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The Assistant Revisited: Suffering as a Proto-Postmodern Value in Bernard Malamud's Novel

SHINO Naoki

"America had become too complicated. One man counted for nothing"
——Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*

Introduction

According to *DSM-5* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*) compiled by the American Psychiatric Association, the diagnosis of depression relies on whether patients' symptoms meet specific objective criteria, requiring them to display a set of quantifiable symptoms designated by the manual.[1] While such objective criteria facilitate differential diagnosis, they are also problematic in that they abstract—or at least neglect—society and community. In a similar manner, taking as an example the condition of what he terms "reflex impotence" among British university students, the English critic Mark Fisher states that their mental health problems become wholly privatized, cut off from social systemic causes (*Capitalist* 21). Fisher's *diagnosis* of society—the privatization of pathology and its removal from the social sphere—is not entirely new. Yet, rethinking mental illness within such a sociopolitical framework resonates with the theme of this essay and thus is useful; it also problematizes a contemporary (or postmodern) society that tends to dismiss as valueless the suffering that may lead to, or result from such conditions.

The spread of capitalism has coincided with an accelerated dissemination of a Benjamin Franklin–style ethic of self-achievement—essentially, an American moral code. As F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The*

Great Gatsby (1925) thematized, American literature has long grappled with the American Dream and its often ruinous consequences. The American Dream here is, in effect, nothing other than an embodiment of a WASP-coded ideal. Such values, however, undermine the balance between a diverse immigrant city like New York as both a place of refuge and a site of economic success, ultimately compelling individuals to pursue success in isolation. The spirit of Emma Lazarus's "Mother of Exiles" in "The New Colossus" (1883)—inscribed on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"—has been decisively lost. This intensely capitalist, and indeed contemporary, condition finds its reflection in the thinking of Morris Bober, the grocery-store owner in Bernard Malamud's second novel, *The Assistant* (1957). With the inequality of 1950s Brooklyn in mind, Morris opines that "America had become too complicated. One man counted for nothing" (206). His sentiment here points both to the rise of capitalist society and to the process by which the individual is dissolved within it. Morris's perspective here indicates a sense of alienation from—and resistance to—the dominant intellectual climate of the era.

When considering Malamud scholarship, it is worth noting that in a classic study, Iska Alter analyzes materialism in *The Natural* and *The Assistant*, concluding that "In Malamud's America, the attempt to liberate others is to confine oneself" (26). While Alter's analysis insightfully situates Malamud within the American social context, it does not fully explore the inner nature of "to confine oneself": namely, the act of suffering. Turning to major studies published since the 2000s, critics such as Ruth R. Wisse and Ezra Cappell have attributed positive ethical value to the experience of suffering, a tendency that continues in the more recent collection *Bernard Malamud: A Centennial Tribute* (2016).[2] In that volume, Pilar Alonso interprets suffering in Malamud's fiction as "the proprieties sought for

in a human being and acts as a metaphorical builder" (123), thereby expanding its meaning. In any case, Alonso's argument, like those of her predecessors, ultimately ascribes affirmative value to the act of suffering. This essay also acknowledges this positive valuation of suffering. However, it departs from these previous studies in its approach to the revaluation of suffering: specifically, it examines the issue from a more contemporary perspective—at the intersection of postmodernism and capitalism, as theorized by Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher. In doing so, this study aims to illuminate how the collapse of community and social bonds, which Fisher diagnoses as a symptom of capitalist realism, parallels the disintegration of shared suffering represented in *The Assistant*. This shared suffering, I argue, functions as a proto-postmodern value that resists the privatization of emotional life under late capitalism.

Malamud's *The Assistant* depicts how the suffering of its characters is transformed into a resource that enables them to endure hardship. The background for this transformation lies in the fact that individual suffering was supported by the multiethnic community of Brooklyn at the time. This essay argues that the community's capacity to embrace those at risk of psychic breakdown situates *The Assistant* as a work on the eve of postmodernism and late capitalism.[3] To substantiate this thesis, the present essay proceeds as follows. Section I identifies Morris's grocery store—and the Brooklyn streets it symbolizes—as a space imbued with historicity; argues that this space reflects the nature of the immigrant and multiethnic society of postwar Brooklyn, forming a diachronic community sustained through suffering. The second section examines Frank's process of becoming the spiritual successor to Morris after his death, elucidating how he transforms into a subject who draws strength from suffering. Frank's Judaization in the novel thus symbolizes the creation of a new kind of "value": an ethical practice for the sake of others that exists outside the logic of the economic order.

1. The Store and the Street as a Diachronic/Historical Community

Most of the scenes in *The Assistant* develop in the Brooklyn grocery store run by the owner, Morris Bober. There, his wife Ida and daughter Helen live, and Frank Alpine, the assistant, helps the shopkeeper with his work. For the Bober family, the store is not only the base of their livelihood but also a space where conversations and social interactions take place. The nature of such a space stands in sharp contrast, for example, to the large chain stores of which Morris says, "The chain store kills the small man" (33); or to the ambitious young Jewish man Nat Pearl, whose aspiration is described as "to be somebody" (133). As Morris's words suggest, in this era, larger stores came to kill off small shop owners like him—as if a chain were strangling him. Thus, it is fitting that Morris likens his store to "a prison" (33). Unlike young Nat destined for economic success as a lawyer, Morris is bound to his shop, with the two characters placed in srtiking contrast. Then, if the commercialism of chain stores and Nat's elitism pursue immediacy, efficiency, and the production of economic surplus, conversely, Morris's grocery store can be seen as a site that generates a different kind of surplus: not financial, but a surplus of sociality—of conversation, relationships, and communal presence that lies *outside* the logic of the economic system.

