

Rene Gallimard's Self-construction of Masculinity in "M. Butterfly"

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Abstract

The present paper discusses Rene Gallimard's self-construction of his own masculinity in "M. Butterfly". The background, gain and failure of such construction are analyzed in detail. The construction is doomed to be a failure when Gallimard is disillusioned in the end.

Keywords

Gallimard; self-construction; masculinity; M. Butterfly.

1. Introduction

"M. Butterfly", based on the plot of a news story and that of the opera "Mrs. Butterfly", is created by Chinese American writer David Henry Hwang. It is adapted from a real-world news story about a French spy trial case. In the case, a French diplomat fell in love with a Chinese man who played the female role in Chinese Peking Opera. To people's amazement, the diplomat did not discover his lover's male identity until years later. "M. Butterfly" is also a parody of the famous opera "Mrs. Butterfly" by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. In the original story, the heroine, a Japanese geisha called Cho-Cho-San was deserted by his cruel American husband Pinkton. To ensure a happy life and bright future for her only son in America, Cho-Cho-San sacrificed all and committed suicide in the end. The present paper tries to analyze the main character Rene Gallimard's self-construction of masculinity in "M. Butterfly" and the final failure of such self-construction after its gain in the hope of better comprehending the hero's inner thoughts and intentions.

2. Body

2.1. The Background of Gallimard's Self-construction of Masculinity

Rene Gallimard's strong urge to construct his masculinity originates from his lack of it. According to Connell, there are four masculinity types, two out of which are hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity. Gallimard belongs to the subordinate masculinity type, which can be shown by many facts mentioned in the novel "M. Butterfly". Let's take a look at several examples. When he was a child, he was not at all welcomed by his classmates and was labeled as the last person that would be invited. In his youth, he was arranged by his friend Mark to attempt his first sex, but unfortunately it turned out to be a complete failure. Being passive from the beginning to the end, he felt as if he had been raped by the pushy girl. Later, He married a tough lady for his career development. When his pushy wife indicated that he should go to see the doctor for their childlessness for so many years, he felt overwhelming shame and inferiority. Definitely, his low self-esteem and subordination developed in his childhood were further enhanced for his impotence in his adulthood.

Though born a man biologically, Gallimard shows an obvious lack of masculinity. In this situation for Gallimard, he has two choices. One is to accept the reality as it is. The other is to rebel against his inner preference. Obviously, in the initial stage, Gallimard chooses the latter, as his social gender forces him to make the "right" choice in order to accord with the

mainstream views and values. He just does not want to be the abnormal. Also, Gallimard had been in constant anxiety before he encountered his perfect Madame Butterfly Song Liling, because he was confused about his sex orientation which can be shown in his impotence when making love with his wife and his strong sexual desire towards Song Liling.

In the depth of his heart, Gallimard has an illusion about changing his disagreeable masculinity type and his alternative sex orientation. It so happened that the time is both theoretically and practically right for him to take action. Theoretically, the famous opera "Mrs. Butterfly" influences generations after generations. Gallimard is dreaming of becoming a person like the hero Pinkton in the play, a cynical, selfish and cruel American captain. Coincidentally, the two have something in common. They are both ordinary-looking, even kind of ugly, and both hold stable jobs. Pinkton is lucky in that he falls in love with a Japanese geisha who is pretty, tender, considerate, obedient, loyal and selfless. Gallimard attributes Pinkton's good luck to his superior American nationality. So when opportunity comes, he will no doubt follow his idol Pinkton's footprints and enjoy his perfect "Madame Butterfly". Practically, his ideal "Madame Butterfly" chances to show up in time. For Gallimard, Song Liling is the "Madame Butterfly" coming back to life. Song resembles Madame Butterfly in that she is reserved and shy, tolerant and obedient. Song has become the ideal target for Gallimard to display his masculinity.

2.2. The Gain of Gallimard's Self-construction of Masculinity

Gallimard's masculinity is regained through the sexual and daily interaction with Song Liling. When having sex, unlike western women, Song is always playing the passive role, giving Gallimard the opportunity to turn from the passive into the active. In Song's presence, Gallimard has evolved into a conqueror from the conquered, feeling as if he were a real man, powerful and hegemonic. Gallimard regains his dignity by satisfying an oriental lady sexually, evoking his inner desire to protect this delicate butterfly just as a masculine man often does. He once kissed Song "rudely" with the latter's slight resistance. To show his masculinity further, Gallimard fell in love with a third person. Song knew all about this, but instead of being angry and rebellious, she adopted a none-of-my-business attitude. The former sexually incapable Gallimard now starts love affairs with two "women" at the same time. Gallimard probably does this on purpose in order to prove his masculinity.

Because of Song Liling, Gallimard's self-identification of power, strength and superiority has been unprecedentedly strengthened. One of Gallimard's anxieties in the past is his inability to bear a baby with his wife. Song Liling gives up "her" career to deliver a son for him. Although there are many loopholes about this baby, Gallimard readily and naturally accepts the fruition of their love. In this way, Gallimard can announce to the whole world that he has no reproductive problems, and it is his wife's defects not his that prevent them from bearing a child.

Song Liling's sacrificial spirit also sets off Gallimard's masculinity. When Gallimard complained to Song that his wife had suggested that he should go to see a doctor to check his reproductive abilities, Song listened to his story attentively instead of laughing at him. She even comforted him by indicating that she would like to bear a baby for him without publicizing their relationship. To some extent, we can say that Gallimard shows his masculinity only when Song Liling creates the appropriate opportunity for him. That is, Gallimard is unable to create his masculinity all by himself in the harsh reality. Rather, his masculinity can only be created in his illusion and fantasy with the help of Song. Gallimard's masculinity is given by Song, so when Song reveals her true male and spy identity in the end, Gallimard's masculinity faded away.

2.3. The Failure of Gallimard's Self-construction of Masculinity

In the end, Song revealed his true identity as a man and spy. By putting on his suit and dressing up as a man, Song reclaimed his real gender. Ironically, Song became the cruel and selfish

Pinkton. By contrast, Gallimard turned back into that poor Madame Butterfly himself. He was so sad and disappointed that he crawled to approach Song, but Song continued with his court statement, showing his coldness and indifference. Gallimard had never imagined that the obedient Mrs. Butterfly had been making use of him to get secret information for his own country. Wandering between fantasy and reality, Gallimard unconsciously put himself in a dilemma. His self-identification of power and strengthen once again faded. The superiority complex that he developed in his interaction with Song collapsed, and he once again became puzzled about his masculinity. In fantasy, he is Pinkton; in reality, he is Mrs. Butterfly when Song stopped cooperating. So fantasy and reality, which will be Gallimard's choice? He prefers fantasy to reality. When the fantasy ends, the masculinity brought about by it also disappears. Gallimard cannot live without Song who forms the very fantasy that he needs, so he dresses up as Mrs. Butterfly and commits suicide. In a sense, Gallimard finally accepts his true identity of subordinate masculinity and homosexuality.

3. Conclusion

With his idol Pinkton in theory and Song Liling he encounters in practice, the hero Rene Gallimard in "M. Butterfly" attempts to construct his own masculinity in a bid to regain his self-esteem and mainstream sex orientation. Under this background, Gallimard starts his wonderful journey of self-recreation. Actually, for quite a long period of time, he really experiences the respect and happiness that a fulfilling American man has. As the self-construction is based on a trap in reality designed by Song Liling and by an illusionary fantasy directed by himself, such construction is doomed to be a failure. In the end, Gallimard turns back to his original state as a weaker sex male. And his reluctance to go back as a weaker sex male forces him to commit suicide.

References

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