

Struggle for Survival: A Study of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*

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Abstract

The present paper has made an earnest attempt to analyse and highlight the human struggles in *The Natural*. It also deals with the dynamics of human relationships, inhuman conditions of modern life, family communication, or the lack of it, as an essential element in his fiction. In his fictional world Bernard Malamud deals with the most terrifying problem, which the contemporary man faces. Malamud, through his writings, expresses his moral concern regarding the threat of a man's identity by the inhuman conditions of modern life. He reveals this through his protagonist's struggles, weaknesses; insights and realizations, which eventually result in his moral integration. Hence he rises to the status of a successful protagonist. In short, Malamud has created a protagonist who seems fully human, who cannot be lightly satirized or made ridiculous, and who can take advantage of the full range of his intelligence and perceptions, who emerges from his ordeal as a compromised but nonetheless an honest man.

Keywords: Human Relationships, Human Struggles, Moral Concern, Inhuman Conditions.

Bernard Malamud is regarded as one of the most influential figures in Jewish American literature, a movement that emerged in the early twentieth century and is known for its fusion of tragic and comic elements. He is endowed with all the above ingredients and his works stand testimony to his credential as a creative writer. He considers his writings to be a moral platform through which he expresses his longing to correct, to advocate and to advice the modern society. Every age has taught humanity some lesson or the other. In twentieth century Malamud has created the awareness and the need for universal brotherhood in the

hearts of his readers. He is an optimist in an age of pessimism. According to him only through love, compassion and faith, the resurrection of moral values and the construction of a better society will be possible. He is a humanistic spokesman who insists on the values of responsibility, and compassion in a world, which is moving towards self-destruction. In his novels, Malamud has given priority to the value of human life and he has reinvented the meaning of human life.

Malamud's first novel, *The Natural*, is a tale of a baseball player Roy Hobbs. He comes to Chicago at the age of nineteen with an ambition of becoming a baseball player. Sam Simpson, a former baseball player, guided Roy but unfortunately Sam died on the way. The beauty of Harriet Bird, who travelled along with him, enamoured Roy. He willingly accepted the invitation of Harriet Bird and went to meet her. She shot Roy in his gut with her pistol. Roy is seriously wounded and his ambition of becoming a baseball player became a daydream. After fifteen years of suffering Roy re-entered the baseball team named 'The Knights' as a pitcher. After the death of the team's best hitter Bump Bailey, Roy became the leading player. After Roy's arrival their team accomplished many victories and laurels. As a player, Roy is a success but as an individual he always committed blunders. Roy is in love with Memo Paris but she is not interested in him. He encountered a slump in his career due to his disappointment in love. The selfless love of Iris Lemon saved Roy from anonymity. She taught him the true meaning and value of suffering. Iris Lemon's love made Roy realize the value of his sportsmanship and the meaning of life. Memo Paris came back to Roy, obviously for his money. During the crucial match for the season, Roy fell ill. Memo with the help of the match fixer Gus Sands and Judge Banner lured him to accept their bribe and compelled him to promise not to play in the match. Roy with the hope of marrying Memo decided to let down his numerous fans. During the match, Roy's misplaced ball hit Iris Lemon. Iris's love and compassion provided Roy the moral strength he required to break the illegal agreement. He returned to the field with the determination to win the game but he lost the match and thus failed to be a hero.

In Malamud's view, man can achieve moral growth through self-sacrificing love and suffering. As such his fiction is full of unending misery and suffering. The suffering of the Jews is to Malamud the stuff and substance of his art; from it he has fashioned works of surpassing beauty and integrity and a sure place among the best writers of his time. The harshness of suffering, the crushing burden of poverty, the separation of the Jew in a world of gentiles are the hallmarks of his fiction, like the fiction of any other post war Jewish

American writer. In “Jewish Writers,” Mark Schechner observes that “the horror of the recent past stands behind all post-war Jewish-American Fiction” (196).

Malamud in his novels radically deals with the oppressed, imbalanced, disintegrated men searching restlessly for individuality and moral integrity. His novels illustrate their protagonists involved in a battle against the destructive forces of their cultural and physical environments and eventually victimized by these evil forces. They struggle against the corrupting social and racial problems with a heroic determination and will, so as to defend their life and human attributes.

