

Quest For Self-Discovery In Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

Dr. J.Jayakumar- Assistant Professor

PG & Research Dept of English

Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Salem-Tamilnadu-636007

ABSTRACT

For a long time American English fiction had wandered at the fringes of being and was content with the portrayal of the outward existence of man. The larger socio-political issues merging from the altered historical perspective of the country had led the American English novelists to examine the relation of man and his surroundings in a realistic way. But when the protagonists of Malamud's novels begin to confess their soul sickness and record their agonized soul-searching, they lead the readers into a profound concern with the self. This passionate self-exploration and burning quest for self-discovery in terms of the American past lie at the core of Malamud's contribution to post-Independence American fiction in English.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Malamud's fiction articulates a distinctly American voice and reveals a clearly discernible American sensibility. It delineates the modernity of human condition in the American context and explores some fundamental problems of human existence. While modern in his choice and treatment of subjects, Malamud draws his strength from the deep well of his cultural heritage. All the critics tried to show each chapters that the reductivist approach to Malamud's fiction that subsumes his novels in either a psychological or an existential system of interpretation; this is inadequate for evaluating the totality of his achievement and appreciating the complexity of issues that

his novels deal with. Although his novels reveal a psychological insight into human condition, psychology becomes, for Malamud only a means to an end, an instrument for exploring some of life's basic problems. His search is directed towards something beyond psychology. The critical efforts to measure Malamud's significance and relevance to us in terms of Western existentialist thoughts are equally inadequate. Since they result in uncalled-for, even superficial, analogies with European authors and fail to account for the resolution of some of the crucial problems that Malamud's protagonists encounter in the novels. The serious existential concerns that one finds in Malamud's novels do not necessarily justify the assertion that he has produced an American version of Western existentialist literature. The influence of the existentialist writers on Malamud is more technical than conceptual or ideological. What distinguishes Malamud's works from those of the existentialist writers is their emotional burden and quality of vision.

QUEST FOR SELF-DISCOVERY IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S *THE ASSISTANT*

The Assistant, Malamud's first and foremost novel, which delineates the quest of a deracinated individual, lacking any clear-cut frame of reference and system of value, for emotional roots and spiritual anchorage. Cut-off from his cultural and emotional moorings, Frank Alpine finds himself in the predicament of an Alien everywhere in the world. He drifts from one end of the globe to another in search of peace and emotional stability. He cannot reach out to the world for fear of pain and he seeks refuge in the concept of detachment which he misconstrues as inaction and withdrawal from life. But his detachment turns into a delusion as he cannot free himself from self-engrossment and selfish desires. It drives him from crisis to crisis sucking in its wake the lives of two innocent persons he loves most, Morris Bobber and Helen. The tragedy shocks Frank out of self-complacency and re-orient

his attitude to life. Through sincere self-examination and intense suffering, which impel him to face the consequences of his actions and accept their responsibility, Frank learns that true detachment does not mean inaction and withdrawal from life. It means right action without any desire for its fruit and involvement with the world without the atrophy of one's detached identity. With the integration of his self, his unity with the world is achieved in a spontaneity of love and unselfish work.

Bernard Malamud's first novel is concerned with its hero's encounters in the public world; his second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), is totally different, opening in a tomb. *The Assistant* closes in one a wretched little grocery store in New York City with an almost windowless five-room flat above. In this soul-corroding twilight the principal characters have lived for twenty-one years: Morris Bobber, the aging and ailing store keeper who is the ethical center of the novel; his nagging wife Ida who suffers from a weakness in the legs and the endurance of her husband; and their twenty-three-old daughter, Helen, who works for Levensplel's Louisville Panties and Bras and dreams of an escape from Bobber fate. At the conclusion of the first chapter a newcomer appears, a young Italian named Frank Alpine, who first robs Morris and then seeks to expiate his crime by a descent into the store. Frank's agony in the grocery, both as assistant to Morris and as unlucky lover of Helen, supplies the central drama in *The Assistant*.

That the Bobber's entombment makes for a depressing history is clear to all readers of *The Assistant*. Every movement toward freedom and every suffering cry consistently rebounds from the shelves of canned goods to seal the unhappy victims in deeper despair. In the two years which elapse in the narrative, it is only occasionally that any of the characters can escape. Curiously enough, what they encounter in these moments usually sends them back to the store with mixed feelings of frustration and release. For the truth of the matter is

that, though they would never admit it and cannot understand it, both Morris and Frank like the store. Such refinement of masochism-and there is no other word for it – in many ways unprecedented in American literature. And even if not quite unprecedented (there is always the darkly affirmative memory of Hawthorne), there still seems no way to classify *The Assistant* with any certainty. Read as a record of life tortured and withering under the weight of walls, poverty, and a hostile world, there has been nothing like *The Assistant* since Mike Gold angrily described the walls coming from New York's ghettos in the 1930's. One of the major differences, however, is that there is no anger in *The Assistant* on the part of the author and little withering on the part of the characters. If the Bobber store is a grave, it is one in which, on occasion, people embrace.

