

Discrimination Influenced by Religious Belief in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

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ABSTRACT

Considering culture as a reason to foreground the difference is not a new subject but a major concern for the modern world and its multicultural societies. The use of religious differences as justification for hostility and discrimination against newcomers from nations with different culture or custom especially from Third World countries in European countries has led to allegations of a new "cultural racism". Bernard Malamud in *The Assistant* emphasized that being a stranger or being from another religious group can be a justified reason for people and society to treat the person differently and suspiciously as Other.

KEYWORDS: discrimination, religious belief, Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering culture as a reason to foreground the difference is not a new subject but a major concern for the modern world and its multicultural societies. Culture with its complex nature and components such as religion, customs, and rituals can be considered as an icon to assign to a nation or individual and can be used as a means for evaluation and judgment. As far as multicultural societies in modern time are concerned the ruling power and dominant hegemony tries to ratify laws to give privileges to a special religious group.

French philosopher Andre Taguieff believes that "heterophobia" or the negative evaluation of a person who is different is provoked by stranger or outsider. Of course, we should not forget that historical and anthropological evidence suggests that outsiders and strangers are not inevitably subjected to hostility. Human character and relationship is highly complex, unpredictable, and flexible; at the same time empathy, curiosity, tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation are also human traits as common as hostility and prejudice.

Man as a social being lives in groups; as a result the members of each group share some common markers which serve to distinguish outsiders and strangers from group members. These collectives and common belongings are language, culture, and territory which are in turn essential for the survival of all social groups. Of course, in the flow of time some other markers might be added to the above mentioned elements. Skin color or in other words the physical appearance, and religious faith are important features as well.

The absence of one of these markers is sufficient for a person to be considered as a stranger and vulnerable to possible danger, discrimination or consequences. The fact of being born in a society is not enough to enjoy the equal rights with other members, though one is a citizen by law. British comedian Bernard Manning insisted on several occasions that "just as a dog does not become a horse simply by being born in a stable, so Asians and blacks do not become English by being born in England (Rattansi, 2007)." This chillingly recalls the claim by Goebbels, one of Hitler's key henchmen that "The fact that the Jew lives among us is no proof that he belongs with us, just as a flea does not become a domestic animal because it lives in the house (Ibid)."

"...it [prejudice] originates from a mindset that regards "them" as different from "us" in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This sense of difference provides a motive or rationale for using our power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our own group. The possible consequences of this nexus of attitude and action range from unofficial but pervasive social discrimination at one end of the spectrum to genocide at the other, with government-sanctioned segregation, colonial subjugation, exclusion, forced deportation (or "ethnic cleansing"), and enslavement among the other variations on the theme (Fredrickson, 2002)."

The age of democratic revolutions that began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century brought serious challenges both to the institution of black slavery and to the legalized pariah status of European Jews. The doctrine that "all men are created equal" and endowed with individual rights derived from nature or reason was difficult to reconcile with lifetime servitude and forced ghettoization, unless blacks and Jews were to be considered less than human (Ibid).

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It can be said that some of the physical characteristics such as skin color, shape of nose, shape of the skull, and shape of eyes are considered as “signifiers” which signify something which are considered or associated with inferior entity. It should be mentioned that these signifiers always do not necessarily signify something negative, but they surely signify something different from that of the hegemony.

The use of cultural and religious differences as justification for hostility and discrimination against newcomers from nations with different culture or custom especially from Third World countries in European countries has led to allegations of a new “cultural racism”. Edward Said the prominent American philosopher and theorist of postcolonialism and the writer of the famous book *Orientalism* observes that

There has been a gathering awareness of the lines existing between cultures that not only allows us to discriminate one nation from another but also: enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote (Said, 1993).

According to historical evidences the earliest religious-based discrimination goes back to the time when dispersed Jews refused to convert to the religion and culture hegemony of the gentile nations or empires within which they resided. Jews created a special problem for Christians because of the latter’s belief that the New Testament superseded the Old, and that the refusal of Jews to recognize Christ as the Messiah was preventing the triumph of the gospel. Anti-Judaism was endemic to Christianity from the beginning, but since the founders of their religion were themselves Jews, it would have been difficult for early Christians to claim that there was something inherently defective about Jewish blood or ancestry. Nonetheless there was an undeniable tendency to consider the Jews who had not converted when Christ was among them as a corporate group that bore a direct responsibility for the Crucifixion. Anti-Judaism became anti-Semitism whenever it turned into a consuming hatred that made getting rid of Jews seem easier to converting them, and anti-Semitism became racism when the belief took hold that Jews were intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions. The “blood libels” against Jews that began in the Middle Ages were rooted in a belief that blood could convey sacred or magical properties (Fredrickson, 2002). One can therefore trace the origins of the two main forms of modern racism—the color-coded white supremacist variety and the essentials version of anti-Semitism—to the late medieval and early modern periods.

