

Cultural Conflicts and Identity Construction in “Neighbours”

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Abstract: In Tim Winton’s short story “Neighbours”, he describes a newlywed couple who move into a European immigrant neighbourhood. Their relationship with their neighbours goes from discomfort to integration, which is a process through caution and discomfort to mutual understanding. The theme of multiculturalism is consisted with two main lines, conflict and integration, then the identity can be rebuilt. And the main way to bridge the spiritual gap is to strengthen interactions and promote mutual understanding. It is revealed that the spiritual divide is more of a concern than material lack, and the main way to bridge the spiritual gap is to strengthen interaction and promote mutual understanding.

Keywords: Cultural conflict; Identity; Cultural integration; Neighbours; Multiculture

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1. Introduction

Born into a police family in Perth, Western Australia, Tim Winton (1960-) is currently Australia’s most prolific and acclaimed young writer. He is a four-time winner of the Miles Franklin Award, which is the Australia’s most prestigious literary award, and is known as Australia’s literary prodigy. Almost every one of his works receives immediate critical attention (Huang 887). Tim Winton is known for his works that explore the human experience and the landscapes of his homeland. His short, meaningful, and very readable works have endeared him to both the critics as well as the general readers. Many of his works are written in simple language, abandoning the fancy and elaborate words, and reflecting the loneliness and isolation of people behind the prosperity of society in a very short piece.

His representative short story “Neighbours”, which first published in his collection titled *Scission* in 1985, captures the difficulties and conflicts faced by a newlywed couple moving into a new neighbourhood in a multicultural setting. Fortunately, the young couple gradually opens their hearts to their neighbours, who come to understand, respect and communicate with each other, and finally multicultural integration is achieved.

Cultural integration refers to the harmonious coexistence of different cultures within the same organization. It is not the simple superimposition of cultures, but the integration of multiple cultures into a completely new culture. In other words, cultural integration is the process of interaction, absorption and integration of two or more cultures with different characteristics after they come into contact with each other, and eventually the original cultural system will disappear or change its form. Cultural integration is a critical cultural phenomenon in the history of human culture (Yang 108). The process of cultural integration is generally the one that people go through from initial anxiety to gradual acceptance, then to eventual true integration. Although the newlyweds in “Neighbours” are domestic migrants, they still go through the process of anxiety from the loss of identity to the joy and belongingness after gradually integrating into the cultural life of the new community. The identity reconstruction of the newlyweds also implies cultural integration. The analysis of the cultural conflicts and integration in Tim Winton’s “Neighbours” proclaims the fact that love and compassion are major components of a society to bind multicultural and multilingual people together.

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2. Cultural Conflicts

Australia is a country of immigrants, where people of different cultural backgrounds live together. Therefore, the question of how people communicate with each other is particularly important. The newlywed couple's move in marks their official entry into the cultural melting pot. The cultural shock caused by the new environment and new way of life affects the couple's daily life to a great extent. The Polish widower on the right side and the Macedonian family on the left of the young couple's house have some typical characteristics of immigrants. Caught in the middle of them, the newlywed couple are highly alarmed, as if they were "sojourners in a foreign land" (Huang 888). Although they are part of the community, they are initially disgusted at their surroundings and experience "uncomfortable relations for many months" (Huang 889) in the neighbourhood.

(1) Language use

One of the first things the newlywed couple faces when they move to a new environment, especially one that is very different from their previous neighbourhood, is the language problem. There is a close relationship between language and culture. Language is not only a carrier of culture, but also a reflection of culture (Huang and Gao 63). If language is transmitted as part of culture, it is no less true that culture as a whole is transmitted very largely through language. It is clear from the couple's first days in their new home that they are quite resentful and even hostile to their neighbours. This is because when people encounter a new culture, most of them will experience cultural conflicts. When the young couple move in "the street full of European migrants" (Huang 888), their house is located between a Macedonian family and a widower from Poland. The couple is overwhelmed with all these strange faces and lifestyles. Due to the different languages they speak, the couple and the neighbours "could not understand a word" (Huang 890) with each other most of the time.

(2) Nonverbal communication

Language is an important tool for human communication, but it is not the only means of communication. In essence, nonverbal communication is a process that embodies nonverbal behavior, which occurs simultaneously with verbal behavior in a specific situation and jointly expresses human thinking activities. Nonverbal communication strengthens the expression of meaning, reflecting the mode of communication and the inner relationship between the communicators. Nonverbal communication includes looks, gestures, body gestures, facial expressions, concepts of time, use of space and so on (Cheng 35). Nonverbal communication is defined as the exchange of information through nonverbal signals (Harrison 193). The young man and woman once lived in an "expensive outer suburbs where good neighbours were seldom seen and never heard" (Huang 888), which means they hardly get in touch with each other. In contrast, things are different in this European immigrant neighbourhood. "The sounds of spitting and washing and daybreak watering" (Huang 889) made by their neighbours come as a shock for the couple. Because of the shouting and screaming, the young couple initially thought that their neighbours are murdering each other. It takes them six months to understand the neighbours are merely talking. The couple, accustomed to quietness, feels that the terrible environment not only seriously affected their daily routine, but also interfered with the husband's thesis writing. On the other hand, they are uncomfortable with the way their neighbours behave. For the young man, the little boy next door urinates in the street strikes him as inappropriate; the boy "spraying the cat from the back step" (Huang 889) makes him feel inexplicable; the act of shaving the child's heads regularly in order to thicken his hair makes him suspicious. Everything is so weird that when the little boy "stood at the fence with only his cobalt eyes showing" (Huang 889), the young man could not look straight and his facial expression appeared unusually nervous.

