



**PROJECTION OF ‘SUFFERING HUMANITY’ THROUGH CHARACTER – PORTRAYAL OF YAKOV AND MORRIS AS ‘FIXER’ AND ‘GROCER’ IN SELECT NOVELS OF BERNARD MALAMUD: AN APPRAISAL**

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**Abstract:**

This paper attempts to project how the moral and insanity of modern man has stimulated Bernard Malamud, the Jewish-American fictionist, to reiterate the need for human values in society and how he upholds the dignity of man by unmasking man’s hidden potential and presenting human relationships and moral responsibility as the only alternative to the cancerous values that are found eating up the society. It beautifully describes how the chosen protagonists like yakov and Morris encounter suffering to make explicit to the world that they are indeed the chosen people of God bringing home the point that it is suffering which is the point of convergence that binds the sea of humanity together and a suffering man is, no doubt, humane in all respects.

Bernard Malamud occupies a significant place in Post-war American fiction. Only a few ethnic writers have given a new dimension to post-war American fiction. The moral and spiritual insanity of modern man has stimulated Bernard Malamud, the Jewish – American fictionist, to reiterate the need for values in society. He does not castigate human beings for their moral aridity. Instead, he upholds the dignity of man by unmarking man’s hidden potential. He presents enduring human relationships and moral responsibility as the only alternative to the cancerous values that are found eating up the society. Almost all his novels trace the growth of the individual through trials and tribulations. He is said to have emerged as a moral spokesman and a humanist, advocating the acceptance of the self, society and the need for fellowship.

Bernard Malamud’s preoccupation with the suffering humanity evokes a profound response in the reader that makes it rather obligatory on the reader’s part to know more about Malamud’s life and background, his influences and his contributions for assessing his creative genius. Born to immigrant Jewish-Russian parents, Malamud grew up in Brooklyn (New York). He had his college education in the City College and Columbia University in New York. His creativity started blooming early in his school days when he started writing stories that were published in his school Magazine. He taught for sometime in Bennington College and Harvard University. During this period he came out with his earlier works which won him instant success. He coupled his career of creative writing with his teaching work. In the realm of Jewish American fiction, Malamud ranks second only to Saul Bellow among the “Jewish greats” like Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Theodore Roethke and I. B. Singer. To label Malamud as a ‘Jewish’ writer is to circumscribe the appeal of his novels that have universal overtones. As Malamud himself observed,

“I’m an Americian, I’m a Jew and I write for all men. A novelist has to or he’s built himself a cage” (P61)

Malamud depicts the Jew as a representative of suffering humanity and not as a member of a particular ethnic group. 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. “To Malamud, the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration” (Podhoretz 177). The Jewish faith in the moral world and its acceptance of tribulations as an indispensable aspect of human experience has influenced Malamud’s works to a great extent. He acknowledged the influence of “The Bible-both testaments in his creative attempts” (P60). Besides the literary and religious influences on him, Malamud was enamoured of the very concept of the “human” – that is ‘being humane’ and the idea of being morally responsible for others. This interest and faith in humanity and human values is the dominant feature of his fiction. Malamud describes his works as:

“... 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)

The novels of Malamud are nothing but a testament of his faith in humanity. All his novels are a rendition of his staunch belief in human values and in the chastening power of suffering. What Malamud

reveals in his very first novel *The Natural* is that “suffering is what brings us towards happiness” and that suffering teaches man to “want the right things” (P158). He has to his credit publication of such works as

1. *The Natural*
2. *The Assistant*
3. *The Fixer*
4. *Pictures of Fidelment: An Exhibition*
5. *The Tenants*
6. *God’s Grace and Collection of Short Stories like The Magic Barrel, Idiots First and Rembrandt’s Hat.*

The Jewish – American writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and J. D. Salinger portray the problems of an exile Jew but Bernard Malamud presents the Jew as a symbol of everyman – of every modern man caught in the destructive forces of the materialistic world. Alienation, isolation, ethnic and religious intolerance and the resultant suffering are not given to the Jews alone. They are the predominant characteristics of every individual who has been forced to leave his native land and make a foreign country his own. However, the fact that no race on earth has undergone such inhuman tortures cannot be refuted. It is this factor which makes the Jewish exile-hero an apt symbol of universal suffering.

