



Femme Fatale in Bernard Malamud's Novel *The Natural*

Ritu Dhawan

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages, M.D. University, Rohtak (Haryana)

Abstract

Femme fatale plays a very significant role in Malamud's fiction as it is she who plays a fatal role to destroy the protagonist's 'new life'. In Malamud's first novel *The Natural*, the female characters — Harriet Bird and Memo Paris — appear as temptresses. Through these female characters Malamud presents most destructive and despicable nature of women. They are completely devoid of the feelings of love and compassion and are capable of touching the nadir of evil for their own benefit. These destructive women bring about the protagonist's fall which is a prelude to his spiritual odyssey. The grace of redemptive suffering shines on Malamud's protagonists only after their fall caused by the *femme fatale*. Besides serving the thematic structure and designs, they also serve to expose the venality of the American society which is being corroded by materialism and hypocrisy, corruption and moral apathy.

Keywords: Protagonist, destruction, evil.

The Natural has been subjected to a variety of critical interpretation. Leslie Fieldler writes that *The Natural* "was largely ignored, perhaps because the lively play of fantasy, the trifling with illusion which characterizes it disconcerted those who had picked it up expecting a 'good baseball yarn' ". "Actually," he continues, "it is a baseball story, disconcertingly out of Ring Lardner by T.S Eliot" (qtd. in Hicks 12). Jeffery Helterman finds the title of the novel ambiguous when he observes that "as Roy he is the King [French "roi"] to restore the kingdom, but his last name suggests the country bumpkin [often called Hob in the renaissance drama] who is out of place in the sophisticated world of the city" (292). Sidney

Richman has called *The Natural* "one of the most baffling novels of the 1950's ..." (28). Marcus Klein and Giles Gunn both feel that "*The Natural* fails because it doesn't answer the question it raises [why does a good man sell out?], they seem to overlook the way in which the mythic method functions in the novel to answer that question unmistakably" (34). Alan Friedman thinks that *The Natural* fails because the "baseball formula is too frail to bear the weight of imposed meaning" (928). But the role of *femme fatale* has not been explored in detail. *Femme fatale* plays a very significant role in Malamud's fiction as plays a fatal role to destroy the protagonist's 'new life'. They are completely devoid of the feelings of love and compassion and are capable of touching the nadir of evil for their own benefit. They lure the protagonists with their sexual advances and thwart their movement towards redemption. They are hypocrite temptress who lures the protagonist in their designs with their physical charm and seductive words. Each of Malamud's heroes falls into the charms of the temptress, and thus are deprived of a bright future. In Malamud's first novel *The Natural*, Harriet Bird and Memo Paris appear as temptresses seeking to destroy Roy Hobbs' dream of becoming the best in the game of baseball. Both these women want to take revenge on the protagonists for having been spurned, revealing thereby the worldly wisdom in the dictum that the wrath of a spurned woman is far more dangerous than the wrath of a dragon. Their motives and objectives are mystified and secret. Through these female characters Malamud presents most destructive and despicable nature of women. These temptresses have a very seminal role to play in the book, as they shed light only not only on

Roy's moral character, but also on the hypocrisies that exist in the society in which they live.

Harriet Bird exposes Roy's basic weakness of his character. The promising baseball player succumbs to the charms of the seductive and destructive temptress. Malamud introduces Harriet Bird as the "silver-eyed mermaid" (Malamud 10). Harriet is wearing a "dressy black dress" (Malamud 8) and has "dark curls" (Malamud 8). By associating Harriet with blackness, Malamud is hinting at the evil designs of the temptress. Malamud gives striking physical attributes to her as "when she stepped up into the train her nyloned legs made Roy's pulses dance" (Malamud 8). Her "heartbreaking legs" (Malamud 9) make an immediate impact on Roy. Jerry H. Bryant describes Harriet Bird as "a strange girl with whom Roy falls hopelessly in love, but who turns out to be his nemesis" (326). Soon, Roy is bewitched by her beauty.

