ANTI-SEMITISM IN RUSSIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE XXTH CENTURY. THREATS AND MANIFESTATIONS

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Abstract: Ethnic oppression is a recurrent theme in world literature. Anti-Semitism in Russia during the rule of Tsar Nicholas the Second is revealed in the novel entitled The Fixer. Awarded with Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the book portrays the abuses to which an innocent man is subjected to. In a corrupt world, Yakov Bok, an innocent Jew sent to jail for a crime he did not commit, represents a model of individual salvation, a character that proves moral integrity. The present article tries to enlighten the relationship of a Jew with God when he is pushed at the limits of the human condition.

Keywords: Judaism, Christianism, history, anti-Semitism, Tsarist Regime

Bernard Malamud is a remarkable literary personality of the 20th century. He was born in 1914 in New York. His biography does not give us anything spectacular, except that he wants to "write well." Besides literary work, he was a high school and college teacher doing his studies at City College and Colombia University. The received awards *the National Book Award, Pulitzer* and *O. Henry Award* demonstrate the appreciations enjoyed by his books: *The Natural* (1952), *The Assistant* (1957), *The Magic Barrel* (1958), *A New Life* (1961), *Idiots First* (1963), *The Fixer* (1966) , *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), *The Tenants* (1971), *Rembrandt's Hat* (1974), *Dubin's Lives* (1979), *God's Grace* (1982), *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (1983), *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989), *The Complete Stories* (1997), *The Mourners.* He died in 1986.[1]

The predominant theme of his novels is the moral rebirth. Sensitive to the problems of the society he is part of, Malamud portrays the joys, failures, fears, troubles of a spatially and temporally anchored community, that "yet transcends the immediate" becoming a model. His characters have the same anxieties, certainties, angers that we find throughout the universal history of the Jewish people. In none of his writings does he mislead either descriptions of environment or profound sounds of the human soul, patterns used especially by the nineteenth century writers.

There is in the world literature, regardless of the Jewish writer's affiliation or other ethnicity, an interesting way of presenting the Jews in the two extremes or limit postures: humble, poor, indifferent individuals, reaching the limit of human economic and biological condition, sad, depraved by their chosen destiny, cursed, people mocked by God, fate and other nations, or arrogant, proud, naughty, vain, greedy, superior, intelligent, intriguing, brilliant and blessed people. Curiously, but this way of presenting the Jews in literature overlaps with the peoples' conviction about them.

Malamud writes with a special love about the ideological "shlimazel," about obscurity, loneliness and suffering. His heroes become symbols of human struggle, taking on an ambiguous destiny. They vary from „scapegoats" from economic point of view to mythical martyrs: they are in general common and solitary people who only superficially conform to the image of "shlimazel."

[1] Bernard Malamud,https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bernard-malamud, last access: 20.06.2019.

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Together with Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Mailer Norman, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Malamud is a writer of the *goldengeneration* of American fiction, and is one of its creators both through the social issues he presents and to which he is very attached to and the stylistic manner. He has a direct, colorful, vivid, alert language with words and expressions often borrowed from the environment it presents, a simple and very humble medium, familiar to the author. His books are mainly addressed to that large segment of the population that through his message introduces into a beneficial morality, this being both the creed and the purpose of his work.

With all these, while one of his heroes (Leo Flinke) said he had come so close to God because he did not love him[2], Malamud loved the people, and so he got so close to it.

The Fixer presents the life of a Russian-Jewish man, Yakov Bok in the time of Tsarist regime, who, left by his wife after nearly six years of marriage, decides to leave his native village and wants to start a new life in Kiev. The luck will shortly laugh at him: he finds Nikolai Maximovitch Lebedev a wealthy business man in a ditch. Lebedev wishes to offer him a considerable sum of money for a particular service and appoints him supervisor to a brick factory. From there, Yakov's situation will change completely as he resides in a neighborhood forbidden to the Jews. Even more, charged for the ritual murder of a 12-year-old Russian boy, Jacob Bok will be sent to jail without a trial. The prison is the space in which he analyses his life and the character of humanity, while he was waiting for the verdict.

The abuses during the Tsar Nicholas the Second, the messianic truth and antisemitism are the main themes that Malamud brings into discussion, beyond the portrait of a „scapegoat" incarcerated because he is a Jew. In prison, Yakov Bok is often interrogated and confronted with an overabundance of physical and emotional violence.His questionings go beyond the reasonable limits of the case, pushing him to speak about his political, ideological and social affinities. Although Yakov claims he is not a highly political or religious man, the police refuse to believe him due to his religion. Every person that tries to get in touch with him is arrested, harassed by the Russian government or in the end commits suicide (the case of Magistrate Bibikov who is incarcerated because he visited Yakov). The great victory Yakov has is that he refuses to confess the crime he did not do. The refusal, at the cost of physical and verbal abuses, will bring in the end the trail. The novel ends with an imaginary dialogue between Yakov and the Tsar Nicholas the Second, where Yakov accuses him for being responsible of the most decadent administration in the history of Russia, when he is transported to his trail.

