

## Bernard Malamud Revisited: Portrait of the Post-Holocaust Jewish Hero in *the Fixer*

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: August 06, 2019

Accepted: October 12, 2019

Published: November 30, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 6

Advance access: November 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this article is concept of Jewish heroism in Bernard Malamud's most celebrated novel, *The Fixer* (1966). In light of a truth-oriented historicist approach, my underlying argument is that Malamud's protagonists are Jewish heroes who befit the post-Holocaust era. They are not schlemiels, unlike what many critics believe, and have three main missions: first, to remind the world of the suffering the Jews have endured throughout history, especially during the alleged Holocaust; second, to revive the qualities of Jewishness and Jewish tradition that no longer existed among the younger Jewish generation of the postwar America; and third, to help the Jews free themselves from their victim mentality, intensified after the Holocaust, through heroic acts of resistance and acceptance of responsibility toward their people. These protagonists neither share America's postwar upheavals, nor resemble the least to the affluent Wall Street Jew financiers. They are typical post-Holocaust Jewish heroes.

**Key words:** Post-Holocaust American Fiction, Bernard Malamud, Jewish Heroism, Jewish Suffering, Jew-the-victim Mentality, Schlemiel

### INTRODUCTION

World War II was an unprecedented event in history concerning both the horrendous numbers of deaths and the use of weapons of mass destruction. In material terms, however, the war left America rich, and thus this war, paradoxically, became known as the "Good War" among the Americans (Grant 325). As a result of the postwar American economic boom, there was a feeling of "assertiveness about how the country was the best that had ever existed in the world, the number one place in God's universe" (Yannella 57). Nevertheless, this tranquility was merely on the surface, and the 1960s brought challenges to many cultural and political assumptions of America. The decade was labeled one of "Tumult and Change," and its Vietnam generation came to be called "the haunted generation" (Grant 357).

In such condition, Jewish Americans and postwar Jewish immigrants received considerable sympathy and attention in the U.S. due to the Holocaust publicity, and thus the periodizing term "post-Holocaust" became more preferred and frequent than its neutral counterpart "postwar", especially among the Jews.

The golden age of Jewish American fiction with its three leading figures, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, arrived on the scene at this time. Within the whole structure of Jewish fiction in postwar America two strands were dominant and in tension: the one that "remembered, celebrated, and romanticized old world Judaism, that of Eastern Europe, the *shtetl*," and the one that represented "Jews as quintessential

Americans" (Goffman). In this struggle between tradition and assimilationism, Malamud took sides with the former. Unlike Roth who believed "freedom of the artist must be given primacy, and Jewish writers had to break out of the shackles of history and identity," Malamud strongly held that "without responsibility, without obligation, there can be no freedom" (Miller). Responsibility toward Jewish people and their history concerned Malamud and his writing the most; however, it is through a journey of suffering that his characters come to such understanding.

Malamud's stories are peopled with suffering and victimized Jews whose sorrow penetrates the bone of the reader. The way Malamud depicts suffering suggests the place of Jews in history as the only people who have suffered. It associates the reader mainly with the traumatized Jew and the alleged Holocaust. That is the main reason why his work is much liable to be, as Roth puts it, "the vehicles of ethnic propaganda" (qtd. in Miller). Nevertheless, this painful process does not weaken his protagonists. They resist and through this resistance they progress from *indifference* toward the acceptance and acknowledgement of their Jewish identities and tradition. In such manner, they represent heroes who belong to a specific people and timely for a specific era.

Throughout his career, Malamud has consistently declared that he is a *universal* writer who writes for all men, and that he is not out to prove anything, about any particular people or race. He holds that he has used Jewish characters and themes merely as the means to an end, and mainly

because they set his imagination going; and that when he narrates Jewish suffering, he has the suffering of all humanity in mind. Nevertheless, there are enough reasons and evidence both in his fiction and life disputing this claim to universality.

The other problem which is dealt with in this study is regarding Malamud's main characters. While popular interpretations of Malamudian fiction refer to his protagonists either as universal heroes or as schlemiels, it will be discussed that they can be best defined as time-bound Jewish heroes propitious for the post-Holocaust period, and congruent with the author's unassimilated mind.

To discuss the concept of Jewish heroism in *The Fixer*, the researcher, first, in light of a truth-oriented historicist approach, explores some key facts regarding the life and beliefs of the author throughout his career which sets the background for this literary interpretation. Having asserted the Jewish concerns of the author, the researcher, then, through examining the main elements and characteristics of Malamudian protagonist in *The Fixer*, argues that he does not reflect the real situation of Jews in *postwar* and contemporary America. He, rather, meets the needs of a generation haunted by victim mentality and devoid of heroism as well as a generation of Jewish immigrant children assimilated into the new culture and in danger of forgetting their tradition.

