



Original Article

# A Critical Study of the Theme of Suffering in Bernard Malamud's Novel the Fixer

Dr. Umaji Ananda Patil

Assistant Professor and Head of Department of English  
Smt. Gangabai Khivraj Ghodawat Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jaysingpur,  
Shirol-Wadi Road, Tal. Shirol, Dist. Kolhapur

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Correspondence Address:

Dr. Umaji Ananda Patil  
Assistant Professor and Head of  
Department of English  
Smt. Gangabai Khivraj Ghodawat Kanya  
Mahavidyalaya, Jaysingpur,  
Shirol-Wadi Road, Tal. Shirol, Dist.  
Kolhapur  
Email: - [umajipatil455@gmail.com](mailto:umajipatil455@gmail.com)



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## Abstract

The present paper sought to analyze the theme of suffering in fiction of American Jewish writer Bernard Malamud. The study focuses on the suffering of the Malamud's Protagonist on material as well as spiritual level. It points out rationale behind the writer's creation of the suffering of the hero. The novel *The Fixer* stands symbolic. It discusses the suffering of hero on the spiritual level. The character of Yaakov Bok stands symbolic and is compared with suffering of Jesus. It focuses on the universal value of suffering. The writer points out the transformation of suffering from compassion to protest and individuality to universality. The study delves into the writer's ceaseless efforts for representation of sorrows and pains of Jewish people which represent sorrows and pains of mankind. The study expounds that suffering paves path to salvation at physical as well as at spiritual level. The *Fixer* discusses the Malamud's hero who represents universal suffering of mankind. The *Fixer* depicts sarcastic but compassionate picture of human being. It discusses the suffering, adversities of the human life. The study is critical discussion on the Yaakov Bok's suffering at universal level.

**Key Words:** - Suffering, Dilemmas, Jewish, Compassion etc

## Introduction

Bernard Malamud is American Jewish writer of mid-twentieth century. He wrote four novels and two volumes of short stories. He won the **National Book Award** twice for his novels *The Magic Barrel* (1967) and *The Fixer* (1966). He wrote about the Jewish suffering due to social and racial discrimination. He discusses the issue of suffering by representing the Jewish character. In the novel *The Fixer*, the character of Yakov Bok represents the suffering of universal mankind. Malamud discusses the problem of suffering from individual level to universal level. The title of the novel itself signifies the plot of the novel is woven round the character of artisan named Yakov Bok who suffers a lot from problem of being Jewish due to racial discrimination in Europe. Yakov Bok conceals his identity as being Jewish.

The plot of the novel *The Fixer* deals with suffering of an ordinary man Yakov Bok. He suffers from racial problem of Jewishness and he migrates himself from his country to Russia by concealing his Jewish identity. He works as fixer by performing different jobs. He works at brick factory. The owner of brick factory gives him place to stay. One day owner comes to know that he is Jew by race after going through his bag. Murder of schoolboy takes place. Russian police arrest him as culprit for that murder case by going through the instruments from his bag. He was imprisoned. He was tormented at physical and mental level. He was booted badly by the police. He was kept in dungeon. He suffers a lot and he reads the bible from his pocket. He blames everybody. He questions that when the good is not rewarded then what is the use of goodness. This question stands symbolic in the context of the novel. Yakov Bok was innocent. His crime was only he belongs from Jewish clan. No relatives, no friends help him. He was taken to trial. His suffering was like Jesus. He kills to Russian authorities. He was hanged to death. Justice was not properly done to an ordinary man. Yakov Bok gives justice by protesting to the Russian authorities.

## Theoretical Discussion on the Novel *The Fixer*

The history of term suffering goes back to the earlier biblical scriptures. The holy figure of Jesus stands as the best illustration of suffering. Since the time unknown in classical and modern literature we came across the figures of suffering heroes. From Ovid's metamorphoses to Franz Kafka's metamorphoses we find the suffering heroes. The term suffering establishes meaning on the two level viz. physical levels as well as on spiritual level. The first stands on the torments on material misery and another stands to the salvation level.

