

BLACK MASCULINITY VS JEWISH MASCULINITY IN MALAMUD'S AND BELLOW'S WORKS

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African Americans and Jewish Americans both have direct experience with having been (and possibly being) marginalized by the dominant, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant society of the United States. While this could be said of all minorities of the United States, Black-Jewish relations were, or have been, particularly troubled and complex, e.g. during the period of direct cooperation and help between the two groups, laced with subtext of mutual disapproval of the other, whether for racial, economic or religious reasons. Some works of Jewish American literature try to shed some light on the troubled relationship between African Americans and Jewish Americans, since the relationship between Blacks and Jews is by no means simply positive or negative. This paper seeks to shed some light on the complicated relationship between these two groups in regard to the view of masculinity, as depicted in the works of several Jewish-American authors, and also to point out some instances in which the depiction of Jewish and/or Black characters could have been influenced by the period the authors lived in.

The origins of both Jewish Americans and African Americans stretch back in the American history to the times before the actual creation of the United States. The history of the Blacks in what was to become the United States of America dates back to the 17th century, to the founding of Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in North America [Hornsby 2005,pp.56-57], and the first Jewish immigrants, as refugees from Brazil, appeared in New Amsterdam around the same time [Diner 2004,p.13]. However, due to the fact that African slaves were confined to their masters' property and the number of Jewish immigrants at this point was not very high, the first contact of the African Americans with the Jewish people could have come only later on. The situation rapidly changed towards the end of the 19th century. After the murder of Alexander II of Russia in 1881, Slavic nationalism brought on a new wave of major pogroms, forcing more than two million Jews to emigrate from Eastern Europe to the United States [Fine 1988,p.15]. True interaction between African Americans and Jewish Americans can also be attributed to the shift towards the industrial city, since it was the demand for factory workers in cities as well as post-Civil-War racism of the South that pushed African Americans to leave their Southern homes and migrate to the large cities of the North [Hornsby 2005,p.457]. As a result, African Americans suddenly found themselves in close proximity to the Jewish communities. Anti-Semitism and racism, both concepts strongly rooted in the society of the United States of the early 20th century, certainly had their part in defining the relationship between Blacks and Jews. The strained, ambivalent relationship between these groups can also find its roots in the ideas of masculinity of these two groups, which strongly differed in opinions defining masculinity for themselves as well as the masculinity of the other group. Where Jewish

men were viewed by the majority society as effeminate and passive, Black men, forced into submission throughout centuries of slavery, felt the urge to become aggressive to win back their masculinity suppressed by the dominant society. This situation can be also witnessed in the works of Jewish American authors.

One of such examples is Malamud's novel *The Tenants*. The difference in the behavior of the Jew, Harry Lesser, and the Black, Willie Spearmint, is apparent from the very beginning: Lesser is mostly a loner, living in his apartment without any company and not going out much; while there is never any lengthy, detailed physical description of Lesser, from the way he lives, it is safe to assume that he is a thin man, studious, neurotic, without much physical strength. At the beginning of the novel, Lesser's morning is described in the following manner: "/Lesser/ itched with desire, as he wrote, to open the nearby closet and stare at his box of accumulated manuscripts. He also half masted an erection—creativity going on" [Malamud 1971,p.15]. If sexual capability metaphorically translates to power, the aforementioned physical reaction to his writing can be interpreted as Lesser's power being connected to intellectual achievements rather than physical ones.

Willie, on the other hand, appears to be the exact opposite – his description hints at physical strength, and his social life seems to be richer than Lesser's: shortly after his arrival at the tenement, he offers to organize a party at Lesser's place, and "Lesser was wiling. Though he didn't say so, he hoped Willie would bring along a lady friend or two. He had never slept with a black girl" [Malamud 1971,p.37]. Not only Lesser displays the belief that a Black man can only know – and befriend – Black women, supported by Lesser's later surprise at the fact that Willie dates a Jewish girl Irene, but Lesser also expresses the way Jewish (or white) men are drawn to Black women, to the sense of otherness: this longing is the result of the belief stemming from the times of slavery: that Black people are sexually more active, one could even say aggressive. This view of Blacks as sexual aggressors also appears later on: at the party in Lesser's flat, Mary Kettlesmith, a Black woman, refuses to sleep with Lesser because he 'smells white' which is, in her view, 'no smell at all' [Malamud 1971,pp.46-47] which points towards Lesser, a Jewish, white male, not being enough, lacking something essential which a Black man possesses. On another party, Mary agrees to be intimate with Lesser, but again, the encounter is unsatisfactory for Mary, who claims she is incapable of being satisfied since she was raped as a child: the rapist is again a Black man, posed against Lesser's capability to satisfy the women he sleeps with, which they discuss with Mary. Through this, Lesser becomes a threat to the sexuality and masculinity of the Black man: the first hints of Lesser posing a threat to Willie's masculinity, at least in the Black writer's perception, appear much earlier in the novel, when Willie lashes out at Lesser simply for using a Yiddish word:

Lesser, don't bug me with that Jewword. Don't work your roots on me. I know what you talkin about, don't think I don't. I know you tryin to steal my manhood. I don't go for that circumcise shmuck stuff. The Jews got to keep

us bloods stayin weak so you can take everything for yourself. Jewgirls are the best whores and are tryin to cut the bloods down by makin us go get circumcise, and the Jewdoctors do the job because they are afraid if they don't we gon take over the whole goddamn country and wipe you out. ... None of that crap on me, Lesser, you Jewbastard, we tired of you fuckn us over.

