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Postmodern Syncretism in Naomi Nye's Works

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Abstract

In the elastic, fluid, and plural world of postmodernism, religion in its authoritative, traditional, clear-cut sense, along with its strictly-observed rituals, commences to diminish or assumes other syncretic or pluralistic forms. Under postmodernism, one's view of religion may become hazy as the power of absolute values or truths diminishes. The existence of postmodern, relative truths allows individuals to create their own perception of spirituality. For example, one might completely yield practicing strict religious rites and replace them with more secular ones, or adopt an idiosyncratic form of religion which could pose as an amalgamation of several religious beliefs entwined in one postmodern understanding of what religion is to be to an individual. This paper argues that the characters in Naomi Nye's works Habibi (1) and 19 Varieties of Gazelle (2) who are set in a postmodern ambience, place religion in a grey area, or combine their inherited religion with other religions adopted from the new cultures they encounter. They allow themselves to accept or waver between their traditional or "official" religion and any forms of religion they are exposed to.

Keywords: *multiculturalism, Naomi Nye, postmodernism, religion, syncretism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Believers of a certain religion could practice several public and private conforming religious rituals that would usually be sanctioned not only by a religious institution, but also by society itself. Some religions in modern cultures seem to lose their magnitude in this traditional concept due to multiculturalism and the advancements of technology that encourage cultures to integrate and synthesize, and hence, the natural consequence is syncretism or the novel concept of postmodern religion which "becomes an exercise in finding new possibilities in experiencing the impossible" (3). In other words, one is free to sample religious beliefs from an array of religions motivated by sheer personal preference and conviction and not merely by inheritance. "In a postmodern world, individuals work with their religious impulses, by selecting bits of various spiritualities that 'speak to them' and create their own internal spiritual world. The 'theology of the pub' becomes as valid as that of the priest" (4).

Because postmodernism annihilates grand narratives, there is no one 'right' or 'wrong' religion, or sanctifying theory. Ideas such as truth, faith, and religion become fluid and changeable, yet all accepted by

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postmodernists. "Postmodernist thinking, which embraces pluralism, would seem to be a natural source of new approaches or rationales, but many who are sympathetic to postmodernism are not sympathetic to religion. They either leave it behind as antiquarian or premodern, and thus unworthy of belief or especially of participation; or they reject religion for its perceived (often accurate) insistence upon ideological conformity based upon uncritical assumptions" (5).

Today, there is a myriad of groups, sects, cults, religions, denominations and interactions. Every day witnesses the birth and propagation of new *faiths* which merge and join, divide and separate over and over again. "Some are grouped together under the brand names of major faiths, and they cohere with varying degrees of consistency. Others, although clearly religious in their particular way, would reject any such label" (4).

The word 'syncretism' was first used by Plutarch (c.46-120) in the sense of political alliance. In the seventeenth century, the German Lutheran theologian Georg Calixtus used it to unite groups of Protestants. (6). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the word syncretism means "the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought." (7). Syncretism is not restricted to a certain period of time or is a phenomenon that belongs to older periods of time when religions were newly received or imposed. According to Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, "'Syncretism' is a contentious term, often taken to imply 'inauthenticity' or 'contamination', and the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions" (8).

Many postmodern thinkers have replaced the traditional sense of syncretism with the fresh, novel, all-inclusive concept of "multiculturalism." According to Peter van der Veer, "Multiculturalism appears to have replaced the term 'syncretism' in discourse about modern, secular, society." In this all-encompassing, more fashionable, postmodern concept, multiculturalism becomes the umbrella under which different individuals and groups unite. Anderson also contends that "postmodernism is characterized by the loss of modern belief in (i) the moral progress of humankind in history, (ii) a conception of reason as ushering in universal agreement, or certainty, and (iii) a grand narrative account of being created human (assuming human sameness, not differences). This threefold loss has had a decisive impact upon twenty-first century religion. In the extreme case, postmodernism undermines the very essence, or any definition, of religion as literally religion: bond" (9).

Since "all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous" (6), it is essential to admit that there is diversity within diversity under multiculturalism. Hence, it is natural that strict religious distinctions of certain cultures may fade away, as the cultures themselves – to use Gilberto Freyre's term—"interpenetrate" with each other (6). To quote Veer again, "[Syncretism and multiculturalism] try to give answers to situations of civil strife seemingly caused by insurmountable differences in religious or cultural identities. Both terms belong to a discourse of tolerance and communal harmony." (9).

Naomi Nye's works deliver a clear message of coexistence, tolerance, and harmony in the midst of the existence of many religions. As a hybrid person herself (born to an American mother and a Palestinian father), Nye attempts to bring the world together. Her idea of syncretism is most strongly illustrated in her semi-autobiographical novel for young adults *Habibi* (1) which describes a Palestinian/American family's odyssey of self-discovery tracing

back its Eastern roots in the village of Ramallah. *Habibi*, or my sweetheart, is the title and theme of the novel that emphasizes the idea of creating an understanding among ethnicities and finding love in a new setting full of conflict between the different ethnicities in Palestine: the Arabs, Jews, Armenians and newly-returning immigrants such as the protagonists, the Abouds, particularly their daughter Liyana.

