



# Colonial Conceptions of Femininity: Analyzing Agnes and Song in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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Received: 10 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 07 Mar 2026; Accepted: 11 Mar 2026; Available online: 15 Mar 2026

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**Abstract**— *David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly portrays the characters of Agnes and Song Liling as opposing forces that reveal the complex intersections of gender, race, and colonial power. This paper examines the contrasting roles of Agnes and Song as representations of the "real woman" and the "ideal woman", respectively. The paper also explores how their relationships with Gallimard expose the fragility of his colonial fantasies. Gallimard's obsession with Song is rooted in his Western stereotypical view of the East as submissive, exotic, and idealized. Agnes represents the grounded reality that does not fit in such constructed fantasies. This challenges the larger colonial myth of power and dominance and emphasizes how Gallimard's illusions fall apart. By focusing on Agnes and Song as contrasting forces, this paper argues how Hwang deconstructs the racial and gendered stereotypes often projected in arts and literature, which later define cultural identities, revealing the realities hidden beneath the fantasies of colonialism. Through this lens, M. Butterfly offers a critique of the politics of gender and race in Western perceptions of the East.*



**Keywords**— *West, East, Ideal Woman, Colonial Fantasy, M. Butterfly*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Western cultural view of Asians often promotes images of compliant, subservient characters represented as flowers who bend over and blush, which is often perpetuated by media, including film and literature. One of the major notable examples of these types of stereotypes is *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini; the story is a borrowing from and has been influenced by other literary works written previously, one of which was Pierre Loti's French novel *Madama Chrysanthème*, published in 1887. (Szuster, 2022) Many other such works of art that express similar themes exist that further support these stereotypes that are present in Western society as pertaining to the Eastern culture.

The storyline of *Madama Butterfly* centers around a 15-year-old Japanese woman named Cio-Cio-San, who marries Pinkerton, an American naval officer. Pinkerton

later leaves Cio-Cio-San, returning to America to marry an American woman, Kate. Three years later, Pinkerton returns to find Cio-Cio-San has had a child (the result of their marriage) while he was away, and Cio-Cio-San, ultimately, in a state of overwhelming grief, commits seppuku after Pinkerton and his new wife decide to adopt the child. (Greenberg, 2020)

The play *M. Butterfly* is a deconstruction of such previous narratives, where the roles and power positions are reversed from previously stereotypical views. The play is based on a true story and critiques the Western perceptions of Eastern femininity and challenges stereotypical Asian representations (Choe, 2022). The real accounts of an espionage case and the relationship between French diplomat Bernard Boursicot and Beijing Opera singer Shi Pei Pu inspired Hwang to write this play. (Johnson, 2018, p. 125) Rene Gallimard, a former French diplomat, and Liling Song, a Chinese opera singer who turns out to be a

spy and a man, are having a love affair and are the subjects of the drama. A two-paragraph article in *The New York Times*, May 1986, about French diplomat Bernard Bouriscot's treasonous disclosure of a sensitive national secret to his Chinese "girlfriend", Pei-Pu Shi, who concealed "his" sexual identity behind the "modest" Chinese attire, became the base for the story. (Liu, 2002) The play is also intertwined and post-colonial deconstruction of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*.

The play investigates the multifaceted relationships among culture, gender, and power through the experiences of eclectic characters such as Song Liling, a Chinese opera singer, and René Gallimard, a French diplomat. Gallimard's wife, Agnes, however, stands in stark contrast and is characterized by simplicity and "realness," and thus is placed in juxtaposition with Song, who represents the Orientalist stereotype of the exotic and submissive "other." Hwang employs both Agnes and Song to expose and critique fantasized colonialism and gender identities.

Gallimard's belief in what an ideal woman is differs from the realities of his wife's life, and the physical, biological, and emotional distinctiveness of being a woman. In this light, this paper investigates the characteristics of Agnes and Song's roles, and "the real" versus "fantasy" within the play, as well as examines how the fantasy represents cultural stereotypes of the East, and analyzes how power operates within the relationships between Gallimard and the two characters, and exposes the deeper colonialist beliefs Gallimard perpetuates.

This research uses both postcolonial and feminist critiques to show how Gallimard's illusions about his power and superiority in relation to Agnes and Song provide him with a false sense of identity that is ultimately undermined by the reality of East-West power relations.

