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Research Article



Yakov Bok: A Humanist's Odyssey in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*

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Abstract

In a Jewish context, a man experiences numerous upheavals for which he bears no responsibility. In Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer* the central character, Yakov Bok, undergoes a compelling journey. This journey takes us through the turbulent world of Tsarist Russia where a Jewish individual is fraught with hardships. In fact, Bok's odyssey reveals the profound challenges

inherent in the existence of a Jewish man within the societal context. This paper aims at dissecting the profound transformation of Yakov Bok against the backdrop of a society rife with prejudice and injustice. It also broods over how Bok's journey, marked by unjust imprisonment and enduring suffering, catalyzes his evolution from an ordinary Jew to an extraordinary human being. Yakov Bok emerges as a heroic figure, staunchly confronting the systemic victimization of innocent individuals within the complexities of his society. Further this research article explores how the immediate context of the novel is resonating with universal themes of human struggle and resilience. Yakov Bok's narrative serves as a powerful allegory for the broader human experience, emphasizing the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary society. The article elucidates the painful existence of a Jewish protagonist by portraying his life's trajectory as a metaphor for poignant dilemmas confronting humanity in the current era. Within this intricate narrative, His tough journey is marked by the endurance of profound adversities notwithstanding his impeccable innocence in a criminal charge. At the same time, it traces his metamorphosis from an unremarkable Jew into a formidable luminary. What it finally affirms is that the freedom to live is not merely the freedom to experience, but also ironically the freedom to struggle and even to suffer.

Keywords: Freedom, Experience, Relationship, Sufferings, Imprisonment, Community, Bernard Malamud, Yakov Bok, Tsarist Russia, Jewish history, Heroism, Human Resilience

Malamud is one of the prominent novelists of the time and his faith in man's innate potential reaches its climax in *The Fixer*, his starkest and finest novel. In this novel Malamud writes about the life of a holocaust survivor in the Tsarist Russia who emerges through his relentless struggle as the hero of the entire human race. Although writers like Bellow and Malamud never experienced the holocaust, as Jewish writers they had to bear the burden of history in an indirect way. Consequently, they have written about the survivors of the holocaust for their own salvation from the guilt of not doing anything for the European Jews in the time of crisis, and for the salvation of the entire Jewish race from its victimhood of racial history. Bellow's journey to Israel in 1976, recorded in *To Jerusalem and Back* (1977), and Malamud's *Trip to Kiev* in 1965, are suggestive of their deep concern for their community. Other writers of the holocaust like Isaac Bashevis Singer in *The Family Moskat* (1950), and Edward Wallant in *The Pawn Broker* (1962), treat the Jew as the mythic victim of social history. Unlike them, Bellow in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Malamud in *The Fixer* break the Biblical myth of Diaspora and place the Jew above history,

making him a hero of all people at all times. Their protagonists in these novels fight against the overwhelming social and racial problems with a heroic determination in order to preserve their life and humanity. They are not inspired by the socio-political purpose to secure a distinct identity for the Jews as the black writers like Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin do for the blacks. As a matter of fact, Bellow and Malamud write about the holocaust survivors for the social integration and cultural assimilation of the Jews with other communities. In Europe and America by projecting their Jewish protagonists as the universal archetypes of man, they mobilize the innate human qualities of their Jewish protagonists which are common to all men and remain unrealized until they are confronted with a crisis. For this, Bellow and Malamud used a Crisis-ridden life of a Jew as a metaphor for the plight of man in the present day world.

