



THE DRAMATIC ART AND VISION OF BERNARD MALAMUD : A BRIEF ANALYSIS.

Dr. S. Chelliah

*Professor ,Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai India.*

An Abstract

This is an attempt to reveal how American Jewish literature has the expression of a cosmopolitan sensibility and the characteristic quality of a bungling hero as the inexpert handling of delicate matters and shows how Malamud's heroes suffer because of their incapacibilities to achieve their desired meaning in life. It also examines the way in which each of the bungling heroes as one facing a trial of conscience or a spiritual test and triumph only by accepting spiritual guidance.

“American – Jewish” Literature has the expression of a sensibility that is cosmopolitan and at the same time retains its Jewish-American identity. This sensibility can be called ‘Modern’ in that it deals with vital issues like victimization, rebellion and alienation. Response to these issues indicating the ‘modern sensibility’ may vary from person to person but it is this common sharing of the modern sensibility which holds the Jewish-American writers together. The wandering Jew of the American Jewish fiction not only indicates the Jewish plight but also that of the whole mankind. The Jew is in search of identity in the troubled world. James ‘Leopold Bloom’ can be cited as a good example for this ‘wandering concept’.

The Jewish-American writers in the thirties of this century like Henry Roth were theoretically committed to Marxian ideology in their creative writings. Then in the forties arose the ‘Jewish intellectuals’ who finally gave a stability to the amorphous situation. All such writers as Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Trilling, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Paul Goodman, Philip Roth and Isaac Rosenfield with their American Jewish experience illuminate in their own way the modern human predicament. Words like alienation, victimization, and marginality became popular definitions of the Jewish sensibility and the Jew became a symbol for something as “the universal estrangement of man”. In the Jewish – American fiction, a new trend of writing came into being, using SCHLEMIEL as the figure that most consistently represents the Jew to himself in modern times. The SCHLEMIEL or the habitual bungler is a person who is ‘struggling, striving, always enroute, but destined never to arrive’ (Hoyt 70) Leo Rosten gives six shades of meaning for the word SCHLEMIEL as 1. A foolish person, 2. A consistently unlucky person 3. A clumsy butter fingered person likely to drop things, 4. A pipe-squeak, insignificant or contemptible person. 5. A naïve, trusting, gullible customer and 6. Anyone who makes a foolish bargain or wagers a foolish bet” (P352). All these types can be found in Malamud’s novels. The Jewish folk-figure on which Malamud has modelled most of his protagonists “is the SCHLEMIEL, the well-meaning bungler, compounded with the SCHLIMAZEL the hapless soul who is invariably at the wrong end of the bungling” (Alter 95).

The SCHLEMIEL is both the object and impulse of all Malamud’s art Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth are the most important Jewish-American writers who are mainly preoccupied with the complex-fate of being a Jew in America. Malamud, along with Saul Bellow Philip Roth and a growing number of other Jewish writers, is drawing upon the resources of humour, comedy and wisdom that make up the modern Jewish personality in America. Like Roth and Bellow, Malamud draws upon Jewish manners for the scene, quality and style of his fiction. The characters of Malamud are tormented and they are fated often to despair, curse and submit. These SCHLEMIELS or bunglers have a specific propensity for making mistakes and they are not adept at handling of delicate matters.

The characteristic quality of a bungling hero is the inexpert handling of delicate matters rather than a clumsy behavior. Malamud’s heroes are all SCHLEMIELS and they carry with them the qualities of an ‘anti-hero’. The anti-hero is the man who is given the vocation of failure. In literature, ‘anti-hero’ is a figure bearing the same relation to the conventional novel. Beckett’s characters are in search of a meaning in life like the characters of Malamud. Malamud’s characters reach their goal at the end or atleast they know the meaning of life and art. But Beckett’s characters are doomed to failure because they are not sure of what they are searching for Malamud’s heroes suffer because of their incapacibilities to achieve their desired meaning. Beckett’s heroes suffer because of their physical degradation and Malamud’s heroes suffer, due to their moral degradation in the beginning. Malamud’s characters are metamorphosed into a matured and morally refined characters at the end.

