

Depiction of Suffering and Moral Transformation in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

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Abstract:

In the post-war period of bad faith and nihilism, the Jew has emerged as a symbol of compassion in American Jewish fiction. The Jews are considered as victims at the hands of fate because of the historic rootlessness and the Holocaust inflicted on them. Thus suffering has been an indispensable part of the Jews, and that is explicitly reflected in Jewish writing. But suffering is not just a strain in Malamud's fiction; it is a necessary condition for the emergence of compassion, which in turn is the ethos of Malamud's moral vision. Therefore, the present research article not only shows the depiction of suffering but also presents the novelist's moral vision.

Key Words: Jews, Suffering, Regeneration, Moral Transformation.

Bernard Malamud's second novel *The Assistant* is the story of a poor Jewish grocer named Morris Bober and his gentile assistant, Frank Alpine. Both the characters suffer intensely in the course of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Frank and his partner Ward Minouge rob Morris, and knock him down with a blow to the head, and consequently he falls down unconscious. However, Frank repents his act because he is not that very bad at heart, and therefore he voluntarily becomes Morris's assistant for free. He is torn between his tendency to do bad and his desire to do good. It is the honest life of Morris, which is full of sympathy for the others despite all his suffering, which helps Frank to discover his own goodness and to feel compassion for others. Although the novel is full of suffering in the life of its characters but the gloom and pessimism is relieved by the creation of the final effect which is of moral beauty, and which establishes the novel within the framework of the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition with its emphasis on suffering and morality has added a poignant touch to the Jewish writings. Norman Podhoretz aptly writes that, "The Jew is a humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspirations" (177). The cardinal principles endorsed by the Jewish tradition are universal brotherhood, justice, love, and compassion. The true meaning of religion has been found in a life of righteousness, mercy, and mutual respect and responsibility. Therefore, for the Jews the meaning of suffering is the compassion. While sharing the deep concerns of others

Jewish novelists with the predicament of the modern man, Malamud goes a step farther and asserts that compassion alone redeems the modern man. That's why, chastened by the suffering, the characters of his novels mellow under its cathartic effect during their journey in the novel. The theme of suffering is explicitly illustrated and exemplified in the two characters of the novel—Morris Bober and Frank Alpine. Morris, being a Jew, is already an embodiment of these values but Frank has to struggle a lot to attain that level of humanity.

Morris is a poor grocer who is almost entombed in the store for twenty-two years of his life. In a world of willful guiles, he lives with moral honesty and dignity. He continues his wretched life in the store without much success for the survival of his family. However, his assistant Frank suggests him to try a few tricks on the customers to earn profits, but his answer shows his belief in moral righteousness and integrity: "Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me" (*Assistant* 78)? He suffers chiefly on the account of his honesty and moral integrity. And it seems that he gives his daughter Helen his hereditary suffering because she also suffers a lot in her life. She does not perceive people and situations correctly. She fails to understand the bad intention of Nat Pearl who only wants to get her physically, and rejects her when his purpose is fulfilled. Further in the novel, when she willingly wants to answer Frank's advances, and wants to surrender herself, he violently crushes her feelings. Therefore, she appears as an embodiment of a suffering soul.

However, she undergoes a character development of her own towards the end of the novel. In this way, the novel might seem defeatist in materialistic terms but “the final effect is that of moral beauty” (Allen 33). Malamud seeks moral beauty in compassion which is shown through the characters of Morris and Frank in the novel. Only this compassion enables Morris and Frank to achieve fulfillment in their life which however is full of suffering.

Therefore, Malamud’s philosophy of suffering is exemplified very deftly in the character of Morris and also in the eventual transformation of Frank to the creed of suffering for others. However the passage of this transformation is not as easy as Frank has to undergone a lot of bad experiences in his life. But this suffering plays an instructive role in his life, and the ultimate result is very beautiful which fulfills his aim and provides him satisfaction in his life. The novelist has used in this novel the figure of the Jew as a symbol of unflinching sufferer for the sake of those around him. Frank enquires Morris about what a Jew means. Morris says that a Jew is a man of good heart and one who follows Jewish laws, the “Torah.” But, Morris himself is not blindly concerned with the ritual of the Torah; he is interested in the spirit of the law. Malamud shows how Morris rises above the narrow framework of rituals and imbibes the spirit of the tradition which is “struggle for moral excellence” and “the wish to be good” (Allen 33). He does not obstinately observe any ritual of the Jews, however catches the spirit of Torah in being a man of good heart. Jewishness

means to him “to do what is right, to be honest, to be good . . . to other people” (*Assistant* 112). Therefore, in a world where honesty and success go parallel without any meeting point, Morris’s life is bound to fail from the materialistic viewpoint. From the spiritual point of view, however, Morris life has nothing but the love and compassion for others. The spirit of compassion in suffering redeems him. Business for him is not a purely commercial and mercenary activity, but an obligation to help the fellowmen. There is no doubt that Morris Bober is a Jew as Schechner says:

