CHAPTER TWO

PROTAGONISTS
AS JEWISH SCHLEMIELS

Bernard Malamud's protagonists are Jewish schlemiels, who emerge into emblems of compassion and moral endurance. According to Ruth R. Wisse, Malamud "has fixed on the Jew as representative man and on the schlemiel as representative Jew" (The Schlemiel as Modern Hero 110). According to Brita Lindsberg, his Jewish representative man is a lonely schlemiel, "the fool-victim who is the butt of fate and men, bungling his way through life, but somehow manages to endure it all" (Qtd. in CLC 9 343). It is true that Malamud's protagonists face adverse circumstances, but they find the means of regeneration in their miserable existence through love and compassion, attained by suffering and self-scrutiny. They are subject to laughter and pity, scapegoats under exploitation, and ignorant, helpless victims in a world of oppression and indifference. Yet they don't succumb to violence and destruction. They become strong in spite of their weaknesses, grow bold amidst bitter surroundings, and learn to love others by taking up responsibilities.

In all his novels, Malamud presents his heroes as comic figures, weak and helpless, possessing all the human frailties. They fail again and again, and they are ridiculed by others who dominate them. Their background is also very poor and miserable, offering little hope for their progress. Yet they realize
their weaknesses, abhor themselves for their mistakes, and move towards a better life. As already discussed in the Introductory chapter, the protagonists of Malamud’s novels are pathetic schlemiels in their unfortunate domestic backgrounds, their repeated failures and their willing acceptance of suffering and responsibilities for others at the cost of their own physical comfort and well-being. Such a schlemiel characterization is allegorical, as it represents an ordinary passive individual’s plight in a world of oppression and violence and the power of endurance he can acquire through the painful process of suffering and humiliation. We can illustrate from each novel how Malamud’s protagonists are Jewish schlemiels who emerge into emblems of endurance.

Roy Hobbs, the protagonist of Malamud’s first novel, The Natural, is not a Jew by birth, but he may well be considered Jewish, according to Malamud’s treatment of Jewishness. In Malamud’s viewpoint, Jewishness not only indicates suffering, but it also brings out the rare qualities of the protagonists to the surface when they exhibit “self-honesty and candor” (The Fiction of Bernard Malamud 122) during trying circumstances. Roy Hobbs is Jewish in that his life illustrates triumph in defeat in the end. He is a schlemiel as he is a victim of fate and circumstances from the very beginning of the novel. He does not remember his mother, but he remembers his father putting him “in one orphan home after the other” (The Natural 30). He grows up with a craze for money, fame, and sex, and he is very slow to learn from his past experiences. He is introduced as a baseball player in the novel, with the burning desire to be “the best there ever was in the game” (The Natural 32).
Even from the very start of his career, Roy Hobbs exhibits so many weaknesses in his nature. He is not able to conquer his lust for Harriet Bird, the lady whom he meets on the train. He defeats Walter Wambold, the leading hitter of the American League, and gets very proud. When his ball accidentally hits and kills Sam Simpson, the father figure, who accompanies him to Chicago, he does not feel any genuine sorrow. He suffers greatly as Harriet Bird who triggers a silver bullet into his gut, and hinders Roy’s progress for fifteen years shatters his glorious hopes of becoming a baseball hero.

As a typical Malamudian Schlemiel, Roy Hobbs emerges out after fifteen years and joins the baseball team of the knights under the management of Pop Fisher. With his bat, “Wonder boy”, he distinguishes himself in the team as the leading hitter, after overthowing the existing leading hitter Bump Bailey. Anyhow he makes himself a comic figure by attaching himself to Memo Paris, Bump’s mistress, and Pop Fisher’s niece. He pursues her madly though he knows well that she has no true love for him. Memo’s indifference and lack of consideration towards him create a slump in his career, and he suffers from hitlessness. A ray of hope dawns in his life when Iris Lemon, a dark haired lady, wearing “a red dress and white rose” (The Natural 139) stands up with a smile among the audience to encourage him. Inspired and greatly comforted by her presence, Roy hits the ball with all his strength and wins. It is Iris Lemon who sustains Roy in his difficult times. She tries to teach him the value of suffering and selflessness. She reveals that she has been seduced at the
age of sixteen and she has devoted herself to her daughter. Now that her daughter has married and has a child of her own, she has become a grandmother.

Roy Hobbs, who has been slowly changing to a better life again falls into the error of selfishness. He is afraid to marry a grandmother and accept responsibility. He forgets the unselfish Iris Lemon and pursues Memo Paris, the embodiment of evil. Memo Paris hosts a grand party to the knights when they are very close to victory over the team of the Pirates. Roy Hobbs succumbs to greed and gluttony at the party. He eats too much and has to be admitted in a hospital with a severe stomach pain. The doctor advises him to give up baseball for the rest of his life. Memo Paris meets him and persuades him to a corrupt contract with Judge Goodwill Banner, the major stockholder of the knights club. According to the contract, he has to drop the pennant-winning team with the Pirates, thus betraying his own team and Pop Fisher who has been so good to him. After much conflict, Roy agrees to the evil contract when the Judge promises to pay him amply for the evil deed. Memo prompts him to accept the offer, as they need the money to lead a comfortable life together.

As Roy Hobbs is on the verge of moral collapse, he manages to overcome the temptation of accepting money from the corrupt Judge. At last adverse circumstances fail to trap him down. He realizes his mistake when his ball accidentally hits Iris Lemon who falls down unconscious. He rushes to
rescue her and learns that she bears his child in her womb. He repents deeply for his mistakes: “what have I done, he thought, and why did I do it? And he thought of all the wrong things he had done and tried to undo them” (The Natural 210). His sincere repentance makes him undo the corrupt contract with the Judge. The words of Iris Lemon. “Win for our boy” (The Natural 210) bring about a deep inner transformation in him. He does not want to lose the game and betray his team just for filthy lucre. He realizes the necessity of giving himself to others. He starts playing with a determination to win. Yet the blow goes foul and his bat, “Wonder Boy” is broken into two halves. With a strange bat, he faces Herman Youngberry, his successor. Malamud effectively presents Youngberry replacing Roy as Roy once replaced Bump Bailey:

Roy caught the pitcher’s eye. His own had blood in them. Youngberry shuddered. He threw – a bad ball – but the batter leaped at it. He struck out with a roar. Bump Bailey’s form glowed red on the wall. There was a wail in the wind. He feared the mob would swarm all over him, tear him apart, and strewn his polluted remains over the field, but they had vanished. (The Natural 218).

