Chapter V

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What distinguishes the Jew is his memory . . . If we stop remembering we stop being.

—Elie Wiesel

The centrality of memory in the Jewish experience necessitates positing the complexity of diasporic factors that define a Jew by his/her devotion to the past. In that case, interpreting the present which leads to reconstructing identity is determined by understanding the past that is attained by the agent of memory. “The past,” Stuart Hall notes, “continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). The relation with the past that becomes effective only after the ‘break,’ is paradoxically a continuity that implies a rupture which connotes both memory and diaspora. Diaspora means the continuity of a race after dislocation while memory invokes the past which no longer exists. Memory, however, is but an element that gives form and meaning to the acute feelings of loss and displacement. It, therefore, becomes a space to dwell when the geographical space lies far away and provides an alternate existence when the real one is besieged and annihilated by the powers of persecution. The present chapter delineates the different faces in which memory crops up and occupies an elevated and prominent position in the Jewish-
American experience. Represented at personal and collective levels, memory in the postwar Jewish American discourse is defined as either a survivor memory or postmemory in terms of how far or near it is to the past.

Memory is often defined in terms of its significance to the present. Arguably, its focus is the past, but unless that portion of the past means something important to rebuild the present its memory remains submerged by the hibernating process of forgetfulness. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre, attributing the phrase “a memory of being” to the category of being called “for-itself” (84), states: “Every theory concerning memory implies the presupposition of the being of the past” (107). For Sartre, the past and its memory are part and parcel of the present: “Since the past is no more, since it has melted away into nothingness, if the memory continues to exist, it must be by virtue of a present modification of our being” (108). Accordingly, memory is a space where the past and the present meet and interact breaking the limits and constraints of time. The present, then, is coloured and decoded by the past in the same way the past is reconstructed on the basis of the present situation. This is why the mechanisms of defining an identity always take as a point of departure nurturing memory against forgetting. This leads to understanding individual memory as both distinct from and related to collective memory. In his book *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs, who finds a strong connection between society and memory, observes: “But I believe that the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society. It is not strange then that society causes the mind to transfigure the past to the point of yearning for it” (51). Laying emphasis on the ‘collective memory,’ Halbwachs thinks that the individual memory functions by relying on “the frameworks of social memory” (182). Events that one remembers acquire their
significance only if they are placed within a “discourse;” i.e. a single system of ideas. The most personal memories, therefore, constitute altogether the components of group memory:

But individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over—to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu. (Halbwachs 53)

The memories of individuals surviving racist oppression or traumas represent an example of the way the present social milieu, the past trauma, and the collective response meet.

The most serious and systematic type of memories is the survivor memory as it hides beneath it multiple layers of anguish and repression. It is often tormenting to remember and explain and sometimes the persistent intrusion of the traumatic past makes it incommunicable for individuals as well as for groups. In his account of memory and silence characterising the Holocaust survivors’ lives, Bjorn Krondorfer comments:

When the totality of memory continues to intrude into the present life of survivors, their silence may be the most authentic act of remembering—because such wordlessness, rooted in continuously felt pain and despair, testifies to a visceral memory that remains
incommunicable and unrecognizable even to the survivors themselves.

(244-45)

Referring to the survivor memory in the Jewish context, however, can include even those who carry along memories of events that never happen to them though they may fall into the category of their victims. For, it is often supposed that every Jew is a survivor in the sense that he/she has been a potential victim. As a result, the theme of survival—real or metaphorical—imposes itself powerfully as a catalyst and precursor of memory. To survive a catastrophe or to live after the death of the beloved is to be exiled in memory. This is why Marianne Hirsch defines memory as “an act not only of recall but also of mourning, mourning often inflected by anger, rage and despair” (659). Hirsch, however, is best known for introducing the term ‘postmemory’ into the modern memory theory.

In “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,” Hirsch defines postmemory as a secondary or second-generation memory that signifies

a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created. (659)

Though Hirsch’s concept is basically developed to describe the Angst of the Holocaust second-generation survivors, she clarifies that the term is applicable to the
“memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” (662). Postmemory then characterises the experience of those who grow up in an environment dominated by the memory of traumatic events that overwhelm and shape their own stories. How far, then, does diasporic memory, especially that of Jews, adhere to postmemory? Jelena Šesnić has the answer:

However, here I would again like to take up the possibility that diasporic memory, insofar as it can be cast as postmemory, memory at a remove so to speak, is traumatic in that (1) it arises in direct response to loss (even if “the work of memory” then continuously strives to convert it into absence, as suggested by LaCapra) and (2) it begins its “work” belatedly, afterwards, by deferred action, suggesting a transgenerational space necessary for its agency. (193)

In this sense, the entire body of postwar Jewish American fiction is likely to be placed within the frameworks of both memory and postmemory. Memory poses itself strongly through individual and collective recollection of the past and mourning for the lost. Postmemory draws the broad framework of literature as an imaginative response to the exilic experience looming large in every Jewish consciousness.

For Saul Bellow, the degraded situation of civilisation is a principal stimulus to recalling the past sometimes due to nostalgia and some other times to trace the point of deviation. He, in Bradbury’s words, writes of “a post humanist world: the world of survivors, after Auschwitz; the world where human beings are dwarfed by cities they live in” (ix). His characters often attribute value to the past because even in its most critical moments it gives the present its ultimate shape and meaning. Bellow creates in Mr. Sammler an epitome of the postwar Jewish collective memory. A hero,
a thinker and a Holocaust survivor, he is haunted by his past and startled to
uneasiness by the present. Like Coleridge’s persona in *The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner*, Bellow’s Mr. Sammler is a person who has experienced both life-in-death
and death-in-life states. What stays behind the old Sammler is no more than a spectre
constituted, to a large extent, of memories and ideas that do not fit in the world of
New York and keep him in a complete estrangement. He is a Holocaust survivor
whose mission is to project scenes from the tragedy on the present peaceful but
morally deteriorating reality of America. While the repeatedly abrupt penetration of
his memory is implicitly meant to show the psycho-social impact of the catastrophe
on the lives of survivors, an emphasis is placed on memory per se as a way of giving
meaning to the existence of a man whose roots lie somewhere else. Wallace, a
character in the novel, states: “The memory is precious. It’s much more vivid than
chocolate cake, and much richer” (156). For him, none can dispense with his
memories, and keep aloof from the past which is his essence and significance in the
present: “Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from
the door” (156). Reproducing the past is, thus, a primary constituent of identity.

A significant feature of Mr. Sammler is that he is one-eyed, a trait that evokes
profound implications. Seeing the world through only one eye means that half of the
protagonist is absent somewhere but conducts visits whenever scenes from the past
are recollected. For, having “only one good eye” (2) suggests that the here-and-now
world contains only half of the truth whereas the other half is revealed only when the
past manifests itself through visual memories. True, “the good eye was dark bright,
full of observation” (2), but Mr. Sammler needs the blind eye equally. If the right eye
helps him indulge in minutest details of the present, the left flawed eye,
distinguishing only light and shade represents a channel connecting Mr. Sammler to a world of the past where no distinctive colours make their objects traceable. Movement between the two worlds, then, takes place throughout the novel alternately and symbolically switching from one eye to another. In his encounter with the black pickpocket, Mr. Sammler’s fear, giving way to nervous stress that he feels sickening his skull, muscles and blood, allows switching to take place. The vision is directed through the damaged nerve of the blind eye to a scene of the past, the Holocaust:

He felt a constriction, a clutch of sickness at the base of the skull where the nerves, muscles, blood vessels were tightly interlaced. The breath of wartime Poland passing over the damaged tissue—that nerve-spaghetti, as he thought of it. (2-3)

Recollecting the traumatic past develops into nervous symptoms that persistently define the present through the eye of the past and retrieve the past in response to present catalysts.

The stream-of-consciousness technique allows moving between images of grotesque death and those of surrealistic life in a harmonious juxtaposition. Repetitively, the luxury of waking up from a tormenting nightmare is interrupted by scenes recalled from the tragedy because they have their catalysts in the present-day America. Fetter’s mad insurance adjuster’s bullet tearing thousands of names in the telephone book reminds Sammler of the Nazis’ mass murder; a phone ringing in a shop brings to his mind the moment death does not answer his call as he is buried alive; and scattering away some disturbing thoughts out of his mind is like the desperate pushing of corpses away from himself in the mass grave “choked with blood” and creeping “on his belly” (169). This last image is reenacted in Sammler’s
imagination as he sees Margotte “chopping onion in a bowl” (169). Hence, after twenty-two years of arrival in America, Mr. Sammler’s vision of the place is no more than a refuge from death relatively peaceful but coloured by the horror lurking afresh in memory.

Although Sammler’s recalled experience seems personal, the fragments of memory convene to constitute a collage of a horrible collective past to which he is a palimpsest. What makes Sammler powerfully devoted to memory is the fact that he, unlike others, is preoccupied with painful matters which others cannot understand since they have not experienced. Things which others may think of as nightmares are for him true as sunlight. One day, he, his wife and others have to strip naked waiting for the moment to be shot dead. Earlier they are given shovels to dig up their graves. Upon the completion of their work they are shot dead into the grave. Sometimes, Mr. Sammler feels guilty that while he lives, his wife is killed. He cannot do anything to save her; instead he does his share in digging the grave, “But as it had turned out, he had prepared her for death without sharing it. She was killed, not he. She had passed the course, and he had not” (226). Poland, their birth place, opens its mouth claiming them into its abyss.

But the catastrophe does not end with the loss of his wife. The same day he is struck blinded by a gun-butt fainting in the process to be spared death. In his view, he is not lucky enough to die, “But somehow he had failed, unlike the others, to be connected. . . : death had not picked up the receiver to answer his ring” (112). Thereafter he wanders in Zamosht Forest freezing and starving with “the dead eye like a ball of ice in his head” (113). The self-preserving impulse turns him into a shooter with a stone-like heart absolutely deaf to the German’s plea for mercy.
Simply killing to gain gun, shells, food, boots, gloves, Sammler becomes a role-player in the jungle law to which he simultaneously is a victim. Now deriving ‘joy’ out of killing, he is a ghastly corpse bursting into life by the soul released from the body of his victim. Still, a man who comes out of grave to live a new life can never stay intact. Something should be paid off as a price of survival. In Sammler’s case the postpaid bill assumes the form of soreness in the heart for all that looks like life but actually is another phase of death. Eaten up by sense of insecurity and the tendency to stay detached, many questions arise in his mind: “If I sleep, will I ever wake? Am I really alive, or is there nothing left but an illusion of life?” (190). He, like Nazerman, finds himself obliged to abandon his humanity in order to survive psychologically.

