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## **AN ANALYSIS OF MALAMUD'S PROSE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF BUBER'S I-YOU PHILOSOPHY**

**Shpëtim Madani**

PhD, Foreign Language Center, Academy of Armed Forces, Tirana, Albania  
[madanishpetim@gmail.com](mailto:madanishpetim@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to analyze the prose of Jewish-American writer Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) from a perspective of Martin Buber's I-You philosophy, which aims toward a transition from I-It to I-You. The I-It connection entails a subject-to-object connection with the world, whereas I-You refers to a subject-to-subject relationship with another human being, including an animal or inanimate object. This sort of relation entails responsibility and is best manifested through love. The study sheds light on the transformation of the Malamudian hero from an egotistical individual who first treats others as merely objects to regarding them as equally important human beings. This moral evolution occurs in the mode of Buberian I-You philosophy. This transition whereby both participating entities are transformed does not occur easily because the protagonist's past is considerably dark and he is initially distrustful of the world. This way, on his road to redemption the male character is generally encouraged and guided by the female counterpart, serving as an alter ego that reminds him of his responsibility and humanism as a human being. The analysis begins with a short introduction into Buber's philosophical ideas, which are then illustrated through Malamud's major works.*

## **Keywords**

Buber, I-It, I-You, Malamud, Love, Responsibility

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## **1. Introduction**

Martin Buber (1875-1956) was a Jewish-Austrian theistic philosopher who became celebrated for his major work *I and Thou*, published in 1923. (The archaic personal pronoun “thou” refers to the second person singular “you”, which was formerly used to address someone on an informal level and, when capitalized, to address God in a prayer.) Composed of three sections, the book probes into the psychology of the individual; the relationship of the individual to other human beings in the society; and relation to God.

In his book, Buber presents two modes of approaching the world: the mode of I-It or “experience” and I-You or “encounter/participation”. The former is regarded by him as the plight of the modern society because the individual is self-centered and detached from the social environment. In other words, the I is the experiencer and observer that imposes some distance on the experienced It, i.e. the external world, forming a subject-object relation. On the other hand, the I-You mode involves a mutually transformative relationship between the I and the object of experience, whereby both entities are active participants and treat each other as a subject, forming an I-You duality.

Ideally, the I’s activity is half of I-You union, while the You or the Other has to be open to this encounter. This kind of involvement has to be characterized by balance, grace, and will on both persons, so that a transformation in the manner they view themselves and the Other occurs. Regarded as perfect, this relation represents the present. Nevertheless, the present of I-you relation is not an abstract point between the past and the future, but it is such in its entirety and intensity and exists only in encounter and relation. On the contrary, the I of I-It only refers to the experience of the past moment; a moment that has no content. Buber emphasizes: “What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past” (1970, p.64). On the other hand, the philosopher conveys the idea that relations cannot just exist in the present, and that the I-It approach is not to be totally neglected because experience enables our survival and order of the world.

Buber remarks that an I-You relationship may also be formed between an individual and other non-human living organisms, such as a tree. In this regard, Buber argues: “[...] if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to

be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me [...] The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily I and has to deal with me as I must deal with it - only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity (p.58). However, since reciprocity cannot be perennial, an I-You relationship is destined to reverse to I-It, sooner or later. This way, human relations are subject to constant reevaluation.

The purpose of this study is to explore Martin Buber's influence on Malamud, hypothesizing that the philosopher's impact on the novelist is greater than noted by various researchers, who have almost referred to Malamud's novel "The Assistant" only.

## **2. Literature Review**

Buber's I-You philosophy presence in Malamud has been referred to by several researchers and critics, such as: Brian Beer and Mahender Singh in their research papers. A profound insight into Buber's correlation to Malamud has been provided by critic Robert Kegan in his work *The Sweeter Welcome: Voices for a Vision of Affirmation, Bellow, Malamud and Martin Buber* (1976). This paper draws on such ideas and expands them.

## **3. Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this paper is a qualitative approach, based on Malamud's major works and Martin Buber's book as primary sources, whereas as secondary sources there were used journal articles and materials from the internet,.

## **4. Results**

Buber's *I-You* philosophy helps us better understand Malamud's four major novels (The Natural, The Assistant, A New Life, and The Fixer), as part of this study. Each of the protagonists reach a high level of maturity that enables them to form meaningful relationships that transition from I-It to I-You.

