

Asia in Asian American Literature: The Drama of Henry David Hwang

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Abstract

Following the success of the Civil Rights Movement in America in the sixties and seventies there was a surge in the production of literature from minority groups. Frank Chin's *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) was one landmark publication that included a variety of work from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American writers. Among the goals of these writers was the claiming of identity as Americans through various narratives of assimilation. In their eagerness to demonstrate their American subjectivity, many of these writers turned their backs on their Asian heritage.

David Henry Hwang was the first Asian American dramatist to portray situations in which Asian visitors to America functioned as educators and healers. This presentation looks at the Asian educators in some of Hwang's early plays and shows how they prefigure Song, the cross-dressing spy in Hwang's most famous work, *M. Butterfly* (1989). Unlike Chin and other cultural nationalists who shunned Asia and created cowboy-like heroes, Hwang created a series of Asian protagonists who attempt to cure Western malaise. Song is one of the figures in this series.

Hwang was interested in fusing his work with that of Asian writers; the two short plays published before *M. Butterfly* are set in Japan and are derived from works by Yukio Mishima and Yasunari Kawabata. Despite such influence, the voice of the educator is unmistakable in the female protagonists of *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties* (1983). The connection between these relatively unknown plays and Hwang's famous work has not been commented upon; that connection, and Hwang's pioneering stance as an Asian American dramatist looking to Asia for inspiration comprise the focus of this presentation

Introduction

American literature begins with the collective mind set of the Puritan fathers and moves quickly towards refining the morality associated with the collective consciousness. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is, in a sense, the first work of minority literature in American literary history because it takes up a feminist point of view, demonstrating the dynamic ethical stance of a woman shunned by the moral majority.

Minority literature continues to fulfill the function of pointing out the hypocrisy of the moral majority and the need for ethical and social renewal. Works like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) shocked the American public into the first stages of awareness about racial injustice in America. Nobel-prize winner Toni Morrison continued this tradition in works like *Beloved* (1987) that sharpened public awareness of the individual suffering resulting from the complacency of the public's "common sense."

Perhaps it is the function of minority literature, or of literature in general, to sharpen the ethical sense of a nation. Banks (1990) describes the ways in which four Malaysian novelists of the latter decades of the last century attempt to refine the Islamic consciousness by contrasting a superficial understanding of Islam with an ethical point of view which is more socially responsible.

Ghanhan Ahmad's *Menodak Baung* (1978) (*The Carp Skewers the Catfish*), Banks tells us, deals with a group of poor villagers who are attempting to take over public land near the village. Keris Mas' *Sandagar Besar Dari Kuala Lumpur* (1982) (*The Big Businessman from Kuala Lumpur*) describes a mining enterprise in Selangor which exploits workers with lack of proper facilities. While these writers, like

Hawthorne, are not recognizably minority writers, by taking the minority point of view, they help to sharpen ethical awareness away from a crude collective ethos.

1. The issue of subjectivity

One of the issues related to the ethical redefinition involved in minority literature is subjectivity. Hester Prynne, protagonist of Hawthorne's early American novel, never re-assimilates into Puritan society, though people come to seek her out in her isolated post near the sea. Her subjectivity is defined by an isolation which, in turn, is born from the community's consciousness of her sin. Ironically, she achieves a multiple subjectivity through her isolation, which allows her to feel the pain of and identify with others in need of comfort.

Bigger Thomas, the black protagonist of Wright's *Native Son*, refuses any assimilation into either black or white society even in his final, pre-execution interview. When Max, the white, liberal Jewish lawyer whose care for Bigger has been an education in itself, takes Bigger to the window of his Chicago prison cell and shows him the skyscrapers that dot the landscape as proof of a human faith that binds men together, Bigger rejects the humanistic vision. This rejection was one of the most shocking aspects of the novel for mid-century American readers. Bigger's rejection of any shared subjectivity, his refusal to assimilate with even the smallest gesture, remains a landmark moment in American literary history and a reminder to white liberals that the inequalities of American society are far from mended.

