CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY CRISES

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw part with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. . . .


The value, which is complimentary in any discussion of America, American Society, and Americans, is identity inter-alia individualism. It is emphasized that the most characteristic quality and the striking feature of America, American Society, and Americans, and the new polity since the Declaration of American independence, and the writing of the American Constitution be Thomas Jefferson and others has been individualism.

Individualism is the inevitable consequence of democracy and equality of opportunities, and equality before law. Alexis de Tocqueville, furthermore, qualifies hid definition of the term, individualism, thus [Quoted in Nathan Glazer, “Individualism and Equality in the United States”, in Making America, The Society and the Culture of the United States, 1998, pp. 226-227]:

As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases, who, although they are neither rich nor powerful enough to
exercise any great influence over their fellows, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their wants. They owe nothing to any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. . . .

But a final quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville suggests the less pleasant face of individualism [Quoted in Nathan Glazer, “Individualism and Equality in the United States”, in Making America, The Society and the Culture of the United States, 1998, p. 227]:

Democratic communities . . . are constantly filled with men who, having entered but yesterday upon their independent condition are intoxicated with their new power. They entertain a new presumptuous confidence in their own strength, and as they do not suppose they can henceforward ever have occasion to claim the assistance of their fellow creatures, they do not scruple to show that they care for nobody but themselves. . . .

In such a condition, the individual has only two extreme options, the one is to bow down to society and the other is to wage a relentless war against the American society and the American Establishment to protect his individuality. Ihab Hassan makes a pointed observation, that [Studies in the Contemporary Novel, 1961, p. 46]:

. . . the contemporary world presents a continual affront to man, and that his response must be the response of the rebel or victim, living under the shadow of death. . . .
The loss of individualism and the consequent search for individualism are the twin major themes, on which Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, maintain a sharp and sustained focus. As such, quest for individualism has continually engaged the minds of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth.

In fact, the subject of the crisis of identity is peculiarly a major American theme, precisely because from Emerson, Whitman, Melville downwards there is not a single American intellectual, who has not focused his attention and concentrated on this subject of the loss of identity and the consequent search for identity, with artistic devotion, and care, and American ingenuity.

Understandably then, quest for identity as a challenging problem of life has engaged the minds of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth. With their creative and virgin imagination and their artistic skills, and with their knowledge of men and matters, and with their language skill and verbal brilliance, they subject the major theme of identity to a close and careful analysis, and study it in terms of the loss of identity and the consequent search for identity.

As stated earlier, the double view of individualism in the United States of America has persisted ever since the victory in the War of Independence. The positive image of individualism has emphasized the American as pioneer, moving into wilderness and among savages, and making his way alone, with rifle and axe.

It emphasized the individualist's indifference to governmental controls, which on occasion meant taking the law into his own hands as vigilant to impose a minimal order on frontier society. It emphasized the individualist's insistence on his
rights as an American - - his right to challenge government in the courts, through organization and electoral activity, and through referendum, initiative and recall.

Much of American society and landscape is marked by the identity crises. And that is precisely why Bellow, Malamud, and Roth the intellectuals are for the self-safeguarding of his or her individualism against all odds. All the same they were conscious of the threats to *individualisme* posed by the society and the Establishment. They were aware of the fact that the society and the Establishment reduced the individuals to mere conformists.

The tragedy of modern man is that he has lost his dignity. In our time tragedy stems not from failure to realize his own individualism and potentiality. He has lost his dignity not because he has laid claim to power beyond his scope and ability but because he has relegated his rights and responsibilities to abstractions of government and society.

Again, the tragedy today is that people have crammed themselves into conformist boxes of established mores, convictions and beliefs about reality and correct behaviour. The result is that the people are able to relate to each other only as boxes of beliefs and ideas and not as individual human beings - - and this is tragic. Therefore, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, recommend new conditions of life, which, they argued, ensured one’s individualism.

Bellow, Malamud, and Roth understood that one enjoyed one’s individualism only if one had the ability to remain the same, notwithstanding the varying aspects and differing conditions of life. Maintaining one’s identity simply meant being one’s own self. Individualism of man was that disclosed to the other what he was.
In this context, Emerson’s assertions that it is easy to be a conformist and that it require a great deal of nerve, and fortitude, and determined will power to be a Bohemian non-conformist, are noteworthy. The point that is made by Emerson is that a Bohemian non-conformist ensures his unique, single, individualistic, and separate identity, whereas the conformist loses it in the general condition of massification. The first assertion of Emerson read thus [“Self Reliance”, in Emerson’s Essays, 1971, p. 36]:

It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own, but the great man is he who in the midst of crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. . . .

