

## BERNARD MALAMUD (1914-1986): A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF EXPLORATION

Dr Hemlata Jain\*

### **Abstract**

*In this research paper I have chosen to work with the novel 'The Assistant' and 'A New Life' by the Jewish American writer Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) who is considered one of the most prominent figures in Jewish-American literature. His purpose of writing was to keep the civilization from destroying. As a writer Malamud has written about man's struggle against destruction forces before. His work shows a regard for Jewish tradition and the plight of ordinary man and imbues with the theme of moral wisdom gains through suffering. The message was implicit in his earliest stories and it became explicit in his later fiction. Malamud believes that man can realize his existence only through his acceptance of society around him. For that reason Malamud's protagonists are always bent on finding a new identity and with it a new rapport with society. This is because in Malamud's opinion, man has an innate strength which always prompts him to fight for the preservation of his life and moral essence. Through this present study the researcher looked into a self identity and exploration of man through his well known novels, 'The Assistant' and 'A New Life' and proved that his characters discussed the meaning of life, of man's place in the universe, of his relation to God and men. Through these two novels the researcher impresses the reader that man's humanity abides in spite of the adversity of his circumstances. And that man is not a static entity, but an organic being, always growing and learning the art of identity.*

**Keywords:** *Jewish tradition, self identity, a consciously constructed personal ethic, innate strength.*

\* Asst. Professor, Hindustan College of Science & Technology, Farah, Mathura

## 1. Introduction:-

The struggle towards the realization of what one can be, the philosophy of self seeks to describe qualities that constitute a person's uniqueness or essential being. Malamud, in his writings concerns himself with the struggle of Jewish American immigrants and their descendants to reconstruct lost Jewish identity or to reconstruct new ones. Malamud's characters seek again and again to reinvent an adequate "Jewish" identity, caught between the unsatisfactory options of tradition and secularity. The quest for identity and self exploration among Malamud's character is their consciousness of having left behind the essential cultural practice of Jewish tradition.

This paper discusses some issues bearing on the theme—how American Jews make attempts to reconstruct their lost identities, either by avoiding both option of an inherited and existing or continuing through ages, or by their self Existence. Malamud has helped his readers understand the complex device by which American society has shaped Jewish –American identity in the generations between the 1950s and 1980s. In his works, Malamud's characters seem caught between a desire to be use their alters egos to refill whatever non exist stent or impoverished dimension of the self they lack, whether caused by an excess of guilt as in 'The Assistant' and 'A New Life' reduction of the self they lack, or an over instinct behavior as in each story, the hero tries to regain his identity through moral obligation or by self Exploration. In the present paper the researcher finds out that Suffering, Commitment, and responsibility are the purity or genuineness of Malamud's heroes as well as the fighting tool for all human beings.

## 2. Research purpose:--

The quest for identity and self existence among Malamud's characters is their consciousness of having left behind the essential cultural practice of Jewish tradition- -Without this source of connection, identities must be re-established on new grounds or invented on entirely new terms.

## 3. Literature review:-

Bernard Malamud's 'The Assistant' and 'A New life'..... Offer (an) affirmation for the possibility of human preservation from destruction or failure and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic. The two novels impress the reader that all men are Jew except they know it and man's humanity abides in spite of the adversity of his circumstances. And that man is not a static entity, but an organic being, always growing and learning the art of identity. The protagonists of The Assistant and A New Life move from innocence to awareness through their experience in society. Thus, although the Jewish community is "the constant condition of his sensibility" Malamud seems to have achieved in his novels a human comedy of self identity and exploration to illustrate the necessity in this world of ethical liability of accepting moral obligation. Through these novels the researcher arrives at and affirms not just a surface Jewish American social adjustment but the realizable possibility of moral regeneration of every man. According to the Judeo-Christian belief, *"For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all men, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God."*

## 4. Methodology:-

### 4.1 Research Object

In this research paper the researcher intends to undertake the analysis of Bernard Malamud's novels 'A New Life' and 'The Assistant' which were considered the famous novels. Both the novels revolve around the self realization journey of Frank Alpine and Seymour Levin who impersonate a role of a hero pursuing his self exploration through becoming a sufferer. My methodological consideration involves that American Jew in Malamud is a more self conscious being than the resident of traditional community. More importantly Malamud in his novels projected the image of Jew that of every man, and through the subtle process of his art, achieves a perfectly satisfying and integral vision of human identity and self exploration in terms of redemptive suffering and moral regeneration.