In his widely acclaimed novels *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*, Malamud presents his Jewish protagonists in two different backgrounds. While *The Assistant* is laid in a Brooklyn grocery store, *The Fixer* is set against the backdrop of twentieth – century anti-Semitic Tzarist regime. The setting needs a close scrutiny as it highlights the fact that wherever the Jews find themselves, be it the US or Russia, they are moulded by Judaic tradition either consciously or unconsciously, settling in a foreign land has in no way altered the Jews’ plight. They are either victimized by the society or made political victims. The economic drive in the US which followed the Great Depression, did not better the economic condition of the Jews who settled there. Hence, Morris Bober in *The Assistant* is caught up in the smothering effects of a grocery store. Economic necessities shroud his existence, engulfed by monetary concerns, he despises himself for not being able to provide even college education for his only daughter. Thus he becomes a social victim – an ironic product of economic reforms and policies. In a similar vein, Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* seeking a living in a Russian district forbidden to the Jews, is manipulated in a crime he did not commit. He is accused of murdering a Christian child by a Government which aims at wiping out the entire Jewish population of Russia. Yakov is made a victim by an anti-semitic Government for purely political purposes.

Yakov, the fixer, unable to cope with his economic depravity, decides to leave the Shtetl for Kiev, hoping to make a decent living. Ironically enough, the conditions of the Russians themselves are no better, and Yakov dreams of leaving for the US, but it is not fulfilled. What Yakov dreamt materializes in the case of Morris Bober in *The Assistant*. Morris relates how he fled from the Russian army to make it big in the US, the land of dreams. But as is the wont with life, Morris “had hoped for which in America and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less” (TA22) America which promised a rich and full life failed to fulfill the dreams of many an aspiring man like Morris Bober. The US like any other country favoured only the conceited, the self-centred and those who climbed the rungs of success by hook or by crook. To a simpleton like Morris, America has nothing to offer but a “grave of a grocery”, thereby thwarting his dreams. While Louis Karp, a fellow Jew made a soaring business in his liquor store, Morris struggled to make both ends meet. Sam Pearl, another Jew, educates his son, Nat in a law college, as he thrives by betting on horses, but Helen, Bober’s daughter has to give up her desire for college education for want of money.

Yakov and Morris strive hard in their respective professions as fixer and grocer. Their lives turn into struggles every day. They have to fight against all odds to eke out a meagre living. Yakov, who earns by fixing the broken furnitures has to wander seeking a job and earns next to nothing. His inability to earn a comfortable living breaks his marriage and drives him to the point of despair. Likewise, Morris gets up early in the morning and waits all day for a customer. Waiting has become a way of life for him;

“The grocer sighed and waited. Waiting he thought  
He did poorly. When times were bad, time was bad.  
It died as he waited, stinking in his nose. . . .  
He went back to waiting. In twenty-one years, the  
Store had changed little” (TA2)

It is necessity which enables Morris to identify himself with the suffering Jews and non-Jews like Breitbart and Frank Alpine. His heart is overwhelmed with grief on hearing the story of the pedlar’s office. Frank’s tale of woe and pathos makes him with the heart of Morris. Morris is of the opinion that only the man who lacks and experiences sufferings can comprehend the agony of another. Himself a bottom – dog in society, he tries his best to help a fellow sufferer like Breitbart, in spite of being reprimanded by his wife Ida for being too generous amidst his poverty. It is this humanitarian concern of Morris which characterizes his Jewishness. This does significantly reflect Malamud’s own belief in humanism as the essence of any religion. When Frank asks Morris where he considered himself as a real Jew, he is quick to explicate his concept of a Jew:

“What I worry is to follow the Jewish law. . . .

It is not important to me if I taste pig or  
I don't. To some Jews is this important but  
not to me. Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish  
because I put in my mouth once in a while . . . a  
Piece ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe  
them, if I forget the law. This means to do what  
is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to  
other people" (TA106)

Viewed in this light neither Morris nor yakov is a fantastic Jew, that is, they do not visit the Synagogue or observe Jewish festivals. When Morris has intense faith in the Torah and followed in the spirit, yakov has little knowledge of the Torah and the Talmud. As yakov says, "Torah I had little of and Talmud less, though I learned Hebrew because I've got an ear for language" (TF11). Even yakov's looks were not that of a Jew. He "had been admonished by more than one Jew that he looked like a goy" (TF13). Yakov believes in sincerity in his work and to him, "a man's religion is his own business" (TF113). Hence he denies his very identity as a Jew and seeks a job in a non-Jewish territory. Though yakov initially rejects the label of a Jew, circumstances make it impossible for him to erase the Jew in him. This is because every Jew finds it difficult to shed memories of his ancestor's horrendous past, which lurks behind in his mind. Yakov's humanism finds expression in his act of rescuing Nikholai Mensvitch, a member of the Black Hundreds Organization, from the biting cold. But it must be noted that yakov's sentiments for his fellow Jews induce him to overlook his own risk in helping an old Hasidic Jew. Later, in spite of his grueling experience in prison, he refuses to earn his freedom by implicating the entire Jewish race in Russia, in the ritual murder. As Sidney Richman observes:

