

Politics of Conflicting Identities: Marginalised Self in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.**Dr Chitra Thrivikraman Nair****Assistant Professor of English****University College, Thiruvananthapuram (India)**

Today's world is more mobile and interconnected than ever before in the history of mankind. This is mainly attributed to the process of globalisation, the effects of which increasingly influence considerable parts of our life. In terms of its basic implications, globalisation refers merely to the sphere of economics, and draws attention to the colonial or neocolonial underpinnings of the wealth of the Western world and the deprivation of the so-called developing countries. In the wake of colonialism and neocolonialism, large numbers of people all over the world have turned their backs on their home countries and migrated either in order to escape persecution or poverty. While the large-scale migrations from Africa, the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent into the Anglo-American diaspora has altered the composition of societies profoundly, it can be seen that the changes that these immigrants to Britain, Canada or the U.S have initiated have been more than sociological in nature in so far as they have also brought with them cultural identities of their own. The major demographic, social and cultural changes of the last decades demand a new critical perspective that takes into account the issues of minority communities. In the context of rapid social changes unleashed in the wake of the process of globalisation, the cultural conflicts and cultural anxieties faced by the minority cultures have caught the attention of critics and scholars in the field of postcolonial studies. The present article titled **Politics of Conflicting Identities: Marginalised Self in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*** seeks to examine Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as an authentic record of the appreciations and depreciations concerning Mennonite life and Anabaptist faith, and seeks to highlight the status of the Mennonites within the diverse communal and cultural framework of Canada. Published in 1962, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is his first novel, and its publication has generated much critical interest and concern. It is hailed as a historic work in the history of Mennonite Literature in English, for it exposed the hitherto unsuppressed and unquestioned beliefs and practices of the Mennonite religion before public scrutiny.

Rudy Wiebe is one of the prominent Mennonite voices in the history of Canadian Literature in English of the contemporary times. As a voluminous writer, he has a number of works to his credit. Born in Fairholme, Saskatchewan on October 4, 1934, Wiebe hails from a family of farmers. As part of the emigration of Mennonite since the sixteenth century, Wiebe's parents too migrated to Canada in 1930. After having given up farming, Wiebe's family moved to Coaldale, Alberta, a town east of Lethbridge. Having established himself as a major figure in Canadian letters, Wiebe's former students include such accomplished contemporary writers as Myrna Kostash, Aritha Van Herk, and Thomas Wharton and Katherine Govier.

It can be seen that Wiebe's works are thematically informed by the presence of Mennonite characters, and so the readers are able to look at the values and traditions of the Mennonite people and their adjustment to new physical and social environment and also their display of their strong Christian belief and conviction directed against persecution and cultural assimilation, drawn his sustenance Rudy Wiebe has earned a place for himself in the Canadian national and literary imagination through the exposition of subject matter drawn from Canadian or Mennonite history, and in particular his deep and comprehensive vision of human experience which is rooted in Mennonite Christianity.

The Russian Mennonites are a group of people who descended from Dutch and are mainly Germanic---Prussian Anabaptists who established colonies in South Russia (the present day Ukraine) since 1789. In Russia, the Mennonites continued their religious institutions, developed a strong independent economy and also became an important sociological community surrounded by a foreign culture. They maintained their separate way of life, but soon found out that their isolated lives and settlements were threatened first by the Russification of the 1870s. Religious faith is at the core of what it means to be a Mennonite. The Mennonites have always considered their religious faith a central feature of their origin, identity and way of life. They firmly believed that faith gives meaning, purpose and direction to their lives. The Church remains the most powerful institution for the Mennonites. According to the Mennonites, it is how you live the whole week that is important, and not what is said and preached on Sundays alone. As a religious group, the Mennonites are committed to the Anabaptist faith which lays stress on community life, the existence of God, the divinity of Church miracles, the physical resurrection of Christ and the concept of life after death. Mennonite theology emphasises the primacy of the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament Scripture. They emphasise the ideal of a religious community based on the New Testament models, and are therefore imbued with the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount.