Emerson’s contention is that the conformist has no individualism. Such a conformist equates his life in terms of us and them at the expense of I or you and therefore loses his individualism. Emerson’s other assertion that bears the same burden runs thus [“Self Reliance”, in Selected Essays and Poems, 1971, p. 37]:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds adored by little statesmen, philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . . The argument is that unless one move out of the conformist circle one can never enjoy true identity. Bellow, Malamud, and Roth project this idea of non-conformism as a mode of asserting one’s individuality and unique identity. As such the tragedy of modern man is that he loses his dignity, honour, and self-respect, and thereby his separate, unique identity, because he has no option except to play the roles defined for him by the society, and the Establishment, and the Military Organization.
Therefore, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth valued selfhood. They were conscious of the shift from Theo centricity to anthropocentricty. In fact, they knew that every aspect and analysis of life, be it social, philosophical or metaphysical, centred on man. Therefore, they contended that social conditions of life and doctrines were to be devised that they did not impinge on the self's right and intention to be his own. But the prevailing modern conditions of life did not allow the self to safeguard his self-respect, dignity, and honour.

In fact, as in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* he got transformed into a hideous pathetic vermin wriggling in the iron grip of the society and the Establishment. As a result he was reduced to the *square root of minus one*, which was less than nothing. The individual in the modern world had to suffer the loss of identity owing to several factors.

At the outset one could readily name displacement and disorientation - - the *Diaspora*. Moreover religious bodies, social organizations, educational institutions, power blocs, large and complex economic and political systems made demands, which lacked moral authority and legitimacy. The claim for loyalty and conformity to these demands was clothed in authoritarian repression.

Furthermore, militarism and materialism made serious inroads into the individuality of the individual. Dehumanization, standardization, mechanicalness, dailiness, defeatism, and fear-psychosis forced one to lose one's identity. As such in the modern context of life most people just had no identity but enjoyed identification, in the sense they just wore a label. In this context, Abraham Kaplan makes a pointed observation: [*Individuality and the New Society*, 1970, p. 4]:

[Individuality and the New Society, 1970, p. 4]:
A century or so ago, a Hassidic master observed, "If I am I only because you are you, and you are you because I am only I, then I am not I and you are not you". . . . Our identities - - what we each feel so keenly within ourselves - - cannot consist in these marks of identification whether of one or many. The psychological problem of individuality in our time begins with this that though we are individuality in our time begins with this that though we are individuated we are also depersonalized. I feel that I have been numbered but that I am treated more and more as though I have become only a number, no longer a person. . . .

Bellow, Malamud, and Roth repeatedly argued that it was the social condition that contributed to the despairing state wherein the individual became a rudderless ship. In such a condition the individual had only two extreme options, the one was to bow down to society and the other was to wage a relentless war against the society and the Establishment so as to safeguard and protect his identity.

Moreover, because of the complexities and multiplicities of modern life the individual suffers from psychological strains and stresses. The individual confronts his own doubles, which bring into question his real identity.

Yet, because of Diaspora, displacement, and disorientation and reorientation, the displaced individual has to shed his original identity and embrace a new identity. He turns into a torn personality - - a schizophrenic - - because of his inability to bury his old identity and embrace a new identity. This is the plight of the Jewish Americans in America. The only option that is open to the Jew in America is to move from the periphery and enter the mainstream of American life. In other words the identity of the
Jew or the Black in America can be only as an American. Bellow, and Roth, like Emerson and Whitman before them, spell out meaningful ways, which when put into effective practice will enable the displaced persons to establish and maintain their separate and distinct identity. They want the self to be assertive. They argue that the individual should settle for self-trust, self-endeavour, and self-reliance.

The self should give expression to his feelings, thoughts and experiences without any reservation, and with fear for none. The individual should not allow the impositions of society to impinge on him. He should learn to live deliberately and to speak with candour. But then he would have to suffer loneliness as our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme individualist, had to suffer. A superb composition of Edward Estlin Cummings makes this point quite clear and the poem is quoted in full, for it makes very interesting reading [Complete Poems: 1913-1962, 1972, p. 648]:

no time ago
or else a life
walking in the dark
I met christ
jesus my heart
flopped over
and lay still
while he passed as
close as i'm to you
yes closer
made of nothing
except loneliness. . . .
All the same endeavouring to be one’s own self is the way to preserve one’s uniqueness, singleness, individuality, and separate identity. The person who wishes to maintain his identity will never be a conformist. The individualist can safeguard his identity by being mindful of the dangers of conformance. Therefore, the recommendation of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth is that the individualist with a distinct identity of his own should live at right angles to conformity.

Emerson argues to the point [“The American Scholar”, in American Literature of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology, 1987, p. 55]:

Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and the honourable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. . . .

Moreover, to be a slave to materiality and to develop a dependent complex depending on the machine-made products are sure ways to lose one’s individuality. Such an individual will believe in spawning and spewing dollars, answering constantly the merchant within him. In the process of earning and hoarding money he will lose his individuality gradually, and be finally reduced into a mere automaton and turn into a mere cipher.

