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From Guilt To Redemption: The Search For Identity In *The Assistant*

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Abstract

In American literature of the twentieth century, the idea of identity has taken a central role and has been used primarily in stories that explore the experience of immigrants and their moral transformation. The book *The Assistant* narrates the ethical and psychological path of a young Italian-American drifter Frank Alpine who is slowly changing due to his encounter with Morris Bober a Jewish grocer in Brooklyn. The story contains such themes as guilt, redemption, ethnicity, and human kindness. This research article discusses the way Malamud formulates identity as a moral process as opposed to a particular cultural aspect. The study examines the theme of character development, symbolism and morals in the novel using textual analysis and thematic interpretation. The results show that in the novel identity comes out of suffering, responsibility, and compassion towards other people. In conclusion of the study, it is concluded that Malamud and the way she gives a reflection of an identity demonstrates the general immigrant experience that takes place in America and puts into fore the universal human values.

Keywords: Identity, Jewish identity, redemption, immigrant experience, moral transformation.

I. Introduction

The theme of identity search is quite frequent in the contemporary American literature and especially works addressing the topic of immigrant society and cultural assimilation. Numerous authors have portrayed the mental struggle of those who are trying to find their identity in the society. Bernard Malamud is one of such authors whose works reflect the theme of human woe and change of morality. One of the most important works by Malamud is *The Assistant* novel. The novel was published in the year 1957 and narrates about the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who runs a small grocery shop in Brooklyn and Frank Alpine, a young man who initially helps in robbing his shop but later joins Morris as his assistant. With this correlation, Malamud creates a theme of moral duty, cultural belonging and redemption.

The change of Frank Alpine to a morally disoriented personality to that of a responsible human being is the main part of the story. Another issue that comes out in the novel is the struggle of the immigrant communities in the United States in the twentieth century. There are characters who have to work with the poverty, discrimination, and the force of assimilation, trying to keep the cultural identity.

II. Background of the Author

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) was considered to be one of the most significant American Jewish authors of the twentieth century. His works are often filled with the themes of suffering, moral duty and meaning of life. Ordinary people, being in a moral dilemma and struggling with the social problems appear to be the subject of Malamud fiction. His style of writing is full of realism and symbolism as well as philosophical thought. A lot of critics call the literary philosophy of Malamud the Jewish humanism because it focuses on compassion, morality and responsibility towards other people.

His major works include:

- *The Assistant*
- *The Magic Barrel*
- *The Fixer*

These works explore the universal human struggle for dignity and moral identity.

III. Literature Review

A number of researchers have examined identity and redemption in *The Assistant*.

According to the earlier works, the characters of Malamud are prone to moral change by means of agony and self-examination. Critics believe that the trip of Frank Alpine is exemplary, the symbolical finding of ethical identity. As it has been shown through research on the novel, Jewish moral values manifested as Morris Bober. His integrity and kindness have an effect on the change of Frank. The next important point that critics speak about is the immigrant identity.

The novel describes the challenges of becoming part of the American dream and preserving the cultural tradition among the immigrants. It is also proposed by studies that Malamud employs the bond between Morris and Frank to represent a moral father-son bond, and he focuses on the idea of passing ethical values between generations. Although much has been done regarding the work of Malamud, more intensive studies concerning identity formation in the socio-cultural context of the novel are required.

IV. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the theme of identity in *The Assistant*.
2. To analyze the moral transformation of Frank Alpine.
3. To explore the role of Jewish ethical values in shaping identity.
4. To study the influence of immigrant experiences on the characters.

V. Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative literary analysis** approach.

Research Design

Textual and thematic analysis of the novel.

Sources of Data

- Primary source:
 - The Assistant
- Secondary sources:
 - scholarly articles
 - literary criticism
 - academic journals

Analytical Approach

The analysis focuses on:

- Character development
- Symbolism
- Cultural identity
- Moral transformation

VI. Identity and Moral Transformation

The overall theme of the novel is the quest of identity by the character of Frank Alpine. At the onset of the story, Frank is depicted as a soulless and ethically disoriented person. He is involved in a robbery which hurts Morris Bober. But when Frank sees the honesty and compassion of Morris, he starts feeling guilty and self-reflecting. The transformation that Frank goes through is done slow by slow as he works in the grocery store. He gets to know of duty, sincerity and sympathy. According to the novel, identity is not predetermined as it develops with the ethical decisions and personal development.

VII. Jewish Identity and Ethical Values

The Jewish identity is very important in the novel. Morris Bober is one of the representatives of the moral values that the Jewish tradition is connected to. Morris is honest and caring despite the poverty and tough life he is experiencing. His personality shows that it is better to be ethical than to be material successful. Morris says that it is through ethics and taking care of others that one can be Jewish. The conversion of Frank to Judaism later is an indication that he accepted these ethical values. This change is viewed by critics as the reflection of identity by Malamud as moral category and not ethnic category.

VIII. Alienation and Immigrant Experience

The alienation is another theme that is discussed in the novel. Morris and Frank are both socially isolated. Morris symbolizes the plight of Jewish immigrants who were trying to make ends meet in terms of finances without losing their cultural identity. Frank, conversely, is a symbol of alienation of those people

who do not belong to the society. Their friendship slowly eliminates this feeling of being isolated and brings about personal change.

IX. Symbolism in the Novel

Malamud is applying symbolism to support the theme of identity.

The Grocery Store

The emblem of the store is that of struggle, survival and moral responsibility.

Bread and Milk

These common objects are the symbols of sympathy and human bonding.

Frank's Conversion Frank becomes converted into Christianity as a sign of spiritual renaissance and the end of his identity crusade.

X. Character Analysis

Frank Alpine Frank is the main character of the transformation. His career is the story of contradiction between egoistic and moral duty. Morris Bober Morris is a representation of goodness and kindness. Frank is shown on the right path of redemption by his influence. Helen Bober Helen is a symbol of hope, education and a promising future.

XI. Discussion

The discussion indicates that Malamud introduces identity as a process that is defined by ethical responsibility and human relations. The transformation of Frank depicts that people can learn to overcome their former mistakes and grow to have a new purpose. Other social problems that are reflected in the novel include immigrant plight, economic deprivation and cultural acculturation.

XII. Findings

The research finds that some important things were discovered: The concept of identity connected to moral responsibility in the novel is intertwined. Ethical values of Jews affect the transformation of Frank. Misery is an essential part of the development. The immigrant experience influences the concept of identity of the characters.

XIII. Conclusion

The novel *The Assistant* is a strong piece of work in terms of identity and moral change. Bernard Malamud, through the character of Frank Alpine, has shown that identity is unrelated to ethnicity or social status but it is related to ethical decisions and care of others. This is what the novel finally underscores as a means of defining what true identity is; empathy, responsibility, and human dignity.

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