Essay on gender and cultural stereotypes in m. butterfly

Parts of the World, Asia

In his play M. Butterfly, David Henry Hwang presents traditional gender and cultural stereotypes of male dominance, female submission, Caucasian power, and Asian mysteriousness. The character Rene Gallimard displays typically male characteristics of strength and control when he deliberately delays contact with the character Song. He and other Caucasian characters are in positions of power within their government, and emphasize their perceived strength over Asian countries. The character Song appears to submit completely to Gallimard's requests, frequently emphasizing traditionally female characteristics of passivity and modesty. Song also maintains a sense of mystery by refusing to unclothe herself. Ultimately, in M. Butterfly, Hwang subverts gender and cultural stereotypes by shattering the illusions of these stereotypes and revealing that a female is actually male and that the Asian male has used the Caucasian male. When the characters undermine these stereotypes, the audience faces questions about their own assumptions regarding gender and culture.

Hwang uses the narrative technique of a play within the play to showcase traditional gender and cultural stereotypes. The character Gallimard introduces many scenes from the play Madame Butterfly, which contains egregiously insipid stereotypes. In Madame Butterfly, a male Caucasian cavalierly marries, impregnates and then deserts an Asian female. She deludes herself that he will return to her because of their love. After three years, he sends his American wife to retrieve the child, and the Asian wife conveniently commits suicide, leaving the American wife free to take the child back to America to its father. This play within the play quickly illustrates several stereotypes. In terms of gender stereotypes, the male possesses all

the power and comes across as active and manipulative. He enters the marriage with his Asian wife fully intending to desert her. He has the economic and political freedom to leave his Asian wife in her homeland while he returns to his homeland. Instead of returning to Asia himself, he sends his American wife as his delegate, making it clear that he will return to his Asian wife nor bring her to America. The main female character, in contrast, seems foolish, powerless, and overly emotional. Even after her husband has obviously deserted her, she refuses to enter a relationship with a man much more suitable for her. She insists to her friend that one day her husband will in fact return for her. She does not take any initiative, such as leaving Asia on her own to go to America. Instead, she passively waits for her husband to return. When her husband ultimately rejects her and their marriage, she lets her emotions determine her fate and chooses suicide because she cannot bear the thought of being separated from him forever. Her suicide makes it easy for the American wife to take the child back to America. So the Asian wife's final act is to make her husband's life easier.

The cultural stereotypes in the play within the play are equally visible. The Caucasian character holds all the power; the Asian character submits to him even when doing so is against her best interest. The Caucasian character attains all his desired goals; the Asian character has a brief period of happiness followed by three years of loneliness and then death. When the audience sees and hears these scenes from the play within the play, they will recognize the absurdity of the stereotypes it contains. To an audience seeing the play M. Butterfly in the late 1980s, the notion that a woman should just passively wait for a straying husband to condescend to resume

their marriage would be ridiculous. For an audience in the 21st century, the Asian wife's suicide might well seem so outrageous as to be comical. Similarly, late 1980s audiences would be familiar with both America's stalemate in Viet Nam and Asian achievements in commerce, and not be inclined to assume that Caucasian characters must always triumph over Asian characters. For an audience in the 21st century, they have new stereotypes in which Asian Americans are supposed to perform better than Caucasians in math and science. If the 21st century audience is familiar with Western history, specifically immigration laws and cultural discrimination in America over the last century, they will recognize the cultural stereotypes in the Madame Butterfly play as reflecting those prejudices.

Hwang subverts these stereotypes through a variety of narrative techniques. The play begins in the present, and the character Gallimard establishes in the first two scenes of Act 1 that he is in prison and was deceived about the gender of his lover for 20 years. Immediately, then, Hwang induces the audience to regard Gallimard as foolish or stupid, and in a position of weakness. Gallimard reinforces this perception when he still clings to his delusions. Commenting on how his countrymen mock him, he asserts, " Can they really be so foolish? Men like that— they should be scratching at my door, begging to learn my secrets! For I, Rene Gallimard, you see, I have known, and been loved by the Perfect Woman" (1. 3). Gallimard's self-delusion mirrors the self-delusion of the Asian wife that soon will be shown on stage in the play within the play.

When approaching M. Butterfly, one might ask why Hwang chose to have the secret of the actual gender of Gallimard's lover made clear to the audience

in the first act. This decision invites the obvious comparison to the film The Crying Game, in which a male character falls in love with a man dressed as a woman and does not discover his actual gender until well into the events of the film. The answer to this question of different narrative strategies most likely comes from what the author was attempting to achieve with the revelation of gender identity. In the case of The Crying Game, the director leaves the audience in the dark while the protagonist falls in love so that the audience will empathize with the protagonist, despite the fact that many audience members would disapprove in general of a homosexual relationship. In contrast, Hwang lets the audience know the actual gender of Gallimard's lover immediately, because his intent is not to garner sympathy for Gallimard but to emphasize his foolishness, gullibility, and emotional nature. Gallimard remains as a hostage to his emotions. He cannot let go of his illusionary love. He displays characteristics often associated with females: he is the victim; he values the illusion of love over reality; he was used by his lover and then discarded once his usefulness ended. By establishing Gallimard this way in the opening scenes, Hwang ensures the audience cannot forget Gallimard's fate even when they see flashback scenes where Gallimard appears in a more traditional male role of power and dominance.