(3) Family value

Although the young man and woman are newcomers in an unfamiliar community, they still retain their original culture and hold a disdainful or resistant attitude towards other cultures, but at the same time, contact with the

new culture is inevitable, and this dilemma makes people feel irresistible anxiety and uneasiness. Naturally, the neighbours as well as could not adjust to the sudden arrival of the newlyweds. The Macedonians express surprise and dismay at “the late hour at which the newcomers rose in the morning” (Huang 889). Not to mention that the young man stays at home to write his thesis while his wife goes out to work, which is also disapproved by their neighbours.

This community is like a microcosm of Australia, where people from all over the world, with different cultural backgrounds, live and gather on the same land, while all of them have retained their original traditions and customs. With the casual and loose tone, Winton unfolds the reality that clashes between cultures and racial discriminations are commonplace in an immigration nation (Tang 83). When different traditions, customs and values are brought together, it is bound to cause certain cultural conflicts. The uncertainty of identity and the conflicts of cultures caused tension between the young couple and their neighbours for months. Cultural differences can be the cause of the negative attitude, marginalization and sensitivity of the couple.

3. Cultural Acceptance

Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial country where traditional prejudices and cultural conflicts are inevitable, which causes barriers between people that can be bridged through interaction, understanding and communication (Kramer 339). The relations between the newlyweds and their neighbours have not improved at all during the first few months. But change occurs unconsciously in a series of trivial events (Zhu 125). Winton describes eight small events in meticulous detail, such as planting in the yard, food exchanging, spontaneous talking, unexpected pregnancy, garage building, caring for the pregnant woman, firewood providing, and waiting for the newborn, all of which demonstrate the gradual and subtle changes in each other’s lives.

(1) Mutual help

The young couple clear their back yard to grow vegetables, and the neighbours “come to the fence and offer advice about spacing, hilling, mulching” (Huang 890). A woman even gives them garlic cloves to plant. Although the young man is tired of these neighbourly interruptions, he takes careful note of what the neighbours suggested. The action of accepting the neighbours’ advice indicates a good start of their relationship. Later, the Polish widower rebuild the fallen henhouse for the young couple without invitation. There is not a single word of communication throughout the process, but good neighbourly relations show a good beginning in silent communication.

As autumn merged into winter, “the young couple found themselves smiling back at the neighbours” (Huang 890). They even offer vegetables in exchange of drinks and firewood, and they no longer lower their eyes when they walk in the street. At this time, they are proud of their life in the neighbourhood. In the spring, the Macedonian family instruct the couple how to slaughter and deal with the ducks they have kept from the winter. As they sit around, laughing and telling stories, they are not nodding acquaintance to each other anymore. By now the atmosphere in the neighbourhood has become natural and harmonious, communication is flowing smoothly, and barriers are gradually broken down.

(2) Spiritual connection

The arrival of spring not only melt the relationship in the neighbourhood but also brings an unexpected surprise. The young wife is pregnant without preparation and the couple is stunned to be made parents. Before long “the whole neighbourhood knew of the pregnancy” (Huang 891), and all sorts of love and care come their way. The man in the deli sends chocolates to the wife and packets of cigarettes to the husband, although the man himself is not a smoker. When the baby is only three or four months old, Italian women begin to offer names for the baby; Greek women offer to feel the wife’s belly and predict with certainty that it is bound to be a boy; the woman next door

knits the baby a suit; the polish widower comes over with barrowful of wood scraps for the fire. The young couple is flattered and grateful for all their neighbours have done for them, and realized how lovely they are.

The labor comes abruptly and all the neighbours pay close attention to it. While the wife is delivering baby in the house and the husband is helping around, all their neighbours are standing behind their fence waiting for the baby to be born, and the Macedonian family wave and call out what sounds like their best wishes for the wife and the baby. Undoubtedly, every one of them, including the baby who is soon to be born, are integrated into the community at this moment, and the harmonious relationship is fostered among the neighbours.