The principal characters of Malamud’s novels are a baseball player, a grocery store assistant, an ex-drunkard turned college lecturer, a poor fixer man, an artist who is self-declared failure, a writer who is unable to finish his novel and a biographer. All of them have encountered disrespect in one way or the other. The Malamud character is harassed by his sense of having been selected for suffering. He is isolated, unsuccessful, unloved, slashed and tormented by situations and circumstances. As he comes out into the fictional world, his impression and behaviour exposes his unworldliness and inadequacy. The society into which he comes to pursue chances for a better life, of course, is doubtful of him and hinders his entry.

The setting and atmosphere to which the Malamud protagonist is exposed convey continually the feeling that man born into this world, is forever condemned to failure and that the surroundings prevail for him are terrific and pitiable by the very presence of their existence. In “Bernard Malamud: The Sadness of Goodness,” Marcus Klein remarks;

The radiant artefacts of Malamud’s fiction have been the shrouds and graves of Jews; rusty caftans and rusty black derbies, decrepit tenements, gloomy grocery stores smelling of poverty, of age and of inviolate failure the Jewish community which is traditionally denied the priority of existence, has been the constant condition of his sensibility. (247)

A typical Malamud character is separated from the society in which he lives by the clear fact of poverty. All his protagonists have an impoverished, pain stricken, humiliating past which robs them of human essence and identity. Roy of *The Natural* recalls his past like this: “After my grandma died, the old man damped me in one orphan home after the other, wherever he happened to be working...”He mentions his mother as “‘A whore’. She spoiled my old man’s life. He is a good guy but died young” (174). Frank Alpine also has a humiliating, shameful past. He tells Morris Bober: “The week after I was born my mother is dead and buried never saw

her face, not even a picture I was raised in an orphans' home and when I was eight they farmed me out to a tough family. I ran away ten times, also from the next people I lived with" (30).

In *The Natural*, both Roy's weakness and society's corruption assist his ultimate tragedy. In "Victims in Motion: Bernard Malamud's Sad and Bitter Clowns," Ben Seigel says the novel probes "the comitragic paradoxes of modern existence" as reflected in the "progressive corruption of a basically honest professional athlete" (204). The novel not only challenges the question but also acts as a clue to the answer. It seems to suggest that in Roy's moral deficiency talent and goodness cannot unite together forming an integrated self. Roy has turned up from an obscure village with extraordinary physical co-ordination, childlike ignorance and with firm belief that he would be the greatest player there ever is in the baseball. But Roy is unable to overcome his sensual weakness, which progressively prevents his career upliftment as a baseball hero.

Early in the novel, *The Natural*, we find Roy on his way to Chicago to make his career in baseball, which he wants to "hang on forever," (10). He feels that he is "done for something very big" and that one day he would "break every record in the book for throwing and hitting" (31). On the train he accidentally meets Harriet Bird, "the silver eyed mermaid" with whom Roy feels impatient to have sex. She offers him sex, but not loves. Later we find that after reaching Chicago, when Roy goes to her hotel room to have sex with her, he meets with a strange incident. There he cannot fair well in his crucial test by Harriet because he does not apprehend the unavoidable link that associates all human beings. As a result, Harriet shoots him down with a silver bullet. This makes him suffer for fifteen years.

In the second part of the novel, "Batter up!" when Roy enters into the baseball world after fifteen years, he is not a morally developed fellow. He lacks mental maturity. In "A New Life" in his 'City of Words,'" Tony Tanner comments "the main focus of the book is on Roy's personal moral failure" (324). He is egotistic and self-centred with strong desire for women, status, money and good food. According to Earl R. Wesserman, "The Natural: Malamud's World Ceres," Roy's weak point is clearly fixed in his "selfish infantilism of spirit" (59). He is troubled by his own selfish, materialistic wants which he hopes to accomplish. Since Roy has never learnt anything from past experiences, he is destined to undergo suffering again.

In *The Natural*, Roy becomes "an archetype for all Malamud's small heroes, who like their larger Greek and Shakespearean counterparts- fall victim to a tragic flaw aggravated by misfortune,"(204) Roy's habit of ignoring his past life acts as the root cause of his inadequacy to cope with the present situation. As a direct consequence, the corrupt, degenerate, materialistic world fascinates him. At the age of thirty-two, Roy

hopefully joins the team 'New York Knights' as an outfielder. Bump Baily declares the team as "the lousiest team in the world." It is highly unconstituted, disunited team. The team's promising player Bump Baily is a 'practical joker' who is not bothered about anyone, ever if it is his team's manager Pop Fischer. Judge Goodwill Banner, the owner of the team, is an evil and crooked person, who works hard to send away Pop Fischer out of his job and "has by his sly ways forced all sorts of trades on us which make money all right but hurt the team" (60). Roy comes into this evil dominated atmosphere.

