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**IDENTITY QUEST IN ASIAN-AMERICAN DRAMA: THE SELECTED PLAYS OF
DAVID HENRY HWANG
POTRAGA ZA IDENTITETOM U AZIJSKO-AMERIČKOJ DRAMI: ODABRANE
DRAME DAVIDA HENRYJA HWANGA**

Master Thesis

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1. Introduction

Discussing the nature of theatre and its relationship to culture, Peter Brook emphasizes its importance suggesting that: “here lies the responsibility of the theatre: what a book cannot convey, what no philosopher can truly explain, can be brought into our understanding by the theatre. Translating the untranslatable is one of its roles” (164). Often controversial, the theatre deals with rather obvious and occasionally harsh social and individual issues. It mirrors culture, society, politics, stereotypes, identity politics, and interprets them from an author’s or director’s perspective. However, the list of responsibilities does not end here. The theatre challenges dominant beliefs, attitudes and prejudices; it may subvert them and introduce new ideas.

This thesis addresses one of the issues that has long captivated audiences in the U.S. and overseas, particularly in Asia. The presence of Asian-American ethnic group in the United States has been strongly felt from the beginnings of the nation, and their contribution on the economic, political, social and cultural plan has not been left unnoticed. The cultural contribution which has been reflected in music, literature, theatre, and art in general, came into particular focus in the past four or five decades (Krasner 54). Under such circumstances, the works of Asian-American playwrights has become a means of presenting the unique identity of this ethnic group, which is embedded in the fabric of American society and culture.

The main goal of this thesis is to present the manner in which David Henry Hwang deals with the theme of identity in his plays. This is the central theme of most of his plays, but the manners in which he approaches it and dramatizes it are not always the same. Much of Hwang’s writing is based on his own Asian-American experience, and on Western projections of Asia. For him, the latter plays vital role in the process of playwriting since this is, for the most part, the perspective that he challenges and tries to subvert. The plays upon which the analysis in the thesis is carried out are *FOB* (1979), which Hwang composed at the beginning of his playwriting career; *M. Butterfly* (1988), a drama whose quality was confirmed by numerous awards and which promoted Hwang to the position of one of the most important Asian-American dramatic authors; and *Chinglish* (2011), his most recent theatrical achievement.

David Henry Hwang is a first-generation Chinese-American, born in California in 1957. His parents, Henry Hwang and Dorothy Huang emigrated to the U.S. in late 1940’s and early 1950’s respectively, determining the courses of their future children’s lives. David Henry Hwang spent his childhood in San Gabriel, California. He was admitted to Stanford

University and later to the Yale School of Drama. After leaving the Yale School of drama, he spent his time studying drama with Sam Shepard (Boles 7).

In an interview by Marty Moss-Coane and John Timpane from 1993, Hwang describes his typically American childhood, giving us insight into the process of his parents' assimilation and his upbringing. He points out that:

We were raised pretty much as white European Americans in terms of the things we celebrated. There's an odd confluence in my family between a father who decided to turn away from things Chinese and a mother whose family had been converted to Christianity in China several generations back. Consequently between the two of them there was no particular desire for us to speak Chinese or celebrate Chinese holidays at all. (Moss-Coane and Timpane 284)

Typically American, his childhood does not seem to have been very different from other non-Asian children. It is in the later stage of his young adult life that he developed interest in his Asian identity. The interest in this topic has grown gradually, from the time when he started experiencing the world and culture around him. William C. Boles, the author of *Understanding David Henry Hwang*, says that:

In some interviews Hwang described his childhood as a Chinese American in the 1960s and 1970s as fairly idyllic and painless in terms of racial issues (he noted at one point that he never experienced any racism until he first went to New York City), at other times he admitted being aware of racial stereotypes and bigotry tied to popular perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans, especially when Hollywood was involved. (Boles 3)

While Hwang's interest in the topic has gradually been increasing, his insight into the dominant American culture has become more extensive and profound. It has shifted from observation to scrutiny and the Asian characters he saw in film and television, which made him "feel frankly embarrassed," (Moss-Coane and Timpane 284) gave way to creating "own Asian characters later in life" (284).

1.1. Influences

Throughout years, Hwang has also developed as a writer. One of the first works he wrote was the history of his family. When in 1967 he found out that his maternal grandmother was ill, he feared that his "family's history would be lost forever," so "in order to prevent such an occurrence, he received permission from his parents to travel to the Philippines to see her" (Boles 4). His visit resulted in a writing which contained the narrated history of his

family. However, Boles recognizes Hwang's Stanford years as the most important period in his life, and concludes that during this period, Hwang had three important epiphanies:

The first epiphany occurred when, in his sophomore year, he began to question his religious upbringing and eventually threw off his family's Christian beliefs. [...] Despite his personal choice to leave the church, religion played an important element in three of his plays. [...] The second epiphany revolved around his ethnicity. As a student, he began to seek answers to that awkwardness he had felt as a child when watching depictions of Asian characters on television. He immersed himself in an exploration of Asian and Asian American issues. [...] The third and most important collegiate epiphany concerned his eventual career. At Harvard, his high school, he had seen Arthur Kopits's *Indians*; then, as a first-year student at Stanford, he visited the American Conservatory Theatre, attending performances of William Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*. [...] So, in his sophomore year, he decided he wanted to become a playwright. (6 – 7)

Since then, Hwang has started writing plays which focus on the unresolved, conflicting issues between East and West, the Oriental and Occident. In a 2011 interview by Dennis Polkow, Hwang calls attention to the unconscious in him and says: "I took a playwriting workshop the summer before my senior year in college with Sam Shepard, [María] Irene Fornés, Murray Mednick in Padua Hills. (...) So, they taught us to write more from our unconscious, that is not censor yourself, and gave us lots of exercises to try to be as directly from the unconscious as possible" (Hwang, "Chinglish Lessons").

In the autumn of 1980, Hwang started attending the Yale School of Drama where he broadened his knowledge of drama. He had already written *FOB* (1979), yet two subsequent plays came out while he was still in Yale – *The Dance and the Railway* (1981) and *Family Devotions* (1981). In 1981, he left the Yale School of Drama without earning a degree. Much of his family's history served as an inspiration for his plays. Such is the case with *Family Devotions* (1981) or *Yellow Face* (2007).

Hwang very much relies on deconstruction, a method of semiotic analysis introduced by Jacques Derrida. This method is used in all three plays which are to be analyzed in this thesis. He mostly deconstructs the imperialistic, colonial discourses, which dominated the Western literature throughout the centuries and have shaped the Western perspective of the East. The process of the identity quest which started in *FOB* thus has evolved throughout his career and reached its peak in *M. Butterfly* (1988) and *Chinglish* (2011).

1.2. Corpus/The Selected Plays

The first play which the paper will discuss is *FOB* (1979), the play which was written as Hwang's college project. FOB is an abbreviation for "Fresh off the Boat", a derogatory term for Chinese immigrants who have just landed to the United States of America. The play focuses on the experiences of three Asian-Americans and their attempts to assimilate into the American society. Moreover, Hwang even presents the conflicts which are evident in the relationships between the members of the same racial/cultural social group by incorporating stories from his own life experience and from previous traditions of Asian-American literature, mostly in the form of dialogue between the main characters or their impersonation and role-playing of mythical figures.

M. Butterfly (1988) is Hwang's most famous play, and its plot follows a complex relationship between a French ambassador in China, Rene Gallimard, and Song Liling, an opera singer and a Chinese spy. The two start an affair which lasts for twenty years. Gallimard never suspects that Song is actually a man and a spy, until Gallimard is accused of revealing classified information to enemy and consequently trialed. The whole story is presented from Gallimard's prison cell. The plot is neither linear nor unified, and we follow Gallimard's story in retrospect. Using the love affair and spy accusations as pretext, Hwang thematizes (world) politics, cultural conflicts, imperialism, power relations, and racial and gender identity by relying on traditional Asian art forms such as Kabuki theatre and opera. Hence the play can be seen as an example of an early form of intercultural theatre.

The third play which is in the analytical focus of the paper is *Chinglish* (2011). In it, the playwright introduces the character of Daniel Cavanaugh, an American businessman who is trying to start his business of manufacturing signs in China. Throughout the play, Hwang uses linguistic misrepresentations and mistranslations as the key factor in portraying cultural differences and misunderstandings between Chinese and Americans. The dramatic plot is framed as a lecture in which Cavanaugh remembers and presents his experiences from the business trip. His business trip unexpectedly becomes a means of exploration of the world of modern economy, culture, tradition and romance.

1.3. Hwang as a Representative of Asian-American Drama

Among the playwrights who have participated in the "project" of presenting and correcting images of Asian Americans are David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda, Diana Son, Edward Sakamoto, Ping Chong and others (Fisher 67). Hwang is perhaps the most famous of them all, and his plays – from *FOB* (1979), to *M. Butterfly* (1988), to *Golden Child*

(1996), to *Yellow Face* (2007), to *Chinglish* (2011) – have earned him a reputation of the representative author of the whole group. This is mostly because Hwang and *M. Butterfly* had the biggest commercial success of all Asian playwrights, as the play had a long run on Broadway, and its success brought the author to the attention of the public. He became quite popular and a part of the mainstream theater production, which until then had no place for Asian playwrights. No matter how prolific and iconoclastic his writing has been, or how much he has tried to thwart the dominant Western stereotypical perspective of the East, his reputation as a leading voice of Asian-American drama has often been challenged by many critics, such as Esther Lee, James Moy, or Frank Chin.

Although Hwang has established himself as a playwright who has tried to reinterpret and reestablish images of Asians in the West and the U.S., Esther Lee criticizes *M. Butterfly* and states that “the most famous Asian American play did not get developed at an Asian American theatre company or receive direct support from the community. Instead, the production’s creative team consisted of non-Asian American artists from the mainstream theatre” (129). However harsh Lee’s criticism seems, the production team certainly did a great job and the play remains Hwang’s most academically reviewed text.