The first exchange that Harriet has is with Eddie, the porter, when she arrives at the station to board the train in which Roy Hobbs is also travelling. She directs Eddie to take her luggage to her compartment while she would stay and have a cigarette. Harriet is carrying "a shiny black hat box" (Malamud 8) which she will not give to anybody as she said "Thank you but I'll carry it myself" (Malamud 9). The exchange of dialogue between Harriet and the porter serves to enhance the mystery surrounding the black beauty. Later, even at the dinner, her hat box "occupied a seat of its own" (Malamud 9). Malamud seems to be conveying that she is a deeply obsessive woman with some kind of mystery behind her actions.

Malamud introduces us to Harriet as a mysterious woman who has killed two sportspersons with "silver bullets" (Malamud 13). Her first victim is a football player and the second, an Olympic runner. The reader is left in no doubt that the third might be a baseball player. She is after "not only athletes but also the cream of the crop" (Malamud 13). Her sexy demeanour makes it easy for her to seduce sportsmen and then kill them. Her evil designs are clearly indicated when she lures Whammer and Roy to indulge in a mutual game of baseball by showing her enthusiasm for the game: "Oh, I love contests of skill" (Malamud 20). Harriet is clever and shows her

excitement about the game because she wants to discover who between Whammer and Roy is a better player. Her intentions are to seduce and kill only the player who happens to be the best. Roy wants to impress Harriet and wean her away from Whammer; so, he accepts the challenge. Malamud aptly describes her as "snappy goddess" (Malamud 25). Roy manages to win the game and Harriet shows by her behavior that she is impressed. Initially, Harriet sides with Whammer but finding Roy to be matchless in the game, she succeeds in her pursuit of finding the right victim. Here, Malamud creates suspense for the readers as a warning to the ensuing danger: "Harriet appeared startled then gasped, hiding it like a cough behind her tense fist, and vigorously applauded, her bracelets bouncing on her wrists. 'Bravo, Roy, how wonderful'" (Malamud 26). By appearing startled at first and later, applauding, Harriet makes it clear that she is not as happy about Roy's skills in the game as she pretends to be. She is clearly shocked to know that Roy aims to be a record-breaking player. Roy is clearly too enamored by her beauty to be able to fathom the hatred that is filling her mind. However, she is also keen to unravel the inner workings of Roy's mind:

Harriet brightened, saying sympathetically, 'What will you hope to accomplish, Roy?'

He had already told her but after a minute remarked, 'Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game.'

She gazed at him with touched and troubled eyes. 'Is that all?'

He tried to penetrate her question. Twice he had answered it and still she was unsatisfied. He couldn't be sure what she expected him to say 'Is that all?' he repeated 'What more is there' 'Don't you know?'

'Isn't there something over and above earthy things—some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?'

'In baseball?' (Malamud 27)

But that is not what she wants to hear him say. So she starts prodding him to talk about the money he will make and the women he will be able to seduce when he is wealthy. But Roy is

unable to see her evil designs and read her mind. With this intention, he mistakes her words as an invitation and places his hands on her body, but she withdraws from him immediately. She pretends that she loves him but on the contrary she is a crooked woman. "Crooking her arms like broken branches," she tells Roy, "' Look, I'm a twisted tree' " (Malamud 29). This exchange paves way for the later scene in which she would shoot Roy after inviting him to her hotel room. Roy goes to her hotel room without realizing her evil designs. He has sex in mind but is shocked to find Harriet pulling out a gun from her hat box. He cried out in a gruff voice:

'What's wrong here?'

She said sweetly, 'Roy, will you be the best there ever was in the game?'

'That's right.'

