

Life against Death: A Psychological Study of Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*

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Keywords: gaze; heroism; imagination; denial of death

Abstract: In the play *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard has a desire for heroism, which, is influenced and constructed by the circumstances and the people around him. The observation of the people, especially that of Song's, is internalized in Gallimard, who follows the imagination. In this play, Marc is the reincarnation of the gaze. Gallimard establishes his heroism, which is created by the gaze of Song, or by the imaginary Butterfly. He sticks to it, protects it, and when truth is unveiled, he still fights for it even with the sacrifice of his mortal life.

1 Introduction

It has been suggested by many scholars that self-respect is part of human beings' nature. In Greek mythology, Narcissus dies of falling in love with the image of his own, from which derived the modern word "narcissism". And we know from later psychological studies that narcissism leads to the urge for heroism, as Earnest Becker, a cultural anthropologist and writer, has argued, "The problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child's need for self-esteem as the condition for his life." (7) As far as I am concerned, the play *M. Butterfly* also touches this ancient and yet vital truth, that is, the common instincts of human beings' fighting against death.

M. Butterfly, written by David Henry Hwang, an Asian American playwright, is a play based on a true story between a former French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer and spy. It shocks the world since after 20-years' knowing each other and many years living together, Gallimard, the diplomat, still fails to recognize the real gender of Song, the Peking opera singer, as a man. This play invites a brilliant analysis on such issues as race (Occidental and Oriental), gender (male, female and androgyny), sexuality (homosexual relationship), and the "constructed" identity and so forth, and yet I think it goes beyond that. I see a hero grows inside Gallimard from the gaze of Song, and I see how he defends for his honor, even at a cost of sacrificing his own life. Gallimard's committing suicide has been interpreted by many critics as "cowardice". They also suggest it signifies Song's success, who overthrows the "femininity" of his/her own and subverts the masculinity of Gallimard, or the Occidental. However, as far as I am concerned, in terms of the love affair itself, there is no winner nor loser; while in terms of the characters, Gallimard actually is fighting for honor, and his immortal life.

Therefore, in this paper, I will try to explore how Gallimard's subjectivity is being constructed by the gaze of the others, especially that of Song. I propose that the gaze Gallimard "sees" is imagination or deception, which, however, helps establish the heroism in him. Once the heroism is realized by him and confirmed by the people around him, Gallimard sticks to it, protects it and the final suicide is an act of rebellion rather than retreat.

2 Heroics and the Gaze

Becker suggests that "What man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem." (3) Such self-esteem is also what he calls the "heroics", which, as he reveals, is the common desire of human beings, "he has to feel and believe that what he is doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful." (Becker 6) Such heroism doesn't necessarily mean that one must become a great person who makes great contribution to the human cause, such as that of great scientists, famous

politicians or entrepreneurs and so on. It refers to the basic self-reassuring, the need of being approved. Most of time, one would hide his/her heroism and protect it rather than expose it, and usually it sounds not that great. "We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children." (Becker 4) In *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard's heroism refers to masculinity, confidence, and a will of control and so on, while Song's heroism refers to his/her being a good actor/actress or a great spy. But the question is: how the subject comes to realize the "hero" lies in him?

Jacques Lacan, in one of his seminars in 1964, suggested that the gaze of others is the way we come to know ourselves, "From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure." (Lacan 83) In other words, the subject comes to know himself through the gaze he imagines rather than through his observations. The gaze is different from the eyes, "The gaze I encounter is, not a see gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of others." (Lacan 84) Briefly speaking, the eyes refer to how we *see* the world while the gaze is how we *imagine* others the way they see us, and since it is imaginary, it is *meconnaissance*, or misunderstanding. Thus, in Lacan's words,

The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing... this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows. (75)

In this play, there are different kinds of gazes. Gallimard is an audience when watching Song's performance while they are watched by the "real" audience of *M. Butterfly*. Song, as a spy, is also observed by the Chinese authority. But let's just focus on Gallimard, seeing how the others' "observations" influence him and how he internalizes those gazes and changes the way he looks himself.

The first time Gallimard meets Song is when he/she is performing Cio-Cio-San, or Butterfly, a character in *Madame Butterfly*, which tells a story of a Japanese girl falling in love with Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy. Butterfly is purchased by Pinkerton with less than sixty-six cents, and falls in love with him, gives birth to a child but ends up with being dumped by him, who marries a woman after returning to his own country and coming back for claiming the child who is raised up by Butterfly alone.

