

Bernard Malamud, a Committed Fictional Writer of 20th Century

Dr. Asrar R. Khan

Arts and Commerce College, Bori Arab Dist. Yavatmal

Abstract:

Literature has remained the standard mode of expression. Authors and poets tend to seek meaning rather than to superimpose on them. Through the ages, philosophers, thinkers and scholars have ceaselessly been writing about the virtues of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. The great literatures of the world too have spread the same message through their masterpieces. The second half of the twentieth century is remarkable due to a number of reasons and one of its important features has been man's spectacular advance in science. However, this advancement also brought worries and threat to very existence of human life on our planet. Man begins to feel uneasy, insecure and bewildered. The loss of faith and decline of traditional values make him feel alienated, degraded and demoralised. Degradation of society results in decline of human values. Malamud's novels and short stories describe contemporary Capitalist American Society at its lowest ebb. He has also handled modern social problems like rootlessness, infidelity, abuse of humans, divorce etc. with great care. Malamud took upon himself the onerous task of investigating the worth of human values viz. love, sacrifice and forgiveness, as well as the purpose of art and the artist.

Introduction:

Since its origin, life on our planet has experienced many ups and downs. The human history itself is very old and complex. It has witnessed many significant events, whether affecting life or not, can hardly be proved trustworthy, unless it is attested by literature. All the happenings on the cosmos and space, major or minor, have been recorded in literature with great reliability and authenticity.

The literature has remained the standard mode of expression. Authors and poets tend to seek meaning rather than to superimpose on them. That is why Yeats called this process the "public dream."¹ It is literature that digs deep and brings out to the surface what otherwise "might lie buried in the subconsciousness of culture." My focus in the present study is on fiction, which according to Joan Rockwell is:

Fiction is not only representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element in social change. It plays a large part in the socialization of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behaviors.²

This brief introduction is a glimpse of current study and just only a means to provide a brief description of the themes of love, sacrifice and forgiveness in Bernard Malamud's novels and its relevance and significance in human life.

Through the ages, philosophers, thinkers and scholars have ceaselessly been writing about the virtues of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. The great literatures of the world too have spread the same message through their masterpieces. Besides, the founders and preachers of various religions have also preached love, sacrifice and forgiveness. They stress on humanity and advocates oneness of mankind in diversity. They discard discrimination on the basis of race or religion and for them every human being under the sky is a creation of God and deserves love and care. M.K. Gandhi says- "True love is bondless like the ocean and rising and swelling within one spreads itself out crossing all boundaries and frontiers envelop the whole world."³

Like other great writers, Malamud also emphasises, as his fiction reveals, the importance of love, sacrifice and forgiveness for all human beings. He rejects the idea of discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, caste, color or creed. To him, each single soul on this planet has a right to live according to his/her will, but not at the cost of others rights. Moreover, in his writings, interviews and speeches, he has stressed its importance in human life.

The second half of the twentieth century is remarkable due to a number of reasons and one of its important features has been man's spectacular advance in science. It has turned many myths into reality and in many ways compelled nature to dance to his tune. Thus he has got an edge over the forces of nature. But he has also mastered the forces of destruction that have filled his mind with a constant fear of doom. He feels uneasy, insecure and bewildered. The loss of faith and decline of traditional values make him feel alienated, degraded and demoralised.

As a contemporary writer Malamud, as his fiction reflects, is fully aware of the changes in the twentieth century. His fiction is an attempt to understand, analyse and try to restore order in the chaos in modern man's mind. Malamud depicts the vulnerability of the individual which results in hopelessness, loss of human values and loss of humanity. Degradation of society results in decline of human values. Malamud's novels and short stories describe contemporary Capitalist American Society at its lowest ebb. He has also handled modern social problems like rootlessness, infidelity, abuse of humans, divorce etc. with great care. Malamud took upon himself the onerous task of investigating the worth of human values viz. love, sacrifice and forgiveness, as well as the purpose of art and the artist. He inextricably interweaves human emotions and passions in his works. His compassionate protagonists struggle for survival and identification in the general milieu. Once they realise the true meaning of love they become more loyal, trustworthy, sincere and sacrificing.

Malamud is an inspirational and committed Jewish American writer of mid-twentieth century. His fiction, with its emphasis on love, sacrifice and forgiveness, endeavours to break through the barriers of injustice and stand up for the needy and helpless by establishing peace, justice and equality. His writings are devoted to the cause of ridding the American society of injustice, corruption and war mania. Malamud is a firm believer in human dignity and "his work reveals a profound reverence for human dignity."⁴ He hopes in creating an environment of peace, harmony and tranquility.