## II. CONSTRUCTED IMAGE OF THE FANTASIZED "IDEAL WOMAN"

The character of Song Liling in *M. Butterfly* is that of an idealized and almost mythical conception of womanhood that René Gallimard has created in his mind. The "ideal woman" that Gallimard envisions in Song Liling is based on his fantasies and desires for control, which are rooted in his colonial beliefs. From the first time Gallimard meets Song Liling, he is taken with her physical beauty and grace and interprets everything she does as an example of perfect femininity. After their first encounter, he states, "...my body shook once more - with the entrance of Butterfly." (Hwang, 1986, p. 9). Gallimard believes that Song Liling is not just a woman but also an exotic, submissive archetype of femininity: someone who satisfies his desires

and reinforces his image as a powerful Western man who can possess this "other." Through his view of Song Liling, Gallimard perpetuates the stereotypical representations of women and the Orient by assuming there is a clear relationship between how a woman looks on the outside and her inner truth. (Kondo, 1990, p. 15).

In the central narrative of the play, Song has an important part to play as the character himself is playing a role that is constructed entirely to meet the expectations and fantasies of Gallimard, who represents the West. Song even addresses this by saying, "It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man." (Hwang, 1986, p. 17)

Song's identity is constantly changing, transitioning from one construction to another throughout the performance and constantly reconfiguring based upon Gallimard's perceived notions of the ideal woman being obedient and docile. As the play continues, it becomes clearer to the audience that Song is not how Gallimard perceives her, but rather that she is playing a role to provide the illusion of power and control that Gallimard desires. Song has been constructed as a character for Gallimard in accordance with the fantasy created by the West about the East. Gallimard's perception of Song as being exotic and submissive, despite her wittiness, is consistent with the broader perception of the East by the West as being mysterious and submissive.

Said argues that the Western imagination constructs the Oriental world as mysterious, alien, and in contrast to the rational, self-assured West. (Said, 1979, p. 5) Furthermore, Said sees this binary opposition between East and West as having formed in part through these contrasting representations, and thereby, representing the whole "Orient" as irrational, mystical, and feminine. (Said, 1979, p. 103) This ideological construction of the Orient forms part of what led to Gallimard viewing Song in this way, and parallels the way colonial ideology functions. His views about Song include many dimensions that can be understood as a result of his roles as both a French diplomat stationed in China and then later as an individual who desired to possess and control Song. Thus, he does not see Song as an individual person, but as an object of desirability and control.

In this scenario, Song's beauty, grace, and "femininity" are not qualities she inherently possesses but rather performative ones that confirm the qualities Gallimard, as a white man, fantasizes about the East. In the same way, Song represents the West's ultimate colonial fantasy through the idealization of women based on the myth of the Orient. The ways in which Gallimard idealizes Song are rooted in a desire for control that reflects his greater

sense of superiority as a Western male within a colonial framework. His perceived ability to possess Song, that is, the ideal Oriental woman, represents the broader history of colonialism as the West has attempted to dominate and redefine the East. The processes of objectification and domination by the colonizer, hence, become an important aspect of Gallimard's relationship with Song. Thus, creating Song as a representation of the colonized female, one that is passive and submissive, and is regulated by the desires of the colonizer, despite not really being one.

### III. GROUNDED REALITY OF THE REAL WOMAN

In stark contrast to the idealized fantasy that Gallimard constructs around Song, Agnes represents the "real woman," someone who does not fit very neatly into Gallimard's projections and illusions of power and gender. Gallimard's wife, Agnes, has qualities that he considers simple and plain, standing in contrast to Song, who is very exotic. Gallimard married Agnes for convenience. When introducing Agnes to the audience, Gallimard states:

Gallimard: (*To us*) I married a woman older than myself – Agnes.

Agnes: (*To us*) I grew up in Australia, amongst criminals and kangaroos. My father was an ambassador there.

Gallimard: Hearing that brought me to alter –  
(*Agnes leaves*)

– where I opted for a dose of practicality. An unsophisticated boy from a provincial town could still manage a quick leap up the career ladder. She may not be my fantasy woman, but she could help me reach the far-off lands of my dreams. (p. 14)

Gallimard had a goal in mind when he was with both of these women; he was just a provincial unsophisticated boy looking for a woman to help him achieve his dreams and then, after he achieved them, he would do whatever necessary to fulfil the dream of being a heroic Pinkerton-type man from *Madama Butterfly* who embodies his concept of Western superiority and that the East needs the West to aid them. In Gallimard's mind, Song is an idealized Eastern woman in the role of Butterfly, and he believes he will assume the role of Pinkerton from Puccini's opera. (Tayebi & Salmi, 2018, p. 13) Conversely, in Agnes' case, Gallimard used her only as a tool for practical purposes, like climbing up the social ladder and producing an heir, at which they failed.