Unlike Lee, James Moy does not look at the production and staging. Instead, he points out at one of the play’s most important characters, Song Liling and claims “that Hwang’s project disintegrates, for he offers at best another disfigured stereotype,” suggesting that the character of Song Liling exists “as a vehicle of massive self-doubt” (Moy 123). Moy is not necessarily wrong, though. This thesis will prove that Hwang’s disintegration is purposeful and intended as a means of dismantling the false projections and binaries. The author goes further than merely offering another stereotype. Through disintegration, he builds his characters a new reputation.

Hwang’s most ardent critic is Frank Chin. Chin is a very important figure of Asian-American theatre and literature. He is considered to be one of its pioneers since he founded the Asian American Theatre Workshop, which later transformed itself into the Asian American Theater Company. He has also worked with East-West Players, a group of actors in theater and TV who have studiously worked on fighting prejudices and stereotypes by taking and making non-stereotypical roles. Himself a prolific playwright, Chin wrote *The Chickencoop Chinaman* in 1972, one of the plays which deal with the issues that have long haunted the Asian population such as racism and stereotyping. The whole body of his work actually deals with stereotypes and Chinese folklore. Except for his plays, he is well known for his occasionally harsh criticism of other Asian American authors such as David Henry

Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston or Amy Tan in “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” (In Ono 133-156). In an article published in 1988 Chin criticized Hwang stating that:

The China and Chinese America he (Hwang) writes of in “F.O.B.”, “Dance and the Railroad” and “M. Butterfly” are the products of a white racist imagination, not any encounter with the facts or the reality of the warriors whose names and lives he forces into the white racist stereotype of a Chinese culture. The good Chinese man, the best Chinese man, the manliest Chinese man is an effeminate homosexual. [...] Please, David, now that you have declared yourself white, stay white, write white about whites and get out of town. (“Hwang’s Chinese”)

However, even after such harsh criticism, Hwang has continued his career as a playwright and produced important plays. Whether aware of it or not, in the above cited statement, Chin also pointed out to the most important issues Hwang has addressed in his plays, which is foregrounded by King-Kok Cheung. In her article “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” (published in Ono 157–174) King-Kok Cheung discusses Chin’s criticism of Hwang and other prominent Asian-American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston. In it, Cheung rightfully says that “to reclaim cultural traditions without getting bogged down in the mire of traditional constraints, to attack stereotypes without falling prey to their binary opposites, to chart new topographies for manliness and womanliness, will surely demand genuine heroism” (169). This is exactly what Hwang is up to and the characters in his plays are a vehicle in presenting the transition in the balance of power. Hwang does not run away from the reality. The first step is to disclose the stereotype and then to subvert it. The next chapter of the paper will deal with a particular approach Hwang relies on in his successful dismantling of the stereotypes – deconstruction.

2. Methodology and Deconstruction

2.1. Close Reading

Before delving into analysis and close reading of the thesis corpus, it seems appropriate to discuss some of the most basic tenets of deconstruction, an approach developed and discussed by Jacques Derrida in the 1970's and onward. Widely discussed and used by many authors even today, it seems to have been an unavoidable part of any analysis in many fields of human activities. David Henry Hwang for sure chose it in order to discuss projections and constructs which have long shaped the opinion of the West on the East, and on Asia in particular. However, another approach critical for understanding Hwang is close reading, a method of textual analysis developed by the New Critics, members of a movement in literary theory which was dominant in the United States until the mid 20th century, and without which deconstruction cannot be performed. This paper will therefore rely on both approaches in the analysis of Hwang's plays as these two concepts work together and the author employs both.

Meyer H. Adams states that "Derrida's way of proceeding is not to lay out his deconstructive concepts and operations in a systematic exposition, but to allow them to emerge in a sequence of exemplary close readings of passages from writings that range from Plato through Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the present era—writings that, by standard classification, are mainly philosophical, although occasionally literary" (qtd. In Abrams 58). Mortimer J. Adler calls the process of close reading "an x-raying of a book" (75), and points out a few rules that are needed in order to perform the act of close reading. Adler notices that "stat[ing] the unity of the whole book," (75) and "showing how [its main parts] are organized into a whole and ... [how they are] ordered to one another and to the unity of the whole" (76) are of the crucial importance to close reading. On the nature of close reading, Caitlin Dakin says that:

In close reading, students can see the authors thinking by re-examining the passage and recognizing particular things in a text to ask themselves What does this quote mean?, Why is the event happening?, and How does it affect understanding of detail? By asking a series of more rigorous analytical questions students can find the purpose of what and why they are reading and will derive deeper meaning and understanding.
(6)

Close reading directs its attention to the text; it is thorough, reflective and critical while its goal is to develop a deep and accurate understanding of text's meanings, structures

and form. It offers ideas which help understanding of the themes expressed in the text, while putting emphasis on the nature of the confusing and in many cases opposing parts of it. It critically analyzes the unity of the meanings of the text and makes understanding easier. Having been widespread in the 1950's and waning from the 1960's, it has become one of the milestones of literary theory and textual analysis especially in the U.S.

2.2. On Deconstruction

In his book, *Of Grammatology*, published in 1976, Derrida investigates the relationship between language and meaning, or rather, language and the process of constructing meaning. Derrida's work, both for this and for his later books was influenced by Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In the works which followed, he developed the notion of deconstruction and discussed its application. Over the course of years, it became an important part of analysis in architecture, art, literary theory and other disciplines such as sociolinguistics, historiography and aesthetics. While many authors tried to provide a definition of deconstruction, it is impossible to find a single unifying definition which could encompass its complexity. Further on, in *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Prof. Izutsu)* (1985), Derrida himself struggled to provide a useful disambiguation of the term which his friend was supposed to translate into Japanese. He pointed out that all of his essays and books were merely an attempt to provide an answer to this question. However, the easiest way to describe deconstruction is to say that it represents the process of critiquing the language and constructed meaning. Deconstruction shares some features with a concept which M. Heidegger first named *destruktion*. Heidegger applied it to the textual analysis and it implied revision of ontological concepts such as time, matter, history, logic, and alike. Heidegger investigated the process by which time and tradition imposed new concepts on words.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida presents the difference between the language and meaning. He argues that Western philosophy is constructed on meaning expressed through what was written and points out that "writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems-conversely-to borrow its metaphors" (35). Furthermore, in the *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Prof. Izutsu)*, Derrida states that "deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" and that "deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique" (3). It is an ongoing process whose sole purpose cannot

be providing an answer to a question but a continuous questioning and comparison. Writing on deconstruction and its application, Irena Makaryk points out that:

For Derrida deconstruction's task is twofold: first, to expose the problematic nature of all 'centered' discourses, those which depend on concepts such as truth, presence, origin, or their equivalents; second, to overturn metaphysics by displacing its conceptual limits. Deconstruction seeks to inhabit the margins of traditional systems of thought in order to put pressure on their borders and to test their unexamined foundations. As an alternative to the strictures of the metaphysical tradition, the vestiges of which Derrida sees as still integral to both structuralism and phenomenology, deconstruction celebrates limitless interpretation and an unrestricted semantic play that is no longer anchored in any signified. This unrestricted play should not be taken to mean, however, that deconstruction naively advocates 'subjective' or 'free' interpretation. (25)

Makaryk's reflections on the matter of deconstruction seem to offer the best answers as to why David Henry Hwang relies so heavily on deconstruction in his plays. Hwang's plays usually focus on questions, rather than providing answers or any set solutions to the issues problematized, and deconstruction then becomes an ongoing process which will result in more questions and deeper probing into the matter of apprehension of racial/cultural roles and stereotyping. Richard Appignanesi and Chriss Garratt state that deconstruction wants "to peel away like an onion the layers of constructed meanings. Deconstruction is a strategy for revealing the under layers of meanings 'in' a text that were suppressed or assumed in order for it to take its actual form – in particular the assumptions of 'presence' (the hidden representations of guaranteed certainty)" (79 – 80). It is the construction of meaning which is in the focus of Derrida's attention. The logocentric principle which puts meaning in the focus of the Western philosophy is Derrida's primary interest and criticism. Meaning does not come as an independent entity and one of the key notions which go hand in hand with deconstruction is *différance*. Derrida discusses the notion of natural origin of meaning in *Of Grammatology* and says that it comes "through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences" (109). Turner thus concludes that

Différance refers to the fact that meaning cannot be regarded as fixed or static, but is constantly evolving. It arises from the constant process of negotiation between competing concepts. Rather than pursuing the truth of a natural origin, what

deconstruction requires is the interrogation of these competing interpretations that combine to produce meaning. (Turner 2016).

Derrida is very precise in explaining elements of deconstruction. Therefore, in *Positions*, Derrida defines *différance*, the core element of deconstruction as:

the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function. It is also the becoming-space of the spoken chain-which has been called temporal or linear; a becoming-space which makes possible both writing and every correspondence between speech and writing, every passage from one to the other. [...] Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of *différance* is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of *structure*. (27)

Derrida tackles another important aspect of deconstruction in *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Prof. Izutsu)* and says that “it is true that in certain circles (university or cultural, especially in the United States) the technical and methodological ‘metaphor’ that seems necessarily attached to the very word deconstruction has been able to seduce or lead astray” (2). However, he also points out on “the debate that has developed in these circles: Can deconstruction become a methodology for reading and for interpretation? Can it thus be allowed to be reappropriated and domesticated by academic institutions” (2)? Obviously, according to Derrida the answer is –no, because it is not a method and it does not serve as a means of analysis. Deconstruction can only show the overturned hierarchy and according to Jonathan Culler, “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise” (86). This is confirmed by Derrida’s statement in the aforementioned work *Positions*, in which he also claims that:

On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of *overturning*. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given

moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. (41)

Although Derrida speaks about overturning the structures and hierarchies in philosophy, the same can be applied to literature and its texts. A phase of overturning, according to Derrida is incessant and it brings about more oppositions that are suitable for deconstruction thus making the process even more complex. Deconstruction is therefore a process of representation of the undermined philosophy or texts, and the hierarchical oppositions on which they rely.

