Life Stories Comparative Essay

Jamie Coulson

Both Chimamanda Adiche autobiographical speech and in Maya Angelou's autobiography talk about their experiences of how their culture and race has affected their life. Throughout each of these texts there are many points raised about White American beliefs about African Americans. I will be looking at how people in poverty are believed to live and the value placed on racial equality in both texts and comparing how they have changed over time.

Throughout both texts there was a reoccurring false belief that if someone is in a low social class then they are unskilled and uneducated. In Maya Angelou's autobiography 'I know why the caged bird sing' this false belief is demonstrated towards African American's. During the time of segregation laws in America the majority of white Americans people believed African Americans were in a lower class. This lead to white Americans believing all African Americans were incompetent and incapable of holding a respected position in society. 'Momma knocked on the back door and a young white girl opened it to show surprise at seeing us. … The girl closed the door firmly' (Angelou, 1969) This quote highlights the disrespect white people had for African Americans, when the young girl firmly closes the door it is a sign that Maya and her grandmother (Annie) are unwanted. During this time period, African Americans had to conform to the stereotypes of white people had towards them (i.e. uneducated). ‘I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is my little grandbaby, and she ain’t gone be no trouble to you … Stand up when you see a lady, you contemptuous scoundrel.’ The first part of the quote is when Annie is ‘Politely’ talking to the dentist how he would expect her to speak, then the second part of the quote she’s angry with the dentist and is trying to confront dentist Lincoln. This quote clearly displays how white people have forced African Americans to conform to their stereotypes.

In Chimamanda’s speech she talks about when she was little and her family got a new houseboy. His name was Fide and all that Chimamanda was told about him was that his family was very poor. Her family would send old clothes to his family. One day her family went to the village and she was very surprised when his mother produced a beautifully patterned basket that his brother had made ‘Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made’ (Adiche, 2009). She was very shocked because all Chimamanda had heard about them was how poor they were and she could not think of them as anything but poor (QUOTE 'Impression') ‘I was startled. It had never occurred to me that anybody in his family could make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor’ (Adiche, 2009). By comparing the two sources we can see both texts highlight the false belief of lower class people being unskilled and uneducated throughout each time period.

In the texts Adiche and Angelou both illustrate the importance of racial equality and how people who don’t value racial equality have affected their life. Throughout Angelou’s autobiography she illustrates the massive impact racial inequality has affected their life. One of these stories is when she went to the dentist to get two teeth that were ‘rotten to the gum’ (Angelou, 1969). She had to walk a long distance to get to the doctors, and when they finally got to the doctors he said ‘I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than a niggers’ (Angelou, 1969). The use of nigger in this quote just shows how disgustingly African Americans were treated by white Americans just because the colour of their skin.

The effect of racial inequality is to a less extent in Adiche’s life but it still has had an effect. When Chimamanda was 18 she left Nigeria for the first time to go to university in the United States. Her roommate was very shocked by her. She asked Adiche when she had learnt to speak English so well even though English is the national language of Nigeria ‘She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language’. She also assumed that Chimamanda did not know what or how to use a stove ‘She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove’. But out of all of the naive assumptions that her roommate made about Africa to one that shocked Adiche the most was that her roommate had felt sorry for Chimamanda before she met Adiche ‘She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity’ (Adiche, 2009). This quote shows that Adiche’s roommate automatically assumed Chimamanda was less than her because of Chimamanda’s race. These two sources display how the value of racial equality has vastly changed for the better between each time period.

By comparing the different time periods shown in both Chimamanda Adiche’s and Maya Angelou’s texts, I have been able to illustrate the change in the value of racial equality and the false belief that people in a lower social class are unskilled and uneducated over two periods of time. This comparison has allowed for me to show how racial equality has been valued more over time and how low class people are still believed to be unskilled and uneducated in both texts.