MALAMUD'S TREATMENT OF HEROISM:
AN EXPRESSION OF HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT
This article probes into the Malamud’s concept of heroism and the hidden strength or potential in a man which saves him from dehumanization. Malamud’s protagonists struggle with the forces of their cultural and physical environments and ultimately victimized by them. They suffered to secure the human status at par with others which makes them realize the importance of humanity as it is lost somewhere in the material pursuits of modern man Judaism symbolizes humanity because after World War II Jews were made to leave their homeland and they suffered a lot on this account but did not lose their faith in humanity and old traditional values. It is only human qualities which makes a man hero in the real sense of the word. Moral transcendence is very close to Malamud's idea of heroism as it employs spiritual growth in him and leads him to understand the values of compassion, responsibility and forbearance.

KEYWORDS: Heroism, Dehumanization, Suffering, Judaism, Transcendence

The shocking awareness of the widening gulf between what a man is and what he ought to be has prompted Malamud to think in terms of moral regeneration and to evolve an idea of a new life based on compassion, love and humanism. This Jewish novelist, like Saul Bellow and J. D. Salinger, projects a profound moral vision in his work and takes a compassionate view of suffering of man. In recent literature, the Jew has emerged as “a symbol of conscience – outwardly, as a function of his prosecution which reached its climax in the Holocaust, and inwardly, as a function of his religious character” [Benson, 29]. Jewish History, with its untold human suffering, and Jewish tradition, with its emphasis of humanism, has added a poignant touch to Jewish writing. Suffering and compassion have been integral to the history of the Jews and their way of life. In the Jewish View, man is born with the capacity to sin, but he can return and redeem himself by his own effort. The possibility of redemption is in his own hands. A struggle for new order of life, with compassion as its cardinal principle, seems to characterize the Jewish tradition. No wonder that creative writers emphasize the need of affirming human values in the waste land world.

In an interview in 1958, Malamud said that his premise is for humanism – and against nihilism. And that is what he tries to put in his writings. Malamud's humanism finds the most cognate expression in his idea of heroism. In fact, bringing out the heroic potential of the human personality is the basic concern of his work. For Malamud, the condition in which the protagonist rises to the status of a hero is moral, and heroism consists in the attainment of moral transcendence. Malamud emphasizes the need of compassion, forbearance, selfless love and suffering for others in his novels, for he wants his heroes to be real human beings.
The germs of industrialization and modernization have spread everywhere and have taken people in their grip. This has led to loss of old human values and traditions. The pre-established social norms have been rendered irrelevant and inoperative. The whole social set-up has received a severe jolt, causing a lot of mental and spiritual anguish and uncertainty. Sense of insecurity has gripped the individual. People have become more and more materialistic and have started worshipping the goddess of wealth. They run after material gains. This has devalued their humanity and reduced the dignity of their self. Moral awareness or conscience has been rendered weak and fragile in most cases. People have become suspicious of religion, and have been cut off from tradition. Urbanization has lead to dehumanization and degradation of moral values. Bernard Malamud believes that “the purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself” [Ihab Hassan, 5]. To him, being civilized implies a sense of fellow-feeling and compassion, the lack of which is the root cause of most of the problems in the modern world. Modern literature is a reflection of the painful search by human beings for individual identity and humanity in the midst of a continuing spell of physical and spiritual suffering. Malamud's writings are no exception. As a result of the World War II, Jews were deprived of their rights and were made to leave their homeland. They became rootless and suffered a lot for the same cause. Suffering has chastened them and taught them the value of humanity, love and imaginative sympathy. The predominant factor behind their survival has been a compassionate feeling for one another. The experience of persecution and discrimination has instilled among the Jews a deep sense of fellow-feeling and developed among them a strong feeling of mutual responsibility. The Jew has become a symbol for man's struggle in the modern world. The main force behind the Jewish-American literature, of course, remains that of humanism, which, unfortunately, is under threat of extinction today.

Concerning his Jewish subject-matter, Malamud says: "As for Jewishness it's there, of course, and I draw from its love of morality to strengthen my own, and from its history as symbol of man's struggle and use whatever other material excites my imagination. I am not a religious Jew" [Sharma, ix]. This makes it clear that Malamud is not a crusader for the Jewish idea of suffering as an inescapable fate of humanity. Judaism has been treated by him as an articulation of man's struggle for justice and brotherhood. Malamud's vision of humanity emphasizes the need to suffer for others. Under this vision it is in suffering that the real meaning and value of human life inheres. Malamud's protagonists like those of many other post-war novelists are cut off from their society. They cherish a romantic conception of self, and their relationship with others is strained and restricted. They feel separated from their past, and groan under real or imaginary grievances. They wage a struggle against the anti-human forces at work to rob them off their sense of identity and humanity. They are in search of freedom and self-identification.

