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American culture and Lorraine Hansberry's a raisin in the sun-a study in contrast?

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Abstract

Universally, the American Culture is lauded, revered and rated high due to its respect for individuality, equality, adherence to rule of law, human values, etc. America is a shining example for unity in diversity since it welcomes and accommodates not only humans, but also thoughts and ideas from all over the world. However, there are small pockets of disharmony which need be addressed since, if left unchecked, it can grow and cause problems leading to blurring of the image of the country since, what happens in America influences the whole world. The story by Lorraine Hansberry can be taken as an eye opener for taking corrective measures to maintain the impeccable image of America. This paper attempts to summarise the different yardsticks which make the American Culture catholic and analyses the story in this back ground. It is only a very small attempt in this direction.

Keywords: American Culture, Individuality, Equality, Hard Work, Black Family, Poverty, Conflict of Interests, Family Values, Sacrifice

Introduction

In general, culture varies between, as well as, among, nations, regions, religions and influences the way of life, like marriage, music, food, behavior etc. The United States of America is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world making the Americans catholic in their attitude. Undoubtedly, every region of the world has influenced the American culture, as it is a country of immigrants. Among them, the influence of British is pronounced since they colonized the country during, as early as, 1600s. The culture of Native Americans, Latin Americans, and the immigrant Africans and Asians also played a prominent role in shaping the American culture (www.livescience.com).

The United States is described as a melting pot in which different cultures have contributed their own distinct flavors to the US culture. It is a classical example of unity in diversity. American culture influences the world and the term Western culture often refers to the culture of the United States and Europe.

American Culture

Individuality

Americans believe in being independent and develop their own goals in life at an early age itself. They are taught not to depend on others including their parents, friends, and teachers. They are rewarded when they try harder to prove their individuality. Americans generally want to showcase their individuality and are very particular to be different from each other. They believe in freedom in everything, be it thinking, education, food, spelling, dress etc (Freedman Morris, 1968)

Their individuality is borne out of self-confidence which is essential for one to succeed.

Privacy

The Americans value their privacy and enjoy spending time alone. Their homes and offices may be open but what is inside the mind is private. They want the space around them to be personal. The majority of older Americans prefer to, at times have to, live in retirement homes for independent living rather than to live with their grown up children.

Every individual needs privacy and in all fairness it should be respected by others, however close they may be.

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Equality

The Americans believe, which is indeed true, that everyone is created equal and has equal rights. This includes women as well as men of all ethnic and cultural groups living in the U.S. Discriminating against or making any insulting statement about someone else's religion or ethnicity is against the law and punishable as a hate crime. They dislike any racist or negative remarks about someone's religion, family background or sexual preferences. Men should not make any sexist remarks about women because it amounts to making women unequal to men.

Nobody should ask Americans direct questions about their religion, age, financial status, salary or dress since this may have an influence, directly or indirectly, on the equality. However, men feel happy to share equally with their wives in parenting and house work.

It should be remembered that even a sense of not being equal is bound to affect the morale of the individual and his/her life style.

Time

Americans take pride in making the best use of their time. In the busy business world, time is money: business dealings get affected by time considerably. Being on time for a class, an appointment, and interviews or for social get together like dinner etc. is important. They apologise sincerely if they happen to be late.

In academic institutions, some instructors give negative marks to students who are late to the class. It is also to be noted that students in most of the universities have institutional permission to leave the class room if their instructor is late by ten minutes. They value their time as well as others'.

If time is lost, it cannot be got back. It is a very important factor which needs to be understood and respected to succeed, at times, even to survive.

Informality

The American lifestyle is generally informal, but, not casual. The students go to class in shorts and T-shirts. Male instructors seldom wear a tie and some may even wear blue jeans. Female instructors often wear slacks along with comfortable walking shoes. Americans always address their teachers, managers, directors, presidents and even university instructors by his or her first name. But certainly they have great respect for them and mean business.

An informal environment results in a friendly atmosphere and there will be no tension which leads to higher productivity.

