

Fantasy, Narcissism and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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ABSTRACT

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* deconstructs Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* by entwining a fact happened in 1986 — a French diplomat Bernard Bouriscot who has a multi-year affair with a Chinese man disguised as a woman. Hwang displays how cultural imperialism and the stereotype of the Asian persona through the protagonist Gallimard who unconsciously perceives superiority of Western power over Eastern weakness, and the Western colonial male over the Asian female. Gallimard falls in love with the Chinese actress Song Liling to whom he projects his fantasy of a “perfect woman” without noticing the fact Song Liling is a man and a spy. His relationship with Song can be interpreted by concept of *the Other* in Western concept. This study discusses how Gallimard in *M. Butterfly* reflects the “Narcissus myth”, how “Othered self” and “selfed Other” work upon him as well as how Song, as a man, satisfies his Western superiority to the power of control and fantasy to an Oriental woman.

Keywords: *Cultural imperialism, Stereotype of the Asian persona, Superiority, Fantasy, Narcissus myth, The Other*

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the issue of the East and the West, it usually focuses on the imperialistic view to the East. The West is masculine and the East is feminine, so the way the West views the East would be discussed into the way as man viewing woman. David Henry Hwang deconstructs Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* by entwining a fact happened in 1986 in his play *M. Butterfly* — a French diplomat Bernard Bouriscot had a decades-long affair with a male opera singer/spy. In Hwang's play, the protagonist French diplomat Gallimard falls in love with a Chinese actress Song Liling to whom he projects his fantasy of a “perfect woman” without noticing “she” in fact is a man and a spy. In the process of pursuing his perfect woman, he resultantly steps into the trap of Song, and inevitably gets a broken-heart and disillusion to his love after realizing the truth.

M. Butterfly deals with not only issues of gender identity but also how people view others through the veil of fantasy and self-delusion. In the afterword of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang talks about his point of view to the scandal of Bouriscot and his observation to the Western culture, “I am also aware [...] a certain stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, blushing flowers. I therefore

concluded that the diplomat [Bouriscot] must have fallen in love not with a person but with a fantasy stereotype” [1]. The scandal can be viewed from the perspective of the myth of Narcissus. In the myth, Narcissus, a beautiful young man, gazes his own reflection in the pond and falls in love with the reflection. His possession to the reflection of himself leads to his tragedy—die for the impossible love.

In Gallimard's love affair, the oriental female he falls in love with is actually the image that he himself sketches out from his fantasy. Song, as an object of Gallimard's love, serves as the locus of his fantasy in which he can realize his pursuit for the superiority of the western power and the imagination of ideal oriental woman. On one hand, he feels disgusted to Pinkerton's shameless abandonment to his Japanese lover Madame Butterfly in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*; on the other hand, he longs for an opportunity to play the role of Pinkerton. His oriental fantasy finds an outlet when he meets Chinese actress Song. Song satisfies his desire to the power of control and fantasy to an Oriental woman by intentionally performing traditional Chinese custom. This study attempts, from the perspective of Narcissism, to discuss why the truth that Song is a man results in Gallimard's identification with Madame Butterfly in the end of the

play and how Song satisfies Gallimard's desire to the power of control and fantasy to an Oriental woman.

2. THE STEREOTYPE OF THE EAST

Gallimard's pursuit to the Oriental woman actually is a pursuit of his ideal image of a submissive, Eastern woman, a stereotype of the East. In the play, we constantly learn his misunderstanding to the East from his talks with Song and Toulon. His "perfect woman" is the stereotype of the epistemology of the West to the East. Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* gives him a fantasy of the Oriental woman who sacrifices herself for her heartless lover Pinkerton, "Its heroine, Cio-Cio-San, also known as Butterfly, is a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave" [1]. Gallimard is attracted by the beautiful Chinese opera singer Song Liling; however, he is unaware that all female roles in traditional Beijing opera were actually played by men, as women were banned from the stage. Gallimard's fantasy to the Oriental woman which projects to Song Liling prevents him from discovering the fact that Song act as a spy for the Chinese government, and she is actually a man who has disguised himself as a woman to seduce Gallimard in order to get information from him. In the twenty-year marriage, he did not realize Song's real identity as a man until the truth is revealed.

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* intentionally provides nonconforming gender identities to get better insight into the character of Song. The relationship between Song and Gallimard suggests that, contrast to the masculine and powerful Western, Oriental culture, like Song, is feminine and submissive. Gallimard is fascinated by the tragedy of *Madame Butterfly* and cannot help pursuing his Oriental fantasy from Song. His understanding to Oriental culture is full of stereotypes, which blinds him to see the truth. He attempts to act like Pinkerton, but he turns out to become the stereotype of the Oriental woman that he fancies for.

