



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

BLACK - WHITE CRISIS IN MALAMUD'S "THE TENANTS"

Dr. ALKA MEHRA

Assistant Professor,

Department of English

Govt. PG College Bisalpur Pilibhit

Email: alkavikasmehra@gmail.com



Article info

Article Received:20/10/2023

Article Accepted:04/11/2023

Published online:17/11/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.4.78](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.4.78)

Abstract

The present paper consists of the black-white crisis in the novel "The Tenants" through the depiction of two writers representing black and white cult in their writings who, inspite of being close friends from their childhood and schooldays and knowing each other very properly, become the victim of the hatred and struggle dominating the social view point and perception between black and white. It points out how the writings of the white one depicts the instinct of the white life's view-point considering itself to be civilized and how the writings of the black one depicts the instinct of the black life's view-point and their suffering experience, injustice, deprivation, hatred and struggle against racism. When it reaches up to the extreme point, both of them become the victim of the increasing hatred against the other and after all take each other's life by attacking brutally.

Keywords: Humanist, Black White Relationship, Experience, Hatred, Suffering

Malamud has tried to maintain an air of currency in *The Tenants* (1971), which is ostensibly about the black-white relationship in New York City, his voice has become increasingly private. In this novel Malamud sounds less than ever like a moral Everyman and more like a driven and eccentric writer. At times the civilized skin of his writing, its campaign for the whole humanist virtues for which Morris Bober had once been a spokesman, wears thin, and conflicts and anxieties that had previously been held in solution by the skilful application of narrative techniques and mythic frameworks come forward as open violence that quite overwhelms all moral implications and literary meanings. The main characters in *The Tenants*, Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint, who share an abandoned tenement while trying to complete their novels, just smash

each other to bits. and Malamud apparently wants us to conclude that both get what they actually deserve.

Bernard Malamud has vividly depicted black-white racial tensions in *The Tenants*. The novel probes the agony of the creative process and the tangled web of this strained relations between the two races. In this novel Malamud responds to the racial conflict born of the crisis of the times and extends horizon of his writing to deal with the neglected race of the blacks and their consciousness. The upsurge of Black Power Movement provides the tense background to the novel. Malamud has explained the factors that contributed to the novel

"Jew and blacks, the period of the trouble in New York city, the teachers strike, the rise of

black activism, the mix-up of cause and effect, I thought I'd say a word " (Daniel - 61)

In the novel Malamud's focus is on the impact of the tense times on the humanity symbolically represented in the mutual hatred, suspicion and guilt of the black and the Jewish writers, Willie Spearmint and Harry Lesser, in this novel Commenting on the possibility of new relationship between blacks and whites, Malamud says

"It is possible to predict- it may go one way or another. A good deal depends on the efficacy of American democracy. In that works as it ought-guaranteeing blacks what they deserve as human beings a larger share of our national wealth, equal opportunities under the law, their rights as men, the relationship of blacks and Jews and other minorities are bound to improve." (14)

Malamud's love of mankind includes the ill-treated blacks. Malamud's portrayal of the black consciousness has won authenticity on account of its acquaintance with black people and black fiction and history. He reveals.

"I lived on the edge of black neighbourhood in Brooklyn when I was boy. I played with blacks in the flat bush Boy's club. I had a friend-Buster, we used to go to his house every so often. I swiped dimes so we could go to the movies together in a couple of Saturday afternoons. After I was married I taught for a year in a black evening high school in Harlem. The short stories derive from that period. I also read black fiction and history". (61)

Delving deep into the psyche of the blacks, Malamud has succeeded in dramatizing the world of pain and anguish in *The Tenants*. In *The Tenants* Malamud is concerned with racist relations and their bloody consequences: The novel is not simply a story of the relations between the blacks and the whites For Malamud it is "a sort of prophetic warning against fanaticism", and it argues for "the invention of choices to outwit tragedy."

Malamud in *The Tenants* presents a confrontation between a black and a white to

dramatize the rise of black radicalism. The two principal characters, once nearly friends, are novelists Harry Lesser is Jewish, his subject of writing is love. Willie Spearmint is black, his subject is hatred and misery They are only the inhabitants of a decaying New York apartment house, whose owner is Irving Levenspiel. He wants to erect legal shops with five floors of big-room flats, over the house. He pressurizes Harry Lesser to vacate the house. Malamud's protagonists are always "bent on finding a new identity and with it a new rapport with society". (Esrael - 22)

The Tenants is regarded as wry fable of an artist's labour pains With two novelists as protagonists, the novel has become the agony of the creative process Harry Lesser is a perfect formalist but falls short of ideas and struggles in vain to finish his world-be masterpiece. Willie Spearmint has authentic black experience but fails to give it a coherent shape. The problems of form and theme confound both the novelists. They remain cut off from real life Willie does not appreciate Lesser's comments of his work in its right spirit because of his prejudice against the whites. He hates Lesser for getting his girl, a white beautiful girl named Irene Belinsky, and burns the manuscript of his novel. As a retaliative measure, Lesser smashes his typewriter Finally they get ready to kill each other out of hatred and revenge.

