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ISSUES OF ASSIMILATION OF DIASPORA JEWISH COMMUNITY IN AMERICAN
LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF BERNARD MALAMUD'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Although the Jewish diaspora has been in America since colonial times, yet a big number of Jews, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe and specifically from Russia, migrated to America in the second half of the 19th and the first few years of the 20th century. Pogroms of Russia and anti-semitic movements in other parts of Europe forced millions of Jews to migrate to America. It was then that restrictions were imposed on immigration of Jews in America which continued till 1965. Millions of Jews settled in America faced issues like cultural integration and assimilation. Sense of being at home, belongingness, social upward mobility and Americanisation have been the prominent issues for the Jewish diaspora.

Bernard Malamud was born to Russian migrant Jews parents and is considered one of the prominent writers of American Jewish community. Most of the characters of his novels and short stories are Jews and through them is delineated the issue of assimilation, rather covertly.

Keywords: Anti-semitism, Americanisation, Assimilation, Acculturation, Diaspora

Introduction

Bernard Malamud, the son of Jewish migrant parents and a college professor by profession, has a broad range to experiment within the outline of his theme. Malamud has never boasted of himself as a great original thinker and he even accepts the fact that he is influenced by other contemporary writers as well as from the age-old traditions. Like a true professor, he delivers in his works a combination of rich vision assorted with a significant rich style which is uniquely and originally of Malamud. It would be a kind of tribute to the writer by quoting from the obituary written by an equally great American writer of the latter half of 20th century, Saul Bellow at the demise of Malamud in 1986:

“Well we are here, first generation Americans, our language was English and a language is a spiritual mansion from which no one can evict us. Malamud in his novels and stories discovered a sort of communicative genius in the impoverished, harsh jargon of immigrant New York. He was a myth

maker, a fabulist; a writer of exquisite parables...The accent of hard-won and emotional truth is always heard in Malamud's words. He is a rich original of the first rank."¹

The quest of the protagonist to start a new life or to assimilate the loose threads of his present existence or to search a new life-style with commitment and responsibility seem to be the major thematic current of Malamud's fiction. The protagonists are portrayed as engaged in struggle with some forces– at times cultural and physical but at times this struggle is within their own selves.

The quest of a Yiddish Knight has been the theme of Jewish writers in America. The age-old medieval Knight went in search of glory and conquest, and here in America Malamud's protagonists are in search of self-discovery and self-identification throughout.

Even the newspaper which Morris, the elderly Jew in *The Assistant*, gets is named 'The Mirror' which is a reflection of grocer's surroundings. After forcing himself at Helen, Frank looks at his reflection and feels "a nose-thumbing revulsion...Where have you ever been, he asks the one in the glass, except on the inside of a circle? What have you done but always the wrong thing?"²

Frank and Levin, the lead characters of *The Assistant* and *A New Life*, both of them try to evade their self-identification under beards. Levin comes to Cascadia with a beard which startles Pauline's son. Later on he confesses about his past to Pauline that after two years' life of self-hatred, he realised that life is holy and he "felt a new identity", to which Pauline retorts: "You became Levin with a beard."³

It is through these images that Malamud characters can get self- realisation but at various occasions they fail to comprehend the warnings issued by intuitions or the sub-conscious selves as they can provide them moral guidance. Those who listen to these guides, seem to gain something moral or spiritual like Frank, Levin or Yakov but those who do not pay any heed to them, fail endlessly like Roy Hobbs.