All Malamud’s works represent a continuous flow of ideas in the same direction. In his very first novel **The Natural**, the protagonist Roy Hobbs is a gentile and an athlete who is crippled. His luck turns and he drags on as a SCHLEMIEL, haunted



by bed memories and evil women. The relationship between two men is the heart of **The Assistant**, the second novel of Malamud. They are the grocer and his assistant, the aggressor and the victim. Basically both are SCHLEMIELS. **The Tenants** highlights pure rage and a long-standing discrepancy between didactic lesson and deeper emotional ground rules. Like the other heroes of Malamud, who are in acute isolation, the hero Harry Lesser is in isolation and Malamud here in this novel explains mankind's divided self. William Dubin in **Dubin's Lives** has a good deal of Malamud in him. Though Dubin lives in the present, almost all his actions are filtered through what he knows of his past and the past of others. Dubin is another of Malamud's SCHLEMIELS who lives on the margins of either art or life.

Malamud's incomplete last novel is a tragic-comic narrative of a persecuted and doomed people, a tribe of Indians in America's north-west in the post civil war period. They place their hopes for justice in an itinerant peddler and occasional Carpenter named Yozip who resists the honor of chieftom but finds it thrust upon him anyway and becomes their chief under the name of yozip. Like yozip, who returns to his homeland, Fidelman of **Pictures of Fidelman** also returns to America, after his quest to find out the relationship between art and life in Italy. Levin of **A New Life** also returns to his place after his career in Cascadia college. Malamud's novels have a recurring pattern which reveals a profound consistency. All novels portray the main characters as sufferers who learn from their sufferings. The Jewish attitude to suffering is due to endurance and the tragic-comic acceptance of it. The SCHLEMIEL is a chronic sufferer but his sufferings are treated with the touch of a comic vein. The problem of suffering of SCHLEMIELS is not only due to their Jewish heritage but also due to the prevailing philosophical climate of the twentieth century-namely 'existentialism'. The existential view is found in representation of man as an anti-hero, instead of a hero and in concern with his struggles and mental torments. In fact, Malamud's characters are not beyond help but they do achieve themselves in the end. But Malamud's portrait of their struggles and their mental states of anxiety, restlessness and depression gets its relevance and oppositeness from the philosophical mood of the twentieth century. Malamud, no doubt, converts the defeat of the SCHLEMIELS in the battle of existence into a moral victory, in the life of 'bungling heroes'.

Malamud's most interesting treatment of the American in Europe is contained in **Pictures of Fidel Man** which is an episodic novel looking like an exhibition of pictures as the title suggests 'together forming a collage' (Shelton 76). The search for romance in life and art and the discoveries of reality particularly the reality of Fidelman's own true nature and condition are the themes of this novel. But Fidelman is an unsuccessful artist and the particular form of his search is determined by the bungling efforts to find his true vocation, his proper relation to the artistic life. As the epigraph from Yeats says,

"The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work....."

But Fidelman wants both, and his story consists of a series of picaresque adventures in Europe. In this novel, one can find the distracting presence of two Fidelmans. The first is the fussy Art historian of "The Last Mohican", the prisoner of love in "Still life", the prisoner in a brothel in "Naked Nude" and the destitute who stays alive by charging for piggyback rides puddles in "Glass Blower of Venice". The second Fidelman is the assured pimp with a sword in his cane in "A Pimp's Revenge" and the con man of art in "Pictures of the Artist". The gap between the soft passivity of the first Fidelman and the toughness of the second is too great. And Malamud tries to bridge the gap by Fidelman's comic relations to art. The toughness is the second Fidelman's shell that has developed to attain the self-realization as Jew, as lover and finally as artist.

