GENDER AND ORIENTALISM FROM PUCCINI’S MADAME BUTTERFLY TO HWANG’S AND CRONENBERG’S M. BUTTERFLY

Eta Farmacelia Nurulhady
English Department, Diponegoro University
farmacelia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Puccini’s opera Madame Butterfly pictures a Japanese woman sacrificing her life for her American husband who abandons her. Hwang deconstructs Madame Butterfly in his play M Butterfly, in which Gallimard, a French diplomat has a relationship with Song Liling, a Chinese opera singer who turns out to be a man and a spy. The play is adapted into a movie directed by Cronenberg. This study aims to analyze gender and orientalism in Puccini’s Madame Butterfly, Hwang’s play M. Butterfly, and Cronenberg’s movie M. Butterfly. Madame Butterfly presents the submissive oriental woman and dominant western man. Hwang’s M Butterfly reverses the gender relation, having the French diplomat commit suicide claiming to be Madame Butterfly. In court, Song explains what makes the 20 year mistaken gender identity possible is what he calls “Western rape mentality towards the East”. Not interested in the political subject of the play, Cronenberg’s M Butterfly emphasizes on the story of the couple: the desire and capacity for physical and mental transformation in their relationship. Puccini’s Madame Butterfly strengthens the notion of orientalism. Hwang’s and Cronenberg’s M Butterfly challenge the binary opposition between the West and the East, destabilize the link between biological sex and gender, and maintain the ambiguity of gender.

Key words: gender, orientalism, western rape mentality

Introduction

The binary opposition between the West and the East, as is common to all binary oppositions, suggest that the first is superior to the latter. It manifests in many aspects, from politics to economy and even literature. The colonialism and imperialism from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century created and maintained exploitation of colonies in Asia and Africa by powers based in Europe. The narratives resulted from the contact between the East/the Orient and the West/the Occident demonstrate the fascination of the West towards the East and at the same time strengthen the superiority of the West. Examples of such narratives include English narrative fiction Daniel Defoe’s The Adventure of Robinson Crusoe and Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness that represent a discourse which Edward Said (2003) terms as orientalism, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). The East are often pictured as being primitive and less cultured compared to the West, yet they are fascinating to the West.

In the United States of America, the fascination towards anything Japan started with the success of the United States of America in forcing Japanese government to begin diplomatic and commercial relations with the United States and other Western countries in mid nineteenth century. The enthusiasm in all things Japanese was apparent in various art
forms, including a long story written by an American author, John Long, titled *Madame Butterfly*. It tells about a Japanese woman getting married to and abandoned by an American sailor. The long story was adapted into a play by David Belasco, and later on into an Italian opera by Giacomo Puccini that pictures the delicate Japanese woman willing to sacrifice her family and life due to her love for her American husband. Though being mistreated, the submissive Orient in *Madame Butterfly* still loves the “cruel” Occident and is even willing to commit suicide to keep her love and honor. David Henry Hwang reversed the relations between the West and the East when he created the play *M Butterfly* by having the western man, instead of the oriental woman, commit suicide. *M Butterfly* had its premiere on February 10, 1988 at the National Theater in Washington D.C. Although presenting a similar line of story and ending, Cronenberg’s movie *M Butterfly* (1993) poses a number of adjustment to meet Cronenberg’s point of view of the story. Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* strengthens the notion of the submissive Orient and the dominant Western in its gender relation while both Hwang’s *M Butterfly* and Cronenberg’s *M Butterfly* destabilize the binary opposition between the West and the East and maintain the ambiguity of sexuality and gender.

**Gender and Orientalism**

Gender is often referred to as biological sex that differentiates male from female, yet as a social construct, gender refers to not only biological but also physical, mental and behavioral characteristics which relate to and differentiate between masculinity and femininity. Riki Wilchins (2002) says, “Gender is a system of meanings and symbols – and the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use – for power and sexuality: masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness” (p. 25). In line with Wilchins, Richard Schechner (2002) believes that, “Each individual from an early age learns to perform gender-specific vocal inflections, facial displays, gestures, walks, and erotic behavior as well as how to select, modify and use scents, body shapes and adornments, clothing, and all other gender markings of a given society” (p. 131). This strengthens the notion of gender identity as a social construct. Earlier in the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir (1972) in her famous book *The Second Sex*, laid the foundation which distinguished sex from gender when she said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 267). This suggests that a woman gradually acquires her gender, a key aspect of her identity, through a socially constructed experience. As a social construct, gender often differentiates the position of man and woman. Beauvoir proposed the notion of woman as “the other,” that woman is defined as not a man: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (p. xvi). Man sets himself up as the standard, and he defines what it is to be woman. Woman is associated with all the feminine qualities, such as being passive and submissive. In other words, the construction of a woman to be feminine happens through social indoctrination.

