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The American Nightmare

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Melissa Ryan

The American Nightmare

Destruction, poverty, death: all things people are willing to accept for the peace they hope war brings, but what about the greater effect on the lives of those who fought and those who lived in the war torn country? The focus on recovering from wars, at least the “successful” ones, is to heal the physical wounds on the people and country; however, the mental and spiritual trauma of the participants is often overlooked. While the realities of the Vietnam War have become more common knowledge since the war itself, the Hmong people have not. Even though “ninety percent of the villages were affected by the war”(Fadiman 134), Hmong involvement in the war and the effect it had on them is a crucial part of history that is often overlooked. This missing chunk of history has had, and continues to have, devastating effects for many Hmong, including Foua. The ignorance of the Americans the Lees encountered, compounded with the trauma they experienced, leads to a deterioration in Foua’s mental state as her value as a person is taken from her.

Foua’s broken mindset is first depicted when Neil arranges for Lia to be taken from her parents and placed in foster care. From this action, it is evident he doesn’t consider their culture or family history, a recurring issue the Hmong face. The Lee family escaped from Laos during a time where the Pathet Lao would “separate Hmong families and send the kids far away from the parents” (Fadiman 157). When Lia was taken from their house, by people the Lees did not know, her parents were reminded of the fear they experienced during their escape. Along with the obvious language barrier preventing them from understanding why Lia was taken, and how they could fix the problem, the cultural barrier presents an even bigger complication. As explained by

Kathleen Ann Culhane-Pera, “Hmong parents believe parents are responsible for the child’s welfare and for deciding the child’s medical treatment” (qtd.in Fadiman 83). Their job is taken from them and they become “confused and enraged when they are stripped of their power” (Fadiman 84). This is especially detrimental for Foua, Lia’s mother, who feels “the police” (Fadiman 82) stole her main purpose in life when they took Lia.

Unfortunately, this is not a one time occurrence. Since arriving in the United States, Foua has felt worthless and stupid. She states that, “too many sad things have happened to me and my brain is not good anymore” (Fadiman 103). She feels that because she does not speak English and does not understand America she is “very stupid”(Fadiman 103). Her “persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about [herself]”(ADAA 1) are a serious symptom of PTSD as described by The Anxiety and Depression Association of America. This deterioration is especially tragic considering she moved to America to maintain her autonomy. Her symptoms are disregarded by everyone as they choose to blame her for everything that has occurred rather than take the time to understand her experiences and the effects these experiences are having on her.

However, despite everything, she still had her motherhood to cling to. Taking care of and loving her children is something she has done in every step of her life, no matter the circumstance, but when even that is taken away, she becomes suicidal. This devastation is most evident when “Nao Kao came home to find Foua pointing a knife at herself. He took the knife away. A month later, Jeanine Hilt’s case log noted that Foua was hysterical and threatening suicide again” (Fadiman 89). These desperate cries for help illustrate the fear and confusion Foua felt losing her daughter. Despite the obvious depression and PTSD symptoms exhibited, no real

help was sent to the family. They had Jeanine, who did care about them, but her job was to help them reunite with Lia, not to be their therapist. Foua desperately needed help and it was never offered. This lack of understanding for her experiences gravely affects her well being.

This continual ignorance is illustrated when Foua is described as “spoiling” Lia, and carrying her very frequently (Fadiman 115). However, upon closer consideration, this is not just a mother spoiling her daughter; this is a woman living in fear. While describing their escape to Thailand, Nao Kao explains that they “carried the babies”(Fadiman 136). They ran from a life of absolute terror, while holding and protecting their children as much as they could. As if that wasn’t traumatic enough, once the family arrives to “safety,” Foua is branded as a “legally abusive parent” (Fadiman 88) and her daughter is taken from her. These circumstances lead Foua to constantly live with the fear that her daughter will be taken from her again. Carrying Lia is a coping mechanism used to soothe her daughter, and herself. Not only does it make Lia feel safe, but Foua believes that if she is carrying her nothing can happen to her. These feelings reflect that “Foua was out of the house”(Fadiman 82) when Lia was taken by CPS. Foua now clings to Lia and doesn’t want to let her out of her sight because of the fear that if she is not with Lia they will take her again. Her “persistent fear” (ADAA 1) is another symptom of her undiagnosed PTSD.

However, these symptoms are once again disregarded as the teachers at the Schelby Center for Special Education judge Foua for carrying Lia everywhere and in response they create a rule in the school, “No one could pick up Lia”(Fadiman 115). While this method might be effective for families who do spoil their children, the Lee’s are not the typical American family. The circumstances that created this desire to protect Lia were initiated by escaping Vietnam, and further instilled by losing Lia to CPS, yet once again no one takes this into consideration. No one

asks Foua why she constantly carries Lia around, or explains to her how this could affect Lia, they only judge her as they would any American mother.

The continual problem, that almost everyone in America judges Foua's actions as a mother based on American customs, creates severe mental issues for Foua. Foua, and other Hmong, can not be compared to Americans who have never had to live through the experiences the Hmong did. As it has been shown that, "past traumatic experiences and current adjustment issues have impacted the mental health of Hmong Americans" (Lee 2). While this may not come as a shock, what does is that "experiences and situations while living in the U.S. are stronger predictors of mental health than pre-emigration issues" (Lee 2). This creates an unfair judgement, rejection, and prejudice against the Hmong in America which causes the Hmong more trauma than escaping from a communist reign did. Foua is a prime example of this as she was never suicidal before coming to American and only became so when Lia was taken.

The Lee's story is just one example of the tragedies faced by the Hmong community, and it is important that their story is a lesson not just for the medical community, but for Americans as a whole. During such a politically charged time with many immigration issues at hand, it is important to not forget history and use this story to prevent repetition. It is not possible to go back and fix the damages left on the Hmong community, but it is possible to prevent such tragedies from occurring again.

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