Re-examining Angela Carter’s Orientalism

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Abstract

Scholars today agree that Angela Carter’s experience in Japan was a turning point in her life and writing career. So far, the argument on Japan’s influence on the writer has centered on gender issues. However, by closely examining how Carter represented Japan as the exotic other, we find that her writings not only abound in clichés and stereotypes of orientalism, but that her treatment of Japanese women and men is problematic. This paper examines Carter’s orientalism in her writings on Japan, and argues that her radical feminist views are closely connected to her experience in Japan. The paper concludes that disillusionment with her own orientalist fantasy led Carter to leave Japan in 1971.

1. Introduction

Angela Carter’s third novel, Several Perceptions (1968), had won the Somerset Maugham Award, which included a travel bursary of £500. After traveling around America with her husband, she went alone to Japan in 1969, where she wrote essays and short stories based on her experiences there. Many scholars including Lorna Sage, Linden Peach, and Sarah Gamble agree that her encounter with Japan was a pivotal point in her career as a writer.1 According to Carter’s biographer, Edmund Gordon, Carter underwent a crucial “transform[ation]” (Invention 137) while in Japan.

To be sure, Japan’s influence on Carter’s writing and her life has already been discussed by many scholars, but as Charlotte Crofts aptly points out, the main focus has been on gender issues and “there has been less extensive exploration of the racial dynamics in Carter’s work”(87). Indeed, Carter’s gaze toward Japan is racially as well as culturally biased. Whether the writer herself was conscious of it or not, her expectation and representation of Japan as the mysterious and exotic other and her eventual disillusionment indicate that she was strongly influenced by Western orientalism.
In this paper, I will examine Carter’s orientalism in her treatment of Japan as depicted in her short stories and essays. Above all, I will address the relationship between Carter and Japan via the looking-glass. Being a Caucasian woman, Carter found herself in a dilemma in Japan, for Japanese society of the time looked down on women in general but aspired to the ways of the West. The paper analyzes how Carter dealt with such a dilemma through orientalist discourse. Finally, the paper argues that disillusionment with her own orientalist fantasy led the writer to leave Japan.

2. Japan as the Looking-glass: “Reflections”

Of her experience in Japan, Angela Carter wrote, “Japan is like going through the looking-glass and finding out what kind of milk it is that looking-glass cats drink; the same, but totally other” (“My Maugham Award” 204). Carter reiterates this image of “going through the looking-glass” in a short story entitled “Reflections.” A solitary walk into the deep, primitive forest leads the male protagonist into a nightmarish encounter with a mirror world. One step into the mirror, and “I had become my own reflection,” the protagonist observes (“Reflections” 118). “The world was the same; yet absolutely altered. How can I describe it . . . almost as if this room was the colour negative of the other room” (119). In this strange world beyond the looking-glass, everything was “reversed” (113) and “contrariwise” (119). Therefore, in order to go forward, one must go backwards; if one wants to get to one side, one must reach out for the other, and so on.

In “Reflections,” the mirror is described as “the symbolic matrix of this and that, hither and thither, outside and inside” (117), of which the formidable androgyne and her/his niece, with the palindromic name Anna, are the guardians. In the fatal encounter with the mirror, “a dreadful vertigo seized [the protagonist], as if he stood on the edge of an abyss” (109; emphasis added). Significantly, Carter records a similar sensation she herself experienced upon first arriving in Japan: “the aeroplane ascended or descended into an electric city where nothing was what it seemed at first and I was absolutely confused. I was seized with vertigo” (qtd. in Gordon, Invention 137; emphasis added).

Carter’s gaze, as some scholars have already pointed out, is imperialist as well as orientalist.² For Carter, Japan was almost like a looking-glass, or to be more exact, an incessantly changing image that appears on the surface of a mirror. She writes, “they
seemed to have made the entire city [Tokyo] into a cold hall of mirrors which continually proliferated whole galleries of constantly changing appearances” (“A Souvenir of Japan” 11). Accordingly, what readers find in Carter’s text is a reflected image of the writer herself, looking at the unfamiliar culture and customs of Japan with the curious eyes of a Western traveler.