In Palestine, Liyana experiences and reflects upon the cultural tensions that constitute her daily routine by being raised in America by an American mother and a Palestinian father, studying in an Armenian school, befriending Palestinian refugees, and falling for a Jewish boy, Omer, in a typical Montague / Capulet conflict. Liyana is relocated from the Western culture where kissing a boy and wearing shorts is acceptable, to an Eastern culture where women are veiled and mostly oppressed. The most influential character upon Liyana's character is Sitti (grandmother) who, though illiterate, manages to demonstrate the wisdom of the older indigenous generation of Palestine.

The narrative of *Habibi* is divided into chapters that begin with a thought-provoking phrase. Each chapter would deal with issues such as hybridity, multiculturalism, adjustment, and identity in the midst of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The search for identity and especially religious identity for Liyana is crucial as she experiences a new setting, a new culture, new religions, and a new form of love "in the land of Jesus."

The new Armenian school urges Liyana to explore her new self as her classmates add the suffix '–ian' to her last name Aboud to make it 'Aboudian' which would assimilate to the majority of Armenian '–ians'. In the streets of Jerusalem, Liyana experiments with the shops, the scents, and the people until she finally meets Omer, the Jewish boy in the antique shop who buys her the green lamp she admires. Liyana's insistence on Omer visiting her Palestinian extended family poses a difficulty for her father. How would his family greet the enemy whose people just smashed Sitti's bathroom? The message of peace and coexistence that Nye suggests is embodied in the lunch that Omer shares with Sitti and Liyana's extended family, and Sitti embracing Omer into her family. In the introduction of *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye insists that the world has to be in the hands of grandparents and children who transcend prejudices and welcome the Other in a utopic world of peaceful hybrid coexistence. Thus, the Abbouds symbolize the typical postmodern family who do not belong to one religion, but form a syncretic view of different religions. Although they are officially Muslim by inheritance, it does not prohibit the family from embracing other views from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity.

> "Liyana's family believed in God and goodness and hope and positive thinking and praying. They believed in the Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you --- who didn't? A mosquito didn't. Liyana's mother believed a whole lot in karma, the Hindu belief that what someone does in this world will come back to him or her… Liyana also liked the eightfold path in Buddhism and the idea of the bodhisattva, the soul who does good for others without any thought for himself or herself… Liyana's entire family believed in reincarnation because it made sense to them" (1).

When Liyana first sees her relatives praying together, she wonders why she has never seen her father pray this way. "Poppy," Liyana whispered, touching his hand.

> "Did you ever pray the way they pray?"

"Always --- in my heart." (1)

Poppy who has lived in America for a long time has yielded performing physical religious practices and has replaced them with a more spiritual experience. "In other words, any sense of the 'spiritual' has to be sited in the concerns of everyday narratives rather than impressed by religious meta-narratives. The concept of faith, religiously defined, will be lost but the possibility of performative acts, in everyday life, being imbued with something of the character of faith may remain" (10). To Poppy, choosing not to perform the Islamic prayer gesticulations five times a day does not forbid him from having a sense of postmodern holiness in his heart. Furthermore, Poppy is open to other scriptures and finds a verse in the Bible that reflects his joy upon arriving at Jerusalem. "A few days before, Poppy had actually thumbed through a Bible looking for a quote he liked from the *Psalms*: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy" (1).

Poppy manages to see some good in every known religion. On several occasions, he denounces the idea of monotheism and welcomes religious pluralism. "Poppy said every religion contained some shining ideas and plenty of foolishness, too" (1). "The worst foolish thing is when a religion wants you to say it's the only right one. Or the best one. That's when I pack my bags and start rolling" (1). Poppy sees that in monotheism lie the troubles of the world which is why, in his world of coexistence, he calls for understanding other views and even embracing them as "Poppy knew from when he was a boy there must be a kernel of truth on every avenue" (1). John Cobb sees eye-to-eye with Poppy's view, "The fact that there are highly diverse religious traditions is not a problem. The fact that some people order life in one way does not invalidate the different ordering by others. The world is richer for these differences"(11). Thus, "…one can be religious without necessary subscribing to the creeds, doctrines and dogmas of a determinate organized religion in order to possess a passion for the impossible" (12).