Harry Lesser is an unmarried serious man of 36, He is human, liberal and accommodating. He is a dedicated writer. He lives to write, writes to live He is whole-heartedly devoted to art, He says, that Home is where my book is. He writes about the need to be human and believes in peace, order, and control:

Inspiration is habit, order, ideas growing, formulated formed. (Malamud - 140)

He has published two novels. His first proves a success and the second a flop although it is bought by the movies. He is now at work on his third, and one wants to make it a masterpiece. Harry is trying his best to find a suitable ending for his book-an ending with love at its core. But, ironically enough, he does not know much about love in isolation from the world. Lesser, thus, is passing through a crucial

phase in his life when his existence as a writer is at stake. In fact, Harry's problems originate from material, non-literary, sources. He is constantly bothered by his Jewish Landlord, Levenspiel, who keeps on asking Harry to vacate the tenement so that he could demolish the house to set up a modern six story apartment building. Harry assures his landlord that he would vacate the building as soon as his third book is ready.

Harry wants to forget his past in his tenement house, which is "pleasure dome" to the novelist explains this state of Harry Lesses felt himself close off se world and relax. Here is where he forgot all he had to forgot to work His present surrounding provided him a mental relief "Relief, calm, somings in bed for a month. Dawn on the sea, rose lighting the restless waves touching an island waking, breathing bushes, seashells Ab, once more suous smells of land surrounded by the womanly sea Birds rise from the bore, wheel, fly above the ragged, mast-like palms in the lucent sky Gulls newling, sudden storms of black birds shirting over the violet water. This is live earth, this scepter isle on a silver sea, this Thirty-first Street and Third Avenue, this forsaken house. This happy unhappy Lesser having to write.

The writing of fiction is a process of sublimation to Harry. He feels redeemed otherwise he does not like writing. Harry felt a momentary sense if loss, regret at having given his life to writing, followed by a surge of affection for the imaginative self as he read yesterday's page and a half and found it solid, sound, going well. The book redeemed him. Another two or three months ought to finish it. Then a quick last rewrite of the enterprise-call a third-and-quarter draft-in about three months, possibly four, and he'd have made, novel accomplished Triumph after just ten years.

As a writer, Harry is a "man of habit, order, steady, disciplined work Habit and order fill the pages one by one. He is determined to finish his book where it was begun, created its history, still lives." (Malamud - 183) Harry has taken title depigraph for Shakespeare's King Lear and calls his book The Promised Land His book, as he himself says, is the story about a writer, a black- bearded,

prematurely old thirty-five-year-old man who is often afflicted by the thought that he has wasted more of his life than he was entitled to, or hence thereof Night after night he wakes in sweaty fright of himself, stricken by anxiety because he finds it hard to give love, the theme of Harry's book is love, as he tells us.

Harry is unable to answer and looks blank because surprisingly he does not have experience and concept of love. Harry's book is "his need". All he has to do is to imagine it to its unforeseen end as he puts the words down onper create love in language and see where it takes him. That's the secret. After some time Willie Spearmint, a black ex-criminal trying to be a nit, intrudes into the anxiety-ridden world of Harry. In fact, Malamud in The Tenants presents a confrontation between a black and a white to dramatise the rise of black radicalism in the contemporary American society The tense relationship between the blacks and the whites has been depicted through the conflict between Willie and Harry Willie does not tolerate Harry's genuine criticism to his novel which he is writing at present. Although Harry a surprised by Willie's revelation that he considers that autobiography is purely fictional. He insists that book should be better as art. There's a flawed quality, what you call blurred, that gives the shifting effect that brothers You.