The style which Derrida uses in presenting the argumentation and the case of deconstruction is almost deliberately complex and he seems to take examples from many fields including philosophy and literature. On so many occasions he quotes Levi-Strauss, or Heidegger. By doing that the readers get the feeling that he is intentionally blurring the differences between genres, which is also working in favor of his statement in *Of Grammatology* that there is “no outside-text” (158). By this statement, Derrida claims that the whole reality of our lives is indeed a text, something we are taught, and that this knowledge is textual. At the same time, Derrida tries to convince us that we cannot divide text into a field or genre, and therefore the distinctions between literary, scientific, legal, or philosophic texts become blurred. Everything is discourse, full of differences which are impossible to categorize or classify. Religion, identity, race, history, stereotypes, and so on, are all texts.

Derrida was one of the most relentless critics of the structurality and structuralism. In his works, he questioned the integrity of the texts which have a center, a guiding concept or the “transcendental signifier,” as he termed it on so many occasions. He also criticized structuralism and its most basic tenet that the meaning between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and fixed. He thought that meaning depended on context and it could not be affixed. We actually refer to things according to the traits which are not stable, the traits which are absent. Vivienne Burr explains the principle in this way:

When we talk about something, whether it be society, minds, freedom, or dogs and cats, we are therefore always implicitly also referring to what these things are not, to what is absent from them. These absences are repressed; we forget they are there, and Derrida suggests that we need a way of revealing their action in our language. His methodology for achieving this is called ‘deconstruction’, and involves very closely reading a piece of text with an eye to showing up how its construction relies upon such unstated absences. (Burr 72 – 73)

Derrida puts emphasis on the moment of the emergence of language, and its influence over the world in which we live in. Therefore, the qualities which construct meaning are to be found in all the things that are absent from it. Derrida's insistence on this approach to the process of constructing meaning relies on stable oppositions and binarisms; to recognize an object is to know and recognize what the object is not. In *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), Derrida deals with the issue and says in his typical style that "the sign represents the present in its absence. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign" (9). Derrida mentions another important detail in the *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Prof. Izutsu)*; he states that deconstruction "deconstructs itself" and "can be deconstructed" (2). This statement is particularly important if we are discussing the nature of deconstruction related to literary texts. It is in the context of fictionality of literature that Paul De Man refers to it. He stresses the fictional nature of its language and intentional ambiguity, as well as its readiness to undergo a variety of interpretations by the audience. In *Criticism and Crisis*, De Man says that literary texts are different from other texts:

For the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression. All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite. (17)

What Derrida claims is that the knowledge we have is textual and that the text shapes our understanding of the whole world. The following confusion which one might have on the nature of literary text is easy to solve. The author of a literary text is cobbling together the text which will furthermore naturally be subjected to deconstruction. However, in reference to Derrida and his statement that "there is nothing outside the text", one of the more important realizations significant to the discussion here is that our knowledge of the history is in itself textualized. The knowledge we possess is presented in a written form and is therefore subjected to analysis and deconstruction. If Derrida proposes that there are no fixed meanings in the text, the meaning can therefore fluctuate and shift in different relations. The text is interpreted and we enter the realm of postmodern insecurity, de-centering and contradiction.

According to Gary Aylesworth, "Derrida and deconstruction are routinely associated with postmodernism, although like Deleuze and Foucault, he does not use the term and would

resist affiliation with “-isms” of any sort” (“Postmodernism”, Ch. 5). However, if we accept Aylesworth’s definition of postmodernism as “a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning,” (“Postmodernism”, Ch. 1) then we can understand why deconstruction is commonly associated with postmodernism. It does indeed destabilize the concepts of presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty and “univocity of meaning” (Aylesworth “Postmodernism”, Ch.1). For Charles Lemert, Derrida “announced the beginning of poststructuralism, a theoretical movement in which the practice known as deconstructionism came to be well regarded,” while complaining at the same time that “structuralism’s innovative spirit did not make it different from all prior, traditional forms of thought” (Lemert 9). In the same book, the aforementioned theorist points out that “today, the movements that Derrida and Foucault and others spawned in the mid-1960s are still at the center of controversy in the academy, though now they are widely known as postmodernism” (Lemert 9). However, Bran Nicole points out the difference between post-structuralism and postmodernism by stating that “poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault are sometimes, erroneously, co-opted into the roll-call of postmodern theorists” (6). Deconstruction as a process is central to postmodernism in the way that it denies the centralized or fixed meaning. Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as “an incredulity toward metanarratives,” (14) and it is by the process of deconstruction that the incredulity is acquired. Bran Nicol states that:

For Lyotard, Enlightenment thought is sustained by what he terms ‘metanarratives’, grand stories which structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy, and science. Metanarratives are a form of ideology which function violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of ‘totality’ and ‘universality’ on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. ... But the characteristic feature of postmodernity, according to Lyotard, is that the power of the metanarrative as a legitimating, empowering force is on the wane. Postmodern subjects simply don’t believe in metanarratives any more. They instinctively acknowledge instead the rhetorical function of narrative, and appreciate that alternative narratives could be fashioned from the same groups of events. Postmodernity, Lyotard argues, prefers ‘little narratives’ (*petit récits*), those which do not attempt to present an overarching ‘Truth’ but offer a qualified, limited ‘truth’, one relative to a particular situation. (11)

The role of deconstruction in the fields of religion, politics, philosophy, science and literature has been discussed long after its emergence in the 1960's. Deconstruction violently shakes the basis of any metanarrative, and this is where its direct connection to postmodern theory lies. A metanarrative gets scrutinized and eventually exposed through deconstructive processes. The alternative interpretations then emerge and the process of deconstruction starts again.

3. Deconstruction in *FOB*

Although *FOB* is Hwang's first play which deals with a rather complex theme of identity in Asian-American social group, it is not less important than those plays which explore the same theme written later in his career. Its importance, except for the theme it explores, also lies in the fact that it shows us Hwang's evolution of thought as well as his development as a playwright and as an artist. The play was written in 1979, a year after Edward Said published *Orientalism*, the book that discussed Western cultural (mis)representations of the East. This book was very influential and it was very much a part of the large scale attempts in the 1960's and 1970's to investigate into the topic of identity and social interaction between different nations, races and more generally between the East and West. Greater numbers of Asians migrating to the U.S. in the 1950's increased the needs of Asian-American population to find effective ways of expressing themselves and establishing cultural presence more firmly, which finally brought results in the 1960's and 1970's when theater groups such as East West Players in Los Angeles, Asian American Theatre Workshop in San Francisco and Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York were formed. However, according to Esther Kim Lee, it was not those years only when the Asian-Americans started to organize first theater groups. The whole process begun decades earlier, as in the 19th century a strong need for the workforce was felt and Asian (and other nationalities) immigrant workers were 'making America great'. In *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006), Esther Kim Lee suggests that a few important facts need to be taken into consideration when discussing the Asian-American Theater. The first issue Lee points out is that:

The term "Asian American did not exist before 1965, and neither did "Asian American Theatre." But theatrical activities by Asian immigrants and their descendents have been around as long as they have lived in the United States and Asians and Asianness have appeared on mainstream American stages at least since the eighteenth century. Historian Yuji Ichioka coined the term "Asian American" in the second half of the 1960's as he and others of the Asian American Movement rejected "oriental" as racist and imperialistic. (7)

Later as we progress through her book, we are introduced to the history of the first Asians on the American soil, as well as to the long history of the most basic human rights' deprivation and stereotyping. Lee focuses her attention to a set of beliefs which were taken as norms back in those days which described the Asian social group in the U.S. in a completely different way when compared to what Asian community really was. She says that:

From the beginning of American history, the imagined Asianness that appeared on theatre stages often had little to do with the realities of Asia or Asian immigrant communities in United States. ... The first relationship American theatre established with Asia and Asianness was founded on exoticism and voyeurism. James S. Moy points out that the appearance of Chineseness (and by extension Asianness) in American theatre occurred in the production of Voltaire's *Orphan of China* ... According to Moy, the production was "vaguely oriental" and far from authentic. All Chinese characters were played by white actors in yellowface makeup and wore Middle Eastern looking costumes. (Lee 10)

As Lee continues to discuss Asianness, and by extension Chineseness, she continues talking about the influence China had on the United States and mentions one of the most important authors who wrote on the issue of the "orientalization" of China and the double standards that the U.S. society had prior to 20th century. John Kuo Wi Tchen in *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776–1882* states that:

European and Anglo-American theater both appropriated and subjugated Chinese difference into a realm of exoticized contrasts – for now, an orientalist "otherness" to be idealized and emulated. Murphy's epilogue articulated what would become an American refrain about China:"They're all crippled n the tiny shoe." The gentry practice of binding women's feet, thought to be ultra-feminine and erotic (and clearly a means of patriarchal control), was used to symbolize all of China. In this view, Chinese monarchs, and by inference all Chinese men, were de facto tyrants. (14)

In order to fully understand the biased and stereotypic representation of China and Asia in what he calls 'Anglicized performance of *The Orphan of China*', Tchen presents the case of the Tong Hook Tong theatre group which offered "a fully staged, elaborately costumed, authentic Chinese opera" in San Francisco in 1850 (86). However, he continues and says that "the manner in which this troupe was received clearly tested the limits of New Yorkers' taste and the nature of philanthropy in the elite civic culture" (86), foregrounding the group's failure to promote original Chinese culture due to the lack of finances. The business deal which the group had agreed on with agents in New York was not met and the group had a difficult task of financing themselves although they managed to perform the play in question. The newspapers "inaccurately spoke of religious sites, peculiar ceremonies, extraordinary amusements and wondrous feats of the inhabitants of China, Tartary, Siam and Japan" (Tchen

88). The Asians in the U.S. thus became “orientalized” and it seems very natural that the whole notion of Asian cultural representation needs to be thoroughly re-examined. Moreover, according to William Boles, David Henry Hwang got the inspiration for *FOB* “during the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival, between his junior and senior years at Stanford University,” where “during a writing drill, his questions about ethnicity and his own Chinese American identity began to appear, leading to the main issues at *FOB*’s core“ (10).

