

# Performing Gender and Fictions of the Nation in David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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**Abstract** Theories of gender and nationalism contribute to understanding David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1986). By interweaving illusions about sexuality and cultural differences, Hwang creates an ironic play that addresses social myths of gender and national identity. A love affair between a diplomat named Gallimard and a spy named Song is placed within the larger context of a national discourse that hierarchically positions the East-West national identity within a framework that represents China as both other and woman. In *M. Butterfly*, subjectivity is created through a patriarchal, socio-sexual matrix that creates gender as a fictive category based on exclusions. I argue that the rhetoric of gender converges with the rhetoric of nationalism at the site of the body so that individual (gendered) identity cannot be separated from public (national) identity. The connections between gender politics and nationalism suggest that both discourses rely upon imaginative fictions to construct identity.

**Keywords** feminist theory; nationalism; East-West relations; David Henry Hwang; patriarchy

Theories of gender and nationalism contribute to our understanding David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1986). Hwang sets his play in a Paris prison with flashbacks to Beijing detailing a twenty-year love affair (1960-80) between a French male diplomat, Gallimard, and Song, a Chinese male spy disguised as a woman opera singer. By interweaving illusions about sexuality and cultural differences, Hwang creates an ironic play that addresses social myths of gender and national identity. The love affair between Gallimard and Song is placed within the larger context of a national discourse that hierarchically positions East-West national identity within a framework that represents China as both other and woman. In *M. Butterfly* subjectivity is created through a patriarchal, socio-sexual matrix that creates gender as a fictive category based on exclusions. Employing Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation

as an “imagined community,” I argue that the rhetoric of gender converges with the rhetoric of nationalism at the site of the body so that individual (gendered) identity cannot be separated from public (national) identity. The connections between gender politics and nationalism imply that both discourses rely on imaginative fictions to construct identity.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler outlines a humanist feminist perspective that addresses the correlation between identity and gender construction. Butler writes “As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (10). These sets of relations, for the most part, function with a dualistic framework so that subjectivity is contingent on having an “other.” Gender functions as an essential set of relations that inform identity and helps to differentiate the self from other. However, Butler argues that even as gender is an essential building block of identity, it is, in fact, entirely fictitious and contingent. Butler traces one argument that begins from this perspective to suggest that identity is constructed within a binary system wherein subjectivity is viewed in terms of masculinity, resulting in the marginality of the feminine gender (11). This view suggests that the active subject can only “be” when in relation to an “unauthorized subject” or object. The inactivity, passivity, or femininity of a person reflects and enhances the subjectivity, activity, and masculinity of another’s identity. In other words, for the construction of “I” there must simultaneously be a relational construction of “You,” or other. Within a patriarchal social structure, the sets of relations that determine agency and identity are influenced by social myths that are maintained by fictive notions of difference rooted in gender.

Fictive notions of difference between men and women can be found in theories such as essentialism or biologism that suggests an individual has a “true nature” or essential core identity. The research of Elizabeth Grosz in *Space, Time, and Perversions* demonstrates this point. Grosz argues that “Women’s social roles [are] . . . the result of culture, not nature, of social organization rather than biological determinants, and thus capable of being changed” (Grosz 50). According to Grosz and Butler, gender can be seen as something produced through culture in order to create polarized differences that define identity. However, since there is no foundational or “true” difference rooted in gender, one must *perform* gender.

Social categories of gender create elaborate scripts detailing how persons should act in order to be a real or “true” woman or man. Judith Butler addresses the ways gender is defined through social performance or masquerade. In certain ways, the masquerade is a necessary result of gender inscription on the body. Butler explains that identity is made through *exclusion*, through excluding what is unacceptable for the different sexes. This exclusion is based on the distinction of interior and exterior

reality as related to the body. The body is the sight of inscribed social, historical, and political meanings so that sexual acts and desires define the gendered person. Butler writes:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body. . . . Such acts, gestures, and enactments generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality. (136)

Butler argues that gender itself is a type of performance constructed and regulated by social myths, rather than an inherent quality of identity. These social myths accumulate at the site of the body, where specific sets of gender relations converge to define identity.

The quote above suggests that identity is produced from social fabrications rather than arising from an essential core. Because there is no core foundation on which identity sits, all actions that define identity are viewed as a performance, i.e., as “playing the part” in the sense that the person must act according to a script that defines their identity. This script is written in terms of gender so that gender is a means through which identity is established. The imagined differences between women and men are merely fictitious and contingent because the body itself knows nothing about right or wrong ways to feel or act, and, for this reason, words, acts, and gestures that define gendered identity are only placed on the surface of the body, rather than imbedded in a genetic code. Precisely due to the fact that gender is a performance attests to that fact that it can’t be an ontological truth; without the performances and exclusions that create gender, gender would not exist. Butler further explains that gender does not reflect any essential foundation of identity because no “true” identity or “essential” interior core exists other than what has been produced/fabricated by socially constructed sets of relations.

