

Negotiating Conflict through Intersubjectivity: Revisiting Bernard Malamud’s “Black Is My Favourite Colour”

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Abstract

That’s how it is. I give my heart and they kick me in my teeth.
– Malamud 365

The present paper seeks to situate the short story “Black Is My Favourite Colour” within the paradigm of peace and conflict studies, between the Jewish Americans and the African Americans. In doing so, the article first strives to shed light on the instances of conflict and resistance between the Black and the Jewish characters in the story; second, to analyse the formation of binaries in the story due to the stereotypes associated with the Blacks and the Jews, and due to the ways they perceived each other in the American land; and third, to understand how the concept of intersubjectivity operates in the text, that shows the possibility of a peaceful co-existence for the two racial groups in America.

Keywords: African American, Jewish American, Conflict, Intersubjectivity, Bernard Malamud.

Introduction

The United States of America became the unrivalled superpower after the world wars and saw exponential growth in economic and technological sectors based on the economic base left after the war. This was unimaginable for most Americans, as something like this had not happened before or during the war. However, the racial discrimination in the country remained intact. The section “Overview of the Post-War United States, 1945-1968” from the presentation on the U.S. History Primary Source Timeline says that:

The image and reality of overall economic prosperity and the upward mobility it provided for many white Americans were not lost on those who had largely been excluded from the full meaning of the

American Dream, both before and after the war. As a consequence, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and American women became more aggressive in trying to win their full freedoms and civil rights as guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution during the post-war era. (Library of Congress)

America from its nascence was a land of indigenous tribes, but as the British colonial occupation started in North America, the land of the natives was encroached and they were displaced or died of disease, and many were killed in the First Indian War. The British brought Black people from the African subcontinent as slaves and indentured laborers to the American land. Slavery in America started in the 1600s and started developing as laborers were needed for land cultivation, particularly for the production of tobacco and rice. Many of the African Americans were the descendants of the Africans who were forced into slavery after being captured during African wars and raids. They were purchased and bought to America as part of the Atlantic slave trade.

The Jews, on the other hand, came to the United States of America for refuge, as there were various antisemitic activities happening all across the world and especially in East European countries like Russia due to the Tsarist rule, Germany due to Hitler's fascism. Since time immemorial the Jews have been persecuted from their respective homelands—starting from the holy land of Israel, which led to the formation of the Jewish diaspora. Due to the unsteady immigration policies of America, many Jews were not allowed to enter the country after a certain point. Those who had already entered the country faced a lot of issues that were common to immigrants, like assimilation and appropriation into the American culture and the American way of life, formation of other branches of Judaism from ultra-orthodox to religious, traditional, and secular, the East European Jews missing the shtetl life, et cetera. Many lives were ruined and many suffered from severe identity crises after leaving their homelands. In the book *They Left It All Behind: Trauma, Loss, and Memory Among Eastern European Jewish Immigrants and Their Children* (2019), the psychological effects of migration on European Jewry is being highlighted, “For all involuntary migrants, there are cumulative layers of trauma. Families have wrenched apart as some stayed behind and others were scattered in a Jewish diaspora across the globe” (Hahn x).

Both the Blacks and Jews being minorities had sympathy for each other, though the Jews had it more because they realized that the Blacks are being the scapegoat in the American land, while the Jews were leading a better life. Eric Sundquist in his book *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (2009), observes that the moral obligation that the Jews felt for the Blacks and vice versa was mostly a case of genuine compassion. However, he also says that their fellow feeling was sometimes looked at with scrutiny, which had a chance of perpetuating internal rifts.

