

COMPASSION AS ALL-ENCOMPASSING PASSION: AN ANALYSIS OF BERNARD MALAMUD'S CHARACTERS

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This article probes into the perception of compassion and passion and also how compassion emanates out of passion. Passion and compassion can be identified as two different emotions that a person experiences. Passion refers to a very intense feeling where as compassion refers to the concern that is felt for another. The word passion originally comes from the Latin word passio, meaning to suffer or endure. Most commonly, passion referred to the Passion of Christ. Since Jesus underwent the furthest extent of suffering, passion mostly referred to Christ's suffering. The word also referred to enduring hardship and suffering in general. The definition of passion is obsolete in the twenty-first century, and the common term used nowadays in its place would be tribulation. However, there is one word still in use which somewhat preserves passion in the sense of suffering: compassion. Compassion is regarded as having sensitivity, which is an emotional aspect to suffering. Compassion is a combination of passion and the Latin prefix-com meaning "with"; literally, the word means "suffering with" "co-suffering" "and occurs "when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, "takes on someone else's pain, and bears it with him..

Malamud's characters are epitome of *compassion* encompassed with *passion*. His characters are embedded with a property of "depth, vigor, or passion." They are stuffed with the qualities of compassion such as patience and wisdom; kindness and perseverance; warmth and resolve. They made their home as centers of compassion. Malamud's protagonists struggle with the forces of their cultural environments and ultimately victimized by them. They suffered to secure the human status at par with others which makes them realize the importance of compassion as it is lost somewhere in the material pursuits of modern man symbolizes humanity. Moral transcendence is very close to Malamud's idea of humanism as it employs spiritual growth in him and leads him to understand the values of compassion, responsibility, and forbearance.

KEYWORDS: Emanates, Tribulations, Perseverance, Victimized, Transcendence.

How do we know what we want? That may seem a simple, perhaps even a trivial question, but it can prove surprisingly difficult, especially when the stakes are high.

“There comes a time when you ought to start doing what you want. Take a job that you love. You will jump out of bed in the morning. I think you are out of your mind if you keep taking jobs that you do not like because you think it will look good on your resume. Isn’t that a little like saving up sex for old age?” – Warren Buffet.

- Passion is an Activity, Goal, Cause, or Strong Desire for which one is Willing to Suffer.
- Compassion = Com + Passion = Willing to Suffer with Another. Share in the Suffering of the Other. Hold a Concern felt for other.

Interestingly, Malamud’s characters are brimming with a different type of passion and compassion. Their passion is a driving force for them to culminate into compassion. Compassion of different type. His protagonists not only “Suffers with Another” but also “Sacrifices their lives for the sake of Others”. In general, they suffer for the benefit of the entire Humanity. Bernard Malamud has always believed in the possibility of moral growth. Indeed this is a consistent theme in his fiction. He believes human beings to be capable of far better things than much modern ideology states. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel*, in (1959), Malamud according to Richman has said,

“I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day....Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed by the words he has invented to describe himself as his now: fragmented ,abbreviated, other-directed, organizational...The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest(23)”¹

Difficulties, obstacles, and suffering are what bring out in Malamud’s characters their potential as human beings. As Malamud himself says,

“A bad reading of my work indicates that I am writing about losers. That would be a very bad reading. One of my most important themes is a man’s hidden strength. I am very much interested in the resources of the spirit, the strength people do not know they have until they are confronted with a crisis. (109)”²

This statement expresses the attitude Malamud owns towards passion and compassion. In order to establish the mood of passion and compassion in his masterpiece *The Fixer* Malamud employs several key motifs and images. The most prominent motif is that of the prison and Bok’s struggle for survival. As Malamud himself remarked in one of his interviews,

“It’s a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history... there are the man-made prisons of social injustice ,apathy, ignorance .There are others, tight or loose ,visible or invisible, according to one’s predilection or vulnerability. Therefore our most extraordinary invention is human freedom”.³

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. One way to live a fulfilling life isFollow ones passion. Passion is 'A willingness to suffer for what one loves most'.

