

A postcolonial reading of m. butterfly



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David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* draws links between sexism, racism and imperialism. Hwang's play, which is loosely based on a scandal involving a French diplomat and his lover, a male Chinese opera singer, utilizes postcolonial ideas in order to imply a connection between sex, race and imperialism. Part of how this is illustrated is through the parallel that the play makes between its plot, and the story of *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. Rene Gallimard, the main character, alludes to Puccini's opera throughout *M. Butterfly*. He is enamored by the opera's title character, Cio-Cio-San, romanticizing her as the ideal woman. This can be seen when he says, "Its heroine, Cio-Cio-San, is a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave." (108, 1. 3., Hwang). As far as Gallimard is concerned, she is the epitome of perfection because he sees in her a pure love, devotion and sense of sacrifice and duty. Ironically, the "woman" who turns him on to this attraction, Song Liling, is herself completely disgusted by the messages in the opera. She expresses this in the line: "But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner-ah!-you find it beautiful." (111, 1. 7., Hwang). Song repudiates the opera early on in *M. Butterfly* by turning the tables on the plot. If the American woman were abandoned by the lecherous Asian man, she would be scorned and mocked by a Western audience. On the other hand, a Western man is attracted by the desire to protect the poor, modest, submissive and devoted Asian girl, and idealizes her as an Oriental "Perfect Woman." This is what Gallimard does while under Song's spell. As opposed to calling Song by her "name" (or the name of the woman being played by the man in disguise), Gallimard calls her "Butterfly", and lusts for her as an exotic prize the way his *Madama Butterfly* counterpart, Pinkerton, does for Cio-Cio-San. Gallimard expresses this when he says, "There is a

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vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in cheongsams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women.” (129, 3. 3., Hwang). Song plays her part as modest, when necessary, mysterious, when necessary and submissive, when necessary. For example, Song tells Gallimard, “ Please...it all frightens me. I’m a modest Chinese girl.” (117, 1. 13., Hwang). Song is doing everything to play into Gallimard’s fantasies about Oriental women. Gallimard bases these fantasies on racial stereotypes. Song appears to understand very well that to Gallimard, the stereotype of the East reflects that of its women: they are weak-willed and frightened, and would rather side with the powerful than stand independently. Likewise, when Gallimard feels secure enough in his relationship with Song, he feels a masculine power over her, and tries to abuse that power until Song is begging for him. Gallimard admits, “ I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call, and, as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt the first time that rush of power — the absolute power of a man.” (115, 1. 11., Hwang). He tries to be Pinkerton, and exert his power over Song. However, his experiment falters when he feels remorse over hurting the person he in fact loves very deeply. Madama Butterfly is a very colonial opera in which the Asian woman is the solemn martyr for the sake of the “ white devil”. In the postcolonial M. Butterfly, the roles become reversed. In the courtroom scene toward the end of the play, the actor formerly known as Song speaks openly to the judge and jury about his ease in deceiving Gallimard. He says, “ Basically, ‘ Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes.’ 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.” (127, 3. 1., Hwang). Here, the

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role reversal is clear, and the link between sex, race and imperialism is made explicit. Song describes the relationship between the land of the conquered and its conquerors. In this view, the conquered land is the woman, and the conqueror is the man. Song makes use of “rape mentality” to complete the metaphor: the people of a conquered land cannot say no, because deep down they want to be dominated. This is related to the assumption that women want to be dominated by men. This is why Asians, will, according to Gallimard, only ever side with the winning team. Yet, one cannot overlook the fact that Gallimard is duped by his submissive Oriental bride. He is led by the nose by his adoration of a gender and racial construct. This is described when we are told “I’m a man who loved a woman created by a man” (128, 3. 2. Gallimard). Gallimard is the one who, in the end, makes himself a martyr for his lost love. He commits seppuku after declaring this: “And now, to you, I will prove that my love was not in vain –by returning to the world of fantasy where I first met her.” (129, 3. 3. Hwang). And when he dies, Song, in men’s clothing, stands over him asking “Butterfly? Butterfly?” (129, 3. 3. Hwang). The postcolonial outlook of this play is made undeniable by the fact that the former submissive character can be Pinkerton, while the formerly dominant character can easily be his Butterfly. “Cultural Case Study: David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly.” Texts and Contexts Winter 2010. Ed. Wendy Eberle-Sinatra. Montreal: John Abbott College, 2010. 105-37. Print.