

Chapter III

The Assistant

Of all Malamud's novels, *The Assistant* has received widest critical attention focusing mainly on major characters, nature and meaning of suffering, and mythical structure of the novel. The world embodied in the novel has also been studied by a number of critics. The world of *The Assistant* is "saturated with pain, flooded with contradictions" (Hassan 204). According to Ihab Hassan, "The world revealed by *The Assistant* is, materially speaking, bleak; morally, it glows with a faint, constant light" (201). Some European critics of Malamud, especially German critics, have read Malamud's fiction as an indictment of American life. Eva Manske observed that "Malamud presents a nightmare inversion of American dream, but stops short of offering any alternative" in *The Assistant* (11).

Critics have also focused their attention on the theme of suffering present in the novel. There is hardly any novel by Malamud which does not study the significance and value of suffering in man's life, and *The Assistant* is the best example to correlate this view. D. R. Sharma in his introduction to *The Assistant* says that the novel "can be called an elaborate rendition of the theme of suffering which runs through the entire Malamud corpus" (qtd. in Kanta 62-63). In the words of Edward A. Abramson, "Suffering, its nature and what to do with it, is a major theme in *The Assistant*, as well as in Malamud's work as a whole" (71). In the opinion of Lee Siegel, "What these Malamudian people end up seeing is the absolute strangeness of fate coupling with their character" (297). Philip Roth remarked that Jews of Malamud's *The Assistant* are kind of "metaphor to stand for certain human possibilities and certain human promises..." (152). Despite its small compass and thinness of social reference, "*The Assistant* could thus take on some of the power and clarity of the great 19th century novels by the graphic description of Alpine's development from a bum to a man of principle" (Solotaroff 241). Fielder says, "What

The Assistant really suggests is that, after all, Jews are the best Christians and that a good Christian might as well get circumcised and face up to this fact” (qtd. in Field and Field 18). Walter Shear feels that “*The Assistant* deals basically with an implicit conflict between a heritage of ancient wisdom and traditional values and the American atmosphere of practicality and success, a conflict which not merely envelops the characters but—since they are not fully aware of its influence—exists as a constant source of confusion and bewilderment” (208-209). Kingsley Widmer calls *The Assistant* a “neo-naturalistic genre-study of an...ordinary Jewish family in the depression who are victims of their socio-economic milieu” (468). Helen Weinberg, in a recent book on the modern American novel, describes this as “a Catholic motif” in *The Assistant*: “This assumption of Bober’s role is for the assistant a continued penitence through suffering, a catholic motif This joining of the imprisonment and rebirth themes makes a final irony, heightened by the fact that the rebirth is suggested in spiritual terms of the Catholic Church although it is presented as an actual conversion to Judaism” (171).

Ironic affirmation is seen by a number of critics as central to Malamud’s approach. The story is deeply ironic and this aspect is best explained by Earl Rovit when he says, “The affectionate insult and the wry self-deprecation are parts of the same ironic vision which values one’s self and mankind as both less and more than they seem to be worth, at one and the same time” (200). Ruth B. Mandel notes that “Malamud piles irony upon irony to achieve the tremendously oppressive and suffocating atmosphere of *The Assistant*. It is the disparity between the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the characters in the novel and the horrible reality that is insisted upon over and over again as it denies the fulfillment of their dreams that produces the overwhelming pathos” (266). Walter Shear sees Malamud’s work as novels of culture. *The Assistant* constructs two cultures, “the Jewish tradition and the American Heritage.” and exemplifies the collision between the old world wisdom and the new-world practicality with its ethos of success. The characters “exist in an ironic relationship” to both worlds (Field and Field, Introduction xxiii). Critics also believe that the novel is structured on the principles of irony and paradox. Ruth B. Mandel sees the novel as “novels of ironic affirmation....for the possibility of human

salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic” (Field and Field, Introduction xxiii). In words of Ihab Hassan, “Malamud’s vision is preeminently moral, yet his form is sly. It owes something to the wile of Yiddish folklore, the ambiguous irony of the Jewish joke. Pain twisted into humor twists humor back into pain” (200). Ihab Hassan further comments that “the achievement of Malamud’s style, which survives his ironic play, lies in the author’s capacity to convey both hope and agony in the rhythms of Yiddish speech” (38).

Many critics have commented upon the theme of redemption through suffering in *The Assistant*. Masako Ueno thinks that “*The Assistant* is a story about Frank Alpine’s regeneration and transition from his old life full of injustices to a virtuous new one” (18). Peter L. Hays believes that *The Assistant* is “a story of redemption which expresses realities of psychological and philosophical truth” (Field and Field, Introduction xxiii). According to Peter L. Hays, “Frank was strongly attached to Judaism and to Helen, and wished to ‘belong’ to both; and he has taken what steps he can, accomplishing the first goal, doing as much as he could to achieve the second. The first brings him a form of rebirth and spiritual peace; the second would bring him sexual fulfillment, a satisfaction of his social needs and probably children, too” (224). Robert Scholes also holds similar views: “Though telling a gentile who becomes a Jew, the story is not about Jewishness or Judaism....It is about the possibility of change in man.... In *The Assistant* Frank Alpine climbs out of evil into good. From a life of petty crimes and graceless lusts,... he struggles through to honesty, responsibility, and love” (32). Charles Thomas Samuels thinks the story of *The Assistant* is centered round how “Frank woos Helen with his suffering, his desire for regeneration, his respect for her chastity and high purpose” (19). William F. Purcell stresses that love for Helen converts Frank and “Frank’s conversion is genuine,... Frank has discovered the responsibilities that love entails, and that he chooses to accept and fulfil them ‘with discipline and with love’ ” (5). Granville Hicks observes that, “the possibility of change in a human being is one of the book’s principal themes” (68). The evident change takes place in Frank through Helen. Her love is the redemptive grace in this novel. Jonathan Baumbach writes, “Frank’s redemption is made possible by his uncompromising love for Helen, which provides the impetus of

his commitment to the store” (121). The regeneration in the protagonist brought out through his concern for fellow beings is also an important point of study. Frank’s life regenerates when he becomes aware of the fact “that in realizable love of his fellow man lies the meaning of human existence” (Handy 128). As William F. Purcell asserts, “As the object of his passions, Helen assumes the symbolic role of an Everyman, standing for all OTHER whom Frank will encounter.... Self-interest—that is, ‘I’ is slowly replaced as his focal point by ‘OTHER,’ particularly Helen” (5). Tony Tanner also maintains the same view when he says, “The main focus of the novel is ... on the moral transformation of Frank Alpine He suffers for others now, not simply for self: in this sense he is the ‘new man’ he wanted to be” (328). Philip Roth thinks that the price is too high and the method by which this redemption is achieved is unjust: “But oh how punitive is this redemption! We might almost take what happens to the bad goy when he falls into the hands of good Jews as an act of enraged Old Testament retribution visited upon him by the wrathful Jewish author—if it weren’t for the moral pathos and gentle religious coloration ...”(35).

