

# I Suffer For You: Survival Through Sufferings In Bernard Malamud's The Assistant.

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## **Abstract**

*Life is a tragedy full of joy- stated by Bernard Malamud, one of the most important Jewish-American writers, while explaining the characteristic mixture of sorrow and comedy in his works. His parents are Russian Immigrants. His writings have universal appeal. Malamud is mainly preoccupied with the complex faith of being a Jew. The major concerns of Malamud's heroes are suffering, commitment and responsibility. Despite their guilt-ridden past, they suffer for a new life. Suffering enabled by their commitment and gratitude towards a more perfect life. These acts of heroism are not acts of self, but derived from or created responsibility towards another soul. The moral vision of Malamud synthesizes values common to Judaic, Greek and Christian traditions. Thus, it is pertinent to not that all the major Malamudian characters to become more human through their journey of sufferings. They offers the possibility of humanism for the sufferers and that is central to the moral vision. In this article I would like to discuss the characters of Bernard Malamud, with special reference to his second novel The Assistant. How they fight to survive and how they face the obstacles being a Jew and Refugee is my focus. Malamud's characters do not consider suffering as a curse for them rather, a boon to bring the best in man.*

**Key Words:** Bernard Malamud, Sufferings, New Life, Jew, Survival.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The novel remains a hymn to the Jewish immigrant experience, a gate into a mostly vanished world told with keen insight and infinite sympathy. It tells the story of how a person trying hard to transform himself. Shortly after Frank Alpine joins the grocery, he reflects on Morris's universal battle for life. The novel revolves a fight that every people may be accustomed to. We all know that to try and do to be good yet we always lose ourselves to temptation, to induce a shortcut, to possess it easy. Handy in The Fiction of Bernard Malamud comments that, "Each of Malamud's protagonists experiences an awakening to the possibility of a fuller existence than the one he has been living and that awakening begins a quest for existence, one which comprises the dramatic struggle central to the novel" (Handy, p.68).

Although every religion teaches human values of compassion and love, the Jewish history has showered more importance to it. Malamud was acclaimed for his short stories, which are often set in a very dreamlike urban ghetto of immigrant Jews. He conveys the utter lost and pathetic state of the German Jewish refugees who had been forced to leave their homes and find sanctuary in other countries. For a few years, these people had been welcomed by other countries and given meagre yet sustainable jobs and accommodations. But then as war threatened to interrupt out and Hitler's word became law in Germany. As situation become worse these people were not allowed entry into other countries and were persecuted in their own. Malamud depict the plight of refugees in many of his stories. . Here we can meet some of Malamud's characters, their dilemmas and how they survive and overcome at last.

"What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said,

" I suffer for you," Morris said calmly. (Malamud, p.115)

Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant* tells the story of a poor Jewish grocer named Morris Bobber and his gentile assistant, Frank Alpine. For Morris, suffering is an unfortunate but necessary part of life. Through suffering, one is in a position to spiritually transcend the pain and see the meaningful absolute thing about life. Both the characters suffer intensely within the course of the novel. The setting and many details of *The Assistant* are inspired by incidents from Malamud's childhood. A baby stealing quarters from the till, and his father catching him at it and forcing him to pay the cash back can have counted as an example. Times were tough during the Depression years, and like Morris, Max faced lonely days in which customers were few. As Bernard Sherman says:

All Bernard Malamud's fiction seem to be based on a single affirmation, dispute the disappointments, sorrow, pain and suffering, life is truly worth living. His work may be best understood in the context of mid- twentieth century literature. (Critical Survey 15)

When the novel begins Frank and his partner Ward Minogue made a robbery in Morris's shop, and knock him down with a blow to the top, and consequently he falls down conscious. However Frank repents his act because he is not that very bad deep down, and thus he voluntarily becomes Morris's assistant without any condition. He is torn between his tendency to try and do bad and his desire to try and do good. It's the honest life time of Morris, which is filled with sympathy for others despite all his sufferings and dilemmas, which helps Frank to get his own goodness and to feel compassion for others. The paper aims at critically analyzing the theme of suffering, redemption and survival in the novel *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud.