Thus there is a tension between the collective self and the self-in-isolation, the representative of the group and the individual whose isolated struggle represents the possibility of ethical progress for the community. This tension has been played out in

the literature of various minority groups in the US. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1956) is a powerful example of black drama in the earliest stages of the Civil Rights Movement. The play depicts the struggle and suffering of a black family who buy a house in a white neighborhood of Chicago. The Younger family's wish to assimilate into middle class America stands in contrast to Wright's earlier depiction of that other Chicago resident mentioned above, Bigger Thomas.

2. Asian American literature: the very beginning

After the success of the Civil Rights movement and the boom in African American literature, other minority groups began to produce literature which centered around non-white Americans. Asian American literature is an example of such a body of literature. *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writing* (1974) was edited by Frank Chin, Jefery Chan, and Lawson Inada, a group of writers who sought to legitimize Asian Americans as Americans and dispel exotic myths about the Asian-ness of Asian Americans. Their own attitude towards Asia—particularly in the case of Frank Chin—was not positive; assimilation was the goal of their characters. David Henry Hwang, whose *M. Butterfly* (1988) would propel Asian American literature into the national spotlight, is a generation younger and ideologically very different from the editors of the earlier anthology.

3. Hwang's early plays: a different kind of subjectivity

FOB, (Fresh Off the Boat) (1979) his first play has moved and perplexed audiences since its first performance in 1979. The play, set in Los Angeles, brings together two Asian Americans in different stages of assimilation with an Asian who is

“fresh off the boat.” This recent arrival is introduced to the audience as an object of scorn and compared to Lennie in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. Yet by the end of the play the realism associated with the assimilationist effort to acquire subjectivity has been abandoned, and the newcomer revealed to be Gwan Gung, a Chinese deity and Everyman whose diffuse subjectivity embraces and holds the history of Chinese America.

Family Relations, first performed a year later, is closely related in theme to *FOB*. The play presents an extended Asian American family waiting for the arrival of an elderly relative from China. The middle-aged male members of the family, successful businessmen, have not questioned the importance of assimilation, and they reveal in their conversation the extent to which the materialism of life in Bel Air, California, has possessed them. The arrival of the long-lost Chinese uncle provides a shock which cuts through the realism of the first half of the play and provides Chester, the young artist of the family, with alternatives to the acquisition of subjectivity under capitalism. Like the recently arrived immigrant in *FOB*, the elderly relative partakes of a diffuse subjectivity which embraces faces of the past.

In this paper I would like to deal with the difficulties that these two plays present not only for a general audience but also for an Asian American audience whose disappointment with *Family Relations* is echoed in Josephine Lee’s (1997) remark that “realism [in the play] promises access, but here it pointedly denies us the goods” (56). I will suggest that such disappointment stems from a reading of the plays as exercises in a naturalism wedded to ethnic nationalism, and that the assumption behind such readings is problematic in its assumption that the task of the Asian American writer is the construction of an Asian American subjectivity. The agony of many Asian American

writers, from Frank Chin to Maxine Hong Kingston, has been to claim America; the direction of Hwang's writing, from these earliest plays, has been to claim an Asian diasporic sensibility that allows for a diffuse subjectivity as it presents alternatives to the death-in-life claustrophobia of American consumer capitalism.

4. Toming Liu and Asian diasporic literature

Toming Liu (1996) has defined the contours of an Asian American diasporic sensibility, contrasting it with the domestic consciousness of cultural nationalism:

It generates new opportunities for expanding the international dimension of Asian American studies, including postcolonial reevaluations of politics in ethnic identity formation and cultural transformation. It questions models of cultural nationalism that include the prevalent concept of ethnicity in the US. Associated more closely with postmodern cultures, the diaspora also acquires connotations of a more fluid and culturally translational subjectivity. In short, from the diasporic perspective, politics of identity and questions of cultural production are considered more internationally, interculturally, and translationally. (Liu)

Liu's parameters of the diasporic consciousness describe the shape of Hwang's drama. In an age when Asian American dramatic production was dominated by cultural nationalists like Frank Chin and Philip Gotanda, Hwang moved to liberate Asian American drama and take its myths and traditions to the mainstream stage. Espousing "a more fluid and culturally translational subjectivity," and taking as his mentor a mainstream playwright—Sam Shepard—whose plays explode the Ego of domestic subjectivity and move in the diasporic direction of "willed homelessness," Hwang's reputation, to quote Karen Shimakawa (2000), "developed largely outside the Asian Pacific theatre circuit . . ." (289). Unlike Asian American dramatists who prefer to

work within the ethnic community, Hwang declares “I actually find the process of cultural translation very interesting” (Shimakawa, 290).

