

The Theme of Socio- Cultural Redemption in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' And Bernard Malamud's 'The Fixer'

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Abstract: *A comparative study of Bernard Malamud and Bharati Mukherjee is taken up for analysis. The striking similarity between Malamud and Mukherjee on various issues has given me a platform to compare their works for this paper. Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' and Malamud's 'The Fixer' form the basis for this study. In Mukherjee's 'Jasmine', the plot follows the titular character in the process of becoming an empowered individual more than that of becoming an American. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Malamud's characters too venture this inner journey, to find their true identity in their struggle to alienate themselves from the roots and trying to identify themselves in the alien soil, which is worth making. The alienated self, cut off from society and even from itself are nowhere more poignantly portrayed than in Malamud's 'The Fixer'.*

Key words: *faith, identity, journey, murder, struggle,*

I. Introduction

Comparative Literature is the discipline of studying literature internationally – across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across disciplines, across boundaries between literatures and the other arts. Seen in this light, a comparative study of Bernard Malamud, son of Russian Jewish immigrants, born and brought up in America and Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American writer is taken up for the present study. The striking similarity between Malamud and Mukherjee on various issues like immigrant sensibility, search for identity, confrontation between values, trying to establish ones individual identity in an alien culture has given me a platform to compare their works for this paper. Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' and Malamud's 'The Fixer' form the basis for this study. Mukherjee seems to experiment with a technique called 'Maximalism', which provides enough overlapping elements to create a hybrid space, a "borderland" for immigrants. Her "New America", as opposed to one comprised of mostly European immigrants, is portrayed in 'Jasmine'. Characters in her world have all shed their past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come to a foreign land and begin again. They have lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime- village-born, colonized, traditionally groomed, and educated. The same elements are observed in Malamud's fiction too but handled with a malamudian touch.

In Mukherjee's 'Jasmine', the plot follows the titular character in the process of becoming an empowered individual more than that of becoming an American. The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation makes 'Jasmine' a quest for identity in an alien land. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel, undergoes several transformations during her journey of life in America, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This journey becomes a tale of moral courage, a search for self-awareness and self-assertion. Malamud's characters too venture this inner journey, to find their true identity in their struggle to alienate themselves from the roots and trying to identify themselves in the alien soil, which is worth making. Their resultant mindscape has a plethora of denials, pains, pathos and pangs of sufferings.

The alienated self, cut off from society and even from itself are nowhere more poignantly portrayed than in Malamud's 'The Fixer'. Malamud's paradoxical philosophy of ultimate internal freedom being achieved only through some kind of bondage is seen when the protagonist, Yakov Bok, is imprisoned not only physically but also morally and emotionally. In fact, most of the action takes place while Bok is imprisoned for a heinous crime that he did not commit. Bok's memory of his relative "freedom" before his incarceration is acute in the prison further complicating his immobile and intensely frustrating condition. The story shows Bok leaving his shtetl heading towards a better life in Kiev. But he is accused of a ritual murder of a Christian child at a time when Tsar needs a scapegoat. He is a Jew. Being a Jew is difficult in Pre-Revolutionary Russia. There is a widespread distrust and hatred of Jews and it is easy to shift the blame on them. As the story comes to an end and as we review the history of that period, we see that Yakov Bok is playing a part in fixing the political

situation. Not only is he a Fixer, or repairman, in the sense that he repairs broken items, he is, in a larger sense by abiding by his Jewish roots of clean consciousness and not yielding to pressures of the alien beliefs and customs, helping to repair what is wrong in Russia. The brief outline of both the stories leaves us with some pertinent questions to answer:

- (i) How do the protagonists of the select stories transform, how do they grow as human beings when Fate, Circumstances or History shapes the individual, defining the nature of inward perception and controlling the external circumstances?
- (ii) How do their social or cultural values redeem them in the process of their outer journey in life and in the inner journey of psychological convictions?

The appreciation and analysis of these stories help me arrive at a hypothesis that social norms or culture has sent in deep roots in one's racial memories and they serve the characters in good stead when confronted with life-or-death predicaments in their respective worlds.

Picking up the threads of stories in the select novels help me test this hypothesis. Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist in the novel, *Jasmine*, is Jyoti. She was born in a traditional Punjabi family hailing from a picturesque hamlet, Hasanpur in Punjab. Her birth indicated a significant event in History. She was born "eighteen years after the Partition Riots". (44) She was married in her teens to Prakash, an ambitious bright young man. As Fate would have it, she was widowed within two years when her husband fell a helpless prey to the terrorist gang, Khalsa Lions' bullets. She cherished great memories of her husband as he broke down the timid shell of rural Jyoti who inhabited Hasanpur and gave her a new sheen of a city woman christening her new identity as 'Jasmine'. Heart-broken and unwilling to be subdued by Fate, she set out, in search of the new identity Prakash has given her to the U.S.A, the land of her husband's dream and the land of her new opportunities. It was the land where her husband's teacher, Professor Vadehra had migrated.

