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Different Characterization of M. Butterfly in Play and the Film: Comparison and Contrast of Gallimard and Song in the Play and the Film

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Different Characterization of *M. Butterfly* in Play and the Film: Comparison and Contrast of Gallimard and Song in the Play and the Film

“Con onor muore/ chi non puo serbar/ vita con onore.

Death with honor/ Is better than life/ Life with dishonor” (*M. Butterfly*).

This is Cio cio san’s death scene in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, in which her soliloquizes her realization of her tragic sacrifice for an unworthy lover. *Madame Butterfly*, the 1903 Puccini’s opera portraying a tragic love story, enforces the idea of an oriental and submissive woman sacrificing for her unworthy love toward an occidental man. Served as a subversion of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang adapted from the true scandal of French diplomat, Bernard Boursicot’s affair with Chinese actor, Shi Pei-Pu in his *M. Butterfly*. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* portrays a story that a French diplomat sacrifices for an unworthy “foreign devil,” a male Chinese spy. The play is a deconstructive work on the Oriental stereotype. This play not only brings out great success to David Henry Hwang with a Tony Award, but also has itself a film adaptation by David Cronenberg in 1993. However, the characterization in *M. Butterfly*’s film adaptation differs from its original play text with clearly one victim as Gallimard and one villain as Song, while the play shows more ambiguity to serve who is a victim or a villain. In the film adaptation of *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard is rather than a victim of his relationship with Song, the male spy from the Communist China who disguises himself as a female Peking opera singer. In Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*, Song serves as a sly and cleverly disguised Butterfly for the exchange of classified national information, while Gallimard devotes everything for the unworthy lover. Reversely, the play shows rather ambiguous on claiming who is the victim or villain in the relationship. Therefore, by making a comparison and contrast of the film and the play, this paper aims to

discuss *M. Butterfly* in depth in order to further see how stereotypical illusions make a man crazy and understand how David Henry Hwang tries to deconstruct an Oriental stereotype.

As Song plays perfectly as the Butterfly for Gallimard, his docility, seemingly innocent and submissive serve him the tool to play a perfect woman of an Oriental stereotype. In Leighton Grist's "'It's only a piece of meat': Gender ambiguity, sexuality, and politics in *The Crying Game* and *M. Butterfly*," he discusses the film, how Song makes good uses of Gallimard's fantasy of a Butterfly, and "combines insinuating modesty with excessive 'feminine,' 'Oriental submissiveness'" (Grist 9). When Grist later explains how "the Orient is familiarly regarded as submissively feminine," Gallimard projects the concept of the inferior Orient into his relationship with Song, and tries to be potent through conquering Song. The Orient is often depicted as "...a sexualized, and sexually compliant, space that is ripe for conquest and rule," Song therefore, takes the advantage of Gallimard's fantasy for a Butterfly, and he plays the "perfect woman" for Gallimard (qtd. in Grist 14). Moreover, in Kathryn Remen's "The Theatre of Punishment: David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*," Remen also points out that Gallimard mistakenly reckons himself with power because he is a white male. Since "power has the authority to punish," Gallimard is obsessed with his fantasy of "being powerful exploiter", he is convinced of himself being the Occident that overpowers the Orient (Remen 393). Gallimard indulges in his fantasy created by his obsession over a stereotypical Oriental woman, Butterfly, who puts him in the pursuit of a "perfect woman," his Butterfly.

