Research Paper Literature

Juxtaposing Judaism and American Dream in Bernard Malamud's The Assistant

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ABSTRACT

Bernard Malamud's The Assistant (1957) heralded a new era in the realm of Jewish-American fiction writing because of its strong Jewish theme and incorporation of American values. The main characters, Frank Alpine and Morris Bober stand for two opposing ideals of American society: material pursuit and moral values. The novel is a strong condemnation of American values because the good and the decent people are not honoured by the American society. Malamud's negation of society's values is insidious; in the end, even those who are close to the moral man and who recognize his inherent worth see him as a failure because he must lead a lesser life in material terms. In The Assistant, it is Frank Alpine who mostly benefits from Morris' example and who carries the metaphoric idea of Jewishness to new areas beyond Morris'definition.

Keywords : American ethnicity, Jewishness, American Dream, Imprisonment, Race, Morality

Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* which contains a strong Jewish theme by using the image of the Jew and the principles of Judaism also incorporates the values of American Dream. The main characters, Frank Alpine and Morris Bober exemplify the basic values of the novel. Frank is shown to be imbibing "Jewish" values from Morris and with Morris' death, Frank replaces him both in the store and in terms of having become an ethical man. At the end of the novel, Frank circumcises and becomes a Jew, although in the metaphorical manner in which Malamud uses the term, Frank had already become one. Judaism, according to Morris, refers to a broader aspect of life. He speaks to Frank: "This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. Our life is hard enough, why should we hurt somebody else?" (*The Assistant* 106). The point is that although Morris may define Jewish Law as the Torah, the basic principles that he chooses to live by, are universal. Most of the laws of the Torah are universal, but there are many, which Morris chooses to ignore that are directed particularly to the children of Israel. Morris' Jewishness is starkly contrasted with the values of modern America. Indeed, those values are seen as diametrically opposed to the traditional Jewish values for which Morris stands. Honesty and integrity do not lead to success in America, where the possession of money confers a status beyond material wealth. The term "American Dream" is used in a number of ways, but essentially the American Dream is an idea which suggests that all people can succeed through hard work, and that all people have the potential to live happy, successful lives. Many people have expanded upon or refined the definition of the American Dream, and this concept has also been subject to a fair amount of criticism. Many people believe that the structure of American society belies the idealistic goal of the American Dream, pointing to examples of inequality rooted in class, race, and ethnic origin which suggest that the American Dream is not attainable for all.

The idea of American Dream is older than the United States, dating back to the 1600s, when people began to come up with all sorts of hopes and aspirations for the new and largely unexplored continent. Many of these dreams focused on owning land and establishing prosperous businesses which would theoretically generate happiness, and some people also incorporated ideals of religious freedom into their American Dreams. During the Great Depression, several people wrote about an American Dream, codifying the concept and entrenching it in American society. For people who believe in the American dream, anything is attainable through hard work. The concept plays on the idea that American is a classless society, although it is obviously not, as any honest examination of the United States will reveal. The idealistic vision of the American Dream also assumes that people are not discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, gender, and national origin, another thing which is unfortunately not true in the United States. Critics of the American dream also point out that many versions of the dream equate prosperity with happiness, and that happiness may not always be that simple. These critics suggest that the American Dream may always remain tantalizingly out of reach for some Americans, making it more like a cruel joke than a genuine dream.

The central irony in The Assistant lies in the fact that Morris considers himself a failure: that is, he accepts the judgment of Julius Karp, who represents the American ethic that monetary and business success are all that matter, even though Karp himself may be aware of Morris' deeper qualities. The irony moves into paradox when we realize that Morris' failure is his success. It is because of his inability to succeed in the American business world, Morris is considered to be a moral and ethical success. He realizes enough to detest Karp's values but wishes that America were the sort of place where morality could lead to practical success. Just before his death, Morris thinks, "I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth" (The Assistant 193).After his death he was buried "in an enormous cemetery – it went on for miles – in Queens" (The Assistant 193). Ida and Helen think that although Morris was good, he was a failure, "He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was" (The Assistant 196).The Assistant is a strong condemnation of American values, because the good and the decent people are not honored by the society. In The Assistant it is Frank Alpine, who most benefits from Morris' example and who carries the metaphoric idea of Jewishness to new areas beyond Morris' definition. Even more than Morris, Frank is the primary protagonist of the novel and the novel is named after him. His attitude towards the Jews and Jewishness was negative in the beginning of the novel. But there are also ear-

ly hints of Frank's potential. Although he is not an observant Roman Catholic, as Morris is not an observant Jew, he still appreciates what Morris stands for and practises in real life: his ability to endure suffering and yet remain moral. Frank thinks that Morris' Jewish tradition must be at the root of his actions, but Malamud makes it clear that any humanistically oriented philosophy can have the same effect.

