QUEST FOR TOTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ABSOLUTE COMMITMENT IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN BERNARD MALAMUD’S THE ASSISTANT

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ABSTRACT

The Assistant is the story of Frank Alpine, a Jew-hater. But as the novel proceeds, he becomes an assistant to a Jew named Morris Bober, and therefore he discovers an affinity between a Jew and a Christian. So the impossible becomes possible, and human relationship, as Malamud insists, can be brought about on an authentic keel by total involvement and absolute commitment. Therefore, the present research article intends to show this total involvement and absolute commitment in human relationship particularly with the background of suffering.

INTRODUCTION

Generally Malamud’s fiction is read with the spectacles of Jewishness. However, the word Jew contains a deep meaning for Malamud as he takes this word in a broad term where Jew stands for the whole humanity. Therefore, as Norman Podhoretz in his article “The New Nihilism and the Novel” explicitly says, “The Jew is a humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspirations” (177). The emphasis on Jewish suffering is continuously noted in Malamud’s novels. However, his concern is with the suffering humanity and not about a particular race or religious community because Jewishness in Malamud’s novels is a type of metaphor for everyone’s life. Malamud is not a rabid Jew; he is simply a Jew by birth and as his novels underline, as existentialist by conviction. The Assistant, his most popular novel, is an attempt at reconciling differences of racial and religious biases. At the center, the novel is a quest for a unique type of relation, one universally available and yet almost universally neglected.
The story of the novel runs as Frank Alpine along with his partner Ward Minouge robs a poor Russian grocer named Morris Bober who somehow survives on his earnings. However, Frank repents the deed and even becomes the assistant to Morris free of charge, but at heart he is not changed. While working for Morris he is attracted by Helen who is the daughter of Morris. Morris’s wife is suspicious of Frank’s design, more so because he is a goy, a non-Jew. Meanwhile, Frank continues to steal money bit by bit and to escape suspicion he puts back the same money in the days of lean business. One day he is caught while filching, and therefore is dismissed. The same night he rescues Helen from being raped by Ward but almost rapes her himself. This puts off Helen but he is still kept as an assistant in the grocery store, as he has become the mainstay of the Bober family. Frank helps the family by keeping the store open, collects enough money to Helen’s admission to college and in order to show his metamorphosis he gets himself circumcised in the Jewish tradition.

Therefore, human relationship is a difficult terrain, be it within a religious community or across it. And Malamud dexterously handles it throughout the novel. He strives to underline that one tends to suffer in a relationship when one claims to be independent self, existing in objective relation to other than himself, the ‘Other’ or the ‘It,’ and try to encounter and even appropriate those. The point that Malamud makes is that the human relationship cannot be built in the case of an independent ‘I’ which, internally certain of its own existence, tries to establish a workable relation externally to the ‘Other’. Malamud seems to claim that there is no ‘I’ in itself but only the ‘I’ existing in two relationships—one of objectivity, i.e. the realm of experience; the other of subjectivity, i.e. relationship of totality and involvement. Similarly, in the beginning Frank unilaterally experiences the outside world in which he alone is active, and the objects that are perceived by him has no value, and therefore he is not much affected by the suffering of the Bober family. But toward the end, he confesses all his sins, and consequently his heterogeneous self fell. Malamud’s solution of the religious dichotomy is that one should rise from parochialism. That’s how Malamud transforms religious problem into existential problem, the problem of living relationships, and the relationship of mutuality. This relationship is undifferentiated, and to inquire of its constitutive parts is to disintegrate what is known as indivisible. No doubt Bober was a Jew as Rabbi 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)

This pray of Rabbi further confirms that Bober lived for the wholeness of the human spirit. He encountered the other in a whole in himself. That is, the Jew existed not in his isolation but in community. He stimulates the same urge in Frank, though the latter takes time to envision the spiritual bonding Bober exemplified particularly when he serves the family. Frank’s coming to his wholeness also makes Helen to desire him. She reflects: “If there had been no Ward Minouge, there would have been no assault. If he had made his starved leap in bed she would have returned passion. She had hated him, she thought, to divert hatred from herself” (203). Nonetheless she detested the memory of her experience in the park. What she says is that human relationship is not a matter of calculation; it calls for sacrifice and risk, risk for endless
possibilities and sacrifice because one may lose oneself. When Helen realizes what he was offering her, her heart moved violently:

She had known he would follow and speak, but she could never in a thousand years have guessed he would say this. Considering the conditions of his existence, she was startled by his continuing ability to surprise her...God-knows-what-next-move. His staying power mystified and frightened her, because she felt in herself, since the death of Ward Minouge, a waning of outrage. (203)

Here we begin to see Malamud's transition from the exclusive relation to the inclusive concerned with life. It is consummated in activity. It is thus a creative relationship. Still Helen dithered. She did not want to consent. She even called him a criminal. However, the title of the novel The Assistant is significant from the prospective of human relationship particularly with reference to Frank and Helen because Frank as an assistant has to go through apprenticeship, i.e. train himself and discovers his inborn goodness. Helen refers to this inborn goodness 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)

But this something, a priori of relation has been a fundamental guide to Frank’s action, an ideal he might have forgotten, as she says and then remembered. And it is what changed him into somebody else, no longer should what he had been, and that she has recognized it before. But how could she or anybody recognize one’s innate goodness, till it blossoms in tenderness and love. All this emerges as, in the novel, Frank’s inherent longing for Helen. It is the longing for a relationship of total commitment, in which one is undistinguishable from the other. This relationship is a matter of choosing or being chosen. It is the relationship of giving up self-asserting instinct. Frank submerges himself of course slowly, but steadily as he moves from his dissipated to his holistic self. He sacrifices his ‘I’ and achieves his form, as an artist does, by consuming himself in his work.

In Frank’s case too, the form is embodied and put forth as he works tirelessly to see Helen go to College. Towards the end Malamud comes closer to Christianity in making Frank love Helen spiritually. It is in this relationship that the novelist finds the true theology, resting on neither Jewish nor Christian, for its basis is not dogma. In fact, the essence of all religions is the same. Here is found no causality, but freedom. When Frank goes for circumcision and becomes a Jew, he acts on no compulsion, but on total involvement of the self, which he has never been. The characteristic of this relationship is mutuality. Helen also, like her mother, comes to recognize a radical change in Frank. Helen thanked him for what he was doing for them. Still the memory of the past haunted her. She did not see the change in him without admitting whether the change was an end to the bad and a beginning to the good, she still doubts. She perhaps wants to know the content of the change, and not its form, the way Frank worked hard for the family.
Malamud keeps the novel open-ended, however, with the hope that Helen would sooner or later recognize his sacrifice and suffering. In fact Bober as a mouthpiece of Malamud wants this relationship not between ‘I’ and ‘You’ but ‘You’ and ‘You,’ as Martin Buber, a theistic existentialist in this regard, says:

Love is a responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling—the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that has nailed his lifelong to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love man. (66)

Therefore, Malamud’s concept of human relationship is based on a quest for full sacrifice as well as faith from both sides. However, a relationship has to undergone several experiences in order to achieve this wholeness. Similarly, Frank passes through a lot of good as well as bad experiences in this journey because this passage of human relationship is not that easy as it is full of sufferings. However, sufferings do play an instructive role when it is encountered on both sides as is the case with Frank and Morris or Frank and Helen. Despite all these sufferings Frank successfully comes out of this dark world and wins the respect of Helen, and finally shows his total involvement and absolute commitment in his relationship with Bober family.

WORKS CITED


Malamud, Bernard. The Assistant. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981. Print. All the following references to The Assistant are to this edition, and figures in parentheses refers to page numbers.