



THE REPRESENTATION OF THE “ORIENT” IN DAVID HENRY HWANG’S *M. BUTTERFLY*

SHUCHI GUPTA

Ph. D. Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern European Languages

University of Lucknow

(UP) INDIA.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the representation of an “orient” in David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly. In this drama, gender, racial and imperial discourses intersect and Hwang has been successful in deconstructing these traditional discourses and exposing the fictitiousness of stereotypical image of an orient harboured by the ‘West’. The drama employs postmodernist aesthetics and brilliant theatrical techniques to foreground the deconstruction of traditional representations that follow. Traditionally ‘East’ has always been misrepresented by the west. This misrepresentation is the result of an essentialist view based upon gender and racial discourses. The play also shows how national entity narratives are internalized and adapted in the construction of the individual subject.

Key Words: Orientalism, Race, Gender, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

David Henry Hwang is an American playwright and screen writer. Born on 11 August, 1957 to Chinese American parents, his early plays concerned the role of the Chinese-American and Asian- American in the modern day world. The identity issues that haunt the immigrants and their children have been explored by Hwang in a series of plays. These identity issues arise due to the conflict between ethnic value system which they are obliged to preserve as their authentic identity and the new value system which they are obliged to harmonize with in order to start a new life. The conflict becomes more complicated when it concerns the people of Asian descent because it is placed at the intersection of racism and imperialism. It can be articulated better as an oriental perspective of an occident towards an orient. The drama *M. Butterfly* puts the representation of an orient from the occidental perspective and places it at the intersection of race, gender and culture. This phenomenon has been theorized by Edward Said in his seminal work “*Orientalism*” (1978). In this work Said has deconstructed the European tradition of “Orientalism”, which is a particular and longstanding way of identifying the “East” as “Other” and inferior to the “West” (Barry 185). This biased interpretation has been the topic of concern in mainstream post-colonial writings.

SHUCHI GUPTA

1Page



The prejudiced outlook of Eurocentric ideology has racial underpinnings too. While European values were embodied into the personality of White Anglo Saxon Protestant, the rest of the races were looked down upon and were evaluated accordingly. There was a trend of universalizing racial parameters for assessment of human intellect and degree of civilization like Hippolyte Taine posited “race, moment and milieu” as the foundational criteria for analyzing any work of art. Race in these usages pretends to be an objective term of classification, when it is in fact a trope. Though it is a fiction it has been accorded the sanction of God, biology or the natural order (Habib 754).

The prevalence of racial prejudices added to the misrepresentation of the east. It cultivated a homogenizing attitude of ‘West’ towards ‘East’ which saw the people of the ‘East’ as a lump of anonymous masses instead of individuals. And further through “epistemic violence”, as Foucault says, distorted the identity of the East. Theorists like Aijaz Ahmad have objected to the blind homogenization of third world countries by the west. Similar objection has been put forward by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” where she brings to light the tendency of western feminist scholarship of creating a stereotype identity of third world woman.

This unexplained authorization of knowledge about the East by the West is aptly explained by Michel Foucault’s concept of “power and knowledge”. Foucault argues that knowledge is not entirely a pure search after “truth”, in fact power operates in that processing of information which results in something being labeled as a ‘fact’ (Mills 72). The ‘episteme’ governed by the one in authority is most likely to produce knowledge based on selective addition and exclusions leading to the consequent disprivileging of the “Other”. Thus Westners in the colonial period imposed systems of classification on the colonized countries which they proposed as global objective systems of knowledge, but which were, in fact, formulated from a western perspective with western interests at their core (Mills 72). Also it is closely related to what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the “effects of public fantasies on individual lives” (Lauretis 308), that is how national entity narratives are internalized and adapted in the construction of the individual subject. It is by this process that the subject is linked to a particular geographical location. This association of an identity to a geographical location has also been deconstructed by Hwang.

David Henry Hwang’s M.Butterfly is a sort of dramatization of Orientalism. The plot is inspired by a real life story of a French diplomat, Bernard Boursicot who is convicted for espionage. He passed secret documents to his lover Shi Pe Pu a, Chinese opera singer. This case took surprising turns when it was revealed that the opera singer whom Boursicot thought was a female and had an affair for twenty years turned out to be a male in drag. In Hwang’s play the French diplomat is called Rene Gallimard and the Chinese opera singer is Song Liling. The action of the play takes place in a Paris prison in the present, where Rene Gallimard awaits trial and sentence for espionage. In the after word to M. Butterfly Hwang



wonders “what was he getting in this Chinese actress? And his answer is “He probably thought he had found Madam Butterfly” or as Hwang explains, the “submissive oriental number.” This real life incident has been juxtaposed with Giacomo Puccini’s opera which narrates the story of a Japanese woman who is impregnated and later deserted by an American naval officer Pinkerton. She commits suicide on realizing that he will never come back. The opera premiered in the Scala of Milan on 17 February 1904. Its most direct source, however, is a one-act play performed at London’s Duke of York theatre in 1900. The tragic story of a young Japanese woman who dies for the unrequited love of a Euro-American man formed part by that time of the West’s fantasy about Asian women. In fact, the first literary precedence of the Madame Butterfly dates from 1887 when Julien Viaud, a French naval officer, published his travel book *Madame Chrysantheme* (Lauretis 309). However it was Puccini’s opera which finally immortalized the story making it an appropriate text to be deconstructed in Hwang’s play.

