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Fall 2019

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Recommended Citation

Connolly, Annakah, "American Culture Against the Hmong" (2019). *Fall 2019*. 32.
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/fys_ww_f2019/32

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Annekah Connolly

American Culture Against the Hmong

Every day throughout the world, different perspectives, opinions, and viewpoints collide. The meeting of these different backgrounds can be a powerful tool in developing various ideas, especially when it creates a shared knowledge. However, two cultures forced together does not always result in a higher shared understanding. In Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, there is a recurring theme of Western insensitivity as the American and Hmong cultures meet. Anne Fadiman utilizes this recurring theme of insensitivity in order to present the idea that ignorance is so divisive that the underlying respect for other humans is overlooked.

It is said that humans fear what they do not understand, which is part of why American culture so poorly interacts with the Hmong and their beliefs. When the Hmong first move to Merced, they are greeted as an "exotic guest" (Fadiman 232), one that is unique and highly revered. However, this perspective quickly changes once the Hmong start practicing their cultural animal sacrifices, shamanic ceremonies, and generally un-American behavior. Local Americans quickly reject this new culture simply because it is different from the Western ideas they are used to. Western insensitivity occurs as the Americans reject the mixing of Hmong people into their community, as the majority of Americans in the area refuse to be accepting of this new culture. The United States was created with the intent that people from all different backgrounds are free to practice their own beliefs in a safe space, and these Western doctors are acting inconsiderately towards the Hmong by ignoring this value. In a country where other cultures and beliefs are supposed to be welcome, it is not evident and "unusual" cultures are disrespected.

Western insensitivity makes yet another appearance when Lia Lee is admitted to the hospital. There is often no official Hmong translator available when the Lees are interacting with hospital staff, especially at night, and it is nearly impossible for doctors to communicate with the Hmong patients (Fadiman 25). Medical problems can happen to anyone at all times of the day, yet the ignorance of the Western culture in the hospital overlooks the possibility of needing a translator. This is especially problematic because one of six people in Merced are Hmong, (225) meaning that a Hmong translator would be a useful and logical addition to the hospital staff. Due to this lack of communication, some doctors treat Hmong patients as animals, saying that they must ““practice veterinary medicine”” (25) because there is no common language to understand how the patient feels. The inconsideration of the Western doctors towards the Hmong culture is evident as the doctors literally degrade the Hmong from human beings to animals due to a lack of common language, and refuse to find a translator despite the large ratio of Hmong to Americans in the Merced community.

The Western perspective of being smart and educated is solely about learning and understanding; facts, support of those facts, and the reason why those facts are true is the basis of Western education and thinking. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, the American doctors are upset that Foua and Nao Kao do not give Lia the epilepsy medicine she needs (Fadiman 53). As the most highly educated people in that situation, the doctors think that they should have the most authority. Since they are experts who have put in large amounts of time, energy, and money going through years of medical school, they know how to best help a patient (276). This dominant mindset is part of what makes the doctors of this Western culture so insensitive. The doctors believe that the Hmong are stupid and that their practices are irrelevant,

simply because they are not the traditional Western norms. The Hmong people may not speak English or have gone through the American schooling system, but they are nevertheless smart people who have survived for thousands of years by being self-sufficient.

In the medical field, nationalism and Western medical beliefs about the body, rather than the soul, take precedence, changing the dynamic between the two cultures. For American doctors, the medical objective is to save a human life, regardless of what the person looks like, which language they speak, or what they believe. This Western viewpoint greatly clashes with the Hmong's prime belief that soul preservation is of the utmost importance. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, an American doctor unapologetically states that "the life comes first" (Fadiman 277). Even if the parents do not want to consent to surgery for their child due to their beliefs that the child's soul may be permanently damaged, the life saving surgery should go on. This ignorance of another's cultural beliefs is precisely what makes Western culture so unaware, because it completely misses part of what life is all about - the emotional, familial aspect of living that the Hmong so deeply value.

Some may argue that there are American doctors who really do care about the Hmong culture and getting to know what they believe. Although this may be true, the majority of American doctors are still heavily influenced by Western ideas when interacting with other cultures and beliefs, therefore becoming uninterested in learning about what other cultures have to offer. Because these individuals are so focused on their own culture, they lack knowledge and awareness of other cultures.

In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, author Anne Fadiman highlights the difference between Western culture and Hmong beliefs in order to demonstrate that the cultural

division between them can be so distracting that it causes one to disrespectfully treat the other as different. Although the people in these different cultures may have “unusual” practices or beliefs, they are all human beings who deserve to be treated respectfully. Americans rigidly thinking in the Western mindset miss out on part of what humanity has to offer. Family, tradition, and community are key factors that make life unique and meaningful; by only focusing on the face value and reality of things, the emotional part of being human is lost.

Works Cited

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* . Farrar Straus & Giroux Inc, 2007.