CONCLUSION

Singer's familiarity with both the old world and the new makes him capable of presenting a convincing picture of the former in spite of his distance from it. With the exception of The King of the Fields, all his novels deal with the vanished world of the Jew in exile:

Singer seems firmly rooted in two worlds. A man without a home in the Old World, and yet uncomfortable in the new, he invokes the old in order to bridge the two. His Polish-Jewish shtetl is gone, of course, but his recreation of it is complete with devils and spirits and magic, just as it was then.¹

Alvin H. Rosenfeld observes:

A recurring and by now familiar truth of Singer's fiction is that, whether it is set in New York or Miami, Buenos Aires or Tel Aviv, the place is always some version of Poland— that is to say, some version of the author's youth. Dream and memory carry him there, his stories of dream and memory carry us there.²

The Jewish writers in America have gradually grown assimilated into the cultural atmosphere of their host country. Thus, their writing, in spite of its Jewish roots, tends to follow the general mode of writing prevalent in the present times:

In America no ethnic or regional group presently enjoys more coherent and conscious identification with an
older cultural tradition than the American Jew. Yet the
literary milieu of the current Jewish - American
writers is American rather than Jewish. Few write, as
does Isaac B. Singer, even after living more than
thirty years in this country, about the unique Jewish
experience.3

Singer acted as a link between these writers and the Jewish
tradition : " .... his books ... crossed the ancient world
of peasant and ghetto Poland and its supernatural past with
life in modern America, in bizarre, ironic ways ; they
undoubtedly helped link younger Jewish American writers with
the European Stock of Jewish literature."4 Forced by
circumstances to leave his familiar world behind, Singer
keeps it alive in his novels ranging from Satan in Goray to
The Penitent. Whether they are placed in Poland, or as
immigrants in other countries, the characters represent the
same cultural and religious heritage :" ... his characters
are always Polish Jews, whether they are Kibbutzniks in
Beersheba or refugees in the Bronx."5 The King of the Fields
is, of course, an exception as the characters presented,
though Polish, are yet to be civilized. Leslie Fiedler
comments :

... he is, of course, though an American and a Jew and
a writer, not a Jewish American writer like Bellow or
Malamud or Roth. He is rather an American Jewish
writer: the only truly distinguished fictionist,
perhaps ... to have arisen from among ex-European Jews entering the United States after the closing down of mass immigration .... He is ... an emigré .... one whose identity is involved with a dead past rather than an unborn future ; one who seeks not to lose but forever to cling to his status as an unreconstructed greenhorn, unassimilated ; incapable of assimilation to American culture.®

In writing about the exiled Jew, Singer is dealing with the ideas of alienation and identity which are so popular in contemporary literature. But instead of using modern techniques of fiction, he sticks to simple, direct storytelling, and makes use of Yiddish, the language of the old world. While Hebrew is the formal language of the Jews, Yiddish is the language used by a large section of them in their everyday life. Thus, it is the most befitting medium for Singer's tales of suffering and possible redemption :

Singer has a strong sense of the wonder and joy of the world. The variety and complexity, the mixture of good and bad, the diversity of things and events and changes is almost unbelievable .... One can believe in the world, because it exists. And it exists because it was made by God. Who, except God, can make such a wondrous variety !

The firm faith in God is clearly noticeable in all of Singer's novels. Even in The King of the Fields, with
its primitive setting, the concept of God's benevolence is introduced through the teachings of Ben Dosa and the Bishop. In The Manor and The Penitent the central character, after a life of material prosperity and personal suffering turns back to God as the only source of comfort. Even a character like Yasha Mazur, who had always prided himself on his supernatural ability, seeks refuge in religion.

The long exile affects the women as much as the men. Constant exposure to the European way of life brings into their minds a conflict between the Jewish tradition and a desire for emancipation. While the weaker ones yield to the temptation of the glittering world outside, the more reasonable ones stay firm in their faith. Thus, although Mirian - Lieba opts to leave the security of home and run away with a Gentile, Tsipele, much younger than her, willingly accepts the burden of family life, and gracefully discharges her duties as wife and mother. The smooth functioning of family as well as community depends on the behaviour of the women in it. In Satan in Goray, Rechele stands for Goray itself. The various phases in her unusual behaviour symbolize the gradual destruction of the town and its people. Wanda, converted to Sarah, can rise with Jacob to the status of a saint whereas Clara or Masha continues to move downward on the path of degradation, polluting the atmosphere around her: "Not far behind many of Singer's women is Lilith, or some similar she-demon from Jewish folklore, to dazzle and lead astray the unlucky quester of
the forbidden pleasures". Singer seems to hold the view that men and women are not absolutely different from each other: "... there's no question that the male is not hundred percent male and the female is not one hundred percent female. We have so much in common. Of course, men and women are very different, but they are also very much alike.