Malamud's ability lies in his power to transcend ordinary and conquer the hardships. He holds that to be a writer one must never give up and always try to establish the virtues of love, sacrifices, and forgiveness. Addressing at the National Book Award in 1958, Malamud asserts:

"It seems to me that the writer's important task, no matter what the current theory of man, or his prevailing mood, is to recapture his image as human being as each of us in his secret heart knows it to be, and as history and literature have from the beginning revealed it."⁵

As a result of his extreme courage, outstanding virtues and undying love for humanity, Malamud is able to spread the message of love, peace and harmony.

Malamud has said that the purpose of art is to prevent mankind from destroying itself and that writing keeps him "connected to men."⁶ His fiction reveals tremendous concern about human values, waywardness, loss of faith and a complete breakdown of human relations. He exhibits a deep concern towards the dreadfully increasing gap between what man is and what he ought to be. His awareness about the endangered human existence motivates him to think in terms of moral regeneration based on love, sacrifice and forgiveness. "Although, in Malamud's writing, subjects and setting vary widely, one characteristic remains consistently throughout: his moral earnestness."⁷

In *The Naturals*, the hero Roy Hobbs might still represent the wrong hero King Arthur and Lancelot. Each, of course, is a heroic with his character but whose lusts lead sadly to his downfall. In the novel, of course, Hobbs has such a tragic flaw and he has such a weakness to yield indeed to his appetites, women,

and also as caring very much rather about his own glory and these tragic flaws result in the destruction of his Excalibur (Wonder boy), and ends for sure with him failing at his final time at bat. Roy Hobbs tries to come back to the field to be ever remembered as the most glorious hero even.

Malamud's first two novels, *The Natural* and *The Assistant*, vividly illustrate the two extremes man may take in this quest for moral fulfillment. Both books are thematically structured by Malamud's two concepts of man's search for personal identity and his responsibilities towards others, but the contrast between the two conclusions exemplifies man's dilemma. In *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs is seeking a new life; he is trying to escape the failures of his past by giving himself to a cause - the winning of a pennant. His immature behavior never changes, however; his great sufferings do not teach him that only a selfless attitude will be able to negate the effects of his past. He tries to help his team, but he cannot make the ultimate sacrifice of giving himself in love to another individual. Frank Alpine, on the other hand, shows in *The Assistant* just how far man must go if he truly wants to achieve real happiness. Frank also suffers, but he learns from his 5 experiences that he must continue to suffer if his life is to have any meaning. He also learns the art of unselfish love as Roy does not, and this is the ultimate test of his moral success. Malamud is showing in these two novels the moral alternatives man may choose from as he moves through life. As a humanist, Malamud is terribly concerned about the moral indifference into which so many men resign themselves. His message is that we must realize the responsibilities we face in our desire to achieve identity; we must recognize the necessity of not only ethical but communal behavior. Malamud is nothing if not a realist, however. He is aware that the temptations of a corrupt society are often too demanding for man's weak nature. Thus, in *The Natural* he shows specifically how man may fail in his duties and deny his heroic moral potential. The situation is exactly reversed in *The Assistant* because there Frank heeds his obligations and gives us a blueprint for success. The important point is that as a unit the two novels express the same moral philosophy; the significant thematic difference between them is that *The Natural* offers one conclusion while *The Assistant* offers the opposite. In examining *The Natural*, the first point to note is that it illustrates both how man may achieve moral heroism and also how he may deny his potential and ultimately fail. Unlike Malamud's other novels in which the protagonists only appear to be failures because of their economic status (such as Frank Alpine whose material condition at the end of the novel seems hopeless), *The Natural* shows man actually rejecting his moral obligation and prolonging his pain. Roy Hobbs achieves no maturity in the novel, no real sense of personal responsibility; as a consequence, he cannot assume his obligations to society. He does not attain personal redemption because in spite of his suffering, he remains unaware of the necessity of selfless behavior. As Sidney Richman aptly explains, "the message of *The Natural* is clear: It is only by the act of succumbing to the good within, by renouncing the demands of the world, that man may find the way to re-attain the world." The thematic pattern of the novel which thus emerges is essentially moralistic; Roy Hobbs is a quester in search of a meaningful set of values which will justify his existence. He does not find these values because he cannot give himself unselfishly in love to anyone. He is doomed to repeat his sufferings because in the Malamudian world of moral responsibility, man finds salvation only if he can learn from his experiences.