However, it is not alone the obvious contrast in mood and pace and the sense of a tangible environment which quickly tells the reader that *The Assistant* is a different kind of novel than The Natural. What persuades him of the fact is the sense of character in the work. Theodore Solotarof said of the novel: "*The Assistant* came as a revelation, as it did for me, partly the reason was that it restored a sense of the dynamics of character and the older intention of fiction to show the ways men change despite its small compass and thinness of social reference. *The Assistant* could thus take on some of the power and clarity of the great 19th century novels'' (4).

Solotaroff's insight is correct, for it is substantially supported by Malamud's own contention that the chief business of the writer is "the drama of personality of fulfilling itself" (3). The figures in *The Assistant* have an amplitude and concretion deeper than gesture and more complex than particular passions. Although Frank Alpine and the Bobbers are spilled on stage like the dregs of victimization, they pulsate with an ironic spirituality that suggests hope at the very moment their loneliness and frustrations seem beyond endurance. But it is

Frank Alpine and his progress and change from the day he first robs Morris to the day he assumes complete control of the store, which prompted Solotaroff's comment. Beyond the first chapter, the novel belongs to Frank as *The Natural* belonged to Roy Hobbes, and for much the same reasons.

Indeed, what is most revealing about Malamud's depiction of his young Italian isolator is the manner in which he has transmuted the allegorical character of his earlier hero into compellingly realistic one. Though the depth of his suffering obscures the fact, Frank's agony is the same as the baseball player's. In his guilt-wracked efforts to escape the determinism of his own past and the countering claims of the will, *The Assistant* confronts on almost every level in his first appearance in the novel, having entered the Bobber store with his accomplice and guide in crime. Ward Minoque Frank stands before a mirror which reflects not only a masked robber but an old man falling before a blow from Ward's pistol. In the conjunction of saintly grocer and hate-filled criminal, both of whom obscure Frank's own terror-stricken face, the future assistant sees the emblems of his own disparate nature and his ultimate burden.

Frank's past, moreover, is also a teasing mystery that is conveyed through a series of images sufficient only to indicate the sources of his anxiety and his motivation. Rather than a coherent record, *The Assistant's* history before his apprenticeship resolves itself finally into a pattern of knotted memories of want and failure that are further obscured by guilt. At one point in the novel, "rehearsing" a confession to Morris, Frank indicates the nature of his earlier experiences in a passage rendered almost meaningless by shame, after certain bad breaks through various causes, mostly his own mistakes-he was piled high with regrets-after many such failure, though he tried every which was to free himself from them, usually he failed; So after a time he gave up and let himself be a bum. He lived in gutters, cellars if he

was lucky, slept in lots, ate what the dogs wouldn't or couldn't, and what he scrounged out of garbage cans. He wore what he found, slept where he flopped and guzzled anything (91).

Frank's incoherence is only the dramatic tissue of what is perhaps the most persuasive element in the characterization. From his first appearance in the novel, the clerk's agony occurs in a strange emotional borderland where he feels more than he immediately feels. Though he has come to the East from the West Coast in order to gain more of the world, it is clear that the journey is, like Roy's, a symbolic translation of the heart's search for a new life. Though Frank fails to understand the nature of his past, his passion is to change it: "to clean it out of his self and bring in a little peace... to change the beginning" (90). Like Stephen, a catholic in search of an unacknowledged Jewish father, Frank, had he been an intellectual, might have cried: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," And throughout his development, the sense of past and continuing failures conflicts with other images of the past, particularly the memories of stories of St. Francis which had been taught him as a youth in a Catholic orphanage. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman (56). Frank explains to Sam Pearl, the candy-store owner, the day after his crime against Morris. "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" (31).

