M. Butterfly: A Love Story?

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Professor Leslie Bow
Misha O'Keeffe
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Introduction:

"What is love?
Baby, don't hurt me
Don't hurt me, no more"
-Haddaway

As I read the story of M. Butterfly, Haddaway's hit song "What is Love" - which questions the concept of love as defined for and by individuals and the collective - echoed in my head, a fitting backing for the sequence of events that unfolded before me. M. Butterfly, based on a true story, opens (and closes) to Rene Gallimard, a French prisoner, and self-described "celebrity" (Hwang 2), who served time for treason towards the end of the 20th century. From his prison cell, Rene recounts the past 30 years of his life through a series of flashbacks which serve as the scaffolding for the story.

In the most literal reading of the story, Rene recounts his 20-year affair with a Beijing Opera actor, Song Liling, while serving as the French diplomat in China during the Vietnam war. Through careful exploitation of Gallimard's Orientalist fantasies, Gallimard becomes "convinced" that Song is his "butterfly": a delicate and feminine ideal, reflecting Gallimard's fantasy power dynamic of men (the West) and women (the East). Though many issues manifest themselves in this story, the one I will be focusing on in this paper is whether this is a love story, and if so, what this means for love as a concept. Importantly, I will also explain how the view of Song and Rene being motivated by love manages to avoid subverting the play's critique of Orientalism.

Constructing a Fantasy

I hesitate to even say "Constructing a Fantasy" as this implies that our fantasies are a blank canvas with nothing already there to begin with. Whereas, in reality, I believe fantasies are multi-faceted, comprising both of individual imagination and an existing socially constructed narrative. The existence of this pre-established narrative is especially evident within the cultural divide between Song, representing the East, and Rene, representing the West. This division creates a space fueling the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. Through these stereotypes, Rene and Song construct their perceptions of each other and the love they share, a phenomenon known as racial fetishization. In this sense, they only see each other through the lens of preconceived notions and expectations, all shaped by cultural stereotypes, a binary world with little room for nuance and individuality. They become mere shelled embodiments of the roles they are expected to play for each other and for themselves.

One example where this becomes apparent is in the Peking Opera with Puccini's "M. Butterfly." Within the Opera, the line between illusion and reality is consistently blurred, thanks to the hyperbolic artificiality of the performances. Song, a character who adeptly constructs their identity as a woman while on the stage, gradually begins to carry this same persona off the stage and into the real world. As Song extends this character beyond the stage, it becomes increasingly evident that the narrative they construct about themselves is as illusory as the Opera itself. Their perceptions are purely artificial, shaped by the roles they've been assigned, and yet they willingly love their embodiments of these roles, both their own and each other's. This begs the question: in love, do we ever truly see each other for who we are? Do we even perceive *ourselves* accurately? So much of our identities are shaped by factors beyond our control. Considering that everyone assumes a certain fantasy role in their own self-presentation, love will inevitably mirror this

constructed version to some extent, so who are we to draw the boundaries of where love exists and where it doesn't. Regardless of how deeply they engage with the illusion, whether in their self-presentation or in their perceptions of each other, Rene and Gallimard find their love in the characters they portray, both of themselves and of each other. This, ultimately, encapsulates the very essence of love. Love is not contingent upon uncovering some absolute, unfiltered, unadulterated, and unconstructed truth of concept about one another. Rather, we exist within a world confined by perceptions and stereotypes, where the opera *is* the world. Even in this world of constructs, of fantasy, and of opera, love persists. Regardless of whether Song manipulates Rene or the other way around, regardless of whether it's intentional or not, Gallimard and Song are in love. In various scenes throughout the play, this "reality" becomes apparent. From the moment the play opens, the audience comes to learn of Song when Gallimard introduces the dynamic as "[having] known, and been loved by…the Perfect Woman" (Hwang 5), a quote repeated once again later (Hwang 77). By the time the play ends, Gallimard remains adamant that "love warped [his] judgment" (Hwang 92). Gallimard's insight is indeed accurate; love has a way of distorting our perceptions and obscuring our understanding, both of ourselves and of one another. Paradoxically, it's precisely these distortions that serve as evidence that love exists in the first place.