Being obsessed with overpowering the submissive Song, Gallimard shows his desire for being potent obviously through his fantasy of an oriental stereotype. In Wen's "The Subversion of the Oriental Stereotype in *M. Butterfly*," the author points out the fact of how westerners stereotype an oriental figure in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, "[s]tereotyping Eastern women is the Western men's way to create the fantasy of their male power." Cio ciosan of *Madame Butterfly* plays the most ideal heroine that an Asian woman sacrificing for an

American soldier, a westerner. Since written by an Italian composer, Cio ciao san as an Oriental figure, is portrayed through the hands of the Occident, that she is “[t]he Orient, ‘invented’ by Europe, has always been represented not by themselves, but by the Occident as a contrast to Europe” (qtd. in Wen 44). The stereotypical illustration of the submissive and docile woman becomes eternal impression of the Occident toward the Orient. In Wen’s paper, he points out that *M. Butterfly* is a deconstruct play of *Madame Butterfly* that David Henry Hwang intends to break the stereotype created by the Occident. Therefore, Gallimard is portrayed as someone who has the strong fantasy over a Madame Butterfly. While victim is a person who has been injured by someone else, the villain is the one who opposes to the hero. In this analysis on *M. Butterfly*, the victim is suggested to be Gallimard in the film, while Song is the villain who opposes and leads Gallimard to his suicide in the prison.

Since a villain is a man who opposes to the hero, while a victim is a man who is hurt, or harmed by someone. In the film, Song plays the role of a villain in his relationship with Gallimard, in which he is takes Gallimard’s fantasy as advantage to gain the classified information for the Communist China, Gallimard can somehow be the tragic hero in their relationship, in which he can never escapes his own fall. While rather showing ambiguously in the play, there is no specific victim or villain in the play.

Portrayed as a man who is lack of a sense of accomplishment in both the play and the film, Gallimard becomes dominance over fantasizing the oriental butterfly; moreover, he indulges himself in his power obsession over his fantasy. The perfect oriental woman for Gallimard portrayed in *Madame Butterfly*, in which he indulges himself to gain a sense of overpowering someone. In *M. Butterfly*’s play, Gallimard is portrayed as someone who is lack of confidence due to his appearance and his unsatisfied growth in his adolescence. As he narrates his experiences in college when his friend Marc asks him to go to the party, in which many girls are in, he refuses out of fear of rejection, “Marc, I can’t ... I’m afraid they’ll say no—the girls. So I never ask” (12; act1.4). Other than lacking confidence, when being

mocked later his scandal exposed in France, he becomes the marked attention among people as a joke. He describes himself, “I’ve never been considered witty or clever. In fact, as a young boy, in an informal poll among my grammar school classmates, I was voted ‘the least likely to be invited to a party’” (8; act1.1). It was not until Gallimard watches Song sing the death scene of *Madame Butterfly* and becomes completely attracted to Song’s docility of a Butterfly, is he finally empowered of finding a Butterfly, whom he describes,

“[h]ere...here was a Butterfly with little or no voice—but she had the grace, the delicacy... I believe this girl. I believed her suffering. I wanted to take her in my arms—so delicate, even I could protect her, take her home, pamper her till she smiled” (17; act1.6). Gallimard is obsessed with the Oriental fantasy described in *Madame Butterfly*, and the fantasy delivered by Song’s performance. “The perfect woman” Gallimard fantasizes, is the Oriental figure who submissively devotes her love to an unworthy lover, and even sacrifices for the unworthy love she has. “Apart from the racialist dimension, Orientalism also has its inherently sexist element. The West usually considers its conquest of the East similar to the dominance of the man over the woman” (Wen 45). The stereotypical depicted Oriental Butterfly creates the illusion of the docility in the Orient, which makes Gallimard fantasize his power over the submissive Butterfly. For Gallimard, in his relationship with Song, he is Pinkerton, and Song is his Butterfly. The fantasy of an Oriental Butterfly makes him obsessed with the power dominance as he fantasizes himself as a Pinkerton who saves Butterfly. Moreover, Gallimard cannot get away his limitation toward the stereotype, that Gallimard “trapped within categories, cannot appreciate the freedom offered by Song—the possibility of ‘different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power’” (qtd. in Lee 93). Gallimard locks himself into his fantasy of an Oriental stereotype, and fantasizes it with over obsession that becomes his desire of being potent. While in the film, though Gallimard is portrayed differently without an unsatisfied adolescence, but the lack of authority in his workplace; the fantasy toward a *Madame Butterfly* also arouses his obsession

