

an intercultural analysis of my big fat greek wedding essay sample

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As a typical intercultural movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is about Toula, a lower middle class Greek American woman who fell in love with a non-Greek upper middle class “white Anglo-Saxon Protestant” Ian Miller. They overcame a series of difficulties and eventually held a big fat Greek wedding. This movie shows us how Greek Americans live, reflecting the conflicts between Greek culture and American culture in a humorous way. Guided by Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, this paper mainly explores how Greeks and American handle the cultural conflicts, and how they integrate into each other’s culture. Therefore, we will arrange the paper in three dimensions of Hofstede’s theory: individualism vs. collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

1. Individualism vs Collectivism

The movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* reveals the sharp contrast between American individualism and Greek collectivism. From Hofstede’s research into culture differences among 50 countries and 3 regions, the US ranked first with its individualism index score reaching 91 while Greece ranked thirty with its individualism index score is only 35. We can learn from the movie that Ian considers himself as an individual and are more independent than Toula in terms of decision-making and family relationship.

1. 1 Decision-making

In the individualist society, people tend to emphasize their own interest and have more power to make their own decision without being influenced by other people. In American culture, it is common that Ian could decide who he wants to marry and what religion he wants to profess. By contrast, Toula, the Greek girl, had to follow her parents’ will to learn Greek and fulfill her duty to

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marry a Greek man. Just as Toula said to Ian, " Nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone... until the day we die." Families' opinions were important to Toula, which forced her to have dinner with several Greek men introduced by her father. Toula seemed to be submissive in choosing her husband because she should not make her own decision without asking her parents' permission. The reason why Toula had less power to make decision is that she is not regarded as an individual but an important part of her big family. Marriage is no longer her own business, but the business of the family.

1. 2 Family Relationship

Greeks have closer relationship with their family than Americans. Greeks attach great importance to their family by living in the same house with their parents and grandparents and gathering the whole family frequently. In the movie, Toula lived with her parents and grandmother, and her relatives always come to visit her family and have small talk frequently. Greeks care less about the privacy and enjoy intimate relationship with their families. For example, Toula's aunt was willing to share her secrets to Ian's parent, " Now, you are family. Okay. All my life, I had a lump at the back of my neck, right here. Always, a lump..." However, Americans are more independent from their family. Everyone is treated as an individual instead of part of a family. Ian lived in his own apartment rather than living with his parents. Unlike the Greek family, Ian's parents seldom mentioned and contacted with their relatives and they were not good at communicating with the family members. That's why Toula's father thought Ian's parents were very " dry" and not friendly at all.

2. Power distance

Hofstede refers to power distance as “ the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. According to power distance index, Greece ranks 60 while the US is 40, which indicates power distance in Greece is larger than it is in America. In large power distance countries there is considerable dependence of subordinates on bosses, and a preference for clearly demarcated hierarchy. The emotional distance between hierarchies will tend to be relatively large: subordinates will rarely approach and contradict their bosses. In Toula’s family, her father lies in the top rank and he is the boss, so he has absolutely the largest power among all the family members. They tend to accept the father’s power and authority simply on the basis of the father’s position in the hierarchy and to respect the father’s right to that power.

Authority is inherent in their position within this hierarchy. Everyone must listen to him and he is expected to make decisions autocratically. In the following part, four examples will be given to better illustrate the high power distance in Greek family: 1 Although Toula was 30 years old, she had to ask for his father’s permission timidly when she wanted to learn computer. 2 Toula would like to work in her aunt’s travel agency, but she had no power to make the decision on her own, even her aunt. Finally, her mother, her aunt and she cooperated together and worked out a good idea that helped Toula realize her dream. 3 When Toula was dating Ian, she didn’t dare to tell her father because she knew that he would ask her to marry a Greek. 4 When Ian first came to visit Toula’s family, Toula’s father even told Ian that Ian

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didn't ask for his permission to date Toula. On the contrary, in small power distance countries there is limited dependence of subordinates on bosses, and a preference for consultation.

The emotional distance between hierarchies will tend to be relatively small: subordinates will quite readily approach and contradict their bosses. People in such a culture are reluctant to accept the power and authority of their supervisors merely because of their position in the hierarchy. Individuals assess authority in view of its perceived rightness or their own personal interests. From the movie, we can see that in the US, each member in a family enjoys equal rights and everyone is responsible for his own things. Compared with Toula's family, Ian's has lower power distance. Ian could individually deal with his affairs without asking his parents' opinions or permissions in terms of dating and marriage, even his religion. In the American family, children were raised with the values of individualism and equality, and their parents have no privilege to ask children to obey orders. There is no obvious hierarchy in American family.

3. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the most obvious dimension that differentiates Greece from the US. Greece has the highest level of uncertainty avoidance among the countries Hofstede have surveyed, which is 112, while the US is 46, much lower than Greece. We can also easily find evidence from this movie. When people are under new cultural environment, there are four main reactions: assimilation, isolation, marginalization and integration. In this movie, isolation is the strategy taken by Toula's father because he is a

chauvinist with a high level of uncertainty avoidance. He tried to keep himself and his families away from American culture and seized every chance to show Greek culture. The methods he used to isolate Greek culture from American culture included building Greek house, hanging Greek flags, teaching his children Greek values, sending his children to learn Greek and opening a Greek restaurant. What's more, all the people he knows were Greek. He thought the root of every American word is Greek.

Actually, all the things Toula's father had done is because he felt greatly uncertain about American culture which was new to him. His anxiety and uncertainty made him want to stay in a safe and comfortable environment- Greek culture. When Toula, a thirty-year-old woman, would like to go to college to learn computer skill, her father disagreed with her because he was afraid that Toula would be cheated by those people selling drugs. When Toula's father knew Toula felt in love with an American guy, he was so angry because he thought this man was not a Greek and he knew nothing about this man. All this showed that Toula's father was anxious about new things and refused to accept them. This movie shows us a typical Greek with a high level of uncertainty avoidance vividly. Compared with Greek people, American people have a much lower level of uncertainty avoidance.

In this movie, when Ian's parents knew that their son was dating with a Greek girl, they was not so surprised and showed little interest about Toula's information. They just accepted this truth calmly. When they came to meet Toula's families, although they were a little bit surprised at such different Greek culture, they did not show any dislike and finally integrated into Greek

Culture. As for Ian, he just easily accepted and tried hard to integrate into Greek culture. From the movie, we can see the action American people taken is integration when they face new culture. That must be one reason why America is called "melting pot". And it also closely related to American people's low level of uncertainty avoidance.

Conclusion:

From the above analysis, we can know that as the second generation of Greek immigration, Toula processed Greek traditions as well as American culture. She could deal with the cultural conflicts better and integrate into the American society better. And Ian also compromised to some extent so as to marry Toula. As the family culture is an epitome of the national culture, the reality is the same. Although two cultures have various differences, even a lot of conflicts, these two cultures can still coexist with each other, integrate into each other. People with different cultural backgrounds can have a tolerant mind to embrace the cultures regardless of the wide difference in terms of customs, traditions, or modes of thinking. What we should do is to adopt a correct attitude towards intercultural communication and deal with it properly.