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COMIC DESIGN IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S *A NEW LIFE*

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Abstract:-Malamud uses comic situations, witty dialogues, irony and humor in *A New Life* to affirm his liberal and humanist values. The staid academic atmosphere of the conservative college is lifted by the use of humor. He also brings into sharp through the comic design of the novel the ongoing debate about the predominance of vocational courses over arts subjects, state funding of educational institutions, academic freedom and behavioral aberrations of the teaching faculty. Thus the paper highlights the functional aspect of the comic design of *A New Life* which besides providing innocent laughter also serves to highlight various issues related to the academic world.

Keywords: Humor, irony, comedy, theme, highlights academic world.

INTRODUCTION:

Different critics have given passing references to the comic design of *A New Life* but it has never been studied in detail. The novel involves “bawdy situations and employ the earthy humor, burlesque, and slapstick which derive from human lusts, mistakes, and misconduct” (Grebstein 192). According to Sheldon Norman Grebstein, “In this novel, too, the mixture of colloquial and belletristic materials generates a comic undercurrent” (207-208). Leslie Fielder observes that *A New Life* “reflects the essential comedy of the West after it has been mythicized by one generation of immigrants and is invaded by the next and the next and the next, being an account of two provincialities meeting head-on in a kind of mutual incomprehension” (154). Ruth B. Mandel views it as a “novel of ironic affirmation... for the possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic” (qtd. in Field, Introduction xxiii). But the redemption is ironic since grace is “accompanied by continual suffering” and need for continual reaffirmation of “spiritual freedom and integrity.” Furthermore, the moral law “makes one an isolated victim of the world” (xxiii-xxiv). Sheldon Norman Grebstein and Ruth Mandel find fault with Malamud's use of satire in the novel. The problem in *A New Life*, according to Sheldon Norman Grebstein, is that “the satire turns too grittily truthful, too near the quality of a roman a clef, and Levin, loveable and interesting as schlemiel-cum-lover, becomes something of a bore as academic crusader...the novel is too playful to persuade entirely as realism and not playful enough to persuade as satire” (194). Ruth Mandel declares that “the comic and satiric elements do not function thematically in relation to novel's serious theme” (269).

The use of irony and paradox, antithesis and ambiguity in the works of Malamud deserves special attention. Only when we are able to appreciate the dramatic structure of his works we shall be able to identify and signify warring and contrary feeling, emotions and attitudes of different characters to arrive at a balanced view of Malamud's genius and vision of life. Characters offer different prospective on life. Malamud uses the device of irony to expose and ridicule all the evils like sex, violence, greed, and mere carnality that afflict not only the American society but also the whole human society. He satirically exposes and analyses the causes and consequences of such evil and that amply prove his profound social concerns. He deftly makes use of humour in his works to laugh at and ridicule all such practices as deviate from reality—be it in thought, speech or action. He creates bawdy situations and uses witty dialogues not only to create humour but also to laugh at the absurdities of his characters' thinking and behaviour, whatever deviates from normative behaviour is held to ridiculous laughter by Malamud. In *A New Life* the comic structure of the novel can be properly studied only when the protagonist is studied in tandem with minor characters. By introducing Sadek, the Syrian student and Laverne, the attractive bartender, Malamud unravels Levin's weaknesses of drinking and womanizing which nearly come to shatter his vision of a new life in Cascadia college. Sadek arrives from Damascus to study at the college. Malamud's irony is evident in his description of Sadek's obsession with cleanliness: “He was majoring in sanitary bacteriology and taking courses in rat control and the bacteriology of sewage” (Malamud 73). He is respectful to Seymour, with whom he shares the accommodation, but that is mainly because Seymour is his teacher. Although he speaks English fluently, he often consults Seymour about usage. They have slightly uneasy

relationship, but they often go out together for a long walk or for a drink or two in the local taverns. The “bug-eyed Syrian” (Malamud 75) could smell the presence of a woman. In a bar, they were seducing Laverne, the bargirl, whose physical presence enticed both of them. Sadek got engaged “in wooing her in a manner that had caused Levin astonishment and embarrassment” (Malamud 76). Sadek was trying to lure her towards him. Sadek “crooned in an unknown tongue, his sensitive nose not more than an inch from her body” (Malamud 76). Later, Sadek is caught by the police as he is “pissing against the wall” (Malamud 78). As Sadek is no longer available she agrees to spend the night with Seymour even though at an outset she “showed no interest” (Malamud 77) for Levin. But later when Levin approached her she remarked “I’ve never done it before with a guy with a beard.” (Malamud 79) but she quickly agreed. Eventually she agrees to go out with him. She also showcases the strong sexual desire that always exists inside Seymour. Whenever he sees a beautiful woman, he is unable to control his emotions. This is a great weakness in his character. They go to a barn in a forest area to have sex, but their plans turn awry when Sadek arrives on the scene after giving a slip to the cops. Somehow, Levin has the following conversation with her: “Your breasts,” he murmured, “smell like hay.” “I always wash well,” she said. “I meant it as a compliment”.... In front of cows, he thought. Now I belong to the ages.” (Malamud 82) When he finds out that Levin is sleeping with Laverne, he arrives at the scene and runs away with the clothes that Seymour and the woman have discarded:

Someone entered the barn, snatched their clothes off the hay bale and ran out.