As "America's Jews," to cite a formulation that appears over the course of the century, blacks were far more likely to bear the brunt of racism, a fact that made Jews sympathetic to their predicament if for no other reason than that it reminded them of the European pogroms they had escaped—and might face once again in the United States but for the scapegoat provided by the African American. If blacks were America's Jews, then Jews need not be. Alongside the human bonds expressed often enough in love, sexual passion, and marriage, the moral obligation Jews felt toward blacks, and blacks toward Jews, was in each case sincerely rooted in faith and traditions of compassion. That the offer of brotherhood was also, at times, an opportunistic means for Jews to fight anti-Semitism and for blacks to fight racism should hardly be a surprise. Even its most ardent proponents recognized that it was at best an "uneasy alliance," one bound to be tempered by ambivalence and self-interest. (Sundquist 3)

Though the issue of racial capitalism which led to Blacks being scapegoated in America could be looked at as a possible hindrance in the way of a potential peaceful relationship between these two groups. Ethan Goffman observed in his book *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary American Literature* (2000) that Jews, being the ethnic group in a favourable position, had an even bigger obligation to emancipate the Other (here, the Blacks), and notes there are chances of a dialogue and an alliance between the two racial groups.

It was Jews who first emphasized common features between the two groups, Jews who initiated the alliance. Two factors directly

influenced this undertaking. First, the surge of East European Jewish immigrants to America, beginning in the 1880s, provided a group sympathetic to spurned outsiders. Second, the rise of anti-Semitism in American society following World War I, including such measures as quotas and restricted social access, revealed assimilation as precarious and provoked a common legal agenda with African Americans. (Goffman 4)

However, the main point of difference between the Blacks and Jews in America remained the fact that the Jews climbed up the ladder in the economic sphere while the Blacks stagnated for years, as even after slavery was abolished, racial discrimination still continued in the economic sphere. Thus, they kept hating the Jews who they perceived as Whites.

Contextualizing Conflict

The story “Black Is My Favourite Colour” revolves around the character Nathan Lime, who was a Jewish man living in America. The story, which was written in 1963, was the time when the Black Power Movement was gaining momentum. It shows how Nathan struggles throughout his life as he was hated and was treated badly by the Blacks for being a Jew. Instances of his getting discriminated against by African Americans started in his childhood when he and his family had moved to a Black neighbourhood in the Williamsburg Section of Brooklyn where he felt quite lonely as he was unable to fit in. There Nathan tried to befriend a Black boy named Buster Wilson. Though they somehow got along for a while, Nathan realized that Buster did not want his friendship and was in fact a Jew hater one fine day out of nowhere, Buster hit Nathan and broke his nose and also used racial slurs against him.

Then there was the case of Charity Quietness, who was the domestic help that worked at Nathan’s house. She was a Black lady who used to clean Nathan’s place once a week when he had an off. She always had her breakfast all by herself, in the bathroom, though Nathan kept pursuing her to eat at the table where he ate. This showed the racism ingrained deep in her mind which governed the way she behaved around her White (Jewish) master. Then, in his youth, he fell in love with a Black woman named Ornita Harris, despite facing antisemitic treatment by the Blacks. His love interest Mrs Ornita Harris was a

widow who was not looking for love from a random stranger, let alone a Jew. However, Nathan stayed steady in his courtship and soon the woman also fell in love with him but their love could not materialize because of all the hindrances they had to meet with for belonging to different racial communities. Thus, we see that even if there were some Blacks who would reciprocate their feelings of love and friendship, being afraid of the other Blacks and in solidarity with them, they would also distance themselves, which happens in the case of Ornita Harris.

These instances from the story, when viewed from a broader perspective, are an apt depiction of the time when the Blacks in America felt an intense rage against the Jews in the country because of racial capitalism. Nancy Leong in her article titled "Racial Capitalism" defines racial capitalism as "the process of deriving value from the racial identity of others which harms the individuals affected and society as a whole" (2). Thus the Blacks in America were highly dissatisfied with being pushed to the margins based on their skin colour. The role of conflict in achieving peace which is properly foregrounded here as though the relationship that formed between Ornita and Nathan was one of love, it started with prejudice and conflict because Ornita was not comfortable befriending white men. Thus it can be said that conflict transformation in tandem with peacebuilding is a thorough process that welcomes conflict as a potentially positive force. As a result, it aims to reduce violence while striving for social justice, wholesome interpersonal relationships, and long-lasting peace. Along these lines is the idea that is being put forth in the article "Rethinking Conflict: Its Role in Building Peace":

Simply put, conflict in and of itself is neutral. Conflict is neither intrinsically negative nor positive. In fact, how it plays out is determined entirely by how it is handled—by the attitudes and skills of those involved. Conflict is not only inevitable, it is essential. Throughout history and still today, conflict is the expression of big fault lines and the seed of big changes in our world. If we understand that conflict can be managed without violence, and can in fact be transformed into an engine of positive change, we begin to see how conflict can actually be a critical part of building peace. (Colgan, et al.)

