

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

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David Henry Hwang, who was born in Los Angeles, California in 1957, is the son of a Chinese who immigrated to the United States in the 1940s. When he was a student at Stanford University in the mid-1970s, Hwang became fully conscious of his ethnicity through his encounter with other students and through the works of Asian-American writers. At that time Hwang was also interested in playwriting, and he attended Sam Shepard's playwright-workshop in Claremont, California. In 1979 his first play *F.O.B.*, which depicted the ethnic identity of Chinese Americans, was accepted for production at O'Neill Theatre Center. The play centers on the conflict of either accepting or rejecting traditional Chinese culture: Steve the new Chinese immigrant 'fresh off the boat' with his ignorance of the American Culture, stands as the opposite of Dale, another Chinese-American student who alienates himself from his original culture and assimilates in the American. Intermediately between the two stands Grace, another Chinese-American student. Commenting on the theme of East-West conflict in the play, Frank Rich states: "If West and East don't precisely meet in *F.O.B.*, they certainly fight each other to a fascinating stand off"(Rich).

In his great success *M. Butterfly* (1988), Hwang continues to explore the East-West relationship. The play, which can be seen as one of the most influential masterpieces in modern American stage history, won the 1988 Tony Award for best play, the Outer Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award and the John Gassner Award for best American New Play. Hwang was the first Asian-American playwright to win Tony Award. The play centers on Gallimard, a French diplomat, who falls in love with Song

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Liling, a Beijing opera singer, to carry on an affair for more than twenty years when Gallimard discovers that Song is not only a male but also a spy for the Chinese government. The details of Hwang's play are weaved with the plotline of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) in which a Japanese woman falls in love with an Englishman who eventually deserts her to kill herself as a result.

The interweaving of Puccini's opera with Gallimard's play helps dramatize the Butterfly myth which basically deals with man-woman relationship. Implanted into this relationship between "the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white [Western] man," is the racial and cultural interaction that refers to the dominant Western stereotypes which define the East as the opposite of the West: weak, submissive, mysterious, unchanging and inferior (*M. Butterfly* 17). Hwang manages to dramatize these stereotypes through some binary opposing relationships: sexual, racial, and cultural where one of the opposites governs the other. However, in an attempt to deconstruct such stereotypical conceptions Hwang stages these binary male/female, West/East relationships not as an everlasting fact but rather as inconsistent reversible oppositions which can be seen as the result of certain social and historical situations. In all, Hwang's thematic concern in his play is to underline the necessity of seeing into the respective layers of cultural stereotypes. He stresses in his After-word of *M. Butterfly* the human beings' need to "deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings" (100).

Thus, the aim of this paper then is to examine Hwang's attempt to deconstruct racial and cultural preconceptions he depicts in *M. Butterfly*(1988). Race biologically denotes distinct categories of human beings. Johann Blumenbach, a German anatomist, develops a racial classification of human beings at the top of which were the Caucasians (Europeans), followed in order by Mongolians (Asians), the Ethiopians (Africans), the Americans (Native Americans) and the

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

Malays (Polynesians) (Feagin 4). This racial categorization became a means to justify the colonialist project in Africa. England, for example, in its colonialist conquests in the 19th century depended on such notions as there were "higher and lower races, progressive and non-progressive ones, and that the lower races ought to be governed by – or even completely supplanted by – civilized, progressive races like the British"(Brantlinger 206)

Again, America in the twentieth century depends on implicit racial ranking in its struggle to maintain its position as the world's greatest industrial superpower. In *New York Sun*, Marusca Niccolini discusses the economic threats of rising nations such as China and India and underlines the need to subordinate these countries' industrialization to the needs of America's own industries (Niccolini 8). Both countries are seen to rely on cheap labor as they compete with the United States. Once more, race works for capitalist gains and mostly benefits the elite.

It is true that a consideration of racism must be outdated in a tolerant modern American society characterized by interracial marriages, and integrated schools; yet, race will be useful for those in power. In all, the notions of biological differences between races, that circulate in the American society, necessitate the need for responses to resist ideological racism. Theater is one of such responses because theatre creates counter narratives which establish the theatrical nature of ethnic identity that struggles between the pressures of the dominant culture and the desire to represent oneself accurately. *M. Butterfly* is one of the plays that challenge the notion of white superiority and domination.

Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, states that cultural and social colonial effects are the most effective forms of imperialist domination, and that the central component of imperialism is the process of Orientalizing the Asian people and locations; a process through which the word 'orient' represents a specific concept in European thought. In his own words: "Without examining Orientalism as a discourse

one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period" (Said 3).

This oriental discourse is produced in the Western intellect through the texts which reflect a specific ideological outlook of the Orient. Said criticizes this textual attitude through which one may take life from the pages of a book rather than from "direct encounters with the human" (Said 93). Thus, he rejects, the possibility of taking life from any kind of texts, and he explains how Orientalism is itself "a Western project to govern over the Orient" (Said 95). The West has thus formulated a textual preconceived notions about the East.

Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) can be seen as an example of the Orientalist art, and the scholarly textual work that establish and reinforce typified ideas about the East. Knowledge taken from such texts formulates in time specific stereotypes. For example, Eleanor Harrington-Austin defines the English tradition or the ethnist stereotype of the Asian woman as "docile, tractable, obedient, absolutely sacrificing, thoroughly passive" (Harrington-Austin 31).

In *M. Butterfly* it is the cultural stereotype of a Butterfly maintained in textual or artistic works such as Puccini's opera which Hwang attempts to expose and to deconstruct. Gallimard has formulated his own image of a submissive Butterfly through his encounter with Puccini's opera: "I saw Pinkerton and Butterfly, and what she would say if he were unfaithful ... nothing It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee" (56). It can be said that the play shows how the West expects the East to enact a fantasy of submission and weakness. Asian subjects, according to the play, are supposed to act out a fantasy of femininity, an expectation that affects not only Asian women, but it also emasculates men as well. We as an

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

audience see, for example, how the French Gallimard casts on his Chinese lover, Song Liling, the Western stereotype of an Asian woman, a delicate butterfly, decorative, at one's service, submissive and disposable.

The irony of the play is that Song unknown to Gallimard turns out to be a man and a spy. All of France, one of the Western imperial powers, cannot believe the ignorance or rather the deception of Gallimard, its representative. During the court scene, the Judge asks Song: "There is one thing that the court – indeed, that all of France – would like to know.... Did Monsieur Gallimard know you were a man?"(81). The point is that a Westerner is not likely to be deceived by an Oriental. The Judge, as a Westerner, is unable to see how his own ideology, the idea that the Orient is "a sort of surrogate and even underground self," breaks down (Said 3). He is unable to accept the validity of Song's explanation:

JUDGE: Your armchair political theory is
tenuous, Monsieur Song.

SONG: You think so? That's why you'll lose in
all your dealings with the East.

JUDGE: Just answer my question: did he know
you were a man?

SONG: You know, your Honor, I never asked
(83).

In his life, it is not women in general whom Gallimard is, in fact, uninterested in, but strong women. His first sexual encounter with Isabelle, for example, is a disappointing one as he describes it: "in the middle of all this, the leaves were getting into my mouth, my legs were losing circulation I thought, 'God is this it?'"(33). Therefore, women like Isabelle with her love of the superior position, and Renee who challenges Gallimard's masculinity are unacceptable to him: "I started Renee's. But no, that was not all I needed. A schoolgirl who would question the role of the penis in modern society. What I wanted was revenge. A vessel to contain my humiliation I headed for Butterfly" (58).

Therefore, what Gallimard desires is a specific type of a woman; the type which he finds only in the effeminate, submissive Song, the Easterner. Gallimard, as Hwang himself states, "must have fallen in love, not with a person, but with a fantasy stereotype" (94).

What Gallimard expects from Song is actually the image of the submissive Butterfly. Therefore, even the physical reality of Song's sex is irrelevant. Because of his need for a feeling of personal power, sex for Gallimard becomes not about lust but rather about how to gain power over another:

"I first discovered these magazines at my uncle's house. The first time I saw them in his closet All lined up – my body shook. Not with lust – no, with power. Here were women – a shelf-full – who would do exactly as I wanted"(10).

