American Social Stratification:  
A Cross-Cultural Examination  
of a Billie Letts Novel Used as an EFL  
Reading and Conversation Text

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Introduction

Relevant curriculum development comprises the heart and vitality of a university program as judicious policies turn out students with new skills and concepts that anticipate and keep pace with emerging technologies, economies, and cultural catalysts that change the inexorably evolving world. A greater emphasis on comparative culture studies in English has been included in the curriculum of the English Literature Department of Soka University. “Cross-cultural”, a synonym of “comparative culture”, is defined by Collins English Dictionary as “involving or bridging the differences between cultures”. A vigorous, well-drafted curriculum will prepare students to leave the school environment and enter a global work environment where a rigorously comprehensive university preparation is tacitly expected. Along with a contemporary curriculum which includes a comparative culture component, concomitant instructional strategies, techniques and materials must be incorporated as well. The demographics, backgrounds, and other endemic differences of both the students and the issues and themes that are being taught are requisite components of a comparative culture focus. (Ogbu, 1992).
Comparative culture study does not always imply merely ethnicity; just as often it applies to socioeconomic subcultures within the same national, racial, cultural paradigm. This paper intends to focus on, contrast and compare two examples of specific spheres of American social and economic stratification, each example the polar opposite of the other: the biggest, richest retailer in the world, Wal-Mart Corporation, and a fictional character in a novel who is the quintessential young high school dropout: pregnant, unmarried, with no family, no money, and no readily identifiable future prospects of help to achieve a comfortable American lifestyle.

Both the extant Wal-Mart Corporation and the fictional Novalee Nation were used as a construct for an American novel of how two people from opposing subcultures or strata of the U.S.A. came together in a most unlikely scenario. The result of their meeting suggests that two different cultures can unite and create mutual benefit. This novel was used for three years in high intermediate and advanced extensive reading classes at Soka University English Literature Department.

In Japan, university level EFL reading programs often use an "intensive" modality, which implies close study of short passages, including syntactic, semantic, and lexical analyses and translation into the L1. Alderson and Urquhart (1984) have argued that this is not a reading, but a language lesson. Global EFL reading instruction is, rather, “extensive” reading in order to guide learners to master reading skills/strategies for understanding such elements as textual features, metaphoric and symbolic elements, and cultural background. (Hamp-Lyons, 1985). “Extensive” reading, especially in an English Literature Department, should mean reading long texts of authentic, unabridged novels, reading for global understanding, and with the intention of obtaining pleasure, inspiration, or formative new concepts from the text.

Selecting appropriate authentic video material for an EFL classroom is a
valuable supplement to reading material, and its full potential is reached when each is authentic, and when they are integral compliments to one another. When such is the case, the video can visually identify, expand, or reinforce, a linguistic or cultural aspect of the reading material that otherwise may have remained ambiguous and obscure (Rameriz, 2003).

Synopsis of Extensive Reading and Authentic Audiovisual Material

In 1995 Billie Letts published her first novel, Where The Heart Is. Oprah Winfrey, perhaps the most influential American television talk-show host, named Where The Heart Is for her Oprah Book Club Selection. This novel has been translated into 25 different languages and has been read by millions of readers around the world. It resonates universally with high school adolescents and young university women and men; those who are beginning to examine and adopt lifetime choices and practices that will prevail in their adult judgments and behaviors. In the year 2000, a feature film based on the novel was released, and the book and the film, used together in a one-semester reading/conversation class, captured and engaged the attention and imagination of Soka University English Literature majors who studied in the classes.

The fictional protagonist, Novalee Nation, is young, homeless, unmarried, and seven months pregnant at the beginning of the novel. On a cross-country car trip, she is duped, dumped and stranded by her boyfriend in the parking lot at a Wal-Mart store, with no money and only the clothes on her back. Dumbfounded, bewildered, and dispirited, Novalee aimlessly wanders through the giant discount department store/supermarket until closing time. Having nowhere else to go, she hides herself in a cleaning closet, seeking shelter for the night. For the next two months, she furtively sleeps at Wal-Mart after closing hours, eating food from the shelves, providing clothes, sleeping bag, pillows and linens, alarm clock, and stacks of home decorating magazines for herself, and using the lavatories for
bathing facilities. She awakens early each morning to carefully replace all the items she uses during the night so that she conceals the evidence of her clandestine tenancy. She also scrupulously keeps a written account of everything she uses so that her conscience is clear, because she has sincere intentions to someday, someway, clear up her debt to Wal-Mart. Roaming the huge Wal-Mart while admiring and yearning to possess all the wonderful material possessions is a distraction that keeps her mind in a state of reality suspension. Exposure to so much desirable wealth feeds her unwavering yearning for the great “American Dream”, to own a safe, cozy home, “a respectable house with no wheels under it”. Growing up, she had always lived in cheap, shabby mobile-home parks or in rundown trailers in disreputable neighborhoods, and she longed to own a traditional middle-class house in which to shelter a loving family and friends. Then, one violent, stormy night, her baby is born on the hard tile floor in a Wal-Mart aisle! She and the baby are rescued and taken to the hospital, trailed by a mass of small-town newspaper paparazzi, and she and the “Wal-Mart baby” become sensationalized local novelties. Sam Walton, Founder of the Wal-Mart empire, not only visits Novalee and the “Wal-Mart baby” in the hospital, but pays the hospital bill and offers Novalee a job in the local Wal-Mart. The job offer is a Godsend to the uneducated, inexperienced girl who now has the extra responsibility as a single mother to support her child. She capitalizes on her good fortune to get a job at Wal-Mart, and through hard work, amazing luck, and the many decent, charitable and loving friends who rally round her, she achieves more in her life than she ever dreamed possible. The entry-level job at Wal-Mart is not enough to provide Novalee everything to which she aspires; her new friends from lower socioeconomic levels lovingly shore her up for years and finally they are the decisive factor in making her dreams come true. The title of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s book, *It Takes a Village* encapsulates the theme of neighbors helping and caring for one another. (Clinton, 1996)
American Social Stratification

