

STRAYING FROM THE BINARY IN DAVID HENRY HWANG'S M. BUTTERFLY

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ABSTRACT

There is limited literary criticism of queer theory in *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang. Research articles, books, and interviews are used to discuss the subtle ways that queer theory is present in ways of homosexuality and nonbinary gender. The previous literary criticism on this play is expanded by looking at the ways the two main characters struggle against common binaries that were seen at the time the play was written and in present day.

In this paper, a nonbinary gender approach is applied to David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*. Also examined is how Song Liling, the Chinese spy, seems comfortable with being gender fluid and not conforming strictly to either male or female stereotypes. The use of a nonbinary approach to expand prior literary criticism, argues that Song is nonbinary and that the character René Gallimard believes despite his impulses that gender is strictly male or female. Most other literary criticism applies queer theory, but examines sexuality and gender roles in relation to ethnic stereotypes.

Key words: LGBTQ, nonbinary gender, gay, queer, asian men, nonbinary biological Asian male, world literature studies

David Henry Hwang uses his play *M. Butterfly* (1988) to create a storyline that allows characters to fight against common binaries of gender, sexuality, and race. The gender-related literary criticism I have found thus far is limited to homosexuality within the framework of queer theory. In contrast, I apply a nonbinary approach to the play.

Specifically, I examine the ways in which the characters Song Liling and René Gallimard challenge common binaries that are expected of both. To respect the changing pronouns of Song Liling, I will use "they/them" to refer to Song; for René Gallimard, who identifies as male until the last scene of the play, I will use "he/him."

For the Week 4 discussion in ENG-L379 American Ethnic and Minority Literature, the class discussed David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and the stereotypes that can be seen throughout. Some of the students in this class chose to focus on the gender and sexuality stereotypes, which ties in with my nonbinary approach. For example, Sarah Hoffman explains that the Spanish word for "butterfly" is a "pejorative used to refer to non-binary males." This connection is compelling since Hwang has not specifically stated anything about having a nonbinary approach to this play. Brittni Walker also makes a statement that encourages the idea of a nonbinary gender approach to *M. Butterfly*; she states, "Even with people who know Song is a man, and even when Song is alone, s/he is playing the part of being the woman." This is important to note since Song lives as a woman for twenty years, rather than only taking on the role of a woman when in the presence of Gallimard.

While it can be interpreted that Song is nonbinary, an approach like this is not something that I have been able to find in prior literary criticism. The criticism that I can find that would relate to nonbinary gender is limited to homosexuality. The closest work of literary criticism regarding a nonbinary gender approach is in Chong-suk Han's "Geisha of a Different Kind: Gay Asian Men and the Gendering of Sexual Identity," which discusses how Asian men are stereotypically seen as being effeminate. Other than this article, most other literary criticism focuses on race and how certain cultures view sexuality, such as in Michelle Balaev's "Performing Gender and Fictions of the Nation in David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*," Jon Rossini's "From *M. Butterfly* to Bondage: David Henry Hwang's Fantasies of Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Gender," and Ashis Sengupta's "Different Strokes: The Chinese

Male Subject in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *M. Butterfly*.”

These articles discuss how culture plays a part in how individuals see sexuality, with an emphasis on homosexuality. Specifically, the authors discuss how Asian cultures view sexuality so that we can gain an understanding of how difficult it may have been for Song Liling to accept themselves as nonbinary.

Aside from these articles that examine homosexuality and gender in relation to race, I was also able to find literary criticism that addresses how David Henry Hwang uses binary oppositions. An interview with Hwang conducted by John DiGaetani gives Hwang's insight into the controversies that he creates with this play; this includes the impact that it has on the readers since this takes on such large controversies even in today's time. Hwang does not necessarily discuss gender as a major controversy during this interview. Instead, he focuses on how Song can play a feminine role in a way that shows how “only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (Hwang 2.7). Robert Skloot's “Breaking the Butterfly: The Politics of David Henry Hwang” also examines ways that Hwang goes against what was politically correct at the time *M. Butterfly* was written and how Hwang chooses to challenge these binaries. Since I am applying a nonbinary approach, I am breaking the common binary approaches associated with this play, representing how productive looking from a different perspective can be. My approach departs from prior literary criticism that I have found, so I can update and complicate the analysis of *M. Butterfly* in a way that illuminates the characters Song Liling and René Gallimard.