"The*Times* headline reads: "Bernard Malamud Is Dead at 71. Author Depicted Human Struggle." Isn't there a depiction of human struggle even in those books that do not make it their theme or subject, even in those "inhuman" works that are more concerned with the nature of language or perception than with lives? To write at all, to set down words in formal ways, to imagine fictively, is to report on a struggle. Malamud did that, more directly than most of the writers."4

The alienated self, cut off from society and even from itself, is nowhere more powerfully portrayed than in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*. Malamud's paradoxical philosophy of ultimate, internal freedom being achieved only through some kind of bondage is taken to an extreme in this novel, as we see the protagonist, Yakov Bok, imprisoned not only physically but also morally and emotionally. In fact, most of the action takes place while Yakov Bok is imprisoned for a heinous crime that he did not commit. Yakov Bok's memory of his relative "freedom" before his incarceration is acute in the prison, and that further complicates his immobile, hence intensely frustrating condition. As life is calling Yakov Bok wants to go toward it with utmost *passion* and involvement, not with hesitation and calculation. This is not the ego's problem of wanting to do something different; it is about living life to his full potential. In his desire to live in a world other than the one to which he is physically confined, Yakov Bok escapes into a world created by his fevered mind. Malamud's *The Fixer* is a historical novel about Anti-Semitism in the Russian empire. It won both National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

In this novel, Yokov Bok the protagonist is a Jew in Tsarist regime in Russia. Bok is falsely accused and imprisoned. For two and half years, he is kept in solitary confinement. He is brutalized, dehumanized, experiencing beating, hunger, poison, rats, numbing cold and is given a gauntlet of physical and emotional abuse but he endures all those abuses patiently. Unexpectedly, he is offered a way to escape his suffering. If he signs a confession, he can go free. Nevertheless, he rejects because he knows his confession will be used against the Jews. He does not want the Jewish Community to be pilloried by his false admission of guilt. He realizes that *suffering is a part of life, but a man can choose to make his suffering meaningful. He chooses to suffer more so that others will suffer less.* This attitude is the basis for Passion turned into Compassion.

- A compassion, which reaches out to the unloved, the ostracized, the marginalized, and the vulnerable.
- A Compassion, that takes a stand for the poor, the victims of injustice, the refugees and displaced
- A compassion that is able to negate and overcome the hate and divisiveness, the racism and communalism, the xenophobia and the exclusiveness that has gripped their world.

In *The Natural*, a host of literary devices draws attention to the ‘unnatural’ landscape, the deliberate design, of Malamud’s first novel. Most discussions of the novel have focused not on these devices, however, but an ancient lore of Arthurian romance, particularly the myths of the Grail knight and the Fisher King. As critics have pointed out, the novel’s ample allusions to the grail legend underline its mythic theme: a hero’s quest, ordeal, and ultimate redemption.¹ In *The Natural*, Malamud uses a theme that will appear in all of his novels and most of his stories: suffering as a possible means to growth. Nevertheless, it is only possible depending on the attitude of the character. In Roy’s case. Little is learned, his difference from Iris stressing his inability to understand what can be learned from suffering. The readers can deduce this for their conversation.

“Experience makes good people better”

She was staring at the lake.

: how does it do that?”

“Through their suffering”.

“I had enough of that.” He said in disgust.

“We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and a life that we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness.”....

“It teaches us to want the right things.”

“All it taught me is to stay away from it. I am sick of all I have suffered.”

She shrank away a little. (159)

His attitude indicates that Roy’s moral development is very limited, although a change does occur towards the end of the novel, when it is too late. Despite the lack of major changes during the course of the novel. Malamud concentrates on the suffering Roy endures, his responses to it, and his lack of understanding of the selflessness required of him. When Malamud was asked about his attitude towards suffering in his work, he replied: I’m against it but when it occurs why waste the experience?” (Stern, (55). This somewhat amusing response should not be taken to show that Malamud takes suffering lightly; indeed; he takes it most seriously and uses it as a means to characterize his protagonists.