The vision of his deceased predecessor, Bump Bailey, the wailing of the wind and the vanishing of the players mark Roy’s failure indeed, but there is triumph in defeat. He breaks the corrupt contract with the Judge and finds out the true colour of Memo Paris. He tells her, “You act all right, Memo, but only like the whore” (221). He knocks out Gus Sands, her evil associate, pounds the
Judge and leaves them in anger. He understands the consequences of his mistakes and abhors himself. He says, “I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (222). Roy’s corrupt compact with the Judge is exposed in the newspaper with a report from the commissioner that if the report is true, Roy “will be excluded from the game and all his records for ever destroyed” (220). In his great sorrow, Roy is not able to refute the charge against him to a kid who says, “say it ain’t true” (223). Though the compact is already cancelled by Roy who is on the way towards a better life. Roy is not able to speak out, as his earlier mistakes prick him. As the novel ends, he “lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears” (223). This is a sure indication of his repentant attitude, which puts him on the road towards redemption.

Sydney Richman finds the mythic formula of Initiation, Separation and Return in Roy’s life (Bernard Malamud 41). Roy is initiated into the game of baseball at the age of nineteen, gets separated for fifteen years, and then returns and joins the team of knights at the age of thirty four. Through the game of baseball, Malamud brings out “the everlastingly crucial story of man” (Bernard Malamud and the Critics 47) represented in Roy Hobbs. Really Roy Hobbs is a Jewish schlemiel, going through the painful experience of suffering and emerging into an emblem of endurance. He suffers as a consequence of his mistakes – his shameless pursuit after two women, Harriet Bird, and Memo Paris, the emblems of evil, his greed and gluttony, and his reluctance to take up responsibilities. Anyhow, he understands his mistakes and sheds tears for his
meaningless life which surely indicate his self-honesty and the possibility of triumph in defeat.

If Roy Hobbs echoes Malamud’s vision of hope and possibility of triumph in defeat as a Jewish schlemiel, a representation of mankind, Seymour Levin, the protagonist of *A New Life* exhibits in a greater degree, Man’s power of patience and endurance in a violent, unsympathetic atmosphere. Levin is another typical Jewish schlemiel surrounded by so many adverse circumstances. He is a Jew by birth, having an unfortunate family background. His father has been a thief, who at last dies in prison as a criminal. His mother becomes mad after her husband’s death, and finally commits suicide. Levin himself becomes a drunkard, being unable to bear all his sorrows and frustrations. Somehow he manages to get an M.A. from the University of New York, and also an appointment as a Tutor at Cascadia College. He travels towards Cascadia hoping that a new place will surely bring about a marvellous transformation in him.

As a typical Malamudian schlemiel, Levin undergoes many humiliating experiences from the time he arrives at Cascadia. Granville Hicks says that Levin is a clown and a blunderer. According to him, “uncouth in appearance, inept with women, ridiculous in the class room, he is to outward appearances a Joke” (Qtd. in CLC 11 346). Actually Malamud presents his protagonist as a comic individual with “his black fedora, his teeth visible through his beard” (7), when he arrives at Cascadia. Dr. Gerald Gilley, the English Composition
Director of Cascadia College and his wife, Pauline Gilley, receive him at the station. In their home, he gets his pants wet twice, once by the casserole spilled in his lap, and then by being pissed on by little Erich, Gerald’s adopted son. He is disappointed when he hears that Cascadia College is not a liberal Arts college, according to his expectations, but a Science and Technical college. Mr. Fairchild, the Head of the Department of English preaches on the virtues of research and academic excellence publicly but in his private talk with Levin, he undermines Literature saying, “you can’t fell a tree, run a four-lane highway over a mountain, or build a dam with poetry” (A New Life 39).

Truly, Levin is a comic blunderer, who is the target of fun and ridicule. He slips in front of the school building with an armful of books. He also makes a fool of himself by taking his first class with his fly open, to the amusement of students. Further, this lonely Schlemiel involuntarily subjects himself to the scorn and derision of his oppressors, when he has affairs with Laverna, a waitress, Avis Fliss, his colleague, Nadalee, his girl student, and Pauline, his composition Director’s wife. All the affairs, except the one with Pauline Gilley are exposed to mockery. Levin’s clothes are snatched away by his rival, a Syrian at the point of sexual consummation with the waitress in a barn. He is interrupted by Gerald Gilley when he is about to have an affair with Avis Fliss, his colleague in his office room. His affair with Nadalee, his girl student makes him unstable and weak. He is terribly afraid of the consequences of his affair as she is a perpetual threat to his career. He is filled with disgust and self-reproach after the affair, and feels that his hopes of a new life have been shattered:
Levin felt himself grow depressed. He thought of Nadalee endlessly, had got her without deserving to-fruit for a teacher – a mean way to win a lay. His escape to the West had thus far come to nothing, space corrupted by time, the past – contaminated self. Mould memories, bad habit, worse luck. He recalled in dirty detail each disgusting defeat from boyhood, his weakness, impoverishment, indiscipline – the limp self entangled in the fabric of will-less life. (145)

It is clear from the above passage that Levin despises and abhors himself for his mistakes with the understanding that he can not get rid of his guilty past so easily.

