

Crime, ethnic identity, and the construction of criminality in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*

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Abstract: This article examines crime, ethnic identity, and the construction of criminality in Bernard Malamud's (1914-1986) *The Fixer* (1966), a key work of Jewish-American prose after the Second World War. The book centers on Yakov Bok, a Jewish handyman in Tsarist Russia who, disguised as a non-Jew, leaves his shtetl to find a better life in Kyiv. After saving an anti-Semite factory owner in the snow, the fixer accepts a job offered by the former in an area forbidden to Jews. Soon thereafter, he is accused of a child's murder that is falsely attributed to Jews as part of a blood-libel accusation. Exposed as a Jew, Bok is imprisoned for two and a half years for a criminal offense he has not committed. The study draws on René Girard's scapegoat theory, whose stereotypes of persecution help elucidate why and how the protagonist is selected and socially and institutionally constructed as a criminal. In this context, the analysis sheds light on the creation of the main character as a criminal at a religious, sexual, and institutional level, examining how ethnic prejudice and bigotry sustain the oppressive mechanisms of morally and legally corrupt state structures that exploit law-enforcing authorities and the press, with a view to inflicting violence and propagating the language of hatred against Jews across all strata of society. It is concluded that Bok resists identity-based criminalization through growing inner strength, asserting himself and achieving moral agency.

Keywords: crime; blood libel; Jewish identity; Bernard Malamud; René Girard; scapegoating; resistance.



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Introduction

Regarded by critics as Malamud's most acclaimed novel, *The Fixer* revolves around Bok, a 33-year-old repairman who, after being abandoned by his wife, feels utterly devastated in the Jewish *shtetl*¹. As a result, he shaves his beard and leaves for Kyiv to pursue a new life. On a winter night, notwithstanding the risk involved, Bok saves Nikolai Maximovitch Lebedev, a member of the *Black Hundreds*². As a token of his gratitude, Lebedev appoints the fixer as his factory manager. Bok's exceptional skills at work arouse the jealousy of the foreman Proshko, who collaborates with the police to implicate him when a 12-year-old boy named Zhenia is found murdered in a cave. The fixer is shortly afterward accused of blood libel and, despite the lack of sufficient evidence, he is held in prison for two and a half years. The novel ends with his trial, as many people cheer in his support.

The novel draws upon the notorious 1911 Beilis blood-libel case involving Menahem Mendel Beilis, who, just like Bok, was the manager of a brickyard and charged with having murdered a 12-year-old boy for ritual purposes, an accusation rooted in a longstanding antisemitic belief. While Beilis was eventually acquitted, incarcerated Bok is subjected to extreme physical and psychological torture. In an interview with Leslie Field and Joyce Field, in 1973³, the author stated: "Since I was interested in how some men grow as men in prison I turned to the Beilis case, which my father had told me about when I was a boy. The fixer is largely an invention. That is, I've tried to bring it as close to a folk tale as I could" (38).

Malamud's statement shows that, although *The Fixer* is based on a historical case, the novel goes beyond the historical event. The Beilis case provides the novel's historical background, while the fictionalization of Bok's persecution lets Malamud explore broader issues of ethnic identity, persecution, and the construction of criminality. The novel thus acquires a broader significance by presenting Bok's individual experience as part of a wider pattern of prejudice and persecution against Jews. Malamud also connects Bok's persecution to the historical fate of European Jewry, while the novel appears in a contemporary American context increasingly concerned with discrimination and civil rights. In addition, the issue in question remains highly topical in contemporary society, considering the widespread prejudice, blame, and persecution that various ethnic and religious groups, or immigrants, are subjected to around the world. The novel therefore invites consideration of the mechanisms through which ethnic and religious prejudice can develop into collective blame and institutional persecution, extending its relevance beyond its historical setting.

Recent scholarship has examined *The Fixer* from different perspectives, particularly in relation to antisemitism, identity, and persecution. Sklar (2024) examines the novel as a

¹ A Yiddish term referring to a traditional Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe.

² Gaining prominence during the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Black Hundreds were ultranationalist and monarchist organizations that disseminated antisemitic ideas and engaged in or incited violence against Jews.

³ Conducted in 1973, through an exchange of letters, the interview was first published in 1975.

counter-narrative to the antisemitic master-narratives underlying the historical Beilis case, emphasizing how Malamud's fictionalization challenges the narratives that have historically contributed to the persecution of Jews. Kang (2022), meanwhile, focuses on the existential implications of Bok's persecution, arguing that his attempt to distance himself from Jewish traditions and identity ultimately constitutes another form of imprisonment. These studies highlight the novel's treatment of antisemitism and identity, as well as Bok's transformation under conditions of oppression. Building on this scholarship, the present study focuses more specifically on the mechanisms through which fabricated accusations, ethnic prejudice, social hostility, and institutional authority work together to progressively construct Bok as a criminal. Applying René Girard's scapegoat theory, particularly his four stereotypes of persecution, the article examines how these mechanisms shape an imposed criminal identity and how Bok subsequently develops resistance to it.