5. Walter Benjamin: the archeologist of modernity

Part and parcel of Hwang’s overall project, as a diasporic intellectual, is to incorporate and isolate aspects of modernity, particularly the *rationalization* bound up with modernity—the disappearance of the gods—a concomitant fostering of demonizing allegory, and an ongoing need to cover the failure of Western individualism with fables of individuation garnered from minority and third world communities. I will suggest in this paper that Hwang’s drama can be most profitably mined by using the theory of another diasporic intellectual, one dubbed “the archeologist of modernity,” Walter Benjamin. I assert that Benjamin’s theories of drama and allegory in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (English edition 1998), little used in Anglo-American literary or dramatic criticism, constitute powerful tools for the assessment of modern literature in general, but especially for the assessment of minority literature. Used in tandem with Frederic Jameson’s early (1971) essay on Benjamin and his subsequent use of the concept of the allegory of individuation as the inevitable literary product of the third world, these tools help to construct critical theory around the intersection of modernity and minority literature.

Jameson’s idea is that third world literature can never really be interesting for first world readers, because it only repeats the patterns of individuation and assimilation already found in first world literature. The idea is shocking in that it presumes that there is only one pattern to be followed in the production of literature, and that the pattern is from collective to individual. The idea ignores those moments in American literature in

which the individual protagonist achieves a multiple subjectivity, as in the classic case of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne.

Hwang's plays run counter to Jameson's theory; in his most recent play, *Golden Child*, for instance, set both in the present and at the time of the arrival of modernity in China in the early twentieth century, Christian individualism and romantic love are contrasted with ancestor worship and polygamy. Ancestor worship is represented as a kind of multiple subjectivity, as an awareness of the voices of the dead. Neither side "wins" in the play, but the case for multiple subjectivity is strong, aided by a good deal of satire, including a bragging contest, aimed at individualism.

Benjamin's dramatic theory is particularly suited to Hwang's plays because Benjamin's theory of allegory is diametrically opposed to the kind of allegory of individual formation which Jameson repeatedly cites as characteristic of modernity; in Benjamin allegory is similar to the ruin in which the signs of the departed gods can be detected. Rather than pointing forward to the triumph of individual formation around the globe, as Jameson is wont to do in his reading of third world literature as allegories of the individual forever breaking off from the collective, Benjamin's use of allegory points back to the disappearance of the gods as it surveys the death-ridden landscape of a present so dominated by the material that inanimate things themselves are about to spring into life. In this chapter we will see that two of Hwang's early plays incorporate this very momentum of Benjamin's dramatic theory: a look backwards at the gods and a survey of the ultimate meaninglessness of the struggle for assimilation, a panoramic view of the death-ridden materialism of middle class Asian America in the seventies. In this sense it is not too much to call Benjamin's vision of modernity "anti-allegoric;" in its warning that the voyage of the individual ego launched by the engines of modernity

is doomed to become morbid furniture upon the baroque stage, it militates against the optimistic (Jamesonian) belief that literature, wherever it is produced in the age of globalization, will continue to mimic the Western story of the individual freeing himself from the claims of the collective.

6. Hwang's immunity to fundamentalism

And in the sense that the anti-allegoric represents a refusal to take comfort in Western myths of individualism, it poses the possibility of overcoming subjectivity; in its rejection of fables of individual formation there is also a rejection, as one can see in Hwang's plays, of the assimilationist struggle for subjectivity associated with cultural nationalism. Hwang's refusal to stoke the fires of cultural nationalism lit by Chin and the editors of *Aiiieeee!* mark him as the kind of diasporic intellectual described by Said (1983) as exhibiting a spiritual stance of "willed homelessness" (7).