In the words of Kremer, “Bellow focuses on the consequences of survival: death or distortion of the creative impulse, impairment of the capacity to love, and religious confusion” (45). In Sammler’s case, the consequences of survival chiefly take the shape of indifference to humanity. Rethinking the morality of his detachment, Mr. Sammler finds no reason to be involved, “And a man who has been killed and buried should have no other interest. He should be perfectly disinterested” (96). Hence, coming out of the grave, actually not metaphorically, entails having a soul that is not one’s own. Moreover, what is the use of mingling in a world of eccentrics? “Declare for normalcy,” thinks Sammler, “and you will be stormed by aberrancies. All postures are mocked by their opposites. This is what happens when the individual begins to be drawn back from disinterestedness to creaturely conditions” (96). It is, then, the Sammler of London and Cracow who derives pleasure from watching the crime on the bus. Later, he is forced to avoid the bus in
order to evade another dreadful encounter with pity. But while watching the crime helplessly is separatism, avoiding the entire scene is a step further in separatism.

Although there is much of repulsion to civilisation, and desolation in him, Sammler is not a misanthrope who dissociates himself by judging. He instead dissociates himself by not judging. Sammler thinks this is the way of God; a hell of indifference; no concern for justice, and no pity or even deliverance from pain. Such misery and despair, brought about by man’s surge for individuality and the hidden pain of the heart that this crisis of existence ensues, draw Sammler’s ratiocination and reasoning toward a purely existentialist conclusion: “And there is a peculiar longing for nonbeing. Maybe it is more accurate to say that people went to visit all other states of being in a diffused state of consciousness” (194). One aspect of nonbeing, in Sartre’s view, is the past since it no more exists. Another aspect is, for Sammler, the earth that represents a space where he dwells in order to remember. This is why flying to the moon means to Sammler a journey to “the bliss of oblivion” (110) while staying on the planet implies an acceptance of the exile that memory embodies.

Mr. Sammler comes out of the Poland’s symbolic world outliving the trouble and becomes immune to any aggressive analytical approach. And metamorphosing into a symbol, he breaks through stability and certainty and flies around broader spheres of meaning, “It was the Sammler who kept on vainly trying to perform some kind of symbolic task. The main result of which was unrest, exposure to trouble. Mr. Sammler had a symbolic character. He, personally, was a symbol” (75). This is exactly what his acquaintances thought of him, “a judge a priest” who survives in miracle; a phoenix, in other words, that comes out of ashes to live a new life. But he does not see himself as a survivor. The pre-Holocaust Sammler disappears and the
one assuming his character is a new one. If survival means outliving death, then he gains a few cheap moments of it for nothing but to remember and grieve. Like the moon with which he is preoccupied, Sammler dwindles between ‘lifelessness’ and ‘deathlessness’, between two lives before and after, yet none amounts to the reality of life. This is exactly the stance of Rosa, a Holocaust survivor in Cynthia Ozick’s eponymous short story ‘Rosa,’ who rightly comments on the meaning of survival: “Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie” (58). At a broader level, the novel evokes an analogy between the protagonist and the central metaphor—the moon. Both Mr. Sammler and the moon observe the universe through a single eye. “By a sole eye, seen as a sole eye” (85). Accordingly, the American phase of Sammler’s life is similar to the lunar life of cyclic movement between birth and death.

As a Holocaust survivor, Mr. Sammler finds himself surrounded by loss and deceased beloved relatives; his wife and Margotte’s husband, Usher Arkin, whose memory Sammler nurtures by keeping his humidor as a token in the bedroom in Margotte’s apartment. Fate seems to conspire against him, and whomsoever he loves, soon he loses. His survival is no more than a ghastly existence haunted by their memory: “Wherever you looked, or tried to look, there were the late. It took some getting used to” (5). But it is Gruner’s death that represents the back-breaking event in Sammler’s second life. Dr. Gruner’s illness of aneurysm represents a point at which Sammler’s anxiety surfaces. The generous rich man, though a nephew from a step-sister of Sammler (his uncle by courtesy), “paid their rents, invented work for Shula, supplemented the Social Security and German indemnity checks” (61). Since 1947, Sammler and Shula have been Dr. Gruner’s dependents. This is why when he
feels anxiety over the expected death of Dr. Gruner, Sammler is actually worried about his and his daughter’s future. In short, they owe their emplacement and normalised life in America to Elya.

Bellow portrays through Sammler-Gruner bond how the past and the present interact yielding creative amalgamation. To Gruner, Sammler is more than an old relative who deserves charity. He is an epitome of history and one of ‘the guardians of traditions’ (Halbwachs 48) that Gruner needs to remember constantly in order to cherish the sense of belonging. Dr. Gruner is committed not only to his kinsfolk but also to the State of Israel. His fruits are imported “from Beersheba”, he buys Israel bonds and real estate, in Westchester “he served Israeli wine and brandy” (66) and he promotes for Israeli products. Even during his illness he flies to Jerusalem. He loves to recollect the stories of his grandparents in the old country since being tied to one’s own past is the means to enhance the tribe’s emancipation in the present. Sammler admires his nephew’s communal interests hoping he can help him acquire the complete image of the past he painstakingly pursues, “Contemporary contacts being somewhat unsatisfactory, he would gladly have helped Gruner to build up the past” (68). It is not by chance then that his name comes from the Yiddish word ‘sammler’ (to gather) when he becomes “a Tiresias figure, a one-eyed observer” (Kremer 58). To Sammler, Gruner is a saviour, who even in the death bed is concerned about the wellbeing of his uncle. He assures him about the continuity of the payment from the West Germany and asks him not to worry about security in old age or being in a home. Charged with the poignant feelings of gratitude to his dying nephew, Sammler thinks: “In short, if the earth deserves to be abandoned, if we are now to be driven streaming into other worlds, starting with the moon, it is not because of you [Gruner]”
(70). An exterminator of anxiety, Gruner is a model of humanity that makes the earth a utopian planet to Sammler.

A common feature of most of Bellow’s novels is that the protagonist appears anxious throughout the novel over a relative dying or threatened by death. While both Sammler and Leventhal keep commuting between their houses and the hospitals attending on Gruner and Mickey respectively, Herzog’s movement is done once from the Berkshire house to Chicago to rescue his daughter. All of them, however, ruminate about the absurdity of life and death so close and recall scenes from their past. What makes the matter more entangled for them is the presence of others (Elena and her mother in The Victim, Wallace the queer and his perverse sister in Mr. Sammler’s Planet and Madeline and Valentine in Herzog) with whom the protagonists are, to greater or lesser degrees, in conflict. In this novel, Wallace, Angela and Eisen are hovering around the dying Elya with avaricious tendencies that, in Sammler’s view, contaminate his soul’s departure. Sammler sees death stealing away the life of a person he loves, this time his saviour. Biyot K. Tripathy traces in Mr. Sammler’s Planet an adherence to the typical Bellovian pattern in which “a last dark journey is made, at the end of which is a confrontation with death” (216). Like the protagonist in Seize the Day, Sammler’s journey at the end of the novel marks a withdrawal from a wider world to the enclosed space of death that certainly leads to a further enclosure of the spirit. Wilhelm sees in the funeral of a stranger a clue to understand the meaning of his misery. So does Sammler with a difference that the latter’s confrontation with death is ambiguous. Hence, attending a place where death is present looks “like drowning in air” (80). Death cannot defeat him when his own life is threatened but can do so by taking away the life of Elya.
The end of the novel is the most poignant. Waiting for the news of Elya’s death to be confirmed, Sammler is like ‘sitting on the edge of a cliff’ (251). Dr. Cosbie comes out to announce it, and Sammler’s agony flows boundlessly for the loss of Gruner as well as for himself, a poor man with a dependant daughter in a desperate condition, abandoned. This is the last nail in the coffin of Sammler’s attempt to come to terms with a torturing present. What the Nazis cannot deprive him of, death can:

He felt that he was being destroyed, what was left of him. He wept to himself. . . . He felt that he was breaking up, that irregular big fragments inside were melting, sparkling with pain, floating off. Well, Elya was gone. He was deprived of one more thing, stripped of one more creature. One more reason to live trickled out. He lost his breath. (259)

Sammler’s hope of living eclipses along with Elya’s death. The latter always epitomises Sammler’s version of the American dream, of rejuvenation, and of living a second life. Metaphorically, Sammler’s death has been postponed by twenty-two years. An agent of the past, he needs the present that Gruner incarnates to understand himself, so the latter’s death becomes a new rupture in self-integrity. This is precisely Bellow’s delineation of the survivor memory.

Moses Herzog is a typical Bellovian protagonist, who gets involved in an encounter with his own past. Surviving the ordeal of a second marriage, he is in pursuit of a personal vengeful justice in the novel. Like Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint and like Mr. Sammler, Herzog’s mind is so tied to memories and speculation that he appears arrested in the present time. As a novel of character, Herzog belongs entirely in the past which in turn gets processed and
reproduced in the protagonist’s memory. Bellow likens Herzog’s memory in which people and events are stored, analysed and then disposed of, to a persecution machine in the sense that their ugly hidden faces are disclosed. The third-person narrator emphasises: “Almost certainly, Nachman ran away from the power of his old friend’s memory. Herzog persecuted everyone with it. It was like a terrible engine” (132). Herzog himself, displaying the nature of his real position as a central consciousness, defines his memory: “But I with my memory—all the dead and the mad are in my custody, and I am the nemesis of the would-be forgotten. I bind others to my feelings, and oppress them” (134). His bad faith incites him to think of his memory as a gas chamber where his persecutors have to be paid back their sins against him. For, after all, Herzog thinks that to remember is his right by nature since he is a survivor.

