

# Modern odyssey of suffering: A thematic study of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*

Sahil Bhagat

Post-Graduate in English Literature

Jammu University

**Abstract:** Each individual is inflicted by suffering in this chaotic world. All are its victims irrespective of its degree from one man to another. One's life cannot be sailed normally. A man can achieve moral growth by redeeming himself through his sufferings because he accepts everything as a part of his life. Moreover, his quest for a successful life sometimes fails and he finally achieves a moral self-realization for a new meaningful life through his past experiences. The present aim of this paper is to trace the journey of sufferings of the protagonist of *The Natural* written by Bernard Malamud.

**Keywords:** nihilism, suffering, regeneration, self-knowledge.

**Introduction:** In the world of nihilism, one can feel alienated and can lower oneself into nothingness. This loss of faith in the spiritual self and a sense of doubt and desperation turn out to be a struggling life in this chaotic world. But man can achieve moral growth by redeeming himself through his sufferings. Still the ultimate achievement is always ambiguous. "A man is always changing and the changed part of his is all important. I refer to the psyche, the spirit, the mind, the emotions" (Handy 77). Human suffering is an enduring theme in every genre of literature. From the classics to the contemporary novels, every literary text is concerned with portraying the torments and sufferings of a human to which he may be subjected. Homer chronicles the trials of his hero in *The Odyssey*; William Shakespeare portrays the sufferings and pains of his protagonist in *King Lear*; Jane Austen reveals the distress of a woman struggling in *Emma*; Arthur Miller chronicles the aches and pains of an ordinary man in *Death of a Salesman*; Sylvia Plath exposes the sorrows and mental breakdown of a young woman in *The Bell Jar* and recent Nobel laureate JM Coetzee highlights the sufferings and exploitations of the oppressed in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. So there is hardly any work in literature that does not deal with suffering in one way or the other. A modern man quests for a more

successful and prosperous life and its failure but beneath this, there lies the moral growth of the protagonist for a new meaningful life through his past experiences.

**Discussion:** The post-war society is characterized by nihilism and cynicism. Bernard Malamud, an American writer, emerged as an optimist in this pessimistic era. Most of his works deal with the theme of pain and suffering and the awareness about it results from the past experiences. His first published novel *The Natural* traces the rise and fall of a naturally gifted baseball player from America. The very focus of the writer is the painful growth of the protagonist from immaturity to maturity. Although he rises to a height of greatness and splendor, his weakness and the society's corruption falls him back to a meaningless life. In many ways, future concerns of the protagonist are foremost portended in the novel fighting for moral predicaments. He finds it difficult to act according to what is reality and finally questions the presence of his existence. Like Ellison's *Invisible man*, the protagonist aspires to be on the top, to achieve the American Dream of success but he becomes invisible when he faces the society and its exploitation towards his people.

Early in the novel, Roy Hobbs, the protagonist is on the way to Chicago in quest of better possibilities in journey of a new life. His career in baseball which he desires to “hang on forever” (Malamud 4). He thinks that he is going to do something very big and he would break all records for throwing and hitting. His ambition gets filled with a confidence when he sees his own reflection in the glass window and hopes egoistically- “I feel that I have got it in me- that I am due for something very big” (Malamud 26). The passing of the train into the tunnel symbolizes the journey of Roy and moving into the dawn through the sufferings of the nights.

With the death of his friend Sam, Roy is destined to undergo his quest alone. But Roy fails because of his egoistic ambitions from the very beginning of the novel. This can be evidenced in his conversation with Harriet Bird-

“What will you hope to accomplish, Roy? He had already told her but after a minute remarked, Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet the people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game” (Malamud 26).

On this reply, Harriet shoots a silver bullet into his guts which makes him suffer for at least fifteen years. Roy is a total failure in Harriet's test and his glorious dream is dashed only by his egotism and self-centeredness. Thus a man, apart from a talent in him, must have some purpose in his life.

In the next section 'Batter up', Roy is trying to revive himself from his state of loneliness and suffering. After this fatal incident that occurred fifteen years ago, Roy is still enthused to become the best player and finally makes up his mind to start a new journey of life. He is still not a matured moral fellow and is agitated by his own selfish, materialist needs which he wants to fulfill in his life. Nothing has been learnt from the past and Roy is destined to suffer again. After years of sufferings, he joins the team 'New York Knights' at the age of thirty-two. During this time, the team has no good reputation with a maximum number of losses under the leadership of a promising player, Bump Baily. Roy, however, once again excels when Bump dies. It is then Roy who plays a regenerative role for his team. He is "like a hunter stalking a bear, a whale, or may be the sight of a single fleeing star the way he went after that ball" (Malamud 152). But this glory is for a short time. He is "a natural, though somewhat less than perfect" (Malamud 74).

