

Rising Voice: Song Liling's Masquerade as an Alternative Discourse in *M. Butterfly*

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Abstract—Based on a real story and converted into a box office play, *M. Butterfly* successfully draws the audience's attention to the issue of gender camouflage. Developed from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* contains a deeper meaning to explicate the transformation of a male figure dressed as a female character to challenge the taboo of sexuality. As many critics emphasize the relationship between Song Liling and Gallimard, this paper will explain how Song Liling's transvestism confronts Gallimard's fantasy of a submissive Oriental woman in terms of cosplay, a modern social phenomenon. As a contemporary representation to express differentiated idiosyncrasy, cosplay can be juxtaposed with carnivalesque, as highlighted by Bakhtin. Thus, this paper will explore the power of costume donning gained by Song Liling to debunk Gallimard's false identity.

Index Terms—M. butterfly, gender, sexuality, cosplay, carnivalesque.

I. INTRODUCTION

The discussion of the Western stereotype of the Orient raised by some critics stems from the effect the transvestite Song Liling has on Gallimard. Aside from Song's sexual orientation, donning a dress of the opposite sex delineates a sense of carnivalesque. In a carnival, people wear costumes to mimic their favorite characters, either to mock them or to manifest their traits. No matter what kind of intention those carnival costume players claim, carnival becomes a venue for them to express their antagonistic discourse against the mainstream. In *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetic*, Mikhail Bakhtin explained that "[c]arnival is the place for working out... a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful social-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life." [1] Bakhtin eschewed the issue of gender confusion, instead evoking attention to alternative discourse. Like wearing a mask, Song's transvestism negates uniformity and conformity because her/his camouflage "is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries." [2] This depicts that Song's dressing in a female costume has been isolated by social convention and classified as gender confusion. In terms of having an alienated voice, Song's transvestism can also be juxtaposed with one modern social phenomenon, cosplay.

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II. COSPLAY AND MASQUERADE

Cosplay has created a subculture of its own, and it no longer refers to only sci-fi or anime. Clothes not only are perceived as part of the self by each individual but also function as extensions of oneself. In other words, they constitute symbolic expression of social attribute. Cross-dressing is another form of cosplay when women or men dress in the opposite sex costumes doing performance on stage. In Chinese opera, cross-dressing has a long history. Women were not allowed to perform on stage in Feudal times. As a result, male opera singers must cross-dress as female roles. The attribution of cross-dressing relies on make-believe, on deception, on the willful manipulation of perception, and on other's recognition. The re-conformation coming from other people determines how they perceive you. The ambivalence of cross-dressing denotes two semantic levels. One refers to covering up, the other seeking to reveal. *M. Butterfly* emphasizes the difficulties of cross-dressing Song to keep up the disguise and gradually exposes the cross-dressing man as a physically deficient pseudo-woman, which corresponds to the position of Song in the beginning and that of Gallimard in the end.

Since *M. Butterfly* was released, many critics have emphasized the extraordinary relationship between Gallimard and Song. Some consider it a play with two personae in a homosexual relationship. For example, the prison where Gallimard is confined resembles a closet that "offers him the protection of identity," whereas Song discloses her/his real self regardless of judgment from society. [3] David L. Eng argued that "[a]s the prison is meant to enclose, the closet is meant to conceal." [3] Gallimard uses his prison cell to hide his sexuality for fear of losing his "phallic authority." [3] Homosexual desire and heterosexual ambivalence are pivots for Eng to examine this play. Andrew Shin further explained that *M. Butterfly* could be read as a play with "repressed homoeroticism." [4] For the preservation of a harmonious heterosexual relationship, Gallimard's final conversion into Butterfly fulfills an ideal heterosexual relationship. While articulating an orthodox culture, Gallimard "constructs a gay identity for himself." [4] Gallimard cannot overlook the hermeneutic of stigmatizing gay sexuality for he has become part of it. Thus, Melanie C Hawthorne concluded that Gallimard "is the victim of his own desire to believe in the femininity of his lover." [5] This manifests that Song's masquerade evokes the proliferation of discourse on the sexual issue many critics have shed light on.