#### *Morris Bober, Frank Alpine and Helen Bober*

Morris Bober is the moral center of this novel. He is a kind and generous person who believes that people should sympathize with each other, and not lie to each other. Morris is an ironic hero. Despite the fact that he was a supporter of the novel, he did not get anything important or won big battles. Morris's character was determined by an implicit change in the hand given to him. This is a hand characterized by economic difficulties and the death of a beloved son, but Morris accepted it without much difficulty. For Morris, pain is an undesirable but necessary part of life. In this way, Morris bring forth a lesson to everyone that is, not yield in front of difficulties rather we can overcome heartache and see the significant beauty of life. Morris practices these values every day. He did not like to be trapped in a failed grocery store, but he thanked God for the existence. In a world where honesty and success do not meet and do not go together, his life should collapse from a material point of view. Morris's own final assessment of his life is one of discontentment:

He thought of his life with sadness. For his family he had not provided, the poor man's disgrace. He thought of Helen. It would be terrible if she became an old maid. He moaned a little, thinking of Frank. His mood was of regret. I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth. (Malamud, p.200)

Frank Alpine is perhaps the most important person in the novel. He is the assistant that indicates in the title of the novel. Frank has evolved from a rude character into a man of kindness and elegance that motivates the movement of the novel. In a heist against Morris Bobber, Frank arrives at a beaver store to reward him for a grocery store. At the same time, Frank's actions have some masochistic aspects, and they are trying to punish themselves for mistakes. Frank tried to do good, but his dishonesty was unstoppable. A shoplifter constantly reveals the extreme difference between what he missed and what he actually does. Frank sometimes feels guilty, but theft is like a bottle that unknowingly drops into your pocket when you steal a little. According to Helterman:

The store is Frank's monastery, his tiny Spartan room, a cell. As Frank begins to take on the virtues of Bober, the cell became a place of monastic illumination. Each act of suffering for Bober and the rest of mankind strips away Frank's worldliness. (Helterman p.50)

Helen Bober, Morris Bobber's daughter, another important character within the novel incorporates a classical name that doesn't reflect her Yiddish background. Helen's name evokes the thought of ancient Greece. Like Helen of Troy, Helen Bober may be a figure that many men become interested in. Furthermore, Helen's name suggests her desire to check the classics herself, a desire that has been thwarted by her family's poverty. Helen is that the character who links the owners of the grocery to the other people within the neighborhood. Helen leaves the grocery every day and heads intent on work as a secretary somewhere. She maintains relationship with Nat Pearl and Louis Karp. It is through her interaction with those men that their true natures become known and it's also through her interaction with their families that Malamud is in a position to explore their family dynamics. Despite her ability to go away the grocery daily, Helen is perpetually unsatisfied. She clings to novels and visits library several times every week, in an endeavor to use literature as a method to escape the mediocrity of her life. Helen may be a dreamer; she doesn't always accurately understand people when she meets them. Her strong longing to escape poverty initiated her love towards many person.

Helen also initially loves Frank Alpine even though she isn't ready to see him for who he is. She believes that he really will attend college because it is what she wants and fails to imagine that the presents he gives her were stolen because she doesn't want them to be. It's only after Frank's vicious treatment of her and Morris's death that Helen slowly involves a replacement realization about Frank and Nat. As the symbol of goodness, Morris remains poor but triumphs and hailed spiritually. Morris may have died a modest man who felt sort of a failure, but his true success as an individual being may be measured in the transformation of Frank Alpine. It's under Morris's influence that Frank turned from being man of ethical degeneration to a decent man who has accepted other's burden of suffering out of a commitment to love, compassion and responsibility. Thus, suffering has exemplary as well as personal value and Malamud has affirmed this idea throughout his novels.