## 5. Discussion

Similarly to Buber's philosophy, Malamud, as a moral realist writing in the second half of the 20th century, expressed his great concern about the human condition after World War II, which was characterized by existential angst, void, sense of impending doom, materialism and greed for power. The Malamud hero is introduced to the reader as a fragmented human being, detached from himself and society, as well as suffering extensively from a guilt-ridden past. The protagonist's search for meaning and a new life is initially based on an I-It approach, with the protagonist viewing others and the world as hostile, to be exploited as a means to an end. The transition from I-It to I-You does not occur without much distrust and deliberation. Malamud's first novel "The Natural" (1952/1980) centers on 33-year-old Roy Hobbs, a talented baseball player who would become immortal if it were not for his hubris, lack of team spirit, and the affair he carries on with his coach's niece, Memo Paris, a *femme fatale* that dries up all Roy's energies and also urges him to sell out, in order to meet her great material demands.

Roy possesses a unique talent as a baseball player. His skills, technique, and dexterity are unknown to the other members of the team because he does not open to any of them. Considering himself highly superior, Roy mingles with the players only during the match. He travels with them but distances himself by sitting far from them, which highlights a blatant I-It connection. The others, in turn, observing his aloofness, begin to rightfully wonder whether Roy is fighting for the team or for himself.

Roy becomes aware of his moral responsibility to others thanks to Iris Lemon – the antipode of Memo. A 33-year-old grandmother, Iris supports and reminds him about the positive example that heroes like him should set to common people. "[...] I hate to see a hero fail. There are so few of them [...] Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go" (pp.139-40). She is supportive, experienced of life's hardships in having had to raise her child in her teens all by herself but she is not as luring as Memo. One is associated with lust, beauty, destruction, while the other with plainness, fertility, and hope. Roy, in the end, deserts Memo, and learns that he is expecting a child by Iris, with whom he is likely to start a new life with responsibility.

Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957/1993) is the novel mostly associated by critics with Buber's philosophy. In this regard, Kegan emphasizes: "*The Assistant* mixes the flavor of the Hasidic folktale with the fervor of the twentieth-century quest. The result is startling. Malamud,

a macher, indeed, fashions identity itself, alive and dancing, and in so doing, brings to life the very rhythm of the I-Thou relationship – a self-transcending communication” (p.37).

In the book, Frank Alpine is a drifter who has come from the West to seek a new life in the East. He is employed as an assistant in the grocery store of the Jewish immigrant Morris Bober, who pities the wandering hungry guy and hires him, despite the inability to sufficiently provide for his own family. The store itself is of special importance throughout the novel: while for Morris it feels like a tomb, it becomes a place of rehabilitation for wandering Frank. Referring to this location, critic Nienke de Mol (2012), in her thesis *The Role of the Grocery Store in Bernard Malamud's The Assistant*, highlights: “This imagery underlines Frankie's transformation, while the transformation is described as a rebirth, coming out of the tomb of the grocery store as a new man and a Jew” (p.4).

Initially, Frank views the world from an entirely I-It perspective, whereby everyone and everything is to be exploited in his own interest. With this idea in mind, he is easily convinced by the criminal Ward Minogue to hold Morris up at the novel's outset, although it was apparent to Frank that they would not profit much from the robbery of the store. Right after starting work as an assistant, Frank takes immediate interest in the grocer's daughter, Helen. But his attraction is exclusively based on lust, in wanting just her body without commitment. His lust assumes the form of voyeurism in spying her naked in the bathroom, which makes him experience feelings of both longing and loss, in not having attained the object of his desire. She, in turn, is getting out of a loveless relationship with Nat, a promising Jewish law student, who treats her like a sexual object. On the other hand, her refusal to give in to Frank increases his yearning to have her.

Critic Shalini (2016) has rightly noted that: “Malamud in his narration follows the characteristics of dialogue. Buber considers speech as a confrontation between two beings at the moment of conversation. One being speaks and the other listens. Analysis of the passages in the novel explains that Bober is the speaker and Alpine is the listener” (p.64). The grocer is Frank's mentor on the latter's journey from a rogue to saint. In this context, critic Dixit (2016), has rightly remarked: “In the novel Morris bears the torch for Frank.” (p.18). However, Frank's transformative path is long, due to his dark past attributed to a dysfunctional family and corrupted mind. It is specifically this attachment to past habits and anticipation of a bright future that makes him feel insensitive to poor Morris. This way, a new beginning primarily based on the judgment-free present is required. In Buber's words: “Nothing conceptual intervenes between I

and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation” (p.62). The grocer, above all, appreciates a genuine dialogue, but he is also aware, as George & Kennedy (2017) have remarked, that: “Genuine dialogue occurs when there is shared mutuality between people” (p.68).

