



# EXPLORING CULTURAL DIMENSIONS ON SELECTED STORIES FROM DIVERSE EPOCH

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**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to examine the cultural dimensions in selected literary texts. Culture has been a debated topic due to its uniqueness in many countries. Examining literary work can be a credible source of cultural representation, because it is a reflection of culture and society in which people's ideas are portrayed most creatively. The methodology includes analysis of the cultural norms, and the environment in which the characters live or originate that influence their cultural practices. Content analysis is applied by looking at relevant extracts of the texts to identify various types of cultural dimensions according to the six categories initiated by Hofstede. The study on cultural dimensions on the selection of texts from diverse era helped to identify and understand how cultural dimensions work among the characters from various cultural backgrounds.

**Index Terms - Culture, Cultural Dimensions, Power Distance, Individualism, Collectivism.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture represents identities that determine the traits and norms in a society. Culture is a concept that commonly reflects a society's behavioural patterns, values, artifacts that are considered unique to an outsider (Waldherr, Sartori & Adams, 2006). Since culture is shared amongst those who live closely together, it can be considered as a collective phenomenon with no written rules. It moulds the identity of the current and future generation's specific cultural way of living (Berry & Sam, 2010). Culture has been a debated topic due to its uniqueness in many countries. Hence, there are countless plethora of studies to observe and examine the similarities and differences of cultures around the world (Waldherr, Sartori & Adams, 2006).

Culture varies in multiple aspects in terms of food, language, and clothing and these cultural elements characterize the specific group of people living in a specific area (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). The lessons and values of a person's culture are passed down from generation to generation (Holtorf, 2012). Though, cultural practices may adapt and comply with the transition of time, certain ideologies and practices still remain the same over the years.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Psychologist Dr Geert Hofstede published his cultural dimensions model, grounded on a decade of research. Since the study was conducted, the dimensions have developed to become the worldwide renowned standard for recognizing cultural differences. Hofstede explored people who were working for IBM from more than 50 countries. In the beginning, he ascertained four dimensions that could discern one culture from another. Later on, Hofstede included the fifth and sixth dimensions, while working with Michael H. Bond and Michael Minkov.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions are Power Distance, Individualism Versus Collectivism, Masculinity Versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Versus Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence Versus Restraint. One of the ways to observe the differences and similarities of other cultures is through the literary works done by authors from other cultures, Hence, in this study, several short stories are analyzed based on the six cultural dimensions by Hofstede.

Volkema and Fleck (2012) claimed that cultural dimension such as individualism-collectivism affects the initiation process in any organization. During the initiation process, there are overlaps between power distance and individualism-collectivism. Thus, negotiation would happen to ensure the approval of a project. Negotiation process is affected by individualism-collectivism as requests, demands, and complaints are received by the people with different cultural values.

Williams (2009) mentioned that there will be negative consequences, and no competition among the members in the organization if the focus is only on individualism. Furthermore, conflicts in relationship would occur in group decision making. Hofstede (2001) claimed that institutions with excessive collectivistic culture would face difficulties (Howe et al., 2019). Oyserman and Sorensen (2011) argued that people can have both individualist and collectivist values according to the context when any of the two values is not applicable in a situation. When a particular group does not make sense, individuals are free to express themselves, and follow their desires.

Cultural dimensions like long term (LTO) and short-term orientation (STO) can also infuse cultural hegemony into the values of a society. This new element of Confucian traditional ethics exhibits a value of long-term or short-term interests held by a culture, focusing on distinguishing the lasting or brief venture of the society for the goal, which is exemplified in long-term planning and short-term planning. Culture and society with LTO attach great prominence to the future and treat things with a dynamic outlook. People influenced by this culture regularly think of the effects from current behavior onto the next generations.

