang's Postmodern Stagecraft

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Abstract— *M. Butterfly* provides a vigorous and multi-dimensional understanding of the relation between factual identity and staged performance, together with the experience of postmodernism behind the conventional constructs of gender, culture, and reality. The subject matter of the play revolves around a French diplomat who falls in love with a Chinese opera singer only to find that she was an impersonator. This study explores how Hwang uses theatrical deception as one of the main techniques to disrupt realist assumptions about the self, especially in the light of postmodern theories that deny realism and essentialism. Song Liling herself embodies a postmodern subject that is at once cruel and vulnerable, postcolonial and postethnic, sexual and asexual, male and female—or genderless; René Gallimard, the protagonist of the play, is as trapped in a cultural dream as Liling is trapped in a theatrical one. In analysing *M. Butterfly*, this study draws on postmodern theories, specifically Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, to illuminate the insights the play offers. *M. Butterfly* reflects certain Postmodernist principles, such as the blurring of the line between appearance and reality, performativity, and stereotypes. By looking into Gallimard's eagerness to subordinate himself to an illusion instead of embracing the truth, it is possible to identify the element of irony that Hwang employs in the play regarding the human tendency to perpetuate convenient fictions even with the information that refutes those fictions. In *M. Butterfly*, the postmodern doubt of whether identity is real comes to the foreground and suggests that the self or culture can be revised and remodeled as the case may be, similar to actors going through their roles in a play.

Index Terms— *Postmodernism, Fluid Identities, Identity Construction, Theatrical Deception, M. Butterfly.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study claims that David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* effectively employs postmodern theatrical techniques to challenge conventional notions of identity, gender, and cultural stereotypes. The purpose is to analyze how the play utilizes theatrical deception, performativity, and the blurring of reality and illusion to expose the constructed nature of identity and the dangers of cultural stereotypes. This study examines how Hwang uses theatrical deception, postmodern theory, and

character dynamics to question traditional views of identity, specifically through Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. The study aims to show that *M. Butterfly* reflects postmodernist principles, emphasizing that identity is fluid, shaped by performance, and often exists as an illusion.

In analyzing *M. Butterfly*, the research employs a postmodern theoretical framework that includes Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This approach enables an exploration of identity construction, theatrical deception, and fluidity within the play, linking these concepts to the broader postmodern critique of realism and essentialism. The methodology involves a close textual analysis of the play's themes, characters, and scenes, supported by secondary sources to deepen the understanding of postmodern ideas and their representation in Hwang's play.

This study first analyses how *M. Butterfly* uses theatrical deception to blur reality and fantasy, analyzing Gallimard's fixation on illusion through Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality. It then explores the fluidity of gender and identity, applying Butler's theory of performativity to Song's constructed femininity. The paper next critiques cultural stereotypes and colonial fantasies that shape Gallimard's perceptions of Song as the "ideal" Oriental woman. Following this, it discusses the play's collapse of boundaries between illusion and truth, illustrating postmodern questions about reality. Finally, the analysis addresses how theatricality functions to construct identity, with a concluding look at the tragic outcomes of self-deception when one clings to comforting illusions over truth.

The theme of the play *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang is the existence of an illusion that embodies the frailty of the oriental subject. The complex and tragic hero of the story—René Gallimard imprisoned and reminiscing about the love for his Song Liling—serves Hwang to discuss the function of the performance of identity (Liu, 2017). Substituting whimsy for

profound awareness, Gallimard cannot grasp what is plainly true about Song, which suggests that the opera tackles postmodern discourse and the fluidity of individual subjectivity. In Scene I, before contemplating “I have known—and been loved by—the Perfect Woman,” is it proper to call it a tragedy that Gallimard falls victim to his own dreams and the constructs of Orientalism? (Hwang, 1988). Gallimard's belief in a certain identity, both his own and that of his lover, leads him to act in ways that ultimately entrap him. His tragedy underscores the power and danger of performative constructs in shaping and sometimes distorting reality. Thus, the quotation emphasizes the interplay between personal dreams, cultural constructs, and performative acts, highlighting the tragic consequences of mistaking constructed identities for inherent truths. This perfectly captures Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that identity is not an inherent reality but an artificial creation made viable by enactment (Salih, 2007).

