

# Historicity of Texts: An Analysis of *M. Butterfly* from the Perspective of New Historicism

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**Abstract**—This paper looks into famous playwright David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* with New Historicism, building concrete links between the play and the real-world historical contexts from which it emerged. It works through textual close reading of the play's dialogues and key scenes to uncover hidden meanings within the text. According to Louis Montrose's concept of "the historicity of texts", the study focuses on how the play's treatments of cultural stereotype, gender roles, and political events is influenced by the complex historical conditions of the 1980s. It further discusses how the play takes an active part in the major intellectual movements at that time. By analyzing content and plot in the play, we can better understand that literary text absorbs impacts from its historical moment, and it also brings new perspectives that feed into ongoing historical construction. This paper argues that *M. Butterfly* offers a clear example of how a text is both shaped by and participating in history.

**Keywords**—*M. Butterfly*, historicity of texts, New Historicism

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most prominent and groundbreaking works in Asian American literature, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* has attracted sustained academic and public attention since its Broadway premiere in 1988. Adapted from the well-documented real espionage case of French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and Chinese opera singer Shi Peipu, *M. Butterfly* is widely regarded as a critical response to Giacomo Puccini's famous classical opera *Madame Butterfly*. David Henry Hwang reverses the narrative by having the western man instead of the eastern woman die for love. The play tells the story of René Gallimard, a French diplomat in Beijing during the Cold War who falls in love with Song Liling, a Chinese opera singer he believes to be his own butterfly. After twenty years, he discovers desperately that Song, the person he adores wholeheartedly and spends time together with, is a man biologically. What's worse, he is a spy of Chinese government. In the end, Gallimard commits suicide dressed as the character Madame Butterfly in the prison cell in front of other prisoners.

## II. LITERARY REVIEW

Existing studies concerning David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* draw from a wide range of angles, including Postcolonial thought, Orientalist critique, Feminist reading and Deconstructive analysis.

In China, scholars tend to anchor their analysis in comparative textual dialogue between this contemporary drama and Puccini's century-old opera *Madame Butterfly*. For example, Ding Wenli's research shows how Hwang breaks the biased romantic myth carried by the original opera, targeting the long-lasting Orientalist stereotypes accepted by

Western audiences without reflection [1]. Moving from cultural critique to gender discourse, Pan Yali turns to Feminist frameworks to find out unequal power dynamics hidden beneath the play's plot, and sorts out the patriarchal logic that shapes the fate of every character [2].

International criticism shifts its focus toward theatrical presentation and the complexity of racial identity on stage. Dorinne Kondo challenges Essentialist categorization in her research. He pointed out how the play breaks fixed labels forced upon Asian people in Western discourse [3]. Karen Shimakawa, meanwhile, concentrates on Broadway's unique performance context, which helps to explore how race and ethnicity are staged and interpreted by Western viewers [4]. More recently, Zhang Xin and He Shumin have paid their attention to narrative craft, investigating the writing techniques Hwang uses to subvert the classic tragic structure of love story [5].

These perspectives are often treated separately. Though some studies mention the political events such as the Vietnam War, they are seen as background information that could not shape the play's narrative structure or plot development. The study thus remains limited in an Old Historicist framework that treats history as the stable background against which literary texts are read and argues that texts simply mirror their historical contexts [6].

Against such research limitations, New Historicism supplies a workable critical alternative through focusing on the interaction between text and history. Theoretically, this paper wishes to enrich the further interpretation of *M. Butterfly*, and to promote the studies of Asian American Literature. From practical significance, the analysis can help us to learn the views on China held by overseas Chinese and provide an opportunity to reflect ourselves at the same time [7].

To fill the research gap mentioned above, this paper adopts Louis Montrose's concept of "the historicity of texts". The term refers to "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing --- not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them" [8]. The idea allows the analysis to move beyond the old mindset of treating history as mere background. Instead, it supports the discussion of how the play both reflects and participates in the historical discourses of its time.