To amass wealth is a social requirement. But to be conscious of money and status is just to permit the society and the Establishment to exercise an iron grip on the individual. Therefore, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth in their separate but original ways recommend to the individual to be his own self, notwithstanding the temptations and pressures of American society and the Establishment.

Therefore, to triumph over societal impositions and to defeat the freedom destroying negations devised by the society and the Establishment, and the Military
Organizations are the sure ways to safeguard one’s individualism argue Bellow, Malamud, and Roth. But then to break loose from the roles devised by the society is not that easy for ordinary souls. That is why Ihab Hassan argues to the point through a valid assertion and it is worth recording here [Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, 1961, p. 28]:

He [self] is still grappling with the radical multiplicities of the human ego, oscillating not merely between two poles such as the body and the spirit but between thousands and thousands. . . .

At this point, it ought to be noted that the Jews as a race have suffered displacement and the consequent disorientation and reorientation as no other race have suffered. No other race has passed through the pains and miseries attendant on Diaspora as the Jewish race has gone through over the centuries.

The two Global confrontations only accentuated their plights and predicaments, as they were driven from place to place. As a result of displacement the Jews had to shed their identity of the original place to which they belonged and accept a new identity of the land where they were pushed. But the Jews wherever they are settled find it hard to give up their religion, rituals, customs, traditions, conventions, beliefs, and language. Therefore they suffer from dual identity or better still the pangs of cultural divide.

Moreover, the Jews in America have migrated into the United States of America from different parts of the world. By design by preference, and by mental acculturation the German Jew, the Czech Jew or the Russian Jew wants to remain as a minority within minority ethnic group. This argues for the Jew’s deep-seated attachment to his race and more particularly the land and language of his original roots. To put it
differently the Jew does not wish to be anything else except to remain a Jew. Jewry flows in his blood, and education, and his culture.

It is of significance to make a note of the fact that the Jews suffer alienation both at the hands of the Muslims and the Christians. In the first place they suffer alienation at the hands of the Muslims because the Jews argue that their Jewish race is superior to the Ishmaelite group that has branched away since the days of Abraham. They take pride in being the chosen lot. They also take pride in their capacity to withstand the pains and miseries that they had to confront during the great exodus from the land of the Pharaoh into their chosen land of Israel and their patience and endurance to prevail over harsh actualities of life, and their innate ability to face all kinds of persecution, and to triumph over the trying circumstances. All these endow the Jew with a separate and distinct identity.

Therefore, Bellow and Malamud and Roth portray their principal characters with distinguishing Jewish properties and characteristic Jewish features. Moreover, the Jews have invited anti-Semitism by their strong faith that the Messiah is yet to come. They consider Jesus Christ as the Prophet only, and not as the Son of God sent to redeem mankind. Therefore, they await the first coming of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Christians love, worship, and adore Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and the Messiah who came to earth to redeem the sinners. And the Christians wait for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This conflict in the religions of the Christians and the Jews, and the group mentality of the Jews, and their business based on usury, has generated a great deal of anti-Semitism.
The Jew takes pride in having such an identity. It is an acknowledged fact that
the Jew enjoys a higher level of intelligence. That is his virtue and strength and that is
also the causative factor for the Jew suffering estrangement and alienation in America.
Bellow and Malamud and Roth are fully aware of these Jewish properties.

Like all the Jews they do not treat them as racial determinants. On the other
hand, they take pride in being Jews and being the spokespersons of the Jewish race
writing Jewish American literature. It is with such a mental acculturation one better
appreciates the Jewish American literature of Bellow and Malamud and Roth.

To begin with Bellow does not tolerate the impositions of the society, which
impinge on the individuality and the separate identity of the individual. On this point,
John Jacob Clayton’s pointed observation is worth quoting: [Saul Bellow: In Defense of
Man, 1979, p. 4]:

Bellow is particularly hostile to the devaluation of the "separate self" in
modern literature, and he values individuality nearly as highly as did Emerson. . . .

Bellow defines the identity of the Jew as that of the suffering self. The sufferings
of the Jew could be traced back to the days of persecution and exodus from Egypt to
Israel under the aegis and control of Moses. Diaspora, disorientation, reorientation,
ostracism, Nazi persecution, exclusion, anti-Semitism, Angst, and the Sturm-und-Drang
are the qualifying parameters concerning the identity of the Jews as delineated and
projected by Bellow.
Incidentally, Bellow is not an ideologue. He is neither a Reformist offering advice in a Pontifical fashion or in the manner of a School Teacher. He merely reports of the conditions of life for Jews in America objectively and that is the point of terminus.

Conclusions, solutions, and resolutions have to be arrived at by the perceptive and critically oriented readers and citizens who are socially conscious and those that believe in social justice track.

