

The Suffering in Bernard Malamud's The Magic Barrel

Zichen Wen, Rongying Zheng

Department of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, 102206, China

Keywords: Malamud; Suffering Motif; Salvation; Jewishness

Abstract: Bernard Malamud, a renowned Jewish writer in the realm of contemporary American literature, prominently featured Jewish individuals as central characters in his works. His narratives mostly revolved around the portrayal of Jewish suffering, serving as a means to explore the universal predicament of human life. This study aims to integrate historical context, reasoning, and the writer's personal experiences in order to understand the theme of immense suffering throughout Malamud's literary works. This thesis outlined the annals of Jewish suffering. Persecution, wounds from bloodshed, and war were the causes of their physical and mental suffering. Concentrating on the writer's unfortunate personal experience, further excavating the path of salvation through digestive suffering. The Magic Barrel demonstrates the Jew's difficult existential state and painful psychological emotions in the suffering state, and uses it as a symbol to illustrate the struggle for human survival.

1. The Jewish People's Suffering Experience throughout History

As is common knowledge, the Jewish people have endured an excessive amount of adversity and catastrophe. The Jews are identified as God's chosen people in the Bible. The Jews are the initial recipients of God's dazzling radiance, which then reflects on other nations.

Throughout history, however, it has been discovered that Jewish history is a tragic history that combines various types of human suffering and adversity. Why do the Jews, as God's chosen people, not receive God's favor and protection but instead endure unimaginable suffering? The perplexed Jews provide a distinct cultural interpretation for the query. According to the Jewish perspective, due to their status as God's chosen people, they have "to observe and do all the commandments of Jehovah our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes" (Hume, 1959). [5] Hence, within the conventional perspectives of the Jewish community, there exists a prevalent cultural motif referred to as "suffering". The Jews believe that suffering is "the Jew's special destiny, evidence of his unique covenant with God, proof of God's concern in that only those who are loved are chastised, and the means of the Jew's peculiar awareness of his identity..." (Grebstein, 1937). [2] From their perspective, they perceive their suffering as a collective burden on behalf of humanity, driven by the noble objective of preserving and rescuing the entirety of the human race. In order to complete the mission of saving all Jews and non-Jews, Jewish generations are expected to carry out God's will, endure suffering, and view it as part of their responsibilities and obligations. "Suffering" is the defining characteristic of Jewishness. For individuals of Jewish heritage, their Jewish identity is often regarded as an inherent and unalienable spiritual sentiment. The Jewish people consider that "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 rachmones, pity, for other men, for other Jews, even for oneself” (Helterman, 1985). [4] Despite the fact that many American Jews now live as guests in other nations, the fundamental spirit of Jewish culture is always there in their blood. As a result, Jewishness is not yet extinct; rather, it is still alive, still suffering, and still driving the lives of Jewish men and women.

2. Bernard Malamud's Identity as a Jewish Writer

The American Jewish writers are adept at selecting "suffering," a Jewish cultural motif, as the central theme of their works, due to the Jews' historical experiences of being uprooted and dependents, as well as their religious awareness of suffering. The utilization of the theme of suffering serves as a proficient means for Jewish writers to manifest their Jewish spirit and explore the intricacies of the Jewish experience. Charles Alva Hoyt has stated in his writing that the “suffering of the Jew is to Bernard Malamud the stuff and substance of his art” (Hoyt, 1964). [3]

Malamud consistently portrays the theme of "suffering" in his literary works, which can be tied to his own encounters with adversity and distress throughout his formative years. And the tragic history of the Jewish people, which lasts at least two thousand years, is ingrained in the subconscious of every Jew. Irrespective of the geographical location or the favorable circumstances in which an individual of Jewish descent may find themselves, their subconscious mind, residing profoundly inside their heart, will invariably be stirred by the awareness that several fellow Jewish compatriots continue to endure profound suffering.