Throughout the novel, Malamud has modelled Levin on the Jewish comic figure of the schlemiel, chosen for suffering. Pauline says later in the novel that she only chose Levin’s name for the tutor’s post out of the pile of discarded applications by Gerald Gilley. Levin had attached a photograph with his application although he was not asked to do that, and Pauline says, “your picture reminded me of a Jewish boy I knew in college who was very kind to me during a trying time in my life” (311). So Levin is accidentally chosen for the post in Cascadia College where he fills the place of Leo Duffy, his expelled predecessor and Pauline’s former lover. Like Leo Duffy, who was expelled from the college for his radical views, Levin is also driven from the college
with Pauline and her adopted kids in the end. He is much depressed and shaken by his failures, but he does not completely succumb to despair, a heroic trait presented in all Malamudian Schlemiels. Sheldon Hershinow says, “Levin is a buffoon destined to be a material failure, but a moral success” (Bernard Malamud 50). Truly Levin moves from selfishness to a life of sacrifice when he decides to take up the responsibility of Pauline with her adopted kids though it costs him much. He has to promise Gerald Gilley never to teach in a college again, just to take the adopted kids with him for Pauline’s sake. He learns to suffer and give up his own comfort for the sake of others. When Gerald presents a list of Pauline’s weaknesses and asks him why he takes on him the miserable load of Pauline and the two adopted kids, he replies with determination, Because I can, you son of a bitch” (310). Malamud seems to probe the development of the soul of Levin through all his failures and frustrations. Evidently Levin reaches a higher level in which he treats Pauline not as a person to quench his sexual thirst with, but as a partner to love, to cherish and to share responsibilities. After a time of suffering and frustrations, he realizes that true love is always accompanied by entanglements and commitments. That marks a turning point in his life when he does not indulge himself anymore in sex without love, but he adjusts himself to a new life with responsibilities. Thus Seymour Levin, in spite of his disabilities and frustrations as a Jewish schlemiel rises to the level of higher moral excellence by accepting his obligations with a spirit of love and endurance.
Like Seymour Levin, Yakov Bok, of *The Fixer* is another Jewish schlemiel who emerges into a man of courage and moral endurance in the thick of trying circumstances. He is based on the actual model, Mendel Beiliss, a Jew, who was tried in Kiev, Russia, in 1913 on the false accusation of the ritual murder of a Christian Child. In history, Mendel Beiliss was acquitted in the end, but Malamud is not interested in the result of the trial in his book, but his concern has been to unfold the mind of Yakov Bok as he suffers under cruel torture in prison. The miraculous level of human endurance in suffering is explored through Yakov Bok. His evolution from isolation and egotistical self-concern to commitment and a sense of involvement with others, is effectively brought out by his sufferings as a schlemiel, and the stoic endurance with which he faces all the unjust punishment inflicted upon him in prison.

Yakov Bok is a typical Malamudian Schlemiel, carved out for phenomenal suffering. His life has been miserable from the very start. His mother dies ten minutes after his birth, and his father is a chance victim of drunken soldiers who “shot the first three Jews in their path, his father had been the second.” (*The Fixer* 8). At the age of ten, he is apprenticed in the trade of a fixer and he suffers from abject penury. His marriage with the Jewess, Raisl also proves to be fruitless. He is so conspicuously impotent that she elopes with another man. All these sufferings induce him to move towards Kiev in search of new adventures. He tells his father-in-law, Shmuel, in the beginning of the novel, “I’m a man, full of wants I’ll never satisfy, at least not here” (15). At the outset, he is a symbol of dissatisfactions and frustrations. The words of his
father-in-law fail to bring him any kind of encouragement. His work as a fixer too brings him only discouragement and despair. He has no belief in the Jewish religion. When Shumel advises him to go and see a Jewish Rabbi for the solution of his problems, Yakov vehemently replies, “Let him stay out of my business and I’ll stay out of his. All in all, he is an ignorant man” (9).

In Kiev too, miseries and ill-luck await him which are natural to Malmudian schlemiels. He accidentally rescues a drunken old man, Nikolai Lebedev from the snow, who happens to be a member of the anti-Semitic Black Hundreds. He hides his Jewish identity from this Jew-hater, which is the very start of his troubles. He paints the rooms of his flat for a fabulous sum of forty roubles. Then he is unable to resist Lebedev’s offer of working in a brick factory in the district of Lukianovsky, a district forbidden for the Jew to live in. The old man’s rich offer of forty roubles per month for simply supervising the work and the room above the stable without rent are too much for him to resist, by admitting his Jewish identity. At the brick-factory, his honest efforts to curb corruption earn the hatred of Proshko, the foreman, and the other workers in the factory. Adding to this, he gives shelter to a Jewish Hasid, chased and injured by some boys, in his room for a night. He wipes the blood off his beard with his tattered cloth, which is later on used as an evidence for the supposed ritual murder of Zhenia Golov, a twelve year old boy, in a nearby ravine. The Black Hundreds organization exploits this murder for its accusation against the Jews. As Yakov Bok is the Jew living at close quarters, a false charge is framed
against him, under which he is arrested and put in prison for nearly two and a half years.

It is in prison that this Jewish schlemiel emerges into a man of heroism and endurance. As Malamud's aim is to bring out the "heroic qualities in small men" (Abramson 55), especially their extraordinary ability to overcome circumstances and their own weaknesses, Yakov Bok's superhuman endurance, developed through the inhuman cruel treatment, and torture in prison is effectively brought out in the novel. He, who has been cowardly, and unwilling to accept his Jewish heritage, now boldly declares before Bibikov, the Investigating Magistrate that he is not ashamed to identify himself with the Jews. He stands for Truth and boldly refuses to acknowledge the crime he did not commit, and betray his fellowmen just to free himself from prison.

When Yakov Bok examines his past life in prison, he undergoes a deep inner change. So far he has blamed everybody for his misfortune, but he learns gradually to self-examine and blame himself for his mistakes. After his arrest as a murderer on false accusation, he realizes that he has all the while been very proud, self-centred, foolishly ambitious and deceptive in hiding his Jewish identity. He determines to change his life completely if he is freed:

He hit his chest with his fist, envisioned terrible things happening to him, ending by being torn apart by a mob. Yet there were also moments of sudden hope when he felt that if he only explained
why he had done what he had done, he would be at once released. He had stupidly pretended to be somebody that he wasn’t hoping it would create opportunities, had learned otherwise, and was paying for learning. If they let him go now, he had suffered enough. He blamed also egotism and foolish ambition, considering who he was, and promised himself it would be different in the future. He had learned his lesson - again. (69)

The above lines reveal how Yakov is sorry for his mistakes and wants to reform his life. Gradually, there is a change in his attitude towards God and religion as he spends his life in prison. He reads the Old Testament and accepts the ways of God who is infinite and just. He is deeply moved by the sufferings of Christ while reading the New Testament. Yet sometimes he has doubts regarding God’s love and care, and feels that God is indifferent towards his sufferings.

