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Bernard Malamud's Works and the Japanese Mentality

Hishashiro Suzuki

Although Bernard Malamud is an American Jewish writer who incorporates Jewish characters, traditions, and rituals in his works, he once said in an interview with Daniel Stern, "I write for all men" (Stern 63). Clearly, this holds true for the Japanese. His works are widely read, translated, and studied by scholars in Japan, a country with a very small Jewish population and little knowledge of the Jewish people and their culture. Actually, Jewish literature in general is quite popular among scholars and students of literature there. In 2001, an academic society, The Jewish Literary Society of Japan, was established. The president of the society, a Japanese professor, is fluent in Yiddish and regularly writes for the Yiddish *Forverts*. He even says that he has seen Isaac Bashevis Singer in his dreams (*Shlemiel* 1). There must be something in Jewish literature that appeals to the Japanese.

The mission statement of The Jewish Literary Society of Japan might be helpful to understand. It says, "We hope to learn the [spiritual], cultural and literary worlds which the Jews have developed over their long history (*Shlemiel* 97). It is no ordinary thing to live through a long period of persecution without losing faith and humanity, from which there must be a lot to learn. A Japanese writer, Motohiko Fuma, says that he read Isaac Bashevis Singer because he was intrigued by the fact that although living in New York, "the most advanced city in the world," he continues to write only in Yiddish (*Mitabungaku* 22-23). Singer's works are full of surprises to him, but he feels that there is always something solid and unwavering in their core, which he attributes to Singer's being Jewish. Fuma admits that he envied the Jews for their close ties to each other [based upon their deep-seated belief and conviction] since he himself did not have anything solid to believe in. He even wanted to write a work like Singer's but has given up trying, partly because of his inability as a writer and partly because of the fact that the Japanese society perhaps does not have such rich spirituality that the Jewish community has (*Mitabungaku* 23). Shozo Kajima, who translated *The Assistant* into Japanese, clearly points out the uniqueness of Jewish writers in the history of American literature. He says, "They [Jew-

ish American writers] had qualitative characteristics which had not been found in American literature before. They seem to be trying to formulate a set of values that are different from the one prevailing in the American society” (Kajima 368).

In modern society, the unique quality of Malamud’s works is the ethical, humanistic way of living that his protagonists—mostly Jewish—present. In *The Assistant*, which is easily his most popular work in Japan, being Jewish is defined by Morris Bober “to follow the Jewish Law,...to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people” (112-13). Malamud himself mentions the importance of the moral, spiritual quality of Jewish life:

When I think of the history of the Jews...I think of the triumph of insight and value that makes their lives so basically rich...Although the primal knowledge is that life is tragic...in other words, they know that despite life’s tragic quality...the rewards of life.... are centered about the development of a spirituality that raises man to his highest being. (Cheuse & Delbanco 186)

The Japanese might be trying to learn from the high spirituality that the Jews have maintained in the face of the dehumanizing persecution in their history, which Malamud uses “as a metaphor for the fate of all men” (Leviant 50). Sandy Cohen once said, “*The Assistant* is credible because it is not unlike the world in which we live and suffer” (38). Actually, the deplorable situation of the Japanese people today described by a Buddhist priest sounds as if he were talking about the themes of *The Assistant*:

Money...has a strong position in our minds. What is...tragic...is that many people readily sell even their own souls for money or material gain and pleasure. In such a world, the morality of honesty is not properly valued. Dishonesty and distrust gradually come to occupy people’s minds. (Hattori 94)

My own life has been incredibly impacted by *The Assistant*, which has guided me morally.

At one time, I questioned how I should live my life. While I was working for a Tokyo company, one of my juniors never wanted to sacrifice his own time for the customers. To me, his attitude was nothing but a selfish one. Since he was in my department, I was partly responsible as his senior for his behavior, and so I attempted to admonish him, but it was no use. He criticized me for working too honestly for the customers, saying that it was just absurd. To my astonishment, some other co-workers supported his way of thinking.