Fidelman, 'a self confessed failure as a painter' (P4) has turned to art history and come to Italy to write a critical study of Giotto. But the present does not allow him to indulge in his sentimental vision of the past. At once he is pursued by Susskind a SHNORRER (artful beggar), who like Fidelman is a Jew in the Christian land. Susskind is a mysterious refugee from Israel, a wandering Jew and in carnation of the reality of poverty and want. In "The Last Mohican", Fidelman the pursuer is all the time pursuing Susskind. Fidelman is disturbed by the presence of Susskind, wherever he goes. Susskind wants money from Fidelman. For that, Fidelman says, "I have no funds to invest, Susskind". (P15) Then, Susskind teaches Fidelman about responsibilities. He says that Fidelman is responsible for him because he is a man and a Jew one day Susskind steals the brief-case containing the chapter on Giotto from Fidelman and disappears. Fidelman has to search for him for more than three months. Finally he finds Susskind, already in flight. Fidelman chased him "but in the middle of it, Fidelman, stout and short of breath, moved by all he had lately learned, had a triumphant insight" (P37). Ultimately Fidelman forgives him and asks Susskind to return But Susskind is still running. In "The Last Mohican" Fidelman talks to himself, finds himself in ludicrous situations, agonises over the discrepancy between his and always hopes for the best but expects the worst. Malamud in this episode brings humour from the contrast within Fidelman's farcical adventures and his sublime aspirations; between his SCHLEMIEL behavior and his artistic pretensions. Susskind plays the role of a



SCHNORRER, the representative figure of suffering humanity. It is made explicit in an exchange that continues to haunt Fidelman throughout the novel. Hershinow says “Susskind becomes for Fidelman a sort of dybbuk (demon) who inhabits his conscience, destroying his peace of mind” (P78)

The “Conscience figure” of Susskind forces Fidelman to confront himself, to discover his own identity. Like Yakou Bok (The Fixer), Fidelman has rejected his family and his past, in going to Italy. Like the innocent character of Henry James, Fidelman gets caught up in the glamour and romance of the Eternal city, but it is Susskind who stops the poor Jew from losing himself in the ecstasy of an over excited imagination. In the second episode, “Still Life”, Fidelman is found abandoning the role of critic and taking the prior attempt of painting. The investigation of art history has given him the ability to explore the creativity of painting in “Still like”. For Malamud, a comic misadventure is a sexual misadventure and an archetypal comic situation is an interrupted sex act. One can see this archetypal situation in **A New Life** and also in **Pictures of Fidelman**. In “Still Life”, the SCHLEMIEL is inflamed by his sex-desires but unable to satisfy them, indulges in acts like.

“Peeping through the keyhole, he saw them both in their overcoats, sitting on her bed, Augusto clasping her hands, whispering passionately, his nose empurpled with emotion, Annamaria’s whit face averted” (P47)

Fidelman’s affair with Annamaria, his landlady produces a kind of farcial humor by which Malamud inquires into the nature of the art and the artist. Annamaria is a delightful caricature of the self-absorbed, eccentric artistic life. Fidelman’s misguided notions about the artistic life. Fidelman’s misguided notions about the artistic life. Fidelman learns a little about art in “Still Life” but enjoys an expected sexual victory over his eccentric companion Annamaria. The Jewish Fidelman is represented from the beginning “by the emblematic star of David concealed in his pictures, possessing the Catholic Annamaria represented by an emblematic black cross always concealed in hers” (Christ of 82). And this image of merging crucifixion and fornication represents Fidelman’s discovery of guilt and of his own different nature. The story shows Malamud’s intrigues, mockeries and tonal variations. And also the story underlines the change that has brought about in the American exploration of Europe in the nature of the quest and of his quest. In presenting an exhibition of the artist as SCHLEMIEL, Malamud creates a humorous but probing exploration into the philosophy of art. In the third episode, Fidelman is found to be a pickpocket blackmailed by two hoodlums, Angelo and scarpio into slaving away at menial labour in a brothel. In the fourth episode, “A pimp’s Revenge”, one finds Fidelman in Florence where he sculpts Madonnas for tourists. Fidelman wants to paint a picture of “Mother and Son”, for which he gets inspiration from an old photograph of his mother and himself as a child. Ultimately he paints instead of “Mother and Son”, “Prostitute and Procurer”. Malamud in this story treats the theme of inseparability of the artist’s life and his work, a counterpart of the theme of inseparability of form and content –in relation to Fidelman’s inability to complete his masterpiece. Fidelman realizes that painting is threatening to his artistic ego; it might lead to a painful self-discovery.

