

Eat, Pray, Love:
The Representation of Italy, India, and Indonesia as Exotic Destinations

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ABSTRACT

The research is a descriptive study of the representation of the cultures of Italy, India, and Indonesia in the novel *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006). The purpose of the research is not only to depict the way the traveler represents the three countries, but also to reveal the traveler's manner towards the differences of the host cultures – Italy, India, and Indonesia – compared to her cultural origin. As a novel which contains travelling experiences and descriptions about the host culture, *Eat, Pray, Love* shows the tendency of the writer's supreme attitude towards the cultures of the three countries. To answer the formulated research problems, the study uses Victor Segalen's (2001) notions of Exoticism which emphasizes exoticism as the notion of difference: the perception of diversity. The research employed qualitative approach and was presented in a descriptive method. The findings of the study show that the three countries are exotic destinations in terms of their cultural, religious, and economic levels. The cultures of the three countries are exotic characterized by three aspects: the existence of the observer's desires towards the observed object, the ability of the observed object in fulfilling the observer's desire for exotic experience, and the remoteness of the observed object. From the analysis, it is found that the traveler gradually respects and appreciates the heterogeneity of the host culture's world views.

Keywords: *Representation, Travel Writing, Exotic, Exoticism, Supremacy*

INTRODUCTION

People love traveling. For some people who love writing and traveling, their travelling experiences are expressed in travel writing. Travel writing is usually written to reflect a different feeling that lingers after having a journey. Travel writing is a genre which was born in 18th century when British travelers expanded to every corner of the world which was driven by varied motives (Bohls & Duncan, 2005). This writing is written in many forms such as conventional travel writing, guide book, reportage and novel (Forsdick, 2005).

Bryan Lawson's *The Language of Space* (2001) asserts that people start to make decisions according to how they feel about the place. As human beings, we tend to search for values of the culture of a place we live in. This is especially true when we visit a new place and culture for the first time. In this situation, we tend to judge other people's behavior, belief, custom, then compare them to those of our own. This attitude leads to an unavoidable tendency of viewing our own culture as being

better or superior to the one(s) we are comparing to. This usually happens in travelling when one visits a place or country which has a different or contrasting culture.

Travelers' descriptions of places that they have visited reveal their perceptions of themselves. An Italian scholar, Papa (1991), identifies the presence of traveler's subjectivity in a travel writing. Apart from objective information given in the text, a travel writing expresses the author's personality and his/her curiosity of the "other". Thus, sometimes a writing of this genre implies the writer's self-supremacy towards the culture of places that are visited.

Eat, Pray, Love (2006) written by Elizabeth Gilbert is an example of travel writing. The book tells a journey of the writer herself who searched for pleasure and divinity throughout three countries: Italy, India, and Indonesia. It tells about the interaction between Gilbert and the locals in the three different cultures. It is interesting to see whether *Eat, Pray, Love* also represents the writer's supreme attitude towards the other.

Said in *Orientalism* argues that travel books feature is one example of the *orientalist* discourse (Said, 1991). It is aimed to naturalize the Orient into Western knowledge in order to facilitate and legitimize Western imperialism (Roper, 2003). This practice can be found, for example, in Rudyard Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West*. The opening of the ballad: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," was popularly criticized by many scholars as Kipling's prejudicial attitude towards the culture of the East and West. The prejudice presents the East and the West social position addressed by the author of the travel writing. Although the memoir is written a few decades after Said discusses the West supremacy in portraying the 'Other', *Eat, Pray, Love* has a similar tendency of presenting the narrator's superiority over the three countries in the novel.

This research uses Victor Segalen's (2001) concept of Exoticism. Segalen was a French poet novelist, archeologist and cultural analyst. He was the one who attempts to define 'true Exoticism'. Segalen's idea of defining 'Exoticism' was motivated by his lifelong

preoccupation with non-European cultures. Therefore, his immersion into this culture was fueled the desire to preserve differences rather than by fear of the other.

METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted by using qualitative approach by connecting the issue of representation of cultural differences with the portrayal of Italian, Indian, and Indonesian cultures. To answer the research problems of this study, the research uses content analysis to collect the data. The analysis involves the identification of attributes referring to each of the three countries as exotic destinations based on Victor Segalen notions of Exoticism. In addition, it also involves the identification of the main character's perception of and attitude towards the places and characters she interacts with.