The main goal of *FOB* is dismantling those kinds of “orientalized” projections of Asia and Asians. Hwang starts a long and complex project of questioning Asian identity in a new world and within new circumstances by exposing the stereotypes and projections of Asia and Asianness through the play’s three characters. They are: Grace, Steve and Dale. Dale is the second-generation American of Chinese descent, his cousin Grace is the first-generation Chinese-American, and Steve is a very young newcomer to the United States. The play is organized in two acts. The action takes place in a small Chinese restaurant in Torrance, California: the first act takes place before dinner and the second act after dinner. The main conflict in the play is between Steve – a newcomer, and Dale – American born Chinese. The play aims to deconstruct complex racial, gender and cultural relationships. In *FOB*, Hwang is determined to expose the intra-cultural conflicts which specifically occur within Asian communities in the United States. Therefore, questions which Hwang might have asked about his own Chinese-American identity and about his own experience of growing up as the first-generation American form the core of *FOB*. In the play, Hwang manages to incorporate mythical characters, Asian gods – namely “Gwan Gung, god of writers, warriors and prostitutes” and “Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior” (Hwang 12). In the playwright’s notes Hwang specifies that the play’s roots are “thoroughly American”, and that it began as “a sketch about a limousine trip...invaded by these two characters from the American literature: Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father’s place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers from Frank Chin’s *Gee, Pop!*” (Hwang 6). The author solely relies on the American experience of the Asian community, emphasizing its importance in American literature and not on the exclusive Chinese or general Asian roots and traditions, as Chin (mis)interprets (Chin “Come All Ye...”; cf. Cheung 157–174).

Identity is the central topic that the author is questioning and the whole play is written from the point of view of his examining Asian-American identity. Hwang’s characters, although there are only three in the play, show the typical postmodern fragmentation and disillusionment which makes the identity quest more difficult. He was indeed influenced by

such playwrights as Sam Sheppard or other Asian-American authors (e.g. Maxine Kingston or Frank Chin) whose characters he incorporated in *FOB*. However, Hwang relies on intertextuality not only in *FOB*, but also in other plays as well. In *M. Butterfly* for example, he relies on opera and on a newspaper article in writing a play. Such a characteristic of Hwang's style classifies him along the tradition of postmodernist drama, on which Kerstin Schmidt has dedicated some time. In her book *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005), she says that:

Since postmodern drama is also decidedly interested in the larger political climate, it conceives of form not as an end in itself but as reflecting and, what is more, as shaping a particular cultural and social context. In their exploration of the boundaries of dramatic form, postmodern dramatists have concentrated on many aspects pertinent to postmodern forms of writing. Most crucially, they have studied the fragmentation and transformation of the self and postmodern variants of character in a mediatized culture. (31)

The fragmentation and transformation of the self which Schmidt presents as some of the most important features of postmodern texts are in the focus of *FOB*. The play compares two different yet very similar aspects of Asian experience. These two opposing experiences are portrayed through two male counterparts in the play: Steve and Dale. First, one should look into character's names, both seemingly Westernized, especially Steve's (as he is a newcomer from Hong Kong, not born in the USA like Dale). On this matter Huan Hsu an author and lecturer at Amsterdam University College says that:

Given the nationalism I've witnessed in China, I was a bit surprised at how readily Chinese adopted Western names. Taking English name isn't kowtowing, nor is it simply utilitarian. Rather, it's essential to being Chinese and achieving Chinese goals. Whereas in the past patriotism was expressed by self-sacrifice, it is now expressed through economic activity. So by working for, say, 3M, Chinese citizens are helping to build up China, and the English names they take on in the process are as patriotic as Cultural Revolution-era monikers like Ai Guo (Loves China) or Wei Dong (Mao's Protector). ("The Name's Du Xiao Hua, But Call Me Steve")

The question of the name needs a thorough investigation since it is the first and most basic level of identification. However, *FOB* is more than a simple dispute on names and origins. It goes further than the obvious and leads to more questions asked, thus making the

conflict between Steve and Dale more general in the sense that it symbolizes the conflicts between the cultures. It is at the same time conflict between two different cultures, Western and Eastern, and the conflict that takes place in the same cultural environment, the USA. Whereas Steve and Dale are representations of two conflicting identities, we get a feeling that Grace is somehow always in the middle, between the two opposites, serving as a mediator who, as the naturalized (first-generation) Chinese-American, understands both sides equally. On one hand, she has started completing the identity change process and is undoubtedly under the influence of her parents (Chinese born immigrants), and on the other hand she is under the influence of society and a set of fundamentally American (taken as Western) principles and standards expressed through education, and play's cultural references to *Saturday Night Fever* or John Travolta. According to Stanley and Derald Sue, there are a number of features which make "a traditional Chinese family" (Sue and Sue 17). In their article titled "Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health", first published in *Amerasia Journal* and then reprinted in Ono, which provides us with an insight into traditional Chinese family and the relations between its members, Stanley and Derald Sue emphasize that:

In the traditional family, ancestors and elders are viewed with great reverence. The primary family unit is strong and typically exerts great control over its members. Emphasis is placed on obtaining a good education, on being obedient to parents, and in giving the family a good name. "Bad" behavior on the part of a member (exhibiting antisocial or criminal behavior, disobedience, low achievement, or even psychopathology), brings shame on the entire family. In order to control members, parents use guilt-arousing techniques such as threatening to disown the person, verbally censuring the individual, or having the individual engage in activities that accentuate his feelings of guilt and shame. (417-18)

The above cited explanation may clarify why it is that Grace is under such an influence of her parents, unlike Dale, who attempts to cut all the ties to his ancestry and thus perceives Steve as a threat.

The first lines in the play belong to Dale who lectures the audience on F-O-B's which stands for "fresh-off-the-boat," a derogatory name for people of Asian origin who have just come to the United States. A very dynamic and from time to time very loud, Dale epitomizes completely different set of features. He starts his lecture by giving a definition of an F-O-B. and says:

F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. Like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. ... Someone you wouldn't want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn't want to marry. That assumes we're talking about boy FOBs, of course. But girl FOBs aren't really as FOBish. Boy FOBs are the worst, the ... pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABC – oh, that's "American Born Chinese" – of all ABC girls. ... (Lights fade to black. We hear American pop music, preferably funk, rhythm and blues, or disco.) ... (Hwang 8, 9)

Dale continues his slur and stops just before the action in the restaurant is about to start. This kind of speech undoubtedly reminds us of the era in which the United States had major issues with racist movements which were widespread all over the country. This kind of speech, had it been given by anyone else except the one that belongs to the same race, would have undoubtedly been recognized as racist and offensive. This way, we are stuck in a paradoxical situation which creates conflict within the same race and raises the question of identification. Hwang deconstructs the dominant belief that the members of the same racial, ethnic or national communities are a closed system in which each member relies on the other and shares the same ideas and attitudes. The deconstruction which Hwang performs here indeed raises another question: according to which principles, creeds, ideas and attitudes do people identify themselves? Hwang does not explicitly answer that question but instead he confronts two characters of the same race. At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to Steve, who has just arrived to the United States and who is still very much under the influence of the Chinese culture. Steve is an embodiment of the new Orient and particularly of new China. He is in the United States to study and to earn himself and his affluent family a good reputation in China. He tries to establish himself in the new surroundings, and cherishes traditional Chinese values: he is dedicated and focused on his goal (he is in the U.S. to study), he is dedicated to his family and ancestors, and finally he is persistent and industrious. This creates the feeling of uneasiness in Dale as he deems those values obsolete and inappropriate in the U.S. On the other hand, Dale is a typical representative of the fully Americanized Chinese. He wears "preppie clothes" (Hwang 9), associated with Northeastern university-preparatory schools which are usually attended by upper class American children, as a symbol of a group he would like to be associated with. Those children have their distinguishable way of speech, mannerisms and dressing code which make them different from the rest (Roberts

127). The two people of the same race now display tendency to completely different convictions. It is exactly here that through deconstruction we are introduced to the clashing perspectives. Neither can Steve understand Dale nor can Dale understand Steve. They look similar but they have nothing in common, hence the identification process is bound to fail. The scene with Dale and Steve, two conflicted identities, continues. In the restaurant, while they are having dinner, Dale puts hot sauce on Steve's plate which the latter devours, stoically enduring the heat of the sauce, and continues eating his food, to Dale's astonishment. In this scene, Dale is very direct and rude and says:

You like your food hot? All right – here. (He dumps the contents of the jar on Steve's plate, stirs) Fucking savage. Don't you ever worry about your intestines falling out? FOB's can eat anything, huh? They're specially trained. Helps maintain the characteristic greasy look. What–? Look, Grace, he is eating that! He's amazing! A freak! A cannibal! (Hwang 30)

A list of Dale's insults could go on forever, but another important moment takes place just before the "hot sauce eating" scene. In it, Dale and Steve are discussing whether they should take Dale's or Steve's car to a restaurant. The whole scene is a discourse on domination and who should retain the control over the other. To Dale's surprise, Steve has rented a limousine for them to drive to the downtown Los Angeles for dinner. Dale is perplexed and easily triggered because he thinks Steve is showing off which directly affects him and is an attack on his dignity. Limousines are a symbol of prestige in the United States and in Dale's mind a simple and unrefined Chinese, lacking sophistication and a good taste, or connections, could not be possibly related to such a detail. Hwang shows us that this is a question going beyond than merely having a ride downtown. He deconstructs both identities, makes them obscure by exposing their 'weakness' manifested in their readiness to accept what they consider is not a part of their character (as in Steve's case) and by exposing Dale's Asian ancestry (which Dale renounces). All of this involves a great deal of cultural knowledge. The context which surrounds the characters is typically American, as Dale and Steve talk about *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta and Bee Gees, and as Dale is trying to help Steve "look like John Travolta" (Hwang 35). This is Dale's attempt to 'help' Steve attain a new identity compatible with Steve's new circumstances and surroundings. As pointed out, the people are seen from American (and Dale's) perspective and the focus is on the stark differences between the protagonists who are of similar origin, which forms the basis of Hwang's deconstruction. In the beginning of the second act, Dale tells his story to the audience:

