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“Orientalism” in J.D. Salinger's “The Laughing Man”

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I. Introduction

J. D. Salinger (1919-2010) is one of the most influential contemporary American novelists. In particular, his best-selling novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) has been familiar to the readers worldwide. In most of his works, he attempted to question warfare. In order to represent this skepticism, Salinger introduced various Eastern aspects into his writings.

Salinger's war experience during World War II is crucial in reading his literary works. Forcing him to fight in the forefront of the battlefield, World War II completely changed his philosophy of life. As Slawenski notes, “Through his writings, he sought answers to the questions that his service experiences had exposed, questions of life and death, of God, of what we are to each other” (Slawenski 139). He also explains “Salinger was far from naïve about war” and “he had already expressed disgust with the false idealism applied to combat and attempted to explain that war was a bloody, inglorious affair” (93). Thus, he came to question warfare in which a person was regarded as a thing without any emotions. As he realized that people were gradually diminishing their humanity, he deemed the battle to be a dangerous threat (49). Hence, it can be said that Salinger disputed the notion of World War II, which constrained humans to observe what the authority announces. His military experience allowed him to recognize the need of the renunciation of the horrible notion. This method, he believed, could lead people to regain their humanity deprived of by the war.

It is said that Salinger started his strong inclination toward Eastern thought after repatriating from the war. He seems to have attempted to reinforce his skepticism toward warfare with the thought. As Slawenski asserts,

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Salinger interpreted Eastern thought as a notion that could bring humanity lost in the war back to people, including himself (153). That is why most of his literary works that were published after the war more or less contain representations of Eastern thought.⁽¹⁾ However, it is also true that these works contain some representations not only of Eastern thought but also of what simply evokes an Eastern mood.

One of Salinger's stories delineating an Eastern atmosphere is “The Laughing Man” (first published in 1949), one of the pieces collected in *Nine Stories*.⁽²⁾ The narrator of this short story calls his supervisor “the Chief,” who tells the tale of the Laughing Man.⁽³⁾ The Chief sets the hero, born in Europe and brought up in China, to be a righteous burglar. He forces this imaginary burglar to have an ugly appearance. Meanwhile, the Chief deprives the hero of his voice except mysterious laughter. At the end of the tale the Chief kills the Laughing Man after a battle against the Dufarges, the world-famous French detectives.

Eastern characteristics in “The Laughing Man” are stereotypical: mysteriousness, savageness, backwardness, and dumbness of the East are highly stressed. In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said (1935-2003) includes these characteristics in the stereotypes of “Orientals,” who refer to people living in Eastern regions including Asia. “Orientalism” as defined by Said is mainly divided into several parts as he explicates:⁽⁴⁾

[Orientalism] is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is,

above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political [. . .], power intellectual [. . .], power cultural [. . .], power moral [. . .]. (Said 12)

According to this detailed definition of “Orientalism,” the world has been divided into the West (“the Occident”) and the East (“the Orient”). This binary opposition, which has traditionally regarded the East as inferior to the West, enables Westerners to dominate Easterners in various ways. As Iwamura claims, Said regards “Orientalism” as the “system of representation” which “reveals much about the Occidental subjectivity” (Iwamura 7). Thus, it seems obvious that “Orientalism” has ruled some Western writers’ ways of thinking unconsciously but steadily.

“Orientalism” is worth considering when the representation of the East in “The Laughing Man” is discussed. The following passage in *Orientalism* explains the reason for this.

[R]epresentations have purposes, they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks. Representations are formations, or as Roland Barthes has said of all the operations of language, they are deformations. The Orient as a representation in Europe is formed—or deformed—out of a more and more specific sensitivity towards a geographical region called “the East.” (Said 273)

Said, with reference to Barthes, argues that representations intend to project warped images of objects represented. He also points out that the geographic distance affects some Westerners’ representations of the East, resulting in distorted figures of “the Orient” in the West. As such “deformations” had been conveyed mostly because of the power of philology, it is possible for readers of books containing the descriptions of “Orientals” to place credit in the deformed representations there (117). This can account for the possibility of some “deformations” as to the East in “The Laughing Man.” Even in the representations of the East there can be a certain amount of unconsciously

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incorporated distortions of the Eastern images. Therefore, it can be said that “The Laughing Man” is an appropriate text to be analyzed, which can reveal the relevance of “Orientalism.”