Deconstructing, and Reconstructing, Individual Fantasy

In the second half of "M. Butterfly," the theme of fantasy love takes on a nuanced transformation within Gallimard. Although fantasy as a whole never entirely dissipates, we see Gallimard deconstruct and later reconstruct his personal fantasies. The pivotal moment in this transformation occurs when the reality of Song's true sex is thrust upon Gallimard. Gallimard, who had been living a fantasy over Song's portrayal as a delicate and submissive woman, must grapple with the disintegration of his love for Song. In this moment, Gallimard comes to the realization that his love fantasies do not exclusively hinge on Song alone. Song has only been the canvas upon which Gallimard paints his *own* fantasy. This realization leads Gallimard to conclude that he possesses the agency to bring his own "Butterfly" to life. While he has always seen himself as Pinkerton, as the story unfolds, he recognizes that his experiences of love and fantasy have been from the perspective of the butterfly itself. With this newfound self-awareness, Gallimard metamorphoses into both the Western man and the butterfly, embodying both the piercer of the needle and the pierced, despite the inherent agony this revelation brings. As Gallimard accepts this reality, he dons the butterfly wig and kimono, in seppuku position, and tells himself and the audience "My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly" (Hwang 93), and with that, like the butterfly, he writhes to death with the "needle" piercing his heart--in love with himself and his fantasies, but in love, nonetheless. Although we see Gallimard come to play both these roles, a facet of his personal fantasies that Gallimard never truly embodies is the masculine ideal, personified by his friend Marc. No matter how diligently he endeavors to emulate the archetype of a man who confidently expresses his desires to a woman, he only falls short of this image (Hwang, Act 1, Scene V). Gallimard's capacities and lived reality do not align with the idealized self-image he has constructed. This incongruity raises

the question: What does this ideal of masculinity truly represent beyond being a mental construct for many young men? It's a complex concept, not only shaping how Rene Gallimard perceives himself but also influencing his aspirations. Is Gallimard's love rooted in the power over women associated with this role, or does he find himself infatuated with the role itself and the men who embody it, perhaps a subconscious yearning for the men in his life? The story leaves us with these questions rather than providing clear-cut answers. Nonetheless, the presence of love is unmistakable. What remains less evident is the true object of Gallimard's affection. Interestingly, Song fulfills both desires, leaving us with these lingering questions because we cannot rule out either possibility. It's plausible that Gallimard consciously loves Song as a man, or he may cherish the perceived power he holds over Song. Either way, I believe he's in love with Song nonetheless. Remarkably, Hwang's narrative suggests that we create fantasy versions of ourselves, loving not only these constructed personas but also others through them, even though these fantasies may not necessarily align with reality. Yet perhaps that's precisely what fantasy represents in the end.

Conclusion

The story of Rene Gallimard and Song Liling challenges our preconceived notions of love and highlights the power of personal narratives and cultural stereotypes in shaping our perceptions. Love is a complex interplay of fantasy and reality, one that goes beyond the "what" and delves into the profound "why" of our connections with one another. What does this mean for us? Well, we're compelled to ask, "What is love? Baby, don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more," echoing Haddaway's poignant lyrics. The narrative of Rene Gallimard and Song Liling takes us on a journey that leads us full circle, much like the cyclical refrain of the song. Gallimard's tumultuous path, from the euphoria of love to the agony of revelation, mirrors the butterfly's delicate existence on the needle's edge. Just as Haddaway's plea is a cry to be spared from pain, Gallimard's transformation into Madame Butterfly, embodying both the piercer and the pierced, represents his release from the torment (or love?) of his own illusions. In the end, Gallimard's final act of self-identification is his liberation. As he declares, "My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly," he embraces both roles he had constructed, transcending the boundaries of his self-perception and cultural stereotypes. The pain that once plagued his existence dissipates with the final curtain fall, much like the refrain "don't hurt me no more."

Professor Bow's comments:

Wow. I'd say that is one of the sharpest papers that I've received on this play. I see that you took the binary suggested in the prompt and laid it to waste. I absolutely agree that self-love is, in fact, love. And you have made the point about occupying the gendered positionalities that accrue to sadism and masochism with virtuosity. One point off for not tackling the racial aspects of the play more head-on. But that's splitting hairs. I see that you have a talent for understanding the politics underlying philosophies of the self. Have you considered the English major???? You also have a very sophisticated style here which stands you in good stead: your voice is complicated but engaging. Nice work.