

# Decoding Orientalism in Borges's The Garden of Forking Paths

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## Abstract

Reflecting the struggle between the British and German soldiers in the First World War (1914 -1918), the story begins with the service of Dr. Yu Tsun, a spy of the Chinese root working for the Germans in the First World War, and the challenge for him to prove to be more intelligent and tougher than white European as his hateful German chief mistreated and humiliated him by expressing his abjection for him to be a spy and his misbelief in the capacity of the people of yellow race. Ultimately, he completes his mission by killing Albert Stephen and sending his message to his German Chief symbolically that there is a British artillery park in the city, Albert. By analyzing Jorge Luis Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths" this paper argues that Borges wants to establish the superiority of the Oriental people of the yellow race to the Europeans in completing the mission in the war, it still has an orientalist perspective in setting, plot, content, and characterization of oriental protagonist Dr. Tsun and Ts'ui Pen it. Among various issues in the story such as the creation of the labyrinth, the labyrinth of time, T'sui Pen's novel "The Garden of Forking Paths", etc. this paper focuses on the issue of the orientalist perspective in the story by following the textual interpretation analysis method.

**Keywords:** Labyrinth, orientalist, spy

## Introduction

It is accepted that there is a deep fissure between Eastern and Western societies based on their perspectives. With the Orientalist perspective, the people of Western society view and dominate Easterners broadly encompassing the regions of Asia, particularly East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. It includes "Oriental (African, Asian, undeveloped) nations (Said, 108). Said also mentions that "Islam, for example, was typically Oriental for Orientalists" (p. 104) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It indicates that Muslim, African, and Asian countries come under Orientals and the biased vision of the Westerners is known as Orientalist. The people of the West criticize the East for being more traditional and having uncertain and mysterious cultures. They want to establish their dominance by blaming the oriental eastern society from their ethnocentric perspective. Their perspective is known as the orientalist perspective. They call Eastern society as oriental society and Eastern people as oriental people. They perceive the Eastern people as exotic to others and their culture as mysterious and inferior to the culture of the West.

'The Garden of Forking Path' is a short story, written by Louis George Borges with the anti-colonial concept in his mind. He shows his favor and reverence to the Eastern culture bringing a special reference to the great Chinese writer Tsui Pen and his creation of the labyrinth through the story. The story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' tries to establish that oriental people are also strong and capable of

completing the assigned duty. Yet, there is an orientalist perspective in portraying the characterization of the protagonists, Dr. Yu Tsun, and Captain Richard Madden, and the creation of the labyrinth in the story. The story is set in the background of the First World War (1914 -1918) in which Germans fought against the British. The Chinese spy, Dr. Yu Tsun, is working for Germany along with his co-spy Viktor Runeberg. The other major characters are German Captain Liddel Hart, the British Captain Richard Madden, the enemy Captain, and T'sui Pen. The plot of the whole story centers around the detective role of Dr. Yu Tsun and his killing of Albert to send his message to his German Captain that there is an artillery park in the city of Albert. However, the story still has an Orientalist perspective to establish the superiority of the West over the East.

Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Path' is a story with multiple issues. War ethics, time as a labyrinth, Ts'ui Pen's novel 'The Garden of Forking Path' as a labyrinth, orientalism, etc. are some major issues in the story. This paper attempts to justify that the story still has an Orientalist perspective with the theoretical support of Edward Said's Orientalism. Different theoretical insights related to oriental, orientalist, and orientalism are given here briefly.

### Review of the Related Literature

Orientalists are the people of the Asian continent. The term 'Orient' is a historical term for the East, traditionally comprising anything that belongs to the Eastern world, compared to Europe, the Occident. Ning (1997) says that "the Orient is nothing but an 'other' far from the imperial centre ... What Said has attempted is a certain sense of 'decentralization' and 'deconstruction', actually anticipating the 'demarginalizing' and 'recentralizing' tendency after the decline of international post-modernism debate" (p. 60). It also indicates that Orientalists are people far from the European center. They are especially the people from the Asian continent, who have Eastern values and cultures.

Whalen-Bridge (2010) says, "Orientalism as a dyslogistic signifier (that is, as the name for a bad thing rather than a good thing) owes its current valence to the literary scholar and theorist Edward Said. ... Orientalism, many have asked why this politically charged tool of social analysis should have come out of an English department" (p. 194). It indicates that orientalism is not taken as a positive term because it reflects the Euro-American perspective to observe and dominate Eastern culture by the West.

