



JOURNEY OF SELF AS A MOTIF IN MALAMUD'S FICTION WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON *THE NATURAL*

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ABSTRACT

In our own Indian history the quest motif is prevalent in the form of deep search for identity in the great epic The Mahabharata although this great epic deals not only with the theme of quest but also reveals the unending exploration of humanity. It is also an expedition to understand the significance of self and humankind's character in a universe which is beyond its vision as well as understanding. Arjun, the hero of the epic (or at least of The Bhagwad Gita), represents all humanity and he pines for self-identification and self-realisation. He strives to bring order to the everyday pandemonium of the human world. The quest for individual human's sense of self is presented in the form of hero metaphor in which a larger-than-life-figure takes on himself the symbolic search for identity.

INTRODUCTION

If we go through the dictionary meaning of quest, it indicates a journey towards a goal. it is:

1. The act or an instance of seeking or pursuing something; a search.
2. An expedition undertaken in medieval romance by a knight in order to perform a prescribed feat: the quest for the Holy Grail.
3. Archaic. A jury of inquest.

Now let us come to the term 'hero' as most of the times the quest involves heroes' lives in a traditional sense. Heroes are the invention of the mist of time and myth and quest is used as a

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thematic plot in literature. In epic literature heroes are given the primary character of a sort of protector or helper of humanity who could even be a super-human or semi-divine figure with some special powers and features put forth to guard or help out the whole human race. Hero traditionally used to be more than an ordinary man— a superior in rank and qualities, fighting for his ideals through excellencies of head and heart, even hands.

A hero's aim generally is to obtain something, or someone, to go on a quest journey and returning home after accomplishing that task. The goal can be achieving something novel that fulfills a lack in his life, or something that was taken away from him stealthily. The obtainment of his desired object brings back the heroic in the hero.

Malamud's heroes are not heroes in the traditional sense as they are not in any way more than ordinary. If they move out on a quest journey, it is up to the most for a reasonable living or dealing with a typical question of survival. The fundamental question of human living and its limitations perplexes the 'heroes' of Malamud as he himself considered it the sanctimonious duty of a writer to captivate man and his matters in writings as he spoke at the ceremony of National Book Award in 1959:

“It seems to me that the writer's important task, no matter what the current theory of man, or his prevailing mood, is to recapture his image as human being as each of us in his secret heart knows it to be and as history and literature have from the beginning revealed it” .

It is a universal fact that human stipulation has its own precincts and one has to accept those boundaries. Earl H. Rovit, a critic of Malamud, suggests:

“Malamud seems to insist that there is a way of escaping the fatal limitations of the human condition. Man need not remain buried in the isolation of self. He must accept the fatality of his own identity— be it Jew or Gentile, success or failure— and working within that identity, transcend himself and burst his prison” (Rovit, p.3).

Therefore, the struggle is not against any outward forces— evil fate or society but one's own self. It is a search for one's lost roots unto the inner most layers of one's self. Almost all of Malamud's characters are made to pass through one or the other stage of this dilemma. With that troubled history as mental background, the Jewish writers are more at ease in dealing with the problem of humanity.

The characters of Malamud, who 'have hardly anything in common' with themselves, try to attain their self. They are lost in the outer mysterious labyrinths, struggling hard to catch hold



of their real self. The Jewishness of Malamud does not carry him to the last and the reader knows at the end that it is not just a Jew who is insecure, who is experiencing the agony of being lost, but any person around him who is always threatened of extinction— be it from outside or the loss of one's self and he may try to do his best to survive or to let others survive. A comprehensive study of Malamud's novels makes it coherent and lucid that one may succeed only if the world around is renounced and the inane goodness of humans is brought into prominence.

Malamud's moral sensibilities find a positive attitude towards suffering. When conflict arises between human freedom and human limitations, one is bound to suffer. Due to human limitations, suffering is inevitable. If it is inevitable, then why waste it? Everybody suffers-- be it Frank, Roy, Levin, Lesser, you or me-- if one is not happy with the unfulfilled past and is ambitious of a certain type of fulfillment in the coming times.

One may succeed or fail but what more dignified one can be than the person who gets dignity out of failures? Malamud's protagonists awaken for a new beginning and that awakening marks the commencement of their quest for existence. His protagonists undertake a zealous journey towards self-realisation and a comprehensive analysis of his novels proves the strong element of quest in them.

In the case of the first novel, *The Natural*, which was made a successful film as well, there is no Jewish character in it yet it no way is lesser to his later novels in dealing with the theme of quest— quest for the betterment of self. The protagonist moves out in the new world under the legendary journey in pursuit of being the best in his field. *The Natural* opens like a novel on a mythic pattern. The hero, a gifted player, sets out in search of name and fame. He journeys to Chicago by a train probably for the first time on a train with a homemade bat called 'Wonderboy' in his hand to become the best in baseball.

Like a mythical quest journey, Roy meets an aging hero, triumphs over him but immediately is conquered by a mysterious seductress, who is always carrying a mysterious hat box. Soon after in a Chicago hotel room she draws out a gun from that box and shoots Roy with a silver bullet in his stomach. He had set out on a journey but after that fatal 'accident' in Chicago he remains in oblivion for 15 years wandering here and there and trying at several odd jobs.

