



Gender Truth 's': Deconstructing the Norms of an Essentially Heteronormative Society Analysing *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang and *Written on the Body* by Janette Winterson

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Abstract

Truth or facts are merely negotiated beliefs, the products of social construction and fabrication, not 'objective' or 'external' features of the world. Truth's questioning can be heard in Simone de Beauvoir's challenge to existing gender norms. In her groundbreaking and canonical work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir set the course for the subsequent study of the "woman question" in the West by putting the issue of gender into focus. This paper studies the postmodern work, *M Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang which questions the mistaken gender identities and binaries constructed. *M Butterfly* dazzles its readers through subversion of the narrative conventions of "submissive oriental women and cruel white man". In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson deconstructs the feminine/masculine binary by telling a story with a genderless narrator, thus showing that there are so many actions, behaviors, and roles that are not related to gender, though they might be assigned a gender association in society. The world is no more eras of closed and deaf monoglossia as Bhaktin says in his seminal work *The Dialogic Imagination*, there are numerous realities, multiple truths and no "Truth".

The 'Truth' in our societies has been those characterized by the western episteme that stems from the thoughts of ancient philosophers in Greece to Enlightenment and beyond. Based on those centers/norms our world constructed categories, hierarchies and binaries. Norms on sex and gender did not escape the influence of western episteme. Gendered ideologies and sexiest reasoning existing in our societies stem from perceived biological differences between the sexes which are supported by dualistic paradigms that have characterized the western thought.

Contradictions concerning reality and questioning of 'The Truth' emerged in a world that was fraught with horrors of world wars, inundated with technology and affected by the manipulative power of mass media. The post-war period saw Post Modern movements in every genre, which were given huge impetus by its influential thinkers through their emerging unsettling voices dismantling the belief systems of the west. The novel was one genre that actively created the polyglot world and actively reflected the decenteredness of post modernism. Through language the novels subverted those compulsory gender norms constructed by a "phallogocentric society", used as a tool to subjugate women primarily through their bodies.

The heteronormative society associated the body to the ways it should perform certain rules, male and female were attributed with certain characteristics considering it as natural or biological like the sex. Judith Butler questions the belief that certain gendered behaviours are natural, illustrating the ways that one's learned performance of gendered behaviour (what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity) is an act of sorts, a performance, one that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. Butler thus offers what she herself calls "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts." (Performativity, 270) But, thinking of gender as 'doing' does not guarantee that one will avoid reifying binary gender. Although rethinking gender as performative allows the concept to include a wider array of gender constructions, describing distinct gender productions and ascribing them to differences in biological sex reinforces the binary system.

The relationship between gender and power in a colonial or post-colonial world necessarily confronts binary gender, because looking at this relationship means looking at "men" and "women." The binary is always already constructed when one is oppressed or viewed as an object of subjugation. The perception of west about orient as 'exotic' further objectifies orient women.

M. Butterfly suggests the ways Hwang challenges our very notions of words such as truth and our assumptions about gender, and, how *M. Butterfly* subverts and undermines a notion of unitary identity based on a space of inner truth and the plenitude of referential meaning. Through its use of gender ambiguity present in its very title- Monsieur or Madame, Mr. or Ms. Butterfly. *M. Butterfly* opens out the self to the world, softening or even dissolving those boundaries, where identity becomes spatialized as a series of shifting nodal points constructed in and through fields of power and meaning. Finally, *M. Butterfly* intertwines geography and gender, where East/West and male/female become mobile positions in a field of power relations. It suggests that analyses of shifting gender identity must also take into account the ways gender is projected onto geography, and that international power relations and race are also, inevitably, inscribed in our figurations of gender

The play opens with ex-diplomat Rene Gallimard in prison. (His last name, the name of a famous French publishing house, resonates with notions of narrative and of textual truth, and his first name, which sounds the same in its masculine and feminine forms, underlines the theme of gender ambiguity. "It is an enchanted space I occupy", he announces, and, indeed, it is enchanted-a space of fantasy, a prison of cultural conventions and stereotypes where Gallimard's insistence on reading a complex, shifting reality through the Orientalist texts of the past makes him the prisoner and, eventually, the willing sacrificial victim of his own culturally and historically

produced conventions. Gallimard will be "seduced," "deluded," and "imprisoned" by clinging to an ideology of meaning as reference and to an essentialist notion of identity. For him, cliched images of gender, race, and geography unproblematically occupy the inner space of identity, enabling opera star Song Liling to seduce through the play of inner truth and outer appearance. The first encounter between Song and Gallimard occurs in a performance at the home of an ambassador, where Song plays the death scene from *Madama Butterfly*. Clothed as a Japanese woman, wearing a woman's makeup, Song is "believable" as *Butterfly*. This "believability" occurs on the planes of gender, size, and geography, when Gallimard gushes to Song about her/his wonderful performance, so convincing in contrast to the "huge women in so much bad makeup" who play *Butterfly* in the West.

