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## A THEMATIC STUDY OF BERNARD MACLAVERTY'S *LAMB*

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### Abstract

The name of the Irish writer Bernard MacLavery may be read as another important one in the long list of splendid Irish or Anglo-Irish writers in English literature. Though his compositions range from short-stories to novels, and radio shows, one common concern of the writer is the presentation of the socio-political and religious conflict, *The Troubles*, in Ireland, which lasted for almost forty decades. The first novel of MacLavery, *Lamb* is a beautiful rendering of many themes amidst a background of *The Troubles*. This short composition (a novel of around 150 pages only) portrays a clash of conflicting ideas like radicalism versus liberalism; idealism versus pragmatism; and rural versus urban life. It also deals with human relationships and values and ideas like freedom, obedience, faith, 'misspelled love' etc. This paper intends to delineate on some of the major and minor themes of this novel which has always *The Troubles* at the background.

Keywords: The Troubles; Ulster Protestants; IRA; Holy Orders.

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With a literary career of almost five decades, Bernard MacLavery still thrives to entertain and engage his readers with his work. MacLavery's contribution to the world of letters, especially Anglo-Irish literature is indispensable. Many scholars and critics have acknowledged his style and expression and placed his work beside other established names of Irish literature like James Joyce, Graham Greene, Seamus Heaney etc. Besides his novels, MacLavery has also achieved critical acclaim for his short stories, children's books, and short films. He has also owned recognition as a writer of screenplay, and in fact, two of his popular novels, *Lamb* and *Cal* have been adapted for films too. MacLavery himself has also written versions of his works for radio shows, musical shows, television programmes etc. Some of his popular novels are *Lamb* (1980), *Cal* (1983), *Grace Notes* (1997), *The Anatomy School* (2001) and

*Midwinter Break* (2017). The list of short story compilations is also a long one but some more popular and remarkable ones are *Secrets and Other Stories* (1977), *A Time to Dance and Other Stories* (1982), and *Matters of Life and Death and Other Stories* (2006). The novel *Grace Notes* was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize in fiction. Other than the written and published form of literature, MacLavery also won the BAFTA award in the category of best director in 2003, for his short film *Bye-Child*.

On a reading of majority of his literature, a reader may trace some common or dominant themes and motifs in his works – be it the novels or short stories. Firstly, almost all of his works are set in Ireland, to be more particular Northern Island. MacLavery, himself was born in Belfast, Northern Island, in a Catholic Family and we find these two

elements – Catholicism and ethos of Northern Ireland present everywhere in his fiction. These two elements seem to be major concerns of MacLaverty because they have seriously affected the peace and harmony of the whole region, and the country as well. MacLaverty always attempts to either give an implicit or explicit picturization of *The Troubles* (1960s to 1998) in Northern Ireland. *The Troubles* was a kind of 'ethno-nationalist' conflict that began in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and continued for almost four decades. On papers (official records) it ended with the 'Good Friday Agreement' of 1998 but in reality the psychological effects of such long conflicts can be felt for years to come.

*The Troubles* was actually a socio-political and religious struggle between two groups of people. On a religious front, it was a struggle between the Ulster Protestants [the Protestants who were British descendants, and migrated to Ulster (a Northern Ireland province) in and around the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century who after becoming a majority over there forced the Catholics of the region to retreat – and the native Catholics of Northern Ireland. Ireland basically has a Catholic majority and thus all parts of Ireland supported the Catholics of Northern Ireland against the Ulster Protestants. On a political front it was a struggle between the Irish Republican Army – the natives of Ireland who fought for the liberty of Northern Ireland from the clutch of U.K and also for the rights of the Catholics of the Northern Ireland – and the British government who wanted to keep Northern Ireland as its province. The Ulster Protestants who were living in Ireland supported the British army and wanted that Northern Ireland should not be severed from the United Kingdom. This socio-political and religious dispute had affected the peace and progress of the Ireland to the roots.