In the Jewish-American novel of Malamud's tradition, the protagonist, despite his persecution and sense of victimization, seeks to establish a healthy relationship with his society, and to understand his own nature, his own self. He wants to strike a meaningful balance between his self and society, and to establish humanity in terms of a meaningful relationship with his fellow human beings. He submits the demands of his ego to those of society, although this process is not at all easy in most cases. He establishes a relationship with the outside world while protecting the integrity of his own self. He now thinks about life very naturally in existentialist terms. He is “seeking through a maze of social and philosophical blind-alleys, for a reattainment of self” [Richmam,17]. Malamud has discovered that this distinctly identifiable Jewish experience, when isolated from the specific circumstances peculiar to the community, and intensified and enlarged, reflects the general human condition.
In the existentialist view, man's worth can be achieved only through a painful process of suffering and anguish. Pain, in the human world, results in the birth of a new personality, and overthrow of one's natural self. For some of Malamud's main characters, the experience of suffering, at least in the initial phase, does not produce any meaningful change in attitude, and remains merely pain without any issue. Ultimately, however, by passing through the fire of suffering, they become complete human beings. They accept suffering as an integral part of their life, and start experiencing love and compassion for others. Their success is in emerging out of pain depends on their appreciation of the value of suffering as a means of asserting humanity and their acceptance of responsibility for others.

A new dimension that Malamud discerns in the Jewish experience is by looking at it as a struggle for a new order of life, an endeavor to affirm human values in the waste land world of modern industrialized society. Although isolation and assimilation have become concomitant elements of the present-day living conditions of the Jews, they are still struggling for universal justice and brotherhood. They have become quite conscious of the increasing value of interpersonal relationships.

Man, to Malamud, is a social animal, and he cannot live in isolation for long. The very essence of living, according to him, is in coming close to other human beings and understanding one another in compassion, a feeling which provides man with a comprehensive view of life. Rajagopalachari defines Malamud’s conception of this as something discovered not in isolation or alienation, but “in a feeling of community that one’s fate is tied up with others in pain and pleasure” [Rajagopalachari, 12]. Malamud thinks that the real meaning of life lies in suffering for a noble cause, and that the true existence is possible only when one suffers for others, and not when one makes others suffer. The protagonists in Malamud suffer on account of their being innocent and humane, not on account of merely being Jews. They suffer for upholding humane values. Malamud’s Jew is a metaphor for everyman. D.R. Sharma rightly observed that “Malamud’s moral vision is shaped by his Jewish heritage, which blends realism with lofty idealism” [Sharma, x]. A Malamud novel can be regarded as a fervent definition of human responsibility. Malamud is of the view that it is not only the Jews who are prone to pain and bad luck but non-Jews can also be victimized by the demon of fate. Most critics consider Malamud an upholder of real human values and not only a later-day defender of Judaism. Jerry H. Byrant, in his book The Open Decision, writes about the post-world war II novels, and maintains that they present the drama of consciousness of modern man. He holds the view that Malamudian heroes learn the value of being human by suffering. He says that our novelists do look at the world honestly as their twentieth-century world picture allows them to. And they do ultimately celebrate the intrinsic value of human beings.

Compassion calls for interpersonal responsibility underscored by love, authentic empathy, and intense understanding. Compassion carries with it a sense of community and fraternity. It recognizes the fallibility of man. Everyone has his failures, weakness and suffering make one feel a tie with others. The “human” element in man with its “struggle between fulfillment and non-fulfillment” [May, 251] makes him feel mutual responsibility. As compassion emerges from understanding, so it is within reach of the human beings.

