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## Intercultural Conflict Analysis: Lessons from 'The Big Sick'

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**Intercultural Conflict Analysis:**  
Lessons from ‘The Big Sick’

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## **Intercultural Conflict Analysis:**

### **Lessons from *The Big Sick***

Throughout my study of intercultural communication, I've been constantly reminded that globalization has massively increased the complexity of our world. Access to technology has aided international travel, business, and urbanization. But perhaps one of the most significant changes we've experienced due to globalization is intercultural integration. Rising immigration has altered our professional, familial, and romantic relationships, making intercultural communication, and the potential for conflict, the new norm. This reality is put on full display in the critically acclaimed 2017 comedy-drama film, *The Big Sick*, directed by Michael Showalter. Written by Emily Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani, it tells a semi-autobiographical story of Gordon and Nanjiani's romance and the intercultural conflict they and their families had to cope with as a result. Kumail Nanjiani plays a dramatized version of himself as an Uber driver, aspiring comedian, and the son of devoutly Muslim Pakistani immigrants. It also stars Zoe Kazan as a fictional version of Nanjiani's wife Emily, Holly Hunter as Emily's mother Beth, Ray Romano as Emily's father Terry, Zenobia Shroff as Kumail's mother Sharmeen, and Anupam Kher as Kumail's father Azmat.

The main characters in the film essentially represent two distinct cultures. First, Emily and her parents seem to represent the dominant white American culture. Emily is presumably Beth and Terry's only child, she attends graduate school far from her parents, and there is no mention of any religious affiliation among them. Their family identity is individualistic and

egalitarian, while their communication style tends to be candid and practical. I felt familiar with these characters' perspectives while watching the film because I share many similar identity features with them. However, Kumail and his family represent an entirely different culture, as Pakistani immigrants with deep ties to the Islamic faith. Their identity is collectivistic and hierarchical, while their communication tends to be somewhat indirect and formal. Kumail visits his brother, sister-in-law, and parents quite often, and they all retain a strong sense of personal obligation to one another. Respect for tradition is a crucial part of their cultural dynamic, exemplified in their commitment to arranged marriage. They also experience a certain level of marginalization as immigrants and members of minority ethnic and religious identities in the United States. I was not familiar with Pakistani culture prior to watching *The Big Sick*, so these characters' stories presented an opportunity to study communication from a fresh perspective. But it was the many conflicts depicted in the film that offered me an entirely new lens through which to consider the impact of culture on personal connection.

The first conflict occurs between Kumail and Emily, bringing their budding relationship to a screeching halt. To give context, out of obligation to his parents, Kumail endures an endless stream of arranged meetings, almost every time he visits his family, between him and suitable Pakistani bachelorettes. He keeps a "file" of headshots and descriptions that these women give him, and, after five months of dating, Emily discovers this in his apartment. At this point, Kumail admits that he hasn't told his parents about their relationship, but Emily feels most betrayed by his decision to conceal this "file" from her. Kumail argues, "I'm fighting a 1,400-year-old culture! [...] You know what we call arranged marriage in Pakistan? Marriage," (*Big Sick* 32:40). He even shares that his cousin was kicked out of the family for pursuing a "love marriage." This demonstrates how cultural differences in perceived responsibility toward

one's family can affect the way people prioritize their commitments, potentially leading to disagreement. Ultimately, Emily can't accept Kumail's explanation, and the pair don't get the chance to reconcile before their lives radically change.

The event that completely alters the course of the film occurs when Emily contracts a mysterious illness, and doctors must place her in a medically-induced coma. This puts Kumail and Emily's parents directly into conflict. Beth and Terry are aware of Kumail and Emily's history and start out openly hostile in their communication. When Kumail offers to stay and wait with them at the hospital, Beth responds: "You don't have to worry about being committed to anything. You didn't want to when she was awake. There's no need to when she's unconscious," (*Big Sick* 49:30). And when the parents try to converse with Kumail, Terry starts by awkwardly asking him about his "stance" on 9/11. Kumail sarcastically responds, "It's a tragedy. We lost 19 of our best guys," (*Big Sick* 52:00). Beth and Terry's initial attitude highlights their lack of cultural competency, treating Kumail as a sort of "other" instead of striving to meaningfully connect with him. In the midst of this tense environment with one set of parents, Kumail continues to face pressure from another.

