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World Peace through Multicultural Path in Stephen Gill's *The Coexistence*

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Abstract

India born Canadian author Stephen Gill discusses the possibility of adopting multiculturalism as the principle on which world peace can rest in his novel *The Coexistence*. Raghu Nath, the hero and the spokesperson of the author, freely expresses his dissatisfaction with wars, genocides, prejudices, xenophobia, racism and discrimination. He seems to be actively involved in the debate of world peace and suggests the idea of live and let live, symbiosis, and multiculturalism as possible ways for the attainment of world peace. Gill seems to reject the Darwinian principle of struggle for existence and suggests that nature offers examples of symbiotic relationship. He is hopeful that world peace will be achieved when there will be a world parliament and national prejudices will be won over. He sincerely believes in the idea of emergence of a World-state. In fact the novel *The Coexistence* appears to be the summary of the emerging socio-political discourse in the developed world.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Discrimination, Xenophobia, World peace, Coexistence.

Peace has been the preoccupation of the Canada based poet and novelist Stephen Gill. In an interview, Gill said that extremely sad situations during his adolescence had shaped his path to be a spokesperson of peace. He was born before partition in the area now in Pakistan; he grew up and got educated in India and finally settled down in Canada. He has been seriously concerned with finding solution for a peaceful existence. Therefore, almost all his writings harp on the question of peace. The novel *The Coexistence* is also a creative attempt to suggest a path for the attainment of world peace. He uses his studies of political science, philosophies and human rights to hint at attainment of peace through democratically elected one world government.

Raghu Nath, the hero of the novel and the spokesperson of the author, freely expresses his dissatisfaction with wars, genocides, prejudices, xenophobia, racism and discrimination. He seems to be actively involved in the debate of world peace and

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suggests the idea of live and let live, symbiosis, and multiculturalism as possible ways for the attainment of world peace. Gill seems to reject the Darwinian principle of struggle for existence and suggests that nature offers examples of symbiotic relationship. He is hopeful that world peace will be achieved when there will be a world parliament and national prejudices will be won over. He sincerely believes in the idea of emergence of a World-state. In fact the novel *The Coexistence* appears to be the summary of the emerging socio-political discourse in the developed world.

Stephen Gill has been a tireless crusader of peace. He grew up witnessing violence and discrimination and thus these elements became engrained in his psyche. He has expressed his genuine concern for peace in his poems "The Flame" and "Shrine" and most other writings. *The Coexistence* (2011) is his well meditated and unequivocal response to the question of world peace. It is an attempt to explore a reliable system of world peace in the world which is riddled with multiple levels of prejudices and discriminations.

Bearing an autobiographical strain, *The Coexistence* is an account of the personal experiences and reflections of the hero Raghu Nath. This is an argument in favour of a democratically elected parliament of nations. Raghu enunciates his model of peaceful world-state based on democratic and multicultural principles. He believes that the instinct for aggression must be replaced by the instinct of survival and the ideals of live and let live and symbiotic relationship must be promoted for a peaceful world. He is in favour of a world-state based on mutualism and symbiosis.

The novel touches a number of issues like war, communal violence, prejudices and discrimination, instinct of aggressions, identity crisis, isolation and globalization; and pushes forward multiculturalism as an ideology that can help address these issues and ensure a peaceful world. Gill suggests that diversity is the will of god and admiration of diversity through communication for understanding it is the way of peace. (19) Raghu says "As per my understanding god has created diversity and therefore humans have to honour the plan of the creator" (232). According to Gill, the key to survival in dignity is agree to disagree. (9) Diversity should not be the basis of discrimination. He believes that various types of discriminations are based on ignorance and disturb the world.

Raghu refers to different types of discriminations faced by himself and his fellow characters. Gill takes up Canada as his setting which, according to him is "a complete world in macrocosm, it is blessed with distinctive ethno-cultural, as well as political, racial, social and religious groups". As Raghu visits different places and encounters different people, he learns about various types of prejudices and discriminations. He is asked to leave Canada. "You fuuuu-up Indians, why don't you go back?" (85) He faces linguistic prejudices. He refers to the partition riots and religious discriminations in India. He meets a woman Queen of Sheba who faces colour discrimination. She says "Canadians will never give responsible positions to the black easily". (86) There are also references in the novel of the prejudices of the professors against students of other countries. Raghu believes that discrimination violates the basic principle of democracy within whose framework multiculturalism can flourish. But he also believes

that discrimination cannot be completely ruled out. He says that human beings are beset with feuds, mutual jealousy, bickering and ill-feeling for one another in every form. (187) As no one can eliminate prejudices, the best way is to recognize them.

In order to save the world from turning into a "republic of reptiles", the world needs to follow the path of symbiotic relationship. Raghu says that the battlefield of maniac messiahs is mind and this is the front where the fight has to start and finish. Our misleaders have to develop policies along the line of live and let live or based on mutualism also called symbiotic relationship. (266) He seems to be enamoured by the "gospel of coexistence" (57) and believes that "coexistence is the core of life". (64) He emphasizes that it is God's plan to coexist and coexistence is needed for peace and divinity. (136) For being peaceful and also retaining one's cultural identity, coexistence is needed. Coexistence is the recognition of everyone's right to survive. (19) The ideal of coexistence can be promoted only through tolerance. The Canadian leader B. Pearson believed that tolerance is the force for a peaceful coexistence that forms a vital organ for democracy which invites everyone to participate in the government through discussion. (19) For peace the world needs to follow the path of live and let live. This path has become the path of symbiotic relationship. (277)

