



## **Self as Transferable in Post-war Jewish Life: Reflections on Bernard Malamud's *A New Life***

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### **Abstract**

Modernity offered an aimless reception to modern Jewish self. This research paper on Malamud's *A New Life* analyses the unpredictable, wavering self in Jews that is contrary to the Jewish self-given in the Torah and in the Oral teachings in Judaism. The paper is framed with the concept, 'to define a Jew is to define man'. Some of the areas of research include Jewish cultural assimilation, prevalence of postmodern notions in American Jews, the transferable attitudes in Jews and Jewish representation of man's unsettled personality. The paper works on the particular differences in post-war Jewish attributions.

### **Keywords**

Transference; Post-war Jewish Life; Bernard Malamud; *A New Life*



Post-war Jewish "self" identifies itself at different levels. The American self, the Jewish-American self and the Jewish self are some of them that are subjectivist categories that stint on the dispensation of age. The inferential history of the age-old Jewish self has been the human self with no apparent exclusive claims. Jewish self is primarily an unsubstantiated self. Had it been substantiated, there needs no terms such as American-Jewish or Jewish-Canadian. Writers like Perry Stone, John Hagee, the ultra-orthodox Jewish

rabbis, Jewish- religious nationalists and several pro-Israel opinion makers are interested emphasizing a part of truth that obscures the other part. Whereas, a novelist has the opportunity of making copious negotiations to analyze its extents. Jewish-American literature according to Morris Dickstein is not American imagination in Jewish literature, but “Jewish imagination in American literature” (Salzberg 51). Malamud’s novel, *A New Life* is a declaration on Jewish appropriateness that defines their present shape. Along with scores of other Jewish-American novels, it focuses on the transferable attitudes in Jews. Also among the other novels of Malamud, *A New Life* offers pointed references to Jewish life that turned Americanized.

Idealist definitions oppose realist definitions. Though philosophical realism and objective reality are defined unalterable, they are transferable to create a new self that offers co-identity in man. Jewish self has been a geographic self, a textual self and in modern terminology, a technoself. The source of consciousness that allows empirical adequacy and experiential relevance create an authentic base to the original self. Digression in post-war Jewish self is vast and distinguishes itself from Jewish tenacity witnessed throughout history. Attitudinal differences emerged only during the end of the age of emancipation and sustained through their exodus to America. Of the several multi-ethnic American literatures from Americas, two categories of writers wrote on profuse literary themes; the African self and the Jewish self. Black narratives point to the racially aggressive self. From the times of Native American history, African-American literature has been a reflection of the strong ethnic self which worked towards blackanization of American literature. But, Jewish-American literature is contrary in its dynamics. Jewish literature had enough American flavour, perhaps a commercial stratagem with Jews. Moreover, there is a great deal of difference between a Jewish-American writer’s clarity on personal opinions and fictional communication. Zeal for ethnic identity in American Jews is distinctly inferior to the zeal amongst the Blacks making a case for the forged Jewish self. Stephen wade on Jewish-American literature says, “Jewish American texts deal with shifting notions of identity” (6).

The functionale of the self in Jews is not just a circumstantial reaction but is an intrinsic reinforcement with transferential attitudes. Orthodox and Conservative Judaism were radically revised by feminist interpretations of the West which later worked towards creating culturally surrogate characteristics. The characters in Jewish-American novels mourn over their failures of American ideals and not Jewish ideals. Max Dimont's *The Indestructible Jews* only points to Jew's historical continuance and not about cultural continuance in an alien land. But the Jews in America found cultural assimilation. Strangely records, Charles Angoff that, "in 1954, American Jews celebrated the three-hundredth anniversary" (7). This is contrary to the national character in Jews recorded by Ian Davies as "strong commitment to Israel as a homeland" (26). The joint distribution committees, public affairs committee, Jewish vocational services and reconstructionist communities are evidences of transferable self as opposed to the apparent, ethnic self. There is more of Jewishness in America than Jewishness in Israel. America is a Jew's symbolized eternity. The culmination of American identity in Jews is found in Irving Howe's book, *World of Our Fathers* when he affirmed the world that America is their Zion.

America offered an "improving environment" (Walcutt 8) for the Jews. Soon terms such as "American Jerusalem" and "total American immersion" (Angoff 9) began to be used. Lewis Fried's subtle categorization of American Jews as people with "outer limits and hostility and inner meaning and mutuality" (Fried 63) is structured with perceptible paradox. Both definitions "outer" and "mutual" suggest that a Jew does not hold an exclusive space, but only a common space to function. Jewish "accommodationists" (Cohen 10) approach to life in America soon entered the pages of modern history. Rivkin states, "...the Jews, and only the Jews have actively participated in every phase of the development of Western civilization" (Rivkin xix). Bonnie k. Lyons also picks up a similar thought in his chapter on *American-Jewish Fiction Since 1945* as he says, "man's nature is ineluctably mixed, according to American-Jewish fiction" (Fried 67). Thus it is asserted by critics and historians that Jewish self as witnessed in America is now a composite self, the self of an unidentifiable Jew.

