

Literary Representations of Japan

At the Intersection
of David Mitchell and
Haruki Murakami's Worlds

Eugenia Prasol
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Series in Literary Studies



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Foreword

Many authors, not only in Japan but throughout the world, write about Japan, including James Clavell (e.g., *Shogun*, 1975), David Mitchell (e.g., *Thousand Autumns on Dejima*, 2010), William Gibson (e.g., *Neuromancer*, 1984; *Pattern Recognition*, 2003), Ming Jin Lee (e.g., *Pachinko*, 2017), and others. In their works, some writers use common global stereotypes or re-creations of stereotypes, for example, aesthetic Japan, traditional and exotic Japan, military Japan, imperialistic Japan, Techno-Orientalist Japan, globalized Japan, Japan as an economic miracle, and Japan as a yellow peril. Other writers, however, go beyond the stereotypes to create new images of Japan.

Interestingly, unlike previous writers, the Japanese author Haruki Murakami depicts Japan with little use of stereotypes, while the British author David Mitchell, who was greatly influenced by Murakami and who declared he would go beyond Murakami's literary description, depicts Japan in Orientalist-like ways. This strange master-disciple relationship has long been a mystery; however, its elucidation will shed new light on writers' representations of Japan and on Murakami and Mitchell's works.

Eugenia Prasol's *Literary Representations of Japan: At the Intersection of David Mitchell and Haruki Murakami's Worlds* attempts to unravel that mystery through a comparative analysis of Murakami and Mitchell's literary texts to present a theory of representation of "Japan". According to Prasol, Mitchell's heavy use of exotic imagery is not because he is an Orientalist, but rather because he portrays Japan as seen from a Western perspective. Both Murakami and Mitchell's representations depart from traditional stereotypes, but the difference between them lies in Japan as seen by the Japanese and as seen by contemporary Westerners. They are both correct images; together, they represent Japan's global image. In this sense, Murakami and Mitchell's texts complementarily describe Japan through an East-West cultural dialogue.

Thus, Prasol's work presents a new theory of Japanese representation and literature by viewing Murakami and Mitchell's intertextuality as a representation by an insider and an outsider—as described by Edward Said. By a persuasive argument with abundant citations to Murakami and Mitchell's texts and previous studies, as well as to previous studies on images, Orientalism, violence, and so on, Prasol's *Literary Representations of Japan* contributes significantly to studies on Japan's representation and on Murakami and Mitchell's works.

Prasol became a full lecturer at Oles Honchar Dnipro National University in Ukraine after she graduated from its master's program. She had researched Japanese literary texts, for instance, those of Soseki Natume, Ogai Mori, and Haruki Murakami, and published good academic articles. More than a decade ago, she generated the idea for the research project in *Literary Representations of Japan*. Having earned a master's degree, she asked me whether she could enter the doctoral program at our university in Japan, where I could supervise her dissertation. I readily agreed, but I did not hear from her again until two years later, when she told me that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology had selected her as a Japanese government-sponsored foreign student. By that time, I had moved to another university with a humanities graduate school still in the planning stages. Moreover, we did not know whether a master's and a doctoral program simultaneously or only a master's program could first be established. Nevertheless, Prasol came to Japan and continued her studies as a research student. When it became clear that a master's program had to be created first, I wanted to write a recommendation letter to introduce her to another graduate school. However, she remained at our university, saying that she would continue our master's program. Her master's thesis was evaluated as outstanding, of course, and this book is based on it. I believe the book's workmanship is at the level of a doctoral dissertation, and it surely opens a significant new perspective on studies of Japan's representation and of Murakami and Mitchell, illuminating their works as an East-West cultural dialogue.

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Introduction¹

In recent decades in the world of humanities, the issues of national perception have come to the fore. This is due to the peculiarities of the development of the academic knowledge itself: without clarification of the laws of the national perception, it is impossible to understand the intercultural dialogue as a whole. In a rather simplified way, we may assume that the world culture is determined by a combination of opposite processes of divergence (national identification and unification) and convergence of cultures (globalization and Westernization). Japanese culture is no exception and can be considered in these terms just as well. It is well-known that the modern Japanese context, marked by the phenomenon of cross-cultural interaction, provides numerous examples of reconstructing the image of Japan in literary texts as well as rethinking the poetics and semantics of postmodernist models of the West in unity with the national tradition and authentic artistic and aesthetic canon.

The image of a certain country is, at first glance, an unambiguous term, which hides in itself the plurality of distinct, and sometimes opposing in their content and ways of formation phenomena: symbols, stereotypes, clichés, biases, etc. The image of Japan in the works of contemporary Western and Japanese authors is often an implicit, metaphysical concept with a large number of meanings, which are always shifting and unstable due to the variety of historical, political, economic, cultural and literary factors. A bias in the perception of oriental cultures is evident in the works of many researchers as well as in the works of many writers, who have repeatedly emphasised the impossibility of understanding between East and West.

