



TRACING THE STRUGGLES OF A MALAMUDIAN JEWISH HERO THROUGH HIS NOVEL THE ASSISTANT

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ABSTRACT: The advent of huge Jewish migratory population in the American continent opened doors for many new domains in the modern literature. The discussion and books on Jewish life and people is very much an essence of American Literature. With writers like Malamud, Bellow, Roth, etc. multiple themes related to the lives of Jews in America have been brought to light. Malamud is a prolific writer whose contribution to Jewish-American literature has been gigantic. Malamud has always tried to portray what the generations of Jewish masses have been feeling and going through in a country which is very different from their ancestral land, but a country which allowed them to assimilate in its culture. The problems of assimilation, trauma of the worst genocide in the many generations are some common areas of discussions under the domain. This paper discusses the concept of a Jewish hero, his losses and his struggles have been traced through the protagonist Frank of the novel *The Assistant*. Malamud's idea of a story may be unique but the feelings and apprehensions of Frank is common to many Jewish people who can relate to Frank. His quest for identity is the main theme of the novel where he just wants to be feel good by being good and doing good. The concept of complex Jewish American identity and the inner struggles of a Jewish common man have been discussed by Malamud through his protagonist.

KEYWORDS: Jewish, Assimilate, Genocide, Identity, Struggle

I. INTRODUCTION:

The dominant and pervasive theme in modern literature is the annihilation or loss of self under the pressure of a nihilistic world. Disillusioned with the chaotic conditions around us, the present-day writer projects the modern culture as hostile to mankind. It isolates man, forces him to recoil into himself, and reduces him to nothingness. It erodes his faith in his spiritual self and fills him with doubt and despair. The contemporary protagonist turns out to be a pathetic being struggling to preserve his individuality in the face of overwhelming forces of a vast, impersonal world. The pressures corrode confidence, dwarf him into insignificance, and put him in a passive stance incapable of any positive action. His efforts to assert his will seem foredoomed to failure indeed; all that he can do is to keep himself from going underground and into annihilation. An example of such would be Dostoevski's *Underground Man* quite appropriately, describes man as an ant in an ant heap. (Dostoevski, 1918:82) Thus, most modern literature conditions us to accept the idea that a man's limitations are the main truth about him. It denigrates the individual, seeing all persons as essentially marginal disaffiliates. Moreover, it portrays ordinary life as trivial and banal, conventional or mechanical, and dismisses men as leading inauthentic, second-hand lives.

However, though the hero has undoubtedly degenerated into a little man by sociological standards, many writers feel that morally he is still capable of great strength. Most of the American-Jewish writers project such an affirmative stance. Saul Bellow comments:

It's obvious to everyone that the stature of characters in modern novels is smaller than it once was. ... I do not believe that the capacity to feel or do can really have dwindled or that the quality of humanity has degenerated. I rather think that people appear smaller because society has become so immense. (Bellow; 1955:73)

With Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and other Jewish writers in mind, Max Schulz says, "This willingness to accept the world on its own terms disorderly, incoherent, absurd ... and yet without losing faith in the moral significance of human action, underlies the confrontation of experience in the best of contemporary Jewish American novels." (F. Schulz; 1969:22) Bernard Malamud is recognized as one of America's major authors. One critic opines Malamud as a writer who has brought a new note into the American novel,

showing that “American fiction is still capable of sudden growth, development and expansion in directions scarcely predictable.” (Allen; 1964:322)

After the Second World War, Jewish-American fiction became very popular and its peak, which can be clearly seen in Bernard Malamud’s work, holds very specific peculiarity in topic as well as in structure and has acquired for him a well-known and basic after unstinting in its applause and regard. As Iska Alter observes,

Without the exuberant self-promotion of Norman Mailer, the black and bitter humour of Joseph Heller, the increasing self-absorption of Philip Roth, or, more significantly, the moral comedy of Saul Bellow, Malamud has continued to be a humanistic spokesman ... for responsibility, compassion and goodness in a world spinning out of control with frightened speed. (Alter; 1981:01)

Bernard Malamud himself affirms his stance as an artist: “My work, all of it is an idea of dedication to the human. That’s basic to every book. If you don’t respect man, you cannot respect my work: I’m in defence of the human.” (Frankel; 1966:40) Unhappy with the negative trend of modern fiction, Malamud asserts, “I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day. ... The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest.” (Malamud; 1963:32) In his own novels, Malamud consciously upholds the sanctity of life and affirms man’s ability to overcome the dehumanizing forces of the world and reassert his spiritual self. Malamud persistently kept focussing on his work which is based on faith in the dignity of the spiritual realm, which only readers who love human beings can appreciate his work.