Like his other novels, Malamud handles the displacement of the absolute self. In the novel, *A New Life*, a conversation between Levin and Laverne speaks of Jewish view on American Identity,

“Are you American?”

“American citizen, born and bred in the U.S.A” (Malamud 79)

American identity has always been viewed supreme among Jews. Most Jewish-American writers aped for this identity. Acquiring the characteristics of the American self, became irresistible with Jews. In one of the interviews, Malamud said, “I am an American, I’m a Jew, and I write for all men” (63). Moreover, he asserted that his connection with Jewish literature is only secondary. Scores of Jews in America have professed the same in the public. Chaim Potok, another popular Jewish-American writer emphatically said, “I am an American, a Jew” (Potok xiii). This attribute in Jews to renounce their ethnicity is a postmodern feature that is prevalent in American society. It is beyond comprehension that the Disney Land could draw an ethnically committed race into its whirlpool and displace their ethnic self. Jews who wish to stay in America do so to satisfy their infrastructural pleasure. When Jews in Poland decided to stay there beyond the times of holocaust, Israeli-Jews viewed it critically. Whereas, when American Jews decided to stay in America, several fanciful terms such as socio-economic collaboration, interfaith, and international diplomacy are used to convince the world. Post-war Jewish migration into America is not inadvertent, but systematic, thought over and fore planned.

Malamud presents America’s unique association with Jews. More so, this unison was made possible as they faced no racial bias like that of the African-Americans. Pauline of *A New Life* reminds herself of a similar association she had with a Jew years ago as she says, “your picture reminded me of a Jewish boy I knew in college who was very kind to me during a trying time in my life” (Malamud 361). Pauline quickly brushed with two Jewish men in her life. Such affairs focus on the mutual need in American-Jewish relationships. Levin, the unproclaimed Jew in the novel imbibes characteristics of the American self to present himself to the Americans. Interestingly enough, there are no violations

in their affairs. This is the one line of difference between the Eastern and the Western world; sexual encounters in the West are consensual. But in this novel, it went murky. Veraciously, surrogacy and moral squalor need not be viewed American, as America herself is immigrant by character. An Indian is Indian on geographic and ethnic grounds, whereas, American identity differs between spatial identity and ethnic identity.

Levin's serial relationship, his capacity to be real to every woman he encounters is staggering. They are definitely uncommon mistakes. During the formative years of his life, he was attracted to another faculty, Avis. There is a noticeable pattern of relationship with Levin; relationships were quick to happen. Relationships began and ended in sex. The discussion says,

Then let's be honest, "Levin said. "Will you come with me to a hotel?"  
Not in town. We'd be recognized as faculty people. I know I would.  
So would you with your beard. (Malamud 130)

Along with his other actions, the beard symbolizes that he is a Jew. This phenomenon of inordinate, unrestrained co-mingling was notionally accepted in the East only after the 1990s. Even in the present times, it is being condemned. The readers find a chance of knowing what America is and who a Jew is. More than any other novel of Malamud, *A New Life* makes a greater revelation on Jewish self. It projects that human life is largely governed by an inner self than man's mere appearances. This "inner man" (1029) in Levin leads him to people with similar interests in life. There is not one example of Levin being turned down by any of the women he wanted to have relationship with. This condition is utterly enigmatic, yet real. This unification of the self (between Levin and his lovers) was so real that Gerard, the husband of Pauline could not convince his wife, neither could he limit her affiliations with Levin. Rather, he is in the business of telling Levin the faults of Pauline his wife and some of his own faults too. These are indications that self is real and strong and that it can only transfer into bonding with select selves. Self and self-will work closely and in many cases, identical. American writer and historian Will Durant's commentary on Schopenhauer says, "Character lies in the will, and not in the intellect" (Durant

313). Obviously, it had a say on Levin's character than his intellect. Levin's self created a free space for his free will. Sandy Cohen's evaluation on Levin reads, "Levin is a potentially different breed of man" (Cohen 59).

Levin's occupation with his self has to be compared with his views on society. Presumably, there is contrariness between self and society, because self always strives to function against society. Levin's idealistic self is his own effort to create a society with similar selves. British writer Leonard Ravenhill's America is Too Young to Die is an example of how society is formed with people who forge themselves to a particular trait which later becomes a governing imperative in society.

Malamud reveals self at two levels; desire for distinction and libidinal extravaganza. The latter usually wins. This Lawrentian instinct in Levin is quick and attainable. There is an incremental force seen in all his sexual advancements. Malamud allows several women to enter the life of Levin. Laverne, a waitress was another woman who walked into his life. Avis floss was willing to satisfy him over and above his desires. The wickedness of Nadalee, his student had a great influence in the life of Levin. This is the time when he desired his self to be transferred to seize the opportune moments of life. Salzberg calls this state as "Insufficiency of sex" (37). The intriguing aspect in Levin's conduct is that his relationships find strident turns and eventually identifies his self in new characters.