Malamud characters have imprisoned themselves in their selves. Therefore, the symbol of prison prevails in all his novels. The all-pervasive prison like situation takes the readers to the *Shtetles* of Eastern Europe where Jews are trying to come to terms with their meager existence. Marcus Klein considered that the fiction of Malamud "depended upon the *Shtetle* problem and *Shtetle* sense... of permanent precariousness of proximity with the mythical past."⁴

The connection with their 'ghetto' like past gives his characters a basis that life can be better than the prevailing one. First, they are alienated from the outside world– be it the dark tangy rooms, isolated groceries, the real prison cell or the rented dark house. The grocery store of Morris is repeatedly called a prison. Morris tells Frank: "A store is a prison. Look for something better." "At least you are your own boss." "To be a boss of nothing is nothing"⁵. The store was "fixed, a cave, motionless."⁶ and the salesman of paper products told Frank to leave the store as this kind of a store is a "death tomb" and "run out while you can. Take my word, if you stay six months, you'll stay forever."⁷

Malamud has chosen a ghetto like corner as the setting of *The Tenants*. The novel starts with the confinement of a solitary writer in an image of a tenement which had been vacated except the writer himself. It stands for the old order of things which has not yet paved the way for the new system. The writer is trying to maintain the old literary values amidst the wasteland as he believes that he can complete his work where he had started it.

¹ Bellow, Saul. (1963). *Recent American Fiction*, Washington. The Library of Congress, p.12.

² *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 174-75.

³ *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, p. 202.

⁴ Klein, Marcus. (1965). "Bernard Malamud: The Sadness of Goodness," *After Alienation*. Cleveland: World Publishing Co., pp. 248.

⁵ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 33

⁶ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 58

⁷ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 60.

Even the title of the novel *The Tenants* is very symbolic that the inhabitant of this place is just a tenant, struggling to complete his incomplete work. This building is symbolic of the desperate state of New York City towards the end of the century, but at the same time it is the modern wasteland of the Western society and the impact of it in literature. Theodore Solotaroff considers Malamud a fantasist as well as a moralist as he pens that along with "providing for his needs as a fantasist, this timeless ghetto has also served his purposes as a moralist, for it enables him to cut through the fog of relativism and to study men who have been stripped down to their irreducible intentions, conflicts and mistakes. The New York of Malamud's imagination is like a secular version of Purgatory."⁸

Cohn, the protagonist of *God's Grace* is saved of the whole humanity. He is the lone human on an island surrounded by chimps. This island is also symbolic of a prison with a difference. This ghetto is, of course, not the cockroach-ridden cell or the grocery store of Morris, yet it is a prison for him as he has no one else to be with him but just the chimps as his companions.

Thus, the symbol of prison is not confined to a place only but the character also carries the prison with him. He moves out for freedom only to be chained: Frank is chained to the grocery store and Levin is chained to Pauline, a woman about whom he is not sure, whether he loves her or not and then her two sick adopted children.

Another metaphor used by Malamud is that of *West* which, in fact, is a mythic name for the unexplored region of the horizon. It is not the real West rather the territory that lies just ahead of us wherever we may be. *A New Life* is the life of a teacher who thinks of himself as bringing culture to the barbarian West and to make it as a professor or even someday the chairman of the English Department.

The novel presents a burlesque yet moving account of the buffoon who comes with a hat over-head and an umbrella in his hand and a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the other hand. He has no actual idea of what west is and ultimately leaves it with the wife of a faculty to lead a (un-) happier life in the East.

The nature is not the romantic or fierce nature of pastoral romances; rather it is the matter-of-fact nature of the New York City. The protagonist, who is leading an isolated life, moves into a world of day-dreaming and fantasizing. There is, in fact, a huge contrast between the actual condition of the protagonist and his idyllic day-dreaming.

