

Untenable Cultural Delimitation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

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Abstract

This research article attempts to explore and examine cultures and their inability to contain the interests and preferences of the individuals and groups that follow them. The objective of this article is to examine the scenes of cultural prescriptions in the fictional setting. This examination, in turn, yields the claim that cultures cannot accommodate the adherents' preferences, wishes, and interests. Wolfgang Iser's theoretical concept of untenable cultural delimitation is employed in the exploration and examination. A culture, in the pragmatic field, is considered to have its boundary; nonetheless, it does not have the edge, upon closer examination. Untenable cultural delimitation as a concept, thus, refers to the cultures' failure in setting their boundaries. The corpus of the study is chosen to be Paradise by Abdulrazak Gurnah which discusses the interaction between and among certain cultural groups. The cross-case and within-case analysis for the development of themes is employed. The analytical framework for the exploration has been twofold: states of undress and the desire for distinctiveness in terms of attires. This framework is representative of the theme of untenable cultural delimitation in that the state of undress is not culturally appropriate and the desire for distinctiveness is a matter of an individual's aspirations which are not containable in a given culture. Informed by a research question: What happens to the cultures when the adherents' interests, preferences, wishes, and interests cannot be accommodated? The study, with the theoretical explanations along with the review and analysis of evidence, establishes that Gurnah's Paradise is a statement of untenable cultural delimitation. The characters go against the cultural prescriptions thereby perpetuating the notion of the evolutionary nature of a culture. This study turns out to be significant as it contributes to the critical debate on the nature of culture.

Keywords: Delimitation, Vestimentary, Civilized and Savage, Tradesman and Clothing, Undress, Distinctiveness

Introduction

The fictional writers refer to the clothes for various reasons ranging from the discussion of luxury to poverty. Apart from an addition to the characterization and descriptive details, the vestimentary details yield a function as clothes are considered the second skin to one's body. The employment of apparel in a narrative piece invites a deeper analysis. The (mis) reading of an apparel is mis (guided) by cultural conventions. Initiated and guided by the research question- What happens to the cultures when the adherents' interests, preferences, wishes, and interests cannot be accommodated?- the study problematizes the sections of the novel where clothing is discussed. Particularly, the accounts in which the characters come across the themes

of undress and aspirations concerning attires are considered the sites of the analysis. Hence, the objective of the study is to examine the scenes of cultural prescriptions employing Wolfgang Welsch's theoretical concept of untenable cultural delimitation. The significance of the study lies in its examination of the nature of culture and its claim that cultures are always in the making and claiming their closures is a real problem.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise* offers adequate amount of evidence for the analysis because the whole novel is an expedition of the attire traders. The traders visit many places for selling the clothes and there are numerous interactions in regards to the clothing. For instance, Uncle Aziz, a seyyid, wears silk and other people wish for the same. Aziz's team provides the shrouds to the dead people in the process of expedition. More importantly, the way people are clad, wish to clad makes a vestimentary code and this code can be analyzed from various dimensions such as untenability of cultural delimitation.

Instead of interpreting a clothing behavior from a singular point of view, it demands multiplicity, Jennifer Craik argues:

Often, clothing behavior is determined by pragmatic criteria and situations. Choosing the appropriate clothes for going to college, for studying, or for doing housework, gardening, or yard work, going grocery shopping, or going to the beach do not require much more than criteria of comfort. On the other hand, dressing for a job interview, a dinner party, for a wedding, or as a law enforcement officer entail specific calculations about clothing behaviors and milieu. (1994, p.10)

Craik intends to establish a fact that not every aspect of clothing can be a subject matter of study. The clothing in the formal occasions requires the complex and sophisticated treatment whilst the ordinary clothing does not invite the sustained treatment. Whatever, studying the clothing cannot be considered a simplistic affair as it entails various dimensions such as luxury to the status markers.

This article comprises an introductory part containing the rationale for the corpus selection that is ensued by the methods employed for reaching the claim. The cross-case and within-case analyses along with the challenge to delimitation of culture are demonstrated through the analytical framework that comprises two themes of states of undress and desire to the distinctiveness. The result and analysis section includes the framework of undress and distinctiveness. The concluding section incorporates the claim that an individual's wishes are not contained by a culture. Thus, the culture is not all-encompassing, in this connection; it is rather a general framework that individuals transcend time and again.

Methods

Basically, this exploration employs the theoretical framework called untenable cultural delimitation, the concept "*delimitation*" towards the outside ensued: every culture was, as the culture of one people, to be distinguished and to remain separated from the cultures of other peoples" (Welsch, 2009, p. 5). Delimitation, in this sense, is the separation of cultures; the fixed ontological status of a culture. To add clarity, delimitation refers to the drawing of a cultural boundary that is considered fixed and unchangeable.

