



Defying the American Melting Pot Theory: A Study Through Bernard Malamud's *the Tenants*

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ABSTRACT

My objective in this paper is to contradict the popularly held notion that American society is a Melting pot, which is in reality a "Cultural Mosaic" of different races and communities as manifested in American ethnic literature. The elements of ethnic diversity dominate the ethnic literature which gives rise to a different concept of Americanness. The picture of the American society, as it appears to us, is an amalgamation of different cultures merging into one common "American" culture. When we use the expressions like "Jewish-American", "Afro-American", and "Native-American", we tend to place a hyphen to establish a link between the ethnic groups and America which is suggestive of a sense of equality and not a way of withdrawing from the rest of the society. In an Urban environment where everyone including the Native-American was something else besides being "American", one had to be an ethnic to find one's place on the map.

KEYWORDS : Ethnicity, Differentiation, conflict, immigrants

Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants* which appeared in the year 1971 is directly concerned with the theme of ethnic conflict. Responding to the reason of writing the novel, Malamud said, "Jews and blacks, the period of the troubles in New York city, the teachers' strike, the rise of black activism, the mix-up of cause and effect. I thought I'd say a word" (Stern 61). *The Tenants* treats the issue of anti-Jewish sentiment of the Blacks in the 1960s, though the Jewish support was there for various Black causes. The pertinent question about American ethnicity is not why there is differentiation in American society but why the ethnic coding system becomes a relevant chart of differentiation for many Americans under certain sets of circumstances. Ethnicity reveals itself as a relatively safe form of differentiation. While there may be conflict and competition among the various ethnic groups, the conflict is rarely violent. Society has implicitly legitimated ethnic differentiation and has provided protocols and processes whereby the potential conflict that could arise from such differentiation is minimized. It is argued that ethnicization is the process by which immigrants from one society become ethnic in another.

In *The Tenants*, Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint reflect each other's prejudices. Even before Willie arrives on the scene, Harry's nightmares contain a black thug that he meets on the stairs. He wonders what it would be like to sleep with a black girl. Malamud presents Willie at times, as a stereotypical black man, one who responds easily to music and actually says: "Don't nobody have to tell me about rhythm" (*The Tenants* 87). Harry's reaction to the white, Jewish Irene being Willie's "sweet bitch", is laden with jealousy, not in the least because a black man is sleeping with her. When Harry and Irene sleep together, he denies it but Irene is aware of the racial implications "...I have this awful feeling as though you and I are a couple of Charlies giving a nigger a boot in the ass" (*The Tenants* 148). Perhaps even more than Harry, who tries early on to compensate for his prejudice by helping Willie with his writing, Willie is full of bigotry, as he is both anti-White and anti-Jewish. Upon first meeting Harry, Willie refuses to shake his hand. His loss of Irene to Harry hurts Willie's pride. She is more of a status symbol to him than anything else, because Willie refers to her when first introducing her to Harry as "his white chick, not giving her name" (*The Tenants* 42). As the prestige of a Blackman having a White woman wanes politically, so Willie begins to end his relationship with Irene, refusing to hold her hand in public or to take her to Harlem.

Willie's central concern in his own writing is to express the sufferings of Blacks at the hands of Whites. He feels that Whites are incapable of understanding black experience or black feelings, and so cannot tell anything of use about themselves. Indeed, he feels it is offensive when Whites presume to try to write about blacks. Harry's attitude is that of an artist, a believer in the universality of which art is capable. He tells Willie "if you're an artist you can't be a nigger..." (*The Tenants* 51) and "if the experience is about being human and moves me then you've made it my experience" (*The Tenants* 75). His stress is on the importance of form, which Willie resists as being part of White, not black writing. Willie

and Harry frequently see aspects of themselves in each other. Both are struggling as writers to put into order on paper elements of their experiences which they even do not fully understand. Harry lacks Willie's orientation to life, to real experience; Willie needs more of Harry's understanding of form, as when Harry tells him, "You can't turn black experience into literature just be writing it down" (*The Tenants* 74). Each writer becomes the other's victim because neither is capable of a sufficient depth of sympathy for the struggles and limitations of the other.

