Intercultural Competence In My Big Fat Greek Wedding: Film Analysis

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

Culture can be defined as the values, beliefs and patterns of behavior shared by a group of people. Each nation will have different culture. Today, since the process of globalization is constant and even irreversible; people will inevitably encounter and work with people from different cultural nations. It contributes to the expansion of cultural ties between the peoples and human migration. In addition, there is happening a mutual penetration of various trends in art and their exchange. In connection with this, this assignment will come up with the analyze of the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding from Intercultural Competence, especially Cultural Identity and Cultural Biases angle.

I. Brief information about the movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”

My Big Fat Greek Wedding is a 2002 independent romantic comedy film directed by Joel Zwick and written by Nia Vardalos, who also stars in the film as Fotoula 'Toula' Portokalos, a middle class Greek American woman who falls in love with non-Greek upper middle class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Ian Miller. The film received generally positive reviews from critics and, at the 75th Academy Awards, it was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

II. The movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” from an intercultural communication angle

One’s identity or self-concept is built on an individual’s cultural, social, and personal identities.

Cultural identity refers to one’s sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. It is formed in a process that results from membership in a particular culture. It involves learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religions, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of society. People internalize the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify with that culture as part of their self-concept.

1. Cultural experience

a. Toula- the symbol for the culture of Greece

Toula is 30 years old, unmarried, and still lives with her parents. She works at Dancing Zorba's, her family's restaurant in Chicago. She longs for an independent life away from the restaurant and her intrusive family.

Moving to another country will definitely embrace people with a lot of new cultural experiences and Toula is no exception. However, she was born and grew up in America, so the cultural gap for her is not so distinct. She is bilingual, with Greek and English. When she was little, she was sent to a Greek school although dreaming of going to a normal American school. She really

wanted to make friends with those girls

In a small step towards independence, Toula wants to take computer classes at a local community college. When Toula approaches her father Gus about the classes, he forbids it, thinking she wants to leave her family. He insists she's 'smart enough for a girl' and it is too dangerous for her to be out in the city alone. After some crafty persuasion by his wife, Maria, Gus reluctantly permits Toula to attend classes. As her classes progress, Toula gains self-confidence. She trades her thick glasses for contact lenses and her baggy, drab clothes for flattering, colorful outfits. She updates her hairstyle and learns to apply makeup. With her new computer skills and polished image, Toula asks her mother and her Aunt Voula to convince Gus that Toula should work at Voula's travel agency instead of the restaurant.

b. Ian Miller – the symbol for the culture of America

Ian Miller is a high school teacher and he is an American. His grandfather and father are both lawyers, but he decides not to follow it.

On meeting and knowing Toula, Ian faces a lot of shocking but also exciting cultural things.

First, it is about language. Greek is a very hard and less-known language. Ian really knows nothing about Greek, and he often has to ask Toula’s younger brother to transfer some phrases from English into Greek. Ironically, he is always tricked by Toula’s younger brother since he often teaches Ian wrong phrases. For instance, Ian wants to say “Everyone, let’s go to the house”, which is mistranslated as “eho tria archidia”. When Ian shouts this phrase, everyone is al surprised.

Second, the tradition in the two family is utterly different. While Toula’s family is crowded and noisy, Ians is quiet. Ian lives in a nuclear family with his mother and father. In contrast, Toula has a extended family with up to twenty seven cousins. Ian’s parents are blown on coming to see Toula’s family.

Moreover, Greece is considered a high-context culture. It is well expressed by the way that Toula mostly hides her feeling. On the contrary, Ian often expresses his disappointment directly.

However, Ian never gives up but he tries his best and willing to do anything he can to get Toula as his wife. Gus, who is Toula’ father, is upset that Ian did not ask him for permission to date Toula, let alone marry her. Ian tries to adapt to the family's Greek customs and mannerisms. Ian and Toula cannot marry in the Greek Orthodox Church unless Ian converts, and Toula is already worried the wedding will be a fiasco. She suggests to Ian that they elope instead. He refuses, saying if it's that important to her family to marry in their religion, then he will be baptized Greek Orthodox. Ian's willingness to do this encourages Gus and Maria to gradually accept Ian into the family.

2. Cultural Biases

Cultural biases is the tendency to judge people in terms of one's own cultural assumptions.

a. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism occurs when the beliefs, values, and practices of one culture are viewed as superior to those of others.

