

# TRANSFORMING THROUGH DIALOGUE IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S *THE ASSISTANT*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the importance and relevance of dialogue in interpersonal relationship and argues that the authentic interpersonal relationship is essentially dialogic and transforming. The importance and the transforming effects of dialogue are explored through an analysis of Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant*. An attempt is made to understand the relationship between philosophy and literature while at the same time an interrogation is made to analyse the role of dialogue in philosophy and literature. For this it makes use of the Philosophy of Dialogue proposed by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. The analysis shows that dialogue acts as a medium through which human beings interact and it has the potential to transform people. The results of this study clearly emphasize the possibility of using dialogue as a tool for transformation in day to day life.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Face, Interpersonal, Medium, Other, Relationship, Self, Transformation

## 1. Introduction

The understanding of the relation between philosophy and literature is bound to change as time and history are in progress. Plato's ideas on philosophy and literature for a long time contributed to the quarrel between the two. Philosophers consciously kept themselves away from literature and literary

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works while on the other hand, literary writers found that their works are closely related with philosophical thoughts. Aristotle, however, rejected Plato's concept of poetics as "thrice removed from the truth."<sup>1</sup> This shift resulted in a continuous conversation between philosophy and literature. Existentialist philosophers kept this discussion alive and broadened the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and literature. It is borne out of a better understanding of and a greater exposure to literary works. Consequently, today philosophers consider literature as a source of inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Also the interest among the writers' literary works shifted towards moral aspects. An analysis of the novel *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud from the theoretical perspectives of Martin Buber and Immanuel Levinas affirms the relation between philosophy and literature.

Martin Buber, well known for the philosophy of dialogue, defines genuine dialogue as "real meeting"<sup>3</sup> which is different from monologue. Very often dialogue is often used as synonym for conversation. Buber clarifies the difference between genuine dialogue and monologue; genuine dialogue has the ability to engage and to be engaged by other, whereas communication of independent experiences and viewpoints as mere information is called as monologue.<sup>4</sup> Genuine dialogue occurs when there is shared mutuality between people. According to Buber, the key elements of dialogue are turning, addressing, listening and responding.<sup>5</sup> Turning means overcoming self-centeredness and giving oneself in relationships. Addressing makes sure the presence of the other person and listening is the whole hearted imagination of what the other person is thinking and

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<sup>1</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, trans., Benjamin Jowett, The University of Adelaide Library, 06 Mar 2014, <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plato/p71r/>> (7 July 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Martha Nussbaum, "Ralph Cohen and the Dialogue between Philosophy and Literature," *New Literary History* 40, 4, (2009): 757-765.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth P. Kramer, "Tasting God: Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue," *Horizons*, 37, 2 (2010): 231.

<sup>4</sup>Kramer, "Tasting God," 231.

<sup>5</sup>Kramer, "Tasting God," 231.

experiencing. Responding is the willingness for future dialogue. This mode of dialogue fosters relationship between individuals and functions as a bridge. Dialogue has the power to create responsibility among individuals towards the other. This unique form of responsibility attained through self-sacrifice and self-discovery leads to the transformation of the individual and gives meaning to the existence of the individual.<sup>6</sup>

Immanuel Levinas gives a prior importance of dialogue in the interpersonal relationships. One has to come out of self-centeredness in order to enter into dialogue. The relationship formed out of the dialogue is different for different people and it depends on the people who are involved in relationships. Dialogue enables participation, which means giving of self completely to the other.<sup>7</sup> This interpersonal mode of relationship leads to responsibility. He calls it as radical responsibility which means the person has to be responsible even though the results come not of his actions. An analysis of Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* shows the presence of dialogue among the characters which leads to transformation.

Bernard Malamud is a Jewish American novelist and short story writer. His novel *The Assistant* speaks about how the exemplary life style of the protagonist transforms the co-protagonist. An analysis of the transformation that takes place in the novel in the light of the ideas of Buber and Levinas proves the ability of dialogue to transform people. This article claims that dialogue is the key element of transformation. It signifies the power of dialogue which enables human beings to be responsible and transformed.

This study establishes the fact that an interpersonal relationship through dialogue brings transformation in human beings. The role of dialogue is to act as a bridge between human beings and enable individuals to come out of self-centeredness. This study also proves that availability is an essential quality to

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans., Ronald Gregor Smith, London: Kegan Paul, 1947, 19.