Social stratification can be defined as “the hierarchical ranking of groups based on the unequal distribution of societal resources and positions” (The University of Texas at Dallas, 2004). Despite the myth that America is a truly egalitarian society where anyone can succeed with sufficient commitment and hard work, this “American Dream” is challenged by barriers such as age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, social strata, and other classifications. All these factors are the principal demerits that forged the wide social gap between the fictional Novalee, and the reality of Sam Walton, America’s richest and most successful discount retailer. America is still a society of astounding stratification (Anderson, 2000).

Sam Walton was, indeed the founder of the international megalithic Wal-Mart discount empire. He of course never visited Novalee, nor did he offer the fictional character a job. There was never a “Wal-Mart” baby. It certainly is not incongruous, however, to conjoin fiction and reality. Sam Walton was a real person who occupied the very highest socioeconomic American and global strata. He bequeathed that level of extravagant wealth and power to his descendents and many corporate executives, but not to the hundreds of thousands of lower level workers like the heroine of the novel. She was born into the meanest of circumstances and the poorest conditions. The Maslow Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is the famous, classic scale of psychological needs assessment. If one applied that standard of measurement to Novalee’s socio-psychological development at the time she gave birth to the “Wal-Mart baby”, she would have been below the first bottom level of the pyramid. She couldn’t meet her own physiological, biological needs. Nor could she have reached the second level in order to provide for her own safety, much less that of her unborn child. Certainly she had not yet reached the third level where Maslow describes that we are able to attain fulfillment of our needs for love and belonging. In contrast, Sam
Walton, by the time of his death in 1992, had become the richest retailer in the world, and had surpassed the highest level of psychological self-actualization (Maslow, A., 1943).

An Iconic and Controversial Titan and His Empire

Sam Walton was a merchandizing visionary, but in latter days, the business practices of his international conglomerate have become controversial. He harnessed the new information technology to cut costs and sell goods at the lowest possible discount prices. He was perhaps the first true information-age CEO. Today Wal-Mart's computer database is second only to the Pentagon's in capacity. It is the largest profit-making enterprise in the world, with sales of a quarter of a trillion dollars at the end of 2003. If this corporation were an independent country it would have been China's eighth largest trading partner, ahead of Russia and Britain. In selling general merchandise and groceries, it has no real rivals. (University of California, 2004).

He built huge discounts stores all across the landscape of the American countryside. He forced a lot of people to change the way they made a living because small-town business owners had to close shop when they couldn't compete with the colossus. He built Wal-Mart stores wherever he could. He would buzz towns in his low-flying airplane studying the lay of the land. When he had triangulated the proper intersection between a few small towns, he would touch down, buy a piece of farmland at that intersection and build another Wal-Mart store (Time, 1998). His pioneering retailing concepts and low-overhead, low-inventory distribution practices created an environment of crushing competition for small-town "Mom and Pop" business owners. So many beleaguered small-town merchants were forced to close their long-established shops because they couldn't compete with Wal-Mart. Hundreds of small-town Main Streets became virtual ghost towns as lower-income and middle-class
shoppers drove to the outskirts of town to bargain shop at the sprawling new discount Wal-Mart. It was a “one-stop” shopping paradise for busy, often single, working mothers on a tight shopping budget. (John Huey, 2006).

Sam Walton is said, moreover, to have had extraordinary charisma. He instilled a loyal “Wal-Mart family” work ethic among his legions (1.4 million) of employees in some 4,000 stores in the U.S. and around 1,500 in 44 other countries. “We’re all working together, that’s the secret” was the mantra Sam Walton instilled in his workers. He assuaged the regret for the declining community allegiances with slogans of company ethics such as, “Each Wal-Mart store should reflect the values of its customers and support the vision they hold for their community”. Once Wal-Mart was indelibly stamped on the face of America, and imported abroad, however, a deeper probe of the social context of the company practices was inevitable, notwithstanding the tremendous customer satisfaction demonstrated by lower middle-class and poor shoppers. Company employees, although part time and paid at minimum wage rates, in the early and mid ‘80s, were grateful to have secure jobs with a reliable corporation, so complaints were barely audible in the early days.

