Clashing of Cultures

The lessons and values that are advocated today are a result of history. Present societies are shaped by their pasts, taking on the cumulative ideals of their ancestors. Differing in environment and circumstances, no two societies have the same history, thus making them different in ideologies and beliefs. When various and diverse cultures clash, the end results are sometimes admirable. They form an almost symbiotic relationship, forming new thoughts and learning from one another to progress towards a more advanced society. This combination of cultures is more like a clash because of how diverse they are in comparison to one another, causing such a profound impact when they meet; this meeting is able to revolutionize their beliefs. The book, Three Cups of Tea, is a great example of such a cultural clash, in this case, between western society and the isolated villages of the Middle East. Greg Mortenson is close to death in the Himalayan mountain range when his porter rescues him, leading him to the small, unmapped village of Korphe, a community living in the past, a pace apart from the rest of the world. Mortenson symbolizes a more modern civilization, and his experiences in this old-fashioned village bring about a newfound insight to his thinking and ideals. However, his presence has a profound impact on the thoughts of the villagers as well, and they are able to move forward from their core beliefs and develop new, unfamiliar ideas that prove to be beneficial for their society. They even come closer to the rest of the world, through the bridge they build, expanding their outlook and bringing forth new opportunities and less isolation. Mortenson’s experiences with the isolated villages in Pakistan and Afghanistan demonstrate that the union of two very different cultures can impact one another and incite changes in their individual, unique ideologies.

In order to see the effect Mortensen and the villagers have on one another, one must understand the differences between their societies. In Three Cups of Tea, Pakistan is portrayed as a very conservative country under the influences of its primary religion, Islam. The government and the citizens
follow Shariat, laws imbued with religious ideology, and it is heavily enforced. At the same time, the citizens also look to Islam as a map for their lives. They store much by the Quran and have a respect for prayer and the belief to submit themselves to Allah, their God. Currently, there are radical Islamic groups, such as the Taliban, in both Pakistan and Afghanistan that harbor spite against western civilization. There are schools set in place by the Taliban, called “madrasses,” in order to impress their beliefs upon the next generation, to brainwash and train children. According to an authority in the field of madrassa education, “more than eighty thousand of these young madrassa students became Taliban recruits” (243) and the World Bank study states that, “15 to 20 percent of madrassa students were receiving military training, along with a curriculum that emphasized jihad and hatred of the West...” (244). The Taliban uses the lack of adequate schools in these regions to their advantage, to develop the next generation of Taliban soldiers.

Currently, Pakistan is going through political turmoil and that radical, conservative ideals are being pushed onto the population, especially the impoverished. The government can be described as inefficient, failing to provide education to all citizens and refusing to maintain infrastructure. There are villages, such as Korphe, that remain helpless because of poor efforts from the local government, who simply does not care. Mortensen remarks that, “The people of Braldu had been promised schools by the distant Pakistani government for decade, and they were waiting still” (104). In contrast, Western cultures are much more liberal politically and religiously. In the United States, the government ensures an education for every child and provides extensive funding to do so. One such example is seen from the Bush administration, from the “No Child Left Behind” program. Politically, there is a division between Church and State; therefore, the laws are separate from religious ideologies. American society endeavors to aid foreign countries even if there is a lack of enthusiasm from the foreign citizens, as seen in Pakistan. Both cultures differ in a myriad of ways, yet Mortenson’s experiences demonstrate how they are able to influence each other to change. Western culture is able to influence the isolated, middle-eastern villages and vice versa.
As soon as Mortensen stumbles into the village of Korphe, he begins to bring in a western perspective into the villagers’ lives. In villages like Korphe, and many others in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the lives of women are limited and controlled through different interpretations of the Quran. Some of these rules include that a woman cannot take more than one husband, whereas a man can take on more than one wife. They have unequal status and are not permitted to receive an education or hold a job. While Mortensen and the Korphe men set to clear the rubble from a landslide, nurmadhar Medhi, the chief of another village, confronts them, declaring, “Allah forbids the education of girls. And I forbid the construction of this school” (152). The fact that the chief of another village makes the effort to travel to Korphe with “henchmen to beat [the villagers]” simply to prevent the education of females demonstrates how strongly some Islamic followers in these communities interpret the role of women as subservient and inferior. However, Haji Ali is not a follower of such an interpretation. He shares in the same belief as Mortenson, who as a product of a westernized upbringing, stresses the education of all children, regardless of gender. Thus, Haji Ali evenly responds, “We will finish our school, whether you forbid it or not...[Mortenson] is a better Muslim than you. He deserves my devotion more than you do” (152), and then continues, “I’ll pay any price so they have the education they deserve” (153). Therein, Haji Ali makes an enormous sacrifice, giving away twelve of the village’s best rams to Medhi just so that the school can be built. Haji Ali’s sacrifice exemplifies the change Mortenson’s presence has begun to create, projecting the idea that the education of women is not unwonted, nor unjustified.

