



A Study of Trauma in “The Magic Barrel”

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Abstract

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) is one of the most important contemporary American Jewish writers. He is good at depicting the people at the bottom of society, showing the miserable life of Jewish immigrants and their Jewishness. He has published eight novels and more than fifty short stories in his life. *The Fixer* won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1966. “The Magic Barrel” is one of his famous short stories. Jewishness is a key theme of his novels and stories. Many professors have analyzed this aspect. This paper is to be analyzed from the perspective of trauma theory. This paper is mainly based on Judith Herman’s and Cathy Caruth’s theory about trauma and recovery, adopting the method of close reading of text and literature research. The formation and symptoms of Leo’s disconnection and recovery are discussed by analyzing this text. By writing trauma, Malamud delineates the plight of the Jews and even the people at the lowest level of the social ladders. The success or failure of trauma recovery is closely related to the personal cognition of Jewish identity and culture. The loss of identity fundamentally hinders their recovery from trauma, resulting in the tragedy of life.

Keywords: Bernard Malamud; Trauma theory; “The Magic Barrel”.

1. Literature Review

The studies of “The Magic Barrel” mainly focus on Jewishness, especially analyzing the spiritual redemption of the Jewish. For Jewish, they are suffering for the whole human beings, and the purpose of their suffering is to save all human beings. Leo’s Jewishness has been clearly analyzed by many professors, such as Chen analyzed that Jewishness is actually

universal in the world. (163) The characters in this short story also be analyzed, especially Leo and Salzman. Bao explored Leo’s spiritual growth from the perspective of psychoanalysis. (30) The image of the magic barrel is also be analyzed. Whether the “barrel” exists or not, ideas are different. If it exists, it is Salzman’s portfolio that contains information about girls. (Li 150) If it did not exist, the magic barrel is an

abstract concept which symbolizes a container of the mind. (Zhang 60) Trauma theory also be used to analyze this short story. Leo's behaviour clearly showed his trauma of disconnection. (Zhao 25)

There are many studies about this story. However, the analysis of Leo's trauma did not fully expose the recovery of Leo. So, this paper chooses trauma theory to interpret Leo more comprehensively.

2. Analysis of Trauma in "The Magic Barrel"

2.1 Introduction of Trauma Theory

"Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (Herman 51). The traumatic experiences break the attachment to family, friend, lover and community, also destroy the construction of self and belief system. The direct manifestation of disconnection is the damaged self. The traumatic events compel the survivors to struggle to restore independence, initiative, competence, and intimate relationships which have been shattered. "Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God" (56). Traumatic events destroy the connection between people and community and create a crisis of faith in their minds. They will be accompanied by a sense of shame, guilt, and social inferiority. For an intimate relationship, they are in a state of oscillation between thirst for independence and pursuit of attachment to others. On the one hand, they will choose to flinch from those closest to them due to a sense of shame and guilt. On the other hand, the survivors are full of fear of traumatic events and desire to be protected.

There are four factors, social support, the role of community, judgment of others, and the response of the community, that have effects on the disconnection of survivors. People in their social circle determine the outcomes of the

trauma. The survivor will seek emotional support from family, friends, or lover. When the person whom the survivor asks for help shows incomprehension or obvious hostility, the feeling of fear, distrust, and isolation may be aggravated. Nevertheless, if the survivors get positive support from those close people, the influence of traumatic experiences will be alleviated.

Similarly, the judgment of the closest person is the most important. As for others' judgments, the realistic ones will help them relieve the sense of shame and guilt, yet the harshly critical judgments will aggravate the sense of blame and isolation. In addition, for survivors, the community plays a vital role in altering the survivors' disconnection. Sharing traumatic experiences is an essential prerequisite for restoring the meaning of life. The response of the community determines whether the trauma will be eventually resolved or not. To repair the rift between the traumatized person and the community, public acknowledgement of traumatic events is needed first, and certain forms of practical actions second.

In short stories, protagonists show the symptoms of disconnection in various forms. Leo in "The Magical Barrel" and Harry in "My Son the Murderer" suffer from a series of traumatic events, and symptoms such as disconnection from family and friends, breach of belief, and lack of trust are demonstrated. (Zhao 25)

2.2 Disconnection of Leo

Leo, a knowledgeable man in "The Magical Barrel". However, he is traumatized by the reality, including lacking of love, shattering of attachment to others, and lossing of belief. The symptom of trauma, disconnection, is shown up in every aspect of his life.