The Laughing Man's death in the last scene is also crucial. One analysis of this issue would show that the Laughing Man mirrors Chief's repressed complex in regard to masculine attractiveness. Nevertheless, this event might also have something to do with the problem of ethnic minorities in the world. In “The Laughing Man,” the Laughing Man's condition parallels how successful the Chief's personal love affair works. While the Chief has a poor physique, Mary Hudson, with whom he is in love, is blessed with perfect looks. When his love for her turns out to be unsuccessful, he commits the murder of the Laughing Man. From the perspective of this correlation between the Chief's real life and the end of his creative work, another interpretation of the Laughing Man's demise, the fate of the non-Western race, can be possible.

Therefore, this paper will discuss how “The Laughing Man” represents “Orientalism.” First of all it will analyse the representation of Eastern characteristics in “The Laughing Man” in terms of mysteriousness, savageness, backwardness and dumbness, which Said considers as the stereotypes of “Orientals” imposed by traditional thought patterns of Western people. Then it will examine the implication of the Laughing Man's death from the viewpoint of the parallel between the Chief and the Laughing Man. Finally it will argue that “The Laughing Man” can be identified as a story that contains a significant number of “Orientalist” aspects in the description of Eastern characteristics. It will also argue that the Laughing Man's demise could imply the limitation of non-Western peoples, including Easterners, who lives in the Western-dominant world.

2. Analyses of Four ‘Orientalist’ Representations in “The Laughing Man”

1) “Mysterious East”

Mysteriousness of “Orientals” is the first Orientalist characteristic depicted in “The Laughing Man.” This stereotype of Eastern people lies in the

Laughing Man's appearance illustrated as follows:

[The Laughing Man] grew into manhood with a hairless, pecan-shaped head and a face that featured, instead of a mouth, an enormous oval cavity below the nose. The nose itself consisted of two flesh-sealed nostrils. In consequence, when the Laughing Man breathed, the hideous, mirthless gap below his nose dilated and contracted like [. . .] some sort of monstrous vacuole. (Salinger 58-59)

Salinger depicted the imaginary hero of this story, fostered by Chinese bandits, as a character with a peculiar head and an unattractive face. When people see his horrible face they faint to death. This persuades his foster parents to cover his face “with a pale-red gossamer mask made out of poppy petals” (59). The image of opium might be easily associated with the stereotype of China.⁽⁶⁾ In addition, the action of covering the ugly Laughing Man with the opium mask might intensify the mysteriousness of the Eastern hero. Thus, the Laughing Man contains some stereotypical features of Eastern image, which emphasises the mysteriousness of the East.

It might be argued that “The Laughing Man” is never linked to “Orientalism” because this is only a fiction that contains Eastern descriptions. Nevertheless, Salinger's biography seems to have something to do with the “Orientalist” aspect of this short story. There is no specific account that Salinger had been to the East.⁽⁶⁾ It is commonly said that he mainly learned Eastern thought from American artists and from the English texts written by Western scholars. These biographical facts can demonstrate Salinger's lack of enough experience to represent the East with absolute confidence. Moreover, Said argues the possible defect of philology, noting that some texts concerning the East written by Western intellectuals often contain their stereotypical views based on what they learned and heard about the East (Said 117). This leads these texts to lack the true facts of Eastern regions. As a result, when Salinger desires to write about the East, he has no choice except for relying on these texts or his own imagination about unknown, mysterious Eastern people. Thus, it is possible that these characteristics of the hero of “The Laughing

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Man” are related to the mysteriousness of the East.

2) “Savage Orientals”

Savageness of Eastern people in “The Laughing Man” also reflects the “Orientalist” view of the piece. First of all, the Chinese bandits kidnap an infant, who becomes the Laughing Man, from a Western couple. The “wealthy missionary couple” (Salinger 58) gave up their son because paying the ransom infringes their religion. This harshly offends the Chinese bandits, resulting in the following cruel deed:

[T]he bandits, signally piqued, placed the little fellow's head in a *carpenter's vise* and gave the appropriate lever several turns to the right. (Salinger 58, emphasis added)

This atrocity, which is committed by the foster parents of the Laughing Man in his infancy, is why the grown-up Laughing Man presents an unsightly appearance. Furthermore, with jealousy of the adopted son's conspicuous activity as a skillful burglar, the Chinese bandits plan to kill him.

[The Chinese bandits] all single-filed past the Laughing Man's bed one night, thinking they had successfully doped him into a deep sleep, and stabbed at the figure under the covers with their *machetes*. (Salinger 60, emphasis added)

Although the Chinese bandits fail to murder the Laughing Man, the victim turning out to be their spiteful mother, it is clear that these savage actions committed are emphasised by their irrational use of lethal weapons. As Said claims, this savageness is one of the stereotypes of “Orientals” (Said 86). This stereotype is accompanied and increased by the irrationality, which is also among Eastern stereotypes (49). Clearly, “The Laughing Man” represents savageness of the East.