In fact, Carter did not choose to visit Japan because she was particularly interested in the country. She had “wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not now nor has ever been a Judaeo-Christian one, to see what it was like” (Nothing Sacred 28). Susan Fisher points out that Carter must have had “plenty of models of writers who developed a successful career by alternating exotic travel with fiction writing,” such as Ronald Firbank, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. It is plausible, then, to suppose that Carter “was not going there [to Japan] without preconceptions” of the Orient (173).

The Orient, as Edward Said wrote, “as much as the West itself ... is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (5; emphasis added). That is to say, if the Orient has any signification at all, it is so in and for the West exclusively. The Orient has no substance in itself, but is an embodiment of Occidental desire. The Orient was “made Orient,” just as what was “typically Oriental” was contrived and decided by Western travelers, soldiers and writers (Said 6, emphasis original). The Orient represents the European fantasy of the East.

Meanwhile, Lorna Sage, while admitting that Carter went to Japan “from [her] very Western wants” (27), claims that her writings should be distinguished from the “old-fashioned orientalism” (26). According to Sage, Carter’s orientalism is “the new-fangled sort,” which “denied you access to any essence of otherness.” That is to say, Carter “found out the truthfulness and finality of appearances, images emptied of their usual freight of recognition and guilt” (26; emphasis original). Sage argues that Carter discovered, like Roland Barthes, who visited Japan around the same time and published Empire of Signs (1970), that everything is a sign. As each appearance or image continually changes, its meaning also changes.3

In this way, Carter became an interpreter of signs in Japan. Sarah Gamble observes that even after she left Japan, Carter continued to cast an eye “of the same scrutiny” toward her own country and culture, and for this, she should be duly credited
(94-5). Her post-Japan works, including *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *A Passion of New Eve* (1977), deal with subversive symbols, deceptive appearances and the artificiality of desires.

However, when Carter wrote that she “started trying to understand things by simply looking at them [Japanese culture, customs and people] very, very carefully, an involuntary apprenticeship in the interpretation of signs” (*Nothing Sacred* 28), she is, if unconsciously, reducing Japan into a text to be read, or even a blank page to be inscribed with some meaning, so that it *makes sense* for Westerners. What is more, the Japanese are unnaturally silenced in Carter’s text. Consequently, whether it be the “old-fashioned” orientalism or “the new-fangled sort,” it does not change the fact that Carter’s discourse on Japan is strongly orientalist. By reducing Japan to a sign, Carter reconstructs the traditional “relationship between Occident and Orient [which] is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5).

3. Becoming *Gaijin*: “Tokyo Pastoral”

Japan as a looking-glass reflects Carter’s expectation for the exotic, and at the same time, it “reflected [Carter] back to herself as an alien” (Sage 26). “I am the first coloured family in this street,” she writes (“Tokyo Pastoral” 234). What should not be overlooked, however, is that Carter’s detachment was predominantly voluntary. In fact, self-alienation was “a habit” of hers from when she was still “an intolerable adolescent”: “like Pavlov’s dogs . . . [she] positively salivated at the suggestion of unpleasure [of isolation]” (“Flesh and the Mirror” 77). “[W]e did not quite fit in, thank goodness; alienated is the only way to be, after all,” are Carter’s own words (“The Mother Lode” 16). Therefore, it is not surprising if Carter willingly accepted the role of an outsider in Japan. Indeed, she would carefully distance herself from the people and the community around her. It is as if, by creating a gap, she managed to secure the otherness that she so much longed for.

Surely, all of Carter’s writings on Japan are written from the viewpoint of a foreigner. She depicts Japan and its people through the eyes of a *gaijin*, a Japanese term she repeatedly uses. Literally, it means “non-Japanese,” and it has the effect of isolating someone as an outsider. In “Tokyo Pastoral,” she writes of an episode in which little children in the neighborhood, apparently shocked to encounter a foreigner,
gathered and whispered to each other in pure surprise, “gaijin, gaijin, gaijin,” but only from behind the protection of a window. To this, Carter’s response was, asoka (Carter provides her own translation of “Well, well, I never did”) (32-3). It almost seems as if Carter enjoyed the alienating effect the word gaijin produces.