Cosplay is a performance art used to describe some amateur performers, called cosplayers, who wear costumes and fashion accessories to represent a specific character or idea. Originating in a report on WorldCon in 1984, cosplay is a portmanteau of the words "costume" and "play." In other

words, cosplayers wear costumes to play their favorite characters to “generate meaningful correspondence and contrast between a given body and a set of texts from which it is modeled and made to relate.” [6] As a way to declare personal identity, cosplay enables cosplayers to “merge[s] fantasy and reality into carnivalesque environment and spaces” so that they can take on new ways to fill their mouths with words and voices other than the mainstream. [7] That is to say, cross-dressing deals with fantasy identities. The existence of cosplayers is always considered a subculture beyond the acceptance of the dominant culture in Japan. As an unorthodox culture, cosplay, serving as an expressive platform, provides cosplayers with protective identities to publicize “a consumption of the image beyond the site of difference.” [8] No matter cosplaying is a hobby or a lifestyle and whether one participates in cosplay or not, cosplay has become one prevalent social phenomenon that consumes most of participants’ time and labor in order to embody their favorite characters. In other words, cosplay is more than just a costume dressing-up, but it is a move for participants to immerse themselves as the characters and to deliver the essence and spirit. Why people dress up as other characters is that they gain strength and earn confidence when cosplaying. Thus, rather than acting, participants must get into the characters and behave like them. Then, one could easily find some similarities between Song’s transvestism and the spirit of cosplay.

III. SONG’S CROSS-DRESSING

In order to execute espionage, Song masquerades himself as a Chinese opera diva. Song’s ambiguity and duality oscillates between the Western stereotype of Oriental women and the issue of gender confusion. With an unequivocal intention, Song chooses to be a woman who defies the taboo of “no homosexuality in China.” [9] In terms of cosplay, he can be defined as a crossplayer who “employs gender reversal.” [7] Not only does Song pry about political information from Gallimard, but he also represents rebellion against the Western hegemony, especially its discourse on gender and sexuality. In other words, Song’s crossplay performance “challenge[s] hegemonic norms about masculinity and femininity.” [10] Song denies the established gender role to alter the boundary of representation. By portraying gender confusion, Song’s defiance exemplifies that “the body is no longer confined or subjected to a form of essentialist discourse.” [8] With this belief, Song pedagogically justifies his habit of dressing like a woman when his comrade Chin questions his eccentric addiction.

SONG. I’m an actor.

CHIN. Yeah. (Beat) Is that how come you dress like that?

SONG. Like what, Miss Chin?

CHIN. Like that dress! You’re wearing a dress. And every time I come here, you’re wearing a dress. Is that because you’re an actor? Or what?

SONG. It’s a . . . disguise, Miss Chin. [9]

Chin’s question to Song implies that a man dressing as a woman is considered unnatural and scandalous. Unlike the examples of Zhu Yingtai in *Butterfly Lovers* and Hua Mulan in *Ballad of Mulan*, the act of male-to-female cross-dressing

is not tolerated or even not accepted in pre-modern China society. Therefore, in Chinese opera, it is crucial that a male character should be made up to be very beautiful so as to deliver female gestures and mannerisms. As an actor, Song becomes more flexible and open-minded about accepting miscellaneous characters. When saying “disguise,” Song has already made Chin believe her/his royalty to her/his country remain the same. In this way, crossplay not only offers people unconventional perspectives on gender fluidity but also delineates sexuality as defying the traditional hermeneutic on sex and gender.

IV. COSPLAY AND CARNIVALESQUE

Ostensibly, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and cosplay share some common ground when it comes to masquerade. Both strive to break the line drawn by the social norm by means of dressing up as another character that polemicalizes ambivalent and paradoxical discourse. The intention of cosplay, “ongoing existence as a subculture,” invokes anti-social behavior expressing melancholy regarding the foundation of hegemonic discourse. [11] Meanwhile, in a carnival, as Bakhtin emphasizes, “there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinction and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life.” [2] Performers refuse to accept the label attached to make them follow the mainstream, regardless of their ubiquitous idiosyncrasy. Song is opposed to the stereotype Gallimard practices on Oriental women when they discuss Cho Cho San’s committing suicide for her beloved diplomat.

GALLIMARD. I . . . what I mean is, I’ve always seen it played by huge women in so much bad makeup.

SONG. Bad makeup is not unique to the West.

GALLIMARD. But, who can believe them?

SONG. And you believe me? [9]

Gallimard believes that Cho Cho San becomes more persuasive played by an Oriental rather than by a Western woman for he always perceives “[t]he image of the Orient as exotic, mysterious and passive” that “connects intimately to imperial and colonial sensibilities.” [12] In other words, Oriental women are weak and desire protection from Western men. Besides, Gallimard refers the “bad makeup” of Western women to the reason why they are not as conventional and submissive as Oriental women. He feels emasculated because of Western women’s independence. Nevertheless, Song cannot agree with Gallimard’s demeanor by responding “[i]t’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.” [9] Song does not consider her/him playing a woman as “convincing,” especially “as a Japanese woman.” [9] She/he believes Gallimard projects his sexual fantasy to create an ideal Oriental woman to secure his masculinity. Gallimard, to a certain degree, encounters gender confusion.