Culture can be learned and passed down through literature such as short stories, novels, poetry and drama. Culture can be seen as the characteristics or customs of language, religion, music, social customs, the arts and much more of a particular group of people. As Hesaraki (2014) mentioned, literature can be a credible source of cultural representation, because it is a reflection of the culture and society in which people's ideas are portrayed most creatively. The author usually tells people about their history, their cultural norms, and the environment in which they live or originate. This paper analyzes two short stories by comparing them with the cultural dimension of Hofstede. The study on cultural dimensions on a Selection of short stories from diverse era will help to identify and understand how cultural dimensions work among characters in short stories.

## II. DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative approach is used for this study. A total of six dimensions are analyzed based on the selected short stories and novels. Content analysis is applied by looking at relevant extracts of the texts to identify various types of cultural dimensions according to the six categories founded by Hofstede. The samples include short stories and novels from different eras to identify the diverse cultural values practised by the main characters. The selected texts include *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) by Sui Sin Far, *The Necklace* (1884) by Guy de Maupassant, *Two Kinds* (1989) by Amy Tan, *The Perks of being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky and *Almond* (2020) by Won-Pyung Sohn. The cultural dimensions that are analyzed are Power Distance, Individualism Versus Collectivism, Masculinity Versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Versus Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence Versus Restraint.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to Hofstede (2011), culture is a collective mind programming that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from others.

### 3.1 Power Distance

Power distance is the degree of inequality that is evident and is accepted between people who are with and without power. A high-power distance index score reveals that a particular society accepts an unbalanced, hierarchical allocation of power, and that people understand their place in the community (Hofstede, 2011). A low power distance index score shows that power is communal and is widely disseminated, and that members in the society object to circumstances where power is distributed unfairly. This dimension, just like other dimensions have different values in different cultures as some might practise small Power Distance, while some may have large power distance. Su (2015), stated that it is common among Asian households to have large power distance as the elders are always considered superiors to the younger ones, which is not the same case in the Western culture.

In the short story *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) by Sui Sin Far follows the life of a Chinese married couple who migrated to America and have been living there together for years. The themes found in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* are marriage, companionship and culture clash. Firstly, the theme of marriage can be related to how, although "Americanized", Mrs. Spring Fragrance does not falter from being the obedient and dutiful wife to Mr. Spring Fragrance. Although it is not a custom for American wives to get permission from their husbands to go or stay elsewhere, Mrs. Spring Fragrance still conformed to her cultural practice. For instance, in her letter to Mr. Spring Fragrance during her trip to visit her cousin in San Francisco, Mrs. Spring Fragrance wrote:

*"Greeting from your plum blossom, who is desirous of hiding herself from the sun of your presence for a week of seven days more."* (p. 21)

So, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the power distance between the married couple is still quite high. Power distance refers to the acceptance of a society to inequality of power distribution within social relationships or organization (Agodzo, 2018; Wu, 2006). This closely relates to the way Mrs. Spring Fragrance describe herself to her husband as *"Your ever loving and obedient woman"* (p. 22). Here, it shows how she still portrays herself as inferior compared to her husband, and accepted this cultural practice as a norm in the Chinese culture.

The short story *The Necklace* (1884) by Guy de Maupassant revolves around a couple where the wife is never satisfied with what she has and dreaded the fact that she was born into a family of clerks rather than families of higher status where her charms and beauty would suit best. Her life changed after an event, and it was not a pretty picture for the couple. Maupassant, however, portrayed power distance subtly in this story where the characters depicted in the top hierarchy are more valuable when they are invited to meaningful events. On the other hand, servants or lower white-collared workers are required to act as they behave in a manner that was acceptable by the community during that period of time. They may not seem too relevant to the hierarchy, but Maupassant portrayed them as wanting to be known and adored by people of higher status or power. This is evident in the text where the male character states, 'I had awful trouble to get it. *"Everyone wants to go; it is very select, and they are not giving many invitations to clerks"* (p.2). This line was mentioned by Mathilde Loisel's husband, who is a clerk at the Ministry of Public Instruction. The high-power distance of the French indicates that they accept inequality, whereby the upper-class

dominate the lower or middle-class. Power distance is evidently present between the officials and the middle-class workers in this short story.