This article draws on René Girard's scapegoat theory to examine the implications of the main character's ethnic identity on the one hand, and the social and institutional persecution he faces on the other. It argues that, despite the state's imposition of a criminal identity on him, Bok develops a growing capacity for resistance and moral self-determination, moving from a passive existence toward greater moral and political agency.

Scapegoating and the construction of the criminal

Throughout history, certain individuals from ethnic or religious minorities, or entire groups thereof, including immigrants, have often been held responsible for economic difficulties and falsely blamed for criminal offenses they have not committed. Group scapegoating can become especially powerful because it treats a group as collectively guilty, even when individual members have nothing to do with the alleged problem. In this light, Jews are perhaps the best example of this social phenomenon. Sentiments against Jews were initially associated with their responsibility for Christ's death. The Christ-killer stereotype emerging during the early centuries of Christianity developed into more explicit forms of antisemitism during the Middle Ages, when Jews were accused of and persecuted for blood libel, poisoning of wells, and causing the Black Death, among other reasons. By the end of the medieval era, popular hostility shifted toward institutionalized oppression. In this context, in his book *The Changing Face of Antisemitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day* (2006), Walter Laqueur states that after the Middle Ages there were "fewer sporadic attacks from the general populace" but "more repression from the powerful authorities," accompanied by the establishment of ghettos and other forms of institutional restriction (62).

This historical context shows how institutional persecution and social exclusion of Jews were deeply rooted in European society. Such conditions provide the background for understanding Bok's persecution and the moral transformation that it brings about. In this context, René Girard's scapegoat theory, especially its four stereotypes of persecution, offers a framework for examining how Bok is constructed as a criminal and persecuted as a victim.

In *The Scapegoat* (1986), Girard remarks that societies try to end disorder and violence

by blaming and sacrificing a vulnerable outsider to restore social order. In this context, the author identifies four stereotypes of persecution: social and cultural crisis; alleged crimes and transgressions; stigmatized group identity; and supposed signs of difference.

The first stereotype of persecution concerns a social crisis resulting from a disaster, epidemic, political turmoil, and similar events. This state of affairs creates disorder, uncertainty, and fear because the collapse of normal differences and distinctions makes individuals see one another as potential threats, an “all against all” scenario. Although the novel depicts a deeply corrupt and unstable Tsarist order, this stereotype is not directly applicable to Malamud’s narrative. The remaining stereotypes of persecution, however, provide a more productive framework for examining Bok’s experience. The second stereotype concerns accusations of crimes that destroy order – an “all against one” situation. Girard observes that persecutors tend to select crimes involving the violation of particularly strict social, sexual, or religious taboos (15).

Malamud’s novel opens *in medias res* with a crime report that reflects Girard’s second stereotype of persecution. The reader is informed that Zhenia is found dead in a cave, and his death is communicated as a blood libel, denouncing the Jews as responsible for it:

After the funeral in the cemetery close by the brick factory, Richter, one of the drivers, brought in a handful of leaflets accusing the Jews of the murder. They had been printed, Yakov saw when he examined one, by the Black Hundreds. Their emblem, the Imperial double-headed eagle, was imprinted on the cover, and under it: SAVE RUSSIA FROM THE JEWS. (Malamud 7)

The accusation is significant because the murder of an individual child is immediately transformed into an alleged crime committed by an entire ethnic and religious group. *The Black Hundreds* leaflet therefore contributes to the construction of a collective enemy, turning the Jews into a supposed threat to Russian society. Recent scholarship likewise emphasizes the relationship between the historical Beilis case and Malamud’s fictional representation. Sklar (2024) describes *The Fixer* as “a powerful counter-narrative” to the specific story of Beilis and to the longer-standing antisemitic claims that support the persecution of Jews (108). In this sense, Malamud’s fictionalization of the Beilis case does not merely reproduce a historical accusation but challenges the narratives through which Jews have been represented as inherently dangerous or criminal.

Being a Jew himself and living disguised in an area forbidden to Jews, Bok is scared upon hearing the news:

In his room that night, Yakov, in fascination, read that the boy had been bled to death for religious purposes so that the Jews could collect his blood and deliver it to the synagogue for the making of Passover matzos. Though this was ridiculous he was frightened. He got up, sat down, and got up again. He went to the window, then returned hastily and continued to read the newspaper. He was worried because the brick factory where he worked was in the Lukianovsky District, one in which Jews were forbidden to live. He had been living there for months under an assumed name and without a residence certificate. And he was frightened of the pogrom threatened in the newspaper.