Another way Mortenson is able to revolutionize the beliefs of the villagers is by disproving their preconception of foreigners, especially Americans. Greg Mortenson does something that no Pakistani or Afghani would ever dream a foreigner would do: he cares about their children and their futures. Before his arrival in Korphe, the villagers had no trust in the promises of “the foreigners.” Jahan, Haji Ali’s granddaughter, recollects, “Many climbers make promise to the Braldu people and forget them when they find their way home...we were so surprised to see [Mortenson] again so soon” (96). Mortenson stays true to his word, overcoming many obstacles and battles to ensure the school’s creation. In turn, the villagers give him their trust, incorporating him into their families. In one of her statements, Jahan
remarks, “[Grandmother] thought of him as her own child...she began to tease my grandfather that he should learn how to be more helpful like his American son” (113). The chief’s own wife is able to put together the words, American and son, displaying how the villagers are beginning to cast aside their prejudices of Americans and embracing the belief that some foreigners really are genuine.

As he provokes new ideas and thoughts into the rural communities he helps, Mortenson gains much from their culture in return. Pakistanis and Afghanis are a very religious people, following the rituals of Islam intensely. They pray five times a day, dropping everything to turn towards Mecca and submit themselves to Allah. In a visit to the tailor, Manzoor Khan, Mortenson gets to observe first-hand a devout Muslim man preparing for his daily prayer. In his desire to learn more, Mortenson joins Manzoor Khan in the lot of a local gas station, where many other men were in prayer. The book describes his reaction, stating, “like many Americans...he had found the idea [of submission] dehumanizing. But for the first time, kneeling among one hundred strangers...he glimpsed the pleasure to be found in submission to a ritualized fellowship of prayer” (68). Mortenson begins to pull away from his previously accepted notion of ritualistic religion and Islam, and towards an appreciation for such religious fervor and spirituality. He learns that through submission to Allah, he is able to detach himself from his impurities and problems, finding solace in prayer. By bringing him along, the tailor does more than just offer Mortenson a new experience; he is able to challenge Mortenson’s preconceptions regarding Islam.

Following that incident, one of the most important lessons Greg Mortenson ascertains is one from the chief of Korphe. When the construction of the school finally begins, Mortenson drives the workers with a frantic fervor, striving to complete the school as swiftly as possible. Haji Ali is forced to take him aside, impressing that there is no need for rush, that it is necessary to “make time to share three cups of tea” (150). Mortenson states, “That day, Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I’ve learned in my life. We Americans think you have to accomplish everything so quickly...Haji Ali taught me to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them” (150). Mortenson has
grown up in a society where everything is done as quickly as possible to elicit results. From a simple villager, yet a wise one, “Dr. Greg” learns the value of patience and slowing down to appreciate the world around him. More importantly, Mortenson learns that in the end, it is not he who needs to complete the school; the villagers must do this on their own. By allowing them to direct the project themselves, it gives them a chance to feel involved and a part of something. The villagers will strive to work harder, and in the end they will gain a sense of accomplishment, knowing that they were essential to the creation of their village’s school. This makes the end result so much more rewarding.

Greg Mortenson himself admits that, “[We have] more to learn from the people [we] work with than [we] could ever hope to teach them” (150). He learns so much from a group of villagers that are worlds apart in thoughts and beliefs. He redefines his thoughts of submission and ritualized prayer and learns the value of patience and relationships. In return, the villagers begin to break away from gender roles interpreted from the Quran and accept the idea of education for all. After spending time with Mortenson, they walk away with a greater trust in foreigners and a better image of Americans in general. *Three Cups of Tea* demonstrates that the exposure of different cultures and societies to one another results in a growth of each of their own respective ideologies and thought processes. It enforces that we all need one another, to interact and share, in order to advance and move forward as a single world.

**Work Cited**