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A Boy's Spiritual Journey: The Cultural and Religious Conflict between Family Relationships and the Conventionalism of Tibetan Buddhism in Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* (2014)

Abstract

This research paper is mainly concerns with the analyzing of Sarah Ruhl's play The Oldest Boy (2014), critically via considering the clashes of culture, and religion with family ideologies. By Adherents T.S. Eliot's approach in his Notes towards the Definition of Culture, the paper is devoted to looking at and embodying the cultural and religious rift occurring in Ruhl's The Oldest Boy. And to stand on the fact of the impact of the cultural and religious conflict on the family relations by passing throughout the main event of the play as to attract a Christian-born child who is only three years' old to convert to Buddhism, and to be a Tibetan Buddhism Lama. The case is hectic for an American mother with no information on, or faith in, Buddhism. The paper proceeds with the hypothesis that the genuine clash is inner and it lies in the Mother's battle to give up her child or not in the middle of the spontaneous flood of cultural, religious and emotional clashes. The paper concludes that religion is what shapes the culture of countries.

Keywords: Post-Modernism Drama, Culture Clash, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist Rituals, Lama, Take Refuge, Sarah Ruhl, The Oldest Boy.

Introduction

During the 20th and 21st centuries, the American playwrights lead in their ventures to the life of the Buddha and Buddhism. The life of the Buddha and Buddha's Conventionalism was of interest to them as it brought them a new subject and figure: The Buddha was an eastern contrast to Christ. The writers have thought that this unexplored content might transform the medieval custom of theater mystery into a modernist form. This thing has added some intellectual and cultural clash between East and West (Samuel, 2015).

Social and culture clashes will happen just when the convictions and customs of one social group represent a challenge to individuals of another. Such a test will inspire mind measures engaged with intellectual dynamic, passionate initiation and physiological excitement related with the flare-up, lead and goal of contention. In another words culture clash is a conflict arising from the interaction of people with different cultural values (Moreira, 2019).

Jonathan H. Turner characterizes culture clash as a contention brought about by contrasts in social qualities and convictions that spot

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individuals at chances with each other, that place people at odds with one another (Samuel Cohen, 2017).

In Fact, the world is comprised of individuals from various societies. Culture alludes to the convictions, qualities and standards that an individual distinguishes. Since various individuals relate to various societies, it isn't unprecedented to discover individuals from various societies experience a social conflict, which brings about a contention. Social clash has been characterized as a sort of opposition that happens at whatever point there is a conflict between various social convictions and qualities. Sociologists note that social clashes are among the most troublesome clashes to address as a result of the distinctions in convictions. They contend that the social clashes will in general increment at whatever point the social contrasts show in legislative issues and religion. In view of the high pervasiveness of social clashes in the general public, researchers have composed numerous books the vast majority of which fixates on social clashes as the fundamental subject. This sort of conflict arises as the focal topic of numerous American plays in both the Modernism and Post Modernism literature, and Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* is no exception.

Sarah Ruhl is presently considered among the most conspicuous writers to have arisen the culture of United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. For sure, her productive creation and number of debuts; the distinctions and grants she has received; and the way that four of her plays were routinely among the ten most-delivered plays (Fernández Caparrós, 2015).

In the dazzling, discreetly moving play, Ruhl depicted the story of an American woman who discovers that her child is accepted to be the reincarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist lama. At the point when a couple of Tibetan priests show up suddenly at her entryway and request that she surrender her child, so he might be taught at a cloister in India, she is compelled to stand up to her own way of life as a mother and the ramifications of her significant other's Tibetan social character, too. As the couple battle to settle on this tragic choice for their kid, they should wrestle with the idea of adoration and connection, the significance of family and confidence, and being both parent and child, and both teacher and student. In Ruhl's creative, expressive style, *The Oldest Boy* takes us on a rich and finished excursion through misfortune, sympathy, and the progressive opening of hearts and brains (Crespo, 2015).

Zachary Stewart raised the question in his published review of Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*: (2014) "Would you let your three-year-old move away to a monastery in India? Sarah Ruhl imagines you

might". Zachary Stewart dealt with the problem from an emotional perspective. Then he goes to talk about the stage design of Mimi Lien and the cultural forms and style that really added taste of the Tibetan Buddhism on the stage.

Concerning Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*, director Rebecca Taichman said: "She has this glorious ability to merge the mundane and every day with the spiritual and surreal, and ask epic questions.". Ruhl values the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary, saying, "I like hearing people in odd positions talk ordinary words, or people in ordinary places speaking extraordinary words (ibid).