As a remedy to prejudices and discriminations, Raghu pushes forward the ideal of multiculturalism. He believes that "multiculturalism is the way of the future and that it holds a passport to the land of coexistence". (135) He explains multiculturalism as "sharing and widening of knowledge to the boundaries of cultures and faiths". (219) It is the spirit of realizing that there are also other beauties and their recognition removes the fear of the unknown. (219) Multiculturalism refers to the acceptance of the language and life of other groups, prohibiting ethnic and religious discrimination and use of weapons to address conflicts. It refers to a situation beyond just tolerance to embrace equality in diversity and interdependence. (390) According to him, the motive behind multiculturalism was to create an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding. (75)

Gill favours multiculturalism as the suitable model for achieving world peace because Canada accepts this ideology. Multiculturalism is a political ideology that not only allows a peaceful coexistence of diverse cultural communities but also ensures them equal status in a democratic system. It is a different type of cultural pluralism. It is concerned with the issue of equality. It asks whether the different communities living peacefully together coexist as equal in the public arena. (Mahajan 2002:11) This emphasis on equality is the main difference between multiculturalism and pluralism. There is an acceptance of diversity and often tolerance is in practice but within the framework there is a "widely accepted hierarchy of cultures". (Mahajan 12) Pluralism is not often multiculturalism. Pluralism often exists when the authority of the dominant community and the symbols of its powers are readily accepted by others. (Mahajan 13) Multiculturalism is based on the belief that the co-presence of different religions, races, castes and other communities is not an indicator of their equal status in public domain. As such multiculturalism is not just an assertion of tolerance, nor is it, for that matter, a celebration of eclecticism of tastes. It speaks equality of cultures and argues

that in a democracy, all cultural communities must be entitled to equal status in the public domain. (Mahajan 15) Different but equal is the leitmotif of multiculturalism. It is against the idea of homogenization and assimilation. Theorists of multiculturalism believe that most states have majoritarian cultural bias. They propose that a multicultural society should not interpret differences in terms of central and peripheral. This society should be a cultural cauldron rather than a cultural melting pot.

The hero of the novel, Raghu thinks about the most suitable form of government for the global village. The model that he suggests is democratically elected parliament of nations. He is in favour of more and more democratization of the world because democracy is a government by discussion (102), and a democratic set up is most suitable for the growth of multiculturalism. According to him "a parliament of nations is a pragmatic solution for international problems". (276) He further defines parliament of nations as "democratically elected, secular world government with its head and powers of the executive, legislative and courts". (276) This world government will be in partnership with all nations, and ruled by law, not by the weapons of mass destruction. The people of the world today in her it a global village without being able to elect its mayor and council to govern it.

Gill suggests that the greatest threats to world peace are posed by prejudices and discriminations, ghettoism in the name of identity crisis and wars. Raghu mentions a separatist movement in Canada called Fronte de Liberation du Quebec. Such movements for the protection of identity lead to disturbances. However, such ghettoes are temporary walls which cannot stand against the onslaught of global current for coexistence based on the recognition of differences with dignity. (144) But the greatest threat to peace is caused by wars. Raghu tells in detail about the losses caused by wars in the past. Wars have led to the destruction of civilizations. They have solved no problems. In the future also the threat of wars looms larger. Future wars are going to be more deadly due to the invention of dangerous nuclear weapons. Raghu is afraid that the intellect of humans has developed robots of Lucifer in numerous ways that can destroy the blessings in the orchard of the global village. (188) He feels that the modern world has been attracted by Darwin's theory of the struggle for existence. The instinct of aggression has been disproportionately inflated whereas the instinct of survival has been ignored. He firmly asserts that nature offers ample examples of symbiosis and coexistence. Aggression is not the law of nature, nor is it instinctive. It is a social learning.

Thus Gill chalks out a design of a peaceful future world. He envisions a global village with a parliament of nations, based on multicultural, democratic principles, following the ideals of tolerance and live and let live. The guiding force of this settlement will be love because love is the language of God and God is peace. (279) Gill also hints at the value of communication, the absence of which leads to prejudices, discriminations, ghettoism and isolation. There are several references of the problem of isolation in the novel. Gill suggests inter-racial and biracial marriages for addressing the problem of racial prejudices. He also suggests that fear and distrust must be removed for solving the problem of war.

The style of treatment of the subject matter in the novel is that of a preacher or a political thinker. The writer seems to be so much obsessed with his ideology that he often fails in weaving the warp and weft of the plot. Raghu emerges as such a dominant figure in the novel that all other characters become insignificant. Gill himself admits in one of his prefaces that he is unable to get his characters involved in conversation. In this novel, the conversations are dominated by Raghu. In fact, Raghu is made to present Gill's point through speech. There are many characters in the novel, which just appear and disappear. They fail to make their presence felt. These are Akram, Krishna, Maple King, Mrs. Patterson, Mrs. Butler, Mrs. Wallace, Queen of Sheba, Mohan, Balwant, Bluebell, Prabha, Mrs. Clifford, Dr. Hafeez and Mr. Aggarwal. These are people from different countries and different racial backgrounds. They tell about their isolation and their experiences about prejudices and discriminations. Some of them are used in conversations deliberately to allow Raghu present his point view. The conversations of Raghu are often very casual dealing with issues like what do the people of the west find exotic about India and what sensationalism in literature is.

The Coexistence is essentially a novel of peace. It emphasizes that no organism is an island and if they have to survive they will have to learn the art of coexistence by accepting diversity as the will of God and by replacing the instinct of aggression by the instinct of survival. The future world will have to say goodbye to wars and discriminations and promote symbiotic relationship between persons and nations. A peaceful world will need to set up a parliament of nations and will have to adopt multiculturalism and democracy. The novel prescribes tolerance and love as the essentials for peace.

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