In Mr. Sammler's Planet, Bellow extends the suffering of the Jews in the holocaust to their suffering in post-war America. Though America does not pose a serious threat to Sammler's life, he finds an American milieu equally depressing. While living in New York city which represents to him a world gone mad, Sammler encounters several social evils which he cannot reckon with at his age. So, he develops within an extraordinary resilience to combat these social evils that threaten his humanity. He falls back on his human virtues to protect himself against the philistine forces of American society. These human virtues are not exclusively Jewish. They are universal human virtues available everywhere. Malamud writes about the holocaust survivor in the European context where the Jews had to resist physically as well as spiritually to protect their life and sanity against the soul breaking tortures of the anti Semites. Yakov Bok, the protagonist of Malamud's *The Fixer*, leaves his native shtetl in search of a new life in Kiev where he falls into the trap of the Russian anti-Semites the anti-Semites charge him with the murder of a Christian child and put him in jail. The wards of the jail subject Yakov to severe tortures with the intention of obtaining a confession from him and then using it as a pretext to carry out a bloody pogrom against the native Jews. But, he refuses to accept the crime and decides to live till the day of his trial. *The Fixer* intends to prove himself innocent to save all the innocent people from the victimhood of history. In his efforts to protect his own life for the survival of others, Yakov prevails over his racial history and emerges as the hero of all men. It may, then, be said that Bellow and Malamud portray the characters like Artur Sammler and Yakov Bok, who rise above the adverse social and political conditions by their courage and intelligence, to bestow the honor of the universal heroism upon the "chained and manacled" (103) the traditional Jewish schlemiel portrayed by such Yiddish writers as Sholem Aleichem and I.B. Singer.

The Fixer is a unique story reminding us of Kafka's *The Trial* as well as the *Monologues* of Dostoevsky. Yakov Bok is a hero but manages to be heroic in same way responding his all time favourite book, having felt the poignant plot and theme, Warren French says, "I have read this book no fewer than 10 times [...] and every time I cry this book was at one time banned because it was thought to be anti-Semitic. I think it's quite possible" (Warren, 13). It reminds me of the quote from Dante "the hottest place in hell is reserved for those who are neutral in times of moral crisis". This could be the theme of this book. "Try as you might to remain neutral but when the world is faced with injustice ... it's just impossible" (Warren French 13).

In *The Fixer*, Malamud turns the famous Beiliss case into fiction with a view to showing man, whether a Jew or a Gentile, as the victim of his racial history Nevertheless, in its final analysis of the novel propagates the author's belief that man can successfully outlive the trappings of history provided he falls back on his human attributes for sustenance and strength. The narrative, rendered in a prose characterized by a luminous Biblical simplicity, communicates the author's conviction that man has, in spite of all his weaknesses, a hidden potential, an "opposing self," which always prompts him to resist any threat to his moral or spiritual essence Malamud portrays his hero not as an extraordinary man, but as a ordinary human being who refuses to bow down to the oppressors and fights with all the force at his command to preserve his life and his sense of human integrity. Yakov Bok responds to his crisis alone and, in spite of continuous torture and isolation, does not lose his grip on his mental processes. Unlike Solzhenitsyn's hero in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), he is not "inside the whale" in George Orwell's sense. Yakov manages to muster extraordinary spiritual resources in the face of temptation, torture, threats, and violence. In this sense, he reminds us strongly of the Jews who survived the holocaust, but, much more, he breaks the legend of the persona extraordinary and becomes the hero of our time. For this reason, Malamud's protagonists are always "bent on finding a new identity and with it a new rapport with society" (Mark 51).

A unique world in itself is created by Malamud by capturing the image of Jew immigrant. He is an individual embodying the burden of the whole Jewishness. Malamud's helplessness to serve us a happy ending could be taken for moral realism of a sort, the sober assessment that life is tough, especially for a Jew. Shechner Mark says, "His characters are disappointed because they desire and where they fail, they do so because their desire either sabotages itself or is undercut by Malamud's own distaste for achievement" (211).

The idea for *The Fixer* has been taken from the actual arrest and trial of Mendel Beiless, a Russian Jew, who was accused of a ritual murder. It would be a mistake to see Malamud's work as a historical account. The point is that we are not so much concerned with the events of the imprisonment of Yakov Bok, the hero of the novel, as we are with his responses to these events. *The Fixer* may bear a resemblance to a historical novel, primarily due to its contextualization. However, its true depth lies in the delineation of a transformative process in the protagonist's consciousness. He has been engaged in an enduring quest which may release him from his inner imprisonment. "A Malamud's character is someone who fears his fate, is caught up in it, and yet manages to out-run it" (Esrael 22).