It also uses the literary method of textual close reading. And particular attention is paid to key scenes that reveal the relation to historical contexts, such as the conversations about the opera *Madame Butterfly* and the failure of military plans. Research literatures and data needed will be collected from influential online platforms, including Google Scholar, China National Knowledge Infrastructure Database (CNKI),

Web of Science and so on.

### III. BREAK DOWN OF THE ORIENTAL FANTASY

The cultural perspective of *M. Butterfly* reveals how the play is embedded in the historical discourse of western perceptions of the East. Edward Said defines the term “Orientalism” as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [9]. It is used to justify western dominance over eastern societies by presenting them as different, and even inferior. The image of the Orient as exotic, mysterious, and passive mirrors a fantasy that connects intimately to imperial and colonial sensibilities throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [10]. In the 1980s, postcolonial critiques has gained wide recognition, setting up the foundation for *M. Butterfly* to challenge the cliché.

What is unique is that the play also exposes the hidden principle of Orientalist thought. Firstly, Hwang discusses Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* in the play. Its story of a young Japanese geisha Cio-Cio-San who kills herself for the love of an American naval officer Pinkerton is widely regarded as a tragic masterpiece. For most western audiences, the heroine’s devotion and sacrifice are beautiful and moving. However, the play *M. Butterfly* challenges the idea from the very first face-to-face encounter between the two protagonists. When Gallimard praises Song’s performance of *Madame Butterfly*, she immediately questions his assumptions:

Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner --- ah! you find it beautiful. [11]

The exchange conveys the double standard at the heart of the *Madame Butterfly* narrative that the same story critiqued as pathetic if it involved a western woman becomes a beautiful tragedy when it involves an eastern woman. Hwang exposes the arbitrariness of the distinction, and forces the audience to realize that it is not a universal story of tragic love but a specific fantasy only works when the roles are assigned according to western expectations.

His criticism of Orientalism is most explicitly expressed in the protagonist Song Liling’s testimony at the French court as a powerful evidence. Song, who has successfully deceived Gallimard for over twenty years by performing the role of a submissive Chinese woman, explains to the judge the logic that made his deception possible in the play:

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. 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 for herself. [11]

This passage exposes the underlying logic of Orientalism that the West uses to justify its dominance over eastern societies. It also enables Gallimard’s persistent romantic fantasy to firmly believe for over twenty years that Song was

naturally obedient and innocent to some extents. Gallimard refuses to break this self-satisfying fantasy, even when subtle contradictory clues appear several times in their daily interactions.

But Hwang’s critique of Orientalism is itself historically conditioned. As a Chinese American playwright, he grew up and studied in the United States, so his understanding of Chinese culture is largely mediated by Western representations. It also creates boundaries for him, and limits his ability to fully deconstruct the Orientalist fantasy. While he attempts to destroy the *Butterfly* stereotype, he still ends up strengthening other stereotypes. Hwang himself admits, “it is impossible to be completely outside one’s culture” [11].

By placing these words in the mouth of an eastern character who takes advantage of Orientalism, Hwang demonstrates that cultural identities are products of history. The play attracted widespread attention and sparked critical debate after its Broadway premiere in 1988. Positive reviews recognized it as a work that broke down the long-held Orientalist misreadings of the East and deconstructed the myth of *Madame Butterfly*, allowing the audience to hear the voice of the Asian *Butterfly* themselves [12]. It holds weight within postcolonial criticism and Asian American literary studies, and fuels the intellectual movement in the twentieth century.

### IV. GENDER PERFORMANCE AND DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES

If western cultural thought paints the East as feminine, Hwang’s treatment of gender analyzes it one step further. The letter “M” in the title is able to stand for both “Madame” and “Monsieur”, leaving the audiences uncertain whether the play is about a *Madame Butterfly* or a *Monsieur Butterfly* [12]. This intentional ambiguity breaks the fixed gender identity of the social convention, and prepares the audience for a story with shifting gender presentations.