The relationship between Mother and Father in Ruhl's the *Oldest Boy* is perfectly addressed by Jury, Whitney Rae in her thesis to get the master's degree in art entitled: (The Ruhl's of Relationships: Connecting with Others Through Theatrical Ambiguity, 2017). Her portrayal of the relationship between the two was fluid and without much intersection with regard to the two different religions; Buddhism and Christianity.

This research paper is mainly concerned with the portray of all the elements of cultural conflict in Ruhl's *the Oldest Boy*, taking into account the religious, social and cultural differences which all clashed with the ideology of the mother, trying to let her give up her first only son, who was only three years old. The paper will be divided into two major parts and a conclusion. The first part will be divided into two sections. The first section devoted to the theoretical framework by relying on T.S. Eliot's Notes towards the Definition of Culture to better understanding the concepts religion and culture, and their relations to each other in the big umbrella the society. The second section would be conceder a short history of the Tibetan Buddhism, when the last part will dedicate to critical analysis of Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*.

Part I:

A. Culture and Religion as Presented by T.S. Eliot in his Notes towards the Definition of Culture

Cultural Criticism is another basic focal point through which any content can be seen. This type of Criticism looks at how changed religions, nationalities, class IDs, political convictions, and perspectives influence the manners by which writings are made and deciphered (Berger, 1995).

In his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot states at the beginning that his sole reason is to characterize culture, a term that he feels "has come to be abused." He envisions that, therefore, maybe, of the ruinous tendency of the new war, the term culture has come to be utilized and misunderstood by writers, for instance, as

though it were a term inseparable with the term civilization. Eliot doesn't reject that those two words might be compatible in specific areas, so his point isn't to raise any counterfeit differentiations between them however to characterize the one, culture, so that it won't keep on being handily confused with being an equivalent for Art as a rule or, significantly more dubiously, for a kind of emotional stimulant (Eliot, 1949).

As he plots his way to deal with the theme in the article, Eliot likewise uncovers, obviously, his own inclination, which is that there is a connection among culture and religion, to such an extent, without a doubt, that "culture [of a people] will seem, by all accounts, to be the result of the religion, or the religion the result of the culture." Furthermore, he accepts that a culture is natural and organic that it develops and changes so it very well might be sent through succeeding generations; that it should be reducible to an ever increasing number of local indications, as is suggested by regionalism; and that, as far as religion is concerned, it ought to reflect both variety and unity (Eliot, 1949).

Moreover, there are different contexts in which one may consider culture regarding habits, for instance, of religion or of learning, of philosophy, or of expressions of the human experience and these are really frequently neither considered or represented. The net outcome is that individuals are in this manner urged to consider themselves people of culture when they are knowledgeable in one zone of it yet are absolutely unconscious that there are different regions also. Eliot's point is that all these different senses, at that point, and all these different degrees of culture should be considered in an intelligible way on the off chance that anything moving toward a sufficient definition can actually would like to be accomplished. These different attributes and classes of culture cover; there is, for instance, even in more crude societies, particular detachment among art and religion or between the activities of the individual and the objectives of the group (Mambrol, 2020).

Accordingly, Eliot's illustration shows up at a crucial point in time, "No culture can show up or create besides comparable to a religion." Indeed, Eliot goes considerably further in connecting a people's way of life to their conviction framework by noticing that all that he has quite recently said via depicting how a culture may decrease and crumble may likewise be said of similar phenomena as they would happen throughout the entire existence of a religion (ibid). Eliot might want to envision a society in which "both 'religion' and 'culture' should mean for the individual and for the whole society something toward which they endeavor, not just something which they have." Religion would thus be able to be "the entire

lifestyle of a people, what's more, that lifestyle is additionally its culture," or it very well might be a lifestyle that a people share with different people groups yet with whom they don't share a typical culture (Eliot, 1949).

B. Finding the Reincarnated Tulkus Lama in the Conventionalism of Tibetan Buddhism

From 1913 to 1950, Tibet was a tranquil autonomous nation under the political and strict administration of the thirteenth Dalai Lama with a different language, culture, and ethnic personality from China. In 1949, Mao Zedong's Communist Red Army crushed the multitude of the Chinese general Chiang Kai-shek bringing Mao into power. Mao declared his capacity by attacking Tibet in 1950 and adding it as a component of China. It was as of now that the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was 16 years of age, was approached to accept full accountability as the political head of Tibet (edited by Steven D. Goodman, 1992).

