

**“Prison Theatricals”: Carcerality and Gender Perception in David Hwang’s *M. Butterfly***

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**ARTICLE INFO***Article history*

Received: December 11, 2017

Accepted: March 01, 2018

Published: April 30, 2018

Volume: 9 Issue: 2

Advance access: March 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

**Key words:**

Metatheatre,

Foucault,

Feminism,

Gender Politics,

Carcerality

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines David Henry Hwang’s drama, *M. Butterfly*, with view at highlighting the author’s dexterity in employing metatheatricality and carcerality to insinuate his message represented in deconstructing gender identity. The play contains an embedded play, performed in a prison setting. Using Michel Foucault’s premises on the prison system, the paper shows how the theatre, just like the prison, functions as a “coercive” environment for learning and cognitive change. In their roles as actors (inmates) in the play (prison), the two major characters, Gallimard and Song, undergo a substantial change in the view of gender construction.

**INTRODUCTION****Research Objective**

David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* constitutes a prime example on Metatheatrical drama. It exhibits a play within a play, which is deliberately enclosed in a prison atmosphere. This prison setting, along with the innovative metatheatrical element, contributes to achieving the author’s message represented in subverting the orthodox cultural values concerning gender politics. Using Michel Foucault’s theory on the prison system, this paper sets out to argue that, as a metatheatrical play, *M. Butterfly* questions the essence of gender identity and seeks to undermine the rigid rules that contribute to its construction.

The metatheatrical nature is set clear throughout the play. The two major characters, Gallimard and Song Liling, indulge in acting within their original acting of the play. They perform Giacomo Puccini’s Opera, *Madame Butterfly*, where Gallimard assumes the identity of Pinkerton in Puccini’s Opera, taking the role of actor, narrator and observer within the framework of the whole play, and Song takes the female identity of Cio-Cio-San. In the same vein, the play highlights the prison setting from the outset. It starts with the stage directions: “M. Gallimard’s prison cell. Paris. Present;” (1).

This same prison atmosphere is reiterated at the end where Gallimard declares “I have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris.” (93). Interestingly, the connection between the theatre and the prison is deliberately orchestrated throughout the play. For example, Gallimard addresses the audience saying: “Alone in this *cell*, I sit night after night, watching our *story play* through my head, always searching for a new *ending*” (4 italics mine).

**Theoretical Framework**

Essentially, a critical examination of metatheatricality and carcerality proves that they are deeply interrelated. Firstly, both, the metatheatre and the prison, entail the “subject’s” awareness of their role and of their being “observed”. In his definition of metatheatre, Lionel Abel states that “the persons appearing on stage ... knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them ... unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality (60). In the same vein, in his elaboration on the carceral system, Foucault illustrates that the “prisoners must be made to know that they are subject to continual oversight” (Koopman pr.17). In this sense, the prisoner’s life resembles that of the character’s action on stage in that both are aware of the roles imposed on

them to act in a certain way. Like the situation on stage, in prison, there is an observer and observed, and there is a “character” who should “act” according to prescribed roles. That is why Foucault described the prison as a “coercive theatre.”

A further link between the two domains is manifest in the fact that both provide a rich arena for learning and cognitive transformation. In his elaboration on the nature of metatheatricality, Abel emphasizes that the metatheatrical setting is a rich environment for rejecting social prescriptions and aspiring for change (*Tragedy* 183). Likewise, for Foucault, “prisons are first and foremost not houses of confinement but departments of correction.” (Koopman pr.16). He goes on to stress that prison, like the theatre, reshapes the identity of the prisoner; and constitutes “a sort of artificial and coercive theatre in which (the delinquents’) life will be examined from top to bottom” (252). Erving Goffman elaborates on Foucault’s contention, speaking of what he calls “Prison theatricals.” He reiterates that, once in prison, the prisoner undergoes “progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others” (24).

## DISCUSSION

The above two features of the theatre/prison are evident in *M. Butterfly*. Firstly, it is clear that the play continuously raises the awareness of both the audience and characters to its metatheatrical nature. For example, Gallimard keeps reminding the audience of the theatricality of his presentation as he says: “And I imagine you—my ideal audience—who come to understand and even, perhaps just a little, to envy me.” (4). He goes on to clearly exhibit his awareness of his role as he addresses the audience: “In order for you to understand what I did and why, I must introduce you my favorite opera: *Madame Butterfly*. By Giacomo Puccini” (4-5).

