

GALLIMARD'S EMBODIMENT OF ORIENTALISM AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN  
CHALLENGING IT

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Throughout the early and mid twentieth century, Orientalist ideas were very prevalent throughout popular media. Mainly describing Asian peoples as being inferior, naïve, or feminine in nature, ideas from Orientalism were expressed in newspapers, books, and even film.<sup>1</sup> Several examples of this view of Asian peoples can be seen in John Luther Long's *Madame Butterfly*, where a Japanese woman is portrayed as submissive, overly-loving, and easily-manipulated. The orientalist ideas of this specific work are effectively challenged by David Henry Hwang, who in his drama, *M. Butterfly*, projects the Orientalist viewpoints of the West toward the Asian East through the main character and uses several unexpected transformations to embarrass the main character and show the true naïvety of Orientalist views.

Throughout *Madame Butterfly*, the idea of an easily-manipulated Oriental is reflected. For instance, after the marriage between B.F. Pinkerton and Cho-Cho-San, the family of Cho-Cho-San comes to alert Pinkerton that his marrying of Cho-Cho-San limits her “opportunities of reappearing on earth in a higher form of life.”<sup>2</sup> Although this is quite a worrying comment for a recently married husband, Pinkerton, being a confident and charming Westerner, is able to joke about the matter and distract their intentions by offering them his liquors “in the generous Western fashion.”<sup>3</sup> Although the family ultimately disowned Cho-Cho-San, Pinkerton was able to manipulate the thoughts of the Oriental family so that “none were more gloomily unfriendly” toward him than before. The ease with which Pinkerton was able to alter the thoughts of Cho-Cho-San's family is due to Orientalist views regarding the superior wit of the Westerner and impressionability of the Oriental.

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1 James Michener, “Novelist James Michener Portrays Romance Between Japanese Owmnen and White Soldiers in *Sayonara*, 1953,” in *Major Problems in Asian American History*, ed. Lon Kurashige et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 321.

2 John Luther Long, *Madame Butterfly*, chap. 3.

3 *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

Along with this, the inferiority and childlike nature of Asian peoples reflected in Orientalist views is shown in almost everything that Cho-Cho-San does. Following the scene where Pinkerton is easily able to charm Cho-Cho-San's family out of any negative feelings, Cho-Cho-San and Pinkerton have a conversation where Cho-Cho-San has a hard time understanding what Pinkerton is saying and has a hard time speaking herself, saying things like “I egspeg I ought be sawry” and “I'm mos' bes' happy female woman in Japan – mebbly in that whole worl’.”<sup>4</sup> Although the misunderstandings between the newly-wed couple could be attributed to their difference in nationalities, it also points to a very childlike innocence and lack of worldly knowledge that Cho-Cho-San seems to possess, further emphasizing an Orientalist view. To further this, after their discussion, Cho-Cho-San is described as throwing “herself like a child upon him”<sup>5</sup>. Given that a child is usually seen as inferior to an adult, this is yet another reference to the Orientalist view of the inferiority of Asian peoples.

Orientalist views do not only state that Asian peoples are inferior, but also that Westerners are superior. This point is reinforced when Cho-Cho-San refers to Pinkerton as a “god” so “tall an' beautiful”,<sup>6</sup> showing that Orientalist ideas not only believe that Westerners are superior, but they also believe that Orientals also see Westerners as superior. Not only Western men view themselves as superior, however, as seen when Pinkerton's American wife speaks in a condescending tone toward Cho-Cho-San, calling her a “plaything” and assuming a superiority by simply entering and interrupting the household of Cho-Cho-San.<sup>7</sup>

These Orientalist viewpoints are played upon and challenged by David Henry Hwang in *M. Butterfly*, where the protagonist, Gallimard, embodies all Orientalist views and sees the world

4 John Luther Long, *Madame Butterfly*, chap. 3.

5 *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

6 *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

7 *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

through an Orientalist lens. From the confines of a jail cell, Gallimard recalls the events that led up to the meeting of his “Butterfly”, an Oriental whom he had fallen in love with. Upon watching a rendition of Giacomo Puccini's dramatic adaptation of Luther Long's *Madame Butterfly*, Gallimard believes that he has found the perfect Oriental woman: Song, the actor who played Cho-Cho-San.<sup>8</sup> Despite the commonality of men playing womens' roles in Chinese theater, Gallimard immediately believes the actor who played Cho-Cho-San to be a woman, reflecting the Orientalist view believing in a general femininity of Asian peoples.

