

## **Stereotyping and Role Assignment to Women in Fiction: A Specific Assessment of Malamud's Novels**

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### **Abstract**

Men have a be-all place in Malamud and the heroines play a subsidiary role to the heroes. Though Malamud's contemporary, Saul Bellow was more of a male Chauvinistic than Malamud, yet the latter, too, cannot be condoned for the step-fatherly treatment meted out to women. Female characters are given marginal slot in the novels either to support in the male quest or thwart his cause. Except in one or two novels, female characters are non-significant before the protagonists. They, as individuals, do not have their own identity; rather have been created to serve the purpose of the writer as well as his plot and male characters.

## **Keywords**

Stereotyping, male chauvinism, gender discourse, sexuality, sex versus gender, feminism.

## **Introduction**

Gender stereotyping has been present in literature from Greek and Latin classical to contemporary literature across the globe. Women have had their share of struggle of existence and recognition as per prevalent social norms of the societies in which they lived. Quest generally depicted in heroes of classical texts remained confined to the male lead characters, whether it involved journeys undertaken to foreign lands or wars fought along with gods.

Character analysis of Malamud's fiction presents clear-cut gender-stereotyping though it was written in the second half of the twentieth century. Women in Bernard Malamud's novels are portrayed as "uni-dimensional characters" who are never confronted with a responsibility of choices. They never face a crisis because their roles of wives, mothers and mistresses prove to be immutable once they are set at the beginning of the narrative. Men appear to be problematic figures of writers, biographers, teachers, baseball players, striving to achieve an identity "to reconcile themselves to the demands of love and commitment."

The co-relation of heroes with heroines is, thus, put in Barbara Koeing Quart's words as "a peculiar obliqueness characterizes the way his heroes relate to women." Again

she puts forth her views as: "Women are set at a curious distance in Malamud's fiction, despite the intense passion, lust, yearning directed at them."

The quest is basically of the hero, though there are certain instances like that of Helen and Fanny who share certain ideas of betterment with the heroes, but it is primarily the protagonist whose quest for a new life matters: "Malamud rarely shows us a man and a woman genuinely sharing a place and life, not to mention a family. The few exceptions like *Dubin's Lives* make even clearer that Malamud's men are by and large alive."

Similar views are expressed by Helterman also: "Women for most part are minor characters in Malamud, important for the way they affect the hero rather than in their own right."

Malamud himself admits very explicitly which is clear from this excerpt from an interview with Joel Salzborg in 1983:

*"Q. Women do not seem to have the same prominence in your fiction as men. They may have important roles but they are never at the dramatic center of your work. Have you ever thought about doing your own version of The Portrait of a Lady?"*

*A. Imaginations differ. Because of James' own unique upbringing and his special relationship to his mother, the subject of The Portrait of a Lady probably came natural to him, however, this is not the kind of novel that I am inclined to write. Yet the death of my mother, while she was still young, had an influence on my writing, and then there is in my*

*fiction a hunger for women that comes out in a  
conscious way."*

It is also very interesting to note that Malamud has not given even physical as well as behavioural perfection to her female characters. Even their physical beauty is marred because of physical flaws. Looking at the individual characters, Avil of *A New Life* has a sick breast. Pauline is flat-chested and has big feet; Memo Paris has sick breast too. Zina in *The Fixer* has a crippled leg which fills the protagonist with revulsion and pity. This feature has been highlighted by Helterman in his book *Understanding Malamud*:

*"These women are always marked by some physical handicap-- the sick breast of Avil Fliss or Memo Paris or the limp of Zina in The Fixer. The hero frequently thinks that the offer of sex is a stroke of luck on his part, but unless he tears himself away from this woman and her temptations, he will be destroyed."*

Apart from these physical deformities, Malamud's women also suffer from temperamental and behavioural abnormalities. Ida in *The Assistant* is never a cheerful happy wife to Morris Bober, the store-keeper. Ida's cousin in behaviour is Kitty who is always nagging and whimsical and could never give Dubin the good feelings of a lovely wife (*Dubin's Lives*). About Pauline, it is Gilley, her husband who knows her better as he cautions Levin, who is already suffering due to his background and his bungling past which always haunts him like a ghost, that living with

Pauline is no bed of roses, she gives headaches to her close ones.

Thus, Malamud presents a very dismal and dismayed picture of women. According to Mark Shechner, Malamud ascribes women with the role of sexual agony:

*"Those Malamud heroes, who suffer from history, commonly encounter it through a woman and their new lives are characteristically erotic quests that lead them to keyholes, transoms and other furtive blinds for the ogling of their dream women. But the gap between their arousal and fulfillment is never closed, leaving a space between hope and attainment in which their strange destinies can unfold. Sexual agony is Malamud's stock in trade."*

Some critics of Malamud are of the opinion that women in Malamud are responsible, to a large degree, to the abundance of suffering and even downfall of heroes. John Alexander Allen opines, "The laws which govern the downfall of characters in Malamud's novels are difficult to formulate with confidence but it is clear that sexual aggression on their part is consistently a prelude to disaster."

All the female figures have been relegated to their sexual roles. According to Chiara Briganti, it is

*"...through commitment that the protagonists realize their freedom. Heroes reach self definition through the abandonment of ego-centralism. The quest for identity engages them in a sentimental education, and those who succeed in a struggle against their ego-centrism most only conquer a new*

*life but learn how to respond to the other with that clarity and sympathy without which for Malamud there is no possibility for regeneration. In this quest women serve primarily as antagonists and as a means to precipitate the crisis in the male protagonists."*

Yet Malamud's novels are not totally devoid of an element of love, which at several occasions, works as a redeeming feature. Love is, most of the times, an abiding force as quipped by Harper: "In escaping alienation man must experience love for others."