In analyzing the instances from the selected corpus, the researcher chose some cases related to the vestimentary codes. The cases have been analyzed with the principle of cross-case and within-case analysis. Cross-case analysis is "called for when the case study consists of at least two cases..." whereas in within case analysis, "a single case is chosen because it is thought

to be critical, extreme, unique, and instrumental... (Klenke, 2016, p. 72). The instances, mostly are analyzed in their own contexts and sometimes with the comparative modes. The analytical framework developed for the exploration and analysis constitutes two modes: the study of the state of undress as the degradation and savagery and the mode of the desire to distinctiveness. Both of the analytical themes are concerned with the attires of the characters in the novel.

Concerning the reading of attire, Davis (1992) adds, “ fabric, color, texture, cut, weight, weave, stitching, transparency, and what ever else makes difference in how the garment or its surrounding ensemble of apparel is responded to in a community of clothes-wearers” (1992, p.13) can be considered the method of the study of the literary clothing. Various dimensions of clothing can be taken as the units of analysis. However, this study employs the framework of the study as the study of undress and the aspirational dressing. This framework subsumes the study of the notion of nakedness and the wishes for wearing better.

Literature Review

Digging the literature surrounding the novel *Paradise* offers a portrait for a thematic departure. The critics such as Dereck Wright, Amir Malak, Sofia Munoz Valdivieso and A.J. Simoes da Silva discuss various dimensions in the novel. The recurrent analyses carried out on the novel are the African landscape, the Islamic world, the idea of the paradise and the notion and practice of slavery. In this regard, the novel has drawn significant attention for certain themes. The novel “recreates an area of Africa before the first world war” (Wright, 1997, p. 79). This line of the study elaborates on the idea that the novel is about the condition of African societies before the First World War. In addition, the novel is considered to have contained the “ Islamic motives” (Malak, 2005, p. 56). The characters often discussing the concerns from Quran and its verse certainly lay the foundations for the study of Islamic and Anti-Islamic interests. Alongside, the novel is supposed to have questioned the “ paradisiacal visions of Africa” (Valdivieso, 2011, p. 123). When the religious matters enter a literary text, almost invariably, the notion of paradise remains a matter of discussion.

Another line of scholarship in the novel that has been studied is the “ analysis of slavery” in “ African Context” (Silva, 2000, p. 186). The central character Yusuf is enslaved for his poverty. Indeed, he has been sold as slave because of his father’s inability to pay the debt. In this line of reasoning, the novel is a call for the anti-slavery.

Since the novel has attracted the critics from the themes such as the slavery, African Studies, notion of paradise and Islamic interests, the study of the cultural delimitation through the discussion of attires is surprisingly absent. This absence is the study of this paper. To add, this study claims that a given culture intends to restrict an individual in terms of behaviors related to attires, and there is the failure of the delimitation set by culture.

Results and Discussion

Employing the theoretical concept by Wolfgang Welsch, and analyzing the cases mostly with the within case analysis, following ideas have been dug out. The ideas sprung thus can be summed as the claim intended: Individuals either practice undress or wish to practice the attire of distinctions. In both cases, the given cultural prescriptions are questioned and the delimitation is transcended.

States of Undress and the Limits of Cultural Imaginary

A value is valid within a boundary of a given culture in most of the cases. The same value cannot be true to an individual from a culture that is different from her. The cultural imaginary as defined by Kuan- Hsing Chen, “ structures the system of ideology, links to the concrete experiences of daily life, and forms the direction and the boundary of the psychological life” (2010, p. 111). Thus, the cultural imaginary tends to shape one’s experiences. This section does exactly what Monica L. Wright did in her text *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-century French Romance*: “ account for the ways in which writers both used the existing, highly restrictive vestimentary code and exploited its limitations to create new meanings for existing forms (1968, p. 14)”. The lack of clothing in certain characters such as a lady from ethnic group from Tanzania, the traders who first visited Chatu, a local leader, traders without clothes and Maimuna’s wrapping of her body with clothes can be taken as the cases of the state of undress. Although not directly associating the state of undress to savagery, in the selected cases, the situation of undress is treated with disrespect. The major concern, thus, is that a group treats this phenomenon of being naked as uncivilized, the insiders, the wearers do not take it that way. There creeps a point of delimitation; the gap between an individual and the cultural assumptions. The cultural assumptions cannot be taken for granted for an individual’s behavior in all situations.