At first, Tibet and Beijing consented to The Seventeen Point Arrangement allowing Tibet provincial self-rule and ensuring there would be no adjustment of Tibetan political, social, and strict establishments. Notwithstanding, by 1954 the Chinese started decimating cloisters, stifling social liberties, forcing the Chinese language, and seizing and rearranging Tibetan land. In March 1959, the people of Lhasa (the capital city of Tibet) assembled and required the Chinese to pull out from their nation. The Chinese reaction was brutal. An expected 87,000 Tibetans were executed, captured, or ousted to work camps. The Dalai Lama and a huge number of his supporters fled to Dharamsala, India where he set up a fairly based Tibetan government in a state of banishment. The Tibetan diaspora proceeded with a large number of Tibetans getting comfortable encompassing regions in Nepal, India, and Bhutan. It is assessed that there are near 150,000 Tibetan outcasts in a state of banishment today around the globe. In 1989, under tension from China, Nepal stopped to allow any recently showing up Tibetans to remain or look for shelter in their nation. Before that, around 3,000 Tibetans fled to Nepal every year. The 20,000 Tibetans who right now dwell in settlements all through Nepal are not perceived as outcasts or given any perceptible legitimate status (Mills, 2003).

Buddhism is a one of worldwide religion with an intricate history and arrangement of convictions. Historians showed that it started in India between the fifth and sixth century B.C.E. As per Buddhist convention, Siddhartha Gautama (later known as the Buddha) is the organizer of Buddhism. He was brought into the world the child of an Indian warrior king and lived in a castle at the lower regions of the Himalayas. He was

furnished with all the advantages of his regal heredity, yet was not permitted to leave the grounds of the castle. At some point, he got away and went into the nearby town where he was defied with destitution, demise, and languishing (Yu, 2012).

In 755 C.E. during the rule of King Trisong Deutsen, Buddhism turned into the official religion of Tibet. Around then, the ruler welcomed acclaimed Buddhist instructors to visit from India, including Pemasambhava, who the Tibetans viewed as the "Second Buddha" and called Guru Rinpoche, or "Valuable Master." He helped the lord build Tibet's first religious community at Samye and instilled Tibet's initial seven priests. In the years that followed, there were numerous wars, and numerous rulers who might smother Buddhism. Notwithstanding, it is accepted that Buddhism was reestablished as the fundamental Tibetan religion in 1042. After 500 years, the title of Dalai Lama would be made after the control of Tibet by Mongolia. At the point when the Mongolian King Altan Khan was changed over to Buddhism by the Tibetan lama Sonam Gyatso, he gave him with the title Dalai Lama, signifying "Ocean of Wisdom." From that point forward, Dalai Lama turned into the title of the sovereign religious head of Tibet (ibid).

In terms of Buddhism, reincarnation is the cycle by which human awareness is reawakened in another form. Buddhists accept that over and over, after every passing, an individual's cognizance "spirit," takes resurrection as another being. Buddhists additionally accept that great karma (a propensity toward positive contemplations and activities) may bring about resurrection in a higher form. The results of awful karma (negative deeds) may prompt resurrection in a lower form (Novick, 1999).

Buddhists believe that through great karma and by defeating voracity, contempt, and obliviousness they can liberate themselves from the ceaseless pattern of death and resurrection. Nonetheless, a portion of those high profound pioneers (called rinpoches or tulkus), penance nirvana (a perpetual condition of harmony and joy) to re-visitation of earth and facilitate the sufferings of people with their tremendous shrewdness and information. These tulkus can handle the time and spot of their future births, and pick their future guardians (ibid).

Buddhist priests have a framework for finding resurrected tulkus that has been set up for millennia. It is accepted that at the hour of their passing and cremation, the tulku will leave signs, for example, footprints in the ashes, or letters and images that show up in the mists demonstrating where search gatherings or students should start searching for their resurrected form. Numerous high lamas will be counseled, just as the Nechung prophet, a Tibetan diviner. The student or search

party at that point starts going all through the locale, utilizing data from the oracle, just as dreams and reflection to center their pursuit. They go from house to house meeting kids in various towns and testing them to check whether they might be the resurrection. The assessments comprise of giving the kid an assortment of articles, including those possessed by the previous lama, and having them distinguish and pick those which have a place with "them." They will get some information about the youngster's dozing propensities, otherworldly development, and conduct. When the kid has been affirmed as the resurrected instructor, the guardians are urged to send the kid to a cloister where he will be enthroned, raised, and officially taught (ibid).