She pulled the trigger. (Malamud 34)

Malamud's description of Harriet as a "snappy goddess" (Malamud 25) is reinforced by the way she dances around the fallen hero. Harriet then "making muted noises of triumph and despair, danced on her toes around the stricken hero" (Malamud 35). Her triumph refers to stopping the advancement of the heroic figure. Jonathan Baumbach puts it, "Roy destiny's hero, tells his American dream to Harriet Bird ("certainly a snappy goddess"), destiny's destroyer. Harriet gives him the hero's reward, a silver bullet in the stomach. Record-breakers are made to be broken" (97-98). It is an accurate observation that her "...presence broods over the entire novel" (Helterman 25). Tony Tanner believes that in her destructive role, "Harriet shoots him, thus, inflicting the symbolic wound which ends his youthful, fatally solipsistic promise" (325). Bernard Malamud wants the readers to understand that Harriet is only interested in killing the best players. Harriet plays a small and yet the most important role in the novel. She helps the reader to gain a better insight into Roy's weakness for women and she also helps in making the story move forward. Her overall function and role in the narrative emerges to be of the scheming temptress who spells doom for the athletes. She is highly devoid of human sentiments. Critics like Edwin M. Eigner, instead of viewing her destructive role in the overall design of the

novel, simplifies the whole issue by saying that such ordeals have to be faced by the Knight to achieve his goal, "for her temptation of the knight is simply a test which he must pass before she can transform him into her ardently desired lover" (89). Under the impact of such a selfish woman, Roy destroys "the natural" within him. It is his blind passion for beautiful women that nearly destroys his career.

The process of Roy's decline initiated by Harriet is brought almost to completion by Memo Paris, another *femme fatale*. It is through her character that Malamud points out Roy's inherent weakness for beautiful women. There are very close similarities between Memo and Harriet. Like Harriet, Memo is also wearing black dress when she first appears in the novel. But unlike Harriet's, Memo's motives in playing the role of a quintessential *femme fatale* in destroying Roy's career completely are very clean and loud. She is Bump's girl-friend who assumes the role of "vindictive temptress" (Briganti 151). She is a beautiful girl "who sat without wifehood in the wives' box behind third base" (Malamud 71) to watch Bump play. Roy takes over Bump's position in the team after he accidentally hits fence and dies in a baseball match. After Bump dies, she weeps "as if faucet was broken" (Malamud 80). Before Bump's death, Memo was always "full of life" (Malamud 112) but his death makes her a "mourner" (Malamud 81). Memo would never forgive Roy for Bump's death. So, in order to take her revenge, she lures Roy towards her. To quote Jonathan Baumbach: "A chronic victim of misplaced love, Roy, however, is fatally attracted to the personification of his unlucky fate. Inevitably, she brings about his downfall" (109). Memo is a clever hand at these love games and she would spurn all his advances only to whet his appetite for her more and more:

Once a hungry desire sent him down to knock at her door but she shut it in his face although he was standing there with his hat in his embarrassed hands....And from other cities, when the team was on the road, he sent her cards, candies, little presents, which were all stuffed in his mailbox when he returned. It took the heart out of him. (Malamud 82)

Roy was confident that "he could beat" (Malamud 82) her and soon he would

entice her by being superior to Bump as an athlete and as a money making player. Roy was infatuated with her but to get her, his accomplishments were not entirely satisfying to him. He was gnawed by a negative impatience—so much more to do, so much of the world to win for himself: “He felt he had nothing of value yet to show for what he was accomplishing, and in his dreams he still sped over endless miles of monotonous rail toward something he desperately wanted. Memo, he sighed” (Malamud 85). Roy always imagined her “in the act of love she lived in his mind” (Malamud 71). Roy wanted to make all possible efforts to get her completely and with this in mind he meets Judge to request him to raise his salary. This shows that Roy is immediately in the trap of the beguiling temptress. Memo excites Roy but does not allow him to have sex with her. As a matter of fact in denying sex to Roy she makes him run after her more. With her presence, Roy plays magnificently in the game. But later when she refuses to go out to movies with him, he becomes restless. He is unable to play the next day so much so that it goes without a “bingle” (Malamud 125). The temptress was weakening his natural capacities which led to his ruin.

