

2<sup>nd</sup> Online International Conference on "Continuity, Consistency and Innovation in Applied Sciences and Humanities" (ICCIASH-2021)



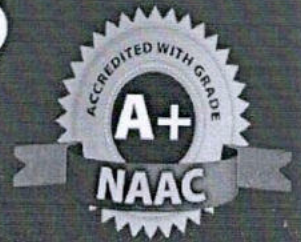
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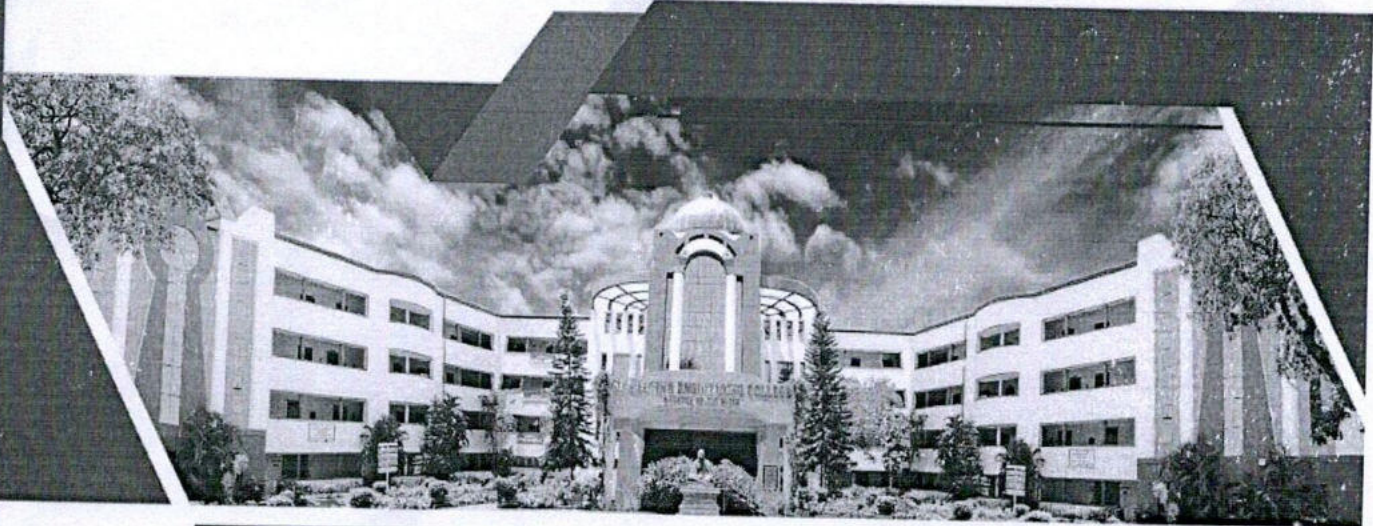
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## REPRESENTATION OF THE AMISH - A DISCOURSE OF STRUGGLE WITH MODERNITY

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The Amish are seemingly unique in their lifestyle, detaching themselves from the advanced world that evinces modern behavior. They engage in simple living, robustly embracing the staunch beliefs of Christianity by propagating their ideas from the Bible. The Amish way of life, to a greater extent, is at odds with modern society, and they live in perpetual tension with the mainstream American ethos. However, the Amish have persistently defended their fabric of culture and beliefs against the pressures to assimilate into the mainstream culture. This paper probes the representation of the Amish and the discourse of their struggle with modernity. It aims to divulge the clash of worldviews between the Amish ethos and mainstream America. The paper also unveils points of misrepresentation of the Amish in popular culture and the social fragmentation of the community.

**KEY WORDS:** Amish Community, Culture, Tradition, Identity, Mainstream, Struggle, Representation, Religion, Clash of worldviews, Beliefs.

The Amish are a relatively small community with a distinctive character where life is ostensibly peculiar. Their practices and traditions are what constitute their exceptional culture, which is primarily defined by their religion - a specific variation of Christianity. The Amish who reside in America have descended from those belonging to the Swiss Anabaptist Movement that was founded in the 16th Century. The Amish way of life is significantly at odds with mainstream society as they distance themselves from modern technologies for they believe that modern technologies are worldly pleasures that might lead them astray - away from God. The term 'mainstream' denotes the Non - Amish society. Despite the American society being pluralistic in nature celebrating diversity, the numerous subcultures that form it, have one thing in common vis-à-vis the Amish, which is the fact that they all embrace technology. In contrast, the Amish reject all forms of modernity.

Culture is a set of learned or shared patterns and models of living through which the lifestyle of a certain community of people is shaped. Edward B Taylor defined culture as "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." The culture of people seems to act as a tool in their hands which serves well in distinguishing them from others. The behavioral pattern of the Amish community has constructed their culture which is a set of beliefs, morals and habits that they have inculcated into their community that externalizes the rest.

