

Bernard Malamud's fictional forte in tending the resources of human personality for effecting human relationship through suffering in his fictional world: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

This paper throws light on the human potential for effecting human relationship and suffering as depicted in Bernard Malamud's fictional world which shows how his imagination is undoubtedly proof of human relationships and moral responsibility. The only alternative to curb the evils of the society is eating away such evils at all levels. The complete application of his theme won him an important place in the twentieth century American fiction.

It is generally held that Twentieth-century American literature is greatly enriched by the profound and diverse contributions made by ethnic writers, particularly the Jews. Bernard Malamud, one of the versatile Jewish-American writers, is said to have given a fresh lease of life to the realm of modern fiction. The moral and spiritual insanity of modern man has out and out stimulated him so as to reiterate the need for values in society. While reading his fiction, one can understand so easily the essential fact that instead of castigating human beings for their moral aridity, Malamud does convincingly uphold the dignity of man by unmasking man's hidden potential. His fictional forte lies rather undoubtedly in presenting enduring human relationships and moral responsibility as the only alternative to the cancerous values that are eating up the society at all levels. Almost all his novels do trace the spiritual growth of the individual through trial and tribulations in life.

Born to immigrant Jewish-Russian parents, Bernard Malamud grew up in Brooklyn (New York). Even during his school days, his creativity started flowering leading to publication of a few stories in his school magazine. Immediately after his college education in the City College and Columbia University in New York, he joined Oregon State College and served as a member of its English Department. His career of creative writing got coupled with his teaching profession. While, teaching for sometime at Bennington college and Harvard University, he came out with the publication of his earlier works and this earlier creative work won him instant success that gave him a literary leap to establish himself as a notable writer in the realm of Jewish-American fiction ranking second only to Saul Bellow among the "Jewish greats" like Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Theodore Roethke and I.B. Singer. Commenting on the creative genius of Bernard Malamud and the place on honour he occupies in the realm of modern fiction, Robert Alter writes:

"Malamud ... is the first important American writer to shape out of his early experiences immigrant milieu a whole distinctive style of imagination and to a lesser degree, a

distinctive technique of fiction as well. He is by no means a 'folk' artist, but his ear for the rhythms of speech and the tonalities of implication, his eye for the shadings of attitude and feeling, of Jewish folk culture, have helped make the fictional world he has created uniquely his own" (P 31)

His works expose his consciousness as a 'human' rather than as a Jew. Assuming the role of a moral spokesman, he is the one who advocates the acceptance of the self, society and the need for fellowship of all men laying focus on the growing necessity to fortify the human value system in his fictional world. Malamud himself once observed thus:

"I am an American, I am a Jew and
I write for all men a novelist has to
or he's built himself a cage" (Hassan 16)

Malamud depicts the Jew not as a member of a particular ethnic group but as a representative of suffering humanity. It may even be said that the 'Jew' in Malamud is a symbol of man, of every modern man living in a claustrophobic world and encountering suffering through alienation from the self and the society. In the words of Norman Podhoretz, "To Malamud, the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration" (P 177). Truly speaking, Malamud has chosen Jewish heroes to ascertain the fact that they all strongly set his imagination going and his creativity blooming so as to let literary fragrance get 'spread and smelt' all and sundry in the realm of literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Romances, Hemingway's natural tragedies, Mark Twain's social satires and above all Thomas Hardy's tragic vision of life acted as richest sources of inspiration to Malamud. Besides the literary and religious influences like the Bible- both testaments on him, Malamud was greatly enamored of the very idea of being morally responsible for others. This interest and faith in humanity and human values is considered the dominant feature of his fiction. About his works, Malamud himself describes thus:

“My work, all of it is an idea of dedication to the human. That is basic to every book. if you don't respect man, you cannot respect my work. I'm in defense of the human” (Frankel 40)

Truly speaking, the common man with his frustration desperation and economic instability forms the ideal persona for Malamud's fiction. The characters depicted in his fictional world are found to be disillusioned with life do emerge victorious in their in their awareness of life's meaning and in their assumption of moral responsibility. The effective and intense portrayal of human dignity in the face of squalor, injustice and racial conflicts is a proof of Malamud's intellectual supremacy and fictional forte. His novels are nothing but a testament of his faith in humanity. Almost all his novels are a rendition of his staunch belief in human values and in the chastening power of suffering. His very first novel namely *The Natural* (1952) does neatly analyse the value of suffering that purges man of his weaknesses. Dealing with the hero Roy Hobb's aspiration to become a baseball champion, this novel picturizes the protagonist's consuming passion to be the greatest player in the game which brings him out of oblivion to the limelight. By achieving his goal and growing into an indispensable player of a leading team, his sudden entry into the new world of fame and pelf, makes his fall so easily into evil company resulting in his suffering of ignominy and depression. During moments of anguish and torment, he is sustained by Irish Lemon, his female mentor who explains to him the significance of the experience of suffering. Rob Hobbs is forced to scrutinize his own failings and he ultimately fights the evil influences with the help of a new realm of values that he has gained through suffering. What Malamud reveals in his first novel is that “suffering is what brings us towards happiness” and that suffering teaches man “to want the right things” (*The Natural* 158)

