



USE OF SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS IN JEWISH MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MALAMUD

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ABSTRACT

Imagery and symbolism play an important role in delineation of theme of self-realization. Malamud's protagonists find themselves in certain images and through them they reveal their selves. Yet at times the picture could be a distortion of the true self or it may be obscure and incomprehensible. Self-appraisal may come through refractive surfaces like mirrors and windows or through dreams and reveries. Through these devices, the hero is confronted with inner passions, frustrations, longings in the face of struggle with outer and inner forces. Self-discovery is one of the foremost themes in Malamud and this theme is best presented through such devices.

Keywords: Symbolism, imagery, myth, allegory, archetypes

Introduction

Myth, allegory, ritual, symbolism, archetypes, pathos, surrealism and imagery create different patterns of meanings in fiction, which are different from the superficial meaning conveyed instantly. Symbolism helps create layers of meaning, with one simpler meaning to other/s deeper larger meanings associated with the text. The first half of the 20th century witnessed a deep influence of a French movement on American writings, which was different from romanticism. Hawthorne, Whitman, Malamud and a long tradition of 20th century American writers made look words have an aesthetic route through allegory, archetypes and symbols.

It is the dexterous use of myths and archetypes that Malamud has got special appreciation from many critics. The narrative, which is used to its ultimate effect, is best suited to the themes of his novels and stories as Mr. Lechuk wrote. "Neither realism nor surrealism has been his forte through the years," he continued, "but the fable, the parable, the allegory, the ancient art of basic storytelling in a modern voice; through this special mode he has earned his high place in contemporary letters."¹

A close analysis of Malamud's novels shows that he used the world of dreams and reveries, fables and images to create a world which is uniquely Malamud's. His very first novel *The Natural* had set the stage for that. Blessed with natural gifts, the hero of *The Natural* Roy Hobbs comes out from obscurity to defeat the fabled titan of national baseball. When the hero realizes that his train is passing from a tunnel, he is not surprised by the "sight of himself holding a yellow light over his head, peering back in."² But even such a rich

¹ Lechuk, Alan. "Malamud's Dark Fable," in *The New York Times Review*, August 29, 1982, pp. 14-15.

² *The Natural*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1952. p 9.

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vision does not bring any particular illumination in Roy. Maybe he fears in accepting the truth that his fabulous career is just a part of the beginning.

In a dream, Roy finds himself holding a golden baseball from which comes out a white rose. His name and fame is in peril from fragile beauty (The involvement with Memo Paris) and these fears are very valid as very soon, when at a moment his goals are within his reach, he falls to the snare charms of Memo who wants to take revenge for the death of Bump Baily, her dead lover. As her name suggests, Memo revengefully stirs his 'memory' but again he is so afraid of his past defeats that he suppresses his memory and conceals his self from himself. He ponders that any talk of past events or 'inner self' is like 'plowing up a graveyard'³

The dreams and reveries of Frank remind him of his failures and his inability to communicate with others. In his dream, he says: "I want to tell somebody something on the telephone...but then when I am in the booth, instead of a phone being there, a bunch of bananas is hanging on a hook"⁴ and at another instance flower carvings for Helen go into the garbage can.

But Frank gains from his dreams as he has a reverie of St. Francis of Assisi picking up the wooden carving and the saint tosses it in air, it becomes a flower. "Little sister," announces the bowing saint, "here is your little sister the rose." From St. Francis she accepts the offering, although it comes from Frank Alpine's "love and best wishes."⁵ Frank does it in a dream, which he could not do in reality.

Levin can also listen to his intuition and his dreams and can avoid some difficulties. Levin dreams of a salmon fish which advises him, "Levin, go home"⁶ and this warning is very valid considering the situations where Levin involves himself with the wife of the person who hired him. Levin won't listen to such advice but in a reference to the earlier dream he could realize that "life is holy" and he became a "man of principle"⁷

Yakov, too, finds some rescue from his anguish in dreams and reveries. Yakov finds Bibicov, a man of conscience, hanged in the adjacent cell and in his dream comes the ghost of the man to warn him that the authorities plan a similar fate for him as well. It is in another dream that he awakes with a brassy taste in his mouth. Yakov has an insight after this dream as he cries, "Poison," "My God, they're poisoning me!"⁸

Yakov considers Tsar Nicholas II a fatherly figure, a father to the whole nation till he comes in his dreams and chastises him for being a Jew: "There are too many Jews," the Little Father declares...Why should Russia be burdened with teeming millions of you? You yourself are to blame for your troubles...The ingestion of this tribe has poisoned Russia"⁹. Now Yakov knows this man better, whom he has never met in his life. He has come to know that he cannot find mercy from such a ruler.