Most importantly, the prison environment occupying this metatheatrical element plays a vital role in changing Gallimard and Song’s awareness of gender identity. It enables them to have a vivid look at their real queer genders and thus “correct” their realities. Gallimard and Song end up embracing two identities: one is real; the other is their assumed identity. What is impressive is that, in the restaged Opera, both assume identities that are in stark contrast to their real ones. Gallimard takes the role of the strongly masculine Western man (Pinkerton), notwithstanding the fact that he has strong feminine side in him. Song, on the other hand, takes the role of the submissive woman (Cio-Cio), which is the opposite of what she/he is. In Foucault’s terms, both Gallimard and Song are “delinquents” who have learnt a lot from prison as a place that redefines and reshapes their identities

The transformative nature of the theatre/prison is deliberately insinuated as Gallimard completely assimilates his second identity. He bluntly says: “I felt for the first time that rush of power—the absolute power of a man (32). He even takes the identity of Cio-Cio-San to be real and falls in love with her. In his role as a spectator, Gallimard clearly announces: “I believed this girl. I believed her suffering” (15-16). More importantly, he exhibits clear patriarchal values as he declares: “I wanted to take her in my arms—so delicate, even I could protect her, take her home, and pamper her until she smiled (16). This patriarchal view is further

crystalized as he pompously declares: “God who creates Eve to serve Adam, who blesses Solomon with his harem but ties Jezebel to a burning bed—that God is a man” (38).

Similar to Gallimard, Song undertakes a vivid transformative process. He assumes the role of a woman, and within this role he take the role of another woman (Cio-Cio-San) and within this role he/she takes two roles; the first is that of the strong Western woman; the second is that of the Eastern submissive and docile woman ““strapped inside this Western dress” (30). Gallimard best describes the existence of these two layers of identity in Song as he declares that “the Oriental in her (is) at war with her Western education” (27). Janet Haedicke beautifully comments on how Song’s role contributes to the politics of the play as he argues that:

By the time Song steps from this stage onto that of Gallimard’s 1988 narration, Such layers of (mis)perception continually displace the theatre of binaries—... reality versus illusion ... male versus female—as an Italian recreation of a Japanese woman is recreated by a Chinese man recreated by a French man recreated by an Asian/American man (31).

In other words, Song’s role raises critical questions that may well undermine rigid gender identity. If a man can assimilate the role of a woman with all the feminine aspects that set a woman different from man, then what is the boundary between masculinity and femininity?? Is it only a biological difference? Are masculinity and femininity mere socially-prescribed “roles” that one has to “act”??

Song wittingly alludes to this “performative” nature of gender as he reveals the truth of his/her double identity to Comrade Chin. He/she admits: “I am an actor” (48). The implications here are clear. The binary oppositions, Masculine/Feminine, are essentially cultural dichotomies. In other words, gender is far from being a natural entity; rather it is the result of societal and cultural indoctrination. Song clearly shows this when abandons his/her mask towards the end, as he/she admits that his/her disguised identity with Gallimard is based on cultural perceptions that locate gender in outward features. Gabrielle Cody beautifully comments on this scene stressing that the audience was not shocked by the fact that a woman turned out to be a man; but because they realized that what is considered feminine is based on merely outer superficial features (26).

In Foucauldian terminology, this “epistemological break” that happened to the audience as well as the characters is further enhanced in the trial scene. In this scene, Gallimard’s comes to realize that he simply was “a man who loved a woman created by a man (90) Realizing the instability of gender and identity, Gallimard is encouraged to embrace internal feminine characteristics put on the identity/mask of Cio-Cio-San. In other word, Gallimard finds his ideal woman in himself, in his feminine part that overrides his masculine one. Robert Skloot acknowledges that Gallimard’s achieved what he called “transformation into his cultural (and gender) opposite” (60).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the metatheatrical/carceral elements in *M. Butterfly* contribute to subverting the ironclad claims of gender identity and dismantling the binary oppositions of masculinity

and femininity. Using the theatre/prison setting, Hwang's text suggests that gender is "made" not "born". It is "acted" rather than "inherited". The play within the play, preformed in a prison environment, instills in the characters, as well as the audience, a new understanding of the gender formation, showing it to be a result of "nurture" rather than "nature". This substantiates Hwang's message behind the text as he declared that, in *M. Butterfly*, he essentially intended to create a "deconstructivist" text that subverts the "layers of cultural and sexual misperception" (qtd. in Yarrow, 93).

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