As in most of Malamud’s works, here too the present can be understood only by appreciating the effects of the past. Roy is obsessed with the past, in particular with his youth. One of the constant threads in Roy’s personality is his desire to regain the innocence of childhood. On the first page, we are told that Roy has no “timepiece”; later, he will hit ball into the ballpark clock and smash it. He desires to stop time or deny its existence so as to return to the period before Harriet Bird shot him and to live again in unsullied hope, and he must go even further back, to the period

before his days in the orphanage, to the time when he lived with his permit him to see the world in terms of simplicity and purity. Of course, he cannot escape from those events, and his attempts to do so show that he has not learned from them. He remembers, “How satisfied he had been as a youngster....And he wished he could have lived longer in his boyhood” (TN, 119).

It is Iris who introduces the central theme of *The Natural*. Her words reveal the reasons for Roy’s failures: people must learn through their suffering. “We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with, and the life we live after that. Suffering is what brings up toward happiness. But Roy is unable to understand the lesson, ‘I am sick of all I have suffered’. (38)8 The irony here is that Roy’s obsession with self-aggrandizement in baseball severely limits his possible choices. Of course, this limitation is self-imposed, but its effects are real nonetheless. Life outside baseball, even with memo, seems a blank to him. When he finally decides to try to reserve his decision to throw the game, it proves to be impossible, as it is too late. He recognizes that “I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again. (237).The final line of the novel reveals a beaten man. Through his suffering at the close of the novel, Roy becomes compassionate that he chooses Iris over Memo, accepts the responsibility of fatherhood, and recognizes the importance of love. Roy has finally seen the importance and truth of human relationships and of what can be learned through suffering. As is all of Malamud’s fiction, success can only be gained at the price of failure; the hero can only gain moral redemption at the price of psychic suffering.

The novel *The Assistant* can be called the masterpiece of Bernard Malamud. The novel opens with a wretched little grocery store in New York City with an almost windowless five-room flat above. In this soul-corroding twilight the principal characters have lived for twenty- one years; Morris Bobber the aging and ailing store-keeper who is the ethical centre of the novel; his nagging wife Ida who suffers from a weakness in the legs and the endurance of her husband; and their twenty-three-year-old daughter, Helen who works for Levenspiel’s Louisville and bras and dreams of an escape from drudgery. The characters do possess some free will, although looking at Morris one may wonder how much. However, Morris could have chosen to become a pharmacist; one can see Helen making a number of choices regarding the men in her life; and Frank decides to change what appears to be an immutable life pattern. Nor is the ending pessimistic in terms of what Frank has achieved, moving as he has from the world of Ward Manague to one of caring for humanity.

Malamud elucidates poverty as both moral teacher and grinding adversary; insights into the human heart occurring in the most likely setting; the importance of moral responsibility and human goodness over materialism; and the ever-present pressure of the past, with its mistakes, unavoidable disaster, and unfulfilled dreams. The essential quality that Morris possess is his ability to view and treat other including those he doesn’t particularly like, not in terms of abstractions or neutrals – “Its” – but as human being _ “yours.”. Through Morris’s influence, Frank is able to defeat the negative aspects of his nature and bring the positive ones to the forefront, but until he is able to establish true relationships with other, he cannot be a good man.

Once he can see others as “Yours,” he not only achieves human goodness, but also can approach an understanding of those eternal.