Suffering moulds his life in prison and slowly he becomes an emblem of compassion and sacrifice. He has been very angry with his unfaithful wife, Raisl, and has even cursed her earlier saying, “May she run for ever” (11), and “A black cholera on her” (11). This bitter attitude gives way to love and compassionate understanding. When his wife visits him in prison, he is very loving and considerate towards her. He is even ready to acknowledge her bastard son, chaim, as his own son for her sake. His love for his father-in-law
is evident when he sees him dying in one of his dreams. He wants to suffer and
even die for Shmuel:

As for Shmuel he’s already out in the cold. He may even die for
my death if they work up a pogrom in celebration of it. If so what
do I get by dying, outside of release from pain? What have I
earned if a single Jew dies because I did? Suffering I can gladly
live without, I hate the taste of it, but if I must suffer, let it be for
something. Let it be for Shmuel. (245)

Thus Yakov wants to live and suffer for others, for Shmuel first, and then for
the other Jews. He, who thinks of committing suicide, decides that he is not
going to be cowardly by doing that, as it can benefit only his oppressors. He
realizes that his suffering is not personal, but it is historical, as it involves all
the Jews. He refuses to sign the letter sent by the Prosecuting Attorney,
Grubeshov which offers him freedom if he puts the blame of murder on the
Jews. Indeed, his refusal to betray his people for his own physical comfort, and
his acceptance of a child, begotten through his wife’s unfaithfulness, as his
own, are heroic qualities which reveal Yakov Bok as an embodiment of
sacrifice and endurance. As he says in the end of the novel, “something in me
has changed. I’m not the same man I was” (289). Truly, from egotism, self-
pity and cowardice, Yakov changes to a person of selflessness, compassion
and moral courage.
Though incomparable with the protagonists, Seymour Levin and Yakov Bok in their endurance and compassion, Arthur Fidelmen, the hero of Malamud’s novel, *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition*, conforms to the image of a Jewish schlemiel in his comic blunders and in his tendency towards reformation at times. Indeed Fidelman has numerous characteristics of a schlemiel, and his adventures in painting, sculpturing, and sex are exhibited ironically in six different parts, “Last Mohican”, “Still Life”, “Naked Nude”, “A Pimp’s Revenge”, “Pictures of the Artist”, and “Glass Blower of Venice” in this picaresque novel. All these episodes portray Fidelman as a bungler, and a hard-luck person, repeatedly failing in his efforts to change his behaviour. In the first and the last episodes, there is a sure indication of change in him when he willingly submits himself to his conscience after a period of aimless life.

In the first part, “Last Mohican”, Fidelman is introduced as “a self-confessed failure as a painter” (*Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* 3). He comes to Italy from America to attempt a study on Gioto, a famous painter. He is poor, and only with the financial help of his sister, Bessie, he arrives in Rome. He has the opening chapter of his research with him and he wants to continue his work in Rome. He is very selfish and fails to realize the fact that his work on the great painter Gioto without his true, compassionate spirit is a waste. His selfish nature is evident when he refuses to give his spare suit to Susskind, a poor Jew and wanderer from Israel. He tries to run away from Susskind, but Susskind follows him everywhere. Fidelman appears to be a comic schlemiel when Susskind finds him in his hotel room and tells him “I
saw you walking in the street, so I followed you” (13). He changes his hotel just to avoid Susskind’s presence, but he meets Susskind again in the dining room of the new hotel. It is just an accidental coincidence, and Susskind’s presence haunts him every-where. Finally Fidelman decides to leave for Florence and get rid of Susskind once and for all. Ironically he has to pursue Susskind after this as his first chapter on Giotto is missing. Susskind’s act of burning the chapter, and Fidelman’s vision of Giotto’s painting of St.Francis giving his gold cloak to a poor knight instil in Fidelman a sympathetic understanding for the sufferings of the needy. At last he learns to share his possession with Susskind in a true spirit of compassion. He exhibits a moral virtue that Malamud’s schlemiels illustrate. According to Elizabeth and Sarah Kurian, “it is only when Fidelman responds to his pleas for charity and accepts his responsibility for Susskind’s welfare”, he “arrives at a point of self discovery” (Indian Journal of American Studies (Winter 1996) 58). They further point out that “Fidelman attains an expansion of the spirit in his assertion of solidarity with an unfortunately placed human being” (58). Hence Fidelman emerges into a person of compassion and conscience from a proud and selfish individual after his encounter with Susskind.

The second and third episodes in the novel exhibit Fidelman as a buffoon with a purposeless existence. His thoughtless, wasteful, time-passing affair with Anna Maria in whose studio he stays for rent, in “Still Life” exposes him as an irresponsible ludicrous idiot. She hates and despises him as much as he adores and wantonly pursues her. She even makes him sweep the studio,
and carry away the garbage for her. Lavishly, he spends his sister’s hard-earned money to buy presents for her. She shows little interest in him and despises all his paintings. Then Fidelman decides to paint himself in a priest’s vestments by actually wearing them and looking at his reflection in the mirror. Seeing him dressed as a priest, she wants to confess her crime of murdering her own child to him. Fidelman uses this opportunity to quench his lust for her.

