

An Analysis of Culture Differences Between Britain and Somalia in *Desert Flower* Based on Cultural Dimensions Theory

Rongzhao He^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, China

Email Address

1250776869@qq.com (Rongzhao He)

*Correspondence: 1250776869@qq.com

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Abstract:

The film *Desert Flower* is adapted from the best seller of the same name written by Waris Dirie, a famous black model. It tells a story about a circumcised Somali girl, who, in order to escape the ridiculous marriage arranged by her father, sneaked away to the United Kingdom and ultimately became the top model after arduous difficulties. This study will take Hofstede cultural dimensions theory as the explanatory framework to contrastively discuss the cultural differences between Britain and Somalia in the film, hoping to reveal a deeper understanding of these two cultures.

Keywords:

Cultural Dimensions Theory, *Desert Flower*, Culture Differences Between Britain and Somalia

1. Introduction

Cultural dimensions theory, proposed by Hofstede and supplemented by Michael H Bond, is one of the most widely accepted and frequently cited theories in the field of intercultural communication. Wang Weirong [1] analyzed the cultural differences between China and America in *The Joy Luck Club* and concluded that cultural conflicts can be harmonized and reconciled with respect. Cheng Xuan and Cui Dayong [2] excavated the cultural connotation buried in Japanese anime based on Hofstede's theory.

However, most previous studies, as reviewed below, explored the cultural differences among those leading powers, while little information is available about how people from Third World nations will react when they encounter with cultural differences. To fill in this gap, the present study using a mixed method will analyze the cultural differences and conflicts between Britain and Somalia in the film *Desert Flower* based on Hofstede cultural dimensions theory, so as to provide a deeper understanding of these two countries, thus making people conduct better exchanges.

2. General Overview of *Desert Flower*

Waris' family lived a nomadic life in Somalia. In keeping with tradition, Waris was circumcised at the age of five. Although it was ruthless and painful, both Waris and her family thought it was an absolutely right observance. When she was 12, Waris' father, just for the dowry - 5 camels, arranged her to marry an old man over sixty to be his fourth wife. Then she escaped and was sent to work as a maid in Embassy of Somalia in London. But when Somalia civil war broke out and she became a fugitive again. Luckily, Waris met a British girl Marilyn Mclane, who sympathetically shared the room with her. As a typical representative of Arab culture, Waris was circumcised, conservative and self-restrained. She remained tied to her own traditions to keep males at a distance and held that looking after the family was her duty. Differentiated from Waris, Marilyn, who bravely pursued her dream and enjoyed life, was a representative of British culture. Consequently, misunderstandings caused by culture differences arose.

3. Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Theory

Culture, influenced by numerous factors, is difficult to define and quantify. Hofstede creatively divided culture into several discernible dimensions and used certain indexes to measure different cultures, providing people with a brand-new perspective to identify and deal with issues caused by cultural differences [3]. Cultural dimensions theory consists of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint.

Owing to a lack of 6-dimension model of Somalia in *Hofstede Insights* [4] and in order to make approximations, the author estimates the first four indexes of Somalia by averaging the indexes of Ethiopia, Kenya and Saudi Arabia. The index of time-orientation dimension is borrowed from that of Saudi Arabia while the sixth index is estimated after referring to papers written by Huang Minxing [5]. And reasons why the author estimates like these are as follows:

For one thing, Ethiopia and Kenya are neighboring countries of Somalia, thus they may have many similarities in economy, politics as well as culture. For another, Saudi Arabia is one of the most representative Arab countries and it may reflect the general cultural characteristics shared by Arab countries.

Figure 1 shows the indexes of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia. And Figure 2 presents the estimated 6-dimension model of Somalia and its comparison to that of United Kingdom.

The differences and similarities can be clearly seen in Figure 2. The United Kingdom has high index of individualism, long-term orientation and indulgence while its index of power distance and uncertainty avoidance are relatively low. Conversely, Somalia is a country with much lower index of individualism, long-term orientation as well as indulgence and much higher index of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Besides, these two countries have similar masculinity indexes, scoring 66 and 65 accordingly.