The master storyteller Bernard Malamud conveys this message through the portrayal of the relationship between Ornita and Nathan, as their disagreement during the initial phase of their relationship led to an even stronger bond later, which was because Nathan did not give up after their initial unfriendly encounters which his lady friend found as an appealing trait of a gentleman and her discomfort in befriending white men soon goes away. Emma Ferman in the article “Shifting the Power: The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping,” says that when women participate in the process of peacebuilding and become negotiators, a peaceful solution is likely to come out and last for a longer period of time. In this story, it can be seen that the Black women like Charity Quietness, Nathan’s domestic help who had discomfort in eating at the same table as him, and Ornita Harris, his love interest, who at the beginning was hesitant in even interacting with him for his being White, were at least not physically aggressive with him like the Black men who tried to kill him at his shop and those who tried to threaten and humiliate Ornita Harris for publicly roaming around with a Jew. Thus, if looked at from the gender perspective, it could be said that the Black woman did not pose a physical threat to him as the Black men did, and this could possibly lead to a harmonious relationship between the two communities.

The new world after the Enlightenment of the 17th century was one such time when both the Jews and the Blacks experienced a “legalized form of oppression” (Philipson xvi). Talking about the dualism of the Enlightenment age in the book *The Identity Question: Blacks and Jews in Europe and America* (2000), Philipson notes that:

Rather than constituting an exception to Enlightenment discourse, the paradox of a slave owner penning the American Declaration of Independence perfectly expressed the dualism of the age. The position of Blacks and Jews in the New World was different, but the logic of proclaiming a democratic republic with legalized forms of oppression drew only perfunctory comment in either Jeffersonian America or Napoleonic France. (xvi)

He further goes on to say how the experiences of the Jews and Blacks entering the new world were quite different from each other. “Unlike Mary Antin, Africans brought to North America did not like their journey across the water to the

Exodus. They came to refer to their transatlantic voyage as the Middle Passage, the second phase of their journey from Africa to their place of servitude" (xvi).

To position and comprehend the conflicts between the Black characters and Nathan (the only Jewish character in the story), they have been categorized into binary oppositions as it can be seen that the formation of many binarisms between the Blacks and Nathan, keeps increasing the resistance and tension between them. One of the binary oppositions is "Intolerance or Tolerance." In this story, it can be seen that Nathan never discriminated against Blacks. All the times that he had to deal with African American people, he was patient and optimistic. On the other hand, all the Black characters in the story have tried to break his hope of a peaceful co-existence. His patience was taken for passivity which in a way allowed the hostile Blacks to become aggressive with him. Then there is the binary opposition of "Businessman or Goons." The story again puts forth the stereotype of Jewish businessmen and Black goons, wherein it was shown that Nathan, the liquor dealer in Harlem, was met with constant resistance by the Negroes for pursuing an African American woman to be his partner, and they displayed muscle power to dominate over his financial power by beating him at two instances in the duration of the story.

Then there is the binarism of "Sensitive or Stoic." The story shows that Nathan was an empath and a sensitive person. In his childhood when he saw his Black friend Buster Wilson's father bleeding from his nose after a fight, he felt sick at the sight of it and ran home, while Buster kept watching without any expression, which portrayed the cold attitude of African Americans and the emotionality of Jewish Americans. It also foregrounds the stereotype that Blacks usually get into fights and are impulsive creatures while the Jews are tolerant and rational.