A lady from the ethnic group in Tanzania, the country in East-Africa is displayed at the encounter of caravan of the tradespeople.. The dichotomy of civilized and uncivilized is much discussed as the traders come across an ethnic lady who shows her breasts as she was in a shop. Although her visible breasts were because she was a recent mother and had to nurse her baby, the traders have interpreted it as an uncivilized lady of ethnic origins; the erotic subjectivity, mockery of unrestrictive dressing, culturally inappropriate state of undress:

At that moment, a woman came to the shop for flour and salt. She wore a cloth round her middle, and a large ring of beads round her neck and over her shoulders. Her chest was uncovered, revealing her breasts. She took no notice as Kalasinga stirred near her, making noises of desire, slurping hungrily and sighing.” (Gurnah, 1994, p. 85)

The cultural dichotomy that the tradespeople term the ethnic lady as the uncivilized one with the bare breast proves that she is not adequate to be called a civilized lady. The notion of undress as uncivilized by the tradesmen can be taken as the illustration of the untenable cultural delimitation. Her culture takes her as a nurse and her state of undress is accepted while the outsiders take it as the gesture of the uncivilized state. Importantly, the tradesmen looking at her as an erotic object would have to be taken offensively given the lady’s nursing needs. A lady who has given birth recently would not have cared about her clothing as a lady who is in perfect health.

Chatu, a local leader in African land and the traders including Uncle Aziz have had a confrontation while they were in their trading expedition. Chatu speaks to the group of traders in the enraged mood, “ When your likes first came to this land you were hungry and naked, and we fed you. Some of them were ill and we cared for them until they were well. Then you lied to us and cheated us” (Gurnah, 1994, p.160). Uncle Aziz and his group of traders were treated badly. Chatu told them that the predecessors of the traders would come naked, Chatu would help them, now the traders have become the masters. Chatu referring to the nakedness and the state of undress of the first traders connotes to the state of having nothing with them. In this instance, the state of undress does not merely stand for the uncivilized state but the state of utter misery,

wretchedness and poverty. Chatu treats them inhospitably only because initially the traders would have to be supported and they were underprivileged. Later on, they became the privileged and started taking over the local people of the African land. This case of dominating those because of whom one becomes privileged is what enrages Chatu so much. They were naked in the preliminary stage. Later, they have become the traders of the attires: those who sell clothes for other people as well.

Gurnah's novel *Paradise* chiefly contains the journey of traders of clothes. In this connection, the study of clothing can be strongly justified as the traders have a strong sense of purpose with them and all the people they meet also have their own perspectives to the traders. When the tradesmen were to make a business deal with Chatu, a sultan of the country, the traders are asked to take the attires along with them lest the attires would be lost and the major item of the traders would be missing. "He agreed to supply a guide and to store any of their goods upon their return. 'I have dealt with traders many times,' he said. 'Don't give me any of your cloths. Where would your trade be without these cloths? This is how you've bought your way across this land. Give me two guns, so I can send my sons hunting for ivory. Have you any silk? Give me silk.'" (Gurnah, 1994, p. 149) The usher in this context emphasizes the need of clothes to the traders. The traders must not leave the clothes elsewhere when they are visiting Chatu. This absence of clothes is not the state of undress. However, a case of not having the clothes with the clothe-sellers. The usher too hints at the degraded situation when the traders go to meet a local leader to talk about the business of the clothes.

Hamid's wife Maimuna's clothing references have been significantly discussed as she was approaching Yusuf. When Hamid is about to inform her that Yusuf does not know how to read the Koran, "Maimuna was still wrapping a cloth round herself as she came out, her eyes registering the anxiety of Hamid's call despite being bleary with sleep." (Gurnah, 1994, p.98). The urgency of call by her husband caused her to come forgetting her formal attires. She came in the dress that would not be acceptable in the public sphere. Hamid and Maimuna are shocked to find that a Muslim boy does not know to recite Quranic verses. This becomes their duty to help him, Yusuf, who does errands for them.

Thus, the state of undress from within a culture and outside the culture is considered. The state of undress has taken various forms such as the savagery to scarcity. The ethnic lady is termed savage as she had not worn adequately and the traders are reproached for their initial nakedness as scarcity while the abundance later on is the result of exploitation as Chatu blames them. To add clarity, the issue of nakedness is analyzed as the matter of savagery to scarcity.

Aspirational Clothing: Desire to Distinctiveness

The cultural delimitation can be questioned even with the desire to distinctiveness. Some characters wish for the silk, the selling of Indian attires in the African land, the distinctive color of European officer and the discussion of shroud for those who are dead can be accounted for such theme.