His own father had been killed in an incident not more than a year after Yakov's 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. But the son had lived through a pogrom when he was a schoolboy, a three-day Cossack raid. (Malamud 7-8)

Bok's fear is therefore not caused by the credibility of the accusation, which he recognizes as ridiculous, but by his awareness of the consequences that such an accusation can have for Jews and, more immediately, for himself. His concealed Jewish identity makes him particularly vulnerable because the accusation can expose not only his supposed criminality but also his violation of the restrictions imposed upon Jews.

Another transgression fabricated against Bok is that of rape. While doing repair work at Lebedev's house, Bok is approached by Lebedev's daughter, Zinaida, whom the fixer refuses because she appears to be menstruating. Notwithstanding this, she testifies against him: "I'm sure he intended to assault me. By this time, I had begun to suspect he might be a Jew, but when I saw for certain I screamed loudly" (Malamud 84). In addition, Bok is accused of attempting sexual advances on Zhenia himself, although the fixer had only chased the boy away to prevent theft. Finally, Bok is regarded by prosecuting attorney Grubeshov as a revolutionary and Zionist, plotting to overthrow the Russian government. Grubeshov's accusations combine the blood-libel charge with broader antisemitic conspiracy theories, including the alleged existence of a secret Jewish government and Jewish control over political and social institutions. The various accusations thus transform Bok from an ordinary repairman into a supposedly dangerous criminal whose Jewish identity is presented as evidence of his guilt. The prosecuting attorney further asserts that: "The Jews dominate the world and we feel ourselves under their yoke. I personally consider myself under the power of the Jews; under the power of Jewish thought, under the power of the Jewish press" (Malamud 205).

Grubeshov's adoption of an unreasonable and disproportionate attitude toward an ordinary individual, as Bok is, can be better understood in Girard's words: "Instead of seeing in the microcosm a reflection or imitation of the global level, it seeks in the individual the origin and cause of all that is harmful" (21). In Bok's case, the responsibility for alleged crimes and wider social problems is concentrated on a single individual because he belongs to a stigmatized minority. His individual identity as a Jewish handyman is therefore replaced by an imagined collective identity associated with murder, sexual transgression, political conspiracy, and social danger.

In a similar light, persecution against Bok is manifested among the Russian masses, who gather on the street to verbally and physically attack him while he is being taken to prison:

He had begged the colonel to let him walk on the sidewalk to lessen his embarrassment, but was forced into the wet center of the street, and people on their way to work had stopped to watch. They gazed at first quietly, then in deep silence, broken by whispers, muttering and a few jeers. Most seemed to wonder what the parade was about, but then a uniformed schoolboy in a blue cap and silver-buttoned coat, poking his fingers up like

horns over his head, danced in the snow behind the prisoner, chanting, “Zhida, Zhida,” and that awoke murmurs, hoots, mockery. A small crowd, including some women, began to follow them, jeering at the fixer, calling him dirty names, “murdering Jew.” (Malamud 67)

Crowd persecution, whether spontaneous or organized by a higher authority, has occurred since ancient times. Girard argues that crowds tend toward persecution because they seek an accessible cause for their difficulties and may turn against an identifiable individual or group (16). In *The Fixer*, the crowd does not investigate the validity of the accusations against Bok. Instead, it responds to the label attached to him, reinforcing the criminal identity the authorities have already imposed. The crowd’s verbal abuse therefore transforms legal accusation into collective social condemnation.

Considering the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian environment in which the novel is set, crowd and mob violence against Jews was also manifested in the form of pogroms. The term pogrom originally referred to outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in the Russian Empire, particularly those occurring from 1881–1884, and such violence continued into the early twentieth century (Ratzabi n.pg.). The Jews were legally confined to the Pale of Settlement, which is also the case in the novel. The area included parts of present-day Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, and Moldova, and it became an important setting for anti-Jewish violence. The historical context of the pogroms therefore reinforces the connection between the crowd’s hostility toward Bok and the broader social environment in which antisemitic violence could develop.

The third stereotype concerns stigmatized identity. In other words, the scapegoat is generally a vulnerable or marginal individual, or someone who is different from others due to being a foreigner, outsider, or member of a socially marginalized group. Girard emphasizes that persecutors may choose victims because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they have committed (17). He further notes that ethnic and religious minorities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and persecution because of their distinct or poorly integrated status within a society (17-18).