The acceptance and integration of cultures does not come out of the blue. Without using a single line of dialogue, the short story presents the whole process step by step through a unique perspective and careful observation. The birth of the boy symbolizes that the cultural seeds for coexistence and integration in a multicultural community is growing. The young father's weeping is not only an expression of excitement and joy at the birth of his son, but also an acknowledgement of the new life with neighbours. As for the unfinished novel, he will not continue to write it, as he knows that a well-written novel is nothing more than a creative work, whereas in real life, no matter it is faced with a cultural conflict or a cultural shock, it has to be resolved through communication and expression of love. The closing line implies that modernity has discarded the ancient biblical ethics of the neighbour, a loss that is highlighted by its unexpected reappearance in Australian migrant culture (Mathews 648). The ending of the child's birth and the young man's tears of joy at the care of his neighbours can be seen as an important sign of cultural integration.

4. Identity Rebuilding

As the newlywed couple interact more frequently with their neighbours, their traits and identity change in this new environment. Identity refers to the interpretation and construction of one's personal experience and social status in a cultural context. Identity construction refers to a series of self-definitions and ongoing revisions of self-constructions (Marchand and Parpart 81). Many of Winton's novels radically destabilize the identity of male white-settler characters (McCredden 95), the short story "Neighbours" is no exception. The young man and woman move from the expensive suburb to a community full of European migrants. Physical movement is accompanied not only by changes in realistic and directly perceivable issues such as living environment, working opportunities, and lifestyles, but also by deeper and more abstract issues, including a series of questions about personal, social and cultural identities, such as "who am I", and "who do others perceive me to be", and so on.

(1) Social identity

According to Tajfel, social identity refers to the membership in a social group to which a person belongs and which is of great emotional and value importance to that person (Tajfel 24). As the seasons changing, it seems that everything changes silently. When the young couple plant vegetables, the neighbours would come over and offer advice. The young man keeps their advice in mind, though he resents the interference. The Polish neighbour rebuilds the fallen henhouse for the couple uninvited, even though they do not understand a word he says. As winter comes, the young couple are smiling back at their neighbours. The barriers between these neighbours gradually disappear, and they get to know each other better. The community, which used to be unbearable, is gradually internalized in the hearts of the newlyweds, who begin to slowly open up and listen to the voices of the neighbours around them, learn about their culture and way of life. The young man and woman are no longer a marginalized group, but part of the new community.

The resentment in their heart fades away, and the relationship with their neighbours is eased. They are exploring their new social identity. "They felt superior and proud when their parents came to visit" (Huang 890), and this feeling is out of happiness and belongingness. The proud in this case is different from the arrogance expressed in

the initial wariness. It is not prejudiced, but simply an inner emotional fulfillment. In front of their parents, they feel as if they have returned to their original community, as if they have regained their identity and status.

(2) Cultural identity

Cultural identity refers to a sense of solidarity with the ideals of a given cultural group and to the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors manifested toward one's own and other cultural groups as a result of this solidarity (Schwartz et al. 6). Whereas identity is about knowing what is acceptable and true for oneself. Cultural identity is formed when the young couple subconsciously interpret and incorporate signals from the community around them into their own identity so they can belong. As the days go by, the young man and woman get along better with their neighbours, even assimilating with them, as in the case of them shouting and screaming at full volume which they deemed as a shock months ago. Comparing with their wariness towards everything around them when they first moved in, they have changed from being out of place to being accepted in a subtle way.

While the young couple are claiming their identities, there are the friction and collision of different cultures. Subtly they are integrated into the culture of the community in which they live. When the unplanned pregnancy comes, that is approximate to the end of the summer, the woman next door has already knitted a suit even complete with booties and beanie for the baby. The young woman is overwhelmed with the nice and warm deeds of their neighbours. The young couple are happy and grateful as "they felt flattered" (Huang 891), and it is clear that they have found a sense of presence, recognition and integration into the multicultural atmosphere of their new community, as opposed to the eyes-lowered walk they have been taking before. The short story concludes with a detailed description of the young woman's laboring process, which is long and heartbreaking. A small group of neighbours line up along the fence outside the house, also worry about the mother and the child. When the newborn boy begins to cry, the group of neighbours look up and abrupt in loud cheers. The young man as well as begins to weep. It occurs to him that the cultural conflicts in their life is not as horrible and disturbing as they thought. Spiritual and mental connection can conquer all of that. To some certain, the process of delivering the boy symbolizes the young couple's integration into the new community and the rebuilding of their cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

"Neighbours", as one of Tim Winton's short stories, is short and concise, detailing the process of a newlywed couple from incompatibility to gradual integration with their neighbours after moving to a new neighbourhood. This process is also accompanied by the requirement of identity construction, the young couple initially encounter with different cultures and finally fit into them and rebuild their identities in the new neighbourhood. In a multicultural world, in order to achieve the common development of different cultures, cultural conflicts are inevitable, while integration remains the mainstream. This article conceptualizes the theme of multiculturalism in terms of culture conflicts and identity construction, and discusses in a deeper level of how people growing up in different cultural backgrounds can live together peacefully in a new environment, and finally love and compassion are major components of a society to bind multicultural and multilingual people together.

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