Such conversations unfold between the store owner and his suppliers, customers, or clerks. As for the suppliers—many of them Jewish and seen by Frank as "born prisoners" (86)—we may note Al Marcus and Breitbart. Al, who is afflicted with cancer and looks "as if he had just lapped up cyanide," continues to work hard despite suggestions from fellow shopkeepers that he retire, saying, "This way let him [death] at least move his bony ass around and try and find me" (86–87). By personifying death as "somebody in a high hat" (87), Al transforms the suffering of cancer into a humorous narrative. Although he possesses "a comfortable pile" (86), and thus could live

without working, Al nonetheless keeps working. His actions are not driven by economic profit but by a desire to reframe his terminal condition—in short, Al invents a narrative uniquely his own. In this sense, Al's wording about personified death reflects his psychological reality: he plays with death, as if adopting the role of a trickster-like character. Suffering, then, is not meaningless for Al; it becomes a source of agency. As for Breitbart, who lives with his young son Hymie, he went bankrupt because of his brother's gambling debts. Carrying electric bulbs on his back as he goes peddling, he is depicted as one whose "hair had turned white and acted like an old man" (87). One day, burdened with suffering, Breitbart confesses his past to Morris, and they wept together (87–88). Breitbart takes on burdens not his own, most notably his brother's debt, which compels him into extreme poverty and physical exhaustion. As a peddler, the two boxes of bulbs cut into "his lean and itchy shoulders" (87–88). The description of Breitbart's hard work, "Every day, in his crooked shoes, he walked miles" (87) evokes religious figures such as a pilgrim or ascetic. As discussed in Section Ⅱ, Morris esteems the Law, that is, the Torah's principle as he interprets it—one suffers for the sake of others (123–25). In this context, Breitbart also emerges as a practitioner of the Law; thus, Morris empathizes with him so deeply that he is moved to tears. The act of suffering for others is a profoundly ethical act. When Frank observes "No wonder they [Jews] got on his nerves" (88), his remark not only betrays his pangs of conscience but foreshadows the possibility of his own transformation. Al and Breitbart could not have endured hardships if they had been completely isolated. Though "metropolitan New York Jews are in danger of sliding back into the shtetl of exile" (Baumgarten 387), it is precisely because there existed others who suffered with them that Al, Breitbart, and Morris could continue to live. In other words, suffering provides the basis for connection and community, a point that becomes crucial when we consider Brooklyn's multiethnic society in

the 1950s, especially in the context of the Jewish community.

Morris's interactions are not limited to Jews. For instance, he shows kindness to a Polish woman who repeatedly buys on credit (3–4) and even overlooks the theft committed by a young Greek immigrant, Mike Papadopolous (48), precisely because Morris understands their immigrant backgrounds. As Iska Alter puts it, a large part of the immigrant characters is depicted in a locus "closed, rigid, without opportunity or economic progress" (8). Particularly noteworthy is his attitude toward this Polish woman. Even while still recovering from the injury inflicted by a robbery, Morris disregards Ida's warning, and insists on opening the store early in the morning. For Morris, as his remark "For fifteen years she gets here her roll, so let her get" indicates (32), it is his responsibility to provide bread for a poor customer who has come for so many years. In other words, Morris's mission is not to generate economic surplus but rather to provide the basic means of living to the socially vulnerable. Ida refers to her as *die antisemitke*, with her words suggesting the woman does not conceal her anti-Semitic sentiments. Yet Morris remains unconcerned. In his view, "She had come with it [a sense of antisemitism] from the old country, a different kind of anti-Semitism from in America" (32); such prejudice is, at least for Morris, part of the hardship she carries as an immigrant. From this perspective, Morris's grocery store embodies the ethos of earlier immigrant communities, re-enacting on a small scale the spirit of hospitality and tolerance expressed in Lazarus's "The New Colossus" quoted in the Introduction; in an interview, Malamud himself states, "Morality begins with an awareness of the sanctity of one's life" (Stern 61). As a site of conversation, a store is thus essentially a place where one person's historical background is revealed to another. In this sense, Morris's store constitutes a diachronic community—that is, a milieu in which historical memory is shared and mediated through suffering.[4]

Morris's store nevertheless carries negative connotations. It is

described as "a long dark tunnel" (4) and "a prison" (33); Morris himself even thinks, "In a store you were entombed" (6). Toward the end of the narrative, gas leaks in his upstairs room, leaving him unconscious: "Morris lying on the floor, his underwear soaked, his face the color of a crooked beet, flecks of foam in the corners of his mouth" (178). In the end, this gas accident indirectly leads to his death, thereby realizing Morris's own word "entombed" in a literal sense. Such a relation between Morris and the store inevitably evokes for the reader the Holocaust. In other words, the process within the store—from being "imprisoned," through "gas," and finally to being "entombed"—calls forth the image of Jewish suffering in concentration camps during World War II. Precisely for this reason, as will be discussed in the second section, the store becomes for Frank a site of severe trial, what Edward A. Abramson calls "a training monastery" ("Zen" 69). It is in this place that the son of Italian immigrants—historically associated with the Axis powers during World War II —can enter into a spiritual exchange with Jewish victims of persecution. In this light, the store's negative valence is itself indispensable for the text to acquire historicity.

When we keep in mind that the store is a place where individual backgrounds are shared—diachronic and historical—the most noteworthy episode is Morris's account of his experiences in Russia, which he shares with Frank. In those years, pogroms frequently occurred in Russia, and immediately before he was drafted into the army, Morris's father urged him to escape to America.[5] One day, after letting his sergeant become intoxicated, young Morris attempted to flee:

> So on that day, Morris said, he told the sergeant, a peasant with red eyes and a bushy mustache which smelled of tobacco, that he wanted to buy some cigarettes in the town. He felt scared but was doing what his father advised him to do. . . .