One might argue that this savageness is not because of “Orientalism” but because of the common characteristics of bandits. However, compared with the Dufarges, a French detective and his daughter chasing the Laughing Man, the savageness of the Chinese bandits becomes more conspicuous. The father and daughter from Paris are collected enough to set an ultimate trap for the

Laughing Man. Meanwhile, the Chinese bandits are impulsive, the thoughtlessness of which leads to the attempted murder of the Laughing Man as noted before. This contrast between the Dufarges and the Chinese bandits might exaggerate the difference of their origins: the West and the East. In other words, the Western parent and child are represented as more rational, while the Eastern tribes are described as more savage. Thus, it is evident that “The Laughing Man” depicts the fixed ideas of the East.

3) “Backward East”

Another “Orientalist” description in “The Laughing Man” is backwardness of “Orientals.” The backward image of the East is more obvious when the Laughing Man is compared with the Dufarges. As for the former character, there are several references of the uncivilized nature of the Laughing Man, who has a Chinese origin, as follows:

[The Laughing Man's] personal wants were few. He subsisted exclusively on rice and eagles' blood, in a tiny cottage with an underground gymnasium and shooting range, on the stormy coast of Tibet. Four blindly loyal confederates lived with him: a glib timber wolf named Black Wing, a lovable dwarf named Omba, a giant Mongolian named Hong, whose tongue had been burned out by white men, and a gorgeous Eurasian girl, who, out of unrequited love for the Laughing Man and deep concern for his personal safety, sometimes had a pretty sticky attitude toward crime. (Salinger 61)

Salinger set the Laughing Man in the deep forest in China with a dwarf, a Mongolian giant without a tongue due to the white men's brutal deed, and a Eurasian girl keeping her love for her host all to herself. Specifically, each of these characters can be seen somehow impure. This impurity is connected with inferiority to perfection in “The Laughing Man.” The daughter of Dufarges exemplifies this connection in the representation of her characteristics, “an exquisite girl, though something of transvestite” (60). Her “exquisite” physical features can indicate the superiority of the West. Her “transvestite” tendency may add some masculine strength to the Western superiority, while the

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Laughing Man's refusal of the Eurasian girl's attachment can add some feminine attributes to the Eastern inferiority. As Said claims, this relationship between the superior and the inferior coheres to the relationship between the West and the East (Said 7). Said also asserts that this relative superiority and inferiority often cause another comparison: the advanced West and the backward East (7). Therefore, the contrast between the Dufarges and the family of Chinese bandits stresses the backwardness of the latter.

It could be argued that the inferiority of the Chinese hero does not mean the backwardness of the East. As some critics asserts, it might show only the specialty of Salinger's works: “the uneasiness of sexuality” or “sexual inadequacy” of a man who suffers from “spiritual hunger” (Kaufman 103; Lane 26; Smith 121). Nevertheless, considering another of his short stories, “De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period” (first published in 1953), the connection between the backwardness and the East is obvious. In this story the protagonist, a European self-professed artist, denounces Monsieur Yoshoto, a Japanese owner of the private art school due to his lack of knowledge and skills of teaching European painting styles. Moreover, the European protagonist is compared with Monsieur Yoshoto as to their appearances. On one hand, the readers can see the former look more or less neat. Even though each item of his vividly colorful clothing creates poor combination, there is no particular expression to degrade his appearance. On the other hand, the latter, Monsieur Yoshoto, is described differently:

[Monsieur Yoshoto] was a tiny man—not more than five feet tall,⁽⁷⁾ wearing rather soiled linen suit, black shoes, and a black felt hat with the brim turned up all around. [. . .] His expression—and my word for it came straight out of a French edition of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu books—*was inscrutable*.⁽⁸⁾ (Salinger 138)

The protagonist narrates the negative image of the Japanese man. The use of the words “soiled,” “Fu Manchu” and “*inscrutable*” might not be a sheer coincidence.⁽⁹⁾ It seems likely that the juxtaposition of these words is intended to emphasize the Eastern nature of Monsieur Yoshoto. This can be readily

associated with the civilized nature of the European protagonist and the uncivilized image of the Japanese man. This phenomenon reminds of the case of “The Laughing Man,” where the backward image of the Chinese hero is contrasted with the advanced characteristics of the female detective, intensifying the inferiority of the former. Hence, these two short stories expose a certain tendency of the characterization, which can demonstrate the prejudiced view against “Orientals.” Therefore, backwardness of the East in “The Laughing Man” can tell a great deal about “Orientalism.”

