

## SUFFERINGS OF IMMIGRANTS:A READING OF BERNARD MALAMUD’S “THE JEW BIRD”

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### Abstract

*Bernard Malamud, poignantly projects sufferings of immigrants, especially Jews, in their migrated land- America. Immigrants go through lot of issues related to assimilation. The story depicts the tragic story of a crow which calls itself a ‘Jewbird’. It hopes to get a shelter at Henry Cohen’s home. The bird hopes, Cohen being a Jew immigrant to America will give him shelter, but unfortunately, Cohen brutally kills the bird. Cohen refuses to accept the bird’s identity as a ‘Jewbird’. It also reflects his hatred towards his own people / birds.*

*The research paper tries to explore the theme of Jewish immigrants’ efforts to assimilate themselves in America. However, Jewish immigrants who find comfortably assumed themselves a part of the host country, reject and refuse to accommodate immigrants from their own community/ religion, For, the former still suffer the trauma of being ‘unwanted’ by the natives.*

**Key words:** migration, assimilation, dilemma, identity crisis and anti-Semitism.

Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird” is one of the best literary pieces that offers an us an insight into the of sufferings of the immigrants, especially the Jewish immigrants to America. The story “The Jewbird,” was published in 1963 in the collection *Idiots First*. Malamud subtly blends the original with magical realism and humor to reveal the serious effects of intolerance and detestation. Malamud is one of the leading voices of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish American literature.

In order to understand his works, it would be very pertinent to appreciate the personal details of Malamud’s life. He was born in a family of first generation Russian Jewish immigrants to American Brooklyn. He had seen the predicament of Jewish immigrants from very close quarters. Therefore, his writings depict the real issues of Jewish immigrants. He authentically portrays the lives of the Jewish poor in New York. He uses allegory extensively to shape his narrative. Malamud was conferred with the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for his writings.

In his writings, Bernard Malamud highlights the issues of social realism, brotherhood, loss of humanity and ethnic identity. In most of his short stories such as 'Black is my Favorite Color', 'The German Refugee' and 'The Jew Bird,' Malamud firmly advocates that, "... it's the writer's business to cry havoc, because silence can't increase understanding or evoke mercy" (Page 28, Benedict, Helen). The short story under analysis intends to voice the plight of Jewish immigrants through the bird. The bird represents the sufferings of the Jewish people. Their lives have been brutally affected by the Holocaust and consequences of the World Wars. The World Wars have, almost, threatened their existence. Expelled and persecuted they are trying to get themselves assimilated in some foreign land.

The short story "The Jewbird" is set in the backdrop of post-World War II. A skinny cross-eyed crow with unkempt feathers flies into the kitchen of the Cohen family while they are having supper. The bird surprises the family members, especially Cohen's wife and their son Maurie, as it is a talking bird. However, Cohen the man of the family starts hating him. The bird tells its name as Schwartz and identifies itself as a Jewbird who is on the run from other birds who are out to prey on it. Here, Malamud uses 'magic realism'. The writer through the pain and plight and the ultimate tragic end of the bird intends to suggest that even Jewish immigrant birds are not spared by the anti-Semites. The hatred is extended to them also.

Harry Cohen is a frozen-food salesman, who is a Jewish immigrant to America. But he has a typical attitude. For instance, when the Jewbird "...began dovening. He prayed without Book or tallith, but with passion. Edie bowed her head though not Cohen. And Maurie rocked back and forth with the prayer, looking up with one wide-open eye." (206) Though a Jew, Cohen cannot tolerate the bird in his house. His act of refusing to accept the bird's existence and his hostility towards the bird can be seen as anti-Semitic behavior. Edie and Maurie show compassion towards the bird and are willing to take him in and feed him. Though Cohen hates the bird, but due to Maurie's insistence, allows it to take shelter at his home for a short period. Cohen warns the bird, "So stay the night, but no longer." (208)

Schwartz strives hard to be a part of the family but Cohen, antagonistically and wrathfully doesn't allow the bird to get assimilated in the family. Cohen rejects Schwartz's identity of a 'Jewbird'. Cohen vents his hatred for Schwartz: "Poor bird, my ass. He's a foxy bastard. He thinks he's a Jew." (208). Cohen threatens to kill it if he does not go away. He doesn't like it entering the house. He instructs Edie, "Feed him out on the balcony". Cohen plays 'dirty tricks' to expel the bird from his home. When the bird refuses to leave the family's home as it does not have any other shelter, Cohen embarks on a campaign of harassing it. He adds 'watery cat food

with the herring slices in Schwartz's dish'. Cohen brings a full-grown cat into the house which is always preying on the bird. This puts Schwartz's life under threat.

The pain is so much that one day the bird complains to Edie, "I'm losing feathers like a tree loses leaves." The tricks played by Cohen to kick out the bird from his home only increase by the day. The bird is unable to understand Cohen's antagonism towards him. So one day the bird asks, "Mr. Cohen, why do you hate me so much?" "What did I do to you?". Cohen replies: "Because you're an A-number-one trouble maker, that's why. What's more, whoever heard of a Jewbird? Now scat or it's open war." (211)

Cohen somehow develops an hatred for his own community. This is a form of anti-Semitism. Cohen assumes the bird as a 'pest' and a 'free loader', (211) even though the bird helps Maurie with his homework and has a very small appetite. Eventually Mr. Cohen kills the bird, throwing him out through the window.

Bernard Malamud rightly analyses human sufferings through the bird in this short story. It reveals frustration, misery and human inability to comprehend the inscrutable workings of God and Life. The story depicts the universal plight of human race. It's not only limited to Jews but depicts the helplessness, despair and alienation of human race.

To conclude, the Jewbird is a representative of the troubles the immigrants face in getting assimilated. Nobody wants to leave his/her country. But circumstances force people to move out, to look for a safe place to live. In addition to the hatred they face from the people of other communities, they are often avoided and hated by the people of their own community, especially those who are now living comfortably in the adopted land. They almost behave like natives and hate anybody coming from outside.

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