"I often write about women, but always in relation to men", observes Singer. He goes on to add that some women, particularly the feminists, accuse him of hating women. Such a stand is taken by Evelyn Torton Beck:

Like so many other male writers, Singer sees the world as essentially male-centered and clearly views woman as "other" (to use Simone de Beauvoir's term - "other" meaning separate, subsidiary, alien, apart. For Singer, "Man" is indeed the "measure of all things". According to Beck, the presentation of woman as temptress or as passive victim points to the author's negative view of women:

The only genuinely positive images of women (such as ... Esther in The Magician of Lublin) are those who faithfully carry out their traditional subsidiary roles and devote their lives entirely to the care of men, no matter what the cost to themselves. Men also are burdened with role expectations, but the formula seems to read: women serve men; men serve God."
Singer repeatedly portrays women as complementary to and dependent on men. In spite of education, sophistication or wealth, woman is rarely seen as having an independent identity. Even Clara, riding on the crest of success, needs a Zipkin to cling to. In the words of Elsie Levitan:

.... there are no women, with a single exception, who make it into the upper reaches of Singer's cosmic Heaven. The single exception is Wanda - Sarah, heroine of The Slave. But verily, merrily the portraits of women beguiled and beguiling, bewitched and bewitched ... are myriad.  

Marriage plays an important part in Singer's novels. While a successful marriage stands for harmony in life failure spells doom for the partners as well as for society. Wanda, converted to Sarah, can attain sainthood because of her unwavering loyalty to Jacob, but Clara and Masha, though married, contaminate both family and society with their immorality. Leslie Field observes:

In Judaism, marriage is very closely related to the notion of community and the essence of Judaism itself. A medieval saying goes "A man without a woman is like snow in a blizzard", violent, unsettled, no centre, no circumference. Jewish reality, it has been said, is defined as the reality of relationships. The people, the community, the marriage. Marriage thus becomes a strong metaphor for continuity in Judaism.
Singer explores such relationships not only on the level of human beings but also in the supernatural world. Demons and imps, even the Devil himself, enter into all sorts of relationships with earthly people, creating various complex situations. They are as real as the human characters:

In a conversation with Breger and Bernhardt, Singer said, "Demons symbolize the world for me ... I believe in their existence ... I believe in clairvoyant dreams, extrasensory perception ... These are reflections of higher powers ... I really believe that there are spirits in the world ... which influence our lives. I believe in re-incarnation, possession by devils."15

Rechele's lifelong association with evil forces and her final possession by the Devil stand out as the most striking example of supernatural interference in the human world.

In Singer's novels women are presented in the contrasting roles of preserver and destroyer. In Enemies: A Love story, while Yadwiga literally saves Herman from death by hiding him in a hayloft, and Tamara helps him to build up his self-confidence, Masha, with her tantrums, drags him down into a mesh of lies and deception. The pull of the opposite forces finally compels Herman to escape altogether:

At the end of novel Broder either commits suicide or goes in hiding from women, as he had once gone in hiding from the Nazis. By withdrawing he hopes to
escape from the web of human desire at the centre of which, life a spider, waits the woman for a victim. "Every female sits in her own net weaving like a spider", Masha's estranged husband had told Broder. "When a fly happens to come along, it's caught. If you don't run away, they'll suck the last drop of blood out of you ... " 'I'll manage to run away,'" Broder vows.\textsuperscript{16}

Dorothy Bilik observes that the three women in Herman Broder's life represent three different phases in his past: Herman has attempted to create a kind of "Eden" in Yadwiga's prelapsarian Brighton Beach apartment, complete with parakeets flying free and bucolic odors. It is the pre-holocaust vision of the European village and as fragile as that vision. In contrast, Masha, Herman's tortured and passionate mistress, lives in a decaying Bronx apartment house. Masha's apartment embodies the recent collective Jewish past. Herman's particular and personal past is represented by yet another place, when Tamar comes to America and creates still another "home", this time in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{17}

Love is very often the panacea sought by Singer's characters in order to counter their worldly troubles. Whether it is Jacob's love for Wanda, or Yasha Mazur's pursuit of Emilia, it is seen as a means of escape. Speaking of Singer's treatment of women, Bonnie Lyons observes:
Singer's affirmation of sexual love is paralleled by his realistic, complex, psychologically convincing, often positive depiction of women. In both, he stands in striking contrast to the mainstream of American Jewish fiction. From Abraham Cahan to Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, American literature is full of negative images of women ... In American Jewish novels and stories we do not see sympathetic treatment of women with profound spiritual and intellectual aspirations like yentl or women who combine such earthy sexuality and hunger for spiritual answers like Sarah.¹⁸

In Singer's world view the ideal place for women is inside her home, by the side of her husband and children. It is only by being an honest wife and mother that she can fulfil her role in life. Any deviation from her appointed role leads to suffering and destruction. Thus, in Singer, piety in a woman is praised whereas frivolity is criticised and ridiculed. This is because of Singer's personal and social beliefs which are deeply rooted in his Hasidic background. He makes use of only familiar figures, women he has known or heard of in his own life. Even after his long stay in America, he finds the women unfamiliar: "American women looked to me very different, they used a language which people in Poland did not use ... in a way aggressive, more aggressive and kind and humorous and silly. All I can say is that they were very different."¹⁹ Singer strongly believes in
writing only about the things he knows. That is why he does not write about his own wife: "Why wife is not Yiddish and even though I have known her for 40 years I don't think I know her well enough to write about her."

Singer's treatment of women, like his presentation of other characters, is thus, an integral part of his tradition itself.
NOTES


8. Rosenfeld, P.51.


15. Levitan, P.140.