He returns now to the team called New York Knights which needs revival after so many defeats but here he is required to replace Bump Baily, who despite being a gorilla on the field, remains ineffectual in inspiring other players. In a friendly game between the two, Baily dies of injuries.



Here Roy's new spiritual father is Pop Fisher, the manager of the Knights team who would be taking them for world championship. It seems at this moment that Roy will be able to bring back glory to the team as well as a name for himself in the game. It is then that his motive for success is thwarted by his attraction towards Memo Paris, the niece of the manager and the former girl friend of Bailey. She symbolically tells Roy that she belonged to the dead man but Roy would not understand the meaning of it and he desires her more and more as she seduces and runs away from him. Even Memo's uncle, Pop Fisher's warning has no impact on him that she will weaken his strength.

The seductive Memo, who wants to take revenge upon the death of Bailey, calls upon Roy and his team-mates for a feast where he suffers severe stomach-ache. Roy loses consciousness only to be informed by the doctor that it would be his last match as he was suffering from high blood pressure. The last blue from the bolt comes in the form of accepting bribe by Roy to throw away a crucial game. However, towards the end of the game, he rediscovers his powers and swings the bat with all his might. It is at this point that *Wonderboy* splits in half.

In *The Natural* the myths of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King have been combined with the contemporary professional story of baseball. Thus, Malamud has reworked on the medieval Arthurian quest to associate it with baseball and Roy's career in baseball becomes a symbol of human moral situation. Roy has the powers of a great player but he is so self-centred that he cannot think of others except himself, his name, his glory and moreover his own physical desires that makes him a failure at the end of the quest journey. He did not listen to the advice of the fatherly figure of Pop Fisher (the mythical King Fisher). He could not become like Pop Fisher rather he replaced Bump Beiley, who himself was very selfish.

Roy is a natural player but cannot envision about his own self. Man himself is the battlefield and he has to fight with himself as Malamud himself declared in one of his interviews. According to Malamud, the struggle of his characters "against self" is "basic" (Leviant, p.18).

Roy resists the truth conveyed by his fears and reflections and he opts failure. Call it moral flaw, ill luck or just stupidity, Roy rejects every inner voice as he succumbs to greed and lust. Moreover he is also a contributor to the death of Bump Baily, whose mistress, Memo Paris, he desires but Memo as her name suggests revengefully stirs his 'memory'. Either is he so shortsighted that his memory of past deludes him or is he so scared of defeat that he tries to suppress his past memories as any talk of past events or 'inner self' is like 'plowing up a graveyard' for him (TN p. 155).

Yet past is never dead and never leaves so easily, especially in Malamud. The past heroes of the game, Bump Baily and Whammer Wambold come like ghosts in his dreams and day



reveries and try to confuse his true identity. The reversal of roles takes place so early that Roy accepts a bribe, his magical bat is broken and he is defeated. With shattered dreams, Roy sobs in the street and one onlooker fan comments: “He could have been a king” (TN p.237). Alas! He could become a king only in his dreams. The rise and fall of this talented athlete seems to be an ironical counterpart of the American Dream.

A folk hero in a society elevates himself from the rest of lesser mortals and reassures them of his heroism. In other words, he shares the dream of so many fellow citizens as is stated by Iris Lemon: “Without heroes we’re all plain people and don’t know how far we can go” (TN p.154). When a hero like Roy fails, along with him fail the aspirations of millions of Americans as it proves to be “a tragic joke” not only on him but “on all of us” but still life is full of paradoxes as “the nightmare of frustration of defeat” also serves as a “fantasy of heroism” (Baumbach, p.110)

The narrative of unfortunate beings can be seen as a positive aspect in understanding the self as suffering also has redemptive powers as envisioned by Iris Lemon: “Suffering is what brings us toward happiness” (TN p.158).

One frequent feature of all heroes of Malamud is that all of them were born into poor families and left their parents or were deprived of them in early childhood for better or worse and would always be attached to their past, although not haunted by it. Rather the past becomes a part of their existence. Behind those surrealistic airs, the message is very clear that there are no new lives but to a certain extent they are illusions and dissatisfaction only.

Malamud’s moral regarding suffering is developed through some symbols including the one of a Jew for a good man struggling and suffering for existence and the symbol of prison for the limitations of human life on earth. Much repeated and celebrated quote from Malamud ‘All men are Jews except they do not know it’ signifies the symbol of Jew (Richman, p. 146). All protagonists of Malamud have to suffer and through suffering, the redemptive forces make them experienced and mature in their vision about life, and to achieve this, at times they have to go through some trials of conscience and they can pass the trial either through the spiritual guidance of a fatherly figure or through his own troubled conscience accompanied by mercy, love, commitment or forgiveness.

All protagonists initially find themselves in desperate situations and try to escape from that. Next they find justification for their actions and then ultimately through redemption comes the purification. By that time they must have realised that God will not intervene to give a justification to their actions rather they have to find it within themselves. After internal conflicts and dilemmas they ultimately gain moral victory, maybe at the cost of material physical gains. Outwardly the circumstances may appear to be the same yet there may be an



internal transformation and they may have spiritual elevation from their surroundings. At one time the store may be a tomb or a prison and at the other time it may become a sacred place of duty or means of deliverance. The whole difference is of attitude, changed vision, self-realisation in the face of hardships and sufferings.

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