The Assistant (1957) which won the Rosenthal Award stands a testimony to Malamud's humanistic vision. Here, Malamud does emphasize the need for human relationships that have the potential to transform man. The spiritual and moral growth of Frank Alpine through contact with the exemplar of virtue namely Morris Bober, is powerfully rendered in the novel. Frank Alpine, an Italian, who holds up the store of the Jewish grocer Morris is tormented by his conscience for having done a wrong to the Jew. Frank decides to make amends for his wrongdoing, by employing himself as an assistant to the grocer. It is this period of apprenticeship which becomes a turning point in the life of Frank, who had for long led a mindless selfish life. Frank, on observing Morris's suffering and his attitude to it, grows morally apprenticed to him. Morris Bober, the Jewish grocer, is presented throughout the novel as “Malamud's image of a man who confronts human suffering and who accepts it as a norm of existence” (Handy 79). Morris is an epitome of human values and is the strict practitioner of the ‘I – Thou relation’. Malamud's stress on human relations and moral integrity amidst trials and wants is explicit in the very character of Morris. In the words of Ihab Hassan, “*The Assistant* is a blazing poetic insight into the daily aches and indignities of man which add up, somehow, to a kind of nobility, a form of aspiration” (P 162). Even his first collection of short stories *The Magic Barrel* lays focus on the profundity of

human relations in shorter compass. Choosing both Jews and Gentiles living in New York as the leading figures in his short fiction, he portrays the economically down –trodden world of bakers, shoemakers, tailors and matchmakers who aspire for a better life and struggle fruitlessly in their efforts. They continue to hope and dream in spite of the invariable suffering they face. The yearning for brotherhood and the human potential to transcend alienation and frustration is affirmed in this collection of short stories. His second collection of short stories titled *Idiots First* (1963) highlights Malamud's perception of racial prejudices and man's inhumanity to man and in stories like “The German Refugee” and “The Jew Bird”, he strips human hypocrisy and defines human responsibility in society.

The Fixer (1966) is Malamud's magnum opus which won him the Pulitzer Award and the National Book Award. Here in this work, Malamud uses the backdrop of anti-Semitic Russian his depiction of the ennobling power of suffering. Yakov Bok, the Jewish protagonist flees from the ‘shtetl’ to experience a better life in Kiev- a territory forbidden to the Jews. There, he is falsely implicated in the murder of a Christian child. His traumatic experiences in the prison cause his transformation from a professed ‘freethinker’ to a martyr for the Jew's cause. Yakov, who left his fellow men in pursuit of his selfish dreams resolves to suffer for his people and for his faith. Malamud portrays a heroic struggle against injustice. *The Fixer* is nothing but a manifestation of the depth of human endurance, vividly demonstrating how in moments of crisis a man's latent potential, which lay dormant in him surfaces. *The Fixer* has rightly been acclaimed as “Malamud's most powerful novel” (Alter 40). The concept of close-knit human relations is given a realistic form in *The Tenants* (1971) where the complexity and the sensitivity of the relationship between the Blacks and the Jews is depicted powerfully by Malamud. Though human relationship is the essence of this novel, its bleak and tragic end asserts that Malamud aimed at it as a warning to humanity. As Israel Shanker puts it, “It is a sort of prophetic warning against fanaticism” (P 22).

Humanity has reached a stage where it is likely to be destroyed by itself. Malamud seems to say that the consistent evils of mankind have caused the patience of God to wane away. The wars and conflicts not only destroy man but also mark his fall from the almighty's grace. *God's Grace* (1982) is Malamud's most powerful novel that reveals how man has degenerated. The dexterity with which Malamud has handled his novels and short stories is an illustration of his dual achievements as a novelist and short-story writer. All his works do effectively pronounce the wrangles of the modern man. His comprehension of the grim realities of the materialistic world that is dramatized in his works has added a new dimension to modern fiction. Today humanity has opted for abysmally low ethical values. But Malamud's novels with their appeal to man to rise from his state of moral degeneration, serve as a panacea to the unbridled evil in society. Sidney Richman pointedly observes:

“In a period when the novel itself threatens to vanish under the weight of anti-novels and anti-heroes, when denigration and nihilism have become the norm, Malamud

has dedicated himself to tending the resources of human personality which seem to be disappearing not just from literature but from life itself" (P 145)