Gallimard is transfixed at the first sight of Song, whose appearance and manner as a delicate oriental woman has awakened the hidden desire of Gallimard, "We, who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful, yet somehow believe, like Pinkerton, that we deserve a Butterfly." (13) Laura Mulvey in one of her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" suggests that woman's role as image while man as bearer of the look (11). It does not necessarily reveal the sex differences, but the connotation behind the sex. As we know, traditionally, the west and the east form a kind of dichotomy, with the former being regarded as masculine and the latter feminine. Therefore, what Mulvey suggests is that there is a power relationship between the characters. "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly." (Mulvey 11) In this case, Gallimard projects his phantasy on to Song onstage, as is shown to the audiences with the materialized pinup girl, who reveals the desire when Gallimard was a boy.

Song notices this and decides to make use of it for his job as a Chinese spy. He/She "takes" Madame Butterfly offstage and continues his/her acting before Gallimard. He/She appears as submissive and feminine, which arouses Gallimard's heroism and makes him more confident and masculine. Actually, it is not that important of figuring out how Gallimard is being misled by Song, but how he internalizes Song's gazes and establishes his own heroism. In this play, the internalized gaze, or the "all-seeing world", is made visualized with the usage of dramatic technique, incarnated by the character Marc.

3 The Materialized Gaze

Like *Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *M. Butterfly* is a memory play with dramatic lighting and musical motifs for the characters. Also, like Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* and his other plays, this play assumes the *verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect – to list the switching roles played by the same character as one example. Apart from Marc, the same character also takes the roles of man No.2 and consul Sharpless. Such applications of theatrical techniques manage to materialize the psychological activities of the characters, such as the voice of the pinup girl, and help to provoke a critical thinking in the audiences. As is mentioned by Kathryn, “The structure of the stage and the use of spot lighting isolate *M. Butterfly*'s main character, Rent Gallimard, and allow the audience to “map” him without distractions.” (391)

In this play, Marc appears as a school guy in Gallimard's dreams after he meets Song as well as the first time he lies to his wife for the sake of another woman. In the dream, Marc's words reveal something that haunts Gallimard since his meeting with Song.

MARC: “Mutual”? “Mutual” What does that mean?

GALLIMARD: You heard? (23)

Since the conversation between Gallimard and Song is kind of private, no one else is supposed to be present, not to say an old schoolmate. It is natural to assume that the conversation between the two reveals Gallimard's inner struggle. As is said by Lacan, “Our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows.”(75) And “I am the consciousness of this dream.” (Lacan 76) In other words, Marc represents the consciousness of Gallimard. As is mentioned above, it is the dramatic technique that allows this play to bring one's consciousness into something the audience can see. The same is true in Scene XI when Marc appears as a bureaucrat.

GALLIMARD: I hear your voice everywhere now. Even in the midst of work.

MARC: That's because I'm *watching* you – all the time. (28)

This conversation not only reveals that Marc is the incarnation of Gallimard, but also supports that the subject comes to know himself through the imaginary gaze of the others. As Lacan claims, “[We] are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world.” (75) Such gaze comes from the others but not specific or concrete ones. The way the others appear to look at Gallimard are internalized in him, and he “follows” that gaze. We can see from their conversation and some asides of Gallimard that how he is being looked at and how he “follows” that.

Indeed, the appearance of Marc as “the most popular guy in school” (28) reveals Gallimard's desire to become him as a “hero” and also his self-abasement in front of a “successful” man. Why does Gallimard self-abase himself? From what is revealed by Marc (or Gallimard), we know that when Gallimard was a young boy in his grammar school, he was voted “least likely to be invited to a party” (8) and he held the title for many years. Gallimard thinks himself the one “women do not flirt with” (22), who is “clumsy and got zits” (12), who “no fantasy woman would ever want” (16), and his first sexual experience even makes him “scared”. All these show how the gaze from others influences his subjectivity and also his later marriage and career – he banishes passion, marries a woman older than him out of practicality, and “[takes] a vow renouncing love” (16), regarding himself as one who deserves no desirable woman.

It is Song who changes the way Gallimard sees himself. However, the way Gallimard imagines how he is seen by Song is just something constructed by Song. This also illustrates why the gaze is *misconnaissance*, or misunderstanding.

4 The Gaze of the Characters

Song notices what Gallimard wants – the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man – and he/she “styles accordingly”. As an actor/actress, and “a man who knows how a woman is supposed to act” (49), he/she successfully cheats Gallimard into loving him/her. But is that all? Is Gallimard only a doll being manipulated by Song? Apparently this play goes more complex than

that. Let's see how Gallimard imagines the way being seen and loved by a "perfect woman" and how his hidden heroism is awakened by that.