The most distinctive about Malamud's novel is its subject matter. It is concerned with two stories which evolve simultaneously. Both stories involve the conflict of imprisonment and freedom but in quite different ways. The first is the story of the unjust imprisonment of Yakov Bok, ostensibly for the ritual murder of a Christian boy, the presentations here— the narrative images, the scenes and the episodes embody Yakov's miserable lot in the prison and his continual struggle for his release. The second story is of the imprisonment of Yakov Bok's psychological and moral.

The images, scenes, and episodes within serve to depict the protagonist's enduring state of unfreedom, as well as his gradual emergence from this spiritual confinement. In this respect, *The Fixer* shares thematic parallels with an earlier work by Malamud, *The Assistant* (1957), wherein the focus is fundamentally on the existential condition of the hero, akin to Camus's *The Stranger*, a novel also centered around the concept of imprisonment.

The Fixer is primarily preoccupied with revealing the essence of individual existence, delving into the nature of a person's inner being rather than merely emphasizing dramatic events. Much like Malamud's *A New Life* (1961), it explores the idea that the most profound aspects of a new life are rooted within the individual, commencing with their capacity for inner freedom. Notably, Yakov's imprisonment is portrayed as a poignant and meticulously detailed account of human suffering, with the intensity of his tribulations not solely arising from the harsh conditions, deprivation, and physical agony, but from the escalating isolation from human interaction. However, the narrative's focus is not centered on the dramatic dimension of Yakov's suffering; rather, it centers on the meaning and significance inherent in his tribulations. It is this thematic focus that distinguishes *The Fixer* from classification as a naturalistic novel, as it would be erroneous to perceive Malamud's hero, Yakov Bok, merely as a passive victim.

Indeed, Yakov Bok is subjected to the forces of his cultural environment, over which he possesses no control. Nevertheless, the Yakov Bok who, through his suffering, embarks on a profound exploration of the boundaries of human existence, cannot be viewed as a pitiable victim. *The Fixer* is unequivocally an affirmative novel, affirming not the suffering itself but, rather, man's enduring struggle as an inherent, fundamental norm of his existence. Simultaneously, it underscores the potential for a free and conscious response to one's conditions.

Bibikov, the compassionate investigating magistrate, in a conversation with *The Fixer*, articulates the central theme early in the narrative, suggesting its universality as a contemporary archetype;

One often feels helpless in the face of the confusion of these times, such a mass of apparently uncontrollable events and experiences to live through, attempt to understand, and if at all possible, give order to, but one must not withdraw from the task if he has some small thing to offer he does so at the risk of diminishing his humanity. (Malamud 144)

Thus, each of Malamud's three major novels is concerned, I believe, with the being of the central character, with his decision to discover a new life, with the subject matter of the search, which in every case begins with the search for self. And in each novel, despite ironies, usually ludicrous, the hero succeeds never, however in the terms in which he had envisioned his quest. Malamud holds the view that "art tends towards morality. It values life, even when it doesn't it tends to... Art, in essence, celebrates life and gives us our measure" (Daniel 51).

Yakov Bok's name, Bok, means "goat" in German. It suggests the scapegoat he does become in a government plot to charge the Jews of Russia with the ritual murder of a Christian child. Bok's name also suggests another goat and one kid of the song Chadgadyah, which is sung at the end of the Passover Seder. The song tells us of a single kid who has been devoured by a cat. Each of a series of destructive forces— dog, stick, fire, water, ox and butcher—annihilates the one before it until the Angel of Death takes the butcher. Then the Most Holy destroys the Angel of Death and only He-and the one kid remain. The song symbolizes the survival of the Jewish people while all the nations who have persecuted it have perished. Malamud, at the end of the novel, does not tell us the outcome of Bok's trial, but there is no question about the fate of the government that persecuted him. The novel begins in the spring of 1911 and ends in the winter of 1919. The death-knell for Tsarist Russia, Bok's persecutor, has already been sounded by 1917, Tar abdicated, ending a thousand years of merciless monarchy

The Fixer is an examination of freedom and its complement, commitment. Yakov Bok, spends the most of his time in prison, and paradoxically, the longer he is imprisoned, the truer freedom he attains. Malamud starts his hero off with the appearance of a good deal of freedom much of it comes from having no responsibility and no so-called hostages to fortune.

