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**CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY OF MALAMUD VIS-A-VIS HIS
CONTEMPORARIES : A CRITIQUE OF THE AUTHOR ON ETHNIC LINES**

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ABSTRACT

Any discussion of Malamud is incomplete without talking about Jews and his Jewishness. Since Malamud has Jewish roots and he, in a way, is not completely an insider of America (born to Jewish immigrant parents from Russia), he has made himself the self-proclaimed son of the assimilated Jews in the countries which have adopted them. But here it must be clarified that although Malamud has Jewish background and he frequently writes about Jewish characters, yet he is not a religious writer who is preaching the Law and dictum of religion. Malamud is basically a secular Jew whose ethnicity is not religious; rather it takes just the moral and humane hue.

In fact, Malamud has written about the aspirations and struggles of a particular ethnic sub-group and Judaism or Jewish rituals per se have nothing to do with Malamud's writings. According to Malamud's own testimony, he read the Jewish religious thought only as an adult. Moreover, Malamud is also criticized by Jewish organizations and Jewish publications for not putting the Jewish content in his writings.

Key Words: Ethnicity, Jewishness, Gentile, Christianity,

Introduction

The impact of Jewishness on American culture and Gentileness was spreading in the mid of 20th century which gets an opinionated expression in *Ramparts*, a religious journal, by its editor, Leslie Fielder: "We live at a moment when everywhere in the realm of prose Jewish writers have discovered their Jewishness to be an eminently marketable commodity, their much-vaunted alienation to be their passport into the heart of Gentile American culture." (Warshba, p.M2)

What can be inferred from the quote is that Jewish writers have used Jewishness to enter into

the realm of literature and create a kind of niche for this new genre of writing. The same observation comes from a critic like Ihab Hassan. According to him, "The urban Jewish writer ...has emerged from the tragic underground of culture as a true spokesman of mid-century America. (Ihab Hassan, p.161)

Can Malamud be bracketed with other Jewish writers of repute, mainly--Saul Bellow and Philip Roth and does he represent the literary trend called American Jewish writing or has ethnicity been the major theme with Malamud?

Discussion

The issues have perplexed the minds of readers and critics for years together. Now coming to the first question, it is very interesting to know that all these writers have rejected the label of Jewish American writer but still are termed as the same. At one place Roth says: "I did not want to, did not intend to, and was not able to speak for American Jews...I spoke to them, and I hope to others as well." (Philip Roth, p.168)

Roth is, at times, mincing words in accepting the title as he says: "...It can safely be said that imagining what Jews are and ought to be has been anything but the marginal activity of a few American novelists."

Then he writes a little later:

If he (the novelist) can, with conviction, assent to that appellation (i.e., Jew) and imagine himself to be such a thing at all. And that is not easy to accomplish. For as the most serious of American Jewish novelists seem to indicate – in those choices of subject and emphasis that lead to the heart of what a writer thinks- there are passionate ways of living that not even imaginations as unfettered as theirs are able to attribute to a character forthrightly presented as a Jew. (Ibid. p.245-246)

The same is the case with Saul Bellow as he also refutes the label and proclaims that his books should not be read as Jewish literature:

"They're books and I resent sometimes being thrust into a bag...The Jewish writers are not so often-- in their own minds-- primarily Jewish writers; they are writers who happen to have this particular kind of experience, that is to say, the power of American society to absorb people is so enormous that you don't have time really to think of yourself in that (Jewish) way." (The Jerusalem Post, p.12)

At another point, Bellow came clean on the subject as he did not feel 'fully awake' to the needs of Israel and his heritage. (The Jerusalem Post, p.4)

Now coming to our own Malamud, is he more an American or a marginal Jew, has been the perpetual question with the critics of Malamud. Critics are a bit bewildered about Malamud's consideration about his subjects and the Jewish element in his writings:

"On the one hand he conveys distaste for self-pitying Jewish exploiters ...on the other he exalts Jewish spirituality while feeling doubts about certain manifestations of it. The Dostoevskian symbolic doubles in his fiction can be seen as representing two contradictory inner voices. The relentless pursuit of one figure by another would imply the secret urge to escape and remain uninvolved as well as the call (through a sense of guilt) to the conscious and willed acceptance of responsibility." (Renee Winegarten, p. 76)

