

Power and desire: the embodiment of female sexuality

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What is the definition of the perfect woman, the symbol of male heterosexual desire? Is it a woman who has a picture perfect body, with a beautiful face, nice legs, and the rest of the body to match? Or is it something more, something other than just physical appearance? In Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard seems to be attracted to a number of different characteristics in women, but he keeps going back to one woman in particular. Gallimard has his wife, Helga. The play hints that Helga is unattractive and not someone that a man would find desirable.

Then Gallimard has his first affair with Song, a submissive Oriental woman, or so he thinks, who is attractive and modest. And lastly there's Renee, who is completely beautiful, the woman of every man's dreams. In *M. Butterfly*, the male heterosexual desire is a product of power differentials, where Gallimard is most attracted to the woman that has the least power, giving him even more. Helga is introduced in act one, scene five, where Gallimard himself hints that Helga is unattractive, or at least, not beautiful.

This impression is given when he says, " the sad truth is that all men want a beautiful woman, and the uglier the man, the greater the want" (Hwang 14). Then later in the play, after Gallimard has met Song, his old friend from school, Marc, appears in his dream. During their conversation, Marc says to Gallimard, " all your life you've waited for a beautiful girl who would lay down for you... " (Hwang 25). This further implies that Helga isn't beautiful because Gallimard has been waiting for a beautiful girl for his whole life.

This is one of the reasons why Gallimard is unhappy with Helga, because she is unattractive. Gallimard is also unhappy because Helga possesses too

much power. Gallimard introduces her by saying, " I married a woman older than myself - Helga" (Hwang 14). By being older than him, Helga holds some power. She is a woman that speaks her mind and has her own opinions. When the two of them are talking about going to the doctor, she tries to force him to go. Gallimard doesn't particularly want to go to the doctor, because he doesn't really care if she gets pregnant or not, and she gets mad and yells " No!

Of course not! Whatever he finds - if he finds nothing, we decide what to do about nothing! But go! " (Hwang 50). Helga has some power in their relationship, and she isn't very attractive, so she isn't sexually desirable to Gallimard. Another woman that Gallimard is attracted to is Renee, a student who is in China to learn Chinese. This is how Gallimard describes Renee: " Renee was picture perfect. With a body like those girls in the magazines" (Hwang 54). According to Gallimard, Renee is the woman that every man dreams about. She's got the perfect body that every man wants.

Although she has the picture perfect appearance, Gallimard still doesn't think she is the perfect woman. After describing how Renee is picture perfect, he goes on to say, " But is it possible for a woman to be too uninhibited, too willing, as to seem almost too masculine? " (Hwang 54). The perfect woman shouldn't be too uninhibited and too willing. Renee wasn't afraid to be seen completely naked, she was too open about her sexuality, just like a man. She talked about how men compete to prove who has the biggest penis. As Gallimard says, " This was simply not acceptable" (Hwang 56).

Even though Renee has the perfect figure that every man wants, she acts too masculine, and has too much power over herself, making her less desirable to the heterosexual male. Gallimard's first affair, before Renee, was with Song, the submissive Oriental woman. She is, as Gallimard puts it, " the Perfect Woman" (Hwang 4). Gallimard describes his perfect woman: 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. Hwang (91) This kind of woman wants to be with a man who has power over them, who'll control them. Song is this perfect woman that Gallimard describes. Near the end of act one, Gallimard tries an experiment to see if he has power over Song. He doesn't contact her for eight weeks, and she starts to send him letters. She starts by saying that she hates him, and misses him, but in the last letter she says, " I am out of words. I can hide behind dignity no longer.

What do you want? I have already given you my shame" (Hwang 35). This proves to Gallimard that he has power over her. When he stays away from her, she doesn't know what to do. He even says, " I felt for the first time that rush of power - the absolute power of a man" (Hwang 32). This is when Gallimard is convinced. He knows that he has the power; that he is in control of her. The first time he sees her after his experiment he demands that she

answer the question, " Are you my Butterfly? " (Hwang 39). After some convincing she finally says, " Yes, I am. I am your Butterfly" (Hwang 40).

Since she is his butterfly, this implies that she is Cio-Cio-San, from Madame Butterfly, who gives up everything for Sharpless. This is when Gallimard has completely fallen for Song. He realizes that he is her world, and he has the power in the relationship. From this point, Song is willing to do anything for Gallimard. First Song agrees to have his child, and when he gets concerned about her career, she says, " Phooey on my career! ... Of course I love my career. But what would I love most of all? To feel something inside of me - day and night - something I know is yours" (Hwang 51).

Then when Gallimard starts having his extra extramarital affair with Renee, Song didn't complain, or confront Gallimard. Gallimard says, " She knew the secret I was trying to hide. But, unlike a Western woman, she didn't confront me, threaten, even pout" (Hwang 56). At this point Gallimard knows he has complete power and control in the relationship. He can do anything he wants, and Song doesn't care. This is Gallimard's perfect woman. Since he has all the power, he has the woman of his dreams. Song fulfills every one of his desires. In M. Butterfly, the male heterosexual desire is a product of power differentials.

Gallimard is married to Helga, who has her own opinion and can't be controlled by him, which makes him unhappy. Renee, even though she has the picture perfect body, isn't the desirable woman. She is too masculine because she is too opinionated, too uninhibited, and too open with her

sexuality, making her undesirable. Song, on the other hand, is willing to give up everything for Gallimard. She'll give up her career to have his child, she doesn't complain when he has another affair, and she's willing to do anything for him. Song is beautiful, but modest, and since she holds no power in the relationship, she becomes the perfect woman.