Hard Work, Responsibility and Achievement

The Americans have impressed all other nations by how with well planned, focused hard work together with necessary rest, they could achieve their goals. A competitive spirit is often the motivating factor to work harder. Americans often compete with themselves to better their previous record, in academics, athletics etc. They feel proud when they beat their colleagues or contemporaries in competition or business and so on. Americans are always on the go, because sitting quietly and doing nothing is a waste of time and comes in the way of success. They never waste material, effort or time. When they take up a job, they assume full responsibility for the timely, efficient and successful completion of the job. For them, assuming

responsibility wherever and whenever required, comes naturally. In their system, authority and accountability are inseparable.

The commitment to hard work, coupled with whole hearted responsibility is the basic requirement for achieving success.

Other Features of American Culture

Americans strictly follow the rule of law. Even law makers cannot be law breakers. They don't push or stand too close to anyone while standing in a line. They wait until their turn comes.

Usually when friends meet in a restaurant, they pay their share of the bill. Most of the American women do not feel comfortable if the men pay for them since it can be construed as if men are superior to women, in other words sexual discrimination. Americans have parties for many reasons. They expect others to look at them in the eyes, smile, and shake hands. Americans open the gifts and cards in front of the presenters. They expect the gifts to be sent with a card. The person receiving the gift will send a thank you card in return.

At a funeral, they never make loud noise, even if it indicates a sense of being sad. They try to keep strong emotions within themselves. It is a solemn affair. There is no traditional feature or act that symbolizes death.

Americans never visit someone without informing first to see if it is convenient. If they invite someone for a party, it is strictly for that person and not for others, friends or family members. However, after seeking permission of the host, they can bring them.

Some men and women, in order to show their love and affection, hug each other irrespective of being not close. It is normal for women to have close male friends and vice versa. It is not uncommon for American men and women to share an apartment as roommates and not have a sexual relationship with each other.

These actions or inactions will go a long way in preventing some of the irritants or hurt feelings.

A Raisin In The Sun

In the general background of American Culture briefed above, "A Raisin in the Sun" written and produced on stage by Lorraine Hansberry(1930-1965) during 1959 is an interesting contribution focusing on the dreams and aspirations together with the miseries, agony, problems and challenges faced by a black American family. This gains importance since, Hansberry is the first black American woman to succeed in spite of being inexperienced as a director, untried playwright and to cap it all, with financial problems.

The Story in Brief

A family living on the south side of Chicago struggles with poverty, struggles to maintain dignity, and dreams of a better life (Hansberry Lorraine, 1959). At this juncture, the head of the family, Walter, passes away. His wife, Lena Younger, known as Mama receives a lump sum payment of ten thousand dollars from his employer. Every member of the family comes out with a proposal to fulfill their need, which is genuine indeed from their angle. Mama wants to buy a new independent house where white people live; Young Walter, also known as Walter Lee the only son of Walter aims at starting his own business; and Beneatha, Walter's daughter wishes to continue her higher studies.

Ruth, wife of Young Walter who was under pressure to abort her pregnancy for want of space in the house to accommodate the new arrival, also desires to go in for a bigger house so that she need not abort.

Young Walter forces his decision, enters into a partnership with a friend, and invests a major part of the money to open a liquor shop. That friend cheats him and runs away. The entire family is upset about the development and Walter is being blamed. The mother takes a decision to invest the remaining part of the amount in the house of her choice.

The whole family realizes that this is the best decision under the present circumstances and moves to the new house.

The Attitude of the Characters in the Light of the American Culture

Young Walter is constantly dreaming of becoming rich by quick means. He does not want to be a poor black man all through his life and imagines of fitting into the circle of whites. He is in a hurry to become rich, share the riches with his family members and please them (Scanlan Tom, 1978).

Even to achieve his goal, he is neither sincere nor prepared to work hard which is not an American culture since the Americans are sincere and believe in dedicated hard work. He runs after his friend to get some idea to improve his financial status. This shows that he lacks individuality and confidence which is totally against the American culture. Americans generally want to showcase their individuality and are very particular to be different from each other. They believe in freedom in everything, be it thinking, education, food, spelling, dress etc.