Bellow's plots and characters, however different, project the Jew as one whose Jewish identity is eroded by the American identity. In this connection he commands the attention of the critically oriented and perceptive readers by his careful attention of the American society and the American Establishment. Keith Michael Opadahl makes a pointed observation in this regard: [The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction, 1970, p. 6]:

He [Bellow] creates protagonists who desperately need community, but portrays a community in which the price of admission is destruction. . . . The man of will's oppression of the hero is our culture's oppression of the individual. Bellow's protagonist is also an American hero groping toward manhood. Vacillating between a need to be loved and withdrawal from a world which does not love him as he wishes, he is immature and a victim himself. . . .

The points that are made here are that the Jew wishes to retain his Jewish identity, and suffering clothes the Jew with a distinct identity, and that being a Jewish American is to experience the painful superimposition of the American identity on his
Jewish identity. The consequences are the stresses and strains - - the *Sturm-und-Drang* - - and anguish, and mental traumas. Consequentially, he loses his individualism.

Moreover, there is the erosion of the individual’s identity by the society and its organizational wings, and by the defined roles laid on the Jew by the society and the Establishment. Therefore, the identity of Bellow’s characters is dependent on the Jewish heritage, traditions, customs, and Yiddish and Torah, which they are unwilling to repudiate and de-link.

Yet, their individualism is qualified by the demands of the American society and the Establishment. Therefore, the Jew remains dangling between his deeply embedded Jewish identity and the superimposed American identity. He is torn because of mental conflicts as a result of the dual identity and cultural divide. Therefore, the Jew becomes a victim of the society, and the pulls and counter pulls. Keith Michael Opadahl argues: [The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction, 1970, p. 9]:

All his [Bellow’s] characters exist in a carefully defined social context . . . if they find little tradition or class structure in America, they have the tradition of Judaism, the rigidity of colorful relatives, the nationalistic jealousies of a mixed community. . . .

In determining his identity in America the Jew has to struggle against his Jewry, Americanism, social realities, and personal predilections, and biases, and cultural moorings. Only by striking a balanced approach concerning these forces, he can establish an identity of his own that is truly dynamic, pragmatic, and realistic.
Apart from this, Bellow is keenly a social conscious artist. As such he is aware of the fact that materialism and militarism make serious inroads into the individuality of the individual, and cloud his identity. In his short fiction, entitled, “Two Morning Monologues”, published in *The Partisan Review*, in 1941, Bellow dramatizes how compulsory enlistment in the army during the Second World War impinged on the individuality of the individual, and cancelled his separate and distinct identity. In this respect the argument of Bellow that compulsory conscription is one of the organized moves of the Military Establishment to erase the identity of the individual finds a running parallel in a similar assertion of Heller in *Catch-22*. Keith Opadahl sums up the point thus [*The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction*, 1970, p. 12]:

. . . it [“Two Morning Monologues”] juxtaposes in its nameless characters Bellow’s man of love and man of will. . . . Both characters, a boy and a gambler, are “mourning” because they are unable to live in a world in which they find themselves - - a shocked nation mobilizing for World War II. *Both consider the draft which threatens them a sign of their helplessness before the forces of history* [My Emphasis]. . . .

What Bellow hints to the Jews in particular and mankind in general is that assimilation is the solution to the problem of identity. It is suicidal to deny that he is not a part of the society. If he evades his physical existence in society, notwithstanding the forces of the society impinging on his individuality and eroding his identity, he divorces himself from reality. Keith Opadahl aptly remarks thus [*The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction*, 1970, p. 25]:

Something of this same polarity between facticity and the essential may even be discerned in the most pervasive influence in Bellow’s work, his
Jewish heritage. Many critics have seen the Jewish experience as symbolic of modern alienation. The problem of alienation, identity, mobility, and powerlessness all form a link of kin, though not of degree, between the oppressed Jew and the faceless modern man [My Emphasis]....

Bellow maintains that the history that the Jewish American confronts in America is not of his making. Others have made it. Therefore, the Jewish experience has to be examined in terms of historical alienation, anti-Semitism, and determinism. The piquant situation experienced by the Jewish American is that he persistently holds on to the view that his birthright as a Jew is no less than his American citizenry.

The way out of such a perplexity is to strike a balance between these two levels. Yet, the Jew has to organize his experiences as a Jewish American, and indulge in the process of assimilating and entering into the mainstream of American culture, without sacrificing his Jewry. And this cannot be impossible with the American society having several in-built tranquilizers of several sorts. Only then the Jewish American can move towards fullness of life, and experience the meaning of the identity of a Jewish American. With the graciousness of surrender they have to accept the few sanctions Western society still provides.