<sup>7</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987, 6.

establish meaningful interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships begin with dialogue and enter into a deeper level of understanding. Dialogue creates responsibility towards other human beings and the final result is transformed human beings. This mode of relationship is essential for fruitful living and meaningful existence. The significance of interpersonal relationships is brought out through an analysis of the theories of Buber and Levinas.

## 2. Dialogue and Literature

A key element that binds philosophy and literature is dialogue. Over the years different perspectives of dialogue have existed and the same have been reflected in literature. Dialogue of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Indian Upanishads and Analects of Confucius are examples of it.<sup>8</sup> It must be remembered that dialogue is different from all other forms of verbal and non verbal communication based on its goal and intention. It focuses on enhancing understanding by addressing problems and questioning them. The difference between debate and dialogue is that the former is aimed at proving one's point while the latter's focus is sustaining relationships. Socrates' model of dialogue emphasizes on bringing out new knowledge through questions and makes use of conversation to find out the value and truth of an individual's opinion. The purpose of Plato's dialogue is to provoke debate among thoughtful people.<sup>9</sup> The mode of dialogue in which both Plato and Socrates were engaged, enabled them to attain truth. Michael Bakhtin introduced the term polyphony and heteroglossia which address cultural production. His theory of dialogism is defined as the open-ended possibilities generated from discursive practices. For him responsive understanding is

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<sup>8</sup>Karel L. vander Leeuw, "Philosophical Dialogue and the Search for Truth" <<http://www.lerenfilosoferen.nl/wp-content/uploads/Karel-van-der-Leeuw-Philosophical-dialogue-and-the-search-for-truth.pdf>> (2 July 2016).

<sup>9</sup>A. B. Mathur, "The Dialogues of Plato" *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 48, 3, (1987): 401, <[www.jstor.org/stable/41855317](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855317)> (2 July 2016).

the goal of dialogue. According to his theory, dialogue leads to many outcomes since it has to take into account different aspects of reality. Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* comprises different forms of dialogues.

Bernard Malamud writes about the struggles and sufferings of an immigrant in his writings. He focuses on freedom and suggests many ways through which one can attain it. The attainment of this freedom is through imagination and manifested in words. Malamud brings out his real experiences in the narrative. His characters, for example, reflect "Jewishness as a garment they wear, almost as closely fitted as their own skin."<sup>10</sup>

Among the existing works on Malamud's *The Assistant* the articles "Role of Grocery Store in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*" and "Zen Buddhism and *The Assistant*: A Grocery Shop as a Training Monastery" are significant as they analyse the theme of transformation in the novels of Malamud.<sup>11</sup> According to these articles, grocery shop is a symbolic representation of a prison and the cause of all sufferings. The characters in the novel try to escape from this prison and their efforts transform them.<sup>12</sup> These articles help to understand the concepts of suffering and transformation, but they fail to address how it is made possible in the novel through dialogue.

Shubha Vats examines the concept of humanism in the article "Malamud's Treatment of Heroism: An Expression of Humanity."<sup>13</sup> According to Vats, suffering enables the human

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<sup>10</sup>Louis Zara, "ERIC-Teachers' Study Guide: The American Jewish Writer, The Image of the Jew in Literature, 1969" <<https://archive.org/stream/ERIC-ED033938-djvu.txt>> (28 September 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Nienke De Mol, "The Role of Grocery Store in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*" <<https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/206847>> (27 September 2016).

<sup>12</sup>Edward A. Abramson, "Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 24 (1994): 146-156.

<sup>13</sup>Shubha Vats, "Malamud's Treatment of Heroism: An Expression of Humanity." *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* 2.7 (2013): 13-20.

being to understand the value of humanism. He also asserts that human being cannot live in isolation and brings out the importance of society and relationships. On the other hand, Abramson explains the attempts of a Jew to relate to the world and the author's attempts to universalize the Jew in "Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship."<sup>14</sup> Abramson criticizes Malamud for generalisations because in his opinion, one cannot write about humanity in general. Abramson's article is relevant since it helps to draw certain similarities between a Jew and a common man.

