



Suffering and Salvation in Bernard Malamud's The Assistant and Dubin's Lives

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to study the Suffering and Salvation in Bernard Malamud's novels, *The Assistant* and *Dubin's Lives*. His fictional world most often urban and Jewish, is formed around the struggle for survival of people who face the particular hardships of modern existence. Their survival depends upon their ability to combat life's inevitable suffering by breaking through the barriers of personal isolation and finding human contact, compassion and faith in the goodness of others. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Malamud was well aware of the social problems of his day: rootlessness, infidelity, abuse, divorce and more. But he also depicts love as redemptive and sacrifices uplifting. The Jews are considered as victims at the hands of fate because of the historic rootlessness and the Holocaust inflicted on them. Thus suffering has been an indispensable part of the Jews, and that is explicitly reflected in Jewish writing.

Malamud's work shows a regard for Jewish tradition and the plight of ordinary men and was imbued with the theme of moral wisdom gained through suffering. Malamud's characters crave for what they cannot have. They suffer silently and peacefully knowing that suffering illuminates the truth of life. In his novels Malamud thus created a secular humanism, based on those human values that are common to all human beings irrespective of their religion and nationality.

Malamud's protagonists are the victims of their overwhelming urge for women and their overpowering urge for women and their passion for wealth. Subsequently, they exhibit a compulsive desire to move from one place to the other in search of beautiful women and plentiful

wealth. But initially they are ignorant about the corrupting forces of the new frontier. Therefore, their weakness for women compels them to fall into the traps of seductresses who drain out all their energies and deprive them of their ambition for a bright future.

Bernard Malamud's novel The Assistant is a story of a poor Jewish grocer named Morris Bober and his gentile assistant, Frank Alpine. For Morris, suffering is an unfortunate but necessary part of life. Through it, one is able to spiritually transcend the pain and see the meaningful beauty of life. Both the characters suffer intensely in the course of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Frank and his partner Ward Minogue rob Morris, and knock him down with a blow to the head, and consequently he falls down unconscious. However, Frank repents his act because he is not that very bad at heart, and therefore he voluntarily becomes Morris's assistant for free. He is torn between his tendency to do bad and his desire to do good. It is the honest life of Morris, which is full of sympathy for the others despite all his suffering, which helps Frank to discover his own goodness and to feel compassion for others.

Helen Bober, Morris Bober's daughter, another important character in the novel has a classical name that doesn't reflect her Yiddish background. Helen's name evokes the idea of ancient Greece. Like Helen of Troy, Helen Bober is a figure-that many men become interested in. Furthermore, Helen's name suggests her desire to study the classics herself, a desire that has been thwarted by her family's poverty. Helen is the character who links the owners of the grocery to the other people in the neighbourhood. Helen leaves the grocery everyday and heads out to work as a Secretary somewhere in New York. Helen has had relationships with Nat Pearl and Louis Karp. It is through her interaction with those men that their true natures become known and it is also through her interaction with their families that Malamud is able to explore their family dynamics. Despite her ability to leave the grocery each day, Helen is perpetually unsatisfied. She clings to novels and visits the library several times a week, in an effort to use literature as a means to flee the mediocrity of her life. Because, Helen is a dreamer, she does not always accurately understand people when she meet them. Her strong longing to flee poverty initiated her love of Nat Pearl. As a future lawyer, Nat represented someone with a possibility. Regardless that his character was not all charming, Helen fell in love with him for what he represented to her. When Helen realized his true desires sex-she shunned him.

Helen also initially loves Frank Alpine eventhough she is not able to see him for who he is. She believes that he really will attend college because it is what she wants and fails to imagine that the presents he gives her were stolen because she does not want them to be. It is only after Frank's vicious treatment of her and Morris's death that Helen slowly comes to a new realization about Frank and Nat. With her realization, she is finally able to love more than she an image that she has created. Morris remains poor but triumphs spiritually because he remains good. Morris may have died a modest man who felt like a failure, but his true success as a human being can be measured in the transformation of Frank Alpine. It is under Morris's influence that Frank turned from being a man of moral degeneration to a good man who has accepted other's burden of suffering out of a

commitment to love, compassion and responsibility.

Malamud's philosophy of suffering is exemplified very deftly in the character of Morris and also in the eventual transformation of Frank to the creed of suffering for others. However the passage of this transformation is not as easy as Frank has to undergo a lot of bad experiences in his life. But this suffering plays an instructive role in his life, and the ultimate result is very beautiful which fulfills his aim and provides him satisfaction in his life. The novelist has used in this novel the figure of the Jew as a symbol of unflinching sufferer for the sake of those around him.

Malamud really makes us feel for these characters. Morris and his dedication to both his store and his family. Frank and his desire to do right and overcome his inclination to make bad decisions. Helen and her obligation to her parents, which competes with her desire for independence and freedom from a mundane life. Finally, Suffering has aided moral growth of characters like Frank Alphonse and Helen Bober.

