

Communication in hills like white elephants



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Communication in relationships, especially intimate romantic ones, is very vital for the progressive sustenance of the bond between the two parties involved. Ernest Hemmingway's *Hills Like White Elephants* presents a narrative of a couple struggling with communication breakdown between them which threatens their relationship and prevents them from solving pressing issues between them. One of these issues, though subtly implied rather than directly mentioned, is abortion which the American man wants but the girlfriend does not appear to favor. Both Jig and the American struggle with communication breakthrough in a bid to come to terms with the conflict in their relationship with each having different views and opinions. The story delineates a couple at an emergency point in their relationship. They battle, in broad daylight, to convey their opposing perspectives on the course their relationship should take. The narrative opens with the two main characters waiting for a train while trying to talk out the conflict and issues in their relationships. However, from the very first moments, one can tell that neither listens to the other and poor listening and communication is going on which worsens the existing crisis in their life. Jig notes that the hills behind the train station "...look like white elephants" and when her boyfriend states he has never seen a white elephant, she responds rudely (Hemingway, 40).

Her rude reply could be because of the pressure she is feeling from her boyfriend, the American, who insists that she procures an abortion as she is pregnant with his child. He has not shown signs that he would like to marry her and although she pretends as if the subject of abortion does not bother her, she is very scared and frustrated about it. She therefore unconsciously

directs her frustrations, pressure, and fears by being rude and uncommitted in conversation with her boyfriend. Fear and uncertainty of prospects, plans, and state of things after the abortion is a factor that causes strain in the relationship between the two lovers. This strain is manifested in the poor communication seen in the rude, strained, and unproductive conversation between the two. Jig's main fear is whether she will be okay or the same after the operation as she asks "Then what will we do afterward?" and the American vaguely answers that "We will be fine afterward, just like we were before." He does not seem to address her fears that the abortion might not be safe or how it will affect their relationship whether it fails or succeeds. In truth, she likes the American a lot, and she is concerned that the abortion might affect how they relate after losing the baby from abortion. It is reassuring for her to hear everything will still be the same but still harbors uncertainty after she asks him "how sure are you?" in his response that it will be just like it used to be before when they do the operation (Hemingway, 40).

This is a sign that she is still distressed and not fully comforted. Both the characters have different perspectives and opinions on what direction their relationship should take which they struggle to show the other while still respecting the other's views. While the American appears not able to fully express himself in the best way possible, it is evident that he cares a lot about his girlfriend when he openly tells her what he thinks she should do. She makes it clear that she does not want to force her to do anything "...I don't want you to do it if you don't want to" referring to the abortion. He tells her that to assure her that he is not going to force or infringe on her wishes

thus reassuring her that she doesn't want her to do something that she is not comfortable with in respect to the abortion. He tells her that he will respect her decision if she does not want to go ahead with the abortion. The take away from this is that the American man cares deeply for her enough not to force his opinion on her. Equal and shared opinion decision making is applied in a bid to solve the issues facing the couple. One primary conflict between Jig and her lover is the divergent views in sharing parenthood. Jig does love her American lover, but at the same time, she is frustrated that the man does not want to share parenthood with her. She walks away to the end of the station frustrated with his sentiments that after the abortion, they will be free to go anywhere that they want to emphasize that as long as the operation is done " we can go anywhere." To this, she retorts that " No, we can't it isn't ours any more." Jig is referring to the world she thinks they share as a couple which will cease to be theirs in case that the operation destroys magic. The conflict here is that the man does not idealize shared parenthood with Jig and this destroys any image Jig has of a magical world post the abortion (Link, 68).

A closer look makes reveals that while the two couples are trying to achieve a convergent place to live their life and steer their relationship into a stable place, there is lack of proper attention and active communication. After her first remark about the hills looking like white elephants is ignored, Jig repeats the statement to her lover saying " I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright" The last questions shows that she is somehow still in doubt about herself and how the American feels about her. She then later comments that all they do is look at things and try new drinks in a way

that shows she is tired, bored, and frustrated by their life. Her lover does not seem to read this properly and nonchalantly answers “ I guess so.” When she goes ahead to comment that the lovely hills do not “ really look like white elephants” and that she “ just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees” he responds in a completely different tone and subject saying “ should we have another drink?” (Hemingway, 56). Their communication lines are very different, and they lack that synergy and relation in how they talk. One can say they are both poor listeners who do not take time to listen to respond appropriately (Link, 68).

In summation, the two characters in the Ernest Hemingway’s Hills Like White Elephants struggle with communication issues in their bid to resolve conflict in their relationship. The primary issue was causing a rift in their different perspectives on the issue of abortion and shared parenthood. Also, poor communication which is manifested in poor listening skills and wanting interpersonal, verbal skills exacerbates the existing rift in their communication. At the core of it all, both genuinely care about each other and want to be with each other only that while Jig thinks having the baby will cement their shared parenthood, the man thinks that it will not be necessary. With time, they both come to learn how to compromise on different issues and come together in a more open and accepting relationship.