In *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang expertly constructs the love affair between Song and Gallimard, who goes on trial for espionage, to reflect certain gender ideologies and cultural fantasies. The play calls into question the foundations of identity based on gender and gender itself as a “truth.” Gallimard, the male French diplomat, believes for twenty years that Song is a woman either by his own foolishness or by the contingencies of gender that allow anyone to perform the role of Woman or Man. Song, the man-as-woman Opera singer, embodies the Perfect

Woman for Gallimard because Song knows what kind of woman he wants: passive, sexually timid, weak. Song supports these myths. S/he tells Gallimard, "Please. . . it all frightens me. I'm a modest Chinese girl" (40). Song reinforces the stereotype of the passive woman and Gallimard buys into it because he relies on *her* image in order to reflect *his* vision of himself as a "real" man.

Gallimard says that he was afraid to find out Song's sexual identity because it would mean that he was even further away from being a "real" man. In other words, real men don't love other men, or, rather, in this heterosexist matrix, a man loving another man is not a "real" man. Real men are defined by loving women. In order to be a Man, Gallimard must find his Perfect Woman, for, without a Perfect Woman, what would he be? How would Gallimard define himself? Judith Butler proposes that, "women must become, must 'be' precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men" (45). The binary, heterosexual matrix of identity positions woman as "not having" and man as "having," so that woman's absence of subjectivity supports and defines man's subjectivity. In this way, one can see that the hierarchical, binary framework of identity is specifically patriarchal due to socio-sexual privileges accorded to males, thus defining subjectivity as inherently masculine.

Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray analyzes the meaning of identity and gender in patrilineal, hierarchical, heterosexist societies in her book *This Sex Which is Not One*. She theorizes that women are seen and used as units of exchange. This theory suggests that a woman's value, in fact, comes from her use in an exclusively male economy of exchange that circulates power only between men (171). Thus, women become commodities, losing autonomous worth to a value system based on the exploitation of women's bodies and identities for men's profit. This exchange market is based on an economy of desire that excludes women even though her body is the desired object.

Irigaray's analysis is useful for examining the relationship between Song and Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*. It appears on one level that Song is using Gallimard for military/governmental information and Gallimard is using Song primarily to establish his masculine identity. Ironically, their relationship reflects a paradigm that demonstrates Irigaray's male economy of exchange because both Song and Gallimard are men, albeit one is performing as a woman. It is a relationship based on the myths of gendered identity, equally regarding the construct of Woman and Man, that both believe and perform. The commodity desired and bought is the myth of Woman. This myth socially regulates the male fantasy of "having" a woman that works to define and reinforce masculine identity. Song and Gallimard's relationship is intriguing because, as readers, we know that it is a relationship between two men, yet, Gallimard believes (or pretends) it is a relationship between a man and woman wherein his

heterosexual fantasies can be actualized.

On yet another level, the lovers' relationship functions within a political paradigm and market of exchange between nations. The heterosexual relationship that Gallimard perceives and Song performs reflects national values attached to men and women's bodies wherein the non-white Eastern female is appropriated by the white Western male. According to scholar Rey Chow, male identity is seen as the vehicle for Western nationality to express itself (Chow 81). Within a patriarchal and heterosexual political discourse, Chow contends that the West, as an embodiment of male identity, views Eastern countries as the embodiment of female identity, and therefore positions the East within a dominant-submissive framework of imperialistic power relations. Relative to political relations between Western Europe and China, the Chinese woman's body becomes the inscription site for French/Western ideology and manhood. National identity is thus translated into a gendered identity so that the West is symbolized as Man and the East is symbolized as Woman. The sets of relations based in gender that define a person elicit a similar pattern in the sets of relations placed within a political context that defines nations and national identity. The binary, heterosexual relationship between woman and man can be viewed through a similar perspective when placed within a binary, nationalistic framework between the East and West.

By accepting Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as "an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign," one cannot escape the distinct connection between the discursive formation of both gender and national identity (6). Anderson stresses that this political community is imagined, that it has no rock solid foundation in reality other than the style in which it is imagined. The significant link that I wish to make here between nationalistic ideology and gender suggests that both are fictive notions that serve to create individual (gendered) identity and collective (national) identity, through socially regulated sets of relations between people and nations. Sociologist Craig Calhoun emphasizes that nationalism is informed by a set of relations to produce a collective identity. Calhoun explains, "A web of interpersonal relationships locates a person locally, but membership in the category 'nation' locates people in a complex, globally integrated world" (7). The correlation between the category of nation and the category of gender is found in the fictive notions and imaginings that create either individual, gendered identity or collective, national identity. The rhetoric of gender and the rhetoric of nationalism blend into one another so that, as Calhoun has noted, nationalistic ideology is necessarily intertwined with gender and sexuality. Henry Hwang's play provides a brilliant example of these theories and their transmutations onto real bodies as expressed in the love affair that occurs between two men, one of whom thought the other was a woman.

