

Masculinity,
femininity, and the
western rape
mentality in "m.
butterfly"



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As its title suggests, "M. Butterfly" is essentially a play about metamorphosis. It is, firstly, the metamorphosis of Giacomo Puccini's famous opera "Madame Butterfly" into a modern-day geopolitical argument for cultural understanding. Author David Henry Hwang shows, through a highly implausible love affair between a French diplomat and the male Chinese opera singer he believes to be a woman, how the failure to separate desire from reality can result in deception and tragedy. Less obviously, "M. Butterfly" alludes to the literal metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Gallimard transforms Song from "just a man" into "the Perfect Woman" (Hwang 88, 4). Due to his insecurity about his own masculinity, Gallimard needs to create Song in the image of the perfect Asian woman - exotic, sensual, and acquiescent - in order to feel wholly male. Though he seeks to confine Song within the context of his fantasy, Gallimard's vulnerability and need actually free Song by providing her with an outlet to flee the Orientalist representation of Asian people. Gallimard transforms Song into a butterfly, but instead of transforming him into "a butterfly who would writhe on a needle", Gallimard is the one who eventually ends up trapped by his own fantasy (Hwang 32). Through an analysis of Gallimard's cultural, sexual, and personal relationship with Song Liling, Hwang demonstrates that his treatment of Song is a reflection of the Western rape mentality toward the East, a philosophy that is ultimately self-destructive. "Orientalism" is a term that refers to the study of Eastern cultures, but, according to postcolonial theorist Edward Said, "can also express the strength of the West and the Orient's weakness - as seen by the West. Such strength and weakness are as intrinsic to Orientalism as they are to any view that divides the world into large general division" (45). The rape mentality of <https://assignbuster.com/masculinity-femininity-and-the-western-rape-mentality-in-m-butterfly/>

the West is a byproduct of the occidental conviction in the dominance and superiority of Western cultures. By playing into the racism and sexism inherent in Gallimard's Orientalist belief system, it is not difficult for Song to deceive him. According to Song, "The West thinks of itself as masculine - big guns, big industry, big money - so the East is feminine - weak, delicate, poor...the West thinks that the East, deep down, wants to be dominated" (Hwang 83). Because Song is from the East, he can never be fully masculine in Gallimard's eyes. The objective of this rape mentality is to serve as an imperialist reminder of the West's supremacy and an assurance of its power over the East. If the West feels it is by nature masculine and that the East is feminine, its power is viewed as natural, real, and justified; in short, something that cannot be helped. Furthermore, the moral compass of Orientalism is the duty to aid the East in becoming more like the West, while still retaining the aspects of its own culture that the West deigns to accept. Said writes, "The modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished" (121). In a telling scene, Gallimard tells his colleague Toulon that the Asian people will always submit to the force of the greatest power (Hwang 46). Therefore, by submitting to him, Song has given Gallimard the right to power. Hwang comments on the cultural exchange between the East and the West by forming "M. Butterfly" as a deconstructivist version of Puccini's "Madame Butterfly". The notion that the beautiful Cio-Cio-San would commit ritual suicide because she has been abandoned by Pinkerton, a "not very good-looking, not very bright, and pretty much a wimp" of a Naval officer, seems entirely absurd (Hwang 5).

But as feminist writer Marina Heung observes: As a master text of <https://assignbuster.com/masculinity-femininity-and-the-western-rape-mentality-in-m-butterfly/>

Orientalism, 'Madame Butterfly' confirms the Asian woman's perpetual sexual availability for the Western male even as her convenient demise delimits such liaisons; in the end, Cio-Cio-San's suicide recapitulates the face of the expendable Asian whose inevitable death confirms her marginality within dominant culture and history. (Heung 225) For Gallimard, Song's Cio-Cio-San to his Pinkerton represents the supreme fantasy of male sexual power. This relationship is made all the more ironic because Song is an opera singer, and Gallimard meets her at a diplomatic function where she was hired to sing Cio-Cio-San's death scene. In Act One, scene 13, when Gallimard first tells Song he loves her, instead of asking for her love in return Gallimard simply asks, "Are you my Butterfly?" (Hwang 39) It is only when she replies in the affirmative that Gallimard responds, "My little Butterfly, there should be no more secrets: I love you" (40). But while Gallimard's statement "Butterfly...Butterfly..." opens the play, it closes with Song's question, "Butterfly? Butterfly?" The inversion of the opening and closing lines indicates the dissolution of Gallimard's "Madame Butterfly" fantasy; just as the meaning of the lines has changed completely, so has the relationship between Gallimard and Song; it is Gallimard, by the end of the play, who has become Cio-Cio-San. The tragedy of Puccini's opera is in the destruction of Cio-Cio-San, an innocent and beautiful Japanese girl who is ruined by the one man she loved. While audiences cannot help but be moved by the helpless injustice of the situation, the circumstances under which it arises are still perceived as wholly believable, from the Japanese bride, to the American groom, to the painful termination of their relationship. As Song tells Gallimard when they first meet, "because it is an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner...you find it beautiful" (Hwang 17). If it were " a <https://assignbuster.com/masculinity-femininity-and-the-western-rape-mentality-in-m-butterfly/>