In his trend-setting fiction, The Adventures of Augie March, Bellow demonstrates the pangs of Diaspora, disorientation, and reorientation faced by the Jew, Augie March, and his family. The points of reference, which operate one within the other, are the Jewish family, the big city, and the spirit of American mainstream culture. These make up the world in which Augie March grows to his peculiar destiny. The first impressions that Bellow creates in the minds of the perceptive readers regarding the
Marches is that they constitute a broken up family, a family still homeless in America or perhaps homeless because in America. Ihab Hasan makes an interesting observation in this regard [Radical Innocence, 1961, p. 306]:

It is as if America, by promising to each a proud and independent fate, could play father to all the world’s orphans. The orphanage is the city, which gives concrete forms to the root lessens peculiar to America.

Augie March learns through displacements, reorientations, and struggles that it is right and proper to accept the claims of history as of nature to the full -- his Judaism -- and to embrace the freshness and fluidity in the present moment -- Americanism to which he is exposed. Augie March understands that everything lives in the face of its negative and reality has no truth with the schemes in arrogant discontent one imposes on others. As a realist Augie March accepts assimilation, and in such an acceptance he finds joy. Augie March argues his viewpoints thus [The Adventures of Augie March, 1954, p. 207]:

Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can’t use, he often can’t see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn’t correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn’t try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be surprising.

Bellow establishes the fact that the quest for freedom from the impositions of society and the Establishment as the means of asserting one’s identity is always qualified by the deeper need for reconciliation. This concept Bellow demonstrates
through his novel, *Seize the Day*. The protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, is a child of fate. His life is marked by error and ill fortune. His errors define his situations and prove to be the tragic grammar of destiny.

Tommy Wilhelm starts his career as an actor in Hollywood by discontinuing his college education and after seven years remains only as a movie extra. Before he attains the executive status he is eased out of his job as the Sales Manager. Thus he establishes his identity as a failure. His wife Margaret bleeds him remorselessly by her constant demands before she divorces him. Tommy Wilhelm’s life is one of failure, dependency, and willing self-humiliation. Thus, Tommy Wilhelm’s identity is that of a Jew who is a total failure in life. Bellow, then, recommends the method of assimilation to the Jewish American in America to gain a distinct identity, and ensure his individualism.

In the fiction, entitled, *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal, is the victim of anti-Semitism. He is the Jew, a burly, impassive, solitary man sprung from a background of tragedy. His antagonist is Kirby Albee, the anti-Semite. Both are locked in a dearth struggle for the impossible meaning of innocence. It is not the Jew, Asa Leventhal, or the anti-Semite, Kirby Albee, who is on trial but man. In fact, all are caught in this war between the Jews and the anti-Semitic people. But Asa Leventhal in the end learns that real identity lies in the true discovery of one’s own limitations and strength.

Moreover, there is true individualism in dignity, notwithstanding the harsh actualities, and great odds of life. Old Schlossberg, a minor character in *The Victim*, mouths these words [*The Victim*, 1947, p. 105]:

If a human life is a great thing to one, it is a great thing. Do you know better? I’m entitled as much as you. And why be measly? Do you have to
be? Is somebody holding you by the neck? Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down. . . .

Thus, Bellow examines the problem of the individualism of the Jewish American in all its ramifications, and recommends to the Jewish American not to remain on the periphery, but enter into the Mainstream American culture, but at the same time remaining without losing his separate Jewish identity.

Malamud on his part mainly concentrates on the Jewish American’s experiences in America. The Jewish American portrayed by Malamud is deeply rooted in Jewry, but is forced to embrace Americanism. Consequentially, he suffers because of a dual identity - - cultural divide - -, which makes him turn out to be one of rootlessness, homelessness, and facelessness. The unwillingness to shed his Jewry and the compulsion to enter the Mainstream of American culture pose to him a serious dilemma, and his inability to resolve causes anguish, the Sturm-und-Drang, and Angst.

The predicament of the Jewish American is whether he should remain a Jew with all his Jewry intact, or become a Jewish American minus his Jewry. Malamud, the gifted Jewish American fictionist, projects this predicament, which the Jewish American confronts in America. Earl Rovit makes a pointed observation: [“Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Literary Tradition”, Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, III, 2 (1960), 3]:

Malamud seems to insist that there is a way of escaping the fatal limitations of the human condition. Man need not remain buried in the isolation of himself. He must accept the fatality of his own identity - - be it Jew or Gentile, success or failure - - and working within that identity, transcend himself and burst his prison. . . .
In Malamud's view of the Jewish American being torn between his Jewish identities and holding on to them in America, the argument that is projected is that of all the races the Jewish race is not willing to be divorced from its Jewry. The true fact of the matter is that the predicament of the Jewish American is to still remain a Jew wherever he is. It is in this context one appreciates the heroes of Malamud, whose constant experience is one of despair. In the context, the pointed observation of Ben Siegel is worth recording here ["Victims in Motion: Bernard Malamud's Sad and Bitter Clowns", Northwest Review, Spring 1962, p. 72]:

Malamud does not view modern society as blameless for man's tragic plight, but neither does he consider anyone the mere passive victim of social cruelty or neglect. His people embody their own self-destructive demons. If they are social misfits, it is primarily of their own doing. . . .