Migration has always been an integral part of the Mennonite history. Driven from their original homelands in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands, the Mennonites settled in places wherever they were offered a place of refuge and a means of existence. Following the severe and continued persecution of the Mennonites under the Communist regime, they were forced to leave Russia to different parts of Canada. As immigrants in Canada, the Mennonites had to undergo several harsh and unpleasant experiences. Himself a member of the Mennonite

community, Wiebe is well-cognizant of the ebbs and flows in the socio-personal life of the Mennonites. With its deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies, the Mennonite community treats women as second-class citizens, and so condemns them to remain on the fringes.

The action of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is set in Wapiti, the closed Mennonite community with its inherent contradictions. Written within the ethnic particularities of the Mennonite community, the novel reaffirms and recreates Mennonite faith in its specificities. It can be seen that the daily activities of the Mennonite community are centred round the religious and moral certainties which have codified themselves into fixed codes of conduct, and remaining unquestioned since many years. Such an institutionalized and blind faith in the “traditions of the fathers” (*PDM* 96) finds expression in the novel. Too much insistence on the moral codes of conduct and fossilized religious beliefs and practices of the Mennonite religion make it vulnerable to attacks by the younger generation. In the conversation that ensue between Peter Block and Thom, the readers realize that there exists a wide chasm in the attitude and approach of younger and older generations towards the rigid tenets and dogmatic ideologies laid down in the Mennonite religion. Thom is evidently not satisfied with the explanations offered by Peter, and his curiosity is further aroused when he comes across several Mennonites models in his life.

In Wapiti, Mennonite religion manifests itself in the ethics of work. But Thom finds fault with Mennonite obsession with labour which has in turn contributed to a lack of fellow feelings among the members of the same community. The notion of work resounds within the Mennonite neighbourhood, and the entire community relishes in doing work -- a work pattern devoid of rest. Thom fails to comprehend the significance attached to workculture, and so finds no meaning in why Block should drive himself and his family “so mercilessly on a stiffening day” (*PDM* 200). The excessive interest in work occurs as a recurrent motif in the novel, and to the Mennonites, every act of labour is a manifestation of spiritual experience. Ironically, the naivety attached to the work culture sometimes gets lost in the personal pride of hard-core Mennonites like Block. Significantly enough, it is the priority given to work that brings about the death of Elizabeth Block. Even after she falls on to the ground, Block does not allow the machine to be switched off. It is the hectic work schedule on the Block farm that brings about Elizabeth’s untimely death. Her pallid, sickly complexion, lack of life and colourless voice are finally lost amidst the unabated, hammering din of the threshing crew working on the farm, and the roar of trucks and tractors facilitating that work. Though Thom himself is part of the world of work, he is thoroughly displeased with the prevailing established norms governing the Mennonite society, and strongly condemns the logic behind the Mennonite work ethics.

Insistence on peace, non-violence and non-resistance are the strong pillars of Mennonite religion and identity. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, one could find the incongruities in the life of a Mennonite, as there is an apparent mismatch between the ideals professed and the realities practiced. And this is most specifically reflected in their ambiguous feelings towards the Second World War. The ferocity of the Second World War with its attendant incidents of violence, and terror does not seem to affect the citizens of Wapiti whose lives continue unaffected by the War.

These agrarian folk are completely engrossed in leading a life in accordance with the values laid down in Christianity. But their Anabaptist convictions and religious ideologies are called into question when Thom is faced with the threat of being called to serve in the War. A completely shattered Thom, he is torn between the values prescribed by the Anabaptist faith and the moral issue of saving those affected by the War by indulging in violence. Thom's position as an in-between being brings into purview the nuances of the fundamental doctrine of the Mennonite religion, namely pacifism. Thom faces moral crisis, and thus passes through critical moments in his life.