Another binary opposition that is foregrounded in the story is "Refined or Crude." In the story, it is shown that the Black men who harm Nathan, always also used offensive language which is full of antisemitic comments. They even used offensive language targeting the Black lady Ornita Harris when they saw her with the white man Nathan, as they not only did not support but were also threatened by the idea of assimilation of the Blacks into Whites and witnessing the love affair between a Black and a White filled them with the need to intervene and prevent such cases. However, there were also other

Blacks, like those that worked at Nathan's store and Charity Quietness, his domestic help, who treated him with civility and respect. So it can be inferred that the Blacks only or mostly talked to the Jews with respect if they had Jewish masters or owners like in the case of Charity Quietness or if they belonged to a well enough economically strong background like in the case of Mrs Ornita Harris. Thus in all these cases, we see that the economic disparity plays a huge role in creating conflicts between Blacks and Nathan.

Intersubjectivity as a Peace-Making Tool

Intersubjectivity is defined as the sharing of different perspectives of different people which is facilitated by empathy. Empathy happens when one puts oneself in the situation of the other and tries to feel what the other could be feeling. Though every human being is inherently capable of being empathetic, it takes choice and intent to be so. In the case of intersubjectivity, it is this feeling that we have for the other by bringing in other's perspectives into one's life. The article titled "Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Intersubjectivity: A Notion Reflected Within the Modern Democratic Society" points out that "political philosophy requires a paradigm shift from subjectivity to the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity in order to achieve decency and dignity of institutions and human relations" (Bulatovic). The concept of intersubjectivity has to do with this mental ability powered by extreme social responsibility, social cognition, and emotional intelligence. It has varied applications across various disciplines. Like in Philosophy, intersubjectivity or mainly intersubjectivism helps one to reach close to the objective truth. Here intersubjectivity happens when people can readily or with some effort, suspend their thinking and become open to the various opinions that others may have.

While in the field of Psychology (Robert Stolorow), the application of intersubjectivity is looked at from the perspective of trying to know the mind of the other with the incorporation of theories like simulation theory, theory-theory, and interaction theory. At the core of the functioning of intersubjectivity in Psychology is the idea that being affected by the other person's sufferings or thoughts does not always involve dialogue. It can also happen when one shares space and close proximity with someone and notices the other and grasps the physical and mental state that the other is in. Allowing the other's being to affect one's own being is how intersubjectivity happens in Psychology. It also

has applications in Phenomenology (Edmund Husserl), Anthropology (George Herbert Mead), Sociology (Alfred Schutz), and Communication Studies (Jurgen Habermas). However, in this story, Malamud could be said to have incorporated the psychological approaches to and applications of intersubjectivity.

Bernard Malamud in his works, depicts the life of Americans post World War 2. However, unlike most post-war American writers who talked about the disillusionment and moral crisis that was an outcome of the catastrophic wars, the ensuing ennui, a general state of distrust, cynicism, and absurdism as the apocalypse had unfolded, and everyone felt that they were living in dystopic times, Malamud talked about hope. While writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Norman Mailer talked about the military occupation in America; those like Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo came up with various conspiracy theories about events of the past that still held relevant and about the postmodern crisis, those like JD Salinger, Arthur Miller talked about coming of age issues, the turning of the American man as a phoney human chasing the American Dream, then there were the writers like Grace Paley, Philip Roth, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud who wrote about the human condition with humor and forgiveness. In Malamud's works, we see those rare moments where the collective pain is felt, and the self and the other(s) share meaningful moments based on intersubjectivity. In the book *Jewish American Literature since 1945: An Introduction* (1999), Stephen Wade says:

What we find in his works are stories of ordinary lives and ordinary men and women. Mostly troubled men with an ethical crisis or a humanitarian leaning. There are characters who are scared of the impending doom as if they're certain of it to happen. His fictional characters are the ones, who like the rest of the people of the world, fade into anonymity. But, then again, Malamud is different from his contemporaries in the sense that what he offers is a man with a new and empathetic vision. (64)

The writer Bernard Malamud shows how intersubjectivity acts as a peace-making tool in this story, as it brings in the possibility of there being harmony amongst the racially different characters, at least to some extent. It can be said

that in the story Nathan Lime practices intersubjectivity, which allows the possibility of the maintenance of peace and harmony between the Blacks and him if not completely resolving all causes of conflict between them.