‘Sadek,’ Levin called ‘Come back, you bastard.’ He chased after him but the Syrian was faster. He popped through the wire fence, dropping something but escaping with most of the clothes. A taxi was waiting in the road. The door slammed and the car drove off. Levin furiously shook his fist.

At the fence he found one of Laverne’s shoes and her brassiere. He found nothing else there but near the barn he stepped on cloth and was overjoyed to pick up his pants. (Malamud 82)

Malamud introduces through Sadek and Laverne comic elements in the narrative. But he ends up almost half the night walking with her; she, with a bra, a horse blanket, and his pants on, and he, only having his shorts on. The way Sadek elopes with the lovers’ clothes and the way Levin runs after him, raising his fist and shouting choicest abuses is indeed a piece of comedy. It is very cold outside and they have to walk stark naked in the darkness for many kilometers before they can find some help. “My ass is frozen.” (Malamud 83) She blames Seymour for not being tough enough on Sadek and refuses to see him again. Levin thus jeopardizes his teaching career, which is yet to begin by getting lured by the charms of a temptress. She further dampens his sagging spirits: “You sure are some fine flop... It’s what I get for picking you instead of waiting for the one with guts” (Malamud 83) He botches things with Laverne -- “Don’t ever let me see you again in your whole goddam life,” (Malamud 85) she shouts in farewell. After his misadventure all through the night, Levin is late for his class which happens to be his first. His nervousness is clearly visible when he finds that the fly of his pants was “all the way open” (Malamud 90).

Levin’s attempts at all-chastisement, and his odyssey to enjoy sex with Nadalee indeed raise boisterous laughter but all these episodes have serious thematic function. Levin’s professed aim to lead a new life is always thwarted by his weakness for women—be she a bartender, a colleague or a student. His newly professed idealism is thrown to wind the minute he lays his eyes on Nadalee, a student in his class. She is described as “a slim girl with short dark-brown hair, pretty, with greenish eyes, mature face, and shapely figure” (Malamud 136). She is tempestuous, like some people’s emotions. She attracts Levin with tight-fitting, bright-colored clothes and “spicy perfume” (Malamud 137). She is a scheming temptress who wants to entice Levin in her charms: “One day as they were sitting together in his office, discussing her latest theme... Nadalee, imperceptibly leaning forward, nuzzled her hard little breast against Levin’s lonely elbow” (Malamud 136). When Levin removes his arm, she repeats the action and then again for the third time so that Levin is left with no misconception. It is a deliberate action and after two minutes when she has left his office, there is “not the vaguest sign of a blush on her, although Levin glowed as with high fever” (Malamud 136). The temptress had struck Levin and “she was in his mind so tenaciously it wearied him” (Malamud 137). He is tormented by the hunger for Nadalee’s body and his resolve not to fall for temptations:

The next day the sight of her skirt clinging to her thighs was enough to upset him. After once glancing at her, every line lovely, conscious of his relentless consciousness of her he vowed not to look again, and managed not to that morning, but it was worse later when he was alone. Desire butchered him. He beheld his slaughtered face in the mirror and stared at it, wretched. How escape the ferocious lust that enflamed and tormented his thoughts as it corroded his will? Why must Levin’s un-lived life put him always in peril? Why obsessively seek what was lost—un-lived—in the past? He had no wish to be Faust, or Gatsby; or St. Anthony of Somewhere, who to conquer his torment, had nipped off his balls. Levin wanted to be himself, at peace in present time. (Malamud 138)

The reader is rather amused by Malamud’s description of various means of self-control used by Levin to douse the flame of passion that was consuming his mind and body. He thus reasons with him:

I have evil thoughts, expensive to my spirit; they represent my basest self. I must expunge them by will, no weak thing in man. I must live by responsibility, an invention of mine in me. The girl trusts me, I can’t betray her. If I want sex I must be prepared to love, and love may mean marriage. (I live by my nature, not Casanova’s.) If I’m not prepared to marry her I’d better stay away. He exhorted himself: teach her only grammar, the principle parts of verbs, spelling, punctuation—nothing not in the syllabus. He would not let the casual brush of a girl’s breast against his sleeve seduce him into acting without honor. The self would behave as it must. She would not make a fool of him, much less a worm. He would, in denial, reveal the depth of his strongest, truest strength. Character over lust. By night, after these terrible exertions, including two cold showers, Levin’s

mind was comparatively calm—he had bludgeoned desire, and though exhausted, beaten half to death by the bloody club he carried against the self, felt more or less at peace. (Malamud 139-140)