Post-war Jewish self in Levin can also be considered as a revolt against Christian virtues on monogamous, pro-creative eroticism. Levin is a shadow of ancient Jews who had multiple marriages. But in Levin's case, it was more of an indulgent and a debauched lifestyle. He trained his inner self to adopt a pattern to live with several associations. Transferable conduct is not a state in a person's psyche, it is a perpetuating force. Levin's attitudes were perpetuated by a singular approach to reality, a pleasure-oriented state of mind. All the mourning over his wretchedness does not create any impact on further conduct. There is a similarity between behavioral addiction and transferable attitudes. Although psychiatrists call it a neurological impairment, there is strange governance in

the soul realm of an individual. Though it was transferential, it was cyclical. What Malamud means by falling in love is to fall in love continually. Attitudes do not produce static behavior, but sequential and repetitive characteristics. Romance in Malamud's novels is an eternal principle that is orchestrated by a fantasy craze. This phenomenon is seen in Frank of *The Assistant*, Roy of *The Natural*, Lesser of *The Tenants* and in several other characters in Malamud.

His desire to find his identity in women found an obsession in his subconscious mind; it was concomitant. While he was with Avis and while she was yet interacting with him, the novelist says, "He began a letter to a second cousin, a lady in Cleveland who sometimes wrote to him..." (Malamud 129). Tremendous sense of shifting identities happens when Levin moves with others. Transferential attitudes are reciprocated when Levin is with Gilley's wife. She also could detach her identity and found oneness with Levin. "In bed he rarely thought of her as Gilley's wife" (Malamud 210) is the testimonial of Levin's position. However, Gilley's wife also takes this stance astutely. These are indications of personal liberty evolving to become a cultural character, a method by which the clientele is formed. It soon develops to be a national character. Malamud's Levin is a definite Jew who found every need of his met in a foreign land; for which he allowed his self towards continuous influence and systematic crystallization. It need not be interpreted as a displacement on Jewish identity, rather there is a transferred self that is beguiled to invent a new-fangled American conduct. Levin's self made an unconditional yielding and adjustment for a newer identity. Mendes Flohr of Hebrew University of Jerusalem says, "one may refer to this shift as a secularization of consciousness, or a disengagement of the consciousness of the individual from the authority of his religious tradition" (Flohr 47).

This tendency to shift to new forms according to Ellis Rivkin,

It should also be stressed that the unity concept is in no way committed to the perpetuation of any of the content attached to it by any of the forms, or, for that matter, to the perpetuation of the forms themselves. Jewish history reveals that no law, idea, custom,

or dictum has been preserved intact from the beginning. It further reveals that, far from sustaining any single form of the unity concept. Ellis gives the next sentence as a master stroke, “Jewish history is the interconnected sequence of *changing* forms. ( Rivkin xix)

Further elucidations by Ellis conclude that Jews made a definite impact and a sincere participation in developing the West. Such analyses by Rivkin speak not of Jewish participation in the existing American humanity, but in creating a quantum of homogenized America. However, this gigantic metamorphosis questions the vulnerability of the human self. The transferable qualities of human self are clearly observed in a Jew. Pauline, despite making her connections with Levin, also in the process said, she had her first love with Guggenheim who set off to Europe to make his academic pursuits. The entire novel is intricately wired with the transport of the self, the possibilities in man’s self to make endless connections.

It is easily noticeable that Levin’s psychological appraisal over societal values found a shift along with the transference of his self. Modern critic Evan Kaplan’s analysis says, “American Jews today do things that not only violate Jewish law, but would have been seen in previous generations as undermining the basis of Jewish communal life” (Kaplan xxi). This is observed to be real in Levin’s life. Violation of Torah seems to be the last concern for a Jew. Geographical alienation is readily followed by cultural alienation.

The culmination of post-war Judaism according to Susanna Heschel says, “American Judaism was the real Judaism, while Europe represented a Judaism distorted by centuries of persecution and economic discrimination” (Nesher 1). America offered an opportunity to Jews to invent themselves beyond evolving. Of all the Jewish history that Martin Gilbert and Colin Schindler speak about concerning all the ages, Jewish relevance is at its best today in America. This view is not an admiration on Jewish scientific and literary expansion, but in terms of their interest in their living conditions outside the Jewish space. Judaism in America has a deadly combination of religious divide and cultural



unity. Over the past hundred years, Jews in America did not have Christian influence but only cultural influence with non-Christian characteristics. Infact America, as it is known today is pro-classical and anti-Christian. Of all the scattered places a Jew went, America offered a trusted space not just to live but to obtain his desired self.

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