With that stated, the present study, first, will elaborate on the social, political, and cultural context within which the author has written; then, it will study the life of the author, and finally it will situate the text within its historical and biographical background. In doing so, the following questions will be answered:

1. Is Malamud a Jewish writer whose fiction mainly deals with Jewish concerns?
2. Does the investigation of the historical and political context of Malamud's time defy his claim to universality?
3. Does the suffering that Malamud depicts in his fiction provoke a universally shared understanding of human suffering, or arouse emotion in the reader on miseries and pains of a particular group of people, the Jews?
4. Is Malamud's protagonist in *The Fixer* a schlemiel?

### THE HOLOCAUST AND RISE OF JEWISH AMERICAN FICTION

Many critics agree that Jewish American fiction can be divided into three main phases during the twentieth century: the "first generation," whose writing dealt more with the immigrant experience in the early decades of the twentieth century; the "second generation," who succeeded in entering the mainstream of American literature in the 1950s and 1960s; and the "third generation," who did its best to defy the prediction of critics such as Irving Howe, who believed Jewish American literature was past its prime (Brauner 96).

Nevertheless, the fashioning or emergence of the phenomenon of the alleged Holocaust that dramatically affected not only the course of Jewish history but that of the world would be more accurate a touchstone for evaluating Jewish American fiction in the twentieth century. As David Brauner emphasizes, "the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel...

provide more meaningful lines of demarcation with which to divide Jewish American Writing than the slippery notion of 'generations'" (97).

It is said that the number of Jewish population in America that had been 226,042 by 1887 reached 3,384,695 in 1920. The number of Jewish American writers who published fiction between 1900 and 1916, however, never went beyond 41 (Cronin and Berger xvi-xvii). Moreover, from 1900 to 1940 only one Jewish American fiction writer, Edna Ferber, managed to win a US literary award. This conveys the fact that during the years when American literature was experiencing a second apex in its history, pre-Holocaust Jewish American fiction was merely reflecting a periphery discourse that was of lesser importance compared to that of the dominant culture.

By contrast, post-Holocaust Jewish American fiction established such a firm position within the mainstream of American letters that Martin Amis declared: "the twentieth-century novel belongs to... Jewish Americans" (qtd. in Brauner 96). Although the 45 post-Holocaust Jewish American fiction writers had only four writers more than their pre-Holocaust counterparts, the number of their award winners rose surprisingly to 31.

It should not be considered a coincidence that "Jewish American writing... reached a remarkable flowering [right] after 1945" (Ruland and Bradbury 375). The Holocaust publicity prepared the general mood in the Americans for a better acceptance and understanding of the Jews. "Images of [alleged] Nazi concentration camps and stories of the suffering and deaths... were published soon after their liberation by allied forces," and in the immediate aftermath of the war American press reported that "millions of Jews had died in what would later be called the Holocaust." To pick one example of many, as Yannella quotes, on 10 June 1945 *New York Times* carried the headline, "80% of Reich Jews Murdered by Nazis." As a result of this, "There was considerable sympathy in the US for the surviving Jewish victims of the Holocaust" and their destinies (121).

This atmosphere, above all, paved the way for the Jews to alter the balance of power by taking up key positions. As one historian notes, "In the 1930s, most Jews had been employed as laborers or in low-level white-collar jobs, such as clerks and office help, but by the early 1950s over 55 percent worked in professional or technical fields, or as managers, officials, and proprietors, compared to only 23 percent of the populace as a whole." This is in the case that a decade and a half later, "the percentage of Jews in white-collar jobs was nearly three times the national average, while only one Jew out of five worked in factories" (qtd. in Hoberek 71). U.S. colleges and universities, too, admitted Jewish professors and students more than any other time. The following report narrates this critical climate:

Quotas in major American universities that had previously limited the number of Jewish professors were lifted, and Jews filled departments of science, mathematics, and economics, among other fields. Even English departments, which had considered Jews an element foreign to the culture they were preserving, swelled with

Jewish academics, the new keepers of the grand Anglo literary tradition. (Goffman)

These circumstances gave rise to a post-Holocaust popularity of Jewish American fiction, and helped Jewish names, including Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, Grace Paley, Norman Mailer, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth, just to name the most celebrated, reign American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s.