The forces like Judge Goodwill Banner and Memo Paris add up to Roy's sufferings. Roy feels an attachment for Memo Paris, a destructive seductress who destroys him steadily. His game suffers every time from every encounter with her. In one instance, when Roy gets entered into a slump, he feels distressed and dejected. Memo has no interest in Roy and excuses herself every time when he is in his slump. He blames himself and knows the cause of his suffering. Then he looks into a mirror and utters-

"An ancient hoary face stared at him. 'Bump!' He groaned and shuddered. An age passes... His own face gazed back at him from the bathroom mirror, his past, his youth, the fleeting years. He all but blacked out in relief. His head, a jagged rock on aching shoulders, throbbed from its rocky interior. An oppressive sadness weighed like a live pain on his heart. Gasping for air, he stood at the open window and looked down at the dreary city till his legs and arms were drugged with heaviness. He shut the hall door and flopped into bed. In the dark he was lost in an overwhelming weakness... I am finished, he muttered. The pages of the record book fell apart and fluttered away in the wind. He slept and woke, finished" (Malamud 127)

Judge goodwill is also a selfish and corrupt man having materialistic wants and prefers things to people. He also entices Roy to deceive his team by promising him thirty- five thousand dollars against the Pirates. In this whole game of self- centeredness, Roy incapables to distinguish between what is real and what is wrong. He has become the space goat of the society.

Roy is, therefore, doomed to go through all this again till he acquires the vision of his sufferings. The moral sensibility is developed in him with the help of Iris Lemon, a life giving figure in the novel who stood up for him, guides him in the journey of his life and desires to bring out the best in him. As she guides him-

“We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness” (Malamud 143).

Still Roy is unwilling to experience anything out of his suffering which can be observed in his conversation with Iris. She says,

“Experience makes good people better.

She was staring at the lake.

“How does it do that?”

“Through their suffering.”

“I had enough of that,” he said in disgust.” (Malamud 143).

Roy knows the worth of Iris but subconsciously denies the reality. He is aware of this actuality and deliberately lives in the illusion that Memo will help him in his future endeavors:

“His heart ached the way he yearned for her (sometimes seeing her in a house they had bought, with a redheaded baby on her lap, and himself going fishing in a way that made it satisfying to fish, knowing that everything was all right behind him, and the home-cooked meal would be hot and plentiful, and the kid would carry the name of Roy Hobbs into generations his old man would never know. With this in mind he fished the stream in peace and later, sitting around the supper table, they ate the fish he had caught), yearning so deep that the depth ran through ever since he could remember, remembering the countless things he had wanted and missed out on, wondering, now that he was famous, if the intensity of his desires would

ever go down. The only way that could happen (he relived that time in bed with her) was to have her always. That would end the dissatisfactions that ate him, no matter how great were his triumphs, and made his life still wanting, and not having” (Malamud 163-164)

After facing the reality, Iris finally becomes an inspiration for Roy and Roy beats the judge and gives back his money after his failure in the last try off:

“Roy took the envelope out of his pocket. He slapped the Judge’s wig and eyeshade off and showered the thousand dollar bills on his wormy head. The judge raised a revolver ---. Roy snatched the gun and dropped in the wastebasket. He twisted the Judge’s nose till he screamed. Then he lifted him onto the table and pounded his back with his fists. The Judge made groans and pig squeals. With his foot Roy shoved the carcass off the table. He hit the floor with a crash and had a bowel movement in his pants. He lay moaning amid the betting slips and pills” (Malamud 216)

Suffering encourages Roy and builds a confidence in him to bear further sufferings. Since he has suffered bitter experiences each time, suffering has never guided him to ascend right things in life. In the end Roy is walking down the street in lonely torture resulting from frustrated life thinking about the emptiness or solitude with which he has to live. He understands “his overwhelming self-hatred. In each stinking wave of it he remembered some disgusting happening of his life” (Malamud 217). He feels- “I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (Malamud 217).

**Conclusion:** Malamud’s concept of suffering is delineated through his protagonist throughout the novel. His protagonist struggles against the anti-human forces which make him suffer at the end. However, the protagonist is a quester for whom the heroism is the object but this end of his quest makes him aware of self-knowledge with which he challenges the world. This experience can only be achieved by through a painful process of suffering. As is said, painful suffering does not change a man’s attitude in the initial stage; however, by going through the flames of suffering every time, he becomes a complete human and accepts the suffering as a significance part of his life. Like the Greek and Shakespearean heroes, Malamud’s hero becomes a victim of his own flaws. Roy also becomes the victim of his own fate and bad luck. He undergoes a transformation in his character toward the end of the novel. Roy’s journey begins with blind self-

centeredness and ends in self-understanding. The novel might defeat the values of Roy but “the final effect is that of moral beauty” (Allen 33) and this moral beauty is self-awareness and self-consciousness. Hence *The Natural* reflects the universalization of suffering which is necessary to develop mental balance and as well as teaches the right things at the right time.

### Works Cited:

Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural*. Avon, 1952.

Handy, W. J. “The Malamud Hero: A Quest for Existence.” *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud*. 1970.

Allen, Walter. *The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965.

