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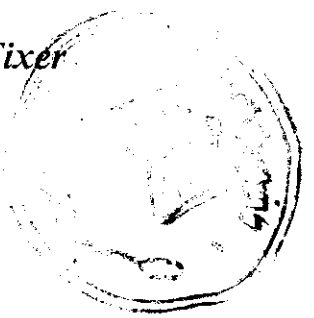
The Image of the Jew in Malamud's Fiction with special reference to *The Assistant*, *A New Life* and *The Fixer*



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To my parents ,

may their souls rest in peace.

Contents

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Introduction

Introduction

With the passing of Bernard Malamud (1914-1986), that genre called American Jewish literature has lost one of its brightest stars. For more than four decades his novels and short stories entertained and enlightened the readers and gave them a level of writing and a cast of memorable characters unique to literature. From Roy Hobbs to Morris Bober and Yakov Bok to William Dubin scholars witnessed Malamud's commitment to human beings who lived, suffered, and learned.

Critics have viewed compassion, redemptive suffering and alienation in Malamud as informing his moral vision. They are not just fragmentary notes found here and there but themes consistently portrayed in all his novels. The aspect of suffering which is largely commented upon acquires meaning and significance only in relation to compassion, Malamud's concept of redemption and alienation. An in-depth study of these significant themes in the work of Malamud deserves to be made. The present study is an effort in this direction and seeks to show these themes as integral to Malamud's world-view in his major works.

The first chapter of this thesis deals with the main themes of the American Jewish writers. It covers topics such as suffering, alienation, persecution and some other humanistic themes. It also sheds light on the code of Mentshlekhkayt and its relation to the Jewish ethical code. It concentrates on compassion and its influence on shaping the imagination of many a Jewish writer and then proposes and demonstrates Malamud's concept of suffering and its catheritic effects in purging and nourishing the soul. Moreover, the chapter delineates the characteristics of Malamud's heroes and projects his vision on them.

The second chapter handles the theme of "redemptive suffering," which implies that the meaning of suffering is to redeem both the sufferer and, to some degree, those for whom he suffers. As is clear, this does not entirely agree with the Christian

concept of Salvation. Malamud thus follows in the ancient Jewish tradition of the Prophets: Amos and Jeremiah who announce suffering to be the Jew's special destiny, evidence of his unique covenant with God, proof in God's concern in that only those who are loved are chastised, and the means of the Jew's peculiar awareness of his identity. Could Malamud have had this biblical passage in mind when he wrote *The Fixer*? The coincidence seems too close for sheer accident, embodying as it does the novel's fundamental situation and symbolism:

> I have given you...as a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness (Isaiah, 42:7).

But this begins to make Malamud sound too holy, to suggest that his writing functions as biblical parable, which is not at all the case. He is a good Jew in his way, but he is not trying to rebuild the temple. "The purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself. But without preachment. Artists cannot be ministers. As soon as they attempt it, they destroy their artistry" (Joseph Wershba M 2). Malamud's heroes all suffer deeply, but they are also secular men whose suffering is not always voluntary, undertaken wholly for exalted reasons, or blessed by great rewards. Malamud's real concern is for the social and moral aspects of suffering as they impinge upon personality. If his characters expect some recompense for their misery, they would like it in the here and now. In sum, although there is no conclusive biographical evidence to assess Malamud's personal religious commitment, the testimony of his work suggests him to be an agnostic humanist- an assumption supported by some of his own remarks:

> My premise is that we will not destroy each other. My premise is that we will live on. We will seek a better life. We may not become better, but at least we will seek betterment" (Joseph Wershba M. 42).