The critics of Malamud have different opinions on the conclusion of the novel. While all agree that Frank’s conversion is not merely a narrow religious act which converts him into a Jew, but it is a kind of symbolic conversion into the broad religion of humanity. Some of them find that the novel ends on an ironic note. Giles B. Gunn comments that “Frank’s conversion can be taken as an act “of self-purgation” (71). He agrees with Ihab Hassan that it can also be considered as “self-repudiation, if not, as some may be tempted to say, of symbolic castration” (71). Sanford Pinsker calls Frank an ironic hero, and says that “implicit in the act are the complicated strands of sexual punishment (for his attempted rape of Helen), castration anxiety (for Bober as his Oedipal father), and religious conversion (for a Covenant he does not understand)” (53-54).

The Assistant is truly an acknowledged masterpiece but surprisingly the unheroic world of minor characters has been of total critical neglect and has not received adequate attention. The amount of critical attention that has been given to the hero is understandable but total neglect of minor characters often leads the critics

to the misreading of writer's fiction. The aim of the present study is to emphasize on the profundity of multifarious characters which play an equally seminal role in Malamud's literary zeitgeist. The sharply contrasted minor characters, their personalities and actions, if studied in proper perspective, will give a balanced view of Malamud's fiction. The beauty and strength of Bernard's writing is that he blends the dramatic worlds of the minor figures very intelligently like an expert weaver. Had these critics given due importance to other characters, their assessment of the novel would have been more balanced and rational. Through host of characters Bernard Malamud has opened to the readers the vast and hitherto unexplored vistas of his genius as a writer. Bernard Malamud has delineated the characters with perfection to not only shed light on the mental and psychological evolution of the main protagonist, but also to bring about many major and minor twists in the narrative. It is these minor characters who provide the body and the landscape for the enactment of the drama in *The Assistant*.

The study of minor characters in *The Assistant* serves to highlight deep and moral concerns. Malamud is deeply concerned with metaphysical and moral issues of human life. Philip Roth says about Malamud: "What is to be human, to be humane, in his subject: connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are his moral concerns" (154). The novel has reached artistic fruition by combining the varied minor characters who have been put together to create an environment which would make the narrative go forward. With the rich novelty of the minor characters, the writer has been able to bring out the truths of human experiences. The entire novel in the Malamudian canon is full of dynamism with a number of minor characters who represent their own life and provide an insight into writer's treatment to human relationships.

The novel opens with Morris Bober's wretched little grocery store in New York where Frank Alpine makes his first appearance. Morris Bober is the moral exemplar and is deeply committed to humanistic values. But Morris's system of values becomes a burden for him. Business is so bad that Morris manages to barely eke out a living for himself, his wife, Ida, and his daughter, Helen. Morris and Ida

depend largely on Helen's earnings who has given up her dreams of college education and has taken a job she hates. Characteristically, it is a Jewish novel, but the whole sequence of the novel changes with the arrival of a non-Jew. Frank Alpine, a destitute, vagabond, an anti-Semite, participates in the robbery in a poor Jewish grocer accompanied by another Gentile, Ward Minogue. The central action of the novel occurs from Bober's relation to Frank Alpine and then later with Helen, Bober's daughter, who is against Gentiles. He indulges in an act of anti-Semitism by robbing Bober. However after realizing the miserable plight of the grocer, he starts repenting on his heinous deeds. Frank Alpine's motives are equally divided between altruism and materialism. In order to keep business afloat, Frank takes it upon himself to run the store. "A goy brings in goyim," (Malamud 171) Morris says. In fact, Frank's presence makes a quick difference in the income. But later, he lusts for Helen and steals from Bober. There is a clear reflection of his irrational anti-Semitism which is present even in his relationship with Morris Bober. Eventually Bober catches him and sternly casts him out. Alpine loses Helen too. Impelled by Bober's gratitude and motivated by his guilt, he takes care of the grocery store and even decides to stop stealing. But Frank cannot resist his weaknesses and Morris gets a proof of his stealing and dismisses him. "To clean up the slate in a single swipe, he thought again of telling Morris about his part in the holdup" (Malamud 157). Conscience makes him confess that he was one of the men who robbed Morris. Morris surprisingly was already aware but Morris cannot forgive Frank for his pilfering and sends him away once again. The entire spiritual energy is generated by his confession under the tutelage of moral Bober and this steadily propelled him to moral apotheosis. Frank even saves Helen when Ward attempts a rape on Helen. "She sobbed in relief. He kissed her eyes and lips and he kissed her half-naked breast. She held him tightly with both arms, weeping, laughing, murmuring she had come to tell him she loved him" (Malamud 167). Helen is concerned about Frank's regeneration. "She was filled with loathing at the fantasy she had created, of making him into what he couldn't be—educable, promising, kind and good, when he was no more than a bum" (Malamud 176). Frank's incapability to control his sexual desire for Helen brings their relationship to an end but simultaneously also to the beginning of a new

experience of unselfish love and enduring suffering by the assistant. With this change in Frank, Helen can never call him “uncircumcised dog” (Malamud 168) again.

Bober’s life is a study of regenerative and ennobling nature of suffering. Michael Brown believes that the gas radiator which nearly killed Morris Bober, whether through accident or intention, is “surely a reference to the fate of Jews in Auschwitz and other camps” (150). In the Malamudian caricature, it is very clearly evident that salvation is achieved only through suffering, responsibility and love. Frank while sitting alone in the funeral parlor after services for Morris, thinks “Suffering, he thought, is like a piece of goods. I bet the Jews could make a suit of clothes out of it. The other funny thing is that there are more of them around than anybody knows about” (Malamud 231). Morris Bober in the novel pays with his life for his belief in the value of suffering. Morris was able to retain the gift of suffering and with his stubborn humanity he was able to illuminate a human in Frank Alpine and was able to awaken his conscience “Suffering thus has an exemplary as well as personal value, and the idea lends literature a resonance that formalists might not applaud but which Malamud has affirmed in novel and story throughout his career” (Langer 145-146). In the words of Sheldon Norman Grebstein, “Suffering is meaningful. It can even be redemptive, stirring up a faint hope for goodness of man after all” (177). During the burial ceremony, Frank falls by accident into Morris’s grave. This is the final transition episode that leads Frank to becoming the new grocer: “As they (Ida and Helen) toiled up the stairs they heard the dull cling of the register in the store and knew the grocer was the one who had danced on the grocer’s coffin” (Malamud 232). His crawling out of grave symbolizes Morris’s rearnation into Frank. This accomplishment was possible only under tutelage of Morris Bober. With this, the novel picks up the elements of hope and dignity with a fresh beginning for Frank Alpine. In the end after Morris’s death, Frank Alpine imbibes the virtues of Bober, gets circumcised and “After Passover he became a Jew” (Malamud 246). He struggles to comprehend the meaning of love and responsibility. As Sanford Pinsker observes that “it is the task of Frank Alpine his assistant to learn what such suffering means and how it can apply to his own situation” (63).