II. THEATRICAL DECEPTION AS A POSTMODERN DEVICE

The pretense that is essential to *M. Butterfly*, as created by Hwang, dissolves the demarcations between real and invented. The transition of Song from a Chinese opera singer to the target of Western fantasies supports the idea that identity is formed, not intrinsic (Johnson, 2018). Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, in which reality is no longer a direct experience but a copy of itself, provides a fitting framework for understanding Song's performance (Wolny, 2017). Baudrillard writes, “We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning” (Baudrillard, 1983). In *M. Butterfly*, this loss of meaning is demonstrated through Gallimard's inability to see beyond Song's performance, mistaking her staged femininity for the “real” thing. Song's performance represents the thought of Jean Baudrillard, who, during postmodernism, claimed that reality is a copy, a simulation of itself (Windleburn, 2021). As Gallimard exclaims, “They toast me; I have become the patron saint of the socially awkward” (Hwang, 1988), he acknowledges his entrapment in an Orientalist fantasy where the distinction between reality and illusion is blurred. Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, where the copy becomes more real than reality itself, resonates with Gallimard's obsession with Song. The more he embraces the illusion, the more he loses touch with reality, becoming “seduced by the simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 2019). Gallimard's personal downfall is not only his own failure but also serves as a commentary on how society sustains illusions about gender and race through the act of performance (Zhang & He, 2023). This serves to show how postmodernism blurs the line between reality and play further into the invented world that Gallimard cannot distinguish between reality and a play. Hwang employs this device to raise the issue of personal dishonesty and the cultures of deception that underlie it.

III. THE FLUIDITY OF GENDER AND IDENTITY

Gender roles and positions are one of the most striking concerns of postmodern culture presented in *M. Butterfly* through the song's acting. The two characters of the play are involved in the entrapment of conventional gender roles. And as the play unfolds, Gallimard is mesmerised by what he thinks is Song's true womanliness; however, this collapses when it is discovered that Song is in fact a man (Bhattacharjee, 2022). Gallimard's failure to see beyond appearances is illustrative of his entrapment in conventional notions of gender roles. This is consistent with Butler's post-structuralist view that gender is not an essential characteristic but a role enacted.

Analyzing the role of men and women in *M. Butterfly*, one can state that the role of gender is performative; therefore, the theatrical concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler is relevant (Bahety, 2009). Butler argues that “gender is not something one is; it is something one does; it is a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun” (Butler, 1995). The manner in which Song embodies the female gender and sexual allure to please Gallimard's exoticist imagination is a classic example of this point. Gallimard's fixation on Song's supposed womanhood highlights his belief in gender as an essential, fixed characteristic (Donnelly, 2017). This notion is, however, reduced to rubble when he finds out that Song is a gay man who disguises as a woman (David, 2020). Song's ability to shift between masculine and feminine personas demonstrates Butler's assertion that “gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 2013). The mutual favorite tactic of presenting Song, a man in a woman's body, to break Gallimard's world is represented as fragile and liberal since the start of the play. The way Song performs the role of a “Perfect Woman” undermines conventional gender roles and norms, which Gallimard and consequently society adheres to. At the climax of the play, Gallimard declares, “For I, René Gallimard... have been loved by the Perfect Woman” (Hwang, 1988), a statement dripping with irony. Even when reality smacks him in the face, he remains loyal to the belief that Song is a woman, which shows that the former is entrapped in a script that Butler identifies as ‘performative’. The play thus exposes the artificiality of gender, reinforcing Butler's argument that gender is an “illusion discursively maintained for the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, 2014). This underlines the fact that gender is not an essence, but a construct that is performed, and this performance implies that Gallimard loses himself in his psychic from the stereotype of gender and culture. His inability to deal with the fact of Song's transsexuality highlights the play's theatricality of both himself and Song.

IV. CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND COLONIAL FANTASIES

Hwang employs drama to challenge the cultural imperialist assumptions informing the Western construction of the oriental other through *M. Butterfly* (Rossini, 2006). The play is based on Puccini's 'Madame Butterfly,' a Western opera of Oriental women, an Orientalist representation (Do, 2021). It is for this reason that Gallimard became obsessed with the idea of having sex with Song, for she, like all Eastern women in this colonial fantasy, is submissive, exotic, and available for Western consumption. In Scene iii, Gallimard wonders, "Its heroine, Cio-Cio San, or Butterfly, is a feminine and frail icon" (Hwang, 1988). This idealisation concept is an example of Orientalism, where the West creates an image of the East that it wants and needs. Gallimard is not just a tragic hero of the story but rather a representative of colonialist paradigms, which do not allow him to recognise Song's true essence (Panaite, 2017). Interrogating how colonial imagery subjugatively constructs the Oriental woman and provides the exotrophying Western man with the license to invent cultural and gendered subjects as needed, Hwang does so through the distortion of Gallimard's colonial gaze in a Far Eastern country. This further cements the idea that such fantasies lead to personal as well as cultural blindness.