I go out now. Lots. I can, anyway. Sometimes I don't ask anyone, so I don't go out. But I could. I am much better now. I have friends now. Lots. They drive Porsche Carreras. Well, one does. He has a house up in the Hollywood Hills where I can stand and look down on the lights of L.A. I guess I haven't really been there yet. But I could easily go. ... My parents – they don't know nothing about the world, about watching Benson at the Roxy, about ordering hors d'oeuvres at Scandia's, downshifting onto the Ventura Freeway at midnight. They're yellow ghosts and they've tried to cage me up with Chineseness when all the time we were in America. So, I had work real hard – real hard – to be myself. Not to be a Chinese, a yellow, a slant, a gook. To be just a human being, like everyone else. I've paid my dues. And that's why I'm much better now. I'm making it, you know? I'm making it in America. (Hwang 33)

By presenting Dale and his identity in the cited manner, Hwang shows the inability of the characters to share a single identity, and foregrounds what these identities do not have in common. Spotting these differences is essential to the process of deconstruction and to the successful subversion of the “pan-Asian” prejudice (“All Asians are the same”). Dale decided to give up on his identity in order to better adjust to the new, American part of the identity, and in Steve he sees everything he considers to be the representation of Chineseness. The Chineseness Dale mentions can also be considered Asianness, a set of projections, totalizing practices, stereotypes and constructs which describe Western notion of the Orient, that Edward Said criticized. Dale's perspective on the Chinese, Asian and generally the East is Western(ized), patronizing, racist, as well as imperialistic, and it is completely debatable since it is built on the Constitutional premises of (rights to) “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, in which an important role is given to general human rights and anti-racism. Steve's identity is also deconstructed and shown as prone to changes as he, a Chinese, takes an English name and uses broken English in the restaurant when addressing Dale and Grace. He chooses a French restaurant to take Grace and Dale out to, and a big, expensive, status-symbol, car to drive in.

As pointed out previously the person who stands half-way between Dale and Steve is Grace. She also narrates of her experience when she first came to the United States and admits that:

... It's tough trying to live in Chinatown. But it's tough trying to live in Torrance, too. It's true. I don't like being alone. You know, when Mom could finally bring me to the U.S., I was already ten. But I never studied English in Taiwan, so I got moved back to the second grade. There were a few girls in the fourth grade, but they were American

born, so they wouldn't even talk to me. ... I figured I had a better chance of getting in with the white kids than with them, so in junior high, I started bleaching my hair and hanging out at the beach. ... But the American-born Chinese, it didn't matter to them. They just giggled and went to their dances. (Hwang 31)

The changes Grace introduced to her appearance (such as bleaching her hair), thus trying to fit in, did not make her become a part of the social group which she adhered to, and with which she at first identified herself with (American born Asian girls). Her assumptions were wrong, yet it was a part of a process of learning which involved a great deal of deconstruction and re-construction of one's own identity. Hwang places much emphasis on Grace's and Dale's emotional states and the audience is given privy to their emotions. Dale's speeches are energetic, spirited, vigorous, and explicit, whereas in Grace's speech quoted above we notice a dose of melancholy and heartache. Steve on the other hand, does not appear to show much emotion and seems to be trying to find the best way to blend in into what he thought would be a typical Chinese (American) community. In trying to do so, Hwang uses a technique which we can find in predominantly postmodern texts. He uses myths and legends and builds upon them. He puts them in a new context, new circumstances and blurs the difference between the text and reality in the following manner. Grace and Steve assume the roles of Gwan Gung and the Woman Warrior and together create a story in which they assume new identities, which had already been established and are identifiable in literature. In Grace's and Steve's story, quite symbolically, the character of Gwan Gung is defeated. The final message of Steve is equally allegorical:

I have come to this land to study! ... To study the arts of war, of literature, of righteousness! I fought with the first pioneers, the first warriors that chose to follow the whit ghosts to this land ... And this land is mine! It has no right to treat me this way! (Hwang 48)

Steve feels that the contribution the Asians had in the creation of the U.S. as a nation is in the fabric of American society nowadays and that he has right to his share in it. He demands recognition and a fair opportunity of equality which his ancestors have made possible, but gets denied in the process by the one who he thought was his national. Grace assumes the role of Fa Mu Lan and makes an important statement stating: "No. Gwan Gung, you have no rights" (Hwang 48). That is, Chinese Americans do not seem to have equal rights in the modern day Torrance, America. Finally, Steve as Gwan Gung points out to Dale and flares up saying: "You! How can you -? I came over with your parents," to which Grace who is still in Fa Mu Lan's character, utters perhaps the most important sentence in the play: "We

are in America. And we have a battle to fight” (Hwang 48). The Chinese identity which has been allegorically subsumed by Gwan Gung, has been built into the foundations of the United States, and yet somehow it still needs to be reevaluated and reaffirmed. It comes in different shapes and as the whole nation evolves it also evolves, and has to become a subject of deconstruction.

4. Power, Gender and Identity: Deconstruction in *M. Butterfly*

The years which followed the staging of *FOB* and winning an award for it have not been as successful as Hwang hoped. His writing in that period seemingly reached a critical point. But the feeling of devastation he had felt upon the failure of *Rich Relations* (1986) was soon replaced by the feeling of sheer joy when in 1988 he wrote *M. Butterfly*, a play which by many critics is considered to be his masterpiece. According to William Boles, Hwang got the inspiration from “a brief news story, featuring the headline ‘France Jails 2 in Odd Case of Espionage,’ that ran in the *New York Times* on May 11, 1986, one month after *Rich Relations* opened” (39). Immediately upon reading the story about Bernard Boursicot – a French diplomat and Shi Pei Pu – a Chinese opera singer, Hwang, just as everybody else was asking the same question: how is it possible that Boursicot did not realize the spy was a man? The play proved to be a major success bringing Hwang fame, and more importantly earning him a reputation of the first ever Asian-American playwright whose play was staged on Broadway. Hwang modeled his play on Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904), whose story focuses on an American sailor Pinkerton that marries Cio-Cio San, a Japanese woman whom he leaves with a child and goes back to the United States. Three years later, Pinkerton’s American wife comes to Japan and takes away Pinkerton’s and Cio-Cio’s son to live in the States, after which event Cio-Cio’s commits suicide. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* thus became a subject of many scholarly reviews and met both positive and negative criticism. According to Boles, Quentin Lee described the play as “not excessive enough—not subversive enough—not Orientalist enough”; Williamson Chang claimed that “Hwang accomplishes this disruption of the Western power ethic through the reification of the usual Asian stereotypes”; and James Moy stated that “Hwang’s Asian creations are “marginalized, desexed and made faceless” in that they pose “no threat to Anglo-American sensibilities” because they exist as “exotic Orientalist fetishes articulating Anglo-American desire” (qtd. in Boles 42).

The play itself comprises three acts. The first act has thirteen scenes, the second act has eleven scenes, and the third act is comprised of three scenes. The story is told in a non-linear way, with time-shifts which occur in the narration. Hwang exposes the manipulative nature of theater and in a typically Brechtian way presents the story to the audience leaving them stunned and alienated. The alienation effect which Bertolt Brecht was ardently supporting helps the audience to maintain the emotional independency from the characters, thus maintaining own identity. Wanting the audience to think and question the play and its protagonists, wanting the audience to perform what we know as deconstruction, Hwang shows he is a supporter of audience’s active role in a play. The main protagonist of *M.*

Butterfly – Rene Gallimard, a member of the French embassy in China and later in a play a vice-consul, occasionally speaks to the audience and breaks the so-called “fourth wall”, which is one of the techniques Brecht utilized in his plays. In this manner, Annette Saddik asserts, Hwang’s play points in the direction of:

the new honesty in the theatre after the 1960s and 1970s that Tennessee Williams hailed, [which] allowed playwrights to explore issues such as race, gender and sexuality during the latter half of the twentieth century at a level that had not been previously done. ... The form of the play is anti-realistic in terms of its time shifts, moments of narration, and breaking of the ‘fourth wall’ by having characters address the audience. In Brechtian fashion, actors play multiple roles with minimal costume change, resisting any realistic illusion of unity between character and actor, and maintain audience awareness of the play as a performance. (Saddik 154, 156)

Except for the narration, Hwang incorporates several other theatrical techniques in the play and uses music and dancing, costumes, lightning, and other props, to bring about the change and to make his point. Just like *FOB*, the play can be said to use such postmodern features such as intertextuality, fragmentation, alienation, irony, etc. The author relies on Puccini’s opera to make a statement on the relationship between power and gender, as well as between the East and the West. Again, Hwang does much more than simply adding his text to that of the opera. In his own way, Hwang rewrites it and uses it to deconstruct the stereotypes of the dominant West and the submissive East. Hwang uses traditional art forms such as the Kabuki theatre and Chinese opera to present the plot which is neither linear nor unified, and discusses the cultural conflict between the two civilizations while deconstructing the dominant beliefs, stereotypes and projections which the West has of the East. The pretext he uses is the love story in which he discusses the power relations and gender roles as elements of a constructed identity (in this case – a strong Westerner and submissive Oriental). Rene Gallimard is an embodiment of predominantly Western values. He has a strong desire to dominate and this desire is reflected in his identity. The desire to dominate affects his relationships with the opposite sex, as well as with his own. In the beginning of the play, Gallimard seems to be afraid of the Western women to the point where he is even dominated by them. He says “I’m afraid they’ll say no – the girls. So I never ask” (Hwang 821). He does not fit the profile of a dominant Western male which is in perfect accordance with Hwang’s deconstruction. The point is that the stereotype of a dominant Western male is only possible in its binary opposite, gentle, effeminate and submissive East. Gallimard cannot exert a full

control over dominant Westerners which is what makes him psychologically inferior, submissive and powerless. In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang seems to want to correct the fallacy by which we suppose that “Orientals” have no such yearning for power and dominance over the others. In order to deconstruct such a projection, he employs the character of Song Liling, an actor in Peking Opera who is on Chinese Communist Party’s assignment to spy on Gallimard. Liling only plays along and assumes the role of a submissive Oriental woman to get what he wants and exert control over Gallimard. Hwang is aware that the discussion on sexuality and gender often brings with it the discussion on dominance, ruling and conquest (male over women and dominance over submissiveness). Robert Diaz confirms that:

scholars who have examined *M. Butterfly* have emphasized the play’s adamant critique of Orientalism in Hwang’s facetious adaptation of the tragic, interracial love story at the heart of Puccini’s *Madam Butterfly* (Kondo 1990; Shimakawa 1993; de Lauretis 1999; Eng 2001). Hwang transposes the original heteronormative and tragic affair in the opera into a queer one, occurring during the Cultural Revolution and right before the Vietnam War. By adapting Puccini’s opera, the play not only critiques the Orientalist logic that originally frames Puccini’s work, it also narrates the way that contemporary racist discourses simultaneously emasculate Asian American men, justify American colonialism in Vietnam, and disavow the presence of same-sex desires and relationships unless they turn on strict racialized metaphor of the dominant white actor and the “submissive” Asian object. (174)