Cases of intersubjectivity in the story can be seen when Nathan Lime faced racial discrimination by his friend Buster Wilson, and he remained calm and reflected upon the situation, trying to figure out what might have led to such intense rage in the boy who he had been trying to befriend. Even while dealing with his Black domestic help Charity Quietness, when she did not sit with him at the same table to eat, he kept pursuing her and she continued to eat by herself in the bathroom, he offered her to eat alone at the table as it became clear to him that she felt uncomfortable eating with him. Thus here it can be seen how he empathizes with her and offers a solution that would also keep her dignity intact. Also, at the time when Nathan gets beaten up by the Black people who attack him and Ms Ornita Harris when they are at the subway while coming back from dinner, he did not resort to violent techniques and rather tried to calmly handle the situation. However, at the end of the scuffle, his Black girlfriend broke off with him as she did not want to attract any more attention to herself. Though Ornita's family was not against her relationship with Nathan, the other Blacks could not let the couple live in peace as they could not forget the systemic violence perpetuated on them by the Whites and they perceived the Jews as Whites. Even here we see how Nathan after all his efforts failed, let go of the woman he was deeply in love with because more than the companionship, he cared for her safety and mental well-being.

In all these situations in the story, Nathan practices intersubjectivity as he tries to understand the perspective of people who hate him and does not spew hate in the process. His acts of friendship and kindness without any ulterior motive go along the lines of Martin Buber's philosophy of "I and Thou" which was proposed in his book *I and Thou* (1937), was the kind of intersubjectivity that was propounded by Buber. According to Buber, I-Thou and I-It is the two-fold attitude of human subjects and the two-fold structure of the world it creates as a result of such an orientation—I oriented to Thou and I oriented to It. The difference is that the I-It relationship is objectifying and the I-Thou relationship entails a mutual relationship. The I-Thou concept by Buber fits

into this narrative wherein a Jewish American man is always at the service of the African Americans and does not hold any bias against them even after facing racial discrimination. He tries to think from the other's perspective, not to justify their actions but to reason out the method in the madness.

Conclusion

The approach that the paper had while incorporating binary oppositions in this story emphasizes the difference between how the oppositions are perceived, as a binary opposition can be perceived in two ways—as either/or (like good/bad) and as a comparison between two opposite terms (like good vs bad). Veronica Yates in her article "The Damage of Binary Thinking" implies that it is not binary formation but a strict adherence to binary oppositions which leads to the kind of thinking where one side is given preference over the other and thus causes violence, and dehumanization. The paper also shows that it is the comparison that perpetuates hate and not the mere presence of differences, which is in fact inevitable and important. The Jews and Blacks faced both harmony and chaos in the American land but saw in each other a stranger, as Eric Sundquist explains in the introduction of his book *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (2009):

title meant to capture this intermixture of empathy, anxiety, and hostility, comes from the familiar scripture of Leviticus 19:34, "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Jews and blacks were both "strangers in the land" of America, yet they experienced very differently, if sometimes parallel, dynamics of exclusion and inclusion while "dwelling with" the dominant white, gentile culture. By virtue of being or becoming "white," Jews, even recent immigrants, might more quickly be accepted "as one born among" other Americans, but Judaism and Jewishness would still set them apart. By virtue of being usually Christian and often generations-long residents, blacks might lay a stronger claim to being "as one born among" other Americans, but their beginnings in slavery and their blackness would still set them apart. Jews contemplating blacks and blacks contemplating Jews

were called upon to see “the stranger that dwelleth with you” in a mirror image that made it at once easy and hard to “love him as thyself.” (4)

The paper made attempts to put forth the reasons that had ignited animosity in the hearts of the Blacks in America against the Jews and how strained their relationship had become by the 1960s, i.e., during the Black Power Movement. It also showed moments of alliance and genuine relationships between the two different racial groups, which was a possibility only when intersubjectivity took place.

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