Gallimard finds finally his perfect woman in Song, for the more he thinks that he dominates Song the more he feels strong as a male: "I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call, and, as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt for that first time that rush of power – the absolute power of a man" (32). In fact Gallimard is entitled to the submissive Oriental Butterfly perhaps because of "his membership in the governing class of Western Imperial power" as Kehde puts it (Kehde 244).

Gallimard's Butterfly, thus, comes just in time to fill the void of his life and to help him fulfill his wish for a male power over a woman. The central idea of the play can be seen then as a wish-fulfillment for Gallimard in the interactions between the East and the West. In other words, his appeal to a butterfly stems from political and cultural stereotypes.

As an Asian-American, Song cannot position himself in the colonial discourse as an Asian man but rather as an Asian woman. However, through pretending to be an Asian woman, Song wants to confront Gallimard as an Asian man.

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

Song's purpose in representing Asian femininity is to disrupt the Western stereotypes. In order to achieve an oppositional stance which may challenge the Western colonial stereotype, Song has to find his own way as an Asian man. In his first encounter with Gallimard, when Song states that imperialism is a mutual practice, he speaks of his intention to take oppositional position which would resist and perhaps reconstruct the Western colonial conception that has constructed him as an Asian other in the first place.

Ling-Chi Wang explains the illegal means of resistance which Chinese-American adopted when their access to the mainstream culture had been blocked:

Where judicial and diplomatic characters failed, Chinese fought racial oppression sometimes by circumventing the law (paper fathers and sons, illegal border crossing from Canada and Mexico), and at other times ... civil disobedience (refusing to register...), strikes (during the construction of the transnational railroad in 1867...), and if necessary, arming themselves in self-defense in the 1870s. (Wang 167)

Thus, according to Wang, illegality can be seen as an effective means in face of a hostile environment. Song, caught in the unbalanced East-West conflict, makes use of the Orientalist stereotype to the extent that he may articulate his identity and his desire for resistance. Shifting between the roles of Butterfly and the Asian man (playing Butterfly), Song would like to inform Gallimard that the upper-handed and the lower-handed, the signifier and the signified of Butterfly might not be consistent.

Song's oppositional position has been further supported by the events in Vietnam, where the resistance movement has gone beyond the Western stereotypical interpretation of Asian cultures and Asian peoples. While Gallimard, for example, believes that "the Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and

power," the resistance in Vietnam and specifically the determination manifested in such resistance complicate the French diplomat's preconceptions of Orientals (45).

To Gallimard and to the Western public generally, Vietnam seems to be a cultural myth that cannot be interpreted within Western discourses. When he cannot account for the situation within the Western framework of interpretation, Gallimard resorts to the rhetoric of Orientalism, which privileges Western over non-Western cultures, and denounces anything non-Western as inhuman and irrational. The puzzled Gallimard, for example, wonders, "Why weren't the Vietnamese people giving in? Why were they content instead to die and die and die again?"(68). Such irrationality of the Asians, from the Western perspective, is precisely the consequence of the Western imperialist conception which forces Asians to take an oppositional position.

According to the concept of Orientalism, anything in Asian culture is to be seen as artistic, beautiful and human, the stereotype which may serve Western colonialism in its mission into the Orient. On the other hand, anything masculine in Asian cultures is deemed as irrational, ruthless and inhuman in the Western point of view. However, the Vietnamese choice of death over life troubles the colonial discourse, and shows their determination to control their own destiny and to regain their own sense of freedom. Thus, in representing the Vietnamese resistance movement in the late 1960s, Song both performs the complexity of Asian identity to Gallimard, and attempts to subvert the Western colonial conceptions. It is noteworthy that Hwang's setting for his play, specifically in the nineteen-sixties, is a historic juncture when China was transforming from a feudal, colonial society to the Communist vision of modernity and nationhood.