The binary opposition between man and woman applies also in the relationship between the West and the East, which is part of the discourse of Orientalism. Edward Said (2003) says:

Unlike the Americans, the French and the British—less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss—have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has
helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.… And yet, one must repeatedly ask oneself whether what matters is Orientalism in the general group of ideas overriding the mass of materials – about which who could deny that they were shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of “the Oriental” as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction? (pp. 1-2, 12)

In other words, orientalism is a discourse created by the West to strengthen their hegemony over the East. The West considers the East as the inferior Other. The notion of the East as the Other can be seen in both Madame Butterfly and M. Butterfly.

**Puccini’s Madame Butterfly vs. Hwang’s M Butterfly**

David Henry Hwang had never watched Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, but he knew that *Madame Butterfly* had become a cultural stereotype of a submissive Oriental woman mistreated by a Western man. When he heard about the trial of Bouriscot, a French diplomat accused of espionage for China, Hwang (1988) recalled asking himself, “I was driving down Santa Monica Boulevard one afternoon, and asked myself, ‘What did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?’ The answer came to me clearly: ‘He probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly’” (p. 95). Bouriscot, the French diplomat, had lived, on and off, with Mr. Shi Pei-pu, a Chinese opera singer, for twenty years and supplied him with classified documents. At the end of which he found out in the court, in which he was tried for espionage for the Republic of China, that his lover Mr. Shi Pei-pu, who he thought was a woman, was actually a man. Hwang decided to write the play *M Butterfly* that he tagged as “a deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*” (p. 95).

In Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, the United States Naval officer, Lieutenant B. F. Pinkerton is marrying Cio-Cio San or Butterfly in a “Japanese marriage” contract. Sharpless, the American Consul at Nagasaki, warns Pinkerton that Butterfly possibly takes the marriage seriously, and it may damage her to find that Pinkerton only considers the marriage as a pastime. Pinkerton disregards Sharpless’ opinion. When Pinkerton leaves Japan, Butterfly devotedly awaits his arrival for three years, believing that Pinkerton will reunite with her and their son as a happy family. When Pinkerton returns, he brings his American wife who intends to take Butterfly’s son to the United States of America. Broken hearted, Butterfly commits suicide, preferring being dead with honor to living with dishonor.

The main character of Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* is Rene Gallimard. His favorite opera is Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard fantasizes himself as Pinkerton and believes that Oriental girls are the ideal women who would do anything and even want to be treated badly. Therefore, he was captivated by Song Liling’s performance when the Chinese opera singer is singing the death scene of *Madame Butterfly*. Gallimard approaches Song after the performance and comments on the beauty of the story:

**GALLIMARD.** Of her death. It’s a . . . a pure sacrifice. He’s unworthy, but what can she do? She loves him . . . so much. It’s a very beautiful story.

**SONG.** Well, yes, to a Westener.

**GALLIMARD.** Excuse me?

**SONG.** It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man (p. 17).

On the one hand, the quotation above shows the power relation between a man and a woman: the man being the active and dominant while the woman being passive and submissive. On the other hand, it represents the power relation of the West and the East with the West represented by the man and the East by the woman. Song points out to Gallimard that if the
story happened the other way around, with an American homecoming queen being fooled by a cruel Japanese businessman, Gallimard would not find it beautiful. However, Song’s sharp remark does not stop Gallimard from living the fantasy in his relationship with Song.

**Hwang’s *M Butterfly* vs. Cronenberg’s *M Butterfly***

The play *M. Butterfly* opens with the ex-diplomat Gallimard in a French prison. Gallimard walks the audience through his life, and he comments on himself. Gallimard tells his story, in a narration which jumps back and forward in time, about his relationship with Song. Gallimard meets and is impressed by Song’s performance of the excerpt from *Madame Butterfly*, and they soon become lovers. Believing that he is a Western man succeeding in conquering an Oriental woman, Gallimard convinces Ambassador Toulon that “Orientals will always submit to a greater force” (p. 46), asserting that the Vietnamese will welcome the Americans and submit to American will. Gallimard is proven to be wrong, and he is sent back to Paris. Bringing their supposed son, Song reunites with Gallimard in Paris. They live together for twenty years, at the end of which Gallimard finds out that Song is a Chinese spy and a man. Tried for espionage, Gallimard is sent to prison. The play ends with Gallimard in his prison cell committing suicide with Song standing as a man in Armani slacks and smoking a cigarette.

