

Factors of american exceptionalism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What does it mean to be exceptional? On one end of the stick, it means to stand apart as different, as in the “ exception to the rule.” However exceptional can also mean unusually outstanding, or in popular political parlance, “ great.” There are two definitions as to what American Exceptionalism means. The first being that America, its people, its government and its culture are distinctive from other industrialized nations. One example of this is Americans own far more guns per capita than any other nation; 89 guns for every 100 Americans. Another example under this definition is that Americans are ‘ in theory’ more religious than the citizens that belong to wealthier more industrialized countries.

While the second definition explains that America, its people, its government and its culture are better or put on a higher pedestal than most, if not all other countries. This “ definition” however, clearly is a matter of personal opinion, although it’s an opinion which is shared amongst most American people. *The Poisonwood Bible* was set in the late 1950s. The major events and personalities that were introduced at that time provided a different opinion to those of what the “ exceptionalism” of America looked like and if it even existed at all. At this time in history, the idea of American Exceptionalism was much different than how we know it in today’s world.

I. Time Period (1959)

The Poisonwood Bible was set in the late 1950s. During this time, in America, I personally feel that not a lot of exceptionalism was visible nor was it present. It was quite a harsh time in the United States of America during this time period, and a lot of changes would be in the making. Some of the values

and cultures that were present at this time were racial segregation and class system division. This gave me a different perspective on what American identity must've looked like in the 1950s. To me, it seems like a lot of people must've had a feeling of entitlement during this time and white privilege seemed to be very much acknowledged. In the novel, Ruth May represented this identity when she said " I was glad nobody wanted to cut off my hands. Because Jesus made me white, I reckon they wouldn't."

A pretty large and continuously growing number of Americans spoke out against inequality and injustice during the 1950s. All of which consisted of prejudice. African Americans had been battling versus racial discrimination for centuries. However, during the 1950s, the struggle against racism and segregation finally made its way into the mainstream of American life. Once the struggles of African Americans had some light shone on them, changes started being put into action. This was the time when the Civil Rights Movement took place. This was a huge event that changed the lives of Americans forever. Major people involved in making this happen were people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. Rosa Parks is known as the " mother of the modern-day civil rights movement." and Martin Luther King Jr. led the Montgomery Improvement Association which was formed by Black community leaders. Similar to Nathan Price in *The Poisonwood Bible* , MLK Jr. is also a Baptist minister. Towards the later years of the 1950s, going into the 1960s more personalities started to show up and participate in the Civil Rights Movement. People like A. Philip Randolph, who was the most influential civil rights leader to arise from the labour movement, and Bayard Rustin, an activist and civil rights organizer who is best known for his work as

an adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the 1950s and '60s. Barbara Kingsolver wrote *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998. The 1990s consisted of some pretty historically grand times as well. During the 1990s, the Gulf War took place. In 1991, the Cold War came to an end. In this period of time, Nelson Mandela was released after being imprisoned for 27 years. Nelson Mandela was the most prominent leader who was a part of the anti-apartheid movement. In October 1995, four hundred thousand to over one million black men assembled in Washington, D. C. for the Million Man March. The march was designed to bring about a sort of spiritual regeneration amidst black men and to instil within them, a sense of solidarity and of individual responsibility to improve their own condition. In this time frame, the meaning of American Identity seems to experience a shift. The American identity represents an individuality, resistant cooperation, and a sense of stewardship. However, that's only implied to one set of people; those who are looking to end segregation and discrimination. Otherwise, American identity remains unchanged and has a feeling of entitlement attached to it. In the novel, Adah says " According to my Baptist Sunday-school teacher, a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo." Again, white privilege unnecessary rears itself into another situation that it doesn't belong in. Even after so many events and incidents, in today's world, it seems like history is repeating itself. Ultimately, the American identity of the late 1950s and 1990s does not reflect American Exceptionalism.

II. Voice of The Author

I believe that the author depicted that American Exceptionalism does not exist. Throughout the novel, racial segregation and discriminatory

characteristics/values are shown through the characters and their beliefs. For example, when Rachel says “ I wanted to live under the safe protection of somebody who wore decent clothes, bought meat from the grocery store like the Good Lord intended, and cared about others.” (Kingsolver, 351). Here, it is shown that Rachel believes America is above other places and everyone should and wants to live the way people in America do. Automatically assuming and believing that America is a god blessed country and is everyone’s dream to be living there isn’t a very healthy way to think.

Another example from the novel of how the author refutes the idea of American Exceptionalism is when America and Congo are once again being compared. The quote states “ Most of America is perfectly devoid of smells. [...]Even in the grocery store, surrounded in one aisle by more kinds of food than will ever be known in a Congolese lifetime, there was nothing on the air but a vague, disinfected emptiness.” (Kingsolver, 5. 10) Here, America is made to be seen as a more excelling country when put beside Congo. In the essay, the writer says “ there are certain ways in which America is clearly different that in fact run contrary to exceptionalism as a faith. Perhaps the most obvious is our history with regard to slavery and race.” (Byers, 86) The writer is implying that America doesn’t reflect exceptionalism.

One last example from the novel that shows how the author represents the American identity linked to American Exceptionalism and how it is not being reflected is when the Congolese culture is being mocked. Rachel says “ Bosoms may wave in the breeze, mind you, but legs must be strictly hidden, top secret.” (Kingsolver, 1. 6) It is common in Congo for women to be dressed as so due to their working conditions and their daily duties as

mothers. Since Americans are open and available to more resources around them, everything they see in Congo seems otherworldly. “ Secretly, most [Congolese] believe white people know how to turn the sun on and off and make the river flow backward. ... They think you represent a greedy nation.” This must be why Congolese people think this. In the essay, it states, “ But exceptionalism was, nonetheless, not only an imaginary response, but a highly problematic one, particularly in two regards. First, there was an obvious contradiction between the ideology of exceptionalism and the material reality of a nation in which all were clearly not in fact equal. The white man’s “ own world” was built in significant part by the labor of Black men and women he owned, and the ostensibly free and classless opportunity allegedly guaranteed by open land was (or quickly became) more imaginary than real, and in any case depended upon the erasure of the Amerindians and their prior claims to that land.” (Byers, 89) In these few sentences, the author explains how racism and discriminatory values is a part of the foundation this nation was built upon. All the above research shows how the idea of American Exceptionalism has been refuted by the author of both the novel and the essay.

III. Process of Science

Malaria has tormented humans for thousands of years. Once the Romans initially introduced the idea, it was universally assumed that malaria was produced by something in the air spreading from swamplands, and that contact with these fumes was a hazard agent for the disease. Though the idea of swamp-gas infecting travellers with malaria seems absurd now, it was not instantly disregarded by 18th-century Italian physician Giovanni

Maria Lancisi who had obtained great acclaim by observing dark pigmentation in the organs of malaria sufferers. These insects are located throughout the globe, while incidents of malaria are concentrated in the tropics. “ About 1, 700 cases of malaria are diagnosed in the United States each year.” The large majority of cases in the United States come from tourists, travellers and immigrants returning from nations where malaria transference occurs, many from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

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