His Jews are not "good" in the traditional sense; few, in fact, reveal any concern for Judaism as a coherent body of doctrine. They share only a communal sensitivity to persecution and suffering. . . .

Malamud purposively and definitely introduces characters, who are passive victims of society, who allow their identity to be erased. Then these blundering fools get into trouble quite often. Bungling and blundering are the features that give them the label of blunder buzzes. The modern age creates another group, and gives them an identity, which is quite undesirable. They are the manipulators who take an instrumental view of mankind. Robert Alter makes these points quite clear thus [After the Tradition, 1962, p. 169]:
The *shlemiel*-shlimazel* . . . is not merely a source of colorfulness in Malamud's fiction, the stock comic property that the type has become in so much American-Jewish fiction. To be a shlemiel - - which for Malamud is almost interchangeable with the idea of being a Jew - - means to assume a moral stance, virtually the only moral stance in his fictional world. For if circumstances are at present indifferent to this individual, if human beings are so complicated, varied, and confused that to be truly open to another person means to get mixed up with and by him, even hurt by him the very act of whole hearted commitment to the world of men means being a blunderer and a victim. The only clearly visible alternative to the stance of the shlemiel in Malamud's fiction . . . is the stance of the manipulator. Gus the Gambler and the sinister club owner, the Judge in *The Assistant*, Karp, the "lucky" liquor-store neighbour of inveterately luckless Morris Bober in *The Assistant*; Gerald Gilley, the Cascadia Professor, scheming for the departmental chairmanship in *A New Life* - - all these characters who in varying degrees take sharply instrumental view of humanity, who manage to stay on top of circumstances and people by being detached from them so that they can merely use them . . .

Malamud projects the truth that it is extremely difficult for the Jewish Americans, the disadvantaged have-nots, to survive decently in America. He presents this idea in the carefully crafted fiction, *The Tenants*. The novel is about two writers one a

- *Shlemiel* is a passive victim of society
- *Shlimazel* is a fool who gets into troubles.
somewhat successful Jewish novelist, and the other a militant Black novice. At one level it deals with the confrontation between the haves and have-nots. At another level it examines the identity problem for the Jewish writer whether he has to root his writings in his word - - Jewish culture - - or in their word - - the Western civilization. Samuel I. Bellman argues to the point ["Bernard Malamud", Essays in English and American Language and Literature, VIII (1973), 74]:

Here [in The Tenants] a second generation Jew, a semi-failure named, appropriately Lesser, is holed up in an abandoned Manhattan tenement, trying against all possible odds to regain his way back to an understanding of himself, and possibly even to peculiar success; in Malamud’s narrative blur, Lesser’s counter self, a Leroi Jones-Elridge Cleaver type, named, Willie Spearmint, is busy doing the very same in another room in the tenement. . . . Willie burns Lesser’s manuscripts and starting over again; Lesser cannot regain whatever control he had over his material. Before Willie and Lesser are destroyed in the old “William Wilson” - - “Castaway” literary play - - whereby the self and the alter ego kill each other, Malamud inserts a profundity or two about the task of the writer. He reminds us of the immigrant’s first line of defense against the crush of foreign culture and convention: the word . . . their word, which you make your own [Italics as in the Original]. . . .

In the superb novel, The Assistant, Malamud recommends that the proper identity for the man who suffers from poly urges, and conflicts in mind, and schizophrenic tendencies is to imitate Jesus Christ, and embrace the identity of the compassionating soul. Morris Bober is one such Christ figure. Though he slips into a
state of incurable despair, he exhibits Christ-like compassion for others, both friends and enemies. Jeffrey Helterton traces the problems of Morris Bober, and projects him with the identity of the humanist [“Bernard Malamud” in Dictionary of Literary Biography, 1978, pp. 294-295]:

Morris’s problem is not finding the right ideals, but rather putting off his despair long enough to carry out what he knows is right. The moral crises faced by Morris as he tries to give his family a future are similar to those faced by the poor shopkeepers who populate The Magic Barrel. Morris first tries to sell the store to poor immigrant, but he cannot let another take up his burden, and he tells the immigrant the truth about the shop’s wretched business. Then Morris goes to an old friend who had once cheated him, but he cannot bring himself to call the friend to account. Finally, he deals with a demonic fire-setter who wants to burn the store for the insurance. Although Morris turns down the fire-setter, he then tries to burn the store himself by starting a fire with a photographic negative. He changes his mind but cannot put out the fire until Frank rescues him and the store. Morris’s behaviour is always based on the need for honesty in his dealing with others and, beyond this a belief in the humanity of all men [My Emphasis]. . . .