In the fiction of Bernard Malamud heroes are sufferers. They are typical Jewish heroes. They are well familiar with the sufferings. It seems very difficult to find the rationale behind the suffering of the heroes. According to critic Tripti Mishra

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"For the Christians Job is the symbol of innocent suffering who belongs to the wisdom literature of the Bible". (Gahlot, Hemant. p-179). The character of Yakov Bok represents suffering of mankind like the Jesus Christ. His sorrows and pains have likeness to the sufferings of Jesus. In the novel Yakov was abused and booted brutally and he experiences physical sufferings in the cell. He suffers from hunger, thirst, cold, exhaustion etc. He is also tormented in the heart and mind. He tries his level best to explain the truth but due to helpless circumstances he fails to prove. He tries to end his life. Research scholar Tresea Gerene Lavender discusses that "*The Fixer* explains more effectively Yakov Bok represents the universal suffering of human being". (Lavender, T. G. p- 7).

The suffering happens when the protagonist is not treated like any other man. The dignity is neglected to the common man and the Journey of suffering begins. The Fixer portrays inhuman treatment given to the Jews in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia. The rationale behind the suffering can be interpreted at the psychological and also at racial level also. The Fixer depicts the ordinary man who suffers from the universal issue raised by the race, creed and clan. In the novel, the Russian boatman gives very ordinary portrayal of the Jew as "Jew's like a devil.....simplicity of his boot and split hoof, which is true" (The Fixer. p- 27).

The suffering of Yakov Bok signifies the principle of divine tolerance. He learns everything from suffering. He reaches at the divine attainments. He rejects psychopath, sexual perversion. He lives in isolation. The isolation signifies the social isolation which makes him inhaled and tries to reach at salvation level. Yokov is tormented by the story of his suffering. He was accused for the murder of Zhenia. At rational level it was cause of his imprisonment but journey of his suffering depicted here stands as symbolic.

Even Yakov suffers from the fear and pains in his dreams. Feeling of loneliness torments him, he recollects the material world. There are polarities between the material suffering and spiritual suffering of the Yakov Bok. He hates the material world and accepts the world of the solitude. It signifies the spiritual world. He doesn't suffers from external forces but he is victimized by his moral nature, his human weakness and fears and his subconscious which create suffering for him. When he appeals to jurists for justice but he was pardoned as criminal. Yakov rejects such a justice. It is just like Jesus appeal against torments. Even the Yakov's reading of the small copy of Bible stands strong faith on divinity.

In this context, the great critic and writer Joseph Campbell in his foundational text '*The Hero With Thousand Faces*' discusses that "The modern hero, the modern individual who conceals call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned cannot wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice and sanctified misunderstanding" (Campbell, Joseph. p-337). The protagonist stands symbolic to compare to the earlier figures from fiction and scriptures. Yokov realizes that there is nothing like the world of goodness and kindness when the humans are haunted with racial discrimination, it works as opium for them and ordinary peoples are victimized. Malamud portrays the character of Yokov who begins to form his personal but universal principle of compassion.

The major trait of Malamud's writing deals with the hero with compassion. It is basic for the salvation of Malamud's heroes. The compassion becomes the life force for the heroes of Bernard Malamud. The protagonist protests against the destroying elements of society. The writer focuses on the elements of goodness are similar to race and clan. The feeling of compassion drives to the hero at worthwhile place. The Yokov's struggle against corrupt social system stands symbolic. He is an oppressed ordinary man. The oppression leads to the individual to universal problem. Through the character of Yakov Bok he discusses the racial discrimination which brings adverse effects on the individual as well as at universal level.

Bernard Malamud is known as Jewish writer who always deals with root causes of the sufferings of the Jews and their oppression done by the superior clans. The writer is the product of his contemporary society. In this context renowned critic Albert Maltz in his book, '*The Writer As Conscience of the People*' states that "history of literature is always dominated by writers distinguished in their lives and works by their compassion for people and their love of people rather by their cynicism" (Fast, Howard. P-24)

#### **Conclusions:**

The present study discusses the Bernard Malamud's suffering of the protagonist in the novel *The Fixer*. The suffering not only interprets the material suffering but it can be interpreted on existential level. When existence is endangered due to suffering then the feeling of compassion mould us to the path of salvation. The character of Yokov Bok signifies the universal suffering.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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