When the play was adapted into a movie in 1993, Hwang wrote the screenplay but had to compromise with the choices of the director, David Cronenberg. Cronenberg objects to the structure of the play because, “There’s a little too much self-awareness on the part of Gallimard” (Rodley, 1997, p. 173). Cronenberg chooses a more traditional, chronological method of storytelling. It starts with Gallimard working as an accountant in the French Embassy in Beijing. His relationship with Song boosts his confidence, which results in his promotion as vice-consul. His mistake in analyzing the Americans and the Vietnamese causes him to lose his position, and he is sent back to Paris. Song comes to Paris and reunites with Gallimard. The Chinese government keeps their son, so Gallimard helps Song to conduct espionage in order to get their son back. At the court, Gallimard finds out that Song is a man. The movie ends with Gallimard performing *Madame Butterfly* and committing suicide. Song, dressed in a suit, is pictured in the plane returning to China.

In addition to the difference in the method of storytelling, there are some scenes in the play that are omitted in the movie. Cronenberg not only modifies some of the scenes from the play, he also adds a number of scenes that are not in the play. In spite of the differences, both the play and the movie destabilize the normative gender. *M. Butterfly* plays with this notion of gender by presenting the relationship between Gallimard and Song that destabilizes the link between biological sex and gender and also the binary of masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, and dominance and weakness.

**Gender and Orientalism from Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* to Hwang’s and Cronenberg’s *M Butterfly***

*Madame Butterfly* presents the opposition of the active, dominant West and the passive, submissive East represented by an American Lieutenant Pinkerton and a Japanese woman Madame Butterfly. Hwang (1988) deconstructs the opposition in *M. Butterfly* by having the Frenchman fantasized himself as Pinkerton and his lover Butterfly, but: “By the end of the piece, he realizes that it is he who has been Butterfly, in that the Frenchman has been duped by love; the Chinese spy, who exploited that love, is therefore the real Pinkerton” (p. 96). *Madame Butterfly* ends with Butterfly committing suicide, but the final scene of *M. Butterfly* presents the suicide of Rene Gallimard, the Frenchman.

Because Song is performing Madame Butterfly and is wearing a dress when she meets Gallimard, Gallimard seems to take it for granted that Song is a woman. When Song invites...
Gallimard to watch her at a Peking Opera, however Gallimard should have known that Song is a man. Men playing women is common to Western theater tradition: men played women characters in Shakespeare’s plays. In Eastern theaters such as Chinese opera, Japanese Kabuki, and Indonesian Ludruk, men also play women. However Gallimard is not only ignorant of the fact but also captivated by the fantasy of a dominant Western man and a submissive Oriental woman in his relationship with Song. After their first meeting, Gallimard visits Song in the Beijing Opera for fifteen weeks consecutively. Song keeps the meeting short which results in Gallimard’s intense attraction. Gallimard is then determined to experiment with his belief of the stereotype of Madame Butterfly, recalling that in Madame Butterfly “Cio-Cio San fears the Western man who catches a butterfly will pierce its heart with a needle, then leave it to perish” (p. 32). Gallimard wonders whether he has found his Butterfly.

GALLIMARD. 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 (p. 32).

On the one hand, Gallimard’s experiment strengthens his belief of the superiority of a Western man over an inferior Oriental woman. He succeeds with his experiment as Song keeps on writing letters begging him to come, finally saying that “I have given you my shame” (p. 35). His intentional refusal to meet Song and Song’s plea to meet him gradually make Gallimard perform the masculine dominant role. On the other hand, as he puts more effort in his job, he performs the best.