There are many ways to be a Jew. . . . Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience. . . . may be not to our formal tradition—for this I don’t excuse him—but he was true to the spirit of our life—to want for others that which he wants also for himself. (195)

In spite of his poverty, bad luck and travails, Morris does not lose faith in humanity. His attitude towards life characterizes compassion even at the cost of self-effacement. It is again his humanity that he takes a sympathetic view of Frank’s pilferage as a recompense for “slave wages for a workman’s services” (*Assistant* 116) and raises his wages to double. Thus Morris lives up to the moral principles such as compassion, suffering for others, and moral righteousness as enshrined in the Jewish tradition. This finds expression in Morris’s acceptance of the burden of suffering for others which is central to the philosophy of

Malamud which he records with precision and ease in the novel:

“What do you suffer for, Morris?”
Frank said.

“I suffer for you.” Morris said calmly. (113)

Frank is another character in whom Malamud has projected the cathartic effects of suffering. Frank transforms from being a self-centered man to an other-oriented human being, a saint-like figure. However, the novelist does not want the novel to be called a simple moral allegory, since “the spirit is more than moral and by the same token, there is more than morality in a good man” (Stern 53).

The feeling of compassion arising out of suffering takes the form of interpersonal responsibility in Morris and Frank. Frank, the gentile who first robs Morris and later joins his store as an assistant to atone for his guilt, gradually fights his guilt and becomes a ‘true Jew’ or ‘a man with a good heart’ like Morris Bober. In search of a better, Frank begins his career as a robber and liar. He appears a man of split-personality who is caught in the conflict between ambivalent motives and actions, ‘a man with two minds’ as Ida, the wife of Morris calls him. He thinks of himself as a man of stern morality and discipline and yet acts far from it. He wavers between guilt and remorse, and finally, leans from his experience of suffering and overcomes his weakness with great struggle. In all his conflicting motives and actions, Frank is guided by his singular passion for Helen

Bober, at first sensual but selfless towards to the end. While Morris evinces exemplary compassion all through his life, Frank has to struggle much to reach that height. From his initial hatred of the Jews, he attains a stage where he becomes one with Morris’s family and turns a Jew literally in the act of circumcision. In portraying the ‘apprentice’ character of Frank, Malamud is concerned with man who is in the process of changing his life and his fate. Malamud says in an interview: “A man is always changing and the changed part of his is all important. I refer to the psyche, the spirit, the mind, the emotions” (Handy 77). He saves Morris’s life twice. He keeps the store open for weeks without any wages when Morris is sick and is admitted in the hospital. Moreover, when the business of the store is terrible, he gives all his personal saving to the store, and even works all night long at a defferent place in order to keep the store alive, and consequently helps the Bober family in their hard days. Helen refers to this inborn goodness in Frank’s character as she comes to see him changed:

It was a strange thing about people— they could look the same but be different. He had been one thing, low, dirty, but because of something in himself—something, she couldn’t define, a memory perhaps, an ideal he might have forgotten and then remembered—he had changed into somebody else, no longer what he had been. (207)

Frank’s moral transformation in the novel is significant. Morris’s earlier

exhortation that, 'I suffer for you' becomes the essence of life for Frank. In the end, he is purged of the selfish motives or the physical yearnings for Helen. He transcends selfish love and achieves a selfless compassion. Like St. Francis, Frank gives away everything for the sake of the Bober family. In this way, he assumes the spirit of both St. Francis and Morris completely with his inordinate suffering and compassion. He not only becomes the assistant of Morris at the grocery store but ultimately becomes the assistant to his way of living a moral and honest life. Towards the end of the novel, after Morris's death, he successfully achieves the place of Morris by embracing his moral philosophy, and by helping Helen to go to college. In the end he gets himself circumcised and becomes a Jew after the Passover.

Thus, the shocking awareness of the widening gulf between what a man is and what he ought to be has prompted the Jewish writer to think in terms of moral regeneration, and to evolve an idea of a new life based on compassion, love and humanism. Mark Schechner observes that, "The horror of the recent past stands behind all post-war Jewish American fiction" (196). Thus, the strength of the novel lies in its emphasis on the role played by suffering in the moral transformation of its protagonist, Frank Alpine who progresses from being a loafer, hoodlum to a saint-like figure. The stress on this humanistic aspect of Frank's regeneration saves the novel from being only a novel of Judaism as a religion of ritual; rather the novel emerges as having a secular and universal appeal which further strengthens Malamud's moral vision of humanity.

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