

FIQWS

Nusrat Raida

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### Freedom and Religious Beliefs

While some characters in Norma Rosen's *"What Must I Say To You?"* and Grace Paley's *"The Loudest Voice"* perceive America as a threat to their religion and culture, the majority consider it as their place of freedom and their opportunity to pursue a better life. In both of the stories, some of the protagonists are trying to seize every opportunity possible by abandoning their own faith and tradition but by embracing others. By portraying America from both perspectives as a threat and also as a place of freedom, both authors explore the issues that living in America brings up for their characters and possibly for readers alike.

*"The Loudest Voice"* is a short story by Grace Paley about a young Jewish immigrant girl, Shirley Abramowitz, who is uniquely capable of speaking out loud and making herself heard clearly. Being a loud and articulate speaker, she is well-known in her school as well. Because of her uniqueness she was given an opportunity to play the narrator in a school Christmas play, where she had to talk openly about the role of Jesus Christ in Christianity and in history. Shirley agreed to play the part because she wanted to feel important and heard. She promised to work harder than she ever did before. So, as Christmas approaches, Shirley begins rehearsing for her role in the play. However, Shirley's mother is adamantly opposed to the performance and was worried

about their tradition and faith. Shirley is raised in a Christian area, so doesn't know much about her religion. So, when the city government decorated and put up a Christmas tree on the road where they reside. Shirley felt sorry to see some Jewish families neglect it, and she tossed them a kiss. I believe It's possible that Shirley's mother was worried about the possibility of her daughter wanting one. She was always concerned about her Christian neighborhood and believed that religious Christian living there would become a threat to their assimilated way of life because they have their own traditions and religious beliefs.

In "Paley's Oppositional View of Assimilation in "The Loudest Voce"" Janet Ruth Heller writes that "throughout the story, Paley emphasizes Shirley's ability to retain her own voice, despite various attempts to silence her"(P#72). They once went to the grocery store, where Shirley was very loud. Her mother and the grocer had a conversation because of this, and the grocer told Shirley's mother not to be afraid of her daughter. They tried to get Shirley to be quiet, but Shirley refused to give up her pride in having "The Loudest Voice" (p1). In my perspective, my understanding of what Shirley thinks about the situation after the fact is that Shirley sees this country as a brand-new opportunity to discover and she desires to be heard. Also, it seems to me that she tries to embrace new culture and wants to be a part of it rather than worrying about her Jewish identity, as seen by her participation in a Christmas play.

Heller writes that ""The Loudest Voice" makes many important points about the position of a minority culture surrounded by the majority culture which attempts to entangle Jews in its folds" (P#73). In the story Shirley's father has a far different perspective on America than her mother; he views the country as a place of freedom. In

the story he states, "In Palestine the Arabs would be eating you alive. Europe you had pogroms. Argentina is full of Indians. Here you got Christmas.... Some joke, Ha?" (p4). Shirley's father is reminding Shirley's mother that she wanted to emigrate here and somewhere else it wasn't safe for them to live. Also, he seems to be claiming that since the main risk is celebrating Christmas here, in contrast to other countries, they are safe here and therefore it's not a huge problem to accelerate a little bit into American culture and its Christians holidays. while Shirley's mother was concerned about how Christmas was taught to children in school and was worried that Shirley would grow up to be untraditional and confused about her faith. In the story "*The Loudest Voice*" she states "If we came to a new country a long time ago to run away from tyrants, and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that our children learn a lot of lies, so what's the joke?"(p3). I assume Shirley's mother asserts that assimilation, such as Christmas celebrations, will eventually become a program and demolish their jewish identity. In another piece of the story Shirley's father mentioned "Christmas. What's the harm?" (p.4). This illustrates Shirley's father is more accepting than her mother since he stands up for his daughter. Shirley, however, has a very different perspective on America than her parents do.

In terms of Judaism and Christianity "*The Loudest Voice*," and Norma Rosen's short story "*What Must I Say To You*" are similar. In her story Norma Rosen portrayed Jewish and Christian characters engaged in religious conflict. Jewish couples and Christian couples were introduced. Among the Jewish couples the wife was born in the United States in a more liberal and less strict environment and the husband was born in a Orthodox family in Europe whose family was directly affected by the Holocaust. Mrs. Cooper is a Baptist immigrant who recently moved from her home country to America

and started working in a Jewish household as a babysitter. While Mrs. Cooper was working; the wife and her spoke about how she finds the loud Baptist church in Harlem offensive and is eager to find a new one. When she asked the wife "Do you ever go to that church? To that Baptist Church?" She stated " Now it's time for me to tell her that my husband and I are Jewish" (p3). It seems to me suddenly and absurdly that the wife was hesitant to discuss her faith, even though Mrs. Cooper was adamant about her religious beliefs and freely proclaimed her wish to find a new church. Further, when the couple discussed whether they should put a mezuzah on their front door, the wife refused to put it and expressed her disapproval and dislike for the practice. My understanding of the wife is that, because no one in her family died in the concentration camp, she does not feel authentic enough to put the mezuzah up and identify as a Jew. But being personally affected by the Holocaust the husband argued that he wanted to put the mezuzah up to embrace their religion and heritage as it was significant to him. Additionally, he wants his daughter to give the same priority to it. Whether the wife is totally against it and she is concerned that if they put the mezuzah up everyone will know that they are jews and they shouldn't do it. The Mezuzah, in her view, poses a threat to her assimilated way of life.

But unlike the Jewish husband, Mr. Cooper is completely different. Despite the fact that Mr. Cooper is Christian and America has a majority of Christians as well as that he has many opportunities to practice his religion, he is busy focusing on his dreams. On the other hand the Jewish husband is not ashamed to exercise his faith, even though Jewish are a minority in America. In the narrative, Mrs. Copper made reference to the fact that her husband no longer attends church. Also, Mr. Cooper was against it when

Mrs. Copper and her children were looking forward to Easter and her daughter was preparing for part in church play. He even goes on vacation without her and the children. The wife stated “ It seems to me, he is taking on the coloration of a zestful America-adopter”. My interpretation of Mr. Cooper is that Mr. Copper doesn't give his faith or traditions much thought, preferring to focus on acclimating to a new way of life. A different piece of evidence revealed that “Mr. Cooper's job opportunities here are infinitely better than in Jamaica, where there aren't employers even to turn him down. He goes to school two nights a week for technical training. He became a citizen two years ago”(p6). His wife, on the other hand, is adamant about returning to her native country when she grows old because she will have more opportunities to live a better life there . While he is concentrating on himself and seeking out more prospects to live a better life and grateful to have all the opportunities.

To sum up, In life everyone attempts to look for ways to enhance their lives in any way they can. The events in both stories were the same. Some characters are quite accepting of differences, even if not celebrated to seek all the opportunities they can. While others are low tolerance to accept and highly concerned about their religion and traditions. The differing perspectives of immigrants on their immigration to America are highlighted by both authors. Some see America as a place where they may develop while others regard it as a threat to their own traditions and beliefs.

Works Cited

1. HELLER, JANET RUTH. "Grace Paley's Oppositional View of Assimilation in 'The Loudest Voice.'" *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, vol. 22, 2003, pp. 72–78. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41205983>.
2. Paley, Grace. *Loudest Voice*. 1959.
3. Rosen, Norma. *What Must I Say To You?*. October 18, 1963.