This is Malamud's real toughness, the factor that prevents his treatment of suffering from deteriorating into drippy melodrama or comfortable piety. He has a view of man which perceives the property of conscience, the seeking to better, not as

a divine mystery but as natural to humans as skin, hair, and voice. Yet this basically optimistic concept of human nature is checked by an almost equally persistent view of man as greedy, treacherous, lustful, and often vicious. Cheerful idealist and hard-eyed realist peer out through the same bifocals. Consequently, Malamud's depiction of suffering is ambivalent; in each of his major characters altruism and materialism combine as motives for self-sacrifice. In Malamud's first hero, Roy Hobbs of *The Natural*, materialism overpowers altruism. He has impulses for good but keeps making the wrong choices for the wrong reasons: baseball for glory rather than the joy of the game, a girl for sex not love, winning for prizes and payoffs. He never learns to live by the wise Iris' dictum, "experience makes good people better.... Suffering is what brings us toward happiness.... It teaches us to want the right things" (*The Natural* 135,136). Roy's venality is symbolised by two climactic episodes in the novel, in which he is twice stricken in the lower organs, suggestive of his errors in responding to the dictates of his appetites rather than his heart. When at the last minute his conscience does take command, he ruins the chance by giving in to other base instincts: anger and revenge. Malamud's only hero who submits neither to love nor to idealism, and whose sufferings are consequently futile, is not a Jew.

The Natural, a story so filled with mythological symbolism, rests on a foundation of moral certitude: that human knowledge of good and evil is innate and inescapable. The shattering of Roy Hobbs's illusions, by the end, does not guarantee that he will be free of them, but, as Ellen Pifer says, it presents the reader with the thought that there is no "natural" man and that the "natural" man, existing outside of the realm of moral knowledge and responsibility, may be the greatest fabrication - the most "unnatural" deception of which humans are capable.

One of the enduring aspects of Malamud's works is his ability to frame ambiguous yet universally relevant questions. One of his questions is: How can a man create for himself a new life? Through loneliness and suffering, Daniel Walden

contends, one grows by balancing the conflicting demands of passion and commitment. It is this moral obligation, this attempt to rise above self-interest, that undergirds the trials of Malamud's heroes. As in "The Mourners", it is the moral imperative for one person to respond responsibly to the humanity in another that is so admirable.

The Assistant, Malamud's masterpiece, achieves his most complex portrayal of suffering. Morris Bober seems a paragon, a holy man in his honesty, his tolerance, his compassion. The dingy starving store is illuminated by his goodness, so that when he instructs Frank Alpine in the meaning of Jewishness, "I suffer for you .... you suffer for me," his words have the force of his example (*Assistant* 125). Yet if the store is his earthly trial and his fate, it also serves as a retreat from the buffets of the world, a tomb and a prison. His daughter's final thought about him, at his grave, may be uncharitable but it contains truth: "he could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was" (*Assistant* 230). This weakness in Morris, a flaw in his character, is symbolised throughout the novel by his vulnerability to natural forces, fire gas and at last the wind and the cold, which have been his enemies from the start.

Frank Alpine's motives are about equally divided between altruism and materialism. Conscience he has; it brings him back to the store to expiate his part in robbing Morris. He also aspires to a better life than that of a drifter and hoodlum. He has ambitions in love, for Helen. But there is a practical side to it. The store is warmer than the street or cellars. A job there offers food and a few bucks. Even the lowly status of a poor shopkeeper or clerk is better than that of a bum. The girl is luscious: "Her body was young, soft, lovely, the breasts like small birds in flight ..." (*Assistant* 75). When at the end Frank endures circumcision and becomes, in Malamud's cryptic phrase, "a Jew", he has attained not only a moral apogee, the height implicit in his name, but has executed a deft romantic strategy as well. Helen can never again call him "uncircumcised dog."

The very title of *A New Life* underlines once again one of Malamud's basic ideas and the motive driving his heroes to their quests. Levin arrives in Cascadia on the run from his past as a derelict drunk; his only conscious aim is to get as much benefit as he possibly could from his life in the West. He wants only to please, to pick up experience, and then to win tenure as a college teacher. But all sorts of messes get dumped into his lap, literally in the opening episodes, figuratively thereafter. From a private man he is transformed, willy-nilly, into a champion of the liberal arts, departmental reformer, and tender lover of another man's wife. To settle for merely making good means to collaborate in the fractured state of things, a dilemma symbolised by the cracked pane of glass in his office window looking out upon the campus. Should he sit there in comfort and security, mouth shut, and earn success, or should he try to right wrongs, thus breaking his chances for advancement? For a Malamudian hero it's a forgone conclusion. Thus, although he arrives empty-handed, he leaves with his hands full: the other man's wife, whom he has loved but no longer wants, her children, and a child of his own growing inside her. Why does he accept the responsibility? Out of some nutty Jewish compulsion of self-sacrifice, a mystery results which is wonderfully dramatised in a culminating scene between Levin and Gilly, the novel's bad guy, who has just offered to let him off the hook:

> 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 (*A New Life* 330).