[Malamud 1971,p.50]

The threat Lesser poses for Black masculinity in general, at least as perceived by the Black men present when Lesser has sexual relations with a Black woman, Mary, results in a game of 'dozens' – basically a contest of insults, where the Black aggression is clearly described, especially at the end where Willie calls Lesser, among other things, also a 'faggot' and a 'whore' [Malamud 1971,p.134], terms clearly aimed at Lesser's integrity as a man. Through these verbal attacks, Willie, representing Black men in general, attempts to regain the upper hand over white males, since, as hooks says, "many black males no longer challenge this dehumanizing stereotype, instead they claim it as a mark of distinction, as the edge that they have over white males" [hooks 2004,p.45].

Another situation speaking of the Black-Jewish relations with a link to masculinity is the love triangle between Willie, Lesser and Irene: while Willie and Irene are together, it appears that Willie treats Irene with disrespect, calling her 'his white bitch' on several occasions. This can be interpreted as Willie's attempt to assert his masculinity with regard to Irene, since she is the one who financially supports them both: financial dependence on Irene, a woman, and a white woman to that, evokes in Willie the need to exert his power over her, to become sexually and physically superior to cope with his economic inferiority. When Irene gets together with Lesser, Willie's masculinity is severely threatened in his view: not only Irene leaves him for another man, but for a white man, a Jew, who has threatened Black masculinity before through his encounter with Mary Kettlesmith. Unable to assert dominance over Irene any longer, Willie's need for his own masculinity escalates into violence in his writing and later on in real life: at the novel's end, Willie attacks what he fears most, that is, Jewish (and consecutively white) masculinity and sexuality in the most physical sense of the word. On the other hand, neither Lesser nor Irene are capable of forming a stable, satisfactory relationship with a Black person: while Lesser openly seeks only the thrill of sleeping with a Black woman, Irene remains confined in a relationship with Willie that does not make her happy. Even Willie himself describes Irene as a "fucked-up nigger-struck chick" [Malamud 1971,p.99] at the occasion of their first meeting: as if Malamud expresses through Willie's mouth the fact that Irene's liking for Blacks is unhealthy and cannot make her happy. The happiness both Lesser and Irene briefly find is with each other, within the metaphorical return to their own Jewishness. This view, just like that of Blacks as sexually and physically violent, can also be attributed to Malamud's slightly stereotyped view of Blacks, a result of his being a Jewish American; even in his other two stories, the view of Black masculinity is rather similar.

In another of Malamud's works, a short story called "Black Is My Favorite Color", Nat Lime, a white Jewish man, establishes a relationship with a Black woman, Ornita Harris. While the relationship seems difficult to begin with, the main conflict stems from the fact that Lime threatens Black masculinity by 'stealing,' figuratively speaking, a Black woman from Black men. When Lime and Ornita are confronted by a group of Black men, the Black assertion of masculinity through disrespectful treatment of women is visible again: Lime poses as a gentlemanly victim of this brutality, a view that seems influenced by the fact that the writer is Jewish American:

"Shut your mouth, Jewboy," said the leather cap, and he moved the knife back and forth in front of my coat button. "No more black pussy for you."

"Speak with respect about this lady, please."

I got slapped on my mouth.

"That ain't no lady," said the long face in the half-inch brim, "that's black pussy. She deserve to have evvy bit of her hair shave off. How you like to have evvy bit of your hair shave-off, black pussy?"

[Malamud 1997,p.338]

By addressing Ornita Harris as 'black pussy,' an object rather than a human being, the Black men express their rightful possession of Black women, displeased if a white man takes 'it' away; much like Irene says of Willie in *The Tenants*, a Black man "doesn't like things taken out of his hands, especially by whites" [Malamud 1971,p.172]. In "Angel Levine," the idea of a Black man as sexually aggressive is rather subdued, but it also appears, in the scene where Manishevitz goes to Harlem for the first time and witnesses Levine dancing with a "big-breasted Negress /with/ both his hands clasped around her restless buttocks" [Malamud 1997,p.162]: Black sexuality in this instance seems to be a part of Levine's fall into the hell that Harlem represents, one of the aspects of Harlem which Levine has to shed to reach his own redemption.

Sexuality as a display of power appears also in another novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* by Saul Bellow. In one part of the novel, a Black thief confronts an old Jewish man who saw him in the act of thievery. The Black is again described as animalistic – during any of his appearances in the novel, he does not speak: "he no more spoke than a puma would" [Bellow 2004,p.39]. His self-expression relies solely on the physical aspect, and through his confrontation with the old man, Sammler, the Black thief displays his masculine power in the most obvious, crude manner, by showing Sammler his genitalia. The crude manner of behaving of this Black thief could also serve as an example of Bellow's biased view of Blacks: the Black man in this novel is again characterized in accordance to all the stereotypes of a Black as an inferior being, intellectually and culturally:

"...the blacks speak another language. A kid pleaded for his life—"

"What kid?"

