

Minor Characters in Bernard Malamud's Novels

SUMMARY

The thesis examines the role and significance of minor characters in Malamud's novel and is divided into five chapters.

The first chapter studies the various trends in the corpus of the Malamud criticism which has almost taken the status of an industry today. The critical survey brings out severely deficient and lop-sided aspect of the Malamud criticism in that most critics have ignored or tended to ignore the role and significance of the minor characters in Malamud's novels because their critical studies are mainly hero-centric, thus neglecting almost totally the important roles the minor characters play in the thematic or structural design of Malamud's novels. The near-total neglect of the minor characters has often led the critics to dub Malamud as merely a Jewish writer whose range and vision as a writer is severely limited. The present study reveals that such kinds of critical imbalances are not exclusive to Malamud. A careful examination of Shakespeare criticism from Coleridge to Bradley reveals that the critics have read Shakespeare's plays as stories of his heroes only, thereby ignoring the significance of minor characters. *Hamlet* for instance was read only as a story of Hamlet. However, a serious reading of the play would reveal that *Hamlet* without Ophelia, Claudius, Leartus and many other minor characters will be reduced to only a meditative play. The study shows that similar critical fallacy is available in Hemingway criticism arising out of the critics' sole attention and focus on the Hemingway hero with the result that Hemingway was dubbed as a writer of the Lost Generation. Similar is the case with Malamud's criticism. For example, if we study *The Natural* only from the perspective of the hero, namely Roy Hobbs, we shall tend to conclude that Malamud's vision of the world was limited only to greed, corruption and lust but when we read the novel in the light of interactions between the hero and other minor characters like Pop fisher and Sam Simpson, we shall be in a better position to understand that the writer's complex vision includes not only human greed and lust but also benevolence, love and compassion. Hobbs's career in baseball is

made possible by the benevolent efforts of Sam Simpson who sacrifices his life for his sake. Pop Fisher, on the other hand, shields the hero from the pernicious effects of self-centeredness and materialism. Actually, the minor characters are the representatives of Malamud's vision and philosophy of humanism, philanthropy and altruism.

The second chapter studies the role and significance of the minor characters in *The Natural*. It is through the minor characters that Malamud exposes various kinds of corruptions and venality corroding the American national game of baseball. It is only when we study Roy Hobbs in relation to the minor characters that we realize the full significance of Malamud's humanist outlook. They act as role models for Roy who undergoes a process of transformation. There are other minor characters like Max Mercy, Gus Sands, Walter Wambold, Bump Bailey and Judge Goodwill Banner who represent the ugly side of human nature. They represent forces of deceit, deception and treachery which leads Roy to choose suicidal path. These minor characters also help to delineate and expound Malamud's philosophy of humanism. Minor characters act as foils to the main protagonist, thus bringing out different attitudes to life. There are various shades of human beings in Malamud's minor characters. Roy's strengths and weaknesses, both as player and as man, come into sharp focus when the protagonist is studied in relation to these minor characters. They also reflect the venality of the American system of values and ideas. Structurally also, the minor characters play significant role. Mercy, for example, helps to unite the two parts of the novel which are separated from each other by a gap of more than 14 years. Malamud also presents different types of female characters through Memo Paris and Iris Lemon. Memo is symbolic of fatal beauty whereas Iris Lemon represents the benevolent and healing such of femininity.

The third chapter deals with Malamud's most successful novel, *The Assistant*, which deals with the business world of America. The novel brings out Frank's moral and spiritual regeneration through suffering the significance of which can best be apprehended when we study the role of the minor characters in his transformation. Malamud's concept of redemptive suffering finds its most eloquent expression in

novel through the minor characters. Bober, the archetypal Jew, is the ultimate representative of Malamud's humanist outlook. Bober's life is, in fact, a study of regenerative and ennobling nature of suffering which kindles the embers of nobility and humanity in Frank Alpine. Characters like Al Marcus, Breitbart and Detective Minogue instil and inspire a sense of confidence in man's nobility whereas characters like Julius Karp, Nat Pearl and Ward Minogue represent the degenerative and depressive forces that stare man in his face. Women characters like Ida and Helen reinforce family values in the most depressing times of Depression and anti-Semitism in the American history. It is only when the focus our attention on the minor characters that Malamud's philosophy of love and compassion becomes clear.

