Transcultural Perspective on German Colonialism in Ferdinand May’s *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*

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ABSTRACT

Culture in classical concepts is perceived as static, homogeneous, and separate. It differs from the contemporary concepts of culture, such as transculturality, which sees culture as a heterogeneous entity that experiences a continuous process and is extremely interconnected with one another. This paper aims to examine the cultural encounter in the *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* (1962) novel by Ferdinand May, which took place in the former German colony in Africa from the perspective of transculturality. This encounter cannot be separated from space and its cultural brokers. The method employed in analyzing this novel is close reading by focusing on the relationship between the cultures encountering and the characters’ role in the novel who act as a cultural broker in mediating these relationships. From the analysis, it is revealed that the colony can also be a reciprocal space for knowledge transfer. In addition, it appears that cultural brokers have a significant role in bridging differences. However, in this novel, the role of the settlers is more prominent than the natives.

Keywords: Cultural broker, German colonialism, intermediate space, novel, transculturality

1. INTRODUCTION

The shifting culture changes the way of perceiving culture. Herder's understanding of culture as a homogeneous entity in the 19th century is no longer able to define the complexity and high mobility of contemporary society. Various kinds of terms, such as the inter-, multi-, and transcultural, appear to define culture in a new civilization that accepts the presence of cultural diversity.

Interculturality and multiculturality seem to still rely on a homogeneous culture. Both see different cultures separately. Interculturality, as mentioned by Wierlacher (as cited in Martinson: 2016), focuses on “opposing themes ("Gegenthemen"), such as between the foreign and the "other" ("das Fremde") and one's own ("das Eigene"). Meanwhile, multiculturalism describes diversity as the amalgamation of separate communities and tends to support stereotypical views of culture Benessaieh. (2010)

Transculturality- a term coined by Wolfgang Welsch in the early 1990s- envisages cultures as various kinds of mixing and permeation. Welsch (2009) also questions the authenticity and alienation of cultures because it is already mixed and seeps to influence one another. Therefore, he believes that today's culture can no longer be described as a closed and separate field as the analogy of the Herderian culture.

The basic concept of transculturality proposed by Welsch is overlapping and entanglement. Welsch (2001) perceives that the concept of transculturality aims to understand the culture in a multi-mesh and inclusive manner, not separately and exclusively. Meanwhile, Herren et al. (2012, p. 46) view that transculturality focuses on culture as an entangled entity rather than seeing culture as a comparable entity. The existing cultures in contemporary society have mixed and bonded with each other so that a single and superior culture is once again questioned. As a matter of fact, these cultures fill each other in the gaps that exist between cultures, as a woven fabric from interlocking threads, they merged into a new and mutually reinforcing diversity. Welsch (2009) asserts that transculturality is not a matter of uniformity; nevertheless, it is intrinsically linked to the emergence of new diversity: the difference does not disappear, but the mode changes.

Benessaieh (2010) states that comparatively, transculturality does not have an intercultural premise about cultural diversities, differences, or conflict.
tendencies. Transculturality places a particular emphasis on equality and correspondence, perceiving cultures as flow moving in close interaction with one another, where negotiations and changes are working alongside conflict. Thus, conflict is not avoided altogether because it is a common phenomenon in cultural encounters. However, at the same time, there is a negotiation space where people recognize their differences and, through their interactions with each other, begin to understand what they have in common and consequently maintains its uniqueness. The role of cultural brokers at this moment often appears to be intermediaries in the negotiation space.

Even though the term transculturality has developed since the shift of the millennium, it is not a new issue in human life. Welsch (2001) stated that since centuries ago, our ancestors have lived in a transcultural manner, realizing that they live more closely linked together and aware of each other's uniqueness. Even in extreme cases, transculturality was possible during the colonial period, as has been described by Ortiz (1947) and Pratt (2008).

The German colonial period, which lasted relatively short (1884-1919), left a story of cultural encounters that is interesting to study. One of the literary works that tell the encounter of German and African culture is written in the novel by Ferdinand May (1962) entitled Sturm über Südwest-Afrika (SüSWA), which was published in 1962 in East Germany. This novel tells about the resistance of the Herero tribe against German occupation. Amid tension and the domination of the German Protectorate Army (Schutztruppe), there are interesting ideas to study regarding transculturality in which the negotiation process between two different cultures was intertwined during the presence of a cultural broker.

