

Transcendentalism as seen in Malamud's "*The Assistant*"

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ABSTRACT:

This article tries to present the different varieties of Transcendence observed in the novel The Assistant of Bernard Malamud. Not only that, it also attempts to prove on how such transcendence of the characters occur by fixing an idealistic or Utopian aim in their minds. A short plan of the article can be seen as follows:

CHARACTERS	IDEALISTIC/UTOPIAN AIM	TYPE OF TRANSCENDENCE
1. Morris Bober	Perfect Jew	Spiritual Transcendence
2. Frank Alpine	Earlier – St. Francis of Assisi Later – Morris Bober	Moral Transcendence
3. Helen Bober	Well educated, realized creature.	Empirical Transcendence

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Literature, as seen till today, serves in a way to project the views of mankind. As changes occur in man's development in all the areas, like thoughts, conditions and so on, the literature too changes accordingly.

Man always hopes and longs for something better than the already existing things. He needs betterments in all the walks of his life. One of the core beliefs of the Transcendentalist is to go beyond one's level of the self and to attain certain self fixed goals. Rightness, goodness and betterment are some of the core principles of transcendentalism.

This transcendentalism was a philosophical movement which developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in the eastern region of the United States of America. Transcendentalists believe that goodness can be found inherent in both man and nature. This idea opposes the common idea that man is basically 'sinful' or 'fallen'. They further believe that Nature and its manifestations have to be conquered. They had strong convictions that people are at their best when truly self-reliant and independent. They also believed that individuals were truly capable of creating wholly original insights with little attention to the existing thoughts. Empiricism and Idealism also get infused in this idea.

Transcendentalists believe in wisdom which is gained purely through personal experiences. And they always hold a view that man lives in expectation related to Utopian views. Man, according to them, keeps an Ideal self in front, as his goal and tries to transcend from all the sufferings and hurdles to that Utopia.

Bernard Malamud in most of his novels employs this theme of Transcendence of the self enhanced by Utopianism or Idealism. Now who is this Bernard Malamud? Bernard Malamud, one of America's most important novelists and short-story writers, was born in Brooklyn in 1914. He was educated at Columbia University. From 1940 to 1949 he taught in various New

York schools, and then joined the staff of Oregon State University, where he stayed until 1961. Thereafter he taught at Bennington State College, Vermont. His remarkable and uncharacteristic first novel, *The Natural*, appeared in 1952. But it was with publication of *The Assistant* (1957 winner of the Rosenthal Award and the Daroff Memorial Award) that Malamud received international acclaim. His other works include *The Magical Barrel* (1958, winner of the National Book Award), *Idiot's First* (1963, short stories), *The Fixer* (1966, winner of a second National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize), *The Tenants* (1971), *Dublin's Lives* (1979) and *God's Grace* (1982). Bernard Malamud was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, USA, in 1964, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1967, and won a major Italian award, the Premio Mondello, in 1985. Bernard Malamud died in 1986 at the age of seventy-one.

With the influence of his Jewish background, Malamud inherits a bitter humour that often appears in the self-mockery of his characters but it is also forgiving of the self and others. His poetic sensibility blended with a tinge of compassion amalgamates with a sense of grace achieved through suffering. Malamud has stated that "All men are Jews," a metaphor for the universality of alienation, suffering, and the moral compulsion for men to make the very best of their lives within the limitations and ambiguities of human existence. Malamud has rarely created specific Jewish social contexts, usually preferring to examine the tensions of Jews adrift in gentile surroundings. Malamud presents the moral dilemma in his fictions and he combines realism and symbolism. He gives realistic happenings a quality of magic and ritual in *The Assistant*.

The novel taken here for consideration is *The Assistant* of Bernard Malamud which is his second novel. It reflects his ethnic familial background of Jewish. Malamud always objected to being called a "Jewish writer," because he has found the term too limiting. Malamud's main premise as a writer was to keep civilization from destroying itself. He worked for humanism and against nihilism. The novel "The Assistant" presents the tradition of Yiddish folklore. Morris Bober represents the moral center of the novel "The Assistant". Bernard Malamud portrays the sufferings and struggles of the immigrants through the character Morris Bober.

The Assistant tells the story of an immigrant grocer. Morris Bober, who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He emigrated from Russia in his teenage years and met his wife Ida in New York. Their grocery recently has fallen on hard times because a new store has opened across the street and is taking their customers. It is not adequate the money earning from their grocery shop to run their life. So, the Bobers also rely upon the wages of their daughter, Helen, who works as a secretary. We come to know in the first sentence of *The Assistant* that the street "was dark though night had ended." This description in many ways captures the larger condition of Bernard Malamud's fiction. Writing after the grimmest struggles of immigrant life, Malamud conjures a world in which the long shadow of suffering still conceals the sun.