The delicate nature of Gallimard's dream of being with Song and the reality of Agnes and the contrast between the

two ultimately highlight the difference between his fantasies and reality. While Song seems to be a controlled rendering of Gallimard's own desires, Agnes is a real person who provides a down-to-earth, practical, and unromantic reflection of his idealized version of a woman.

Despite the fact that Agnes is neither as glamorous nor as alluring as Song, she is still depicted as an authentic and self-sufficient individual who does not meet the expectations Gallimard has set for an "ideal woman." These expectations are based on his fantasies about East and what it would mean to have a relationship with a woman like Song.

The contrast is again evident as Song projects herself as modest, demure, and submissive, while Agnes cannot be put into any of these categories. Where Gallimard feels the need to save Song, inherently putting him on the stronger and higher ladder in the hierarchy, Agnes and he began their relationship when she stood higher; she was the daughter of an ambassador in Australia, while he was only a 'town boy'. In this way, she does not have any place in Gallimard's fantasies and embodies the reality of womanhood that is unadorned by fantasy or illusion, where he is the powerful white man. She also does not fall into the objects of Gallimard's colonial desires and challenges his assumption that women, particularly those from the East, should be compliant and docile.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps us to understand who Agnes and Song. Butler posits that gender is not an inherent trait, it is something that can be performed by acting out certain actions, exhibiting certain behaviors and through social expectations about what constitutes masculine or feminine behaviors. (Butler, 1990, p. 33) Song takes advantage of this performative aspect for the benefit of her goals to portray an ideal woman image for Gallimard.

It becomes evident that Agnes does not conform to the "ideal woman" image that Gallimard has envisioned, thereby challenging the preconceived notions of femininity built on his colonial/patriarchal ideologies. Her existence, hence, stands in contrast to the fantasies that Gallimard has created about women's roles.

In *M. Butterfly*, Agnes's role in relation to the overall critique of colonialism and Western arrogance is significant. While Gallimard is ensnared in the notion of saving Song, her emergence in Act 2, Scene 5, soaked from an anti-Chinese protest, serves as a metaphorical backdrop to symbolize the disassociation between Gallimard and real life. By contrasting Gallimard's imaginative, idealistic view of China with the realistic situation facing China at that moment in time, Agnes acts as a force to discredit and challenge Gallimard's selfish,

egocentric worldview, revealing the emptiness of his fantasies and pushing him to recognize his disconnection from reality.

Gallimard's constant fantasies about being in control stem from his colonial beliefs, which promote the false dichotomization between the East and the West. On the contrary, Agnes represents reason and reality that reveal and challenge Gallimard's delusional ideals.

Agnes's refuses to see the colonial view of the West as superior, presenting it instead as a complex and a place of contradiction. She acknowledges the limitations of Gallimard's fantasies regarding the West's inherent superiority and helps him to see and recognize the larger social and political structures that he chooses to ignore. Her statements, such as "the West is a 'paper tiger'," her conversations of "world revolution," (Hwang, 1986, p. 81) challenge colonially constructed myths that Gallimard believes in. Agnes does not see the West as a powerful and permanent entity, but, instead, questions its position by addressing "The inevitability of world revolution." (Hwang, 1986, p. 81)

In contrast to Gallimard, who is surrounded by his idealized and romanticized version of China and who only projects his colonial fantasies upon Song, Agnes appears more connected to the current political and social realities of the time. Therefore, Agnes serves as a voice of reason that reveals the emptiness of Gallimard's worldview.

The conflict between fact and fiction is evident in scenes when Agnes questions Gallimard's disconnect from reality. Gallimard's fantasy version of what it means to be "China" in his home in France, which includes burning incense and seeing himself as a powerful diplomat, indicates his wish to avoid real-world complexities by escaping into a fantasy world of his own where he has total control over everyone else, like he imagined he once did when he was in China. The way in which Agnes rationally responds to the world of fantasy that Gallimard has constructed indicates that there are significant real-world factors that Gallimard fails to recognize. While he builds an imaginary sense of power through his fantasies, Agnes is working to confront issues of the events that are taking place in reality.

