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On *Human Rites*, a Play by Seth Rozin

In his one-act play, Human Rites, Seth Rozin uses a university setting to present three different perspectives on a controversial issue while using the character's backstory and opinions to highlight a more subtle issue of cultural differences guiding one's perceptions. In this play, Michaela Richards, an African American, Dean of Arts and Sciences, calls in Dr. Alan Freidman, a 50-something year old, Caucasian, cultural psychologist to her office to address the complaints she received from his students, who were repulsed by his claims and findings that female genital mutilation or as Alan consciously refers to it, female genital circumcision, is a practice that is accepted and even cherished by many women in parts of the African continent. While Alan feels justified to publish his findings as it is backed by evidence, Michaela is not convinced that his research method is impervious to bias and mistakes and in the light of students' thoughtful disapproval, she recommends that he should retract his work or at least consider the opposition in depth. Due to the personal nature of their relation, this argument gets heated and unfiltered till a third character, Lydia Namandu, is introduced. Lydia is a graduate student from Sierra Leone, who is summoned by the Dean to help conduct the same study as Alan, but as an insider to the African culture and customs. Lydia refuses to conduct the study to honor the secrecy of the ritual and asks to be excused but is roped into a conversation that leads her to reveal that she herself has been circumcised, agrees with Alan's findings, yet recommends that he should not publish the paper as it is not his place to speak on this issue.

Through this dialogue, Rozin brings to light many different issues. First, is the central issue of the plot, is female genital circumcision (FGC) as barbaric practice that needs to be abolished to save young girls or is there an aspect to this issue that is not readily discussed by activists and international media? However, the play goes beyond this issue to subtly raise the question, what role does culture play in giving rise to fundamentally different views and feelings on the same issue? And finally, is it acceptable for people outside of a cultural group to study, judge and "save" people from the culture's practices? This paper uses the play's viewpoints on each of these questions to springboard into ideas and conversation about these topics and conclude with the overall critique of the play, Human Rites.

In the play, all characters provide a thoughtful voice on the issue of female genital circumcision. Alan's point of view on the issue is backed by evidence and study that he conducted. He admits to having a started the study with a negative viewpoint of the practice but after interviewing, "four hundred women – members of six different ethnic groups in four different countries", he concludes that a majority of them "not only embrace the practice, enthusiastically, but consider it a fundamentally good thing; socially, spiritually, physically and aesthetically" (Rozin 19). Michaela is also an academic who respects the authority of a well conducted study but is well aware of the issue that scientific methodologies can be flawed and does not trust that Alan's work can be considered conclusive. Her opposition is fueled by her lack of confidence in this qualitative study that could be subjectively biased, as well as her inability to comprehend the merits of this practice. In her viewpoint, "any diminishment of pleasure is unacceptable" and clearly champions rights of women to choose and condemns a practice that may be there to exercise power over them (Rozin 24). She sounds genuinely compassionate about the plight of women who have to undergo this act and has a personal connection to this issue as she has an adopted daughter from

the African continent with this being one of the issues, she was protecting her child from. Her voice changes from a skeptic of the research methodology to an ardent dissenter of the practice as she could not imagine why anyone would willingly want to subject themselves to female genital circumcision. Even when a third voice, that of Lydia Namandu, someone who has intimately experienced the ritual, supports the practice – Michaela cannot seem to accept that it is a willing choice. She expresses to Lydia that she doesn't think that the choice was made as freely as she thinks (Rozin 53). Lydia lends a voice that is unique in that it provides an in-group view that is emotional, intellectual and challenges the biased perceptions of western academics and activists who feel privileged to express disdain upon a culture and practice they don't fully understand. To Lydia, this bias is not just driven from ignorance of the rituals but possibly from the imperialistic views that have defined the relation of the West with the African continent. Even if she agrees with Alan's findings, she does not appreciate him being the spokesperson for the women in Africa or using their experience for his academic wins. She accuses him to be "profiting off of stolen secrets, instead of elephant tusks" and does not think highly that "Westerners love being the arbiters of what is considered civilized" (Rozin 56, 62).

All three people in this dialogue are reasonable and somewhat justified in their viewpoints but none of them are impervious to bias. While Alan is adamant that his work is research backed but there is certainly a possibility that the evidence is not complete. In Carla Obermeyer's work, "The Known, the Unknown, and the Unknowable", she reviews the large corpus of studies conducted on the prevalence and medical harms of the practice of female genital circumcision and finds that while "information regarding the prevalence of these practices is becoming increasingly available, research on their consequences for reproductive health and sexuality is clearly insufficient" (Obermeyer 97). She cites a number of reasons for this: diversity in the practice in

different groups makes it hard to define what is form or level of female genital circumcision is being discussed, differences in the terminology for the practice in different places, raises ambiguity in responses when surveying women and the general difficulty of getting a candid response from the women who may not want to willingly share their views on a subject that is closely tied to their own culture. While Obermeyer uses evidence to make the case against the widespread horror of the medical harms of female genital circumcision and supports what Alan is claiming in the play, the realities of research difficulties of this practice apply to both those who are pro and those who are against. Therefore, it doesn't seem unreasonable to have additional studies and closer look at the methodology to confirm if any generalization is valid. Nonetheless, Alan does show understanding that the severity of female circumcision is variable and applied a yes/no strategy to make the respondents comfortable lending his research merit and he himself is not opposed to critical comments through peer review process but is not willing to leave the work unpublished.