Then in another dream he imagines the death of his ex-father-in-law, Shmuel Rabinowitch and awakes crying "Live Shmuel," he groans, "live. Let me die for you." He continues "What have I earned," he asks himself, "if a single Jew dies because I did? Suffering I can gladly live without, I hate the taste of it, but if I must suffer let it be for something. Let it be for Shmuel."¹⁰ Thus, the dreams of Yakov make him more aware of his

³ *The Natural*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, p. 155.

⁴ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p 37.

⁵ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p 245-46.

⁶ *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, p. 24.

⁷ *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, p.201-2.

⁸ *The Fixer*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1966, p. 199.

⁹ *The Fixer*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1966, p. 251.

¹⁰ *The Fixer*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1966, p. 272-73.

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own plight as well as others associated with him and eventually strengthen his determination and his behaviour.

Then, there are the symbols of mirrors and windows through which the protagonists try to view themselves, though at times the view is very blurred or distorted. At various occasions, mirrors and windows offer Morris and Frank the chances of self-realization and identity. A cracked mirror is hanging in the Morris store. After hitting the grocer, Frank looks into the mirror and maybe he realises that he cannot have a new life by committing crime. So, he comes back to make a penance for the crime.

Malamud is also a great writer of pastoral mode of archetypal narrative structure and a consistent pattern of imagery and symbols. Nature finds a place in the archetypal myths of life, death, rebirth, love hatred etc. Seasonal changes become symbols of worship, love, optimism and anticipation. After the windy chilled winters, comes the spring which is laden with hope and in other words- rebirth. James M. Mellard is of the view that:

“The very flexible structural archetype the pastoral offers Malamud is the pattern of vegetation rituals and myths. Based upon the seasonal cycle of change, this pattern gives Malamud a central controlling form in the pastoral fertility myths of dying and reviving gods, of youthful heroes replacing the aged, of the son replacing the father.”¹¹

It is noteworthy that it is in the spring that Frank converts himself into a Jew- from a Jew- hater to a Jew himself. It is at this point that the term ‘Passover’ comes in the text which celebrates redemption. If we take into account the ironist in Malamud, then Passover is the traditional time for anti-Semitic blood libels and prosecution of Jews in Eastern Europe. In fact, the spring with its renewal pogroms and suffering does give some bitter taste in the Yiddish literature.

Morris, the bundle of sufferings, recalls, at one point in the novel, his days at a night school when he had learned the piece of poetry, “Come, said wind to the leaves one day/Come over the meadow with me and play”¹² but the wind never played with him. In the opening chapter, we get a picture of the daily horrors of Morris in the store, “The early November street was dark though the night had ended, but the wind, to the grocer’s surprise, already clawed. It flung his apron into his face as he bent for the two milk cases.”¹³

Both Morris and Helen yearn for spring but what they actually get is the ‘false spring’ in April, which is the cruelest month. The dream of a soothing spring brings the almost rape of Helen and death for Morris. The last day of Morris’ life is the day of April, the spring when the grocer goes to clear the path from snow, which ultimately leads to his death, “What kind of winter can be in April”¹⁴. What an irony that even a day of April becomes winter for him and his doomsday!

The novel, *A New Life* can be put into two sections on the basis of the cycle of seasons and the corresponding changes in them, which have an impact on and correspondence with Levin’s struggles at Cascadia and his own self. First section starts from fall to winter and Levin passes through various phases of disappointments with fathers who are false, faculty members who are corrupt and dishonest, the grammar

¹¹ Mellard, James Malamud. “Malamud’s Novels: Four Versions of Pastoral,” in *Critique*, Vol. IX, No.2, 1967, p.10.

¹² *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p. 83.

¹³ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p3.

¹⁴ *The Assistant*. NY: New American Library 1957, p.223.

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classes which do not have the liveliness of literature and the students who make assignment projects a farce as if plagiarism is a part of the system and this phase eventually ends with the failure of Levin at all fronts.

The second section, if we put it that way, is the amorous quest of Levin, who gets involved with Pauline, the wife of a faculty and the political crisis in the English Department and due to both, the dismissal from the job. On the surface level, both seem to be failures for him. Maybe Levin is asking for more of nature than it can give to a New York Jew. He had come to create a kind of renaissance in the wastes of Cascadia but on the final page of the novel Levin reflects that a beautiful country is fine if “beauty isn’t all that happens.”¹⁵ Also, he has the reveries in the early pages of the novel, when he finds a salmon cry in dreams, “Levin, go home.”¹⁶ Thus, in a way, he is not able to keep the ambiguous relationship with the environment.

Most of the action of the novel *The Tenants* takes place in winters. The novel opens in a cold wintry Manhattan. Moving through January and February, there is the hope of the spring as Lesser rises of his hibernation through his yearning for life. April comes at last but without any hope as it is in the spring itself that the winds of revenge blow and the whole manuscript of Lesser has been burnt by Willie. The readers find that in a few pages of the novel, it comes autumn and with that again come January, February– the chilly winters and again the hope of proper spring, as there are no leaves, no flowers. Spring does not get its romantic form or hue rather it becomes just a mention of the spring.