4) “Dumb Orientals”

The last stereotype of “Orientals,” dumbness, is the most fundamental feature appearing in “The Laughing Man.” The hero of this short story cannot utter a word, except his laughter and a special language to communicate with his fellows. This dumbness is the crucial evidence of Orientalist aspects in this short story because Said discusses this characteristic throughout the text of *Orientalism*. According to Said, the West has regarded “Orientals” as unable to describe them (Said 21). The fact is that the West and the East have different languages. However, some Western scholars tend to see this difference as Western ability and Eastern inability. This misperception of these Western intellectuals has encouraged them to describe “Orientals” on behalf of this voiceless, incompetent people (21). Such context of “Orientalism” parallels dumbness of the Laughing Man. Therefore, dumbness of the East is the most serious issue implied in “The Laughing Man.”

It is often argued that “The Laughing Man” just represented a challenge to “mundane actualities and practical considerations of post-war America” rather than the “Orientalist” view (Wenke 70). Davidson also doubts the relevance of “Orientalism” to this piece. He states that this story “seems to predate Salinger's obsession with Eastern Thought” (Davidson 55). Nevertheless, as indicated before, Salinger began his commitment to Eastern thought around 1946 (Slawenski 153). Considering that the publication date of “The Laughing Man” was 1949, it is possible that Eastern thought certainly influenced this short story. O'Connor also mentions the possibility of

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“Orientalism” appearing in Salinger's literary works. His opinion that “even fewer sought to elucidate his Orientalism (usually reduced to Zen) in relation to his narrative art” seems crucial enough to be considered in discussing the relevance of “Orientalism” on Salinger's commitment to Eastern thought (O'Connor 79). Thus, there is a certain possibility that “The Laughing Man” represents the hidden “Orientalist” way of thinking.

3. An Examination of The Laughing Man's Death

Not only the four stereotypes of the East discussed above but also the Laughing Man's sudden death can tell how Eastern elements are dealt with in this short story. The imaginary hero dies a regrettable death as a result of the battle with the Dufarges. Namely, the Chief intentionally kills the Laughing Man and end his story telling for his own convenience. The meaning of this murder of the creation committed by the creator lies in their interrelation.

The names of “the Chief” and his Boy Scouts, “the Comanches” hint at the problem that the Laughing Man's death raises. The Chief is at the head of “the Comanches.” This name evokes a group of American Indians who lived in the southeast of the North America until the late nineteenth century. It is said that the tribe who acquired horses from Western people and menaced the U.S. at that time. They are known as ones who resisted white settlers fiercely. Eventually, however, they were sent to Oklahoma to be forced to engage in agriculture. Considering this history of the American Indian tribe, the naming of “the Chief” makes sense. Namely, the Chief in “The Laughing Man” can be seen as a leader of a minority group in the American context.

Moreover, the Chief's creation of the Laughing Man's story parallels his romantic situation with Mary Hudson. She is as exquisite and active as the daughter of Dufarges, which makes the couple poorly matched. However, the Chief eagerly tries to build a good relationship with her. While he gets along with her, he makes the Laughing Man do remarkable work. The hero's humanitarian stance almost defeats the Dufarges, which seems to lead to their mutual understanding. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Chief and

Mary Hudson collapses. It is soon after this collapse that the Dufarges murders the Laughing Man in the Chief's story. Obviously, as Davidson indicates, the Laughing Man seems to be the Chief's alter-ego (Davidson 63).

This correspondence between the Chief's romance and the Laughing Man's condition is not a coincidence, when the implication of the names "the Chief" and "the Comanches" is taken into account. Firstly, the distinction between the appearance and nature of the couple, which is similar to that between the Laughing Man and the Dufarges, can imply the difference between an American Indian and a white settler. Secondly, the end of their romance, which evokes the death of the imaginary hero, can suggest a fatal conclusion that an American Indian and a white settler could never understand each other. Davidson indicates that "the Chinese-Paris border," in which the Laughing Man and the Dufarges go back and forth to battle, has "the distant-closeness" (62). This leads to the suggestion of a huge gap between the West and the others, including the East. Thus, the murder of the Laughing Man might show the bafflement of the minorities living in the world of Western dominance.