In spite of being a lonely outsider failure with a blemished past and in present living in a grim sad world, the Malamud hero turns out to be unique and redeemable. No one is beyond redemption and love may become the medium of his redemption.

Women become a tool for the regeneration and assimilation of the erring hero. Malamud presents his heroes who are eager to start afresh and are in a search for a new identity and a set of new values which may give a new meaning to his life. It is at this point of his life that a woman's entry takes place and she helps him on the path of self-exploration, a kind of self knowledge which can support him in getting rid of his blemished past. Of course, no one can do away with past and even God cannot change it but yes, one can always find future in the past Sandy Cohen opines that, "Malamud believes that in each man there is the capacity to learn from suffering and to become better morally."

In Malamud's novels the love between man and woman initiates at a physical kind and eventually turns into a higher and spiritual type called Eros which can be best understood through Jung's philosophy about love:

*"The first stage is best symbolized by the figure of Eve, which represents purely instinctual and biological relations. The second can be seen in Faust's Helen. She personifies a romantic and aesthetic level that is however, still characterised by sexual element. The third is represented for instance, by the Virgin Mary—the figure who raises love (Eros) to the heights of spiritual devotion. The fourth type is symbolized by Sapientia, wisdom transcending even the more holy and more pure."*

A woman plays the role of a redeemer as she enters the life of the hero and passing through various stages of love, eventually redeems him. The same views about the redemptive force of love are expressed by Jonathan Baumbach:

*"Love is the redemptive grace in Malamud's fiction, its highest good. The defeat of love is its tragedy. Love rejected, love misplaced, love betrayed, loveless lust: these are the main evils in Malamud's fictional world... yet the world, for all its potential goodness is not good and the good man, the man capable of love, is inevitably the sufferer, the sacrificer, the saint."*

Women, in general, are seekers of permanence in relations as relegated by Briganti, "All the female characters in Malamud's fiction share a common shallowness and common values: they all respect

marriage and family life and, whatever their past, they seek fulfillment through a permanent relationship with a man."

Ihab Hassan has also commented about the moral impact of love, rather he feels that morality is manifested through love, as he opines, "It is the response of the conscience to the incongruities of life, the quest for dignity in humiliation, the perdurable glow in a handful of ashes scraped from the health of every-man. It is pre-eminently a moral response- though morality, for Malamud, declares itself less in judgment than love."

If some women redeem the protagonists through their love, there are other women also who prove to be disastrous for the spiritual advancement of the hero. They do not stand with the Eros side of love; rather they suck the real energy out of them like the spirit of Helen does with Dr. Faustus. When Faustus wants to become 'immortal' with her kiss, it turns out to be the kiss of a spirit which eventually sucks out the powers of Marlowe's Faustus. Though Malamud's heroes are not that 'scholarly', yet they make a wrong choice about women and they also err in judging their true selves as well as the women who come in their life- the seductresses, burdensome females who play a villainous role in their lives' urge for a new achievement.

Thus, we have two types of women characters in Malamud's novels - first, are the symbol of love, womanliness, inspiration, revelation, motive and moral

development and are initiators and redeemers; then second type of women are the cruel temptresses and vindictive seductresses, who are seeking the destruction of the hero with their satanic traps of beauty and lead them astray from their preferred course.

Therefore, there are two types of temptresses in the novels-- active and passive temptresses. Harriet Bird, Memo Paris, Laverne, Nadalee, Avis, Zina, Golov come in the first category who are simple characters with feminine evils and who have uni-directional approach towards life. Helen, Pauline, Bell, Raisl, Fanny- they all fall in the second category. They are not as simple as the female characters of the first category rather they are complex and multi-dimensional. They act as retarding factors at one point of time in the lives of the heroes but it is through their association with these women and their bitter experiences with them that the protagonists get moral awakening and they find a new life which is actually very different from the lives envisioned and much-desired by them.

The analysis of hero's relationship with other women in Malamud's novels indicates towards a conclusion that Malamud is neither for a sexless love nor for a loveless sex as both the situations don't constitute the foundation of an enduring relationship rather an alchemy of spiritual and sensual combination makes the relationship healthier, more nourishing and more wholesome.

The characters of Malamud undergo different stages of love in inter-novel and intra-novel analysis. In *The Natural*,

Memo is initially, rather throughout, an embodiment of feminine evils who tempts and seduces the hero but towards the end of the novel, even she appears to be a victim of the materialistic society which is after name and fame only. Towards the end of the same novel, Iris becomes the projection of a mythic archetypal role of Mother Earth who nurtures and is the ultimate saviour.

There is already a development in the depiction of characters in the next novel, *The Assistant*. There is no clear-cut division into elemental polarization rather the characters are warring within themselves and this drama within gives rise to more interest and naturalness to the characters.

Similar kind of internal conflict moves forward in *The Tenants* along with the external tension between a black and a white writer. Irene is a bundle of multitude complex feelings who ultimately leads to the catastrophe of the destruction of the hard- worked manuscript of Lesser by Willie. In her earlier role, she attracts Lesser but towards the end when she wants to settle down in her life with the man whom she loves, she develops into a strong woman who can take a decision to leave the man for whom she is not as important as book- writing.

Thus, Malamud has presented the quest of his protagonists in very bold letters but at the same time he has forgotten the other half, be it the better-halves or the worse-halves. Or maybe Malamud was not meant for writing a work like *The Portrait of a Lady*. It seems that

Malamud deeply believed in the patriarchal system in which women got a subordinate role.

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