This incident made me think about how to live. I had believed that making sacrifices for the customers was right. However, this person denied it outright and even some of my co-workers were on his side. I was beginning to wonder if my way of thinking might be wrong. It was soon after this incident that I read *The Assistant*. Morris’s uncompromising honesty, however absurd it might seem, confirmed my way of living or the way of living that I believed was right.

After that, I read other books by Malamud, and, in most of them, discovered Malamud's sincere effort to seek the moral way of living as a human being. To be moral in one's life often means more than just to be honest. It means to be compassionate to others, to trust and believe in them beyond one's prejudices that tend to be created by the prevalent ideas of the society in which one lives. The protagonist of "The First Seven Years," Feld, the shoemaker, decides to allow Sobel, the impoverished refugee, who works for him and loves his daughter Miriam, to marry her instead of Max the college boy, in spite of his desire to give her daughter a better life. In "Angel Levine," the protagonist Manishevitz is faced with the difficult task of believing the drunken black man, Levine, to be a Jewish angel. He overcomes his prejudice against Levine by his sincere wish for his wife's recovery from her deadly illness. Sometimes, the moral way of living means to be responsible for others as a fellow human being. In the short story "The Last Mohican," Fidelman, an American sojourner in Italy, is accosted and persistently pressed for a suit by a Jewish refugee, Susskind. Fidelman at first only thinks that he has nothing to do with Susskind's predicament and does not acknowledge his responsibility for him, but later recognizes it as a fellow Jew. In "Man in the Drawer," Malamud widens his compass and puts his American protagonist, seemingly only concerned about himself, in a situation where he must take responsibility as a member of mankind for his fellow writer unable to get his works published in the Soviet Union in the Cold War years.

Inspired by Malamud, I also read works by other Jewish writers, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, who also dealt with the way people should live. *The Penitent* is a story about a Jew named Shapiro, who has led a prodigal, immoral life in a corrupt American society but turns himself into a moral person dedicated to Judaism in the Holy Land after his constant struggles with the evil voice that tries to take him back to his immoral way of life. *The Magician of Lublin*, although set in nineteenth century Poland, deals with the same theme; the protagonist, Yasha, living a life of dissipation that culminates in his attempted theft, begins to doubt his way of life and is torn between the evil way of life and the righteous one of Jewish faith. He finally chooses the latter by becoming an ascetic, secluding himself from the world and its temptation. *The Slave*, set in eighteenth century Poland, also emphasizes morality, but Singer also reveals that even when one has faith, problems can result. Jacob, the Jewish protagonist, falls in love with the Christian girl, Wanda and commits a serious sin of marrying her—a gentile converted to Judaism—but he lives quite an honest way of life. In contrast, people in the Jewish community which the couple come to live in, though apparently upholding their religious rituals, are in reality corrupt hypocrites who do not hesitate to speak ill of Wanda, pretending to be deaf and dumb or to rob Jacob as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

The writers' interest in morality must be the source of Jewish writers' appeal to the Japanese. They write about the Jews, but their experiences, inner struggles, and sufferings can be understood as the universal experience of life. Malamud himself said in an interview that he writes about the Jew "who manages to be influenced by the concepts of morality which, incidentally, are Jewish but not only Jewish" (Masi-

lamoni 70). In fact, asked in the same interview for whom he writes, he answers, “I write for anyone who can read. I write for Indians, Japanese, Hungarians, British—anyone who can read” (Masilamoni 70). Malamud’s emphasis on the universality of his works is also clear from his following statement: “Jewishness is important to me, but I don’t consider myself only a Jewish writer. I have interests beyond that, and I feel I am writing for all men” (Benedict 135).