In order to be able to confront the Western subject and to regain his identity as an Asian man, Song manages to readjust his relationship with Gallimard: "C'mon. Admit it. You still want me. Even in slacks and a button-down

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

collar"(85). Because Gallimard refuses to do so, Song transfers into the role of the subject, and as a result Gallimard is to be the object of his desire: "You don't? Well maybe, Rene, just maybe - - I want you"(85). Thus the story can be reconstructed according to a different level, according to Song's own viewpoint. Because Song has been stereotyped as a butterfly or as the other, it is difficult for Gallimard to believe Song's shift into the position of the subject and the role of a spy who has deceived the Western subject.

In an interview, Hwang states that it is Song who is the real Pinkerton and the subject of the story. It is true that Song has lost his identity for twenty years; yet "he realizes what he's lost in the same way that Pinkerton realizes too late at the end of the opera" (Di Gaetani 152). Thus, according to Hwang, Song can be seen as a cultural victim but a villain personally, while Gallimard as a cultural villain but a victim personally. The whole play highlights the puzzlement of a helpless individual caught in the complex East-West cultural conflict.

It can be argued, then, that Gallimard's ideology depends on certain stereotypical perceptions one of which is that if a man cannot be powerful having control over a 'butterfly' woman, he is metaphorically castrated; and likewise if a woman possesses manly characteristics she is then masculinized. Thus, according to the same perceptions, Gallimard himself can be seen as a female when he is perceived by others as well as by himself; as the weak, the submissive and the inferior at the end of the play.

It is true that Gallimard is overwhelmed by cultural and racial stereotypes; yet, according to Hwang's dramatic strategy, Gallimard's stereotypes are to be inverted from the very beginning of the play. Frustrated and depressed in his Western culture, Gallimard believes that he can attain self-realization in Beijing where his dream and fantasy may come true; nevertheless, he becomes vulnerable because Song, who understands Gallimard's needs, is able to gain control

over him employing the same stereotypes that nourishes Gallimard's fantasy. It is noteworthy that Song at 'her' first meeting with Gallimard does not appear in the Butterfly image, rather 'she' appears aggressive and cynical concerning the western man's Butterfly-stereotype: "It's one of your favourite fantasies, isn't it? because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner -- ah! -- you find it beautiful"(17). Gallimard's response, "so much for protecting her in my big Western arms," highlights how he is deeply overwhelmed by his misconceived conceptions (18).

Although Song's argument means that not all Chinese women are butterflies; yet Gallimard could not see Song as anything else except the butterfly of his mistaken perceptions. For example, when Song, flirting with Gallimard, states that Chinese women "have always held a fascination for your Caucasian men," soon Gallimard is ecstatically overwhelmed by his own views: "women don't flirt with me. And I normally can't talk to them. But tonight, I held up my end of the conversation" (22). Gallimard is thus ready to fall into the arms of his butterfly, because Song is able to reinforce Gallimard's conceptions of the stereotypical qualities of a Western woman and those of an Eastern butterfly. Song's plan is to appear initially to Gallimard strong and aggressive to maintain complete control over him later on when 'she' pretends to be a submissive, weak Butterfly.

Having played the role of the strong Western woman, Song is ready to perform the role of the Butterfly to complete 'her' control over Gallimard who believes wholeheartedly in the Western stereotypes concerning the East. Nourishing Gallimard's fantasy, Marc tells him that Song "cannot help herself... She must surrender to you. It is her destiny.... It's an old story. It's in our blood. They fear us, Rene. Their women fear us"(25). Consequently, Gallimard becomes convinced that a beautiful Chinese woman is going to surrender herself to him because, according to his fantasy, "she is afraid of me"(27). During

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

their first meeting at Song's flat, Song confirms this act of 'surrender' justifying perhaps 'her' change from the image of a strong Western woman to an Eastern Butterfly:

Hard as I try to... hold to a Western woman's strong face up to my own... in the end, I fail. A small, frightened heart beats too quickly and gives me away. Monsieur Gallimard, I'm a Chinese girl. I've never... never invited a man up to my flat before. The forwardness of my actions makes my skin burn". (30-31)

Gallimard feels that he has finally gained power over a beautiful Oriental Butterfly; and as a result his triumph is fulfilling for him. Yet, Song-Gallimard first seduction meeting involves Hwang's attempt to reverse the stereotypical West-East cultural conception. Song gives orders such as "keep my clothes" and "turn off the lights," and Gallimard becomes the follower, the controlled (40). The stereotypical Oriental woman becomes perhaps the seducer and the conqueror.