In the third episode, “Naked Nude”, Fidelman is presented as a pathetic schlemiel working in a brothel under the keepers, Angelo and Scarpio. He attempts to steal money from an American tourist owing to penury, and he is punished severely by Angelo and Scarpio for the misdeed. They snatch his passport, make him clean toilets and run errands for whores. The schlemiel’s sense of morality is brought out when Fidelman shows his resistance in stealing the great painting of Tiziano, ‘Venus of Urbino’ from Lago Maggiore, in accordance with the keepers’ wish. They ask him to copy the painting and replace it with the original so that they can claim a ransom for the picture. They promise to give back his passport and three hundred and fifty dollars. Inspite of the tempting offer, Fidelman says, “It is stealing another person’s ideas and work” (77). Anyhow, his oppressors make him copy the painting and get ready for its exchange with the original. Scarpio accompanies him for the hard and unpleasant task. Fidelman at last gets courage to resist him. He beats Scarpio nicely and escapes with his own painting instead of replacing it with the original. This is indeed a heroic act of the comic schlemiel, presented by Malamud.
The fourth part “A Pimp’s Revenge” brings out Fidelman’s unsuccessful attempt as a painter. He picks on a whore, Esmeralda, to relax him for painting. Esmeralda stays with Fidelman in order to be free from the clutches of her former pimp, Ludovico Belvedere. She cooks for him and poses as a model for his painting. He wants to paint a picture of a mother and son, but he is not able to succeed however hard he tries. Again he is exposed to ridicule when he is made to act as a pimp for her to earn their livelihood. Then he gives up his planned painting and starts painting the picture of a prostitute and procurer, painting Esmeralda as the prostitute and himself as the procurer. The picture comes out very nicely, but Fidelman listens to Ludovico’s cunning advice and ruins the picture completely by repainting it with a light shade. He feels very sad and miserable, but he does not blame Ludovico for the ruin. He snatches the knife from Esmeralda who is about to stab Ludovico, and thrusts the blade into his own gut, blaming himself. Perhaps he realizes the futility of his meaningless existence and owns up his inability as a painter.

In the fifth part “Pictures of the Artist”, Fidelman becomes the comic figure of the digger of holes. He digs two square holes, one big and the other small, and advertises an exhibition. He collects an entrance fee of ten lires before he admits anyone inside. He deceives people saying that they are not just empty holes, but “elements of conceptual work of art” (157). One young man who is disappointed with Fidelman’s work, demands the money back to buy bread for his children, but Fidelman refuses to give back his money and sends him away. Here Malamud portrays the inhuman, ugly self of Fidelman.
After the youngman’s departure, a stranger arrives and pushes Fidelman into one of the holes, covering it up with earth. This act may symbolise the death of Fidelman’s old ugly self, because after this, he emerges out into a man of compassion in the same story. He is engaged in painting a cave in the ground floor, while in the first floor, his sister Bessie lies dying. He wants to finish his work and then go and see her. Here, an inanimate object, a hundred watt bulb under which he works, arouses his conscience that he should go and see his sister. He obeys the voice of his conscience and visits his sister. Bessie is very happy to meet her brother before her death, and dies with great satisfaction. At last Fidelman rises from his low level of inhuman attitude and performs his duty as a brother to his sister.

The last part “Glass Blower of Venice”, exposes Fidelman’s affair with an attractive young woman, namely Margheritta and his homosexual relationship with her husband, Beppo, the glass blower of Venice. After a period of aimless life, he listens to Margheritta’s advice and leaves the family for good. He leaves for America, and the story concludes with the lines, “In America, he worked as a craftsman in glass and loved both men and women” (208). Perhaps there is a change in Fidelman from selfish brutal nature to selfless love of treating all people equally.

The over-all picture of Fidelman in all these six episodes, compiled together as a novel is that of a comic schlemiel with ludicrous actions. There are some signs of awakening from a purposeless life and moving towards
reformation. In showing kindness to Susskind, in “Last Mohican”, in refusing to steal Tiziano’s beautiful painting in “Naked Nude”, in forgiving Ludovico and blaming himself for the ruin of his picture in “A Pimp’s Revenge”, in visiting his dying sister Bessie before her death in the midst of his work in “Pictures of the Artist” and in leaving Beppo, and the city of Venice for the peace and happiness of his family in “Glass Blower of Venice”, one can see some marks of progress in his wretched life and the possibility of a better life in future. Another significant change in him is the abandonment of his painting which may indicate a redemptive trait in his life. Like the other Malamudian schlemiels, Fidelman too moves towards compassion and endurance, though the progress is rather slow.

Like Arthur Fidelman, the movement of the central protagonist, Harry Lesser of The Tenants towards compassion and selflessness is not very conspicuous. Harry Lesser too is a Jewish schlemiel with so many flaws. He is a writer who has published two novels and is working on the third one in a crumbling tenement. He refuses to leave the place in spite of the repeated pleas of the poor land lord, Irving Levenspiel. He is determined to finish the third novel at any cost in the same dilapidated building, because he fears that another place may spoil his mood and hinder the progress of the writing. In spite of his hard travail for ten years on the third novel, he is unable to finish it. Malamud presents the unfortunate, sad, family background of this Jewish Schlemiel:
He remembers as he writes the disjunct past, fleeting images. Death of his mother in a street accident when he was a 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. Still waiting in some Asian jungle for a train? Useless death. Life so fragile, fleeting. (The Tenants 150)

As a pathetic schlemiel, he has faced the tragic deaths of his mother and brother. The predominant Jewish traits in his character seem to be his commitment to work and his stoic endurance. He works very hard, unmindful of the discomfort in the crumbling tenement.