When in an interview Malamud was asked the question about Jewishness in his writings, he also, like his fellow writers, rejected the label but at the same time gave a different explanation of a Jew: "What has made the Jewish writer so conspicuous in American literature is their sensitivity to the value of man...Personally I handle the Jew as universal man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it. The Jewish drama is a ...symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible terms. Jewish history is God's gift of drama." (The Jerusalem Post, p.13)

Malamud also explained at times that Jewishness was important to him but at the same time he would not consider of himself only as a Jewish writer. In another interview, when Leslie Field asked Malamud about the term Jewish American writer, Malamud replied:

"Ans.: The term is schematic and reductive. If the scholar needs the term he can have it, but it won't be doing him any good if he limits his interpretation of a writer to fit a label he applies. Bellow pokes fun at this sort of thing by calling "Bellow-Malamud-Roth" the Hart, Schaffner and Marx of Jewish literature."

Q.: "Would you not agree that your writing reveals a special sense of a people's destiny that more often than not cannot be fully grasped in all its nuances and vibrations by those who are not fully sensitized to that people or its destiny?..."

Ans.: "I'm sensitive to Jews and Jewish life but so far as literature is concerned I can't say that I approve of your thesis: that one has to be of a certain nationality or color to 'fully grasp' the 'nuances and vibrations' of its fiction. I write on the assumption that any bone sensitive to fiction can understand my work and feel it." (Leslie Field, pp.11-12)

In spite of all the rejections, critics are not going to be swayed away by the refuting words, but here the question arises how should Jewishness be defined? Whom do we call a Jew? Is it blood descent or religious observance or cultural heritage or just brute chance or being on a mission from God, being Chosen even?

To find an answer to all these questions, one needs to go into the background of Judaism and even of the author himself. Malamud's belief is that all men are Jews though they may not know it. His characters are both archetypal Jews and suffering humanity. Time and again, Malamud himself has tried to prove that he is writing not just about Jews as *Jews* but as the generalized form of mankind. Malamud's own background is also cited to connect it to the characters. Joel Salzberg is of the strong opinion that a Jew with a similar sociological milieu could present the real suffering Jews in his works:

"Malamud's fictional world was born out of the author's experiences with death, separation, poverty, loneliness and his unyielding struggle to become a writer. The early death of his mother, the loss of a brother, his relations with his father, the thin family life with a step-mother, to have just a few crucial events constitute Malamud's formative experiences which he refused to discuss in detail; they are the distilled human dynamics of his fiction, with their attendant urban, and sometimes

cosmic sense of gracious suffering." (Joel Salzberg, p. 15)

For Malamud's humanistic approach also the credit, to some extent, has been given to the bitter experiences of his early formative years:

"Malamud's writings reflect a humanistic trend that culminates in selflessness partly due to experiences of his formative years. He says of his parents, their world taught me their values... the welfare of human beings. What makes a man function as a man? Theirs was a person's centered world... when I think of my father I'm filled with a sense of sweet humanity." (Abramson Edward, p.1)

Abramson A. Edward continues with the thought that the impact of childhood social and cultural milieu was there and it became complementary in presenting the American Dream:

"There probably were at least some influences from this 'person created world' of his youth that made him feel that the American ideal of material achievement was inadequate, that it didn't create moral individuals... failure in the world in terms of acceptance and material success is seen as the pre-requisite for inner moral success..." (Ibid.)

Malamud himself had a very tough time in the early years, probably which makes him to "deprive his characters of physical comfort, emotional well-being, freedom or the achievement of their life's goals." (Ibid.)

Malamud's friend and critic, Garrison is of the view that Malamud's ethnic identity had an impact on his writings as he tries to justify his point by saying:

"Neither Bern nor Ann - born a Catholic - practiced religion by going to synagogue or church. Nor can I remember ever having discussed religion with Bern. For a while, their children -- like ours -- attended the Unitarian Fellowship. Regardless, he never forgot his heritage; being Jewish. This

identity was stone-strong and his writing reflects his outlook, which was more ingrained than merely trained. (Chester Garrison)

Malamud's Jews have a humanistic approach as a result of the holocaust past, which is an ingrained part of a Jew and makes them more acceptable universally. According to Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "Malamud best represents the phenomenon of the Jewish Movement; not only is he one of its founders and major practitioners, he is probably its best single exemplar. In Malamud's work we most clearly perceive just those characteristics which define the entire movement." (Sheldon Grebstein, p. 20)

Irving Howe considers Malamud "the most enigmatic, even mysterious of American Writers against 'the crumbling of Yiddish culture.'" (Irving Howe, p. 595)