The theme of freedom of the human spirit as a necessary condition for living appears in three distinct conflicts in Yakov's life in his capacity to be open to the world of his daily existence apart from his relationships to it, in his capacity to be open to human relationships apart from his needs in the relationship, and in his capacity to commit himself through political action to a cause in the community of man. The first concerns his ability to celebrate the quality of the real world around him, the second concerns his ability not to celebrate another but rather the reality of a relationship with another, the third concerns his ability to celebrate his experienced relationship with mankind. In each instance the problem for Yakov is presented as vitally connected to the problem of freedom.

Yakov Bok is an orphan as his parents are dead and he is a fixer by trade. For not being satisfied with his poor and miserable life he makes a plan to go somewhere out of the shelter for better living, for getting acquainted with the rest of the world and for knowing what was going on in the world. He wishes to change even his name and dress to seek better employment. He reaches Holy Kiev, mother of Russian cities and the city forbidden for the Jews. Like most of Malamud's heroes, he takes himself almost immediately into the enemy camp when he enters Kiev, he stays in a Jewish quarter, but a chance occurrence puts him into the prohibited Christian sector. He hopes for a good future there for himself in the beginning but when a twelve years old Christian boy is murdered by his mother's lover, the Russian authorities raise a ritual murder, Jews murdering Christian children so that their blood can be used for making matzos in order to deflect the criticism of a regime.

On the suspicion of murdering a Christian boy, Bok is imprisoned, though he knew nothing about the forces working there until near the end of his imprisonment and this insignificant man becomes a focal point in Russian history. In jail Bok has to defend himself against the demons of fear, loneliness and even madness as he is systematically deprived of human society and the consequent ability to depend upon for help, for companionship and for self-definition. When Bok enters the prison population, he appears to gain important support through a few friends among the prisoners. There he meets a fellow Jew named Gronfein who promises to get his story to the Jewish population. Finally, he meets the Investigating Magistrate, Bibikow, on his side. When

Grofein betrays him to the prison authorities, Bok is removed from the general prison population to solitary confinement.

Bibikov knows but cannot prove that Martha Golov, the mother of the murdered child and Martha's lover are responsible for the child's death. Bok wants for Bibikov to find the evidence to incriminate Martha, but then in an apparent act of carelessness, Bok's guard leaves the prison cell open and Bok sneaks out of his cell. Bibikov knows that it is not enough to know the truth only; one must be committed to it totally. He is a kind, honest and responsible man. When he comes to know that he cannot serve both his government and his conscience, he hangs himself after being arrested for his interference in the government's prosecution of Bok. He creaks under the pressure put on him by the minister of justice to manufacture the evidence of Bok's guilt. Though Bibikov does not betray him but he thinks himself responsible for his failure. The murder of Bibikov is seen by the other prisoners as martyrdom. Often Bok returns from the infirmary and he is put in another cell.

At the outset, Bok though an unusual fixer, one who carries selections from Spinoza with his bag of tools, is characterized by the disappointment of his lot. All of the images in the beginning section reveal an attitude towards his life of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. It is clear that Yakov Bok as a viewpoint character is much more than a convention for telling the story; rather his assertions function dramatically to present his sensibility. One of Yakov's chief characteristics from the outset is an impulse to reflect about events, the reflection that leads to his own awareness of his own weaknesses as various events express his prosperity to be an aware man, to stand apart from his experience and see the matter in its larger context. And after reflecting on the value of his experience, he admits that what he has learned will not help him to get out of prison.