Morris Bobber in *The Assistant* and Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* retain their gift of suffering even in helpless situations. This keeps their minimal existences from dissolving into despair. Moreover, this gift of suffering is transferable and transformational. Bobber's finally provides a model for his wayward assistant's in disciplined nature. Morris suffers especially due to his honesty and integrity. But another member of the family of the Jews, Karp, made a

fortune by founding a liquor store, Morris did not encourage the line of business they have chosen:

The grocer, on the other hand, had never altered his fortune, unless degrees of poverty meant alteration, for luck and he were, if not natural enemies, not good friends. He labored long hours, was the soul of honesty- he could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock. (Philip Roth p.19)

In *The Assistant* Morris stands as an incarnation of compassion who lives and dies for others within the midst of crushing suffering. Showing love and care towards the Bobber's family, Frank Alpine now takes the role of Morris Bober after his death. It is pertinent to note that Malamud's philosophy of suffering is exemplified very clearly within the character of Morris and Frank, who transformed as one who have the creed of suffering for others. According to Ihab Hassan,

Both Morris Bober and Frank Alpine as typical of eiron, collector of injustices. Morris regrets that he has failed to support the education of his daughter Helen and come to depend on her job instead. In spite of his poverty, bad luck and travails, Morris Bober does not lose faith in humanity. His attitude to life characterizes compassion even at the cost of self-effacement. (Ihab Hassan, p.61)

However, the period of transformation is not as easy as Frank, because he had undergone lots of bitter experience throughout his life. But the ultimate result of suffering is instructive and it fulfills his aim and provides him satisfaction. Here the novelist's understanding and compassion towards the people around him makes the figure of the Jew as an unflinching sufferer. Malamud really makes us sympathize with these characters. Morris and his sincere dedication to both his grocery shop and his family, Frank and his desire to change to right and overcome his inclination to form bad decisions, Helen and her gratitude towards her parents, which competes together with her desire for independence and freedom from a secular life. Finally, what suffering has gifted most importantly the moral growth of characters like Frank Alpine and Helen Bober. Commending on Malamud's philosophy of life, M. Rajagopalachari finds, "it is in defense of the human that his fiction prescribes the value of compassion revealing "what is to be human, to be humane". (Rajagopalachari p.27)

Morris Bober stands a symbol of Malamud's humanistic principles. He is the embodiment of the spirit of compassion and Jewish ethics. F.W. Dupee aptly states: "The Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration. Therefore, any man who suffers who greatly and also longs to be better than he is can called be a Jew" (Dupee 37). For him, business was not a medium of making money and profit but a medium of involving service to humanity. When Morris, seeing Karp's thriving business, wished the shop would bum to the bottom although it shamed him. But later he is anguished for the same. His sympathetic response, however, grows not so much out of his guilt for wishing Karp, a foul fortune because it does out of his genuine feeling for another's suffering.

Frank is motivated by a mix of love and lust and repeatedly proclaims his like to Helen, trying to justify his actions and make her understand. His feelings for Helen are ambivalent. He lusts for her, but at the identical time he wants to safeguard her. Within the park, the roles are meshed when he defends Helen from Ward Minogue's attacks, but violates her honor himself. Instead of fulfillment, he experiences a good loss, loss of Helen, of love and of self-respect. "In his narrative the Jew, vulnerable historical subject and depository of an unrealizable law, sets himself up as the character of the existential experience of the contemporary man", (Cristina Nilsson p.58) says Cristina Nilsson on her analysis of Bernard Malamud.

*Transfiguration of Frank Alpine*

It is significant to note the changes in Frank Alpine, he is guilt-ridden at having raped Helen, and having betrayed his values and principles. The sense of agony increases in Frank and that is why he begs Helen for her forgiveness. He had murdered the last of his good hopes in an exceedingly single terrible act within the park. Frank is being killed by his conscience. When Morris is admitted within the hospital for pneumonia, Frank labors within the store incessantly. He tells Ida Morris that he will stay within the store until her husband recovers from his illness. He doesn't want any wages. So he dedicates himself to support Helen and her mother.