Song’s transvestism overthrows the binary opposition of Gallimard’s world which categorizes society into men and women, overlooking the existence of crossplayers. As a matter of fact, crossplayers are not a neoteric phenomenon in

this world. For instance, in Shakespeare's theater, men always played female characters in order to arouse a polemic effect. From time to time, men dressing as women created both entertaining and ironic repercussions. Furthermore, in Taiwanese Opera, women play male personas for men regard acting as a disgraceful career, one prominent figure being Yang, Li-hua, not to mention Zhu, Yingtai in *Butterfly Lovers*, to name just two. Noticeably, crossplayers have existed not only to manifest miscellaneous discourses but also to legitimize the presence of other gender camouflage. Song justifies her/his masquerade after Chin questions her/his loyalty to China that does not allow homosexuality.

SONG. Miss Chin? Why, in Peking Opera, are women's roles played by men?

CHIN. I don't know. Maybe, a reactionary remnant of male—

SONG. No. Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act. [9]

Song's justification primarily addresses the issue of her/his motivation to disguise himself as a woman. According to conservative social conventions, "produc[ing] a spellbound and frightening condition," to the West, Song invokes her/his "passage of transformation" to eradicate the misconception of Western dominance as well as to steal political information. [13] Song's transformation employs the sufficient scheme to inspect the deficiency of Western consciousness of Oriental women. As actors are "portraying the essence of what makes a woman or a man as they act on stage," to play Cho Cho San, Song must make herself/himself look like a real woman. [14] Only in this way will Song expose Gallimard's intention of "scripting Song as homosexual to his heterosexual." [15] Song is aware that Gallimard is unable to deal with the fact that he has fallen in love with a man. Respectively, Gallimard enjoys his sadistic attraction to Song but fears experiencing Oedipal castration anxiety. Depending on whose eye one sees through, Gallimard's eye/I speculation magnifies the pervasive emphasis on gaze, so truth and reality undergo equivocal definition. Ironically, "seeing is believing" does not apply to Gallimard's situation.

V. THE POWER OF SONG'S TRANSVESTISM

Challenging Gallimard's visual paradox, Song exhibits cross-dressing to arouse gender confusion. Her/his crossplay performance merges fantasy and reality into carnivalesque and destabilizes the hegemonic binary opposition of gender and sexuality. Song personifies Gallimard's fantasy of a perfect submissive Oriental woman to realize Gallimard's pornographic desire because Song acknowledges that her/his performance "is a response to the collapse of ideologies, religions and common value" that control the ideology of this world. [15] First of all, Song needs to play an obedient woman and then she/he can subvert such false ideology. Thus, when Gallimard asks Song to be naked, Song makes good use of "her modesty" that the West attributes to Oriental women.

SONG. No . . . let me . . . keep my clothes.

GALLIMARD. But . . .

SONG. Please . . . it all frightens me. I'm a modest Chinese girl.

GALLIMARD. My poor little treasure.

SONG. I am your treasure. Though inexperienced, I am not . . . ignorant. They teach us things, our mothers about pleasing a man. [9]

This dialogue becomes so intriguing when it comes to Song's defense for not stripping in front of Gallimard. In fact, Song has made it clear that she/he is not "ignorant," which connotes that she/he will not follow Gallimard's script: "Even my own heart, strapped inside this Western dress . . . Even it says things." [9] Rejecting Gallimard's request is her/his first defiance of the Western norm. By claiming to be a "modest Chinese girl," Song "subverts and undermines a notion of unitary identity." [17] She/he proves the existence of the proliferation of discourses on sexuality. This evokes the awareness of emphasis on bilateral needs claimed by poststructuralists. Ki Namaste argued that "[h]eterosexuality needs homosexuality for its own definition: a macho homophobic male can define himself as 'straight' only in opposition to that which he is not." [18] In this regard, no matter whether heterosexual or homosexual, Song's ultimate goal is to diminish the representation of psychoanalytical discourse on sexuality so as to negate the image publicized by hegemony.