The universality of Malamud’s works seems to be based upon the essence of Judaism, that is, the emphasis of ethicality and morality--- which it would be possible to consider to be a cosmic law beyond the narrow-minded dogma of religions. Rabbi Milton Steinberg states the importance of the moral act in Judaism as follows:

Most important, Judaism has never arrived at a creed because, highly as it rates the life of reason, it rates the good life even higher. For all its heavy intellectualism it sets morality above logic, the pursuit of justice and mercy over the possession of the correct idea. That is why the Talmud lists among those who may “acquire eternity in one instant” heathens who lack the true faith and the ignorant and simple incapable of grasping it. (Steinberg 35)

A Jewish philosopher, Leo Baeck, also tells us the importance of practicing goodness in Judaism: “Man’s duty toward man comes before his knowledge of God” (Baeck 14). To do what is right as a human being, whether one has a good knowledge of God or not—this is the essence of Judaism, which Malamud has adopted in his works. In *The Assistant*, we can find it in the rabbi’s words at Morris’s funeral:

There are many ways to be a Jew. So if somebody comes to me and says, “Rabbi, shall we call such a man Jewish who lived and worked among the gentiles and sold them pig meat, trayfe, that we don’t eat it, and not once in 20 years comes inside a synagogue, is such a man a Jew, Rabbi?” To him I will say, “Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart.”...he was true to the spirit of our life—to want for others that which he wants also for himself. He followed the Law which God gave to Moses on Sinai and told him to bring to the people. (203)

The Jewish Law, being made substantial by Morris’s honest way of living, can be said to be a universal code of morality that it is possible to understand beyond our religions, races, and nationalities.

While the universality of Malamud’s works makes them appealing to the Japanese, some aspects of the Japanese cultural background seem to contribute to the popularity of Malamud in Japan. One of the important factors that underlies the Japanese culture is Buddhism. In *The Assistant*, Morris’s statement, “If you live, you suffer” (113) sounds exactly like a Buddhist idea. Buddha teaches that for all sentient beings, life is full of suffering, caused by our intrinsic earthly desires. His main concern is how to eliminate pain from our life, and Buddha preaches that we can be liberated from our sufferings by attaining the consummated position of

non-attachment. However, it is no easy thing for us to do so, and, in fact, a sect of Buddhism called “Pure Land” was founded out of the practical necessity of giving salvation to common, mediocre people who “often come to realize how much we are unable to fulfill the required disciplines to eliminate....self-attachment” (Hattori 58). In Japan, Pure Land is a “far more popular Buddhist faith [than Zen]” (Eliot xiii), and Frank, with his struggle and repeated failure to make himself selfless, is no stranger to the Japanese. Even Morris sometimes strikes us as a familiar figure, who has the worldly desire of providing his family with a better life and constantly grieves over his misfortune.

The essential nature of Frank's struggle and moral development is “achieving his spiritual freedom” (Cheuse & Delbanco 86), freedom from his selfish desires, as Buddha and Saint Francis of Assisi teach. In Malamud's own words, “the battle, the true battle, is of the spirit” (“Jewishness” 138), which means it is the inner self that counts. Frank often reflects on himself, and we can see his internal struggle against selfish desires throughout the course of the novel. As Frank's comment, “I don't understand myself” (*Assistant* 37) seems to suggest, he is at first controlled by the selfish force beyond his control. This is because, in Buddhist terms, “we are born from and into the pervasive influence of karma and afflictive emotions” (Lama 34). Even his aspirations to be like Saint Francis, which are supposed to influence him to live selflessly like the saint himself, are actually making him too self-conscious and conceited. He tells Helen of his attraction to Saint Francis, but its purpose is to impress her, “to do something that would open her eyes to his true self” (*Assistant* 85), which “he had secretly considered valuable” (157). Frank is only contriving to be good in order to get Helen's attention, which is nothing but a selfish act.