This relationship between Gallimard and Agnes illustrates one of the major themes throughout *M. Butterfly*, the seduction of colonial fantasies juxtaposed with the ugliness and hardship that lie beyond. Gallimard's preoccupation with creating an ideal version of the "perfect woman," as well as wanting to save Song from the mythical oppression of the East reflect larger colonialist attitudes that have been held by many in the West who attempt to impose their values and beliefs upon

the "other." Furthermore, Gallimard's love for Song as an object of desire, who is ultimately an "ideal" prototype of the "East," and his inability to see through the reality of life that led to his ultimate demise, (윤소영, 2015)

#### IV. DECONSTRUCTING GENDER AND COLONIALISM

Oriental women are viewed as docile and compliant by Gallimard, and he's not the only one to hold that belief. There is a historical and cultural basis for such stereotypes. The play also outlines how, during the 1960's, the "new" feminist moment made Eastern women seem submissive, which later became the stereotype. Western men after the movement were no longer able to uphold the patriarchal society's presumption of white women as subservient in this circumstance. Eventually, Western men began seeing Asian women as the ideal of domesticated, obedient womanhood because, as in the 1960s, Asian women were still in the pre-feminist stage. (Tanimoto, 2003, p. 100)

By presenting the characters of Agnes and Song, Hwang breaks down the traditional classification of women as either submissive or independent based on their Eastern or Western origins. From a feminist standpoint, Song Liling exemplifies the interconnectedness of gender and colonialization. At the beginning of the play, Song Liling appears to fit Gallimard's standards for an ideal woman, however, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Song is actually a man who has used the 'ideal woman' image performance for deception and to manipulate Gallimard. Song's acting has effectively challenged traditional definitions of gender and demonstrated that Gallimard's perceptions of the ideal woman Song were completely false. Through the interpretation of women in Gallimard's fantasies, Song strengthens Butler's concept that gender is performative and can be defined by the power structure of both gender and colonialism.

The manipulation act also highlights the intersection of race and gender within the colonial space. The inability of Gallimard to look past his own fantasies stems from a colonial ideology that looks to impose Western standards onto others. Song's deception acts as an act of resistance to this colonial fantasy because he contradicts Gallimard's fantasies and demonstrates the violent nature of both colonial and gendered structures of power. Song uses the idealized female form to demonstrate how colonial ideologies not only create perceptions around race and nationality but how they also create gender's construction as well.

Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, who suggest that gender is both performed and socially constructed, apply

to both Agnes and Song. Agnes defies the performance of the idealized woman and instead manifests a view of gender as a lived experience; conversely, Song uses the performative elements of gender to his advantage and reveals the power dynamics that exist in both colonial and gendered relationships. Both characters also prove how gender is not a biological fact but can be constructed, influenced by social norms and politics.

Through a feminist and postcolonial lens of *M. Butterfly*, we can see how the play critiques gender and colonialist ideologies by exposing how these dominant ideologies impact the lives of the characters. This also suggests that both Gallimard and the West are victims of their imaginations, and challenges the mainstream cultural constructs of male/female, white/nonwhite, and East/West. (Noureldin, 2017)

## V. THE ROLE OF ILLUSION AND FANTASY IN SHAPING COLONIAL IMAGINATION

One of the central themes in *M. Butterfly* is the way colonial fantasies shape and distort both individual identities and cultural perceptions. Gallimard's construction of an idealized "China" and an idealized "woman" in Song is emblematic of the larger colonial project of the West. The way he views East is a result of desire and power; he cannot seem to quantify his fantasies of rescue and control, as he perceives the two differently. Only when Agnes asserts that he is a "clerk" does he begin to understand the extent to which his illusions have been built on power. In a confrontation, she mentions:

I found the letters. The ones you've been writing. For God knows how long. A huge stack of them. To some Chinese slut. "I swear I will find a way"... "to rescue you from yours"... You're a clerk! How are you going to rescue anyone, when you haven't got the courage to drop them in the mail? (Hwang, 1986, p. 81)

The world created by Agnes's words exposes the absurdity behind the grand delusions that Gallimard has constructed about himself; he is just a man hanging on to fantasies that eventually offered him nothing. It is through Agnes's perception of him that Gallimard begins to see that he has no power over his situation or the perpetuation of some of the very myths of colonialism that he holds.