blonde homecoming queen” and a “ short Japanese businessman”, the play would be considered ridiculous (17). Heung concurs, writing that “ Puccini’s popular opera is in many ways a foundational narrative of East-West relations, having shaped the Western construction of ‘ the Orient’ as a sexualized, and sexually compliant, space that is ripe for conquest and rule” (224). Because the East is seen as so innately feminine, any association between a blonde homecoming queen and a short, Japanese businessman would be impossible; the businessman could never, within an Orientalist framework, beat his Western competition. Orientalism arose as a study, but its underlying racism developed in response to fear – principally the fear of the East’s potential, which is a very real threat to the power of the West. A critical element in Puccini’s plot is that Prince Yamadori – rich, handsome, and royal – loses Cio-Cio-San to Pinkerton, the poor American sailor. In true Orientalist fashion, Cio-Cio-San would rather kill herself than marry Prince Yamadori after experiencing the superior affections of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. Gallimard’s reasoning for why most Asians hate “ Madame Butterfly” is “ because the white man gets the girl”, but their distaste is due to more than merely “ sour grapes” (17). The West’s figurative castration of the East is a very real problem, a mindset that is advantageous to neither party and doomed to be fundamentally self-destructive. It seems improbable that anyone can remain ignorant about the sex of his lover for twenty years, but “ M. Butterfly” is based on the true story of the French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and his Chinese mistress Shi Peipu, with whom he had a twenty-year relationship with before discovering his lover’s true identity. Hwang attempts, in “ M. Butterfly”, to provide an answer for how such an incongruous relationship could have come about. While he intends the affair

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between Gallimard and Song to be a criticism of the West's xenophobic and supremacist perception of the East, Hwang writes in his Afterword that it is not a " diatribe...quite the contrary, I consider it a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our own mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings" (Hwang 100). The only probable reason why Gallimard and Boursicot could have been blind for so long is because they did not want to acknowledge the truth. Song explains to the Judge, when he is tried for spying, that men hear only what they want to hear, and that Gallimard believes he is a woman because he needs to accept that his fantasy woman is in reality female. As a consequence of Gallimard's profound insecurity about his own masculinity, he experiences considerable problems with communication in all of his relationships with women. His marriage to Helga was a matter of convenience, his brief affair with Renee was fueled only by his sadistic desire to cause Song pain, and he maintained a twenty-year relationship with Song without any level of emotional intimacy at all. Gallimard's desperate need for dominance exposes a vital weakness, which provides Song with the means by which to assert his freedom from the castration of the East by asserting his sexual power over a member of the elite West. Song knows exactly how to inveigle Gallimard: " I take the words from your mouth. Then I wait for you to come and retrieve them" (86). As he admits to Comrade Chin, only a man knows how a woman should behave; because Song is aware of how the perfect Asian Butterfly is required to act, he knows precisely how to seduce men like Gallimard (63). From the start of the play, the audience already knows the entire story. The play is presented in a series of chronological flashbacks interspaced with personal

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commentary from the various characters. At times, both Gallimard and Song speak to the audience, calling upon the audience to attempt an understanding of the different motivations of the characters. The character of Gallimard is a tragic figure, because – as he readily admits to the audience – he does not wish to acknowledge the actuality of his situation, but chooses rather to continue to live in his imaginary world with his imaginary woman. In the final, climactic confrontation between Gallimard and Song, he tells Song, “ Tonight, I’ve finally learned to tell fantasy from reality. And, knowing the difference, I choose fantasy” (Hwang 90). Like Cio-Cio-San, who faithfully waited for three years without a word from Pinkerton, Gallimard’s most pitiful quality is his dogmatic incapacity to concede the obvious truth. “ I knew all the time somewhere that my happiness was temporary, my love a deception. But my mind kept the knowledge at bay. To make the wait bearable” (88). Even after the truth is presented beyond a doubt, Gallimard knows he cannot live with the weight of the knowledge. In his final speech, Gallimard yearningly recollects his “ vision of the Orient...of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils” (91). Like the tragic heroine of “ Madame Butterfly”, Gallimard chooses to die with the death of a dream rather than live on with the acceptance of fact. Gallimard claims he dies for love, and to an extent he is right – he does love the woman he believed Song to be. “ The man I loved was a cad, a bounder. He deserved nothing but a kick in the behind, and instead I gave him...all my love” (Hwang 92). However, Song is not Gallimard’s Butterfly, but rather a strange man in Armani slacks wearing a cold chain and smelling of garlic (Hwang 90). Hwang shows, through a geopolitical lens, that Gallimard’s relationship to Song is a reflection of the Western rape mentality. The Orient

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of slender women in chong sams does not exist anywhere but in Gallimard's fatally misguided imagination, and his faith in such a self-serving, chauvinistic paradigm impels Gallimard to lose grasp of reality and ruin himself. Edward Said assents:[Orientalism] set the real boundaries between human beings, on which races, nations, civilizations were constructed; it forced vision away from the common, as well as plural, human realities like joy, suffering, political organization, forcing attention instead in the downward and backward direction of immutable origins. (233). Though it is only a dream, Gallimard's criterion for the " Perfect Woman" creates a very real wall between himself and Song, which eventually grows so ingrained that it cannot be breached. Monsieur Butterfly does not refer to Song, but to Gallimard. " Madame Butterfly" does not exist; the only Butterflies are the men who fool themselves into loving a product of their own imaginations.