Though he is convicted of treason and imprisoned, what makes Gillmard unable to face is the fact that his "perfect woman" is a man. In his imprisonment, he immerses himself in distorted recollection of the events surrounding their affair. When Song shows up in front of Gallimard in a man's dress, Gallimard refuses to face the reality and claims he only loved the idea of Butterfly, never Song himself. In the prison cell, Gallimard puts on makeup, dresses like Butterfly and commits suicide as *Madame Butterfly* in Puccini's opera. He himself fulfills his Oriental fantasy that he longs for receiving from his "perfect woman" who was vulnerable and has deep affection for her heartless lover and would sacrifice herself to complete the love.

What Gallimard falls in love with is actually his own imagination to the Orient. Refuse to face the truth and the disillusion of his love, he himself plays the role of

"perfect woman" to complete the ideal image of the Oriental woman. In a sense, he does not fall in love with Song but in love with the image he fancies in his mind.

3. NARCISSISM

Gallimard's understanding to the Orient suggests the prevailing Western cultural imperialism. His imagination to the Oriental woman and the way he commits suicide can be interpreted from the idea of Narcissism. In *Jacques Lacan*, Narcissism is distinguished into primary narcissism and secondary narcissism, namely, ideal ego and ego ideal:

Ideal ego is usually defined as an ideal of narcissistic omnipotence constructed on the model of infantile narcissism. Ego ideal is an agency of the personality resulting from the coming together of narcissism (idealisation of the ego) and identification with parents, or with their substitutes. The ideal ego corresponds to what 'he himself was', and the ego ideal to what 'he himself would like to be' [2].

This ideal ego of primary narcissism indicates what Gallimard himself was. As a Western, his vision to Song—the submissive and obedient Oriental—is deeply influenced by the imperialistic view of the West. The "perfect woman" Song is a stereotype and the projection of his fantasy in the Western epistemology. In the ego ideal of secondary narcissism, Gallimard's ego ideal is influenced by Puccini's Pinkerton. Lacan suggests that the identification with someone is not necessarily a positive feature. Therefore, instead of identifying with the womanizing cad Pinkerton, Gallimard negates Pinkerton's behavior and personality. His primary and secondary narcissism present a dialectical process. In other words, what Gallimard would like to be is affected by what he himself was. He used to want to act like heartless Pinkerton, but his negation to this Western figure drives his ultimately identification with *Madame Butterfly*, the ideal figure in his mind. In *Between the Sign and the Gaze*, Paraport indicates that Lacan's ideal ego belongs to the imaginary, and imaginary is related to the "gaze" in the Other. He suggests that "narcissistic satisfaction [...] depends on the subject's ability to relate the ideal ego of primary narcissism to the ego ideal of secondary narcissism by means of the unique and unifying trait of the Other" [3]. Because of Song's intentional encouragement, Gallimard unwittingly gets lost in the fantasy stereotype that he observed. However, such fantasy ultimately turns out to be a politic measure to Song to carry out his mission as a spy.

3.1 The Other

Imperial ideology contributes to the concept that "the Oriental Other" exists in opposition to the Western Self. To the Western peoples, the Oriental has been subordinate in the East-West relation. Observing the "Other" in

relationship between Gallimard and Song, Freud's perspective on the narcissistic quest serves as an explanation,

There is a moment in the development of the subject when the libido cathects its own ego—or, in some sense, “love itself”—more than any external object or person. This is the precise stage of narcissism, where “self-love” is to be properly understood as a libidinal cathexis of the ego onto itself. [...] narcissism is the libidinal quest for the ego as its own object of desire, [...] the narcissistic quest of the (ego) libido for itself as both the desiring and desired self [4].

Freud regards narcissism functions as “a dialectical process in which object-choice is modeled on the self [...]. Narcissism is, simply, the dialectical process of loving oneself in the other” [4]. From the point of view, Song becomes an object-choice based on Gallimard's fantasy, while his fantasy to the perfect woman is completely his own wishful thinking. Song is like the reflection in a mirror who reflects Gallimard's “selfed Other” and also the “Othered self.” In the binary relation of the Orient and the Occident, the subordinate oriental is consequently feminized by the masculine occidental. In order to fulfill his mission, from the very beginning of their encountering, Song, disguised as a submissive Chinese woman, sets the trap by exploiting Gallimard's Oriental complex. *Her* modesty as a woman in the age-old Chinese tradition, *her* display of *her* inferiority and submission and *her* sacrifice for *her* love, all of these performances successfully make Gallimard believe his quest to the perfect woman is realized. Song becomes an idealized figure in his mind. He is not aware of that Song's image of modest woman is the projection of his “selfed Other.” What he loves is the self in the other (Song). Song perfectly plays Gallimard's “Othered self” to suit his fantasy.