as being the dominant. In the beginning of the film, Gallimard is invited to the Swedish Embassy, where he watches Madame Butterfly, and completely falls for Song's performance as a Butterfly. Rather than being satisfied with the performance, Gallimard indulges himself in his relationship with Song. Before being promoted to be the vice president in the French Embassy, he is an accountant teased by his colleagues when they warn him off denying their documentations of expenses, "You listen to me. You're nobody. You're worse than nobody. You're an accountant. If you're not careful...we'll break all your pencils in half" (*M. Butterfly*). Therefore, Song's submissiveness and illusion of being a docile, innocent Peking opera singer empowers Gallimard to be confident. He then is promoted because of his growing aggressiveness and confidence when Gallimard is having an affair with Song. Gallimard wants to be the protective Western arms to protect his docile Butterfly.

However, enjoying being in the position of the dominance both in the play and the film, the affair with Frau Baden in the film can be indicated to the more marked characterization of Gallimard's obsession of power. His affair with Frau Baden can be the indication of his overpowering a woman who "everyone can look, but no one gets inside" (*M. Butterfly*). Frau Baden is the second wife of the Swedish embassy, who is portrayed in the film as the figure that men fantasize. Different from the play, the new character in the film, the Swedish embassy's wife Frau Baden is Gallimard's another mistress. In the scene where Gallimard first watches Song's performance of Madame Butterfly, Gallimard seems acquainted with Frau Baden, and later when he goes home conversing with his wife, he denies the fact that he meets Frau Baden in the embassy's house. "So... tell me... did you get the chance to meet Lars Hammer's new wife? / "Oh no" (*M. Butterfly*). The audience might notice Gallimard deceives his wife from the fact of him seeing Frau Baden in Swedish Embassy house without knowing why. Later when Gallimard has an affair with Song, their relationship with Song's unwillingness of being undressed makes Gallimard insecure. Gallimard cannot overtake the fact that Song uses Chinese modesty to refuse him of being naked in front of him. As Song

uses modesty, he shows his shyness and innocence of being unaware of sexual intercourse,

“Rene, please let me keep my clothes on.

It all frightens me.

Modesty is so important to the Chinese” (*M. Butterfly*).

The inability to have Song been naked and seemly the reverse of the power dominance in the relationship of Song and Gallimard, Gallimard has another affair with Frau Gallimard. In the scene Frau Baden is naked in bed, Gallimard says, “You look exactly as I imagined you would under your clothes” (*M. Butterfly*). Frau Baden is like the other Western women for Gallimard; she is bold, free, and not restricted by the modesty of her culture. She is the figure who has rather more power than Gallimard since “she’s the one really running [the] embassy house.” Moreover, she’s also the figure that other men fantasize. Gallimard’s affair with Frau Baden is after he gets promotion when he is more powered; however, without meeting his expectation of a woman’s picture, Frau Baden disappoints him for being active instead of submissive as Song. Frau Baden’s boldness and activeness threatens Gallimard’s authority as, “[i]t is a ‘threatening’ presence that, in combination with Frau Baden’s cursory ‘come and get it,’ differs markedly from the imagined ‘young innocent schoolgirl’ with whom Gallimard compares Song...” (Grist 11). After, Gallimard goes straight to Song’s house, drunk as he is, he demands to see Song naked. Apart from Frau Baden, Song behaves submissively, and still refuses with his/her Chinese modesty to remain his clothes on. Gallimard’s sexual impulse comes from the submissiveness Song has, and it is the Madame Butterfly fantasy he has, and pursues. During the film, he gains a sense of satisfaction when he overpowers the submissive Butterfly; he is obsessed with the idea of protecting the weak with his “big western arms”. However, it is also his obsession of his fantasy for the oriental submissiveness that leads him to his suicide in the end.