Orientalist perspective is the biased view of Euro-Americans to victimize and dominate oriental people in their society. Orientalism is the perspective that excludes people, culture, and geography of the Asian continent from the Euro-American society. It is a discriminating political perspective. It also tries to establish the cultural superiority of the West over the people of the East in the Asian continent. Vasudha Damila-Luderitz (1993) cites Said's (1997) view as "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist" (p. 96). This statement shows that anyone who studies; teaches; and researches about Orientals, s/he is known as an orientalist, and her/his perspective is known as the orientalist perspective. It is a problematic and biased perspective. In this way, the Orientalist perspective is the point of view that evaluates Easterners' culture with their Western perspective. It is a biased view of the west dominating the east. Haiqing Sun states, "The Garden of Forking Paths' by Jorge Luis Borges is a respect for Chinese culture and Chinese writers Hog Lou Meng and Ts'ui Pen". He further says "In 1937, Jorge Luis Bore dedicates one of his essays on world literature to *Hong Lou Meng*, which displays a curious observation of this masterpiece" (p. 17). He also mentions that his short story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is such a piece, in which both '*Hong*

*Lou Meng* and *'One Thousand and One Nights'* are mentioned. However, Sun overlooks the Orientalist perspective while analyzing the story.

Jacob Bender (2019) in his article 'The Dead in the Garden of Forking Paths' compares the anticolonial sympathies in both Joyce's 1914 story 'The Dead' and Borge's 1948 story 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. He seeks to locate, "anti-colonial sympathies" (p. 260) within Joyce and Borge's writing. He means that both writers, Joyce and Borges are against colonialism in their writing. The colonial rulers might have thought that they were superior to the colonized people. However, nobody can avoid death, and "We are all ghosts in infinity, and it is the ghost world that is the real world, not this flickering, ephemeral, material one" (p. 282). It indicates that all dead people can return to the world as ghosts and live again. Both, Joyce and Borges form "a simplistic binary: maximalist versus minimalist, comprehension versus compression" (p. 283). It suggests that everybody has to face death either colonizer or colonized people. The story of 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is one of the best sample stories to decide based on evidence for making effective decisions. Alex Kale, Matthew Kay, and Jessica Hullman (2019) suggest, "To make evidence-based recommendations to decision-makers, researchers conducting systematic reviews and meta-analyses must navigate a garden of forking paths: a series of analytical decision-points, each of which has the potential to influence findings" (p. 1). Decisions should have direct impacts on results. It is possible only through effective communication. Tsui Pen kills Mr. Albert and gives his German Chief the message that there is an artillery park in the city of Albert. In the research they conclude with, "We point out opportunities for interactive systems to support research synthesis by helping researchers map the garden of forking paths, document their reasoning about analysis paths, and effectively communicate uncertainties impacting their analytical decision-making (p. 11). It also means that 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is the best sample for critical analysis for researchers to make the right decision.

In the attempt to analyze the Space-Time vision of 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and 'The Aleph', Chen Rundi (2023) avoids the particular or specific concept of time. There are various possibilities of time. The objective of his research is "to briefly analyze how Borges constructs a "labyrinth" to objectify his vision of time in the story, and how he uses "mirrors" to express his vision of space (p. 510)". It means that the concept of time is a labyrinth in the sense that it is infinite. It is the time that supersedes all of the human beings. He further adds, "The labyrinth in the garden that symbolizes parallel space and time in "The Garden of Forking Paths", and the transparent sphere known as the Aleph, which symbolizes infinite space, in 'The Aleph'" (p. 513). Thus, the above texts are related to the infinity of time and space respectively.

Estee Beck (2010) argues that the 'Garden of Forking Path' is "the contamination of fiction and fact" (p. 100). It presents the story of killing Albert which is fact and linear in the plot. On the other hand, it also presents the concept of time as a labyrinth in the death and rebirth of human beings which is fiction. He further says that "Borges plays with oppositions throughout the story. ... The first narrative level is linear; the latter is the metaphysical narrative that opens up discussion about infinity" (p. 100). The first is related to the detective style. It is the metaphysical part of the story discussing the concept of infinity and the infinity of time. It also raises the issue of finite versus infinite, space and time, history versus fiction, etc.

In the above review of literature, Ning, Whalen-Bridge, and Damila-Luderitz discuss the concepts of oriental, orientalism, and orientalist respectively in which oriental means the person with Eastern culture; orientalism refers to the mindset of the Western to view Easterners as weak, traditional and uncivilized people, and orientalist is the perspective of Western people to judge oriental people of the

east. Similarly, Sun states that 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is a creation respecting Chinese culture. Bender argues that Joyce's *Dead* and Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths' are anticolonial writings. Alex Kale, et.al, talk about 'Garden of Forking Paths' as the best model for making evidence-based decisions and Rundi presents the vision of 'space' and 'time' in the 'Garden of Forking Paths' and 'The Aleph'. Beck claims that 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is the contamination of fiction and fact. Thus, the above scholars have studied Borges's story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' from various perspectives. However, it remains to be unstudied from an Orientalist perspective.