The mouthpiece of not only Bellow but also the postwar Jewish mentality, Herzog thinks of a life dominated by suffering as a face of survival no matter what catastrophe man survives. Herzog, recalling the “blood-colored sunsets of winter and solitude” (128) behind him, comes to a philosophical conclusion about survival. The bad things of the past do not look bad in the present. This situation however does not, by any means, reduce the label of survival of a person still getting no chance to absolutely control his life. “Survived!” he notes “Till we figure out what’s what. Till the chance comes to exert a positive influence” (128). Herzog feels triumphant over outliving all the ebbs and tides of his life: failed marriage, hospitals, psychiatrists, lawyers, drugs, debts revenge, insomnia, etc., “he wondered that he had survived at all” (94). He survives because he wants to survive, no matter how that survival is misshapen. He falls back on what Spinoza, the Jewish philosopher, says about it: “the first requirement of stability in human being was that the said human being should
really desire to exist” (96). But in his case to live is to moan under the load of Angst, to stand defiant to others’ conspiracies even if that defiance gets reduced to a mere psychological murder of which a timid person like Herzog is capable, “one thought-murder a day keeps the psychiatrist away” (96). It is through surviving ordeals that Herzog feels the compulsion of memory.

For Herzog, surviving the act of committing murder against his enemies represents a victory. Since the beginnings he is, like Hamlet, a man of thoughts but not of action. Coming all the way along to Chicago, and spying on the target—Madeline and Gersbach, Herzog’s attempt to fire the “pistol was nothing but a thought” (257). Pushing the crisis of his life to its climax, Herzog at that exact point can defeat the sense of defeat caused by the scoundrels’ injustice meted out to him. His sense of triumph comes from the illuminated realisation that the intended fatal violence where the two love-actors cunningly trap him in reduces to a ludicrous ‘theatre.’ By revoking that nihilistic decision, Herzog can gain a new redeemed life and get saved from ‘self-hatred. As though up to that moment he has been suffocated, Herzog now can breathe: “His breath came back to him; and how good it felt to breathe! It was worth the trip” (258). Ironically, Herzog, who comes to exterminate two lives, earns a new life for himself instead.

Herzog’s trauma goes back to a childhood sexual abuse when a dirty man molested him forcing his orgasm upon the helpless boy. Ironically, Herzog later in the hospital is made to read from the Old Testament: “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (289). Recalling this, Herzog remembers, too, a grand German advice: “to forget what you can’t bear” (289). But those philosophers, in Herzog’s view, are ignorant that only the strong can forget and shut up his history. Herzog is a Jew and
narcissist at the same time, i.e., double weak, so he does not belong to that category. To be strong and to hold your head up among people you must hate yourself first, “Hatred is self-respect” (289). He, then, can only survive because he is a Jew, a true sufferer. In his long letter to professor Mermelstein, Herzog philosophises on suffering locating implicitly his own position as a Jew and an intellectual in its map. The pain, in his opinion, needs a power that can employ it for the wellbeing of humanity. In religions, to suffer means to get an opportunity for salvation by transcending evil. For artists, however, the matter is different.

Why not say rather that people of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into their bliss, as people pinch themselves to feel awake. (317)

Herzog, the artist, belongs to this category, “I know that my suffering, if I may speak of it, has often been like that, a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion, and therefore I can take no moral credit for it”. (317). Both wakefulness and the extended form of life suggest true attributes of postwar memory.

The movement from resenting society to accommodating and involving is stated in his message to Edvig where he describes the lesson he learns from Madeline’s eye that “For cowards, not-being!” (304). That also helps him decipher the chief ambiguity in his life:

I think I can say, however, that I have been spared the chief ambiguity that afflicts intellectuals, and this is that civilized individuals hate and
resent the civilization that makes their lives possible. What they love is an imaginary human situation invented by their own genius which they believe is the only true and the only human reality. (304)

Philosophically, Herzog discovers how disappointing the reality of stepping down from the realm of thought and ideas—unreal—to the realm of action—real—is. It exposes to him a deformed ordinary life, “Is this, by chance, the reality you have been looking for, Herzog, in your earnest Herzog way? . . . By yourself you can’t determine which reality is real?” (287). For him, the entire event is as human as burning the house to roast the pig.

In Herzog’s long letter to Shapiro, Bellow harps upon the idea of how Jews, living as survivors, can never turn a blind eye to the cost of that survival. The cost is paid either collectively in the form of a large number of human ransoms devoured by the fire of Western hatred or individually in the aftermath living as spectres haunted by the cloudy memory of the lost.

_We are survivors, in this age, so theories of progress ill become us, because we are intimately acquainted with the costs. To realize that you are a survivor is a shock. At the realization of such election, you feel like bursting into tears. As the dead go their way, you want to call to them, but hey depart in a black cloud of faces, souls. They flow out in smoke from the extermination chimneys, and leave you in the clear light of historical success—the technical success of the West._ (75)

Herzog becomes clear in his motivations and self-justifications towards the end of the novel. He affirms how self-explanation, signifying the stir behind what he is and what
the novel essentially is composed of, is a necessity of survival. The explained life, no matter how unbearable it is, becomes, in terms of the historical consciousness, more worthy living than the unexplained one. The new law is “Synthesize or Perish” (322). Hence, the moment at the end of the novel when Herzog stops composing messages inaugurates the post-survival stage of life that by implication precedes his non-being. By resorting to silence, Herzog prefers quiet emptiness to stormy anguish. Anguish, in this sense, is a byproduct of survival in which the protagonist is lost in poignant reflection about how his life is an epilogue to others’ death.

The issue of survival as raised by Bellow is part and parcel of the past-centred Jewish identity. In Herzog, the Napoleon Street of Montreal days, parents, siblings, aunt, etc. constitute the protagonist’s Jewish background which he cherishes with nostalgia. Like most of Bellow’s protagonists, Herzog’s journey into the past should pass by his mother as a figure whose influence shapes his present outlook of the world. A great part of Herzog dilemma owes much to the melancholy he has once seen and experienced in his mother’s look:

And though he recalled his mother’s sad face with love, he couldn’t say, in his soul, that he wanted to see such sadness perpetuated. Yes, it reflected the deep experience of a race, its attitude toward happiness and toward mortality. (232)

Hence, through probing the melancholic, agonised and sometimes disastrous experience of a mother or a mother figure, Bellow offers his protagonist a track to the heart of their history suggesting that whatever the present is, it can never be mutilated from the past.
Herzog remembers his Baltic mother with a nostalgic agony. Once, going to the restaurant with Madeline, Herzog loiters around the fish store for nothing but recollecting the likes of his deceased mother. “Well, my mother came from the Baltic provinces. She loved fish” (113), explains Herzog to the inconsiderate Madeline who does not care for the dead. But what Herzog remembers well is the week of her death in winter. Losing the power to speak and struggling to extend her life several moments so that she can comfort her Moses, Sarah Herzog strokes the hand of the boy sitting by her deathbed with those death-cold fingers. Of all past thoughts, Herzog recalls well the heartbreaking vision. Apparently, it begets Herzog’s later preoccupation with death. This is why Herzog is intensively moved by the Indian film of an old woman dying in the woods along with a young girl in the rain. The scene brings to his mind a gloomy past and an ambiguous future, “His heart was aching. He too had a daughter, and his mother too had been a poor women. He had slept on sheets made of flour sacks” (48). In the midst of these crowded memories of his mother, Herzog feels guilty for not visiting her grave, and thus writes her an incomplete letter: “Dear Mama, as to why I haven’t visited your grave in so long…” (11). The thought of his mother helps Herzog to figure out his parents’ diasporic grievances.

America, for Sarah Herzog is a place of misery where she sadly dreams of her luxurious past, “On this withdrawn side, she often had a dreaming look, melancholy, and seemed to be seeing the Old World” (139). In the slum of Napoleon Street of Montreal, his mother, along with the other members of the family, is wretchedly struggling to survive. Herzog remembers how his father’s life is a series of unlucky illegal business that leads him from Russia to Canada and then to America. Whenever
he starts a business by smuggling goods, spotters and police turns it into a failure. In all that he is motivated by the moral instinct of keeping dependent children alive: “On Napoleon Street he had five mouths to feed” (138). Grandfather Herzog, taking refuge in the Winter Palace of Russia, is an instance of the disintegrating family. When Herzog reads his writing, “Shall I ever see the faces of my grand children? And who will bury me?” (138), he cannot withhold his tears.

Taking into consideration the parents’ memories, hopes and despair that shape the imagination of little Herzog, his recreation of the past amounts to postmemory. For, while recollecting scenes from their life, he remembers the mysterious depressive powers governing their action; powers that he is too young to decipher. Recalling all that in addition to the quarrels of his father with often-grudging Aunt Zipporah, Herzog realises how attachment to the past is so unwilling that he can never give it up. To haunt the past and love the dead is a weakness in his depressive character:

Depressives cannot surrender childhood—not even the pains of childhood. He understood the hygiene of the matter. But somehow his heart had come open at this chapter of his life and he didn’t have the strength to shut it. (143)

He remembers how his mother strictly instructs him not to let anybody know about his personal or familial background at the age of five years, “You must never say” (22). Adhering to that repressed self-expression of childhood, Herzog in the present never says anything; he writes whatever he wants instead. Apparently, this gives a clue to his silent and discreet communication with the world around.
While moving towards grand central, Herzog’s memory moves forty years back in time when his family’s holidays used to begin with a train ride. The images of his father’s peeling pears, of his mother moistening her handkerchief at her mouth and rubbing his face clean, and of his brothers and sisters intensify his sense of present loneliness where there are “no pears, no Willie, no Shura, no Helen, no mother” (33). They have been absented either by death or by the distance imposed by the struggle to live, to be one’s own, “But he had not forgotten the odor of his mother’s saliva on the handkerchief that summer morning in the squat hollow Canadian station, the black iron and the sublime brass” (33). The whole story of the family’s misery and gloomy past leaves its impression on Herzog’s heart:

I still know these cries of the soul. They lie in the breast, and in the throat. The mouth wants to open wide and let them out. But all these are antiquities—yes Jewish antiquities originating in the Bible, in a Biblical sense of personal experience and destiny. (148)

By telling the tale of exceptional suffering, Herzog feels that he is still a slave to Papa’s pain. Now comparing that distressing past to the anguished present, Herzog finds out how his movement, though upward, has been catastrophic, “I rose from humble origins to complete disaster” (152). At this juncture, the personal memories and postmemories intermingle and give way to the collective ones.