In an article for *American Theatre* (2000), Hwang explains how he acquired an immunity to cults and developed a diasporic point of view; born into a "weird Chinese American Baptist evangelical fusion," he grew up "watching a number of different fundamentalisms compete for supremacy before a background of constant change" (50). Other cults awaited him at college:

In college I turned away from Christianity only to find myself soon after reborn, this time as an Asian American. This was in the late '70s, still the relatively early days of the Third World identity movements. And though Asian America means a great deal to me, there have always been certain aspects of the movement which I've held at arm's length. The isolationism, the proselytizing, the siege mentality, the veneration of martyrs—I had just left one cult, I was leery of going straight into another. (50)

7. Asian sources for the return of the gods

In his diasporic determination to avoid the pitfalls of cultural nationalism, Hwang has drawn his inspiration and materials from a variety of sources. Intrigued by the fusion of tradition and modernity in the works of Japanese writers, he has turned not only to China but also to Japan for the materials and philosophical underpinning of some of his plays, notably *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, both set in Japan. Like the Japanese playwrights of the nineteen sixties, Hwang rejects the conventions of realism by introducing gods onto the stage. As Goodman (2003) asserts in his study of Japanese drama of that era, *The Return of the Gods*, the reappearance of the gods on the Japanese stage was a rejection of the conventions of realism. In its efforts to speed up Japan's modernization and bring it culturally into line with Europe, the Meiji government had sponsored the writing of realistic plays in the manner of Strindberg and Ibsen, and discouraged performances of Kabuki and Noh. The new drama, born at the end of the nineteenth century and called *shingeki* (new drama), was a vessel of modernity in its rationalization of the traditional:

Japan's modern theatre was characterized by . . . [an] alienation from the traditional cosmology. It is no coincidence that early shingeki plays depict the decline of traditional patterns of belief . . . Kikuchi Kan's Madman on the Roof (Okujyo no kyojin, 1916) ridicules traditional religious practices. Shingeki as we know it today thus originated in a rupture with classical theatre and with the premodern imagination it embodied. (5)

That classical theatre, Goodman explains, "overflowed with gods and demons of every description" (5). In the fifty-odd years of *shingeki's* ascendancy, these gods were banished from the stage. Then, in the social turbulence following the renewal of the controversial U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, younger playwrights began to

react against the theatre of social realism that had been imposed by a government eager to emulate the West.

One of the chief characteristics of this new dramatic movement that emerged in the sixties was “the identification of a character or characters with an archetypal, transhistorical figure (a god) into whom they metamorphose” (10). Such characters help to effect an escape from time under modernity, from “a world which is drained of experience and wholly under the reign of consciousness . . . what Benjamin later (in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*) would call ‘empty and homogeneous time’” (Cassegard, 238). Indeed, at least one of these post-shingeki plays, *The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings* (*Tsubasa wo moyasu tenshitachi no buto*, 1970), “intentionally resembles the messianic revolutionism of Walter Benjamin, where revolution and redemption are identified” (Goodman, 12). In this messianic revolutionism time is not eschatological; “instead every moment in time is a narrow gate through which the Messiah (revolution) might enter” (12).

8. Conclusion

Hwang’s plays should be read as participating in such a movement against a dramatic realism bound up in the logocentric discourse of modernity. This reality becomes apparent both in Hwang’s fascination with Japanese writers opposing the rationalizing forces of modernity, and in his conscious emulation of Sam Shepard’s plays. “Are we always going to be imprisoned within the realm of our own subjectivity and forced to perceive meaning through our own prejudices?” Hwang’s question, delivered in the text of his 1994 MIT Abramowitz lecture, gives us a crucial understanding of his plays. He is not concerned with the construction of an Asian

American subjectivity within the temporal stasis of modernity; rather, he seeks to create characters who, in the fluid dynamism of their alterity, offer a way out of the philosophical dilemmas of modernity. The allegories of his plays are not those allegories of individuation and separation from the collective which Jameson consistently reads as the true fables of modernity (1971, 1986); rather, Hwang's plays take us in the opposite direction, towards the recognition of a multiple, dynamic subjectivity that can cross over into the individual and collective subjectivities of others.

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