The portrayal of Japan in Western culture and literature has its own history. Particularly controversial and complex are the Japanese phenomena in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The exotic image of a beautiful country of cherry blossoms, resilient samurais and picturesque geisha is replaced by the propaganda cartoons of the “yellow peril”, which in their turn give room to the technological and anti-utopian visions of Japan, the country of the future. Another complexity in branching and systematizing the images of Japan is related to the contrasting vision from inside and outside. “Objectivity” of the image from the outside is often accused of the Orientalist approach, which pays special attention to the exotic functions of Japaneseness and aesthetics in the culture of this country.

¹ This research is based on my Master thesis

Similar to those of other Asian countries, the images of Japan are constructed on the basis of two main approaches: it is either an underlined vision of Japan's femininity in its elegance or the notions of its aggressive and violent character. However, Japanese culture occupies a special place in the context of contemporary Western culture due to the unique combination of Eastern sensitivity and the achievements of technical progress. Representations of modernized Japan are augmented with high technologies, creating an image of a country focused on the idea of financial and economic success. It is needless to say that such views may well be quite divorced from reality. Such stereotypes fall under the definition of techno-orientalism, which is well-known in literature because of the genre of cyberpunk. This genre is marked by the distinct perspective on Japan as a soulless superpower which is to be hated and afraid of. The best examples can be found in the works of famous representatives of the genre, such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Philip K. Dick, who influenced to some extent the works of Murakami Haruki and David Mitchell, shaping their own perceptions of the techno-images of Japan. The concern is with the assessment of the state of the Japanese culture, the tendencies of development and the destruction of spirituality. Thus, the attention of Western writers is focused on the futuristic arrangement of the Japanese theme. It is no coincidence that the images of Japan in both Japanese and Western literature always exist in the field of the influence of one of the opposite stereotypes – 1) Japan's traditional aesthetics and culture; and 2) Japan, which loses its past, becomes modernized and robotic.

In the context of such an ideologised discourse of orientalism in general and techno-orientalism in particular, the relevance of studying the images of Japanese uniqueness becomes acute. At a time when the West builds its own image of rationality and superiority through its relations with Japan, Japan itself also defines its position, emphasising its geographical and cultural uniqueness. Important components of these representations are the victim mentality and the idea of the incomprehensibility of the Japanese soul. Those aspects are at the centre of artistic comprehension and interpretation of contemporary writers who try to look into Japan from the inside (Kawabata Yasunari, Tanizaki Junichiro, Oe Kenzaburo, Shimada Masahiko, Murakami Ryu, etc.) and outside (William Gibson, Roger Zelazny, James G. Ballard, Kazuo Ishiguro). Murakami and Mitchell are among them. However, those stereotypes are not permanent as well; they also change over time according to historical circumstances. When relations between Western countries and Japan are good, as in the early twentieth century or in the 1960s, the aesthetic visions of Japan in the West tend to predominate. First, it was Pierre Loti with his *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) and then Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* (1904) that were considered the key texts in moulding Western attitudes toward Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. In the post-war period, it was Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum*

and the Sword (1946) which depicted Japan in a highly aesthetic way. Kawabata Yasunari, the Noble Prize laureate in literature in 1968, can also be considered a writer who, to some extent, meets the specific Western expectations in regard to Japan with its unique sense of beauty and expression. The proof of that can be found in the Noble Prize given to Kawabata Yasunari in 1968, whose aesthetic view of Japan was admired by the West.

An interesting tendency in the representation of Japan should be noted. When relations were worsened, either during the war or after the tensions in the trade relations of the 1980s, the “warrior of Japan” became dominant in the representation of the country. The most distinctive literary examples of that can be found in Michael Crichton’s controversial novel *The Rising Sun* (1992) and in the sci-fi genre of cyberpunk mentioned above. Although the power of stereotypes remains unquestionable, these fluctuations leave space for alternative images, which may as well be independent of clichés and mainstream biases. In this research, I examine Japaneseness in the works of Murakami Haruki and David Mitchell as the essence of Japanese national identity, the peculiarity of their world perception and their way of thinking.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the formation of an updated image of Japan started in the works of English and Japanese authors. Studying the image of Japan, which is now part of cultural, political, historical and literary discourses, requires an interdisciplinary approach involving studies of Japanese history, culture, philosophy, and aesthetics. In modern conditions, to write truthfully about something as complicated as Japan often means avoiding generalizations and ideological or aesthetic considerations. According to numerous researchers (among them are the prominent works of Roland Barthes (1983), Jacques Derrida (1985, 1997), Koichi Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Kojin Karatani (1989, 1993, 1999, 2011), John Lie (2004), Ian Littlewood (2007), Masao Miyoshi (1991), Takayuki Tatsumi (2006), Karen Thornber (2009), etc.), Japan remains a country of unshakable stereotypes, and even the Japanese themselves contribute to such a state of things often adding up to the existing stereotypes about Japan. In this research, the categorisation of such generalizations will be checked by the analysis of specific cultural and literary material. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to determine the basis for representing the image of Japan in the novels of the Japanese writer Murakami Haruki and the English writer David Mitchell, to discover the similarities and differences in the representation of Japan in theme, problematic and intertextual levels.