Representations, in step with Stuart Hall, are either a reflection or distortion of reality. He says,

"Representation is the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things depicted through the images or

whatever it is, on screen or words on a page which stand for what we're talking about." [10]

Representations serve as interpretations of a particular idea through words or images. The Amish are portrayed through representations of sorts in relation to their form of lifestyle - Culture and Tradition. There are two kinds of representation that fall into the picture - Self Representation and Representation by the World. Kramsch Claire states in her book on 'Language and Culture',

"..to identify themselves as members of a community, people have to define themselves jointly as insiders against others, whom they thereby define as outsiders. Culture is a process that includes and excludes, always entails the exercises of power and control." [14]

The Amish, in the midst of the pluralistic diversity, have identified themselves as a community and have parted away from the clutches of modern technology. Hence, they define themselves against a contrasted picture of their solidarity within their own community. The fact that they are a minority group largely reduces their status of power in the dominant society. The Amish culture answers reasonably well to this paradigm, in fact a religious collective through the nature of its sacred practices. Amish beliefs and practices manifest the coherent vision of social order that stems from a distinct set of religious beliefs. Hostetler, in his book, asserted,

"The Amish are often perceived by other Americans to be the relics of the past who live an austere, inflexible life dedicated to inconvenient and archaic customs. They are seen as renouncing both modern conveniences and American dream of success and progress." [7]

The Amish community is self-sufficient in its religious life and socialization patterns and educational functions. Some social theorists have presumed that with time the Amish will be absorbed into mainstream society. On a controversial note, the Amish have not only thrived but their population has also expanded comparatively. Their society is not a museum to be showcased but it is a community that is dynamic and evolving.

Culture is the expression of social groups worldwide and their value systems. Emile Durkheim argued that culture maintains itself through collective representation which are primarily the symbols and practices used to express the worldview and value framework of a given culture. Collective Consciousness is a fundamental sociological concept that refers to the set of shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes and knowledge that seem to be common to a particular group or a society. It gives a simple sense of belonging and an identity as well. He primarily developed this concept to explain how individuals are bound together into collective units like societies. He further makes a strong claim that the reason behind the existence of a society is the sense of solidarity in individuals in relation to others. He also emphasizes that religion plays an important role in producing this collective consciousness among groups of people from different religions. The Amish way of life is strictly defined in, what is referred to as the 'Ordnung'. The Ordnung is the set of laws and rules by which the Amish community must abide and failing which the individual will be excommunicated or 'shunned' in their terms. However, the Ordnung admits of small variation from church to church across the Amish territory in terms of regulating their private, public and ceremonial life. The Ordnung is not a written law but passed on through oral tradition.

The Amish believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible - in terms of dressing, resisting worldly temptation, importance of family life, Education, Media, etc.. Therefore the Ordnung is framed in accordance with the Bible allowing them to lead a completely devoted life leaving the world of modernity. They have distanced themselves from the world based on Biblical references like Romans 12:2 - "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." or Luke 22:42 - "...not my will, but yours be done" and many more alike. The Amish seemed to have developed a sense of selflessness and a willingness to submit to God while any kind of luxury is considered

worldly. They believe they should detest 'Hochmut' meaning pride and place a high value and adhere to 'Demut' which is humility and 'Gelassenheit' - submissive nature. It is this religious dimension that acts as the primary social bond among the Amish. They live in a symbolic world which articulates submission, binds the community and demarcates from the larger society. They stand unified in averting acculturation.

The Amish set of beliefs, practices, culture and tradition embrace the virtues of modesty and humility, deploring any form of publicity in the modern world. This difference builds a kind of discrimination between the Amish community and the dominant society, laying pressures on the Amish to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Representation of the community differs when produced by the Amish and the Non - Amish as it takes an Amish to authentically present the subculture in relation to the bigger society. Being closely associated with the culture gives an intense understanding of the community which is seen lacking in the Non-Amish form of representation. Bourdieu postulated the idea of 'Habitus' while Dessecker makes a claim that the concept of 'habitus' can be comprehended with the introduction to 'doxa', in other terms, it is the cultural norms. When 'doxa' is practiced within a particular population, it is referred to as the 'Habitus'. Bourdieu also makes a claim that people with similar habitus are more comfortable within their surroundings and this is the pivotal reason for the Amish to choose the path of living within their community, rejecting all forms of modernity. Hostetler depicts the fact that,

"The Amish community is homogeneous in the totality of its culture and psychology. Ways of thinking and behavior are much alike for all persons in corresponding positions of age and sex." [8]