Morris, stands as a man of upright character. He is honest in his thoughts, feelings, deeds and behavior. The miserable poverty and unflinching moral zeal of Malamud's parentage shapes Morris Bober. His father's predicament suits that of Morris who lives and dies penniless in his store without moving far away from his moral integrity. Even when Frank steals from the shop, Morris never takes him to task. He holds himself responsible for the crimes of Frank. Morris thinks that since he pays him poorly, Frank is unable to satisfy the daily needs of his life without stealing. Morris suffers mainly because of his honesty. Frank gave up the concept of becoming a criminal and he decided to reform himself. He understands that Morris was the soul of honesty. He is a man who dead against his guiles and tricks. He once asked Morris to do some tricks on his customers so as to form profit. Morris was unable to simply accept the concept of earning money by dishonest ways. He asked Frank:

Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me? He further said: when a man is honest, he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel (Malamud 84)

Frank takes care of both Helen and Ida by working at employment in day and night, after

the death of Morris Bober. Once living only within the past, now he lives within the future to be forgiven. Even Helen becomes aware of Frank's transfiguration when she happens to work out a skinny overworked Frank behind the counter of the store where he worked in the dark. All of Frank's actions at the beginning of the novel are of an ulterior purpose, either to reduce the guilt or to seduce Helen. Frank Alpine hives up thieving, the instant he sets his eyes on Helen Bober through the grocery window. It's for her sake that despite Ida's constant nagging and indifference, he is worked more time each day within the grocery. Frank's impatience for Helen, knows no bounds and Frank thought that if she ever fell for him, it might change his life the way he wanted to be. Frank takes the responsibility for Helen and her mother. He amends himself by being converted to Judaism. The renewal of human life is depicted within the love of Frank Alpine and Helen Bober. As Samuel Irving aptly says: "Purgation in humility, rebirth through love is Frank's purpose". (Irving 90). Suffering brings changes and hope in Frank's attitude towards life.

It is pertinent to note the transfiguration of Frank Alpine towards the end of the novel. Frank falls on the grave of Morris Bober and when he rises, symbolically Morris rises again and Frank becomes Morris Bober. Morris Bober converts Frank Alpine to, who being a Jew means practically taking responsibilities of Morris, his wife, his daughter and particularly his grocery store. Being a Jew, Frank embodies the place of Morris Bober and brings new life to the female Bobbers. It was Frank's decision to become a disciplined moral person, leads his conversion to Judaism. Through the experience of his own moral life Morris suggests the right way for his vision. For Malamud, to be a Jew is to be the moral man which is an unacceptable fact in the scheme. H.E. Francis says:

Frank's conversion is important because he discovers not alone, but through another human being a law of conduct which might give meaning to the burden of suffering to life. As he accepts faith, he paradoxically eradicates barriers within theologies (Francis p.94).

Frank does have a kind of goodness that competes with his criminal instincts. He despises Morris for his suffering, but at the same time, he forces himself in an attempt to solve the misery of Morris's existence. Almost against his will, he thinks and acts like Morris Bober who lives a life worth living. After Morris Bober's accident he adds money each day to the receipts so that when Ida Bober wrote figures down in her book each night she would not feel bad. In another incident, when he meets the desperately ill Ward Minogue on the street, Frank is so moved by Ward's need of money that he gives his last three cents to him. In these experiences, he transcends himself and responds sympathetically to the needs of others, without regard for his self. He has discovered the responsibilities that love entails and he chooses to accept and fulfil them with discipline and with love.

Malamud seems to suggest that suffering deepens moral awareness and stresses on the values of love and compassion in his moral world. Morris Bober's ethical soundness aggravates Frank's agony at his moral lapses in his relationship with the grocer and his daughter. Malamud's vision encompasses human pain and human potential. He captures the bitter reality of suffering and shows the possibility for spiritual growth through such suffering. Judaism merely provides Malamud with a practical means of enduring the suffering necessary for salvation. Malamud's philosophy of suffering and compassion is exemplified in Morris Bober. Frank enquires Morris what a Jew means. According to Morris, a Jew is man of good heart and one who follows the Jewish laws, the Torah; he is interested in the spirit of the law. Morris consider himself a true Jew. He says:

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? For everybody should be the best, not only for you and me. We are not animals. This is why we need the law. This is what a Jew believes. (Malamud p.112)