V. THE COLLAPSE OF BOUNDRIES BETWEEN REALITY AND ILLUSION

Postmodernism has the use of reality and fantasy, and this is a significant aspect of *M. Butterfly* whereby the two aspects are consistently used interchangeably (Lye, 1995). Gallimard's memories, his fantasies, and the present become blurred time and again; the audience has no way of knowing what is actually happening or not; this corresponds to postmodernist doubts as to the ontological status of the world (Heise, 1997). As Gallimard notes in Scene 1, "The limits of my cell are as such: four and a half meters by five... It is a magical place that belongs to me." Since his delusions, his field of vision is limited to the size of his cell (Hwang, 1988). The issue of 'playing' different roles and the actual construction of the theatre as a space that allows one to put on and take off an identity as easily as putting on a different shirt emphasises this topic (Weis, 1993). This aligns with postmodernists like Lyotard, who postulated that in the postmodern world, there is the downfall of metanarratives, so every person exists in their postmodern isolation (Ates, 2019). Thus, Hwang employs postmodernism to portray the essentials of identity as too contingent and thus bogged down the fabrications of Gallimard's make believe and reality. This supports the argument that, in contemporary society, identities are shaped more by discursive structures than by personal truths.

VI. THE ROLE OF THEATRICALITY IN CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

The theatricality of the play is not only a plot device but also a philosophical tool for discussing the artificiality of personal identity. Hwang's play often invokes its own theatricality, which serves to constantly point to the fact that both Gallimard and Song are only performing (Zou, 2023). When Song is dancing in Scene I, dancing to the Peking Opera music and then switching to the *Madame Butterfly* music by Puccini, the movements are the same but the meaning is different (Hwang, 1988). This juxtaposition underscores the significance of context when it comes to the question of identity. Although the performance is for Gallimard, the audience also witnesses it, proving the postmodern approach that an individual is a stage upon which he acts in accordance with the observer (Donati, 2024). Due to social constructivism, the play shows that people build their identity through anticipation of expectations from themselves and the rest of the society. Recourse to theatrical characterization and a manipulation of audience allows Hwang to claim that this identity is as real as a theatrical role which may be different depending on whether the curtain is drawn or not.

VII. THE TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES OF DECEPTION

This is the deception in *M. Butterfly* that brings about Gallimard's tragedy, but the play proposes that the tragedy is not that Song was a woman dressed like a man; it is that Gallimard wanted to be deceived. This is not simply deception by Song; the main character is an active participant in creating the illusion that will lead to his demise. Song's mockery in Scene 2, "Perhaps he did, and simply misidentified the equipment (Hwang, 1988)", underscores this point, highlighting the absurdity of Gallimard's ignorance. His downfall is due to his inability to move past the manufactured and artificial world he has willingly embraced for its comfort. Thus, Hwang contemplates the tendency of humans to stay with illusions rather than face the realities of life.

The deception in *M. Butterfly* does not end with the fact that Song is a man but with Gallimard's ready ability to deceive himself. This marks the main focus on theatricality (Ling et al., 2021). The story of Gallimard is based on a play, and the employment of the theater dynamics reveals to a great extent the real protagonist of this passion play: Gallimard as the leading actor of his own theatricalization (Furness, 2021). He creates an 'act' in which he plays the liberator, the sex-starved Western man, and Song is his sex object, the shy Asian woman (Lee, 2015). These dramatic devices include building up an image of Song based on Gallimard's fantasy ala Orientalism and deliberately closing his eyes to any fact that perturbs this view. As Gallimard said in Scene II, "it might be that he did and mistook the equipment." As in "A compelling case for sex education in the schools" (Hwang, 1988), he consciously distorts the real world. Gallimard's deception is not an inactivity of sorts but a sham, rooted in his desire to uphold a façade of domineering and authority. This appears to be postmodern because identity and reality are lived and performed, and

Gallimard is both actor and spectator in his own drama (Zhang & He, 2023).

CONCLUSION

M. Butterfly, as constructed by David Henry Hwang, breaks down the rigid categorisation of identities through the play within a play with the aid of drama and the theatricality of the situation. *M. Butterfly* deconstructs the stable understanding of identity and thereby enforces postmodernism since the main character is impossible to distinguish between real life and a performance. Accordingly, this analysis answers the questions mentioned in the abstract by explaining how the play employs theatrical deceit, gender ambiguity, and stereotypes. Hwang has provided the quality that shows identity is not a reality but a representation of culture, fantasy, and drama. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity are pivotal in understanding Gallimard's tragic downfall. Hwang's play echoes with the ideas of postmodernist thinkers like Baudrillard and Butler, who assert that identity is not an essence but something augmented and performed. The main theme to be derived from the play is thus that the search for clear, definable, and tangible categories is not only impossible but also problematic. The fact that he insists on conjuring up illusions even when the truth is told to him markedly substantiates postmodern denial of the reality of identity. Finally, seeing is deceiving in *M. Butterfly* when Gallimard raises questions regarding reality and identity, making the impressions of life akin to the impressions of theater. This play is not merely about onanism and illusion but an exploration of the societal structures that support these illusions. Thus, Gallimard's tragedy lies not in the fact that he has been cheated but in his failure to recognize the illusions he himself helped to create. In a postmodern context, *M. Butterfly* serves to illustrate that identity is never a construct performed in a genuine or authentic sense and that things are not always what they seem.

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