

Free the spirit catches you and you fall down essay sample

[Parts of the World](#), [European Union](#)



Critical Analysis of the Readings: The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

Critical analysis of the reading

Lia Lee and her family originated from the Hmong tribe, which is an ethnic group located in China and Laos. The Lee family was among a number of families that were displaced in the height of the Vietnam War. After her epilepsy diagnosis, Lia Lee found her herself in the middle of a cultural misunderstanding between her family and doctor events which led to them destroying her brain (Fadiman 1997). The book does not discuss mainly Lia's illness as much as it discusses the western and cultural medicine and how each group viewed illnesses and medicine differently.

Lia's mother, Foua Yang, had already given birth thirteen times before she got pregnant with Lia Lee. However, all the other births had taken place under different circumstances, which was easier for her since her environment was much more controlled because of the familiarity. However, in Lia Lee's case, she had to give birth just like other American women on a metal table and sterile drapes so that her daughter would become an American citizen, or so she thought. The writer of the book, Fadiman (2007), describes the origin of the Hmong people to try to shed lights to their differences in behavior and attitudes from the western culture. Fadiman describes the Hmong people as a shaman oriented group that based their belief in the spirit called the dab. This spirit, they believed, controlled their souls as well as caused illnesses. The shaman was responsible for negotiating with the spirit dabs, for his patient's illness. However, doctors in charge of Lia's case did not recognize this believes systems and repeatedly

bombarded Lia's cultural based parents with the western understanding of biomedicine.

When the Lee's sort helps from the hospital, they did not realize that they also had to accept the medical procedures and medicine that the doctors would prescribe. The main reason why they reached out to the hospital was that they knew the doctors were highly educated and respected.

Unfortunately, the married couple of doctors Neil and Peggy were not properly equipped to deal with the cultural barrier and hatred to the western medicine that existed in Nao Kao and Foua Lee, who were Lia's parents. This is because before coming to the United States, Fadiman (1997) writes that the Hmong people had heard rumors that doctors took blood from people and even children yet they believed a body contained a finite amount of blood that could not be replaced. Among other rumors, they also heard that doctors ate patient's brains, livers and cut up people into little pieces. All this was not accepted practices in the Hmong culture. The doctors, during Lia's treatment, believed that their culture was ignorant, backward, and inadequately explored to give it a chance as part of a holistic treatment for their patient. Doctors took advantage of their powerful position, but this only bred mistrust and disrespect between the doctors and Lia's parents. In the book, both parties partly blamed the other for Lia's vegetative state and physical disabilities that became of Lia from the age of four (Fadiman 1997). While epilepsy and septic shock were treatable conditions in the 1980's, hostility between the Lee's and hospital staff robbed Lia of any chance of ever leading a normal life in America. Fadiman (1997) argues that some of practices that annoyed the Lees included tying her down to look for veins,

restraining her since she had become too hyperactive and the general administration of large amounts of medicine to little Lia. Her parents, especially her mother constantly lied and gave confused feedback when asked about the administration of Lia's medicine. Although the Lee family was filled with nothing but love for their daughter, they stopped medication, gave her double doses of certain medications while completely neglecting the others since they felt it made her better. As a result, she was taken into a foster home so that her medication could be properly monitored (Fadiman 1997). However, this only made her sadder, and she had to go back home where she finally suffered her greatest seizure that led to her being in a vegetative state for the rest of her life until she died at the age of thirty in 2012.

Cultural conflict within the story

Fadiman in his book wrote that it was not the septic shock or the noncompliant parents that destroyed Lia's life, but the cultural misunderstanding that existed between the two realities of western rationalism and the Hmong animism (Progressive Christianity 2012). The first difference that existed between the two was the language barrier that was very difficult to bridge. The fact that the hospital did not have English-Hmong translators working in the night shift meant that the doctors had no way of knowing where the patient was hurt or exactly how they felt in order to make the proper diagnosis. In fact, the doctors initially misdiagnosed Lia with a bronchial infection severely because they did not know that the bronchial issues were caused by the seizures. However, even after they

properly diagnosed her with epilepsy, her doctors were unable to communicate with the parents on how to administer her medicine because they did not even understand the diagnosis (Fadiman 1997). Since Lia's parents were illiterate in the English language, they could not read the prescriptions in her medications to properly administer the drugs and the doctors did not make an effort to assist them understand how to administer the drugs. This prompted the doctors to report them to child protective services, and Lia was taken away from them for six months because of poor communication between the doctors and parents regarding Lia's medicines. Secondly, the Progressive Christianity (2012) states that the family was not open about the cultural beliefs and perspectives that they had that may have helped with Lia's situation. From the family's reality, they would have been comfortable with her dying if the shaman would not have been able to negotiate her life with the dabs. However, western medicine called for intrusive and extreme measures to try to save her life. The lack of knowledge by the western doctors to try to understand their culture means that both parties had no respect for each other. Even though the Hmong people bore too many taboos that contradicted with the western medicine, proper training on the part of the doctors would have assisted them greatly with dealing with the hardened parents. The doctors did not understand that the shaman and dabs were the only legitimate mode of treatment that the Hmong understood given their harsh experience in history (Fadiman 1997). This group of people had survived wars, exile, drought, and oppression rendering them very resilient culture that resisted other cultures with everything that they had. Unfortunately, the cultural discords made the Lees