Martin Buber asserts that a man defines himself in his relation with others and by virtue of his wholeness, his integration of personality. He believes that the essence of man can be grasped “by beginning neither with the individual nor with the collectivity, but only with the reality of the
It is only compassion which brings about a whole I-Thou relationship. Thus, compassion becomes an act of humanism, and shares with it concern for the dignity of man. Compassion comes out of the conviction of the individual that “nothing human is foreign to me” [May, 252]. It is the quintessential spirit of Jewish humanism. The central character in Bernard Malamud’s novels reveals a consistent pattern of experience, which embodies Malamud’s affirmative view of human life. Three of his protagonists, Roy Hobbs in The Natural, Frank Alpine in The Assistant, and Harry Lesser in The Tenants, for example, begin as victims, but grow into heroes. The special kind of heroism which Malamud confers on them is marked by their transcendence of self, society, and history. Malamud's protagonists are questers and heroism is the object of their quest. Bernard Malamud shares Saul Bellow's affirmative vision, Roth's psychological and moral concern and Salinger's quest for authentic human relations. He imbibes singer's moral vision and his humanist concerns. His measure of humanness is complacent with one's selfless suffering for others. Malamud's view finds expression in The Assistant when Morris Bober tells Frank Alpine: "I suffer for you" [The Assistant, 113]. His protagonists become saints because they strive to be human in the real sense of the word, not because there is something divine about them. Their sanctity does not lie in their private communion with God but in their communion and involvement with fellowmen in order to understand and share their suffering. Malamud's response to human condition in the modern world is sensitive, in so far as it is born out of a compassionate understanding. For Malamud, life is a drama of moral issues, and word like conscience, responsibility, love, suffering and compassion have an implicit value. He assumes that man is a compound of good and bad, but that, at the same time, he has innate potentiality to change for the better, suffering and compassion become instrumental to this process of transformation to new life. There are only sporadic direct references to the theme of compassion in Malamud's novels, but compassion, as the underlying principle of his humanistic vision, permeates his entire creative output. Malamud is greatly troubled by the depreciation of the human in the modern times, and believes that the human must be protected, and the note he sounds again and again is compassion. Francis thinks that Malamud's own humanity can be felt in his Jewish characters as they sympathize with one another in their tragedy. Malamud's vision of humanity is rather broad and inclusive. He believes that man does not live only in the naturalistic world of material pursuits, where the strongest motivating force is that of survival, and where only the fittest survive. For Malamud, man lives also in the world of human relationships, the world of interpersonal relationships, where his character understand the need of compassion, fellow-feeling, mutual responsibility and selfless suffering for others. Although Malamud's characters appear to be schlemiels destined to fail and lose, yet they are not just passive victims of fate and circumstances without any capacity to resist or change. They have the spiritual strength within. In his novels, Malamud explores the hidden potential in his heroes, which saves them from dehumanization and death in a callous and corrupt world. He proves through his investigation into the human psyche that man has sufficient physical and spiritual stamina to foil the deterministic forces of society and to find a viable system of values. Malamud's characters are initially seen to be completely unanchored, groping for a workable set of morals and a desirable mode of living. But they neither run from their problems, nor succumb to their weakness; rather they fight. Malamud's protagonists make persistent efforts to bring about a change in their moral outlook by learning from their failures. In Malamud's view, man is always amendable to moral
growth through his struggle and suffering. So, his characters intensify their struggle for survival and acquire a new moral awareness. The changed outlook of these characters allows them to develop a pattern of life which ensures them humanity, identity and dignity. Malamud says: "Man is always changing and the changed part of him is all important. I refer to the psyche, to the spirit, the mind, the emotions" [Hassan, 161].

Malamud refuses to accept the rumour that humanity and selfhood have altogether vanished from contemporary society. In his opinion, man has an innate strength which prompts Malamud's protagonists to suffer and struggle against the demanding conditions of society and enables them to pass beyond the dehumanizing odds of life. For Malamud, the living of life, including its struggling and suffering, is not simply the fate of man but the privilege of man. According to him, suffering is the human lot, but we need not surrender to despair. To escape from suffering is impossible; to live a good life in spite of it is not. Malamud's characters suffer silently and peacefully, knowing that suffering illuminates the truths of life.

Malamud's protagonists struggle to save their life and morality; they suffer to secure a human status as par with others. The quality of suffering and struggling carries Malamud's characters beyond their racial boundaries, into the larger and more secular, domain of humanity.

Malamud is keenly perceptive of human destiny, and shapes his heroes out of the grammar of defeat and misery, an aesthetic of hope, of affirmation of heroism. Malamud is a stern moralist, and in his novels he tells the story of human personality fulfilling itself. He says not to the devaluation of man, and refuses to contribute to anything to its acceleration. Malamud is quite tired of this colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day, for whatever explanation: that life is cheap amid a prevalence of wars; or because we are drugged by totalitarian successes into a sneaking belief in their dehumanizing processes. Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed in the words he has invented to describe himself as he know: fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational, anonymous man, a victim, in the words that are used to describe him of a kind of synecdochic irony, the part for the whole. The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest. Malamud's voice in this passage is angry. His assertion of human life, of its beauty and worth, constitutes the main drama in his novels.