When he decides to start a new life, away from the narrowed universe he had lived in, Yakov had sold everything. However, he will retain his tools and four books: the "Russian grammar ", an elementary biology book, a seedy atlas and "a collection of Spinoza. "

The lucid analysis of life: "*In my dreams I ate and I ate my dreams*"[3] approaches him to Mr. K., the typical model of failed existence. This unsuccessful experience will transform Yakov into a non-conformist, the exception within the Jewish community. He believes it would be better if he participated in the Socialist League meetings than in those of synagogues to the desperation of his father-in-law, a Jew with fear of God, a Jew who conforms to the mosaic dogmas.

At the time of his arrest for a ritual murder of a boy, the resemblance to Kafka's *Process* is increasingly visible. The existential plot of the character highlights the relationship between the individual-society (system) and a supreme force, the law that can either be given by divinity or confused with divinity. If for Kafka the reason for the arrest is not known and is not made on ethnic grounds: *"Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew*

[2]Bernard Malamud, *Butoiașul vrăjit și alte povestiri*, Ed. Hasefer, Bucharest, 1995, p.111.
[3] Idem, *The Fixer*, https://archive.org/stream/fixer00mala#page/10/mode/2up, last access: 20.06.2019, p. 11.

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he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested,"[4] for Malamud the arrest has a political connotation: *"In the name of His Majesty Nicholas the Second II, said the red-headed colonel, I arrest you. Resist and you are dead. The fixer readily confessed he was a Jew. Otherwise he was innocent."*[5]

During the trial, Yakov clearly presents his relationship with the Jewish community and with God: *Are you a Hasid or Misnogid?" Please take down his answers with extreme accuracy, Ivan Semyonovitch." Neither. I am neither one nor the other", said Yakov. „As I told his other horror-if I am anything at all it is a freethinker. I say this to let you know I am not a religious man."*[6]

Shortly after this denial, cast into an existence where the law has lost its original meaning, surrounded only by authorities and executors, the community is the only refuge in which he could find support and protection : *"and sent running back to the Jewish quarter-oh, with what pleasure he would run."*[7]

Damnation, hard to bear, pushes him into a mental rebellion against both Christians who plot against a Jew, any Jew, and his relative recognition of the reason for his situation: his lack of faith: *"He sometimes thought God was punishing him for his unbelief. He was, after all, the jealous God „ Thou shalt worship no other Gods before me" not even no Gods. He also blamed the goyim for eternal hatred of Jews."*[8]

The great desire to know the verdict, the loss of patience, the spiritual tension, the introspection pushed to the depths of himself, make Yakov, in this limiting situation, recite Psalms to God in Hebrew and Russian:

Behold, he travaileth with iniquity;
Yea, he conceiveth mischief, and bringeth forth false-hood.
He hath digged a pit, and hollowed it,
And is fallen into the ditch which he made.
I am weary with my groaning;
Every night make I my bed to swim;
I melt away my couch with my tears.
For my days are consumed like smoke.
And my bones are burned as a heart.
My heart is smitten like grass and withered;
For I forget to eat my bread.
(……)
Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up thy hand;
Forget not the humble.
Break Thou the arm of the wicked.
(……)
I have pursued my enemies, and overtaken them;
Neither did I turn back till they were consumed.[9]

All these represent the desperate cry of someone who, as a last chance, invokes God. It is like an existential fear in the face of infinity, of boundless, an anxiety that breaks the last remnants of dignity.

[4] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*,https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/the-trial.pdf, last access: 21.06.2019, p.2.
[5]Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer*, https://archive.org/stream/fixer00mala#page/n7/mode/2up, last access: 21.06.2019, p.62.
[6]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.58.
[7]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.82.
[8]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.127.
[9]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, pp.171-172.

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"Personal prayer allows everyone to find before God the meaning of the specificity of each human person. It is a space of freedom. In the Talmud it is said that in ancient times, the devout men came to the synagogue one hour before the public service, so that everyone could think in his own soul."[10]

And this time God does not help him, He leaves him to his despairs because*:" ...but when he looked at God all he saw or heard was a loud Ha Ha. It was his own imprisoned laughter"*.[11]

Very cautious when reading the *New Testament*, the fixer still proves a bit of sensibility and humanism in a world of torture and fear: *"Yakov would at first not open the book, having from childhood feared Jesus Christ, as stranger, apostate, mysterious enemy of the Jews…At last he opened it and began to read…Christ died and they took him down. The fixer wiped his eyes Afterwards he thought if that's how it happened and it is a part of the Christin religion, and they believe it, how can they keep me in prison, knowing I am innocent? Why don't they have pity and let me go?*"[12]

Yakov interprets the attitude of those who are Christians in his own way. In a conversation with a guard he says: *"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get*."[13] He addresses these words to a Christian guard,trying to make him understand that his acts can bring him goodness or wickedness. In any totalitarian religious system, Christian religion loses its primordial importance, and in this case it is conceived as an instrument of the state against everything that represents the Jews.