My research focuses on a comparative analysis of the Japanese and English prose written in the last decades and examines constant, stereotypical and historically changing features of the literary image of Japan in the writings of David Mitchell and Murakami Haruki, as well as the discursive ways that are

used by scholars such as Roland Barthes (1983), Kojin Karatani (1989, 1993, 1999, 2012), Edward Said (1979, 1993), etc. It helps to see the ways in which imagery and concepts are activated in the discourse on Japaneseness. The primary reference is not to the empirical reality of Japan but to intertextuality in English and Japanese prose. Bringing forth new imagological problems of contemporary comparative studies and broadly historical, sociological, cultural and literary contexts allows the unveiling of the paradigm of representing Japan, at the core of which is auto-image – a theory of Japaneseness (*nihonjinron*). The emphasis of this research is on a range of stereotypes and their artistic deconstruction by Murakami Haruki and David Mitchell. The in-depth comparative analysis gives grounds to reveal the interrelated aspects in the image of Japan. Traditional stereotyping of Japan as exotic, mysterious, strange, irrational, sensual and potentially dangerous is juxtaposed with literary images of the country in the works of Murakami and Mitchell that reveal the variety of complex paradigmatic components of the image of Japan (exotic, violent, odourless, techno-orientalist, etc.). This study evokes the enduring themes in national identity debates that are substantially reworked in contemporary theories of Japaneseness (Ruth Benedict (1967), Peter Dale (1986), Naoki Sakai (1998), Harumi Befu (1987), Sugimoto Yoshio (1986), etc.) thereby determining the reasons for the longevity of stereotypes and understanding the complex phenomenon of shifting formulations of “Japan” as an aestheticized object. This research expands the knowledge of Japan as a set of meanings, tracing not only the common features but also delving into their historical evolution, multidimensional nature, specific artistic deconstruction and recontextualization. The ultimate goal of this research is to advance the understanding of how both general and specific components of literary representations of Japan and Japaneseness are manifested in the East-West cultural dialogue.

The research material for this book is, as mentioned earlier, the works of Murakami Haruki and the “Japanese” novels of David Mitchell. The choice of these two authors is not coincidental. Murakami has had a great influence on Mitchell’s writing, and Mitchell himself admitted on numerous occasions that he tried his best to learn from Murakami in his pursuit of a writing path. That most certainly creates a strong link between the two authors, which is only deepened by all the intertextual relationships between their novels. As I will try to prove later, Mitchell intertextually implements a lot of Murakami’s topics and techniques, creating a certain intercultural dialogue in representing Japan. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to claim that Murakami is the only intertextual source for Mitchell’s novels – by all means, there are other Western and Japanese writers that Mitchell refers. However, being contemporary authors, both of them share the modern social and cultural context, which is why it is important to study their literary relationship closely while researching the renovated image of Japan and the postmodern deconstruction of the

stereotypes related to Japan and Japaneseness. Keeping in mind the link between the two authors and their new view on old concepts, I research the semantic and poetic peculiarities of a postmodern reconstruction of the orientalist image of Japanese uniqueness in polemics with the tradition existing in the West and East.

It is noteworthy that both Murakami and Mitchell are quite conscious of creating and renewing the image of Japan while undermining and deconstructing the existing and widely spread stereotypes. Thus, Murakami addresses this problem directly, devoting his non-fiction work *Underground* (1997-1998), among others, to the investigation of what modern Japan has become and how it is possible to consider some darker sides of Japan, such as terrorism, to be still part of Japan. Mitchell follows in the footsteps of his older colleague, trying “to do what Haruki Murakami does, depicting Japan as it is, and finding the beauty in the ugliness” (Mitchell 2014, para. 17), bringing up everything that there is to Japan, no matter how ugly it can be, and raising it to a new level.