The 20th century witnessed a multitude of adversities and calamities in Western culture. These included the global Great Depression that originated in the United States in 1913, the rise of fascist ideologies, the occurrence of World War II, the protracted Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the looming threat of nuclear conflict, among others. Since the 1870s, anti-Semitic mass atrocities have occurred frequently in Russia. Therefore, Malamud's parents shifted to the United States to avoid persecution and genocide at the hands of anti-Semites. Malamud lived during the period of World War I after his birth. Because he grew up in Brooklyn, where many American Jewish immigrants resided, he had firsthand experience with their destitution and hardship. He once said,

“Whenever I start writing, my parents, their images always over my mind. The characters I create always bear the characteristics similar to my parents...” (Delbanco, 1996). [1]

Malamud, being of Jewish descent, exhibits a profound comprehension of the terrible historical trajectory of the Jewish people, encompassing many forms of suffering, including prejudice, persecution, and massacres. Besides living in the 20th century, he has learned the wounds brought by the wars. Thus, Malamud mostly portrays the existential challenges faced by individuals, particularly those of Jewish descent. The predicaments encompass various challenges, including the scarcity of resources, the hardships experienced in daily living, the enduring historical suffering of the Jewish people, the trauma resulting from wars and massacres, and profound spiritual isolation and anguish, among other factors.

3. The Theme of Suffering in the Magic Barrel

In his short story *The Magic Barrel*, the American Jewish writer Malamud also indicate Jewish cultural theme of "suffering." Whether in real life or the spiritual realm, the character Leo has endured anguish and suffering. In actuality, Leo was a poor and mediocre student. He rented a small, dimly lit room and lived alone, away from his family and relatives. He had no social life, devoting all of his time and energy to his studies and having no interest in what was happening around him. He led the life of a sadhu, with few desires and a rigorous study of Jewish law. When Salzman arranged a blind date with the high school teacher Lily, he even did not have decent clothes. After a great deal of work,

he was finally successful in locating the thick and heavy black tuxedo that was hidden away in the storage closet. He reserved this tuxedo for the sole purpose of wearing it on Saturdays when he went to church. After using the brush to meticulously clean the tuxedo, he chose a fedora in the same color as the tuxedo so that the two would look nicely together. After he had changed his appearance, he presented an additionally appealing appearance. After that, he strutted his way to the appointment with pride, walking as quickly as he could.

If the reader believes that Leo could still appreciate life in the real world, which is full of mental desires, he is utterly mired in the abyss of suffering in the spiritual realm. The experience of Leo's blind date is a perfect proof of this. Within the story, Leo, who resided in the realm of school, possessed limited exposure to social interactions. The protagonist inadvertently became ensnared in the trap meticulously laid up by Salzman from the outset of the story, resulting in a convoluted and arduous journey in his search for a suitable marital partner, causing him considerable distress. Leo was naive and clumsy, whereas Salzman was shrewd and deft; Salzman was calm and careful in dealing with issues, whereas Leo was the one who easily disclosed his thoughts and blushed in shame. Leo had been recommended three women by Salzman. They were a widow, a woman five years his senior, and a girl with a disability. However, Leo was extremely displeased in them. The blind date with Lily brought him to the realization that he was a forlorn creature who neither loved nor was loved by others. The most humiliating aspect was his abrupt realization that he was not as devoted to God. This devastating realization nearly disintegrated him.

Subsequently, the ensuing week proved to be the most excruciating period experienced by Leo throughout his existence. The substantial disparity between the conceptual ideal and the tangible reality elicited a sense of perplexity, distress, and cognitive dissonance within him. Leo's life had undergone a state of disarray, characterized by significant disorder and chaos. Leo had contemplated the possibility of escaping or discontinuing his education. Nevertheless, these were not the sole afflictions that Leo had endured, but merely the inception of his anguish. Upon careful contemplation, he came to the realization that his existence was devoid of purpose. Particularly when he reassessed his connection with the God, he experienced a heightened sense of disorientation and exhibited a degree of hesitation. Throughout the course of time, his endeavor was indeed devoid of vision. The comprehension of the Pentateuch proved to be worthless. Leo in question exhibited a lack of self-awareness and a limited contemplation of their professional trajectory. Furthermore, their commitment to religious devotion was not evident. Nevertheless, Leo's extensive interaction with Lily and the subsequent introspection prompted by their conversation, along with the subsequent week of distress, exerted a significant impact on him.