The male-female opposition which is presented in the play in the form of cruel white man and the submissive Oriental woman can be seen theatrically as a metaphor for the opposition between the new Western culture and the old Eastern one. For example, in a discussion with Gallimard, who argues that " 'old' may be synonymous with 'senile'," Helga states, "you are not going to change them. East is East and West is West" (19). Such a discussion concerning the polarity of old and new, East/female and West/male uncovers a stereotypical Western imperialist attitude toward the East. This polarization is again suggested by the fact that Gallimard believes that his promotion to a vice-consul is a direct result of his ability to fulfill his desire for a male power over a butterfly woman. He argues: "of course! God who creates Eve to serve Adam, who blesses Solomon with his harem but ties Jezebel to burning bed – that god is a man. And he understands"(38). Gallimard thinks that God blesses

him now because he has attained his role as a male by conquering his butterfly.

In Act II Hwang develops the possibility of reversing the stereotypical polarity of the new strong West and the old weak East. For example, Gallimard's conception of sexual and racial dialectics collapses when he interprets it in terms of the political scene concerning Vietnam War. He believes, "the Oriental simply wants to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power" (45). Yet, this concept turns to be a miscalculation, as his boss states later on: "everything you've predicted here in the Orient ... just hasn't happened"(69). The misjudgment of Gallimard helps stage the French and the American failure in Vietnam in particular, and perhaps the Western imperialist attitude towards the East in general. Because of its cultural chauvinism, the self-deceiving West, that underrates the power of the East, is likely to lose in its dealings with the East.

Moreover, Hwang makes the forces of the East invade the West, when the foreigners including Gallimard are forced out of China during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. More than that, the West is terrified and startled when the French students in Paris go out in demonstration "shouting the slogans of Chairman Mao ... in French"(73). Yet, the reaction of Helga and Gallimard to the "indignity of the students," can be seen as a denial of the power of the East, as Gallimard states to Helga: "You have never understood China, have you? You walk in here with these ridiculous ideas, that the West is falling apart, that China was spitting in our face"(74).

The possibility of alternation between the two cultures is vividly dramatized in the final act of the play through the final transformation both of Song and Gallimard. In an obvious reverse of the situation in *Madame Butterfly*, Song insists on changing: "You know I have to. You know I will"(78), while Gallimard pleads Song not to do, not to change 'her' clothes into those of a man, because this perhaps means that Gallimard will assume the position of Butterfly.

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

Because the final Act takes place in a courtroom, it can be argued that Hwang puts the Western stereotypes concerning the East on a trial. Song accuses the West and insists on the validity of his theory:

The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor ... but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom – the feminine mystique. Her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated – because a woman can't think for herself. (83)

The act of changing Song's clothes can be seen as a metaphor for uncovering the Western misconception concerning the East. Gallimard/the West is forced finally to see and confront the naked truth of Song/the East. Moreover, Gallimard is to be transformed into the position adopted previously by Song. Consequently, Gallimard, with the "kimono in his hands," comes to realize that he is "as sorry ... as a butterfly"(91). Hwang makes Gallimard recognize the possibility of reversing the West/East stereotyping in sexual, racial and cultural terms.

It is true that the act of reversal, dramatized in the final act of the play, is a representation of a deconstructive process; however, this process does not create another hierarchy in positive terms because the images of the East according to Skloot "are no more positive" than those of the West (62). Commenting on the conclusion of the play, and specifically the process of deconstructing racial-cultural stereotypes, Hwang finds the East as guilty of misconceptions as the West. In his own words: "the play is fairly even-handed in saying that the East also misconceives the West. The East is guilty or complicit in this dual form of cultural stereotyping" (DiGaetani 141-142).