In a new mood of optimism and affirmation, Malamud explores the possibility for redemption and heroism of his protagonists. The hardest fact of their life is poverty and its concomitant in capitalist America, social and material failure. They are further alienated, this time for themselves for each one of them has a flaw, and this flaw alienates their social desire from their authentic moral aspirations, bringing in a deep cleavage in the self.

The central character in Bernard Malamud's novels reveals a consistent pattern of experience, which embodies Malamud's affirmative view of human life. Three of his protagonists, Roy Hobbs in The Natural, Frank Alpine in The Assistant, and Harry Lesser in The Tenants, for example, begin as victims, but grow into heroes. The special kind of heroism which Malamud confers on them is marked by their transcendence of self, society, and history. Malamud's protagonists are questers and heroism is the object of their quest. In The Natural, Roy's ambition is inordinate – to become the best there ever was; in The Assistant, Frank Alpine drifts around in the Brooklyn neighbourhood passionately nourishing the dream of becoming a crime king; and in The Tenants, Harry Lesser is too selfish to be able to give love to or to feel responsible towards others. All of them are also victims of social circumstances and of themselves, apparently incapable of redemption in human experience.

Malamud's affirmation of self, his vision of the regeneration or renewal of man, takes the form of heroism, which he confers of his "sad and bitter clowns," such as the three mentioned above.
Malamud transmutes the struggle for class identity into his protagonists search for a personal identity. The end of the quest, his protagonists achieves a kind of self-knowledge with which they challenge their world. His assertion of the new self becomes ultimately an act of transcendence, in that his false desires are defeated. Malamud's protagonists accommodate the world within themselves by means of a set of values created within. They are no more victims. The heroism which Malamud posits for his protagonists, as areal and live option, depends on their ability to transcend themselves and their world. Each novel of Malamud dramatizes this ability of the protagonist.

Malamud's idea of heroism as transcendence demands of the protagonist the knowledge that the 'American Dream of Success' is a myth and that it is ugly as it is selfish. The protagonist wants success in material and social terms. The protagonist in the novels of Malamud fights two battles simultaneously; the one against himself, and the other against the society. Malamud makes the battle tough and bitter by choosing individuals who apparently suffer from shapelessness and uncertainty of social experience, and of the modes and manners of contemporary American society in terms of consistent pattern of moral corruption. The struggle is bound to be more interesting as the individual has to plunge into the battle and achieve double conquest; over himself and over the world outside.

The capacity for perception, the nature and quality of the perception upon the perceiver, would seem to be at least as much important as a norm for the hero as anything else. In Malamud's novels perception is the point from which the protagonist rises towards his assumption of responsibility, participation in suffering and the consequent accommodation of the world into the self. This is the state of transcendence to which the Malamudian protagonist aspires, and which he ultimately attains. The self-assertive principle, which lies at the root of heroism, finds its noblest manifestation in transcendence. The state of transcendence for Malamud hero is through perception of the inadequacies of the self and of the incapacity of the outside world to subdue the individual, and make him a victim. The hero also perceives his essential human dignity. This perception confers a new strength and power on the individual, equipped with which he fights his way towards transcendence.

In his novels, The Natural, The Assistant and The Tenants, Malamud has fully developed his idea of heroism through the protagonists Roy Hobbs, Frank Alpine and Harry Lesser. In The Natural the hero fails, while in The Assistant the protagonist rises to the status of a hero. Roy Hobbs and Frank Alpine both come to realize that the greatest value in life lies in suffering, which Malamud treats in all his novels not only as the main burden of the Jewish history but as the highest moral agent of redemption. Frank even discovers the centrality of his being in values dramatized as peculiarly Jewish. As Malamud himself says; I handle the Jew as a symbol of the tragic experience of man existentially. I try to see the Jew as universal man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it. The Jewish drama is .... symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms" [Field and Field, 9].