Jewish fiction writers of America, except few instances, like J. D. Salinger, whose works are more American than Jewish, were preoccupied with their own “Jewish” concerns. Jewishness as a form of identity found a fresh place in the post-Holocaust literary life. Although Jewish fiction had existed prior to the war, “it was arguably always understood in terms other than its Jewishness: the immigrant novel (Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska), the proletarian novel (Yezierska, Mike Gold), modernism (Henry Roth, Nathanael West)” (Hoberek 73). The alleged Holocaust reinforced the theme of Jewish identity more than any other time, but on the other hand it extensively helped the assimilation or neutralization, as some viewed it, of this ethnic group as well. Therefore, to be assimilated or not to be assimilated became the new question. Martin Halliwell in studying the 1950s literary context refers to this new status:

A variety of Jewish voices emerged in the 1950s, but two impulses were dominant: the first suggested that assimilation to mainstream American culture was a desirable option for many Jews, while the second revealed that other second and third generation American Jews were feeling dislocated from their past, particularly for families with relatives back in Europe living in the aftermath of the Holocaust. (56)

This question did not resolve in the 1950s and developed in the next decade. As Sharon Monteith mentions, “The responsibility of the writer to his ethnic and racial group was becoming a subject ripe for debate in the 1960s” (103). Now it is time to see what stance Bernard Malamud took on this question.

### JEWISHNESS IN MALAMUD’S LIFE

Malamud began writing seriously a little late in the early 1940s by publishing stories in non-commercial magazines for which he did not get paid until 1949 (Giroux ix). He published his first novel *The Natural* (1952) at age thirty-eight. This does not mean he was not prolific, for Malamud published eight novels, considering his unfinished *The People* (1989), and fifty-five short stories during his lifetime. However, this suspended start and slow progress could not be without reason. The base of this hesitation, among other reasons, could be contemplating and reconsidering his mission as a writer. Relevant to this, Abramson states:

Malamud was greatly affected by World War II. He was not particularly concerned about his own Jewishness until the events of the Holocaust, and said, “The rise of totalitarianism, the Second World War, and the situation of the Jews in Europe helped me to come to what I wanted to say as a writer.” He became convinced that he wanted to be a writer and began a study of Jewish history and culture. (5)

The alleged Holocaust news highly intensified Malamud’s self-consciousness as a Jew and set the tone for his profession. Alan Berger asserts, “Bernard Malamud was moved to write by the advent of World War II and the Holocaust” (119). However, he could not have been unconcerned about his own Jewishness before it. The hard life of his parents was always in front of his eyes. Max Malamud, his father, was a Ukrainian-born Jew who immigrated to America in the first decade of the twentieth century and ran a small grocery for almost all his life. Bertha Fidelman, his mother, also came to America from Ukraine. She suffered from schizophrenia and died in a mental hospital in 1929 at age forty-one. His brother, Eugene, similarly endured schizophrenia and spent much of his adult life in a hospital. The immigrant life of Max and Bertha was no doubt a major source for the creation of characters and settings in Malamud’s works. He admits that thinking about my father’s immigrant life – how he earned his meager living and what he paid for it, and about my mother’s, diminished by fear and suffering – as perhaps matter for my fiction. I had them in mind as I invented the characters who became their fictional counterparts. (Qtd. in Aarons 682 ellipsis in orig.)

Malamud’s Jewishness had nothing to do with religion; it was more a sense of commitment and nostalgia for the history and the fate of the Jews. His Jewishness, like that of his characters, was a progressive process. That is, the more he aged and read about the Jews, the more he felt Jewish. Janna Malamud Smith, his daughter, notes the same point: “although my father was not religious, there was something rabbi-like about him” (16). She adds, “Dad’s interest in his own Jewishness increased with age and knowledge” (211).

It helps us understand the nature of his Jewishness and its gradual development if we learn that Malamud’s marriage was a civil one—a marriage performed by a government official, not by a clergyman, for being out of the faith. He “knew that his atheist father had sat ‘shiveh’ over him—mourning and saying the prayer for dead—when in 1945 he had decided to marry an Italian Catholic in Ann de Chiara, rather than a Jewess.” So, he wrote his father a letter “explaining why for the sake of his life he had to follow his heart” (Davis 11). By the passage of time, however, Malamud became one like his father. Janna Malamud Smith observes, “He may have had times when he wished he’d married a Jewish woman” (211). He even let this feeling of his surface right in the eve of his daughter’s marriage. She recalls that night “[m]y father and I sat alone reading in the living room; everyone else had gone to bed. He appeared to be concentrating on text but was ruminating... He put aside his book, cleared his throat, fumbled. He had my attention. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I wish you were marrying someone Jewish’” (212).

### MALAMUD AND POSTWAR AMERICA

During postwar years, the United States imperialistic policies caused considerable damages to Americans, and imposed irreparable afflictions to weaker nations, but neither of them could exceed the tragedy that took shape in Vietnam. The one about which Bertrand Russell remarked, “There are few parallels with the war in Vietnam” (54), and the



war during which “United States dropped more than twice as much bombing tonnage... than the total bombing tonnage dropped during World War II” (Anderson 92).