In the opening of the novel, two men rob Morris's grocery and knock him with a blow to the head. He is severely injured. After this, a man named Frank Alpine arrives in the neighbourhood. He has come from in the West. After the severe injury, Morris reopens the store. Frank comes there each morning to help him drag in the heavy milk crates. Morris offers him an opportunity to work in his grocery. Frank asks Morris let him work for free so that he could learn the trade. But Morris says no and Frank disappears. Soon after, Morris

observes that a quart of milk and two rolls are stolen from his deliveries each morning. After a week, Morris informs the police because he cannot find the culprit. On the next day, Morris finds Frank Alpine sleeping in his cellar. Frank admits to stealing the milk and bread out of hunger. Morris feeds Frank and lets him sleep in the grocery for the night. The next morning, Morris slips while dragging in the milk and passes out. Frank rescues him then he puts on the grocer's apron and starts working in the store. During the two weeks in which Morris was recovering, Frank earns much more money than Morris had done.

When Morris comes back to his grocery shop after his recovery, Frank moves upstairs to a small room which was rented by the poor immigrant Italian couple, Nick and Tessie. Morris wants to pay Frank because his business is so successful. Frank feels guilty about being paid because unknown to the grocer, Frank has been stealing money. Furthermore, it was he and Ward Minogue, a boy whose father is a local detective, who had robbed the grocery.

Frank becomes interested in Helen Bober. Helen recently lost her virginity to a local Jewish boy, Nat Pearl, whose parents own a candy store. But she shunned him after learning that he wanted her only for sex. The other local Jewish boy on the street, Louis Karp, opines Helen to marry him, but she is not interested. Frank woos Helen by meeting her at the library, which she visits twice a week. Ultimately, they start spending a lot of time together and even started to become intimate. When Frank opts for more physical attachment, Helen refuses any progress towards sex between them, because she weighs true love more than that of carnal pleasure. So in order to win her love, Frank tries to control his sexual urges.

Morris Bober likes working with Frank. The two men tell stories to each other during the day. One day, Morris suspects Frank of stealing because revenues do not equal what Morris thinks that they should be. He watches the activities of Frank closely. By his guilty consciousness, Frank has decided to repay all the money he has stolen. One day, Frank places six dollars back in the register, but when he realizes that he will need some money for that night, he steals a dollar back. At that time, Morris catches him and is heartbroken. Still, he orders Frank to leave. Helen goes to meet Frank at the park in the same night. She has decided that she loves him and will have sex with him. But Ward Minogue comes there and tries to rape her. Frank appears and rescues her, but proceeds to rape her himself.

The next day, while Morris Bober sleeping in his apartment with the radiator unlit, deluging his rooms with gas and almost killing himself. Frank and Nick Fuso save him. Morris contracts pneumonia and has to go to the hospital. Frank keeps the store open for the weeks when Morris is sick. Business is terrible because two Norwegians have just reopened the competing grocery and all the customers have gone there. Frank gives all of his personal savings to the grocery and works all night long at a different job to keep it afloat. Still, when Morris returns to the shop he makes Frank leave. Morris himself then tries to save the business by finding another job, but he cannot. A mysterious man appears one night offering to burn the store down so that Morris can collect the insurance money, but Morris turns him down. Later Morris tries to light such a fire himself, but nearly burns himself to death before Frank appears and rescues him. Morris again orders Frank out.

One night, Ward Minogue, who has been diagnosed with diabetes and who is acting desperately, sneaks into the Karp's liquor store through a broken back window. After getting drunk, Ward accidentally sets the store on fire. Karp's store and building are ruined. The next day, Karp, who has insurance, offers to buy Morris's store and grocery so that he can reopen.

Morris feels happy and goes out to shovel snow for the pedestrians, although he fails to wear his coat. Later that night, he falls sick and dies three days later from pneumonia.

After Morris's death, Frank Alpine starts running the store. He works all night at a different job and tries everything to make the store work, but times are tough. Still, he decides that he wants to pay for Helen to attend college. At the end of the book, Helen has become friendlier to Frank and seems ready to accept his offer of tuition. Frank himself has changed utterly becoming completely honest and very much like Morris Bober, whose store and philosophies he now embraces. In his final act, Frank Alpine goes to the hospital, has himself circumcised and after Passover becomes a Jew.