The Natural, Malamud's maiden novel, can be read as a necessary reference text for the study of his special notion of heroism. The study is that of a phenomenally gifted base ball player, Roy Hobbs, who finally succumbs to the corruption of the flesh and society. In this novel, Iris Lemon defines the nature of the heroism for which Roy is still a potential. He has become a hero in the eyes of the society by hitting the Homer and saving the life of a sick boy. But he is still obsessed with himself, and with the dream to be the best there ever was in the game. He would become a real hero only when he can triumph as a man too, and reckon with the things Iris calls life. Hobb's career exemplifies need for heroism as well as the condition with which heroism as
transcendence would be possible to attain. Despite many weaknesses, Roy realizes his inner moral demands. His willingness to suffer again is indicative of his moral apophenia.

The Assistant tells the story of an orphan, rootless and disconsolate Italian drifter, Frank Alpine. At the beginning of the novel Frank lives the life of a criminal. He is criminal accomplice in the act of robbery – to rob Morris Bober, the owner of a grocery store. Frank wants to gain success on social and material level. But later on when he realizes his follies, he serves Bober as an assistant in the store to redeem his sin. In the company of Morris Frank learns the value of compassion, forbearance love and selfless suffering. Like Roy, he also comes to know through suffering, that American Dream of Success is a mirage and he can't attain spiritual contentment by getting material gains. Frank adopts the qualities of his spiritual father, Morris Bober. In spite of poverty, bad luck and travail, Bober doesn't lose his faith in humanity. His attitude to life characterizes compassion even at the cost of self-effacement. While Morris evinces exemplary compassion al through his life; Frank Alpine, his gentle assistant, has to struggle much to reach that point. Frank's love, chastened of its sensual element, plays a major role in his moral transcendence. Frank fords new life in his meaningful, authentic and compassionate relationship with the Bober family, where he learns the importance of humane values.

In The Tenants, Malamud suggests the need of fellow-feeling. Malamud's basic focus is on the impact of the tense times on the humanity which is symbolically represented in the mutual hatred, suspicion and guilt of the black and the Jewish writers. Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint. Malamud is worried about the lack of compassion in a world where nihilistic tendencies are growing rapidly. Harry is a Jewish novelist for whom writing is an obsession of life. Willie is a black writer. The Jewish writer represents a humanistic tradition while the Black writer symbolizes the black community struggling to create a new black culture. The conflict between the blacks and whites in the novel suggests the divided self of human-beings. At first the two writers earnestly need each other, and suffer together. But later on Harry's criticism of Willie's manuscripts turns the later against him. They start victimize one another. The final ending of the novel shows Lesser and Spearmint blood thirsty and Lesser flirting with Willie's white beloved, Iren Ball. Ultimately, they kill each other. Levenspiel, the landlord of the apartment in which Harry lives, cries for mercy – 'Hab Rachmones.' This cry for mercy emphasizes Malamud's call for humanity and compassion.

Malamud creates in his novels a secular humanism, one which is based on the human values common to all human beings, irrespective of their religion and nationality. In this way, he brings the Jews and Gentiles so close to each other that one community appears to be the alter ego of the other. Later on, they realize that their commitment to human relationship is more important than their religious prejudices or racial conflicts.

Bernard Malamud's moral intelligence, his scrupulous examination of the elusive character of American reality, has enabled him to devise the heroism which is new in American literature, and consists in the protagonists sense of direction or purpose, in his passionate pursuit of 'betterment,' in his recognition of the value of maturity, and thereby freeing himself from the characteristic of American obsession with innocence, and in his acceptance of responsibility, the Malamud hero denies the view to be the hero is only secondarily a moral idea; he stands as the moral hero par excellence. Malamud's vision of humanity and his concept of heroism emphasize the need to suffer for others. His protagonists wage a struggle against the anti-human force takes away their identity and humanity. Philip Roth says about Malamud; "What is to be human, to be humane is his subject; connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are his moral concerns" [Goyen, 4]. He
describes the anguish and suffering of the disinherited in his novels. His novels voice the need of human relatedness: Most of his works highlight 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.

To conclude, it may be stated that Malamud is a humanist and views Judaism as a source of humanism because it symbolizes suffering. He is moved by the degradation and loss of human dignity in the modern world. He is sick of deceitful devaluation of man in the modern conditions of living, but he affirms his continued faith in humanity. The heroism which Malamud posits for his protagonists depends on their ability to transcend themselves and their world. At the end of each novel mentioned above, the protagonist realizes the old traditional values of humanity, love, charity and sense of responsibility towards others. According to Malamud, all these human virtues alone can outwit the tragedy of humanity in general in the contemporary world.

References:
Letter to D. R. Sharma, dated 2 October 1971. Quoted by Sharma in his Introduction to The Assistant.