

Jewish Schlemiels to Emblems of Endurance: A study of *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud

Dr. Beulah Hemalatha

Department of English

Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillayanmanai

hemasudharson@gmail.com

Abstract- The paper entitled “Jewish Schlemiels to Emblems of Endurance: A study of *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud concentrates on the distinct character types, suitable signs and minute narrative details. The protagonists are Jewish schlemiels who emerge into emblems of compassion and moral endurance. They are tormented, guilt-ridden and paranoiac. They face adverse situations, but they find the means of regeneration in their miserable existence through suffering and self-scrutiny. They are subject to laughter and pity, scapegoats under exploitation, and ignorant, helpless victims in a world of oppression and indifference. Yet they don’t succumb to violence and destruction. They become strong in spite of their weakness, grow bold amidst bitter surroundings, and learn to love others by taking up responsibilities.

Key Words: Schlemiel, Paranoiac, Emblems, Torah, Blanch

The motif of the quest of the schlemiels Morris Bober and Frank Alpine are used as a means of discovery of self. It is an inward journey that promises salvation to the main protagonist Frank Alpine. He undertakes a symbolic journey towards a meaningful existence. He has been dissatisfied with his aimless life in the past, as he confesses it to Morris Bober, “All my life I wanted to accomplish something worthwhile in life a thing people will say took a little doing, but I don’t” (*The Assistant* 42). Even in New York, he starts his life as a thief and criminal. Likewise, Morris Bober also suffers from pains of conscience. As a pathetic schlemiel, he feels that he must suffer as a Jew. He does not understand the reason for his suffering and he believes that a Jew has to suffer. According to Malamud, a Jew is not a man who abstains from pork, praying three times a day, and following the Jewish holidays, but he is a moral man with a good heart. It can be said of Morris Bober that he has understood Torah with its principles and imbibed the spirit of Jewishness.

As long as Frank Alpine loses his true self due to error and cowardice, he suffers from alienation and finds hard to see himself in the mirror. He often feels unfulfilled and imperfect. He tells Morris Bober “I don’t understand myself” (*The Assistant* 37). After Frank Alpine becomes the assistant to Morris Bober, he captures the spirit of Jewishness from his boss. Morris’s statement about suffering makes explicit the central theme of *The Assistant*: man’s inherent potential of transcending the inevitable pain and hardship in life by making suffering meaningful. In Morris Bober we see the quintessential Jewish

sufferer, a Job-like character who suffers simply because it is his lot in life. Suffering is central to Morris's identity. He needs it, expects it, and receives it in generous doses.

The schlemiel Bober is honest inspite of being poor. He gets up early as he feels that it is his responsibility to give a three cent roll to a poor polish woman, his regular customer. Despite his starvation, he gives bread on credit to the daughter of the "Drunk Woman" (*The Assistant* 8) as he is unable to see the little girl in tears. Morris Bober continues to be honest without cheating his customers. When Frank Alpine, his assistant suggests to try a couple of tricks on the customers, Morris Bober reveals his Jewish moral righteousness saying "Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?" (*The Assistant* 78). Morris Bober clearly points out that the Jewish Law wants men to live like human beings, loving and understanding each other and not like animals. According to him if a Jew does not follow that, he is not a real Jew at all, notwithstanding his adherence to Jewish rituals.

Morris Bober is not an orthodox Jew. He does not follow the rituals of the Jews nor attend any religious services. But he is true to the law and remains a man of good heart. He does not bother about sufferings in his life. His acceptance of suffering for others and his sympathy towards Frank Alpine, his assistant is shown when he raises the wages to fifteen dollars from five dollars a week. When the schlemiel Bober understands that Frank Alpine steals, he blames that he is responsible for Frank Alpine's act of stealing as he has paid the wages of a slave to a skilful workman. In the end also, Morris Bober meets his death because he shovels the snow in front of his store in the night to help customers in spite of his wife Ida's objections, and catches pneumonia. Hence, Morris Bober's life is selfless and service-oriented towards humanity, as he slowly emerges into an emblem of endurance.

Malamud implies, he would not be subject to suffering in such overwhelming onslaughts. Because of his unwavering honesty and compassionate belief that people are better than they seem, Morris is deemed to material suffering that plays a counterpoint to an arduously won but genuine spiritual triumph. Hence both Morris and Frank Alpine suffer throughout their life without expectations. Frank Alpine gives meaning to Morris Bober's suffering and Morris Bober stimulates the deep inward nature of Frank Alpine, bringing out his deep spiritual and moral awareness. He feels integrated and achieves a new kind of relatedness to the world. He is antagonized by the Jew's acceptance of suffering and his concern for others. From his own personal grief, however, Frank learns the meaning of compassion. At Morris' funeral Frank undergoes a symbolic resurrection when he falls into Morris' open grave and is retrieved. All his earlier delusions are destroyed and he finds his individuality in freedom of love and selfless act. Truly Frank Alpine rises from a level of hatred, selfishness and lust to the higher level of altruism, true love and sacrifice. He learns the power of virtue and charity and becomes the emblem of endurance like Morris Bober.

Malamud is all in all against the devaluation of Man in his times. He wants man to inhabit the world, overcome the hostile forces around him, and function effectively in society, taking up responsibilities, for his welfare and the welfare of others around him. He is a skilful writer who has made use of schlemiels as protagonists. Suffering, to most of the characters in his fiction is not a useless burden but it also offers a way out of this miserable condition through accepting the inevitability of suffering and responding to it with sympathy and a sense of responsibility.

The moral evolution of the protagonists in *The Assistant*, especially Frank Alpine and Morris Bober is quite surprising and amazing. Malamud himself stands amazed at his creation, Frank Alpine. He says in one of his interviews "I have not given up the hero-I simply use heroic qualities in small men. Sometimes my characters do things so heroic that I myself blanch at their accomplishment". Morris Bober and Frank Alpine refer to the small men who are elevated to heroes. From pathetic Jewish schlemiels they rise to the level of emblems of endurance.

Works Cited

Wisse, Ruth R. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971.

Liptzin, Soloman. *The Jew in American Literature*. New York: Bloch, 1966.

Richman Sidney. *Bernard Malamud*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1966.