As a peace-loving community, the Mennonites abhor violence, and as Joseph Dueck says: "Though Mennonites because of their training naturally abhor violence, yet they faintly admire it!" (*PDM* 30). The moral dilemma arising out of the conflict between the need to preserve peace and the need to serve humanity is best embodied in the character of Thom Wiens. In his view, violence is no solution to the problems plaguing the world. His mind is affected with conflicting thoughts when he is forced to choose between the Mennonite religious convictions and the Canadian nationalist fervour during the Second World War. He rightly understands that pacifism as a Mennonite way of life is not an end in itself. Even with the close-knit Mennonite community, the Mennonite insistence on pacifism is not practiced, as traits of violence find reflected among its members like Block. The logic of sovereignty and the irreversible laws of the Mennonite faith in Wapiti are embodied in Block. His decisions as a sovereign are imposed on his family members, and his Janus-faced approach becomes evident when Herman Paetkau, "a half biological Mennonite" asks for Elizabeth's hand in marriage. Block considers himself as an overarching figure of the Mennonite community in Wapiti, but flouts the established norms and conventions for his selfish ends. Elizabeth's affair with Louis Moosomin comes in as a great shock to him. Beneath the tall claims of pacifism and non-violence, the Mennonites like Peter Block conveniently uses religions, and also manipulates its tenets to their advantage. The murkier side of his personality reveals itself when he threatens Louis Moosomin with castration for having physical union with his daughter. Block's tyrannical control over his daughter ultimately ends in disaster. Block intention to control the entire Wapiti community with a tight fist only serves to alienate him further from his own society. Elizabeth's quasi-revenge on her father expresses itself in the form of a sexual liaison with Louis Moosomin.

Peace Shall Destroy Many quite succinctly captures the conflict between the practical realities of life and the graphic interpretations of religions. This conflict is brought out through the contrasting attitudes and opinions of the characters towards life. Traditional values and beliefs clash with modern attitudes and perceptions. Having grasped the hollow and irrational approach adopted by Peter Block, Thom rightly comprehends that there is more to the world than what meets the eye. As a devoted Christian, Thom Wiens has been taught to be conscientious to the sufferings of his fellow beings which has been imbibed right from his childhood onwards. This is reflected in his teaching the half-breed children, half-European and half-native at the Sunday School. The Mennonite treatment of the "half-breeds" as outsiders brings in questions

regarding the veracity of the religious beliefs and practices of the conservative Anabaptist tradition. The non-Mennonites are not legally accommodated within the religious framework of the Anabaptists. The sense of fraternity feelings professed by the Mennonites do not extend itself out into the world. In this context, the words of Craig will not certainly be out of place:

Block, the old-style Mennonite leader, is out of place in Canada and out of time with his won religion, a man caught between theory and practice, crushed inwardly by the self knowledge that he does wrong but must do wrong. The failure of the Mennonites to live with the rest of Canada is shown further by their single concession to the obligatory conversation of others – the sending of missionary couple to India instead of facing up to their responsibilities among the Métis in their midst(130).

The lack of correlation between theory and practice is best seen in the character of Peter Block who really blocks the growth and development of the Mennonite community. Thom realizes the truth that there is not point in being God-centred without a sense of fellow-feeling. His plans to teach the Métis children is not welcomed by the conservative elder Peter Block who observes: “Do you think I’d have allowed someone from our community to become as involved with the breeds as you have if I thought they’d be saying here for year to come?”(*PDM* 26). He is unable to comprehend the real nature of Peter Block, who with his stoic nature controls each and everything in a mechanical fashion:

All these months, Block had deigned no mention of his plan. This man handled everyone, Mennonite and Half-breed, as if they were pieces of farm machinery: each pawn had a particular spot in his scheme, each was told what to believe and what to denounce. Each had small significance beyond covering his spot. You there, and you there! Could some one merely be ordered: Believe! Holding himself rigidly controlled needing to know more, he said, “You say we must be taught to believe the right. What about the new school-teacher? She isn’t a Christian. Is she going to go on teaching the small children --”(*PDM* 37) .