The plays informs that Gallimard was not a popular guy in college, and he married Helga for career and because he realized that no fantasy woman would be interested in him. The movie does not really show Gallimard in his youth, but it shows how Gallimard does not get along well with and is not respected by his colleagues in the embassy. However, his confident in having “the absolute power of a man” affects his work performance. He is rewarded with a promotion into a vice-consult. Gaining his victory, Gallimard comes to meet Song for the first time after several weeks, asking her to be his “Butterfly.” Gallimard is determined to hear Song’s submission. To assure his masculine dominant superiority, Gallimard needs Song to be the feminine, submissive, and inferior Other. Once Song submits, Gallimard never calls Song with her name; instead he calls her Butterfly. Song’s surrender and the promotion boost Gallimard’s self-confidence and his belief in the superiority of a Western man.

The notion of man being the Subject and woman the Other finds its application in the relationship between Gallimard and Song. At least from Gallimard’s point of view. He sets the standard for a perfect woman and imposes it on Song. In the play, Gallimard says, on his relationship with Song while they are in China: “She would always have prepared a light snack and then, ever so delicately, and only if I agreed, she would start to pleasure me” (p. 49). In the movie, when Song says that she has missed Gallimard after some time they have not met, Gallimard replies: “You don’t expect me to give up my career for your sake, do you?” which Song immediately answers: “Of course not. I am your slave.” Those two instances suggest that Gallimard is the Subject who decides what to do, and Song must follow. Even when Song wants to please Gallimard, it should be after he gives his consent. Gallimard also implies that because he works outside, Song has to wait for him at home and is not supposed to complain.

Both the play and the movie suggest that gender, and even sexuality, is a construct. In a scene between Song and Comrade Chin, the binary between masculinity and femininity is challenged. There is Song, whom the audience knows as a man, wearing a dress and acting feminine. Comrade Chin, the biological female, on the other hand is not wearing a dress, and
she does not act feminine. Chin complicates gender because her performance is more androgynous. Answering her own question that she addresses to Comrade Chin about why in the Peking opera women’s roles are played by men, Song says, “Only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (p. 63). Cronenberg comments:

That was the line in the script and the play that made me want to do it; the idea that female sexuality is invented by men. The idea that sexuality of each of us is an agreed-upon fantasy that we both create for each other. It’s kind of sweet in some ways and kind of scary in others, because it means in a way there’s no reality in sexuality; there is no such thing as absolute maleness or femaleness (p. 184).

Knowing Gallimard’s fantasy of an Oriental woman, Song performs her best to be one for Gallimard, acting as a modest, embarrassed, and timid woman and performing a submissive Oriental woman. Song’s performance must have been very convincing that Gallimard says, “I know she has an interest in me, I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education” (p. 27). Thus Gallimard believes that Song, in spite of her seemingly Western masculine traits in being bold and outspoken, will not be able to beat her Oriental nature.

Both the play and the movie show how Gallimard and Song perform their acts which mark their supposed genders. Gallimard performs masculine acts while Song performs feminine acts. Song’s performing a feminine gender is apparent in the movie. She dresses in cheongsam, Chinese traditional dress, most of the times. As Gallimard’s lover, Song is always portrayed occupying domestic sphere. Song is the one who serves Gallimard: pouring his tea, serving his food, and pleasing him. On the other hand, Gallimard is constantly portrayed in public sphere when he is not with Song. He enjoys his career improvement in the French embassy. He is out at the party and in a hotel having an affair while Song waits patiently at home. In the play, Gallimard’s career is skyrocketing while Song is giving up her career as an opera singer.

The play M. Butterfly destabilizes the link between gender and biological sex by presenting a Danish student character Renee. Although Gallimard keeps this extra-extra-marital affair with Renee for several months, he comments on Renee: “It is possible for a woman to be too open, so as to seem almost too masculine” (p. 54). Therefore, presumptions on gender are tied with cultural assumptions. Renee, the Western woman, is not Gallimard’s real object of desire. Gallimard confirms, “I kept up our affair...because of Butterfly ....It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee” (p. 56). Through his affair with Renee, Gallimard exercises his power over Butterfly. Gallimard assumes that Song knows his affair, but unlike a Western woman, Song just cries and keeps silent. Gallimard is attracted and falls in love with the stereotypical image of Oriental woman who is passive, submissive and obedient.