One of the central themes in the novels of Bernard Malamud is self-transcendence. This theme is explored to a certain extent by Sandy Cohen in the book *Bernard Malamud and the Trial by Love*. According to Chester E. Eisinger, a reviewer of the book, Malamud uses fiction as a means to show transformation in the characters. This article draws certain similarities between real life and fiction.<sup>15</sup> Liberation from suffering is a common theme of all the above mentioned articles. They strongly argue about the transformation of the characters. But they fail to bring out the process through which transformation occurs in the characters of the novel. This gap is addressed through the present paper, which dwells on the importance of dialogue, a key element of transformation. Whereas the existing researches on the works of Bernard Malamud emphasise the need of a study on the transformation of the characters, this paper attempts to show how it could be done through a philosophy of dialogue.

### 3. Philosophy of Dialogue

The concept of dialogue proposed by Martin Buber is worth studying because of its transforming abilities. He introduces his philosophy of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' based on the authentic and the inauthentic attitude of human beings. 'I-Thou' relationship is a reciprocal relationship between person and person as subject and

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<sup>14</sup>Abramson, "Bernard Malamud and the Jews," 147.

<sup>15</sup>Chester E. Eisinger, "American Literature," *American Literature*, 47, 2 (1975): 292–292. <[www.jstor.org/stable/2925501](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2925501)> (2 July 2016).

subject. On the other hand, 'I-It' relationship is based on domination and control where a person considers the other as a mere object. This mode of relationships is applicable to relation with nature, God and other human beings. He gives importance for mutuality in 'I-Thou' relationship. The role of the dialogue in interpersonal relationship is to enable real meeting.<sup>16</sup>

Emmanuel Levinas considers dialogue as a medium through which persons relate and interact with each other. According to Levinas, face is the medium through which one can interact with the other. He states that "The other continues to face me, to reveal in his face."<sup>17</sup> This mode of relationship goes to the extent to which it evokes a responsibility in oneself, which cannot be rejected because of the constant interaction through the face. Levinas opines that it becomes a tie between two people. He gives importance to the face, which acts as the central part of the body through which people relate to each other. The relationship with the other begins with conversation and leads to dialogue. The appearance of the face is an invitation to enter into dialogue which leads to interpersonal relationship.

### 3.1. Dialogue and Existence

The conceptual similarities and the focus on dialogue among the philosophers confirm the fact that the existence of the other is an important factor to affirm the existence of self. Dialogue emerges as a necessary factor to affirm one's own existence since it acts as a medium through which one comes to know about the existence of the other. The uniqueness of a person is not a barrier to entering into relationship with one another. Acceptance, availability and responsibilities are the key factors of this mode of relationship. Acceptance is the first stage of intersubjective relationship. Every relationship begins with acceptance. It is a process through which one understands the common bond between people. The ability to accept other individuals leads to availability. It is the ability to give a space for the other human beings. Acceptance and

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<sup>16</sup>Kramer, "Tasting God," 231.

<sup>17</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, London: Kluwer Academic, 1969, 81.

availability are the basis of responsibility because it asks the self to sacrifice oneself and give completely to the other. Dialogue has a significant role in interpersonal relationship because it helps to understand other individuals and functions as a bridge. The analysis of Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant* brings out the transformative nature of dialogue.

### 3.2. Buber's Perspective on Dialogue

According to Buber, recognition and acceptance are the essential elements to form 'I-Thou' relationship. He considers acceptance as the beginning of 'I-Thou' relationship.<sup>18</sup> Acceptance is essential for establishing the relationship between 'I-Thou'. It takes place through distancing,<sup>19</sup> the ability to understand the difference between the self and the other. Dialogue plays a key role in distancing and accepting the other. It is through dialogue that a person comes to know the difference, which makes them understand what he or she is. Buber states: "... by accepting as my partner in genuine dialogue, I have affirmed him as a person."<sup>20</sup> Distancing and accepting enable a person to understand one's own uniqueness by accepting the qualities of the other, and precede all other characteristics of the relationship.

Buber explains the role of dialogue in relationship by the term "immediacy"<sup>21</sup> that excludes a third person relationship without mediacy. It means that partners in dialogue turn to each other. A person of dialogue looks spontaneously and impartially, placing no hindrance between himself and the other. Dialogue has the ability to bring out the authentic essence of relationship.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, New York: Harper Collins, 1985, 68-69.

<sup>19</sup>Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 60.

<sup>20</sup>Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 79.

<sup>21</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans., Walter Kaufman, Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1970, 62-23.

