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Katie Gordon

Hmong Reduction in the Melting Pot of American Society

In Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Fadiman juxtaposes the Lee family's struggles with the western medical system while caring for their ill daughter, Lia, and the adversity the Hmong culture as a whole faces in the United States. Fadiman highlights the strife that comes with the stark cultural differences between the Hmong people and the Americans. For Foua, Nao Kao, Lia, and the Hmong people, immigration to the United States, as highlighted by Fadiman, meant reduction: reduction of their culture, reduction of their freedom, and reduction of their humanity.

Throughout many centuries, the Hmong people have responded to the threat of assimilation by engaging in wars, or simply fleeing. When the Hmong people were forced out of their home country into the United States, large capitalist corporations, such as Ford, forced their migrant workers to take classes such as "work habits, personal hygiene, and table manners" (Fadiman 183). Ford imposed the ideas that American culture deems important, such as hygiene and table manners, on the Hmong people without any regard for their culture or what they believe to be important. Classes such as these reduce the autonomy of the Hmong to be their own people with their own unique culture. Fadiman also highlights that "the first sentence they memorized was 'I am a good American'" (182). Fadiman utilizes this quote to prove to her readers that the Hmong people were immediately forced to abandon their own identity in favor of a new American identity. It is also important to note that very few Hmong understood even a word of English. In these classes, they were being forced to memorize and repeat things they did not understand. None of the Hmong people were able to stand up and say, "I am not American. I

am Hmong,” because they had no idea that they were admitting to abandoning their native culture. The culture of the Hmong people was reduced from being strong and vibrant, like it was in Laos, to being just one of the many that make up the diluted melting pot of immigrant cultures in the United States.

Following the completion of these culturally reductive courses, the Hmong people are subjected to a graduation ceremony. Fadiman describes:

During their graduation ceremony they gathered next to a gigantic wooden pot, which their teachers stirred with ten-foot ladles. The students walked through a door into the pot, wearing traditional costumes from their countries of origin and singing songs in their native languages. A few minutes later, the door in the pot opened and the students walked out again, wearing suits and ties, waving American flags, and singing The Star-Spangled Banner. (Fadiman 182-183)

The imagery of the Hmong people in this ceremony is used by Fadiman to indicate the incredible reduction of culture that is imposed on the Hmong upon moving to the United States. Their culture is simmered down into a uniform mixture of people who, despite coming from varying backgrounds and having very distinct cultural practices, appear the exact same after being influenced by the United States. Further, Fadiman uses a very specific word to describe the dress that the people from all different cultures walk in wearing: “costumes”. The use of the word “costumes” degrades the intricacy of the traditional clothing that the Hmong people put hours into planning, hand stitching and creating for their families. The word costume implies some sort of fabricated dress that lacks originality, meaning or intricacy, which is the exact opposite of the Hmong people’s cultural dress. If anything in this situation could to be referred to as a costume,

it should be the suits and ties that are being forced onto the Hmong people as a sign of their reduction into the melting pot of American culture.

For many Hmong people, the reductions imposed on them by the American people resulted in much more than just unwillingly being forced into a suit and tie. Fadiman juxtaposes the experiences of the Hmong people as a whole with the experiences of one family in particular: the Lee family. Shortly after the Lees moved to the United States, they realized that their youngest daughter was ill. The Lee family diagnosed the illness as “*qaug dab peg*, which means ‘the spirit catches you and you fall down’” (Fadiman 20). When Lia was rushed to MCMC hospital, for the first time, the doctors diagnosed Lia with the seizure disorder epilepsy (Fadiman 31). As the Lee family returned again and again to MCMC hospital in times of emergency, the doctors grew increasingly frustrated with the Lee family and their views on their daughter’s medical condition. Fadiman noted, “*No one* at MCMC would have noticed anything but her seizures. *Lia was her seizures*, To MCMC residents, *Lia continued to be her seizures*” (256). To the doctors, Lia was no longer a human, she was a debilitating medical condition that needed to be fixed. Fadiman emphasizes over and over that Lia’s humanity had been reduced by every doctor she saw. The doctors didn’t see Lia as a young child with emotions, feelings, a family that cared for her and possibly a future. Lia was her stack of hospital charts, her long list of emergency room visits, and her infuriating problem that had almost no hope of ever being solved.

The conflict between the Hmong culture and the beliefs of the medical professionals resulted in a heartbreaking but inevitable situation for Lia and her family. After years of the Lee family treating Lia the only way they knew how and the medical professionals fighting

persistently to have Lia's care executed the way they wanted, Lia was rushed to the emergency room in the midst of a grand mal seizure that she would never recover from (Fadiman 141). After hours and many attempts to save Lia, most of which were against the family's wishes, Lia was pronounced brain dead (Fadiman 150). Fadiman highlights that even after this tragic event, the medical professionals still had little sympathy for Lia and her family. While recalling the distress that Lia was in, one doctor stated, "She was in a vegetative state. But that was one angry vegetable" (Fadiman 173). From this point on, whenever Lia was in the hospital she was almost always referred to as "the vegetable". Fadiman uses these comments to prove that even after the heartbreaking brain death of a four-year-old child, the doctors still didn't have respect for the Hmong people and continued to not call Lia by her name or even refer to her as a person. On Lia's best days, she was still only "a perfect vegetable" (Fadiman 214). Lia's reduction from a human to a simple vegetable was a direct result of the doctors' frustrations with the differences in cultural beliefs of how to treat Lia. This behavior shows the neglect that the doctors had for the Lee family and the issues that Lia was plagued with.

Whether in the hospital or in the American communities surrounding where the Hmong were concentrated, a constant lack of respect and lack of understanding of their culture plagued the Hmong people. Fadiman writes, "typical phrases from the newspaper and magazine stories in the late seventies and eighties included "low-caste hill tribe," "Stone Age," "emerging from the midst of time" (188). For the Hmong people, in a new foreign land, their cultural practices were all they knew and the part of their quickly changing lives they wished would remain constant. They believed that the best way to heal a sick person was through the *twix neeb* (Fadiman 112). The ways in which they obtained their food, through the sacrifice of animals, was the only way they

knew how to feed themselves. The ritual of sacrificing animals is not “low-caste” or “Stone Age”, for the Hmong people it was all they knew. Their American neighbors, uncomfortable with this practice and unable to acknowledge the differences in culture, quickly jumped to the conclusion that it didn’t belong in their society. They brought the issues they had with the Hmong rituals to the city government and banned it from their communities. Fadiman highlights this ban on animal sacrifice, and other Hmong rituals like it, in order to draw attention to the restrictions that were being put on the freedom of the Hmong people to practice their culture in their own homes.

Fadiman describes the doctors, towards the end of her work, as, “all-head-no-heart formalists who, when presented with a problem, would rather medicate it, scan it, suture it, splint it, excise it, anesthetize it, or autopsy it than communicate with it” (273). While this statement made by Fadiman is directly representative of the medical staff at MCMC hospital, it is also representative of the American people and their response to the Hmong immigration. When the Hmong immigrated to the United States, the American people were quick to see them as a threat to their society. The doctors saw the Hmong people as a threat to their credibility as medical professionals; the Ford motor company saw them as an obstacle in the way of their success in the capitalist economy; and the people who were neighbors to the Hmong communities saw them as a threat to the purity of their society. Rather than talk to the Hmong people about their culture and how to incorporate it into American society, the doctors, the business giants, and the American people, with all head and no heart, reduced the Hmong culture, reduced the Hmong people’s freedom and reduced the Hmong people’s humanity.

Works Cited

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

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