The complicity of the East, according to Hwang, in 'cultural stereotyping' is dramatized in the play through the story of espionage in which the Chinese authority makes use

of the same Western readings of the East for their own advantage. Comrade Chin, her boss, and Song show how the East manipulates the same Western misconception concerning the East, and in so doing they unwittingly reinforce the Western racial stereotypes about the East causes. More than that, we as an audience, should not fully sympathize with Song who treats Gallimard mercilessly in the last scene; Song/the East is not thus better than Pinkerton/the West. Song's image becomes repugnant. In all, the newly supposed ranking with the East as the apparently winning culture is as erroneous and unacceptable as the original stereotypical hierarchy, and hence Hwang displaces his deconstructive attempt.

The attempt of deconstructing East/West racial and cultural stereotypes in Hwang's play is not entirely satisfying because Gallimard's transformation into the position of a butterfly; the position of the weak, the submissive and the feminine, suggests the fact that it is still, as in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, the weak, self-sacrificing woman who dies on the stage. Weakness is still linked with the female gender.

Moreover, the irony of the final transformation is that Hwang upholds the same ranking he sets out to upset. What is wrong with Hwang's deconstruction of the West's stereotypical reading of the East is that it is ironically attained by confirming the same stereotypes of the West. This is evidenced by Hwang's delineation of numerous images of masculinity in the play such as the 'masculine' Danish girl, the libidinous Toulon, and the gross Marc. Consequently, the West is stereotyped as strong, cruel, aggressive and masculine in an imposing way which cannot be deconstructed by the tiny example of Gallimard's transformation into the image of a Butterfly. Thus, the image of the West is too strongly established to be undermined by the final transformation.

**Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's M.
Butterfly(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt**

However, Hwang's aborted attempt of deconstructing East-West cultural stereotypes can be conceived as a successful dramatization of the implications of the East-West cultural reality; of the environment in which the play is created. Forming the play in dual structures reflects the cultural dilemma of the Chinese Americans. Hwang himself admits that as an Asian-American man, he is culturally and racially split. In his own words: "As an Asian I identify with Song [Butterfly]. As a man I identify with Gallimard. That willful self-delusion is something I know I've experienced as a man; I've been good at self-delusion when I've wanted to be"(Qtd. in Cody 24). Hwang's dilemma is that, as an Asian, he feels the negative impact of the cultural East/West stereotypes, on the one hand and on the other, as a man he benefits from the Western socio-political system.

This split may account for the dramatization of the aborted attempt of deconstructing the East/West racial and cultural stereotypes. This aborted attempt can further be justified perhaps by Hwang's belief that the West is actually more powerful both economically and politically than the East. It seems that Hwang realizes that any cultural change depends on an economic change, as Savran points out: "Whatever country dominates the world economically determines what culture is, for a while" (Savran 127). Cultural superiority based on economic realities will keep having impact on people even if such economic situations change. It seems that the act of reversing certain racial and cultural stereotypes requires changing economic and ideological conditions.

Hwang cannot, thus, transcend certain historical realities in his aborted attempt of deconstruction. Skloot argues: "We usually behave the way we do because it has been culturally imagined for us already Thus, Gallimard can only act the way he does because he knows and believes in the artistic structure of *Madame Butterfly*" (Skloot 62).

Gallimard is trapped by pre-determined ideas; as a Western man he feels inadequacy if he cannot live up to such stereotypical perceptions of a Western man. He is overpowered by certain ideology which is part of his unconsciousness and which seems to be incomprehensible to him.

To sum up, it can be said that Hwang is limited by certain realities imposed on him and on his characters as well, making perhaps them all "prisoners of ... time and space"(47). However, Hwang's aborted attempt to deconstruct certain stereotypes underlines the necessity for the West and the East to deal with each other just as humans. Hwang, thus cautions the audience against the calamities which cultural preconceived ideas may impose on them, and he urges them to acknowledge and understand the East-West stereotypical interactions.

Racial-Cultural Stereotypes in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*(1988): A Deconstructive Attempt

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