Local critics that began to oppose new Wal-Mart store openings cited concerns such as traffic problems, environment problems, public safety, absentee landlordism, bad public relations, and low wages, company positions, and benefits, especially for women and minorities. Many women and minorities who had previously struggled to eke out a subsistence, to feed and clothe their families on a yearly income below the official government poverty level, had been happy to be hired to work at Wal-Mart; to be able to depend on a steady job and a weekly salary that was not likely to evaporate at the first small downturn of the economy.

The point of criticism on behalf of women began when Wal-Mart, a non-union employer, was found to discriminate against women and minorities with
part-time positions, minimum wages and low promotion ceilings. Gender stratification in retail trade, with Wal-Mart as a prime case study, was documented by the Brandeis Center for Women’s Studies, and a class action gender discrimination suit advocated by the San Francisco Impact Fund scrutinized the Wal-Mart multinational corporation and identified an archetypical example of low-wage female part-time employment and exploitation. “Wal-Mart has been able to pioneer a low-wage labor relations strategy without hindrance from unions, the government, or local communities”. (University of California, 2004)

Independent critics say that Wal-Mart is a success in a free enterprise system because it sells products at low prices that people want to buy, satisfying customers’ needs, but at the same time their lower prices draw customers away from local businesses that have been established for decades, sometimes generations, and therefore is the cause of decaying rural communities and declining small community values. (Wikipedia, 2006)

Critics argue that Wal-Mart pressures manufacturers for lower and lower prices, so that outsourcing jobs to China and other third-world nations where the cost of labor is less expensive, is rendering American manufacturing plants redundant, consequently leaving many Americans from the lower working classes, without jobs. (Global Insight, 2005) On the other hand, proponents of Wal-Mart celebrate the large numbers of jobs that the opening of a new Super Wal-Mart in a new location brings to their area. Thus, the controversy continues over the benefits versus the evils of the seemingly unstoppable forward movement of the high-income prime movers of Wal-Mart. (World Trade Organization, 2000)

Conclusion
Billies Letts juxtaposed Novalee Nation and Sam Walton in Where The
Heart Is in order to dramatically highlight the extremities of the highest and lowest subcultures that co-exist and even collaborate to accommodate one another within the multi-stratified American culture. Novalee was young, untried, unmarried, and seven months pregnant. She was totally alone in the world, with no family or friends to help her in dire circumstances. She had an inborn, inherent strength and trust in herself as well as in others, however, that focused her attention directly to the goodness of other people. That facet of her character likewise drew other good people to her. Having no real life experience or moral training as a child, she had wandered from one person and one situation to another, building castles in the air and daydreaming about a better life in a vague, nebulous future. She had neither money nor a high school diploma, nor marketable job skills. Yet she had a sweet, loving disposition. Like Blanche DuBois said in the famous 1948 Pulitzer Prize winning drama by Tennessee Williams, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers”. All the fictional characters in Where The Heart Is are just a little out of the ordinary; a little quirky in one way or another. “Even in the most humble, common places, I believe it is easy to find goodness, generosity and magic in people”, Billie Letts said long ago in a personal conversation. (Letts, 2001) Novalee found generous, “magic” friends who helped her achieve her dream. “The kindness of strangers” indeed contributed abundantly to the critical developmental phase of her life when otherwise she would have been liable to severe suffering and failure. Working for low wages at Wal-Mart, and supporting her child as a single mother, Novalee never, ever could have owned her own small, modest home. Only through the goodness and generosity of her best, most supportive “quirky” friends was she able to do so.

Studying literature, one can learn much about the real world and about real human nature. That is the case with the depiction of both Novalee Nation and Sam Walton in this novel. In the fictional account, Sam Walton visited Novalee
in the hospital when the "Wal-Mart Baby" was born. He talked with her for less than a quarter of an hour, then completed his visit with a sizeable check and a job offer. Daisaku Ikeda, Founder of Soka University and recipient of 200 honorary doctoral degrees from major universities around the world, asserts that high level corporate officials can observe a person for only a few minutes and with a high degree of accuracy, assess their strengths and weaknesses, then approximate the potential worth of that individual within the scheme of their own network of corporate enterprises. (Ikeda, 2006) Sam Walton perceived the resolute strength and reliable commitment toward self development and improvement that Novalee possessed. He recognized a good source of cheap, durable labor that he could seize, develop, and exploit. Novalee gratefully and quickly grabbed the opportunity to take advantage of a powerful helping hand. She recognized that even the meanest, entry-level job at Wal-Mart would give her a springboard to perhaps even greater opportunities. She was eager and resolute to realize and maximize her determination to get ahead. Two people from distinctly disparate social, cultural, and economic levels met and recognized in the other how they could mutually benefit each other. This is the happy ending that any fictional tale can and often does unfold, but happy endings happen in the everyday real world too, despite life's attendant nuisances, crises and anxieties, and despite a world full of nay-sayers, gold brickers, and chronic complainers. This novel provides students with lessons in problem avoidance. It imparts inspiration, motivation, reading pleasure, and English language conversation pleasure. Reading this novel as an EFL textbook has been a worthwhile classroom and homework experience for the English Literature students in these classes.

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