The Assistant, Malamud's most autobiographical novel, is based on his father's difficult life and his own need to break away from it. Morris Bober's story is vaguely located, claustrophobic its argument less social than metaphysical. In poor health, working interminable hours, barely getting by, he is the Good Man in a world stacked against him. Here luck falls only to the unworthy. Yet Morris is also an emblem of a generation, those for whom the vaunted American dream has failed-toiling immigrants stuck in marginal lives with little reward. Malamud's warm feeling for luckless characters, doomed to struggle and fail, has looked different in recent years as we learned more about his own life.

The Malamudian narrative takes suffering as its premise and the continuation of suffering as its plot. From story to story the sufferer's identity varies, but within a fixed range. Almost all are Jews.

Although the novel is full of suffering in his life of its characters but the gloom and pessimism is relieved by the creation of the final effect which is of moral beauty, and which establishes the novel within the framework of the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition with its emphasis on suffering and morality has added a poignant touch to the Jewish writings.

In the novel, Dubin's Lives, Malamud treats a writer's predicament in the context of his psychological problems in the middle age. William Dubin, a fifty-six year old biographer of repute is caught into a baffling conflict between his rising sensual urges and his declining physical and intellectual powers, which makes him conscious of his age and death. Consequently, Dubin loses his interest in his wife Kitty, and his profession too. This gives him a calm uneasiness, making his life unbearable. But Dubin's morality as a writer does not allow him to commit suicide in the face of difficulties. Therefore, he undertakes to write the biography of D.H.Lawrence, the prophet of sex with whom Dubin claims to have vague similarities.

The characters of Malamud's novel serve to present different aspects of Dubin's life as a husband, father, lover and biographer and to demonstrate his struggle to live his life fully and responsibly. Kitty, Dubin's intelligent, caring, and patient wife, waits out his moods and his impotence, supporting him and encouraging him and yet driving him crazy.

Dubin fails to understand Lawrence unless he falls in love with Fanny Bick, a young cleaning person in his house. She celebrates life through her free sexuality. Fanny Bick is associated with sensuality. She embodies the principle of sexuality that Dubin wishes to integrate into his life. Later, she becomes someone he loves and to whom he is committed, one of two women between whom Dubin must choose. Maud, the daughter of Kitty and William, has dropped out of college after a year, having become involved with her Spanish Professor, a married man her father's age. She has become pregnant with the professor's child. She plans to have the child and live in New York City.

During his affair with Fanny, Dubin goes deep into the mysterious of the human flesh and comes out with a fresh understanding of Lawrence. Divided in his loyalties for Fanny and Kitty, Dubin relies on Lawrence's view that honesty is more important in marriage than fidelity.

Therefore, Dubin chooses to go back to his wife. He gets a job for Fanny and leaves her free. In this way, the biographer again acquires his psychic balance and domestic stability by his intellectual resourcefulness. Subsequently, he completes the biography of Lawrence successfully. Malamud demonstrates a commitment to suffering human beings in their painfully absurd conditions. No matter how pathetic or foolish the individual can assert his humanity. Self-transcendence is the ideal which controls much of the characters. Self-transcendence becomes a painful process and it involves a great deal of suffering, usually connected in some way to an elaborate and ritualistic trial by love.

The substance of Malamud's art is the suffering of the Jews. Most of his work highlights the value of personal integrity. Despite some differences in his novels the basic idea remains the same—the idea of moral earnestness and human suffering. His concept of human suffering is delineated through Jewish characters, because Jews are very close to suffering. Malamud considers Judaism as another source of humanism. According to him, the ordeal of suffering teaches us to become better human beings; it brings us close to our deeper self and to the humanity which resides in others.

All the characters of Bernard Malamud are united by the one thing which they have in common, their suffering. All the main characters, Jew and gentile bear an amazing amount of pain and encounter many difficulties, for Malamud has made his Jewish hero a symbol. He does not write about one man alone, as of characters like Morris Bober or Dubin— but his writing is about mankind. The Jewish's physical and mental hardships experiences a difficult existential state and painful psychological feelings and took it as a symbol and revealed the plight of human survival. Perhaps the most obvious reason for the suffering endures the fact that Malamud has given the hero,

despite his Jewishness, as universal character. In other words, the hero within one body, a composite of all men who lived and who are now living.

Malamud's hero experiences a severe pain within their "inner world". The suffering of the Jewish hero in his "outer world" is both impressive and offensive to the reader. The suffering is that which the hero experiences within the realm of himself, within his "inner world". It is here in the psychological and spiritual self of the hero that he is tortured by a struggle between his two natures- the human being and the moral being or the conscience. He is also tortured by the knowledge which he possesses or by the awesome nature of the reality of the self and of life. Then the pain which is brought by conscience and enlightenment is increased by dreams. Malamud's hero is a special man with a definite concept of right and wrong.

To conclude it may state that Malamud is a humanist and views Judaism as a source of humanism because it symbolizes suffering. At the end of each novel, the protagonist realizes the old traditional values of humanity, love, charity and sense of responsibility towards others. Malamud affirms his firm faith in these novels that man can recreate his humanity through self-scrutiny, suffering and sympathy and that man can attain salvation through suffering.

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