What makes Harry Lesser different from the other Malamudian schlemiels is his lack of love and the failure to share other people’s responsibilities. Malamud himself acknowledges that his “faith in humanity has been bruised to some degree” (Qtd. in IIAS (Winter 1996) 58) while writing this novel. Harry Lesser does not rise to the level of selflessness and sacrifice as the other Malamudian schlemiels. He neglects his aged father who lives in Chicago. For him, his book is more important than his aged father who may die anytime. He says, Once I finish up, I’ll fly to Chicago for a visit” (The Tenants 150).
His lack of consideration towards others is seen in his attitude towards Bill Spearmint, an Afro-American who comes to occupy the same tenement. He criticizes the black writer’s work saying that it lacks form and aesthetic distancing. He is not sympathetic towards the Black race, represented by Bill Spearmint, whose experience has been more traumatic than that of the Jews in America. Evelyn Gross Avery points out that the black becomes a rebel due to his suffering and he “responds violently in an attempt to survive” (Rebels and Victims 4). Bill Spearmint gives vent to his bitter feelings against the whites in his book, and his response to Lesser’s greetings in their first meeting is very sullen. His unfriendly and indifferent attitude to Lesser is clear when he refrains from a handshake though Lesser extends his hand. When Lesser asks him what sort of writing he is engaged in, Bill Spearmint replies, “Now that’s personal question and what I’m writing is my own business” (329). For Willie, rebellious anger against the whites is a means of survival. He says in his novel, “The more I write on the terrible and violent things of my life, the more I feel easier on myself” (57). So, he is concerned more about revealing his experiences as a black man rather than the form of the work. Lesser does not understand this, and he finds fault with the work regarding the technical aspect. Bill Spearmint is one of the protagonists of the novel who can be identified with his Jewish counterpart in suffering and commitment to work.

Harry Lesser’s inhuman attitude is also revealed in his response to the landlord Levenspiel’s cries. He wants Lesser to vacate his flat so that he can pull it down and build another building: “Have a little mercy, Lesser, move out
so I can break up this rotten house that weighs like a hunch on my back” (19). Lesser inhumanly turns a deaf ear to all his arguments, and finally asks, “Why don’t you go somewhere and let me work in peace?” (21). Thus he is not able to identify himself with his fellowman’s needs. Malamud shows Lesser as a representation of modern alienated man whose “level of identification with his fellow human beings is abysmally low” (IJAS Winter 1996 58) When Levenspiel sets fire to his own apartment, Malamud presents Lesser’s indifferent attitude very effectively:

Up goes the place in roaring flames. The furnace explodes not once but twice, celebrating both generations of its existence. The building shudders but Harry, at his desk and writing well, figures it’s construction in the neighbourhood and carries on as the whining fire and boiling shadows rush up the smelly stairs. Within the walls, lit cockroaches fly up, each minutely screaming. Nobody says no, so the fire surges the inevitable way upwards and with a convulsive roar flings open Lesser’s door. (23)

The above lines show how Lesser is deeply engaged in writing and he does not care what happens around him till the fire reaches his very door. Many critics feel that this ending is imaginary as Lesser is seen writing his book in the next chapter.

Lesser’s deep-rooted selfishness is revealed when he says, “I had got used to being the only man in the Island” (30). Obviously he does not want to
share anything with others. Then he becomes attached to Willie’s white girl friend, Irene Bell, who is fed up with Willie’s neglect of her. They meet often when Willie is immersed in his book. To Irene’s dismay, Lesser too treads on the footsteps of Willie and forsakes her often to continue his writing. When Irene proposes marriage and advises Lesser to leave the place with her, he refuses to do so until he finishes the book. Ironically, the book he is engaged in writing is focused on love, while the writer, Lesser is without love. His unwise disclosure of his love affair with Irene Bell to Willie at the moment of his utter dejection invites a lot of trouble on himself and Irene Bell. Willie’s mad anger is very dangerous. He wounds Harry, belts Irene in the eye, and burns Lesser’s manuscript. As a result, harry has to rewrite the novel with so much pain and agony, and he neglects Irene. She leaves him with a note in utter disappointment: “No book is as important as me” (170).

Though Malamud seems to lose hope in humanity in presenting his Jewish protagonist, Harry Lesser, as selfish, irresponsible, and loveless in The Tenants, there are some glimpses of his selflessness, love and self-scrutiny which offer some hope for regeneration. For example, Lesser protects his opponent Willie from the Jewish landlord’s anger by keeping his typewriter and hiding him for a time. He also buys the required furniture for Willie, to continue his work. A positive trait in his character is that he indulges in self-scrutiny and blames himself for his ugly nature like the other Malamudian schlemiels. Earlier when he is so much attracted towards Irene Bell at a party and is not able to refrain himself from looking at her at the party, his
conscience blames him for lusting after Willie’s girl friend. He retires to his study and reflects, “My God, why are all my desires visible?” (39). He reproaches himself for his detestable lust. When he sees Irene Bell and Willie enjoying their walk one February night, he is ashamed of his jealous feelings towards Willie for having got Irene before him:

As he watched Irene and Bill, both enjoying themselves, his feeling turned unpleasant, desire in corrosive emptiness, intensified by shame for feeling as he felt. Could I be jealous of them? How can that be if I have nothing to be jealous of and am not, so far as I know, a jealous type. Recalling that he had experienced a similar seizure on first seeing Irene at his party, something more than hunger, touched with regret that he hadn’t got to her before Willie had. (95)

From the above lines, it is clear that Harry Lesser discovers his own ugly jealous nature through self-examination. Hence in self-scrutiny, he is closer to the other Jewish protagonists in Malamud’s novels.

Malamud brings out Harry Lesser’s fantasy of a double wedding as the second ending of the novel. He hallucinates a scene in which a village chief-tain marries him to the black Mary kettlesmith and a Jewish rabbi conducts the wedding ceremony of black Willie and white Irene Bell. At the wedding, the Rabbi observes, “Someday God will bring together Ishmael and Israel to live as
one people and it won’t be the first miracle” (163). Malamud expresses his hope for the harmony between the whites and the Blacks through the protagonist’s fantasy. In spite of the bitter reality of the unfriendliness and hatred existing between the two races, Malamud hopes for the best and he expresses his optimistic views through the Jewish protagonist. Here, Harry Lesser is not a representation of deteriorating humanity, but an emblem of hope to show that mankind can still avoid total collapse through mutual love and understanding. Lesser tells Irene who marries Willie in his fantasy, “it’s something I imagined like an act of love, the end of my book if I dared” (164). He is neither jealous of Willie nor lustful towards Irene, but learns to show selfless love, seen in the Jewish schlemiels, as they grow gradually in understanding, though it is a fantasy here.