However, this is not the only way in which Hwang deconstructs the projection of the West as dominant over the Orient. In the beginning of the play Gallimard, as he is the narrator of the play, starts telling the audience his story and takes us all the way back to his high school days and his friendship with Marc. He recalls having wild parties at the pool and not being able to find a girlfriend as the other boys did. Then he switches to the present and moves back in time again. In the first act, in the seventh scene, Gallimard is presented thinking he is in the control of the situation and openly discusses the Chinese with his wife Helga saying:

GALLIMARD: The Chinese are an incredibly arrogant people.

HELGA: They warned us about that in Paris, remember?

GALLIMARD: Even Parisians consider them arrogant. That’s a switch.

HELGA: What is it that Madame Su says? “We are a very old civilization.” I never know if she’s talking about her country or herself. (Hwang 826)

Helga's inability to distinguish between Madame Su and China is the essential part of Western Orientalism and stereotypization. Hwang makes his case and goes further by making the narrator lose the control of narrative process. As the narrator, Gallimard addresses the audience and assumes the full control of narration. Yet as Song Liling's character develops gradually, his antics solidify and in the second act, in scene four, it is he who addresses the audience instead of Gallimard. Patricia P. Chu and Amy Ling emphasize the importance of the change of narratives and say that

Song's refusal of Gallimard's narrative authority not only amuses; it illustrates her refusal of his domination in other areas as well. The sharp satire, quick pace, and multiple levels of reality favored by Hwang would be compromised by a more naturalistic approach emphasizing strictly chronological narration and psychological realism. (415)

At the same time, we learn that Gallimard is sterile and unable to have children, which is another blow to his masculinity and desire for power. Not that he wanted to have them anyway, but realizing and finally getting the confirmation of his crushing defeat as a Westerner is what causes him to turn to Song even more. As he turns his attention to Song and their relationship, Gallimard gets consumed by his ego and seems to become interesting to his colleagues at work, especially to Toulon who even promotes the former to the position of vice-consul. The false sense of importance and dominance over the submissive Song is making Gallimard more influential in the community of French imperialists who are still very sore about losing Vietnam to the Americans and the Vietnamese. Hwang identifies this sense of security and undermines it. Gallimard is very open about what he considers to be the truth and leaves no space for second thought. He is nourishing his desire for dominance and is very afraid of underachieving which he believes is a constant in his life. Therefore, he says that "Orientals only want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power. You live with the Chinese, sir. Do you think they like communism?", and claims that "Orientals will always submit to the greater force" (Hwang 839). Song's actions are Hwang's attempt to deconstruct these projections and later, as the story progresses, the audiences are made aware of the historical events which Hwang uses to confirm his deconstruction. Gallimard's assessments are incorrect, and the French and Americans suffer more losses in Asia. Hwang deliberately blurs fact and fiction, of which the final result is deconstruction. The projections which the West has on the East are deconstructed and the final result leads to more questions and reassessments, which is according to Derrida a typical way in which deconstruction works.

According to Brecht, historicization is a process of giving text a historical context and Hwang utilizes it in *M. Butterfly*. Patricia P. Chu and Amy Ling are informative of the play's cultural and political context and the process of historicization in Hwang's play when they say that:

Brief but crucial references to China's Cultural Revolution and the U.S. intervention in Vietnam are used to imply that orientalism still colors American foreign policy. Hwang does not prove this with historical documentation or analysis. Instead, he creates a fantasy in which characters spell out how stereotypes operate in ways that are powerful, but ignored or denied in real life. (415)

Apart from blurring the history and reality, and fact and fiction in a typically postmodernist way, Hwang also blurs the geographical differences between China, Japan and Vietnam and portrays them as a part of a larger whole, of Asia, again challenging the Western perception of these countries. Annette Saddik comments on this and says that "Hwang's shift in the setting from Japan (in Puccini's opera) to China – two quite different national cultures – signifies a blurring of Asian cultural identity in the Western mind. Gallimard tells Song that she is 'convincing' as a Japanese woman, and Song replies that she assumes the 'irony is lost' on him" (Saddik 175). Since the play puts the focus on the importance of identity and dismantling of the stereotypical projections, geography is not the only thing that Hwang blurs. Namely, Gallimard and Song decide to rent an apartment in Beijing where they can spend time together. The way in which their apartment is decorated presents hybridity of the relationship. It is a mixture of "Western furniture and Chinese antiquities" (Hwang 838), which symbolically represents their union. Hwang tries to confuse the audience even more by adding to the story a French girl, also called Rene with whom Gallimard has an affair and who shares her insight into relationships. The affair is meaningless but it gives us an insight into Gallimard's weak character and the widespread gender identity confusion in the West. However, Hwang does not question only the West. Comrade Chin, Song's superior is a woman and also what one might call conservative. She opposes to homosexuality in "communist China" and is highly critical of Song's methods to the point where Song is almost forced out of the country without anything in order to continue spying from France where Gallimard was relegated due to his failed assessments about Asia, particularly about Vietnam. Gallimard is fascinated with *Madame Butterfly* and the idea of submissive Asian woman, and dislocates the myth from Japan to China, clearly aware of, yet not minding the ethnic differences. Song is also aware of Gallimard's fetish and he decides to assume the role as the embodiment of the Asian and says:

SONG: It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.

GALLIMARD: Well, I don't quite mean . . .

SONG: Consider it this way; what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah! – you find it beautiful. (Hwang 826)

Song seems to take this personally and sounds offended as he deconstructs Gallimard's projection. He is open about it and uses the same technique as Hwang does in the play. Song Liling changes the roles, power relations and draws conclusions while deconstructing the dominant beliefs and assumptions. A few moments later, Song asks one of the most important questions in the play – “You are Westerner. How can you objectively judge your own values?” (827), as he is asking the audiences the same questions. The point is that nobody is in a position to judge anyone else, including oneself because one can never be objective enough.

Hwang successfully deals with people's inclination to generalize, on which Christopher Bigsby comments that:

M Butterfly, indeed, addresses the question of the extent to which we require those stereotypes which we agree to treat as archetypes, the degree to which we collaborate in those confusions which bring us to the brink of tragedy. It is a play in which gender no less than racial clichés becomes the basis of personal and national psychology. ... In this schema the West becomes masculine, the East feminine. It is not that politics is sexualised, but that the process whereby myth and stereotype are invoked to validate attitudes and actions applies to the world of politics no less than to that of sexual relationships. It is in that sense that *M Butterfly* links imperialism, racism and sexism. (351)

Thus one has to conclude that Hwang is an iconoclast, speaking boldly and fervently about the false representations by making us deconstruct the stereotypes which he thinks are about to become archetypal. He “intersects racism and sexism” (Bigsby 326), and deliberately

creates characters which challenge the traditional perceptions of sexuality. Annette Saddik maintains that “erotic and political desire for domination are fused in Gallimard’s desire for Song” (175), which can be confirmed in Gallimard’s almost sadomasochistic desire to affirm that Song is his Butterfly. Leslie Bow finds that “the play offers a Freudian depiction of fetishistic love by exposing the stereotype of the submissive “Oriental” woman as a male fantasy that allays the threat of castration and therefore homosexuality and serves the purposes of global asymmetry” (126). Gallimard passionately asks Song whether s/he is “his butterfly” twice, while Song skillfully evades the answer until the moment he no longer can continue with the evasions and submits and confirms it. This kind of fetishistic attitude is present in other parts of the play, too. In the second scene of the second act, Song informs us of the “rape mentality” that the West has toward the East, exemplified in Song’s words “her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes” (Hwang 858).

No matter how much disputed, *M. Butterfly* remains Hwang’s most significant and most famous play. Hwang questions identity and dramatizes interculturalism throughout his literary oeuvre and *M. Butterfly* is not an exception for that matter. However, another play, the one of a very recent date, deals with the same themes but presented in a slightly different manner when compared to *FOB* or *M. Butterfly*.