Leo concluded after a week of self-reflection that he was a Jew for reasons that could not be disputed. According to Jewish belief, as God's chosen people, they were created to suffer, and they endured pain and suffering not only for their own salvation but also for the salvation of all humanity. This was God's specific test for the Jewish people, through which they attained spiritual sublimation and moral ascension, finally receiving the real meaning of life and God's salvation, and walking into the dreaming paradise. Such traditional ideas had become profoundly ingrained in the Jewish nation's ideology. It left a lasting impression and had a profound impact on Leo's thoughts. Therefore, considering himself as an elect of God, he had no choice but to suffer for himself and others. And it could be seen as the beginning of his guilty fate. However, this kind of ideological consciousness improved his thoughts again and paved the way for his life of guilt and salvation.

Leo ultimately decided to pursue his genuine love on his own rather than relying on the matchmaker. When he eventually opened the envelope Salzman had left him, he was profoundly impressed by the girl in the cheap photograph. But this caused him to experience the pain once more. Leo experienced a profound sense of internal conflict due to the presence of Stella, the daughter of Salzman, who exhibited characteristics like to those of a wild dog. He felt uneasy even when eating

and sleeping, and struggled with the conflicting emotions. Then he made a decision that he would “convert her to goodness, himself to God” (Malamud, 2003). [6] Even at the last minute before he had to make a decision, he was still in agony. The search for a spouse is a process of self-discovery and self-fulfillment for the Leo spirit, despite the fact that it is a painful one.

This point is the shining point of Bernard Malamud’s works. In Bernard Malamud's short story “The Magic Barrel,” the protagonist Leo, a young man with aspirations of becoming a rabbi, has commendable qualities and shows great potential. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, Leo unintentionally becomes engaged to Stella, a woman characterized as morally corrupt. Although the unbelievable conclusion appears to be an elaborate trap set by the marriage broker Salzman, it is plainly implausible and unconvincing without the support of the Jewish concept of suffering, which is that redemption is possible after suffering and struggle. After Leo met Stella, “he pictured, in her, his own redemption” (Malamud, 2003).

Bernard Malamud, an American Jewish writer, used the Jewish cultural motif of "suffering" as a central theme in his literary works, which holds additional layers of meaning and significance. From a religious perspective, it may be seen that the Jewish community, being regarded as the chosen people by God, is believed to endure significant suffering in order to facilitate the salvation of others. The primary objective of elucidating the plight endured by the Jewish community is to assert that their suffering is emblematic of the collective human experience. Throughout history, they have been consistently identified as the scapegoats. By writing this kind of theme, Malamud has expressed his own faith and belief. Furthermore, the deliberate choice of "suffering" as the central theme in Malamud's work can be attributed to certain political factors. Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population had not possessed a definitive homeland. They were individuals who resided among civilizations different from their own. Numerous historical calamities, notably the Holocaust during World War II, profoundly impacted the Jewish community at large, including Jewish immigrants residing in the United States. As an individual temporarily residing in the United States, one may currently experience a stable living situation. However, it is vital to consider the prospects for the future. These people have come to the realization that despite their dissatisfaction with their identities as marginalized and oppressed guests, they find themselves unable to resist. The historical experiences of the Jewish people, characterized by hardship and the occurrence of heinous crimes in Europe, serve as a reminder that resistance often resulted in expulsion, massacres, and even self-inflicted destruction of their Promised Land. Hence, adhering to the God's will and embracing suffering as a mission, responsibility, and obligation has emerged as a strategic approach among Jewish minds. This profound strategy has enabled the Jewish people to transcend calamities, secure salvation, and persist in their existence within the global landscape. The Jewish writers exhibit a natural inclination towards their homeland, since they prioritize writing that caters to the interests and concerns of their own community. Similar to Jewish intellectuals, they prioritize the preservation and welfare of the Jewish community above all else. The author discusses the motif of "suffering" with the intention of fostering the Jews' comprehension of the significance inherent in enduring such hardship. In Bernard Malamud's literary works, the portrayal of Jewish individuals enduring misfortunes not only highlights their capacity to withstand adversity, but also underscores their inherent responsibilities and aspirations. Consequently, the concept of "suffering" in Malamud's narratives assumes the role of a moral pursuit, serving as a pivotal and indispensable catalyst for the development, establishment, and enhancement of their personal identities. In the context of Malamud's work, the experience of suffering serves a dual purpose: it functions as a means of redemption and also serves to stimulate a hopeful vision of a more favorable future. In the short story “The Magic Barrel”, the author not only explores the Jewish concept of suffering, but also delves into broader themes. The primary emphasis lies on the process of soul sublimation and the attainment of moral perfection by the characters subsequent to enduring hardship. From a certain