The discussion of the silk like that of seyyid reminds the analysts the need of the aspirational dress up. Some characters wish to wear certain attire in the days ahead while they are conducting the trade. They wish to wear like the seyyid's silk attires. In the chapter "The Mountain Town" Yusuf has begun the journey with the team of Uncle Aziz. People on the street would watch them. Yusuf and Khalil had to help porters. At towns they would go to pray. Once Khalil talked to Yusuf about what good would happen to him. As Khalil, Yusuf's grandfather might be met in the journey, he added, "You'll be a rich merchant soon, and you'll wear silk and perfume like the seyyid, and carry moneybags across your belly and a rosary round your

wrist” (Gurnah, 1994,p.53). Khalil’s talks to Yusuf hint at the possibility of a good life on the part of Yusuf. His present life does not contain what he wants and wants a life better than it is and the better life includes the silk like that of seyyid. This aspirational dress up in the life of seyyid is the reminder of a better life.

The discussion of various types of Indian attires from the Indian origin has been conducted while the tradespeople are visiting the internal part of Tanzania. This evidence can be enunciated as the presence of international market. Nonetheless, the evidence will be aligned to the researcher’s point of discussion for the argument that the culture cannot contain all the tastes and interests of the members, “They had iron implements: hoes and axes from India, American knives and German padlocks. And cloths of different kinds: calico, kaniki, white cotton, bafta, muslin, kikoi. And buttons, beads, mirrors and other trinkets which would be used as gifts” (Gurnah, 1994, p. 109). The traders’ major item for the sale is the clothes of various types, particularly the African ones. The traders’ aspirations can be taken as the conduits for success in regards to the business.

The attires are exchanged in the ethnic groups of Africa in unique ways. Rather than the use of the money, the attires were exchanged and the barter system was in vogue. This might indicate the ancient mode of economy. Nonetheless, this textual evidence is interpreted for the claim that the cultural delimitation and prescriptions are all but incomplete:

Their trade goods were mostly cloth and iron, he explained. Kaniki, marekani, bafta, all kinds of cloth. Any of it was better than the stinking goatskin the savages wore when left to themselves. That is if they wore anything at all, for God made heathens shameless so that the faithful can recognize them and resolve how to deal with them. On this side of the lake the market was flooded with cloth, although there was still demand for iron, especially among the farming people. Their real destination was the other side of the lake, the country of the Manyema, in the very depths of the dark and green mountain country. There, cloth was still the most common item of exchange. The savage did not trade for money. What could he do with money? They also had some clothes, sewing needles, hoe blades....(Gurnah, 1994, p.119).

This instance portrays the issue of the need of newness. One becomes savage when one does not adapt to the new mode of exchange. When someone died in the expedition run for the trade of clothes:

The families of those who had died on the journey were sent what their deceased relatives would have received. Uncle Aziz sent enough white cotton or a shroud even though the body was already buried hundreds of miles away, and added something from the pocket. ‘ For the funeral prayers,’ he would say to the man to whom the money was entrusted”.(Gurnah, 1994, p.183)

Those who died would be offered the shrouds as the source of sympathy and support. This aspiration of the tradesmen that they were helpful enough also can amount to the analysis of the distinctive mode of attires.

A case contains the examination of the attires of the European officers whose attires are very clean and attractive:

Through the cracks between the boards they could see parts of the clearing and the road. Before long they saw a column of soldiers marching with unhurried precision behind their European officer, who was dressed in white. As the

column came nearer, they could see that the German was a tall and thin young man, and that he was smiling. They exchanged smiles themselves, and Khalil moved back from his spyhole in the shop's boards and sat back with a sigh. (Gurnah, 1994, p.243)

Similar to the silk of seyyid, wishing for the white European's clothes by the members of the tradesmen can be interpreted as the act of transcending the cultural prescriptions. These cases: the offering of the shroud, the wish for the like that of seyyid, selling of Indian attires and the desire for the white attires of the European officer stand for the desire to distinctiveness. In turn, these evidences contribute to the challenge to the cultural delimitation.

Conclusion

This study entails the discussion of untenable effort to delimit a culture. Also, it concludes with a statement that a culture cannot be accommodative enough to address all the interests and wishes of its adherents. To be more specific, on occasions, characters in the novel practice a level of nudity and they face the degraded self, on other times, they are ambitious and wish for the better attires. Whilst the characters transgress the limits set by a given culture, its implication lies in the open-endedness of any culture. Claiming a culture better than other culture turns out to be a questionable practice because no culture can be delimited as it continues to evolve. This research can be helpful for the researchers to gain the evidences for the discussion of cultural transgression. The novel can be studied through the study of foods, music and religion for the claim that cultural prescriptions cannot hold the adherents' inclinations. The adherents of any culture can go beyond the limits of their own cultures.

Statement of Funding Acknowledgement

This research article is the product of the support by University Grants Commission, Nepal; UGC Award Number: SRDIG-79/80-H&S- 06. I thank UGC, Nepal for the funds offered to me.

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