

**JEWISH SUFFERINGS IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S
THE FIXER AND MAN IN THE DRAWER****K.S. Khandare**

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ABSTRACT

It is found that exploitation of weaker section of society has been a universal phenomenon and hence it is reflected in literature of different ages. After having taken the detail survey of the Jewish-history of the world, it is easy to understand that exploitation of Jews appeared in different forms, right from jeering to the brutal killings. They were ill-treated in all walks of life i.e. social, economic, religious, academic and political. So to remain alive they went from one country to another and settled in the different parts of the world. But they were not safe. Particularly after the emergence of Hitler and his Nazism in Germany majority of the Jews were murdered. All these historical facts are vividly described by most of the Jewish-American poets, short story writers, dramatists and novelists in their writings. Bernard Malamud is one of those prominent writers of the Jewish fiction. He is the winner of several awards including Pulitzer Prize. Like other Jewish writers Malamud was greatly moved by the events of the exploitation of the Jews. He too portrayed the injustice done to them in his writings. In this article an attempt is made to study Barnard Malamud's novels.

Keywords: Jewish, exploitation, Malamud

It is found that exploitation of weaker section of society or minority group has been a universal phenomenon and hence it is reflected in literature of different ages. After having taken the survey of the Jewish-history of the world, it is easy to understand that exploitation of Jews appeared in different forms, right from jeering to the brutal killings. Throughout the centuries Jews maintained their religion and developed means of survival. Gradually Jews played an important role in urban settlement, and developed crafts and commerce and became financially strong wherever they lived. Hence Anti-Jewish feelings were externally and artificially stimulated by gentile individuals and classes to materialize their personal and institutional interest. Jews were ill-treated in all walks of life i.e. social, economic, religious, academic and political. They were prevented from owning land. They had to wear the distinctive clothes with a yellow sign. They had to live in ghettos in cities and shtetl in villages.

However after the arrival of Hitler in political scenario of Germany Jewish cultures, their customs, and their deep local roots were utterly destroyed by the Nazis during his rule. All the anti-Semitic groups supported Hitler's Nazism. In the beginning Nazism meant hatred and occasional beatings of Jews. But gradually terror and hatred became a way of

life. It stood for systematic tortures, exploitation and murders of Jewish people.

The Nazis opposed not only Jews but also Jewish ideas. They continued the war against human intellect. It was one of the important principles of the Nazis that all art, science and research must serve their purpose. Even Newspapers had been ruthlessly suppressed for the slightest difference of opinion or criticism. No news of the terror was allowed to be published and even a whisper of it was punished heavily¹. In this connection, Indian thinker and writer, Jawaharlal Nehru, commented that the attack on the Jews was a racial attack, something of the kind that used to occur in the middle ages². Almost all the fields such as education, the theatre, art, science everything was stamped by the Nazi³. All these historical facts are vividly described by most of the Jewish poets, short story writers, dramatists and novelists in their writings. One of the poets of that time W.H. Auden, in his poem Refugee Blues expresses his anguish at the plight of millions of Jews who were tortured by the Nazis and were rendered homeless after being driven out of Germany by Hitler. He speaks about their sufferings and sorrows and the world's apathy towards them in this poem.

A parallel situation is found in Longfellow's poem Jewish Cemetery. He describes how Jewish people were mercilessly treated by the Gentiles. They received nothing but hatred from Christians. Because of Christian hate they went in America. They were persecuted and treated mercilessly. Jews lived the life of anguish and humiliation wherever they went 'through the world' they were trampled and beaten by their racial enemy. They were forced to live in ghettos and Shtetl. In the school they were taught to endure the sufferings.