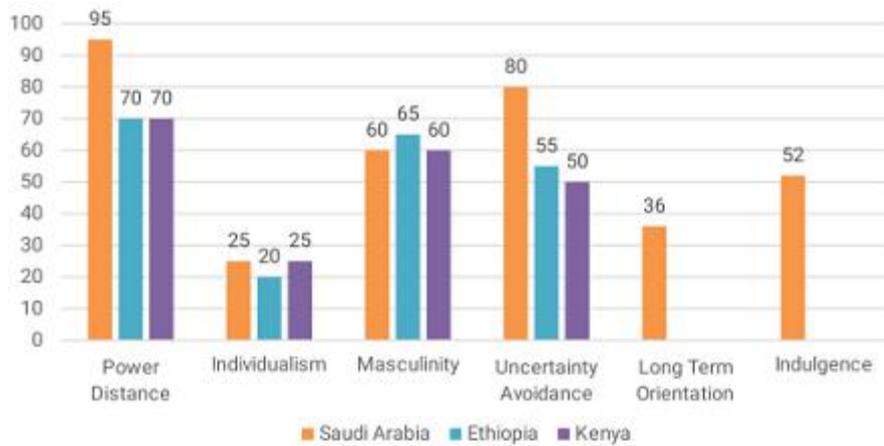


Figure 1. 6-dimension index of Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya

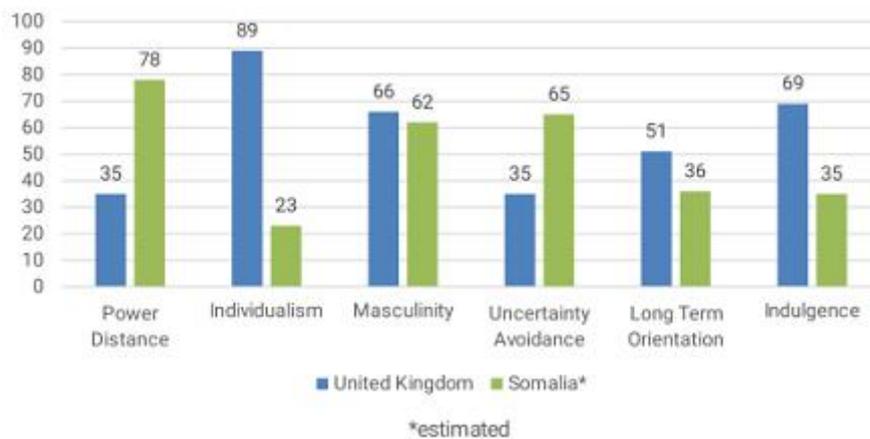


Figure 2. 6-dimension index of United Kingdom and Somalia

4. The Analysis of Culture Differences in *Desert Flower*

4.1. Power Distance

Power distance dimension is defined as “a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between boss and subordinates as perceived by the less powerful of the two [6].” And power distance index (PDI) has been designed to assess the extent of acceptance of the unequal distribution of power within a society, an organization or institution by people of low social status.

Hierarchy is one of the dominant characteristics of countries of high PDI, where people occupying higher positions hold more power and privileges with little challenge while powerless people tend to respect and conform to authorities. Children are taught to listen to their parents and teachers; employees are used to following orders of their superiors without raising any objections. Oppositely, people are not judged by their sex, age, wealth and social status in countries of relatively low PDI. They have the courage to question and challenge the authority, and tend to try to distribute power equally.

According to Figure 2, Somalia is a high-power-distance country while United Kingdom is a low-power-distance country. And their PDIs score 78 and 35 respectively.