### 3.2 Individualism Versus Collectivism

Collectivism according to Hofstede (2011), is the attitude of people in a community, whether they socialise and act as a group, or otherwise. This dimension can either be collectivist or individualist. According to Su (2015), Asians are usually a collectivist community while the individualist are more related to the Western culture.

In *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, readers are provided with a sense of companionship in some scenes when Mrs. Spring Fragrance meddle in the love life of Man You (Laura's betrothed) where Laura is helped to gain approval to be with her true love, Kai Tzu. Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension of Individualism vs Collectivism, the representation of culture shown in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* leans more to collectivism. A collectivist society values interpersonal relationship, support extended families and take responsibility for the well-being of the members of their group (Waldherr et al., 2006). Mrs. Spring Fragrance is not blood related to the Chin Yuens' daughter Laura, but she felt it was her responsibility to help Laura with her unwanted arranged marriage. Thus, Mrs. Spring Fragrance went to great lengths to help Laura by becoming the matchmaker for Man You and Ah Oi (the prettiest Chinese girl in San Francisco). This is apparent in her letter to Laura that states "*the little Ah Oi and the son of the Illustrious Teacher will be joined together in love and harmony*" (p. 20). Subsequently, Man You who was head-over-heels for Ah Oi went against his parents' wishes and annulled his engagement with Laura, much to her relief. Here, it can be seen how careful and considerate Mrs. Spring Fragrance had been, in helping Laura, as she did not only help Laura and Man You from a loveless marriage, but she also saved the face of Laura's parents and their parent-child relationship from withering. Thirdly, immigrants from other countries who try to adapt and assimilate in a new culture can experience culture clashes. In *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, those who were raised in another culture different from their parents, such as Laura, can experience confusion in deciding the values that they should follow. Since it is a norm in the Chinese customs to marry those who are chosen by the parents, Laura, who has already been exposed to the American culture, does not like an arranged marriage as she already met her true love, Kai Tzu.

In *The Necklace*, Mathilde Loisel is portrayed as a woman with great pride despite her situation. She also has the tendency to go places where the privileged people gathered. She is represented as being selfish when she only thinks about materialistic things and is very concerned about how she brings herself to the event. French individualists have a passion for uniqueness and freedom of opinion. We can see that Maupassant cleverly portrayed Mathilde Loisel as an individualist where he mentions "She danced with intoxication, with passion, made drunk by pleasure, forgetting all, in the triumph of her beauty in glory of her success in a sort of cloud of happiness composed of all the homage, of all this admiration, of all these awkward desires, and of that sense of complete victory which is so sweet to woman's heart". This meant that Mathilde Loisel enjoyed everything by being an individualistic, even though she had to go to the extend borrowing things. This action led her to feel good about herself and also very proud of what she had achieved at that moment. Collectivist contrast with the individualist, where the collectivists stress on the importance of the community, while individualism shines on the rights and concerns of each person (Cherry, 2020).

### 3.3 Masculinity vs Femininity

Masculine traits focus on goals and assertiveness such as incomes, progression, title, respect and others. As opposed to feminine traits, based on Hofstede (2011), it is related to the more personal and humanistic goals. There is a significant discrimination in the varieties of activities and careers that men and women occupy (Subrayan, 2015).

In *The Necklace*, Maupassant did not explicitly touch on masculinity or femininity but from the line "...he was laying aside just that amount to buy a gun and treat himself to a little shooting next summer..." indicates that the story leans more to masculinity. Men are the provider for the family but at the time they also respect their wives's needs. Although Novela (2017) mentioned that France has somewhat of feminine culture, this shows that time has evolved and that femininity is being recognized.