The boldness with which Agnes challenges Gallimard shows both how his fantasies about himself allow him not only to doubt himself but also make galling claims that are rooted in inconsistencies; for instance, he identifies himself as someone with a potential need to save someone else despite his inability to even face the reality of his own

life. In addition to being a part of his cultural background as a Western man, his fantasies about the East have also been created by his view as a Westerner that equates the East to being an exotic, mysterious, inferior part of the world, and allows him to feel superior to other cultures. Therefore, he sees the West as the most advanced part of the world; thus, he has continued to indoctrinate the belief that he is somehow more powerful by virtue of his existence in this cultural environment.

Gallimard's fantasized view of an ideal "Oriental" woman, exemplified by Song, is rooted in these romantic colonial fantasies. In his mind, Song embodies an ideal Eastern woman, submissive, obedient, and exotic, making her a desirable object through which he realizes his fantasies of oppression and domination. Additionally, Gallimard's fantasy of possessing and dominating an elusive "Oriental" woman is linked to his notion of colonial superiority over the East. In his mind, the East is a canvas upon which he will paint his ideals, a reflection of his personal need for power and authority.

In this regard, Agnes challenges Gallimard's illusions of wanting to "save" Song through her rational and grounded view of the world. Agnes is fully aware that Gallimard is but a man caught in a world of delusions, not capable of understanding the political or cultural world in which he lives.

Agnes characterizes the "true", realistic, and ordinary, while Gallimard's fantasies about Song as a perfect, created "Eastern" woman. There is a strong contrast between the realistic, ordinary, unadorned representation of womanhood found in Agnes and the perfected, imagined, distorted depictions of womanhood represented by Song.

The fixation Gallimard has with Song prevents him from seeing either his own reality or the reality of cross-cultural relations between East and West. In Scene 5 of Act II, when Agnes confronts Gallimard, she reveals the limitations of his power and the falsity of the illusions he has created around himself. She reminds him, "You're a clerk." This line exposes Gallimard's false notion that he is a powerful diplomat and diminishes his sense of superiority, both to himself and the audience.

Gallimard's fantasies about Song are rooted in his own colonial understandings of power. In Gallimard's worldview, the West is powerful and dominating over the East. For him, Song is an exotic, submissive girl who meets Gallimard's need to be in total control and exercise superiority over another person. This idea is consistent with the general colonial mindset, in which the East is seen as something to be conquered, tamed, and controlled.

However, Agnes resists this colonial perspective by

confronting Gallimard's false conception of reality - both his personal fantasies and his political fantasies - and exposing the fact that the concept of colonial superiority by the West is built on a weak foundation. She has her own rational view of the world, which challenges the validity of Gallimard's fabricated image of reality about Song. As a result, Gallimard is forced to confront his own realities when he sees Agnes.

Therefore, Agnes becomes the voice in the play that Hwang uses to critique the colonial myth of the white man's burden and the supposed need for the West to save the East. Gallimard's ideas about saving Song illustrate his own insecurities and the need to feel important and powerful.

Agnes's rationality exposes the emptiness of this need for personal validation, showing that the true reality of East-West relations is far more complex than Gallimard fantasizes.

## VI. THE MYTH OF FERTILITY: AGNES VS. SONG LILING

The theme of fertility also operates on multiple levels in the play. Gallimard and Agnes's inability to have a child contrasts sharply with Song's ability to "produce" a child, highlighting the deeper, often unspoken aspects of colonial power dynamics and fertility. Fertility, or the lack thereof, therefore, becomes a metaphor for Gallimard's failed illusions of potency, both as a man and as a colonial figure. While it strengthens the colonial view of the East as fertile and productive, the later unfolding of the plot reveals Gallimard as infertile.

Gallimard's lack of ability to have children is a very important reason behind why he has such a strained relationship with Agnes; with each failed attempt at conceiving a child with her comes another blow to his already poor self-image as a man. In addition, Gallimard's obsession with "saving" and being in control of Song, whom he sees as the mother to his child, is not only his way of seeking validation but is also a metaphor for the West's inability to maintain control over the East. As Gallimard cannot father a child with Agnes, he feels a sense of incompleteness and a question about his masculinity. He expresses his personal humiliation at their inability to conceive, saying in Act 1 Scene 17 that, "I feel like God himself is laughing at me if I can't produce a child." (Hwang, 1986, 56) This is another instance of the conventional idea being deconstructed; this time, about fertility, here the male fertility is also put to question as they are unable to conceive a child.