Several previous researchers have carried out some research on the SüSWA novel. Hermes (2009) conducted a study by taking the theory from Lenin and examined the resistance carried out by the Herero tribe in the SüSWA novel as a manifestation of class struggle. Meanwhile, Drechsler (as cited in Bürger, 2017) analysed this novel from the perspective of discrimination which still remains as a stereotype built by the Western against Africa. Furthermore, a transcultural study of German literature was carried out by Martinson (2016). He analysed German dramas, namely two plays by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Die Juden and Nathan der Weise) and one play by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (Iphigenie auf Tauris). These plays focus on creating a clear distinction between intercultural and transcultural studies and offering a much more explicit definition of transcultural space.

Meanwhile, the analysis of the SüSWA novel in this study is different in viewing the perspective of the German colonial period. It is no longer focused on viewing the binary opposition between the two intertwined cultures. Instead, it tried to view the overlapping and interrelated cultures, which influenced each other and the role of cultural brokers in intermediating the difference. In addition, it also analysed the conflict source spaces and the negotiation efforts to resolve them.

2. METHOD

The Analysis of the SüSWA novel employed the close reading technique. According to Moya (as cited in Rosewall, 2018), close reading is "a type of intensive reading and re-reading that requires a higher level of attention to language and literary forms, considering that both are semantic structures that mediate the perceptions of writers and readers about the social world". An in-depth reading of the SüSWA novel focused on data related to transculturality that viewed differences and conflicts; on the other hand, there were negotiation efforts to look for commonalities from the intertwined of two different cultures.

The data included words and sentences, either directly spoken by the figures or conveyed through the narrator. Through this data, it is sought the relation between the figures and their views on the problems that occurred in the German colony in South-West Africa as well as space where the conflict occurred. Additionally, the role of some figures as cultural brokers was regarded as considerably important data in exploring the transcultrual side in the SüSWA novel.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The invasion of immigrants and the formation of colonies in one area cannot be regarded as the presence in an uninhabited land. Nevertheless, sometimes invasion is committed in an area with the existed civilization. It becomes a conflict source since most of the time, there is no prior knowledge of the culture from both parties, especially the immigrants' understanding of the indigenous population culture. The same thing happened in the SüSWA novel.

The understanding of alienation and self-recognition is crucial in perceiving the transcultural aspect of the SüSWA novel. It is evidently pictured on how both parties viewed the other as foreign and realized their own advantages and, on the other hand, recognized the advantages of the other.

The Herero population was negatively imaged by some Germans, as infidels, dirty and lazy as in the following quote: “... all natives are "infidels," there is no difference to them whether Herero, Hottentot, Bergdámaras or others” (May, p. 18) as well as “But he was taught that Herero was immoral, insolent, stupid, thief, lazy and dirty.” (May, p. 100). This negative
image was highly dominant in the views of most Germans colony, even in the Christian missionaries’ views in the colony.

Although some of them had stayed for a long time, the negative image was believed by Dr. Grünheide as a lack of Germans who did not sufficiently understand the African nation. He also stated it as an allusion to the Flotow peasants: “And try to learn the customs of the blacks a little, I bet, you know a lot more about the lineage of the Prussian aristocracy than about our Herero.” (May, p. 34)

On the other hand, German immigrants were also negatively imaged by the Herero inhabitants, as a nation that seized their land worse than any other European nation.

“He hated the British for their arrogance; he hated the Europeans for their greed and bigotry. Now he hates many Germans because they are worse than Europeans and British people.” (May, p. 108)

In addition, Germans were also considered to have very limited knowledge of African nature and traditions as in the following quote:

“Baas only knew the horse and the rifle, he couldn’t even tell individual herds from each other, while that is what every Herero boy and every Hottentott girl learned earlier than reading or writing in a missionary school.” (May, p. 21)

Dr. Grünheide and Lieutenant Palmer tried to minimize this negative image on both sides by providing Germans a correct understanding of African people, as it is shown in the following quote: “The Nama tribe is an intelligent tribe, Baas Christiansen. He knows his friends, knows his enemies. This tribe has experts, in which Europe knows nothing.” (May, p. 206). From this quote, it is clear that there were efforts made to balance the tensions caused by stereotyping due to the lack of fundamental knowledge about the intertwined culture in the colonial space.