In the movie, Cronenberg replaces Renee with Frau Baden, Gallimard’s colleague. In a scene at the Great Wall of China, answering Song’s question on why he, instead of picking a Western woman, chooses “a Chinese with a chest like a boy”, Gallimard answers: “Not like a boy, like a girl, like a young, innocent school girl waiting for her lesson”. Song serves as the object for Gallimard to exercise his power. The image of “a young innocent school girl” is later contrasted with the image of a mature, naked body of Frau Baden, a middle-aged, sophisticated woman who is described by one of the intelligence officers as “built like the Forbidden City. Everyone can look, but no one gets inside.” Gallimard’s extra-extra-marital affair with Frau Baden does not give him the sense of power over a woman. Frau Baden’s cursory “come and get it” after Gallimard’s comment upon seeing her naked body signifies her experience and control. Therefore, the affair does not work. Gallimard immediately flees to Song after his sexual encounter with Frau Baden.
In the movie, not until Song asks Comrade Chin for a baby that the audience is informed of the fact that Song is a man. The play, on the other hand, informs Song’s gender identity as a man since the very beginning. However, the play also suggests the ambiguity of Song’s identity. Song is always performing. As an actor, Song performs women on stage in the Western opera Madame Butterfly and in the Chinese opera. As Gallimard’s lover, she plays a submissive oriental woman. As a spy for the Chinese government, Song impersonates a woman to help her conduct her assignment. In the courtroom, Song performs as a homosexual man in a Western suit.

There is a scene in the play that suggests that Gallimard knows Song is a man but he denies the knowledge even to himself. Gallimard asks Song to strip, but when Song has surrendered to be stripped, Gallimard stops and apologizes. Gallimard comments on the event: “Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps” (p. 60). Commenting on this scene, Karen Shimakawa (1993) says: “Song’s apparent “modesty” comports with Gallimard’s vision of the perfect Asian woman, and so maintains her as Other” (p. 350). Gallimard simply apologizes “for everything, from the start” (p. 60) and offers to love, rescue, save, and protect Song, strengthening his subject dominant and more powerful position. The play and the movie is different in that in the movie, Gallimard stops and apologizes only after Song says that she is pregnant. In the play, Gallimard stops before it.

In the movie, when Song is asked by Comrade Chin why she is always wearing a dress even when Gallimard is not around, Song replies, “I despise this costume and all the bourgeois perversion, but for the sake of the great helmsman I want to do it.” Cronenberg takes the line to mean for Song “being forced to be a homosexual and loving it, of course, and needing and wanting it and at the same time being humiliated by all those things” (Rodley, 1997, p. 176). Therefore, in the movie, Song was not a spy when he first met Gallimard; Song was flattered and excited by Gallimard being in love with her. Song is forced to become a spy to redeem her perverse (homosexual) act. Cronenberg adds a scene in which Song’s maid peeks through the window at Song and Gallimard’s lovemaking. Cronenberg says:

I wanted to suggest that she blows the whistle on Song, who is then forced to spy, or it’s a serious labor camp for being a homosexual. So she can play the political game, play for time. She is forced to do what she wants to do anyway, but now there are strings attached (Rodley, 1997, p. 185).

The play differs from the movie in that it suggests that Song is already a spy when he meets Gallimard. There is a scene between Song and Comrade Chin that suggests this.

CHIN. You’re wearing a dress. And every time I come here, you’re wearing a dress. Is that because you are an actor? Or what?
SONG. It’s a disguise, Miss Chin.
CHIN. Actors, I think they’re all weirdos. My mother tells me actors are like gamblers or prostitutes or –
SONG. It helps me in my assignment (p. 48)

In the play, Song performs a woman, which is supposed to be forbidden, to conduct the espionage. Chin warns Song, “Don’t forget: there is no homosexuality in China” (p. 48), but Song violates the party’s notion of homosexuality that later results in her being punished by the Chinese government. In both the play and the movie, Song performs her gender and makes Gallimard believes that he is a woman. Song exhibits the proper signs needed to be not only a woman but also an Oriental one.

That the audience never sees Song’s penis strengthens Song’s ambiguous identity. In the movie, Cronenberg invents the scene at a paddy wagon that takes Gallimard to prison and Song to the airport after the espionage trial. Song strips in front of Gallimard, but the audience only sees Song’s naked body, not the penis. Cronenberg argues, “Nakedness, not
the cock, is important in our scene because Song says, ‘Feel this skin, it’s still the same skin.’ In a way, it’s his purpose not to show how different he is from the Song that was imagined, i.e. the woman, but to show how much the same he is” (Rodley, 1997, p. 183). By having Gallimard see Song’s penis just in an instant, Cronenberg maintains the ambivalent signs of both genders: Song with masculine look but feminine voice.