<sup>22</sup>Daniel Brien Anderson, *From Deliberation to Dialogue: The Role of the I-Thou in Democratic Experience*, Thesis, University of Uregeon, 2012, 143-144, <<https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/>



According to Buber, immediacy is "looking into the heart of one another's eyes."<sup>23</sup> Immediacy is the path through which the relationship becomes concrete. Dialogue is an essential element for both immediacy and concreteness. It helps the being to present to the other and to make an authentic relationship.

Freedom and responsibility are the key elements in 'I-Thou' relationship, which is absent in 'I-It' relationship. Responsibility means the ability to respond or being answerable. Responding means entering into 'I-Thou' relationship. Acceptance and immediacy are the important elements that leads to 'I-Thou' relationship. Responsibility is real and productive only in the life of dialogue.<sup>24</sup> 'I-It' relationship is limited within the self and does not have the ability to relate to the outside world. When the other person is seen as a means of personal enjoyment that person becomes an object. Buber does not negate the possibility of transforming the 'I-It' world to 'I-Thou' world.

Dialogue functions as a key element in the formation of 'I-Thou' relationship. It shows the possibility and everyone's capability to enter into dialogue and form 'I-Thou' relationship. It is a personal relationship and gives a chance to everyone to enter into dialogue. Dialogue is a necessary factor which plays an important role in 'I-Thou' relationship because it helps to affirm existence. 'I-It' relationship is based on monologue and 'I-Thou' relationship is based on dialogue. It is a basic requirement and helps to affirm the existence of human beings.

The dialogue, which is focused towards the other, creates responsibility in the self towards the other. Responsibility occurs when a person wants to create a relationship through dialogue. The mode of relationship which gives sufficient importance to the other is called as reciprocity, which acts as the centre of one's own existence. Dialogue acts as a bridge between the relationship between the self and the other. The basis of such relationship is availability which has the potency to create a relationship with

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[handle/1794/12536/Andersen\\_oregon\\_0171A\\_10518.pdf](https://doi.org/10.17758/1794-12536/Andersen_oregon_0171A_10518.pdf) > (13 October 2016).

<sup>23</sup>Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 21.

<sup>24</sup>Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 35.

many other human beings.<sup>25</sup> Irrespective of intellectual and spiritual capacities of a person, everyone is involved in a life of dialogue. Dialogue becomes an opening to share one's own memories and convictions. The inability to share convictions distances the individuals from one another and results in the failure of the relationship. According to Buber, speech in the form of a monologue and debate cannot be considered as dialogue; he calls them as technical and political argument.<sup>26</sup> Monologue and debate fail to form dialogue because the participants consider them as absolute. It happens due to the inability to reciprocate.

According to Buber, speech is a medium through which communication between two individuals takes place.<sup>27</sup> The three important elements in communication are the speaker, the listener and the medium of communication. The listener and the medium of communication are as important as speech in the formation of dialogue. The ability to evoke response in another person makes genuine conversation. Genuine conversation occurs when two individuals step into a mutual engagement. The moments of genuine conversation are speaking, being heard, being answered and again speaking. According to Buber, dialogue has the potency to turn 'other' into a 'thou'. Dialogue functions as a medium through which two individuals reduce their distance and come closer.

Dialogical meeting is an important element in the philosophy of Buber. One has to come out of the self and should be able to identify the uniqueness of the other human being. This mode of the meeting involves the participation of the individuals. Dialogical meeting is the process of entering into relationship. It occurs as part of unforeseen moments because it cannot be caused or planned beforehand.<sup>28</sup> These inter human being relationship

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<sup>25</sup>David Howkinson, *Martin Buber's I and Thou, Pastoral Counselling and Reading Text: A Proposal for Integrated Approach*, Dissertation Catholic University of America, 2010, 35-36 <[http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/phd\\_theses/9/](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/phd_theses/9/)> (13 October 2016).

<sup>26</sup>Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 37.

<sup>27</sup>Buber, *I and Thou*, 70-71.