Many contemporary Irish writers have, time and again, attempted to graphically present the condition of the 'troubled' and ethnically divided Ireland in a literal and metaphorical manner and Bernard MacLaverty too is one of them. One important thing to note is that MacLaverty deals with the issue of *Troubles* in his novel in an oblique manner. Though he was highly concerned about the situation of Ireland in these troubling decades, he

opted for a story that dealt with the chaos in the country in an indirect manner. It's always present there in the background, but a direct and detailed presentation is missing. Hamish Robertson, in his edition of the novel *Lamb* writes:

Mr. MacLaverty told me that, while writing *Lamb*, his imagination was much possessed with the terrible events which had unfolded and were unfolding in Northern Ireland. He also wishes, however, to approach the whole issue obliquely, since, like many other Northern Irish writers, he fully understands the potential of artistic dangers – of exploitation, of false glamour, and of oversimplification of the complexity of things – in writing directly about the troubles. (viii)

*Lamb* is a novel abundant in various themes and symbols. On one hand it focuses on human relationships – their shaping and reshaping, their growth amidst adverse circumstances, on the other hand it deals with various emotions and values like duty, obedience, freedom, faith, guilt, helplessness, and particularly 'misspelled love'. One interesting element of the novel is that most of the themes of the novel are symbolised or represented through the two characters who are poles apart – Brother Benedict and Brother Sebastian (also known as Michael Lamb). Though apparently Benedict has a very small role to play in the novel (directly present in the first 3-4 chapters only) he is a huge influence on Lamb's decisions throughout the novel. We find Lamb remembering Benedict every now and then, and trying to do something completely opposite to what Benedict would have done in certain circumstances.

At the very outset of the novel we find Benedict and Lamb in a conversation and this conversation puts light on the first important theme of the novel – radicalism or violence v/s liberalism or peace. Benedict is a clear-headed pragmatic. All his actions are oriented towards only one motive, which is to maintain discipline in the borstal and demand obedience on part of the subordinate staff and the young boys. He is not at all moved by the tender age of some of the boys admitted to the borstal. Benedict believes in adopting harsh methods to

maintain discipline. Rather for him all boys admitted to the borstal are criminals who deserve sternness and punishments as well. He supports the idea of “kill and cure” (34) which means threatening and punishing the boys to such an extent that an impression of this fear lasts for a lifetime and they never ever dare to do anything wrong. It is somewhat like killing their spirit of protest and doubt towards the authorities. Here ‘cure’ actually means that Benedict wanted the boys to be ‘slavishly obedient’. Benedict also used to say “anybody who says that he loves children doesn’t understand them” (34). According to him, children could be taught to be obedient only through force and fear. While on the other hand Lamb believes that love and affection is the best means of reforming someone. Thus one may notice a stark difference in the approaches of the two characters towards people or a situation – Benedict standing for violent methods, Lamb for love and peace. This difference of approach may also be found in case of their ideas pertaining to ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland.

Lamb was a Catholic from Ulster and therefore Benedict expected him to be favouring the Irish Republican Army which adopted violent means to get its demand fulfilled. In the very first chapter Benedict can be seen conversing with Lamb regarding the same. Benedict, himself, is in full support of the ideology of IRA and thus says,

If in our position we can’t be seen to help, then we should not stand in their [IRA] way. They are angry men with vision, Brother, and by God their anger is justified. Ireland has not much longer to suffer. Her misery will soon be over and we’ll a united country again. (2-3)

Lamb protest and says,

. . . but I don’t like their methods . . . . You describe them as men of vision . . . . But human elements can’t be kept out. Anger, hatred spoiled the purity of vision and the result is evil. If you know anyone who was killed then you know how evil it is. (3)

This conversation of Benedict and Lamb is an indirect comment on the chaotic condition in Ireland

during the Troubles. To completely opposite stances are put forth. Implicitly, the stance of MacLavery is also very clear that if even a drop of blood is shed the vision to achieve freedom or fighting for the right cause gets stained and misdirected.

The theme of ‘freedom’ is another very important concern of MacLavery in the novel. It is a cherished dream of the two important characters, Lamb and Owen, too. Owen, a young boy of 12, is threatened by the inhumane and oppressive rule of Brother Benedict in the borstal. In fact he finds the place so deplorable that he tries to run away from there twice or thrice. Owen admits it to Lamb that though at his home too he is unwanted still he prefers his home more than a place like the borstal. Like Owen, Lamb too is tired of the sickening tyranny of Brother Benedict in the borstal. Due to the psychotic tyranny of Benedict, Lamb even starts doubting the validity and purpose of religious beliefs and practices. Both Benedict and Lamb were Catholic Brothers, but their approach towards fellow-beings was very different. Benedict enjoyed being a dictator at the borstal, while Lamb was an overtly compassionate human being. He had taken the ‘Holy Orders’ with an expectation to achieve internal and eternal peace and happiness in the selfless serving of the community. But with the passage of time he felt an uneasiness and disillusionment at the means and methods of people like Benedict. Though Lamb didn’t lose hope and belief in God, but he started questioning the many meaningless prayers, rituals, and preaching of his community. According to Lamb, religion tends a man to be more compassionate and considerate in nature. It doesn’t teach one violence, hatred, or infliction of pain on others. Disappointingly, this is what Benedict was himself practicing and also supporting in context to IRA. Therefore, Lamb wanted to ‘escape’ or free himself from the degrading influence of Benedict.