Upon hearing from Morris that some shopkeepers steal their customers, Frank, suggests that the grocer do the same, but the grocer flatly rejects the idea, stating that honesty is of paramount importance to him. Frank himself occasionally steals from the cash desk himself, justifying this with the hard work. Morris, on the other hand, knows about this pilfering but does not utter a word, hoping that the assistant would change. Frank is baffled by Morris’ integrity all along, culminating in the following Buber-like exchange:

“I suffer for you,” Morris said calmly.

Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. “What do you mean”

“I mean you suffer for me.” (p.150)

Ironically, though Frank has replaced most of the money, he takes one dollar, just in case he needs after the date with Helen at the park. Caught in the act by Morris, Frank is shown the door, considering their relationship to have run its course. In this regard, Buber states that “every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing, or at least to enter into thinghood again and again” (p.69). In reality, the main reason why Morris alienates Frank is fear for Helen, which turns out to be well-founded. Thus, saving Helene from Warde’s attempted rape, Frank forces himself on her, believing that he will lose her for good, due to the incident with the grocer. Being treated as an It by both Morris and Helen, the assistant becomes aware of the importance of establishing meaningful human relations, instead of merely regarding other people as objects. With Morris this happens when the grocer is dead. As critic Meise (1996) has commented:

It is not until the end that Malamud fulfills the relationship of the two men by having Frank rise from Morris's grave after having slipped into it and eventually taking his place as the grocer and caretaker for his family; a vision which may well be seen as a type of descent, symbolizing the world of IT, to resurrection, symbolizing his turning towards THOU. From Morris, Frank is given a new beginning, and from Frank, Morris' primary concern for his family is resolved. (p.60)

This way, upon the grocer's death, Frank takes his place in the store, and commits himself to providing for Helen and her mother. The transformation of Frank is evident in him working night and day to send Helen to university, which shows that Frank has changed in line with Morris' guidance, by entering into a pattern of I-You relationship with the rest of the Bober family. Particularly, with regard to Helen, Samantaray (2014) has rightly observed that: "Love replaces lust, and seeing the eternal "You" becomes a possibility" (p.108). For Frank, what matters most now is to live in the spirit, by responding with his entire being to a You. According to Buber, "spirit is not in the I but between I and You" (p.89). While You may exist outside the relationship, the I is the conscious subject defined in relation to the rest of the world with which it interacts. As Buber states: "Man becomes an I through a You. What confronts us comes and vanishes, relational events take shape and scatter, and through these changes crystallizes, more and more each time, the consciousness of the constant partner, the I-consciousness" (p.80).

Helen, on the other hand, becomes appreciative of Frank's sacrifice, and becomes aware that she had been unrealistic in decides to give their relationship a second chance. In Buber's words, they come to the realization that "feelings one 'has'; love occurs. Feelings dwell in man, but man dwell in love. This is no metaphor, but actuality: love does not cling to an I, as if the You were its 'content' or object; it is between I and You" (p.66).

The hero in the novel "A New Life"(1961/1980), Seymour Levin, is another Malamudian protagonist escaping from a dark past and in desperate need of starting over. A master of arts, he is hired at College of Cascadia in the West. At the workplace, he is involved in an affair with Pauline, the wife of his boss Gerard Gilley. Given that Pauline is the mother of two children, neither of them seem to seek anything beyond some fun, establishing thus an I-It relation. Nonetheless, for some time, Levin stops seeing her, so as to clear up the relation existing between moral responsibility and romantic feelings for Pauline, deliberating that his conduct had been guided by allurements and inappropriateness rather than self-control and righteousness. As a result, he starts to hate himself, suffering until he comes to the conclusion that the cause of suffering is not offering love, which is something he has kept against his will.

Even though, with time, Levin seems to have gone off her, he decides to assume the responsibility for his actions in telling Gilley about the affair and the intention to marry Pauline. The following snappy exchange occurs between him and Gilley, the latter only being concerned about keeping up appearances:

‘An older woman than yourself and not dependable, plus two adopted kids, no choice of yours, no job or promise of one, and other assorted headaches. Why take that load on yourself?’