Frank's worship of St. Francis and his addiction to stories dealing with the saint's gentleness serve as the ironic basis for his transformation into a Jew equally important; his worship also deciphers the driven nature of his personality. In the ironic juxtaposition of persona in his first and second appearances in the novel – masked criminal in one, saint worshipper in the other-Malamud indicates the need for integration which animates not only Frank's history in the store but the crime which precipitated it. For Malamud, as for Dostoevsky, whom he much resembles the ambiguous agony in which ego and alter ego

collide is the most fertile of the subjects. Though tempered by satire and realism, the issue in *The Assistant* is in a way sainthood or villainy, hero or non-hero in any case, the outer limits of personality yearning to resolve itself. The “way” of the criminal is therefore not so much different from the “way” of the saint; it is its paradoxical brother.

Malamud writes and the pain of this state is registered in scenes of self-loathing and, frequently, physical pain. When in the role of crime-expiating clerk, Frank steals from Morris’ register, he suffers for the act a headache so intense that “He was afraid to look into the mirror for fear it would split apart and drop into the sink” (85). While it is futile and misleading to speak of definitive identity, Frank, during his whirling progress, alternates with furious rapidly from lover, to hater, victim to victimizer, and saint to criminal. And the short history of his life in the store is continually dominated by the yearning of a fractured personality to resolve and so “fulfill itself”: first as exiled criminal and the, inchoately, as Ganymede to Ganymede, servant to servant. To round out his distinctive themes-again an echo of *The Natural* Malamud suggests that alienation from self is the ground of isolation from other men. The measure of Frank’s “fulfillment,” his potential for victory, is inevitably equated with his submission to others, to a will-breaking responsibility.

The framework which directs Frank’s development throughout the ten chapters of the novel, however, seems less a direct appropriation from Dostoevsky than a parallel of the history of the Jews themselves – a pattern that Malamud has described as “First, the Prophets’ ‘way of gentleness;’ the sins of the people, punishment, Exile and Return... the primal problem of man seeking to escape the tragedy of the past,” (6). The first chapter of *The Assistant*, a recounting of a typical Morris Bobber day, ends with Frank’s crime. The next five chapters belong to Frank’s punishment. At the conclusion of the second chapter, “I need experience” (54). The line signals both his defeat and his salvation: the half-understood

acceptance of the victim's identity and all the enraging frustration that goes with it. Frank's punishment, however, hides progress at the same time it mysteriously forwards it. Initially, he succumbs to his bewildering motivation with a sense of relief; he welcomes the store's solidity, its separation from the outside world. But almost immediately his victimization – asserts itself clearly. To his compound of human needs the store gives nothing. Though he struggles continuously with the desire to confess to Morris, he retreats constantly from the thought of the “Jew listening with a fat ear” (157).

The significance of Frank's complex pains is clear, however. In suffering for his relapses and for his joy at his relapses, Frank undergoes changes which in time will transform him into a Jew. Ironically, it is precisely this fact which neither Frank nor Morris can quite understand. Perhaps the grimmest humor in the novel springs from *The Assistant's* and the proprietor's efforts to deny a relationship that are apparent in every gesture; both retreat into a complex prejudice that perpetually screens their merging humanity. “You had to be a Jew,” despairs Frank in the midst of his grinding assistantship; “They were born prisoners” (86). “Who could stay in such a place but a Goy whose heart was stone?” reflects Morris late in the novel (195). In an ambiguous drama of cross purposes that do not really cross, Malamud indicates the unacknowledged relationship that unites the pair.

Though Frank denies it to the last moment, as does Morris, his transformation from anti-Semite to Jew is continuous. Retreating from Bobber's sympathy he castigates the old man internally: “His pity leaks out of his pants” (83). And, rising at dawn to tend the store with a zeal that can only be compensated for by theft-an act which rebounds like a knife into his own heart-Frank cries passionately “... a Jew is a Jew... What the hell are they to me so that I gave them credit for it?” (70) Throughout the first half of the novel-the record of his punishment-Frank and Morris, in the seemingly inviolable separateness of Jew and Goy,

bound and rebound upon each other without really knowing it; and in the process Frank's identity is worn away, later to be refashioned.

To further dramatic tension in *The Assistant's* development into a Jew, Malamud has written into the novel a symbolic parallel to the Frank- Morris relationship. Ward Minoque, Frank's accomplice in the crime and a consummate Jew hater, represents the polarity of *The Assistant's* character. Similarly, Ward's relationship to his father, the detective of the story, represents a reverse variation of the symbolic father-son relationship. Motivated by his own stern conception of the law, legal rather than moral, Detective Minoque searches after Ward continuously in an effort to drive him from the neighborhood; and, just as continuously, Ward flees punishment.