The memories of his childhood with grievous mother, desperate father, and the tiny dreams of brothers and sisters, help Herzog retrieve, from a far off corner in his past, their bitter sweetness, “My ancient times. Remoter than Egypt. Now dawn, the foggy winters” (140). Representing the consciousness of the race, Herzog traces the present diasporic misfortune and wandering to the enslavement under the
Egyptian Pharaoh. This is why Herzog’s heart feels attached to the memory of his brother’s reciting ancient prayer with a power that transcends the distance in time and space separating them from their historical core. As he remembers the entire scenes, Herzog nostalgically emphasises:

Here was a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find. The children of the race, by a never-failing miracle, opened their eyes on one strange world after another, age after age, and uttered the same prayer in each, eagerly loving what they found. (140)

While such memories are fused with sweet nostalgia, they leave a vacuum of loss in Herzog’s soul. This is why he tries to drive them out of his mind in order to subsist. To him, perpetual thoughts of death are symptoms of disorder, so he urges himself to get past them, “Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead” (33). But can Herzog do so?

Exploring Hegel’s ideas about the essence of human life, Herzog rethinks his attitude towards history, memory and the knowledge of death as three components of humanity. “[B]y man came death.’ For knowledge of death makes us wish to extend our lives at the expense of others” (162). Herzog is preoccupied with death, however, not in accordance with Hegel’s theory of struggle for power, but because he is denied the bliss of death. Once he writes “No person, no death” (3), the phrase that originates intentionally or unintentionally in Heidegger’s and Sartre’s emphasis that without being there will be no ‘non-being.’ Many things in Herzog’s life can be projected on the same equation. His life is corrupted because he happens to be an incompetent husband; he mismanages everything because there are many things in his life in need of well management and control; these all are symptoms of disintegration since the
integrated self cannot outlive them; and above all he is doomed to suffer and wander externally and internally because, he believes, he is a Jew.

Towards the end, Herzog becomes more preoccupied with death which, in Tripathy’s opinion, is typical of Bellow’s ending that marks a ‘threshold’ at which “everything seems to disintegrate” (217). Herzog envisions the human fragility before death in this image: “Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb” (290). Human life is governed by hatred and cruelty rather than love and sympathy. People do all that because death opens its mouth and, thus, they can spare themselves by pushing others into it. Sooner or later they will fall however:

You think history is the history of loving hearts? You fool! Look at them millions of dead. Can you pity them, feel for them? You can nothing! There are too many. We burned them to ashes, we buried them with bulldozers. . . . If the old God exists he must be a murderer. But the one true god is Death. (290)

For a survivor, remembering death is one way of commitment to the requirements of survival. Herzog does so by way of keeping vigilant to its nihilistic powers. For, the experience of anguish resulting from facing death leads to authentic existence.

In The Victim, Bellow creates a protagonist whose present depression and insecurity can be understood by an analysis of his unhappy childhood and tense familial relationships that mar his ability to fathom and deal with an equally annoying present. Asa Leventhal, though having no first hand experience of the Holocaust, falls victim to a horrible chase of a manic anti-Semite that turns the entire cityscape of New York to a quasi concentration camp. In Malcolm Bradbury’s words, Bellow’s
novels are filled with “the incorporation of ghetto experience into the post-war mainstream life of super-rich America; the guilt of the survivor, never able to grow free of the horrors of the Holocaust and the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. . .” (ix). Furthermore, Leventhal is burdened much more by the condition of his dying nephew, Mickey, with an absent father and a cranky mother. Leventhal is, therefore, a survivor in the sense that he can outlive the abyss of psychological chaos into which Albee persistently attempts to push him. In addition, he experiences the agony of losing a relative Mickey in whom he sees his own past tortured by separation from a mad mother.

Comparatively, Leventhal’s existence in America is not that of a refugee like Mr. Sammler but the crisis of identity in his case is more traceable than in Mr. Sammler’s Planet and Herzog. He is involved in a struggle to cherish his life in a world that, like the bus he misses at the beginning of the novel, never stops for a poor immigrant unless he is able to force his space in the crowd. This is his father’s philosophy which Leventhal, all the time self-conscious and touchy to anti-Semitism, fails to adopt. He remembers how his father, careless about living among haters, always repeats the saying: “Call me Ikey, call me Moe, but give me that dough. What’s it to me if you despise me? What do you think equality with you means to me?” (98). Leventhal, nevertheless, does not hold a high reverend image of his father because of his complete apathy to anti-Semitism and materialistic interests. As a result, he does not only reject his ideals but also looks down on the “proud old fool with his savage looks” (99). It is then that the memory of a father tyrannising over the entire family and driving the mother to insanity causes Leventhal’s sense of insecurity in adult life.
Like Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Leventhal has a father figure whose image is maintained with respect and glorification since he represents a saviour who can pick him up from the drabs of life. Harkavy adopts Leventhal, encourages him to go to college, and even lends him money. His death, later, represents a disappointing shock to Leventhal. He finds himself cast again, first into a “dirty hall bedroom on the East Side, starved and thin” (11) where he used to sell shoes and later becomes a clerk in a hotel on lower Broadway. It is this exact scene of misery that Leventhal cannot help but remember with agony. Watching the scene of Albee and the woman, Leventhal feels heartsick as his memory goes back to his early wretchedness working at that hotel. He is overwhelmed by a sense of Angst that comes as a result of what Kierkegaard calls the “possibility of possibility;” i.e. the possibility of having been caught in the same position. Moreover, the scene arouses in his memory the dark aspect of life he once lived, “Both of them, Albee and the woman, moved or swam toward him out of a depth of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended” (249). In other words, their condition is the abyss on the brink of which Leventhal once stood and now is standing looking down full of “awful pain and dread” (249).

The life of seclusion, Leventhal once led in New York, extends to his life in Baltimore where his “alien, sceptical interest” (12) in the world passively shapes his paranoid outlook and wild reaction to any hostile remark. In the midst of all these poignant memories, his first meeting and then relationship with Mary emerges as a ray of hope. The symbolic significance of the egg race where he meets and falls in love with her arises from the way he changes from an observer to a participant. Paralleling this movement is a metaphorical growth from seclusion to accommodation: “He ran in the egg race, he swam, he felt his spirit thawed out that
day” (12). Mary stands out as a stimulator in all that, though Leventhal’s ungraceful conduct sometimes pushes their affair to a critical impasse. Conscious of the disfigurement caused by the harshness of his life, Leventhal always feels afraid of being shared Mary’s heart by someone else. And like the duke in Browning’s “My last Duchess,” he evokes his partner’s sin so that he can punish her. Leventhal urges Mary to confess an old sin with a married man only to punish her shocked by the pain of reality. The memory of the egg race, then, brings to Leventhal’s mind the fragility of man as he stands vulnerable to any external provocation. Dealing with life in a place surrounded by haters is like handling an egg: “Man is weak and breakable, has to have just the right amounts of everything—water, air, food; . . . there was also the opposite, playing catch with the egg, threatening the egg” (88-89). His encounter with Albee is a reenactment of the egg race that culminates in a critical moment with the egg being almost broken when the eccentric turns the gas open in an attempt to commit suicide. If that happens, then Leventhal will have lost the race broadly standing for his life in New York and the struggle to survive. Moreover, Mary’s status throughout the novel never goes beyond a mere memory. Like most of Bellow’s female characters, she is an abstraction that exists only within photo frame, a few postcards, and in the protagonist’s hopes.

Emphasizing the value of the past, Sartre notes that

citation

memory presents to us the being which we were, accompanied by a plenitude of being which confers on it a sort of poetry. That grief which we had—although fixed in the past—does not cease to present the meaning of a for-itself. . . . (119)
The poetry of Leventhal’s for-itself is a sense of an inexorable depression. Through his memory the reader is exposed to the gloomy past as a background to his recent condition. At the core of that past, there is the disintegration of the family and the movement of the abandoned children into odd jobs to cherish themselves. Leventhal’s experience in Hartford amounts to a nightmare with a father “selfish toward his sons” and a mother who “died in an insane asylum when Leventhal was eight and his brother six” (10). Their little minds are too immature to understand the real fate of their mother accepting the father’s part of the story that their mother is “an embittered ‘gone away’” (10). When discussing the whole matter with Mary later, she believes that their mother’s fate remains ambiguous and that they should have not accepted their father’s narrative. Recalling very faintly the “large features and black hair” of his mother, Leventhal starts examining in his imagination what now looks like “an abstracted look” which is nothing but a “mad-looking; a familiar face and yet without anything in it directed toward him” (46). What bothers Leventhal is to have anything resembling that look, a feeling that Mary refers to as lack of self-confidence and vulnerability to others’ views of him. He is anxious to have inherited any aspect of that madness which, while he is unaware of, others might see vividly in him. This is why Harkavy’s remark about persecution pesters his peace of mind, “Knowing his history, how could Harkavy say that to him?” (46). This is how the personal and collective histories become inseparable.

Again, Bellow bases understanding the present on the way it reproduces the past and, thus, reconstructing the past on the present simulators. Leventhal’s mind develops a pattern of analogy between what Mickey-Elena relationship is and the abstract memory of his mother. Elena and his mother are alike in the sense that when
they are disturbed they go mad. They are mad, however, in no identical manner and the miserable fate of their sons—Leventhal and Mickey—is a consequence of that madness. These are some instances in which Leventhal sees in Mickey an image of himself and in Elena an incarnation of his deceased mother. As a result, Leventhal fears Elena’s anger when unintentionally his ring rubs against the boy’s bed causing noise. He dares not enter the child’s room in her absence, and watching closely the expression of her eyes, he “felt a pang of his peculiar dread at their [her eyes’] sudden widening” (51). Motivated by his mental analogy, Leventhal, after the death of Mickey, advises his brother Max to find her a psychiatrist to avoid any mental disintegration.

Rethinking Elena-Mickey relationship, Leventhal judges how an extreme maternal love can be fatal. Elena’s hypochondriac fear of hospitals determines keeping the miserable child within her grip leading to his deteriorating health. The child is no longer a person since his fate is determined by his mother’s outlook. This poses the question of how fair it is to the child. To Leventhal, “that was the meaning of helplessness” (45). The child seems a decaying corpse embalmed by his mother’s hypersensitive care and hospital phobia. The environment she creates round the dying boy indeed foreshadows his fate, “He was lying in Elena’s hot, shadowy, close room,” (7) with damp hair, open mouth and burning cheek. Witnessing the dying child represents a moment in which Leventhal finds himself haunted by the smell of a lost generation.