Harry says to Willie that he can understand the grief of the blacks by putting himself in their place he know how they feel, he put himself in their place. In cold and haughty anger Willie replies. No one can put himself in his place. This is a black book they talking about that you do not understand at all. White fiction aint the same as black It can not be He also ponts out that black experience cannot become true literature just by writing down Willie, who is prejudiced against the whites, fails to accept Harry's heism in right spirit He considers Harry a white man unfit to judge the Hack experience. "Black aint white and never can be. It is once and only for black. It aintversal if that's what you are hintin up to What I feel you feel different Tu cannot write about black because you do not have the least idea what we are or how we feel. Our feeling chemistry is different than yours Dig that? It has to be so". (Malamud 74-75)

Willie's book is Willie's human history from "Down south Boy" to "Black writer, via progression "Up south", "Harlem Nights", "Prison Education". The book was mainly naturalistic confession Willie's adventures simply narrated, he grows up in redneck Mississippi in pure black poverty. He knocked around by kith and in more than whites, but it seems to him his first major insight into his life is how much he hates them for maiming the blacks who maim him, in particular his miserable meagre mother and white- kissing stepfather Willie as man is more revolutionarily moved by the offering of his people than as novelist He continues his argument, "I am written the soul of black people crying out we are still slaves in this fuck in country and we ain't gonna stay slaves any longer. How can you understand it, Lesser, if your brain is white".(Malamud) For Willie, all concerns of literature are -theme, technique, art, tantamount to black experience and nothing else.

Willie's hatred against the whites is based upon his suffering as a boy in white racist society. Willie went from Georgia to Harlem with his mother and small sister when he was sixteen. He says that he spends the most of his days cleaning out white shitstalls for the Ford Company. He suffers from terrified awareness of something frightening in his nature. The panic of his quilt causes him to split. As a boy of thirteen, Willie was so much tortured by a white man that he remembers it ever now: "My hate of him was so pure it warmed me the rest of my life."(Malamud - 61) He has been tried, convicted and sent to Jail for five years. His new discovery is How low your misery can go. All day he walks on himself and the shit sticks to his shoes. Willie expresses his intense hatred of whites in his statement to Lesser "The point I am making. Lesser, in case you not with it is I think this is the main way the blacks have to be ad along to dill whites, still those who are alive vomit with pain at the thought of what wrongs they have done us, and better not try to do any more".(Malamud - 61) Willie infers from the rejection of his book by Jewish publishers that they are afraid of what the book says.

Willie is writer of only black people. He writes about the real life of the blacks. He reads every customs and culture. He keeps his hatred for the whites He keeps it in his mind every minute of the

day but he does so in principle in his weird story titled "No Heart", an "unnamed black heart, The violence in Willie's story shows his "unspent rage". Willie's writing is to define black community, a kind of a means to gain power over the whites and overthrow racism and financial inequality. He says, "what can I say to man who's suffered so much personal pain, so much injustice, who clearly finds in his writing his hope and salvation, who defines himself through it? He comes in the end, as in the old slave narratives, to freedom, through his sense of writing as power...."(Malamud - 67) He believes that "he can, in writing, help his people overthrow racism and economic inequality That this freedom will help earn theirs The Life he writes, whatever he calls it, moves, pains, inspires, even though it's been written before".(Malamud - 67)

Willie changes his name to Bill Spear. He has changed his ideas about form and pattern of writing after reading Lesser's novel. It also is a means to enrich his black experience in form.

"Art is OK. when it helps you to say what you got to, but I do not want to turn into a belfass white writer or as an ass-kissing Negro who imitates of ays because he is ashamed or afraid to be black. I write black because I am black and what I got to say means something different to black people than it does to whites, if you dig We think different than you do, Lesser He do and we are, and we write different." (Malamud - 66)

In his opinion, black fiction is different from white fiction, black people have different experience. Subject matter and form of fiction are inseparable from experience. He makes it clear in his speech with Lesser: "If some white prick tears a piece of black skin off your ass every day. when somebody says, "sit down", its gonna mean two different things to me and you, and that's why black fiction has got to be different than white. The words make it different because the experience does. You know that, man Also we are the rising people of the future, and if the whites try to hold us down it ain't so secret we might have to cut your throats."(Malamud - 82)

Willie wants to write all his black experience in his writing. If he feels any need of learning from a

white man, he would take it as a help to write his black experience: "You have had your day and we are gonna have ours. That's what I have gone to write about but I want to write it in black art, in the best way I can. In other works, Lesser, I want to know because I am black And if that means I have to learn something from white to do it better as a black man, then I will for that purpose only".(Malamud - 82)

As a writer, blackness is always central to Willie. He is a black man to the core and wants to change his black experience into fiction. But Malamud holds the view that "art tends towards morality: It values life, even when it doesn't it tends to... Art, in essence, celebrates life and gives us our measure".(Daniel - 51)