Though the third or final ending of the novel is gloomy, and presents Willie and Harry killing each other, there is still some glimpse of hope in Malamud’s presentation:

Their metal glinted in hidden light, perhaps starlight filtering greenly though dense trees. Willie’s eyeglass frames momentarily gleamed. They aimed at each other accurate blows. Lesser felt his jagged axe sink through bone and brain as the groaning black’s razor-sharp sabre, in a single boiling stabbing slash, cut the white’s balls from the rest of him. Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other. (173)
There is obvious suggestion that each writer feels the anguish of the other in the end. At least there is an end to hatred and indifference before their death. Ben Siegel says that this ending is also not real like the writer’s two previous endings, and it is only the writer’s fantasy. He says, “Tension and violence build to a final scene that seemingly spurts blood. But neither the blood nor the apocalyptic conclusion is real” (The Fiction of Bernard Malamud 139). Brita Lindsberg also says that the third ending “is intended as a reminder and warning” (Qtd. in CLC 9 346) to the human race not to destroy themselves in mutual hatred.

Thus Malamud leaves a message—a vision of hope and warning in this bleak atmosphere enveloping this present century. Though the central protagonist, Harry Lesser too is indifferent, irresponsible, selfish and loveless at times, corresponding to the tension and strife of the day, Malamud still presents a ray of hope through him, showing that mutual love alone can redeem mankind from total annihilation.

More than Harry Lesser, William Dubin, the protagonist of Dubin’s Lives seems to conform to the image of the Jewish schlemiel in his deliberate choice of obligation over passion. He is a biographer, who has written on the lives of Thoreau, and Mark Twain, and has started on the life of D.H. Lawrence. He too has an unfortunate family background. His father, Charlie Dubin was a waiter in a restaurant. It is said that he never smiled at his customers. There is a complaint that “he depressed the place” (Dubin’s Lives
79). His mother, Hannah Dubin, becomes insane after the death of her nine year old son, William’s brother. Hence the protagonist, William Dubin experiences a distressing loneliness in his childhood. At forty, his mother dies which increases his mental torture. Then he marries a goyish widow, Kitty, despite his father’s objection. After the marriage, he has to bear up with her, “the sameness, dissatisfactions, and eccentricities” (269), and “her fears, her unforgotten and unforgettable past”. (269). They are temperamentally different, and Dubin often finds it difficult to lead a harmonious life with her. Kitty easily becomes impatient and anxious. She has a phobia of the leakage of gas burners, and every night asks Dubin to check them. She often compares Dubin to her former dead husband, Dr. Nathanael and finds him inferior. This attitude irritates and upsets Dubin. She dislikes Dubin’s incessant pursuit of biographies and neglect of her. She says, “I am married to you, not your book” (169). Often they disagree with each other and quarrel. Like the other Jewish schlemiels, Dubin has sexual affairs with other women too. He is drawn sexually towards Betty Croy, the woman who saves him from an accident. He dreams of her occasionally and wants to send her flowers. He has an affair with Flora, the wife of his friend, Oscar Greenfield. Unfortunately, he is not concerned with his friend’s health, and makes love to her when his friend suffers from heart attack in another place. His affair with Fanny Bick, an educated young woman, employed by his wife to do household work for a period, and his subsequent conflict, form a major part of the novel.
Abramson points out that like the other Jewish schlemiels, Dubin moves from “Self containment to expansion of heart that compasses the needs of others” (Bernard Malamud Revised 101). Initially, he indulges in selfish sexual relationship with Fanny neglecting his wife and children. He spends a week with Fanny telling a lie to Kitty that “he liked a long drive alone once in a while” (59). His stay with Fanny in Venice exposes him as a comic Schlemiel. Fanny gets sick with vomiting and diarrhoea at that time, and Dubin has to nurse her till she gets well. She makes him a laughing stock by having an affair with another man in his absence. Dubin hates himself for wasting his time in Venice. He abhors himself for believing Fanny, very much younger than him, and feels that she does not deserve his love:

What, my God, am I doing in the same bed with her, back to back, four thousand miles from home and work? He detested himself for falling into the hands of a child. Dubin felt in himself a weight of mourning he could not shove aside, or otherwise diminish. He was, he thought, ashamed at having offered himself to her to betray. (95)

This self-abhorrence is common to all Malamudian schlemiels. Dubin often beholds himself in a mirror, and recognizes his ugly self. After his ridiculous affair with Fanny in Venice, he falls down on the steps accidentally while looking for a restaurant. Nobody cares for him, and he feels very miserable. After cleaning himself, he looks into a mirror, and recognizes his ugly self.
Malamud effectively presents Dubin’s loathing of himself, when he says that in the mirror “he beheld a stone gray face disgusted with him for having fallen; for being in Stockholm rather than home: for having gone through the wastes of Venice”(113). When he becomes sick and impotent because of his wrong choices, he curses at himself in the mirror:

You rat-faced Jew, I am unknown to you—as Christ is who was born to the Spirit, Word, the Man, the Male. Your Jew mind is antagonistic to the active Male Principle. You dare not live, as man ought. Sex, to you, is functional, equivalent to passing excrement. You fear primal impulses. Work which should be an extension of human consciousness you distort to the end—all of existence. You write muckspout livers because you fear you have no life to live, your impotence is Jewish self-hatred. I detest and loathe you!(352)

The above lines express adequately Dubin’s hatred of himself. He always feels that his life is aimless and blames himself for his mistakes.

As a pathetic Schlemiel, Dubin is placed in difficult surroundings. His daughter, Maud has an affair with an elderly black teacher, a man of about Dubin’s age, and gets pregnant through him. She does not want to inform the man about the pregnancy nor does she want to abort the child. Dubin finds Maud’s affair with the elderly man similar to his affair with Fanny. Maud
leaves her parents and goes away to New York, and Dubin is worried about her safety there. At yet another level, his step-son Gerald in the army does not consult with his parents on anything. He is in Russia, and due to his unwise request to the army officer to send him back to Sweden, he is dismissed from the army without pay and food. He suffers from starvation and other illnesses. His long letter to his parents informs his pathetic condition. Dubin acknowledges sadly that in getting close to Fanny, he has neglected his wife and children. He plans to go to Russia with Kitty and wants to help poor Gerald. Realization dawns on him that Fanny can look after herself, but Kitty needs Dubin to help the children. As in the lives of the other Jewish protagonists, obligation triumphs over passion in Dubin’s life. He deliberately moves from Fanny, his mistress of passion, to his wife Kitty, with devotion and love. Dubin’s return to Kitty with love is the result of his realization of responsibility to his wife and children. As a true Malamudian schlemiel, he chooses the life of obligation rather than an aimless, drifting life.