While the Nanjiani family actively embraces their Pakistani identity, Kumail himself struggles to accept many of the implicit aspects of his culture. This is the third central conflict in *The Big Sick*. Unlike his parents, Kumail has adopted many aspects of the dominant culture's worldview and approach to communication. As I mentioned, Kumail spends most of the film hiding his relationship with Emily, and her subsequent illness, from his parents. Eventually, after he misses an "appointment" with a prospective bachelorette, Kumail's parents confront him about his evasive behavior, and he comes clean. They angrily remind him of all they sacrificed and that they've only asked for him to "be a good Muslim and marry a good Pakistani girl!" (*Big*

*Sick* 1:24:00). Kumail responds “Why did you bring me here if you wanted to not have an American life? [...] You don’t care what I think. You just want me to follow the rules. But the rules don’t make sense to me,” (*Big Sick* 1:24:30). He admits that he has doubts about his faith and can’t see himself going through with an arranged marriage. To this, his mother coldly replies, “You are not my son,” and his father says “You think the American dream is just about doing what you want and not thinking about other people? You’re wrong!” (*Big Sick* 1:25:40). To me, this scene captures many of the nuances of generational conflict that can occur within immigrant families, illustrating the clash between individualistic and collectivistic worldviews.

One interesting conflict that seems to be occurring beneath the surface is Kumail’s inability to perfectly align with either the dominant U.S. culture or his family’s Pakistani culture. For example, while performing a stand-up routine, Kumail gets heckled by an audience member ignorantly yelling “Go back to ISIS!” (*Big Sick* 1:00:30). This demonstrates that, regardless of Kumail’s ever-changing perception of himself, people will always make prejudiced assumptions about him based on his physical appearance. In another scene, after Emily’s parents begin opening up to Kumail, Terry frankly discusses how much he loves his wife and daughter and the shame he felt after once cheating on Beth. Kumail’s unwillingness to engage with this blunt conversation shows, in my opinion, his struggle to distance himself from a cultural upbringing that taught him to communicate more reservedly. So, does this story offer any kind of solution to intercultural conflict?

Perhaps my favorite part of *The Big Sick* is the clear message throughout the film that humor is often the most impactful way to bridge cultural divides. Kumail and Emily’s parents find common ground through their senses of humor. And, when Emily recovers, she and Kumail joke with one another as they try to reconcile. In another notable scene late in the film, Kumail

barges in on his family unexpectedly, though they ignore him. Because of their silent treatment, he presents written cue cards for them with comedic phrases like “You’re so much more handsome than your brother,” “Always with the comedy,” and one heartfelt message “It’s interesting how you can’t really kick someone out of your family because they’ll always be your family,” (*Big Sick* 1:45:30). And this tactic eventually seems to work. Near the end of the film, as Kumail prepares to move to New York City, his parents finally stop by to see him. The conversation is brief, and his father concludes with “It was nice to have you as a son. Goodbye forever,” then adds, “When you reach New York just text us and tell us that you’ve reached safely, okay?” (*Big Sick* 1:54:30). Watching *The Big Sick* taught me a lot about the complexity of intercultural communication, especially in the context of personal relationships. It’s difficult to accept that seemingly insurmountable differences can arise even with the people that we’re closest to. But navigating intercultural conflict is possible if we can tolerate a bit of ambiguity, elevated emotions, and occasional contradictions. So it’s our task to wade into those murky waters with empathy for ourselves and others, making space to laugh along the way.

## References

*The Big Sick*. Directed by Michael Showalter, performances by Kumail Nanjiani, Zoe Kazan, Holly Hunter, Ray Romano, Anupam Kher, Zenobia Shroff. Amazon Studios, 2017.  
Film.