Between 1954 to 1960, the Eisenhower administration invested over \$1.65 billion in the South Vietnam (Farber and Bailey 36) in order to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese away from the communists as well as making it one of its own allies. During Kennedy administration (1961-1963), America grew even more deeply involved in the war. He “increased the number of American military advisors in Vietnam from around 900 to more than 16,000, and spent another billion dollars during his presidency” (Farber and Bailey 37). The consequence of this escalation is manifest in the following shocking statistics:

By mid-1962 over 5,000,000 people had been put in camps designated as ‘concentration camps’ and... by late 1962 as many as 45,000 students alone were kept in South Vietnam’s concentration camps. 160,000 dead by mid-1963; 700,000 tortured and maimed; 400,000 imprisoned; 31,000 raped; 3,000 disembowelled with livers cut out while alive; 4,000 burned alive; 1,000 temples destroyed; 46 villages attacked with poisonous chemicals. (Russell 58-59)

After Kennedy’s assassination, Lyndon Johnson entered the White House, and remained faithful to his predecessors’ policy of containment. It was in his administration (1963-1968) that America waged a full-scale front-line war in Vietnam. He greatly escalated U.S. military involvement, and increased the number of American soldiers to 550,000 by 1968 (Farber and Bailey 38).

One of the responsibilities of a committed universal writer is to be concerned about the pains of the people of the world as well as his/her society. Vietnam War was one of the most obvious examples of injustice in Malamud’s time which led to the formation of another humanitarian trend along with civil rights movement. “Encompassing political, racial, and cultural spheres, the antiwar movement exposed a deep schism within 1960s’ American society” (Barringer 53) that began in 1965 and involved America until the war ended in 1973 (Anderson 94).

During this time, many well-known figures from various fields spoke and penned for or against this war. Some, however, preferred to remain silent. About this silence Martin Luther King remarked, “the greatest tragedy of this period... was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people” (196). Malamud was among the latter group. One instance of this is when Writers and Editors War Tax Protest was organized. About 528 writers and editors, including James Baldwin, Noam Chomsky, Henry Miller, Thomas Pynchon, William Styron, Allen Ginsberg, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Susan Sontag, and Norman Mailer (the last five were Jewish), pledged to refuse to pay the 10% Vietnam War tax surcharge (“History of War Tax Resistance”), but Malamud did not get involved. Another opportunity to show concern for the Vietnamese as a public actor was related to an orchestrated boycott. “At a National Book Awards ceremony Bernard Malamud accepted his award gratefully,” and thus cancelled out the

boycott which had been seemingly organized by Mailer (MacGowan 31).

In contrast to Malamud, Mailer can be judged both as an American and a universal writer who had fictions relevant to the turbulent society of America and the people of Vietnam. Mailer, too, was a Jew, but there was an “apparent lack of interest in Jewishness” in him (Brauner 97). Mailer did not see himself as committed merely to the concerns of an ethnic group. Although he wrote two novels *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) and *The Armies of the Night* (1968) directly engaged in the political and social question of his day, “Mailer records that he became involved in the weekend of protests – he would be arrested and spent a night in prison – because he was unable to convince himself that his fiction writing was sufficient response to the war in Vietnam” (MacGowan 30).

In a letter to a friend Malamud gives away his idea about the relationship between the art and universal injustice like the Vietnam War: “The Vietnam thing has me bothered. [but] I confess I take a dim view that artists can be directly effective. Perhaps they can be as people. but one’s work can’t be directed to that end. Once you do that there’s no art” (qtd. in Smith 221-22). As you see, Malamud believed that art should not be involved in social and political issues like the Vietnam War. In the next part, we will see if he did not direct his art to the alleged Holocaust either.

### JEWISH HEROISM IN *THE FIXER*

In reading Malamud’s fiction, many critics define his protagonists as schlemiels. Some, however, including Jeffrey Helterman and Howard Faulkner, consider them as either schlemiel or schlimazel. Nevertheless, the fact that I wish to establish is that although there are certain elements of the schlemiel in Malamud’s protagonists, there are crucial differences as well. Most importantly, especially in the case studied in the present study, they do not fail at the end.