Like Malamud’s other protagonists, Calvin Cohn of God’s Grace is a Jewish schlemiel. The novel is an imaginative, allegorical presentation of Man’s annihilation after the final nuclear war. It also portrays the terrible intensity of loneliness and suffering, the individual Calvin Cohn has to face, after the destruction of the rest of mankind. Malamud fantasies the end of the human race in the imaginary war between “the Djanks and Druzhkies” (God’s Grace 11). Calvin Cohn is the only person saved from the holocaust as he is working under the sea in a submarine, attached to “the oceanographic vessel,
Rebekah Q” (14) at the time of devastation. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Calvin is the only human being alive, and of all the human beings, he has to face the intensity of loneliness and depression. His father is a Jewish Rabbi and his grandfather also is a Jewish Rabbi who is killed in a program. His wife dies at an early age and his life has already been miserable. Though Calvin too had studied for the Rabbinate before the Devastation, “he was not moved by his calling—as he was by his father’s calling—so he had become instead, a paleologist” (25). Ironically he has to become a Jewish Rabbi to reform the chimps and baboons, the existing living creatures in the Island. As he is the only human survivor, he wants to create a new reformed society of chimps and baboons.

The novel is divided into six parts. The first section “The Flood” brings out the destruction of the entire human race except Calvin Cohn who drifts aimlessly on the lone oceanographic vessel. Malamud brings out the dreadful isolation of Calvin Cohn and underlines the value of companionship in the world. Cohn sees “a faded rainbow”, (14) a dim reminder of God’s covenant with Man, but “a wedge shaped section of its arch seemed broken off” (14), which may indicate a broken covenant. In his desperate condition, Cohn senses the presence of another living creature in the ship. After a frantic search, he finds out “a small chimpanzee with glowing frightened eyes” (21). Another scientist, Dr. Walter Bunder, before the holocaust has kept the chimp, and it is endowed with speech abilities by Dr. Bunder’s operation on its larynx. Calvin Cohn names it ‘Buz’, and both of them reach an island with plenty of fruit
trees and flowery plants. The other sections of the novel present how Cohn finds more chimps and baboons in the island and becomes their teacher. He finds out a gorilla too, whom he calls George. He teaches them how to behave kindly towards others. He frames new commandments for them and wants them to live in love and harmony. Of all the creatures whom Cohn finds in the island, only the gorilla, who does not talk, seems to be benefited by his teaching. The chimps that talk and who move towards a civilized life never love and respect Cohn, their guardian and protector. They mercilessly kill Cohn's child, Rebekah, brought forth by the young female chimp, Mary Madalyn.

Calvin Cohn, like the other Malamudian schlemiels has his own doubts regarding God's love. He imagines God "in his butcher's hat" (19), and calls Him "the wrathful God who had let him out in a string" (19). He asks himself after the Devastation, "If we were bound to come to this dreadful end,. Why did the all knowing God create us?" (42). Cohn's reflections of God reveal him as one of the haunted protagonists who himself is haunted and who haunts the readers with so many doubts and questions. Though haunted with so many doubts and fears, Cohn faces life with a stoic endurance like a Malamudian schlemiel. The chimps are not grateful to him for his service. Though he deprives them of their speech ability, he still wants them to change and lead a reformed life. In the end the chimps drag him up the mountain with a bundle of split wood against his chest to kill and burn him. Buz, who is like a son to Cohn starts "aiming at his throat with a stone knife" (201). Cohn feels near the
end of his life and he addresses God as “The merciful God” (201). He further says, “I am an old man. The lord has let me live my life out” (201). These lines show how Cohn reconciles with God before his death. His death also symbolizes his sacrificial act of offering himself as a scapegoat for the redemption of other living creatures.

It has been made clear with the discussion above that, Bernard Malamud’s protagonists are Jewish schlemiels. They have an unhappy family background, face so many difficulties, commit the same mistakes again and again, become objects of ridicule before their manipulators, and fail in their best efforts to succeed. Frank Alpine, the protagonist of The Assistant expresses the plight of Malamudian schlemiels aptly when he says of himself to Morris Bober:

I’ve been close to some wonderful things – jobs, for instance, education, women, but close is as far as I go. Don’t ask me why, but sooner or later everything I think is worth having gets away from me some way or the other. I work like a mule for what I want, and just when it looks like I am going to get it, I make some kind of stupid move, and everything that is just about nailed down tight blows in my face. (The Assistant 40)

It is obvious from Frank’s statement that the schlemiels are unlucky, and they fail to get the fruit of their hard work through their stupid actions. At the same
time they are not completely broken down by their failures, but they manage to
come up in life. Malamud’s genius lies in that he makes his impoverished Jews
indulge in self-scrutiny, which leads to self-understanding and reformation.
Malamud himself says, “self understanding is a very strong theme in my books
— working to penetrate the mystery of self” (Conversations with Bernard
Malamud 115). As the protagonists understand themselves through self-
scrutiny, they try to reform themselves, and gradually emerge into
embodiments of endurance and compassion even when they are surrounded by
adverse circumstances.

That Malamud’s Jewish schlemiels move towards reformation, can be
illustrated through the allegorical Journey, each undertaking towards the
betterment of themselves and others. Hence this chapter forms the basis of the
next chapter “The Allegorical Journey”, which focuses on the Journey motif
presented by Malamud in each novel, conforming to the allegorical pattern of
writing. It is shown clearly in the next chapter how Malamud has manipulated
this allegorical Journey motif in his novels to show the definite progress in the
lives of his protagonists from self-centredness and vainglory towards
compassion and selfless service.