Hybridity and Aberrance in M. Butterfly

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Abstract. In the play M. Butterfly, David Henry Hwang reinterprets Puccini’s classic opera Madame Butterfly and touches upon such issues as gender discrimination, racial prejudice as well as western hegemony. It reverses the male and female gender pattern, and tactfully deconstructs the binary opposition into an “either-or” relationship, breaking the old myth of Orientalism, and triggers us to think further as to the issues of race, gender and Oriental-Occidental relationship. In light of the post-colonial theory proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, the paper explores the feature of hybridity and aberrance in M. Butterfly. From the discussion of the butterfly icon, gender icon as well as cultural elements, this paper discusses how the play is a mimicry as well as hybridity with Madame Butterfly. Through such a deconstructive writing, David Henry Hwang aims at cutting through the respective layers of cultural and sexual misconceptions and creating a sincere, mutually beneficial relationship for both sides.

Introduction

Edward Said (1979) has stated in his Orientalism, that Oriental women are usually viewed as creatures to please male, “the creatures of a male power-fantasy” [1] Marchetti (1993) also made her statement that “Asian females are often depicted as sexually available to the white hero.”[2] Asian women are a group subordinate in the patriarchic society, and the Asian ethnicity, men or women, are considered inferior objects for exploitation and dominance. Towards such a prevailing and largely distorted image of women, a large number of literary works have been produced, thus facilitating the establishment of an image stereotype. Among these, one prominent instance is Pucci’s Madame Butterfly. This piece of work serves as a prototype for the work discussed in this paper, David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly, which has deconstructed and subverted the above-mentioned gender and race conventions.

David Henry Hwang and M. Butterfly

Parallel in literary position with Maxim Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, Hwang was officially established as one of the representatives of Chinese American writers. His writing career began as he published FOB (Fresh off the Boat, 1980), which tells the story of the cultural conflicts among a new immigrant and two westernized Chinese American students, and thus receiving Obie Award for best new play of the season. He has demonstrated great interest in Chinese roots in the cultural clash of the play. Another play of his, the Dance and the Railroad (1981) set the background in the construction of transcontinental railroad in the 19th century, where two immigrant Chinese railroad workers attempt to figure out the past when facing new identities and uncertain futures in the US. His other works include Family Devotions (1981), the House of Sleeping Beauties, the Sound of a Voice (1983), Rich Relations (1986), 1000 Airplanes on the Roof (1986), and they mostly focus on shattering Asian stereotypes and breaking the Oriental misconceptions of marginalized Asian groups. The issues of identity, the politics of race, gender and class were the key issues of his focus. He started winning renowned awards in the mid 1980s, and it was when M. Butterfly premiered on Broadway, that he became commercially successfully and obtained international acclaim. And by virtue of this famous M. Butterfly he became the first Asian American playwright in history who has
won Tony Award for best play.

The story of *M. Butterfly* cannot be fully grasped without a perception of its pretext *Madame Butterfly*. *Madame Butterfly* is a play that is typically imperialistic, depicting a Japanese geisha Cio-cio San (Madame Butterfly)’s tragic love story with the American sailor, Pinkerton. The obedient and sacrificial Butterfly was legally married to Pinkerton, becoming his “Asian wife”, and she submissively awaited the return of Pinkerton after he went back to the States, refusing marriage proposal from Japanese royalty. She had also borne his child during the period of waiting. However, after all these painstaking waiting and wishing, she ended up knowing that Pinkerton remarried another white woman, and came back to her only to claim his child. After realizing the tragic nature of her love, she chose to end her own life. Madame Butterfly, as depicted in this play, has thus become a stereotype for the submissive and tender Asian women, attracting the hearts of many white men.

In *M. Butterfly*, however, such a relationship is totally subverted, and a new text is created. Rene Gallimard is a French civil servant dispatched to China for confidential missions. He observed the play Madame Butterfly and thought herself to meet “the perfect woman” [3] while watching it. He became obsessed with this Butterfly played by a Chinese male spy. For twenty years, they kept a relationship together, and Gallimard has divorced with his wife for a legal relationship with this Oriental butterfly. However, it was not until the end of the scene, did Butterfly Song Liling reveal his identity. Rather than a submissive Madame Butterfly, he is actually Monsieur Butterfly, a male spy masqueraded as female to deceive Gallimard for confidential information. And it was not until the end of the scene, did Gallimard realize that all his love had been a lie. Not ready to face a life of deception and failure, he committed suicide dressed in kimono as Madame Butterfly.