In *M. Butterfly*, the man-as-woman character, Song, elucidates this aforementioned dialectic between gender and nationalism during the espionage trial of Gallimard's love affair with Song. When Gallimard is accused of passing French military secrets to China, Gallimard maintains his innocence and true love for Song. Song explains how Gallimard had been duped (for twenty years!) into believing that Song was a woman by drawing an analogy between the West's perception of the East, and men's perception of women:

The West has sort of an international rape mentality towards the East . . . . 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. (83)

Song plays up both gender and national stereotypes of the other in this explanation of Song's duplicity and Gallimard's willingness to "buy into" the masquerade. The rhetoric in the quote above attests to the similar mentality between essentialized notions of gender and national politics, thus reinforcing the idea that the personal politics of gender identity is intricately enmeshed with the public politics of national identity. Song says that the "West thinks of itself as masculine . . . so the East is feminine" (83). This statement implies that within the "discourse of nationalism" the opposing countries are accorded power status that is entwined with gender status (Calhoun 8). Because political power is imagined in terms of gender, the imperialistic mentality of colonial dominance must assume local power of bodies which are understood and accessed in terms of gender.

Gallimard was deceived into believing that Song was a woman not because Song wore great make-up, but because the qualifications of gender are fictive and contingent. Judith Butler's aforementioned arguments regarding gender as masquerade when applied to *M. Butterfly* suggest that anybody can perform gender, just as nations can be imagined regardless of geographic boundaries (Anderson 3). In one sense, nationalism can be seen as the performance of an imagined collective identity. Ernest Gellner points out that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (169). The act of imagining and the act of performance both reinforce the fictive and contingent quality of identity. One can understand, then, the ways in which Gallimard believed Song's masquerade due to the contingencies of gender and the discursive formation of national identity. Gallimard believed that Song is a woman, not only to validate his masculine identity,

but also for the validation of his French nationality. If national identity is symbolized and expressed through the masculine and male identity, then one can understand the convergence of heterosexual male desire with the nation's (political) desires of dominance and control. Both desires are rooted in a patriarchal, dualistic ontology that views difference (the other) as a threat. Therefore, if one labels difference in terms of gender and power, it follows that from the perspective of the masculine West, both women and the East are the objects of desire that are exchanged and dominated. Song's analogous passage between gender and nationality suggests that China is the mirror for France to see itself, just as the gendered category of woman creates a metaphoric mirror for men to see themselves and perform in front of in patriarchal societies.

The feminization of China within East-West colonial discourse works from the same ideology of subject formation based on exclusion, as discussed earlier. Judith Butler notes that, "It is important to remember that subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view"(13). In order for the West to be a subject, other countries must be found to be an object to reflect the West's subjectivity. Because subjectivity is framed within a masculine discourse, the othering of China involves its feminization because the "other" must be positioned as feminine to reflect the West's masculine subjectivity. Rey Chow explains this polarized power dynamic further: "China is a spectacle, as what facilitates the production of surplus-value in the politics of knowledge-as-commodity, this China becomes, in its relation to the West, 'woman': in the sense that it is the 'other' onto which the unthinkable . . . is projected" (Chow 87). Chow suggests that the other country, China, embodies all the attributes of what the West is not: weak, intellectually submissive, and militarily passive. This dualistic subjectivity reinforces the interrelatedness of gender and nationalism in the sense that power is coded in terms of gender. The threat of the East is not only a political threat, but a threat to the very center of Western national identity that imagines itself as masculine. Masculine identity must assert its power against the threat of emasculation by the other, which is coded in terms of the Feminine as a "deauthorized subject." As Chow notes, the West can project the "unthinkable" onto China because it is a deauthorized subject which functions only in relation to the masculine West. *M. Butterfly* offers rich dialogue regarding sexual and cultural myths that readers can examine in order to contemplate the influence of gender and nationalism on identity.