Malamud is also very dexterous in presenting an allegory of Jewishness as he has the conviction of humanity and this conviction leads him to "construct an allegory of expiation, prodigious labors, self-sacrifice, and what might be called – after the two millennia of the Christian ascendancy – re-conversion."⁹

Some critics have tried to find a kind of parallel between Malamud and the master of absurdity and existentialism, Samuel Beckett. A friend and contemporary writer who is also put in the parentheses with Malamud as a Jewish American writer, Philip Roth, tries to find the equation between the two in the form of obituary:

"In the early 50's I was reading Malamud's stories, later collected in "The Magic Barrel," as they appeared -- the very moment they appeared -- in *The Partisan Review* and the *Old Commentary*, he seemed to me then to be doing no less for his lonely Jews and their peculiarly immigrant, Jewish forms of failure - for those Malamudian men "who never stopped hurting" - than was Samuel Beckett, in his longer fiction, for misery-ridden Molloy and Malone. Both writers, while bound inextricably to the common life of the clan,

⁸ Solotaroff, Theodore. (1970). "Bernard Malamud: The Old Life and New," *The Red Hot Vacuum and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties*, Atheneum, pp.75.

⁹ Mudrick, Marvin. (1970). "Malamud, Bellow, and Roth," *On Culture and Literature*. New York: Horizon Press, pp. 210.

severed their racial memories from the larger social and historical setting, and then... created, improbably, parables of frustration charged with the gravity of the grimmest philosophers."¹⁰

He again continues in the same stroke, "Not unlike Beckett, Malamud wrote of a meager world of pain in a language all of his own. He tried to say some sweet thing but his tongue hung in his mouth like dead fruit on a tree, and his heart was a black-painted window."¹¹

The pathos of the life of Frank Alpine comes in the form of pity, who alternatively robs and aids the Morris family. The absurdity of the conclusion of the novel can be termed as religious absurdity otherwise when Frank takes the final step:

"Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised.... The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew."¹²

In some cases like that of *The Fixer*, Malamud has chosen history as the basis of the story. The historical basis of "*The Fixer*" is the Mendel Bellis case. On March 20, 1911, the mutilated corpse of a Christian boy was found in a cave in the outskirts of Kiev, Russia. The murder could have been easily solved had not the crime been taken up by the virulent anti-Semitic groups as a pretext for massive persecution of the Jews.

Mendel Bellis, a Jewish labourer who worked in a brick factory near the cave, was arrested on trumped-up charges of ritual murder. (According to the anti-Semitic hallucination, Christian blood was supposed to have been used by Jews in the preparation of Passover matzo.) Bellis was interrogated, tortured, imprisoned. The frame-up became a political issue, extending to the Czar.

In "*The Fixer*," Mendel Bellis is Yako Bok, a non-religious Jewish handyman who liked things in place and functioning. But one cannot hold a novelist too closely to history. Moreover, it is a pertinent fact of history that while the crime of ritual murder was confirmed at the Bellis trial, Mendel Bellis was himself acquitted. The fact acts as a disturbing and undermining counterpoint to the novel and it robs Yakov's lengthy and sometime slightly preachy wrestle with life's meaning.

But in the end it is not just the story Malamud had heard from his father as a young boy rather according to Malamud himself, "A novel that began as an idea, concerned with injustice in America today, has become one set in Russia fifty years ago, dealing with anti-Semitism there. Injustice is injustice." He cautions against the story of *The Fixer* that "it has to be treated as a myth, an endless story more than a case study. A case study couldn't be art."¹³

In many ways the Russia of Yakov, like the Cascadia of S. Levin, becomes a metaphor of contemporary America, presenting the existentialistic anguish of the people of 20th century.

Even in a book like *The Tenants*, which apparently seems to be a novel of confrontation between two writers, who are struggling to complete their works, one being a Jewish novelist and the other a black novice, there is an insight into the contemporary problems of the conflict between haves and have-nots.

Some critics find the quest of Malamud's fictional characters for self identification and self discipline related to Malamud himself. Malamud seems to have been guided by his intrinsic self and his social and cultural milieu in the depiction of characters. To start with, *A New Life* seems autobiographical to many readers and critics. The Jewish teacher who goes to West to begin a new life seems to many as Malamud himself who leaves New York City and moves to the rural Oregon State University with his city-conditioned vision. The fate of Malamud and the treatment meted out to him at Oregon seems a kind of parallel to S. Levin's career except the Pauline issue.