Now, David Henry Hwang creates Song Liling and René Gallimard to be two highly controversial characters who are creating a fantasy together. Gallimard lives and dies in this fantasy while Song lives a truly misleading life that Gallimard is unaware of. Gallimard, a character who believes one must be strictly male or female, falls in love with the fantasy of Song, a character who believes gender can be fluid and free. These two have an affair for twenty years with only Song having

extensive knowledge of their partner's gender identity. This results in sudden turmoil for Gallimard's fantasy once he inevitably discovers the truth.

From the start, Song Liling shows many characteristics that point to their being nonbinary. The biggest identifier is that Song maintains a physical and emotional relationship with Gallimard for over twenty years, even playing the role while Gallimard is not physically around. Showing both feminine and masculine roles goes along with scholar Charlie McNabb's book (2018) that states, “gender is an action rather than a state” (6). This quotation helps prove how Song's showing the feminine and masculine sides of themselves gives the impression that they believe gender is meant to be fluid rather than something that is strictly set at birth. Song shows that they are fine embodying the female physical identity while having the anatomy of a male. While playing the feminine role, they state, “I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man,” which demonstrates how they are okay exploiting the stereotype of Asian men being effeminate (Hwang 3.1). In Song's eyes, it is okay to be gender fluid and show masculine and feminine features, which is highly different from how Gallimard sees it.

On the other hand, René Gallimard believes one must be either completely male or completely female; gender fluidity is not part of this binary that he follows. This is ironic since Gallimard falls in love with someone who is fluid with gender, but this helps Gallimard fall more in love with the fantasy that is created. Gallimard identifies as a male the entire play up until the final scene, when he suddenly identifies as female. This takes place after Song starts playing a masculine role. Gallimard decides to take on the female role so that the fantasy can play out despite Gallimard's rejecting Song as a male. Gallimard does not necessarily show characteristics of being nonbinary but shows characteristics of being queer, though he does not accept homosexuality as a proper form of love.

Notably, this fantasy is all that Gallimard thinks of, which is why he is willing to switch roles for it to play out. He goes from being the male to identifying as the female within the heterosexual relationship he believes he is in. Though he switches roles with Song, he quickly sacrifices himself to die with the fantasy. Gallimard believes that true love involves the women being “willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man” (Hwang 3.3). Gallimard embodies this phrase by becoming the woman that is willing to sacrifice herself for love, in this case, the love of the person within the fantasy, not necessarily for the love of Song. Making this sacrifice is Gallimard’s way of honoring the fantasy. This leads to Gallimard’s dying with honor, rather than continuing living with the dishonor of not accepting the love that he has for the fantasy he creates. He is fooled by one he believes he is truly in love with and chooses to end the relationship with what he thinks is real, instead of facing the reality that has been revealed.

Now, Gallimard may switch roles and start taking on the female role so that Song can take on the male role, but this is so Gallimard can still deny that he is queer. Skloot states, “Gallimard kills himself to maintain the political image of the world he prefers” (61), which is a world of heteronormativity. Throughout the play, little hints are dropped that show Gallimard knows that Song is biologically a male. This is why Gallimard sees Song as perfect and can have an emotional and physical relationship with them when he could not with people who have female anatomy. For instance, Gallimard states while watching a woman disrobe, “my skin is hot, but my penis is soft. Why?” (Hwang 1.5). This question of asking why he cannot become aroused while watching a woman get undressed is a prime example of one of the hints that Hwang drops to show Gallimard is queer, without accepting himself for this “untraditional” sexuality. This line helps show the reader how he is not able to sexually have a relationship with a person who has female anatomy and find pleasure, but still tries to have these relationships to convince himself that he is heterosexual. Gallimard is in such denial of his sexuality that he feels

the need to transition to the female role to continue to fit the standard heteronormative relationship during the final scene.

Despite all claims, it can be seen that Song is not the “perfect woman” that they are thought to be. Act one, Scene six is the first instance of Song and Gallimard interacting. This is Gallimard’s initial reaction to seeing Song and finding them beautiful; it is the start of his fantasy. However, this scene gives an insight that Song is not the perfectly submissive woman that Gallimard expects. During this initial moment, Song challenges Gallimard in a way that is stereotypically unfeminine and should be his first clue that Song is not a cisgender female. Song states, “It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man” (Hwang 1.6), which is a perfect example of these challenging ways. Gallimard is so caught up in the fantasy already being created in his mind that he does not care to see that from the start, Song is not the perfectly kind, submissive woman he finds her to be. It is from this moment that Gallimard is infatuated with whom he believes Song to be, and Song feels as if they can start playing into this fantasy in order to get closer to Gallimard for the role they are playing.