**Hybridity and Aberrance in M. Butterfly**

*M. Butterfly* is a subversive re-writing of *Madame Butterfly*, which has broken the myth of Orientalism, and established a new and hybrid gender identity, and subverted the original sexual relation. Oriental-Occidental relationship is re-examined in such a post-colonial context. Homi K. Bhaba, as a representative figure in post-colonial theory, has placed East-West relationship into a mutually influencing and hybrid status. His works such as *Nation and Narration* (1990) and compilation *the Location of Culture* (1994) are representative works on post-colonialism. Such concept as “hybrid identity” as well as “aberrance” can be applied into the analysis of this text.

*Nation and Narration* focuses on the intervention into “essentialist” study of nationality which seeks to define and naturalize third world nations through a “supposedly innate, homogenous, and historically continuous convention that mistakenly define and warrant such subordinate status.” [4] Bhaba had the assertion that nations are “narrative” constructions which arise from “hybrid” interaction of diverse competitive cultural constituencies. He has also penetrated into the relationship of antagonism and ambivalence between the colonizers and the colonized.

In *the Location of Culture*, Bhabha has pointed out such terms as mimicry, hybridity, and “third space” between cultures. His central preoccupation is the manner in which the European practice of cultural studies has glossed over the ambivalence of the location of culture. He made efforts on exploring how to articulate the luminal space of marginality in cultural production.

Bhabha has pointed out the hybridity and contention between the colonizers and colonized. “My contention, elaborated in my writings on postcolonial discourse in terms of mimicry, hybridity, sly civility, is that this luminal moment of identification – eluding resemblance – produces a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative ‘unpicking’ and incommensurable, insurgent relinking.”[5] Bhaba points out the condition of confusion and interfusion between the colonizer and the colonized. Such a status is a challenge and upheaval of the colonizers on the colonized. Hybridity has uplifted the authority of a colonial discourse, thus eliminating binary opposition, and further de-constructed the cognitive limitedness of the western imperialism. Homi K. Bhaba has also applied the concept of “dissemination” of Derrida, pointing out the dissemination, interaction as well as aberration of the colonial discourse in the colonized countries.
Below will be an analysis of *M. Butterfly* in terms of its hybridity and aberrance. The analysis will be conducted in terms of the butterfly icon, gender icon and other cultural symbols, so as to see its deconstruction of the play *Madame Butterfly*.

**The hybridity and aberrance of the “Butterfly Icon”**

“Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things.” [6] If Chuang tze is the one who first created the “Oriental Butterfly image”, then *Madame Butterfly* in Pucinni’s play strengthened and intensified this image by portraying an innocent and obedient girl Cio-cio San. For many years, this self-sacrificial butterfly image of Cio-cio San has become a stereotype of the Oriental women.

The beautiful Oriental Butterfly image satisfied the peeping desire of the Western men, and the scene when he committed suicide stirred the hearts of the white male, even infatuated them. The portrait of this unrealistic Oriental woman only exists in the white “male gaze”. [7]

In *M. Butterfly*, the Oriental Butterfly image is no longer an artistic icon, but a representative symbol that plays a part in the actual representation practice. “M.” can stand for either “Monsieur” (male) or “Madame” (female), which has therefore blurred the boundary between genders and created a sense of hybridity. This contrasts with the original opera *Madame Butterfly*, which has a clear indication of the female character represented. *M. Butterfly* can refer to Song Liling: a spy who played the role of Madame Butterfly and created a fantasy stereotype that fulfilled Gallimard’s imaginations. Song managed to play the role of a spy at the advantage of his gender ambiguity, manipulating Gallimard with such tools as his language, action, and clothing. At the end of the story, when he has resumed his real gender identity, he could speak for himself and reveal the truth and purpose behind all his hiding. Throughout the play, Song Liling managed to switch freely between genders as he moved across.

On the other hand, this symbol can also refer to Gallimard, a loser in career and in his personal life. During his mission as a diplomat in China, he fell in love with Song, a Chinese spy who was acting Madame Butterfly. Moreover, he further identified himself as Pinkerton, and the object of his love was actually a fantasy stereotype. The thought that he should deserve a subservient Oriental Butterfly is what triggered him to act the way he did through the entire play.

