

A BEHAVIOURAL ANALYSIS OF PIRA IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S "GODMAN'S MASTER"

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Abstract

This paper deals with a midget called Godman who has been kept in a box by his exploiter and forced to make prophetic utterances that bewilder the villagers. Pira is the dwarf inside a box. "Godman's Master" dramatically tells of the coming together of Africa's past and its possible future when a young man, acculturated by four years at a British university, comes back and rescues Pira, one of the strangest inhabitants of the old traditional society. Godman is an image of imprisonment. He is under nurtured and denied of unrestricted existence. At the end, Godman is happy and asserts himself despite having confronted the worst of the worst while living in a constant state of fear, he has endured. This paper tries to study and analyse, Pira's character through the help of the tools provided by behavioural analysis.

Key terms: behavioural psychology, freedom, short story, Margaret Laurence

Behaviourism, also known as behavioural psychology, is a theory of learning which states all behaviours are learned through interaction with the environment through a process called conditioning. Thus, behaviour is simply a response to environmental stimuli. Behaviour analysis is the scientific study of behaviours based on the principle of behaviourism. This is a branch of psychology that has its root in the idea that all behaviours are results from conditioning, which means that there are different influential factors that will lead to a specific behaviour.

Wilfred Sellars(1912–89), the distinguished philosopher, noted that a person may qualify as a behaviourist, loosely or attitudinally speaking, if they insist on confirming "hypotheses about psychological events in terms of behavioural criteria" (22). Among psychologists behaviourism was even more popular than among philosophers. In addition to Pavlov, Skinner, Thorndike, and Watson, the list of behaviourists among psychologists included, among others, E. C. Tolman (1886–1959), C. L. Hull (1884–52), and E. R. Guthrie (1886–1959). Tolman writes that "everything important in psychology ... can be investigated in essence through the continued experimental and theoretical analysis of the determiners of rat behaviour at a choice point in a maze"(34).

Freedom is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. This also means the absence of subjection to alien domination. Freedom starts with a principle of self-control, also known as self-ownership. In a free society, each and every person has legal control (or "ownership") of their own body and mind. As such, the concept of freedom refers to empowerment. A free society is one with an equal distribution of legal rights and in which each and every person has equal legal rights.

“Godman’s Master” is a short-story written by Jean Margaret Laurence (1926-1987). Margaret Laurence is a much-loved Canadian author. She is known for her stories from Canada and Africa. She was born in Neepawa in Canada on July 18, 1926 to Robert Harrison Wemyss, a lawyer, and Verna Jean Simpson. She lost both her parents. Laurence’s stepmother was a teacher and later a librarian. She encouraged her throughout her life.

Laurence began writing short stories shortly after her marriage, when she was living in Africa. When Laurence returned to Canada in 1957, she wrote her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, and her first collection of short fiction, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* with a Ghanaian setting. Laurence moved to England in 1962 and stayed there for a decade. During this time, she created five books about the fictional town of Manawaka, patterned after her birthplace, and its people. They are *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House*, and *The Diviners*. Her works depict the contemporary life of women depicting the choices, and consequences of those choices, women must make to find meaning and purpose in life. After a fruitful life, she died in Lakefield, Ontario in 1987 as one of Canada’s most respected and adored authors.

After her return to Canada, Margaret Laurence wrote “Godman’s Master”, an interesting story from Africa. Freedom takes on different perspectives for each character in the story. This paper tries to attempt a behavioural analysis of the short story Margaret Laurence’s “Godman’s Master”.

This story “Godman’s Master” comes under New Literatures. New Literatures deals with places that have once been colonised by the British. The study of New Literatures is concerned with colonial and postcolonial writing which emerged in former British colonies such as: parts of Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, islands in the South Pacific, and Sri Lanka. The literatures of these countries are also called postcolonial literatures/writings.

Moses Adu is a native African, who, educated in Europe, returns to Africa with pharmaceutical qualifications to free his people from the bondage of magic and superstition. “Moses” recalls the biblical law-giver who leads the Chosen People to the Promised Land. Here in the story, Moses, trapped by circumstance into enacting the role of Liberator more directly than he had ever wished. Patricia Morley says that Godman’s story is “an analogue of human evolution, of the movement of the human spirit towards independence and maturity” (18).

The story starts with a beautiful description of rain. “The sky cracked open like a broken bowl that held a sea-full. The moment the rain began, the thick heat vanished. Humans and animals would shudder in the unaccustomed cool until the returning sun made the drenched foliage steam”(GM 91). (The primary text is Margaret Laurence’s “Godman’s Master” from *Splendid Short Stories* edited by Dr Suresh Frederick and Dr S Newton Raja). Moses Adu’s movement is curtailed by the rain. He drives very fast through the rain to take up a job. His car is an old one. His thoughts start to wander. Due to the heavy pouring and lack of concentration, he hits a goat. Villagers surround him and demand an exorbitant amount for the dead goat. He refuses. So he is taken to a priest called Faru.

