Shirley Jackson’s Short Story The Lottery

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Shirley Jackson’s story The Lottery is the most analyzed story in the history of American literature. It was published in New York in 1948 for the first time. It is a unique story that is different from other short stories in its gruesome plot and its ending. Its main theme is about blindly following tradition, and no one has the right to ask a question about their tradition. The central idea of this story is that people are vulnerable to persecution by a large group of people or communities. A person could feel safe when they get support from a group. It was experienced by Tessie when she won the yearly lottery, and later on, the experiences of the Dunbar and Watson families have explored it to a higher level. After winning the lottery, Tessie examined that her family and community bonds had broken down in her town. Here, we will discuss the negative impacts of unquestioned or unchallenged dogma on the individual’s life. To learn more about the vulnerability of an individual in society, we will study other examples discussed by other authors. Humans in society are reluctant to accept any reality against their traditions which they learned from their predecessors.

The Lottery as an Outdated Instrument of Persecution

Many villages have rejected this outdated tradition. However, this village still had the culture of the lottery. The people of this village were reluctant to reject their outdated and useless traditions and cultural traits. They held the lottery every year, and it had continued for a long time without any interruption. This tradition could be traced back to the 18th century and the era of slavery to retain their slaves. After the abolition of slavery, it was continued until 1919 to prevent women from exercising their right to vote. Then, in the third phase till 1960, it was used as an official public policy for racial discrimination. So this is one of the lessons the author has conveyed in this short story and represents the vulnerability and discrimination of a specific class of people. Tessie was a woman who had never missed the lottery and was willing to participate in it every year. Once she drew a paper that had a black mark on it, she was stoned and sentenced to death. She arrived late because she had forgotten the lottery day. She was a free soul, so her protest against the lottery led her to such a brutal penalty. Hutchinson’s family had drawn the marked paper, and she exclaimed that it wasn’t fair, so she was subsequently stoned to death. The villagers didn’t listen to the reality and truth spoken by her. Her family was not selected to participate in the lottery, so that might be one of the possible reasons for her claim of unfairness, but it was a moot point. Whatever forced her to speak out, the reaction of the villagers was not fair.

Humanity Against Blind Tradition

Traditions, norms, and rules are not above humanity; every person has the right and freedom to talk about the flaws in our traditions and other systems. Some people do not have tolerance and follow their culture and tradition blindly. Not limited to that, they are trying to impose their ideas, norms, and values on others as well. The tradition of the lottery was the best example of ignorance, discrimination, and superstitious beliefs of people. Tessie was stoned to death by her family members, friends, neighbours, and other villagers. She would have realized that in hardship, even your close friends and family don't support you. The villagers continued to follow their violent and senseless rituals, and no one was allowed to talk against their tradition. There were certain traditionalists such as Warner, the old man, who decided this sentence. According to Jackson (1948, p. 258), Warner asked people to take stones and finish it quickly. He was shouting to provoke people, "Come on, come on, everyone". In history, there are unlimited examples of such incidents that happened with truthful people. We have examples of Socrates, Galileo, and other people who unveiled the reality and truth which were against tradition and virtues; people rejected their ideas and hurt them.

Rushdie on Ancient Wisdom and Modern Truth

Salman Rushdie stated in his book "Imagine There's No Heaven" that people have imperfect knowledge of this world. He added that people should live in their own time because ancient wisdom is nonsense in the modern age. People who are living with their previous traditions and knowledge are far away from the truth (Rushdie, 1999, p. 142). As in the story of Shirley Jackson, the villagers were stuck with their tradition, and one who talked against the wrongdoing was killed brutally. He has questioned the sacred books and the beliefs of people, asking why people believe their stories to be more truthful than others' stories. He also unveiled the flaws in the religious teachings which might not be true.

Religious Myth and Scientific Reality

According to Rushdie, religions have imprisoned their followers, and they are not accepting the scientific observations regarding the universe which are true and factual. However, many religions have proposed false theories regarding the creation of the universe, such as African mythology vomited the universe, Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, danced to create this universe, and many other similar beliefs. He was considered a free thinker and analyzed the creation of the universe and compared it with different religious beliefs regarding the creation of this world, which are nonsensical and opposite to scientific realities.

Mob Psychology Scapegoats and Critical Thought

This story was about mob psychology and the people who were blindly following their traditions without thinking about their consequences. They defended their tradition and shut the mouths that spoke the truth and reality. The villagers stoned a woman to death because she screamed about the unfairness and deception of the lottery. The violence that took place in this story can be generalized to any context around the world. In our modern world, no one can challenge certain beliefs because of their consequences. There are three major themes of this story such as the wrongfully designated scapegoats of the society, following the crowd and avoiding critical thinking, and the reluctance of people to reject outdated traditions.

Works Cited

Jackson, Shirley. “The Lottery (1948).” The Treasury of American Short Stories (1949).

Rushdie, Salman. “Imagine There’s No Heaven.”.”. Step Across This Line (1999): 141-144.