<sup>28</sup>Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 112-113.

ends only with a response. The ability to create response and responsibility towards the other makes an authentic human being. The important elements of this relationship are reflected in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

### 3.3. Levinasian Perspective on Dialogue

According to Levinas, dialogue is an essential element in the formation of the relationship between the self and the other.<sup>29</sup> Even though the intention of dialogue is to create an inter-human relationship, its intensity and the mode of relationship differ from one to the other. It shows the uniqueness of inter-human relationship that has the ability to transcend. Levinas considers participation as an important element of inter-human relationship and defines participation as an act of giving oneself to the other.<sup>30</sup> Dialogue initiates the process of participation and leads to a deeper relationship. Levinas insists that participation should not be limited by language because participation implies giving oneself totally to the other. The role of language is to initiate the process of participation.

According to Levinas, face is the medium through which one person communicates with the other. Levinas terms face as "nudity"<sup>31</sup> which means formal bareness; he also calls it as non form. The Face has the ability to invite the self for interaction and create an effect on the person because it is a revelation rather than an object of perception. The ability to enter into relationship and transfer the self is known as alterity. The revelation of the face is much beyond the physical appearance. It is a personal way of expressing identity. The nakedness of the face is an important concept in the interpersonal relationship because it enables oneself to present to the other without hindrance. Interpersonal relationships begin with conversation and later enter into dialogue, which is characterized by turning, addressing, listening and responding. The face acts as an invitation to enter into

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<sup>29</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans., Michael B. Smith, London: The Athlon Press, 1999, 93-94.

<sup>30</sup>Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 6-7.

<sup>31</sup>Levinas, "Collected Philosophical Papers," 96.

dialogue and respect for the other is the reason behind this unique mode of relationship. Another reason for the uniqueness of this relationship is that the form of interpersonal relationship formed between the self and the other cannot be transferred to any other mode of relationship. The response of the self towards the other decides the intensity of the relationship. The relationship between the self and the other is reflected on the face, which is the symbol of a moral power.

The important elements of dialogue explained by Buber and Levinas describe interpersonal relationships in its depth and show the possibility to transform other human beings. Dialogue transforms the individuals to responsible human beings. It leads to a stage where one feels responsible for everyone. The common feature among this mode of relationship is that it begins with dialogue and leads to transformation. It goes through a progressive relationship from acceptance to availability and to transformation. Acceptance enables to understand the common bond between people. It is a movement from oneself to the other and to follow the other. Availability is the ability to respond to the needs of the other that leads to transformation where one becomes responsible human being. It is a space where there is no space for self-centeredness. This mode of relationship takes place through dialogue and it functions as a bridge to relate with other human beings. It works as a medium through which the self and the other foster relationship. Dialogue creates a responsibility towards the other. It creates an inter-human relationship and helps to come out of self-centredness. Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant* describes a relationship that is based on dialogue which has the ability to transform others.

#### **4. Dialogue and *The Assistant***

The novel *The Assistant* tells the story of Morris Bober, a grocery store keeper from Brooklyn. His business was a failure and he could provide for his family neither a good living nor good education. However, he holds high morals and values of life, even when he suffers. He is kind to everyone and is able to transform people through his dialogue. Frank Alpine, the co-protagonist of

the novel, comes to Brooklyn in search of a job. He resorts to stealing since he could not find any job. At one point he steals from Bober's store and even attacks him. Bober understands his difficulties and accepts him as an assistant in the store. The interaction with Bober gradually transforms him into a good person. The one who was initially a thief eventually becomes a person who helps selflessly. Alpine came out of his self-centeredness and started to help others in their needs. Bober was able to transform others through respect, patience and kindness.

The philosophy of dialogue plays an important role in the transformation of the characters in the novel. Bober uses dialogue as a medium through which he reaches out to others. It involves four elements such as turning, addressing, listening and responding. "You caught a cold? He asked sympathetically"<sup>32</sup> shows the ability of Bober to come out of oneself and form a relationship with Alpine. Bober addresses Alpine's conditions through the question, "How can you sleep in such a cold and drafty cellar?"<sup>33</sup> Bober responds to Alpine and his response shows the inclusion of all the four elements. "He is a poor boy. I feel sorry for him."<sup>34</sup> Bober uses dialogue as a pedagogy to teach Alpine the good qualities of life and the values of quality living. Alpine could find many good qualities like selfless service in Bober which in turn makes him a good human being. Bober used to get up early in the morning to serve even a single customer knowing fully well that he/she may not even pay him. Alpine's attitude gradually changes in due course of time with Bober's influence and eventually decides not to take money from the poor.<sup>35</sup>

Buber considers dialogue as a medium through which one comes to know the other and according to Levinas, it is the face of the other which reveals the person. The protagonist of the novel reveals himself in two different ways through dialogue and through presence. The presence of the self acts as a means to

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<sup>32</sup>Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*, New York: Farrar, 1957, 34.