> Then the soldier stopped to urinate into a ditch in the road. Morris pretended to wait but he walked on, every minute expecting a bullet to crash through his shoulders and leave him lying in the dirt, his future with the worms. But then, as if seized by his fate, he began to run. (82–83)

Morris recounts this episode to Frank with striking precision, as if reliving the moment of escape and the near-certainty of death: "expecting a bullet to crash through his shoulders and leave him lying in the dirt, his future with the worms." Shortly after his account of Russia, Morris warns Frank with words of regret: "A young man without family is free. Don't do what I did" (83). The crucial point here is not only the warning itself but the act of sharing his suffering as a means of building a communicative bond with his clerk. Moreover, in the cited passage above, young Morris practices "what his father advised him to do." Here, the father-son pair of Morris and his father parallels the relationship between Morris and Frank. This structural repetition implies that, within the overall narrative design, Frank is destined to enact the moral lessons he learns from Morris. Thus, Morris's recollection of his life in Russia and his conversation with Frank together foreshadow the formation of a quasi-father-son relation between the two. Frank's reaction, however, is telling: he feels "uncomfortable" and thinks, "His pity leaks out of his pants" (83). Frank's unease does not negate Morris's gestures; rather, it demonstrates that the act of sharing suffering is never simple; it unsettles as much as it connects.[6] What becomes clear in their conversation is that, by narrating his own pain, Morris forges a bridge to Frank, and in so doing transforms a personal ordeal into part of a larger historical memory.[7] Unlike Ezra Cappell, who describes *The Assistant* as "ahistorical" (42), Morris's act of storytelling thus affirms the store as a site where individual histories are woven into history itself, a diachronic community sustained through suffering.[8]

As discussed above, the store in *The Assistant* functions diachronically or in a historical mode, as a community where characters can share their suffering. While such historicity reflects the immigrant society of New York at the time, it also stands in sharp contrast to the values of the postmodern age that Jameson characterizes as "a crisis in historicity" (*Postmodernism* 22). In postmodern culture, the past is consumed as mere surface styles or fragmented images, whereas in Morris's store, the characters share the lived historical backgrounds of others. In this sense, the store embodies a pre-postmodern value, one in which historicity is still tenuously sustained.

2. From Assistant to Owner; or, Revaluing Suffering

What *The Assistant* thematically depicts is the process through which the Italian American clerk Frank becomes "Jewish." Frank's "Judaization" carries a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to Frank's literal conversion to Judaism; on the other, it signifies his inheritance of the ethical sensibility embodied by Morris, the owner of the grocery store. Yet Frank's becoming Jewish should also be understood as a metaphorical act—a symbolic reconstruction of identity. Put differently, Frank does not merely adopt a set of religious practices or moral codes; he reconstitutes the very foundation of his being. As Daniel Walden observes, "The grocery store is his [Frank's] prison, but it is symbolically the locus of his regeneration" ("*Menschen*" 170). The decisive moment in this transformation lies in Frank's re-evaluation of suffering: he comes to see it not merely as something to be avoided but as an experience to be recognized and shared. The second section first examines Morris's characterization within the novel, then analyzes how Frank decodes his ethical sensibility and installs a new one within himself. Finally, this essay considers how Frank's newly acquired ethos—cultivated in the local space of the Brooklyn grocery store—may be extended into broader

ethical relations with others in postwar American society.

As discussed in the first section, Morris exhibits a compassionate attitude toward others—particularly those who, within the immigrant community of Brooklyn in the 1950s, suffer social and economic hardship. For example, the early narration, "The world suffers. *He* felt every schmerz" (7; *sic*), succinctly captures Morris's empathetic disposition. After his death, the rabbi's eulogy, though somewhat exaggerated, nonetheless conveys the core of the shopkeeper's character: "And for this reason that he worked so hard and bitter, in his house, on his table, was always something to eat. So besides honest he was a good provider" (229). Shaped by the context of the Jewish funeral, the rabbi's emphasis falls on Morris's honesty and diligence primarily as virtues directed toward his family and his fellow Jews. In practice, however, these virtues transcend ethnic boundaries. Particularly noteworthy is the rabbi's phrase "a good provider." Morris certainly worked hard to support his family, but his labor at the store was also directed toward the socially and economically vulnerable—the poor Polish woman and others who struggle to live. In this broader, more universal sense, Morris was indeed "a good provider" to his community. Considering these facts, we may say that Morris, in his daily life, truly embodies what it means to feel "*every* schmerz." What defines Morris's compassion is precisely his ability to empathize through suffering—to render the pain of others intelligible within his own moral framework. Following Victoria Aarons's remarks, "Malamud's characters are given the opportunity for acts of compassion, acts that connect the characters in a uniquely human enterprise" (101). And it is for this reason, and not merely because of his Jewish identity, that Frank ultimately inherits his ethos.