Along with Saul Bellow Bernard Malamud is an important group of Jewish novelists who flourished in the 1950's and beyond. Malamud is one of those prominent writers of the Jewish fiction who spoke and wrote about sufferings of Jews. He is the winner of several awards including Pulitzer Prize. Malamud has been called as the most solid, the most consistently fulfilled, and the most Jewish. In this context one of the critics Sheldon Norman Grebstein remarks that Malamud best represents the phenomenon of the Jewish movement. He is not only one of its founders and major practitioners, but also its best single exemplar⁴. Like other Jewish writers Malamud was greatly moved by the events of the exploitation of the Jews. Malamud himself has commented that somewhere along the line, what had happened in Nazi Germany began to be important to me⁵. One of his fictional characters Yakov becomes his mouthpiece and comments that being born a Jew means being vulnerable to history including to its worst errors. According to Renee Winegarten, "Much of Malamud's earlier fiction lays his personal experience of the depression during the inter-war years and the intractable fact of Nazi genocide. But now he tends to speak of social and racial injustice in a broader sense⁶."

While speaking about Malamud, Robert Alter states that Malamud is, to the best of my knowledge, the first important American writer to shape out of his early experiences in the immigrant milieu a whole distinctive style of imagination and to a lesser degree, a distinctive technique of fiction as well. He is

by no means a "folk" artist, but his ear for the rhythms of speech and the tonalities of implication, his eye for the shadings of attitude and feeling of Jewish folk culture, have helped to make the fictional world he has created uniquely his own⁷.

Malamud's major literary work includes novels and short stories. Magic Barrel (1958) is collection of short stories. His major novels include: The Natural (1952), The Assistant (1957), The Victim, The New Life, The Fixer (1966), The Tenants (1971), Dublin Lives (1979), God's Grace (1982), Man in the Drawer (1968). The Fixer is a parable history of the ritual murder of a Christian child. The novel also speaks about past history of Jews which is full of pains and agonies, burning and killing of Jews wherein he writes:

"Rich or poor, those of our brethren who can run out of here are running. Some who can't are already mourning. They sniff at the air and it stinks of pogrom". (TF- 270).

Yakov, a typical Malamud unfortunate protagonist, leaves the shtetl, shades off his Jewish identity and rises economically. But after very short time he is unjustly accused of ritual murder. His imprisonment and its accompanying torture, cruelty, and humiliation are the concrete examples of irrational anti-Semitism. And then he endorses revolution and political action. He says:

"One thing I've learned" he says, "there is no such thing as an apolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough. You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed" (TF 271).

Thus Malamud's immigrants, refugees, and survivors are examples of exploitation and commemoration of a vanished culture. In The Assistant (1957) and short story collection, The Magic Barrel, (1958) Malamud's Jews are "shown suffering, contending and failing⁸ ." The Victim is about human responsibilities and the conflict between Jew and gentile. In Malamud's novel Man in the Drawer (1968) the protagonist, an assimilated American-Jewish writer named Harvitz, goes for vacation in the Soviet Union. His first Moscow cabdriver Levitansky greets him and

identifies himself as a “marginalized Jew” of mixed parentage. His father is Jewish and his mother is Russian. He is Soviet writer forced to write for the drawer. Because of his themes and the identity of his characters, which are Jewish, his stories fail to pass the strict standards of official censorship. He muses, “I am master of the genre of silence” (MD 48). So, he hopes to publish his short stories abroad.

Therefore he asks the American writer to read his work and to tell honestly his opinion about it. The story is about an author whose stories are rejected by the publisher because he writes about Jews. In a fit of frustration he decides to burn his artwork in the kitchen sink. His frightened son asks:

“Papa, what are you burning in the sink?”

“I am burning my integrity... My talent. My heritage, replies the father (MD 95).

As an American Jew, Harvitz has no right to be indifferent and uninvolved. He is morally bound to register his protest when there is a danger that the Russian Jews of silence may become a lost tribe, when they are deprived of their fundamental rights and their talent, identity, and heritage. And so Livitansky appeals to Harvitz that “we are member of mankind, if I am drowning you must assist to save me” (MD 71). According to Charles Deemer “what distinguishes Malamud’s fiction is that characters are transformed, if not in their relationship to the world, then by our attitude toward them⁹.”

References

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