In order to deconstruct the Western stereotype of the Orient women, Song runs the risk of being a traitor with regard to committing homosexuality in China, which exemplifies that "genders are not always truthful representations of their sexual identities." [19] As a crossplayer, Song not only wears a costume but also constructs her/his identity. Although such identity is only a temporary result of imitation, Song "in fact play[s] with identity all the time" and "express[es] [her/his] own identity through a costume." [20] Sex and gender are not inscribed on a body, nor do clothes make a man. What is imbedded goes beyond the signifiers of clothing, as Song argues: "Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me." [9] Song's transgression of sexual identity subverts the pervasive fantasy of exotic Oriental women. Song exploits the ideology that governs the West in its relationship with the Orient. When Song responds "[t]hat's your Western mind, twisting itself into strange shapes again," she/he aligns with the idea of sex alternatives. [9] Song believes heterosexuality is not the ultimate alternative and it should not exclude other forms of sexuality. Every sex preference should be valued with regard to its idiosyncrasy to occupy one spot in society, no matter whether it is heterosexual, homosexual or even transgender. As the title of *M. Butterfly* suggests, the abbreviation "M." adopts gender blending. In French, "M," stands for "Monsieur" whereas "M." could also be applied to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Another example is Gallimard's first name which also represents an androgynous masquerade. The name of Rene Gallimard connotes an embedded female characteristic in terms of French pronunciation. If the letter "é" is added at the end of Rene, it becomes the woman's name, "Reneé." In fact, "Rene" and "Reneé" acoustically share some common ground; we can hardly tell which sex is referred to verbally unless a designated one is manifest. As a result, the androgynous figure conveys an alternative sexuality, and Hwang's *M. Butterfly* "captures the ambivalence of the fact that beneath the feminine costume, the operatic figure of Madame Butterfly is really a man." [5] Song deconstructs an established ideology symbolizing a close relationship

between clothing and gender. Her/His homoerotic performance helps the disclosure of queer identity as well as redefines herself/himself through crossplay.

Since the proliferation of discourses on sexuality oscillate around the unitary androcentric foundation of hegemony, Song's masquerade provides her/him with a feminist alignment to expose the Western fantasy of submissive Oriental women and effeminate Oriental men. Aware that "one's identity is multidimensional," Song coalesces with Gallimard's pornographic fantasy to personify an ideal perfect Oriental woman committed in selfless devotion to a man. [21] Song uses her/his body to explicitly display her/his affection for a certain narrative because "mimesis not only affords the cosplay a sense of agency in expressing pleasure, but contains the potential to alter the boundaries of representation." [8] To a certain degree, Song plays more than a woman; she/he re-creates a woman character with precision to emancipate her/his character from the confined narrative of Gallimard's fantasy. Such a carnivalesque spirit "offers a view of the 'official' world as seen from the margins." [22] Song refuses to be "conditioned . . . by external, alienating societal factors" and acknowledges that she/he needs to change from one form to another to survive the whirl of the Western stereotype. [23] Deviating from the masculinity norm, Song defies the foundation of hegemonic masculinity. As a crossplayer, her/his masquerade is not to create a mockup of a woman figure but to express her/his own identity. Robert R. Wilson commented on how carnivalesque achieves its function to overwhelm conventional discourse. He argued: "Carnival, then, is a second voice, an unofficial one, that mocks, derides and up-ends, but it is also, and this seems essential to the definition, a double voice, authority calls it forth and gives it being. Carnival always plays against an official discourse: it is the mask of the official discourse that it mocks." [24] Regardless of the misunderstanding of her/his comrade Chin, Song's anti-authorial trait confronts Gallimard's homogeneous hermeneutic on sexuality. Song collapses Gallimard's forged space by delineating that meanings derive from miscellaneous differences, especially in a dynamic transformation of presence and absence. Marginalized sexuality and repressed homoeroticism are reconfigured through Song's crossplay.

The moment of truth that bombards Gallimard's phallogocentric ideology finally comes when Song decides to remove her/his costume. Song's costume has been her/his protection to deal with the pressure that develops from both her/his conservative China and Gallimard's projection of submissive Oriental women. With a view to expediting the process of carnivalesque, Song must get rid of the costume that has burdened her/his shoulders. In carnival, "[t]he laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary . . . life are suspended." [1] Song believes she/he has aroused a riot that stirs the system run by homogenous hegemony. To attain a world free of hierarchy, removing her/his costume forces "Gallimard to see her in terms of racialized conceptions of ethnicity." [25] Gallimard needs to learn the difference and diversity other entities convey, so as to accept miscellaneous narratives. In Gallimard's own monologue, he confesses that "[d]id I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find?" [9] Undoubtedly, Gallimard has always known the truth of Song's sex and is afraid to acknowledge his true sexuality. Song responds to Gallimard by asking "[h]ow can

you objectively judge your own values" to feature Gallimard's blindness of knowing the truth. [9] Fear hinders Gallimard's judgment and conscientiousness to see through his own misdemeanor.

GALLIMARD. You're only in my mind! All this is in my mind! I order you! To Stop!