### 4.2 Research tool

The tool adopted by the study was the concept of ... self-identity and exploration of man.....through which it shows that man must identify his identity and self existence. As consciously or unconsciously man's identity determines his place and development in the society. Malamud has given his Jews a common identity with mankind. They easily merge into the non-Jewish society. They fit in very well with the change in American attitude. He has expressed a commonality directly on several occasions in such words as *"All men are Jews except they don't know it."* The researcher point out that to explore such progress in a life of an individual in full agreement with Malamud's basic premises, *"People can change additionally, he declines; their circumstances may remain the same but spiritually they transcend their surroundings things are what we make of them."*

## 5. Research Method:-

The main objective to include Malamud's Jewish world in present study is to prove the man's place in the present society. Malamud believes that man can realize his existence only through his acceptance of society around him. The Malamudian concept of the Jewish American tragic soul comprises who the individual pain that goes with the crisis of identity and exploration. *So Israel Shenker observes, "A Malamud Character is someone who fears his fate, is caught up in it, and yet manages to outrun it."*

## 6. Discussion:-

In both the novels 'The Assistant and 'A New Life' often when the wise choice is made, the character transforms a lesser virtue into a greater one or one virtue into it's opposite to seek his existence in the society.

The Assistant shows Morris Bober as a good example of 'what one can be'. Frank Alpine is not like him in the beginning, although he does have a desire to be liked him, a necessary preliminary condition. Alpine, the hero of the novel gets not only job in the Bober grocery store but also kindness and sympathy from Morris Bober and love from Helen. There, he learns a lesson of righteousness, goodness, honesty, mutual love and brotherhood. So he moves upward from manhood to sainthood. He plans to return stolen money when he is in a position to return, and finds himself in a psychic dilemma which leads him towards moral refinement.

However, Alpine needs an experience to mobilize these hidden qualities in her quest for identity. She thinks that one should have experience or knows when to start and where to quit. Thus, through the story of *The Assistant*, the researcher dramatizes Frank's struggle for identity and his circumstances to cultivate his own moral values. It "*celebrates not a people, but the individual, less than he could be, more than he seems who endures his encounters with life.*"

In *A New Life*, the hero Seymour Levin establishes his identity and self existence as a moralist. He adopts a new mode of life and finally is turned a moralist. His life has initially been "without much purpose". It was suffocating and miserable, desolate and disappointing. He faced bad times; he cheated himself and killed his choices. Seymour Levin does not start his new life when he decides to overcome his past as a drunkard and tries to become a successful teacher and scholar. Only after his morality nurtures and takes on responsibility for Pauline's love and own family. Levin also achieves a partial secular redemption. This time the new life will probably overshadow Levin's responsibility to society

According to Malamud a new Life never start spontaneously without a change of one's self but it always results from the conflict between human freedom and human limitations with the stress on the latter rather than the former. In the present novel the researcher proved that Levin wins over his past, hence, over himself because he is able to take advantage of possibilities. *This quest takes place in a society that is looking after for a self definition and identity.*

## 7. Conclusion

Malamud has successfully dealt with Jews as a symbol of self-identity and exploration and with the help of present novels the researcher also proved that Malamud sees human existence as characterized by struggle and suffering and reveals a deep sense of understanding for what is means to carry out a human existence. In these novels discussed here, it is the seeking that is fully affirmed and the heroes, though a suffering community, transcend social, racial and national barriers and become universal heroes of all people, at all times to come. They grow from an ordinary man to an extra ordinary person of the universe.

**Reference:**

Malamud, Bernard. The Assistant. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957.

Malamud, Bernard. A New life. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961.

Alter, Iska. The Good Man's Dilemma: Social Criticism in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud. (New York : A.M.S. press, 1981).

Fisch, Harold. Studies in Jewish American Literature – Bernard Malamud: In Memoriam,7, No..2 (Fall 1988).

Vladarova Helena. A quest of new life, University of West Bohemia, Plzen Contemporaries American Novel, New York.

Fiedler, Leslie A. The Jew in the American Novel (New York : Herzl Press, 1959).

The Fiction of Bernard Malamud. (eds.) Richard Astro and Jackson J. Benson. (Crovallis : Oregon State University Press, 1977).