If the novel is analyzed carefully, it can be seen that its characters experience the transcendental feeling in their life in different ways. This experience is undergone by them by keeping in mind an Ideal goal and Utopian kind of hope in their mind.

SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE:

Morris Bober, in the novel *The Assistant*, exhibits very clearly this spiritual transcendence. He has learned how to transcend his self and to proceed with grace. Being the main character of the novel, he exhibits strong Jewish impulse. "He seems, as well, to have a kind of spiritual hernia simply from bearing the injustice of the world." (*The Assistant*, vii). Suffering and tolerance; to trust, to love and to change is the ideal Jewish model according to Morris Bober. Thus, Morris struggles hard to reach this Utopian concept.

This went to such an extent, where Frank even began to mistake suffering for Jewishness.

"Why do Jews suffer?" Frank asks Morris one day in the back of the store.

"They suffer", the grocer replies, "because they are Jews."

"What do you suffer for?" Frank asks Morris.

"I suffer for you", the grocer replies. (*The Assistant*, ix)

Morris is not only a serious loser who tolerates his losses and hardships. But he has a type of solid righteous force that shines bright even in dark circumstances. In sticking to his Jewish tenet, to help the stranger for the reason "You were strangers in the land of Egypt." (*The Bible*), he welcomes Alpine, a shady young Italian American who as a matter of fact helped rob him. Morris actually overlooks the battered exterior of the Italyener to the soul within.

This Morris is a sincere, solicitous and empathetic man who lends his service to other people even though the world continuously conveys bad luck to him. His character is stalled as the mould of ethics and it is what Frank Alpine attempts to imitate. In a community characterized by social and economic plights, Morris stands as a substratum of moral support. His store provides the milk and bread that nourishes the community, just as his morals help to treat all people in a benevolent behaviour. That is why he even tried helping Frank even after finding him stealing in his store.

Thus, Morris Bober fully acknowledges the thought of suffering. He sees that it is essential to his self and the world. Through his acceptance, Morris is able to transcend the disciplining effect of his suffering and liberate his self. Thus he attained a spiritual freedom by transcend his self.

MORAL TRANSCENDENCE:

Frank Alpine, another main character in the novel too exhibits experiencing this transcending quality on a moral plane. He uses the novel learning for himself to transcend the shameful wishes of his self and learn to be a fine human being. Frank's common leaning, as exhibited in the beginning of the novel, lean toward dishonesty and lust for Helen. He desires to become like Saint Francis, a Utopian model of goodness, but it is only through a violent fight that he is able to do so. Frank Alpine happens to emerge as the stranger in the Bober's neighbourhood and ultimately takes over their grocery. His effort to have power over his self and his character is the motivating inconsistency of the novel. He is almost shattered between his predisposition to do awful things and his desire to do good things. Thus he venerates Saint Francis of Assisi as a model of good. Yet even while he visualizes of being like the Saint he continues to steal from the grocery. But he is conquered by his guilty conscience. So he decided to settle up all the money he has stolen. He even has done so one day, but fickle mindedly takes back one dollar again from the six dollars he has replaced, considering his need of that money. In the novel, it can also be witnessed, how he struggles to control his desire towards Helen.

Frank initially shows up to be the assistant to Morris' techniques of running the grocery, but in reality becomes an assistant to his ways of life. By the end of the novel, Frank will have fully come to embrace Morris' ethical system. After Morris' death, he starts running the store; works all night at a diverse job and tries everything to make the store work even in tough times. But still, he plans to compensate for Helen to attend college.

Thus, Frank himself has changed utterly becoming completely honest and very much like Morris Bober, whose store and philosophies he embraces later. He even undergoes wonderful conversion as a Jew.

EMPIRICAL TRANSCENDENCE:

Helen Bober, who is the daughter of Ida and Morris Bober, desires to read and turn out to be a great intellectual and become skilled at the classics, but her limited access to college makes her very annoyed. For this reason, Helen becomes a visionary who does not always perceive people and situations correctly. Thus she is short in the level of wisdom. For example, she initially fails to observe that Nat Pearl is not seriously involved in her, which later defeats her after she has sex with him. Next, she seats her own perceptions of Frank upon him, thereby not entirely reading his character correctly. Thus, Helen undergoes a character development of her own that mirror's Frank's in some ways, making her a more realized creature at the end of the novel. Thus, she attains a kind of empirical transcendence.

Thus, the characters discussed above underwent transcendence on various planes keeping a Utopian or idealistic view in front of them.

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