In the first conversation between Gallimard and Song, we see the more "real" Song, the one who is not acting – at least not intentionally. Song regards the play he/she performed as "ridiculous" and rudely opines that Gallimard should "expand [his] mind" since his knowledge of China or of the Oriental is so restricted that they are nothing but "fantasies" and imperialist (which turns out to be utilized by Song as a means of "educating" Gallimard). But during the next meeting, Song retracts his/her words by saying that "fascination is imperialist" and yet "mutual". This flirt, however, is taken serious by Gallimard, which is materialized by Marc in his dreams, "[Mutual] means the money is in the bank, you only have to write the check!"(23) This actually reveals Gallimard's thoughts, "She must surrender to you. It is her destiny."(23) This knowledge, though based on Gallimard's misunderstanding of the Oriental, is reinforced by Song, who later takes his/her initiatives to call him and invites him to attend one of his/her shows. The message he/she gives to Gallimard is that he/she has been struggling to make this call for a whole night. The following behaviors of him/her makes it more convincing that "she has an interest in [Gallimard]" (25), which makes him believe that "she is afraid of [him]" (25).

Actually, Gallimard also notices the changes of Song later and remarks that his/her behavior is "much differently than the first night" (28) and yet he doesn't doubt it because of his reinforcing confidence aroused by his imagination of Song's gaze and his colleagues as well.

Song strengthens Gallimard's imagination by language. In front of Gallimard, he/she behaves timidly on the one hand while on the other hand, he/she "is outwardly bold and outspoken." (25) Normally a traditional Chinese would not say something like "A small, frightened heart beats too quickly and gives me away", and "I am silly. Light-hearted" – conservative Chinese would not be so outspoken. Had Gallimard known a bit more of Chinese culture, he would not be so easily cheated.

Song is in effect reinforcing the "traditional" image of Chinese in Gallimard's mind, who finds himself "finally gained power over a beautiful woman" (31) after the "successful" experiment of him. Besides, Gallimard's usage of language also reveals his desire to be a hero ever since the "love" of Song is confirmed; Gallimard never changes his naming him/her as Butterfly. As Suner points out, "The metaphors that Gallimard chooses to name their relationship are no less revealing with regard to his desire to conquer and dominate." (49)

Gallimard's confidence has not totally constructed until the job promotion, before which he is still afraid of being punished by God. But the promotion makes him believe "God is a man" and that "[he] was suddenly initiated into the way of the world" (32). The changes in him later are confirmed by the people around him, for instance, Toulon appraises him as a "new aggressive confident thing." (32) Even when his secret is revealed, what he receives is congratulation rather than blames.

The climax of Song's "performance" in front of Gallimard is his/her pretending to be pregnant. This, in reality, speaks more strongly than anything else that has reinforced Gallimard's "heroism" – in this case, the heroism refers to fertility potential. Sometimes Gallimard is still afraid of being laughed as "not a man", as is revealed when he is asked by his wife to go to the doctor for the possible sterility of him, "I'm a modern man, Butterfly. And yet, I don't want to go...I feel like God himself is laughing at me if I can't produce a child." (40)

Song's gaze, like Marc's voice, goes with Gallimard everywhere, even when he is having an extra-extramarital affair, which is in truth Gallimard's another experiment to prove his "heroism" (after the one he makes to test Song's love). He gets excited not from the naked western woman, but from Song's gaze, which confirms his masculinity. He imagines her as Pinkerson and Song as Butterfly and admits, "It was [Song's] tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee." (44)

5 Dying for Heroism

In effect, Gallimard does not always that believe Song, which can be seen from his struggle to strip Song's clothes. He tries to carefully protect the happiness. "Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would found? Perhaps. Happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it." (60) He even "begs" Song not to strip when Song suggests doing so – "Every night, you (Song) say you're going to strip, but then I beg you and you stop!" (66) He is afraid of something that would destroy his heroism, which can also be seen from his helping him/her photocopying the sensitive documents without even asking what to do with them. Finally, when he meets the naked Song, he confesses, "[he] knew all the time somewhere that [his] happiness was temporary, [his] love a deception. But [his] mind kept the knowledge at bay." (66) But he turns to the imaginary Butterfly soon, "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man" (66). This statement reveals his awareness that his heroism is established by the imagination of a woman, who is created by a man.

Gallimard chooses his pride, the pride of being a man. He chooses to remain with Butterfly, the one who makes him a hero. For him, "death with honor is better than life with dishonor." (17) In the end, he dresses himself up as Butterfly, makes up his face and plunges the knife into his body, killing both himself and his imaginary Butterfly, and in this way his heroism lasts. His heroism is like a dilemma since he can only make a choice between the immortal honor and the mortal life. Such heroism, though defines by him, he still fights for it, protects it, and sacrifices for it.

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