Seeking her brother's help, she secured forged documents and ventured into the uncharted world of the new world- the U.S.A. A series of traumatic experience chased her. Her forged documents could only fetch her the option to travel with underworld travelling companions, raped by a scarred stranger in an unknown motel. Young, attractive and unescorted young lady in her bloom of youth was at last defiled by Half-Face, the captain of the trawler in which she crossed over to Florida. Outrageous and Kali-like, she slit the throat of the rapist and avenged the heinous crime meted out to her. A good Lutheran, Mrs. Gordon helped her reach Professor Vadehra. There she accidentally discovered the truth about Vadehra. He was not a professor by profession but lived there under the false name of David O' Hara, who in reality was an importer and trader of human hair. When his false exterior crumbled like a pack of cards before a naïve girl, he felt distressed and offered to procure her a green card as a price for keeping his secret.

Through her Lutheran benefactress, she assumed the role of a care-giver under a new identity, Jase for Wylie and Taylor and their little girl, Duff. There Jase indulged in an alluring interlude with Taylor when Wylie fell out of love with her husband. But she fled the Wylies in grave fear on sighting her husband's assassins. The transformation of Jyoti had come a half circle: "Jyoti was now a sati-goddess. Jasmine lived for the Future, and Jase lived for today. For every Jasmine, the reliable care-giver, there is a Jase, the prowling adventurer." (176) From the Wylie couple she then moved on to Iowa, where she was a live-in-companion to Bud Ripplemeyer, a humble town banker. Jane's foreignness captivated and drugged his senses and he never indulged in her past as he was scary of her past. Her foreignness was like a dark fantasy and an inscrutable mystery.

In the process of her assimilation and the resultant transformation, Jane was in the grip of an intense longing to belong to the land of her dreams but she was flabbergasted by the American experience:

This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing...
There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake one self.
We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images
Of dreams.

In her effort to belong, she identifies herself closely with Bud's adopted son, "Du" a Vietnamese because he was an immigrant like her. Both had a close brush with death and had a bone-rattling roller-coaster ride through time tunnels encountered the seamy side of life and survived their worst fate. Both had an insatiable thirst to become American trying to erase the nightmarish past. But the "America" of her dreams had a lot of disillusion in store for her- to name a few, the kind Quaker lady in Florida, who gave her a decent abode being tried by the American Judiciary, the classy New York streets being infested with beggars, a migrant doctor earning his livelihood as taxi driver and such scenes disgusted her many a time.

The climax sees Jane being tossed between her duty towards the cripple, Bud and her love for Taylor. She finally discarded all her guilt and nightmares and walks out of the door with her wants and her hope taking an upper hand of her. Mukherjee's heroine, Jasmine handled the cultural confluence with dignity and metamorphoses the American experience as one of "fusion" and immigration a part of "two-way process" in which the natives and the immigrants interchange and merge.

The paper further proceeds to study the theme and dominant issues related to immigrant minority in Tzarist Russia in Bernard Malamud's "The Fixer" (1966). It is considered one of Malamud's most powerful works. The winner of both the Pulitzer Prize for literature and the National Book Award, the narrative is derived from the historical account of Mendel Beiliss, a Russian Jew who was accused of murdering a Christian child. Drawing upon the Eastern European Jewish mysticism, *The Fixer* turns this terrifying saga of torture and humiliation into a parable of human triumph. *The Fixer* was not simply a recast of Mendel Beiliss' case, it was much more than that. In it, Malamud has imbibed the spirit of silent suffering of the Jewish immigrant minority in Tzarist Russia as retold by his Jewish Russian immigrant parents and partly from his knowledge of the fate of Jews in Hitler's Germany.