The turning point that enables Frank to inherit Morris's ethical disposition takes place in their mid-narrative dialogue (123–25). After Morris explains, "The important thing is the Torah. This is the Law—a Jew must believe in the Law," the most crucial exchange

unfolds as follows:

> "What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said.
> "I suffer for you," Morris said calmly.
> Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. "What do you mean?"
> "I mean you suffer for me."
> The clerk let it go at that.
> "If a Jew forgets the Law," Morris ended, "he is not a good Jew, and not a good man." (125)

What Morris articulates here is a Jewish relation that not only signifies the communal bonds mediated by suffering, as discussed in the previous section, but also foregrounds the reciprocal dynamic whereby one's suffering evokes that of another. The statement "I suffer for you" implies a hypothetical and anticipatory act of bearing the pain of the other. In other words, if "I suffer for you" naturally leads to "you suffer for me," it presupposes that the other will also suffer on one's behalf. Such an assumption, in turn, signifies a kind of *unconditional* trust. As Alphonso Lingis notes, "Trust, which is as compelling as belief, is not produced by knowledge. In trust one adheres to something one sees only partially or unclearly or understands only vaguely or ambiguously" (*Trust* 64).[9] Like Lingis, the Morrisian—or Malamudian—proposition of "I suffer for you" exists beyond the realm of given logic or pre-established conditions. Moreover, through Morris's deliberately ambiguous mode of speech, the Jewish code of the Torah operates in a way that transcends ethnic boundaries, thus assuming a kind of universality. Also significant here are "His mouth ached" and the description that immediately follows, "His brow was covered with sweat" (125), indicating that Morris's words penetrate Frank's interior, eliciting not merely a rational but a bodily and affective response.[10] In this sense, the scene

provides Frank with a decisive moment of transformation—the opening of a pathway toward becoming a subject who lives for the other. Within the context of this essay, such a moment carries a dual valence: the Morris–Frank dialogue not only dismantles Frank's American moral code rooted in the dream of economic success but also restores within him an ethical disposition oriented toward the other.[11] Through Frank's inner transformation, Malamud foregrounds "the importance of moral responsibility and human goodness over materialism" as Abramson puts it (*Revisited* 36).

The sins Frank commits in this novel can be broadly divided into three categories: first, the robbery of Morris's grocery store; second, pilfering money from the cash register after he begins working there; and third, the quasi-coercive sexual act with Helen. At first, Frank sought to confess these transgressions in the hope of being forgiven and absolved. Indeed, Frank wavers at great length over whether to confess his sin (89–93). In this scene, Frank's narration repeatedly shows his impulse toward "confession": "the confession had to come first" (89); "he would someday confess it all" (91); and "he would someday soon have a dirtier past to reveal" (93). While this intense desire for confession reflects Frank's Catholic background, the act of confessing can easily turn into a means of averting one's own culpability.[12] Frank, however, comes to inherit Morris's sense of "the Law." Already struggling within the moral space of the grocery, he thus does not confess—precisely because he has entered the process of acquiring the Law.

In the latter half of the novel, Frank turns away from confession and begins to confront his guilt through practice—above all, by contributing to Morris's store and supporting his family. In effect, each of Frank's transgressions finds a form of reparation: the money he stole is answered by his financial support, his assault on Helen by his dedication to her education, and the robbery of the store by his labor to preserve the very place he once sought to jeopardize. After

Morris's death, when Frank offers to help the family and support Helen's college education, he explains to Helen his motivation: "In your father's name. If not for you, then for him" (239). As this dialogue makes clear, Frank is no longer dependent on external frameworks such as social approval or economic success. Rather, he acts autonomously and responsibly for the sake of others. His labor is not teleologically directed toward profit or reward; instead, even when burdened by suffering, he turns it into a *resource*, choosing to live for the other without preoccupation with the outcome. In this sense, Frank, the Italian American clerk, has fully embraced the ethics embodied by the Jewish grocer Morris, thereafter undergoing "the experience of redemption through and not from suffering" (Alonso 133–34).

Frank's entry into a community sustained by the mutual support of suffering subjects culminates in the novel's closing line: "After Passover he became a Jew" (246). On one level, the phrase indicates the fact that Frank likely marries Helen and inherits the store, thereby becoming Jewish in an ethnic and religious sense. More importantly, however, Frank also becomes Jewish in an ethical sense. In short, Frank has transformed himself into a Morris-like "I suffer for you" subject. Indeed, Frank's kindness toward the Polish woman who comes for "her three-cent roll" (244–45) parallels Morris's earlier gestures (3). Within the overall narrative structure, this correspondence between the two confirms the ethical transformation of Frank's subjectivity. Malamud frequently portrays his Jewish characters with layered meanings, and in *The Assistant* the symbolic weight of Jewishness is borne by the figures of Morris and Frank. Their "Jewishness" comes to signify an ethics that resists the dominant values of capitalist society, generating an alternative form of value *outside* the economic order. This revaluation of suffering, and the creation of a community in which suffering subjects sustain one another, illuminates the distinctive significance of Malamud's Jewish

characters: they embody ethics that both critique capitalism and affirm the possibility of communal solidarity.

Conclusion

In *The Assistant*, Malamud depicts the importance of an individual's capacity to enact ethics within society. This concern reaches its fullest expression in *The Fixer* (1966), where the confrontation between the individual and systemic injustice is narrated with even greater intensity. The ethics depicted in *The Assistant* and *The Fixer* may sometimes seem overly directed toward the other. However, this emphasis should be understood as integral to Malamud's project as a Jewish American writer. By representing the Jew as an executor of ethics, Malamud provides a symbolic figure whose significance extends beyond its immediate ethnic or religious framework. This act of representation remains suggestive, as it has rendered Malamud's work an enduring ethical point of reference for contemporary Jewish American writers.[13] In short, it is a novel that generates insights when placed within a contemporary framework. This essay thus has sought to contribute to such a rereading by situating *The Assistant* on "the eve" of postmodern capitalist society.[14]

Notes

This study was supported by JSPS KAKENHI grant number 25K12952.

