



Contours of Contradictions: Mennonite Experience in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*.

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It is a psychologically established fact that issues related to a person's identity are inevitably anchored in the reservoir of his socio-cultural and religious experiences of his past, and are of universal significance. The large-scale mobility of people across borders and spaces impels one to foreground one's identity in terms of race, caste, community and religion, such a situation assumes serious proportions in the case of those religious and cultural communities whose search for home land coincides with the act of assertion of their identities against the dominant socio-cultural context marked by drastic and dynamic transformations. The onus therefore lies upon the writers of the postcolonial era to draw the trajectory of the postcolonial era to draw the trajectory of their experiences from the cultural and personal histories of the communities to which they belong and to showcase their experiences related to identity issues which adds to the complexities in an interactive socio-cultural space. The research article titled **Contours of Contradictions: Mennonite Experience in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*** explores the religious rites, rituals, practices and customs of the Mennonites and also maps the contours of contradictions inherent in Mennonite religious experiences as reflected in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*.

Born in Manitoba, Friesen is a prolific writer whose outstanding literary contributions have won him several awards including the Manitoba Book of the year Award in 1996, and also became the runner-up for the Milton Acorn people's poetry Award. *A Dark Boat* (2012) is his latest work to date.

Having been brought up in a typical Mennonite community, Friesen's poetry calls into question his ethnic roots and religious beliefs through an exploration of the contradictions existing within the Mennonite society characterised by confusion and disbelief thereby breaking the hitherto silence of the community.

In order to take cognisance of the influence of Mennonite religion on Friesen's poetry, it is necessary to delve in to the socio-cultural history of the Mennonites as the Mennonite culture is inextricably linked to its religion. The Mennonite religion owes its origin to Menno Simons, a Dutch priest who belonged to

the 15th century. As members of Anabaptist denominations, this religious sect is noted for its emphasis on pacifism, believer's baptism and a personal commitment to Christ. In order to maintain the rigidity of the Mennonite religious faith, the religion preaches a separation from the secular world thus paving the way for binary constructions of self within the same society. Mennonite religion emphasises on the retention of spiritualism in its ritual practices and rites, and ensures the need for discipline in personal and communal lives. To live in a Mennonite community is to lead a life of strict commitment to religious ethics which places emphasis on discipline and authoritarianism. To the writers, the Mennonite experiences pull at the roots of their writings, and they present the struggle between the cultural and religious underpinnings ingrained in its sacred practices and the secular world with its impious and profane ways of life.

Akin to many other writers of Mennonite tradition, Patrick Friesen's identity too was molded by the ethnic and cultural influences embodied in the Anabaptist faith. As a writer, Friesen engages with his heritage and Mennonite experience while taking into account the contradictions inherent in the spiritual terrain of his religion. It is interesting to note how Friesen tries to create a world of his own managing to transcend the several layers of boundaries established by the Mennonite religion. He, thus, derives impetus to rewrite his self from his contrary positions as an insider and an outsider of the Mennonite society. On a close reading of Friesen's poems, it can be seen that he challenges the beliefs and practices of his religion only to redefine and reaffirm his place in the society. Though a Mennonite by ethnicity, Friesen like several other writers of the Mennonite tradition have openly criticised the smothering practices prevalent within his religion thus speaking out the truth and breaking down the borders. The act of writing itself involves transcending into the secular realm where the religious domain is called into question, and as a corollary, writing translates itself into an act of sin transgressing the borders of the individual privacy of a Mennonite. In the literary space that he occupies, Friesen tries to navigate through a maze of interrogation and rejection of orthodox Mennonite and Christian beliefs within the heterodox framework.

One of Patrick Friesen's Mennonite poems, *The Shunning* offers a clear picture of how his identity devolves from the structural system concentrated on configurations of the Mennonite emotional, intellectual and social space. The narrative of the poem is centered on the lives of two brothers, Peter and Johannes Neufeld whose non-conformity with the official dictates of the community's church grapples with the poetics of silence and politics of exclusion confronted by the members of the Mennonite community. Caught between the contrary and contradictory poles of the secular and the personal, *The Shunning* engages itself in a critical probe into the contradictory politics at work in the Mennonite church.

In the poem, Peter Neufeld is presented as a scapegoat to Mennonite religious tradition and practices, and it is his non-conformity with the fundamental beliefs upheld by the so-called Mennonite community that ultimately leads to his expulsion from it. Mennonite world is laid bare before the readers through a critical interrogation in to the basic ideas and ideologies that constitute Mennonite identity. The politics of exclusion practiced by the Mennonite community in terms of language and religious beliefs based on a commitment to non-violence is called into question with Peter Neufeld's alienation and subsequent expulsion from the Mennonite community. With its close watch on transgressions, the Mennonite community creates physical and spiritual borders as they consider themselves to be pure and so shuns the secular world outside. With the boundaries drawn and imposed upon the community, Peter reacts by his very first act of disobedience when he "had waded barefoot in the creek before the weather was warm enough" (16). As the Mennonite community with its insistence on the absolutism of the Church imposes serious restrictions on its members which was against the growth and development of the individual self. Peter was punished by his mother by tying "his ankle to a tree with a 5 foot length" (16) of thread. Acting within the self-imposed boundaries of the strict rules of the community, Peter's mother epitomises the spirit and vigor of a true Mennonite when she warns his son not to cross the limits of religious and communal restrictions. Transgression invites severe punishment, and is looked down upon as an absolute sin defiling the body politic of the Mennonite community. The members of the community were either shunned or banned from it for their sense of indiscipline and refusal to comply with tenets of authoritarianism. One who remains obdurate and chooses to cross the Mennonite tradition and religious values does not feel at ease with the outside world. Posited as an in-between being, he is forced to choose between his disregard for Mennonite faith and his refusal to accept the outside world as it is. In the fixation on stable religious and cultural collective memories, the Mennonites eventually end up in suppressing individuality which is highly detrimental to the growth and development of the community.