In thematic context, Memo represents the allure of sex without love. She, in fact, is the seductive agent of Judge Banner, the owner of Roy’s team and Gus Sands, the bookie. Memo tells Roy that Gus is “ ‘just like a daddy’ ” (Malamud 113) to her and portrays a false picture. Memo is also extremely money-minded. With the money of Gus Sands, she arranges a party. In party, she keeps on loading Roy with more and more food saying “All the food is very fresh” (Malamud 180) and the ordeal goes until Roy falls sick with great pain. Memo is acting as Gus’s agent to ensure the defeat of Roy’s team and this is possible only if Roy is not able to play well.

In the hospital, he is advised by doctors to say good-bye to the game. At this moment, Memo persuades Roy to sign a contract with Judge for a big amount so that they could live comfortably after marriage. Memo uses all possible means to exploit the situation. The character of Memo lacks dignity and truthfulness. Memo’s aim is just to lure Roy and destroy his natural talents and hit him psychologically. She wants him to compromise with the spirit of the game for her own larger gains. Taking consideration of the

materialistic American society, Iska Alter finds her to be “an exponent of the business of commercial sensuality” (6). Memo delivers a message from Judge to Roy for the betrayal of the team. Roy enters into agreement at the cost of his soul reminding the reader of Faustus selling his soul to Mephistopheles. As Iska Alter says, “For Malamud, the need for money, and therefore power, becomes the concrete emblem of popular, superficial notions of success and accomplishment, ultimately corrupting all facets of the national experience—moral, economic, and sensual” (4).

It is only when Roy has lost everything that he realizes the ulterior motives of destructive temptress. When he is trying to avenge himself by beating up Gus Sands, she intervenes: “Don’t touch him, you big bastard. He’s worth a million of your kind.” Roy says, “You act all right, Memo, but only like a whore” (Malamud 229). They have shed every figment of pretentiousness and Memo appears like a whore and her associates, Gus and Judge, are nothing more than a pair of hoodlums. Later in the scene Memo picks up the gun and tries to shoot Roy. However, the bullet goes past him after only scratching his neck. Memo’s final words to Roy accurately subsume the pernicious hatred that fills her heart: “ ‘You filthy scum, I hate your guts and always have since the day you murdered Bump’ ” (Malamud 230). In the climax to the novel, she ends up playing a key role in the destruction of his playing career. Marc L. Ratner believes that Roy’s “rapid decline is accelerated by Memo’s poisoning him” (670). Memo takes advantage of his weakness and destroys him. She is undoubtedly a calculating schemer but in her depiction, Malamud is also portraying the stark reality of American society. In the words of Sandy Cohen, Memo now reveals herself as “the bitch- goddess of the American dream” (12). Robert Shulman calls Memo as “the false princess of the waste land,...that dark temptress, is in league with the evil antagonists and black magicians of this book, as opposed to Roy as clown, savior, and white magician. Memo is ‘bad’ influence, and through her a complex of American values concerning money and success are brought to a focus” (401).

These destructive women bring about the protagonist’s fall which is a prelude to his spiritual odyssey. The grace of redemptive

suffering shines on Malamud's protagonists only after their fall caused by the *femme fatale*. Besides serving the thematic structure and designs, they also serve to expose the venality of the American society which is being corroded by materialism and hypocrisy, corruption and moral apathy.