1. For instance, *DSM-5* prescribes that the patient must exhibit at least one of the following: A1–"Depressed mood," or A2–"Loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities." The diagnostic criteria for depression referenced here are quoted from a summary table found on *the NCBI Bookshelf* rather than drawn directly from *DSM-5*.
2. For more details, see Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Language and Culture* (2000) and Cappell's *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction* (2007), respectively.
3. The argument of this essay owes much to Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. As discussed later, the sentence here is especially shaped with reference to

his pathbreaking analysis of our contemporary world, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

4. While Morris's store may be understood as diachronic and historical, it should be recalled that in postmodern culture, historicity is always marked by its absence. Taking cinema as his example Jameson observes: "Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (*Postmodernism* 21).
5. A pogrom is an organized outbreak of violence, looting, or massacre directed against a minority group, most often Jews in the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
6. Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, Malamud's narrative technique in *The Assistant*—a structure that allows the painful history to permeate the text—resonates, though in a somewhat different context, with Fredric Jameson's well-known remark: "Conceived in this sense, history is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention" (*Political* 88).
7. The process by which suffering creates a channel for others may be considered as an essential aspect of a community. As Alphonso Lingis argues, "Community forms when one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one. One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one's forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice" (*Community 12*). His account approximates the dynamics of Morris's store.
8. Fisher's view on mental illness also reverberates with my discussion here: "The current ruling ontology denies any possibility of a social causation of mental illness. The chemico-biologization of mental illness is of course strictly commensurate with its depoliticization. Considering mental illness an individual chemico-biological problem has enormous benefits for capitalism" (37).
9. Morris's ethical vision here resembles less that of Martin Buber—whose emphasis lies in dialogical reciprocity—than that of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas identifies ethics with the encounter with the "face"—*visage* in the original French—of the Other, as calling one to infinite responsibility. For further discussion, see *Totality and Infinity* (1979).
10. Pre-linguistic responses, frequently portrayed through Frank and other

characters in *The Assistant*, can be analyzed from an affect-theoretical perspective. For further discussion, see Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and Paul Hurh's *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville* (2015).

11. Jeffrey Helterman offers illuminating remarks on Frank's recovery of his inner ethics: "Each act of suffering for Bober and the rest of mankind strips away Frank's worldliness so that his act of becoming a Jew is, in St. Francis's terms, true *imitatio Christi*" (50). While Frank is clearly associated with St. Francis, it may not be accidental that Morris's figure evokes, even if not explicitly, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who is well known for his exploration of the "philosophy of dialogue" in *I and Thou* (1958).
12. Frank's urge to confess his sins may be linked to his Italian Catholic background. In the Catholic tradition, the practice of confessing one's sins—commonly known as confession—plays a central role.
13. Concerning its ethical value, Jonathan Safran Foer, one of the representative third-generation Jewish American writers of the Holocaust, states as follows: "While *The Fixer* isn't a book *about morality*, it is *a moral book*. That is, rather than offering a flimsy detective, it presents the reader with a forceful question: Why aren't you doing anything?" ("Introduction" xi ; *sic*)
14. If added, in light of ongoing violence in contexts such as Israel and Gaza, *The Assistant* should be reread as a text that probes "what it might mean to live ethically as a Jew."

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歌うという抵抗
——*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* における黒人女性の声の力 ——

西岡　聖子

序論

1920 年代のアメリカにおいて、ブルースは黒人たちが痛みや怒りを「声」に変え、抑圧に抗うための重要な表現手段であった。その先駆者として「ブルースの母」と称されたのが、実在の黒人女性歌手マ・レイニー（Ma Rainey）である。オーガスト・ウィルソン（August Wilson）の戯曲 *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* は、1927 年のシカゴを舞台に、マ・レイニーのレコーディング風景を通じて、近代化するアメリカ社会における黒人の葛藤を描いた作品である。その主題として、白人の支配的構造のもとで異なる立場にある黒人男性たち — 従順な者、怒れる者、理想を語る者 — の間にある分断や緊張を主軸にしつつ、そこに立ち現れる黒人女性の姿を通して、ジェンダー的視点も浮かび上がらせている。

当時の音楽業界は、南部から北部への黒人の大移動（Great Migration）の真っ只中にあり、北部でも根強い人種差別が続く一方で、南部ではジム・クロウ法（Jim Crow laws）による制度的な隔離と暴力が黒人の日常を苦しめていた。そうした社会状況の中、南部の黒人コミュニティでは、日々の辛苦を歌に込めたブルースが生まれ、それが人々の「声」として拡がっていった。そしてこの音楽はレコード産業の発展により、北部や他州へと広がり、多くの南部出身ブルース・ミュージシャンの音源が商品化されていったのである。

本論文では、このような歴史的、文化的背景を踏まえつつ、戯曲においてはあくまで一登場人物として描かれるマ・レイニーに焦点を当てる。ア

ンジェラ・デイヴィス（Angela Davis）の *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* を主要な理論的手がかりとしながら、マ・レイニーがブルースを通じていかに「抵抗」と「尊厳」の声を確立したのかを考察する。同時に、黒人女性が黒人男性たちのあいだで「リーダー」として存在することの困難さや、黒人コミュニティ内部におけるジェンダー的緊張関係にも注目し、ウィルソンの戯曲におけるマ・レイニーの位置づけとその意義を再評価していく。

1. 抑圧に抗するブルースと黒人女性の声

1920 年代、ブルース音楽がレコードとして流通し始めた時代に、マ・レイニーは「ブルースの母」と称される実在の黒人女性シンガーとしてその先駆けを担った。南部のテント・ショーで圧倒的な人気を誇り、やがて白人が支配する音楽産業でも成功を収めた彼女は、黒人女性の自立と声を象徴する存在として描かれる。

こうしたマ・レイニーの芸術的実践を理論的に支えるのが、アンジェラ・デイヴィスによる女性ブルースの新たな位置付けである。デイヴィスは、従来のブルース研究が抗議の表現を男性中心的で公的な言説に限定してきたことを批判し、女性ブルースにはジェンダー的抑圧への応答としての想像力（blues imagination）が内在していると主張する。

