

**THE REVELATION OF AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S
*THE MAGIC BARREL***

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ABSTRACT

All Americans immortalize America as the land of freedom. American Experience argues for independence of mind and deed. American Experience upholds capitalism, savings, free enterprise, and privatization. There is the sustained focus on the equality of opportunities and the equality before law. American Experience underscores the fact that diplomacy is the first line of defence and militarism is the second line of approach to solve problems. It places the stress on candour, self-reliance, progress, affirmation, pragmatism and dynamism and distinct individualistic identity, and at the same time places the emphasis on American mainstream culture. This paper aims at revealing the American experience a Jew encounters in the land of freedom. Bernard Malamud obviously brings it out in his short story collection *THE MAGIC BARREL*.

KEYWORDS:

Globalization, Democracy, Candour.

.... America has stood for three and a half centuries as a “city upon a Hill”. Its Puritans and philosophers, Daniel Boones and George Babbits, frontiers and market places, mobility and abundance continue to make the United States a laboratory of national character.... [Luther S. Luedtke, “Introduction: The Search for American Character”, in *Making America: The Society and Culture of the United States*, 1989, p. 29]

American Experience is distinct, unique and singularly famous. The world is the beneficiary if the parameters governing American Experience become the national experience of all the nations. American Experience has so much to offer by way of learning, training and developing for individuals and nations. With New York identified, established, and globally accepted as the Capital of the world, and with America experiencing positive influences on all the Nations of the world, there is absolutely the felt need to know the history, politics, government, sociology, inter-cultural and multi-racial

rooted-ness, womanism, America and American literary strengths, and America's spectral reachability, and the maximized limits and potentialities of American Experience in an integrated manner.

American Experience is a way into the great issues of American mainstream culture and the national character of America. It is a lively and creative exercise for it offers an understanding of the social, economic, political, cultural, moral, spiritual forces that have shaped the American nation into what she is today. There is a careful consideration of all the parameters governing American Experience. It is in the precise sense that American Experience is based on equality, candour, self-reliance, individualism, liberty, freedom, democratic processes, and readiness to confront all hardships and all odds, and all challenges of life, free enterprise, privatization, and free trade.

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America and Democracy are convertible terms right from the days of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. The glorious definition of Abraham Lincoln is that American Democracy is the pragmatic form of government of the people, by the people, for the people. In letter and spirit this is put into effectual practice.

The Holy Bible to the Americans is sacred, supreme, and sovereign. Their faith in the American Constitution is supreme and sovereign. It is next to that of their faith in *The Holy Bible*. In fact, all Americans are constructionists.

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As the twentieth century closes, Americans feel secure, prosperous, and confident. They see the United States of America as the world's most important and powerful country, with the fear of

armed threats from a rival superpower diminished. In an era of increasing globalization, Americans view economic rather than military power as the most significant measure of global strength.

All writers incarnate America and depict the true nature of America and create the right feel of America. In fine, they make America and American Experience come alive on their pages as it were in flesh and blood. Moreover, the American writers portray her charm, power and strength. However, they are not blind to her prodigious faults and colossal mistakes. But what they admire in America is the fact that America is always on the move.

The American writers are conscious of the fact that their eulogy of the country that they love is not unfounded. For one thing, America is a nation strongly founded on democratic principles. They realize in their lifetime that American democracy provides the best environment for the individualist to grow, expand, and rise to his full stature. They understand America as the land of equal brood, as the land of geniality, and as a land of opportunities to all the people to the measure of their desert.

It is left to the individualist to rely on one's own self and work out his or her particular destiny. Furthermore, nothing could be thrust down the throat of the individualist. It is because all the citizens of America reacted as one body, if the government proclaimed that there could be nothing beyond the State, and everything should be for the state and in the state.

The American intellectuals, like Malamud, for instance, denounce collectivism. Furthermore, American Experience places the accent on the individual safeguarding his separate identity though he is of different racial origins. The American intellectuals who value American Experience recommend new conditions of life, which, they argue, ensures one's identity. One enjoys the identity only if one has the ability to remain the same, notwithstanding the varying aspects and differing conditions of life.

The title story, "**THE MAGIC BARREL**", was Malamud's prizewinning first short fiction collection, **THE MAGIC BARREL** is one of most frequently discussed works of short fiction. It is a quintessential Malamud in form and content, and perhaps most of all in moral vision; the story combines elements of realism and fantasy in an urban, Jewish

setting, and centres on the protagonist's struggle to break through the barriers of personal isolation. While Malamud's handling of such themes as love, community, redemption, and Jewish identity has been widely praised, he is also noted for his creative use of ambiguity.

The short fiction, "**THE MAGIC BARREL**", focuses on the interaction of two main characters, a young unmarried rabbinical student named Leo Finkle and PnySalzman, a vulgar, yet colourful, marriage broker who smells distinctly of fish. At the story's outset, an acquaintance advises Finkle that it will be much easier for him to find a congregation after graduation if he is married. Having spent his life studying, Finkle has little experience in the area of romance and reluctantly decides to engage the services of Salzman. The marriage broker shows Finkle numerous pictures of potential brides from his "magic barrel" and comments on their qualities, particularly their ages, educational backgrounds, family connections, and the size of their dowries.

Finkle, however, seems uninterested in Salzman's usual selling points and constructs flimsy excuses for rejecting many of the candidates. Salzman eventually convinces Finkle to meet a

woman named Lily Hirschorn. During his traumatic encounter with Hirschorn, Finkle recognizes that his life has been emotionally empty and that he has lacked the passion to love either God or other humans.