The theory of Exoticism suggested by Victor Segalen is used as a foundation to reveal the portrayal of Italian, Indian, and Indonesian cultures. According to Segalen (2001), exoticism is the notion of difference, the perception of diversity, the knowledge that something is other than one's self. Exoticism is an

expression of a special curiosity for foreign people and foreign lands. It emphasizes diversity and variety, instead of unity of mankind. Exoticism, in this research, is the character's special curiosity for cultural products, social life views, and the religious views seen through her perception and descriptions as the character immerse into the observed objects. These notions are used as the basis of the identification of attributes representing the cultures of the three. The researcher seeks for descriptions which show the exoticism of the character towards the three countries.

The collected data findings are then categorized using Oueijan's (1998) belief that the 'exotic' label given by the subject to the 'observed objects' occurs at several levels: cultural, economic, religious, and political levels. He believes that through those levels the East could 'satisfy' the Western desire for an exotic experience. These levels are used to categorize the description.

The data findings, then, are assessed in accordance with the issue of the research, namely supremacy, by applying Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* to see whether the author expresses a cultural prejudice or

ethnocentricity, which occurs in the eighteenth century travel writing, or shifts the social positions of the three countries. Supremacy concerns the state of being superior to others (Shipley, 1964). In the context of this research, the state of being superior refers to the feeling of being superior of the character in terms of her social life view and religious view in view of the three countries' social and religious views. The superiority is reflected when the character as the observer consider her own social life and religious views as being better than those of in the three countries. The manner is identified by seeing the character's attitude when she compares the views and perceptions of the three countries' views and analyzed through the characteristics of ethnocentric and ethno-relative stages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

People see something as 'exotic' because they have a desire to see it. The 'exotic' label is given to someone else or something because those 'object' or 'place' fascinates and creates a desire on the part of the viewers (Santaolalla, 2000). The

given label to the observed objects occurs through four levels: cultural level, religious level, economic level, and political level. Through those levels, the observed object could 'satisfy' the viewer's desires for exotic experiences (Oueijan, 1998). The following passage will reveal the representation of Italy, India, and Indonesia in terms of their levels and types of exoticism as found in the novel *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Italy, India, and Indonesia represented as exotic destination

To answer the question whether Italy, India, and Indonesia are represented as exotic destinations, three characteristics proposed by Santaolalla, Oueijan, and Youngs are used as a reference. The first is the ability of the observed object to give a fascination and raise the observer's desire. Santaolalla (2000) suggests that anything can seem exotic to another as long as the observer's desire to view the object exists.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Gilbert shows her desire explicitly by confessing that she really wants to experience a balance of worldly pleasure and divinity. In addition, she also shows her desire to the observed

objects through her exaggerated responses. In the previous part of this chapter, Gilbert has a desire for learning and practicing Italian language in Italy, creating a fantasy of romance whenever she sees the Italian men, and enjoying homemade culinaries. In India, Gilbert is fascinated by the natives. The natives are the figure of strong women she found during her journey and the figure of influential spiritual teacher who led her to get divinity experience of 'meeting' with God. Also, Gilbert is also fascinated by the way religious rituals were performed in Ashram. Gilbert does not really show her desire when she was in Bali but she is fascinated by the Balinese notion of balance.

The ability of the observed object in fulfilling the observer desire for exotic experience is the second reference of the Italy, India, and Indonesia's representation as exotic destinations. Oueijan (1998) believes that the observed object can raise the observer's desire and therefore the observer needs the object to fulfill their desire to experience something different and pleasurable. The observer's desire can be seen from the

motivation of the observer to visit the different places.

Gilbert's main purpose of taking a journey to the three countries is to obtain the feeling of peace. She believes that the peace can be found by experiencing a balance life of worldly pleasure and spiritual experiences. Gilbert believes she can get the worldly pleasure experience in Italy. The major manifestation of Italian worldly pleasure can be encountered by practicing the beautiful Italian language with the natives and enjoying the culinaries. In India, Gilbert gets her spiritual experience by practicing various meditation and other rituals such as chanting. After having the spiritual activities as a routine, Gilbert begins to feel the peace. She believes that the combination of worldly pleasure and spiritual experience can be found in Bali. In her view, Bali is a place where people can find a balance life. Gilbert perceived a balance as as having pleasurable activities and spiritual/religious routine activities. These pleasures are the experiences she never have when she was in her homeland, such as spending her morning by reading a book in the garden, spending her evening by

having dialogue with Ketut Liyer, the medicine man, and spending her night by meditating.