view the doctors as forceful authoritative figures, which meant that they had to dislike and defy everything that they advised. The doctors, on the other hand, understood them as stubborn and ignorant parents who did not have the ability to take care of their sick baby. This cultural animosity consequently led to Lia's vegetative state.

The Progressive Christianity (2012) argues that the secular and rationalistic practices of the doctors and the spiritual practices of the Lees conflicted in the holistic treatment of the little girl. In the modern world, technology and the numerous inventions that have taken place over time have made people believe that they can control every single aspect of their lives. However, the Hmong people did not share in the same ideology. They believed that spirits and other spiritual beings controlled their fate in life and after death. While the doctors had a more rational idea to the cause and treatment of Lia's illness, the Lees preferred a more traditional approach which involved making sacrifices, special herbs, and the name changing as all that was supposed to be done to help Lia (Fadiman 1997). As a result, they came to believe that a little of both was what was best for Lia. However, Lia's illness would have been treated had the doctors used a more conjoined method that also involved the traditional methods to combat the illness. This might have given Lia a much better chance of leading a normal and healthy life.

Other similar cultures

Native Americans were another culture that bore different ideologies of the health and treatment from the western culture. According to Native Americans, health was a continuous process of staying strong spiritually,

mentally, and physically (Symon 2013). The strength kept them from forces that brought illnesses helped them fight diseases. In addition to strength, obeying religious teachings also helped them keep healthy. They believed that disobeying these religious doctrines had consequences of physical and psychological illness that lead to disability, and bad luck. Therefore, people were responsible for their own health as all their thoughts and actions were responsible for creating harmony or disharmony in the body and the spirit. For the treatment, the Native Americans engaged in rituals and practices that employed local herbs and a local medicine man to achieve harmony in their bodies (Symon 2013). However, after the 20th century, the Native Americans started using the western medicine to treat the illnesses that the western people had brought with them. However, the essence of spiritual harmony has remained as part of the Native American life as they continuously guarded the knowledge of their medicine people.

The pygmies of central Africa are also part of a cultural group of people that have come in conflict with that of the primary culture. Often regarded as the forest people, the pygmies have relied on their forests for their livelihood, medicine, religion, and cultural identity (Symon 2013). However, activities in central Africa for the past century have heavily affected their traditional basic way of life. Expansion of agricultural activity and mining into the forest left many of the subgroups displaced, and this took toll to their health and overall wellbeing. Further studies reveal that the Congo massacre heavily affected the pygmy population who were mercilessly killed and their women raped (Symon 2013). Today the little population left of the indigenous group is in danger of extinction as the forest they call home is at a constant threat

of miners, loggers, and farmers. The central African governments and the United Nations should strive to protect the forest people, as they are part of the last remaining survivors of the indigenous cultures.

The Sentinelese tribe, which is a group of around three hundred people who live in the north of the sentinel island, have refused any effort to receive visitors into their island. This tribe will shoot anyone trying to land on their island and, as a result have remained in isolation for most of their existence. The only information gathered from them date back in the 1960s, which was part of a peaceful interaction between outsiders and the community (Symon 2013). The foreigners brought with them coconuts, which were eaten instead of being planted, live pigs shot and buried, and other items in red buckets received but those in green buckets left. These people have survived natural disasters like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami without any help from the west. As a result, this indigenous group has continued to live without the interference of the western world for all their existence.

Conclusion

Many medical researchers argue that the events that took place in Merced have brought tremendous improvements in the medical world. They now understand that cultural awareness cannot be created by organizing a single day seminar but through employing a bilingual and bicultural workforce that can work alongside doctors and patients to provide amiable choices of treatment that will work for the benefit of the sick. This means that the medical society now pays attention to cross-cultural issues that were neglected in the 1980's leading to the poor treatment of Lia.

References

Symon, E. V. (2013). Ten tribes that avoided western civilization. Retrieved from: <http://listverse.com/2013/01/24/10-tribes-that-avoided-modern-civilization/>

Fadiman, A. (1997). *The spirit catches you and you fall down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Progressive Christianity. (2012). Review: *The spirit catches you and you fall down*. Retrieved from: <http://ephphatha-poetry.blogspot.com/2012/08/review-spirit-catches-you-and-you-fall.html>