Liyana's mother Susan inherits Christianity as a religion, though she never commits herself to any church nor does she observe Christian rituals such as fasting or praying. Religion to her becomes more of a social or moral practice rather than abiding by firm religious rites. "They [the Abbouds] didn't join any church. They were always marked as visitors" (1). Later in the novel, the Abbouds visit different religious sites in Palestine and never commit themselves to sites of a certain religion. The mother and her children visit the Jewish Museum despite the antagonism between Muslims and Jews. The Abbouds also visit the Chapel of Calvary, the Garden of Gethsemane, walk along the Via Dolorosa, stop at the Wailing Wall (Al Buraq Wall) and finally traipse around the Dome of the Rock. "At midnight on Christmas Eve they stood with their parents in the long line at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Poppy had done this as a teenager himself, with his Arab Christian friends… Liyana and her mother led a few verses of "Angels We Have Heard On High."(1)

Liyana's encounter with Jewish Omer makes her come to grips with her religious identity. She and Omer seem to share similar views about religion, though religiously different. In that sense, their syncretic view of religion brings them together rather than disperses them.

"Omer asked, "What religion are you?"

The Abbouds had never belonged to a church since Liyana was born, but it might have made things easier. Liyana's mother said they were a spiritual family; they just weren't a traditionally religious one.

Most people said, "Huh?"

They wanted you to say, "I'm this kind of letter and I go in this kind of envelope" (1).

On another occasion Liyana "postmodernly" creates her own syncretic view of religion and gives it the name "Big God."

"Why would any God want to be large enough to fit inside a group of hearts? God was a Big God. Once Liyana answered someone that way, but it didn't work very well. What religion are you?"

"Big God." (1)

Another character that surprisingly combines different religious views from different religions is the old grandmother Sitti who as a devout Muslim prays and wants others to do the same. However, when she sees Omer, she believes that he is an incarnation of a shepherd she used to love and whose soul was brought back to live in the body of Omer. "She thinks one person can carry the spirit of another person in" (1). When Sitti is asked by Liyana if she believes in Heaven, she says, "Of course. It's full of fresh fruit" (1).

Nye's recurring character Sitti, who is an embodiment of her real grandmother, appears in many of her works. In "Naomi Nye's Letter to a Would-Be Terrorist" she says, "She [Sitti] wanted people to worship God in whatever ways they felt comfortable. Just worship. Just remember God in every single day and doing. It didn't matter what they called it." In the same letter she also says, "Don't expect others to be like you" (13).

Nye collection of peoms, *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2), is a sensually-evoking work that presents the reader with glimpses of life in the Middle East. While she dwells on personally-experienced themes such as family ties, alienation, multiculturalism, social and political conflicts arising from different ethnicities especially that of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the reconciliation of people from diverse backgrounds, Nye brilliantly captures the reader's attention by beginning with a poem on the attacks of September 11, from which she moves on to similar experiences of human suffering in Palestine. She writes that after the September 11 attacks, "a huge shadow had been cast across the lives of so many innocent people and an ancient culture's pride" (*2*).

Nye also manages to change negative stereotypical representations of Arabs who have always been portrayed as ignorant Bedouins, and are now stigmatized as terrorists after the September 11 attacks. She sustains the idea of tolerance towards others "who have bodies like and unlike my body, / skins and moles and old scars, / secret and public hair, / crooked toes" (2). She illustrates how Arabs writhe with universal daily concerns for security, belonging and survival.

The sixty poems in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, are eye-openers to a personal life made public and universal as it assimilates to that lived by suffering Palestinians. The poems recognize and appreciate the voices of the real and the fictional characters Nye draws upon to highlight the themes of harmony and peace in the midst of hostility and distress. For instance, in the poem "Different Ways to Pray," Nye reflects Sitti's belief in the versatile methods of

praying that she believes in no matter what religion the person belongs to. "Praying" ceases to be a matter of gesticulations or performances in a holy place or a religious institution but everyday moral rituals to which people commit themselves to in their daily life. To her, the acts of eating, the daily "pilgrimage" of carrying water from the well, balancing baskets of grapes, embroidering children's dresses, talking to God while playing dominoes are seen as postmodern spiritual acts of prayer that defy the strict religious understanding of what a prayer is. In the poem she says:

"There were men who had been shepherds so long they walked like sheep.

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms –

Hear us! We have pain on earth!

We have so much pain there is no place to store it!" (2)

In "The Words under the Words," Nye sees Allah through the eyes of her grandmother. She contends that He is everywhere in every day practices and not confined to religious or holy places. The omnipresence of Allah is prevalent in this poem. Her grandmother sees Him,

"in death.

When she speaks of the orchard

and the new olive press,

when she tells the stories of Joha

and his foolish wisdoms, He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name."

(2).

II. Conclusion

Postmodernism discards the grand narrative account of reality. Reality resists being categorized in a single system of beliefs. Accordingly, postmodernism facilitates a connection of different faiths rather than obliterating religion. In addition, moral relativism can allow different people from different religions to respect and tolerate other people. One's postmodern faith becomes a potpourri of faiths from which individuals select what appeals to them rather than a faith they blindly and forcibly inherit. Thus, Nye embraces multiculturalism which encompasses a multitude of religious beliefs. In her shining beacon of hope in a peaceful multi-existence, she welcomes the Other in any form and any religion defying the image of segregation typically and mistakenly attributed to Arabs.

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