In *Desert Flower*, the fact that Somalia is a high-power-distance country is revealed both at home and in society. Like millions of other Somali families, Waris' father, who took all decisions, was the patriarch of the whole family. For 5 camels, the so-called dowry, he decided to marry off Waris to the old man Mohammed who was over sixty. Waris' mother and her brothers and sisters all knew that it was ridiculous, but none of them dared to challenge the father and stop the marriage. When Waris escaped to Mogadishu, her grandmother told her that her mother was beaten because she let Waris go. Neither Waris nor her mother would be forgiven. It follows that the patriarch of a family has the absolute validity, who should never be questioned and challenged.

In Somalia, people, especially males, who possess wealth, have good family background or personal achievements, will be regarded as superior to others. In the film, for example, Waris was dressed up to serve the honored guest Mohammed who was superior because he had a gold watch and a flock of sheep. And Waris' family accepted that they were inferior and had no chance to change their fates, thus they submitted and arranged the marriage.

However, the idea of equality had lodged itself in United Kingdom where Waris was treated equally and politely even though she was black and poor. For instance, Waris' boss Lucinda always snapped at her subordinates who all ate out of her hands, but she just used her power legitimately to make the company function well.

4.2. Individualism Versus Collectivism

Individualism versus collectivism dimension mainly focuses on people's relationship to the larger groups to which they belong. It refers to whether a society is always concentrated on the interests of individual or that of a group. Individualism index (IDV) is created to assess the degree of individualism of a culture.

Self-centeredness, independence, uniqueness as well as privacy are highly advocated in societies of high IDV, namely, individualistic societies, where the self-concept is paramount. Members of individualistic societies only take care of themselves and their immediate families, and they will make decisions or judgements from the perspective of individual. However, collectivistic societies emphasize the sense of collective honor and hold that personal interests should be subordinated to that of the collective. Members of this kind of society are looked after by the group, and in turn, they should be faithful and responsible for it. And decisions are always made based on what will benefit the group.

In Figure 2, it can be concluded that Somalia (23) is a collectivist country while United Kingdom (89) is an individualist country.

In collectivist countries like Somalia, people from birth onwards are closely integrated with their own groups and people ingroup should share weal and woe together. The groups are usually their families, tribes, parties or even the country. In the movie, Waris' father ordered her to marry Mohammed for the sake of the whole family. When she escaped, her aunt and cousins marked: "She blamed our family." Waris' happiness was sacrificed to improve the economic situation of the family. Once she defied, she was labeled as a disgrace to the family. Thus we can conclude that in collectivistic societies, people are required to be absolutely loyal to the group they belong to.

Afflicted by the scar caused by FGM, Waris went to hospital. The British doctor, who encouraged Waris not to worry, asked a black male nurse to serve as interpreter for better understating. Nevertheless, the nurse totally misinterpreted his words and said: *“If you change what you are, then you are betraying your parents, your people and your heritage. Does your mother know what you are about to do? Shame on you!”*

From the doctor’s perspective, he treated Waris as herself and wanted her to be cured. By contrast, the nurse ascended Waris’ behavior to the level of family and country. Undoubtedly, he never respected Waris as an individual, instead he just trapped Waris by so-called collectivist. However, other people such as Marilyn and Terry Donaldson in the movie lived an arbitrary life and did whatever they wanted, with no one asking them to do what benefits the group.

4.3. Masculinity Versus Femininity

Masculinity versus femininity dimension refers to whether the male quality such as competitiveness and arbitrariness or the female quality such as humility and humanity is more common in a society. Masculinity index (MAS) is created to assess the extent of masculinity of a culture.

In high-MAS cultures, gender inequality exists and is regarded as reasonable and beneficial. Social status and material achievement are usually used to judge a person, and success through hard work is highly praised. Masculine cultures have different expectations for men and women. Generally speaking, men should be brave, ambitious and assertive while women are taught to be tender, gentle and sympathetic. And this kind of culture tends to define gender roles in a more conservative way, that is to say, women should be at home and take care of the whole family. In low-MAS cultures, however, gender equality is encouraged and accepted no matter at home or in the workplace. Both men and women should be tender and caring for the quality of life. And gender roles are not clearly defined.