In the third chapter—"Alienation and Persecution" —the same motivation must apply to Yakov Bok, hero of *The Fixer* (1967). He endures the dreadful misery of his imprisonment, not because of any lofty ideals but because he must do it. Even when he is made aware that his case has become a national concern and that this fate will affect the destiny of all Russian Jews, he refuses to surrender to his captors' threats or be seduced by their deals, not because he is a saintly martyr or idealist but

because he is too stubborn to give in. Hate for his tormentors sustains him much more than love for mankind. Where idealism does enter into the novel, it appears only in glimmers. The most splendid example of it is Bibikov, the magistrate, whose attempt to get Yakov fair treatment under law results in his own death—although it should be noted that Bibikov acts perhaps less out of charity for Yakov than out of his own strict sense of duty and legality. Nevertheless, in standing by the law, Bibikov becomes, in Malamud's definition, a true Jew. Another case is the guard Kogin, who intercedes to save Yakov's life at the cost of his own. And then there is Yakov himself, who gives his name to his unfaithful and runaway wife's bastard child.

But despite these occasional miracles of character refined by suffering, the book more often than not stresses how suffering brutalises, and that man's brutishness is general. By simple tabulation there are far more demented, stupid, ruthless, or sadistic people in *The Fixer* than decent men. Grubeshov, Father Anastasy, Berezhinsky, Marfa Golov—these seem to be the norm for human character in the novel. Ultimately, only two affirmations rescue the book from bleakest despair: Yakov has been physically bent and weakened by his imprisonment but he has been broken; and he will, finally, have his day in court. The persecuted and despised Jew will at last be heard.

Malamud was a virtuoso in the use of myth and archetype in all of his books. The use of "Bok" (meaning "goat") in *The Fixer*, for example, points up Yakov Bok as a scapegoat. Similarly, Yakov, like Jacob, the prototypical Man of Troubles, as it is said in Genesis 47:9: "few and evil have the years of my life been." As Harold Fisch demonstrates, the analogies in *The Fixer* as well as the ironic disparities point to the ways in which the myth patterns function. Jacob made his covenant with a personal God; Yakov Bok explicitly did not. In short, it is clear that Malamud, like other modern writers, has found the Bible to be a rich source of myth and anti-myth.

But Yakov Bok, reflecting Malamud's request for truth, accurately reflects the ambivalence of the latter-day writer towards those biblical stories and poems which continue to impress themselves so powerfully on his imagination. Moreover, these mythic elements still generate further ambiguity in *The Fixer* when conveyed with the surrealistic suggestiveness.

Chapter Four —"Malamud's Technique and Tradition"— treats Malamud as a gifted and multifaceted writer, whose style of imagination and technique of fiction are characteristically his. Among the issues discussed in this chapter are Malamud's realism, his use of fantasy, myth, allegory, humour, as well as his innovative short story technique. In addition, the chapter addresses the influence of Yiddish writers on Malamud's work, as reflected in his use of Yiddish words and phrases.

Finally, the Jewish writer speaks in a distinctive literary voice. With Bellow and at about the same time, Malamud invented and perfected a fresh literary idiom, a "Jewish style." This style consists of much more than the importation of Yiddish words and phrases into English, or a mere broken Yiddish-English dialect of such works that present lovably silly Jewish stereotypes. Rather, it is a significant development and expansion of the American colloquial style established as a vital literary medium by Mark Twain. The Jewish style is for the first time in the American literary history a voice that conveys ethnic characteristics, a special sort of sensibility, and the quality of a foreign language, yet remains familiar and eloquent to non-Jews. Although dialects and dialect styles tend to be reductive, rendering their speakers either funny or absurd, Malamud's style can evoke either tragic dignity or comic foolishness, or, miraculously, both at once.

Bernard Malamud died on March 18, 1986. Early in 1983 he had undergone bypass surgery. The spectre of ill health and death may have been with him in those last years. Regardless of that, the body of his work demonstrates that Malamud was one of the greatest American Jewish writers.