### Textual Analysis

There is a reflection of the Orientalist perspective in portraying the character of Dr. Yu Tsun as the Orientalist perspective dominates the East proving that the Easterners are more traditional, thoughtful, and vulnerable characters. A similar type of story is found in the ancient *Aeschylus's Persians*, the earliest Athenian play extant, and *Bacchae*, the very last one extant. The lamentation of the defeat is shown in the chorus song of the ode as Said (1997) points out that the Orientalist perspective judges the Eastern people as, "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal" (40-41). The story shows that a similar type of character is found in the character of Dr. Tsun in the novel. There are two spies: Viktor Runeberg (a German) and Dr. Tsun working for the German chief. There is no depiction and explanation of worries and anxieties in the character of Runeberg before his death. It was heard that he was killed. This story only shows Dr. Yu Tsun is more vulnerable and worrying, a less confident and weaker character than others in the story. Dr. Tsun is the main protagonist, and a yellow color spy from China serving for Germans in the First World War. However, he has been depicted in the most subjugated and pitiable condition. The text of the story narrates the confusing and horrified moods of the character in the context of being searched by his enemy, Captain Madden, through these lines of the story, "It seemed incredible to me that the day without premonitions or symbols should be the one of my inexorable death. In spite of my death father, in spite of having been a child in a symmetrical garden of Hai Feng, was I- now- going to die? Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of earth and sea, and all that is really happening to me " (34). These various feelings of worrying such as anxiety about possible capture, the cloud-shaded six o'clock sun, remembering his dead father, fear about possible death; and worriedness about the possibility of an encounter with Captain Madden on the railway platform, etc. all have been connected to the feeling of Dr. Tsun to justify that he is a weak yellow man or oriental.

The story also presents Ts'ui Pen as an imaginary character with less success in creating his labyrinth "The Garden of Forking Paths". He is a great writer of the yellow race of oriental society and an ideal for Robert Stephen and Chinese Yu Tsun. He had been killed by a monk of his own yellow race and he could not complete in writing his labyrinth or his novel. A similar type of characterization also can be found in orientalist characterization as mentioned by Edward Said in the *Bacchae*, perhaps the most Asiatic dramas, Dionysus is explicitly connected with and with the strangely threatening excesses of Pentheus, King of Thebes, is destroyed by and her fellow Bacchantes. Having defied Dionysus by not recognizing either his power or his divinity, Pentheus is thus horribly punished, and the play ends with a general recognition of the eccentric god's terrible power" (170). The text of the story in the context of Dr. Tsun's understanding about him narrates as,

"... Ts'ui Pen who was a governor of Yunnan and who renounced worldly power in order to write

a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng* and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Thirteen years he dedicated to the heterogeneous tasks, but the hand of a stranger murdered him... and his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth". (p. 37)

Ts'ui Pen leaves his job to write a novel; and to construct a labyrinth. It shows that Ts'ui Pen is a great yellow man who cannot become successful in his work. The above characterization shows that oriental people are inferior, less intelligent, stereotyped, less advanced, and unchanging in their thinking, behavior, and culture than Europeans.

Before the nineteenth century, Orientalism was an academic discipline for studying oriental language, culture, history, and many other mysteries. There was a department for oriental study in Oxford. Orientalist perspective was not considered a shortsighted view of Westerners before writing Said's '*Orientalism*'. Orientalist scholars mostly focus on studying Asiatic subject matter. In the context of defining Orientalists Said claims "By and large until the mid-eighteenth century, Orientalists were Biblical scholars, students of the Semitic languages, Islamic specialists, or, because the Jesuits had opened up the new study of China, Sinologists (163). The character Stephen Albert in the story '*The Garden of Forking Paths*' was also a sinologist as the storyline narrates, "Stephen Albert observed me with a smile. He was... He told me that he had been a missionary in Tientsin 'before aspiring to become a sinologist" (38). The story also mentions, "... I read in the same papers that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger ..." (40). This textual evidence justifies that Stephen Albert was an orientalist representing Western scholars who wanted to study oriental culture, specifically Chinese culture.