In the flashback scenes, Gallimard imagines himself to be in control of the relationship with Song. After a period when he visits her regularly and she reveals her shame at being so forward with him, he describes his plan:

Over the next five weeks, I worked like a dynamo. I stopped going to the opera, I didn't phone or write her. I knew this little flower was waiting for me

to call, and, as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt for the first time that rush of power— the absolute power of a man. (1. 10)

While Gallimard claims for himself the “ absolute power of a man” in letting Song wonder why he doesn’t call or visit her, the audience perceives the dramatic irony of his statement. He believes he is making the rules of the relationship; however, Song in fact is playing him, using his own fantasies of what an Asian woman is like to entrap him. When he finally visits her again, he experiences guilt at her apparent devotion to him and begins a full-time relationship with her. During these scenes, Song of course is dressed as a woman. To the audience, then, the character who appears to be female is the one who wields the ultimate power in the relationship, even as her character repeatedly states how ashamed she is and behaves in a submissive way, claiming to be too modest to let Gallimard see her naked. Added to this gender role inversion is the audience’s knowledge that Song is in fact male, which makes the gender issues quite convoluted. Song is a man pretending to be a woman who pretends to be submissive and in love with a man. Can these characters, or the audience, determine if there really are clear-cut differences between what a male is “ supposed” to be and what a female is “ supposed” to be? At a minimum, Hwang challenges the audience to think about traditional gender stereotypes and to admit that those stereotypes are often invalid. As Li notes, “ The Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang makes a self-conscious move and inverts the gender identities of his characters Gallimard and Song” (272).

Similar to his undermining of traditional gender stereotypes, Hwang also inverts traditional Western stereotypes of culture. As Fung comments, “

Exploring the ideology of Orientalism that Hwang negotiates in his play, one must study the long history of colonial and imperial contexts between the East and the West" (16). Hwang chooses to have his two Caucasian characters, Gallimard and Ambassador Toulon, discuss events such as the upcoming American participation in the Viet Nam war. For example, Ambassador Toulon predicts, " I don't see how the Vietnamese can stand up to American firepower" (2. 3). In that same conversation, Gallimard states, " If the Americans demonstrate the will to win, the Vietnamese will welcome them into a mutually beneficial union" (2. 3). In this scene, Hwang again relies on dramatic irony for good effect. The audience knows that the American participation in Viet Nam, despite more advanced firepower, did not result in overpowering the North Vietnamese army. Nor did the Vietnamese people welcome Americans with open arms simply based on their will to win. By having these two Caucasian characters make such predictions, that the audience knows to be wrong, Hwang gets the audience to think of the Caucasians as not omniscient or omnipotent, but as bumbling fools. When Admiral Toulon mentions that Gallimard has an Asian mistress, he does not caution Gallimard to be careful of state secrets; he applauds Gallimard for trying to understand the Asian people. This conversation implies that Toulon is so confident of his superiority as a Caucasian diplomat, he cannot even conceive that Gallimard's Asian mistress might manipulate Gallimard into revealing sensitive political information. For his part, Gallimard seems oblivious to any potential security leaks when he casually gives Song details of American plans.

Hwang also plays on the concept of the Asian female as mysterious and

alluring. The primary way he achieves this is through Song's refusal to disrobe when Gallimard is present. Song claims to be too modest to do so, while the audience knows the refusal is to delay Gallimard's realization that Song is actually male. In addition, when Song passes along the information he has obtained to a Chinese female handler, the female handler is portrayed as very direct and straightforward, criticizing Song for wearing a dress and reminding him that there is no homosexuality in communist China. There is nothing mysterious about this Asian character.

At the end of the play, Song appears so that he can shatter the illusion Gallimard still has. Gallimard still deludes himself that one day Song will return to him, but Song shows himself in male clothes and with a completely different personality. Gallimard chooses to die rather than give up his illusion. This scene seems to reflect Hwang's commentary on the persistence of stereotypes; even when humans are shown that gender and cultural stereotypes are not always valid, some humans would rather continue with those illusions than embrace reality. When asked about the play, Hwang noted that both Westerners and Asians use the cultural stereotypes in his play:

The play has been taken as a commentary or a criticism of Western attitudes toward the East, and I think that's accurate. But 1 would like to think that the play is fairly even-handed in saying that the East also misperceives the West. The East is guilty or complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping. The West, having had the advantage of being the 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. (Interview 141-142)

Ultimately, by undermining both gender and cultural stereotypes, Hwang makes an argument that it is time to shatter the illusions engendered by these stereotypes.

Works Cited

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