In the same scene, Ward hits a second mark, Mocking Frank's efforts in the store; he says "Your Jew girl must be some inspiration" (144). Ward's reference is to Helen Bobber, who like some damaged Sophie, both animates *The Assistant's* quest for rebirth and challenges it. In Helen, who has spent twenty-one of her twenty-three years in the grave of a store, Malamud has enlarged the image of Iris Lemon in the form of an aching dissatisfaction, in which unfulfilled desires induce both lethargy and hysterical pride. "I won't (compromise) with my ideals" (45), Helen proclaims to Louis Karp; but, for Helen, ideals serve the purposes of anti-life and self-delusion.

Helen's character is a complex, dividing hurt. Dramatically, she unites, as Jonathan Baumbach has noted, all the "sons" of the novel-Louis Karp; Nat Pearl, the Columbia law student; Ward Minoque; and Frank-into a single contrasting unit (7). But like the group itself, her personality is a shambles. Poverty and an unremitting drabness have induced in her a yearning for some impossible fulfillment, a future outside the store in which her plea-"Life

has to have some meaning”-can be realized (43). In the static round of work, sleep, and needs unsatisfied, her life turns upon a desperate hunger for an end to a never-ending winter, for a future which robs her of the present. “What am I saving myself for ... What unhappy Bobber fate? Helen asks herself (46).

Malamud’s manipulation of the Helen-Frank relationship involves the reader in perhaps the most ambiguous thematic issues in the novel. Unwillingly, Helen finds herself both interested in and repelled by Frank. His following eyes suggest both danger and a gratifying adoration; and her reaction is further compounded by her mother’s attempts to keep them apart, by Frank’s non-Jewishness and by, ironically, the very nature of his reclamation- his future as another Morris. There is also a sense of physical danger; for sex, Helen believes, has betrayed her. She had lost her virginity long ago with Nat Pearl, “handsome, cleft-chinned, gifted, ambitious,” who “had wanted without too much trouble a lay and she, half in love, had obliged and regretted.” Later, “unwillingly willing she had done it again.” In retreat from experience and from her own awareness that she had wanted a stake in Nat’s future (for Helen, like Frank, is inevitably better than she thinks), Helen seeks refuge in an abstract, programmatic assault on her destiny: “...she promised herself next time it would go the other way; first mutual love, then loving, harder maybe on the nerves, but easier in memory” (14). In the meantime, her emotions stalled, she dreams of attending night course at college and reads endlessly.

Morris Bobber’s portrait is the author’s triumph. In creating him, Malamud relied less on the mythic image of the son seeking father in *The Natural* than on a perhaps analogous but infinitely more human tradition which extends backward to Job. In some respects, Morris is a quintessential instance of the Jewish “sufferer” whose enemy is life itself-or, at least, every impulse of inhumanity which naturalism, as well as the tragic vision, has isolated and

decried; and they zero in on his goodness like flies to honey. At times the novel seems to become an enormous joke in which nature and fate, far from being “disinterested,” take active delight in torturing the grocer, secure in the knowledge that he, with “the will of a victim,” will submit with only a murmur (206).

Finally, it is only because of their endurance and their privation that Morris Bobber and Frank Alpine sense that they are true to themselves. But this realization also carries its measure of comic relief, for what the characters sense is not the same as what they understand. This fact underscores Frank’s ambiguous contempt for Morris. Though Frank himself actively seeks pain as the one sensible reminder that he is “on the way,” *The Assistant* nonetheless condemns the process in Morris and in Jews generally

Ultimately, at the heart of Frank’s conversion-as well as Morris Bobber’s identity - is a transcendent mystery. But, curiously, there are none of the features of mystery assuredly; there is nothing of the intensity of mystic states which can answer for the horror of the immediate world. What seems clear about Malamud-or at least as clear as such an ambivalent state can allow-is that he is a pessimist who believes. From the realists, or at least from his own contact with the world, he has derived a full measure of despair, of the futility of human values in the face of contemporary reality. The avenues of romantic redemption-nature, romantic lover, power, individuality-are all echoed in his work; and all are painfully discounted. Like so many of his contemporaries, Malamud sadly delights in picturing those reversals which call traditional values into doubt or in portraying the self in battle with an amorphous public world that turns the self into an absurd posturing Quixoticism. But at the same time, and even if it appears paradoxical, Malamud is also an affirmative writer. He believes in the mystery of the human personality and its power to remake itself, even in the face of the “laws” of history and science. Like F.Scott Fitzgerald, he apparently holds two

opposed ideas in balance; and, as with the earlier writer, for Malamud the conflict is dramatic gain.

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