Cronenberg’s movie emphasizes more the relationship between Gallimard and Song. Cronenberg says that the first draft of the screenplay has a subplot about Americans in Vietnam and scenes of bomb falling in Vietnam. He told Hwang that he was not interested in that because: “It’s about these two people and what goes on with them” (Rodley, 1997, p. 173). That Cronenberg is not interested in the political subject in the play results, for example, in the difference of the French court scene in the play and the movie. In the play, Song makes a lengthy speech about “a Western rape mentality toward the East” telling the judge and the audience: “You expect Oriental Countries to submit to your guns, and you expect Oriental woman to be submissive to your men” (p. 83). Song goes on explaining that Gallimard was fooled because he believed that he had found his fantasy woman in Song who acted as a submissive Oriental woman. Therefore, without asking any question, Gallimard would do anything for Song, including photographing sensitive documents which Song then passed on to the Chinese government. Song suggests that Gallimard might not understand the extent of his activity. That Song needed the document was enough reason for Gallimard. The movie omits Song’s political theory about the East and the West. Representing Cronenberg’s emphasis on the story of the couple, Song says that Gallimard knew that the documents that he gave to Song were passed on to the Chinese government. Gallimard did that because Song said that they had to do it so that the Chinese government, which kept their son, would let them to see him. Song says: “In his small way, Rene was the perfect father,” a sentence which is not in the play.

The relationship between Gallimard and Song may be said as representing the relationship between the West and the East in which the West considers the East as the inferior Other. The notion of gender intertwines with that of Orientalism in the play. Gallimard’s vision of an Oriental woman is, “Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man” (p. 92). Song, talking in the court as a man, says: “Being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man” (p. 83). Believing in his power over an Oriental woman, Gallimard is confident in telling Ambassador Toulon that: “there is a natural affinity between the West and the Orient” and that “Orientals will always submit to a greater force” (p. 46). This discourse of Orientalism affects the Western men in the play and movie in conducting their actions, and is used by Song to manipulate them. Song explains to the judge and everybody in the French court:

The West has a sort of an international rape mentality towards the East. . . . The West thinks of himself 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.

Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated – because a woman can’t think of herself (p. 83). Song makes it clear how the twenty-year affair is possible without Gallimard finding out his true male identity. On the one hand, Song says that Gallimard, representing the West with his “rape mentality toward the East,” has fooled himself in his belief of having power over an Oriental woman. On the other hand, Song helps to make it happen by performing as an Oriental woman.

In the play, associating his relationship with Song, Gallimard assures Toulon that the Chinese: “Deep down, they miss the old days. You know, cappuccinos, men in Tuxedos —” (p. 45) suggesting that the Chinese does not like communism and prefers Western ways.
Toulon naively associates having an Oriental mistress with having better knowledge about the Orientals. Therefore, Toulon believes Gallimard about the Vietnamese who will submit to the Americans as long as the Americans show their will to power. Their belief turns out to be wrong.

GALLIMARD. And somehow the American war went wrong too. Four hundred thousands dollars were being spent for every Viet Cong killed; so General Westmoreland’s remark that the Oriental does not value life the way Americans do was oddly accurate. Why weren’t the Vietnamese people giving in? Why were they content instead to die and die and die again? (p, 68).

Toulon also points out that Gallimard is wrong thinking that China is ready to open to Western trade. Gallimard and Toulon believe in the opposition between the West and the East, representing a discourse of Orientalism which puts the West in a superior position towards the East. M. Butterfly deconstructs the opposition by showing that what those Western men believe turns out to be wrong. The Orientals; the Chinese and Vietnamese are not submissive at all. Both the play and the movie show the consequence of Gallimard’s mistaken analysis.

While Hwang emphasizes the play as “a deconstructivist Madame Butterfly,” Cronenberg has his own opinion when he directs the movie. He believes that the idea of transformation is everywhere in M. Butterfly and emphasizes the desire and capacity for physical and mental transformation in the relationship between Gallimard and Song. Therefore, he adds the scene with a dragonfly. A dragonfly’s life cycle involves transformation from aquatic larva into adult dragonfly. He says, “M. Butterfly for me is about transformation; that’s what attracted me to it. There must be this transformation into a man, and you can’t get it if you get someone that is such a perfect woman that you can’t transform them” (Rodley, 1997, p. 180). For that reason, Cronenberg does not want to cast a woman or a transvestite for the character Song. Cronenberg wants the audience to see Song transforms from a woman into a man. Cronenberg also does not want to present Gallimard as just a total sexual nerd and inept, for which the audience would believe that he might be fooled. On the other hand, he casts Jeremy Iron because, “I wanted Jeremy precisely because you’d feel that it was a willed suspension of disbelief. He’s not fooled. He wants to be fooled” (Rodley, 1997, p. 186).

