Culture Clash Essay, Research Paper

Culture Clash is a story of two families from different backgrounds, culture trying to live in harmony. They are trying their hardest to understand each other’s customs and traditions. One of the family is your typical middle class American family, Ellen and Ben Matthews, owners of a home, a small business, two cars and three kids. The other family are refugees from Vietnam. Kim and Quang, Vietnamese newly weds in their 20’s fleeing their own country with Kim’s two sisters, Lan and Minh. This book is written through Ellen Matthews’s point of view about their struggles, differences and how they coped with them. Ben Matthews was in the military and served some time in Vietnam. In this service time he has gained some experience dealing with Vietnamese people and he has a rough understanding of their culture and customs. He also has some unconscious guilt about America abandoning Vietnam, which is one of the reasons why Ellen believe he has signed up to sponsor a refugee family.

The two families first met in August of 1975 at the refugee campsite. In their first couple of months, aside from the obvious language barrier, there were many misinterpretations, misconceptions, miscommunications and misunderstandings. One of the first misconceptions that occurred was that Kim and Quang, and most Vietnamese people thought that all Americans are rich. This misconception was likely brought forth due to the many good second hand items that were donated to Kim and Quang when they first arrived to America. Many second hand items that were donated included a black and white TV and furniture. In their homeland these items would’ve been considered good only for the rich, but it’s not the same in America. There’s an old saying “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure”. This couldn’t be truer in Vietnam. In Vietnam, the typical middle class family with two cars and a house would be considered rich. Quang said it best when he mentioned that a house in Vietnam is made with “a few chips out of the woodwork or things lying on the floor”.

The language barrier and misunderstandings has always been a problem for the

two families. One of the points that Ellen chose to make was that she did not like Kim begging other people for money and other freebies such as food stamps. In Kim’s own words, she says, “We no have money to buy food”. Ellen looks at this as if Kim is looking for a handout, while Ben believes that there are words and meaning lost in the translation. I agree with Ben, I believe that what Kim is trying to say is that she is looking for a job in order to buy food and support her family. Asian people tend to convey messages and use suggestive language to replace direct request. Americans are usually very direct and will take words literally, which explains some of Ellen’s misconceptions to Kim’s pleading, which could be interpreted as a request for a job.

Americans also has their flaws of conveying messages that Asians misinterprets. Since Americans are usually very direct when it comes to requests and emotions, they are vague in other areas such as a friendly notation of suggesting a “get together:. Americans will most likely use this as a polite form to end a conversation or a meeting. Asians that aren’t familiar with American culture will take this literally, and in some cases will prepare for this “get together”. Kim was a victim to this innocent comment once, and consequently she was hurt when the “get together” didn’t happen. One incident happened when Ellen had suggested that her and Kim should meet sometime. Kim misinterpreted that thinking she meant to visit her on that same day. Kim cleaned and tidied the house only to have Ellen never showing up.

Another one of the biggest flaws among Asian people is their inability to say “no” to other people; and their utmost willingness to please. Kim is no exception to that statement. Ben defines that a “typical Vietnamese” is “passive and unassumingly nice”. A good example of this happened during the process of locating Kim a job, Ellen had ask Kim to work a volunteer job as a baby-sitter for future references. Kim reluctantly agreed, out of respect for Ellen. Ellen eventually understood this after spending more time learning about their culture. Ellen had some misconception on this subject matter because as an American, she was used to directness and speaking of your emotions.

Minh and Lan were born and raised in Vietnam, just like Kim and Quang, they both came to America at the same time, there isn’t much of an age difference, but yet, they hold different views than them. American influence has taken over their young minds. They refused to accept free lunches from school, fearing that they’ll look poor among their classmates, which Ellen appreciates. Ellen compares this to Kim and her continuous request for food stamps. Ellen comments “at least they have a sense of pride”.

Many Americans, especially middle class Americans, patronize those on public support a have a low opinion of them. Minh and Lan probably realized this from attending school because they are more involved in American society, unlike Kim and Quang. Since Kim and Quang did come from a country like Vietnam where welfare and food stamps are virtually unheard of, they were eager to get on the system, concerned that they are losing out when their peers are receiving them.

When Kim and Quang first came to America, they learned to appreciate anything they had, such as handed down furniture to a black and white TV set (even though Kim wanted a color TV). This display of charity had also given Kim and Quang their first ideas about the mindset of America. I can imagine them wondering, “Why would Americans throw away something that is still in good usable condition?” After all, in their country these items were luxuries and only for the rich. Of course, when Kim and Quang first arrived in America they valued these items (regardless of what Ellen perceives). Over time Kim and Quang’s mentality began to change gradually. Kim and Quang learned to adapt to American society, especially after the birth of their first child, Tommy. They began to become more materialistic, buying things out of aesthetics instead of necessity. For example Quang’s first car was Ford Mustang, with “extra options”, not a used car as Ellen and Ben viewed as the wise economical choice.

Kim and Quang are good examples of the missing link between the first generation of Asians that settled in American and the second generation of Asians in America. The first generation of Asians are usually are older, they tend to live life as it was in their home country, following the traditions and culture. The second generation are usually younger and tend to adapt to American society and their culture. The first generation of Asians were very much like Kim and Quang when they first came to America, they learn to value their material items, save their money and work hard. The second generation of Asians are very much the opposite, which is what became of Kim and Quang after six years of living in America. The second generation would go out and buy main brand clothing, unnecessary material items, socialize and spend money foolishly. I suggested that Kim and Quang are like the missing link because they went from being penniless to what has become of them six years later, they’ve done it all. They have two houses, two cars, $50,000 to take with them to California.

In conclusion, I like to say that I am glad I chosed this book and I am glad I had a chance to read it. I feel as if I could empathize with Kim and Quang through the superior descriptive writing skills of Ellen Matthews. I feel that a lot of Asians in our society are misunderstood and misrepresented. Asians aren’t even considered as minorities in America when it comes to statistic and polls. I can see that gradually changing though. The next generation and the generation after that will be the melting pot in the Asian society. Kim and Quang has set the tone for the direction of Asians in America. They have lived the American dream in six years, whereas Americans have taken an eternity to achieve. These changes are already happening, I am part of the melting pot. All the students in our class are part of this melting pot. Our parents live their life like Kim and Quang when they first came to America. We, the next generation, live our lives like Kim and Quang of present day.