Every tragic hero ends his life with an unavoidable and fatal reason. Gallimard, as being his fantasized “hero” saving a Butterfly, approaches his death because of his own oriental

fantasy for a submissive figure in both the film and the play. In the play, Gallimard commits suicide with a surreal environment; also like a performance of *Madame Butterfly* that Gallimard stabs himself to death. With final realization of his betrayal by the unworthy love he has for the foreign devil, Song, he is desperate and willing to die. With the dancers who hand him the knife to commit suicide, the death scene of the play is rather surreal. With the last line of Song's calling for Gallimard, "Butterfly? Butterfly?" (69; act3.3), it makes identifying the true victim and villain in their relationship more difficult. Here, not only does Song show his affection toward his Butterfly, but it also suggests his disguise throughout the years is not only for exchanging information, but involves in true affections.

Different from the play, the film shows the audience a distorted Gallimard with extreme feminine figure of his confession as the Butterfly. Apart from the play where it starts with the prison cell and ends with the prison cell, the film didn't show the prison cell until Gallimard's suicide. After the trial, the audience sees the scene proceed to a prison cell; Gallimard appears through the little window on the prison cell door, with only his hands shown and his mouth. Apart from the masculine figure he is along the film, he has his nails polished red. As the guard hands him over the sash (obi) and the wig, the guard mentions the performance Gallimard is going to have for the night. Then the scene embarks on to Gallimard standing on a stage with the set of *Madame Butterfly*'s death scene. Accompanying Gallimard is the prisoners and the police in the prison, as they all expected to see the performance Gallimard has. Gallimard wears a kimono, and as he puts on the obi, he addresses himself as the big joke of France. Frank and sincere as he is to his unworthy love, he says, "...for I, Rene Gallimard have known, and have been loved by the perfect woman" (*M. Butterfly*). The scene then proceeds to the airport where the audience can see Chinese characters on the plane. As Gallimard plays the tape, the music of *Madame Butterfly*'s death scene fills the prison. He puts on make-up as a geisha with a kimono, as his speech proceeds, "there is the vision of the orient I have, slender women in cheongsams and kimonos who die

for love of unworthy foreign devils, who are born and raised to be perfect women...It's a vision that has become my life."

Gallimard's monologue and make-up not only enlightens the audience the true situation in his relationship with Song, but also enforces his role as the "real" Butterfly who loves an unworthy foreign devil, Song. As he addresses that his vision becomes his life, it is clear that his oriental fantasy leads him to the road like Madame Butterfly, to sacrifice for his love. As he continues his speech, he puts on the black haired wig styled in the Japanese woman fashion. Here, the audience sees Gallimard transform into Butterfly as he soliloquizes,

"Death with honor is better than life with dishonor.

So at last, in the prison far from China, I have found her.

My name is Rene Gallimard, also known, as Madame Butterfly."

With the reflection shown in the little mirror Gallimard holds, the audience sees Gallimard as Madame Butterfly. Gallimard uses the mirror to cut his own throat and dies on the stage with the set of Madame Butterfly's death scene.

The suicide scene interacts between Song and Gallimard, in which reversing the roles between Gallimard and Song. Song becomes the unworthy, cruel, and dominant figure who is ready to be sent back to China, while Gallimard remains in France, as the one to sacrifice himself for a person who gives all his love to. As he puts on his make-up as the Japanese woman on the stage, he is revealing himself as the true Butterfly in his relationship with Song. When he collapses into his blood on the stage, the opera was the only sound lingers in the film and the prison, without closing his eyes; Gallimard dies with his fantasy, the vision that becomes his life. The death scene of the film gives the audience a clearer image suggesting Gallimard's true identity as a Butterfly.

In conclusion, the film's Gallimard is portrayed as a victim when the villain, Song uses Gallimard's fantasy to create an illusion of a docile, innocent butterfly for him in order to gain classified information for the Communist China. However, originally, Gallimard and

Song's relationship is rather ambiguous that Song also shows his affection and intimacy toward Gallimard. The film adaption of *M. Butterfly* enforces the process of Gallimard's transformation into a Butterfly, which also enforces the fact that Gallimard is the victim, the Butterfly in his relationship with Song.

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