The observed object can fulfill the observer's desire for interesting experiences in some levels. According to Oueijan (1998), there are five levels of exoticism which can be fulfilled by the observed object; the cultural level, religious level, economic level, and political level. Based on the research findings, there are three levels of exoticism which fulfill Gilbert's desire; the cultural level, religious level and economic level. The representation of the three countries as exotic destinations found in the novel is revealed through those levels.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Italy is presented as being exotic on the cultural level. There are three cultural attributes which are prominent in the representation of Italy namely language, natives, and culinaries. The three aspects of the cultural levels are represented as something beautiful and magical. It is demonstrated by the emergence of some adjectives that refer to the beautiful and magical things. The adjective are used in describing the feelings that Gilbert has when she saw and experienced

the observed objects, such as describing the Italian language pronunciation as a singing sparrow, a magic trick, and a truffle. She uses her familiar experiences in the past to describe the feelings she experienced during her childhood in her homeland.

India is also represented as an exotic destination in terms of its cultural and religious levels. The scenic views and natives of India are represented as something really strange but interesting. This is clearly shown on every description of them. The extreme weather, the barren landscape which shows poverty, excessive attitudes towards sacred objects, and the view about women are four things which are perceived as being different and strange to Gilbert. At the religious level, religious figures and rituals are represented as very devotional, influential, mysterious and beautiful things. Gilbert comes to those representations as a result of the religious figure's facial expression and personality. The representation of the religious practice is determined by the rhythm, meaning, mood, and harmony at the performance of chanting ritual. Gilbert perceives them not just

superficially but deeply into the philosophical meaning she comes to understand.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Bali is an exotic destination too. It is represented as a place where beauty, balance and mystery can be found. Regardless of the stereotypes out there about the exotic Bali, Gilbert shows a response and a description that refers to the characteristics possessed by the Balinese. The exotic Bali is seen from its cultural, religious, and economic level. The viewed aspects of cultural level are the scenic views and the natives. The scenic views she sees are represented as a beautiful thing and being related to the balance. For example, when Gilbert saw the reflection of the evening sky in the fields she regards it as the beautiful scenery and a wonderful thing. She interprets the view as a reflection symbol of balance between human and God/Universe.

Youngs (2006) proposes that something is interesting and exotic because it is remote and different. Even though the object or the activity may be taken as ordinary things by the natives, as a new comer, Gilbert still perceives them as extraordinary

things. For instance, when Gilbert hears a new Italian phrase from her Italian friend she suddenly declares that she loves it even though it has a flat meaning.

Segalen's (2001) statement in the previous paragraph about appreciating the existence of heterogeneity indicates that the position of every human and culture is differently valued in each culture and there is no statement like 'better than others'. In relation to the creation of judge, Said (1978) asserts that the nineteenth-century Europeans creates stereotype towards the non-European as indolent, thoughtless, sexually immoral and unreliable. Said's account on the Orient that is stereotyped by the nineteenth century Europeans conquerors implies that the feeling of superiority appears when one compares and assesses the object he/she saw to their culture of origin. The emergence of this superiority may have an impact on being ethnocentric which can lead to a racist and discriminative attitude. The following part describes Gilbert's attitudes of dealing with differences she found in the three countries.

Perception: ethno-relativity

Alan Corners (2004) emphasizes that perception towards differences are often shaped by what has been believed and what is already known. A person cannot truly aware of his/her own cultural programming until he/she experiences being in another culture. Corners believes that the background and history of our country of origin also plays a major role in governing the behavior towards the other. The perception which is revealed in the novel indicates the existence of Gilbert's manner and attitude towards cultural differences. The exposure of the observer's manner leads to the answer to the question whether the observer feels superior or not.

The three countries, Italy, India, and Indonesia are different in terms of cultures from the culture where Gilbert comes from. Gilbert realizes the differences she encounters in the three countries. Gilbert compares and contrasts several social views of her culture of origin and the host culture. For example, Italian, as described in the previous section, has a different view about 'having fun' or 'pleasure'. After having a conversation with her

Italian friend, Gilbert finds that Americans are poor when it comes to enjoying their spare time. She admits that Italians know better of how to get a pleasure experience. In India, she feels that Indians has an excessive attitude towards sacred things. However, she also sees a good side of the devotional attitude. This can be seen, for example, when she saw a boy who dressed up, while she herself appears in a messy cloth. Similarly, in Indonesia (specifically in Bali), the life principles shared by the natives of Bali, for Gilbert, are applicable. She also realizes that there are some life principles that may not be suitable in her culture of origin because they are completely different, such as the principle of living in a clan. The examples of Gilbert's attitudes toward the cultural differences above show that she enjoys recognizing and exploring cultural differences without claiming that her own cultural view is better than the other. As stated by Bennet (1998), people who tend to be ethno-relative are aware that their behavior and values are not the only good way to be in the world.

It is also found that Gilbert's perception changes in some ways. The change of perception is the

change of expectation she made when she was still in her homeland. Gilbert creates several perceptions that she expects to find when she arrives in the destination places. The expectation she creates is her imagination that she hopes will be similar to the reality she will encounter. The background knowledge and cultural background of the observer, Gilbert, influences the change of perception. Consequently, the perception can change in times.