Apparently, Carter is proud of her newly gained identity: “I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other. I had become a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast; I was an outlandish jewel. He [Carter’s boyfriend] found me, I think, inexpressibly exotic. But I often felt like a female impersonator” (“A Souvenir of Japan” 8; emphasis added). Here Carter describes herself as “exotic.” However, the expressions she uses are all stereotypes and clichés of orientalism: phoenix, fabulous beast, outlandish jewel, exotic, female impersonator. By recycling these images of the Orient, Carter reconstructs the relationship between the West and the East.

If Carter’s life in Japan is often regarded to be a pivotal event in the writer’s career, what Gordon refers to as “great hinges on which her story turns” (“Angela Carter: Far from the fairytale”), this gaijin identity played a crucial role in bringing about such a transition. As Sage puts it, in Japan, Carter “discovered and retained a way of looking at herself, and other people, as unnatural” (28). The word gaijin is, in fact, used by Carter as a sign of defiance, resonant with the message of “I am not one of them.” Carter’s gaijin identity, then, postulates the Western “I” (or “eye”) as the speaking and observing subject, from whose point of view Japan is interpreted. Her giving up any attempt to learn the Japanese language from early on only underscores her detachment. For Carter, the Japanese language, which lacks adequate equivalents for such words as “identity” and “to be,” seemed incongruous with her Western mind (“My Maugham Award” 204).

Meanwhile, in “Notes from the Front Line,” Carter laments having been “defined as a Caucasian before [she] was defined as a woman” and of her “painful and enlightening experience [in Japan] to be regarded as a coloured person” (72). The passage is controversial in many ways. For one thing, just because she had to “[learn] the hard way that most people on this planet are not Caucasian and have no reason either to love or respect Caucasians” (72; emphasis original) does not make her a minority, much less “coloured.” Crofts also problematizes such a tendency of “the upwardly mobile Western traveler straightforwardly aligning themselves with the less privileged, economically and politically marginalized ‘other’” (95). Needless to say,
Carter’s definition of “coloured” as “marginalized other” is not only biased but politically incorrect.

The historical as well as social background of Carter’s visit is as equally relevant. In the late 1960s and the early 70s, Japan was going through the so-called “bubble” period of rapid economic growth. The government as well as society was adopting Western ways, and the US and European countries were regarded as role models. That Japan had lost in the Second World War and been subject to post-war US cultural imperialism are also key factors in appraising the power relationship, or imbalance, between Japan and the Western country. The superiority of the West was too obvious to ignore in Japan, at least at the time of Carter’s visit, such that Carter equating her experience with that of “a coloured person” seems unrealistic and farfetched.

Robbie B. H. Goh criticizes as “Eurocentric” Carter’s treatment of other cultures. He states, “While she is often alert to gender codes, to their artifice and arbitrary power, she is much less aware of the imperialist codes which place the West in the centre of her consciousness and efface all other regions and cultures into an indistinct and irrealist mass”(70). Then, the biggest problem lies in her dealing with other cultures in the same way that she would look at European countries, insensitively oblivious to the racial, cultural and economic differences. Carter justifies her own “touristic and imperial gaze”(Goh 73), and further yet universalizes and generalizes the ways of the West. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri C. Spivak also problematizes the manner in which Western subjects have tried to interpret other cultures on the basis of Western epistemology. In this respect, it is highly questionable whether we could attach full credence to Carter’s account of Japan, especially because Japan is placed mutely under her pen and criticism, which sometimes entails unjust generalization, and the Japanese are not given a chance to speak for themselves.