Orientalist perspective is also reflected in the setting and plot of the story '*The Garden of Forking Path*'. The story is set at the time of the First World War, and the war between the British and Germans. In this context, Vasudha Dalmia-Luderitz (1993) mentions that Orientalism includes "the ancient world, the period of colonization in the nineteenth century, and the current relationship between the West and Orient". In this regard, she further expresses that Said's enterprise exists as the most relevant analysis of the discourse that accompanied the making of the empire, "British and French, in the nineteenth century" (p. 100). However, Said has left Germans to include in the Orientalist perspective. It should be that Germans were not colonizers of India. By taking the similar setting and content mentioned in Said's statement, the story '*The Garden of Forking Paths*' reveals an Orientalist perspective.

The German Chief, the protagonist of the story, is guided by his orientalist perspective toward his spy Dr. Tsun and he thinks that Dr. Tsun does not possess the capacity to work as a spy. Although Orientalist scholars of the Western societies had been creating oriental literature from the Orientalist perspective, they had a fear about the hard work and discipline of most Chinese and Japanese people who had been struggling in Europe and the U.S. for their survival. As thousands of Asian people began to immigrate to America, the federal government felt a threat of a 'Yellow Peril' invasion. Orientalists had a strong fear and hatred towards the yellow Orientals. Therefore, Hsu (2009) writes, "the government of America made to a law and passed federal entry restrictions in 1862, 1875, and 1882 to exclude Asians from America ..." The new law is the result of American attempts to limit the federal entry of oriental people into America. The law was modified only in 1965 with "the 1965 Immigration Act". All the above views show that orientalist is the perspective that is problematic increasing bias and division in terms of culture, geography, and color. Regarding it, the character, 'German Chief' in the story has a similar hatred and doubt towards the oriental character Dr. Tsun. Dr. Tsun had been working

for Germans but the German Chief had an orientalist perspective and he humiliates Dr. Tsun by saying that a yellow man cannot do the job of spy as the text in the description of the feeling of Dr. Tsun narrates:

"I am a cowardly man. I say it now, now that I have carried to its end a plan whose perilous nature no one can deny. I know its execution was terrible. I didn't do it for Germany, no. I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the abjection of being a spy. Besides ... I did it because I sensed that the chief somehow feared of my race for the innumerable ancestors who merge with me. I wanted to prove him that a yellow man could save his armies" (35).

These lines of the story reflect the orientalist perspective of the German chief towards his spy Dr. Tsun. Orientalist writers have created negative perspectives towards the richness of oriental culture rather than growing the literature of Orientalism. In the eyes of Orientalists, oriental cultures were full of rituals, traditions, and norms of mysterious stories. While narrating about the orientalist perspective, Said mentions that orientalist try to prove their concepts of mysterious Eastern culture with evidence by their uncomprehending knowledge when they are traveling through the land of oriental culture. Said adds, "Finally, the very power and scope of Orientalism produced only a fair amount of exact positive knowledge about Orient but also a kind of second-order of knowledge- lurking in such places as the 'Oriental' tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability- with a life of its own" (165). The orientalist perspective has generated knowledge of negative perspectives more than its real positive perspectives in rich oriental culture. Tsui Pen's novel 'The Garden of Paths' in the story is a mysterious and incomplete novel with an unsolved labyrinth. The novel reflects the mysterious and unsolved characteristics of oriental culture. The storylines mention the thinking of Dr. Tsun, "...and his novel was in coherent and no one found the labyrinth...I imagined it infinite...I thought it a labyrinth of labyrinths" (37). In the story, Albert says, "The Garden of Forking Path is an enormous riddle, or a parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention" (41). These statements attempt to prove that Tsui Pen's novel was more mysterious like a parable and riddle in front of orientalists. Accordingly, the novel narrates the story reflecting vagueness and obscurities with an Orientalist perspective denying the cultural richness in the oriental societies of the East.

In this context, Eleonora Orlando (2011) shows that there is a philosophical concept of a possible world in Borges' fiction 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. It describes Borge's two types of stories: stories of his real world and the story of his fictional world. A possible world can play an explanatory role of intuitive notions such as necessity, possibility, contingency, and impossibility. His main thesis in the article is "possible worlds are part of the narrative content of the two stories thereby involved, the main one and the novel embedded in it, namely the book labyrinth owed to T'sui Pen; moreover, the concept of a possible world is used in the main to story to explain the meaning of embedded novel". In this way, Orlando (2011) might be indicating that the possible world of Borges is the Eastern culture which is full of mystery and uncertainty like the labyrinth of Tsui Pen's novel 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. The story indicates that Eastern culture is a mystery dealing with the metaphysical and fictional world. It also reflects that Eastern culture is more related to the fictional world than the real world of the story from the eye of the Orientalist perspective.