His comment that “he had liked having the acid weight of it [his conscience] in him because it had made him feel he was at least that different from other people” (*Assistant* 141-42) sounds conceited too, since it could be interpreted that he is proud to feel superior to other people. Buddhism says that self-understanding is often deceiving:

To truly know oneself is a perilous matter, fraught with all kinds of temptations and obstacles. Foremost among them is our uncanny ability to delude ourselves, that through some extraordinary experience—ecstatic visions, paranormal powers, mystical clairvoyance—we achieve a kind of self-knowledge. In fact, Buddhism says that they only deepen our self-delusion. (Unno 154)

Unfortunately, this holds true of Frank.

The only way that we can truly know ourselves is to try to practice morality (Unno 155). By doing so, we notice our internal corruption, the selfishness of our motives, in spite of our external “good” deeds. Through his repeated failure to do good, especially such fatal mistakes as stealing from Morris, as a result of which he is kicked out of his store, and abusing Helen, Frank finds himself not so worthy as he has imagined he is: “The self he had secretly considered valuable was, for all he

could make of it, a dead rat” (*Assistant* 157). The sense of his unworthiness makes him humble: “He felt pity on the world for harbouring him” at Morris’s funeral (*Assistant* 205). As Lamar Nisly points out, “his entry into the religious [higher spiritual] sphere begins the day of Morris’s funeral” (Nisly 69). According to Buddhism, “When we acknowledge our karmic reality, our transformation takes place and the possibility of change occurs for the first time” (Unno 129). Frank is considered to be a good example of this; the mortifying realization of how far away he really is from his ideal of the disciplined person is the starting point for his moral way of living.

The remarks that Morris makes in his dialogue with Frank, “I suffer for you” and “You suffer for me” (113) sound Buddhistic too. Since everybody is suffering because of karma, Buddhism encourages us to be compassionate to others and when we feel pain, to imagine “that by accepting your pain you are using up the negative karma of everyone destined to feel such pain” (Lama 38). In fact, the Buddhism prevailing in Japan, called Mahayana (meaning “greater vehicle”), which has also widely spread among countries such as China, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia, has a strong social orientation and puts much importance on being compassionate. In fact, a professor of Japanese Buddhism was once asked to write a book on Buddhism by an editor at a United States publishing company, “who felt a strong need for the aspect of compassion in Buddhism to be more widely introduced to the general public” (Unno vii).

Malamud’s attitude toward suffering is similar to that of Buddhism in that people should be compassionate to each other when “the world suffers” (*Assistant* 10). However, his attitude is even more positive than that of Buddhism. That does not mean that Malamud thinks it is desirable, as he himself says, “Suffering? I’m not for it. The less we have, the better” (“Jewishness” 142). It means that if it is inevitable, it should be used for a positive purpose: “If you have the wool you might as well weave the rug” (“Jewishness” 143). In his novels such as *The Assistant*, *A New Life*, and *The Fixer*, suffering is used for the protagonist’s tremendous moral development, which could never have been possible without it.

Another factor that underlies the Japanese culture, Bushido, also seems to make Malamud’s works appealing to the Japanese. Bushido was influenced most by the teachings of Confucius as to its strictly ethical doctrines, with “his politico-ethical precepts. . . particularly well suited to the samurai, who formed the ruling class” (Nitobe 49). Bushido was also influenced by Mencius, whose teachings of benevolence were fully accepted as the qualifications necessary for the samurai (Nitobe 87), who could have misused their power without such teachings. Based upon the teachings of these two Chinese philosophers, Bushido, of all its virtues, comes to place top priority on rectitude, “the most cogent precept in the code of samurai” (Nitobe 59). Righteousness is very important to the samurai, and “nothing is more loathsome to him than underhand dealings and crooked undertakings” (Nitobe 59). However, it is hard to achieve, since it requires that one should act free of every calculation, at the risk of one’s own loss. A Japanese specialist on Bushido comments on this:

Rectitude rests on absolute values derived from the universal code of conscience, and is said to be an irrational idea. A commonly used phrase, "A samurai should not hesitate to die for justice" shows how absurd it can be from the rationalistic point of view. Rectitude is more important than life. (Misaki 213-14)

