

The Dynamics of Anti-Semitism in Bernard Malamud's 'The Jewbird'

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Abstract

Jews were forced to adopt ways of the West by European Journalists and other organisations and especially dominant Christians and also forced to develop a tenant mentality in order to achieve assimilation which will be acceptable to Europeans in order to allow Jews to stay peacefully. Any deviation from forced and acceptable norms will lead to trouble as is being faced by Schwartz in 'The Jewbird'. They were contributing to the GDP of Europe but they were never thought to be a part of the nation. As a result, Jews always thought themselves as tenants as they were made to believe so by the Whites also. A tenant has to follow the rules and regulations in order to assimilate properly but sometimes this race for over assimilation is leading to self-hatred for their own community members among Jews. This is also anti-Semitism. So, anti-Semitism is working in many ways apart from the way it is generally understood. Antisemitism may be religious hatred, self-hatred or may be having its postcolonial dimensions. All these dynamics of antisemitism can be found in 'The Jewbird' by Malamud.

Keywords: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, Assimilation, Over-Assimilation

Introduction

In Jewish literature one can easily find the theme of anti-Semitism. Merriam Webster dictionary defines anti-Semitism as "hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group". A number of stories written by Malamud covers different aspects of anti-Semitism which are practised against Jews. All these aspects may be termed as dynamics of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism may be practiced in the form of "Gentile over Jew... assimilated Jew over unassimilated Jew" (Watts 159), religious or racial hatred etc. In Europe, due to their religion, Jews lacked the legal status of being citizens as most of Europe is Christian. The Jews customs and religious beliefs separate them from Christian majority. And they were always thought to be tenants though they had contributed to their development. They were always considered as denizens in Europe instead of being citizens. This resulted in development of a tenant mentality among Jews. European journalists also played their role in the development of tenant mentality among Jews. A number of evidences have been mentioned in the dissertation titled "Kafka Identity Crisis: Examining the Metamorphosis as a Response to Anti-Semitism and Assimilation in Turn of the Century Europe" by Sarah B. Classon. While English Jews didn't face the level of violent antisemitism (Classon 11) as was felt in other parts of Europe or media attacks. But on reading various texts in this context, one can easily presume that Jews were forced to adopt ways of the West by media and other organisations and especially dominant Christians and also forced to develop a tenant mentality in order to achieve proper assimilation which will be acceptable to Europeans in order to allow Jews to stay peacefully. Any deviation from forced and acceptable norms will lead to trouble or suffering as is being faced by Schwartz. Malamud through his writings has shown that the suffering of Jews is the universal suffering of the people who are not in power. Tresea Gerene Lavender points out this suffering by telling that "The Jew is one with mankind because mankind, in general, suffers; then, in the same sense, anyone who suffers is a Jew" (3).

Bernard Malamud is one of the greatest bards expressing the universal suffering of Jews in his writing using realism. One may also interpret his writings as autobiographical in nature because his parents were immigrants in the United States of America and he minutely observed their sufferings during his childhood. He had also observed the suffering of other Jews and immigrants in the United States of America. His learning in this context helped him to write about it in fiction and especially in 'The Jewbird' where-in he is showing that the suffering of Jews has many trajectories in order to be shown in literature. Ashalata Raman writes in her article 'The Theme of Suffering in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud, that "For Malamud, the substance of his art is the suffering of the Jews. His emphasis is on the Jews because he is a Jew, and he understands Jewishness" (n.p.). Depiction of Jews sufferings in his writing has also its universal character because it also depicts the suffering of the people who are not in power. Bernard Malamud opines:

I write about Jews, when I write about Jews, because they set my imagination going. ... Sometimes I make characters Jewish because I think I will understand them better as people, not because I am out to prove anything. ... I was born in America and respond, in American life, to more than Jewish experience. I wrote for those who read. (quoted in Butler XV)

A number of critics have commented on the theme of suffering and anti-Semitism in his works but a few of them just touched the concept of trajectories of antisemitism or dynamics of antisemitism in his works. Eileen H. Watts comments in her article 'Jewish Self Hatred in Malamud's "The Jew Bird"':

To Return to Cohen's apartment, the cage within a cage images so-ciological double layered anti-Semitism: Gentile over Jew in the form of the rented penthouse, assimilated over an unassimilated Jew in the form of the empty bird cage. (159)

Cohen and Jewish speaking black bird named Schwartz are in conflict with each other in 'The Jewbird'. Through their conflict, we as readers come to know about the anti-Semitism that is being practiced by assimilated Jews in America against the people of their own community.