Significantly, it is Carter’s gaijin identity that eventually leads her to achieve the self-confidence and a sense of independence. “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self”(Said 3). This is especially true in her relationship with Japanese women and men, as I will discuss in the following sections. What is most important is that Carter’s newly-gained self-confidence in Japan helped her build equal relationships with men. Considering that Carter ran from her relationship with her husband in England, it seems to make all the difference that Carter’s transformation into a radically
thinking and independent woman took place in Japan and against Japanese men.

4. The Battle of the Sexes: “Poor Butterfly”

Paradoxically, despite Carter's famous declaration that “[i]n Japan, I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalized” (Nothing Sacred 28), few of her pieces in fact deal with Japanese women. “Poor Butterfly” is among the few pieces that Carter wrote of Japan dealing with Japanese women. It tells of the writer’s experience working as a hostess in Ginza, a famous and exclusive recreational district in Tokyo. In this essay, the narrator starts by introducing “the battle of the sexes in Japan” (“Poor Butterfly” 249). Here, she gives examples of how Japanese men look down on Japanese women and how Japanese women are denied self-esteem and means of self-assertion: “True femininity is denied an expression and women, in general, have the choice of becoming either slaves or toys. Not long after this epiphanic revelation, I found myself in the front line of the battle” (249). This passage is often quoted to support the view that Carter’s identity as a radical feminist was established through her experience in Japan. However, it is not so simple because an orientalist discourse is involved, and what is more, as Anne Pasolini states, “Carter does not allow Japanese women to speak, ‘wording’ them instead” (136).

In fact, Carter’s depiction of Japanese women in “Poor Butterfly” is inconsistent. On one hand, she deliberately draws a line between foreign hostesses and Japanese hostesses. She observes that a ranking existed between the two groups, and there was “[hostility] to the alien competition” on the part of the Japanese girls (“Poor Butterfly” 252). This was mainly caused by “a curious double standard” on the part of male customers, who would treat foreign hostesses as being of higher station, while regarding Japanese women to be beneath themselves (252). In addition, “[f]oreign girls also get more pay and exercise far greater job mobility, having different notions of the nature of employment” (252). Rather than sympathizing with Japanese girls, or even trying to listen to them, Carter indifferently cuts them off and concludes that Japanese girls “simply cannot afford to have the self-respect to strike” (252). On the other hand, she writes that “the battles of the sexes” in Japan are actually universal and that “Japan is just the same as everywhere else, only more so” (251).

In a way, Carter’s inconsistent treatment of Japanese women effectively illustrated the paradox of Japanese society at the time, looking down on women in general while
acting obsequiously toward Western women. At the same time, it reveals the dilemma that Carter herself was in. While her Western self expected the otherness of the Japanese, she could not fully dissociate herself from Japanese women because of her sexual identity. As a result, Carter’s representation of Japanese women inevitably became inconsistent and self-contradictory. On this point, Crofts is certainly right when she claims that “Carter is in danger of eliding the differences between the experience of being seen as racially other, alien and foreign, with the experience of being viewed as man’s sexual ‘other’” (93).

5. Gender Reversal: “A Souvenir of Japan”

Carter’s relationship with her Japanese boyfriend is even more complicated, as gender reversal takes place. When Carter first came to Japan, she was still married to Paul Carter. Unhappy with her marriage, she needed to get away. Japan seemed to be a desirable ground for starting afresh, where she knew no one and nothing. There she was able to attain a “new sense of personal independence,” and eventually “a new artistic freedom” (Gordon, “Angela Carter: Far from the fairytale”). In Japan, she fell in love and started a new life with her Japanese boyfriend, whom she found to be exotic and attractive. To be sure, romance between a white man and the exotic lover becoming “a source of inspiration for his artistic creation” is the typical trope in orientalism although, in Carter’s case, it is a romance between a white woman and an exotic man (Murai 4).4