The problem of "Orientalism" lies here as well because the death of the Laughing Man reflects the existing hegemonic relationship between the West and the East, one of the minor races, which Said mentions (7). White settlers neutralized the actual Comanches by their deportation and compulsory farming. In the same way, the Chief allows Dufarges, the Westerners, to neutralize the Laughing Man, the Eastern righteous hero. Although the Chief, in his tale, conveys his desire to break the limitation of the inferior and defeat the superior, he is made acutely aware of the impossibility of his aspiration. Therefore, it is clear that "The Laughing Man" describes this fate of the American minority in parallel with the representation of the East. This parallel can lead to a view that the East in the world is as minor as the American Indians in the U.S. Thus, the analysis of the hero's death demonstrates that "The Laughing Man" can be considered to contain "Orientalist" aspects.

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4. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has firstly discussed to what extent the representation of Eastern characteristics in J. D. Salinger's “The Laughing Man” can be identified as “Orientalism” as defined by Edward W. Said. It has mainly analyzed mysteriousness, savageness, backwardness and dumbness of the East depicted in the short story. Then it has demonstrated that this short story includes “Orientalist” perspectives to a great extent.

This paper has also discussed the significance of the Laughing Man's death in terms of the relationship between the extent of Chief's actual love affair and the degree of the Laughing Man's humane activity. Then it has demonstrated that death of the hero, who is one of the minorities, can implicate the tragic destiny of non-Western ethnic groups, such as American Indians and Eastern people.

These two demonstrations lead to the conclusion that “The Laughing Man” represents “Orientalist” viewpoints as defined by Said in two ways: that is to say, not only does this short story show directly “Orientalist” aspects by adopting Eastern elements, it also represents some “Orientalist” features in an indirect way by having the symbolism of the minorities embedded. Outwardly this piece reads as a story of an American young man's challenge and setback. However, “Oriental” contexts are seemingly woven into this story, which might raise a question of white supremacy and its exclusivism that certainly lie in the world.

Notes

This paper is written as a part of research in School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. I would like to ask for the acknowledgement that some parts of this paper overlap the final essay submitted during 8-week pre-session course in SOAS, which has been touched up and corrected into this paper.

(1) Among these researchers who explores the relevance of Eastern thought to

Salinger's works is Ando, who considers the influence of Zen Buddhism on Salinger's writings (Ando, 1970). Rosen examines the aspects of Zen Buddhism mainly in *The Catcher in the Rye* (Rosen, 1973). O'Connor's research on *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (first published in 1955) includes the elements of Taoism as well as Buddhism (O'Connor, 1984). While few scholarships indicate a certain influence of Orientalism on American writers, Obeidat's comprehensive research seems to be one of pioneering studies on Orientalism in American literature. He examines the prejudicial misrepresentation of 'the Muslim Orient' portrayed in American literary works from nineteenth century to late-twentieth century (Obeidat, 1998).

(2) "The Laughing Man" (with double quotation marks) refers to the title of Salinger's short story discussed in this paper. The/the Laughing Man (without double quotation marks) refers to the name of the protagonist of the short story "The Laughing Man."

(3) The short story "The Laughing Man" has a dual structure. A supervisor called "the Chief" occasionally told a story of the Laughing Man to his Boy Scouts, including the narrator. The narrator, now an adult, recollects his childhood, the episode of which includes the tale told by the Chief.

(4) In this paper, "Orientalism" and "Orientalist" (with double quotation marks) refer to the concept as defined by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Orientalism and Orientalist (without double quotation marks) refer to the concepts other than the one as defined by Said.

(5) Opium smoking began in China and became worldwide in the middle of eighteenth century. The increase of the import of opium into China caused the Opium War in 1840. China finally surrendered to the United Kingdom.

(6) Salinger might imply his unfamiliarity with the East by letting a decoy wolf

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make the following comment: “[The decoy wolf had] never been to China in his life and hadn't the slightest intention of going there” (Salinger 68). The wolf is employed by the Dufarges to entrap the Laughing Man to death.

(7) Five feet is about 152 centimeters. This relatively small stature seems to evoke the dwarf Omba, one of the fellows of the Laughing Man. The characterization of these two characters, Monsieur Yoshoto and Omba, might emphasize immaturity of the East, which also leads to the implication of Eastern backwardness.

(8) Sax Rohmer is a British author of the serial novel of Fu Manchu, a fictional Chinese character who is world-famous for his uniquely long moustache. Iwamura includes this Asian character among “negative portrayals of Asians emerged in American popular culture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries” (Iwamura 9).

(9) Although Fu Manchu is set to be a Chinese criminal, he is referred to as a description of a Japanese man. This confusion can show that all kinds of Eastern people are viewed as identical, which might be evidence of the mysteriousness of the East represented in this short story.

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