Regardless of being more a social and cultural phenomenon, race matters with related cluster and subcategories became a new concern in literary criticism in the twentieth century. Literary schools and movements in the century focused on a variety of subject matters and notions. Marxism tried to find a relationship between social classes and the role which economy plays in man’s social life. New historicism and cultural materialism tried to find the dominant culture and as a result the subcultures and marginalized ones together with power relations. By the emergence of the feminist movement and gender studies the focus shifted to the role of women in society and literary works and also the literary works created by women. The movement was considered as an awakening propaganda for the silenced, discriminated and marginalized portion of the society. Another important movement which has its root in politics and imperialistic policy of West in looting the natural and human resources by colonization of Orients is colonial and postcolonial studies.

Only a few years prior to World War II the world witnessed another shaming incident that was the Holocaust. Jews did not have a homeland like other nations and they were spread all over the world, and in each country they faced a different behavior whether accepted or rejected. In some nations they were forced to migrate and in other fought to death. This minority group settled down in any land that seemed safe and secure for them. America was a country that seemed more tempting than others in its being the land of big dreams, dreams of success and prosperity known as the American dream. It is widely said and commonly believed that nobody feels or considers themselves a “stranger” in the United States of America since everybody is one. Moreover, the country “has always been the civilization symbolized by a commitment to a better future for all its inhabitants (Alter, 1981).” People from different countries with different cultures and customs migrated to this land from the early time of its discovery and settlement. A great many of Jews migrated to America from different countries and settled there and formed a community. Though minority groups seem to dissolve in the dominant social structure of the society, they have their own territory within and try to keep it safe and clean. They prefer to be themselves in their small territory and keep away the strangers even if they are from the majority group.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Knowing that Bernard Malamud is from a minority group in a heterogeneous society and sharing the cultural and ethical beliefs with the community he is from, this study is trying to detect how the two factors are in action. How literature has been used to air what was happening in the society and how literary texts are time and place bound and reflects the social, political and economical situation of the society. Literary texts are inevitably involved with discourse and ideology because they are political and they not only reflect the power relations but also participate in consolidation and construction of ideology and discourse.

In this study the researcher tried to analyze *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud in the light of cultural and political studies by applying the library research methodology. Since, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, cultural studies encompass the literary, social, and political realms. Moreover, the idea of being an “Other” usually has been considered from the prospect of the dominant culture not from the prospect of the marginalized culture or community. In this study the researcher tries to look at the notion of “Otherness” from a different angle and see how it works in the works of Bernard Malamud.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the exposition of Jewish-American fiction that has characterized the United States of America’s literary history since the Second World War, Bernard Malamud’s work is outstanding and unique in both subject matter and form. Malamud is considered to be a humanistic spokesman, although he was frequently disappointed with the world spinning out of control with frightening speed. In order to embody his moral and social concerns as a Jew, an artist, and a moral man, he applied a style that is uniquely his. He is not only interested in describing the actual social structures, or the human interactions that sustain them; he is also concerned with defining and dramatizing the underlying forces which form the bases upon which a given community is built. Moreover, for Malamud the elements that constitute the culture’s visionary potential, such as alienation, loneliness, transience, and the psychological and geographical movement from the roots and tradition are also the sources of terror.

The novel which is going to be discussed here is *The Assistant* in which Malamud could masterfully picture the multicultural and cosmopolitan feature of American society in the twentieth century. Malamud seems to be over-conscious about the nationality and religious faith of his characters and even people in relation with them and the neighborhood they are all settled in. Throughout the novel readers can see how much the relationship or the presence of these people can create positive or negative feelings. The world of *The Assistant* seems closed, rigid, without prosperity or welfare, where the traditional values of honesty, thrift, and hard work go unrewarded, and may, in fact, even be meaningless. “The setting of the novel is a neighborhood inhabited by the marginal, the frustrated, and the luckless, whom a hungry, active, pushing civilization has discarded as useless: immigrant Jews left behind in the rush toward assimilation and the good life; would be criminals successful only in their failure; the trapped, who are caught forever in a net of unfulfilled expectations (Ibid).” The neighborhood which is used as the setting of this novel is mainly a Christian settler and the hegemony; except for “the Karpes, Pearls, and Bobers as Jewish families who make the minority and marginalized Jewish community. Judaism as a formal religion seems to have little place in their lives, but their consciousness of themselves as Jews is always present. “The isolation condition of these three Jewish families makes them vulnerable, susceptible to paralyzing memories of their ghetto history (Ibid).” She [Ida] had waked that morning resenting the grocer for having dragged her, so many years ago, out of a Jewish neighborhood into this. She missed to this day their old friends and landsleit-lost for parnusseh unrealized (Malamud, 1974).