Malamud presents Morris as a powerful emblem of a remarkably good heart. For Bober the store was "more a poor grocery" (Malamud 5) reflecting his poverty and his world of suffering. He was a "luckless Bober" (Malamud 151). "The store looked like a long dark tunnel" (Malamud 4) depicting Bober's endless suffering. In the hey days, Bober's life was not too difficult. He "drove a horse and wagon" (Malamud 6) but in America he rarely saw the sky as he was completely entombed in his store. Bober faced the worst but never complained either against the world or against God. Morris Bober, a scrupulously honest and soft-hearted Jewish grocer, is the ethical centre of the novel. Morris is a poor Jew who runs a grocery in a community full of Gentiles. Morris Bober is "representative of the traditions of the older Jewish community" within the "more competitive and fluid urban community" (Leer 72). Malamud describes the unremitting burden of Morris's daily life in the style of literary naturalism. Rising in the morning to sell a three-cent-roll to a "sour-faced, grey-haired Poilishch" (Malamud 3) conveys Morris's routine of daily aches and frustration. Morris is entombed in his "bloodsucking store" (Malamud 27) where he worked hard and was rewarded with poverty and nothing else. At the outset of the novel, a ten year old girl enters the grocery shop to request for some food items on credit. " 'My mother says, ' " she quickly, " 'can you trust her till tomorrow for a pound of butter, loaf of rye bread and a small bottle of cider vinegar? ' " (Malamud 4) He knew that he will never be paid because her mother is very poor. But the seemingly hard attitude of the store owner melts on seeing the tears in the girls' eyes. Morris ends up giving the girl a quarter pound of bread, even though he is aware he will never get paid for it. His generosity is evidence that even though close to starvation himself, he extends credit to his poor customers. Morris's honest and generous attitude of giving credit to the poor becomes a metaphor for taking care of mankind and his humanitarianism. He has further conveyed that goodness prevails in the character and this impression will last through the rest of the narrative. Morris suffers because of his honesty: "He could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock; to cheat would cause an explosion in him" (Malamud 16). Morris could not ever think of being dishonest in business. His honesty further added to his poverty. He even rejects Frank's suggestion:

‘Why don’t you try a couple of those tricks yourself, Morris? Your amount of profit is small.’

Morris looked at him in surprise. ‘Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?’ (Malamud 84)

Morris always believes that if a man were honest he would not have to worry for anything in life. Bober has certain ethics even in business and can not even think of deceiving anyone. It seems that Bober is perhaps in a wrong job. He wants to be a pharmacist in his youth, but lands up in a grocery store because of which his whole life changes.

Morris is against guiles and tricks. Morris also has an instinctive faith in people. When a quart bottle of milk is stolen and Ida blames the baker, Morris replies “ ‘The baker will steal from me? I know him twenty years ’ ” (Malamud. 46). His business is low and unprofitable but he has lived a life of ethics and principles. Even later, the masher proposes the fire to burn the grocery to collect insurance money. He tries to sell Morris some kind of celluloid that would help him burn down the shop and collect the insurance money. The masher suggests, “ ‘I will make for two hundred. I will do a good job. You will get six–seven thousand. After, pay me another three hundred ’ ” (Malamud 212). But for Morris, the suggestion is “Impossible” (Malamud 212) to accept.

Morris’s definition of Judaism is also extremely broad. According to Morris, the nature of his law, consists of moral principles. “ ‘What I worry is to follow the Jewish law ...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? ’ ” (Malamud 124). Morris never observes articulated Jewish laws nor does he attend any religious services. He believes that a good Jew suffers for law and law teaches honesty and goodness. His view of a Jew is very different. Morris does not go to a synagogue; he does not eat kosher and even keeps his store open on Jewish holidays. Morris believes that to be a Jew one needs to be good at heart. “ ‘This is not important to me if I taste pig or if I don’t. To some Jews is this important but not to me. Nobody

will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my mouth once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece of ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the law ’ ” (Malamud 124). Morris further adds, “ ‘For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me. We ain’t animals. This is why we need the Law. This is what a Jew believes ’ ” (Malamud 124). Enlarging the proposition, Morris believes everyone suffers for everyone. Bober possesses the authentic voice of Bernard Malamud as Ruth B. Mendel puts it, “Morris Bober’s Jewish law is synonymous with Malamud’s secular moral code” (10). The character of Bober displays the sense of universal brotherhood, responsibility and compassion which is a part of Malamudian ethics. Michael Brown writes of Morris that “he suffers honorably and quietly in order to maintain his Jewishness, his *menschlichkeit*, in a world that seeks to obliterate everything Judaism stands for” (151).

Morris Bobber is presented by Malamud as “a man who has achieved spiritual fulfillment, a man who understands human suffering and who accepts it as a norm of existence” (Handy 78). The bitterness of his circumstances fails to fade his humanism. His character reflects the importance of moral responsibility and human goodness over materialism. Morris is very considerate and sympathetic to his suffering fellow humans. He always kept orders for Al Marcus who was fighting a losing battle against cancer. “No matter how bad business was, Morris tried to have some kind of little order waiting for him” (Malamud 86). He feels pity for the fatigued bulb-seller, Breitbart, because he knows the pangs of life. “Seeing his fatigue, [he] offered him a glass of tea with lemon” (Malamud 87). Even later, when Breitbart narrates his sad story, Morris “weeps”. Morris is a man of generous impulses and is always touched by human emotions. He even has the ability to empathize with others as Malamud himself says, “The world suffers. He felt every *schmerz*” (Malamud 7). He is acquainted with tragic qualities of life. The service extended by Morris towards all his customers is the manifestation of Morris’s sense of responsibility towards others. Morris with all his innocence invites Frank to his store and allows him to work and gives him an opportunity to redeem himself. Morris has concern for Frank who is poor and hungry:

‘How can you sleep in such a cold and drafty cellar?’

‘I slept in worse.’