The myth of ‘Butterfly’ which means a perfect woman is a fantasy shared by men, whether eastern or western with a common virtue of being submissive and self sacrificing. This abstract ideal of femininity is a creation by the men for the men which has also been deconstructed by Hwang in the drama when Song Liling says “Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act.” This one statement rejects all stereotype of feminine identity based on essence and foregrounds the constructed and performative nature of gender. This constructed and performative nature of gender has been analyzed in detail by Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. She surmises that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. In this sense gender is not a noun but a verb. But this performance is not a choice. It is conditioned by cultural intelligibility. Though Song’s performance was a drag, but the portrayal of a submissive oriental woman was controlled by the Chinese cultural context. Cross-dressing has been used as a method of subverting the closed gender categories by Judith Butler. It is a technique of de-essentializing gender. Moreover, Song’s cross-dressing and multiple performances not only de-essentialize gender, they also de-essentialize race and ethnicity. From the perspectives of Western theatre, these techniques are linked to Brechtian theory’ particularly related to the processes of defamiliarisation or alienation effect. It involves the use of technique designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performances.

The drama is remarkable not only for the deconstruction of west’s tendency of essentializing an orient but also for the deconstruction of the homogenizing tendency. The intertextual placement of Puccini’s story in which the woman is Japanese and the actual plot where the female character is Chinese foregrounds the west’s confusion and their identification of an orient all the same despite geographical and cultural differences. This confusion is evident when Gallimard fails to understand the irony implicit in Song’s reply to his compliment that



she was “convincing” as a Japanese woman: Song: Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you (Hwang 17). The fact that Japanese used Chinese people for medical experiments during war does not mean any thing to him. Theatrically, this confusion is foregrounded by moving the main action from Japan to China and by the appropriation of elements Japanese Kabuki theatre and Chinese Beijing opera as if both formed a part of monolithic culture. And when Song Liling appears on stage she is in traditional Chinese clothes, dancing initially, to the sound of Chinese music which gradually dissolves into the Love Duet of Puccini’s opera (Hwang 1). In her second appearance she dances to that same music, but now dressed as Butterfly, the Japanese geisha. The confusion and generalization is reflected in Gallimard’s own words: “There is a vision of the orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimomos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils” (91). In fact this play exploits on the various traditionally acknowledged emblems of Japanese identity: Cho-Cho san is a geisha, the manner of her death is the conventional Japanese suicide and the construction of the Japanese as a “people accustomed to little things, humble and silent”. And the beauty of opera seen through Western eyes is that the Asian woman is ultimately condemned to die, as her identity as a Japanese geisha demands. Butterfly sacrifices everything: her husband, her religion, her people, her son and ultimately her own life, for the love of a Westner.

The drama employs the technique of post-modern aesthetics of parody which first installs and then subverts. In the beginning of the play Gallimard fantasizes Song as Butterfly, a submissive orient and himself as Pinkerton, a cruel white man. And it is an orient, who kills herself for a Westner. But as the play comes to an end we realize that there is a subversion of this orientalist tradition. Gallimard realizes that he himself has been a “Butterfly” and Song is the real Pinkerton who exploited him to meet his ends. And like the Japanese woman of the Giacomo Puccini’s story he commits suicide. The ambiguity and irony are further foregrounded by the letter “M” in the title “M.Butterfly” which may refer to “Madam” or “Monsieur” at the same time. This shift from the “Madam” to “Monsieur” is not only ironical but also parodic. Apart from this, the fact that traditional Chinese opera were generally “onnagata” performances, where men specialized in playing the role of woman also works to make the twist in the plot more acceptable. Even in Japanese Kabuki theatre men performed the role of women.

Hwang has also employed specific techniques for the presentation of drama which takes forward this parodic deconstruction. Interestingly the mixing of oriental and western dramatic techniques foreshadow the complexities that are to arise. The rectangular stage is surrounded with a curved ramp swirling across and around the stage .The ramp resembles the Japanese “hanamachi” (which is a long entrance platform used in Kabuki theatre) as well as the more western version used by strippers. The make-up and the ornamental costumes of Song Liling are reminders of both oriental theatre and western opera. Music which is an integral part of

both the Chinese and the western opera has been tactfully employed. The entrance of Song is marked by Chinese music which later dissolves into western opera, the “love duet” from Puccini’s M. Butterfly. This transformation of music proves to be an effective dramatic technique to foreground the intertextuality that follows. It also hints at the transfixation of Butterfly from one context to another. The assumptions about an orient in this play are embodied in the concept of “Butterfly.” This feminine ideal of beauty demands virtue of submission and sacrifice. It is this perfection which fascinates Gallimard in the play:

“... Alone in this cell, night after night, watching our story play through my head, always searching for a new ending, one which redeems my honor, where she returns at last to my arms.(Hwang 4).”