5. A New Perspective: Deconstruction in *Chinglish*

Surely Hwang's most successful play after *M. Butterfly*, *Chinglish* (2011) tends to explore the relationships between different cultures. The play does not feature any Asian American characters and instead focuses on the experiences of Daniel Cavanaugh and Peter Timms in China, while introducing a number of Chinese characters such as Xi Yan and Cai Guoliang at the same time. According to William Boles, Hwang got the inspiration for the play "when he visited a newly built theater, which featured gorgeous Brazilian wood, Italian marble, [and] state-of-the-art Japanese sound systems" (78). No matter how state-of-the-art and up to date everything was, there was one thing that really failed to meet the expectations of such an institution. Boles states that:

Despite the quality of the construction, the signs in the facility were horribly mistranslated into English, and one sign identified a bathroom for the handicapped as the "Deformed Man's Toilet." In 2010, when Hwang and production team members for *Chinglish* went to China, they attended a banquet where they were served "wood frog fallopian tubes." It turned out they were eating some type of edible fungus. He encountered numerous mistranslations like these during his trips to China. (78)

Soon enough, Hwang decided to write a play which would explore the nature of misunderstanding and miscommunication. He linked the mistranslations of the signs in the theatre to the cultural miscommunication which he exemplified in the play's plot. The miscommunication takes place in a new context, which assumes a transfer of power from the West to the East and assumes an ensuing identity swap. Hwang sets out to explore the difficulties in the most basic, everyday communication between the Americans and Chinese as allegories of the West and East. Boles points out that:

With *Chinglish* Hwang aimed to address this problem of cultural miscommunication by highlighting how the United States and China fail to recognize the difficult nature of communication at its most basic level. If these two countries cannot communicate clearly about the most basic needs (toilets and food), then how can individuals from each country engage in the much more heady negotiations required in the public world of business and in the emotional and private intimacy of romance? (78)

Patrick Healy concludes that Hwang "explored multiculturalism, the stranger-in-a-strange-land tensions that affect Asian-Americans and others of hyphenated ethnicity," and that "with *Chinglish*, which has no Asian-American characters, Mr. Hwang has moved on

from multiculturalism (“it’s no longer cutting edge,” he said) to consider internationalism today” (“Do You Know What I Mean. Probably Not!”). Marilyn Stasio states that “behind its cheerful facade, this well-made comedy takes a poignant view of the profound isolation and terrible vulnerability of people who are lost without their native language” (*Chinglish*). Hilton Als points out that “because the play is about love and business and language, it has to work on many different levels: as a farce, as a tragedy of misunderstanding, as a song of hope,“ calling it at the same time “a dream in terms of construction” (“Double Talk”). However, the play kept running on Broadway and it was shown 109 times before they stopped staging it (Boles 81).

While *Chinglish* is original and comic, at the same time it shares some similarities with the previously analyzed plays. It explores similar topics and allows us to glance at the characters’ newly discovered identities. The way in which *Chinglish* starts is very similar to the way in which *FOB* starts. The main character, David Cavanaugh has a power point presentation on the importance of signs and their mistranslations. He is a businessman from the United States who hopes to land a business deal with the Chinese provincial government officials. However, he discovers *guanxi*, a term central to the process of making business in China. David discloses the fact that the relationship between two people is of a great importance when making business in China. Although the term *guanxi* can roughly be translated as any kind of relationships in English (Langenberg 1), it is actually much more than that. It implies deeper understanding and knowledge of the person. An important character in the play is Peter Timms, an ex teacher and now a business consultant who knows Chinese and can speak it fluently. In the first act of the play, Daniel is making a business proposal to Cai Guoliang, Minister of Culture of Guiyang City in Guizhou province, but the play itself starts with the presentation during which the main character addresses the audience thus breaking “the fourth wall” in the same Brechtian fashion as in *M. Butterfly*. Peter arranges Daniel a meeting with Minister Cai who will decide whether to hire Daniel’s company or not. However good the first impression seemed to be, Minister Cai arranges another meeting with Daniel to which he sends the Vice-Minister Xi Yan. Although she tells him that the offer will be declined, she insists that they two work together and insists that Cavanaugh should dismiss Peter Timms as his business consultant. At the same time, we are witnessing to the love affair between Daniel Cavanaugh and Xi Yan. Daniel dismisses Peter as his consultant causing stir between the two of them and makes a presentation again, but this time before Judge Xu Geming. Daniel lands a job and his company starts to grow. The other

characters are not so fortunate. Minister Cai is fired from his position by the Communist Party's leaders and his place takes Judge Xu Geming, Xi's husband.

Hwang does not hide the fact that there is another story running simultaneously with this one. Beneath Daniel's story lies the story which places greater emphasis on the fight for power and dominance. Unlike the previous two – *FOB* and *M. Butterfly*, *Chinglish* is put in another context. Hwang is up-to-date with the most recent global economic shifts and contextualizes his play within them. The main character of the play, Daniel Cavanaugh owns a family business and he is trying to resurrect the business by making a breakthrough in China, world's largest market. Hwang questions the ways in which both Chinese and Americans deal with the changing roles these two nations are undergoing. He deconstructs the old and the new ways, and exposes new identities, their faults and negative sides. The side effects of the deconstruction, as Derrida rightfully claimed, are further questions needing answers, and it seems that as Hwang keeps on developing the plot of the play, it gets more and more complicated, eventually leading us to the final result which by no means brings the identity quest in the play to an end. The answer is once again typically postmodern. There are no firm rules, everything can be questioned and the differences in perspectives really determine the whole process of seeking an answer, as well as its outcomes. The differences are blurred and emphasized at the same time and the answers remain a few.

The exploration of identity through its deconstruction starts through Daniel Cavanaugh's words from the opening scene one in act one, in which Cavanaugh, while presenting, says the following:

Thank you to the Commerce League of Ohio for inviting me to talk about doing business in China. The greatest pool of untapped consumers history has ever known. People ask me, how did I manage to get a foothold there? Well, the truth is when I started out, I knew nothing more about China than the difference between Moo Shu Pork and General Tso's Chicken. The first rule of doing business in China is also the last. Assuming you are an American. Because, if you are American, it is also safe to assume that you do not speak a single fucking foreign language. If you take away nothing else from our talk today, remember this. Write it down. (Hwang 8)

Daniel immediately points out the differences between the Americans and Chinese through the language differences and the complexity of communication between the two nations. The complexity of communication being one of the most important and most obvious themes that pervades throughout the play opens up a number of questions which Hwang is

eager to explore. Although Boles calls *Chinglish* “a major shift in the direction of Hwang’s writing, as he pursued an international perspective on the ways of the world,” (79) it still seeks to define both American and Chinese identity. Hwang’s point is that those identities are subjected to a change and he presents the change in the play. Daniel’s belief that “if you are American, it is also safe to assume that you do not speak a single fucking foreign language” (Hwang 8) reflects the national attitude and a feeling of deep pleasure stemming out of nation’s perception of its own achievements, which are based on the assumption of a dominant position of the United States and Americans over the rest of the world. However, Hwang challenges this belief in the play and compares the US and Americans to China and the Chinese as the nation’s greatest challengers. He transfers the action of the play to China and uses Chinese Mandarin to accentuate the level of misunderstanding between the Americans and Chinese. Language, as one of the most important identity constituents is used to explore these differences, and throughout the play, except for the presentation which frames the plot and Peter and Daniel’s dialogues, Chinese is given much space. That is only one of the ways in which Hwang presents the shift in the balance of economic power and dominance. Once prosperous and profitable American companies are turning their attention to the Asian market hoping it will bring them money and keep them out of the financial crisis caused by the sluggishness and fragility of the American economy. With the balance of economic power shifting to the East, the West must take a new role which was once reserved for the East and its people. Eric Hayot investigates into the issue of particularly Chinese workers who came to the American West Coast and states that:

Chinese migration to the United States began with the first voluntary migrants coming in 1848, two years before California joined the Union, in response to the news of gold found loose in the scrubland hills. In that same year, as Moon-Ho Jung has noted, the word “coolly” [sic] moved “from the appendix to the main body of Noah Webster’s American dictionary,” a sign of the changing status of the concept in American social life (Jung 2005: 679; see also Jung 2006). By the late 1850s, tens of thousands of Chinese migrants were toiling either as free miners or as contract laborers on the transcontinental railroad, and many had settled in the cities and small towns of the California coast. (82–83)

In *Chinglish*, the Americans who come to China and generally in Asia are not immigrants, but Hwang makes a parallel between the arrival of the Chinese workers to the United States and Americans’ most recent arrival to China. He compares them and their circumstances emphasizing individual problems they face. A portion of the problems that the

Americans are facing are cultural. In the first act, from scene three onwards, ethnically Chinese characters who happen to be translators face serious problems in translating and interpreting English. In the aforementioned scene Minister Cai, Vice – Minister Xi, their translator Quian, Daniel and Peter are in the Minister’s office having a meeting. They meet for the first time and immediately face obstacles in their communication, because of the translators’ inability to properly translate English to Chinese but luckily Peter is there to correct and help:

Daniel: We’re a small family firm.

Qian: His company is tiny and insignificant.

Daniel: Started by my great-grandfather in 1925.

Qian: His ancestor founded it in the early twentieth century. (Hwang 13)

The misunderstanding is soon over as Peter intervenes and makes it clear that Daniel’s company is from Cleveland but that they “have done business in Chicago,” (Hwang 13) which makes Minister Cai interested since he also visited Chicago where he “enjoys eating steaks” (Hwang 17). Miss Qian makes things even worse and again wrongly translates that Daniel’s “home village is insignificant,” (Hwang 14) making Minister Cai say that he also came from a small village (14). The communication goes on, as follows:

Xi (*Exasperated*): Cleveland! Mr. Cavanaugh is from Cleveland! Not a major city, but a significant manufacturing center.

Peter: Thank you, Vice Minister.