‘Are you hungry now?’

‘I’m always hungry.’

‘Come upstairs.’ (Malamud 51)

Morris is certain that Frank is untreatable and is holding some money back like a thief again. Morris blames himself for paying him meager commission which might have forced him to do such an act: “The fault was therefore his for paying slave wages” (Malamud 128). Morris decides to pay “a little every day so that it would not be noticed” (Malamud 129) as he is afraid of telling Ida as she would then create fuss over the issue. Morris raised his “wages to straight fifteen dollars without any commission” (Malamud 129). He feels guilty for paying Frank less. Morris is also “sentimental wop at heart” (Malamud 93) a fact revealed by Morris’s visit to Breitbart’s house where poverty danced like a witch. Finding that Breitbart was not at home, he leaves two quarters on the table for his ailing son and says: “ ‘Your father loves you ’ ” (Malamud 210). The novel is replete with such acts of sympathy, compassion and understanding.

Morris Bober is a poor businessman who lacks the wiles to reach the top of business in America where man’s worth is measured by the wads of dollars he carries. Despite his poverty, he always wanted to give the best to his family. After Ephraim, who died at a very young age due to an ear sickness, Morris was more concerned about Ida and Helen. Morris knew Ida to be the co-sufferer who “shared unwillingly the grocer’s fate” (Malamud 8) for which she never displayed her dissatisfaction. As a matter of fact, “the weight of his endurance was too much for her now” (Malamud 8) but Morris always wanted to maintain peace with his querulous wife. Morris “often hid unpleasant news from her because she made it worse” (Malamud 46). Nevertheless, he always felt embarrassed that he could not give a good life to Ida Bober and his daughter, Helen, who had to give up her dream of college education because poverty demolishes dreams. Yet, Morris tries to compensate Helen whenever he can:

He reached into his pants pocket and took out a five dollar bill.

‘Take,’ he said, rising and embarrassedly handing her the money. ‘You will need for shoes.’

‘You just gave me five dollars downstairs.’

‘Here is five more.’

‘Wednesday was the first of the month, Pa.’

‘I can’t take away from you all your pay.’

‘You are not taking, I am giving.’

She made him put the five away. He did, with renewed shame. ‘What did I ever give you? Even your college education I took away.’ (Malamud. 20)

Morris wanted the best for his daughter but unfortunately could do nothing. He was a sorrowing father but when business gradually picked up with the advent of Frank Alpine in the grocery store, Morris even told Helen “to keep more of her hard-earned twenty- five dollars; he said she must now keep fifteen, and if business stayed as it was maybe he would not need her assistance any more” (Malamud 104). Later he said “ ‘My child, ’ ” he sighed, “ ‘for myself I don’t care, for you I want the best but what did I give you’ ” (Malamud 21). Though he always wanted to be a good provider to his family, Morris always thought of his life with sadness and had mixed feelings of frustration.

Morris knows the importance of education in one’s life. Because of his poverty, he could not fulfil his dream of becoming a pharmacist because he had no fee to pay for college education. He knows the importance and significance of education. He always regretted that he could not pursue his education. Sighing, he said, “ ‘Without education you are lost ’ ” (Malamud. 83). He even advised Frank, “ ‘Don’t throw away your chance for education, ’ ” Morris advised. “ ‘It’s the best thing for a young man ’ ” (Malamud 36). It saddens him when he thinks that Helen had wanted a college education but was forced by the circumstances to take up a job she never liked.

Morris is Malamud's representative Jew who is completely knocked down by destiny. For Morris, "Life was bad enough" (Malamud 23). Morris's wending series of frustrations is also revealed during the time Bober was robbed. Morris "felt sick of himself, of soared expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many" (Malamud 26-27). He had hoped a lot in America but got nothing. Somewhere Morris also believed that " 'They suffer because they are Jews ' " (Malamud 125). Morris felt there was a complete decay and collapse of human values in America. After Frank left, Morris's condition became worse "Life was meager, the world changed for worse. America had become too complicated" (Malamud 206). However, Morris felt that "he had the will of a victim, no will to speak of" (Malamud 206). Selling food had left Morris in poverty, a reflection of American Dream. Morris rejected the moneyed values of America and that is why Bober faces the final collapse of his American dream. The novel is a strong condemnation of American values in which society does not reward honest but strongly favours selfishness. Morris goes to death accepting America's judgment of him "I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth" (Malamud 226). Malamud's "negation of society's values is insidious; in the end, even those who are close to the moral man and who recognize his inherent worth see him as a failure because he must lead a lesser life in material terms" (Abramson 27).

Having the grocer's ethical commitment and spiritual transcendence as a background, Morris Bober's 'tomed' store is a place of Frank's regeneration. The grocer's extreme forgiveness, love and patience are the only things that can appeal to the protagonist's humanity, thus helping him to recognize himself as a sinner searching for redemption. As a foil to Frank, Morris performs the role of a father. Morris Bober is the key character that reveals Frank the gate towards spiritual transcendence by following the only law that defines Jews in an empty world where concern for the other has been cast into oblivion. The compassionate Jew opens the possibilities of redemption to his gentile assistant but in the end, Bober faces final collapse of American dream.

This novel is a complete criticism of American system of values where dishonest people succeed. The system, it appears, does not reward honest and sincere people instead strongly favours selfishness. Success in business is for cheats like Karp and Charlie. Karp owns two stores in the building where Morris lives with his family and has a liquor store. Karp with his dishonest means elevated his level from being the owner of a shoe shop to a liquor dealer and succeeded tremendously in business. The same thing happened with Charlie who too was a confirmed materialistic. Before Bober opened his grocery shop, he had entered into partnership with Charlie Sobeloff. Morris funded \$4000 to their partnership, but Charlie turned out to be a crook and he managed to pocket most of the money. In contrast, people like Bober are honest and are therefore pissed off in business.