Leo is a rabbinical student. He is going to be a rabbi after he graduates from university. He lives in a small, almost meager room. To win the

congregation easily, he is advised to get married. After Salzman, the matchmaker, introduced him some girls, he was not satisfied with all those girls. The lack of love makes him judge marriage and girls through beauty, age, and wealth. Even when he goes to meet Lily Hirschorn, he only has a black fedora and coat. However, Lily is not the ideal woman for him, nor is Leo of Lily. Salzman's cheating of information irritates him. After this terrible meeting, Leo gradually realized his lack of love and loss of belief. "I came to God not because I loved Him but because I did not" (Malamud 147). He does not love anyone, let alone God. He does not make sense of the relationship with God, so he eventually finds he hardly converts to God. His loss of belief is the clear symbol of disconnection. At that time, he realized that he barely figures himself out and learns nothing from Five books of the Old Testament, so that his self is shattered. Moreover, he shows no attachment to others, living lonely. "Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately" (Herman 56). Leo wants to find a wife independently without the help of the matchmaker, Salzman, due to the failure of the date with Lily. However, after suffering obstacles, Leo thinks that Salzman remains to hold information of quality women and rests his hope that he needs to find a wife as soon as possible on Salzman. He is in a serious struggle between seeking for independence and pursuing help from others.

"Unsatisfactory resolution of the normal developmental conflicts over autonomy leaves the person prone to shame and doubt" (53). The failure of finding a suitable wife leads him to doubt himself deeply. "He felt curiously bitter and upbraided himself for having called in the marriage broker" (Malamud 143). He gets lost in a dilemma of seeking help from others and making efforts to stay independent. In addition to the doubt about himself, Leo is also suspicious of Salzman. He hardly believes the age of the girls recommended by him. In Leo's mind, Salzman manages to sell the clients to him

by beautifying the situation of those girls, such as age and physical conditions. When he has a date with Lily along Riverside Drive, he has a feeling that Salzman follows them furtively. His date with Lily ends with a failure due to the unrealistic expectations from Salzman's beautification of them.

"Did you not state that she was twenty-nine?" Leo insisted.

"I give you my word—"

"She was thirty-five, if a day. At least thirty-five."

"Of this don't be too sure. Her father told me—"

"Never mind. The worst of it is that you lied to her."

"How did I lie to her, tell me?" (148).

Leo's doubt about Salzman's behavior is also demonstrated when he has a date with the matchmaker's daughter, Stella. "Leaving the cafeteria, he was, however, afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way" (Malamud 153). He suspects that Salzman is most likely to leave his daughter's photo in his room deliberately to attract his attention. Yet he can't retain his independence when connecting with others. Further, he doubts himself and others in the aftermath of traumatic experience of pursuing love.

2.3 Cause of Trauma

Jewish identity refers to the objective or subjective state of perceiving oneself as a Jew or as relating to being Jewish. Generally speaking, Jewish identity is hardly dependent upon whether a person is considered as a Jew by others, or external factors such as religious, legal, and sociological norms. In essence, Jewish identity is related to Jewish culture and community. Most of cases, it can be divided into three parts, Jewish people, Jewish religion and Jewish culture. Jewish identity rarely attaches importance to religious orthodoxy, yet it is

either a moral concept based on religion or a loose connection of national unity.

Since ancient times, Jewish had been in diaspora for thousands of years. To protect themselves, they try their best to hide their Jewish identity. Whereas, loss of Jewish identity is more likely to bring traumatic experiences to them. In "The Magic Barrel", under the impact of American mainstream culture, Leo has lost his Jewish cultural identity. He reads a lot of books concerning Judaism carefully, but fails to love God at the bottom of his heart. He is aware that matchmaker is a traditional and respectable profession in Jewish culture. "He remarked in passing that the function of the marriage broker was ancient and honorable, highly approved in the Jewish community, because it made practical the necessary without hindering joy" (Malamud 139). However, he is doubtful about the matchmaker Salzman's behavior for several times and afraid that he is deceived by him. Even though he will soon be ordained as a rabbi, he is not aware of the responsibilities he needs to assume. He simply read those books of law, without direction or a purpose. Therefore, he is easily lost in the feeling of despair and confusion. One of the important themes in Jewish culture is undergoing suffering and gaining redemption. He suffers from the trauma deeply and the way to pursue love is fraught with difficulties because he lost his Jewish identity. "Because of special culture and torturous national experience, Jews are extremely sensitive and persistent on the issues of identity" (Chen 188). They are more likely to embrace their cultural identity again. His pursuit of love demonstrates the journey of getting rid of trauma and raising the awareness of his Jewish identity.