Research Methodology

The researcher will take quotations (showing sociological multi-layered layered anti-Semitism and how it works) from Malamud's 'The Jewbird' which is primary text for the purpose of analysis and it will be support it from secondary sources. Dynamics of antisemitism works in many ways like Gentile over Jew, assimilated Jew over unassimilated Jew, religious hatred etc. Also, the technique of psychoanalysis will be used to show how anti-Semitism is a complicated phenomenon in the form of sociological, historical and political one by giving instances from the primary text. Malamud's story 'The Jew Bird' has been taken as primary text to understand how anti-Semitism works as a different layered concept against Jews. The story revolves around a Jewish speaking black bird named Schwartz, Cohen, his wife Edie and his son Maurie. Cohen along with family members is trying to assimilate in America but his efforts of assimilation have become the struggle for over assimilation. Over assimilation is developing the feeling of self-hatred in Cohen against the members of his own race. Also, Cohen is himself suffering from anti-Semitism practiced by Gentile. In this story, the Jewish speaking blackbird is killed by Cohen who is himself a Jew and is shown practicing anti-Semitism against the members of his own community. He killed the bird because the bird was not assimilating in its new environment.

Analysis and Findings

Cohen with his wife and son is living in an apartment in the east part of New York city. Cohan is in the business of selling frozen foods. He has not been successful in his business and belongs to a middle-class family. When the action of the story starts, it is seen that Cohen is having dinner with his family. All of a sudden there is an entry of a Jewish speaking bird. This bird lands in the middle of the dining table. Cohen becomes very angry and try to attack the bird. Cohen reacts like a fanatic towards Schwartz:

"Right on the table," said Cohen, putting down his beer glass and swatting at the bird. "Son of a bitch." (205)

This bird saves itself from the attack, moves away and sits on the kitchen door. The bird surprises everyone by speaking in two languages: Yiddish and English. The bird informs them that it is hungry and running away from anti-Semites. The bird informs that it is a Jewish Bird. The bird starts prayer, Edie and Maurie join the prayer. But, Cohen does not join as he is having the same feeling of anti-Semitism against unassimilated members of his own community which is practiced by Christians against Jews.

"Wise guy," muttered Cohen. He gnawed on his chop, then put down the bone. "So if you can talk, say what's your business. What do you want here?"

"If you can't spare a lamb chop," said the bird, "I'll settle for a piece of herring with a crust of bread. You can't live on your nerve forever."

"This ain't a restaurant," Cohen replied. "All I'm asking is what brings you to this address?" (205)

We come to know that the name of this black Jewish speaking bird is Schwartz. He likes herrings and rye bread. The bird requested them to allow him to stay in their house. Cohen gives permission to the bird to stay only for a night and then leave next morning. Next morning, Maurie persuades his father to allow Schwartz to stay with the family. Cohen allows this Bird with the condition that it will be living only on the balcony. Edie also persuades Cohen in order to allow it to stay on their balcony but Cohen is still not happy:

“He’s no trouble at all,” she told Cohen, “and besides his appetite is very small.”

“What’ll you do when he makes dirty?”

“He flies across the street in a tree when he makes dirty, and if nobody passes below, who notices?”

“So all right,” said Cohen, “but I’m dead set against it. I warn you he ain’t gonna stay here long.” (207)

Cohen is a representative of second-generation Jews who have assimilated in America. Malamud has criticised this community for its false sense of belongingness in comparison to new immigrants from their own community. According to Watts, Cohen represents his “icy humanity” and “cold compassion” (Watts 159) for new immigrants. Matt Prater opines that “In terms of race and what Schwartz's position as a symbol for distinctly human racial politics suggests, the excerpt reinforces the claims of Watts and Hanson who suggest that key to the story is a narrative of Jewish self-hatred and uneasy US-Americanization” (4). Cohen has become anti anti-Semite for his new immigrant community members and this shows his Americanisation. Cohen through his attitude shows this Americanisation and self-hatred to Schwartz because Schwartz openly says that I am a Jew and he has no shame to express it:

“What have you got against the poor bird?”

“Poor bird, my ass. He’s a foxy bastard. He thinks he’s a Jew.”

“What difference does it make what he thinks?”

“A Jewbird, what a chutzpah. One false move and he’s out on his drumsticks.” (207)

From the above discussion one can infer that Malamud has shown the feeling of hatred against their own community members among the assimilated Jews in America. This instance shows that antisemitism works in many ways apart from religious one. Cohen seems to have learned this anti-Semitism from his own and family’s treatment based on religious hatred practiced by Whites. If a Jew would sound like a Jew then he will not be welcomed among assimilated Jews. Cohen is against the use of Yiddish in his family. Cohen could have provided his new tenant good food but his self-hatred for new Jew immigrants is allowing him to behave in this manner. He also doesn't want his family to assimilate with these new immigrants.

“If I were you,” Cohen said, angered, “I’d keep my big snoot out of other people’s private business.”

“Harry, please,” said Edie.

“My goddamn patience is wearing out. That cross eyes butts into everything.” (208)

Cohen is also showing the same condescending attitude to the new immigrants as is shown by assimilated Jews for unassimilated Jews. Perhaps, he has learnt this self-hatred by staying in the USA since birth. Through Cohen, Malamud is showing how this psychological strain of anti-Semitism develops and leads to chaos and alienation among distracted Jews. Also, sometimes, this strain of anti-Semitism becomes so powerful in the psychology of over assimilated Jews that they start thinking themselves as right and high priest of their community. These over-assimilated Jews suffer from a feeling of superiority complex against their own marginalized class. The more is one assimilated the more one is antisemitic and suffering from self-hatred.