While the most of Malamud’s work is Jewish, a significant portion of it is not, and Malamud protested about calling Jewish-American author. He said that:

I’m an American, I’m a Jew, and I write for all men. A novelist has to or he’s built himself a cage. I write about Jews, when I write about Jews, because they set my imagination going ... Sometimes I make characters Jewish because I think I will understand them better as people, not because I am out to prove anything I was born in America and respond in American life to more than Jewish experience. I wrote for those who read. (Stern; 1975:56)

Given the way his message was all-inclusive, he thought the title was reductive. His concern is about as a whole humanity, not just for Jews:

I handle the Jew as a symbol of the tragic experience of man existentially. I try to see the Jew as universal man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it. The Jewish drama is a ... symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms. Jewish history is God’s gift of drama. (Malamud; 1968:13)

In his attempt to respond to pressures, individual requests, and life’s responsibilities, Malamud portrays Jews as everyman.

Malamud in his fiction projects something of the paradoxical condition of contemporary man in America. The hero who emerges brings with him both the helplessness of man in the face of the forces of dehumanization, mechanization and conformity and the hopefulness, as futile as it may seem, of triumphing over these very forces. The hero is trapped in a now natural existential difficulty: man misled by a world he never made but then longing for extraordinary force and a secretly fulfilling ability to be self-aware.

Malamud’s heroes are dedicated to the imperatives of self. They strive for a fate good enough to fulfil a sense of a privately satisfying self. Their quest is personal but they must make it through the recognisable social world. They confront the oppressive forces that undermine their active quest for spiritual selfhood. The confrontation between the hero (activist or victim) and the world, between an individual and the shaping forces in public life, is central to the fiction of Bernard Malamud. The ultimate achievements of the Malamudian hero, are ambiguous. In any event, a quest for freedom, a commitment to the imperatives of self, does not necessarily and inevitably bring productive results. However, what is laudable is their courage to try and forge a personal identity in the face of worldly schemes. The breakthrough they achieve, however negligible, is by a desperate act of will.

Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant* (1957) is an in-depth examination of a vulnerable man’s arduous journey to becoming a solid, man of integrity. In keeping with Malamud’s statement, “I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day,” (Hicks;1963:32) the novel is “an affirmation of man’s ability to realize himself even in the face of deprivation and disaster.” (Ibid.;32)

In a note for the Norwegian translation Malamud wrote, "the apprentice character interested me, as he has in much of my fiction, the man who as much as he can in the modern world, is in the process of changing his fate, his life." (Ibid.;32) Thus, though the story is of a gentile's conversion into a Jew, it is not about Judaism. It is simply a story of one man's efforts to change himself into a better person. From a petty thief and an un disciplined person he struggles to be honest and responsible.

Frank Alpine "lately come from the West, looking for a better opportunity." (Malamud; 1967:30) Frank is a wanderer, he has no place to stay which he can call it a home and no morals (except for some good intentions which he does not know how to put into practice). Up till now "his life was mostly made up of lost chances." (Ibid.;84) His old life having come to nothing; Frank seeks to start afresh with a new self and a new moral consciousness. Like all Malamud's protagonists, he is a lonely man trying to create for himself an identity. "Let bygones be gone.... From now on he would keep his mind on tomorrow.... He would change and live in a worth-while way" (Ibid.;142), Frank thinks. Though a weak, frustrated character, he is in looking of "something worth-while" (Ibid.;30), in a collection of morals or a discipline that will give his life meaning