He invests in liquor business without proper planning whereas the Americans believe in detailed planning. He loses the investment since it was made without proper planning and in a hurry.

In one way he reflects the American culture in that he is very particular about his goal of becoming rich. However, as explained earlier, for want of proper planning he could not succeed. In short Young Walter wants to purchase social status without bothering about the basic requirements to attain the same.

Over all, Young Walter, thus, does not fit into the accepted American culture.

Beneatha is focused and clear about her goal of continuing her higher studies. As a typical American, she has planned her future well. She argues for equal rights in the insurance money. Her aim is to work hard and become independent. This is in keeping with the American culture.

She respects the ambitions of others and does not demand a major share of the money. She was prepared even to sacrifice her goal of higher studies for the sake of her brother to fulfill his greedy ambition. She did this in order to maintain the unity of the family, and keep up its name and values. Even though, this is a rare phenomenon in the American way of life, this is indeed laudable.

Over all, Beneatha fits into the accepted American culture.

Lena Younger asserts unquestioned authority in the family and represents all that is traditional. She believes in preserving Christian virtue, keeping family bonds and traditions together. The white man's hatred of the Blacks and the veiled threat to the Younger family worries her (Staples Robert, 1971). She is one who knows the aspirations and views of the family. In spite of that, she is convinced that whatever she does is for the welfare of the family. Hence, she makes a down payment on the house in

the all-white neighborhood without consulting any other member of the family. Ruth, Travis, and Beneatha are pleased, but Walter Lee views his mother's purchase as just another demonstration of her power. He is upset since this will come in the way of his starting a liquor business.

She has exhibited a sense of individuality to buy a house without consulting others. She wants to buy a house among whites to prove that she is equal to others which is a typical American culture. She takes upon herself the responsibility of the entire family in terms of accommodation, education, equality in the society etc. She believes in the rule of law that she being the head, has the right to decide what is good for the family (Cheney Anne, 1984).

Even though she wanted to have equality in the society, she is not ready to give equal rights to the members of her own family.

In general, Lena Younger fits into the American Culture.

Ruth Walter is aware of the financial burden of Walter Lee. As she thinks that the child will be an additional burden, since the privacy required will necessitate additional space in the house, she wants to abort the pregnancy. She is convinced that she has to be considerate to others and treat them as equals. Lena who is traditional and who had lost a child through miscarriage discourages Ruth. Finally, she agrees to have the child respecting her mother in law's advice. Even though she was prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the family, she changed her mind in deference to the wishes of her mother in law. Unlike Beneatha and Walter who are known for their modern outlook, extravagance and selfishness, Ruth respects the tradition and responsibility. Hence, she has no choice of her own. In Ruth grooming herself to become another Lena, the situation continues. Lena prepares Ruth to play the role of a matriarch for the next generation.

As a typical American she longs for privacy. She exhibits splendid concern for the family members by not revealing her desire since that may lead to dissents in the family there by proves her responsibility for the family.

She did not fight for her rights with the family members which is uncommon among Americans. Her behavior exhibits both American culture as well as non-American culture, both being for the good of the family.

Scope for Further Study

It is true that there are problem cases of different magnitude and nature. They need be studied in detail, analyzed and reported from different angles. The why of the problems are to be understood and solutions found from a global angle: global angle since, the happenings in America will impact the entire world. This will help in minimizing, though not eliminating, and such problems.

Concluding Remarks

The story ending presents how the Walter's family stands by long term family goals, values and beliefs providing a sense of unity. Even though it may look that this family has not followed the American culture completely, it should be remembered that the Blacks underwent innumerable problems compelling them to take such decisions. Such cases should not be taken to be typical of American culture. This paper is presented to expose some of the problems existing in the American society so that steps can be taken to initiate corrective measures to weed away such problems. However, it can be stated without any hesitation that the

American society is catholic in its outlook and the human values are respected. It is tolerant to the happenings in the world and shows concern and compassion.

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