" . . . perhaps the most important fact of  
Malamud's characterization is that his Jews  
do possess an ancient identity and that  
they bear it, consciously or unconsciously,  
through a hall of historical mirrors.  
And their relationship to this identity  
determines their development" (P22)

Hence, Yakov experiences spiritual conflict when he ponders whether to pursue his relationship with zina, a non-Jew. His Jewish upbringing deters him from yielding to the charms of Zina Menschivitch. Likewise, in *The Assistant*, Helen's engagement on being molested by Frank, an "uncircumcised dog" (TA44) and Ida's refusal to trust Frank, a goy, in spite of his whole-hearted service in the store, stand testimony to the latent Jewishness in them. Ida can never imagine her daughter getting married to a non-Jew. But Morris freely mingles with the Jews and non-Jews alike. Morris is thus, both an orthodox Jew and a Reform Jew in his belief in the Talmud, which serves primarily as a guide to the civil and religious laws of Judaism.

The relation between a Jew and a Christian finds explicit expression in *The Assistant*, where Morris, 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 enamoured of Morris's selflessness. 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 as a technique to externalize one's inner spiritual growth. Unlike Frank, who converts himself to a Jew, Yakov refuses to embrace Christianity, when an offer is made to him. It dawns on Yakov, the 'freethinker', that his Jewish past possesses a rich significance. He contemplates the history of Jews and realizes the value of the suffering encountered by his ancestors. Offer of conversion serves to strengthen Yakov's own faith in Judaism. As Evelyn Gross Avery pointedly states:

"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" (P31)

The 'chosen' protagonists encounter suffering to make explicit to the world that they are indeed the 'chosen people' of God. They are not without doubts regarding the meaningless anguish. As Yakov, who claims to be a free-thinker, ponders, "Why me? . . . why did it have to happen to a poor, half-ignorant fixer" (TF254) Experience reveals that their suffering enhances the possibility of redemption. It paves the way for a closer communion with the Almighty. Hence Jews like Morris accept it as a manifestation of the will of God. As Josephine Zodusky Knopp observes,

“ . . . . the Jews are chosen to show God’s ways  
to the rest of mankind and frequently to suffer  
for the sake of this good cause . . . .”(P14)

This explains why the Jew accepts the inordinate suffering, in the midst of which he is forced to live. By their sheer capacity for incredible endurance and temperance, the Jews have established a unique place for themselves in the history of mankind. Suffering which chisels the character of Jews enables them to retain their identity and their stoic acceptance of suffering can be attributed to their faith in the God of the Covenant. Malamud’s presentation of the Jew’s innate potential to face and accept suffering teaches humanity the need for patience and endurance in the face of the rashness and intolerance which shrouds mankind.

To conclude, ‘suffering’ is a recurring theme in Malamud’s novels. 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 as follows:

“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” (P172)

Malamud’s protagonists ‘have or gain an expert knowledge of suffering, whether in the flesh from poverty, and illness or in the mind from frustration and remorse’ (Solotaroff 166). The most pathetic of Yakov’s sufferings comes from the ‘searches’ on his body. 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 man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an over grown coffin and never once during the day . . . . . poke your beak out of the door for a snootful of air? The answer wasn’t hard to say – you had to be a Jew. They (Jews) were born prisoners” (TA72)

Morris’s suffering can be attributed, in part, to his moral integrity and honesty. He is an epitome of virtue, who does not see through the guiles of men and he prefers suffering to amassing of wealth by giving up one’s virtue, like the karpis. His is the religious stance of enduring suffering rather than enslaving the soul for material benefits. Though it is incumbent on his part to support his family, he knows fully well that he has not done anything for his wife and daughter. His dreams about his dead son Ephraim, give him a hint of the possibility of happiness but it wanes away with his dreams. “For his family, he had not provided, the poor man’s disgrace” (TA 192). Morris neither wails nor complains but puts up with his suffering with a stoic acceptance of it as the will of God. In a nutshell, what Malamud seems to suggest in his novels is that it is suffering, which is the point of convergence that binds the sea of humanity together and a suffering man is no doubt humane in all respects.

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