In addition, efforts to overcome these tensions were also carried out by Africans themselves as seen in the following quote:

“They are our brothers,” said Hendrik Witbooi, “We all have the same father in heaven. But they are no longer free once your miners find gold or copper under their huts. And let me tell you, you have to pay us! Every ton of ore, every gold grain. With that money, we then build schools, hospitals, roads, and bridges. In fifty years, no one will say stupid infidels.” (May, p. 202).

The negative image that African people were infidels and ignorant was assumed to be gone if there was a synergy between newcomers and natives in the management of natural resources, the results of which could be used to increase their human resources.

Another most fundamental problem in the immigrants' arrival is about land ownership. Different cultural backgrounds led to different perspectives on land ownership. The Herero tribe did not know individual land ownership. They believed that land was shared property as an inheritance of the ancestors: “... The ancestors gave them land, it cannot be sold. There is no private land ownership, only tribal land.” (May, p. 29)

Nevertheless, with the Germans' invasion, they were then introduced to private ownership of their land when purchased by the Germans, both individually and by an institution, as was carried out by Christian missionaries. Common ownership was lost, especially when water sources located on the border between German peasants’ lands and customary lands were controlled. Besides, water channels were made to plantations owned by German peasants. This situation made them marginalized to only infertile lands. This problem was often questioned by tribal members to their high leaders, considering that their land was getting narrower. Unfortunately, the leader did not give any response. Only from these few dialogues, it was discovered that their leaders had exchanged their lands for livestock and other goods.

This opposite condition was a sign of overlapping relations in the colony. This relationship might also be a negotiation between the two parties in looking for alternative forms of cultural encounters to get along better. The shift of perspective in viewing on African territory was carried out by some Germans such as the Overhoff peasants: “What a beautiful land, Captain! ... Here in the southwest. ... My God, here I have ample pasture and farmland, I will buy a power-air pump .... ” (May, p. 77). The farmland, which was considered a blessing for the Overhoff peasants, also influenced how he treated the land and the African people as their partners in farming. Thus, in a very urgent situation, they received a lot of sympathy and help from the Herero inhabitants. In contrast, it was a different situation for other German peasants, Flotow, and Bodo von Eschenbach. They thought that the land and people in the colony could be treated arbitrarily so that when the Herero inhabitants revolted, they were the first to become retribution targets.

Lieutenant Palmer also conveyed the importance of togetherness in managing land that was impossible to cultivate an area of one and a half times the area of Germany with only two thousand German immigrants without the African population involvement. Meanwhile, Herero inhabitants also regarded the importance of the joint processing of natural resources for the progress of the African people, as seen in the previous quote.

The novel discussed in this study depicted the transfer of the knowledge process, which is considered
necessary in transculturality. The awareness of advantages in other cultures and elements of self-culture in other cultures is the key to transculturality. The phenomenon of transculturality where the different cultures met cannot be separated from the figure of the cultural broker. This intermediary has a vital role in bridging the intertwined cultural elements. In the two novels studied, the cultural intermediaries were played by the character of Dr. Grünheide and Lieutenant Palmer.

Dr. Grünheide was a doctor, described as having a concern for equality between Africans and Germans. He had a good knowledge of the intertwined two cultures in the colony. It can be seen in the following quote: “... he knows the country; he knows the indigenous people.” (May, p. 181). In addition, when the conflict heated up and led to war, he still hoped for peace by negotiating individually with both the Herero chief and the Germans.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Palmer was a Protectorate Army, who had adequate experience in the German territory in Africa. He also had sympathy for the African people and always tried to be a friend to them. “He was an officer of the Protectorate Army, he, who wanted to be friends with the natives!” (May, p.145).

Transculturality, as previously mentioned, aims to understand the culture in a multi-mesh and inclusive manner. It implies that the ability to connect and undergo a transition from the interacting parties is required. It can be viewed from the efforts made by the characters in the SüSWA novel to bridge differences in seeing themselves and the others. Welsch (2001) believes that transculturality is related to our efforts to see ourselves and others better, as he stated: “It is a matter of readjusting our inner compass: away from the concentration on the polarity of the own and the foreign to an attentiveness for what might be common and connective wherever we encounter things foreign.”