Morris’s compassion is matched by his honesty, which is so exacting that in his funeral the rabbi relates “Morris with one who ran two blocks in the snow to return a nickel to a financial liability.” “The soul of honesty himself, he seems destined to trust the wrong people.” His daughter reflects (TA 247). Attracted by Morris’s honesty, compassion, and forbearance, Frank comes to associate these qualities with Morris’s Jewishness. When he can barely endure his poverty, isolation, Frank tells himself that Morris is able to suffer only because he is a Jew and Jews live to suffer: he who suffers the most is the best Jew. Slowly, he comes to respect Morris, and their relationship subtly shifts from shopkeeper and assistant, to father and son, to teacher and novice. One day Frank asks why Jews suffer so much. Everyone suffers, Morris replies but Jews suffer for the law, which means, simply, for honesty and goodness. Pointing out that other religion also believes in these principles, Frank asks what Morris suffers for, “I suffer for you,” (197) comes the calm, reply.

Morris’s statement about suffering makes explicit the central theme of *The Assistant*: man’s inherent potential of transcending the inevitable pain and hardship in life by making suffering meaningful. Because of his unwavering honesty and compassionate belief that people are better than they seem, Morris is doomed to a material suffering that plays a counterpoint to an arduously won but genuine spiritual triumph. Thus in *The Assistant* Passion has been turned into compassion.

Malamud’s novel *A New Life* is at once an academic satire and a bildungsroman depicting Levin’s quest for new life. Robert Bowen says: “No other American novel gives as clear a report of normal state mental espionage, blackmail, subordination, and assorted shenanigans” (384).¹² It probes the development of the soul of Seymour Levin. Levin, the protagonist, regrets very much like Malamud that the education system at Cascadia miserably fails to teach “how to keep civilization from destroying itself.” (NL 103). Levin discusses his affair with Pauline as a moral issue. Morality for Levin is synonymous with compassion.

Levin felt that the main source of conscious morality was live of life, anybody’s life. Morality was a way of giving value to other lives through assuring human rights. As you valued men’s lives, yours received value. (NL 222)

He feels that “we must protect the human, the good, and the innocent” (NL202). He thinks that the strongest morality does not brook temptation. He decides to give up Pauline at least now for the sake of morality. He sees in it the possibility of life. “To be good, then evil, then good was no moral way of life, but to good after being evil was a possibility of life. (NL 223).

Malamud’s novels mostly centre on the suffering, that is the passion of the characters lead to Compassion. Frank Alphonse (*The Assistant*), Sy Levin (*A New Life*), Yakov Bok (*The Fixer*), Arthur Fiedman (Pictures of Fiedman), all strive to escape an ignominious or unfulfilling past

and to achieve a new life of comfort and fulfillment. Though they are defeated in their ambition, they achieve a new dignity, turning defeating into victory by assuming a burden of self-sacrifice. Problems come when people are passionate about only one thing, or when they are passionate in an exclusive way. This often leads to isolation; living an exclusive existence with very limited involvement will only lead to frustration and pain. Compassion is not an attitude of kindness but an instrument of unprejudiced involvement. Else, even being “empathetic” towards the suffering of another can be known as compassion. This highlights that while passion stems from within an individual, compassion comes from the outside. A person can be enthusiastic towards the object of compassion, but this is different to that of passion. Passion is a trigger to compassion. “The lack of passion leads to a lack of compassion.” Compassion is not that which is bereft of passion, it is a larger dimension of passion. Once the characters venture into the world, expectations fly fast and furious. Expectations lead to thousand letdowns. They pin more of their happiness to expectations it is not wrong to pursue passions. The passions have to be tempered with compassion.

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 that 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 tied up with others in pain and pleasure” [Rajagopalachari, 121] 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 25] makes him feel mutual responsibility. As compassion emerges from understanding, so it is within the reach of the human beings. Malamud’s response to human condition in the modern world is sensitive. 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.

Bernard Malamud’s characters are personification, hallmarks, and epitomes of passion and compassion. Passion and compassion makes their life colorful. They embody love and wisdom with passion and compassion. To conclude it is apt to say that Malamud is under the notion that “The world will become a better place when people turn their passion into compassion”

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