All cultures teach their members “preferred” ways to respond to the world, which are often labeled as natural or appropriate. Thus, people generally perceive their own experiences, which are shaped by their own cultural forces, as natural, human, universal.

This side is clearly portrayed in the movie, especially by the father of Toula- Mr. Gus. He is the one who strong opposes Toula’s love line at first. He even tries to invite many guys to come home for dinner in order that Toula will give up on Ian and get to know some of the man he invited.

Furthermore, he often tells people to give him a word, and he will find a Greek root for this word. He firmly states that every word all comes from Greek. Sometime, it seems that he makes up the root. For example, it is when Toula’s friend asks him the root for the word “kimono”. It takes Gus some minutes to come up with an answer that is not very satisfied: “Kimono comes from the Greek word “Cheimonas”, that means winter. So what do you wear in the winter time to stay warm? – A robe. You see? Robe, kimono. There you go.” He also says that: “Greek should educate non-Greek about how to be Greek”. It can be said that Gus is a clear example on that.

b. Stereotyping

Stereotypes are a form of generalization about a group of people. Groups can be stereotyped based on their religion, age, occupation, social class, geographical location, and many other characteristics. Stereotypes can be inaccurate.

In the movie, it is shown clearly. Gus, Toula’s father groups all American guys to be not nice, not good, and not the one to be married.

c. Prejudice

Prejudice refers to attitudes toward other people that are based on faulty and inflexible stereotypes.

Prejudiced attitudes include irrational feelings of dislike and even hatred for certain groups, biased perceptions and beliefs about the group members that are not based on direct experiences and firsthand knowledge, and a readiness to behave in negative and unjust way toward member of the group.

In the movie, Toula’s father, without any understandings of Ian, definitely says that Ian is not a good guy. He thinks only Greeks are good, and Greek shoould marry Greek to give birth to a Greek baby. At first, he even does not try to get to know Ian.

d. Discrimination

The term discrimination refers to behavioral manifestations of prejudice; it is prejudice in action.

Discrimination is well portraited in the movie when Gus calls Ian “a Xeno” and asks Toula to break up with him. He hates Gus.

Toula’s grand mother also an example when she really hates being in America. She says she is kidnapped and wants to go back to Greece.

e. Racism

One obstacle to intercultural competence to which we want to give special attention is racism.

At the individual level, racism is conceptually very similar to prejudice. Individual level racism involves beliefs, attitudes and behavior of a given person toward people of a different racial group. For example, European Americans who believe that are somehow inferior, exemplify individual racism. Positive contact and interaction between members of two group can sometimes change their attitude. At the preceding discussion of prejudice suggest, people with prejudicial beliefs about others often distort new information to fit their original prejudices.

In the movie, because Ian is not Greek, Toula keeps the relationship secret from her family, but her parents find out when a family friend sees them kissing in a parking lot. As she feared, Gus is angry because Ian is not an ethnic Greek—referring to Ian as a 'Xeno'—and both Gus and Maria tell Toula to end the relationship. Toula insists she loves Ian. Her parents try to dissuade her by bringing various Greek bachelors home to meet her, all to no avail.

III. Suggestions for intercultural competence:

1. Acquiring knowledge about other cultures

This process may be achieved by interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds in both professional and personal life, talking with service providers and community organizations who work with culturally diverse people, researching, watching films or documentaries or reading about other cultures and cultural diversity, and participating in workshops and seminars.

2. Be willing to adapt new cultures

A major challenge in working across cultures is that the world doesn’t stand still. An ability to adjust quickly to new circumstances is vital. Cultures change and adapt as they come into contact with others, and with the impact of ever-evolving technology. Tread carefully when you make assumptions about the people you’re working with and be willing to alter your perceptions based on experience.

3. Learn and be open-minded about other cultures

Learn as much as possible about your target culture. As you learn and become open-minded it is easier to understand the differences, see things from a different perspective and thus adapt. Learning some key words in the local language helps a lot as well.

On the wedding day, Toula is nervous and surrounded by relatives, but the traditional Greek wedding goes perfectly. At the reception, Gus gives a speech accepting Ian and his parents as

family. He then presents the newlyweds with a deed to a house. Both Ian and Toula are deeply touched by Gus's generosity. Following the reception, Toula and Ian leave for a honeymoon in Greece, both appreciating the craziness of their Greek family.

Conclusion

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, although not a box-office hit at its time, still a very meaningful movie. From the movie, viewers can see how characters gradually change their attitudes towards more amicable and friendly. It also a good material for cross cultural learning.