

Falling out of line: conformity in a complicated kindness



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Rollo May once argued that the opposite of courage is not cowardice, but conformity. In a society which constantly pushes one to fit an ideal, remaining true to oneself is the greatest sign of bravery. Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* illustrates a population of two conflicting behavioral extremes. According to the narrator, Nomi Nickel, in the Mennonite community of East Village, Manitoba, "[there is] no room for in between. [You are] in or [you are] out. [You are] good or [you are] bad ... You fall into line or you fall" (Toews 10). With this idea, Toews asks a compelling question: is it better to compromise one's self in order to be a part of one's society or to assert one's self and become the outcast?

Conformity becomes especially difficult when the expectations of one's society are overblown or unrealistic. Mennonite values are rooted in modesty and abstinence, which many members of the community find difficult to follow. Some bans include: "the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, makeup, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock" (5). The banning of these common practices demonstrates how East Village is trapped in a traditional lifestyle, isolated from the outside world and alienated from present-day ways of living. These restrictions on entertainment and pleasure directly correlate with the deteriorating mental state of the townspeople, which cause many of them to crave these taboos all the more, and to rebel to an extreme extent as a result. The community possesses a strong loathing of the world and a sour attitude towards life. From a young age, the village's children adopt this cynicism. The elders believe "that it [is] better for little children to listen to the names of dead

people being read out in a terrifying monotone than the Beatles singing all we need is love" (39). During a time of one's life which should be filled with innocence, the children are brainwashed as they are encouraged to pursue behavior that enforces a sad, pessimistic perception of life. Because this behavior is encouraged from childhood, it becomes all the more difficult to overcome this mentality. This becomes particularly challenging once these children grow older and struggle to find out who they are outside of a religious framework. Those who are able to find confidence are actively shunned for this mentality. The narrator recognizes that " It [is] the biggest sin in [her] town to be sure of yourself" (65). The rejection of self esteem indicates that East Village places little value on the well-being of their inhabitants, and instead prioritizes worship and devotion over happiness. Because the beliefs of Mennonite society are so strong and heavily enforced, one is likely to abandon these beliefs in order to regain their identity. Though, the heavy enforcement of these values may also urge one to stay so that they may continue to hold on to the sense of belonging.

Those who do choose to conform face numerous emotional and psychological challenges due to the erosion of their individuality. As humans, one possesses a natural desire for freedom. When free will is abolished, Nomi's sister, Tash, loses sense of who she is and inevitably spirals out of control due to the overwhelming pressure she experiences from being judged by the ' pushers', that is, those who impose these beliefs so strongly. Shortly before she flees and outcasts herself, she exclaims, " I think I'll go crazy. I can't stand it. It's all a fucking lie. It's not right and it's killing me. It's killing me!" (146). After living so many years attempting to conform to an

image that is untrue to herself, Tash rightfully erupts in frustration. Had she decided to abandon her society in order to find herself, she would be able to express herself unapologetically. There is a significant evolution in character when Nomi's uncle Hans devotes himself to religion. He easily adopts the nickname "The Mouth of Darkness" (46) once he becomes a preacher, as Nomi often wonders "what happened to the happy little boy before he turned into The Mouth" (50). He is a sad man who drowns his sorrows in worship. He feels as though it is so important to devote himself completely because he is, at his core, insecure. The Mouth needs an outlet through which he can apply himself and feel as though he is doing some good for the world. Before Nomi's mother, Trudie, rebels, she suffers substantially because she must keep her pain internalized in order to not disrupt her character's image of goodness and compliance. Nomi knows that her "silent raging against the simplisticness of this town and her church could produce avalanches, typhoons and earthquakes all over the world" (46). While she decides to conform, she is too consumed by the community to recognize that the apparent 'horrible' outcome of rejection is, in reality, better than the restrained torment of conformity. These individuals face such dramatic repercussions simply because conformity cannot truly be forced. One must willingly apply themselves to a society in order for it — and for the person — to function without chaos. Their sole motivation in following the societal norms is the insecurity of not being part of a community and the fear of rejection. This fear overpowers one's innate need to express oneself and ultimately leads to the destruction of character.

Those who decide to oppose the beliefs of East Village face outward consequences — the judgement of others — though they are rewarded internally, with the satisfaction that they can be their true selves. The worthiness of this sacrifice relies solely on whether or not an individual prioritizes their relationship with others over their relationship with themselves. Many choose to rebel because these strong values become overwhelming. The pressure to conform accumulates and opposition becomes a simple escape from compliance. Tash demonstrates a consistently negative attitude throughout the novel, though she is seen smiling for the first time when she leaves the community to be free. Before her departure, she wears a “ really tender genuine smile ... She’d freed herself. That’s what a smile really meant” (147). As important as it is to feel like one is a part of something greater than oneself, this desire is overruled by Tash’s eagerness to express herself without the limitations of her society. Trudie experiences an equally vital change in attitude before she is excommunicated. In her last moments with Nomi, “ she [smiles] the same kind of smile that Tash had smiled just before she left ... It’s a smile that means that there is nothing left to lose. That you are free” (189). One may think that it is ironic that Trudie smiles when she is banished, though her rejection from the society is ultimately the best outcome, because her identity as an individual is more imperative than her identity as a Mennonite. Though, the true irony exists because Trudie is punished by her community for rebelling, even though it is the community’s fault that she does so. Trudie resists out of grief from the loss of her daughter, which occurs because of the unrealistic expectations that East Village places on the members of their society. Had Tash not been pressured to conform to the society of the

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straight and narrow Mennonites, she would not be excommunicated and Trudie would not be so inclined to resist. The only way Trudie is able to be liberated from her pain is through escape. Although Nomi does not physically escape the village, she finds her escape by defying Mennonite beliefs. She is one of the few individuals who is able to find a thin light beam of freedom within the cloudy restrictiveness of her society. The only time she feels free is when she is in the pit with the other rebels, “ drinking, dropping, smoking, swearing, screwing, fighting, swimming, home-made-tattooing, passing out and throwing up right up until an hour or so before church the next morning” (34). Unlike other characters, such as her father, who conforms, she is able to find happiness within the village, despite being judged by others for rebelling. Toews clearly illustrates that the only way for East Village’s inhabitants to experience joy is to isolate themselves from the community and to reject the lifestyle that has been integrated so thoroughly into their lives.

The sole reward for conformity is being liked by everyone, except oneself. The author proves that this is not a worthy price to pay. Conformity presents the person with a job to do; it is rules to follow, a common procedure and a blueprint framework to build oneself around. Anyone can do this job. In fact, there will always be someone who is able to do this job better, faster, and more efficiently. But remaining true to one’s character: that is the one thing in which no person can ever be outdone. Although being part of a society is important, being the outcast arguably leads to a more fulfilling life, granted that one is allowed to assert their individuality. In *A Complicated Kindness*, Miriam Toews presents a variety of ideas surrounding conformity and

tradition, though there is one that peaks as most prevalent: it is no use contributing to a society if one is not first whole, as a person, on their own.

Work Cited

Toews, Miriam. *A Complicated Kindness: A Novel*. Toronto: A. A. Knopf Canada, 2004. Print