The death of Mickey, though expected by Leventhal, causes a depressive shock to him. The wretched boy means much to him. Symbolically, Mickey represents a touchstone of Leventhal’s commitment that is not often strong and
coherent. This is why he cries bitterly when Villani brings the bad news to him. By no means Leventhal can rid the guilty sense of not doing his best to help the child. All he does is a reluctant response to an uncle’s duty that never passes without nagging remarks, unpleasant murmuring, and accusing the child’s father of being a shirker. From another perspective, Mickey’s death sends the protagonist to a very broad but cloudy horizon of speculation on the nature, meaning and value of his existence. When Dr. Denisart asks him to call Max, Leventhal certainly knows that it is the “showdown”. And arriving at this conclusion, he feels guilty, “for at least he had no hope” (140). Reflecting on the emotions aroused in him by the word ‘showdown’, he realises how comprehensive the word is, embracing Mickey’s crisis, Elena’s grievances and Albee’s trouble. But still its connotations go beyond to encompass the realms of his diasporic, existential dilemma:

But what he meant by this preoccupying ‘showdown’ was a crisis which would bring an end of his resistance to something he had no right to resist. Illness, madness, and death were forcing him to confront his fault... and the moment was coming when his strength to resist would be at end. (141).

Hence, by introducing the theme of death, Bellow invests a rupture at the brink of which memory is invoked and the entire process of survival is freely contemplated. This is one of the discrepancies that distinguish Bellow’s treatment of memory from that of Malamud.

While Malamud’s characters are trapped in the present, the root of their misery goes back to being part of a history that they have never chosen. They are obliged, therefore, to play their roles on that historical stage which Malamud’s calls
“God’s gift of drama” (qtd. in Abramson 147) regardless of the extent to which they fight for existence or for remembering the battle they have once fought. True, Malamud writes for all people as he likes to put it, but he, in Edward A. Abramson’s words, “relies upon aspects of Jewishness to provide in part what Issac Bashevis Singer called ‘an address,’ something that roots his characters and ideas in a specific people, with a specific history and customs” (147). The more these characters struggle to release themselves from the web of history that holds them tightly like a quicksand, the more they entangle themselves. Yakov Bok of The Fixer is a typical example. He tries to be a universalist freethinker like Spinoza, whose masterpiece The Ethics is condemned as atheistic, but the Jewish past pursues him like a shadow. Only in prison his memory, representing an internal sphere of confinement, guides him to his fate as a series of events organised by Spinoza’s principle of necessity, “He was imprisoned in a cell, and even in memory because so much that had happened to him during a life that had perhaps, at times, seemed free, now seemed designed to lead to this imprisonment” (187-88). In his case, when a Jew wants to forget, the entire people of Russia stand in league to remind him.

Referring the moments the past is conjured to the present social environment, Maurice Halbwachs states: “Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). Bok has to undergo the most inhuman exposure to that social milieu to become a part of the collective memory. Reflecting on the entire series of events leading him from the shtetl to the prison cell in Kiev, Yakov Bok gets confused by the senselessness and absurdity of life that heaps its burdens and miseries on a person already miserable. His worldview becomes existentialist as he ruminates:
The rain put out fires and created floods. Yet too much had happened that didn’t make sense. He had committed a few errors and paid for them in more than kind. One dark night a thick black web had fallen on him because he was standing under it, and though he ran in every direction he could not extricate himself from its sticky coils. Who was the spider if it remained invisible? (139-40)

Bok does not know who his perpetrator is: God for his disbelief; the goyim finding in him a scapegoat to inflict their eternal hatred against Jews; or he himself for jumping into sea without being able to swim. He questions the justice and rationality of putting an innocent person in prison: “Who were they punishing if his life was punishment?” (140). There is no reason, no proof to detain, imprison, and try him. There is only a plot against Jews and he happens to be the accidental choice for the sacrifice, “Being born a Jew meant being vulnerable to history, including its worst errors. Accident and history had involved Yakov Bok as he had never dreamed he could be involved” (141). In this respect, Lisa Ann Edwards observes: “Malamud selects a ‘thicker’ moment in history and creates a character who walks right into it” (121). But while the involvement is accidental, its effects, misery and anguish are personal.

Viewed from a thoughtful perspective, the entire novel, accounting for true incidents of victimisation of the Russian Jews, is Malamud’s own version of postmemory. It re-creates Belies’ gloomy story turning it into an imaginative work that contributes to reshaping the Jewish modern identity. Bok is doomed to survive many people and incidents as part of a miserable fate with which the entire race is afflicted. The opening seems designed to confirm that destiny of a Jew who outlives persecution only to be tortured by memory of deceased relatives and early orphanage.
He describes the incident in which his father is killed soon after his birth, “something less than a pogrom, and less than useless: two drunken soldiers shot the first three Jews in their path, his father had been the second” (8). Bok himself lives through a pogrom during his school days—of three-day Cossack raid. He cannot forget the image of a Jewish corpse he sees on the third day when led out of the cellar where they hide, “a black-bearded Jew with a white sausage stuffed into his mouth, lying on the road on a pile of bloody feathers, a peasant’s pig devouring his arm” (8). Such an image, imprinted in the mind of a school boy, becomes a horrible prologue to the tragic scenes that hang back on the stage of his life.

Bok survives a failed marriage and an unfaithful wife who elopes inaugurating a series of his degradation. In the prison, to retrieve his story with Raisl is like fishing in the rushing corners of an abandoned chest: “I search at memory. I think of Raisl” (189). The casual way in which they meet and marry anticipates the failure of their marriage. She always looks dissatisfied and in pursuit of luck actually out of her reach. Once their fate brings them together in a moment of illicit love affairs, their marriage becomes a necessity. While Raisl stipulates love as a pre-condition for marriage, Bok does not believe that love and misery can co-exist: “Who talks about love in the shtetl?” (191). As part of her nature Raisl keeps nagging him after their marriage to move out of Russia so that their luck might alter. After six years of childless marriage, Raisl’s desperate attempts to defeat barrenness and misery, frustrated by Bok’s passive acceptance of the status quo, turns into a demonic impulse. Ultimately, she elopes leaving a torturing memory and causing Bok to face all miserable consequences.
Bibikov, the Investigating Magistrate, is another example of a ray of hope that soon becomes a past abandoning Bok to an utter darkness. Bibkov pays his life as a price for his attempts to reveal the truth that is about to force the accusation of murder the opposite direction towards Marfa. He is, therefore, hanged in after several days of solitary confinement. Neighbouring Bok, he tries to convey a message by shouting and beating regularly on the wall in what looks like a code. With the murder of Bibkov the authorities kill the only hope of deliverance. Now, to survive after Bibkov’s sacrifice is to step down a level towards degradation, to live a new but more deformed phase of meaninglessness and absurdity. Consequently, the dark memory of Bibikov, his lost saviour, develops into a hallucinatory vision in which a ghost appears and vanishes. Living for several bitter weeks and months with the sweet anticipation of good to usher and feeding on the hope implanted and cultivated by the “just and gentleman,” Bok’s grief is endless on remembering that Bibikov is no longer there to help, “He mourned Bibikov with great sorrow, great bitterness” (166).

Bok can survive the most painful and humiliating treatment in the prison which might have pushed him to one of two catastrophic ends: suicide or insanity. The thought of suicide, the threat of death, and the torment of endless waiting for indictment leave Bok a body inhabited by ghostly obsessions. For a prisoner who can never expect when his indictment would come, waiting per se marks the highest degree of Angst. Waiting “a minute of hope and days of hopelessness,” Bok realises the absurdity of counting time units that accrue without having any use of them: “When one had nothing to do the worst thing to have was an endless supply of minutes. It was like pouring nothing into a million little bottles” (193-4). When one gets time but no hope, life becomes a heavy burden. Equally burdening is the
knowledge that people around him are conspiring against his life though they do not want to take it openly. The prison authorities are resolved to get rid of Bok since there is no evidence raised against him, and poisoning his food is the ‘final decision.’ Filled with horror of death, Bok’s sleep becomes a rehearsal of it, “He lay motionless in a graveyard, rigid, terrified. In the black sky were black stars. If he stirred he would topple into an open grave, amid the rotting dead, their dead flesh and putrefying bones” (165). Stuck in the pit of fate up to neck, Bok refers that suffering and anguish to history: “From birth a black horse had followed him, a Jewish nightmare. What was being a Jew but an everlasting curse? He was sick of their history, destiny, blood guilt” (206). The greatest agony for Bok arises, however, from the physical pain, mental anguish and most of all the frustration of having thoughts while a voice is denied. But to his persecutors’ misfortune, Bok’s years of silence activate the memory that helps him remember his essence and thus react in terms of collective memory.

Apparently, Malamud intends Bok to survive all these events in order to witness this exact moment of alliance with Jewishness which he has once denounced. “Bok’s survival,” comments Susan Mizruchi,

is imperiled as a Jew in essence. This may explain why Malamud sidesteps the ‘real’ ending of the Beilis case—the acquittal—because he wants to emphasize the perilous circumstances of the Jew in this pre-Holocaust moment. (486)

At a desperate moment, Bok starts thinking of a way to end his life by a hunger strike, hanging himself, or even provoking them to shoot him dead. But rethinking the wisdom of it, Bok infers that through maintaining his life and resisting the Russian
torturing machinery, he can stand like a thorn in their throat serving in the process the cause of his people. His life, therefore, is of value more than his death. Russians wants him to be a representative of a whole race and thus he feels obliged to represent his people well. At this juncture, Bok begins to revise his previous detachment and thus to believe in the right of Jews to live like other people:

He pities their fate in history. After a short time of sunlight you wake in a black and bloody world. Overnight a madman is born who thinks Jewish blood is water. Overnight life becomes worthless. The innocent are born without innocence. (246)

His involvement is quite complete after the vision in which he sees a coffin that contains Shmuel slaughtered. Obviously, Bok’s movement away from Jewishness is absolutely reversed.

Prior to this change, Bok tries to present himself as a secular thinker who has his example in Spinoza’s philosophy. Secularism, he hopes, might make Russians tolerant toward him. In the questionnaire he writes that he is a Jew “by birth and nationality” (80) interpreting it to Bibikov: “What I mean by that is I’m not a religious man” (80). Bok’s skepticism bordering on blasphemy is a symbolic step toward oblivion that he never attains due to external forces. He figures out God as his first and foremost enemy forgetting the real earthly one. When asked by Shmuel before departing the shtetl not to forget God he replies: “Who forgets who? What do I get from Him but a bang on the head and a stream of piss in my face? So what’s there to be worshipful about?” (19). He feels that he is in no need of God because he wants his piece of bread today not in the paradise. He even scorns the religious ways of the old Shmuel. In the ten-minute visit of Shmuel to him in prison, Bok does not scruple
to speak out his blasphemous grievances against God: “I blame him for not existing. Or if he does it’s on the moon or stars but not here. . . . I don’t need him unless he appears” (230-1). But the skepticism that begins as self-fashioning and ends as an outcome of frustration and despair does not change anything about Bok’s situation. This shocking truth is given in Bibikov’s words: “Do you think it adds to your stature to be irreligious?” (81). Malamud intentionally creates a skeptic character in Bok in order to drive home the message that a Jew is a Jew and nothing can protect him against history even if he denounces his people and religion. Ironically, the journey the destination of which is oblivion is recurrently signposted by agents of memory reminding the protagonists at each step of his fundamental nature.