Malamud's obsessive portrayal of men languishing in poverty and anguish does not project them as victims. He objectifies how man can transcend his sufferings and limitations into blessings and aspirations. The suffering of his protagonists does not make them passive but engineers the development of their self. They gain an insight into life through trials and tribulations. It no longer thwarts their dreams or destroys their faith. It gives a new shape to their personality by enhancing their strength and hope. So, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope" (The Bible James Version 166). The relation between a Jew and a Christian finds explicit expression in *The Assistant*, where a Jewish grocer is linked with Frank Alpine, an Italian catholic by the cord of humanism. Frank sees Morris as an epitome of human values which draws him towards Morris. Frank, who had apprehensions regarding the nature of a Jew, is enamored of Morris's selfishness. Morris, devoid of greed, jealousy and anger serves as a touchstone for the ideal human behavior. Frank comprehends that concern for the fellow-being is the essence of Jewishness. Morris, the Jew, becomes an idol whom Frank willfully decides to emulate. Frank embraces Judaism towards the end. Conversion is used by Malamud is a technique to externalize one's inner spiritual growth. It gives Frank the meaning of life. The purpose of life, as he realizes is to be of service to others. "Malamud considers Judaism a positive influence nurturing ethical conduct and pride in self and community. In Malamud's works. Judaism's intellectual tradition encourages questioning and self-analysis. Emphasis on earthly welfare and a personal relationship with the God of the covenant results in constructive social change" (Avery 31). The chosen protagonists encounter suffering to make explicit to the world that they are indeed the 'chosen people' of God. In a word, Malamud's presentation of the Jew's innate potential to face and accept suffering teaches humanity the need for patience and human endurance in the face of rashness and intolerance which shrouds mankind.

Suffering is an enter-present theme in Malamud's fiction. The exhaustive use of this theme has won him a prominent place in the realm of American fiction. Charles Alva Hoyt points out the significance of the theme of suffering in Malamud thus:

"The suffering of the Jews is to Bernard Malamud, 'the stuff and substance of his art', from it he has fashioned works of surpassing beauty and integrity" (P 172)

To highlight the fact that it is suffering which unites mankind Malamud has delineated the character of Frank Alpine. At the outset, he is presented as a man begotten in misfortune. Nothing seems to go right for him or in the way he intended. The fact that he was rendered homeless at the tender age of five and was brought up in an orphanage, adds a pathetic dimension to his miserable plight. Frank is perturbed, on account of the way things seem to work against him. He confides in Morris the causes for his failure. Yakov's life also is

plagued with struggles and wrangles. To add to his miseries, his wife deserts him, thereby making him determinedly decide to leave the 'shtetl'. Suffering juxtaposed with imminent struggle is not something new to Yakov. Like Frank, he has been exposed to the crudity of existence and depravity ever since his childhood. Deprived of the joys of childhood, Yakov is quick to learn that it is only monetary gains which determine man's happiness. But unable to carve a niche for himself even in his adulthood, he desperately ventures out of the 'shtetl' to improve upon his situation. It is this quest for better existence which ironically enough leads Yakov to the abysmal pit of suffering. His journey out of the 'shtetl' towards Kiev draws out the grid of suffering he is to encounter later.

In the Malamudian corpus, the search for material prospects is the basis for the suffering of the protagonists. In *The Assistant*, though Morris's flight from Russia of the US was primarily to escape persecution, he nevertheless, nurtured fond hopes of establishing himself in the ever prospering world of America. But, his aspiration are frustrated under the effects of the Great depression. All the characters thus encounter the whirlpool of suffering. Malamud's novels affirm that "the freedom to live, to discover a new life is ironically, the freedom to struggle and the freedom to suffer" (Handy 82). Yakov's suffering acquires the mythical dignity of Job because of its intensity. But the denial of his "place in Jewishness and his place therefore in mankind", (Friedman 289) causes him greater suffering than that of Job. Though the suffering of the Jewish grocer Morris lacks the profundity of Yakov's physical anguish, he undergoes the same trauma. Malamud presents the distinctive and poignant dimension of Jewish suffering through one of Frank's monologues:

"What kind of the man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin and never once during the day... poke your beak out of the door for a shootful of air? The answer wasn't hard to say you had to be a Jew. They (Jews) were born prisoners" (The Assistant 72)

What Malamud seems to suggest in his novels is that it is human suffering which is the point of convergence that binds the sea of humanity together. To conclude, what is significant about suffering lies in the relationship it necessitates. A suffering man is, no doubt, humane; this factor accords him a sense of responsibility to another sufferer irrespective of caste or creed. Malamud's portrayal of suffering in his novels accentuates the need for inter-personal relationships. Malamud's protagonists thus experience moral regeneration only by encountering human suffering which serves as an experiment for discovering a 'complete life'. Their suffering, no doubt, marks the move towards transcendence. In a nutshell, it may be said that Malamud has employed his fiction as an efficacious weapon to uplift the morally lax humanity. The affirmative tone and the profound realistic scrutiny of the human condition has secured for Malamud, a place of lasting repute in the world of fiction.

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