As if directed by a sardonic movie-makers’ camera, readers’ view is turned from the free-wheeling birds rising against the ‘lucent sky’ to the prosaic house, the lonely man. From the false and ridiculous imagery, focus is shifted to the harsh, grim reality: “Ah, this earth, this sceptred isle on a silver sea, this Thirty First Street and Third Avenue. This foresaken house. This happy unhappy Lesser having to write.”¹⁷

Along with the medieval overtones and Jewish milieu, Malamud presents an influence of biblical inclusions. Giving a mythological treatment to the characters of the first three novels, *The Natural*, *The Assistant* and *A New Life*, Granville Hicks compares the heroes to the sufferers from mythology. In a sense, Malamud has moved from the story of Samson, punished for the misuse of powers, to Job, suffering because chosen to suffer, to Jesus, suffering voluntarily to redeem.¹⁸

Malamud has also made ample use of allegory in his novels as well as stories. His moralistic vision has been beautifully conveyed through the medium of allegory, which is a part of the main American tradition. It is remarkable that this allegory is not the conventional allegory of personification or metaphor rather it has taken a modern hue and shape, where the hidden meanings are conveyed in an ironic way.

In the use of allegory, Malamud comes closer to Hawthorne but he is not able to keep the grip of strains too tight throughout. The allegory helps to convey the persistent internal and spiritual conflict of different characters. Malamud has, in fact, used the devise of a character as the voice of conscience, particularly the character near to the protagonist. Through them is objectified the inner self of the central character and it is used in two ways– at the one level, other characters work as allegorical conscience for the protagonist and at the other level, the protagonist works for the reader.

¹⁵ *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, 366.

¹⁶ *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, p. 24.

¹⁷ *The Tenants*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1971, p. 10.

¹⁸ Hicks, Granville. (1963). *The Creative Present: Notes on Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons, Doubleday & Company Inc., pp. 223-24.



In all his novels and almost all his short stories, there is at least one character who works as the voice of conscience for the central character and in many cases this character happens to be a woman. If the hero rejects that voice, he fails as it happens with Roy Hobbs whereas S. Levin listens to that voice and accepts the burden of responsibility, love for him now no more remains the initial lust.

In *The Natural*, Malamud has written a sustained and elaborate allegory in which the "natural" player, who operates with ease and the greatest skill without having been taught, is equated with the natural man who, left alone by, say, politicians and advertising agencies, might achieve his real fulfillment. The story here is of a natural man

Roy is a natural man who is a representative of transcendent demi-god. He makes himself a baseball bat called *Wonderboy* known to possess mystical powers. With this magical bat, Roy is remarkable in the field. His bat is the symbol of 'rudimentary romantic primitive innocence' and 'transcendental divinity'.¹⁹

But this demi-god will be 'side-tracked'²⁰ into becoming a lesser man as his bat becomes impotent as "Wonderboy resembled a sagging baloney."²¹

First of all, let's take into account the pattern of the names of the characters. Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* has something to do with the old Hebraic use of scapegoat as Bok means goat. Thus the meaning itself carries the meaning extended to a person or a group who bears the guilt for a larger group. The charge of ritual murder against Yakov is, in fact, a denunciation against the whole Jewry.

The name of the (anti-)hero of *A New Life* is S. Levin or Seymour Levin, Pauline calls him 'Lev'. Malamud opens the novel with the epigraph from *Ulysses* whereas; the literal meaning of Levin is 'lightening'. When Pauline explains to him that he was chosen because of his 'Jewish' looks, he wants to be called as 'Sam' – "Sam, they used to call me at home"²². And the name Sam brings to mind the image of the first Hebrew Prophet– Samuel.

The name of Lesser in *The Tenants* itself is suggestive of the lesser talent than the master writers. Willie Spearment insolently tries to manipulate with his name so that it sounds like 'Willie Shakespeare' which presents a humorous-ironic peculiarity.

A synthesis of the old theme into a distinctive vision and ironic appearances are the very qualities of Malamud which earned him acclamation but these are the points which have also attracted some critics to strike a note against him as comments his learned contemporary and friend, Philip Roth: "Malamud does not or has not yet found the contemporary scene a proper backdrop for his tales of heartlessness and headache, of suffering and regeneration" and he suggests further that Malamud had to create a world.²³

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¹⁹ Coleman, Arthur. "The Iron Mistress and The Natural: Analogue or Influence?" *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 16, No.1, Jan. 1986, p.11.

²⁰ *The Natural*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, p. 70.

²¹ *The Natural*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, p. 146.

²² *A New Life*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1961, p. 366.

²³ Roth, Philip. "Pictures of Malamud," Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk, April 20, 1986, p. 229.

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