In his short story “The Lady of the Lake” published in The Magic Barrel, Malamud brings in a character who teaches Levin, a Jew denying his Jewishness and assuming a new identity, a lesson in the meaning of the past. Isabella, a survivor of Auschwitz, says to Levin: “We are Jewish. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for” (132). That meaningful past is indeed the catalyst beyond Malamud’s writing The Assistant as a fictional account of his own past. He writes: “I think I know a little too much about what I am writing and tend to rely more on memory than on the imagination. . . .” (qtd. in Davis 120). But memory, here, goes beyond the closer frame of family past to the broader one of collective Jewish memory. “The Assistant,” notes Ezra Cappell, “is perfect example of Malamud’s allegorical or symbolic use of history in a novel since Morris Bober’s grocery store functions as a decaying tomb or pseudo death camp. . . .” (203). Hence, when Morris Bober suffers personally in the store, the fate of the race unfolds along with those successive clips of Angst like a code encrypted on a playing tape.
While Bok, sipping his tea, blames existence for the bitter taste that otherwise can be overcome by adding some sugar, Bober appears at the outset of *The Assistant* chewing on a roll “not tasting what he was eating” (4). The image exposes that Bober no longer cares about whether his life is bitter or sweet since eating like living is just a banality of wasting one more day.Unlike Bok, Bober comes to a complete acceptance of his embittered fate and thus is not willing to add a sum of forty-two cents to the balance of the Polish woman lest Ida nags him, “His peace—the little he lived with—was worth forty-two cents” (4). Goaded by his honest nature, Bober advises Frank not to waste his life in a prison-like store regardless of its independent status, “To be a boss of nothing is nothing” (33). Morris’ acceptance of the status quo in the store does not hide a Malamudian hope to get beyond the American version of exile that originates in the dark deep bottom of history. In Philip Davis’ view,

In that grocery store the young Malamud, bursting with need and imagination, was still living claustrophobically imprisoned in a small version of the shtetl, when he yearned to be living in the America just outside” (139).

Symbolically, the grocery store itself, an enshrined relic of exile, is an icon of the past that gives memory an incarnated shape.

Frank’s work and mingling with the Bobers give him a new insight into the meaning of the Jewish complete surrender to suffering as part of adherence to traditions. As if they have to suffer in order to be true Jews; all of Morris, Al Marcus and Breitbart belong, in Frank’s view, to the same school, “They were born prisoners” (86). They even bequeath that anguish to their children; Helen is a case in
point. Frank has some doubts about the Jewish suffering which he wants Bober to clarify:

“But tell me why it is that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don’t they?” “Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews.” “That’s what I mean, they suffer more than they have to.” “If you live you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew don’t suffer for the law, he will suffer for nothing.” (124-25)

This piece of conversation sums up a great deal of the Jewish way of viewing their position in the world. They suffer as part of their existence whether an external adversity hovers around or not. Their suffering, in short, comes under a collective task to keep the history of victimisation unbroken and to keep the sense of wakefulness maintained. The moment that sense fades out, identity becomes at peril. This is why Daniel Fuchs observes: “Suffering crystallizes identity in Malamud’s best work” (251). Frank, therefore, is an apprentice whose mentor trains him in suffering.

When memories go back to Bober’s life in old country, they are not writ from both excitement and agony. Tracing a history that repeats itself in Ashkenazi Jewish contexts, Bober can never recall his life in Russia without envisioning the pogroms of death and the misery of conscription into the Tsar’s army. By his father’s advice, Bober runs to America to evade recycling his father’s tragedy. Bober succeeds in crossing the river but fails utterly in creating a prosperous life on the other bank—America. There he gets a roof but “rarely saw the sky” (6). He can escape the Russian Army, “but once in a store he was like a fish fried in a deep fat” (83). Like a leaf
submitting itself to the playful wind, Bober abandons his education, ambition and gets married giving up his chances.

Bober experiences a childhood of complete exposure to the erosive elements of nature in Russia, “There he stood in all kinds of weather drenched in rain, and the snow froze on his head” (5). But in spite of its wretchedness, Morris, like Sammler, Herzog, Bok, etc., recalls his childhood with nostalgia. Maurice Halbwachs defines the “nostalgia for the past” as comprising the most sombre aspects of memory enveloped by clouds that half cover them. That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture. (48-49)

In the midst of the deadly cold atmosphere and anxiety over the store, Bober who is a few steps from death, recalls his boyhood with melancholy as if retrieving it from the deep bottom of a trash basket: “He remembered the green fields. Where a boy runs he never forgets. His father, his mother, his only sister whom he hadn’t seen in years, gottenyu” (194). Besides, the scene of snow heaped on the street always moves Bober bringing to his mind the memory of childhood so he cannot resist the desire to go and play with because he is fed up with the suffocating air of the grocery, “He thought of himself, a boy running in it, whooping at blackbirds as they flew from the snowy trees; he felt an irresistible thirst to be out in the open” (221). The thought urges him to go out and shovel, and thus he catches pneumonia only to die three days later of heart attack. Though Morris’ shoveling snow is often viewed as an altruistic act of
self-sacrifice, a deep reading discloses that he does so to satisfy an impulse belonging to the past of playing in snow.

The showdown of Bober life starts casting its shadows on the cold weather that looks melancholic arousing in his spirit a boundless anxiety over the grocery. Surrealistically Bober can envision death stealing from the deadly silent store through the cracks, “What else can you hear from a graveyard whose noiseless tombstones hold down the sick earth? The smell of death seeped up through the cracks in the floor” (195). Approaching death, he dreams of his son Ephraim in rags and looking hungry who soon disappears paying no heed to his father’s promises of giving him a good education. Contextualised within the Freudian wish-fulfillment, the dream leaves Bober overwhelmed by a sense of repentance, grief and guilt for being a bad family breadwinner. The rabbi’s speech of the dead Bober in his funeral sums up the bond that links him to Jewishness which is by no means traditional. “Yes,” the rabbi declares, “Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart” (emphasis mine 229). Following the law of God, for the rabbi, is to suffer and endure with hope so that one becomes a part of collective sensibility.

Bober survives the agony of losing a son and the torment of poverty and imprisonment only to die at the end bequeathing all that to those who outlive him. Helen, having survived a traumatic incident of rape and then the loss of her father, belongs no more to the world of youth and gaiety but to that of sadness and anguish. Wistfully desperate, Helen has no hope to expect from days passing like burdens, “Each morning she crossed off the calendar the sleepless day to be” (188). But while Helen is burdened by both memory and postmemory, Ida wails Bober’s death, and
her fate of being abandoned and dragged into poverty and hopeless strife. But most of all, Bober is survived by alter ego—Frank who assumes his position as a grocer and sufferer. Frank keeps Morris’ memory revived by being a double doing exactly what Bober has done plus what Bober once hoped to do; that is giving college education to Helen. In short, Bober gets a chance to survive metaphorically and to live a second life in the form of Frank Alpine but even in the second life he is not able to change his lot. Poverty is poverty and a store is a store.

Malamud’s *The Tenants* is a novel almost entirely set in the present regardless of the past tense in which the narrative is written. It is mainly concerned with the present moment tension between Jews and blacks. But the protagonist, who appears devoid of the past, unknowingly plays his role in history that the conflict between the two peoples exemplifies. This is emphasised by Paul Malamud, “Malamud used *The Tenants* as an opportunity to re-visit the past and to imagine the future” (qtd. in Davis 268). There is only one instance in which Lesser’s memory recalls his family’s history and that occurs while he is undergoing psychological disintegration. He remembers how all the members of his family have miserable dooms weighing against what he figures out as his own wretchedness. The past passes in his memory like fleeting images:

Death of his mother in a street accident when he was kid. She had gone out for a bottle of Grade A milk and had not come back. Death of his older brother in the war before this war. He had disappeared, ‘missing in action,’ no sign of him ever. (198)

He has lost communication with his aged father many years ago. Contemplating the fate of his family along with that of other tenants who become memory and history,
Lesser realises how trivial and elusive life is, “Life so fragile, fleeting” (198). To outlive those who pass away, to survive the grinding mill of death is a way to depart the actual world and get encased in a space of language; an imaginative planet that the letters of his book define.

According to Sidney Richman, “history is implicated in Malamud’s Jewish material” (20). Jews are the ‘People of Book’ and this is embodied in Lesser’s case. Forcing a separation between him and his persecuted book leads him to wander “the rainy streets, adrift without his book to write” (179). His loss is too painful to forget. Nevertheless, Lesser gradually recovers from the trauma by redefining the actual relationship between the writer and the book in terms of Martin Buber’s ‘I-It’ rather than ‘I-Thou’ relationship. He convinces himself: “The book is not the writer, the writer writes the book. I will write it, I’m the writer” (180). A survivor who gets a chance to outlive real rather than formalistic end of his book, Lesser is, thereafter, imbued with energy to give a rebirth to the book that has died a premature death. Challenges, however, do not allow him. As if putting an end to his book implies the end of the writer, the novel ends with no end at hand, neither Lesser’s book nor Malamud’s. Mission is not complete. Malamud’s ultimate message by the open-ended novel is that as long as the book is a race with a rich inventory of memories, the end will remain vague and mysterious. This silent address to the past, common in Bellow’s and Malamud’s novels, represents the undercurrent of Wallant’s too.

Obviously, Wallant’s novels, especially the two under the study’s focus, address themes of an existential and authentic nature: the inevitability of alienation; the prevailing and pervasive atmosphere of loss; the callous response of a materialistic society; the responsibility to community; the grounding of identity in
Jewish history and culture; and above all the persistence of memory. Technically, the theme of memory is central to *The Human Season* where the chronological advance of the main narrative is counterpointed by a reverse chronology of flashbacks. While Berman’s life moves forward towards whatever fate awaits him, the half-chapter parts designed in the form of memory move backward towards the earlier childhood experience as a Russian Jew in a figurative reverse diaspora. Berman’s present sense of bereavement makes the scenes retrieved from memory tinged with a bittersweet nostalgia for the past.