Gallimard adheres to stereotyped images of women and of the Orient, where he assumes a transparent relationship between outer appearance and the inner truth of self. The signs of this identity are clothing and makeup, and since Song is dressed as a woman, Gallimard never doubts Song's essential femininity. Gallimard's equally essentialized readings of "the Orient" enable Song to throw Gallimard off balance with her initial boldness. Later, Song becomes flirtatious, and strategically exhibits the appropriate signs of her inner, essential Oriental female self: modesty, embarrassment, timidity. Gallimard responds by thinking, "I know she has an interest in me. I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education" (25). Thus, Gallimard reads Song's Westernized, masculine identity as mere veneer, masking the fullness of the inner truth of Oriental womanhood. However she may try to alter this substance of identity, in Gallimard's eyes, she like *Madame Butterfly* will never be able to overcome her essential Oriental nature. This conventional reading of identity enables Song to manipulate the conventions to further her ends, to become more intimate with Gallimard, and, eventually, to pass on to the government of the People's Republic of China the diplomatic secrets she learns in the context of their relationship. When Song first entertains Gallimard in her apartment, she appeals to Orientalist stereotypes of tradition, modesty, unchanging essence, invoking China's two thousand year history and the significance her actions therefore take on in a traditional culture: "Even my own heart strapped inside this Western dress . . . even it says things . . . things I don't care to hear" (27). Her appeal finds a willing audience in Gallimard, who finds this Song far more to his liking and shares with the audience his delighted discovery that "*Butterfly*," as he now calls her, feels inferior to Westerners. Seeing Song supposedly revealed paradoxically, in the moment of her greatest concealment in her feminine/Oriental inferiority, behaving with appropriate submissiveness and docility, Gallimard for the first time finds his true self as a real man defined in opposition to Song. Wondering whether his *Butterfly*, like Pinkerton's, would "writhe on a needle" (28), he refuses to respond to her increasingly plaintive missives, and for the first time feels "that rush of power-the absolute power of a man" (28), as he cleans out his files, writes a report on trade, and otherwise enacts confident masculine mastery in the world of work. In the phrase "the absolute power of a man," Hwang highlights the connection between this power and the existence of a symmetrical but inverted opposite, for though presumably Gallimard was by most people's definitions a man before he met his *Butterfly*, he can only acquire the absolute power of a man in contrast to her. In love with his own image of the Perfect Woman and therefore with himself as the Perfect Man, Gallimard reads signs of dissimulation that Song keeps her clothes on even in intimate

moments, with appeals to her shame and modesty as proofs of her essential Oriental woman hood. In so doing, he guards his inner space of real, masculine identity.

Gallimard begins with a conception of gender and racial identity based on an ideology of the inner space of selfhood. The audience, however, is allowed a rather different relationship between inner truth and outward appearance, one that initially preserves the distinction between "real," inner self and outer role. That Song is a Chinese man playing a Japanese woman is a "truth" we know from an early stage. Song plays ironically with this "truth" throughout. Its subtleties are powerfully articulated in a scene where Song is almost unmasked as a man. Gallimard, humiliated by the failure of his predictions in the diplomatic arena, demands to see his Butterfly naked. Song, in a brilliant stroke, realizes that Gallimard simply desires her to submit. She lies down, saying, "Whatever happens, know that you have willed it.... I'm helpless before my man" (47). Gallimard relents, and Song "wins." Later, Song triumphantly recounts the crisis to Comrade Chin, the PRC emissary, and then rhetorically asks her: "Why, in the Peking opera, are women's roles played by men?" Chin replies, "I don't know. Maybe, a reactionary remnant of male ... "Song cuts her off. "No. Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (49). Irony animates these passages. On the one hand, Song is surely a man playing a woman-and his statement is a clear gesture of appropriation. However, Hwang suggests that matters are more complicated, that "woman" is a collection of cultural stereo- types connected tenuously at best to a complex, shifting "reality." Rather than expressing some essential gender identity, full and present, "woman" is a named location in a changing matrix of power relations, defined oppositionally to the name "man." So constructed by convention and so oppositional defined is "woman" that, according to Song, only a "man" really knows how to enact "woman" properly. And because "man" and "woman" are oppositional defined terms, reversals of male and female positions are possible. Indeed, it is at the moment of his greatest submission/humiliation as a woman that Song consolidates his power as a "man." She/he puts herself/himself "in the hands of her man," and it is at that moment that Gallimard relents and feels for the first time the twinges of love, even adoration. The vicissitudes of the Cultural Revolution and the signal failure of Gallimard's foreign policy predictions send Gallimard home to France, but he keeps a shrine like room waiting for his Perfect Woman. And in his devoted love, his worship of this image of Perfect Woman, Gallimard himself becomes like a woman. This stunning gender/racial power reversal forces the audience toward a fundamental reconceptualization of the topography of identity. True inner identity is played with throughout, then seemingly preserved in the revelation of Song's real masculinity, then again called into question with Gallimard's assumption of the guise of Japanese woman.