After all that has been said, the next part of the research is devoted to analyzing the family relations in Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*, that have been faced with cultural and religious tensions, which may lead to the depart of a family member (the son) to live in another country to undergo with a spiritual and religious journey.

Part II: Family Relationships and the Conventionalism of Tibetan Buddhism under the lens in Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*

Sarah Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* is set in an American modern city with a broad number of Tibetan people, which Ruhl never be specific about it. Tenzin is an apparently ordinary American boy brought up in exile by an American mother and a Tibetan father. His parents met after his mother inadvertently stepped into a restaurant when she was searching for somewhere to eat and after that they never decided to split. They married against their family's cultures, religions, and desires, and conceived a boy. Three years later, a Buddhist monk and a follower arrive at their house. They claim that Tenzin (the son) is reincarnation of a great lama, so they want to send him to India for more spiritual training in terms of the Tibetan Buddhism's Conventionalism. Naturally, the mother is concerned. Since meeting her husband, she has been more involved in Buddhism. Nevertheless, it has never prompted her to make a sacrifice which is of course big like that. It may be necessary for her to announce whether she believes or not.

The mother is concerned about her faith and the other culture. She is a Christian girl born and bred, and her tutor was a Jewish professor who taught her deconstructionist theory. Mother and Father share a love-at-first-sight moment; the kind of moment people wish it. They remember on the stage how they came to know each other and how they thought they were each other's. Mother was in an incredibly fragile condition when she first approached Father; her instructor had just passed away and she was unable to finish her graduate

degree owing to a holdup on her thesis. When she met Father, however, life took a turn in a positive path for a bit (Dolan, 2015).

Though they end up together, ready to tell viewers the tale of how they met, the beginning of their partnership did not run smoothly. Father is Tibetan, which indicates he comes from a collective culture, one that respects their relatives in a separate way. Though he undeniably fell in love with Mother the night they met, his duty for his family did not falter instantly. He also felt as though he should marry the woman for whom he was arranged because his society and his culture were dying and he had a strong regard for his mother's desires (Jury, 2017).

According to Jury (2017) this is a peculiar phenomenon that happens in many societies in the East. Most weddings are organized nowadays. People from the West seem to believe that marriage weddings are old-fashioned but, no, it occurs often and should not be disrespected. Most Americans say it is. However, for Mother, credit where it is due, a relationship was a choice made by the individual and not the family. Both Father and Mother have a fixed idea of the marital institution:

FATHER: Oh my mother...my mother would be so sad...

And my father—my father would be so mad...

MOTHER: But you do love me?

FATHER: Yes, of course.

MOTHER: So?

FATHER: So in my country it is not like: oh I love you so that's the end of that. Love is not just this private romantic paradise. There is duty and family

MOTHER: But you moved here (Ruhl, 2016).

The mother then claimed that because he came to America, Father should obey the rules of the American culture, since she believes that the chose of marriage is lay at the man hand there. Father is an incredibly intelligent and articulate man, even though. He describes to her the contrast between Americans and other culture's obsessiveness in being able to pick things and edit stuff to their taste (ibid):

"FATHER: ...my mother tried an arranged marriage, but it didn't work.... what you wish doesn't always come, your destiny comes instead.... I have to marry someone of my culture. My culture is dying. It's like salt dissolving into water, my people dissolving. If you put a small amount of salt into a very large pool of water,

and take a sip, the water is no longer salty." (Ruhl, 2016).

Triandis in his book: (Individualism And Collectivism, 1995) states that individuals who prefer individualistic societies are perceived as stronger because they are powerful, self-reliant, assertive, and autonomous. While a collectivist society stresses self-sacrifice, dependability, and serving others. Thus the point here is not about the strength but, Father in *The Oldest Boy* originally belonging to collectivist kind of society. In terms of (Jury, 2017) individualism has shifted the boundaries of love in this century. In western civilization, peoples are expected to pursue what they want when they want it. Romantic partnerships in this culture are not restricted to marriage, since arranged marriage has historically been normal. There are no promises. The American culture is emphasized in this term by the Father:

Americans like to choose things. You choose things all the time. I would like: a soy chai latte, wet, with extra foam. You have these preferences. And you believe that these preferences reflect your identity, and that's all you believe. When it's convenient you are religious. When it's not convenient you are not religious. When it's convenient you help your family. When it's not convenient you do not help your family. When your mother is able-bodied, you have her babysit your children. When your mother is old, you put her in a home. It's not like that in my country (Ruhl, 2016).