<sup>33</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 51.

<sup>34</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 53.

<sup>35</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 19-20.

affirm the presence of the other. Alpine, as a stranger in Brooklyn, is of no importance or of consequence to anyone. The inability to find a job compelled him to steal food. Bober offers him tea and they begin their interaction through dialogue. This dialogue enables them to understand each other. The opening of the dialogue helps them form an interpersonal relationship.

According to Buber and Levinas prior experience with the person is not a requisite to enter into a dialogue. The novel *The Assistant* clearly establishes this idea through its characters. For the public, Alpine, the stranger, is an impediment and an obstacle to enter into dialogue. Whereas for Bober Alpine's strangeness is of no relevance. The face of Alpine asks for a response from Bober, and he accepts Alpine as an assistant and the dialogue between them makes Alpine a transformed character.

Dialogue plays a key role in establishing the existence of the characters in the novel who are known to the readers through dialogue. Ida Bober, the wife of Moris Bober and Helen Bober the daughter of Ida and Morris Bober, are the other major characters in the novel. The conversation among these characters does not lead to dialogue since it lacks the major elements of dialogue such as turning, addressing, listening and responding. For example "Sam, who was used to all kinds of people, and had in his time seen many strangers appear in the neighbourhood and as quickly disappear, showed no special concern for the man."<sup>36</sup> According to Buber, dialogue functions as a medium through which human beings know each other and it acts as a bridge between human beings. The characters in the novel establish a relationship through dialogue. Dialogue functions as a medium through which people share their beliefs and convictions. In the beginning of the novel Bober conveys his idea about education; he says "Don't throw away your chance for education ... it is the best thing for a young man."<sup>37</sup> Bober has realized the need of education through his life experience. The difficulty to attend night classes had forced him to stop his education and he

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<sup>36</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 29.

<sup>37</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 36.

attributes that to his impatience. This life experience enables him to understand the need and importance of education and he imparts this knowledge to others through dialogue.

Malamud uses different elements of dialogue in the narrative. He uses language as a medium of confrontation between individuals. "When a man is honest, doesn't worry when he sleeps, this is more important than to steal a nickel."<sup>38</sup> This conversation clearly depicts the role of a speaker and a listener. The speaker, Bober, tries to impart what he considers as precious and the listener, Alpine, considers it as an opportunity to imbibe the good qualities. The reader comes to know about the impact of this conversation at the end of the novel when Alpine gets transformed into a better person. This example also shows how dialogue works as a medium in the process of transformation.

Buber considers coming out of the self-centeredness as an important quality of interpersonal relationship.<sup>39</sup> Bober is able to come out of his self and reach to Alpine to form an interpersonal relationship. The confrontation among the characters in the novel and the fact that they are able to overcome the self-centeredness clearly show the ability of the characters to transcend barriers and form an interpersonal relationship. When Alpine appeared at Brooklyn no one took care of him since he was a stranger to everyone. But Bober takes the initiative to offer him tea and they enter into a dialogue. Dialogue works as a medium through which they are able to share their personal feelings. Alpine says "I was raised in an orphans' home, and when I was eight they farmed me out to a tough family."<sup>40</sup> It is an occasion for Alpine to share his sufferings, seek and find consolation. This dialogue, in fact creates a sense of responsibility in Bober towards Alpine. This interpersonal relationship creates a similar transformation in Alpine.

Dialogue becomes more personal and deeper when they deal with religion and beliefs. Though many of the questions asked by

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<sup>38</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 84.

<sup>39</sup>Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 39.

<sup>40</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 36.

Alpine are not comfortable for Bober, he nevertheless attempts to answer these questions because he considers it as his responsibility. One such question is about Jewish religion and the answer reveals that he was not highly educated in order to answer this question. The question "Do you consider yourself as a real Jew?"<sup>41</sup> is very personal and the answer to this question shows the depth of the relationship. Bober answers that to be a Jew means to do what is right, to be honest and to be good. According to Bober, suffering is part of the life of a Jew and he is both right and honest. This dialogue leads to inter-human relationships. The feeling of responsibility towards the other fulfils the requirement of interpersonal relationship.