Malamud never loses sight of the complexity which he has developed in an overall image of his hero even in the midst of his terror following his arrest and questioning, he retains the possibility of momentary freedom from his troubled self to experience his world. What the novel finally affirms is that the freedom to live is not merely the freedom to experience, but also ironically the freedom to struggle and even to suffer. The point is made specifically when Yakov's reading of the Testament brings his own discovery, one quite different in emphasis from the traditional interpretation. At the end Yakov Bok plunges into deep meditation over his lot he had to face. He raises a question why he was put to such a fate.

"Why me?" he asked himself for the ten thousandth time. Why did it have to happen to a poor, half-ignorant fixer? Who needed this kind of education? Education he would have been

satisfied to get from books. Each time he answered this question he answered differently. How see it as a part of personal fate- his various shortcomings and mistakes-but also as a force of circumstance, though how you separated one from another. Who had to go find Nikolai Maximovitch lying drunk in the snow and drag him home to start off an endless series of miserable events. Was that the word of God, inexorable Necessity? Go find your fate-try first the fat Russian with his face in the snow Go be kind to an anti-Semite and suffer for it. And from him to his daughter with the crippled leg was only one crippled step, and then another into the brickyard and a crippled hip into prison! (Malamud 254-255).

Yakov Bok's growing anger is a result of the unjust circumstances he finds himself in. He perceives that an entire society has turned against him, viewing him as a "poor man with a few grains of education" who, regardless of his innocence regarding the crime they accuse him of, has become the target of their hostility. It's a profoundly unsettling and extraordinary situation for someone like Yakov, who is a fixer by trade and has never harmed anyone. His only "crime" has been residing in a forbidden district for a few months. What makes this situation particularly remarkable is that his sworn adversaries are not just any individuals but representatives of the Russian State, including its officials and the Tsar. Their hostility toward him stems from his Jewish heritage, as he is, in their eyes, the designated enemy due to his ethnicity, even though, in truth, he bears no enmity toward anyone but himself. This citation highlights the injustice and prejudice Yakov faces simply because of his Jewish identity in a society that unjustly labels him as an enemy. He is;

a poor man with a few grains of education, but in any case innocent of the crime they accuse him of what stage and extraordinary thing for someone like himself, a fixer by trade, who has never in his life done thing to them but live for a few months in a forbidden district, to have as his sworn and better enemies the Russian State, though its officials and Tsar, for no better reason than that he was a born Jew, therefore their appointed enemy though the truth of it is he is in his heart no one's enemy but his own. (Malamud, 223)

The only crime of Yakov Bok is that he is a Jew, and suffering is his lot. It is the story of all the Jews in the world. The Jews are all in history, that's, but some are more than others, Jews more than some. He had his painful surprise, stepped into history more deeply than others. It had worked out so. Why would he never know because he had taken to reading Spinoza? Anyway, if he had not been Yakov Bok, a born Jew, he would not have been, to start with, an outlaw in the Lukianovsky when they were looking for one, would never have been arrested they might still be

looking. It was history's doing, it was full of all sorts of barriers and limitations, as though certain doors had been boarded up in a house and to get out you had to jump out of a window.

His young mother and father had remained all then poor lives in the shtetl, the historical evil had galloped in to murder them there So the "open", he thought, was anywhere. In of cut it was history that counted-the world's bad Memory. It remembered the wrong things so for a Jew it was the same wherever he went, he carried a remembered pack on his back-a condition of servitude, diminished. Opportunity, vulnerability a Jew was not free, because the government destroyed his freedom by reducing his worth. (255)

Foucault says, "Truth and meaning depend on politico-historical contexts" (Foucault 17). Yakov Bok is also entrapped in the political conspiracy of Black Hundreds who easily create the truth that he is a murderer and killed a Christian boy for a religious purpose. New historicists see history from a marginal perspective. According to Foucault, "history is historicized" (Foucault 84), the real history of the marginal voice is not heard. Yakov Bok's voice is a marginal voice, which is not heard though it is real. From the new historicist perspective, it is not the real justice so Yakov Bok searches for the truth and quests for justice.