Helen Bober, daughter of Morris is a clear example of a different aspect of American Jewish ethnicity. She stands for the mad rush for attaining immediate material success as promised by the American Dream. To her, Jewishness is the religion of her parents; a burden which she is unwilling to carry in her search for a promising life in America. Helen who rates love and happiness very highly and ironically begins to believe that the things that people have in common are more important than those that separate them; that is, she arrives at a judgment of the oneness of humanity through stressing her own individual needs and by eliminating the Torah, whereas her father arrived at the same conclusion through selflessness and an adherence to his particular understanding of the Torah, or the Law. Ida Bober, Helen's mother takes a very narrow view of Jewishness. She is not convinced of the "human" definition of individual worth. Ida reflects the fearful approach to the new world of one who has never been able to become a part of it. Her view of America consists of the little she knows about it and the vast amount of what she does not know and of which she is afraid. She wants Helen to breach the walls of the hostile American fortress, which she was too timid either to conquer herself or to allow Morris to take the necessary risks to succeed in. Her fear has made her a confirmed materialist, and she has taken on the corrupt values of the American world. Thus, she is willing to deceive the prospective buyer Podolsky, and she pushes Helen toward Nat as much for his prospects as for his Jewishness. In the guise of wanting the best for her daughter, Ida denigrates Morris' morality and constantly tries to persuade him to abandon it. Morris wants a better life for Helen too, but is unwilling to abandon his ethics to achieve it. Morris' view of Jewishness as love and responsibility for all humanity is alien to Ida.

In The Assistant, the store acts as a symbol of misery for Morris as mentioned in the text, "In a store you were entombed" (The Assistant 3). The store is Frank's monastery and his tiny Spartan room, a cell, "as Frank begins to take on the virtues of Bober, the cell becomes a place of monastic illumination. Each act of suffering for Bober and the rest of mankind strips away Frank's worldliness…" (Helterman 50). Thus, physical imprisonment is essential for Frank if he is paradoxically to release himself from the imprisoning forces within him. What Frank requires is the very imprisonment against which Morris raises a set of four walls, which Frank refuses to leave through self-discipline. To achieve this discipline, he must accept the fact that he is imprisoned more by his own character flaws than by external walls. When, towards the end of the novel and literally at Morris' death, Frank becomes Morris both in the sense of replacing him in the store and in taking on his mantle of morality, it is a sign that he has become a new person. In the end, it is Frank, Morris' acolyte and substitute son, who eventually replaces his teacher in the store. By formally becoming a Jew at the end of the novel, Frank illustrates Malamud's point that "paradoxically, a character may become more Christ like as he becomes more Jewish" (Helterman 2). Whether Jewish or Christian, it is the heart that counts. The transformation of Frank is evident. The man who climbs out of the grocer's grave though looks like Frank Alpine is really Morris reborn, a new Morris who will complete his mentor's life: "Frank will see to Helen's education, one purpose of which is to give posthumous meaning to the grocer's pathetic life. Thus each life gains meaning by what it gives to the next, and the divine circle of the Law, of doing for others, curves back on the point of its origin: the meaning of Morris Bober's life" (Field and Field, eds. 164).

Helen's role in Frank's redemption, in his becoming a moral individual through responsibility and selflessness and concomitantly his achieving a sense of God, is not as important as Morris', but she has some importance in this process. Malamud's depiction of their relationship can also be seen in terms of Buber's philosophy: "when a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the You of her eyes allows him to gaze into a ray of the eternal You. But if a man lusts after the 'ever repeated triumph'-you want to dangle before his lust a phantom of the eternal?"(Buber 154) From climbing up the airshaft to look at Helen naked in the bathroom Frank moves toward a feeling of love for her. He does rape her, however, and one may question Malamud's treatment of this as a sign of Frank's starved love and a result of Helen's having wrongly rejected him. However, unlike Frank, Helen is depicted as a character that does not really grow in understanding. Frank wonders whether she learned anything from the great literature she has read. The rape marks a turning point for Frank after which all the previous events coalesce in a determination, finally to take control of his life: "the wrong he had done her was never out of his mind. He hadn't intended wrong, but he had done it; now he intended right" (The Assistant 157). Love replaces lust, and seeing the eternal "You" becomes a possibility. The question arises as to the price Malamud exacts for Frank's redemption. Philip Roth thinks that the price is too high and the method by which this redemption is achieved is unjust. Frank has chosen entombment as being necessary for his redemption; he is a prisoner in the store, slaving his life away for Ida and Helen. Also, he gets himself circumcised; an act of self-punishment to atone for Helen's rape as well as a ritual for conversion to Judaism as we see in the text that "the pain enraged and inspired him' (The Assistant 210). While Roth stresses the pain, Malamud stresses the inspiration; the inspiration derived from Frank's hard-won ability to discipline his baser instincts. The element of irony also dominates Malamud's treatment of Jewishness in The Assistant. The striving of the characters to achieve their goals is usually undercut by an opposite character trait that prevents their success or by a result that is far different from that which was desired. Morris' goodness achieves neither material rewards nor respect from his family. While Malamud admires Morris, he is ruthless in not permitting him any satisfaction or fulfillment as a result of his goodness. Even, Morris' burial seems to annihilate his memory as it takes place in a huge anonymous cemetery. Affirmation occurs only through a sense that goodness is worthwhile as an end in itself and through Frank's transformation on account of Morris' example. Thematically, the novel centers round a paradox: Morris' failure is his success. The sustained goodness of his heart in the face of business failure signals his spiritual achievement. This paradox receives emphasis from the contrast between Morris and his two successful Jewish neighbors, Sam Pearl and Julius Karp. Sam Pearl owns only a small candy store but has made enough money while betting on horse races to send his son to both college and Law school. While Julius Karp, who started as a shoe salesman, becomes rich by operating a liquor store in their poor neighborhood, selling a product which Morris refuses on principle to stock in his own store. In this sense, Morris is a Jew in a non-Jewish neighborhood and a commercial failure surrounded by Jewish success.

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