“*The Assistant* is a dramatization of never-quite-resolved conflict between two cultures – the Jewish tradition of the Bobers, Pearls, and Karpes and the American heritage, the wisdom of old world versus the utilitarianism of the new (Shear, 1966).”

The Jewish law always called for the highest morality (indeed, a kind of moral passion); for joy in God’s gifts within the limits of the law; for justice among nations; and for equal treatment of stranger and friend; but some of these requirements often clashed with the structure and demands of modern life. Anti-Semitism led to fear and suspicion of the gentile; isolation, religious observance, and dietary laws led to a feeling of alienation from the gentile. Morris believes that being Jewish accounts for the best elements in his character -- honesty, trust, and kindness -- but he cannot help being a product of his world and he does have certain suspicions and animosities toward gentiles. Morris pays cash to Otto Vogel because he wants no favors from a German. Here the association with German anti-Semitism is almost impersonal. Morris finds it easy to accept the Polish woman’s anti-Semitism because it is “a different kind of anti-Semitism” than that in America. He regards it as an almost natural kind of ethnic suspicion, a slightly shameful recognition of one another’s humanity, a suspicion that doesn’t prevent all trust. On the other hand these feelings, however, are far less vicious than similar ones in Ida. She could not get along with the presence of the stranger in the shop, so she tried to create a social distance not to be too friendly to him. “She tried not to be too friendly to him, to make him feel that a distant relationship meant a short one. When they were in the back or for a few minutes together behind the counter she discouraged conversation, took up something to do, or clean, or her paper to read (Ibid).” In short it can be said that Ida suspects strangers and tries to approach Frank little by little from the beginning to the end of the story. What makes her more suspicious is the reason that made Frank stay there. He actually gets nothing for what he does. Just food for eating and a place to sleep and a few dollars pocket money! Of course he said that he wants to learn how to run a grocery and maybe he opens one in the future. Was he there for the sake of Helen? Yes or no, this is the other reason that made Ida more cautious and worried about. “She is suspicious of anyone who may attack what little position and self-respect she has acquired.

She is therefore hostile to the newcomer Frank Alpine on two counts: as a stranger, he may steal money; and, as a non-Jew, he might steal a more valuable piece of property, a key to the future, her daughter (Alter, 1981).” Ida arranges the presence of her daughter, Helen, while she is at home for lunch, dinner, or when she comes down to the shop once in a while in a way that Frank would not see her. Frank finds out that and thinks “He felt they were both lonely but her old lady kept her away from him as if he had a dirty disease; the result was he grew more impatient to find out what she was like, get to be friends with her for whatever it was worth (Malamud, 1974).”

Since Ida could not find the least evidence of dishonesty and cheating in Frank, she insisted on Morris’ longer staying in bed for a better recovery. “Yet she felt, whenever she thought of it, always a little troubled at the thought of a stranger’s presence below, a goy, after all, and she looked forward to the time when he was gone (Ibid).”

If one does not put aside their prejudice about what they have or who they are, they try to associate every good and feature or characteristics to “us” and all the negative ones to “them”. Once Frank willing to see Helen, noticed that she was coming home; he saw every element of beauty and female characteristics in her, but he thought they were too much of a Jew. “Her face was prettier than he had remembered and his throat tightened as she walked to within a couple of feet of him, her eyes blue, her hair, which she wore fairly long, brown, and she had an absent-minded way of smoothing it back off the side of her face. He thought she didn’t look Jewish, which was all to the good (Ibid).”

“Anti-Semitism is on a fairly small scale because there are few Jews in the neighborhood, but one senses a delicately ritualized distancing between Jew and Italian, and an identification of German, Irish, Norwegian, and Swedish as somehow to be suspected but, in one’s deeper soul, to receive recognition as fellow humans (Marcus, 1972).”