As the novel opens in June, 1956, the protagonist is portrayed as lost in depression due to outliving his beloved wife. Later on, the reader is told that after a warm dinner on April 30, 1956, Mary feels sick unable to speak and the next day at 8 O’clock she dies leaving Berman with his depression, “She’s gone, she’s gone, she’s left me” (22). Almost taken by his deep grief, Berman mourns his wife’s death like nobody, “And later he began to cry furiously, ferociously, so no one could get near him, and he kept crying that was for almost all of the next eighteen days” (22). Now after his daughter’s departure, Berman, a fifty-nine-year-old plumber, appears drowning in a lonely silence. The quietness he finds himself involuntarily absorbed in, however, is not of serenity or tranquility but that of anguish and abandonment, “But then the quiet became dark and threatening like a vessel filling with a strange liquid” (9). Everything in the house reminds Berman of his deceased wife and thus touches his tremor afresh. The little antique cups, the little flowerpot, and the rustling feminine fragrance intensify his sense of loneliness and loss as does the “dimming echoless emptiness of the house” (15). Sleeping on the bed that accommodates two, Berman is obsessed with his grief to a point that when he touches a hair net that
happens to be on the bed, he is stricken by horror thinking his dead wife has returned. He feels ashamed to find a knife in his hand, “Did I think it was her returned to me? And if I did, what was my fear . . . why the knife? Would I kill her again? (39). Quite clearly, he does not speak about his loss because his entire life becomes an involuntary reenactment of it. Berman the man vanishes and what remains is an ethereal mass of memories.

The juxtaposition of scenes from the past and the present is meant to set off his current Angst as well as to mock his life after the tragedy. According to Thomas L. Lorch, “Wallant develops the novel by Juxtaposing Berman’s present with his memories of the past. His present seems a terrible parody of his past” (79). The scene of skepticism is a stark denouncement of his early piety; the encounter with a policeman in the cafeteria is a reenactment of a previous one with the guard bearing the bad news of his son’s death; and Russel, the stuttering masturbator, is a poor substitute for his deceased son. Above all, the ‘cleaning lady’ represents a cruel mockery of the relationship with his wife as a sanctified life-bond. The cleaning woman creates another chapter in the tragedy of his attempt to forget his losses. Feeling anxious of her lonely existence in the house in his absence that may violate the precious memory of Mary, Berman quits work and returns home to find her drunk seducing him to discharge a volcanic desire he suppresses in order to maintain the eternal bond he reserves for Mary. She somehow succeeds in tempting Berman to get drunk and then to go deep in a sensuous exploration of her body. Berman, however, awakens to a shocking reality, and his attempts to forget heap upon him a boundless weight of agony,
He began to beat his head gently against the invisible pattern of the hallway wall, thumping it in the rhythm of prayer, but senselessly, not aware of what he was doing, in the manner some babies put themselves to sleep. (122)

Berman, in this scene, like the pawnbroker declining the advances of Jesus’ girlfriend, is awakened from the numbness bequeathed by the tragedy to a horrible reality recycling the old pains.

Berman is a man who can never come to terms with his losses easily even if those losses lie adrift in the farthest span of time. Before losing Mary, he enjoyed moments of happiness but those moments are always marred by the memory of his dead father, son and mother. It is the death of his father in the village of Dolmyk in December, 1912 that inaugurates a series of losses. The wailing of the mother Rosele, then, while coming from an inborn stock of Jewish sentiments, still has its echoes in his heart: “Berman’s mother began the terrible wailing, and it seemed to Berman that he had known the sound of that grief all his life or known that it existed, for he seemed to recognize it as something preordained” (126). In September 1949, while they are celebrating the 25th anniversary, Berman cannot help but feel the twinges of Angst lurking beneath happiness:

He was happy but there was all of that, too, the sadness, the losses, things he hardly thought of in the midst of his routine days; but there, in the midst of celebration, they made themselves known as though by contrast alone, like a cool current running against your body while you bathe in some warm stream. (44)
Part of his anxiety is caused by the old woman living her last moments inside an Oxygen tent. He tells Mary on their way to the restaurant, “No, it is for that old woman that I cry inside. It is for how I remember her, how she cared for me when I was a boy” (42). Again, the image of a dying mother, which is typical in the postwar Jewish American context, is given a space in Wallant’s fictional worlds. Suggestively, the memory of a troubled mother, which stands for an embittered past, becomes a decisive force that presents the children’s reflections as postmemories.

It is only after Mary’s death that Berman understands the nature of the foregrounding agony. Now his grief is collective in the sense that he holds one edge of its thread while the other one goes invisible in the darkness of the past. On Fridays’ nights, Berman is awaited by the intensive and desperate sense of loss and solitude. The liveliness the house has once been filled with is replaced by a ghostly emptiness that makes him curse both the merciless God and the callous people to whom his close considerate friends Riebold and Fox belong paying no attention to their persistent hovering around him. Playing cards with them in Riebold’s house, Berman looks absent-minded though his senses are connected with the voices of his friends’ wives playing cards in the neighbouring room. For twenty years he used to have Mary play with the other women and when the game ends, he expects her to come out of the room so that they walk home together. But that night the door becomes a wraithlike existence annoying Berman:

And Berman followed his glance at the clock with a sudden rush of anguish. The smile died on his mouth. The women’s voices mounted in the volume that signaled the ending of their game, too, and Berman
watched the doorway through which they would come with an expression of dread rounding his eyes. (69)

Obviously, two factors stand between Berman and his amnesia: the present social milieu that always reminds him of a missing element; and his active power of observation which digest the minutest details and reproduces them feeling the present absence of what is missing.

Resisting all the powers that urge him to forget, Berman surrenders himself to an utter detachment from the reality that surrounds him. Loe’s and Lethal’s attempts to help him out of the abyss of depression become futile since Berman is quite aware of their intentions as well as of the inexorable nature of his grief:

You been trying all along to bring me out of it [. . . .] There’s nothing anyone can do for me. I’m not going into it, there’s no words. Only I can tell you this: Mary’s death is not all of it;—that was just the last straw, the worse. . . . What He’s done to me . . . what a joke He’s played on me all along. . . . (141)

Like Sol Nazerman, Berman undermines both the suffering and sympathy of the people around him and thus is not ready to share his grief even with those who love him. He scorns his daughter’s concerns about him and her grief over her mother’s death, “You talk about sad, about mourning. That’s what you got. It’s different. What you got is like a sad movie” (143). Like Nazerman too, he considers himself a dead man whose only contact with life comes through hatred, despise and revulsion to all people and things: “I’m not crying for the good old days [as Ruthie in his view does]. I’m crying because I’m dead . . . worse than dead . . . in Hell. I feel only hate” (144).
Berman, gives in to what Halbwachs calls the “illusory appearance of the past” (49) and these all are inevitable complications.

In his comment on Wallant’s novels, Codde notes that each novel ends with “an affirmation of life” that develops “out of the very misery so darkly presented” (194). The Human Season is no exception. The moment Berman stretches his hand to fix the T.V. and pry its alternative world of numbness open is a moment of being touched by life again. Getting fiercely electrocuted and thrown a motionless limb on the floor as though by a gigantic hand, Berman is brought suddenly to life, feeling and faith. Now he realises that there is “no Enemy, no Betrayers, no bearded Torturer” (172) but God to whom he prays for forgiveness. Furthermore, his hatred for people is substituted by sorrow making out of himself a “mournful old man” (172). The harbinger of redemption stirs him to move out of the house and agony alike. His physical journey from New Haven to Woodmont encompasses the implication of metaphorical journeys from numbness to feeling and from a nervous breakdown to regeneration. His previous self-blindness vanishes to be replaced by precise observation of scenes and people. This takes place as a result of his ability to push his painful memory to a neglected corner of his brain:

As he walked through the rising heat of early morning, he was without emotional memory. Everything that had happened to him was locked away someplace deep inside and all he was left with were the tiny, recorded images, reproductions of the way he had left, no disturbing, and with no more impact than microfilm has for the naked eye. (177)

His recovering from remoteness to involvement is suggested by being chosen as an involuntary witness to the Negro-Italian fight. This, however, is interrupted by the
rainfall that, like the river bath in Forster’s *A Passage to India*, activates the ceremony of purgation. For, in the same way Berman soaks each drop, he feels “an immeasurable relief, as if something that had been of great value, and pain, too, was removed from him, and he could dwell in the calm of contemplation” (187). At this point, it can be inferred that Berman is able to survive the dark and destructive facet of memory; that is mourning. He thus succeeds where Nazerman fails.

Being a survivor novel, *The Pawnbroker* has a framework that comprises two paralleling threads of action: the existential crisis of a survivor who cannot overcome the perplexity of outliving a beloved family and traumatic experience that leaves him “the rawness of a bleeding wound” (Leonard J Leff 353) (25); and the haunting of “inarticulate memory” (Rosen 95) triggered by present catalysts. In the former, Berman feels estranged in a world that cannot imagine the evil experienced by him and thus develops a pathological indifference and numbness to the world. In the latter, the fragments of the tormenting, repressed past are revisited through nightmares in the novel and sudden flashes of remembered images and sounds in the film. Between the two awes of the past and the present, Nazerman is trapped where neither the dreams of Dachau and Bergen-Belsen nor the wakefulness of Harlem provides a refuge from each other’s horrendous scenes. His post-survival life, if it can be called life at all, is no more than a mission of revenge against a self overwhelmed by the sense of guilt in the first place and the world in general.

One of the most precise and expressive images representing Nazerman is that when he likens himself to “one of those stilted figures in old engravings of torture, hardly horrible because of its stylized remoteness from life; just a bloodless, black-and-white rendition, reminiscent of pain” (53). At the outset of the novel, Sol
Nazerman appears like a big machine devoid of any sensation and creating noise as he moves onto the street that he cannot see. He is so because he is not willing to allow his sensation to go beyond the shell of his internal world of thoughts. Of the New York’s urban setting, and Harlem River, he hears the ‘crunch’ of his feet. Something in his appearance tells that he is in the wrong place, “but the sight of the great, bulky figure, with its puffy face, its heedless dark eyes distorted behind the thick lenses of strangely old-fashioned glasses, dispelled any thought of pleasure” (3). The nice day seen by the ‘skinny negro,’ Cecil Mapp, who belittles his own agony compared to Nazerman’s, does not make difference to the latter, “It is a day” (4). “Beauty lies in the eyes of beholder,” and Berman has no specimen to identify what others see beautiful. He, by contrast, looks with suspicion at the ‘deceptive beauty’ (4) of New York as though the entire scenery is no more than a lovely flower hiding beneath its colourful petals mouth and teeth ready to bite.