The conspicuous clash between the supposed civilized ways and the Amish ways are very apparent in the society. The Amish resistance to modernity intensifies and demonstrates their war against the spirit of progress. This entails the drawing and redrawing of social and cultural lines to build and maintain their identity. Hostetler, in 'The Amish Use of Symbols and Their Function in Bounding the Community' exemplified,

"While the modern scientific world is determined to use technical change and invention to make the world a better place to live, the Amish have turned from such goals to seek refuge in traditional and other-worldly source." [8]

The struggle to be separate is translated in many areas of their life - dressing, marriage, transportation, use of electricity, health, rumspringa (an experience of the outside world), mass media life, etc.. The same is delineated in an unbecoming manner by a Non-Amish in the realm of popular culture. The literature of the Amish has interesting facts about the system, while it also lacks the genuineness in some areas as being depicted by non - Amish presenters. The short story 'The Amish Girl' by William H. Coles (a non- Amish writer), is a story of a young Amish girl who tries to abide by the Ordnung, but eventually finds herself interested in a non-Amish boy. This intolerable act gets her shunned from her community. Though the story depicts certain aspects of the Amish culture, it focuses long on the part where the Amish girl strayed away from the Ordnung and the community. The Amish are well trained from their childhood, prioritizing the Ordnung as their foundational rock and they do not easily yield to such temptations of worldly pleasure. The identity of the girl is overpowered by the modern world and its luring fascinations. The author is not closely associated with the community and lacks accurate knowledge of the same, driving the story dominantly into constructing a negative side of the Amish. Another piece of literature, 'Straw in the Wild' by Ruth Dobson heightens the misinterpretation of the Amish, where the Bishop is portrayed as cruel, love for the land becomes greedy and family commitment is viewed as control over the members. Representations draw its readers into believing what is portrayed, as the truth. There have been other works that have pictured the Amish through the stereotypical framework and have failed to offer an explanation for their kind of unique lifestyle. In the article, 'The Amish and their portrayal provided by the film - Witness', Riedlova highlighted, "The Amish beliefs are in sharp contrast with the ideas behind new technologies because they had always been opposed to modern things which could endanger their simple way of life." [11] Many times there are inaccurate

representations or even misrepresentations of the Amish ways of living, claiming it to be a tyrant world of restrictions. The book 'Rosanna of the Amish' by Joseph W. Yoder, was written in response to these clichéd representations and brought to light the truth of this community of devout people.

The media has grown to become one of the main sources of knowledge and also plays a significant role in creating opinions on different aspects of the Amish. Media influences the perception of religious groups in the public. Riedlova asserts in her article,

"In order to attain such a great influence, to amuse and entertain people with varied interests and occupations, producers must use certain strategies and methods which can be widely accepted. Sometimes, it may be even necessary to slightly adjust the original story if it is taken over from a book, or the reality if a film claims to be at least partly real, which then becomes more entertaining and thus more suitable for large-scale audiences." [11]

There are some films based on the community of the Amish - 'Witness' or 'A Stoning at Fulham County' directed by non-Amish Americans who have developed their knowledge of the Amish through various external sources. The film 'A Stoning at Fulham County' is a story of an eight month old baby being stoned by some English youth. The Amish family rejects the idea of taking this to the court as they believe that judgement lies in the hands of God. They followed the Bible in its literal sense and framed their laws based on these foundational roots. The family refuses to cooperate with the civil servants and stands firm on the decision. There is clearly a struggle faced by the family through the pressures from the outside world. Eventually the film portrays how the elder daughter takes a step to legally take action on the boys. This is an inappropriate representation of the Amish as they would refuse to take part in the Western law in any case. Zouhra advocates that,

"The Amish are taught to meet any verbal or bodily assault with silence. They take literally the Bible teaching to 'turn the other cheek'." [13]

The Amish are portrayed as people with no sense of justice and are blinded by the strict rules. There is a clear picture of cultural clash on the issue of justice and the pressure of assimilation. The movie is based on a real life incident, but the family in real life never came to witness in the court. The Amish never run to the law for it counters their submissive spirit of silent resistance and as rightly specified by Thomas Foster and Tom Foster,

"The Amish have also attempted to minimize their involvement with the larger society's legal system which violates their beliefs in two respects: (1) It attempts to employ force to secure conformity to its norms and, (2) It requires the swearing of oaths in courts of law. [6]

Popular culture, in a way, has emasculated the Amish and their culture by portraying a dismissive picture. They are seen as unpatriotic for not respecting the law of the state and are looked down as religious fanatics. Some domains of popular culture also project an immoral depiction of the community which puts them in a discomfited frame. Such distorted images are not well received by the community and they claim it to be a misinterpretation of sorts. Some filmmakers like Mary Haverstick stated that, "this is a false portrayal" [5] and also as stated,

