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Suffering, Struggle and Loneliness: A Passage to the Threshold of Redemption and New Life

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Abstract

This article attempts to study the suffering and alienation faced by the protagonist in 'The Assistant' and how it becomes instrumental in redefining and searching out a new identity for himself. It is a novel written by a famous Jewish American fictionist Bernard Malamud. His fictional world mostly revolves around the lives of the people who suffer endlessly and intensely in their lives to combat the hardships associated with modern existence. Suffering and compassion becomes instrumental in the process of their transcendence and search for a new life. They suffered to secure the human values and also to universalize the importance of humanity which was lost somewhere in the post World War scenario amidst the blind material pursuits of modern man. Thus Malamud's characters after acknowledging love as redemptive and sacrifices as uplifting, try to breakthrough the barriers of personal isolation by entering into meaningful human relationships, living in a world of interpersonal relationships and reaffirming their faith in the goodness of others, they try to redefine their lives and search out a new identity for themselves.

Keywords: suffering; alienation; compassion; transcendence; isolation; redemptive

Introduction:

Bernard Malamud is one of the most widely acclaimed Jewish American writers of the post World War decades. He was born in America as the son of Russian Jewish immigrant parents. He received his college education in the City College and Columbia University in New York. The impressions of his creative ability became apparent in his early school days, when he started writing stories that were published in his School Magazine. For a short period, he taught in Bennington College and Harvard University also. It was the time when his earlier works came out



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and gained immediate success. This inspired him to couple his career of literary creativity and along with imparting education to youth.

His contemporaries like Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth and J.D Salinger confine their portrayal only to the problems of an exile Jew but Malamud used Jewishness as a metaphor of suffering humanity. His Jewishness universally symbolizes the pitiable plight of modern man who suffers extremely in the cruel hands of modernization and materialism leading to alienation, isolation, loneliness and a sense of rootlessness. Malamud himself observed,

“I am an American, I’m a Jew and I write for all men. A novelist has to or is built himself a cage.” All Malamudian characters have one thing in common, their suffering. Charles Alva Hoyt has written “Suffering of the Jew is to Bernard Malamud the stuff and substance of his art.”

Reflections of Existential Tenets in the Literary Genius of Malamud - Malamud today occupies a very secured place among the writers of post World War II Jewish literary renaissance. Although he has written most of his novels and stories centering around the lives of Jews, but it is a fact that he is least concerned with being a Jew as with being human. The protagonists of his fictional world are mostly the individuals struggling hard for survival and they are all symbolized as poor Jews. His creative genius is widely influenced by Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical movement which gained momentum in the 20th century especially after the end of two World Wars when the World was standing almost on the verge of chaos and collapse. As a philosophy it mainly concerns itself with disillusionment and despair of modern man.

The Oxford Dictionary defines Existentialism as “The philosophy or the theory that humans are free and responsible for their own actions in a world without meaning” (277).

The different tenets of existentialism seem to cast a major influence on Malamud’s writings. “For the existentialists neither universal systems of moral order nor the influence of society and social custom can provide meaning for individual’s life, each person must find meaning himself” (Hershinow). But each individual can search an identity and a new life for himself only through love and compassion and not through reason. Hershinow very aptly remarks, “As a writer influenced by existentialism, Malamud demonstrates an implicit respect for self. His protagonists characteristically transcend the disorder that surrounds them, finding meaning in the power of love and moral commitment.” Similarly Marc Ratner writes, “The general theme of Malamud’s



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work is the humanistic value of suffering as a way toward man's ennoblement and enlightenment."

Victoria Aarons says, "Bernard Malamud is the moralist, the humanist. For Malamud...(compassion) is central to the Jewish and human enterprise. For what it means to be human, is, in Malamud's universe, what it means to be Jewish."

Sufferings of Frank Alpine: A Path Towards his Redemption:

One of Malamud's masterpieces, 'The Assistant' was published in 1957. It is a classic of its kind. The novel mainly projects the possibility of change and regeneration in humans. It is the story of a poor Jewish grocer Morris Bober, his gentile assistant Frank Alpine and their endless suffering in the whole course of their lives. As the story begins Frank Alpine is portrayed as a sinful man who along with one of his companions Ward Minogue rob Morris by knocking at his head and making him unconscious. But later on he repents his sinful deed by becoming Morris assistant and to serve him for free. Frank's character is full of contrasts. On one hand he nourishes an inherent inclination towards committing sins and other immoral deeds but on the other hand he longs intensely for spiritual transformation and moral upliftment. Frank Alpine finds himself completely torn between the two opposing ends of his nature. He feels utterly lonely and devastated and longs for self identification. After joining Morris Bober as his assistant he understands the importance of compassion, forbearance and selfless suffering. In existentialists view also man can achieve his worth only through the process of tough trails accompanied with suffering and anguish. Malamudian characters gradually understand that suffering is the inevitable part of life and thus they evolve out as an enlightened embodiment of pure human virtues like love and compassion for others. After the successive episodes of trials Frank Alpine gradually acknowledges to himself that American interpretation of success in terms of material gains is merely an illusion and can never provide an individual the spiritual contentment. Frank Alpine follows his spiritual father Morris Bober by adopting his humane qualities. Morris despite of his meagre existence, loneliness, frustration, bad luck and travail maintains his unshattered belief in humanity. The only difference between them is that Morris stands as an outstanding example of selfless compassion all his life, Frank takes time and struggles hard to reach that point. But ultimately he finds the way to his redemption by appreciating the values of pain and selfless suffering which results in the birth of a new personality and self identity.



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Conclusion:

Thus, Malamud is basically a humanist who repeatedly reaffirms his faith in the essential virtues of humans like selfless love, compassion, fellow feeling and endurance of pain for the sake of others as a means of regeneration and the attainment of salvation. According to him the essence of every religion is to convey the essential goodness of human heart. Frank Alpine, despite his criminal past endures suffering and bears pain for others as they are instrumental in his regeneration into a 'new personality'. He buries his former self and evolves to identify his natural self.

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