3.2 Gallimard's “Selfed Other” and “Othered Self”

That Gallimard renames Song “Butterfly” and marks her into his conception of the Chinese custom shows that Song is the locus of his narcissism in which he can pursue the “self-love.” Actually, what Gallimard identifies with is not the real person Song but the ideal Oriental woman she represents in his fantasy. Therefore, from Song we see the “selfed Other” of Gallimard. As Narcissus's pool, Gallimard's reflection in the Oriental vision is his “selfed Other” and consequently reflects his “Othered self.” That is, when he sees Song as his perfect woman, Song is the projection of his oriental fantasy, the “Othered self” imbedded in himself. We can figure out Gallimard as the Othered self in his confession about his fantasy. His continual quest for the perfect woman ends in his identification and impersonation as Madame Butterfly. His identification to Madame Butterfly is his Othered self

that he is not aware when he falls in love with Song. As mentioned above, “the narcissistic quest of the (ego) libido for itself as both the desiring and desired self,” so Gallimard's pursuit of the perfect woman from Song presents the dialectical relationships not only of Othered self and selfed Other but also of the desiring and desired self. He loves Song means that his Othered self loves his selfed Other as well as the desiring self is in love with the desired self. Whatever he loves the selfed Other or the desired self shows the same result—like Narcissus, what he loves is his own reflection of the perfect woman. Song functions as a medium that Gallimard uses to fulfill his Oriental fantasy. In his disillusion, Gallimard, before committing suicide in prison, ultimately realizes that it is he who plays the role of Madame Butterfly in his relationship with Song, “I have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris. My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly” [1].

From Narcissus's story, the child's mirror stage is concerned with the situation that the child will view its own body as an object of love when seeing its own reflection. But the reflection of the object of love is impossible to reach in reality. Similar to the child's inability to distinguish itself from its reflection, Steve Pile mentions that “the essence of Narcissus myth is that the ‘boy-man’ falls in love with his own reflection; realizing that this love cannot be fulfilled, Narcissus decides to die” [5]. Likewise, Gallimard falls in love with an ideal Oriental female image he fancies and thus fails to recognize a proper love object and consequently cannot fulfill his love from the object of love. He finds out what he pursues and believes for twenty years is just an illusion to the Oriental. His pursuit to the “ideal woman”, the “perfect woman” only exists in his fantasy which he cannot find a real external object to realize this fantasy. His pursuit is like Narcissus's pursuit to his own reflection in the glassy pool:

Narcissus tries to be the object of his own fantasy, to become his own foundational imago. The reflection in the pool is unreal, without substance—because without genuine otherness. Narcissus, driven by the fantasy, plunges toward the fantasy to his death [6].

Even though he ultimately learns his vision to the Oriental is a fantasy, Gallimard would rather choose to die with the fantasy than live painfully in a disillusionary reality. In this fantasy, “Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth” [1]. He is driven by his fantasy and decides to act the role of the perfect woman—Madame Butterfly—to sacrifice his life to complete his love despite the fact that Song is an unworthy lover. Like the glassy pond which reflects Narcissus's face, Gallimard's vision to the Orient reflects his selfed Other and dooms his destiny:

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 woman. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life [1].

As a spy, Song seduces and tempts Gallimard painstakingly with a submissive oriental female image which misleads Gallimard to a false impression that he finds his Madame Butterfly and she is so real that she can fulfill his fantasy of the perfect woman. However, Song is just a fake, an imitation, who even is not a woman. It is impossible for her to fulfill a perfect woman to satisfy his fantasy. What he imagines in his fantasy is intentionally manipulated by a man who disguises in the appearance of “perfect woman.” Narcissus puts an end to his desire to the object of love by death, so does Gallimard. He intends to use his death proving that his pursuit for the perfect woman is not a delusion. In the reality really exists a perfect woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for her love—it is he, the fantasy stereotype, who is the perfect woman and is willing to sacrifice for love.

4. CONCLUSION

Gallimard’s Oriental fantasy is a kind of “fantasm.” Such fantasm, in terms of imaginary projection, can be considered paranoid. Even though Song expresses the Chinese custom on purpose, it must be under Gallimard’s misperceptions to the Oriental that Song’s conspiracy can be achieved. He misunderstands Song, who “is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education” [1]. If Gallimard does not have such fantasy and stereotypes to the Oriental, he would not be misled by Song so easily and even does not realize his “wife” is actually a man in the twenty-year marriage.

As what Hwang emphasizes in this play, the Chinese custom and modesty of Asian women are a stereotyped view in the Western perceptions. This fantasy stereotype turns to be a kind of paranoia of the Western to the Oriental. This paranoia reaffirms Gallimard’s misperception while he gets along with his “wife”, the incarnation of “perfect woman”. This misperception later leads Gallimard to the cognition what he truly falls in love with is the fantasy stereotype. The fantasy stereotype only exists in his mind which cannot find an external object to match with. Does the “perfect woman” really exist? To Gallimard, his “perfect woman” does exist. She exists in his projection of self. When searching for the ideal object of love, the “perfect woman” lives in his fantasy in which he projects his own image on the surrogate self. His Othered self completes his Oriental fantasy. In other words, one’s own reflection can satisfy one’s quest for the ideal object of love in his/her fantasy. Like the narcissistic Gallimard constantly pursuing his selfed Other from Song. Despite the fact that the scandal

ultimately consumes his life, Gallimard bursts forth the most vigorous emotions of his life. Like Gallimard. we do the same thing when gaze at our objects of love. No matter what the surrogate self is like ourselves or not, she or he would turn out to be the locus where our narcissism works.

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