On the other hand, beyond academic skepticism, Michaela's view is biased by her personal belief system of choice and independence that is in accordance to the culture and society that she participates in. Early in Alan's and Michaela's conversation about children's freedom to choose, she accepts that the ability to do so is "sewn into the fabric of our culture… our unassailable values" (Rozin 5). However, interestingly she didn't feel her decision to adopt a child and decide for Naila that she will be raised in a single parent household in a foreign nation was questionable as she saw it as a way to exercise her independence and justified by the moral superiority that she felt in "sav[ing] at least one girl from some of the horrors that awaited her" (Rozin 4). Her opposition to the practice of female genital circumcision stems from a belief that women do not really have a choice in the matter as they really do not have an alternative or complete knowledge of the practice and that makes this an oppressive practice, which is possibly the lasting legacy of

a patriarchal culture. Even after hearing Lydia share that the Kono have a female creator, the practice is gender inclusive and commanded by the women leaders of the group, she is not convinced of it being a matter of choice. To her the derivation of one's identity comes from an individual search and internal attributes and not communal rituals and social bonding. This mold of thinking runs deeper than an individual opinion and falls in the territory of notion of self, that is in fact derived through culture. Markus and Kitayama state in their paper, "the Western view of the individual as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity" that is different from the interdependent view that many other cultures of the world hold (Kitayama 224). This can certainly limit Michaela's ability to accept a practice whose main merit is the ability to form connection with community and to gain one's identity and role as a woman or man through physical modification.

Finally, Lydia lends a powerful voice for the women in her community, but her knowledge and experience is limited to her own and her community's. She relies on her own personal experience to highlight that the rituals are not all unsafe as the media usually portrays. According to her, "the surgeries in [her] community are an ancient practice conducted by highly trained elders – sowies – with properly sterilized instruments" (Rozin 52). To that, Michaela aptly questions if that is an exception to the norm of the practice and Lydia cannot decisively confirm it is not. With the viewpoint coming from a personal experience, it is much harder for her to look at the practice objectively and for all people that it affects. Her anger against "African women shamed by Western activists", however justified, could make her hold onto the practice even more strongly and oppose interference more vehemently (Rozin 58). While it's certainly arguable that her position on the matter could have bias due to her emotional connection to the matter, it is not something that should be dismissed. In fact, it gives a stronger imperative to understand the social and cultural

motivations of the practice before labelling it barbaric or oppressive. In Okin's paper, as she is questioning the acceptance of non-feminist multicultural practices, she presents Will Kymlicka's argument that, "rich and secure cultural structure with its own language and history, is essential both for the development of self-respect and for giving person's a context in which they can develop the capacity to make choices about how to lead their lives" (Okin 20). If Lydia feels that she is empowered to make the decision to participate in the ritual, it is not fair for outsiders to impose their viewpoints through tactics of fear and misrepresentation but what if her positive experience and the choice is available to her but not to the many other women that are subject to this practice?

Through the medium of this dialogue and strong characters, Rozin deftly presents the prominent arguments against female genital circumcision as well as the lesser heard rebuttals from academics and the women of who accept to undergo this practice. Even after being presented three valid perspectives, the reader is quite possibly left with the quandary of what is the universally right answer in this debate. In Shweder's work on culture psychology, he presents an idea of confusionism and states, "a nonconsilient Confusionist truth [that], the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular" (Shweder 300). A difficult but necessary step in understanding and accepting multicultural practices is the recognition of contradictory "right actions" and the influence of the social and cultural notions that give rise to this.

In Human Rites, the role of culture in the acceptance or rejection of ideas is presented in many forms. To Michaela's objection to even consider female genital circumcision as an acceptable practice, Alan brings up the question of male genital circumcision. He questions that

how come a practice that is based in religious tradition, with little justification for health reasons and gives no choice to the baby boy does not raise the opposition that a gender inclusive practice of circumcision in other cultures does. It seems apparent that culture norms have a way of normalizing a practice. However, for one group to object to another group's "normal" makes it seem there is one right that needs to be imposed. Lydia shows Michaela how uncomfortable it is when someone judges another's culture norm by making a statement that not being circumcised makes Michaela undignified as per Kono culture. Lydia later shows how such shame inflicted by "outsiders" for a common cultural norm can be emotionally and socially taxing when she shares her personal story of losing her friend over the issue of female circumcision. Activists that vehemently oppose female genital mutilation with concerns for girls physical and mental wellbeing in mind, inadvertently forget the mental and emotional trauma faced by people as their social systems are attacked and disintegrated. It is social and cultural practices that give rise to sense of self that impacts a person deeply. In the paper, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation", Markus and Kitayama, show how the very notion of self can differ in different cultures and that understanding can have a profound influence on psychological level.