In contrast, Song's ability to bear a child is presented as

a significant aspect of her relationship with Gallimard. Song uses a moment of Gallimard's emotional vulnerability to announce "I'm pregnant" at the end of Act 1. As Song is not truly a woman but a man masquerading as one, the child she carries becomes a symbol of Gallimard's fantasies and provides him with personal validation. For him, the child represents the ultimate proof of his virility, even though it is an artificial and deceptive construction. Song's ability to conceive, therefore, becomes a way for her to manipulate Gallimard further, providing him with the illusion of fulfilment in his desire to produce an heir, while never truly fulfilling the deeper emotional and psychological void that Gallimard has.

Agnes' incapacity to conceive with Gallimard highlights their failed marriage, emphasizing the breakdown of their marriage and the collapse of Gallimard's fantasies. However, as a rational woman, Agnes gets herself checked to know issues that may be resulting in their inability to conceive and finds herself completely healthy. In Scene 17 of Act 1, while informing Gallimard of her hospital visit and medical examination, Agnes also informs him that she has also made an appointment for him to get him checked as well and that there is nothing wrong with her (Hwang, 1986, p. 55), which Gallimard equates to her questioning his masculinity.

While Song has created the impression in Gallimard's mind that he is fertile, his inability to conceive with Agnes stands in stark contrast to this fallacy created by Song, which makes it further difficult for him to escape from reality. The stark contrast between Song and Agnes clearly shows that the idealistic view of women can easily fall apart when these views are based on such misconceptions.

The very act of conceiving, which Gallimard associates with validation and dominance, is something he cannot achieve with the woman who remains grounded in reality but is "granted" with Song, whose fertility is part of the performance of her deception.

Ultimately, the fertility themes underscore the collapse of Gallimard's colonial and personal fantasies. Song's ability to produce a child, thus, becomes an escape into the depths of his fantasies. The inability to have a child with Agnes illustrates how Gallimard's fantasized ideals will always fall short of reality. Through *M. Butterfly*, Hwang establishes a symbolic representation of the nullification of power between the East and the West, male and female, and between what appears to be real and what is truly true. In the end, it is Song (the illusion) who creates the new child, and Agnes (the real woman) is unable to create a new child to show how impossible it is for Gallimard to be able to achieve his colonial fantasies.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The characters of Agnes and Song Liling in *M. Butterfly* exemplify the differences between reality vs. illusion, and authentic vs. performance in relation to colonialism and gender relations. Gallimard's fantasies about Song reflect the Western stereotype of the East, which portrays it as submissive, exotic, fertile, and ultimately idealized; however, the grounded reality of Agnes acts as a counterpoint, providing the image of "the real woman" in opposition to the constructed identity of Song. The disparity in power based on race and gender, illustrated by the fantasies of Gallimard are also apparent in the relationship between Agnes and Song, demonstrating that Gallimard's delusions of masculine superiority, domination over the female character, and control through colonialism were very fragile.

The themes of fertility and reproduction also serve to reinforce these ideas. Song's ability to bear a child, while artificial in nature, symbolizes the failure of Gallimard's desires; the fact that Gallimard and Agnes cannot produce an heir symbolizes the failure of their relationship as well as the failure of Gallimard's colonial aspirations. Through these means, Hwang critiques the very foundations of colonial power and exposes the gendered ramifications of colonialism, not only of Gallimard's romanticization and personal illusions but also of the broader Western cultural biases placed on the East.

Overall, Hwang's *M. Butterfly* examines the politics of gender, race and power as evidenced through the characters of Agnes and Song, who help Hwang reveal the layers of colonial fantasy and provide a sharp critique of the general occidental perception of the East, and of the stereotypes perpetuated by colonial ideology that historically shaped the cultural and gender identity of both men and women. Hwang, through the juxtaposition of both characters' roles, critiques not just the psychological/political paradigms that bind Gallimard, but also exposes the underlying and often excruciatingly painful truths that were part of the power and identity dynamic that contributed to Gallimard's ultimate demise.

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