



Fall 2019

FYS 101 Women Writing the World

Fall 2019

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Recommended Citation

Dean, Becky, "Cross-Cultural Misapprehensions" (2019). *Fall 2019*. 34.
https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/fys_ww_f2019/34

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Becky Dean

Cross-Cultural Misapprehensions

Throughout Anne Fadiman's book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, there is a persistent divide between the Hmong and American cultures. Each group maintains their individual beliefs on medicine, religion, relationships, etc. and holds them strongly in their hearts, preventing the entrance of opposing viewpoints. The lack of a common language between the Hmong and Americans further separates the two groups and prevents the establishment of a common ground. Rather than being able to communicate about Lia's disease, the doctors and the Lees assume the worst in each other regarding Lia's treatment. Without being able or willing to question the other, both the Lees and the doctors at MCMC find it nearly impossible to work with each other in a respectful manner. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman carefully demonstrates the recurring cross-cultural misapprehensions between the Hmong and Americans as a consequence of their clinging to beliefs, lack of a common language, and perspective on the scope of medicine.

When confronted with a culture that is different from one's own, the worst attitude to take is noncooperation. It requires a willingness to question the opposing side about their beliefs and values to understand another point of view. Unfortunately for both the doctors of MCMC and the Lee family, this did not occur. Both groups clung so closely to their respective belief systems that they could not accept the other's point of view, leading to a cycle of failure. Fadiman fairly presents each side while demonstrating both empathy and sensitivity to each perspective, qualities both the Hmong and American doctors lacked. Fadiman makes it clear to the reader that when refugees started settling in Merced County in the 1980s, the doctors at

MCMC had never heard the word “Hmong”, much less anything regarding to their culture. After his first encounters with Hmong patients, Tom Sult stated, “They’d bang the crap out of some kind of musical instrument, and the American patients would complain. Finally we had to talk to them. No gongs. And no dead chickens” (Fadiman 64). This critical remark portrays how the American and Hmong struggle to coexist as they maintain their cultural beliefs and practice their rituals. The American patients found the Hmong to be annoying simply because of their peculiar traditions.

Fadiman further demonstrates the theme of cross-cultural misunderstandings occurring as a result of lack of awareness for each other’s values through statements such as, “Neil and Peggy had no idea what the Lees were doing to heal Lia because they never thought to ask” (112). Without questioning the Lees, Neil and Peggy failed to understand what was helping Lia and continued treating her with their Western medical approach. The Hmong and Americans failed to connect to one another because each was so focused on their own way of life that they did not care to question or begin to understand the other’s reasoning.

It was difficult for the two groups to mesh well together, especially without a common language to bridge the already-far gap between the Hmong and Americans. Two cultures cannot begin to understand the other without the presence of a common language. Struggles with communication can lead to individuals falling victim to paranoia and misinformation, leading to further misunderstandings of the opposing culture. The Hmong became victim to falsities which can be seen through the questions Mao Thao was confronted with at the soccer field in Ban Vinai: “After you die, why do American doctors try to open up your head and take out your brains? Do American doctors eat the livers, kidneys, and brains of Hmong patients?” (Fadiman

32). These questions came as a result of limited contact with Western medical techniques and the mistranslation that resulted from the lack of a common language for the Hmong to understand the procedures the doctors were performing. The language barrier also made it impossible for Foua to communicate with Lia's doctors, or to administer her medicine in the correct dosages and at the correct times. Fadiman put it simply when she stated, "since Foua cannot read and has never learned to recognize Arabic numerals, it is unlikely that she followed these instructions" (8). Foua and Nao Kao were oblivious to the fact that they were not administering Lia's medicine correctly, so when Lia continued to be misdiagnosed, her parents' skepticism of American doctors was raised each time. The lack of communication between the Hmong and Americans led to misunderstandings of the overarching goals of each group. The distance between the Hmong and American cultures grew due to the lack of a shared language, disallowing a common ground to be formed.

The Hmong interpretation of medicine and the Western approach to medicine did not align in the slightest, leading to a cross-cultural misunderstanding of which is more important, the life or the soul. Hmong believe medical concerns to be intertwined with all elements of life, never an isolated issue. A body ache or pain is indicative of a spiritual issue in one's life. With this in mind, Fadiman enlightens her readers of the Hmong perspective on Lia's condition. The contraction of Lia's disease was carefully described in the way the Lees understood it: "the noise of the door had been so profoundly frightening that her soul had fled her body and become lost. They recognized the resulting symptoms as *quag dab peg*, which means 'the spirit catches you and you fall down'" (Fadiman 20). Translated to epilepsy in the English language, the condition Lia was faced with had two varying treatment plans, each aligning with the two cultures' beliefs

on how to best treat the three-month-old child. The Western medical approach the Americans took focused only on the body, not the soul. Fadiman points out Hippocrates' assessment of epilepsy: "Men think epilepsy is divine merely because they don't understand it" (29). This misunderstanding of Lia's condition led to ineffective treatment, ultimately leading to her vegetative state. If there had been a bridge to walk to connect the two scopes of medicine, would her end state had been different? It is very difficult to determine such an answer because the Hmong and Americans failed to communicate their differences in understanding epilepsy and how to treat it.

Anne Fadiman, through writing *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, is able to identify the cross-cultural misconstructions between the Hmong and Americans as consequences of their strongly-held beliefs, which were unable to be communicated to each other due to the lack of a common language. Resentment is generated between the two groups as each of their perspectives on the scope of medicine clashed in Lia's inpatient room at MCMC. Fadiman was able to determine the roots of the issues experienced between the Hmong and American which included their differing beliefs, languages, and perspectives on medicine. By including such detailed accounts of the happenings in Lia's life, Anne Fadiman is able to expose her readers to a situation where the result can be altered in today's medical environment only if there is a change in the approach from both doctors and the minority. Lia's battle with epilepsy and the struggles she endured along the way challenges Fadiman's audience to be more open minded when dealing with an individual or group of individuals who hold beliefs other than their own.

Works Cited

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.