Irving continues with the same stroke of his pen:

"In his best stories he writes as if, through miraculous salvage, the ethos of Yiddish has become an intimate possession... Malamud not only draws upon Jewish figures and themes, not only evokes traditional Jewish sentiments regarding humaneness and suffering, he also writes what can only be called the Yiddish story in English. Malamud can grind a character to earth; but in his best stories there is a hard and bitter kind of pity, a wry affection preferable to the wet gestures of love, which makes him seem a grandson – but a grandson without visible signs of descent- of the best Yiddish writers." (Ibid.p.596)

But Malamud's daughter, Janna wishes her father's works to be evaluated as pieces of art rather than finding the writer in his fictional creations. She writes that her father "wanted people to read his books, not about him." (Janna Malamud Smith, p.43)

She continues with her view-point that "failure in the world in terms of acceptance and material success is seen as the pre-requisite for inner moral success." (Ibid. p.43)

The general Jewish movement in America was the outcome of the dearth of other movements during the mid of the century. At the same time, the Nazi activities and Hiroshima were still fresh in the memory of people. Writing about the birth of the American Jewish movement, Sheldon Grebstein explains: "...The Jewish movement responded to an urgent cultural need...the Jewish writer was made the beneficiary of Hitler's death camps...from hatred, feared or ridiculed figure lurking on the fringes of the culture, he was transformed into the Man Who Suffered, Everyman." (Sheldon Grebstein, pp.18-19)

Grebstein looks basically for three points in Malamud's fiction to term him as a Jewish writer: 1) the theme of meaningful suffering; 2) the use of Jewish humor; 3) the use of a distinctive Jewish voice. (Ibid. p.19)

For Malamud, Jew is humanity, suffering for moral aspirations. Therefore, any sufferer longing for a life of betterment may be termed as a Jew. It seems that such idea of a Jew is the creation of Malamud's head. It is not borrowed from Hebrew or Yiddish literature, although the basic vague reference could have been taken from there. Jew is not a religious identity but a symbol for Malamud, as is retorted by Theodore:

"Malamud uses Jewishness as a type of metaphor for anyone's life-- both for the third dimension of anyone's life, the one of the spirit, and for a code of personal morality and salvation that is more psychological than religious. To the extent that the Jew and his problems become a way of envisaging the human condition, he becomes more symbol than fact-- that is, fashioned to the service of an abstraction." (Theodore Solotaroff, p.72)

The Jew of Malamud has come a long way from the Shakespearean Jew, who was malicious, unlawful, cunning and aggressive moneylender to a symbol of suffering humanity. Although in the present scenario, Jew is no longer an alienated figure and his 'country' has given him the space and identity but the Jewish writer is trying to present the past history of the race.

Of course, the situations have changed and the adopted countries have tried to mete out equal treatment to them and they have been accommodated as well, yet there is a difference between an insider and an outsider. It definitely lets the readers believe that 'adjustments', 'accommodations' and 'assimilation' acts cannot make them forget their past struggle or their present alienation which gets reflected in the Jewish literature. In the words of Lionel Trilling, "In its essence, literature is concerned with self, and the peculiar concern of the literature of the past two centuries has been with the self in its standing quarrel with culture." (Lionel Trilling, p. 56)

If it is said that the Jew today is not socially alienated, then maybe he is alienated unto himself. This is exactly what the Malamud Jew is doing throughout his life to find a kind of social connection and integration. While doing so, he unravels before us as a man who has roots in his history but is still looking around for fulfilment. He, knowingly or unknowingly, cannot locate his lost roots, cannot implant himself and flourish to his best. The trauma of implantation leads him to have quest for his lost roots.

Can one justify the material gain at the loss of one's self? Perhaps this is the pertinent question which made Malamud feel very sorrowful over the present lot of mankind, which got reflected in Malamud's acceptance speech at National Book Award for his collection of stories, *The Magic Barrel*, "I'm tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in his day...Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed by the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now; fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational. The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest." (Granville Hicks, p.32)

Malamud often said that the advent of World War II and the Holocaust made him sure that he had something to say as a writer. Until then, he said, he had not given much thought to what it meant to be Jewish, but the horror of the war -- as well as the fact that he married a gentile woman, Ann de Chiara in 1945 -- made him question his own identity as a Jew and compelled him to start reading

about Jewish tradition and history. He believed that not enough had been made of the tragedy of the destruction of six million Jews. Somebody had to cry -- even if it was twenty years later and even if it was a writer.

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