Gallimard makes gross assumptions about how China, as a political country, will act in war because he buys into the notion that Eastern countries are weak and, thus, feminine. As mentioned above, by connecting weakness with femininity, Gallimard

highlights a significant trend in the discourse of gender when masculine identity is asserted. The fear of emasculation helps sustain the performance of gender. The rhetoric of gender purports that one cannot be a “real” man and be weak or exhibit feminine attributes. Gallimard surmises that China’s military will act the same way in war as Song acts in bed. He says, “Orientals will always submit to a greater force” (46). This reinforces the stereotype that all Chinese are the same, all women are the same, and China is like a woman in the face of a stronger force like France, who is the masculine dominator. Gallimard’s assumptions promote the ideology that Chinese women are not “real” women, but, instead, are more like a mythic symbol of the ultimate desired object: the other gender, the other sex, the other race, the other country. The feminization of China simultaneously disempowers both women and the East while supporting the dominant gender and government’s right to oppress. Gallimard enacts the dominating Western national identity in relation to Song’s dominated Eastern national identity by believing in and performing the socially dictated male fantasy. He says to Song, “You showed me your true self. When all I loved was a lie. A perfect lie. . .” (89). And Song replies, “So, you never really loved me? Only when I was playing a part?” (89). Gallimard has struck home when he says, “All I loved was a lie” (89). Yes! It was a two-fold lie: that Song as a man was masquerading as a woman and that there was even a true origin of identity that Song was covering up by the masquerade. The deceit rests upon the fact that it was a lie constructed upon a lie: that Song as a male had to masquerade or “pretend” or to be a woman and hide his masculine gender, when, in fact, the masculine gender is just as fictive and performative as the feminine gender. All identity is performative because it is rooted in gender and thus far gender has been argued as a fiction, a performance, and a fantasy that has no “true” foundation.

Gallimard’s conflicting social reality and personal fantasy throughout the play forces the reader to question social notions of identity, gender, and nationalism. As readers, we come to realize that Gallimard’s interior reality is actually produced by social discourse and the public regulation of fantasy through the heterosexual politics of the body. The irony is that this relationship between Gallimard and Song is wholly fictitious, due to the fact that Song is male. There is double irony, however, found in the argument that *all* heterosexual relationships are performative, regardless of the “true” gender and sex of the partners because gender itself is a fiction that causes identity to also be a type of fiction. Sexual partners perform their respective gendered identities dictated by social discourse. Gallimard’s futile efforts to find the foundation of “true” identity and his struggle to distinguish between inner and outer reality is manifested throughout the play with his monologues in prison.

After being tried as a traitor, Gallimard tells us that he gladly refuses Song, being



more content with his fantasy of the Perfect Woman. In the final scene, Gallimard decides that the only way to find his Perfect Woman is to *become* his own fantasy. He chooses to become the female character, Butterfly, from the opera, *Madame Butterfly*, who embodies Gallimard's ultimate Woman. Gallimard becomes the other, the Woman, the Oriental, the non-White. He understands that in being a Man he will always have to desire something outside of himself--a Woman. So, in order to resolve the conflict, he embodies his idea of the Perfect Woman inside of himself and changes one gender mask for the other.

Internalizing the lost object of his desire (evoking characteristic traits of Freudian melancholia), Gallimard incorporates this Woman (Butterfly) inside his own identity. Gallimard *is* Butterfly; i.e. he turns himself into his own ultimate fantasy. He says, "Love warped my judgment, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face . . . until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but . . . a woman" (92). Throughout this monologue, the stage directions detail him dressing up as a Chinese woman. He dresses himself in a Chinese woman's kimono, a woman's wig and woman's make-up. Gallimard takes off his mask of "man" and puts on the mask of "woman." He trades one gender mask for another and enters into the other side of the performance. Literally and metaphorically, Gallimard moves across the market of exchange in terms of gendered bodies and nations. In the end, Gallimard finally resolves his identity conflict rooted in myths of gender by becoming his own unattainable woman finally attained. His identity no longer depends on some(body) outside himself. Now, the dualities are contained inside himself; the outsider is finally inside.

*M. Butterfly* presents the regulatory fiction and performance of gender through the relationship between Gallimard and Song. Cultural fantasies and myths of women and China as other are developed by playwright David Henry Hwang in order to question the historical and social foundations of identity. The idea of a foundation of identity, namely gender, is a highly fictitious category that is discursively produced in a binary, patriarchal, socio-sexual matrix dependent on exclusions. Feminist and gender theories call for the acknowledgment of the fictions, exclusions, and contingent foundations inherent within gender and identity. To demonstrate the fictitiousness of gender, I pointed to Song's masquerade and Gallimard's ability to "buy into it" and directed attention toward Gallimard's internal conflict between perceived notions of reality versus fantasy. The process of subject formation is understood within the broader context of the discourse of nationalism that positions the East as Woman, Object, and "other" in contrast to the West as Man, Subject, and the "Self," calling for a closer examination of the influences of state power, global trade, and imperialism within even the most private, intimate relationship of lovers.

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