Technically called "ban," the Mennonite church had institutionalised shunning and had been using it as a formal method of punishment against the non-conforming members of the Church. The excommunicated member is given a chance for repentance, failing which he will be shunned not only by the Church, but also by his family members. Such a situation calls for a comparison with the process of ostracisation found in many parts of India based on casteist or communal grounds. In a Mennonite social setting, the process of shunning is initiated and undertaken in its most aggressive form when the banned member refuses to fall in line with the tenets laid down in the religion. In the poem, Peter becomes the victim of the spiritual extremities and violence perpetrated under the pretext of embracing the Christian values of love and peace. Despite their Anabaptist convictions and ideologies of non-resistance, non-violence and emphasis on peace, Peter is faced with a moral crisis when he refuses to change his individual ideas, opinions and perspectives in the larger interests of his community. He feels a sense of unease as his emotional insecurity and experience are not in congruence with

the values upheld by his society. Peter's unease and discomfort creates a sense of psychological dissonance, and leads to rebellion and subsequent separation from the Mennonite society.

As a poet, Friesen decided to present the contradictions in his community by writing about it. To him, the very act of writing itself is tantamount to an act of violation when he exposes the lacuna in the communication of the history of his community. The Mennonites who harboured an antagonistic attitude to the act of publishing cast an evil shadow over Friesen's literary ambitions. Friesen broke away from the traditional path, and engaged in attempts to expose the narrow mindedness deeply ingrained in the orthodoxy of the Mennonite religion. His writings are informed by a sense of freedom characterised by his external perspective.

Conceived in two parts, *The Shunning* focuses on Peter's problematic relationship with the Church and having been imbued with a sense of pride and refusal to change his perspective, he invokes the wrath of the Church. His act of keeping himself aloof from the community is coupled with the Church's attempts to impose borders and restraints on him. The elder Loewen even instructs Helena to avoid his bed, and the physical shunning which Peter confronts can be viewed as a symbolic resistance against the ideological gap prevalent between him and the Church. As a victim of physical distancing which he faces from his own family, he undergoes intense emotional and spiritual turmoil which culminates in disowning his own life. He, thus had to pay a huge price for the assertion of his individual self, and for transgressing the rigid boundaries of the Mennonite religious discourse. Peter's act of questioning and adoption of a rebellious attitude against the tenets laid down in the Mennonite Church and religion evoke hostile reactions from the Mennonites through the personal experiences of Peter, Friesen attempts to rewrite the individual's story against the larger history of the Mennonite community. Peter's ways of life makes him an odd man out of his own community where his views and inclinations are hopelessly and unfortunately misunderstood, thus making him a doomed figure unable to be at harmony with his community.

Having been driven to despair, Peter eventually commits suicide, but his death does not in any way affect the community as it goes on as usual. Peter's death has a desirable influence on Helena. All throughout, she had remained a typical Mennonite, and had joined hands with the Mennonite Church in shunning Peter. However, it is to be noted that ironically that the same community which shunned Peter adopts a similar attitude towards Helena too. The double standards of the Mennonite community and its lack of adeptness in solving the tension between the individual and the society becomes apparent in its attitude towards Helena. The construction of individual identities is dictated by the hegemonic powers of the Mennonite society, and the politics of excision can be viewed as attempts to foster communal ties to ensure shared identity through a connection to the past. Here, Peter's ex-communication takes place on account of the realization of his "self" which becomes perceptible in relation to "other". As Stuart Hall rightly observes that "the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the other that the "positive" meaning of any term and thus its 'identity' can be

constructed” (17). Peter’s non-conformist stand forces him to represent and redefine his self against traditional and collective identities. The socio-religious identity of the Mennonites is a reflection of the reality imbedded deep within society.

The Mennonite society is defined by contours of established commonality among its members. As part of strengthening communal ties, religious practices, customs and traditions provided the framework through which the Mennonite world is constructed. In *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity*, Gross points out how “tradition helped to foster certain mental dispositions which then served to strengthen tradition’s hold on the thought and practice of individuals” (20). Peter’s sense of identity is constructed along lines of opposition to the hierarchical power structures. Implementation of power politics entails a sense of egoism, and very often the lives of ordinary people like Peter are put at stake. In the poem, even though the Mennonite community professes itself to be pacifist to the core, Peter’s suicide indicates the contradictions existing within the fabric of the Mennonite society. Peter’s individuality is sacrificed for the sake of the larger communal interpretations of what the Mennonite faith entails, and his faith is interpreted or rather misinterpreted as disbelief in the practices and beliefs followed by the Mennonite society. The hypocrisy of the Mennonite society in singling out Peter is a pointer to the thoroughly unchristian attitude prevalent among the traditional Mennonites in early 20th century Manitoba. Thus, the tension between the individual and the established practices of the Church is articulated through Peter whose rebellious attitude and independent views are unfortunately misunderstood and is eventually dubbed a dissenter.

The Shunning focuses on the praxis of complex relationships working within the contested spaces of individual and communal lives. Peter succeeds in establishing the gaps that existed between the lived realities and the theoretical fantasies within the Mennonite religious community.

Works Cited

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