Willie struggles hard with the grammar book given by Lesser, discusses grammar with him, and tries to memorize meanings in vain He explains, he has bilched up and whammies all his pleasure that he used to enjoy out fmy writing. He, however, makes a little improvement in his writing. The first chapter of his new novel titled Book of Black is praised by Lesser as well formed and written The subject of the new novel is also the hatred of a black child for a white man. A lost black child is brought back to his mother by a black cop. The child is full of contempt for his poor mother and indecent behaviour of the with man The poverty of the black mother forced her to have illicit relations with the white man for money. The white man used to take out his prick to scare the child. The child expresses his hatred for the white man his deliberately affected "migger talk".

Willie's hatred for the white people has been expressed through his behaviour with Irene and Lesser Willie beats Irene for having sex with Lesser, a white man, and speaks abusive language against her. She tells us, "He called me filthy names. He said he could not stand the sight of me. That I had hurt his blackness" (Malamud - 171) Willie does not like things taken out of his hands by the whites: He does not relish unfavourable criticism about his novel by Lesser He grows wild at Lesser's criticism and expresses his anger at Lesser.

He then cries, what a hypocrite shitass he is to ask a Jew of ay of advice how to impress my soul

work. Just in read in it you spoil what it says, he ought to be hung on a hook till some kind brother cut off my white balls. Even in his love poem written for Irene, Willie expresses his hatred for the whites. Willie is by nature an activist and revolutionary writer He mentions Heading some of the revolutionary authors because he wants to know moreabout revolutionary scenes. He reads Marx, Lenin, Trotsky Mao He reads vity book he can about black people, books on Africa, slavery, black coms and culture He keeps notes in a loose-leaf notebook, but when he mes to write about black people, usually the material comes out, and he comes to a broader understanding of his people's history and the injustices of their suffering. He always thinks of helping black people. As we have already discussed earlier, his writing is also to help his black community He decides to quit writing extend his helping hand to his black brethren.

"I am quitting my writing, the black said, looking up gently. It's no fault of you, Lesser, so do not worry yourself about it. I have decided its no for a man and rots your body bones. It eats my heart I know what I got to do so why do not I do it I got to move my broke ass to get to the true action I got to help my suffering black brothers." (Malamud - 166)

Lesser pleads that Art is action, do not give up, Bill, but Willie affiens, Action is his action. But Lesser's revelation at this point about his love for Irene, Willie's girl, adds fuel to fire Willie loses his temper and hits head against the wall violently When Lesser tries to stop Willie, he enters in headlong savage fight with Lesser Willie who at one time saved Lesser's de from the attack of Sam and other blacks is now full of hatred for him trick me. Jewprick, got me within so deep you stole my bitch away Lesser tries to pacify and convince Willie that their enmity with each other would be harmful for each other: Willie is least convinced by the statement of Lesser and revengefully retorts "What's wrong is I forgot to go on hating you, white shit Now I hate you till your death". (Malamud - 152)

Outraged Willie goes to Irene and leaves her with a black eye and swollen mouth. He later steals

and burns Lesser's manuscript in revenge for stealing Irene from her and depriving him of normal sex life. He writes the charcoal message on the wall; "Revolution is the Real Art. None of that form shit I am the right form." Both Lesser and Willie feel mutually repelled when they meet on one winter's night. They, however, forgive each other for "burning my book" and for "stealing my bitch." Willie is not free from his hatred for the whites all the same.

With a view to making friendship with Willie, when Lesser says, for God's sake, Willie, they are writers. Let them talk to one another like men who write. Willie refuses to conciliate: he did a different drum that other does, Lesser None of that fuck form for me You heart my inside confidence with that word. Account of you, I can not write the way I used to any more one night Willie and Lesser meet in a grass clearing in a bush, not seeing each other but sensing other's presence. Willie calls Lesser "Bloodsuckin Jew Niggerhater", and Lesser calls him "Anti-Semitic Age" This tragic drama of their hatred reaches its climax when they meet in dark hallway and take each other's life.

Reference

Stern, Daniel. *The Paris Review* 16, No. 61. 1975.

Field and Field, *Barnard Malamud, A Collection Essays*. 1975.

Stern, Daniel. *The Paris Review*, 16, No. 61. 1975.

Shenker, Esrael. *The New York Times Book Review*, 30/08/1971.

Malamud, Barnard. *The Tenants*. 1971.

Stern, Daniel. *The Parish Review*. No. 61.1975.

Malamud, Barnard. *The Tenants*. 1971.