Significantly, Carter’s relationship with her Japanese lover apparently differed from her relationship with her English husband.5 In their marriage, Paul controlled their relationship, while Angela appeared less confident and rather self-denying. In “The Quilt Maker,” Carter includes an episode of a British couple traveling in a Greyhound bus across America. In this strongly autobiographical essay, she writes, “If the man who was then my husband had not told me I was a fool to take the little peach . . . then I would never have left him, for in truth, he was, in a manner of speaking, always the little peach to me” (123). In a way, while okusan is another Japanese word Carter liked to use, meaning a typical Japanese wife, it may just have been her old self with Paul Carter: “The word for wife, okusan, means the person who occupies the inner room and rarely, if ever, comes out of it” (“A Souvenir of Japan” 4). What is striking, then, is that in Japan Carter “fought against it [a similar treatment] bitterly” (4). Thus, in her
relationship with her Japanese boyfriend, she was the stronger person. For one thing, she was older and earning more. Carter was “adamant” in her claim for independence (Gordon, Invention 154). There is even a glint of pride when she writes “if I occupied the inner room . . . it was I who paid the rent” ("A Souvenir of Japan" 10). Such a gender inversion that Carter experienced in Japan greatly contributed to her subsequent emancipation and empowerment.

“A Souvenir of Japan” was written at least one year after she arrived in Japan. The story centers on the narrator’s relationship with a Japanese lover; he is much younger and she must support him, because he cannot afford to pay the rent; he is infidelitous, unreliable and yet unbelievably attractive. The narrator’s desire for him is such that “I should have liked to have had him embalmed and been able to keep him beside me in a glass coffin, so that I could watch him all the time and he would not have been able to get away from me” (8). He is also compared to Gauguin’s Tahitians, which only highlights the narrator’s orientalist fascinations.

Furthermore, to enhance the effect of exotic otherness, Carter reverses the gender role and sexual identity of herself-as-the-narrator and her lover. Not only is the Japanese lover dependent and fickle, he is described as having “the inhuman sweetness of a child born from something other than a mother, a passive, cruel sweetness . . . it was that of the repressed masochism which, in my country, is usually confined to women” (“A Souvenir of Japan” 7; emphasis added). His delicate body is “elegant” with “curious, androgynous grace”; his pectorals are, she describes, “almost like the breasts of a girl approaching puberty” (7). In this way, the narrator’s boyfriend is deliberately feminized.

In contrast, Carter elaborately builds up her “masculine” image in Japan. Compared to her lover, she “had the stronger character” (“A Souvenir of Japan” 5). As she was too big for Japanese sized clothing and shoes, she wore “men’s sandals,” and even those were “the largest size” (9). Seeing that she was apparently unfit for anything sold at a department store (especially the items labeled “For Young and Cute Girls Only”), she felt “as gross as Glumdalclitch” (9). In thus identifying herself with a giantess in Gulliver’s Travels, Carter draws attention to her unfeminine features. However, this is just another masquerade that she adopts in Japan. Like the identity of a gaijin, her “masculinity” not only allows her to separate herself from her effeminate Japanese boyfriend, but also from Japanese women.
Such gender reversal appears in another essay, where Carter records a meaningful episode with her Japanese boyfriend:

... while I was earning a Sadie Thompstonesque living as a barmaid in the Orient, I found myself, on a free weekend, riding through a flowering grove on the other side of the world with a young man who said: "Me Butterfly, you Pinkerton." And, though I denied it hotly at the time, so it proved, except, when I went away, it was for good. I never returned with an American friend, grant me sufficient good taste. ("The Quilt Maker" 125; emphasis added)

Interestingly, Carter identifies herself with Sadie Thomson, a heroine from a silent movie in 1928, based on Somerset Maugham's short story "Rain." Like the young heroine of this story, who fled to an island in the South Pacific Ocean to start a new life, Carter, too, was leading a new life in an unknown land. More importantly, in the above passage, Carter refers to Puccini's opera and John Luther Long's short story Madame Butterfly (1907), a well-known story of an American Naval officer abandoning a Japanese woman, Cho-cho san (Butterfly), to her death. The story is parodied and the relationship between Butterfly and Pinkerton is meaningfully inverted. In Carter's case, it is an English woman taking advantage of a Japanese man.