Ida, Morris's wife, is a typical Jewish housewife whose house is her domain. But the vagaries of life have made her quite cynical and she often blames her husband for not being able to improve the lot of the family. Ida has compassion but the feelings are subdued because of her poverty. Ida loves her husband tenderly but never had given him moments of tenderness. Lack of money erodes her humanity to some extent: "She had waked that morning resenting the grocer for having dragged her, so many years ago, out of Jewish neighborhood into this" (Malamud 8). Although there was nothing more than nagging she did, but she wasn't happy with the decision to come to America. This gives an insight into Ida's materialistic concern. "On the top of their isolation, the endless worry about money embittered her" (Malamud 8). She seems too obsessed with the idea of making more money but there was very little that she could do to improve her condition. She wanted Morris to sell the grocery store as the business prospects had become too bleak. This made their condition miserable making her more and more irritable and nagging. "Ida pooh-poohed his worries, Morris could not overcome his underlying dread" (Malamud 11). Ida was too immersed in her despondency. She also makes fun on her husband's short-sightedness in business and admires the corrupt and cunning Julius Karp for his business acumen. " 'A business is a business. What Julius Karp takes in next door in a day we don't take in in two weeks ' " (Malamud 9). Her measurement of human worth is material possessions and that is why she likes Karp's foresightedness and future: " 'So why

you didn't have the sense to make out of your grocery a wine or liquor store when came out the licenses? ' ' (Malamud 9) She knows the real worth of success in American society. When Morris tells Ida that he likes neither Karp nor Louis, who had adopted dishonest methods to become successful, Ida reacted and said " 'Everybody is a stupe but not Morris Bober ' ' (Malamud 10). Ida's fear has made her a confirmed materialist and she has taken on corrupt values of American world.

Ida was worried about her husband's health and his failing business: "Cigarettes," she said bitterly. " 'Why don't you listen what the doctor tells you? ' ' (Malamud 7). Ida shared unwillingly grocer's fate but did not show her dissatisfaction. She kept nagging:

'I told you to oil the floor.'

'I forgot.'

'I asked you special. By now would be dry.'

'I will do later.'

'Later the customers will walk in the oil and make everything dirty.'

'What customers?' he shouted. 'Who customers? Who comes in here?'

'Go' she said quietly. 'Go, upstairs and sleep. I will oil myself.' (Malamud 9)

She is a typical Jewish wife, nagging and dominating whereas Bober as a Jewish husband is diffident and submissive. Morris and Ida offer a study in contrast. Whereas Morris is idealistic, Ida is practical. The grocer aims for higher things in life like education but Ida is bothered only about materialistic things.

Helen wanted education as a means to cherish the American Dream and she strongly felt that education will help her realize her true potential. For Ida education is abstract and riches are concrete. Ida thinks that it is better for her daughter to marry a rich Jew than waste her life in the corridors of colleges and universities. Ida tells Helen: " 'Some people want their children to read more. I want you to read less ' ' (Malamud 115). She questions her daughter's decision to avoid Nat: " 'Who gets rich from reading? What's the matter with you? ' ' (Malamud 110) Ida felt that Helen

could only remain happy if she marries a rich. Education meant nothing to her. In her eyes Louis and Nat are suitable grooms for Helen, because they are rich Jews: “ ‘I don’t understand why she don’t see Nat Pearl anymore. All summer they went together like lovers... Louis Karp also likes her. I wish she will give him a chance ’ ” (Malamud 10). Ida’s measurement of judging a human being is his material possessions. Helen did convey to Ida that their “ ‘tastes are different ’ ” (Malamud 147) but even then Ida wants Helen to marry Nat Pearl. Ida never wanted her daughter to repeat the mistake she made by marrying poor grocer. Morris, on the contrary, gives preference to morality than money, but this attitude of Ida threatens the institution of marriage as it reduces it to mere means of escape from poverty. Ida’s selfishness prevents her from seeing the goodness in Morris. Ida’s systems of values are different from that of Bober. Ida likes Karp because he is rich businessman. She approves of Louis Karp because he is a son of a rich man. She likes Nat Pearl because he would be rich one day. Her abstraction of life is that love has no meaning in life and materialistic possessions are all that matter. In selecting a possible husband for her daughter, she is only concerned about the man’s religion and his social status. Through these interactions it is evident that Ida is not governed by the humane ethics of Jewish tradition. By her intransigent attitude, she proves to be a major obstacle in her daughter’s efforts of finding a suitable husband for herself. But at the same time she is deeply in love with her daughter and is immensely concerned about her.

Her conservative outlook on life is also revealed by her racial attitude. Her view of life consists of the little she knows of Jews like Karp, Louis Karp, Sam Pearl and Nat Pearl who were Jewish. Her main argument against Alpine is that he is not Jewish. When she learns that the store’s clerk Frank Alpine has his heart set on her daughter Helen, she gets filled with antagonism for him. Her main argument against Alpine is that he is not Jewish. She is also constantly haunted about fears of future. Ida’s attitude towards Alpine is clearly revelatory of strong prejudice against non-Jews. Right from the time of his entry into the house, Ida was against Frank and often told Morris, “ ‘Give him better a dollar he should go someplace else ’ ” (Malamud 53). For her, his presence in their house was a “new misfortune” (Malamud 55) and tragedy would soon follow. Ida felt that she has seen the world better and

knows what's in Frank's mind. She is against her daughter for having any relationship with this "goyim". Disturbed by the thought she even followed her when Helen had gone to meet Frank. Even Helen was aware that and "knew what caused it—her mother, in making every gentile, by definition, dangerous; therefore he and she, together, represented some potential evil" (Malamud 94). Ida felt " 'But the most important is I don't want him here on account of Helen. I don't like the way he looks on her ' " (Malamud 79). For her he was always untrustable. She warned Frank " 'Yes, she is a Jewish girl. You should look for somebody else ' " (Malamud 181). By her antagonism to Frank, Ida manages to prevent his relationship with Helen from developing fully because of her racial hatred for the goyim. Claudia Gorg is right when she observes: "Throughout the novel Frank remains the goy to Ida, which means to her he is a person a Jew should not associate with because Jewish- gentile interactions inevitably bring trouble for the Jewish party involved" (58). Through the character of Ida Bober, Bernard Malamud is also trying to shed light on the welter of religious hypocrisies that are capable of obfuscating the minds of most ordinary people.

Julius Karp lacks morals and scruples of a good human being. He is also presented as a foil to Bober, who in the eyes of Malamud and his readers, is the example of a decent human being who fails because of his goodness in the American society where deception and thuggery are the stepping stones to success. As an achiever of American Dream in Malamud's world, Karp has become as Morris terms it "wise without brains" (Malamud 16). The affluent Julius Karp is the owner of " 'KARP Wines and liquors ' " (Malamud 16) whose liquor business has become astonishingly successful. But, for Malamud, Karp's success had been bought at dehumanizing cost. His story is a story of a success of American dream where people who are deceptive become most successful. Earl H. Rovit opines that it is denial of humanity "which dries up the humanness in Julius Karp, transforming him from a man into the proprietor of a liquor store" (9). He has no concern for his fellow Jews because success in business is more important for him and when it comes to business, a Jew becomes a goyim and goyim becomes a Jew. He is totally indifferent and callous to the plight of Bober who happens to be his Jewish neighbourhood. He had

promised Bober not to rent his business to another grocer because it would add to his business losses. Promises and trust are fragile things to be broken easily for business success and that is what he does. He allows Schmitz, a German grocer to open his shop in his building. He conveniently and profitably forgets the atrocities perpetuated on the Jews by the Germans. Although Karp had promised that he would “look for another tailor or maybe a shoemaker, to rent to” (Malamud 11) but he had betrayed Morris’s trust.