His ambition is not self-centred and egoistic; he wants to be a better human being and seeks to transcend his old self. The process of reformation is a painful process, full of trials. Frank must acknowledge his past mistakes and atone for them. He must discipline himself. Despite his strong urge to do well, Frank can't help but indulge his baser impulses. He yearns for a new life, but due to his lack of discipline, he seeks it by becoming a felon: "he had this terrific idea that he was really an important guy, ... meant for something a whole lot better....Then when he asked himself what should he be doing, he had another powerful idea, that he was meant for crime."(Ibid.;84). At crime, he feels, "he would change his luck, make adventure, live like a prince. He shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, assaults ... each violent act helping to satisfy a craving that somebody suffer as his own fortune improved." (Ibid.;84) This is how he comes to gang up with Ward Minogue to rob the Jew's grocery store. (Frank shows anti-Semitic inclinations in the beginning). Yet, during the hold-up when Ward hits the hapless Jew, Frank realizes that he has "made the worst mistake yet, the hardest to wipe out." (Ibid.;85) and "his plans of crime lay down and died." (Ibid.;85).

He endures aches of blame and to calm his still, small voice he returns to the staple to work for its Jewish proprietor. For penitence he becomes Morris's assistant without pay. He won't stay there long, he promises himself: "I'm only staying there till I figure out what's my next move." (Ibid.;88) While Morris lies in bed, recuperating from the injury inflicted by Ward, Frank makes genuine attempts to boost the grocery's revenue. The grocery store becomes the catalyst for his gradual and debilitating transformation.

The two factors which get Frank going on the right path are his own guilty conscience at having robbed Morris, and the grocer's kindness towards him when he lay starving and frozen in the cellar. That this lowly fellow's deepest desire is to be good (even though he is not fully conscious of it), is obvious in his adoration of St. Francis who has been the subject of his romantic admiration since childhood: "For instance, he [St. Francis] gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back. He enjoyed to be poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman." (Ibid.;31) Goodness attracts Frank the way wealth and fame attract Boy. He says of St. Francis: "Every time I read about somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me I have to fight to keep from crying. He was born good, which is a talent if you have it." (Ibid.;31)

It is through the mirror images that Malamud projects Frank's awareness of the duality within him. The cracked mirror in which Frank's image is reflected makes him conscious of the conflict in his mind. The extremes of goodness and evil to which he wavers, make Frank "afraid to look into the mirror for fear it would split apart and drop into the sink." (Ibid.;78) Frank's confrontation of self in the mirror is important because self-awareness is the first step to change and development of the self. From an irresponsible, compulsively evil person, Frank gradually becomes good, self- sacrificing and responsible. On the symbolic level, the other characters in the novel are the archetypes of the good and evil aspects of Frank's personality. It is through his relationship with the other characters that Frank learns to overcome his weak self and assert his moral self. His association with Ward Minogue, Morris Bober and Helen help him achieve self-perception and thus develop from egoistic pre-occupations to commitment towards others. Ward is the archetypal symbol of his own evil self.

The criminal tendencies in Frank's character get expression through Ward. At his instigation Frank participates in the hold-up. Likewise, "if there had been no Ward Minogue, there would have been no assault" (Ibid.;211) on Helen by Frank. The only good outcome of Frank's interaction with Ward is that he

begins to recognize the evil aspect of his psyche and in a bid to reject the evil in his nature Frank breaks off from 'Ward and turns towards Morris and Helen (symbols of his better self).

Frank genuinely admires such goodness in Morris but still continues to be bad himself. "He is like a man with two minds" (Ibid.;110) a man who hasn't been able to come to terms with himself. His positive instincts continually interfere with his evil impulses. "He is not bad; it is only that he finds it prohibitively difficult to be as good as he would wish a saint's good. This is the essential paradox of his existence: he meant to do good yet compulsively continues to do harm." (Baumbach; 1963:451)

Frank has become the grocer's assistant out of guilt for his part in robbing and assaulting Morris. He continues to be an assistant because he continues to add to the burden of his guilt by his misdoings. In spite of the sincerity of his repentance and the pangs of conscience he suffers, Frank cannot resist pilfering from the grocer's register and lusting after Helen.

Morris tells him "When a man is honest he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel. Frank nodded. But he continued to steal... There were times stealing made him feel good." (Malamud; 1967:78). Frank exhorts himself "to be honest. Yet he felt a curious pleasure in his misery, as he had at times in the past when he was doing something he knew he oughtn't to, so he kept on dropping quarters into his pants pocket." (Ibid.;64-65). Still, while the baser self encourages him to steal, the better half of Frank makes him keep account of the money stolen; he intends to return it to Morris at some later date.