¹⁰ Roth, Philip. "Pictures of Malamud," Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk, April 20, 1986.

¹¹ Roth, Philip. "Pictures of Malamud," Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk, April 20, 1986.

¹² *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 246.

¹³ Frankel, Haskel. (1966). Bernard Malamud. *Saturday Review* 49 (10 September): 39.

Although Northwest and Cascadia College are used metaphorically, yet they have the stamp of real observation of Malamud himself and his own experience at Oregon State College, Corvallis, where he taught English from 1949 to 1961. Like Levin, he was a New Yorker, previously a high school teacher, who was assigned four sections of English composition.

But anyway, S. Levin, the Chaplinesque professor of *A New Life*, teaching his first college class with a wide-open fly, is hilariously foolish but Malamud cannot be so.

In *The Assistant*, the grocery store of Morris Bober could be the reflection of Malamud's early days at Brooklyn where his father, a Jewish immigrant ran a grocery shop and earned a meager income. Like Bober, he was good at heart and strongly believed in the Jewish values and had compassion for humanity.

Even *The Tenants* is based on Malamud's own experiences as a teacher and his concern with Jews and blacks comes as the conflict of various ethnic groups in the society. The background and the setting of the novel is very dim and gloomy and the class of the two ethnic groups supports the dark dull apartment of Malamud's days' New York City. How could possibly one do some creative work at such a place, is another issue which is related to the fact that most of Malamud's literary work was done in his tenure at Oregon State College, Corvallis.

Dubin's Lives presents Malamud in a very new hue. Malamud, who himself had the experience of teaching and living in different societies, was now aging. The mature phases of a biographer's life is the subject of this novel which deals with love, marriage and ageing. A ripe in age biographer tries to complete the most ambitious project of his life. This theme of passion and ageing is depicted through Malamud's ability of art, the beauty of landscape scenery. "Dubin of *Dubin's Lives* reflects a lot of Malamud although he denies it, "Dubin's life was his own" but admitted that he shared many of Dubin's concerns about life and art."¹⁴

Is conversion into Judaism an absurdity or sentimentality, without knowing what Judaism is? Frank has converted without knowing what conversion is and what Judaism is. It is definitely not sentimentality as he converts to take the place of Morris, the one who himself had never been to a synagogue in twenty years, who could never answer what a Jew is but who becomes a sheer symbol of Judaism.

Thus, especially in the case of *The Assistant*, it is a conglomeration of myth of Catholicism, in the form of dancing St. Francis and Judaism, which ultimate makes it a mystical humanistic novel. A certain kind of paradox is prevalent throughout the novel which can be well gauged from the paradoxical statement of Frank, "Even when I am bad I am good"¹⁵

The symbolic confrontation between two ethnic groups in *The Tenants* becomes a paradigm of the strained relations in our own society. The surrounding and setting is surrealistic. Realism and fantasy are so beautifully blended that it becomes very difficult to determine the elements of both. Malamud pours tons of fantasy in this sordid gloomy story that makes it an artistic piece.

Shift from past tense to present tense is also used as a vehicle to move between fantasy and reality in the novel, *The Tenants*. The effect of surrealism is achieved through grammatical tenses. Initially past tense is more pre-dominant whereas present is more occasional and at times there is an over-lapping of one by the other. Through the concluding sections of the novel, the contours of space, time, action and thought are blurred by the devices handled so exquisitely throughout by the novelist like the mingling of the past and present tense, the inter-changing of 'he' and 'I' and the surrealistic setting of the novel.

Conclusion

Malamud has used diverse techniques, different settings and variety of methods in his novels but Malamud, the moralist and humanist writer remains the same. He presents the characters who ultimately start

¹⁴ Helterman, Jeffrey. (1985). *Understanding Bernard Malamud*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, p.5.

¹⁵ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 140.

believing in the power of love, come to know the real meaning of meaningful suffering and initiate living life not just for themselves.

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