To fit Song’s fluid mentality, they do not seem to necessarily care if they come off as homosexual or heterosexual, which would fit into the contemporary Chinese culture. Song even makes sexual references to embrace the homosexuality that they know they are engaging in, such as in a conversation with Chin, stating,

Chin: Remember: when working for the Great Proletarian State, you represent our Chairman Mao in every position you take.

Song: I’ll try to imagine the Chairman taking my positions.
(Hwang 2.5)

This takes place right after Chin harasses Song for always wearing a dress, and Song states that “it’s a . . . disguise” rather than admitting to committing what Chin would consider a sin and abomination to the nation (Hwang 2.5). Song knows that they are nonbinary but is

not willing to admit it just yet. They use their role as a female spy as a “secret gratification of [their] gay desire” (Sengupta 74). This shows a way they can engage in a type of love they prefer without committing a criminal act. Song embraces their feminine side when they are with Gallimard; they are not afraid to hide their true feelings during the affair, even willing to play the role and wait while Gallimard tries, and fails, to maintain a relationship with another woman.

Additionally, John DiGaetani states during his interview with David Henry Hwang that Gallimard “had an affair with a man and never told anyone, not even himself” (DiGaetani 145). Gallimard is in such denial of his queerness that he internally knows Song is biologically a male but does not question them once during their twenty years together. Gallimard even backs down from making Song strip at times because “[he] knew, somewhere deep down, what [he] would find” and does not want to ruin the perfect fantasy that has been created in his mind (Hwang 2.7). Embracing the queerness and accepting it would require Gallimard to admit that he is queer, which is not something he has any intention of doing. It would also make Song publicly go against their entire nation’s policies and put them in a troubling position. For twenty years only Song knows what they are engaging in but does not dare bring it to the surface because of the challenges it would create.

Further, Chong-suk Han states, “one racial group of gay men occupies a predominantly feminine space” (5). This represents how Asian men are seen as effeminate, with even more feminine stereotypes being associated with homosexual Asian men. Song, a nonbinary biological Asian male, chooses not to embrace the negativity associated with this stereotype, but instead embraces it to full effect by identifying with it and with femininity. There is a particularly powerful line where Gallimard states, “I think you must have some kind of identity problem” after Song strips completely naked and shows the biological male anatomy that Gallimard has never seen before on them (Hwang 3.2). Song chooses to strip naked so that Gallimard can see the full person that he created his fantasy with for many years. Gallimard

makes this statement to discourage the idea that he may indeed be queer after this truth has come out. Gallimard does not want to accept the homosexuality that he feels and instead chooses to belittle Song, whom he had thought he loved dearly.

Concurrently, Gallimard comes to his senses and accepts that he does, in fact, not love Song, but is in love with the fantasy he created. However, it is hard for Gallimard to live with knowing that Song is not the woman that was expected. This results in Gallimard’s sacrificing himself for the love of the fantasy. Rossini argues that Hwang uses this ending of everything coming together and then abruptly stopping with the sacrifice to have the audience “question this ‘act of love’” (72). This ending, this final scene, this final moment, is it an act of love? Or is it an escape from the truth that has just been revealed? In Gallimard’s eyes, it is an act of love by switching roles, becoming the butterfly that he wished Song to be, and ending with a true sacrifice for the love they held for each other during the fantasy that was created. Even in this final act, Gallimard is still running from the idea that he is queer. He admits that he loved the mistaken identity of Song, but he still feels the need to switch roles and become the female for their final moment of love, creating a heteronormative image. Up until death, Gallimard denies that he is queer so that he can still live in the fantasy that was created and run from his sexuality.

Consequently, Song is stuck with this ending of being in a new role, but being in a new role for a fantasy that no longer exists. They finally come to Gallimard as nonbinary and accept themselves for being gender fluid in a way that was not accepted at that time, and still not fully accepted now, resulting in the one they learned to love leaving to fulfill the fantasy he has created in his own mind. Living the truth is too hard, but in the end Song must keep living that truth without their co-partner. Balaev writes that Hwang “expertly constructs the love affair” (610) between Song and Gallimard, though it is a love affair that is not fully accepted by Gallimard. Gallimard cannot bear to live knowing the truth behind the affair. A fantasy created on lies from

both parties results in an unfortunate situation where one cannot learn to accept his sexuality, while the other fully accepts their gender fluidity. Two broken binaries create one fantasy and it ends with the ultimate sacrifice. ■

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