CHAPTER 6
RECAPITULATION

Keeping in view the discussion in the foregoing chapters it becomes clear that all the major protagonists in I B Singer's novels suffer from a sense of exile. The nature of this exile is of two kinds. One is the physical state of exile which sets them apart from the surrounding mass, i.e., their community, religion and way of life. The other one is of the metaphysical nature that makes them acutely aware of the sense of severance from God, the ultimate reality. It is the state of exile that compel them to search for their identity.

In addition, every one of them has a stance of protest; a state which Singer describes as an ethics of protest, i.e., protest against God, the creator who remains indifferent to pogroms, massacres and killing of innocent human beings and even animals. Each one of Singer's protagonists seeks to find answers to certain eternal questions that have puzzled mankind for several centuries. Endowed with an intellectual bent of mind some of them like Ezriel, Zadok and Asa Heshel, leave their traditional lifestyle. They are fascinated by secular knowledge, and revolt against the traditionality for they feel that it obstructs their progress and presents them from becoming modern. They also seek answers to their eternal questions raised in secular sciences and hope they would ultimately succeed in their efforts. Some of his protagonists like Yasha Mazur, Calman, Joseph Shapiro, Jacob, Aaron and Herman Broder are victims of their circumstances or their own predilections.

Yasha is a magician by profession. As such he keeps on moving from place to place and performs magic. Though he believes in God's existence, he cannot
accept revelation of God to an individual like Moses or some pious souls. The question of the loss of identity, the separation from the community and the communal life does not puzzle him till he is asked by Emilia, his beloved to convert. The Commandment 'Do not steal' also does not carry much importance for him till he feels that to raise a handsome amount as demanded by Emilia, he has no alternative but to steal. He tries to commit an act of burglary in which he fails. In the process he hurts himself and is incapacitated for magic performance for that particular season. Magda's act of suicide and Zefel's sexual relationship with Herman shock him. His heart is full of remorse and he decides to repent and become a pious Jew. He studies the Talmud, the Torah and decides to live in a brick wall cell, avoiding contacts with the world for fear of transgression. Thus, he can be seen as a victim of the predilection in which he finds himself.

For Calman, it is the sudden change in life that is due to acquisition of wealth. His business makes him completely a worldlyman leaving no time for God and his rituals. It is a painful state which he is in, yet the lure of wealth is too strong to be resisted. After his wife Zelda's death, he enters into a marriage alliance with Clara, a modern woman who completely disrupts his life as a Jew. She wants to live like a modern woman, not attached to one person alone. She finds a lover in Zipkin, and is in no way faithful to Calman. Finally, Calman brings an end to this life by renouncing his worldly affairs and leading a simple life of a Jew.

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Jacob, too, living in exile amidst the pagans is constantly worried about how to preserve his identity as a Jew. The pagans try their best to defile him. There are temptations in the form of women. He falls victim to one of the women, named Wanda. In the initial stage it is the strong sense of passion for her, which, with the passage of time, through suffering, turns into love. Both Wanda and Jacob suffer and come closer to each other and turn more mature. Jacob realizes that the essence of true religion is not confined only to one's duty to God but it also lies in suffering. He also learns that seeking freedom and gaining it does not lead to happiness. Freedom always entails a greater amount of responsibility. Jacob, in spite of all odds, brings up his son in the Jewish tradition and thus derives the satisfaction of having attained his identity.
In Aaron's case, it is the problem of being fully identified with one's living tradition and to preserve it through one's creative writing. Aaron, as a writer, undertakes an onerous responsibility of making the tradition immortal. To fulfil this task, Aaron has to undertake great risk in face of the imminent holocaust and powerful temptation in the form of women, visa and a comfortable life.

Herman Broder's case is unique. He being a survivor of the holocaust, cannot lead an authentic life even in America. It is a fake life, completely ruined by hallucinations of the terrorizing events of the Holocaust. His search for meaningful life with Masha, a survivor of the holocaust fails. His act of disappearance can be interpreted as a step in the direction of living an authentic life.

In Ezriel's case it is the sense of failure coupled with a strong feeling of anti-Semitism that causes him to discard his modern life and return to the communal life of the pious Jews. Though it is not an easy act, he makes a fresh beginning by taking all possible steps to bring up Misha, his youngest son in a traditional manner. He also feels within him an irresistible attraction for the communal life that can end his sense of alienation.

For Zadok, the son of Marshinov Rabbi, it is anti-Semitism that compels him to reconsider his decision to lead a secular life. The news of fatal illness of his father, the Rabbi Jochanon, awakens his sense of duty towards his father. He reaches the court of Marshinov before his father breathes his last.

Asa Heshel's return to Warsaw and to be with the members of his family is a step in the direction of coming to the fold of one's own people. Barbara, his
beloved, wants him to leave Warsaw with her. She does not want to perish in bombardment. Her attempts to persuade Asa to leave Warsaw and members of his family fail. She finally parts and Asa decides to face the Holocaust in the company of his kith and kin.

One discerns a symmetrical pattern in the lives of all the major characters in I B Singer's novels. What binds all of them into a group is that they cannot find convincing solutions to the eternal problems. Within them they continue to fail conflicting emotions of faith and doubts, trying to resolve the enigmatic issues of evil, violence and sense of suffering. It is this state of mind that makes them modern.

One of the striking features of all the major characters in Singer's fiction is their aversion to violence - killing of animals, birds and even insects. Each one of the protagonist wants to be a vegetarian. He extends his compassion not only to human beings but other creatures as well. In itself this may appear rather trivial. However, in Singer's world, this is the result of an attitude of defiance, the ethics of protest that makes them act humanly. The following illustration from The Slave vindicates this attitude: "From somewhere far off came a muted yodel. A cowherd was singing in the foul dampness and his distant voice pleaded and demanded lamented the injustice visited on all living things: Jews, Gentiles, animals, even the flies and gnats crawling on the hips of the cattle." [p 64]. This attitude is similar to that of the Jainism which preaches non-violence Ahimsa Paramo Dharma: Non-violence is the greatest sacred duty.

These protagonists have a strong urge to identify themselves with Jewish way of life, which can give a sense of meaning to their life. They feel rooted and experience a deep sense of fellowhood.
Such a keen desire to belong to a community, to a particular religion, nation and language sometimes engenders the sense of excessive pride leading to parochial attitude. It may also result in looking down upon others. But Singer is a great novelist and shows how those narrow barriers of religion, language can be transcended to. He establishes strong links with mankind in general. It is obvious that the Jews in Poland and in other countries as well could maintain their identity because of the historical consciousness that always reminded them that they were the 'chosen people' of God and their covenant with Him expected them to live a life as prescribed by Scriptures. One more element that kept the Jews in Poland bound together was the Yiddish language. The acute sense of exile, Homelessness, Diaspora kept them alive to their obligations to God. It also made them put complete faith in God's words that their days of Exile would come to an end through the advent of Messiah. Even their concept of Messiahnism is not confind to the welfare or well-being of Jews alone, it extends to the happiness and prosperity of the whole mankind. This strong urge of transcending the nationalistic identity that gives it a new dimension that of a secular identity and realizing a global one. Singer through his prophetic vision indicates that the spiritual identity though not realized yet is not a distant dream.