The author, through the silent sufferings of Yakov Bok, extols the Jewish and also the basic human virtue Love and how it brings redemption to Bok in a multiple situation where the Tzar feigned a host of false accusations and prepared a lengthy report to tighten the noose around Bok. Simply for the love of Jewish Tradition he wanted to survive though he was tormented often by thoughts of suicide in the prison with a very bleak scope for a fair trial. The character Bok wrestled with his Jewishness and ultimately defied his fate by acclimatizing to the pluralistic society by his steely grit and determination. Iska Alter, along with a host of other critics, opines that "the predominant theme in Malamud's work is a continuing affirmation of man's capacity to mature, to accept responsibility, and to create through experience a moral structure within which to function." But what happens when man's personal emancipation faces a threat on confronting the darkest phase of history? It is here that "The Fixer" offers a different response to man's involvement in History. Malamud's absorbing imagination sanctifies such historical events (the dark chronicles) and transmutes personal suffering and historical catastrophe from negative conditions to positive spiritual content.

Yakov Bok is the main character. He struggles from the beginning to the end of the story. He leaves the shtetl and heads toward a better life in Kiev. But contrary to expectations, he finds it really tough. He is accused of a ritual murder of a Christian child at a time when the Tzar is in need of a scapegoat. Though he is an amicable person, his fine bearing of character does him no good. He is a Jew and being born a Jew is a curse in pre-Revolutionary Russia. The widespread distrust and hatred of Jews has made them an easy ploy for any crime of the time and are subject to untold miseries in prison for an infinite period of time. A heinous crime was meted out to Bok when he was forced by the Tzarist regime to bear the cross of suffering for the murder of Zhenia Golov. He was imprisoned for no crime of his. The writer makes us see Bok imprisoned not only physically but also morally and emotionally. Though there is a dearth of physical action in the novel, it is compensated by an intense psychological action where we see Bok in an internal conflict trying to balance his cultural milieu with the existing historical forces that try to wipe anything Jewish. The paradox that heightens Bok's physical imprisonment and his relatively internal freedom that refuses defiantly to accept a crime that he has not committed enhances his heroic dimensions.

Bok's desire and decision to live in a world other than the existing traumatic world of punishment serves a purpose technically- where the author blends fantasy and surrealism to the reading delight of his admirers. This sway from one world to the other is further embellished when his estrangement from the society becomes more pronounced. The world of fantasy is not only confined to Bok but also to Bok's prosecutors, who lay a death trap for Bok by shamelessly hurling gory lies at Bok in a desperate attempt to ensnare the helpless victim and crush him to death mercilessly. Blowing the truth of Bok's innocence out of proportion, they try to extinguish his struggle for survival. Marfa Golov, mother of the murdered boy in connivance with her lover, the actual murderer with the backup of the cunning government officials conspire to strangle Bok by documenting mad accusations at Bok in their letter to the corrupt officials. Thus, the whole milieu which is trying to defeat Bok is steeped in phantasmagoria. In the meanwhile, Bok himself worsens his situation by feverishly concocting moral and psychological torments. Here, Malamud's skill as a seasoned writer takes an upper hand in his deft employment of surrealism to delineate his delirium, his sojourn in a realm of waking and sleeping.

The effective use of dream motif to define Bok's oppressors and their indulgence in violent and blood-curdling murders while the pale figure of the Tzar supervises the bloody prison rituals. The falsity is further exaggerated by the officials who give a notorious twist to the murder of the Christian boy by assigning a false motive quoting Bok's Jewish roots- a blood ritual where the body is drained of its blood necessary for the baking of Passover matzos and cakes. The equally quick shift from the phantasmagoric world of dreams to the equally phantasmagoric world of reality of prison, the prison guards and the deputy warden highlights Malamud's subtle blend of fantasy and reality. His competent use of Bok's hallucinations to portray the intensely chaotic world into which he has been plunged adds another feather in his cap. Thus through dreams Bok's consciousness discovers the truth which the reality confuses. As Aravindh Sant opines, "The subconscious discovers truths that the waking self is too confused to comprehend." Yakov's initial guilt of refusing the burden of his Jewish heritage and his ultimate endurance because of his acceptance of responsibility of Jewish identity serves as a contrasting mechanism to show how a Malamudian hero grows in stature by

relinquishing personal advancement in lieu of spiritual growth. Bok's transformation is complete when he recognizes that history is an exemplary moral process rather than a compendium of irrational acts. The afflictions and personal disasters that Bok encounters in his life are a series of redemptive measures intended by God to sketch the Jews as moral exemplars and to be civilization's scapegoats.

II. Conclusion

Thus Malamud shows very powerfully that the "new" Bok who has emerged after the alchemy of suffering has come a full circle by growing in his heroic dimensions and is able to cope with the disorder around him, and who through his suffering can redeem himself and his race. Both the authors selected for the present study have helped me confirm the hypothesis that the social milieu and culture of their birth have an unquestionable say in redeeming the individuals concerned and turning their saga of torture and humiliation into a parable of human triumph.

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