Malamud believes that writing is a tool which not only denotes human problems but provides satisfying remedy also. Literature of every age mirrors its contemporary social, political, moral and religious anxieties. The literary figures of all the times have always fearlessly wrote about the good and evil in the contemporary society. Thus the role of literature is very important as it enlightens the human mind. In an interview, Malamud laments, that the contemporary American fiction "is loaded with sickness, homosexuality, fragmented man" "rather it should be filled with love and beauty and hope. We are underselling man."⁸

The basic concern of Malamud is the nobility of human spirit. Like any other committed writer, he probes deep into a variety of human relations which provide him opportunity to come out with an exquisite prescription. He knew that every single soul has some virtue; the only thing that matters is finding it out. One needs to learn from the past, because those who forget history cannot create history. He cannot preach

all the time. He knows the limitations of a writer. Philip Roth, a great Jewish American novelist and critic, advises writers that they “cannot be ministers. As soon as they attempt it, they destroy their artistry.” To him “writing must be true; it must have emotional depth; it must be imaginative. It must enflame, destroy, change the reader.”⁹

Malamud searches for the hidden potential in a man which saves him from dehumanization. His characters deal with the forces of their cultural and physical environment and are ultimately victimised by them. His protagonists suffer to secure their status at par with other humans. It is through suffering that they realise the significance of humanity as it is lost somewhere in the material world. In Malamud, Judaism symbolises humanity. The two World Wars have torn to shreds the veil of so called benevolence of humanity. The persecution of the Jews compelled them to abandon their homelands. They suffered immense physical, mental and spiritual agony. Their horrible conditions and the inhuman treatment they met with, have affirmed their faith in the evil in humanity.

Malamud’s concern is humanity. He says that he is for humanity and against nihilism. His novels and short stories portray human beings at their worst as well as at their best. For example his protagonists, whether consciously or unconsciously, gradually develops into man who is morally committed to his fellow beings. In *The Fixer* Yakov Bok through his suffering learnt, what he has educated himself of what it meant by commitment and responsibility. His sufferings have taught him selflessness. Now he is ready to take responsibility of his run away wife Raisle and her illegitimate child and gives a written statement about the purity of his wife and son. “This may suggest a commitment that is more than moral.” Malamud’s firm belief in hidden human potential finds a large expression in his work. He always emphasises the need of compassion, selfless love and commitment. “The ethical vision of Malamud would urge the person to acknowledge his duty, drop his conscience, carry on with another life, and attempt to move towards honesty through self-amazing quality. Further, the vision of the change of the heroes in the midst of the anguish and hopelessness would motivate the people in the contemporary occasions to demonstrate empathy to other people and put solid faith or belief in humanism.”

Malamud’s humanism has deep roots in love and compassion. The latter half of the twentieth century in particular, is marked by fast development of science and wide spread modernization. These germs of modernisation and industrialisation have made the modern man a materialist at the cost of humanity and the established social norms. It has brought in a feeling of insecurity and caused loss of faith. It has created an environment of fear and doubt that had led to devaluation of humanity and reduced the dignity of an individual. In such conditions no sensitive writer can remain unaffected and Malamud is not an exception. He says: “the purpose of the writer is to keep civilisation from destroying itself.”¹⁰

Malamud believes that most of the modern problems have their root causes in the lack of compassion. His compassion brings him “so close to the bone of human feeling which makes one feel so keenly to the enigmatic quality of life.”¹¹ His novels and short stories abound in such feelings and search for individual identity. His two most celebrated protagonists, Frank Alpine in *The Assistant*, and Yokov Bok in *The Fixer*, struggle for finding a place for themselves. Though, the protagonists begin by thinking about themselves only but slowly and surely they learn the value of humanity, love and sympathy. Their feelings of mutual responsibility lead them to suffer for the betterment of the suffering humanity.

In Malamud humanism signifies sacrifice and selfless suffering for others. It is expressed through his mouthpiece Morris Bobber of *The Assistant*, when Morris tells Frank Alpine: “I suffer for you”.¹² This is quite symbolic which brings out Malamud’s views about suffering for the humanity. Such feeling makes Morris a saint in the real sense. Thus, the sanctity does not lie in isolation, but in being with the humanity in its joys and sorrows. Tagore too echoes:

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see God is not before thee!”¹³

Companionship with God lies in the communion and involvement with fellow human beings and sharing their sufferings. Malamud's fiction reveals a consistent pattern of experience, which embodies his affirmative view of human life.

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