The next episode “Pictures of the Artist” comes as a bridge between the soft passivity of the first Fidelman and the toughness of the second who is to come in the last episode. “Pictures of the Artist” is written, “in a fantastic style, and a sort of clowning, surrealistic, recasting of Giorgio vasari’s Lives of the Artists” (under450) In “Pictures of the Artist”, one might see many ennovative styles and literary ranges like rapid shift in setting, point of view and diction which produces a “neo-joycean comic-tragic, surrealistic, stream of consciousness, visionary sequence” (Grebstein 43)
For instance:

“Oil on wood. Bottle funkng guitar? Bull impaled one Pole? One-eyed carp stuffed in staring green bottle? Clown spooning dog dung out of sawdust? Staircase ascending a nude..... Boy pissing on old man’s shoe? The blue disease? Balding woman dyeing her hair? Buggers of clais? Blood oozing from ceiling on foggy nights?” (PF 167).

This disconnected, distorted allusions to master-pieces of modern art, effectively express Fidelman’s moral descent into the nightmare world of the artist’s hell. In the final episode namely “Glass Blower of Venice”, Fidelman is rehabilitated. He is found recovered and resurrected but reduced to humble service as a kind of St. Christopher carrying passengers piggy-back through the flooded squares of venice. This useful duty initiates his incorporation into the human community. The subject of Pictures of Fidelman is ‘art’. Through his sufferings, Fidelman learns art; Malamud himself has stated that his goal was to have his comic hero “find himself both in art and self-knowledge” (Hassan 5).

Fidelman’s self-discovery begins in the first story but is not completed. As his comic adventures continue, Fidelman is stripped off his superficial identity and a new dimension of identity as craftsman and lover is slowly discovered. In the find



episode, the acceptance of Fidelman's hidden-self requires an expression of love, mercy, charity or forgiveness to confirm his faith in himself and humanity. As he completes his journey of moral self-discovery, the sometime art critic, fool, pimp and judas accepts his past failures in life and art by loving all mankind. By presenting the artist as SCHLEMIEL character whose comic misadventures, internal struggles and moral compromises, Malamud has proved himself to be an excellent artist in a new perspective. In a sense, Malamud's purpose is to glorify art by ridiculing its excesses, No doubt, **Pictures of Fidelman** is a good portrait of the American SCHLEMIEL specially as 'artist'. Here Fidelman has discovered himself as individual, not as American or democrat or natural nobleman, "nor is the distinguished by moral superiority as the American heroes and heroines in James and Howell" (P88), Fidelman meet his European counterparts in their own land. He picks pockets, makes love to bony chambermaids, pimps for his young whore, cuckholds Beppo and then becomes his lover. He sees the ways of this world in his own way on the whole, this novel can be perceived as a BILDUNGSR OMAN, the progress of Fidelman as an artist.

To conclude, Malamud writes about bungling heroes in almost all his novels. For him, SCHLEMIEL is the proper figure to translate his theme into action. The SCHLEMIEL heroes are found in all his novels. His SCHLEMIEL figure represents the Jews altogether and this in turn represents the twentieth century man who is confronted by the same problems of the SCHLEMIEL. With the portrayal of these characters like Fidelman and Sam Levin in the form of man, there is the God-given fire of decency and determination that enables him to overcome everything arranged against him. Commenting of the ideal of Malamud, Charles Alva Hoyt says,

"This is the oldest and finest romanticism of all, that of plato and his predecessors, who refused to estimate man's worth by an objective reckoning of things. It is in that tradition, and for that ideal, Malamud stands" (P65).

Each of the bungling heroes of malamud's novels faces a trial of conscience or a spiritual test and triumphs only by accepting spiritual guidance or by listening to his own troubled conscience, an acceptance accompanied by an expression of mercy, love, charity or forgiveness. In a nutshell, it may be said that Malamud's heroes evolve morally, growing in ethical depth through various kinds of suffering, intellectual as well as physical and they suffer in order to explore and express the sheer terror of existence in the twentieth century.

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