The most prominent change of perceptions is the change in her perception of the natives and the social life views in India and Indonesia (specifically in Bali). Gilbert changes her perception of the idea of religious figures in India. The perception constitutes the ideal figure of spiritual teachers and the idea of religious rituals called *chanting*.

When she was in her homeland, she perceives Swamiji, the most influential spiritual teacher, as a powerful and intimidating person. For Gilbert, the personality of the spiritual teacher does not fit her idea. When she was in America, the ideal figure she constructed is a living, lovely, feminine and modern (university-educated) person. The perceptions are

influenced by her cultural background as the ‘New Englander generation who believes that skepticism and pragmatism are her intellectual heritage’ (p.164-165). In addition, the background knowledge she got about the history of the relation between Western and spiritual teachers which raised chaos influences her greatly. However, Gilbert’s thought about the ideal religious figures changes after her arrival in Swamiji’s birthplace – India. The changes occur because Gilbert feels an emotional closeness to him as she arrives and reads a lot of Swamiji’s life journeys.

The perception of religious rituals also changes. As Gilbert heard about the word “chanting”, she refers it as a boring and scary ritual. When she celebrates New Year’s Eve together with other people she does not know in India, she feels that the atmosphere of chanting is beautiful and harmonious. The performance of the ritual which is held in a beautiful rhythm and sounds including the cheers of the other people changes Gilbert’s perception about the idea of chanting.

In Bali, Gilbert also changes her perception of the concept of balance and the idea of the word

“paradise” which sticks as the image of Bali. The concept of balance is perceived as a balance between pleasure and divinity. In reality, as she arrives in Bali, the concept of balance is more complex than she ever thought. She realizes that her perception does not suit the idea of balance in the Balinese perspective. When she was still in America, Gilbert believes that the word “paradise” refers to an innocent place where history of violence never occurs. Gilbert’s previous idea of paradise is depicted when she reads the textual information about the Balinese history which reveals the other side of Bali.

People can assess something positively or negatively depending on the background knowledge they possess. It affects the way people interact and respond to the differences they experienced. Because judgements are influenced by background knowledge, people create expectations before they arrive in the destination. The assessment could change when they see the reality.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Gilbert shows her superiority in a smaller and ‘soft’ scale than the scale evoked by some authors before her whom Said

criticized in his works. In addition, compared to the nineteenth century Europeans' stereotype of the Other which Said (1978) states, Gilbert's representation of the three countries, especially India and Indonesia (Bali), is contrastive. However, the attitude is developmental as she arrives and immerses herself into the host cultures.

The attitude is shown by the positive changes of perceptions which results in her appreciation and respect for the cultural differences. The changes of perceptions indicate that Gilbert is open-minded towards the world view. In conclusion, Gilbert finds the three countries as the exotic destinations and being different to her country of origin. Regardless of the weaknesses of each country's worldview, Gilbert sees the cultural worldview as being cultural relative. It shows that Gilbert is aware that each culture cannot be assessed objectively by comparing it to her culture of origin as the center of superiority

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis, some points can be concluded. First, the representation of Italy, India, and

Indonesia as exotic destinations can be seen through three levels of exoticism; cultural level, religious level, and economic level. The levels of exoticism are the points which determine the level of the observed objects' ability to fulfill the observer's desire for an exotic experience. According to Gilbert, Italy is exotic due to its cultural level which includes the language, natives, and culinaries. Different from the first destination, India is appealing because of its religious aspects such as religious figures and rituals which fulfill Gilbert's desire for a devotional experience. Finally Indonesia, Gilbert believes that the country is fascinating in that they have a balance in worldly and spiritual pleasures which manifests clearly in the social life in the island of Bali.

Gilbert considers Italy, India, and Indonesia as being different to her own homeland but still have similar positions in the social level. The social level is seen through her world view and the world view of the natives of three countries which are compared and contrasted. From the comparison, Gilbert is aware that each culture has different values and is evaluated differently. Moreover,

she is aware that the differences should be perceived as heterogeneity by respecting the badness and goodness of each culture. Compared to the nineteenth Europeans' stereotype of the Other which Said (1978) states, Gilbert's representation of the three countries, especially India and Indonesia, is contrastive

The perception of the observed object as an exotic thing

does not always lead to a negative representation if the observer respects heterogeneity. However, the perception itself is influenced by background knowledge and the motivation of the observer in travelling to the destination countries. The perception may also change as the observer sees the reality, and immerses herself into and experiences the social lives of the target cultures.

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