‘Because I can, you son of a bitch.’(pp.318-19)

Levin’s choice to give up everything for Pauline is tough, but once he hears that she is pregnant by him, the feelings of a future father bring him closer to her. In this regard, Buber states that:

Love is a responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling – the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that has nailed his lifelong to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love man. (p.66)

In the same context, in an interview with E. Masilomani (1979), Malamud denies the impression that Levin has ceased loving Pauline at the end of the novel:

Levin has not ceased to love her. There can be no responsibility without some love. The golden hoop rings he gave her which she fastened on to her ears are a symbol of love, to me symbolic of the wedding ring. (p.35)

On a personal level, Levin initially finds Gilley highly likeable and friendly. As a result, he does not hesitate to support him for department chairmanship. Soon, it becomes clear to Levin that he is being exploited by a candidate that promotes stagnation rather progressive ideas, which leads to a considerable alienation between the two. Levin runs for head of department himself, but Gilley discloses the affair with Pauline, despite the disgrace. This causes Levin to lose the elections and the job.

A progressive moral growth entailing a transition from I-It to I-You also occurs in the novel “The Fixer” (1966), set in pre-revolutionary Russia. Yakov Bok, a Jewish handyman in his early thirties, is introduced to the reader as a highly selfish person that blames everything on fate and his wife, Raisl, who deserted him once he stopped sleeping with her. He leaves the shtetl for Kiev, deciding to live disguised as a non-Jew in a neighborhood forbidden to Jews. Falsely accused of murdering a child for religious purposes, he is imprisoned and maltreated for almost three years.



In the beginning, while in prison, he curses his Jewish heritage and blames his incarceration on Raisl: “She ran off with an unknown party and that’s why I’m in jail now”(p.69). With time, however, suffering renders Yakov compassionate towards people that suffer injustice, in general, and his Jewish community, in particular. In refusing to compromise against Jews, commit suicide, or provoke his murder from the guards, Yakov fights the evil in the best manner possible. He even kills the czar in his dream, which entails a reversal of the hero’s feelings from unconditional love for the sovereign at the novel’s outset, to extreme hate at the end. Or, in Buberian terms, a transition from I-You to I-It.

Concerning his wife, he has a change of heart, as well. By the end of the novel, she comes to visit him in prison, begging him to sign a paper, accepting fatherhood to her child by another man, so that she is permitted to live in the community. Yakov agrees to that, stating that whoever acts as father is the real father.

## **6. Conclusion**

Martin Buber’s *I-You* philosophy seeks to reform relations among human beings, as well as promote a rebirth of original connection between individuals and the world. The world that Buber portrays is the world in which we live, not an abstract one. It is the world where he lived with other living beings, nature, and God.

Buber’s *I-You* is a philosophy of encounter and dialogue requiring human beings to participate in the world and interact with one another in a complete and responsible manner. To Buber, it is through relation, which is enabled by encounter, that real life is rendered possible. The You in I-You relation is not static permanently; it may, at a moment, transform into an It and can become a You again. Individuals who constantly treat others as objects or things do not lead a full and meaningful existence. Finally, the world of I-You and that of I-It are not two separate worlds in which people would act. There is only one world, but which is dual.

In a light similar to Buber’s *I-you* philosophy, Malamud’s prose conveys the novelist’s concern about the predicament of the modern society, in which there is a prevailing tendency for the individual and the world to objectify one another. Malamud’s protagonists are not initially impervious to this inclination. Thus, at each novel’s outset, Roy, Frank, Levin, and Yakov respectively are introduced as selfish, detached, and hostile to the world. However, thanks to their predisposition to interact and open up to people that offer valid guidance and genuine love

to them, all the protagonists manage to undergo a meaningful spiritual transformation, while imposing a reversal from I-You to I-It to people that prove to be unworthy of support, trust, or love. All in all, what is evident in Malamud's prose is Buber's idea that a meaningful life is led through the permanence of I-You relations, which are characterized by reciprocity, presence, entirety, and responsibility.

The present paper has its own limitations, in that it does not cover the relationship of Malamudian characters to God, which is also the core of Buber's third part of *I and You*. This could be the scope of future research by focusing on other novels and short stories by Malamud.

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