This desire of submission by an orient has imperialistic underpinnings. Wrapped in the cloak of humanism, western cultural thought intended to create an inverse reflection in binaries. By making ‘submission’ a virtue of an orient, indirectly authority is recognized as a virtue of the westner. The conversation between Song Liling and Rene Gallimard in Act one/ Scene six employs the postmodern aesthetics of parody where the traditional western opera is installed by the Song’s performance and then later subverted by the Song herself when she deconstructs the representations of western opera: “It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive oriental woman and the cruel white man. (Hwang 17)” She takes the argument forward by presenting role-reversal:

Consider it this way: what would you say if a blond homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, and then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then 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 is an oriental who kills herself for a Westner-ah! – you find it beautiful. (Hwang 17)

It is through this binary equation of “submissive oriental woman “and “cruel white man” the tradition of orientalism has been deconstructed. The assumptions of Rene Gallimard about his own identity and Song’s identity mirror the truth of east-west relationship. The way Gallimard fantasizes Song is very obvious and expected. And it is these expectations that are overplayed by Song to deceptively exploit him. How the concepts of modesty and purity, epitomized about an oriental woman are over-magnified is evident in Gallimard’s confession during the trial: “... it was dark ... and she was very modest!” Along with modesty, self-devaluation and inferiority are also considered inherent in an orient: “... It’s true what they say about Oriental girls. They want to be treated bad!” These words of Pinkerton echo the general thinking of the West. Further Gallimard falls into the trap of his own cultural and gender delusions as pointed out by Song Liling:



“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... The West believes the East deep down, wants to be dominated- because a woman can’t think for herself” (Hwang 83).

Here we see issues of racism and sexism intersect. This psychology relatively reflects concepts of “Prospero syndrome” and “white man’s burden” where superiority of the West is taken for granted.

The idea of the Western man as the Asian woman’s deepest desire makes Gallimard fall unquestionably in love with Song. And all the time he believes that he is playing with her and it is she who is being overcome by passion. The appearance of his friend Marc, in the dream scene in Act One, further confirms the illusions Gallimard harbours in his heart: “She cannot love you, it is taboo, but something deep inside her heart...she cannot help herself... she must surrender to you. It is her destiny” (Hwang 25). Traditional western conceptions of the East echo in the words of Gallimard as he outlines the developing phase of their relationship:

“Orientals will always submit to a greater force (Hwang 46) ... In my heart, 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” (Hwang 27). Song makes use of the classic beliefs as (s)he takes advantage of Gallimard’s delusions. When Gallimard goes to Song’s apartment for the first time, (s)he fuels the belief of Gallimard: “Hard as I try to be modern, to speak like a man, to hold a Western woman’s strong face up to my own... in the end I fail. A small frightened heart beats too quickly and gives me away. Monsieur Gallimard, I’m a Chinese girl.” The Frenchman’s gives an anticipated response: “Did you hear the way she talked about Western women? Much differently than the first night. She does- she feels inferior to them- and to me” (Hwang 31).

Gallimard is thus captive to his own illusions. Hwang has employed the binary stereotypes in order to deconstruct them. The categories that have been deconstructed are: East/ West, Male/ Female, Body/ Mind and Reality/ Fantasy. The play has been criticized for its employment of stereotypes even if it is for the purpose of deconstructing them. It is argued that in the process of critiquing the “oriental” stereotypes one assumes or creates an “occidental” stereotype. Like there is no monolithic identity of the East, similarly there is no monolithic identity of the West. Edward Said’s “Orientalism” was also criticized on the same grounds. It has sometimes also been regarded as an anti- American play for its violent assault against the stereotyping of the East by the West but Hwang’s intention is not guided by any bitterness. On the contrary it is an appeal to people everywhere to go beyond categorization of cultural and gender characteristics. It is an attempt to make people seek not the stereotype but the



truth as an individual human being. The stereotypes of identity categories have always clouded our vision. We are not capable of looking beyond them. This is the reason why Judith Butler objected to the universalization of identity categories. It is not just the imperial and racial politics that Hwang has emphasized. He also highlights the sexual politics. While racial prejudices are retained by the West for the East and vice-versa, sexual prejudices seem to be common to both. For instance, the issue of homosexuality. Chin's (Song's comrade) statement that there is no homosexuality in China actually implies that homosexuality is not allowed in China. On the other hand Gallimard is a closeted homosexual. He commits suicide when he is forced to face the reality of his lover's sexuality. Whether East or West, homosexuality has been disapproved. Hence this play is a plea to look beyond racial and sexual politics.

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