> I argue that the inflexibility with which [blues scholars] define both what constitutes protest and what constitutes acquiescence prevents them from looking more deeply at the blues imagination. […] If there is implicit in the blues a "feminist" critique of society, linked to this is a broader critique of repressive civilisation. (94)

つまり、女性ブルースは長らく周縁化されてきたが、実際には性的支配や

家庭内暴力といった構造的なジェンダーの不平等に対する批判を内包しており、黒人女性たちは自身の欲望や怒り、拒絶、ユーモアを通じて、こうした抑圧に応答してきたのである。デイヴィスの言う「ブルースの想像力」とは、こうした女性たちの感情と経験を社会批判へと昇華させる詩的な力を意味している。この視点は、マ・レイニーが音楽を通じて声を獲得し、自らの存在を主張しようとする姿を読み解く上でも示唆に富んでいる。

しかしながら、劇中で描かれるマ・レイニーの登場場面（47）は、当時のアメリカ社会に根付く人種差別と性差別の構造を如実に反映している。たとえば警官が “We don’t know whose car he was driving”（49）と語る場面では、黒人女性であるマ・レイニーが自ら所有する車に乗っていたにもかかわらず、その正当性を疑われる。さらには、“We got her charged with assault and battery”（49）と、一方的に暴行容疑をかけられる展開は、まさにレイシャル・プロファイリング（racial profiling）— 人種的偏見に基づき、黒人を不当に犯罪者と見なす差別的な警察の捜査手法 — の典型例である。さらに、警官が “The cabbie gets out to try and explain the situation to her … and she knocks him down”（50）と報告する一方で、マ・レイニー自身 は “Said he wasn’t gonna haul no colored folks … if you want to know the truth of it”（51）と述べており、これはタクシー運転手による人種差別的な乗車拒否であったことを示している。このような描写からは、1920 年代の北部都市シカゴにおいてさえ、黒人が日常的に直面していた構造的差別が根深く存在していたことが浮かび上がる。また、白人マネージャーのアーヴィン（Irvin）がマ・レイニーを自宅のパーティーに招いて歌わせた逸話は、彼女を「声」だけの存在として利用する白人社会の視線を象徴している。実際、マ・レイニー自身も “All they want is my voice”（79）と言い切るように、彼女は、黒人女性としての身体性や人間的主体性を無視し、ただの「商品化された声」として扱おうとする白人中心社会の搾取的

構造に対して強い抵抗の意思を示している。

そしてその抵抗は、ようやく始まったレコーディングにおいて、彼女が二つの具体的な要求を突きつけることに現れている。ひとつはレコーディング前にコーラを飲むという要求であり、もうひとつは言語障害をもつ甥のシルヴェスター（Sylvester）を前説に採用するという提案である。スポーツ選手が試合前にルーティンとして特定の動作を行い、精神の安定や集中力を高めるように、彼女にとってコーラは、レコーディングという重要な場面に臨む際の儀式のようなものであったと考えられる。同時にそれは、白人が支配するレコード業界の中で、黒人女性として自身の芸術空間を守り抜くための「支配権の宣言」でもあった。彼女の “I says what the matter is with the band. I say who can and can't do what.”（77）という台詞が象徴するように、彼女は自らの表現の場において誰が何を行うかを自ら指図する主導権を一切手放そうとはしない。コーラを求めるという一見些細な要求には、自らの行動や状況を他者に委ねないという強い意志が込められており、その決定権の上にこそ彼女の芸術表現は成立している。マ・レイニーの音楽は、消費される対象としてではなく、自らの意思で創造される表現行為であり、その中心にいる主体として彼女が存在するのである。

マ・レイニーが、吃音のある甥シルヴェスターをレコーディング冒頭の前説に起用する場面には、「誰が語る資格をもつのか」「どのような声が公共の場で認められるのか」という構造への静かな問いかけが込められている。彼はうまく話せず録音が何度も中断されるが、彼女は “I know he stutters. Don't you think I know he stutters. This is what's gonna help him.”（78）と断言し、決して彼を降ろそうとしない。その姿勢には、効率や完成度よりも、甥の成長と尊厳を優先する意志が表れている。

物語全体において、「声」はきわめて強い象徴性を持つ。マ・レイニー自身が、その力強いブルースの歌声によって白人支配層やレコード会社と渡り合い、自らの地位と尊厳を築いてきたことからも明らかである。その

彼女が、あえて「障害をもつ声＝不完全な声」を曲の冒頭に置いたことには、特別な意味がある。それは、声がうまく出せない者にこそ語る場を与え、その声が響いた時、周囲の無理解や偏見すら一時的にでも超えられるという希望の提示である。マ・レイニーの行為は、自身が獲得した声の力を「まだ語れぬ者」のために用いようとするものであり、黒人女性が共同体の未来を見据え、声を育てる存在であることの証でもある。