Like the one-eyed Mr. Sammler, Nazerman has a live channel with the past that allows switching to take place without alert. A hellish vision always draws a blind over his eyes offering only one frozen image: a recollection of the past with a brief ache that lasts for a moment before thinning out, “Suddenly he had the sensation of being clubbed. An image was stamped behind his eyes like a bolt of pain. For an instant he moved blindly in the rosy morning, seeing a floodlit night filled with screaming” (5). What is distinct about his nervous disorder is that it represents the real depth to a shallow speculation of the present surrounding. The daily walks he takes between his residence and the store become one way by which Nazerman can get rid of the phantoms that chase him in sleep and wakefulness. They take him between two worlds each has its own distinct form of agony.
With heart like a stone devoid of emotion, Sol Nazerman runs the pawnshop where people’s poverty compels them to pawn their histories and memories to a man absolutely detained by his own. He offers neither chances of bargain nor signs of sympathy besides the few bucks to the wretched customers. Mrs. Harmon is a case in point. For her two silver candlesticks, Nazerman offers two and then three bucks. For her smiling and cheering dialogue, he gives strict short answers. Even with his apprentice, the black Jesus Ortiz, he keeps an emotional distance. His sarcastic remarks about the young man’s energy and ambitious spirit always leave an unabridged gap of ambiguity that bewilders Ortiz. And what bewilders him more is the tattooed number on his employer’s arm posing a persistent question mark. “It’s a secret society I belong to,” Nazerman’s ironical answer comes out bearing heavy clouds of bitter tones and mysterious implications, “You could never belong. You have to be able to walk on the water” (20). Tortured by memory that leaves its physical sign on his arm, Nazerman trades in people’s memories—relics that they pawn.

Nazerman’s callous reaction to the people around him informs about the weight of the dilemma he feels in the post-survival world of New York. People of all categories come in and out of his shop: villains and victims; young and old; real deprived and mere jesters. None, however, can get a chance of penetration beyond the iceberg or even move the cool voice,

And all the while the Pawnbroker maintained that long-mastered yet precarious equilibrium of the senses. It was as though his nerves and his brain held on the present and the immediate like some finely balanced instrument. (25)
Nazerman is neither part of that world nor can he feel it, “He stood there as though dead while the world continued its Babel-like conversation in car motors and boat whistles from the river, in distant shouts, in laughter, in the frayed yet gaudy music from some jukebox” (28). Another residue of the Holocaust survival is skepticism that disturbs Nazerman’s relationship with God. As a result, he is not willing to give a loan on a velvet Torah cover asking its owner to vanish from the store, “Take it out of here, you and it together” (105). This incident reflects the weight of his grievances against the heavenly law which urges him to ask Jesus: “Tell me, Ortiz, do you believe in God?” (114). As for Nazerman, except for money, he cynically does not trust anyone and anything, “I don’t trust God or politics or newspapers or music or art. I do not trust smiles or clothes or buildings or scenery or smells” (114). The post-Holocaust memory is a space where God is not welcome because faith, like anything else, has lost its meaning.

A distinct feature about The Pawnbroker is that it adheres to what Rosen calls the “logic of an unarticulated memory” (99) where the intimations of Nazerman’s horrible past are sensed in everything but not spoken out by him. Every August 28, he remembers that moment when his life stood frozen, “his heart had atrophied; like the mammoth he has been preserved in ice” (249). It is the anniversary of his family’s death that touches afresh all traumas and scars. The most miserable part of his commemoration is that it does not give an outlet to his grief, “He did not grieve or mourn them, because he had been cauterized of all abstract things. Reality consisted of the world within one’s sight and smell and hearing” (91). August then is the worst month because it reminds him that he still exists and that before 15 years he skipped death. Whatever, therefore, appears beautiful is a delusion that hides beneath
ugliness. The memory of those lovely days before the tragedy urges Nazerman to blind himself to the present, décor-like nature he experiences with Marilyn, “He took off his glasses to blind himself to the present and his fingers traced the shape of them around his eyes” (209). The true beauty is that which once froze and got enshrined in a sick memory: “And he was paralyzed, too, forever out of reach of the dear faces, frozen a few feet short of all he had loved” (242). America in which he has been cast away is not a land of ambition but a chimney that he sees in a dream standing in the ruins of a brick building “like a monument to a forgotten race” (276). It is not the land where he belongs because it never embraces dream, memories and most of all his dead. “Your dead are not buried here” (276) Nazerman reminds himself.

Expressionistically speaking, Nazerman’s relationship with Tessie is another method that provides him with an access to the past. Ironically, the only place to which Nazerman pays optional, frequent visits in order to relieve himself is Tessie’s house. This, however, is practically a metaphorical cemetery. For, no sign of life can be detected in Tessie and her father Mendel, being themselves Holocaust survivors. While Tessie appears with yellowish face, hollow in temples and thin distorted legs, her seventy-five-year-old father looks a hundred with a “face like an arid relief map of some forgotten valley” (61). The old man lives in a continuous crazy delirium prevailed by the Holocaust, “Yeh, don’t esk qvestion, it’s a Jew—gas him, burn him, stick him through vit hot needl” (61). When Nazerman goes to them, he is unwillingly attracted to the spot in New York where he aptly belongs. Long after survival, they still fight to survive. “But you don’t,” says Nazerman to Tessie, “and I don’t and the old man doesn’t. We live and fight the animals” (62). When Nazerman and Tessie meet and make love, they do so not out of real love or passion, “but,
rather, that immensely stronger force of desperation and mutual anguish” (62). In short, they are spectres of the past visiting the present but can never work out its realities.

Like Bellow’s and Malamud’s heroes, Nazerman, towards the end of the novel attends the death of Mendel although his presence seems to be a parody of the act. He is there not to mourn, nor to bid a farewell to the psychotic old man, nor to console his daughter. He is rather there to give Tessie a lesson, that he himself does not comprehend, in how to forget, “Forget all that. Don’t think, don’t feel. Get through things—it is the only sense. Imagine yourself a cow in a fenced place with a million other cows. Don’t suffer, don’t fear. Soon enough will come the ax” (229). While Tessie laments, he stands still like a corpse without pain or grief, “like a creature embedded in a plastic block” (230). Shocked by the icy countenance of him as well as self-thanking for supporting her with money as his own contribution to the disaster, Tessie states: “Sometime I do not think you are human at all” (230). His reply is a loud laughter echoing the mumbling of thunder and showing scorn to the dread of death. Ortiz’s sacrificial death, however, fills his spirit with bitterness inaugurating the process of redemption. He feels tortured to survive everybody and every chaos only to remember the agony of loss. As soon as the tears flood Nazerman’s eyes, he is restored to the world and regenerated:

All his anesthetic numbness lift him. He became terrified to the touch of air on the raw wounds. What was this great, agonizing sensitivity and what was it for? Good God, what was all this? Love? Could this be love? He began to laugh hysterically, . . . (272)
For him, redemption means floods of tears not only for Ortiz but also for all previous losses: “Rest in peace Ortiz, Mendel, Rubin, Ruth, Naomi, David . . . rest in peace” (279). As the novel approaches ending, he heads to Tessie’s house “to help her mourn” (279). Ironically, the moment Nazerman is able to cry and feel the torment is exactly the moment he is actually restored to the world of agony and suffering. That redemption remains ambiguous though. Nowhere is mentioned or even insinuated that Nazerman parts with his old anxieties. In his character, Wallant competently portrays how the pretension of forgetting allows the repressed memory to grow in multiple complicated forms.

Comparing now the three writers’ discourse on memory, many areas of intersection in addressing the theme are perceptible, though the writers’ philosophical perspectives remain distinct. Bellow provides his protagonists with memory as a means for survival that enables them to explain and even defend the self; in Herzog’s case it becomes a mad machine with which he tortures his enemies. Malamud invokes nostalgia for the past not because it is better but because it is past. Wallant uses memory as a harbinger of death, a hangover of loss, and an elegy to mourn the death of everything including God. Each of these perspectives, however, is not exclusive. They rather define the salient feature of each approach but may occur in others’ texts too. Technically and thematically the writers’ treatments of memory meet at many junctures. Technically, the stream of consciousness; the juxtaposition of scenes from the past with ones from the present; and the frequent employment of dreams allow the theme of memory to move forward. Thematically, preoccupations with death and rejection of society represent two threads that ally characters and contexts together. Philosophising on the entire process of survival, the writers depict death as a
parameter of memory and a shadowy area where both the past and the present speak to each other. The dying or dead relative, an image that repeats itself in the novels, is an agent of Angst to the protagonist. Being a rupture between two worlds and times, death causes a foggy vision in the characters consciousness of reality. A complete detachment from reality is one way through which retrieving the past is done without interruption. As a result, almost all characters have variable degrees of separatism and skepticism. Skepticism indicates that the post-Holocaust memory is a space where faith is not welcome because it has, like anything else, lost its stability. Denouncing reality, then, necessarily leads to accepting memory as an advanced version of exile; an extended life full of care and wakefulness.

The fragments of personal memories convene in each novel to reconstruct the ultimate image of the past as a collective identity. The history of gloomy familial atmospheres is re-created by postmemory as a shaping force on the mentality of the protagonists whose active imagination can sense the present absence of the past in everything surrounding them. The memory of a troubled mother, for example, haunts nearly all the novels constituting a metaphor of an embittered history that the Jewish collective memory nurtures. Unlike the mother, the father is often rendered as an unpleasant figure while wives maintain their status as abstraction defined by the protagonists’ thoughts of them. They are all, however, objects of memory unveiled through a silent discourse with the past that, in spite of its sombre details and difficult moments, is often recollected with nostalgia as a lost part of one’s own past being. This is why suffering, a trait underlying every hero’s relationship with the present, is one way of belonging to a collective tradition that should be kept unbroken. Hence, even the most intentional journey towards oblivion like that of Bok is reversed by
adversities to a reminder of one’s essence. Accordingly, the memory that involves internal spheres of confinement develops in some cases into an inspiring power of resistance and integrity.
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