Thus, Malamud maintains that a life of struggle and suffering endow the Jew with a distinct painful identity, which only the African Americans experience in equal measure. Secondly, the Jew who passes through hard times is naturally sympathetic to others who are having hard times. There is that anguish of others felt by the Jew portrayed by Malamud and he gains the identity of a compassionating soul. Above all
suffering enables the Jew to gain a moral as well as a spiritual vision. This is a kind of hard-won, eked out saintliness. This evolution to a better frame of mind is again a distinct identity of the Jew, in whom suffering and spiritual goodness are interlinked.

The centering of Israel and Jewish identity, and their treatment in a warm and positive light in his works, is an accomplished literary achievement in the works of Roth. Taking into consideration Roth’s work, Operation Shylock, the readers confront many unresolved questions that Operation Shylock raises. The tendency to indulge in rhetorical excesses, and the melodramatic gestures on the part of the characters of Operation Shylock and that everyone sound like Roth leave the readers with the thought that there are too many threads left dangling and abruptly torn of in the ending. What survives such difficulties in Operation Shylock, however, is a great deal of talk, and that proves to be formidable enough. The fiction, Operation Shylock, is really a series of encounters between performing selves and the chief interest is in the verbal and emotional energy of the performances. This stand-up comedy is in part a reversion of Portnoy’s Complaint, with the important difference that in Operation Shylock the tenor of talk is political and historical, not personal and psychological.

The politics of Jewish existence after the Holocaust and the founding of Israel is the occasion for most of the displays. That existence, as Roth recognizes, is shot through with interesting and ironic conflict: Israeli versus Palestinian, Israeli cultures versus Diasporic Jewish life, an untrammelled sense of Jewish self-affirmation versus resurgence of anti-Semitism. The effect of the performance is to play out the opposing lines of these conflicts, to allow the articulation of each position at the top of the decibel scale. This habit of verbal extravaganza is necessarily Jewish, and probably also essentially neurotic. Even George Ziad, the militant Palestinian, roves to be in this
respect thoroughly Jewish, though he waves a different flag. The textual passage reads thus [Operation Shylock, 1993, p. 127]:

The gush, the agitation, the volubility, the frenzy barely beneath the surface of every word he [George Ziad] babbled, the nerve-racking sense he communicated of something aroused and decomposing all at the same time, if someone in a state of imminent apoplexy. . . .

It is in vain that Smilesberger quotes to the narrator the injunction to silence [Operation Shylock, 1993, p. 127]:

‘Grant me that I should say nothing that is unnecessary’ -- of the early twentieth-century Polish rabbinical luminary Israel Ha-Cohen, who was known as the Chofetz Chaim and became a household name in the Orthodox Jewish world for his moralizing tract against the abuses of speech. . . .

For everyone in this fiction, [Operation Shylock], it ought to be noted lives, irrepressibly, by outdoing through language. On this point, the critic Benjamin Harshav makes a pointed observation: [Quoted in Robert Alter, “The Spritzer”, The New Republic, Vol. 208, No. 4 (5 April 1993), 32]:

Such Jewish discourse [founded on Yiddish and the study of Talmud but then manifested in all sorts of secular art-media] is talkative, argumentative, contrary, and associative. It’s typical traits include answering with examples, anecdotes, parables or questions, rather than with direct, logical replies; seeing the smallest detail as symbolic for
universal issues; delving into meanings, connotations and associations of a single word, and leaping from a word or concrete item to abstract generalizations and theories. . . .

When it is translated into fiction, this associative, exegetical, sometimes pugnacious mode of discourse produces neither linear plot development nor panoptic descriptive vision, but rather meandering verbal extravaganzas. Countless examples from Yiddish writers like Mendele and Sholom Aleichem, and from other older Hebrew writers come to mind. Political positions in *Operation Shylock* are not analyzed or defined they are played out as verbal vaudeville, as when Ziad complains of Israeli invocations of the Holocaust as stated in the text [*Operation Shylock*, 1993, p. 130]:

> Marlboro has the Marlboro Man, Israel has its Holocaust Man . . . for the smokescreen, that hides everything. Smoke holocaust [Italics as in the Original]. . . .

The narrator's [Roth's] misgivings about his own futile Hebrew education as a child balloon into the airy fantasy of a wild set of comparisons thus [*Operation Shylock*, 1993, p. 130]:

> For one hour a day, three days a week, fresh from six-and-a-half hours of public school, we sat there and learned to write backwards, to write though the sun rose in the west and the leaves fell in the spring, as though Canada lay to the south, Mexico to the north, and we put our shoes on before out socks. . . .