Furthermore, Welsch (2001) also stated that the discovery and acceptance of individuals for their transcultural constitution is a condition for reaching an agreement with the transculturality of society. Acceptance of individuals is identified by Welsch as transculturality at the micro-level, while transculturality in society is identified as the macro level. The understanding of transculturality will become the principal of a larger transcultural life in society. At the micro-level, hatred aimed at strangers is basically projected hatred towards oneself. On the other hand, the acceptance of differences that exist in strangers is an awareness of the acceptance of differences existing in themselves.

It can be viewed in the efforts of how the characters in the SüSWA novel attempted to eliminate the differences between them, mainly due to the former stereotypes attached. The negative image of Africans, such as stupid and infidel by the Africans themselves, was denied because they actually had better knowledge than Germans about several things. Additionally, negotiation efforts to improve the situation through development in the field of education were also carried out by the Herero tribe leader. Meanwhile, other efforts made on the part of the German immigrants were to see more clearly and study more deeply towards the indigenous culture. Hence, they knew that the African people actually had advantages over the Germans.

Colonialism is seen as an effort to bring Western civilization into its colonies. In other words, they consider that the world other than the West is still primitive; thus, they should be guided to become civilized. However, in transculturality, the process of transferring knowledge is viewed as a reciprocal effort, and not from one side. It is depicted in the SüSWA novel, on the one hand, the Herero inhabitants received lessons from the Germans about education and Western religion (Christian). However, on the other hand, the natives also indirectly taught them a lot about livestock and war in the desert region.

The dichotomy of identity between self and others, as developed in the homogeneous cultural paradigm, tries to be transcended in transculturality. The identity of self and others influence each other pervasively; consequently, there is always a continuous process. It was also conveyed by Monceri (2019) that one who is able to transcend culture presupposes a trans-cultural process - that is, transcending culture - which aims to overcome given contextual boundaries continuously. Even though it appears that the process is complex, Monceri (2019) believes that this issue can be overcome by broadening the perspective by considering different information that comes from other human environments.

Collective and private ownership are other forms of binarity from self and others. Private ownership was indeed something that was introduced by the Germans in addition to other economic systems, as in the following quote, “In German Africa, colonialism introduced money, exchange relations, private property inland, and the appropriation of labor” (Short, 2012). The territory boundaries belonging to the African and German populations were initially unclear. However, with the advent of measuring technology, the strictness of the boundaries between colonial spaces became highly crucial and reinforced the differences between migrants and inhabitants.

Private ownership forced the appearance of zones, which became a barrier between the people who interacted with each other. In this case, the Herero residents and German immigrants, Tomas (1993) stated that these zones are geographically contested areas. A compartmentalized world characterizes a colony. This space division is basically to emphasize the differences
between them. Hence, this space became a dichotomy between indigenous and European regions. This different space was exemplified by Fanon (2000, p. 6) that a settler’s city is a city with sufficient food, a tranquil city. It is always filled with good things. Meanwhile, the native city is a city of hunger, without bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. It is viewed from the situation described in the SüSWA novel when the bubonic plague attacked their cows, causing the population to starve because they had no more meat to eat.

The space described in the colony area illustrates the dynamics of cultural exchange. Cultural agents move to influence each other and negotiate in order to find and reach an agreement of the transcultural space. In a transcultural point of view, this movement and spatial change are not solely due to power relations. It is rather due to negotiation efforts to find intermediate spaces that are always in a process to form new spaces that are acceptable to all parties. The intermediate space, as mentioned by Hoerder (2013), is a space where the process of migrants’ changes both themselves and the receiving society. In the process of transculturality, individuals and societies change themselves by integrating various ways of life into a new and dynamic everyday culture.

4. CONCLUSION

The colonial space in the transculturality viewpoint is a space where cultures are pervasive and influencing each other. Although the dichotomy between self and others is still prominent in the SüSWA novel, the efforts to achieve a transcultural condition emerged from both sides, namely the Herero tribe and German immigrants.

Negotiation efforts to create self and transcultural society are carried out through the significant role of cultural brokers. However, the cultural brokers who play a dominant role in this transcultural process are brokers who come from Germany. In general, it is apparently not enough to defeat the power domination of the German immigrants, especially the protectorate army, in an effort to create a new order, where all people can live side by side.

REFERENCES