Finkle's discovery of a picture of Salzman's daughter, Stella, prompts him to act on his self-knowledge. Distinctive from the women in the previous photographs, Stella appears to be someone who has lived and suffered deeply. Salzman refers to her as a fallen woman, stating that she should burn in hell, and argues that the presence of her picture among the others was a mistake and that she is not the woman for Finkle.

Finkle remains strongly attracted to Stella and envisions an opportunity to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The story's concluding tableau is highly ambiguous. It depicts Finkle running toward Stella, who is standing under a lamppost dressed in a white dress and red shoes, while Salzman stands next to a wall around the corner, chanting the kaddish, a prayer for the dead.

In Malamud's fiction, **THE MAGIC BARREL**, the protagonist Leo Finkle follows the tradition of the old world, at the beginning. As a rabbinical student Leo

Finkle understands adhering to law, to ritual, to custom; so, to pick a wife. Leo consults a marriage broker because his own parents had been brought together by a matchmaker. Salzman, the marriage broker, is a man of business with a ritual. For him, first comes family, then the amount of dowry, and finally kind of promises.

The ritual progresses towards strict standards and specifications in order to better bargain. Such ritual is not a part of the American myth, which has its centre a virtual lack of history and tradition. The marriage broker is an element in a tradition that is not American. Even Leo realizes the un-American tone of matchmaking when he inquires about one of Salzman's clients. The text reads thus [*Magic Barrel*, 1956, p. 27]:

I [Leo] don't understand why an American girl should go to a marriage broker. . . .

Salzman is part of a profession that existed long before Jamestown, so, properly, that profession has established procedures, ritualized and orderly, to accomplish the bargain in an unemotional way. Leo requests the old-world tradition because his is an old world personality. His severe scholar's nose and ascetic lips

illustrate an inactive life. He studies without time for a social life even in the midst of that entire all-American place, New York City. No women, no laughter, no dancing, drinking or theatre going accompanied his life.

Likewise, Leo lacks decisiveness, another American characteristic. Leo wants someone else to act and to decide for him - - not a reflection of the American independent streak - - rather than to experiment and experience on his own. Leo's Lack of initiative parallels his lack of emotion - - at least emotions other than embarrassment and uncertainty. His first exposure to matchmaking disconcerts him. By nightfall, however, he had regained sufficient calm to sink his nose into a book and there found peace from his thoughts.

Leo's old world traits make him incapable of finding, pursuing, or captivating an American woman. However, the development in the story is the development of Leo's American personality that finally enables him to love Stella. Malamud parallels this development with the coming of spring and warmth, symbols of fertility and freshness long associated with America, the New World. Leo's first change is toward emotionality. Showing emotion may not be a signal of maturity, but it

certainly is an element in the typical American personality, which is characteristically youthful and exaggerated. The change begins after Leo's epiphany about his own religion: he found himself possessed by shame and fear. The text reads thus. [*Magic Barrel*, 1956, p. 39]:

I [Leo] think that I came to God not because I loved Him but because I did not.
...

Leo sees his own lack of emotion and his heart begins to pump out feelings from that moment. Subsequently, Leo was infuriated and he swore and his anger rose when he looked at Stella's photograph and let out a cry. Leo was astounded and overjoyed when he burst out. As his emotion about Stella increases, so does he bent toward action.

Leo would never have known his desires if his Americanization had not included for him a change toward decisiveness. Leo's conversion to American traditions reveals itself through his newly developed emotionality, action, and decisiveness. These traits are fostered, obviously, by self-awareness, suffering and love; a woman is the catalyst for each of these. Through this conversion, Leo demonstrates one of the American

paradoxes: *E Pluribus Unum*. The rabbinical student has long been alone. However, to be American he must be independent, which ironically occurs only after his close association with people. He must know others to be himself; he must be a part of society to be himself. Leo must love other persons to love humanity. With this balance of the one and the many, Leo's decisions, actions, and emotions are fully American. Thus through the character Leo Malamud projects the *Melting Pot* brewing up new commitments in Leo, the American.

The American artists know that America allows through her systems and structures political choice fairly and equally to all her citizens to determine their government. And in this lies the strength of America's political system, which is the core of American Experience. The fact remains that it is America that offers the writers the scope, freedom, and encouragement to shape into unique, original and individualistic artists and thereby gains eminence.

In their candour, in their handling of the theme of love, sex, and violence the Americans have established their American ingenuity and American character. But each has his own way of projecting America and underscoring

American Experience as the staple of American mainstream culture.

It is because of America being the land of freedom, which is the main feature of American Experience; the American intellectuals voice their protests against the injustices and ills of the society and the American Establishment, in the spirit of the *Old Testament* prophets. Therefore, the quest for identity as a challenging issue of life engages the minds of the American intellectuals. With their American ingenuity the American intellectuals subject the major theme of identity to a close and critical analysis, and study the question of identity in terms of its loss and the consequent search for it.

It is only America the land of freedom that offers poetic license to the greatest extent to the artists. In no other country the intellectuals enjoy that amount of artistic freedom to the extent as the American intellectuals do in America. That is why the American intellectuals such as Malamud and others glorify America as the land of artistic freedom.

Moreover, sex is subjected to literary treatment by the American intellectuals like Malamud with his

greatest freedom, openness and candour. In fact, candour is an American virtue. Whitman in his *Preface to the Leaves of Grass* observes thus [*Nineteenth Century American Literature: An Anthology*, 1965, p. 127]:

How beautiful is candour!

All faults are forgiven of him that has candour [My Emphasis]. . . .

END NOTES:

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