At the end, when he learned that what he loved was but a lie, he was still unsettling with his Butterfly complex. He dressed himself as Cio-cio San, and committed suicide with a knife. If Song can be described as *M. Butterfly* who could manipulate his gender at his own will, then Gallimard is *M. Butterfly* who could not identify with the mainstream western definition of the male gender.

Through the words of Song, David Henry Hwang has subverted the traditional textual image of “Butterfly”; the weak Madame Butterfly image was replaced by *M. Butterfly* with independent thought and control over his own fate. The cultural image of Butterfly is rewritten, and its content is totally subverted.

**The hybridity and aberrance of the “Gender Icon”**

“Whereas woman’s independent successes are in contradiction with her femininity, since the ‘true woman’ is required to make herself an object, to be ‘the other’.” [8] Madame Butterfly is an image that totally caters to the “other image” of women, fragile in appearance, as if a butterfly stuck onto the wall waiting to be manipulated; submissive and faithful at heart, ready to sacrifice her all to the most unworthy western guy.

However, the play *M. Butterfly* has blurred the gender difference, and brought the image of Butterfly onto the stage through mimicry and finally deconstructing *Madame Butterfly*. Song’s transgendered play of a woman is a proof of the contention that women are made rather than borne to be. In order to fulfill his duties as a spy, he could play his role of an oriental butterfly and also return to his real gender identity when needed. “The West has sort of an international rape mentality
towards the east...the west thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor, but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom—the feminine mystique...the west believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated”. [9] Through the description of such “an international rape mentality”, Huang not only reveals a sexual relation, but a power relation under the metaphor of gender.

In compliance with Song, Gallimard is also the one who unconsciously does gender performance. A guy sexually impotent and a failure in his own career, he deviates from the mainstream male image. After seeing Madame Butterfly played by Song, he fell in love and developed a romantic relationship with “her”. Through such a romantic relationship he has rediscovered his sense of value. For the self established through such an image, he further projected his desires onto this butterfly illusion.

Throughout the play, the gender identities of Song and Gallimard are hybridized. Song disguised himself as a woman, whereas Gallimard, a man by gender, turned out to be full of female characteristics, sexually impotent and full of illusions for the Oriental Butterfly. At the end of the play, they two switched their genders as were originally portrayed throughout the play. Such hybridity and gender reversals have given the audience a new perspective towards gender. The position of the East and the West as metaphorized by male/female is now equalized, and the right of speech is also gradually equalized. Imperialism, while trying to exert cultural hegemony, is simultaneously affected by the culture that it was colonizing; such a binary opposition has become an either-or relationship.

The hybridity and aberrance of other cultural elements

Speaking of the artistic form, Madame Butterfly is an opera, an ancient and delicate form of art, and singing with standardized language is its major form of performing. However, M. Butterfly, a post-modern drama, has borrowed from Madame Butterfly its aria, and increased the tension of the play through theoretical dialogues.

In terms of scene and layout, the original Madame Butterfly has a simple layout: the wooden cottage has sakura all over, the entire scene of the stage and the design of the clothes maintain historical truthfulness. Contrastingly, the scenes in M. Butterfly interplay between Paris and Beijing, between the theater, the mansion, and the prison. The interposition between western furniture and Chinese antiques, and a rather symbolic existence of tea sets was displayed in Gallimard’s house.

In terms of clothing, in Madame Butterfly, white is chosen as a basic color. Contrastingly, M. Butterfly has all types of clothing. While Song made his first appearance, he was the slender woman in kimono. As the story developed, Song had his clothing shifted between Japanese kimono and traditional Chinese clothing. Whether he was being the butterfly lover, or Madame Butterfly on the stage, clothing helped him to establish a perfect Oriental female image. At the end of the play, Gallimard put on black wig as well as make-ups to become a Japanese lady on the stage, mimicking himself as Madame Butterfly who died out of love. Song, on the other hand, put on a suit and a tie and assumed his real gender.

Conclusion

Through the hybridity of Butterfly cultural image, gender icon as well as other cultural elements, M. Butterfly has realized a deconstruction of Madame Butterfly, and shifted the binary opposition between genders and the colonized/ the colony into an either-or relationship. It triggers the readers to reconsider such issues as gender equation and Oriental-Occidental relationships. Through such a deconstructive writing, David Henry Hwang aims at creating a sincere, mutually beneficial relationship for both sides.

References