Robert Charles Edgar in his Ph.D. dissertation *The Schlemiel and Anomie: The Fool in Society* (2001) examines the character of the schlemiel in comparative Jewish and Gentile American literature and cinema, which I have benefited from to mention some of the attributes of the schlemiel figure here. The word schlemiel itself is a derivative of Yiddish, and thus has a clear connection to Jewish culture and tradition. Schlemiel or the wise fool is considered as “the most archetypically Jewish character of all” (2), and is “a potential form of hero not considered in conventional Narratology” (70). The schlemiel is “essentially a comic character” (57), “almost never arrogant” (64), and “a character whose life and ultimate contentment is rooted in an unshakeable faith and belief” (142). Schlemiels are “not expected to succeed from the outset,” and they “do not require our pity, nor do they deserve it, because, ultimately, despite the ending, they have had a hand in the process of their own deception” (197).

It is true to say that Malamud’s fiction possesses moments of comic relief, and that humor is an important feature of his writing. He was interested in Charlie Chaplin and drew inspiration from his work. “As a writer I learned from

Charlie Chaplin... the reserved comic presence—that beautiful distancing; the funny with sad,” he told an interviewer. In a like manner, Malamud liked his comedy “spiced in the wine of sadness” (“Art of Fiction”). It is also true to say that Bok’s witty answers as well as his getting stuck in some unlucky situations contribute to the creation of comic moments. However, Yakov Bok can never be considered as essentially a comic character. Neither the novel’s atmosphere which is filled with pain and affliction allows such fleeting moments to be enduring in the reader’s mind. And this is exactly the very effect Malamud expected to achieve through his humor: a spice in the fixer’s wine of sadness.

Unshakable faith is another distinctive quality of schlemiel-like characters. He has ceased reading Torah, and reads Spinoza instead. Before leaving his shtetl for a new life in Kiev, Bok attempts to strip away his Jewishness: He shaves his beard and drops his bag of prayer things into the Dnieper, while on a ferry. Later in prison, he introduces himself as a Jew “by birth and nationality,” and adds that “I’m not a religious man... I’m a freethinker” (TF 86).

Bok’s Jewishness is very much like that of the author himself. Although he is not religious, there is something rabbi-like about him. Obedience to Jewish laws surfaces on various occasions in the form of a sense of belonging to Jewish tradition and people. One of the most obvious instances of this occurs when Bok is offered by Lebedev’s daughter, Zinaida, who is a gentile, to have sex with her. On the verge of submitting to this temptation in her bedroom, Bok discovers that she is having her period. “But you are unclean!” (TF 52), he tells her and leaves there. Undoubtedly, he could never bridle his sexual desire if it were not for abiding by the Jewish laws. Another instance is when he is offered to convert to Christianity to be freed, which the fixer rejects.

If that is the case, one might ask, why Bok strives to escape his past and Jewishness? The short answer is *suffering*. It is in fact the misery, suffering, and bad luck that he is escaping from. When he introduces himself with a false gentile name to Lebedev the factory owner and his daughter, he feels “sorry he hadn’t at once identified himself as a Jew by birth.” When he is asked by Bibikov “if you are ashamed of your people, why don’t you leave the faith officially?” he answers that “I’m not ashamed, your honor” (TF 41, 87). The fixer is definitely not ashamed of his people, but he has no idea why he should suffer or endure suffering. Whereas Shmuel, his God-fearing father-in-law and defender of the faith in the novel, bears suffering in the hope of finding a better life in the hereafter, Bok insists that “[t]oday I want my piece of bread, not in Paradise” (TF 17). He also associates suffering with the Jews, which results in his escape from both Judaism and Jewishness. As the examples show he is ashamed of neither his people nor his Jewish identity, but suffering for nothing has pushed him toward the rejection of both.

Nevertheless, suffering and loneliness are no doubt the major sources for change in Bok’s views and personality. Loneliness which is an integral part of Malamud’s protagonists prepares the way for the fixer’s deep thinking. He is deprived of all external support: First, his family; then, a fellow

Jew named Gronfein, and finally, Bibikov the Investigating Magistrate who assures Bok of not being “without a friend in the world.” Bibikov also assures him that “I know you are falsely accused. I am determined to continue this investigation to the best of my ability and powers in order to discover, and if necessary, publish the whole truth (TF 169). Gronfein, who is ironically a counterfeiter and Bok meets in prison, turns out to be a fake friend by betraying and telling lie against Bok to save himself. Bibikov is hung mysteriously, and does not live to see the outcome of his endeavors. After the death of Bibikov, who is the fixer’s honest friend and his last human support, Bok has to bear his suffering with no hope and no help. Yet, he has time to refer to his self and reflect upon his past and future.