Cohen self-hatred has reached such a stage that even the good efforts by any new migrant Jew are also not acceptable to him. Schwartz had helped his son to improve his score in school but Cohen still hates him. Cohen is suffering from a tenant mentality. Rumena Buzrovska also express her ideas on tenant mentality:

This short story is rich with metaphors, symbols, parodies and other figures of speech that point to the various levels of meaning in the text. For example, the short story can be analyzed through the metaphor of the tenant, which is also the subject of Malamud's 1971 novel *The Tenants*. In fact, this short story treats the idea that for centuries Jews were "tenants" in foreign lands, not having their own country where metaphorically they could be their own "landlords". As "tenants", they were always dependent on someone's mercy or whim... (176)

For the researcher, the tenant mentality is a kind of attitude in a Jew to always set goals and improve himself so that WASP society may accept them. If their children will qualify for Ivy League College based on their academic performance then they will become accepted in WASP. This is a false attitude to judge oneself from others' viewpoint. It means tenant mentality is to perform and conduct as per the wishes and demands of the dominant class. This leads to over assimilation and constant desire to keep on performing as per others choices in whole of their life. Anna Simonova expresses her concern for the acquisition of this tenant mentality by saying that "Malamud's treatment of the Jewish Self in 'The Tenants' affirms the view of identity as being performatively constructed" (47).

This tenant mentality shows that some over assimilated Jews have been the failures in their life. This tenant mentality leads to over assimilation, stinking of arrogance and self-hatred engendered by living in a subtly anti-Semitic society. For such anti-Semites, Schwartz replies:

"I'm too old for baths," said the bird. "My feathers fall out without baths."

"He says you have a bad smell."

"Everybody smells. Some people smell because of their thoughts or because of who they are. My bad smell comes from the food I eat. What does his come from?" (210)

For Cohen and other assimilated Jews, new migrants are trouble makers. This idea of trouble makers is used by Gentiles for Jews. So, it seems that Cohen is also behaving like a Gentile in order to judge members of his own community. Cohen's attitude to Schwartz has been the same as has been of Christians against Jews and if Schwartz is not listening for assimilation then he is to be tortured and harassed.

The frozen foods salesman began his campaign against the bird by mixing watery cat food with the herring slices in Schwartz's dish. He also blew up and popped numerous paper bags outside the birdhouse as the bird slept, and when he had got Schwartz good and nervous, though not enough to leave, he brought a full-grown cat into the house, supposedly a gift for little Maurie, who had always wanted a pussy. The cat never stopped springing up at Schwartz whenever he saw him, one day managing to claw out several of his tail feathers. (210-11)

He has become so obsessed with his antisemitism that he kills the bird when he finds the bird alone and also, he has no regrets for the same. One can liken the scene with the narrative that has been used in the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Cohen has become a Hitler in his own home. Apart from Gentiles, Jews themselves are the culprits for having antisemitism in their thoughts. Self-hatred is a new form of antisemitism apart from religious and Gentiles.

"Where is he now?" Edie asked, frightened.

"I threw him out and he flew away. Good riddance." (211)

In this text, meaning is generated at two levels: the universal and the socio-cultural. At the universal level, one is conveyed that anti-Semitism has the tendency to take different forms and at the socio-cultural level, one is informed that tenant mentality in migrants is responsible for development of anti-Semitism. So, the second-generation assimilated Jews develop tenant mentality and suffer from anti-Semitism.

Also, Malamud has been very subtle in conveying the real ideas. Peace in life will come when there will be real brotherhood. But real brotherhood, humanity and compassion is not visible in this world. This beautiful message is given by Malamud using Schwartz to Edie. Schwartz says:

“When he stops trying we will both be in Paradise,” Schwartz answered. “Do me a favor and get rid of him. He makes my whole life worry. I’m losing feathers like a tree loses leaves.”

“I’m awfully sorry but Maurie likes the pussy and sleeps with it.”

What could Schwartz do? (211)

Conclusion

In this story, the Jewish speaking blackbird is killed by Cohen who is himself a Jew and is shown practicing anti-Semitism against the members of his own community. He killed the bird because the bird was not assimilating in its new environment. Cohen is seen by us as the disguised anti-Semite. He is doing everything which is in his power to destroy the culture of his own community. Through analysis, anti-Semitism is seen as a multi-layered concept. Also, Edie and Mourie have been depicted by Malamud as Jews tolerant to their own culture and also imbibing the new culture. Malamud has been bold enough to address multi-layered concept of anti-Semitism in ‘The Jewbird’. Also, Jews have to endure anti-Semitism from their own over assimilated community members in different foreign countries and especially in America. It can also be concluded that ignorance and hatred cause more injury to humans and destroys the very foundation of humanity which is love as the kelson of all creation.

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