The outcome of interpersonal relationship through dialogue is transformation. Interpersonal relationship through dialogue transforms Alpine in the novel and it makes a difference in the entire family and he is able to contribute to society. Alpine takes up the responsibility of Bober's daughter's education and the grocery store. Bober is hospitalized due to fever, Alpine takes up the responsibility of the grocery shop.<sup>42</sup> The interpersonal relationship formed between Alpine and Bober gives them an identity in the novel. Alpine becomes a person who lives for the other. Bober manifests the good qualities through his dialogue and exemplary life style. The interpersonal relationship established between Bober and Alpine makes Bober responsible for Alpine. The constant interaction through dialogue transforms the life of Alpine.

Malamud shows transcendence of the characters at the end of the novel. Alpine is able to recognize the transformation within himself when he sees people being arrested for their crime.<sup>43</sup> Alpine stands his ground and refuses to give in to Ward Minogue's plan to continue stealing. He remains a transformed person even in difficult and trying circumstances. Alpine returns all the money he had stolen from the shop and even confesses before Bober. He apologizes to Helene for the mistakes he had

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<sup>41</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 124.

<sup>42</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 58.

<sup>43</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 143.



done to her. Alpine comes to Bober's rescue when there is a fire in the shop. His only request is to take him back in the shop. He even goes through the ritual of circumcision in order to become a Jew.<sup>44</sup> All these changes clearly and categorically show the transformation and the transcendence of the characters in the novel. Bober, undoubtedly, is the inspiration behind these changes and it was facilitated and realized only through dialogue.

## 5. Conclusion

The aspect of dialogue discussed in this article specifically argues that the essence of interpersonal relationship is dialogic and it acts as an all embracing actuality which is the basis of human existence itself. In other words, to exist is to exist with others. One becomes authentically human only in dialogical existence. The existence of the characters in the novel is affirmed through dialogue. Dialogical existence presupposes that separateness or otherness is a positive reality. Dialogue does not overcome or eliminate otherness or independence, but transforms and humanizes it by bringing it to relatedness. The differences among the characters in the novel act as means to form relatedness. The theory of dialogue points to the truth that, unless one pulls down the protective walls, one has built around oneself, the wall of individualistic ideas, philosophy, theology, traditions and beliefs and goes out to meet the other, one will never regain one's personal integrity and wholeness. The story of Alpine and his transformation are examples of it. This form of dialogue also points out the fact that to be a person in communion with other persons is the essential nature of human beings. Men and women are essentially persons meant to live in personal fellowship with one another. The theory of dialogue points out the fundamental equality of persons. The individuals have to form interpersonal relationships irrespective of their individual differences. It points out the equality of all, despite individual, functional or sexual differences.

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<sup>44</sup>Malamud, *The Assistant*, 246.

The unverifiability of the concept of dialogue may lead one to think that the entire dialogical relationship is only a fancy. If there are no criteria to find out the error the lived dialogical relationship itself will become questionable. If I want to respond to every demand of the other, would it not be an infringement of my personal freedom? It fails to fully clarify the discrepancy between freedom and responsibility in dialogue. It asks to make a choice between the needs of my life and the needs of the other. The purpose of relationship is one of the other questionable factors in the interpersonal relationships. The questions such as why people enter into a relationship, form friendship or love one another remain unanswered. The readers of this article may also enquire into the possibility of becoming a person by ourselves since this theory emphasises the fact that the possibility of becoming a person only in communion with other fellow beings.

The theme relationship and dialogue which is discussed in this article is relevant in this materialistic world. The distance between human beings can be reduced through acceptance and availability. Dialogue is an essential requirement to establish and sustain relationships. It has the power to bring about transformation. No matter what the intention of a person is, even if it is an attempt to murder as seen in the novel through the character of Alpine, transformation is possible through dialogue. Dialogue, therefore, is a necessary and a profoundly important tool for transformation in our everyday life. The lack of dialogue in the current global scenario is a hindrance in interpersonal relationships. It is essential to prepare a situation where there is a possibility for dialogue. The first and foremost step which leads to dialogue is the ability to accept oneself and the other, it should lead to listening and responding. Dialogue is significant to overcome the social, professional, ideological and regional differences.