"For decades the film directors have been trying to represent the Amish way of life, but only some of their efforts were met with success. Reasons why they have been doing this may differ considerably, from making money to attracting the audience's attention, which in the end results in earning a handsome profit. Many film directors have managed to cross the cultural frontiers, the invisible boundaries between two completely different cultural spheres and present to the non-Amish people the culture which has been ever so enthralling to them." [12]

The subcultural community is bound together through what Durkheim calls, 'collective representation'. Their shared set of beliefs and behavioral patterns are what give them that collective identity. As rightly suggested by Hostetler, "the ability of the Amish to withstand the pressures of the American scene, urbanism and technology suggests that they use effective ways for maintaining group consciousness." [8] The Amish are not interested in contesting against the dominant society and defend themselves through a silent discourse. This discourse of struggle is carried forward through their lifestyle and rejection of modernity. It is also a comprehensive factor that,

"Culture, History, Language and Religions are aspects that shape the identity of the minority community. They help them to define their identity in comparison to the majority. However, sometimes, they may also foster the majority's perception of minorities as 'different' and 'other'." [13]

They do not publish anything for the outside world for they don't believe in representing themselves or even use the medium of print to express their ideas. They do not adopt the symbols of the civilized world as they detest conforming to the world.

A BBC documentary 'Living with the Amish' is a series of six episodes that show an intercultural dialogue between the Amish and some British youth. The English Youth have gone to live with different Amish families to learn and get a firsthand experience of their lifestyle. The British youth found it difficult to identify themselves as one among them and adapt to their style of living. There is a huge clash of worldviews between the Amish and the mainstream which prominently figures in these documentaries. These documentaries were made by non-Amish, trying to place the two cultures at hand and drawing the clash of worldviews through the articulation of the two cultures. The Amish live in a calm environment unlike the English youth who enjoy a boisterous city lifestyle. There is a world of differences between the Amish and the mainstream community - from their ways of dressing to their ways of leading a peculiar lifestyle. The idea of God to the Amish ranks the highest as they believe in the word of God and God's guidance. This religious facet differs with the ideas of the English youth. They don't have a staunch faith in God and some are even atheists which takes the Amish by surprise. The Amish are very simple in their way of dressing as they believe in their inner capabilities and strengths rather than focusing on external appearances. They have their own systems of education and schooling and are also of the thought that higher education will draw them away from God.

The mainstream community criticizes the Amish system of practices as a cruel set of rules limiting their freedom. However, the Amish enjoy what they do and how they do it with commitment. They are in many ways self - described and also bear the description raised by the non - Amish stream. The Mainstream eroticizes and picturizes them to be quaint. They are viewed as a 'curiosity' rather than engaging them in a spirit of equality. The plain culture is portrayed in a way that disregards their values and the uniqueness of a dignified set of people. Though the two communities live in the same country, their lifestyles are what draw a line of separation. This makes them a subculture or the marginalized because they do not blend with the mainstream culture.

David Zercher, in his book 'The Amish in the American Imagination', explores how the Americans have domesticated the Amish in terms of interpretations and portrayals. The Amish are discriminated based on their cultural practices and rejection of modernity, which is quite in opposition with the mainstream. According to Weaver, there is a constant 'commodification' of the Amish - highlighting them as tourist attractions. There are clashes in ideas like - forgiveness, existence of God, work ethics, marriage, etc... In the Durkheimian perspective, society is a moral phenomenon where the well-being of the society completely depends on the people's commitment to certain moral beliefs that find expression in

customs and rituals. Therefore, the Amish society is a unified system with a set of beliefs and practices that are unique and different. Their society is constructed on certain moral values and their commitment to those values. The religious collectiveness and their hard rules are what set them apart from the mainstream. Their culture is based on what their people have framed, regarding the Bible as their foundational pillar of source.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The Amish have a completely different view of theology and their vision is unique. They believe in literally practising the Bible which separates them from the mainstream. Though they have few years of education, they are not illiterates nor unemployed but are self - employed. They make collective decisions over issues and focus on the community rather than their individual interests. The 'Ordnung' serves to hold them together as a community and by giving them an identity, separates them from the dominant society and also defends them from the pressures of assimilation. The Amish are different from the mainstream world yet a part of the world and are not of the world. They seek separation from the world and ironically that serves as a reason for the public's attraction towards them. The Amish have lived a separate life and have confronted modernization in their own ways.

The world has comprehended the fact that the Amish, though a closed culture, has been able to thrive within the American society. They live within a liberal community but the outside world perceives it to be suffocated with restrictions and refute the idea of liberalism in the Amish community. They are very committed to their ways of living and defend themselves from the assimilationist pressures of mainstream society. Resistance in all its subtlety is their language of defense towards their culture. The Amish will pursue their journey, shield their culture and forms of representation and reiterate their efforts to shun modernity.

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