To better understand it, it is necessary to first look at the gendered narrative that Hwang seeks to reverse. In Puccini’s opera, the female protagonist dies for the love of a man who left her behind. The name “Butterfly” also comes from her falling image. Her wide sleeves flutter much like a beautiful butterfly hitting the ground. In this way, her death turns into something poetic and beautiful, making it easier for the audience to overlook how cruel the love story really is. It also assumes that women are naturally more emotional, more faithful, and more willing to sacrifice themselves for love. Men, by contrast, are those who leave and move on easily. Such gender roles were largely taken for granted in the early 1900s, which made the story of a woman dying for love seemed reasonable and appropriate.

By the 1980s, however, popular thinking questioned these old assumptions. Instead of stemming from innate biological facts, Second-wave feminism argued that gender roles are social constructions. It provides the historical conditions for *M. Butterfly* to imagine a different ending. Judith Butler’s theory of “gender performativity” also offers a useful way for analyzing it. According to Butler, gender is produced through repeated acts, gestures, and performances. She describes that gender is “a stylized repetition of acts” that builds the false scene of a fixed personal identity [13].

It is obvious that Song’s character just embodies this

insight. He understands the cultural script of femininity and follows it perfectly, dressing in what is considered women's clothing, speaking with modesty, and moving with delicacy. And he performs femininity so convincingly that Gallimard never questions his womanhood for about twenty years. Just as he explains, "Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" [11]. This concise line directly exposes that so-called femininity is not an innate natural quality exclusive to biological women but a complete set of standardized learned social behaviors that can be skillfully performed by anyone who fully understands Western cultural implicit rules. In consequence, Song's long-term success as a confidential intelligence spy entirely depends on his flawless ability to perform idealized femininity recognized by Gallimard. Honestly speaking, Song does not need to possess female biological characteristics at all to win Gallimard's trust; he only needs to precisely imitate the delicate and modest female image shaped by Western Orientalist imagination. Every gentle gesture, soft tone and humble wording he presents is a carefully rehearsed performance rather than his true personal temperament. This setting proves Butler's performativity theory from concrete dramatic plot. Gender identity never exists in advance, but is continuously created through repeated deliberate behaviors.

Moreover, The play's most radical reversal occurs in its final scene. Having discovered that Song is a man, Gallimard dresses in a kimono, applies geisha makeup, and commits suicide in the prison cell. He announces, "My name is René Gallimard, also known as Madame Butterfly" [11]. In this moment, the suicide victim shifts from female to male, from the object of a fantasy to its subject. Gallimard becomes what he once desired, completing the circuit of gender performance.

Therefore, the dramatic innovation inside *M. Butterfly* considerably enriches and promotes the depth of second-wave feminist ideological movement rising in the middle and late twentieth century. Against the social background of widespread reflection on patriarchal norms in the 1980s, this play openly challenged long-standing rigid traditional gender stereotypes deeply rooted in public cognition and made ordinary theater audiences begin to doubt the so-called natural and unchangeable attribute of preset gender roles. The whole plot fully reveals that individual gender identity is never fixed and innate, but can be freely subverted, reshaped and reconstructed according to different social performance demands. It also fundamentally challenges the binary opposition mode simply dividing all human beings into male and female, and encourages every audience member to abandon inherent biased judgment and rethink the complex, diverse essential connotation of gender identity beyond simple binary classification.

#### V. POLITICAL ARROGANCE BEHIND WAR AND COLD WAR

Beyond the above two perspectives, the political perspective of *M. Butterfly* helps to analyze the play considering the historical conditions of the war. The story is set in Beijing during the 1960s, a period in which France had recently lost its colonies in Indochina and the United States was preparing to intervene in Vietnam. Gallimard is a French diplomat stationed in China, and Song is a spy for the Chinese government to extract information about military

plans. Without this context, the story would not exist.

The tense Cold War political atmosphere between socialist Eastern bloc and capitalist Western bloc is also fully reflected in every character's interaction inside the play. It is set in the 1960s, a long period of constant intense diplomatic and military tension between the East and West. The play vividly shows how Cold War political opposition penetrates every corner of ordinary personal life. Pure personal emotions such as romantic love, mutual trust and intimate companionship are all inevitably suppressed and compromised by unshakable political loyalty and national intelligence missions. It thus reveals the shocking extent to which fragile individual emotional relationships can be subtly shaped, controlled and even completely destroyed by invisible large-scale international political forces. Gallimard's obsessive belief that he has finally met his ideal Oriental Butterfly completely blinds his rational judgment, making him unable to realize the simple fact that he has long been used as a stable source of Western diplomatic intelligence by Song for national intelligence work.