> There is something quite engaging about the way this Jewish affirmation is projected. As to the larger political questions raised by the fiction, *Operation Shylock*,
the splitting of selves and the clash of opposing performances do strike brilliant sparks. The appeal of the Diaspora is articulated by a character who is a dazzling arguer.

Roth has created *Operation Shylock* in which Jewishness, individually and collectively, is imagined as an ineluctable destiny with positive, if troubling content, in which he [Roth] can see himself as complement, antithesis, and spiritual brother to Appelfield, the Holocaust survivor who composes his fiction in that mysterious ancestral language that moves from right to left. The fiction, *Operation Shylock*, is an astonishing and a gripping work, with lasting value.

Roth’s *The Human Stain* is set against the background of the outrage and titillation that spread across the United States of America in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Roth’s *The Human Stain* is as fresh, as angry and as bitterly amused as his early fiction. Roth’s *The Human Stain* vibrates with mockery, disapproval, poetry, and a healthy dose of personal vindictiveness that one would be tempted to dismiss as unworthy if it were not so funny.

Roth’s *The Human Stain* is the tale of another determined individualist who finds himself up against the tyranny of decorum. Roth’s protagonist is Zuckerman’s neighbour Coleman Silk, a seventy-one year old classicist, long time Athena Professor and in the last sixteen years of his career, its high-powered Dean of faculty.

During that time Coleman cut a formidable figure on campus, both respected and feared; he had made it his business to drag the College into the contemporary world by ruthlessly hacking out the dead wood, hiring Young Turks from Yale and Princeton, and turning Athena into one of the country’s more prestigious institutions.
Coleman’s initial downfall occurs when, taking attendance in one of his classes, he asks about two students who have never shown up. The text reads thus [The Human Stain, 200, p. 106]:

Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks? . . . The absent students, it turns out, are Black, and Coleman’s use of the word spooks is taken as a racist slur. With cruel dispatch, he is hounded out of his job in a crusade spearheaded by the very element - - the young, the hip and the radical - - he had been responsible for bringing to Athena.

The irony is that Coleman Silk, unbeknown to anyone including his wife and children, is himself Black. He presents himself as a Jew, and is a Professor of the Whitest subject in the curriculum on the Whitest campus in America, but he was born into a Black family in East Orange, New Jersey. Brooke Allen makes a pointed observation, which is worth recording here in extenso [“Twilight Triumphs”, New Leader, 83, No. 2 (May-June 2000), 31]:

Coleman is, in short, that classic American figure, the convinced individualist who reinvents himself and escapes the prison of his past. All he had ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free; not Black, not even White - - just on his own and free. His father’s death during Coleman’s first year at Howard was the catalyst. He realized he could pass and began a new life as a White student at New York University. But shedding the shackles required a ruthlessness that nearly negated the benefits. When Coleman decided to marry a White it meant severing ties with his family. Telling his mother was the most brutal thing he had ever done. His brother Walt- - who as a community
leader and a pioneer in Black education would go to have the very career Coleman renounced -- forbade him [Coleman] to come near the family again. Even his own children have been blighted by the lie they sense yet do not know. His youngest son Mark sees him, without really understanding why, as a destroyer, and spends his life in a futile search for meaning -- primarily, ironically enough, in Judaism [Italics as in the Original]. . . .

Zuckerman befriends Coleman two years after his ouster from Athena, which was quickly followed by the stress-induced death of his wife Iris. Coleman's biggest secret is still a secret, but his smaller one is becoming common knowledge; rejuvenated by Viagra, he is having an affair with an illiterate, tragic young woman half his age, whose children died in a fire and whose estranged husband, a deranged Vietnam veteran, constantly threatens her. Since Coleman is no longer associated with Athena, one might think he can do as he likes with another consenting adult.

Instead, the morality police, led by the trendy young Parisian Chair of the Languages and Literature Department, Delphine Roux are out to get him. The affair between Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley is, despite appearances to the contrary, a match between equals. But in its deviation from the norms of propriety -- seventy-one year-old grandfathers are not supposed to sleep around, for God's sake, much less with menials who cannot read -- it outrages the campus social arbiters, radical as they may think themselves. The textual passage runs thus [The Human Stain, 2000, p. 183]:

Appropriate. The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody
comfortable . . . As a force, propriety is protean, a dominatrix in a thousand disguises, infiltrating, if need be, as civic responsibility, WASP dignity, women's rights, Black pride, ethnic allegiance, or emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity. It’s not as though Marx or Freud or Darwin or Stalin or Hitler or Mao had never happened. . . . It’s as though Babbitt had never been written. . . . Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or its Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk! . . .

The campus of Athena, like the larger culture, is in fact reactionary, no matter what self-flattering guise it chooses to dress up its reaction.

Thus, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth examine the theme of identity crises and the causes that impinge on the identity of the individuals and how best the individuals could turn into distinct individualists with self-respect, honour and dignity.