The tenement in which Harry and Willie entomb themselves effectively blocks out much of the real world. When the world does enter demanding concern and compassion, as with a whimpering dog with a bleeding eye, Harry immediately removes it from the building, ignoring sounds of "muted cries, distant wailing..." (*The Tenants* 24) that seems to float in from the city outside. The isolation of Harry and Willie in the tenement permits Malamud to focus on them in great detail. There is also a symbolic parallel between the disintegrating building and the state of race relations in the United States. The building may be seen to verge on becoming an objective correlative for the emotions roused by the claustrophobic nature of the protagonists' obsessions with writing and the jungle like ferocity of their eventual confrontations, in which racial issues are predominant. *The Tenants* is an essentially gloomy and pessimistic novel, not possessing even the limited and qualified optimism that exists at the end of *The Fixer*. Given what has happened in the story, the likelihood of the interracial wedding that took place at the end of the novel between Harry and Mary and Willie and Irene is remote. With the possible exception of Irene, none of the characters is particularly amenable to sympathy from the reader. Cynthia Ozick, however, thinks that characterizations are flawed, but not completely so: "The balance was unequal, the protagonists unfairly matched, the Jew too hesitant and disciplined, the black too spontaneous and unschooled" (90). Lesser talks about universality but uses his writing for the most subjective, egoistic reasons and a private search for self. On the other hand, Willie, who realizes his writing as a search for identity, egoistically believes that his own identity equals all black identity. Both Lesser and Willie lack insight into humanity and life, a sense of objective purpose, insight into their own past and cultural heritage, and a clear sense of where they stand as individuals or as artists. Willie and Lesser are representative men, microcosms of the nation. Lesser who wants to write about love and truth, loves only self and tells only enough truth to preserve his own false self-image. Willie, who wants to write for black freedom, attaches himself to a White girl for physical support and a White man for moral encouragement, a White man he constantly refers to as "Lesser man". Yet Willie refuses to admit that the souls of the Whites are the same as his own, that Whites do feel as he does, given the same situations, that compassion can be shared between black and White for either to flourish. In the conflict between Lesser and Willie and their foils, Malamud realizes his themes: the conflict between black and White in the American society, the relationships governing art, life, social involvement, individual commitment, and social obligations.

The three major endings take place in the concluding part of the novel and reflect the possible outcomes of black-White relations in the United States of America. The first is apparently hopeful: black and White will intermarry and solve the problem of racial conflict. However, there are many caveats and hesitations expressed. The Chief says: "when our black daughter marry the white mens we do not rejoice..." (*The Tenants* 210). The rabbi is equally nervous and "stares in amazement at the assemblage" (*The Tenants* 209), later saying: "My rabbinical colleagues will criticize me strongly for performing this ceremony..." (*The Tenants* 216). The second ending concludes a period in which Harry has destroyed Willie's typewriter, having found that his own paper gave off an unpleasant odor, that of hate. He has had a reverie of being destroyed in another fire, this time set by Willie. He now no longer writes; that is, he no longer attempts to find out about love. The building has become a jungle and each strikes the other in the place where his own group is most prone to being stereotyped, thus showing how much like the other each has become. So, Harry sinks an axe in Willie's brain and Willie cuts off Harry's balls. Like the previous ending, this one is also fantasy; it does not occur. The only hope is seen in the final phrase: "Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other" (*The Tenants* 230). But, it is too late for this feeling to have an effect.

The final ending of the novel is Levenspiel's cry for mercy. Since the first ending is unlikely, the only way to avoid the second may be through Levenspiel's plea that black and White must have mercy for each other as struggling fellow human beings. While some critics think this triple ending as inadequate, actually an avoidance of an ending, Malamud's provision of choice here mirrors the reality. Malamud admitted in an interview four years after the novel's publication: "It's impossible to

predict-it may go one way; it may go another" (Field 1975, 14)). In a climactic scene, more hallucinatory than real, the two writers meet in a dark hallway, transmuted by Lesser's fervid imagination into a primitive jungle, and lock themselves together in a bloody struggle: "Bloodsuck-in Jew Niggerhater" followed by "Anti-Semitic Ape". Acting out the last stage of their hatred for each other, Harry cleaves Willie's skull with a razor-sharp saber. The final words of the novel are Levenspiel's: as he discovers the bodies and prays for mercy-for himself, for Lesser and Willie, and for mankind- "Mercy, mercy,...mercy".

Willie and Lesser stand for two racial identities, signifying two distinctly different cultural backgrounds. Thinking of himself almost totally as an artist rather than Jew, Harry considers ethnicity an inadequate basis of art. Willie defines his writing as black writing, which no White can understand. As emblems, the Jewish writer represents a humanistic tradition that strives to advance civilization by using reason to discover the universal truths of human experience. The black writer is a symbol of a black community struggling to create a new black culture. In this sense *The Tenants* is a parable of the black-white confrontation. It pits the notion of civilized White against savage Black, love versus hate, reason versus instinct, Israel versus Ishmael. There is some irony in the fact that much of the prejudice against the Jews in America began not so much from religious hostility, as from the super energetic pursuit of the American Dream. The stereotype before World War II was largely one of acquisitiveness—Jews will make a place for them; acquire money, and status regardless of the moral cost. This pattern becomes even more alien when we stop considering the underpinnings of the American Dream.

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