The idea of freedom also parallels to the socio-political condition of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The people too were struggling for freedom – Republic of Ireland wanted a freedom from the interference, exploitation, and constitutional hold of Britain over Northern Ireland; similarly the Ulster Protestants wanted a freedom

from the pressure of uniting with Ireland and severing its ties with Britain. To attain their 'freedoms' these groups engaged in an ethnic war, violence, and bloodshed. But in this struggle for freedom, everyone overlooked the fact that they were actually ruining their basic right to live in a peaceful and free world. The question was were the means adopted by both the groups worth for achieving freedom, or were they actually leading themselves towards a more deteriorating condition? Benedict at a very early stage in the novel had said, "Freedom is an affliction" (6). This statement makes the reader rethink that is everyone capable of handling freedom? The people of Ireland had transgressed all limits of humanity to attain freedom, but the concern was whether such people will really be able to make the right use of the 'freedom' that they were struggling for so hard. Hamish Robertson in his edition of *Lamb* also observes that, "*Lamb* is the story of an escape to freedom, but to a freedom which is worse than the reality originally faced" (xiii).

The novel *Lamb* may also be studied as a narrative that delineates upon nuances of human relationships. The first and foremost relationship that lies at the heart of the novel is the 'father-son' relationship of Michael Lamb and Owen. However, Lamb and Owen's bond cannot be discussed in the absence of a reference to the father-son bonding of Lamb with his own father, as whatever Lamb does to Owen seems to be an imitation of what Lamb's father did for him. The selflessness which was a trait of Lamb was actually a quality inherited from his father. Lamb's mother had met an accident, when he was only five, and thus became paralysed down the waist. Throughout his growing years, Lamb witnessed his father taking care of his mother affectionately and uncomplainingly. For Lamb it was a sacrifice of his father for his mother. However, we may put it into better words and consider it as the 'selfless love' of Lamb's father for his mother. In case of Lamb and Owen, the reader witnesses this same selfless love of Lamb for Owen. Though at the end Lamb takes Owen's life but we cannot detest him for the same as his intentions were benign. It was Lamb's way of protecting Owen from the inhumane treatment of Benedict and his likes, when he fell

short of any other way out. To kill a loved one in order to protect him/her from further tribulations was another quality inherited by Lamb from his father. Whenever the rabbits, lambs and other domestic animals of Lamb's father were infected with some fatal disease or attacked and hurt by some predator in an unrecoverable manner, Lamb's father himself killed them in a blow in order to save them from further pain. Other than this, Lamb's father "was a man who had respect for every living thing" (78-79). Similarly, it may be said that to end Owen's life was more painful and suffocating for Lamb than for Owen.

Other than the father-son bond of Lamb and his father, and Lamb and Owen, there are numerous mythical and religious references to the father-son bonding. For instance, there's a reference to the mythical story of the Greek craftsman, Daedalus and his son Icarus who were Put into a labyrinthine prison by King Minos. Daedalus devised a plan of flying out of the prison and thus made two pair of wings, made of few feathers and wax for his son and himself. The father-son duo fled towards freedom but ended up in a tragic manner. When Icarus, overwhelmed with his freedom, fled too close to the sun his wax feathers melted and he fell into the Aegean Sea and died. In this instance too, the son trusted the father and in a joy of attaining freedom met a tragic end. Similarly, there's a reference to the bond of Holy Father and Holy Son in Christianity. The Holy Father too had made his Holy son sacrifice his life for the redemption of mankind. Aspen in her thesis observes that "Lamb imitates not only his father's example but those of fictional fathers as well" (59). Another reason that contributes to the occurrence of unpleasant things in his life was his extremely 'simple-minded' nature. In this context, Aspen comments:

In *Lamb*, the main character mistakes poor choices for noble ones, a confusion which finally ends in tragedy. . . . Michael Lamb begins to re-enact mythical, religious, and personal narratives, and despite his good intentions to be a positive father figure, becomes a figure of evil. (41-42)

The religious references justify the action of Lamb who committed this act to 'redeem' his son from all pains – physical (his epileptic attacks), and mental (fear of going back to Benedict; fear of his drunkard father's return someday, who used to torture him to death; fear of losing Lamb, or fear of losing 'love').