In Malamud's works, the attitude of Yakov Bok in *The Fixer*, who is determined to live honestly and for righteousness at the risk of his life, can be quite comparable to that of the samurai. *The Fixer* is the story of Yakov's development of spiritual insight into his responsibility as a member of the Jewish nation. He is accused of and imprisoned for a ritual murder that he did not commit, and although at first his perspective is not so broad, with his stubborn honesty, Yakov resists the Russian prosecuting attorney's cunning proposal of letting him go if he "sign[s] a confession saying [he] committed the murder unwillingly, under the influence of [his] religious cohorts" (203). Even when he is told that the only alternative would be imprisonment for the rest of his life, he never lets himself submit to dishonesty. Yakov is committed to being honest without any calculation for his own benefit, which is impressive enough, and such rectitude is exactly that one that the samurai should have.

However, through the course of the novel, Yakov goes beyond just being honest and achieves moral development; he learns to live for the sake of others in spite of his sufferings. By accepting his wife Raisl's child as his own (who is not biologically his) and despite his bitter feelings toward her for leaving him, Yakov commits a benevolent and magnificent act. Now a compassionate man, Yakov also develops a broader perspective of his role as a Jew. Feeling sympathy and respect for his father-in-law Shmuel, who has repeatedly advised him to believe in God for his own good, Yakov thinks that "If I must suffer let it be for something. Let it be for Shmuel" (245) and quickly discards the idea of committing suicide, which would be solely for his own benefit. Then, he finally reaches the point where he feels responsible for all the other Jews, regarding himself as a kind of representative. With a renewed determination, he decides to endure every pain to protect them from pogroms, selfless enough to think that "the purpose of freedom is to create it for others" (286). Righteously indignant at the injustice of the Czarist government, he never gives in, even for the desire to be released from pain. While the samurai's life provides "the means whereby to serve his master....and its ideal is set upon honour" (Nitobe 161), Yakov gets a broader, better perspective, which has a stronger social orientation than that of the samurai. That makes Yakov's decision even worthier and more dignified.

Roy Hobbs, the protagonist of *The Natural*, serves as an example of how not to behave from the viewpoint of Bushido. Although talented as a baseball player and, in that sense, in a privileged position just as the samurai is in the ruling class privileged to use his brute power, Roy is selfish and thinks of his own glory, not having any belief that would prevent him from misusing his talent. Just as Bump Bailey, the best hitter in the league, fails to inspire his teammates, Roy, at the crucial moment for the team, fails them by his selfish desire. He cannot keep himself from being dragged to Memo Paris, as a result of which he accepts a bribe to throw

the most important game for the team, and when he finds that he is wrong to have done so, it is too late, and he fails to help the team win the pennant. Giving priority to one's own benefit and succumbing to dishonesty are the most detestable acts in Bushido, and Malamud shows that to us by punishing Roy, making him unable to hit at the last crucial moment.

Not only do the novels, where protagonists attain spiritual growth such as *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*, appeal to Japanese readers, but some other Malamud works in which the protagonist fails can also find an audience. Probably this has something to do with the emotional sensitivity to things (called *mono no aware*) that is said to be one of the defining characteristics of the Japanese culture. This concept is based on Shinto, the native religion of Japan, an animistic belief in nature worship. A Japanese literary scholar in the Edo Period, Norinaga Motoori, developed it through his studies of *The Tale of Genji*, explaining that we are emotionally moved not only by nature, but also by various aspects of people's lives.

In *The Tale of Genji*, our deep feeling of sadness is evoked by the last years of its protagonist, Hikaru Genji. His life in his younger years overflows with prosperity; being handsome and fun loving, he attracts a lot of women, by one of whom he has a son who is to succeed the Emperor, and he himself is given an honorable title. His last years, on the other hand, are just miserable. When his beloved concubine dies, he breaks down. Panicked and upset, he becomes incapable of behaving decently in front of socially inferior people. Deeply despondent, he repents his sin, becomes a Buddhist monk, and dies only a year later. The story, with the decline of its protagonist, acutely appeals to our emotional sensitivity as is meant by the author, who "intended to make readers feel *mono no aware* as deeply as possible" (Matsumoto 47). Today, this concept is almost exclusively used to refer to our sad feelings.