If the minor characters help in defining the word of sports in *The Natural* and the world of business in *The Assistant*, they help in bringing into sharp focus the various facets of the academic world of America in *A New Life*. The fourth chapter dealing with the academic world reveals Malamud's continued and continual concern with the possibilities of unburdening the burdensome past to emerge in a word of freedom and self-control. It is only when we focus on the role of Pauline that we realize the full significance of Levin's spiritual growth. Levin's colleagues like Fairchild and Bucket help in bringing out with subtle irony the departmental objectives, politics, conservatism and the oddities of the so-called academicians of the Cascadia College. The study of minor characters also brings out the comic structure of the novel which involves bawdy situations, witty dialogues, burlesque and slapstick deriving their origin from human lusts, mistakes and misconduct.

The fifth chapter takes up *The Fixer and Dubin's Lives* for detailed study from the perspective of the minor characters. *The Fixer* presents an accurate picture of the Jews in the Tsarist Russia. The novel deals with the sufferings of Yakov Bok, the symbol of archetypal Jew. The novel presents a variety of minor characters who throw light on different aspects of human nature and also on the different facets of the Tsarist Russia. Samuel and Bibikov represent Malamud's humanistic concerns. The character of Samuel is a moral touchstone for other characters. In spite of his short visits, he plays an important part in the spiritual regeneration of Yakov Bok. Bibikov,

on the other hand, represents the clearest example of a humanist and liberal democrat. Through him Malamud is voicing his concerns about religious bigotry. Bibikov is the only Gentile character without whom it would have been hard to save the novel from falling into the category of biased writing. Through other characters like Deputy Warden, Father Anastasy, Nikolai Lebedev, Proshko and Prosecuting Attorney, Malamud is exposing the racial hatred towards the Jews. Female characters like Zinaida Lebedev and Marfa Golov represent the most destructive and despicable nature of the female characters. It is through these characters that Malamud satirizes the superficial and hypocritical approach towards religion. *Dubin's Lives* deals with the life of a biographer who is living in a cell of his own creation. There are a number of limitations – artistic, familial and sexual — that his mind has contrived. Kitty, his wife, presents the self sacrificing nature of a house wife whereas Fanny plays the role of a temptress and a redeemer for William Dubin. Dubin's two children – Maud and Gerald- are underdeveloped characters perhaps to show Dubin's ignorance of his emotional distance from the children. With their characterization, Bernard Malamud has brought out clearly the dysfunctional aspect of the American family. Through these minor characters, Malamud analysis closely the mysterious world of the artists and also the intricacies of human relationships.

The last chapter sums up the findings of the study. The critical imbalances arising out of the critics' obsession with the Malamud hero are sought to be rectified in the study. Malamud is not a writer whose range is limited only to the Judaic world. Instead, there is not even a single character in the whole of his oeuvre who can be termed as Jewish from religious standpoint or standard. The study also rectifies the misconception that Malamud belongs to the misogynistic tradition of writers like Normal Mailer. The study clearly shows that women characters are central to the action of each of his novel. These women characters possess a unique identity of their own and possess complex feelings, attitudes and emotions. It is through them that Malamud is presenting his philosophy of love and compassion. The study also brings to fore Malamud's versatility and maturity as a writer. The wide reach of his thematical concerns with which he colours his fictional canvas ranges from America's commercial world in *The Assistant* to the sports world in *The Natural*, from the world

of artists in *The Tenants* and *Dubin's Lives* to the world of academics in *A New Life*. The study reveals Malamud's strong denunciation of American system of values. Malamud is critical of the fact that in American society, corruption is rampant, values are fast disappearing, cheats and cheapskates are thriving and sincerity and commitment have become peddlers' wares to be hawked in the streets. The study also demolishes the critical fallacy that Malamud is a passive and morbid brooder of life. Quite the contrary we find through the study of the minor characters that his fiction is a testimony to inherent and infinite possibilities of love, compassion and benevolence. The study also underlines the use of irony and paradox, anti-thesis and ambiguity which form the core of the dramatic structure of his works.

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