Malamud's *The Assistant* is also a suggestive work with the Judaic experiences of the main characters. In this novel, he relates the experience of an orphaned Italian youth who after having attacked the Jewish grocer Morris Bober is struck by greater remorse that the rest of his life is devoted to the Jew and his family until he becomes a Jew himself. He finds grace and dignity through his contacts and sacrifices material prosperity and his family's comfort because he cannot exploit others. He even berates himself for envying his neighbor's success. Frank asks Morris, "what is a Jew anyway?" This is a central question of the novel. Frank thinks that being a Jew means being a victim - that is why he said, " they were born prisoners who lived ... to suffer" (Malamud 178). This irritates Frank. Slowly he comes to realize that although they do embrace suffering, the Jews like Morris are not victims, but heroes. They suffer not for themselves, but for others. As Morris tells Frank, " I suffer for you ... you suffer for me "(Malamud 179). It is Morris's opinion - and Malamud's -that being a Jew means to "do what is right, to be honest, to be good...to other people" (Malamud 152). According to our author being a Jew means to be a fully realized human being, to have compassion for others, a capacity which we all have inside us. "All men are Jews, whether they realize it or not", Malamud said. When Frank converts to Judaism at the end of the novel, it is the final step in his transformation into a moral and compassionate human being.

The major concerns of Malamud's heroes are suffering, commitment and responsibility. Despite their guilt-ridden past, they suffer for a new life. Suffering enabled by their commitment and gratitude towards a more perfect life. These acts of heroism are not acts of self, but derived from or created responsibility towards another soul. The moral vision

of Malamud synthesizes values common to Judaic, Greek and Christian traditions. Thus it is pertinent to not that all the major Malamudian characters to become more human through their journey of sufferings. They offers the possibility of humanism for the sufferers and that is central to the moral vision. According to Sidney Richman:

They are copied not from any models on earth but from an idea in the mind of Bernard Malamud. This idea brings about a grand simplification or specialization of historical fact (Richman p.158).

Malamud has not restricted himself to a selected ethnos though the sufferings of the Jews have influenced him to a good extent. But he has depicted his belief that men generally are the victims of fate and bad luck. In his works, Malamud depicts regionalism, human sufferings, ethnic barriers and complexity of life. He moves on to probe human misery generally. The grim and tragic struggle of a Jew for a life of love and compassion may well be the struggle of any man within the twentieth century. Thus, Malamud has universalized the concept of suffering. Malamud's interest lies in capturing the spirit of Jewish life and moral experience seen in suffering and compassion. His heroes becomes the symbols of struggling humanity, partaking in its ambiguous fate. It's through suffering that Malamud's characters come to grasp the meaning and relevance of their history. Compassion which is that the underlying principle of Malamud's humanistic vision, pervades his entire creative output. Abramson compares Malamud with the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky. He notes:

Through suffering one can achieve redemption. For Dostoevsky, however, the suffering is not as clearly chosen as in Frank's, although both authors stress the importance of suffering borne on account of love, this being the most important element. If salvation is to be at all possible. (Edward Abramson, p.32)

Malamud did not portrait compassion as a strain as in other Jewish writers. Suffering for Malamud becomes nihilistic and corrosive if it is not endowed compassionately. Constant suffering has fostered the values of compassion and charity. They gave hands to the needy brethren, not only Jews but also non-Jews. Being civilized implies a way of fellow feeling but lack of compassion is that the root reason behind all problems within the present. Malamud believes that man will endure and prevail because he features a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance. In *The Assistant*, Morris Bober could be a compassion incarnate who lives, and dies for others within the midst of crushing suffering. After his death, Frank Alpine, his gentile assistant, performs the role of Morris Bober, works day and night out of kindness and love for the Bober family.

Humanistic value of suffering as a way towards man's ennoblement and enlightenment are the general theme of Malamud's work. In the Jewish view, man is born with the nature to sin, but he can redeem himself by his own effort. The possibility of redemption lies in his hands. There is dignity and moral growth out of hardship, injustice and existential agony. Malamud continues to emphasize the fundamental worth of life and possibility of humanity. Frank Alpine sees the emblems of his own desperate nature within the mirror and his ultimate burden. Finally, Frank's history before his apprenticeship resolves itself in to a mode of mixed memories of desire and failure that became obscured by guilt. While rehearsing a confession to Morris Bober, Frank indicates the character of his earlier experiences:

Well, after certain bad breaks through various causes, mostly his own mistakes - he was piled high with regrets - after many such failures, though he tried every way to free himself from them, usually he failed; so after a time he gave up and let himself be a bum. (Malamud p.248).