Xi: Or it was, back when the U.S. still manufactured things. (Hwang 14)

Xi’s last sentence in the dialogue is very important since the characters are discussing Daniel’s identity, which is closely related to his family’s residence that happens to be in Cleveland, Ohio. Daniel’s identity in the eyes of the Chinese is determined by what Cleveland used to be economically. But, more importantly, Daniel is an American and America is struggling economically: this puts him in the least favorable position than ever before. He takes up a new, more submissive identity and the power relations are changed. Hwang deconstructs the projections of the United States as a strong and decisive global factor and discloses the power that the industrious China has gained over the years. However invisible, the competition between China and the United States soon grows into the competition between the East and the West as Miss Qian, the translator, says that “sometimes westerners try to use Chinese, too” (Hwang 29) or when Daniel tries to convince Peter that they “may be

dealing with the Chinese, but must be Westerners” (49). The local, regional, ethnic, national and even civilizational differences are pointed out in many places of the playtext on both sides, starting from Cleveland and Chicago, to American Midwest (Hwang 13), and West as a personification of demagoguery in Xi’s statement that “Westerners have always fed us lies” (78). The regional differences are emphasized the most when Daniel and Xi compare elite Los Angeles and New York to elite Shanghai and Beijing to less famous and less elitist Cleveland and Guiyang which is “a small city, only four million” (Hwang 33). Hwang writes the play from an American perspective but the insight he has of the Chinese culture allows him to explore the questions he finds most interesting and which deal with the changing and complex nature of the two identities. On several occasions in the play, Hwang uses various easily recognized and typically American brands thus enabling the audience to recognize the power and the influence the United States once had on the rest of the world. On one such an occasion, Daniel mentions *Smith & Wollensky*, a very popular steakhouse (Hwang 16), and on the other occasion, a bath product – *Mr. Bubble*, which Xi calls a “Western luxury item” (76). On an occasion which takes place later in the play, before Judge Geming and other members of the decision-making panel, we find out that Daniel was one of the people who were involved in one of the biggest financial scandals in the U.S. history. The scandal resulted in the bankruptcy of the Enron Corporation, an energy company based in Houston, Texas, the company whose name was synonymous with corporate America. Strangely enough, what Daniel (and the rest of the United States) considers a failure, in China it becomes one of the most important success factors. Having introduced the notion of ‘guanxi’ to Daniel in the beginning of the play, Peter tries to help Daniel to achieve it. He already achieved the guanxi with Minister Cai and hopes to continue establishing his own network of relationships that would help in doing business. However, Minister Cai cannot fully live up to his words and the guanxi between the two is interrupted only because Cai’s guanxi with his wife’s side of family. Knowing one’s place and responsibilities beyond the contracting parties’ duties and responsibilities is very difficult for Daniel but eventually he manages to realize the true nature of guanxi. What is important in his case is not the fact that he participated in the scandal causing Enron’s collapse, but the fact that he is related to the people who were its ringleaders, which according to Boles skyrocketed his reputation:

Dealing with a businessman of his prominence raises the importance of Guiyang, which considers itself to be of little value in China, despite its population of four million. Enron’s corruption is not critical to these officials, since, as Peter explained,

the justice system in China is absent. Relationships are more important, and Daniel's past association with Enron makes him a valuable business partner. Daniel discovers, much to his surprise, that what is considered a liability in the United States is an advantage in China. (84)

Hwang presents the realities of both China and the United States and the people living in those countries. He deconstructs the idea of both countries as utopias while presenting the pros and cons of the system of rules which regulate an individual behavior and actions. The system of the rules and the code according to which the society works is constantly undergoing a change which is reflected in both Chinese and American characters' expectations and behavior in the play. Hwang still seeks to dismantle the projections which the West has on the East and he does that by challenging the stereotypes and dominant (Western) beliefs of the Eastern subordination. The Chinese characters in the play are by no means subordinate to the American. As in the previous play discussed in this thesis, the author turns things upside down in *Chinglish* as well, and changes the power relations between the characters even when it comes to sex and relationships. Daniel has an affair with Xi, but he does not understand her relationship with her husband, which can also be considered as *guanxi*. Their relationship is in many ways different to that of Daniel and his wife. Hwang deconstructs the whole concept of love and its meaning as it is understood in the West, and provides us with a completely new and (from the Western perspective) incomprehensive concept of interpersonal relationships, which apparently works in Chinese culture. In the second act, in scene eleven, Xi and Daniel are discussing the nature of love and her relationship with her husband:

Daniel: Is that what you do? You? Respect your husband?

Xi: Yes.

Daniel: By having sex with me?

Xi: And do not tell. (Hwang 109)

Daniel is surprised to hear that what Xi thinks of her relationship with her husband, because he does not understand the appreciation and respect they have for each other. Translating cultures and unearthing cultural misunderstandings is a very difficult task to undertake, but Hwang decides to try his luck. Just as in *M. Butterfly*, he also goes so far as to explore and deconstruct traditional gender roles, which implies a thorough exploration of

sexuality as well. Hwang displays the change which conservative communist society is undertaking through Xi's monologue in which she sees herself as "one who cheats on her husband, with a foreigner, even worse. We were the new generation, who would pick good men, and live for love. I did everything right. Yet now, am I any happier than my grandmother with her arranged marriage and bound feet?" (Hwang 102)? This monologue is very important since it echoes a new, different China, China whose remnants are still visible and according to which stereotypes were made. The sexuality Hwang explores in *Chinglish* is less emphasized but still present and very important because he portrays it through a kind of fetishism. This time, it is Xi who enjoys listening to Daniel telling her that he feels like she knows him and that she can see into his heart, to what Xi urges him to keep talking more (65). Just like Gallimard in *M. Butterfly*, Daniel Cavanaugh is attracted to an Asian which is, unlike Song Liling, in a dominant position. In *FOB*, which was also written from an American perspective, the Chinese migrants are represented as hypersexual and "someone you would not want your daughter to marry" (Hwang *FOB* 9) but the fact is that Hwang deconstructs the very same projection using the Freudian argument of the unconscious mind which drives such a behavior. On another occasion in *Chinglish*, when Daniel presents some of the wrongly translated signs, Xi is very determined to defend the Chinese identity and shows Daniel what happens when Westerners try to use Chinese. She points out the slogans on T-shirts like "I'm a pervert," and presents to Daniel a well respected Western academic journal – The Max Planck Institute Magazine – which mistranslated classic Chinese poetry into "We will lead to you to young housewives with figures that will turn you on" (Hwang 30). He deconstructs the West and Western projections of the East as much as he deconstructs East, showing how different and yet at the same time similar they actually are. The patterns of behavior of both Easterners and Westerners are very similar and very different at the same time, and the quest for a distinguishable identity does not bring any results. The audience gets the feeling that the East is becoming more like West and that the West is becoming more aware of the true East.

6. Conclusion

David Henry Hwang is the most popular Asian-American playwright, living and working in California. In the master paper entitled “Identity Quest in Asian-American Drama: The Selected Plays of David Henry Hwang”, I have explored Hwang’s long time obsession with the theme of identity.

Nowadays, when the whole world seems to be getting more and more divided on so many issues including race, gender, ethnicity and nationality, the theme of identity seems to generate more interest than ever. Hwang’s plays reflect a change in the American society and whole national mindset especially emphasizing the change on both sides of Asian-American amalgam. The progress which has led the Americans to prosperity is suddenly questioned and the whole system of values has become subject to scrutiny.

Hwang explores this theme throughout his whole literary oeuvre and presents it to the audience in his plays. He started writing plays in his college years and soon became the first Asian-American playwright whose plays were performed on Broadway, perhaps the world’s most famous theatre stage. Hwang is still an active playwright, but his plays, except *M. Butterfly* do not get many academic reviews. For the purpose of exploring the topic of identity and Hwang’s interest in it, I decided to choose three plays, namely *FOB*, *M. Butterfly*, and *Chinglish*. The reason I took these three plays as the corpus for the master thesis is that they closely follow and manifest the stages of Hwang’s progress in defining his own and the identity of the whole Asian-American community. During the process of writing the thesis, I found out that Hwang’s work had been both criticized and applauded to, and that his ideas have progressed over the course of time. *FOB* is his first play, while *M. Butterfly* is considered his most commercially successful play. *Chinglish* is Hwang’s most recent play and it was also commercially successful, although to a lesser degree than *M. Butterfly*.

The first chapter of the thesis introduced the subject matter and provided a short insight into Hwang’s life. Although not extensive, it gives us the most important information on his background and Asian origin. This chapter also discussed Hwang’s place in Asian-American literature. It quoted critics and scholars such as William Boles, Rachel Lee and Frank Chin, whose voices allowed us an objective insight into the author’s position in Asian-American literature.

Whereas the first chapter puts emphasis on the origin of Hwang’s obsession, the second chapter discussed the importance of the methodology which Hwang has used to address the identity issue. The second chapter showed how close Hwang has been to the contemporary literary conventions.

The next chapter of the master thesis disclosed how Hwang dealt with the theme of identity quest. By using methods of selection, close reading, deconstruction and reproduction, I was able to point out key concepts which Hwang used in the aforementioned plays. The chapter confirmed my thesis that Hwang extensively relies on the process of deconstruction in his efforts to dismantle the totalizing practices, projections and perspectives which the West has on the East. Deconstruction, perhaps the key concept of the 21st century, as formulated by Jacques Derrida who is considered to be its creator, seeks to find and undermine the relationship between a text and meaning by finding out what is opposite to the intended meaning. This master thesis also showed that Hwang is very much aware of Derrida's attitude that deconstruction itself can be deconstructed and that deconstruction cannot and should not offer any final answers and definite conclusions. The very essence of deconstruction is asking questions each of which leads us to new questions. This being said, the thesis also made an important disclosure that while deconstructing the Western perspectives on the East, Hwang also deconstructed the Eastern perspective of the West and its own projection of itself. At the same time, the thesis confirmed that Hwang is very much on the same page with Derrida. His plays also do not offer any final answers nor do they draw any conclusions. Instead, they rather make us explore and question the social, cultural, intercultural and international circumstances in which we live, especially emphasizing the identity crisis the whole planet seems to be going through and our own prejudices towards the "Other(s)".

The thesis also confirmed that Hwang flirts with postmodern literary techniques while using typically Brechtian theater techniques of breaking the fourth wall between the play and audience. He also uses music and dance as a means of presenting or at least foreshadowing concepts and ideas, and that he uses costumes and theatrical scenery to present his ideas. In terms of structuring of plot, the thesis showed that Hwang relied on using retrospective in order to show new possibilities of a dramatic text and to keep plays alluring and captivating. The constant questioning of and the ongoing quest for an identity looks futile, on the surface. Mixed impressions, reviews and Hwang's constant blurring of the differences and similarities between the East and the West have their goal. The unsuccessful quest for an identifiable reference is only an illusion in Hwang's case. It is a confirmation of Derrida's model of difference, the fact that the meaning is constituted by the qualities that are absent from a sign, just as any identity is constituted by the features that are absent from it. Hwang's particular attitude toward the unending question of identity, the thesis shows, is more cosmopolitan and egalitarian.

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