Suffering brings the fixer moral growth. This morality brings about a change in his character. The first sign of the change appears in an epiphany-like moment when he understands that suffering should not be for nothing. “[I]f I must suffer let it be for something. Let it be for Shmuel” (TF 273). This makes him ready to accept his own share in the past failures and mistakes. Visiting his faithless wife in prison, Bok, who once arrogantly blamed and cursed Raisl for their fruitless life, now tells her:

I’ve thought about our life from beginning to end and I can’t blame you for more than I blame myself. If you give little you get less, though of some things I got more than I deserved. Also, it takes me a long time to learn. Some people have to make the same mistake seven times before they know they’ve made it. That’s my type and I’m sorry. I’m also sorry I stopped sleeping with you. I was out to stab myself, so I stabbed you. Who else was so close to me? Still I’ve suffered in this prison and I’m not the same man I once was... If I had my life to live over, you’d have less to cry about... (TF 288)

He also does her a great favor by claiming her illegitimate child as his own. As Abramson says, “Becoming a father means that he will be responsible for the plight of other people and will have to extend his concern beyond himself” (63).

In the last step, Bok comes to the understanding that now he should stand for not only the innocence of himself, but his people. “You suffer for us all” (TF 305), his lawyer reminds him. Throughout the novel, Bok does everything not to become involved in the fate of his people: he changes his appearance, changes his name, hides his Jewish identity, introduces himself a freethinker, and declares, at least three times, in different situations that “I am not a political person.” But now he is strong enough to resist suffering both for his people’s rights as well as his own. “Something in myself has changed. I’m not the same man I was. I fear less and hate more” (TF 45, 319). This more hatred is for anti-Jewishness and injustice toward the Jews throughout their history.

This is the role of suffering in Malamud’s fiction: to make the protagonist’s eyes wide open toward his place in history and the responsibility he has toward his people. Trying to compose a little essay before his imprisonment, the fixer writes, “I am in history... yet not in it. In a way of speaking I’m far out, it passes me by. Is this good, or is something

lacking in my character?.. What a question! Of course lacking but what can I do about it?.. Best to stay where one is, unless he has something to give to history.” Now he has something to give and to fight for. He is no longer the fixer who disliked politics; contrarily now, he emphasizes “there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew.” On the way to his trial and in his thoughts he shouts “Death to anti-Semites! Long live revolution” (*TF* 60, 335), and in his reverie he even manages to shoot the Tsar’s heart, thus eliminating the source of injustice for all Jews.

*Webster’s New World Dictionary* gives an etymology of the word *schlemiel* as “name of a tribal chief... identified in the Talmud with a prince who met an unfortunate end” (“*schlemiel*” 1282). The fixer’s end as well as other elements of the *schlemiel* studied above do not confirm that Yakov Bok is a *schlemiel* figure; even “Malamud [himself] hated the way his work was vulnerable to readers patronizing his characters as ‘*schlemiels*’” (Davis 169). But if Bok is not a *schlemiel* figure, what kind of character is he? Gerald Sorin is among very few critics who have put a more accurate interpretation on this issue. He observes that “unlike other Jewish writers, who make the *schlemiel* a pathetic figure to be pitied or ridiculed, Malamud’s *schlemiel* is interchangeable with the idea of being a Jew, a *mentsh*, a humane figure—one who assumes a moral stance and recognizes the responsibility of peoplehood” (271). What I like to add is that Yakov Bok is a Jewish hero timely for the post-Holocaust period.

In “Writing American Fiction” (1960) Philip Roth refers to a significant point concerning Malamudian Jews. He argues that the Jews of Malamud’s tales of suffering and regeneration “are not the Jews of New York City or Chicago.” They are, Roth notes, “a kind of invention, a metaphor to stand for certain human possibilities and certain human promises.” He then continues that “Malamud, as a writer of fiction, has not shown specific interest in the anxieties and dilemmas and corruptions of the modern American Jew, the Jew we think of as characteristic of our times; rather, his people live in a timeless depression and a placeless Lower East Side; their society is not affluent, their predicament not cultural” (Roth). More than a decade later, in “Imagining Jews” (1974) he similarly observed that *The Fixer* is a novel of masochistic Jewish suffering, adrift from contemporary reality (qtd. in Davis 266-67).

Jews could have never been in more superior condition than in the years after the World War II. As Philip Yannella puts it, “Jews were alone... in being perceived as so powerful, so victimized by world events, so important to American foreign policy, so crucial to maintaining access to oil, or, in the eyes of ultra-rightists and their allies, so destructive” (124). However, as Roth rightly notes, Malamud’s fictionalized Jews do not in the least resemble their real counterparts, especially, in contemporary era.