In Figure 2, it can be seen that both Somalia and United Kingdom have high-MAS, therefore, both of them are masculine countries.

When Waris recalled her life in Somalia, pictures of women who washed the clothes, cooked the meals and took care of children unfolded. Waris cleaned the room and prepared the breakfast the first morning in Marilyn's room, and she said: *“I cook excellently”*. This shows that doing housework is one of the orientations given by Somali culture and Waris gladly accepted it. In order to reside in Britain permanently, Waris and Neal got married on paper. Waris also shouldered the responsibility of doing housework in Neal's house while Neal read newspaper, drinking beer, and Neal marked, *“You are a bloody horrible cook.” “You certainly nag me like a wife.”* In Neal's mind, cooking is the duty and nagging one of the characteristics of wives, and this reflects the masculinity of United Kingdom to some degree.

Besides, the masculinity of United Kingdom can be directly perceived through these people: Marilyn sparing no effort for her dream of being a ballerina, Neal working industriously as a care taker and the photographer Terry Donaldson who was thought highly of because he had taken photos for Diana.

4.4. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is utilized to measure whether a society will avoid and control the uncertainty by formal means when threatened by uncertain events or unconventional environment. Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) is created to assess this dimension.

Cultures of high-UAI have low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, where lots of rituals, rules and formal means are applied to regulate people's behavior to ensure security. Members are unwilling to change and intolerant of dissent as well as deviation. On the contrary, people in low certainty avoidance cultures are more willing to cope with stress and anxiety caused by ambiguity and uncertainty. They also tolerate deviant behaviors better [7]. They are encouraged to take risks and try new things. Besides, they think dissent and competition, which can be solved by negotiation, are natural.

From Figure 2, we can conclude that Somalia is a country of high-UAI while United Kingdom is a country of low-UAI.

For one thing, women in long robes and veils can be seen everywhere in Somalia, as if they were born out of the same mold. This is a kind of tradition regulating women's behavior. Once a bright-colored brace dress happened to strike Waris' fancy. She tried in front of the mirror, but she still couldn't accept the style. And these reflect the high-UAI of Somali culture. On contrary, people in United Kingdom dress differently from each other, and they prefer to show their individuality and uniqueness. Pictures of people in outlandish clothes on the street unfolded in the movie can prove it.

For another, Terry Donaldson invited Waris to be his model, but Waris refused because "Aunt Marian said that pictures are bad". Even there was no evidence, Waris chose to obey the ritual to avoid uncertainty and to do the cleaning in Burger Bar. By contrast, having been rejected by Royal Academy of Dance, Royal Ballet School and the English School successively, Marilyn didn't give up and seized every chance of audition. She was willing to take risks and not afraid of uncertainty, which might be regarded as deviant in cultures of high-UAI.

4.5. Long-term Versus Short-term Orientation

Long-term versus short-term orientation is applied to measure what extent members of a culture accept the delayed satisfaction of material, emotional as well as social needs. This dimension was proposed and developed on Chinese values.

Members of long-term oriented cultures tend to set up long-term goals and accept the delayed gratification of their needs. Thus, children are taught to be tough, persistent and humble. In addition, age and status differences are greatly attached in interpersonal communications. Short-term oriented cultures value conventions, reciprocity and personal steadiness. Members will resort to traditions or rituals when faced with changing situations. In communicating with others, people tend to maintain the face of both sides. And they expect their needs and efforts to be satisfied immediately.

In the light of Figure 2, Somalia is a short-term oriented country, scoring 36. While the index of United Kingdom is relatively higher, scoring 51.

In *Desert Flower*, after her arrival in Mogadishu, Waris' grandmother said: "It was Allah's will." "It's Allah's will that you move on." "May Allah protect you.", which shows that Somali people tend to resort to their own deity and rituals when faced with

unsteadiness or threat. That Waris thought being a model was better than being a cleaning lady and she wanted to earn money to change her situation presents that people of short-term oriented cultures want their needs to be satisfied in a short time. She even bore a reciprocal relation with Marilyn—she bought a watch for Marilyn in return.