一方で、本作を原作として Netflix で映画化された作品において、主演女優ヴィオラ・デイヴィス（Viola Davis）が語るように、マ・レイニーは “mass of contradictions”（矛盾の塊）でもあった。彼女は「日曜には教会に行き、月曜には乱交パーティに参加し、バーでは男を殴り倒す。そして彼女はバイセクシャルだった」と述べるように、当時の社会規範を意図的に逸脱するような、タブーの境界に生きる人物であった（*OWN Spotlight*）。こうした逸脱的な生き方ゆえに、彼女はしばしば周囲から「矛盾した存在」として誤解され、特にバイセクシャリティや暴力的側面といった要素が過度に強調されることで、彼女の芸術的、政治的実践が見落とされることもあった。しかし、その矛盾こそが、沈黙を強いられきた黒人女性が、自らの声を発するために選び取った戦略でもあった点は見逃せない。社会から一貫性や道徳性といった正しさを求められる黒人女性にとって、マ・レイニーのような存在は、その枠組みを破って語ることを可能にした先駆者である。ヴィオラ・デイヴィスが “mass of contradictions” と評した背景には、当時の黒人女性に対して社会が課していた道徳規範に彼女が収まり切らなかったことへの戸惑いや拒絶も含まれている。その生き方は、「黒人女性として表現の自由を手にするには、社会的な道徳規範を突き破る必要があった」という歴史的現実とも重なる。この点について、デイヴィスも “Blues women were expected to deviate from the norms defining orthodox female behavior, which is hey they were revered by both men and women in black working-class communities.”（38）と述べている。つまり、マ・レイニーの

“矛盾”とは、誰も経験したことのない「黒人女性ブルースシンガー」という前例なき道を切り拓くために必要だった、ラディカルな生き様であり、自己確立のための選択でもあった。彼女の声は誤解や偏見にさらされながらも、「語ることを許されなかった者たち」の先頭に立ち、その沈黙を破ったのである。

彼女の “Black Bottom” 以外の代表曲のひとつ “Prove It On Me Blues” の歌詞：“They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me / Sure got to prove it on me”（Davis, 238）で語られることとは、黙らされない姿勢や女性ブルース歌手としての社会の眼への挑戦でもあり、そのすべてが、「黒人女性が抑圧に沈黙しない」というメッセージに満ちている。同曲についてデイヴィスは、“ . . . suggests how the iconoclastic blues women of the twenties were pioneers for later historical developments” と述べ、さらに “They did not allow themselves to be enshrined by the silence imposed by mainstream society.”（40）と指摘する。つまりこの歌は、周縁化されつつも声を上げ続けた女性たちの、能動的で反抗的な生のあり方を象徴しているのである。

2. 黒人女性が黒人男性を率いる困難

マ・レイニー率いるブルース・バンドは、黒人女性ヴォーカルと 4 人の黒人男性バックバンドという構成である。バンドのリーダーであるカトラー（Cutler）は、バンドリーダーだがマ・レイニーには逆らわない。だが彼自身は「音楽をやる喜び」よりも、与えられた秩序を守ることに満足しており、マ・レイニーの表現への理解や共鳴は薄く、レヴィーから強く押されればレヴィーのバージョンで演奏する（59）。スロードラッグ（Slow Drag）の語りは多くないが、マ・レイニーに対して拒絶も共感も示さず、むしろ淡々と仕事をこなしているように映る。しかし機材トラブルがあり録音がされてなかった時、メンバーがそれぞれの苛立ちを述べるが、スロードラッグは “Don't make me no difference if she leave or not. I was kinda

hoping she would leave.”（88）とマ・レイニーと距離を取る口ぶりで、結局は彼はマ・レイニーとは異なるスペースにいることを思い知らされる。新入りのレヴィー（Levee）は、攻撃的で反抗的、若く野心的で、マ・レイニーの支配に屈したくない。彼は、マ・レイニーの「女性による支配」への激しい拒否を示す。自らの力で音楽的に成功しようとし、彼女の「声の権威」に苛立つ。レヴィーの言う “I’m gonna get my own band. I’m gonna play my music, not hers. [...] I ain’t playing Ma’s music no more.”（59）は、黒人男性が黒人女性に支配されることへの潜在的な屈辱と反抗の象徴である。トレド（Toledo）は、メンバーの中でも最も知的で理性的な人物であり、黒人社会の歴史的自己認識を語る存在として描かれている。マ・レイニーが警察とのトラブルで困窮していた際に最初に声をかけたのがトレドであったことからも、彼が信頼と尊敬を得ていることは明らかである。

しかし、最終的にトレドはレヴィー（Levee）によって殺される。この悲劇は、黒人共同体内部における抑圧の再生産として読むことができる。フランツ・ファノン（Franz Fanon）は *The Wretched of the Earth* の中で、植民地での暴力が被支配者の身体と精神の奥深くに沈澱し、やがてそれが共同体内部で再び暴力として噴出する過程を描いている。ファノンは次のように述べる。

The colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people. This is the period when black turns on black, and police officers and magistrates don’t know which way to turn when faced with the surprising surge of North African criminality.(15)

ファノンによれば、外部の支配者に向けられない怒りと屈辱は、抑圧された者自身の内部で鬱積し、同胞への敵意や暴力として現れる。レヴィーの行動はまさにこの構造を体現している。彼の激しい怒りと絶望は、白人

社会から受けた侮辱と搾取に根ざしているにもかかわらず、そのエネルギーは同胞であるトレドへと向かう。ここに、植民地的支配の構造が非抑圧者の心身にまで浸透し、連帯を破壊するメカニズムがしめされているのである。

同様の現象は、ルイス・E・ロマックス（Louis E. Lomax）の *The Negro Revolt* におけるアメリカ黒人社会においても観察されている。

> われわれは自己の領土にとじこもって生きた。だがそれはわれわれが自ら選んだ領土ではなかった。そして、われわれの種族を引き裂く大きな裂け目とは、雑多な前歴や考えをもつものたちが、白人のすてて行った貧民窟その他の地域の住人として生きて行かねばならなかったことから生じた直接的な結果であった。その結果、ニグロ社会はやっかいごとだらけの場と化した。人殺しや暴力沙汰がおこった。しかしながら、その多く — 私にいわせれば、ほとんど全部 — はニグロ同士のいがみ合いからおこったものであった。… そのほとんどがアメリカ黒人という境遇がもたらした、まぎれもない挫折感、絶望感によるものであった。（62）