This is mainly due to the fact that Malamud could never cease harking back to the life of his parents. He admitted, “almost without understanding why, I was thinking about my father’s immigrant life (how he earned his meager living and what he paid for it) and my mother’s (diminished by fear and suffering) as perhaps matter for my fiction. In

other words, I had them in mind as I invented the characters who became their fictional counterparts” (qtd. in Davis 95). The other main reason is the alleged Holocaust. As noted earlier, he was greatly under the influence of the news of the alleged death camps and the devastation of European Jewry. “Somebody has to cry—even if it’s a writer, 20 years later” (qtd. in Berger 119), he said later to an interviewer. Nevertheless, similar to many other Jews in his time, his mind seemed to be occupied with one important question.

As a consequence of reflecting on the occurrence of the alleged Holocaust that its news had been spread by unprecedented political publicity, a host of fundamental theological and philosophical doubts and questions raised among the Jewish common people and intellectuals. Central to them was this: Does the Holocaust prove God’s nonexistence? If not, why God did not use His providence to intervene into this event? The first important Jewish theological responses to the alleged Holocaust written in English began by “American and European authors since the 1950s” that included views ranging from “the claim that ‘God is dead,’ to those of conservative thinkers who attempt to respond to the Holocaust by recycling classical defenses of God, drawing on biblical models such as the ‘binding of Isaac,’ the ‘suffering servant’ of the Book of Isaiah, and that offered by the Book of Job, among others” (Katz 3).

Unsurprisingly, the fixer’s mindset echoes the same question. Shmuel insists that Bok should remain in the *shtetl*, because “here at least God is with us.” But Bok returns, “He’s with us till the Cossacks come galloping, then he’s elsewhere.” This suggests the author’s belief as well if we replace the Cossacks with the Nazis. Later, in the moment of departing from each other Shmuel says passionately, “don’t forget your God!” which Bok retorts angrily, “Who forgets who?... What do I get from him but a bang on the head... what’s there to be worshipful about?... We live in a world where the clock ticks fast while he’s on his timeless mountain staring in peace. He doesn’t see us and he doesn’t care.” Obviously, Bok expects God’s intervention in his suffering, otherwise He does not exist. As he later tells Shmuel, under the influence of Spinoza, “Nature invented itself and also man. Whatever was there was there to begin with... When it comes down to basic facts, either God is our invention and can’t do anything about it, or he’s a force in Nature...” (*TF* 12, 17, 257).

Malamud was not a religious man, and neither were his heroes. The response to this problem, therefore, should not be traced in Jewish theology. It should be found in what Malamud had seen and experienced when he was young. What fascinated Malamud about the immigrant Jews of New York was the warm relationship they had with and among each other. “What he remembered above all was ‘an emotional people’ possessed of an old gentleness that was ‘a miraculous transfiguration of the bitter experiences of the past.’...It was those miraculous or magical ‘transfigurations’ that later he wanted to recreate in his own fresh language” (Davis 118). He looked at it as a virtue resulted from the hard times they have been experiencing. That is why he mentioned, “When I think of the history of the Jews...



I think of the triumph of insight and value that makes their lives so basically rich" (qtd. in Davis 119). In such manner, Malamud's mission was to convey this tradition to the young generation who seemed to be assimilated in American culture, and thus in the danger of forgetting their past, as well as to the more recent Jewish settlers of postwar America who had many doubts and questions regarding the alleged Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews.

The embodiment of this mindset is visible in the way his hero functions. For the most part, Yakov Bok is a Jew to whom suffering is imposed because he is a Jew. When questioned about his crime, he answers, "If I weren't a Jew there'd be no crime" (*TF* 158). But on the other hand, this hero is not like his classic counterpart, the schlemiel. He does resist, and through achieving morality he gains a sense of responsibility for his own people. The important point is that there is nothing heroic about him at the outset. Malamud's heroes are all ordinary men, and thus more believable for the readers. There is no full-scale combat in between. They overwhelm their enemies or captors by moral strength. This is what exactly happens to two of Bok's guards. Zhitnyak brings Bok a broom to clean his cell, loans him "a darned needle and some thread to sew them with" (*TF* 205), and does some other favors which eventually cost him his job. Kogin's fate is even worse. The moments before leaving for his trial, Bok was made back to his cell to undress and undergo the daily search. After the routine search was done, the Deputy Warden orders him "[t]ake off that stinking undershirt." This makes the fixer agitated, and he shouts, "I have never taken it off before. Why should I take it off now? Why do you insult me?" At the Deputy Warden's insistence, however, Yakov rips off his undershirt and flings it into his face. The Deputy Warden, as if waiting for this reaction, draws his revolver and is ready to shoot Bok in the name of "interfering with and insulting a prison official in the performance of his duty," when Kogin stops him and says, "I've listened to this man night after night, I know his sorrows. Enough is enough, and anyway it's time for his trial to begin." The Deputy Warden orders Kogin out of his way, but he "pressed the muzzle of his revolver against the Deputy Warden's neck" (*TF* 325-26). In a duel-like scene, Kogin is shot and dies.