perspective, it is just the self-redemption which is looked forward by the Jews. In the story, Leo exhibits a resolute will to save the morally degraded prostitute through the power of love, so achieving redemption for both her and those around her. Simultaneously, he was engaged in the pursuit of personal salvation. By engaging in acts of assistance and rescue towards others, he acquired the capacity to develop affection towards others, and he held a genuine conviction in the existence of a higher power. Leo, a figure crafted by Malamud, exemplifies the archetypal journey of redemption, both for himself and for others. The Jewish community, which has endured significant hardships, remains alert even in times of relative tranquility. It is recognized that for the Jewish community to thrive and progress, it is insufficient for individuals to alone preserve their Jewish identity through enduring hardships and seeking personal redemption. Rather, a crucial aspect lies in their ability to contribute to the well-being of others by undergoing suffering themselves.

As the representative of the older generation of American Jewish immigrants, Salzman, a Jewish old man, has always adhered to the traditional Jewish culture and his own Jewish cultural identity. In the novel, Salzman always takes "doing good" as his life goal, and in the process, he practices his Jewish cultural identity. When Leo made a request to make friends with his daughter Stella, although Salzman was very eager to arrange suitable blind dates for his daughter, he still sincerely said his daughter's bad behavior, "She is not suitable for you." She is too wild, she has no shame, she is not fit to marry a rabbi "(Malamud, 219). [7] At the end of the novel, Salzman prays for the dead, implying on the one hand that the fallen Stella has bid farewell to the past and her spiritually reborn; On the other hand, Salzman hopes to be reborn by praying to help other souls like Stella's be purified.

In the multicultural society of the United States, Salzman's adherence to the traditional Jewish culture also means the identification of his own Jewish cultural identity. According to Israel's Law of Return, amended in 1970, a person can be considered a Jew if he or she believes in Judaism and keeps kosher. In the novel, Malamud does not explicitly identify Salzman's Jewish identity, but Salzman's adherence to traditional Jewish culture meets the Jewish standards of the Law of Return. Thus, Salzman's Jewish identity is first and foremost reflected in the fact that he is a Jew within the bounds of the law. In addition, he plays multiple roles through which he reveals his inner Jewishness. In the novel, Salzman plays three different roles: as a professional matchmaker, Salzman is passionate about his career. When he accepted Leo's request for a blind date, he went out of his way to introduce him to different blind dates. Despite Leo's rejection, Salzman persevered and visited Leo several times; As the breadwinner of his family, Salzman is positive and optimistic about the reality of life. He lived on a shoestring diet of bagels and small smoked fish. However, Salzman never gave up hope for life. As a father, Salzman is both serious and loving. While Salzman positively confronts the hardships of life, his daughter Stella sees poverty as a sin and does disgraceful things because of it. Although Salzman abhors his daughter's bad behavior, he is full of care and love for his daughter and does his best to save her fallen soul.[8]

In addition, Salzman's Jewish immigrant status also determines his marginal position in American society. Antisemitism has been growing since the early days of Christianity. The existence of anti-Semitism has dealt a major blow to the Jewish immigrants in the European diaspora, whose Jewish cultural identity has been continuously marginalized in the wave of anti-Semitism. In the novel, Leo is unable to find specific information about the Salzman's residence in the Manhattan and Bronx directories. When he finally found Salzman's house, it lacked a number, only his name was written in pencil on a dirty piece of paper under the doorbell. In the context of ethnocentrism, Salzman's suffering is a metaphor for the exclusion and oppression of the lower-class Jews in the mainstream American society. Although they work and live hard and hope to realize their dreams by their own efforts, the process of integrating into American society is extremely difficult. As one of them, Salzman's job makes it impossible for him to eat and take care of his asthmatic wife and wandering daughter. To a certain extent, Salzman's living situation reflects the characteristics of "marginal

people" who are isolated by American society.[9]