Similarly, he moves up in the passage to watch Helen in the water; yet, his excitement at what he might see mingles with the thought that "it was a mistake to do it." (Ibid.;70) He feels greedy as he gazes at the naked Helen, "But in looking he was forcing her out of reach, making her into a thing only of his seeing, her eyes reflecting his sins, rotten past, spoiled ideals, his passion poisoned by his shame." (Ibid.;70) "Guilty of imperfection (the presumption of the romantic hero), he debases himself as penance. ... Since he wants more than anything else to be a good man, his crimes are a means of self-punishment, each time he pockets money from Morris register, he torments himself with guilt." (Baumbach; 1963:455) Thus, we see that he indulges his weak self and then torments himself.

Besides all this, Frank stays on because under the good s influence of Morris he has begun to change. He becomes increasingly involved with the life of the Bobers and under the tutorship of Morris, Frank's better self begins to gain over his appetitive self. He regrets "all the wrong he was doing and vowed to set himself straight. If I could do one right thing, he thought, maybe that would start me off." (Malamud; 1967:65).

At first, nonetheless, Frank is repelled by the Jewish way of life. His prejudices against the Jews surface now and again: "That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has the biggest pain in the gut and can hold on to it longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they got on his nerves." (Ibd.;81)

Though unhappy at Morris condition, Frank is attracted by Morris's attitude towards his life. Before long Frank graduates from disgust to curiosity about the Jews. He questions Morris closely about the Jewish religion for he feels that it was Morris's Jewishness which teaches him to accept suffering like a martyr. Frank's sensibility has always been drawn towards Jewish idealism though, it takes time for him to realise that.

In fact, as Marcus Klein says, "Malamud has himself spoken of the similarity of sensibilities he finds existing between Italians and Jews." (Klein; 1965:260) To Frank's insistent queries about Jews, Morris explains "to be a Jew all you need is a good heart." (Malamud; 1967:112) Morris follows the spirit of Judaism, not all its rules. Even then it is not his religion which defines Morris. It is his suffering and endurance which characterize him. "He suffered, he endured, but with hope.... For such reasons he was a Jew." (Ibid.;203)

Malamud's primary concern is with the hero's quest for a meaningful new life. The theme is based on the experience of rebirth. Man fails but is given a chance to redeem himself by accepting his fate (for better or for worse) and within it transcending his weak self, to become an integrated self. The stress in the process to maturity falls on making the hero realize his humanity which is shrouded by egoism and expediency.

In fact after Morris's death, Frank decides to convert. It is at Morris grave that Frank experiences resurrection and his life passes from a spiritually empty life to one of spiritual fulfilment. Frank starts as

the Jewish grocer's apprentice; he ends as the Jewish grocer himself. His identification with Morris is complete; he takes over the responsibility of his store and along with it Morris's fate of suffering. "His rising from the grave as Morris is a symbol of resurrection, the season aptly enough is spring, shortly before Passover and Easter." (Francis; 1961:95) This is the time of renewal in nature as well as the time of resurrection of Christ.

Frank's rebirth as a Jew makes him assume the living death of Morris's life: "They heard the dull cling of the register in the store and knew the grocer was the one who had danced on the grocer's coffin." (Malamud; 1967:206) Finally he replaces the grocer's own child who had passed on when still a kid.

However, at the end of the story, Frank's outlook toward others has improved. Now, it is his sense of commitment and responsibility that makes him assume the burden of providing for Ida and Helen. From wanting to improve his fortune at the cost of another's misfortune, Frank develops into a self-sacrificing person for whom the needs of another take priority over his own needs. Frank plays a father's role towards Helen when he fulfils Morris's desire to send her to college. With fatherly responsibility he provides for her needs.

Frank's affirmation is ironic for it brings no material or personal gains for him, "rather it offers personal grace accompanied by continual suffering and a constant challenge daring the redeemed man to maintain his spiritual freedom and integrity in the face of a world made up of grocery tombs and cascadian vacuums." (Mandel; 1964:111) By the end Frank affirms the "possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic." (Ibid.;110) Frank attains partial salvation when he takes on the responsibility of supporting Morris's family and assuming Morris's values.

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