One of the most important themes of the novel is the kind of love which is 'misguided' or 'misspelled' in nature. This theme has a direct connotation to the socio-political condition of Ireland in the times of the *Troubles*. MacLavery very implicitly and evocatively comments on the condition of Ireland through the story of Lamb and Owen. One may clearly draw a parallel between what Lamb did to Owen in the name of love and what the people of Ireland, especially the Roman Catholics and IRA, were doing to their country in the name of love and patriotism. Gibson, in his thesis entitled *Through the Lens of the Land: Changing Identity in the Novels of Bernard MacLavery* studies Owen as a symbol of Northern Ireland which is being contested for control by Michael Lamb and Benedict. Lamb stands as a symbol of the misguided citizens who are ruining their own country in the name of love (28). Benedict may be considered as a symbol of the more powerful force, Britain, which might easily retrieve its hold over Ireland or for that matter over Owen. Throughout the novel there are only two instances when there's a direct reference to the *Troubles*. First, in the very first conversation between Benedict and Lamb, at the beginning of the novel, and second towards the end of the novel when Lamb had made a resolution to carry out the 'terrible' plan of drowning Owen and putting an end to his turmoil. For the execution of the plan when Lamb was heading towards the beach, he passed through the city of Strabane which exhibited the consequences of the violence in the city. There were "tall terraces of shops with charred rafters for roofs, crumbling gables, slogans sprayed everywhere . . . Two or three minutes passing through Strabane in the rain was enough to depress Michael . . ." (129). According to Gibson, this was a 'reminder' or warning to Lamb to give a second thought to his plan because, "when each side in the struggle is insularly resolute in their determination to be right and to be

champion, no one emerges victorious, not the Catholics, not the Protestants, not Michael, not Owen" (33). However, the end of the novel makes it clear that Lamb couldn't understand the signs of the consequences of misguided love and tore himself apart from the dearest thing to him – his son, Owen.

Besides these major themes there are many other minor themes too, that the readers may trace, in the novel. For instance, one may also note the rural v/s urban theme in *Lamb*. Lamb is a man from rural background, born in Ballycastle, who lived amidst deep forests, rivers, and natural landscapes. One can notice his naivety and resulting discomfort when he moved to London city with Owen. Though a grown-up man, he and Owen often got lost in the city and most of their time and energy was spent in finding the way back to the hotel. In Ch. 10 of the novel, Lamb's dislike, but helplessness at the same time to take refuge in a city like London, is very conspicuous - "Michael had never liked the city – any city – but he knew . . . they would be conspicuous in a village. The city hid them and he was grateful and annoyed at the same time" (76).

The idea of rural v/s urban may also be studied in reference to the two countries mentioned in the novel – England and Ireland. Ireland was a less urban and more rural country with natural landscapes, lowlands, pastures etc. in comparison to England. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that after a short excursion to England, Lamb opts to return to Ireland to execute his plan. His happiness could be seen when they were about to land in Ireland and Lamb could see the green patches of land from the aeroplane, which he missed in England.

*Lamb* can also be studied as a depiction of the struggle of 'Man' against his 'Fate'/'Destiny' (a theme very pertinent in Thomas Hardy's novels). Lamb and Owen were people with a poor luck. Numerous instances of the same may be found in the novel – meeting an Irish room-keeper in the hotel; always losing in the pinball game; cancellation of Owen's favourite team's football match; epileptic attack just before the beginning of the football match; not getting drowned in the first attempt etc. All these incidents press the idea that howsoever



hard one may try to escape one's destiny, it is something unavoidable. This fact makes the story of Lamb and Owen even more tragic and disheartening as they were naive people who just craved for each other's love and still couldn't make it till the end just because of their hard luck.

Depicting such intrinsic themes in such a concise narrative (*Lamb* is a novel of around 150 pages only) stands as a testimony of MacLaverty's compact yet meaningful and evocative reading. The expressions, language, and symbols hit the mark and leave an indelible impression on the reader's mind. The beauty of his writing is that apparently his compositions seem to be easy readings – language, vocabulary etc. – but every reading adds new layers of meaning to the narrative, thereby making the compositions inexhaustive in nature.

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