## CONCLUSION

This study will contribute to the scholarly conversation already in progress about Bernard Malamud as a major writer of the twentieth century and a leading figure in Jewish American fiction. Through a careful study of Malamud's life and career, and observing the role he could have played in postwar America's social unrests and injustice, this study challenges the Malamud's claim to *universality* and asserts that he is a Jewish writer who reflects and identifies with the ideals of a particular people. Also by introducing Malamud's protagonists as heroes who belong mainly to a particular people and period, this study takes a new step to a more accurate understanding of Malamudian fiction.

The concept of Jewish heroism plays a crucial role in reviving, sustaining, and encouraging Jewish national pride,

identity, and solidarity. Jewish heroism and Jewish suffering are two sides of the same coin. While the notion of Jewish suffering seems mainly to have external function, Jewish heroism acts as its supplement and fortifies the interior and domestic structures and helps "to create a 'new Jew,' free of the victim mentality" (Shiff 150).

Jewish theological responses to the alleged Holocaust began during and after the war, and to settle this question non-theologically, one significant way has been to portray the alleged Holocaust, especially among the Jews, as a source of heroism and resistance. That is why Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel is called Holocaust and Heroism Day. In other words, although the Holocaust is symbolized to be the emblem of Jewish suffering and persecution, it is at the same time shown to the Jews as the symbol of Jewish heroism and resistance, as well as "a new 'canon of faith in the Jewish Religion,' [that has] strengthened the ties of the international Jewish community and [has] made it more powerful than ever" (Wistrich 296).

Malamud is among the few Jewish American writers whose fiction, especially his highly praised novel, *The Fixer*, is concerned foremost with this double theme. That is to say, on the one hand it portrays the Jews as the most suffered and the most victimized, and on the other hand not as passive takers of it; not as schlemiels. As Richard Gray says, although "[s]uffering is inevitable for them... [and] it is their uninvited, unavoidable history; it is what they do with their suffering that counts" (610). They become heroes through their resistance, morality, and the responsibility they accept toward their people, and thus strengthen the sense of solidarity among the Jews. They deserve the praise of their people for this heroism. This is apparent in the reaction of the Jews who were watching the fixer in the carriage on his way to the trial: "Among those in the street were Jews of the Plossky District. Some, as the carriage clattered by and they glimpsed the fixer, were openly weeping, wringing their hands. One thinly bearded man clawed his face. One or two waved at Yakov. Some shouted his name" (*TF* 335).

I have argued in this article that Bernard Malamud is primarily a Jewish writer whose hero of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Fixer*, should be considered as a Jewish hero who befits mainly the time of its creation, the post-Holocaust era. He should not be interpreted as the archetypical Jewish character, the schlemiel, or as a typical universal hero. He is the portrait of Jewish suffering and Jewish heroism at the same time; the Jew for whom we can feel both pity and pride. That is to say, on the one hand Malamud's protagonists are a metaphor to stand for the alleged death of six million Jews, and on the other hand they are heroes of resistance, morality, and acceptance of responsibility toward their people.

By making a contextual contrast between *postwar* and *post-Holocaust* America, I have argued that Malamud could have contributed to more universal issues compared to the alleged Holocaust and Jewish suffering. According to the facts and details provided in this study, the U.S. domestic and foreign policies in the postwar years not only caused considerable social unrests in America but imposed imperialistic wars and irreparable afflictions to

various countries. Two incidents, however, have been of paramount significance and the focus of national and international attention: the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Although the discrimination and violence being perpetrated on the black population of America has continued even to the present day, the Vietnam War can be considered as the embodiment of injustice in the postwar years. The war during which the “United States dropped more than twice as much bombing tonnage... than the total bombing tonnage dropped during World War II” (Anderson 92). Malamud believed that one’s work should not be directed to a political end like the Vietnam War, and if that happens, there is no art. This is in the case that he directed his own art to the alleged Holocaust and spoke for the Jews and Jewish concerns in many of his works, especially *The Fixer*.

Regarding *The Fixer* and its hero Malamud himself said, “I wanted to write a gutsy, triumphant book, not a book about defeat and sorrow. I was writing about a folk hero” (qtd. in Abramson 70). This folk hero does not resemble in the least the affluent Jews of postwar America, but Malamud has created him for them. This is why Philip Yannella in his contextual analysis of American literature after the Second World War notes that one of Malamud’s primary subjects is “how to retain the Jewish cultural traditions despite living in an alien place” (124), or why Gerald Sorin observes, “Nowhere is the responsibility of peoplehood more starkly or darkly demonstrated than in *The Fixer*” (271).

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