On the other hand, in the short story *Two Kinds* by Amy Tan, there are conflicts between the main character Jing-Mei's childhood and the effects of her mother's expectations of her life. The mother said that there were two kinds of daughters where one is obedient and the other follow her own mind. In Amy Tan's short story, Jing-Mei's mother wants her daughter to live the American way of life. She claims that America is a land with limitless possibilities. She wants her daughter to be a prodigy, "in specific, ...you will be a prodigy, of course, ... You will be the best" (p.1). From the beginning, both of them cultivate a prodigious concept that reveals their ambition to be the best. They watch television shows and read magazines to determine which talent Jing-Mei will aspire to do. Her mother believes that her daughter could be the best if she worked hard and practised anything. Not only that, Jing-Mei also has a dream of becoming a perfect child if only she can decide her area of interest. They try a few things before they settled on the piano.

### 3.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

This dimension explains how well people are able to manage anxiety. In situations where there is high score for uncertainty avoidance, people try to make life foreseeable and manageable as possible. In situations where they are unable to control their lives, there are possibilities for them to stop trying. In these circumstances, they may put their fate in God.

Immigrants from other countries who try to adapt and assimilate in a new culture can experience culture clashes. This can be seen in the story *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, where those who were raised in another culture different from their parents, such as Laura, can be confused in deciding which values to follow. Since it is in the Chinese customs to marry those who are chosen by one's parents, Laura, who has already been exposed to the American culture, does not like an arranged marriage as she has already met her true love; Kai Tzu. In this situation, the dimension of uncertainty avoidance is quite high at first. A society with high uncertainty avoidance is quite concerned with affairs that are unpredictable or unclear (Bergiel, Bergiel & Upson, 2012). This phenomenon is evident in how the Chin Yuen couple had arranged their daughter's marriage with a man she knows nothing



of. Although they have already adjusted to the American lifestyle, it is observed that they still “*religiously observed many Chinese customs, and their ideals of life were the ideals of their Chinese forefathers*” (p.17). This shows how they are quite anxious to go beyond their Chinese traditions regarding their daughter’s marriage, as they are more comfortable to follow a stable custom that has been tried and true for centuries (Agodzo, 2014).

However, it became clear that at the end of the story, Mr. Chin Yuen had a change of heart regarding marriage customs. He stated that “*the conditions of life in this Western country are not as in China*” (p. 25) and permitted Laura choose her own husband. Hence, the uncertainty avoidance had reduced which shows how assimilation into a new culture can change one’s values and perceptions.

### 3.5 Long vs Short Time Orientation

In *The Necklace*, Mathilde Loisel is clearly seen as someone who is short time oriented. At an instant where she is desperate, she goes in all measures to get her way. But little did she know that this could jeopardize her future for the next ten years. After losing the necklace, she borrowed from a friend, Mathilde Loisel’s husband went around town to borrow money and replace the necklace that was lost. For the past ten years after that event, they finally managed to pay everything off, and when Mathilde Loisel met with the friend whom she borrowed the necklace from it turns out that the necklace was fake. This is uncovered in their conversation:

“You say that you bought a necklace of diamonds to replace mine?”

“Yes, You never noticed it, then!’ They were very like.”

And she smiled with a joy which was proud and naïve at once.

Mme. Forestier, strongly moved, took her two hands.

“Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, my necklace was paste. It was worth at most five hundred francs!”

It shows that Mathilde made a decisive decision without thinking of the consequences. If she had come clean with her friend, she would not have suffered those ten years just like that. Being long-term oriented and short-term orientated defines a person’s mentality and how they go about dealing with the situations. Some cultures really look far into the future while some enjoy living the moment and doing what they can do best at a time

## 6. Indulgence Versus restraint (IVR)

Hofstede's sixth dimension, which was ascertained and explained together with Michael Minkov, is comparatively recent, and is hence followed by lesser data. Countries that have a high IVR score consent or support comparatively unrestricted indulgence of people's own desires and reactions, such as relishing in life and indulging in entertainments. In a society with a low IVR score, the emphasis is more on suppressing gratification and focusing more on controlling people's conduct and behavior, and there are stricter social norms.