この記述が示すのは、外部の抑圧構造が内部化されることで、共同体内部に分裂と暴力が再生産されるという事実である。ファノンが植民地社会において理論化した心理構造が、ロマックスの描くアメリカ黒人社会の現実にも明確に反復しているのである。

このように、トレドの死は黒人共同体内部における連帯の崩壊を象徴しており、その背景には人種的構造だけでなく、ジェンダー的構造も深く根ざしている。本作では特に、バンド内の対立がマ・レイニーの「女性」という属性に起因していることが明瞭である。彼女が女性であるという事実そのものが男性たちのプライドを刺激し、特に黒人男性にとっては、黒人女性に主導権を握られることが、心理的な葛藤や抵抗感を引き起こす要因

となっている。

このようなジェンダーをめぐる緊張は、表面的には音楽的意見の不一致として現れるが、やがて悲劇的な結末へとつながっていく。作品中で明示的に語られることはないものの、黒人社会内部におけるジェンダーと権力の不均衡という見過ごせない主題が、明確に浮かび上がっている。

マ・レイニーは、白人のレコード会社に対しても、男性バンドメンバーに対しても、明確な指示と支配力をもって行動する。このような姿勢は黒人女性としては異例であり、彼女の存在は「黒人男性が唯一持っていたはずの権威」すら揺るがすものとして描かれている。特に、レヴィーのように野心を抱きながらも、白人にもマ・レイニーにも認められない黒人男性にとって、彼女の存在は屈辱というよりも、深い焦燥や反発の対象となり得る。つまり、マ・レイニーのリーダーシップは、白人による外的な人種的抑圧だけでなく、黒人男性からの内的なジェンダー的抵抗にも直面している。彼女は「抑圧される者」であると同時に、「支配する者」としても恐れられており、その存在は複雑かつ多層的な権力構造の交差点に立たされている。

この構造的矛盾は、現代アメリカ社会においても色濃く残っている。2024 年の米大統領選に向けた報道では、黒人女性であるカマラ・ハリス（Kamala Harris）元副大統領が黒人男性層から十分な支持を得られていないという指摘があった。実際、バラク・オバマ（Barack Obama）元大統領は、「一部の黒人男性は、女性が権力を握ることに慣れていない」（Business Insider）と述べており、これは黒人女性リーダーの存在が依然として受け入れがたいものであることを示している。加えて、ハリス候補への支持率の低さの背景には「性差別の要素が根強く残っている」ことが示唆されており、「女性が上に立つことへの心理的抵抗」が一部の男性有権者の態度に影響しているとされている（AP News）。このように、黒人女性が「語る存在」として表舞台に立とうとするたびに、内外から異なる力によって

引き戻される構造は、マ・レイニーの表象とも重なる。

また、芸術表現の現場において、カリプソの女王とうたわれた、トリニダード・トバゴ出身のカリプソ・ローズ（Calypso Rose）が “I had to fight double” と語ったように、黒人女性であること、音楽業界で「女王」となること、そして先駆者としての立場は、しばしば多重の困難を伴うものであった。マ・レイニーとカリプソ・ローズは、時代や音楽ジャンルは異なるものの、ともに構造的抑圧の只中に身を置きながら道を切り開いてきた存在である。女性が「声を持つ」ことは、それがポジティブに受け止められる場合もあるが、ときに周囲の不理解や抵抗と衝突することも少なくない。特に音楽業界においてリーダーシップを発揮する女性にとって、その困難は一層大きなものとなる。女性アーティストが先駆者として「声を持つ」過程において、歴史的に特有の摩擦と抵抗が存在してきたことは、見過ごすべきではない。

結論

上記の二つの論点の統合として、マ・レイニーの存在は、白人社会によって商品化される一方で、黒人男性の側からも脅威として扱われるという矛盾の中にあった。音楽をめぐる衝突の背後には、「誰が語り、誰が制御するか」をめぐる根深い緊張がある。マ・レイニーはそこに立ち向かい、自らのやり方で場を仕切り、言葉を選び、沈黙せず応答した。

彼女のふるまいが「厄介な女」と見なされるのは、社会の側に不自由な規範があるからであり、だからこそ彼女のブルースは意味を持つ。甥シルヴェスターのつかえながらの語りに耳を傾け、そこに力を見出したこともまた、「声を得る」という行為への深い理解の表れだった。

今もなお、語ることをためらわせる空気は多くの場所に存在する。マ・レイニーやカリプソ・ローズのように、黙ることを選ばなかった女性たちの足跡は、歌い続けることの重みと希望の両方を私たちに教えている。

本作 *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* は、黒人男性バンドとして黒人男性の視点、白人男性による黒人への支配と差別が主たるテーマではあるが、黒人女性が先駆者として闘っている様を描き、黒人女性の主体的表現とその代償を描いた重要な作品である。声を上げる女性が今なお批判されやすい社会において、マ・レイニーやカリプソ・ローズのような女性たちの「声の闘争」は継続中である。

マの「声」は音楽産業で消費される娯楽ではなく、黒人女性としての存在証明であり、音楽の場を交渉と抵抗の空間に変える力を持っていた。アンジェラ・デイヴィスが述べたように、マ・レイニーのブルースは、黒人女性が性や労働、暴力について自らの語りで主導権を握る数少ない機会であり、そこにおいて彼女は「歌う主体」であると同時に、「社会と闘う政治的存在」でもあった。彼女の姿勢には、弱者へのまなざしと、語る力の継承が見られる。その声は、しばしば誤解や偏見にさらされながらも、「語ることを許されなかった者たち」の歴史を代弁するものである。

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