"In the papers. A kid who was surrounded by a black gang of fourteen-year-

olds. He begged them not to shoot, but they simply didn't understand his words. Literally not the same language. Not the same feeling. No comprehension. No common concepts. Out of reach."
[Bellow 2004,pp.154-155]

This short excerpt of a conversation between Sammler and Wallace, a younger Jewish man, explains not only the perception of Blacks at the time as being incapable of understanding human language or even human feelings, but also the fact that this perception was strongly influenced by the presentation in the media, i.e. 'in the papers.'

Sammler himself acknowledges the act of the Black thief showing him genitalia as a demonstration of power, a warning, in several places in the novel, while he himself is aware of his lack of sexuality, commented on also by the students he agrees to speak to on one occasion; one student interrupts Sammler's lecture by speaking out against the old man: "'Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come'" [Bellow 2004,p.34]. Sammler is aware of this fact of his life: "In the past, Mr. Sammler had thought that in this same biological respect he was comely enough, in his own Jewish way. It has never greatly mattered, and mattered less than ever now, in the seventies. But a sexual madness was overwhelming the Western world" [Bellow 2004,p.53] – his own lack of sexual power is not something that would bother Sammler, and through him a Jewish male, but in the 'Western world' where the dominance through this kind of power is strongly represented, Jews cannot help but feel the difference and possibly inferiority. Sammler himself presents his negative view of the over-sexualized Western society as culturally lacking in several places in the novel: this is visible especially in his conversations with Angela, the daughter of Sammler's relative, who is described in the novel as a sexually active woman, often viewed with thinly veiled disagreement by Sammler:

"You are disgusted with me, Uncle."

"I? Not really. I knew all this long ago. I regret it when things become so stupid, that's true. It seems to me that things poor professionals once had to do for a living, performing for bachelor parties, or tourist sex-circuses on the Place Pigalle, ordinary people, housewives, filing-clerks, students, now do just to be sociable. ... Is it an effort to 'liberalize' human existence and show that nothing that happens between people is really loathsome?"

[Bellow 2004,p.130]

Sammler is incapable of understanding this new way of behaving; he tries to explain this trend of sexual liberalism as connected to Blacks at least on a metaphorical level: "Millions of civilized people wanted oceanic, boundless, primitive, neckfree nobility, experienced a strange release of galloping impulses, and acquired the peculiar aim of sexual niggerhood for everyone" [Bellow 2004, p.133]. Goffman also clarifies that for Sammler, "Europe is the source of the highest ideals of civilization while Africa represents an opposition against which Europe may be defined [and] Bellow's America is a site of metaphysical struggle between opposed worldviews, with European civilization losing its authority to primal Africanism" [Goffman 2000,pp.128-129]. In

the air of sexual revolution of the 1960s, Sammler is forced to view his own lack of sexual power in contrast with the aggressive, superior masculinity of a Black male; Jewish culture and education seem incapable of winning over the physical, sexual aspect of the Black existence. The Black masculinity is represented in a negative light, through Jewish eyes, which could be seen as Bellow's personal feeling and view of Black men and their perceived violence and intellectual inferiority, as well as Jewish feelings of emasculation.

In conclusion, the relationship between Blacks and Jews of the 2nd half of the 20th century was bound with prejudiced social conventions, often reinforced by the minority groups themselves, as it is possible to see on the example of Jewish American authors such as Malamud or Bellow. While real-life Blacks had to face the out-dated belief from the times of slavery that they were sexual predators, aggressors, violent and incapable of any higher thought or emotion, and also incapable of controlling their urges, Jewish American literature did not help much, seeing as most Blacks in the literary works discussed in this paper dealt with the same stereotypical image of a Black man as violent and sexually aggressive. While some of the characters are described in higher detail than others, the main idea behind them remains the same; in the end, Willie Spearmint's cutting of Harry Lesser's genitalia remains at the same level as the anonymous thief's showing of his own penis to Mr. Sammler, even if Spearmint's motives are partly revealed in the novel. On the other hand, Jewish men in these works often feel – or are – emasculated by the majority society's pressure and also by the aggression of Black men; Harry Lesser is incapable of dealing with the insults concerning his masculinity, Mr. Sammler is incapable of standing up to the students who accuse him of impotence, Nat Lime cannot protect himself or his Black girlfriend from the aggression of Black men.

Literature

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Summary

The relationship between Jewish Americans and African Americans in the 2nd half of the 20th century was bound by prejudice dating several centuries back. The difficult perception of what is and what cannot be considered masculine enough further strained these fragile relations between Jewish American and African American men; many of the contemporary problems between these two groups can be followed through literature. The paper deals with the view of masculinity as shown in several works by two important Jewish American writers of that time, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. On the Jewish and Black male characters from their works, the issues concerning masculinity as perceived by these two groups are pointed out.