Individualization, according to Professor of Psychology Jon Inglis, is the "process by which people become detached from the all-encompassing, self-sacrificing lives of extended families, communities, religions or other social groups" (Inglis, 1998). The issue here is, people in western society also feel the need to stick to the desires and customs of their respective extended families. With all these powerful outside powers driving us, on the other hand, one finds himself puzzled and stuck to the conservative beliefs and ideals. Should we continue the rituals, Christian families are urging us to observe, or are we wiser to make our own independent decision?

In *The Oldest Boy*, Mother is not a profoundly religious character. She also created her own faith and is not part of her childhood religion. By the time Mother encounters Father, she has no faith in religion. Father's Buddhist ideals have a major impact on her passion for him. She not only discusses Religion but also through her own

interactions. This has an impact on his faith purely because of the love of a human who has an interest in the religion. The person is more inclined to switch to something if he or she feels that it is beneficial for them. Father's faith was more satisfactory than most religions Mother has learned about her entire life:

FATHER: And so I turned the open sign to closed. The closed sign now faced the world, the open sign now faced us.

MOTHER: And that was that.

FATHER: There were some difficulties along the way (Ruhl, 2016).

The conflict turns then to another point, which we may concede it as the main conflict in the play. The conflict of whether the Mother will let the son (Tenzin) go to his spiritual journey as the reincarnated Lama or not. In addition to the change that may occur to the mother's relationship with the father and the mother's relationship with the son.

When she met the Tibetan Buddhism monk and informed about the case of Tenzin, the mother laments, "Why does every religion have stories about giving up your child?" (Ruhl, 2016, p. 56). And that is to show her first rejection to the idea of letting her son (Tenzin) to go, as she cries bitterly "the cruel animal fact of motherhood is bigger than any idea" of theological or other reincarnation doctrines (ibid). However, when the monk asks her if she is restricted to her religion, she stated: "I think when you are born Catholic you are always sort of Catholic" (Ruhl, 2016).

Father displays obvious signs of his affections for Tenzin, and has a silent acceptance of the concept of reincarnation. This man knows how to correctly lay down the rule in his cultural framework, but upon a hit like that, he would still be the one getting left behind. Having grown up in the culture, he recognizes the honor, but is also aware that his wife will bear more of the emotional cost. The guiding motivation of the mother seems to be ashamed of the contributions her spouse and her American way of life have made. He screams at her, "I give my family up for you. So why can she not surrender her son?". That is to say that the Father of course still a number for his original religion and culture. (Ruhl, 2016).

In terms of T. S. Eliot, that any cultural conflict arises in the first degree from religious difference, and a culture of a group of people is the result of their religion. Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy* addresses religious differences that worked on building a wall between people, which result of the culture clash to meditate on the cost of separating from loved ones. Accordingly, if the mother would let her son to go for his spiritual journey, then she also would accept the Buddhism as her new

religion. It is more a meditation of motherhood than something else the core struggle is being played early on, and the battle is whether Mother is worthy of embracing her new religion and giving up her son, or of defying the tradition of her husband and holding her family intact. In the way she focuses on motherhood loneliness and the complexity of linking communities and faiths (John, 2019).

The play of Ruhl is an initial and eloquent way of demonstrating this fear for separation. But, though the play the mother finally turns her infant off to the monk, her problem has so unexpectedly been settled as she accepted to send her son. And even she decided to take refuge (the formal way to be Buddhist). we never really see the definitive moment when she overcomes and makes this decision to her own motherly instincts. There is no logical reasoning since, ultimately, it does not have any sense, just a comforting spiritual perspective, above and beyond all human interpretation (Stewart, 2014).

Conclusion

Investigating peoples' cultures always leads us to their religion. Religion is the instrument that produces cultures. In the inspiration and manifestation of cultural expression, the connection between culture and faith is exposed. If culture reflects how the universe is perceived and understood by humans, faith is a central manner in which people perceive the world and understand it. Religion is seen as a material basis embodied in community. Religious expression and inspiration can drive cultural expression, with culture becoming a way for people to convey the intent and significance provided to them by religion.

In Ruhl's *The Oldest Boy*, while mother finally surrendered her child to the monks, this ending of her problem is still not quite simple and uniquely reflects the theme of separation from Christianity to reform a new culture for the mother according to the new religion (Buddhism). Throughout the analysis of the play, it was found that there is a clear convergence and relationship between religion and culture. The idea that the mother would agree to send her son on a spiritual journey to India was linked to the issue that the mother accepted the Buddhist belief frameworks and accepted its culture.

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