However, Waris also shows characteristics of long-term oriented cultures. For example, Waris was firmly convinced that all pain must be worth something and she bravely resisted unequal treatment and destiny. Her transversion from a nomad girl to a top model exactly represents the toughness, persistence and humility encouraged by long-term oriented cultures.

In time-orientation dimension which is based on a Chinese value survey, the two orientations do not always contradict with each other. For instance, Chinese tend to maintain the face but they are also taught to be thrift and humble.

4.6. Indulgence Versus Restraint

Indulgence versus restraint dimension refers to the degree of tolerance of basic human needs and the enjoyment of life in a society. It is the latest dimension of the theory and has not been widely adopted in intercultural communication research.

Indulgent societies place a greater importance on freedom, personal happiness and the satisfaction of physiological, psychological and social needs, where people tend to freely express their needs and enjoy life. However, people in restrained cultures are firmly convinced that human needs must be regulated by strict social norms, while happiness, freedom and leisure are not given equal importance. People seldom express themselves, and sometimes they may feel helpless about personal destiny.

According to Figure 2, Somalia is a restrained country with an estimated index of 35 while United Kingdom is an indulgent country, scoring 69.

After a week's hard work, Marilyn said "We can have some fun tonight, Missy" and took Waris to a bar for relaxation. Marilyn freely wiggled in the dancing floor while Waris stood in the corner, with an eiderdown jacket wrapped around her tightly. Though impressed by Harold's handsome appearance and gentle manners, Waris slipped away out of shame when he invited her to dance. On seeing Marilyn having sex with a man in the room, she was so scared and ashamed of her. The following conversation shows their different attitudes towards indulgence, which is the climax of the culture shock between Somalia and United Kingdom in the movie.

Waris: A respectable woman doesn't do that.

Marilyn: A respectable woman can have fun and still be respectable.

Waris: No. A respectable woman doesn't do that.

Marilyn: Doesn't do what? Waris. You can't say, you know? Sex. Ok? It's nothing to be shamed. What's so bad about it?

Waris: Only a cut woman is a good woman.

Marilyn: Sorry. What cut?

Waris: This is how she stays a virgin, yes? Until her wedding night. And her man opens her. That's the way. Isn't it?

Marilyn: Waris, I don't know what you're talking about.

Waris: You're not cut?

Marilyn: What do you mean? Did they cut something away from you? Can you show me? Maybe I can understand.

From the dialogue, it can be seen that influenced by different cultures, Waris was very inhibited and restrained about sex while Marilyn freely pursued both dream and love. Arab men have the final say on important matters, who fetishize virgins and want the property to be inherited by their own children, thus they use female genital mutilation (FGM) to keep girls chaste. And the concept of virgin has been deeply rooted in the heart of women like Waris, who, in fact, are compelled to be self-restrained under the yoke of FGM. Even the Coran is silent on this point, FGM continues and persecutes millions of women both physically and psychologically. On the contrary, Marilyn had never heard of FGM and lived with her own ideal and wishes. The author regards this as the biggest culture conflict in the movie, which is the most proximate reason of Wari's great change.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article analyzed the cultural differences presented in the film *Desert Flower* from power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint proposed by Hofstede, revealing some cultural facts rarely known by people. Although there were great differences between Somalia and Britain, Waris got along well with Marilyn and other characters and made tremendous accomplishments as well, which can never be realized in isolation from the respect and understanding towards different cultures, and this is also what we should bear in mind when communicating with others of disparate cultural backgrounds. Due to the lack of data, the author established an estimated 6-dimension model of Somalia based on that of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia, which has somewhat reasonable scope but further experiments need to be conducted, hoping cultural dimensions theory can be refined and completed.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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