Morris disliked his “unwanted advices” and thought that he was a “cheapskate” person “who had fallen through luck into flowing prosperity” (Malamud 148). Morris was rigidly uncommunicative towards Julius Karp and called him a “Big mouth” (Malamud 9). In fact, he used to visit Morris “more than his welcome entitled him to” (Malamud 22). By his sharp juxtaposition of Bober and Karp, Malamud exposes the hollowness of the moral foundation of the myth of American society. Further, to justify himself, he told Morris, “ ‘You saw how long stayed empty the store. Who will pay my taxes? But don’t worry. ’ ” he added, “ ‘he’ll sell more delicatessen but you’ll sell more groceries. Wait, you’ll see he’ll bring you in customers ’ ” (Malamud 11). Morris felt “his own poor living was cut in impossible half” (Malamud 13). Karp added miseries to Bober’s life. Karp had betrayed friendship and loyalty by allowing another grocery store to compete with Morris’s business. The character of Julius Karp represents the ethnic that momentary and business success is all that matters.

Bober’s honesty is also compared with Karp’s dishonesty who “with a shoe store that barely made him a living, got the brilliant idea after Prohibition gurgled down the drain and liquor licenses were offered to the public, to borrow cash from a white- bearded rich uncle and put it for one” (Malamud 16) with which later he rose to a moneyed class. “It was his luck, others had better” (Malamud 27). Karp is also incredibly lucky and once he managed to collect \$500 on a \$10 bet at a horse race. Karp even wanted Bober to be dishonest. When Karp meets Polish refugee who shows an intention of buying Morris’s store, he told Morris not to reveal anything about business. “ ‘Let Podolsky look around here but not too long. Also keep your mouth shut about the business. Don’t try to sell him anything. When he finishes in

wanted to absorb Morris's grocery in order to make unified business as he would then "take over Morris's sad gesheft and renovate and enlarge it into a self-service market with the latest fixture and goods" (Malamud 151). Karp did not like Frank working in the grocers shop since Karp's interest was purely selfish of getting hold of Bober's grocery: "it was always dangerous to have a young goy around where there was a Jewish girl" (Malamud 150). Later, in the novel when Louis Karp remarks that Helen is not his type, Julius Karp convinces him by saying, " 'When you got gelt in your pocket any women is your type' " (Malamud. 202). For Julius Karp woman is just a commodity which one can purchase with a dough in his pocket. He would even condone the stealing by his son, Louis. He knew that his son "snitched from him, but by Louis he was not bothered" (Malamud 150).

Louis Karp has made a relaxed living out of "letting the fruit of his father's investment fall into his lap" (Malamud 41). Louis was not ambitious as his outlook in life was only to perpetuate his father's successful business. He is the real son of a real father. Louis wants to enjoy life out of father's earning. He seems to be most unambitious in the most general sense of the term: " 'Louis,' she said watching a far-off light on the water, 'what do you want out of your life?' He kept his arm around her. 'The same thing I got—plus' " (Malamud 43). His love for Helen is purely physical, not authentic and mutually satisfying with proper sense of dignity. Louis makes starved attempts to get a response from Helen. "His arm tightened around her waist. 'Talk is too cold, baby how about a kiss?' " (Malamud 43) Helen feels disgusted with his attitude and does not respond to his advances. The moment he expressed his desire to kiss her, establishes the fact that his desires are purely carnal in nature with the sole purpose of satisfying physical desires. Girls are for physical pleasure for him. He never wanted deeper relations with Helen but just wanted to use her as a means of sexual gratification. She makes continuous opposition to the idea of marrying him. Louis Karp suspects of Helen's involvement with Nat Pearl which she denies. " 'Say baby, let's drop this deep philosophy and go trap a hamburger. My stomach complains ' " (Malamud. 44). His unsatisfied hunger for sex and food makes him more of an animal and less of a man.

Louis and Helen have different perspectives on life. Louis is having an affair with Helen, but he does not agree with her version of life. During one of the conversations with Louis, Helen explains what she expects of life: “ ‘Education,’ ” she said, “ ‘prospects. Things I’ve wanted but never had’ ” (Malamud 43). Louis flirtiously replied “ ‘Also a man?’ ” (Malamud 43). Helen wanted education but Louis was more focused on having physical pleasure with her. This conveys that Louis was most self-centered and was concerned only about himself. It does not matter to him what Helen desires to achieve in life. He seems to be simply interested in being physically close to her. His principle of life is only to live on his father’s money and to use women for pleasure and sex.

Helen asks him how he would feel if the woman whom he had married tried to do something to make herself a better person: Louis answers but in a very lackadaisical way. “ ‘I ain’t gonna stop anybody from being better,’ Louis said, ‘That’s up to them’ ” (Malamud 43). The extracts reveal that Louis has no conception of a better person. He is too simplistic to dwell on these kinds of issues. This depicts shallowness of his character and utter degradation of human values. As a self-centered man, he has a narrow focus in life. His purpose is to live on simply without any involvement in human issues. He is apparently indifferent and unaware of moral obligations. In the end, when Julius Karp suffers from heart attack and has to retire, Louis Karp decides to get a “ ‘job of salesman for a liquor concern’ ” (Malamud 232) instead of building on his father’s flourishing business.

Detective Minogue, a “soft-spoken, unsmiling man, bald, a widower” (Malamud 49), is a strict police officer who is actually an illustration of ‘ideal of law’. The character matches the Malamud’s scale of values. The character is full of humanistic commitments and genuine perceptions that help him take vital decisions. Detective Minogue being a man of strong impulses is not ready to give his son any concession because he has violated the safety of Morris’s person and property. In fact, he is a man of principles and desires only respectability. He has a very strong sense of justice. Detective Minogue on several occasions “beat him sick and bloody with his billy” (Malamud 49). Detective Minogue was a strict father and would not tolerate

any unlawful happenings in a civilized society. The biggest problem in his life is his son who has criminal instincts.