Threatened by a wave of anti-Semitism, many Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe chose the United States, a land of opportunity, and began to pursue their "American dream." Leo, the protagonist of the novel *The Magic Barrel*, pursues his dream of becoming a priest, and Salzman hopes to fulfill his dream of finding an ideal husband for her daughter. They are all pursuing their personal dreams, but the paths they choose are very different.[10] Despite the difficult living conditions, Salzman still maintained an optimistic attitude and constantly pursued the meaning of life. He was a model practitioner of Jewish national values and a stickler for traditional Jewish culture. However, Leo was influenced by the materialism culture of American society, and his inner Jewishness gradually diminished. On the one hand, Leo wanted to become a rabbi, on the other hand, he used holy marriage as a bargaining chip to advance his career, simply because marriage would be easier to gain the trust of the church.[11] At the same time, Leo also tends to be materialistic in his criteria for choosing a wife. What he cares about is the family background of the girl, the amount of the dowry and various conditions of commitment. Therefore, when Salzman introduced the girl Lucy, he was very confident, as if he played his "trump card". As a typical representative of the young generation of American Jewish immigrants, Leo did not resist the temptation of money and fell into the lost - he failed to follow the value orientation of the Jewish nation, and he could not really integrate into the American society, and had to survive in the gap between the ancient Jewish civilization and the American capitalist material civilization.[12]

4. Conclusion

For the Jews of Malamud's works which fully suffered catastrophe and lived the hardship, Malamud argued they scrupulously follow Judaism religious doctrine essence, and let them endure the survival pain, but also can maintain an honest and tolerant spiritual quality and took this as their spiritual support, endeavoring to perform good deeds. As for the disaster caused by the persecution, genocide and wars, standing in the humanitarianism standpoint, Malamud called for abuser's regression of human nature, and call for the human's peace and call for tolerant and charity in the human world.

As a Jew writer, Malamud's novel writing were not confined to Jewish writing, "taking a Jew as a symbol of human existence's tragic experience" was the essence of Malamud's broad spirit and profound contents. Malamud focused on suffering as well as human existence dilemma, has manifested the strong spirit of humanitarian and compassion feelings, trying to guide human out of its misery which seek to transcend the road was given all the human dignified ponder and good inspiration.

References

- [1] Delbanco, Nicholas and Alan Cheuse. *Talking Horse: Bernard Malamud on Life and Work [M]*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Pp.6-8.
- [2] Grebstein, Sheldon Norman. *Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement in Contemporary American Jewish Literature [M]*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1937.pp 9-15
- [3] Hoyt, Charles Alva. *Contemporary American Novelists [M]*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964. p23
- [4] Helterman, Jeffrey. *Understanding Bernard Malamud [M]*, University of South Carolina Press, 1985. Pp18
- [5] Hume, Robert Ernest. *The World's Living Religious- An Historical Sketch [M]*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959.p41
- [6] Malamud, Bernard. *The Magic Barrel [M]*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- [7] (US) Bernard Malamud. *Magic Barrel—Malamud short Stories [M]*. Lv Junyi translation. Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House, 2001.11-57
- [8] Zhang Wenjian. *Faith triumphs over suffering—Judaism [M]*. Beijing: The World Knowledge Press. 1998.12-27

- [9] Qiao Guoqiang. *And American Jewish Literature* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2008.14
- [10] Zou Zhiyong. *Malamude* [J]. *Journal of Wuhan University of Technology*, 2001 (2): 69-72.
- [11] Li Xinjun. *On the rheology of Jewish ism in Bernard Malamet* [D]. Lanzhou: English Language and Literature of Lanzhou University. 2007.23-26
- [12] Zhang Lu. *Everyone is Jewish—Malamoud short story interpretation* [D]. Xi'an: Comparative Literature and World Literature of Northwest University, 2007.3.