From the state of transcendence, preoccupied with the spiritual essence of the Christian dogma, Yakov is brought into reality by the obscene language of the Christian with whom he thought he could have a normal dialogue: *"Listen, Kogin, Could I ask you for a small favor? It isn't much of one. I would like a piece of paper and a pencil stub to write a few words to an acquaintance of mine. Could you lend them to me?" "You better go fuck yourself", Bok, said Kogin "I am onto your Jew tricks*."[14]

Spinoza's book he took with him when he came to Kiev gives him the opportunity to meditate and lean more towards the God of Spinoza "*one has to find him in the machinations of his own mind*."[15]

He is not able to understand the God of his co-religionists because: *"God is after all God; what he is is what he is. What does he know about such things? Has he ever worshipped God? Has he ever suffered? God envies the Jews: it's a rich life. Maybe he would like to be human; it's possible, nobody knows*."[16]

In a discussion with his father-in-law, Yakov denies the existence of God even more vigorously. The only thing he can give to Him is his silence. A sign, a single sign is what he asks, to be a protective father, not a force, to be the same God for him and the Tsar:" *If Gods exists I'll gladly listen to him If he does not feel like talking let him open the door so I can walk out. I have nothing. From nothing you get nothing. If he wants from me, he has to give first. If not a favor at least a sign...If God can't give me respect, I'll settle for justice. Uphold the Law! Destroy the Tsar with a thunderbolt! Free me from prison.*"[17]

[10]Philippe Gaudin, *Marile religii*, Bucureşti, Lider,1995, p. 95.
[11] Bernard Malamud, *op.cit.*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.172.
[12]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.190.
[13]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.192.
[14]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.192.
[15]*Ibidem*, last access: 21.06.2019, p.197.
[16]*Ibidem*, last access: 22.06.2019, p.197.
[17]*Ibidem*, last access: 22.06.2019, p.211.

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Haunted by insomnia, the fixer has the labile psychic structure of a man aggrieved by nightmares, a man who: *"Not that he is afraid to die because he is afraid of suicide, but because there is no way of keeping the consequences of his death to himself. To the goyim what one Jew is is what they all are. If the fixer stands accused of murdering one of their children, so does the rest of the tribe. Since the crucifixion of crime of the Christ killer is the crime of all Jews." „His blood be on us and our children*."[18]

The affiliation to Jewish ethnicity is now the only reason why he does not commit suicide. The suicide would blame the community and be perceived as the only escape for the inability to atonement his punishment: *"The human body is worth less than its substance. A person is shit. Those Jews who escape with their lives live in memory's eternal pain. So, what can Yakov Bok do about it? He's half a Jew himself, yet enough of one to protect them. After all, he knows the people, and he believes in their right to be Jews and live in the world like men. He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he ca. If God's not a man, he has to be. Therefore, he must endure to the trial and let them confirm his innocence by their lies. He has no future but to hold on, wait it out*."[19]

The wife who left him is the only person who renders visits on the basis that she could convince him to sign the document that he murdered the boy and also to assume that he is the father of her child, although she made the child with another man. One of his disturbing moments of mental suffering comes out when she visits him and tells him that she has a baby. Imagine a man, a Jew who has reached the limit of the human condition: degraded biologically and socially, in a profound psychic decay, in which, despite all his attempts at reconciliation with his family, co-religionists, society and God, does not get response and is pushed into the abyss. Such a man is absolutely necessary for another human being, his wife, the one who had left him. Here's the revelation: *"You stinking whore, what did you do to me? It wasn't enough we were poor as dirt and childless. On top of that you had to be a whore.*"[20]

Like the patriarchs, but unconsciously, he once again accepts the service of his ethnicity for the fulfillment of his destiny, which at that moment accepts: *He wrote in Yiddish „ I declare myself to be the father of Chaim, the infant son of my wife, Raisl Bok. He was conceived before she left me. Please help the mother and the child, and for this, amid all my troubles, I'll be grateful. Yakov Bok.*"[21] This is the greatness of the patriarchs, prophets, and of course it will lead to the channeling of his deepest thoughts.

A foreigner amongst foreigners, an innocent man among the guilty ones, the fixer believes that the death of the Tsar is the only chance for the salvation of his nation: "*As for history, Yakov thought, there are ways to reverse it. What the Tsar deserves is a bullet in the gut. Better him than us*."[22]Although he kills the Tsar in one of his hallucinating delusions, his belonging to the Jewish community resides in his subconscious. If God does not turn his face to him, if God does not punish the guilty ones, then you have to take an attitude because*: "Afterwards he thought, where there's no fight for it, there's no freedom. What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it! ...there is no such thing as an apolitical man, especially a Jew...Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live liberty!*"[23]

The meditation at the end of the book, the words he speaks with such fierceness and hatred brings him to judgment and mosaic position: a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye.

[18]*Ibidem*, last access: 22.06.2019, p.222-223.
[19]*Ibidem*, last access: 22.06.2019, p.223.
[20]*Ibidem*, last access: 23.06.2019, pp.231-232.
[21]*Ibidem*, last access: 23.06.2019, p.237.
[22]*Ibidem*, last access: 23.06.2019, p.271.
[23]*Ibidem*, last access: 23.06.2019, p.271.

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