References

- [1] Abramson, Edward A. *Bernard Malamud Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. Print.
- [2] Alter, Iska. *The Good Man's Dilemma: Social Criticism in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud*. New York: AMS Press, 1981. Print.
- [3] Baumbach, Jonathan. "Malamud's Heroes. The Fate of Fixers." *Commonweal* 28 Oct. 1966: 97-99. Print.
- [4] Baumbach, Jonathan. *The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: New York UP, 1965. Print.
- [5] Briganti, Chiara. "Mirrors, Windows and Peeping Toms: Women as the Object of Voyeuristic Scrutiny in Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* and *Dubin's Lives*." *SAJL* 3 (1983): 151-165. Print.
- [6] Bryant, Jerry H. *The Open Decision. The Contemporary American Novel and its Intellectual Background*. New York: The Free Press, 1970. Print.
- [7] Ducharme, Robert. *Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Malamud*. Paris: Mouton, 1974. Print.
- [8] Eigner, Edwin M. "The Loathly Ladies." *Field and Field* 85-108.
- [9] Friedman, Alan W. "Bernard Malamud. The Hero as Schnook." *Southern Review* 4 (1968): 927-944. Print.
- [10] Helterman, Jeffery. "Bernard Malamud." *American Novelists Since World War II: Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Ed. Jeffery Helterman and Richard Layman. II Detroit: Gale, 1978. 291-304. Print.
- [11] Helterman, Jeffery. *Understanding Bernard Malamud*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1985. Print.
- [12] Hicks, Granville. *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1991. Print.
- [13] Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952. Print. Hereafter abbreviated as *Malamud* in the text.
- [14] Ratner, Marc L. "Style and Humanity in Malamud's Fiction." *The Massachusetts Review* 5 (Summer 1964): 663-683. Print.
- [15] Richman, Sidney. *Bernard Malamud*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1966. Print.
- [16] Shulman, Robert. "Myth, Mr. Eliot, and the Comic Novel." *Modern Fiction Studies* 12.4 (Winter 1966-67): 395-403. Print.
- [17] Tanner, Tony. *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-70*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. Print.

Bernard Malamud lives in a white clapboard house in Bennington, Vermont. Spacious and comfortable, it sits on a gentle downward slope, behind it the rise of the Green Mountains. To this house on April 26, 1974, came friends, family, colleagues, and the children of friends to celebrate Mala...
The Natural was adapted from the novel by Bernard Malamud and is a magical sports fantasy loosely based on the story of Sir Percival from the Arthurian myths: Roy Hobbs = Odysseus. He is trying to "find his way" [home]; The broken bat = the broken sword; Pop Fisher = The Fisher King; The team called "The Knights". 4 Sep 2017 Dermot Bernard Malamud Cite Post.
In The Model by Bernard Malamud we have the theme of identity, insecurity, loneliness, connection, loss and paralysis. Taken from his The Complete Stories collection the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Malamud may be exploring the theme of loneliness. Mr Elihu lives on his own. His wife and daughter have died and there is a sense that he has nobody else in his life. Which may be the reason as to why he has decided to paint again. In many ways painting is a form of conn
Bernard Malamud is considered one of the most prominent figures in Jewish American literature, a movement that began in the 1930s and is known for its combination of tragic and comic elements. Early life. Bernard Malamud was born on April 26, 1914, in Brooklyn, New York, the first of Max and Bertha Fidelman Malamud's two sons.
Malamud's first novel, The Natural (1952), traces the life of Roy Hobbs, an American baseball player. The book has mythic elements and explores such themes as initiation and isolation. Malamud's second novel, The Assistant (1957), tells the story of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who owns a grocery store in Brooklyn. Bernard Malamud (April 26, 1914 – March 18, 1986) was an American novelist and short story writer. Along with Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, and Philip Roth, he was one of the best known American Jewish authors of the 20th century. His baseball novel, The Natural, was adapted into a 1984 film starring Robert Redford. His 1966 novel The Fixer (also filmed), about antisemitism in the Russian Empire, won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Bernard Malamud is the author of a novel, The Assistant, included in the TIME Top 100 best books. I have read about a quarter of The Assistant and realized that I love it so much, that I want to prolong the pleasure, so it is now in standby. The German Refugee could have been I case where I come with expectations and get disappointed. However, I started reading without being attentive to the author, this The German Refugee by Bernard Malamud. This is an excellent story, which was to be expected. Bernard Malamud is the author of a novel, The Assistant, included in the TIME Top 100 best books.
Years ago I read Bernard Malamud's book The Natural and was blown away by it. So when I came across this book of short stories, I was intrigued. I leave this book disappointed.