“We will take him to the oracle” (GM 95) said the villagers. “Moses grinned in

embarrassment. ‘Oracle? ...’ (GM 95). He is not willing to accept their story. In fact, Moses has come to serve as a medical practitioner precisely to help this ignorant lot. When he goes into the house, he looks around. “Against the far wall stood a long table, containing at one end a *kuduo*, an ornate jar with twisted handles, cast in brass for long time ago and now encrusted in dirt and verdigris. In the centre of the table rested a mahogany box, perhaps two and half feet long, in appearance unlike a child’s coffin”(GM 96). Others are looking in a “reverent” way but Moses is “stubborn”. “In a deep resonant voice, Faru addressed the oracle, explaining the predicament. A moment’s silence. The villagers leaned forward expectantly, and even Moses breathed softly and slowly as he listened. Then from the box came a sound” (GM 96). Moses is surprised. “The voice that followed was small and tenuous, entirely in different pitch and emphasis from the voice of Faru” (GM 96). Thus he encounters this tiny Godman, who is imprisoned by another man’s freedom is in question.

After the Godman delivers the verdict almost in favour of Moses, every one begins to leave the place. Moses pays the appointed amount and when he is about to leave, he hears a noise. “The box coughed once more, a gentle apologetic sound. Moses swung around, feeling both foolish and terrified. ‘Who – what is it?’ he whispered. There was a flutter of movement inside the box” (GM 99). He hears a voice. “‘I beg you, I beg you, I beg you’, the small voice gasped, ‘let me free!’ Hardly knowing what he was doing, or why, but moved by the urgency of the voice, Moses stepped quickly over the box and began wrenching at the lid” (GM 99). The tiny man wants to breathe the fresh air of freedom.

Moses is surprised to see that old face. “The creature’s face was old, old as Africa, as old as all earth. But it was not the leathery oldness of health. The skin of the face was pouched and puffy; it had the look of unpleasant softness, like skin soaked too long in water. The eyes were so sorrowfully wise they seemed not to own the ludicrously stunted body, palpitating with panic under its tangle of rags”(GM 99, 100).

Moses somehow helps the tiny man to escape from that place. He is curious to know about the small man. Godman says, “Oh bless your name, I bless it! He kept me out there --- oh, a long time, I cannot remember how long. I will bless your name every day of my life. There were small holes in the box but I had to breathe very small and small and small. Oh, you would not believe how foul the air was --- it has ruined my lungs; lately I cough all the time”(GM 100, 101). Thus Moses understands the plight of this tiny man. Thus this dwarf is able to feel the freedom which eluded him so long.

The tiny man says the following about himself. “‘I am Godman Pira’, the ex-oracle replied. ‘One of the *pirafu*, you know, a dwarf. Can I help it? Does that make me any less a man? I am different, maybe, but I am as much a man as any of them. Do you think so? Do I seem that way to you? To one who has lived in a box for so long, it is sometimes hard to tell----’”(GM 101). Moses clearly understands his plight. “‘I want to be a man,’ Godman Pira said. ‘I have always belonged to some priest you see. Before this one, it was another, and before him another, and before him another. Always the same thing. It is a very hard life to be an oracle. Some of the *pirafu* seem to be court jesters to the kings of the Ashanti. But not anymore. No one wants to laugh any more, perhaps’”(GM 101). After being a slave for many years, Godman becomes a

free man in the house of Moses.

Then Godman lives in the house of Moses for many months. Then Moses realises that he has become another master, and the Godman has become dependent on him. So, he decides to send him away. But Godman refuses to accept this. “Although Godman Pira had yearned for freedom, he believes that he is incapable of living on his own in the world and insists on living with Moses as a sort of houseboy”(Xiques 263).

Godman Pira pleads, “Do I not work well? Are you displeased with me? The groundnut stew – oh, I prepared it carefully, carefully, I swear it ----” (GM 110). He tries to persuade Moses to help him stay in the house. Like in the case of Caliban in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, he has moved over from one master to another. Godman pleads with Moses to continue in bondage. “‘You saved me’, he said. ‘You cannot deny that that you saved me. I would have died if I had stayed there much longer. You lifted the lid of the box and let me out. It was no other man. You were the one. Who else, then, should protect me? Who else should I serve? Who else’s name should I forever bless? You freed me. I am yours’” (GM 111). Moses with a tough mind tells him the reality of life. “Moses put his head down onto his hands. ‘There is more to freedom’, he said, ‘than not living in a box’”(GM 111). Thus, Moses sends Godman Pira out of his house into freedom. But Godman Pira is not ready for that.

Eleanor Roosevelt in *You Learn by Living: Eleven Keys for a More Fulfilling Life* says “Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility”. Godman is not willing to accept freedom and responsibility. He wants to live as a parasite on Moses. But the situation makes him a complete person.

Moses is not a hard-hearted person. He always thinks about Godman. After a year he comes to know that a tiny man has come with a “travelling troupe” (GM 113). He is sure that he should be Godman. He goes to the place. “When the little man saw Moses, he jumped down and ran towards him” (GM 114). Moses finds him as a happy and contented man. Even though there is no physical freedom for Godman inside the circus tent, he has found mental freedom. Doney Xiques observes that “Godman Pira, waves goodbye to Moses...” (263), because Pira is happy and content.

“The story dramatises the desirability of freedom and the inescapable security of bondage, for freedom can be frightening” (Stovel 151-152). The “frightening” freedom offered by Moses is not accepted by Godman. He is happy with the restricted freedom, which is offered in the troupe. He is more than satisfied with the dress he wears and the food he eats. He is now empowered to work on his own, he cherishes this freedom. Godman Pira has self-ownership of his own body and mind is more important. Thus Pira’s behaviour is conditioned through interaction with the environment.

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