From a feminist point of view, such gender reversal may appear as a triumph, for Carter was finally able to gain the self-esteem and independence that she was not able to enjoy before Japan. However, that such a reversal was made possible under the influence of orientalism must not be overlooked. The hegemonic discourse of orientalism has it that the superiority of the West is often associated with men, while the East is regarded as feminine. Therefore, if Carter appeared manly in contrast to the delicate and feminine features of her Japanese boyfriend, it merely suggests that their relationship was similar to the power relationship between the West and the East. In fact, effeminizing oriental men in order to gain authoritarian power was an old trick of the Occident. In this respect, Carter's gender reversal is far from radical but rather old-fashioned, especially when it is compared to the subversion at work in David Henry Hwang's drama M. Butterfly (1986), where a French man is betrayed by a Chinese man who poses as a woman, thus overturning both gender and racial relationships. As Gamble writes, in Carter's works, "the female protagonist can assume the dominant role vis-à-vis the gaze without any real violation of the dominant power structures, because
she is adopting the customary Occidental view of the Orient” (110). Carter’s empowerment in Japan can thus be attributed to the orientalist discourse.


Ironically, what eventually led Carter to leave Japan was her disillusionment. As the distinction between the Orient and the Occident and between femininity and masculinity was becoming obscure, she gradually became disillusioned with her own orientalist fantasy that she had sustained for so long. “Flesh and the Mirror” literally opens with disappointment, from her Japanese lover failing to meet her at a port after she had been away for a while. This opening is quite symbolic, for it illustrates not only her lover’s disloyalty but the subsequent disappearance of the expected other.

Furthermore, in a hotel room with a stranger, she is confronted with a mirror which, unlike the familiar looking-glass that showed her what her imperialist gaze desired to see, “presented [her] with a hitherto unconsidered notion of [herself] as I” (“Flesh and the Mirror” 82). The mirror was set on the ceiling and showed her reflection being made love to. This experience of seeing herself as a desiring self and an objectified (desired) self at the same time shakes her self-integrity: “Without any intention of mine I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror. I beset me. I was subject of the sentence written on the mirror” (82).

The narrator protagonist is thus made aware that while she had thought she was the one watching and deciphering the codes in an alien country, she was at once being watched and made to act upon the desire of the other:

I think I know, now, what I was trying to do. I was trying to subdue the city by turning it into a projection of my own growing pains. What solipsistic arrogance! . . . this city presents the foreigner with a mode of life that seems to him to have the enigmatic transparency, the indecipherable clarity, of dream. And it is a dream he could, himself, never have dreamed. The stranger, the foreigner, thinks he is in control; but he has been precipitated into somebody else’s dream. (“Flesh and the Mirror” 78-9)

Natsumi Ikoma writes that the conclusion of “Flesh and the Mirror” indicates that “every act, not merely in romantic relationships, is a performance to fulfil some sort of expectation imposed upon us.” Hence, “self” for Carter is “not the thing I am,” and such loss of self, Ikoma writes, becomes the central feature of Carter’s post-Japan fiction (85).
Such loss of self inevitably leads to the painful realization that all this time she had been looking for something that was not there. That is, she had been looking at the reflected image of her own desire in the looking-glass:

Living never lived up to the expectations I had of it—the Bovary syndrome. I was always imagining other things that could have been happening, instead, and so I always felt cheated, always dissatisfied.

Always dissatisfied, even if, like a perfect heroine, I wandered, weeping, on a forlorn quest for a lost lover through the aromatic labyrinth of alleys. And wasn’t I in Asia? Asia! (“Flesh and the Mirror” 79)

The exclamation at the end clearly shows her exasperation. Disillusioned with her own dream, Carter-as-the-protagonist decides to leave the country.