The history of the first decades of the twentieth century in Wapiti attests to their preference to remain isolated from the rest of the world. In the novel, one comes across young men like Hank Unger, a military fighter pilot fighting against the Nazis serves as a rebellious figure acting against the dictates of the conservative Mennonite religion, and Herb Unger who finds no meaning in religion. Thom finds that the Mennonite identity projected and upheld by Block only serves to alienate him further from his own people

The racist attitude of Block is at odds with the cosmopolitan outlook of characters like Thom Wiens and Hank Unger. Wiebe portrays Thom as a person groping in the dark, oscillating between the processed ideals and practical realities existing at the heart of the conservative Mennonite society. The discriminatory attitude of the Mennonite society is unbearable to Thom

who reacts thus: “And why must we in Wapiti love only Mennonites” (*PDM* 215). The self-imposed isolation and segregation practiced in the Wapiti Mennonite Community make them turn blind to the forces of modernity and change. Thom is presented as an ethnic insider who earnestly desires to bring about substantial changes in the attitude and approach of the Mennonite society. Conservative to the core, Block does not seem to understand the dynamics underlying the structure of the relationships the Mennonites had with the outside world.

It is in sharp contrast to Block that Wiebe presents Joseph Dueck who appears as an epitome of faithfulness to Christianity. As a true follower of Christ, he reposes immense faith and commitment on the values laid down in the Mennonite religion, and probes into Anabaptist tradition in the light of the tenets laid down in the Scripture. He even dares to apply the Biblical command to show fellow-feeling towards the Métis living in the neighbourhood. This is reflected in his questioning of the use of German in Mennonite preaching for as he “pointed out that there were some people there from both districts who were not Mennonites and could not understand German. Also, we noticed some Indians within hearing distance and so he suggested we speak in English” (*PDM* 55). His defiant act of rebelling against the Mennonite religious practices amounts to heresy. The use of the English language meant establishing a link with the non-Mennonite world -- a derogatory act in the eyes of the Mennonites. The elder Mennonites speak Low German, a language which is intimately connected with their life. But the younger Mennonites use the English language as medium of communication even among their own family circles:

[H]ow are we today expressing this Love in the comfort of Canada? We can in no way assert our rights against our neighbors by any means, violent or otherwise, yet what if our neighbours molest our country? Can a country then continue to exist, a majority of its people being non-participants in war? [...] Given a war situation, we Mennonites can practice our belief in Canada only because other Canadians are kind enough to fight for our right to our belief. The Godless Man then dies for the belief of the Christian! [...] But we as a church have gone on in the traditional ways of reacting to war, or considering that the world has changed, even since World War one (*PDM* 60).

The dramatic events leading to the confrontation between Joseph Dueck and Block reach its climax when Thom is in a flux as to whether to sympathise with Dueck or to adopt a rebellious attitude towards Block. Against the conservative orthodox Mennonite framework, Thom is introduced as a catalyst to expose the harsh realities of Mennonite existence. With the intrusion of modernity into the traditional Christian community of Wapiti, transformations have taken place in the community and it can no longer remain isolated from the rest of the world. As a young Mennonite school teacher, Joseph makes use of his education to reinterpret and understand Mennonites in the light of his best knowledge, and it serves only to intensify the anger of the Wapiti Church leaders for trying to tamper with the traditions of the Anabaptist Church.

Peace Shall Destroy Many truly strikes the readers as a typical Mennonite narrative, where Wiebe has effectively captured the issues faced by the Mennonite community which arise out of the tension or opposition between the old world and the new one, and between tradition and modernity. Thom as an individual leads a paradoxical existence, caught between two selves- his individual self and the communal self which throws ample light on the lack of correlation between the theoretical tenets laid down in the religion and the practical possibilities which the Mennonite life offer.

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