SONG. To what? To strip? That's just what I'm—

GALLIMARD. No! Stop! I want you—

SONG. You want me? [9]

Apparently, with such illogical responses to Song, Gallimard has lost his edge and is unable to deal with the situation because of the gender confusion that he has created for himself. More precisely, he begins to struggle with his true identity, and whether or not he has fallen for a man. Many drifting and uncertain answers pop up to coerce Gallimard to concede his homosexuality. The reason why Song can easily break down Gallimard's defense is that "[m]en always believe what they want to hear." [9] Feeling deluded and mesmerized, Gallimard's articulation fails him by revealing his real consciousness.

Carnivalesque would not be complete were it not for a death scene. In a carnival parade, a clown or a jester must go through death to consummate carnivalesque. The spirit of carnivalesque lies in laughter that "destroys traditional connections and abolishes idealized strata." [2] Such a death scene is not a tragic death and does not arouse sympathy. Bakhtin once said that "[d]eath is the necessary link in the process of the people's growth and renewal. It's the 'other side' of birth." [2] The purpose of death helps the realization of a twisted concept of sexuality. When Song "removes his wig and kimono, leaving them on the floor. Underneath, he wears a well-cut suit," she/he proclaims the annihilation of pervasive hegemonic propaganda. [9] Preserving his strength to protect this illusive narrative, Gallimard must fulfill the myth of an obedient Oriental woman to maintain his integrity, so he "enters, crawling towards Song's wig and kimono." [9] Since Song reveals himself to be a man, Gallimard has no choice but to change himself into a woman to comply with the fact that "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man." [9] Plunging a knife into his body, Gallimard chooses to obey his Western myth.

GALLIMARD. Death with honor is better than life . . . life with dishonor . . . The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things . . . But how can it face one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than . . . a man . . . I have found her at last. [9]

Gallimard's subsequent transformation is affected by the conventional beautification of romance, which delineates lover's reunion in death. Committing suicide preserves the

integrity of Gallimard's homoerotic fantasy love of Song. Literally, Gallimard feels secure in his relationship with Song, not because of Song's obedience but because of her/his own honesty to sexuality. Donning the costume as Butterfly only depicts Gallimard's weakness in admitting that he has constructed a gay identity for himself. Thus, Gallimard reaches the phase of denying the fact that Song is a man, whereas Song objects, "I'm not 'just a man.'" [9] Song's announcement of not being "just a man" removes the boundary built to estrange homosexuality from a Phallic authority. Butterfly is an iconic image sheltering Gallimard's anxiety of violating social taboos.

VI. CONCLUSION

Song's act of gender bending by cross-dressing is considered the thematic core in *M. Butterfly*. Judith Butler once affirmed that gender construction originates from the dress. Men and women define themselves as masculine and feminine through proper dressing. The motif of cross-dressing always involves issues of gender and sex, which Gallimard thinks light of when confronting Song. The question of gender hierarchy becomes polemic when it comes to cross-dressing. Clothing is the primary tool in Song's willful manipulation of Western fantasy toward the Oriental women. Even though cosplay has a very broad interpretation, which includes manga and animation, comic books and cartoons, video games, and live-action films and television series, Song's masquerade achieves a certain degree of intention designated by cosplayers. The move that Song invokes as a drive defying the Western fantasy projected on Oriental women is the same as that of a cosplayer who manifests his/her own subculture threatened by the main culture. Borrowing the practice of masquerading from the Western culture, cosplayers are able to display their admiration and adoration toward characters by re-enacting their favorite scenes. Cosplayers consider "cosplay as a mode of identity performance," which becomes the pivot that Song strives to justify. [26] Through her/his performance, Song dons a costume and/or accessories to overwhelm her/his viewers by showing that the meaning of sexuality does not merely rely on biological bodies; both feminine and masculine traits can be freely acquired without phallic confinement. Song's masquerade as an opera diva and Gallimard's transformation into Butterfly both exemplify that each individual's sexuality and identity are ambiguous as well as shifting. The homogenous narrative is no longer an unequivocal repertoire that stigmatizes the existence of other voices. The discrepancy of Western fantasy regarding the Orient comes to pieces after Gallimard disarms his masculinity to yield to Song's innate femininity. The ending of *M. Butterfly* epitomizes the extinguishment of an obnoxious and ignorant culture where both Western fantasy of dominance and male fantasy of female submission are under scrutiny. It previews the liberation of sexuality and the emergence of multiplicity. Subculture, like homosexuality, rises as a nemesis to adjust the misconception from society. The profound of cross-dressing ambivalence as embodied by Song results in both Gallimard's anxiety and amusement toward readers. Thus, Song's cosplay as an Oriental woman

successfully accomplishes a sense of carnivalesque in this polemic play.

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