In addition, much to her dismay and even embarrassment, she confesses that thus far she had been manipulating and inventing the otherness in every aspect of her life in Japan. She was merely playing a puppet show, she both the stage manager and the puppet. It is as if, “I was the creator of all and of myself, too” (“Flesh and the Mirror” 78) she writes. She was the heroine of her own “puppet theatre,” at the same time “pulling the strings of [her] own puppet” (80). She even hints that the Japanese man, her lover, was also “an object created in the mode of fantasy” (85). She confesses, “I created him solely in relation to myself, like a work of romantic art, an object corresponding to the ghost inside me. . . . I picked up my scalpel and set to work” (85-6).

As the illusion dissolved, the Japanese lover as well as the city (Tokyo) disappeared: “his features were blurring, like the underwriting on a palimpsest. It wasn’t long before we parted . . . . Then the city vanished; it ceased, almost immediately, to be a magic and appalling place” (“Flesh and the Mirror” 88). After all, Japan as a magical and appalling place existed only in the looking-glass of Carter’s orientalist gaze. Importantly, disillusionment ends with the disintegration of the looking-glass. At the end of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, a novel that she finished writing before leaving Japan, the protagonist, Desiderio, kills Alberta, who is his ideal woman but actually an image of his own desire. Killing one’s desire is similar to killing a part of oneself. Just as Desiderio suffers greatly over the death of Alberta, Carter also experiences, if briefly, a painful period parting with Japan and, in a way, with a part of herself.6

Since Carter wrote that she had “learnt what it is to be a woman and became
radicalized” in Japan, many scholars have taken her word for it and assumed that Japan had turned the writer into a radical feminist. Carter’s words have also given the wrong impression that there existed a kind of mutual understanding between herself and Japanese women in their struggle against Japan’s male-dominated society. However, as this paper has examined, that was not exactly the case. Carter was so strongly influenced by the orientalist discourse that it affected her attitude toward and representation of Japanese women and men. Moreover, whether it be with her Japanese boyfriend or with Japanese hostesses, her relationship with the Japanese always reflected the power relationship between the West and the East. Accordingly, when Carter wrote that she had “learnt what it is to be a woman,” she specifically meant “what it is to be a Caucasian woman traveling in the unknown land of the Orient.” Carter arrived in Japan full of orientalist expectations but left it, disillusioned, two years later. It was her own orientalist gaze that eventually led her to see the deceptiveness of her own racially as well as culturally biased desire.

7. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the orientalism in Angela Carter’s writings on Japan. As Crofts pointed out, Carter’s writings on Japan have long been discussed as feminist texts rather than in the context of orientalism and postcolonial theory (87). However, as we have seen, Carter’s representation of Japanese women and men, as well as her depiction of Japanese culture and customs, are strongly influenced by orientalism. Therefore, Carter’s feminist theories need to be examined more closely in relation to her orientalist discourse, and vice versa, since feminism and orientalism are complexly intertwined in Carter’s work on Japan. Lastly, I would like to stress that, in order to understand her orientalism better, Carter’s writings on Japan should be addressed in the context of her entire body of work, instead of separately. For, while her earlier works abound in orientalist expectations of otherness, her later works depict her eventual disillusionment with this expectation.

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Notes

1. Peach is reluctant to see Japan in terms of “a watershed in her literary career” (2), as defamiliarization and deconstruction, which are prominent features of Carter’s post-Japan work, can already be seen in the writer’s earlier work. Nonetheless, he maintains that her experience in Japan “confirmed her in the way in which she was developing” (21).

2. See for example, Crofts 93-9, Goh 69-84, Pasolini 133-8.

3. For discussion on the connection between Carter and Barthes, see Sage 26-7, Goh 78-9.

4. Mayuko Murai discusses the influence that Carter must have received from Pierre Loti’s Madame Chrysanthème, Charles Baudelaire’s relationship with Jeanne Duval, a Creole woman, who became the inspiration for his “Black Venus” cycle of poems, and Paul Gauguin’s Tahitians (4-5).

5. For details on and interview with Carter’s Japanese boyfriend, Sozo Araki, see Gordon (Invention) and Ikoma.

6. For details on how Carter spent her last days in Japan, see Gordon, Invention 186-99.

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