While Lydia defends the practice of female circumcision as practiced by Kono and accepts that Alan's work is not unfounded, she leaves him shocked when she refuses to support him in publishing the results. His is adamant that they are on the same side, but Lydia takes a stand their story is theirs to tell. It should not be "another anthropological study by another western scholar" that reduces their ideas and existence to a mere curiosity for the world (Rozin 63). Her resentment towards western scholar's feeling entitled to study and be the voice for the all cultures is seen as she equates Alan to a poacher who is there for his own gains and remarks that people who are

studied rarely benefit from the study. Through Lydia's stance, Rozin gives the readers an important thought to consider – in a globalized world, is it time for western scholarship to relinquish the power to understand, evaluate and share everyone's culture and story? While many academics and even colonial time naturalists such as Warren Hastings and James Cook, dispassionately noted the what they saw as they traversed the world and could live by the ideology to let people follow their own social order, others such as Thomas Macaulay championed the spread and establishment of liberal education to make all cultures civilized and assimilated into British culture. One's mental framework in studying other cultures could greatly affect their perception and how they share about the practices and beliefs. In this regard, Lydia's resistance to entrusting an "outsider" who may or may not objectively understand and articulate their culture satisfactorily is justified.

While many times it could be a malicious attempt to undermine other cultures, other times, it could simply be a stark difference in belief that impedes one's ability to remain objective in studying other's culture. In his paper, "Shouting at the Hebrews: Imperial Liberalism versus Liberal Pluralism and the Practice of Male Circumcision", Shweder defines, "liberal is a person who has a moral taste for any way of life (whether familial, social or political) that encourages and enables persons endowed with reason and free will to lead their lives by their own lights and to realize their potential for self-governance" (Shweder 250). He distinguishes that an imperial liberal would find it justifiable to stand up against illiberal practices and it is acceptable to eliminate any tradition that is at odds to liberal ways of life for individuals to "make world a better place" while a liberal pluralist doesn't make that assumption and can accept other ideals. In Susan Okin's piece, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", she urges liberals who are caught between accepting other cultures and upholding liberal ideals such as feminism, to not yield group rights to the "clearly oppressive" cultures that infringe upon women's rights. The "rights" are not determined through

cultural relativism but decided through the lens of liberalism. In the play, Michaela, seems to resonate with the argument of imperial liberals, such as Okin. She opposed the idea of making female genital circumcision safer as “that would only encourage the practice” and felt deeply pained at the idea that even educated girls succumbed to participating in this “barbaric” practice and suspects that is it is ultimately oppression in the form of customs that is making one choose participation in this practice (Rozin 52). While Alan seems to align with ideology of a liberal pluralist, who does not support the practice but affirms that it is the choice of the women in the community since there is no evidence of lasting physical harm or voluntary participation.

While Lydia’s stance, that, African women need to be the ones to have a strong voice in this matter is commendable, having an objective opinion from an outside perspective does hold some merit. Discarding any western scholarship from this or any other discourse on culturally divisive issues would skew the discussion in the other way. To move towards a place where honest efforts are made to understand and uphold cultural practices that give people a sense of identity, purpose and belonging and to exist in a world where different cultures can exist harmoniously, both in-group and out-group voices should be represented. Her challenge to the western norms of elderly care and her resolve to study western culture is one step closer to reversing the unidirectional study of culture and increase objectivity in cultural understanding, but it makes one wonder - does it need to be in turns?

Overall, the play, Human Rites, successfully engages the readers in a deep layered conversation through novel perspectives presented by interesting characters. The unfolding of the plot takes one through a journey on the issue as well as that of the character’s ideas and likability. The Indianapolis Business Journal aptly reviews the play to “relentlessly challenge its audience to

rethink its assumptions, about both big-picture issues and the human characters wrestling with them" (Human Rites). The tension between Michaela and Alan because of their history, allows an unfiltered conversation that goes beyond academic and professional narrative. As the Dean of the department, Michaela only politely advises him to reconsider his repercussions but as the conversation took a personal tone, she challenges his very motive of conducting the study is rooted in his fascination for Africans and also accuses him of using her and taking her idea of researching initiation rites. Even the interactions between Michaela, Alan and Lydia go from a professional discussion to a raw, upfront discussion. It was interesting that Lydia's study was on elderly care while Alan had just helped his parents settle into a retirement community yet refused to see it as a cultural practice. Or that Michaela had adopted a girl from Africa and had African roots but removed from those cultural influences in her upbringing, she could not relate with Lydia on this matter. While at the beginning of the play, Michaela considers herself more relatable than Alan for conducting studies on Africa, towards the end Lydia charges her of abandoning her roots and embracing the "full palette of white European values" (Rozin 62). It was through these interconnections and interactions that the play retained a personal and interesting quality while continuously presenting a thought-provoking discourse. In just a short one-act play, Rozin brought to attention: the different views on female genital circumcision, questions of cultural differences and the role and rights of an academic or any outsider to study other cultures.

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