

Minor Characters in Bernard Malamud's Novels

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ABSTRACT

The study of the role and significance of minor characters helps correct some of the misreadings of Malamud's fiction as a result of critics' heavy dependence on the study of hero. The critical imbalances arising out of near-total neglect of the minor characters are sought to be rectified through the study of the minor characters. The profundity and the richness of the writer's view of life and the wide reach of Malamud's concerns can best be appreciated through the study of the minor characters. Malamud has been presented as a writer of the Judaic world only by majority of critics but the study of the role and significance the minor characters reveals that there is not even a single character in the whole of his oeuvre who is a Jew by any stereotyped religious standards or attitudes. Not even a single character is found performing religious Jewish rituals. His characters are varied and varying representing different shades and attitudes of life. If his Jews are honest, they are crooked as well. If Bober is honest, the Karps are dishonest who have stooped to the most dishonest and unethical practices to become successful. Malamud defines man not by his religion but by his feelings, beliefs and attitudes. For him, love, compassion and benevolence form the core of human philosophy. He is not a passive and morbid brooder of life. He has inherent faith and belief in man's realization of his self and potential despite the hovering clouds of despair and sorrow. The study clearly underlines his healthy outlook on life. His fiction is a testimony of inherent possibility of man's development and regeneration. He is a strong votary of liberal humanism which leads to the possibility of self-development in which body, mind and soul all proceed toward spiritual ends without loss of material functions of living. His is not a bleak world; it may be dark like Bober's store but is illumined by mutual love, faith and understanding. Minor characters like Bober, Sam and Fisher act like tutors to such tyros as Frank and Roy. They may not be materially affluent but they are spiritually rich and

their moral idealism leads the tyros to redefine and redirect their lives. His entire work is a beacon of hope in such a dismal and bleak world.

Malamud's achievement lies in the fact that his Jews transcend the narrowly defined territories of ethnicity and achieve universality. Actually, the minor characters are the representatives of Malamud's vision of philosophy of humanism, philanthropy and altruism.

Another major finding of the study is that Malamud does not belong to the misogynistic tradition of writers like Normal Mailer as has been asserted by the critics. Women in Malamud's fiction have been described as unidimensional characters who are totally devoid of complex human feelings. A careful study of the role and significance of women characters reveals that they are central to the action of Malamud's works. They possess a unique identity of their own and possess complex feelings attitudes and emotions. They are not the appendages or extension of Malamud's protagonists. It is through them that Malamud asserts his philosophy of love and his strong faith in family values. The study also brings to fore Malamud's versatility and maturity as writer. His thematical concerns range 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*. Malamud's novels are peopled with a variety of minor characters, belonging to different walks of life, represent different attitudes and possess unique traits. The study also reveals Malamud's strong denunciation of the corrosion of values in different walks of life in the American society. It is through the study of minor characters that we come to realize that America has degenerated into a land of exploitation of women, criminalisation of the youth and denial of academic freedom.

Malamud's use of irony and paradox, antithesis and ambiguity, humour and pathos which form the core of the dramatic structure of his works become clear through the study of minor characters. He deftly makes use of humour through the minor characters to laugh at and ridicule all such practices as deviate from reality—be it in thought, speech or action. Besides providing comic relief, Malamud's use of humour is geared towards re-affirming his set of value. The study of the minor characters reveals that his humour ranges from innocent laughter to cynical satire and is never without the bedrock of a humanist and a liberal outlook on life which informs all his fiction.

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