Values, norms, ethics, and morality are important sources of motive to guide people in the oriental culture. There are more rituals and traditions in Eastern culture. People cannot go beyond their cultural rituals, ethics, and morality. There is a famous slogan 'Bashudhakam kutumbakam' related to treatment and hospitality in Indian culture. However, Borges characterizes Dr. Tsun from an Orientalist

perspective in the story. The story also depicts Dr. Tsun violating war ethics by killing his closest supporter, Stephen Albert for his selfish mission of sending the message about the British artillery in Albert City by killing Stephen Albert, the text of the story mentions, "Albert rose, standing tall, he opened the drawer of the tall desk; for the moment his back was to me. I had readied the revolver. I fired with extreme caution. Albert fell uncomplainingly, immediately, I swear his death was instantaneous – a lightning stroke"(42). Alejandra Salinas (2010) in the context of Borges' politics of depicting character says, "Yet, in spite of his staunch defense of individualism and liberty, his writings emphasize the essential fallibility of individuals, understood in Popper's terms as 'the realization that all of us may and often do error, singly and collectively'. The statement can be interpreted in this story as the characterization of Dr. Tsun as an individual who completes his mission as a spy. Moreover, he kills an innocent and a close person to him. It is against ethics related to the lives of innocent people in the war. It also proves that Dr Tsun is not being as an ethically and morally strong character.

In this way, the story of 'The Garden of Forking Path' shows that Eastern culture is mysterious, chaotic, and a labyrinth. Westerners think of Eastern culture as chaos having many mysteries, and controversies in the eye of Orientalists. There are many doubles and counterparts in the rituals and traditional Eastern societies. Regarding this, the researcher Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1980) has studied the Borges story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and brought out many patterns of interchangeabilities as doubles and counterparts in his article "Doubles and Counterparts: Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges' The Garden of Forking Paths". Here, the whole story of 'The Garden of Forking Paths' represents Eastern culture. In this context, Kenans's article analyzes the various fictional levels and many parallels established among characters Yu Tsun, Stephen Albert, and Ts'ui Pen forming a chain that modern psychoanalysis would call "intersubjective repetition" as in Shlomith Rimmon Kenan (1980). He also gives evidence illustrating many parallel relations such as Pen's novel as a labyrinth, here labyrinth means labyrinth of time which forks perpetually. It indicates the labyrinth of Eastern culture in the eye of Orientalists. Albert's garden also has zigzagging footways and Borge's own story is similar to 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. There are also patterns of interchangeability in actions as Ts'ui Pen is murdered by the 'the hand of stranger' and Albert, too is killed by 'a stranger one, Yu Tsun', and Yu Tsun is himself about to be hanged for the same crime. He further adds that there are also analogies between diegetic and metadiegetic levels of narration; and says, "At the metadiegetic level we are told by Stephen Albert that the famous Tsui Pen renounced worldly power 'in order to compose a book and a maze'..... At diegetic level, an analogous situation occurs cas two disparate newspaper items prove to be intimately related: the Germans' bombing of the city Albert and the murder of British sinologist Albert Stephen" (642-43). He also finds a correlation between the paradoxical treatment of classical opposition in the whole works of Borges and in that of his fictional labyrinth producer Tsui Pen as "time versus timelessness ... time as transitory and eternal ...concealment through revelation and revelation through concealment... transitory and event-bound nature of events" (643-44). In this way, the researcher concludes that there are many parallels and patterns of interchangeability and at metadiegetic and diagetive level between Tsui' Pen's novel 'The Garden of Forking Paths' in this story.

## Conclusions

The paper has studied and analyzed the Orientalist perspective in J.L. Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" by focusing on textual evidence and it has the conclusion that Orientalist perspective is the Euro-American ethnocentric view to patronize and humiliate Asians or

Orientalism and it tries to establish the superiority of the Western culture upon the Eastern culture. This perspective is still pervasive in Euro-American societies to discriminate against Orientals from them. The problem of the orientalist view is more horrible and less sounding in comparison to other issues such as race, ethnicity, gender issues, etc. in Euro-American societies as there are many humanitarians, social organizations, civil rights activists and many other organizations have been working for gender, color, and other issues and, still there are not any more number of organizations and human right activists working on behalf of discriminations grounded on the cause of orientalist perspective. Although the story "The Garden of Forking Paths" attempts to justify that an oriental or yellow person can prove to be more intelligent and tougher to complete his mission than a European, it seems to be a failure to some extent in it with the presence of orientalist perspective in the story.

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