Whereas the death of Madame Butterfly in Puccini's opera offers us the satisfaction of narrative closure, Gallimard's assumption of the identity of a Japanese woman is radically disturbing, for in this move Hwang suggests that gender identity is far more complicated than reference to an essential inner truth or external biological equipment might lead us to believe. As Foucault has noted, sex as a category gathers together a collection of unrelated phenomena in which male and female are defined oppositional in stereotyped terms and posits this discursively produced difference as natural sexual difference. M. Butterfly deconstructs that

naturalness, opening out the inner spaces of true gender identity to cultural and historical forces, where identity is not an inner space of truth but a location in a field of shifting power relations.

Jeanette Winterson's uses and reworks the post-modern concepts of the body in her novel *Written on the Body*. Gender is redefined as series of shifting identity. *Written on the Body* offers constructive ways of theorizing the female body within a postmodern framework, because it is shaped by concepts of wholeness and fragmentation at the same time. Winterson develops a critique of androcentric science that strives to know the female body by dissecting it, analogous to the way modern society compartmentalizes human lives into neat manageable units. Likewise, Winterson criticizes the equation of the female body with a penetrable surface.

The androcentric concept of sexuality that associates penetration with the exploration of hidden depths and the achievement of power and knowledge is unmasked as necrophiliac. However, by constructing a lover/narrator whose gender remains undeclared, Winterson manages to unsettle perceptions of gendered difference. The text produces different meanings depending on whether the narrator is read as a man or a woman, and sexuality requires a basic human sameness from which a host of differences emerge that may or may not be gendered. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson disturbs fixed boundaries and rigidly gendered identities that objectify the body in order to build up a concept of the body that is fluid and leaves room for changes and mergings with other bodies, where bodies are held together not by a stable body image and a gendered identity, but by forces of connection and interaction between parts of the body.

Jeanette Winterson deconstructs the male/female or masculine/feminine binary by telling a story with a genderless narrator, thus showing that there are so many actions, behaviours, and roles that are not related to gender, though they might be assigned a gender association in society. Gender defined here as social differences between masculine and feminine, including some essential physical differences is frequently assumed to be something that determines one's attitudes, preferences, and abilities in professions, relationships, and other wide-ranging parts of life. Gender is not to be conflated with sex, which is defined here as the undeniable biological differences between a genetic male and female, such as the fact that males have testicles and females have the ability to give birth. Gender, because of a certain level of undeniable biological differences (sex), is a pervasive category in determining an individual's identity.

Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* evokes the reader himself to question whether gender difference is biological or a social construction. While the plot of the story is compelling to an extent, the reader is further propelled by the enigmatic narrator. Though the story is a first person, intensely intimate account of the narrator's love affair with a married woman, the reader gets almost no details that are typical of a first person narrator, including name, age, appearance, sex, or gender. The reader, with her human desire to categorize, is invited to determine these presumably important aspects of identity through morsels of identity that Winterson purposely plants. Additionally, the themes explored in *Written on the Body* suggest that it is more useful and significant to look at what every human has in common, rather than create arbitrary boundaries that are mistaken for biological between males and females. Winterson effectively illustrates the concept of gender construction

through prompting the reader to question gender assumptions in attempts to identify the a narrator with a fluid shifting gender identity.

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