On Gallimard’s transformation, from a man to finally become a woman in the end of the movie, Cronenberg asserts that Gallimard is unconsciously responding to the idea of transformation:

He is transforming himself, into what we don’t know. It’s the idea that reality is created by human beings, that there is really no other kind of reality for us. Rene is creating a reality for himself and, for her own reasons, Song is helping him. ... Gallimard is in the process of (unknown to him) of creating his own opera. He is creating the opera of his life, preparing to become a diva of it (Rodley, 1997, p. 174).

Gallimard physically and mentally transforms himself into Madame Butterfly. Finding out that Song is a man, Gallimard says that Song is “a perfect lie,” “a woman created by a man.” In his Freudian reading, Leighton Grist (2003) says:

However, it is a lie that clarifying reflects back on the truth denied by his preceding disavowals and hubrisic phallocentrism: that Song is a man and that Gallimard whose overconfident Orientalism has been encouraged and exploited by the Chinese; that, in fact, like Cio-Cio San in Madame Butterfly, he has sacrifice everything “for the love of a man” (p. 23).
It is indeed Gallimard who sacrifices his marriage, his job, and his life for Song. He calls 
Song as Butterfly, and the fact is he is the Butterfly.

At the end of the play, in his prison cell, Gallimard puts on a kimono and commits 
suicide claiming: “My name is Rene Gallimard – also known as Madame Butterfly” (p. 93).
In the movie, Gallimard performs the opera of Madame Butterfly in front of other prisoners 
and prison guards. Saying the same last sentence, he slits her throat with a mirror that he uses 
to put on his make up as Madame Butterfly. Why Gallimard has to commit suicide as being 
Butterfly? According to Teresa de Lauretis:

Butterfly sustains Western man’s desire, his capacity to disavow, his narcissistic 
self-absorption: ‘I’m a man who loved a woman created by a man. Anything 
simply falls short.’ Paradoxically, Rene [Gallimard] must die Butterfly’s death 
so that his desire may live in the consummation of the fantasy, as eros, the 
vital principle, only ever delays in the inexorable movement toward death (p. 
324).

Gallimard rejects Song’s offer to continue their relationship with Song being a man, because 
knowing the difference between reality and fantasy, Gallimard chooses fantasy.

In the very last scene of the play, Song is standing as a man, smoking cigarette and 
staring at the dead Gallimard, uttering: “Butterfly? Butterfly?” (p. 93). Although Song 
appears to take pride over her successful deception and Gallimard’s uninhibited willingness 
to believe the said deceit, he probably feels what Pinkerton feels when losing his Butterfly. In 
the movie, after her identity is revealed, Song appears to be sad and apologetic, especially in 
the scene where he is sitting in a plane that will take him back to China. In spite of the 
different ending between the movie and the play, both maintain the ambiguity of gender.

Conclusion

Puccini’s Madame Butterfly presents normative gender through the relationship 
between Pinkerton and Cio-cio San/Butterfly. It can also be said as representing the discourse 
of orientalism in that the fascinating yet submissive oriental woman is being ill-treated by the 
superior Western man. Using the stereotype of Madame Butterfly, Hwang reversed the 
relations between the East and the West by having the Western man commit suicide at the 
end of his play, M. Butterfly. The play also mocks Western’s sense of superiority over the 
East by showing Gallimard’s mistakes in judging his personal relationship with Song and the 
political relationship between the Americans/the West with the Vietnamese/the East. 
Cronenberg’s movie M. Butterfly intentionally ignores the political subject and focuses on the 
relationships between Gallimard and Song in which Gallimard transforms himself into 
Madame Butterfly. The notion of the submissive Orient and the dominant Western is 
reinforced in Puccini’s Madame Butterfly, while both Hwang’s M Butterfly and Cronenberg’s 
M Butterfly challenge the binary opposition between the West and the East by having the East 
manipulate the Western rape mentality towards the East. The play and the movie also 
destabilize the link between biological sex and gender and maintain the ambiguity of gender.

Bibliography