Therefore wherever he was or went and whatever happened was perilous. A door swing opens at his approach. A hand reached forth and plucked him in by his Jewish beard - Yakov Bok, a free -thinking Jew in brick factory in Kiev, yet any Jew, any plausible Jew-to be Tsar's adversary and victim to be imprisoned, starved and regarded, chained like an animal to a wall although he was innocent. (Malamud 255-256)

Knowing his fate as a Jew, Bok ceases to fear the state. He also knows that every nation that has employed the Jew as scapegoat has crumbled, and that this history is sung at the end of the Passover service in the story of the one kid who survived all its predators as a goat, Bok is from the Jewish nation that has survived in spite of his suffering. To be a Jew is to understand the suffering that God puts into the lives of all men. This understanding leads to goodness that must take the form of pity for other men, without it the suffering is meaningless and goodness non-existent.

Yakov Bok, through suffering in the imprisonment, comes to understand the meaning of human life. He remembers from Spinoza that life is life and there is no sense kicking it into the grave. He reads prison regulations, mends his clothes, sweeps his room, and recalls stories of various writers like Chekhov. He spends his time in eating, thinking and making wood for fire. While suffering in isolation, he acquires a new understanding of himself and his relationship with

others. He comes to know more about his innate physical potentials and moral munificence consequently he compassionately reconsiders his relationship with his wife and gets over his hatred for her, rationalizing that she “had tied herself to the wrong future”. He survives the cruelty of history with the help of his human attributes— the hidden strength in him that finds expression in the time of crisis. And in the later part of his imprisonment, he suffers not only for himself but also for other victims of man’s inhumanity to his own kind. He, thus, transcends the national, social and racial barriers and becomes a universal hero of all people at all times to come. He suffers to grow from an ordinary Jew to an extraordinary man who fights heroically against the victimhood of the innocent people in the present day society.

Frederick Karl in his book *American Fictions* writes, “Malamud’s novels define, unique world: post Holocaust ethics, Jews and Gentiles intermingling in universal suffering, guilt, and penance, that consciousness of miracle which derives from faith in something beyond the self: the despair that precedes a deepening of ethical belief” (241). Indeed, in Malamud’s *The Fixer* we are drawn into a world where the exploration of freedom, suffering, and the indomitable human inborn ethics and spirit unfolds with a heroic resonance.

In Malamud’s *The Fixer* we are drawn into a world where the exploration of freedom, suffering, and the indomitable human spirit unfolds with a heroic resonance. Through the character of Yakov Bok, we witness an extraordinary evolution— an ordinary man who, in the face of unjust imprisonment, rises to become an extraordinary figure. He is the one who fearlessly battling the hostile forces of history and prejudice. Bok’s journey serves as a testament to the enduring struggles of individuals subjected to adversity.

This work resounds with the universality of human struggle by emphasizing the profound significance of inner freedom. It showcases the importance of confronting seemingly insurmountable agony and the enduring capacity of the human spirit to overcome oppressive exploitation. Bok becomes a timeless mirror reflecting the ever-relevant themes of our contemporary society, reminding us that the freedom to live encompasses not only the freedom to experience but also the freedom to confront, to struggle, and, at times, to suffer for the greater good.

The following statement of Yakov Bok in the end, “Where there is no fight for it, there is no freedom and justice” (333) clearly shows that the brutal treatment which he endured in prison has not only made him realize his rights but also it has endowed him with the strength to fight for truth and justice.

Thus, in the character of Yakov Bok, we witness an extraordinary evolution of an ordinary man who, in the face of unjust imprisonment, rises to become an extraordinary figure. He is the one who fearlessly battling the hostile forces of history and prejudice. Bok's journey serves as a testament to the enduring struggles of individuals subjected to adversity.

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