Frank gave up the thought of becoming a criminal and he decided to reform himself. He observed that Morris was the soul of honesty. He is good enough to stand against worse and tricks. He once asked Morris to do some tricks on his customer so as to create profit. Morris was unable to simply accept the thought of earning money by dishonest means. Once he asked Frank:

‘Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?’ He further said: ‘when a man is honest, he don’t worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel.’ (Malamud p.84).

Though poor, Morris Bobber has unconditional faith in traditional values of honesty and truth. He never thought to plan evil. From Morris, Frank experiences the futility and vagueness of cheating others. It is his discipleship under Morris Bobber which results the whole change of Frank's character. Morris and Helen have a major role in Frank Alpine's transition and regeneration to a better man. In the beginning of the novel, Frank appears as a robber in the Bobber's grocery, but when the novel concludes Frank is change enough to repent for his deed against Morris Bobber. Frank's conversion to Judaism can be treated his sincere interest to be more kind and poor. Moreover through his conversion he proclaims he too be a part of the sufferers in this world.

In the transition period, Frank indulge between his innermost thoughts, desires, guilt and conflicts, which struggles together with his awakening conscience. Slowly, he evaluates himself, reflecting, justifying and eventually gaining a way of his own morality. Frank undergoes the existential impact of intellectual and moral suffering, in addition as of the physical suffering in existence. As he slowly becomes recreated within the image of Morris Bobber, his suffering begins to require meaning. The emotional part of the novel happens when Morris says that he has already doubted Frank Alpine's involvement in the robbery. Thus, Frank's desire to confess is matched by Morris Bobber's desire to forgive.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The novels of Bernard Malamud center on the suffering that results from the conflict between human freedom and human limitations with the stress on the latter rather than the former. His characters are complex human beings whose flaws are often the source of their pain and their predicament. Frank Alpine in *The Assistant*, Seymour Levin in *A New Life*, Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* strive to escape from a disgraceful or unfulfilling past and to accomplish a new life of solace and fulfilment. They achieve new dignity, turning defeat into victory by assuming a burden of self-sacrifice. The characters of Malamud acquire self-respect, recognition and even influence when they assume responsibility for others. Despite their environment, they still possess their own humanitarian values. When Malamud's victims are given a choice between hurting themselves or others, they chose the former option. Malamud's love for fellow human beings shines through most of the characters he created. His ability to persuade the readers to the reality of his characters, their emotions, deeds, words, and surroundings remain astonishing. His identification with his people tends to be perfect because they are mostly Jews of a certain class. Malamud is always concerned with the people living in great misery. Some of them are crushed by it, but most survive through hope or by sheer fortitude. They learn to be compassionate, and compassion is first of the virtues for Malamud.

In the world of Malamud's fiction, the qualities of compassion, love, humanism, tolerance and understanding give meaning and strength to one's life and can save man from man within the present world. *The Assistant* illuminates the great issues and decision of a life set in an exceedingly small intimate world. It pictures a blazing insight into the daily aches



and indignities of man, which add up to a sort of nobility- a variety of aspiration. Engaging bitter struggle, Malamud's protagonists finally realize that it was love, responsibility and compassion make life more purposeful than other materialistic comforts. Through the narration of Frank Alpine, Seymour Levin and Yakov Bok in his novels, Malamud shows the likelihood for the spiritual growth through intense suffering. His heroes suffer deeply but they are also secular men because their suffering is not always voluntary, but happened wholly for exalted reasons or blessed by great rewards. The Jewish tradition give importance to universal justice, compassion and love, and the same they regarded as the basic principles of moral life. Though not a religious Jew, Malamud depicts that Jewishness consists in suffering for one another which forms an essential quality of compassion. So when we go through the novels we can delve in the world of these protagonists and wonders how Malamud creates the defense of man and human values in his novels.

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