2.4 Recovery of Leo

"In terms of 'Jewishness' reflected in modern and contemporary American Jewish literature, 'Jewishness' mainly refers to a certain ideological concept associated with Jewish culture or religion expressed by Jewish writers in their works" (Qiao 17). Jewish identity,

mainly manifested as Jewishness, is related to everything symbolizing Jewish culture. Reconnection with it promotes the individuals to relieve from his past life and pluck courage to embrace a new life. Respecting the culture and reestablishing the faith push them to get rid of trauma and make a recovery.

The Jewish people are a nation full of "sufferings" and constantly pursuing "redemption". They are willing to endure the suffering in silence and continue to pursue redemption. Suffering is the road to redemption. In "The Magic Barrel", Leo's reconnection with Jewish identity can be demonstrated from three aspects: embracing the great spirits of suffering, converting to God, and his redemption. "Suffering" and redeeming himself through "suffering" have become a unique way for Malamud to express the "Jewishness" (383). As usual, suffering and redemption symbolize the protagonist's spiritual growth. Leo, who is about to become a rabbi, is familiar with Judaism and Jewish law. However, he suffers from spiritual disorder and despair since he has not found a marriage partner. "He drew the consolation that he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered" (Malamud 148). Gradually, he recognizes his identity that Jews are suffering and becomes optimistic towards life. The matchmaker, Salzman helps Leo to find love, and becomes his spiritual mentor to guide him to return to Jewishness. Under the guidance of Salzman, Leo starts to realize the relationship between him and God. He abandons his selfishness and determines to convert to God. Moreover, making light of Stella's past indecent experiences, he is ready to date with her. "He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God" (153). Judaism persuades people to be good and convert to God. For Leo, marrying a sinful woman is his suffering, also his redemption. Leo endeavors to be redeemed by saving Stella. "Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead" (154). The dead is Leo's former self. Departing from the past, understanding the

meaning of being a Jew, redeeming himself and others, Leo recovers from the trauma.

In this story, Leo endeavors to connect with others step by step. At first, he has no time to build a social life and no female partner to accompany him, which is rooted in his lack of love to others. The reason why he asks help from matchmakers to find a girl to get married is that he thinks that marriage is prior to love. However, after experiencing the frustration and desperation of pursuing love, he gradually holds a new understanding of love. "Perhaps love would now come to him and a bride to that love. And for this sanctified seeking who needed a Salzman?" (78). Having realized the importance of love, he is disappointed at the matchmaker and decides to pursue premarital love. "To be frank, I now admit the necessity of premarital love. That is, I want to be in love with the one I marry" (149). In the process, he has undergone a great change concerning the relationship between love and marriage. At first, he asked Salzman whether this young girl believes in love. But after experiencing those things, he rethinks his value of love. He is attracted by one of the photos left by Salzman. And the girl in the photo is Salzman's daughter, Stella. He can realize the hard life she has lived. So, he determined to make her inclined to goodness or charity. Although Salzman reveals the demerits of Stella and manages to persuade him to give up loving her, Leo insists that he will convert her to goodness. He dates with her and builds a connection with her. It is love that drags him out of a despairing and lonely life and promotes him to make a reconnection with his self and others.

The recovery in this short story can be elaborated from three stages: reestablishing a sense of safety, narrating traumatic experiences, and rebuilding reconnection. Most likely, a person survives from traumatic experiences will experience those stages step by step. Reestablishing a sense of safety is necessary for Leo to make a recovery due to their suffering from a broken relationship and an unsafe living

environment. Narrating traumatic experiences will help them deal with all those repressed emotions. Building a reconnection with society will help them make a recovery. Leo's reconnection can be divided into two aspects: One is the reconnection with Jewish identity; the other is the reconnection with others.

3. Conclusion

Trauma is rooted in Malamud's works. "Accepting and enduring 'suffering' became a strategy of Jewish thinkers; It is a strategy related to Jewish people's avoiding disaster, surviving and waiting for salvation." (Qiao 384). The purpose of this paper is to interpret the theme of trauma in "The Magic Barrel". In this short story, Leo's experience is analyzed by trauma theory. His disconnection is shown through his lack of love and loss of belief. Loss of Jewish identity is the cause of his disconnection. His recovery from trauma is shown through his conversion to God and love for Stella. The research may provide inspiration to interpret Malamud's other works from this perspective.

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