Detective Minogue was the in-charge of investigation of Morris's holdup. While inquiring thoroughly and systematically, he told Morris, " 'I might bring him in to you for identification ' " (Malamud 50). Though Ward is his own son, he does not allow his emotions to overpower his sense of duty. On another occasion, Ward wants a bottle of wine on loan. Upon refusal by Louis Karp, Ward flung the bottle of wine at Louis's head and ran away. Detective Minogue chased him until he was caught by him. The relation between two is tense so much so that Minogue "beat him mercilessly with his billy until Ward collapsed. Bending over him, the detective yelled, " 'I told you to stay the hell out of this neighborhood. This is my last warning to you. If I ever see you again, I'll murder you ' " (Malamud 216).

The character who displays the most aggressive anti-Semitism is Ward Minogue. Although Ward incarnates evil in *The Assistant*, he is also a victim of American mentality, a teenage rebel who sees crime not only a particular vision of American dream but also a way of defying a stern father who wanted to raise him up according to his own existing standards. Ward Minogue, an incorrigible criminal, Alpine's partner in crime and the architect behind the hold-up at Morris' grocery, is defined as "a wild boy, always in trouble for manhandling girls" (Malamud 49). From his childhood, he had a wild reputation of an eve-teaser and a law breaker. Ward was also "canned from his job for stealing from the company" (Malamud 49). But as Ward grew up, his tendency for indulging in crime went on becoming stronger, and he become an alcoholic and a hardcore criminal. He teams up with Frank Alpine and robs Morris. Ward said, " 'I don't care if it's Karp or Bober, Jew is a Jew ' " (Malamud 70). He has a decidedly anti-Jewish mindset. His antagonism to Jews is easily palpable in these words. " 'You're a Jew liar ' " (Malamud 25). He plans to rob Karp not because he is the richest man in the neighbourhood but because he is a Jew. Later he tells Frank,

'Karp. I want to stick him up.'

‘Why Karp? – there are bigger liquor stores.’

‘I hate that Jew son of a bitch and his popeyed Louis’ (Malamud 72)

By his virulent display of racial bias, Ward plays an important role in the narrative. He manages to bring the various schisms in the society into the open and by doing that he makes the narrative more forward. Apart from exposing racial bias of the American society, Malamud is seriously concerned with its criminalization. He even tries to rape Helen because he cannot even think that a Jewish girl who has slept with another Jew boy will not do so with goyim. He comments, “ ‘I hear those Jew girls make nice ripe lays ’ ” (Malamud 74). During his conversation with Frank, he remarked about Helen that “ ‘She has a nice ass ’ ” (Malamud 70). This vulgar language displays vulgarity of his mind. Ward’s anti-Semitism is also reflected in his rapist tendencies when he attempts to rape Helen in the park “he grabbed her with astonishing swiftness, smothering her scream with his smelly hand, as he dragged her toward the trees” (Malamud 166-167). It reveals how even aberrant sexual behaviour tends to become stereotyped in terms of ethnicity in the society portrayed in *The Assistant*. Ward is drained of all positive qualities with no hope of redemption. Ward’s character represents all kinds of evils in American society—sexuality, rape, hold-ups, racial hatred and criminalization. His physical deterioration and his mindless grasping for the stupor of drink are not only symbols of his moral degradation but are also signs of his disregard for the rules of self-preservation and the possibility of hope. Ward wanted liquor and begged Louis to trust him with money but when the latter refused to do anything for him, Ward impatiently and in anguish “grabbed a bottle of wine from the counter and flung it at Louis’ head” (Malamud 215). The character of Ward Minogue gives a glimpse of very anti-Semitic world full of ruthlessness and criminality. His behavior is detrimental to the society. Ward is instrumental in making much of the action in the narrative take place. Bernard Malamud has created a character of multiple personality disorders.

Ward, a Gentile, acts as a negative role model for Frank who lures him into vice. In the end, his alcoholism leads him to death as he inadvertently sets fire to the spirits he had spilled all over at Karp’s shop during the night. He had entered the shop

with an intention to rob but Ward tries to get out, but gets “caught between the bars and exhausted, died” (Malamud 218). It was a brutal end to a brutal character.

Nat Pearl is a “handsome, cleft-chinned, gifted, ambitious” (Malamud 14), young man. He is a promising law student but in reality he is shallow and selfish. His traits include materialism and self-centered insensitivity as Nat always believed in “money making” (Malamud 133). To Nat Pearl, the law offers a way to raise his social class and a foundation for material success. By these values, Nat ultimately becomes a part of materialistic society. Nat wants the success promised by the American Dream. He is also Helen’s first lover but he now regards her as an object to be acquired and used. Morris hates him, and often calls him a “showoff” (Malamud 10). But Ida dreams of Nat and Helen getting married. Throughout the book, Nat continues to have an on-off relationship with Helen. Helen always felt that Nat has given her “unearned sadness” (Malamud 15) for which she felt self hatred. He takes away Helen’s virginity. Helen, “half in love” (Malamud 14) with Nat, allows herself to be seduced by him because he has a promising career as a law student. But in spite of that, he did not treat her with fairness. Even Helen felt they don’t “ ‘see things in the same way’ ” (Malamud 21). Helen wants no contact with Nat Pearl as she feels he doesn’t know how to conduct himself before her. Helen never wanted to be too friendly with him and wanted to keep distance. Nat seemed respectful, then said in an undertone, “ ‘I haven’t seen you a long time. Where’ve you been keeping yourself?’ ” (Malamud 13) Helen could easily picture that he was pretending. He tried to be cordial but deep inside was a hollow person. She understands that he is a manipulator and lacks candor. By asking her where she was keeping busy herself, he was trying to shift blame from himself for not keeping in touch with her. His traits reflect hollowness of his personality.

Helen regrets her moment of weakness when she had yielded to Nats’ sexual advances. He deviates from the norms of balanced behavior and humane response. “ ‘You’re a funny kid,’ ” Nat was saying. “ ‘You’ve got some old-fashioned values about some things’ ” (Malamud 109). Nat made extended effort to invite Helen to meet and spend time but Helen didn’t pay heed and avoided him. For Nat the sexual

encounter that he had with Helen does not mean much to him. Nat has no morality and women are only sex objects for him. Helen understood and realized “how little he wanted” (Malamud 14). In his eyes, it is normal for people to sleep around. Helen’s and Nat’s system of values are very different. Nat wants to enjoy Helen again but Helen has learnt her lesson well. He says: “Let me make it quick and clean. Helen, it’s been long time. I want to see you” (Malamud 109). Helen rejected his plea and after several exchanges conveyed, “ ‘My values are my values’ ” (Malamud 109). She has very high conception of man-women relationships. For her, a sexual encounter must lead to a permanent relationship. Nat’s attitude is selfish on account of differences in their education and social status.