After Song's identity is uncovered, Gallimard with him shares a final conversation in a prison transport vehicle. Song asks Gallimard, "So you never really loved me? Only when I was playing a part?" [11]. The question suggests that even the professional spy Song may be uncertain about the boundary between his performance and true feeling. Then, Gallimard's reply "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man. Everything else simply falls short" reveals that he never saw Song as a real person, only as his fantasy [11]. The dialogue shows the devastating damage that Cold War politics presses on personal relationships. Even if their feelings are real, they are trapped in a political structure that made genuine intimacy impossible.

Besides, the play connects with the Vietnam War through Gallimard's diplomatic work. As a French official in China, Gallimard is asked to assess how the Chinese would react to American military action in Vietnam. He also holds the opinion that the Vietnamese, like the Chinese, will accept western domination because they desire strength and power. Just like what is mentioned before: because of his Orientalist assumptions, he confidently argues that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force" [11]; because of his patriarchal assumptions, he firmly believes that "Their women fear us" [11].

However, Gallimard's predictions are proved to be wrong. The Vietnamese do not submit, but the Americans fail to win the war. As he later reflects, "the American war went wrong too... Why weren't the Vietnamese people giving in?" [11]. Besides, the "eastern woman" Song do not die for love, but the western man Gallimard himself commits suicide in the prison cell. The parallel between his fate from confidence to humiliation and the American experience in Vietnam is striking [14].

The United States, just like the arrogant French diplomat Gallimard, stepped into the Vietnam military conflict. They don't only carry strong racial superiority and blind political arrogance, but also firmly believe that their advanced military power and dominant cultural discourse would guarantee rapid victory and permanent regional dominance over all Asian countries. But both of them were gradually dragged into a complicated regional situation they could

neither predict nor fully control, and finally sank into complete failure and lasting national personal shame. Gallimard's desperate final suicide in the prison cell is meaningful. He takes on the costume and tragic fate of Butterfly that he once imposed on Eastern figures, actually forming a powerful textual echo with the humiliating historical failure of Western military intervention in Asia represented by the Vietnam War. Personal tragedy and national diplomatic defeat originate from the same core flaw of Orientalist prejudice and blind faith in Western hegemonic power. This parallel design makes the play's political critique far more concrete and persuasive than abstract academic argument.

It thus fully demonstrates that literary creative texts can never exist independently separated from real international political trends and historical events. Every plot arrangement and character tragic fate inside the play is deeply shaped by the unique political historical conditions of the late twentieth century, and at the same time actively responds to widespread public reflection on Western intervention in Asia prevailing in that era. It fulfills the mutual interactive relationship emphasized by New Historicism between text and history.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay has examined David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* through Louis Montrose's concept of "the historicity of texts". It exposes how the West constructs the East as obedient in order to justify its hegemony, reverses the patriarchal tradition, and shows the arrogance behind the military plans of controlling Asia. Through this process, the play reflects its historical conditions and also participates in the cultural, gender and political movements in the twentieth century.

While this paper discusses the political dimension of the play around Vietnam War and Cold War espionage lines, it mainly concentrates on overseas military conflicts and diplomatic tension, without carrying out a more detailed multi-angle examination of domestic social changes including the Cultural Revolution due to limited access to complete first-hand Chinese historical materials. In addition, the whole theoretical framework of this study remains largely situated within mature Western critical discourse

systems including Post-colonialism and Gender performativity, which may not fully capture the unique cultural specificity and local historical context of China reflected in the script. Finally, the current textual analysis only centers on three fixed perspectives of culture, gender, and politics, lacking discussion and interpretation from other valuable possible critical approaches such as queer theory, which leaves room for further follow-up research expansion.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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