During the first encounter between Gallimard and Song, Song shows large amounts of disrespect toward Gallimard and Westerners in general; however, blind to reality, he continues his pursuit with the belief that he “deserve[s] a Butterfly”<sup>9</sup>. Despite evidence to the contrary, Gallimard's Orientalist views cause him to believe that simply because the actor who played Cho-Cho-San is Asian, she must be very much like Cho-Cho-San in submissive, caring, and loyal personality. This is further emphasized during one of Gallimard and Song's first private meetings, where Song acts in an understandably nervous fashion. In response to this nervousness, Gallimard concludes that “she feels inferior ... to me.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that this is the first conclusion that Gallimard comes to shows that he feels that Asian women, especially Song, are inferior to Westerners and that they should feel this way as well.

Gallimard is not the only Westerner who is shown to have these beliefs. During one of his shifts at the French embassy in Beijing, it is revealed that a coworker is aware of Gallimard's relationship with Song. Without any knowledge about Gallimard's partner except for the fact that she is Chinese, the coworker immediately assumes “she must be gorgeous” and that she is a

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8 David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988), 18.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 *Ibid.*, 28.

highly desirable “lotus blossom”.<sup>11</sup> A lotus blossom, being soft and gentle, is a perfect description for the Orientalist view of the femininity of Asian peoples. The sharing of these views between Gallimard and the entirety of the embassy staff shows the normalcy of Gallimard's skewed Orientalist views throughout Westerners.

The Oriental views that Gallimard holds do not only extend toward Song specifically, however, but they also extend toward the entirety of Asian people. This is revealed in Gallimard's predictions of the Chinese and Vietnamese regarding the American war effort. In response to a question about Chinese viewpoints, Gallimard describes them as being submissive and wanting “to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power”, “always submit[ting] to a greater force”<sup>12</sup>, which is obviously a very Orientalist viewpoint. Since Gallimard's views are expressed toward different things and not just the woman he loves, he proves to be an even stronger representation of Orientalist viewpoints as a whole.

As the relationship between Song and Gallimard continues, Song's personality seemingly begins to morph into something that represents the Orientalist views of Gallimard, especially after Gallimard returns to Song after a small affair with another woman. Song is pictured as singing softly in a “childlike” trance, saddened by her disloyal lover.<sup>13</sup> This set of actions, being described as “childlike”, are very similar to the actions of the childlike Cho-Cho-San from *Madame Butterfly*, and seemingly confirms that the Oriental viewpoints of Gallimard toward Asians are not necessarily incorrect; however, Gallimard soon discovers that this apparent transformation is nothing but an act.

David Henry Hwang's challenging of Orientalist views is realized when it is revealed that

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11 David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988), 38.

12 *Ibid.*, 37.

13 *Ibid.*, 46.

everything Gallimard believed in was wrong, showing the absurdity of his views. Gallimard's general Orientalist views toward the Orient were proven to be incorrect when he was fired from the American embassy in Beijing because “everything ... predicted here in the Orient... just hasn't happened”<sup>14</sup>. His views that the American people were superior and that Orientals were submissive seem laughable after it was revealed that “the only thing they're trading out there are Western heads.”<sup>15</sup>

Even more of his Oriental views were proved wildly incorrect when it was revealed that Song, the actor who played Cho-Cho-San in *Madama Butterfly*, was male. Gallimard, believing that he fell in love with the “perfect woman”, is made to look like a fool as Song talks about how easily Gallimard was tricked, believing that he found his “fantasy woman.”<sup>16</sup> This comedic revealing that Gallimard was unable to detect the gender of a person he fell in love with speaks for the entire Orientalist perspective, showing that it incorrectly judges Asian peoples as being feminine.

Although it may be argued that since Song chose to disguise himself as a woman, she is reinforcing the idea that the Orient may act feminine, Song directly disproves this in his defending speech to the judge. When Song says “You expect Oriental countries to submit to your guns, and you expect Oriental women to be submissive to your men.”<sup>17</sup>, he proves that he is well aware of the Western Orientalist viewpoints, showing that he simply took advantage of them in order to give the Chinese a military advantage. Song's experience as an actor in the Chinese theater makes it even more convincing that he was simply taking advantage of the Orientalist viewpoint, showing that he is not feminine in nature, but trained to act as such by profession.

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14 David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988), 53.

15 *Ibid.*, 53.

16 *Ibid.*, 62.

17 *Ibid.*, 62.

Thus, the ease with which Song was able to take advantage of Gallimard's incorrect Orientalist viewpoints shows just how wildly incorrect they really were.

The ideas of Orientalism are clearly reflected in the actions of Pinkerton and Cho-Cho-San in Luther Long's *Madame Butterfly*. The same views of Orientalism are perpetuated through the thoughts and actions of Gallimard in Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. The story, being told from his perspective, effectively challenges the views of Orientalism as it is revealed that all of Gallimard's beliefs toward Asian peoples were incorrect. Unable to handle the tragedy of being incorrect about the one he loves and the Orient as a whole, Gallimard commits suicide and disappears – just as Orientalism should do.

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