Ward, Frank’s partner in the holdup is one of the misfortunate and the antagonist of the novel. Though it had never been mentioned why, he was at odds with Jews for no reason. His hatred toward Jews was shown many times in the novel. “Although these families are still anxious to participate in the flawed American dream, they are viewed by many of the Gentiles in the community as seeming embodiment of the anti-Semite’s stereotypical Jew, and therefore as legitimate targets for robbery and violence (Alter, 1981).” In the first chapter of the novel Ward and Frank are ambushed in a car waiting for a proper time to do their plan, but in the last minutes the victim is changed. Morris becomes their victim instead of Karp not because they could get their fortune there in his shop, but because Ward said. “I don’t care if it’s Karp or Bober, a Jew is a Jew (Malamud, 1974).” It seems that he wanted to start a pogrom against Jews by himself. After a while Ward came to Frank with a new plan: “Karp. I want to stick him up.” When Frank asks “Why Karp?-there are bigger liquor stores.” Ward said, “I hate that Jew son of a bitch and his popeyed Louis. When I was a kid all I had to do was go near banjo eyes and they would complain to my old man and get me beat up (Ibid).”

Frank “remembered thinking as they went into the store, a Jew is a Jew, what difference does it make? Now he thought, I held him up because he was a Jew. What the hell are they to me so that I gave them credit for it (Ibid).” Frank’s attitude toward Jews reveals a parallel duplicity in his character. Frank tells Morris “I always liked Jews,” which is a lie, for he persists in thinking of Morris as “the Jew.” His statement is an attempt to believe that he is broadminded, but it is also an embarrassing effort to overcome barriers between himself and Morris and to ingratiate himself with Morris. Frank’s persistence in seeing Morris as “the Jew” shows that he continues to think in prejudiced clichés, using Jews as targets for his restless hostility. Frank’s feelings about Jews, however, are mild compared to Ward’s hatred.

As time passes Frank noticed that the heavy burden he was carrying in his mind and heart was too heavy and many times he decided to confess and admit his role in the holdup. But he thought this might worsen the situation. What he felt about it was interesting. “It was a funny thing about that; he wasn’t really sorry they had stuck up a Jew but he hadn’t expected to be sorry that they had picked on this particular one, Bober; yet now he was (Ibid).” It seems that Frank could justify his role in the holdup just because the owner of the shop was a Jew and deserved it. Even the time that Ward discussed his plan with him he emphasized that the victim was a Jew. “Ward sat down and told him that it was a Jew he planned to rob, so Frank agreed to go with him (Ibid).” But now that he lived with this family for a while and he has passionate feelings for Helen he wishes it were not this family.

From the time Frank started his work in the store the condition improved for a number of reasons. For example Morris thinks that the improvement in sales is due to Frank’s sociability and cracking jokes with customers. “The customers like him. A goy brings in goyim (Ibid).” Karp says that that is because a new apartment building is opened in the neighborhood and the German grocer opens late in the morning and closes soon at night for his health problems. But what Ida thinks is quite different. She utters that the rush of customers is due to the presence of a non-Jew in the store.

In a multicultural society people with different faith might live, work, and play together. They might take part in many social activities and events. If we consider marriage as an important event in everybody’s social life there we will find many rules and regulations or in other words marriage conducts assigned by the government and more important than that, the laws of religion. Marriage out of the religion is forbidden in many religions and in some it might have severe consequences. Because of that people approach it more carefully and logically. They might find it

mysterious and fear of approaching the idea. This might be rooted from their radical view toward religion, lack of information about other religion or illogical beliefs. In this novel as it was mentioned before Ida, regardless of her pessimistic attitude toward strangers, is worried about the possible relationship and marriage between Frank and Helen. Ida says to Morris "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 (Ibid)." Likewise, as far as marriage is concerned this is what Frank is worried about, too. In his daydreams he thought of marrying Helen out of his feeling but then out of logic he doubted it. He had thought that if she ever fell for him it would change his life in the way he wanted it to happen, although at times the very thought of another change, even in this sense of it, made him miserable. Yet what was the payoff, for instance, of marrying a dame like her and having to do with Jews the rest of his life (Ibid)?

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that in this novel every relation and connection from the most complex one to the most ordinary one are highly influenced by what one thinks about the other people. This might be due to social and historical evidences. Since most of the characters of the novel are Jews, the memory of the ghetto is remembered the fear of a new pogrom or anti-Semitic behavior is felt in any encounter with strangers and newcomers. Malamud emphasized that being a stranger or being from another religious group can be a justified reason for people and society to treat the person differently and suspiciously as Other. Malamud used a multicultural society as the setting of this novel. Although the feeling of being a stranger or Other is felt in every communication between characters, Malamud tries to focus and emphasize on love and humanity as important traits to let people live in peace in multicultural societies.

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