This research consists of three main parts. In the first chapter, “Murakami Haruki’s Works as Intertextual Component of the Representation of Japan in ‘Japanese’ Novels of David Mitchell”, I aim to present the two writers as well as analyse all the affinities and common features in their works and to present in what ways Mitchell references Murakami and intertextually invites the Japanese author into his text. The focus of this chapter is on the image of Japan as a country which is unique in its immutable tradition, as well as its radical revision in Murakami’s and Mitchell’s fiction in the aspect of modern ideas about Japan based on the ideas developed by Roland Barthes (1983), Iwabuchi Koichi (1994, 2002), Karatani Kojin (1989, 1993, 1999, 2012), Miyoshi Masao (1991), etc. Here I argue that the general denominator of Mitchell’s artistic concepts is Murakami’s novels. As Mitchell pointed out himself, “I had a crush on Murakami” (Mitchell 2009, para. 7). The English writer considers his purpose to revise the Orientalist point of view on Japan: “I wanted to do what Haruki Murakami does, depicting Japan as it is, and finding the beauty in the ugliness” (Mitchell 2014, para. 17). Some researchers, such as Philip Childs (2011) and Bairon Tenson Posadas (2011) who considerably simplify this phenomenon of creative consonance, call Mitchell the “intertextual doppelganger” (Posadas 2011, p. 97) of Murakami, counting the quotations and references, while leaving out the main point in Mitchell’s “Japanese” novels – creative polemics with the Japanese writer, intertextual gaining of new meanings in regards to the image of Japan. The intertextuality of Mitchell’s novels is not limited to just quoting but rather appears to be an attempt (and quite a successful one at that) to participate in East-West dialogue in regard to the image of Japan.

The second chapter, “Techno-Orientalism and Techno-Images of Japan in the Works of David Mitchell and Murakami Haruki”, is divided into a few parts of its own. In “Perceptions of Japan through Different Types of Orientalism”, I offer a brief overlook of the theoretical framework, which I use for further analysis in this chapter. I address the ongoing debate on Orientalism and look closely into the evolution of Orientalist conceptions in regard to representing Japan. The chapter focuses on a variety of exotic images that have undergone significant transformations over the centuries and yet remain fundamentally orientalist. In “Techno-Images of Japan in the Works of David Mitchell and Murakami Haruki”, the image of modern Japan is considered not only as the deconstruction of stereotypical representations of Western cultural discourse, but also as a reconstruction and remediation of techno culture such as cyberspace, computer games and so on. I try to trace the techno-images that Mitchell and Murakami use in their novels, formulating and recreating the image of Japan. Such an image of the country is formed because of the existing stereotypes, but it also goes against them, reformulating, complementing and correcting newly emerging ideological prejudices. My purpose here is to search how the authors address the futuristic image of Japan, how it is related to the notions of Orientalism and by what means the writers defy possible stereotypical meanings of it.

In the third chapter, “Representations of Violence as Part of the Image of Japan in the Works of David Mitchell and Murakami Haruki”, the focus is on another famous image/stereotype of Japan as a country of violence in the eyes of the West, is often associated with, but not limited to, the ethics of samurai. This image is widely manifested and deeply deconstructed in Murakami Haruki’s and David Mitchell’s work. As I demonstrate, the authors address this issue differently, using their own particular set of images, characters and situations. This only proves that Mitchell does not duplicate the novels written by Murakami but rather involves himself with the dialogue-polemics, which creates not just the chronicles of the modern life of Japan but the image of the unimaginable cruelty of the world in general. Despite all the differences in style and in addressing the topic of cruelty, the two authors yet somehow reach the same result creating a complex, multi-layered and somewhat controversial image of the country and people of Japan.

Based on the analysis undertaken in the abovementioned chapters of this research, it becomes clear that although there are a lot of distinctive similarities in representing Japan between Haruki Murakami and David Mitchell, there are still a few differences in their style and emphasis. The Japanese writer Murakami creates and recreates Japan without implementing any orientalist features or exotic imagery. The writer has long been known as one who attempts to depict Japan as close to its real contemporary condition as it is at all possible. On the

other hand, the English writer David Mitchell whose writing about Japan is hugely impacted by Murakami's work, nevertheless does not avoid using imagery that can be considered fairly orientalist in its essence. Here I intend to look into such phenomena closely and try to prove that his exotic images are not orientalist in its meaning but rather a parody – an ironic way of depicting Japan as it might be expected from the traditional Western perspective. I certainly cannot go as far as to call the two writers “realistic” since both create their worlds in the postmodern tradition with significant elements of magical realism, which is fairly estranged from literary realism. However, as the following research demonstrates, it is perhaps still possible to claim that both Murakami and Mitchell create Japan in the most mimetic way achievable within the bounds of contemporary literary reality, approaching “the real Japan”, whatever that may mean for each of them.

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