But Levin is Levin and he is tempted by all temptations. Nadalee is a scheming “temptress” (Malamud 140) and Levin's arguments, rationalisations and exhortations to score victory of “character over lust” (Malamud 140) vaporises like dew before the sun. As Nadalee comes to see him next day, she freely admits that she had enjoyed sex earlier also and was not at all “little- innocent” (Malamud 141). When Levin urges her to keep complete secrecy about the affair, she suggests her aunt's motel on the coast as their love nest. Malamud's description of Levin's pathetic condition is full of irony and sarcasm. He says, “Levin resisted every sentence but his imagination was whipped to froth. Who could resist Eden?” (Malamud 142). Next Friday, Levin begins his sexcapade and, like the knight, faces and conquers all impediments to win his lady love. Malamud's description of his sex voyage is highly comic. But once the sexual passion subsides, Levin starts thinking of the threat looming large over his teaching career if somebody came to know of the teacher-student affair. So he becomes indifferent to her. When she again meets him and proposes another tryst during Christmas vacations, he gives a cold shoulder to her proposal as is evident from the following descriptions:

'But we will meet now and again, won't we, Seymour?'
'Now and then,' Levin said. 'We might go for walks along the river.'
She looked at him curiously. 'Is something wrong? Did I do something you didn't like?'
'Oh, no,' he said 'nothing of the sort. It's just that we have to be very careful, I told you that.'
'Then when during Christmas will we meet? I could find an excuse to stay on at the dorm and maybe we could go to your room sometime, or something like that if it could be arranged.'
'That would be nice but I may be going to San Francisco during Christmas,' Levin said.
'Oh, swell! Wouldn't it be nice if we could go together? I'd pay my own way, of course.'
He said it would be except he had promised a colleague he might go along with him, in the other's car.
'Oh,' said Nadalee.

Though they talked longer, she seemed, when she left to have grown cool to him. He observed this with regret. He was treating her badly. (Malamud 156)

When his guilt-stricken conscience pricks for having sexual affair with a student, he becomes very strict with Nadalee and awards her C grade. When she expresses her unhappiness over the marking of her paper, she is absolutely right when she asks him, “ 'Aren't you punishing me because you did something you shouldn't have ' ” (Malamud 157). To hide his guilt, he tells her that he “thought it wouldn't be fair to mark you on one standard and everyone else on another (Malamud 158). Nadalee retorts sarcastically, “ 'I see there were things you could bring yourself to do when they suited you ' ” (Malamud 158). The affair ends the way other affairs with Laverne and Avis have ended, revealing thereby Levin's weakness of character. These comic episodes serve to expose Levin's obsession with drinking and womanising which poses a serious challenge and threat to his quest of new life. In the novel even Fairchild's obsessive habit of equating a whiskered person with a drunkard and Bucket's frequent, even inappropriate use of quotations from Sterne, the writer on whose works he has written a dissertation, create humour in a rather dismal world of 'scholars'. Malamud rails and scoffs at every kind of deviation from normal behaviour and thinking. Oddities and eccentricities of his characters become source of bawdy humour and comic situations. It is through Bucket that Malamud presents the oppressive atmosphere of the Cascadia College. Everybody in the department is secretive because nobody has full faith in one's colleagues. When Levin voices his dissatisfaction over the functioning of the department, Bucket goes into the hall to find out whether there is any eavesdropper around. Satisfied that there is none around, he advises Levin not to speak loudly: “ 'You might keep your voice down ' ” (Malamud 114). Bucket is secretive about everything. When Levin “knocked on the jamb,” Bucket tries to hide his papers lest Levin should know what he is doing: “Bucket hastily covered the papers on his desk with a folder and swiveled to face his visitor” (Malamud 114). Through his secretive behaviour, Malamud is commenting on the lack of mutual faith and understanding in the department. There is hardly any mention of the feelings of camaraderie in the department. The way he sandwiches his conversations and observations with Sterne's quotations is a source of hearty laughter:

'I admire your patience.'
'Tis known by the name of perseverance in a good cause, – and of obstinacy in a bad.'
'Sterne?'
'Touche.' (Malamud 114)

So does Algene, Bucket's wife, whose quotations from Sterne again raise laughter and are the source of humour in the novel: 'Joe never complains,' Algene said. 'His motto is: 'Labor, sorrow, grief, sickness, want and woes are the sauces of life.'

'Sources?'
'Sauces'
'From Sterne?' Levin asked.
'What else?' (Malamud 91)

The aforesaid analysis clearly brings out the comic structure of the novel which involves bawdy situations, witty dialogues, burlesque and slapstick deriving their origin from human lusts, mistakes and misconduct. It is by focussing our attention on the study of comic designs of the novel that we can be initiated into the proper understanding of the lofty and serious purpose of humour in his novels. Besides providing comic relief, Malamud's use of humour is geared towards re-affirming his set of value. His humour ranges from innocent laughter to cynical satire, is never without the bedrock of a humanist and a liberal outlook on life which informs all his fiction. Humour also helps to uplift the otherwise staid atmosphere of a conservative college. Malamud skillfully creates comic situations, uses wit and irony to create humor in the novel. Besides providing comic relief, Malamud's use of humor is geared towards re-affirming his set of value.

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