Our emotional sensitivity, *mono no aware*, is evoked by Malamud's tragic stories, too. In fact, many Japanese people appreciate his bittersweet stories. It is often pointed out by scholars that the appeal of Malamud's works lie in their pathos. Shozo Kajima, the Japanese translator of *The Magic Barrel*, comments that among the stories set in New York in the collection, two stories "The Loan" and "The Bill" are the best ones, both of which depict the bleak, pathetic situation of people who have too much suffering of their own or are not affluent enough to save other impoverished people in spite of their wish to do so.

In the stories describing the protagonists' failures to achieve moral insight and development, the force of their circumstances, including the Holocaust, is so dominant that the characters are unable to fight it off. In the story "The Loan," Bessie is overwhelmed by her past misfortune and sufferings, including her Holocaust experience. She has narrowly fled from Warsaw to America because of the sacrifice of her brother's family. Lieb, her husband, when asked for a loan by the impoverished Kobotsky, who has failed to pay back another loan earlier, decides to grant it as an act of humanity, but Bessie, who cannot afford to think of anybody but herself because of her past afflictions, tells them her story of anguish, and both Lieb and

Kobotsky have no choice but to give up the idea of the loan.

The protagonist of the story "The Bill," Willy, does get an insight into his responsibility to Mr. and Mrs. Panessa, who run the delicatessen across from the apartment that he works in as the janitor, but it is only after it is too late. Willy is surprised when Mr. Panessa offers him credit, and although he and his wife are poor, he is so happy that he cannot stop buying from them until he notices that he does not have enough money to pay for what he has bought. Having an inspiration for his responsibility to pay back to Mr. and Mrs. Panessa, since "if you were really a human being you gave credit to somebody else and he gave credit to you" (*Stories* 250-51), he works hard, but is unable to get extra money with which to pay back his debt. After he gets a letter from Mrs. Panessa saying that her husband is sick and asking Willy to pay back just ten dollars, he goes out of his way to pawn his overcoat, and gleefully gets ten dollars for it, but by that time, Mr. Panessa is already dead.

The protagonist of "The German Refugee," Oskar Gassner, an educated, prominent Jewish journalist in Berlin, is a somewhat similar character in that he cannot fight off the power of his circumstances, which deals with the devastating influence of the Holocaust on people quite realistically. Oskar has escaped from Hitler's Germany to America, leaving behind his German wife, whose mother is an appalling anti-Semite. He will not believe his wife's loyalty to him that she declares in her letters, and makes her convert to Judaism as the last resort, as a result of which, she is arrested and shot to death. Recognizing that this distrust of his wife has virtually caused her death, Oskar, guilt-stricken, takes his own life.

Bessie might be blamed for being self-centered and Lieb for being too easily dissuaded. Willy might well be accused of being addicted to credit, and Oskar could be considered to be villainous for his distrust of his wife. We are, however, emotionally stirred by these stories, probably because all these characters are also victims of circumstances which Malamud portrays sympathetically. Motoori regards the essence of literature as the expression of the deep emotion (*mono no aware*) on the author's part: "man, by nature, cannot keep from talking to others about what he has deeply felt" (Matsumoto 48). He also says that literature is not necessarily morally uplifting. While *The Assistant* and *The Fixer* are, "The Loan," "The Bill," and "The German Refugee" are not. However, they are expressions of the deep emotions that Malamud must have felt toward the characters who cannot resist the outrageous force of their circumstances, and that is what makes it possible for the Japanese to be emotionally moved when they read these stories written by a Jewish writer.

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