*The Perks of being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky revolves around Charlie, a fifteen-year-old dealing with anxiety and mental breakdowns. It is written from the perspective of Charlie writing letters sent to an anonymous friend that never writes back. His aunty, Aunt Helen was killed in a car accident on his birthday and his only friend committed suicide. Charlie starts to participate and try to attend events, where he would make new friends, struggle with his past, encounter the challenges of facing the world and maturity. The setting for the story is in America which centralizes around high school in 1991. The cultural aspect of the American culture is very apparent as the characters experience segregations of groups within school such as popular and unpopular students. The experiences and expressions of love, trauma, abuse, and relationships is the focus of the novel, giving audiences the perspective of a teen coming to terms with his life. *The Perks of being a Wallflower* has a variety of themes such as love, acceptance, manhood, coming-of-age, sexuality, and happiness. The character Charlie indulges in his teen life amidst his personal problems by going out to parties and meeting new people and eventually making new friends while trying new things. He indulges in the comfort of unfamiliar faces knowing that he is not the only person who is odd because of his personality. The experienced he shared while being at the party was stated as below:

“*The party was in the basement of this house. The room was quite smoky, and the kids were much older*”.

The statement alone signified that he was very unfamiliar with the scene. He vaguely addressed the things he experienced because he himself did not know where he was, who he was with and what they were doing. Yet, he indulges in those moments as they distract him from his own problems. The unfamiliarity became an addictive feeling for him to use as a tool in confronting his own personal issues.

*Almond* (2020) by Won-Pyung Sohn is a Korean novel that revolves around a young boy named Yunjae, who is born with a brain condition that makes it hard for him to feel called Alexithymia. The story tells the story of Yunjae coping with the condition and growing up towards maturity. Yunjae does not have any friends as the condition he has makes it difficult for him to properly socialize. However, his family is there for him and supports him by teaching with the proper emotion and manner to present himself in specific situations such as smiling, laughing, and greeting. Coping with all the trauma, he faces bullies, friendship, love, and socializing. The story of *Almond* centres around a young boy growing up in a Korean School. Culture is especially important for Koreans and they focus on family values. Yunjae restrains himself from integrating with society by limiting his interactions with people outside. He was constantly aware and made insecure of his own medical condition and resorted to experiencing the world through the lens of a reader. He found comfort in reading books and expressed how reading makes him feel more alive and expressive and he would compare to being in real life. He says so by the quote below:

“Books took me to places I could never go otherwise. They shared the confessions of people I’d never met and lives I’d never witnessed. The emotions I could never feel, and the events I hadn’t experienced could all be found in those volumes “

“Every Christmas Eve, we’d eat out to celebrate my birthday. That year, on Christmas Eve, we were getting ready to go out, as usual. It was freezing and damp. The sky was cloudy, and the heavy, moist air seeped into my skin. Why go through all the hassle, it’s just a birthday, I thought to myself, buttoning up my coat. And I really meant it. We shouldn’t have gone out that day.”

The second quote is when he was actually out for his birthday and he expressed his regret in doing so. He would have easily preferred staying at home as he could not quite understand the need for a grand birthday celebration. Here, it is also evident that Yunjae restrains himself from wanting to go out even when he has to. He is more comfortable being in his own room at his own house with his own family compared to being out in the public.

## CONCLUSION

Literature is a voice that expresses values and beliefs. It shows how people live as individuals or groups with this perspectives, how their cultural lives were, and how their cultures and traditions used to be. The authors for the selected text distinctively describe culture through characters and symbolism in short stories. The stories in the texts also emphasize the importance of culture as people always bring together their culture whenever and wherever they are, despite the notion that following the old customs may be irrelevant or unnecessary. To most people in societies, cultural values and practices are inherent.

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