Helen does not to see him any longer as they “ ‘didn’t have the same things in mind ’ ” (Malamud 117). Nat always brings in the issue of sexual relationship with her. Although Helen had conveyed that she had forgotten the incident, Nat still insisted,

‘Helen, don’t talk like a stranger. For Pete’s sake, be human.’

‘I *am* human, please remember.’

‘We were once good friends. My plea is for friendship again.’

‘Why don’t you admit my friendship you mean something different?’

‘Helen ...’

‘No.’

He sat back at the wheel. ‘Christ you have become a suspicious character.’

She said, ‘Things have changed – you must realize.’ (Malamud 164)

After Bober’s death, Nat still tried hard again for sexual favours but when she stubbornly refuses, he calls her a “bitch,” (Malamud 244) There is another scene where he tries to accost Helen by reminding her of their past tryst. “ ‘Helen, how can we forget what pleasure we had in the past? ’ ” (Malamud 164) That is all that Helen means to him. The only bond between them is that of pleasure. Bernard Malamud has developed Nat Pearl as that of a typical dandy, whose interactions with Helen shed

light on her own state of mind and character. Also his character is representative of American materialistic youth.

Bernard Malamud introduces Al Marcus another minor character who has very small appearance but does manage to shed light on the nature of the society in which the drama is being played. He is a paper products salesman who regularly visits Morris to take orders for paper bags, wrapping paper, and containers. Philip Davis opines that “It was personally and emotionally, not politically, that Malamud’s grocer belonged to the tradition of Jewish socialism” (116). Al Marcus is suffering from cancer but he does not want to stop working. He is a cancer patient but laughs in the face of death. The character has tremendous courage and fortitude. He has been portrayed as a man of strong will power and high spirits. “ ‘If I stay home, somebody in a high hat is gonna walk up the stairs and put a knock on my door. This way let him at least move his bony ass around and try and find me ’ ” (Malamud 87). Al Marcus uncomplainingly fights death and manages to stay alive. The character represents desire for life and the propensity for suffering. Despite being well-off he refuses to stop working which suggests the work culture in American society.

He wants to make the most of what life has offered him. He is the most baffling minor character as his behaviour is not easily interpretable as “his eyes [were] far away from what he was saying; and after that, tip his hat and take off for the next place. Everybody knew how sick he was...” (Malamud 87). He wanted to live gracefully ignoring the grim realities. He knows the harsh realities of life and, therefore, advises Frank to leave the store as it was no more than a “death tomb.” By confining himself in the dungy store, he would be flittering away his life and energy. Later he even “warned the clerk not to trap himself in a grocery” (Malamud 86) and wants Frank Alpine to leave the store. “This kind of a store is a death tomb, positive,” Al Marcus said. “ ‘Run out while you can. Take my word, if you stay six months, you’ll stay forever ’ ” (Malamud 60). For him, racial prejudices are insignificant because this sound advice is given by a Jew who has known the pangs of suffering a goyim who has not.

Breitbart is an uncanny light bulb seller, “who dragged from store to store his two heavy cartons full of bulbs” (Malamud 86). He supplies electric bulbs that Morris sells at his grocery shop to earn enough to support himself and his son. He is a man of few words and likes to read Jewish papers. They have a good relationship and often inquire about their families. Breitbart in “his crooked shoes, he walked miles, looking into stores and calling out in a mournful voice, “ ‘Lights for sale’ ” (Malamud 87). He trudges through the neighborhood selling “lights”, as a symbol of hope. The character embodies the possibilities of life. This reflects that the character has accepted the sufferings that life has meted out to him but still there is always hope. Besides all his troubles the “seven-year itch” (Malamud 87) could not let him sleep after a day’s hard work. When Breitbart narrates his story to Morris, they both cried in pain. In spite of all misfortunes, his survival capacity is tremendous. Even at the age of fifty, on his back he lugs around a burden of light bulbs. It suggests many frames of reference from the spark of humanity or conscience to modern world of progress. Perhaps all these meanings work in the same confused, half-comic, intermittent light which pervades the entire novel. The character successfully weaves moral texture of the story. Breitbart had gone bankrupt and times were bad for him. When Morris offered him tea with a slice of lemon, he immediately “gulped the hot tea, his Adam’s apple bobbing” (Malamud 6) conveying his restlessness and melancholy. His past life is also a story of American victimization. Oddly enough, a minor character named Breitbart seems to summarize many of the cultural tensions in the novel. Breitbart was alone to take care of his dullish son, Hymie. Malamud thus confers an intense tragic quality by creating such a character who is perhaps one of the most pathetic characters in the novel as he is not a victim of society where there are no values. In one of the interactions that they have in the beginning of the novel, Breitbart is easily able to bring out his pessimistic outlook towards life. “ ‘So how goes now?’ ” asked the grocer. “ ‘Slow, ’ ” shrugged Breitbart (Malamud 6). Life seems too difficult for him. Moving between existence and non-existence, he has no definite role within either context of meaning and yet a possible place in each. His routine, like those of the other characters, is invested at different times with different meanings. This establishes the fact that human values have not become extinct. Marcus Klein asserts

his view of his fiction, “The world does not come easily to Malamud, everything is on the verge of not being, and the process of his own holding on, rather than any moralizing he does, is indeed the excitement of his fiction, and its tension” (217).

The foregoing analysis clearly reveals the definite role and significance of minor characters in *The Assistant*. The novel presents a complex vision on relationships and provides an insight on different perspectives of life. The novel examines ambiguities in relationships, behaviours and their values. The strength and the complexities of Frank’s character become clear only when measured against the minor characters. There is a host of characters who play a variety of significant roles in developing anti-thetical structure in Malamud’s narrative. The representation of band of characters also helps to rectify the imbalances in the assessment of women characters who populate Malamud’s world. An analysis of role of women characters like ten year old girl and Ida Bobber is highly rewarding as they illustrate through their characters values of compassion, suffering and responsibility. They have been created realistically even though in the Malamudian canvass men are portrayed as dominating but a correct appraisal of women characters comes to surface when they show traits of love, tenderness and humane stoicism.

This pattern of juxtaposition of various sets of relationships and attitudes by different characters fall easily into the pattern of Malamud’s ultimate vision of life. The analysis of the enormous range of minor characters helps us in defining Malamud’s outlook towards psychological complexities of human nature. Also even in the defeatist environment, characters seem capable of making a moral choice. As a matter of fact, the writer’s broad and normative vision becomes fully evident only when emphasis is placed on his treatment of minor characters. The study illustrates the regenerative role of suffering, redemption, the possibilities of moral growth, love and compassion. The profound aspiration for a better life in face of prison-like limitations, constitutes the core of Malamud’s vision which comes into sharp focus only after a comprehensive study of the minor characters in his fiction.

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