People like Judge Goodwill Banner, Gus Sands-the gambler and Memo Paris, whose only aim in life is to make money by any means, dominate the world of *The Natural*. The forces of evil work in the person are the Gus Sands, the Judge Goodwill Banner and Memo Paris and they never hesitate to cheat other innocent people for their own welfare. Roy falls after Memo Paris, the alluring woman of the American sensual world, who acts the role of 'the destructive mother'. Wesserman views Roy's pursuit of Memo as "the selfish attachment to the terrible mother that introverts and blocks the psychic energy that could flow outwardly from the mature hero and restore the world" (53). And Judge Goodwill Banner is an entirely corrupt man with no chance of liberation from wicked ways. He is utterly selfish, crooked and hard-hearted. He is the apt representative of a morally corrupt, degenerate America. He has got clear conviction that the society prefers things to people and that its materialistic, corrupt ideas justifies the change of people into things, objects to be utilized. During the stage of the hero's assimilation into the society, the protagonist strives intensely to have socio economic triumph. Roy does hard work to become the greatest in baseball. Roy, who has undergone a series of failures, comes to a place where success of any kind is a distant probability.

Memo Paris, the money minded seductress obviously working for Judge Goodwill Banner is a wicked woman. Memo remains an attraction for Roy, and in his passionate pursuit of her, he over satisfies his appetite and crumples. The second lengthy meeting between Roy and the Judge happens in the hospital and Roy is compelled by the judge to deceive his team. The Judge allures Roy by means of Memo Paris. He also promises to pay Roy thirty-five thousand dollars to cheat his team against the Pirates. As Wesserman says "The Judge is the futility of all codes artificially imposed from without religion, the law, codified morality, golden maxims, and he is an illustration of how they can be hypocritically applied" (53). Yielding to the attractions of money and Memo Paris, Roy, in the beginning expresses readiness to betray his team because he is incapable of distinguishing between what is right and wrong. But eventually Roy develops moral sensibility, with the help of Iris Lemon and he beats the Judge and returns the money after his failure in the

final 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 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 bills.

Roy's inefficiency to come to terms with his past experiences and sufferings is the result of his denial of himself. Even though he has gone through bitter experiences, suffering has never taught him to like the right things in life. In the end we see Roy walking along the street with great loneliness and frustration thinking about the emptiness with which he has lived his life. "He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I live to suffer again" (222). What Roy does not understand is that life too is a game of opportunities and circumstances and that one have to make life better by maintaining appropriate relationship with others. He remains in a condition of ignorance, refuses Iris Lemon, his only possibility of redemption. He does not perceive that suffering is an assertion of oneness with other people - the partaking in other's lives, thus redeeming their burden. It is the one possibility of love.

Here Malamud suggests that only when Roy loses his baseball life is he in a position to gain his new and more natural life with Iris and his child, which she carries, for Roy must suffer quite a bit and learn from his suffering before he can realize that if he tries to ignore his past, he will be destined to relive it. Hence *The Natural* reflects the theme that one should suffer in order to achieve meaning in life. Suffering teaches us to want the right things at the right time. Suffering helps to develop moral discipline and mental balance necessary in life. Thus the novel acts as a clue to the nature of forces against which Malamud's later heroes must struggle and the ritual gestures by which they must preserve themselves.

Suffering pursues Malamud's heroes. They are redeemed and disciplined by it and as a result they become true human beings. He views suffering as a device for moral regeneration. It initiates the protagonist to grasp his social obligations and communal responsibilities. Suffering guides to self-knowledge and accomplishment of identity. Suffering promotes the integrity and humanness of individuals. His attitude towards suffering is mentioned in clear terms. "I am against it," he says, "but when it occurs why waste the experience?"(136) quoted by Sheldon J. Hershinow in *Bernard Malamud*. This is the reason all his novels earn their spirit from the unique experience of suffering. As such all his protagonists submit to extreme suffering, which is not always undertaken willingly.

In Malamud's fiction, the protagonist's individuality is established by his understanding of suffering. A Malamud protagonist is in the beginning an innocent, immature person. However at a certain stage in his life, he becomes sensitive to the holiness of life and this awareness directs him to strive for a new life. Suffering at this phase receives meaning. Suffering in Malamud is intended to liberate not only the sufferer but also for whom he suffers. The motif of worthwhile suffering as mentioned here suggests the quest for moral resolution and self realization.

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