In *The Fixer*, discrimination against Jews was legally imposed by geographically segregating them in the Pale of Settlement, which entailed restrictions on residence, landholding, and occupation. This adversely affected their living conditions, whereby only a small number of highly qualified craftsmen and learned professionals could benefit from exemptions. Bok, likewise, is aware of the residential and work-related constraints:

He had for a fleeting minute again considered saying he was a Jew – just quietly informing Nikolai Maximovitch: “Well, you ought to know what the situation is. [...] I was born Jewish and for that reason can’t live in this district.” But that was of course impossible. Even supposing – a fantastic suppose – that Nikolai Maximovitch, two headed eagle button and all, overlooked the confession in his own interests, still the Lukianovsky was not for Jews, with certain unusual exceptions, and if a poor fixer were

⁴ A derogatory term for Jews in Russian.

exposed as one living there, he would be in serious trouble. (Malamud 54-5)

The passage demonstrates that Bok's Jewish identity constitutes a legal and social liability even before he is accused of murder. His assumed identity is therefore not simply a personal choice but a means of survival within a discriminatory system. By concealing his Jewish identity, Bok tries to avoid the restrictions imposed on him, yet that same concealment later fuels suspicion about his identity.

Beyond the marginal outsider as a target of persecution, Girard argues that the third stereotype also includes the marginal insider. In periods of crisis, even powerful figures may become targets because their privileged position can be interpreted as a source of responsibility for social disorder (18-19). Russian society is depicted in deep crisis in all regards. The Tsar has been incapable of introducing the required reforms to ameliorate the living conditions of his subjects, particularly of the Jewish minority. Refusing to take responsibility for the overall situation, the head of state retorts, "I am the victim, the sufferer for my poor people. What will be will be" (Malamud 299). Although the exchange occurs in a dream, Bok kills the Tsar, which constitutes a symbolic act of revenge on the Tsarist system and, more broadly, on the structures responsible for his suffering. At the same time, Bok's anger is not directed against benevolent Russians such as the investigating magistrate Bibikov and prison guard Kogin. The latter, witnessing Bok's immense suffering and sorrows every day, objects to the Deputy Warden's further humiliation of the fixer prior to his trial, but ends up being killed by the senior official. These figures show that the novel does not present all Russians as persecutors; instead, it distinguishes between those who participate in or resist the system of persecution.

The fourth stereotype of persecution concerns physical or other supposed signs of difference through which the majority identifies or imagines it can identify the minority. The latter is perceived and constructed as an overt or covert threat because of the outsider status and characteristics of the vulnerable minority. Paradoxically, the minority is regarded as more threatening when its differences are not easily discernible. Girard emphasizes that minorities may be persecuted not simply because they are different but because their difference is perceived as insufficiently visible or is believed to be concealed (22).

In this regard, the novel depicts the perception of Jews as a source of danger to the social order. Despite having removed his beard and passing as non-Jewish in his quest for a new life, nonvisual markers, such as imperfect language, constitute another supposed sign of difference. During the river crossing, the fixer's accent exposes him as a non-Russian to the boatman, who immediately makes derogatory remarks against Poles and Germans. Although Bok conceals his identity by introducing himself as Latvian, his interlocutor nevertheless proceeds to express overtly antisemitic sentiments, dehumanizing Jews through animal imagery:

Anyway, God save us all from the bloody Jews," the boatman said as he rowed, "those long-nosed, pockmarked, cheating, bloodsucking parasites. They'd rob us of daylight if they could. They foul up earth and air with their body stink and garlic breaths, and Russia will be done to death by the diseases they spread unless we make an end of it. A Jew's a devil – it's a known fact – and if you ever watch one peel off his stinking boot,

you'll see a split hoof, it's true. I know, for as the Lord is my witness, I saw one with my own eyes. He thought nobody was looking, but I saw his hoof as plain as day. (Malamud 28)

The boatman's reaction illustrates how an apparently minor linguistic difference can become a basis for the projection of a much broader antisemitic stereotype. Bok's accent does not reveal that he is Jewish; nevertheless, it enables the boatman to associate him with an imagined foreignness that can easily be connected to antisemitic prejudice. The absence of an immediately visible Jewish marker does not protect Bok. Instead, his uncertain identity becomes another reason for suspicion.

Similarly, the factory foreman questions Bok's identity, derisively saying he speaks like a Turk (Malamud 56) and runs like a ruptured dog (Malamud 60). However, only when the foreman sees Bok with the Hasid does he become certain that the fixer is a Jew. Likewise, Lebedev, although a former member of the antisemitic organization, cannot recognize Bok as a Jew, despite pointing out the fixer's pronounced Russian accent. Finally, Zina cannot identify him as a non-Russian, deciding to sexually offer herself to the Jewish handyman. These details point to a convergence of two systems into one: the perceived threat and the persecution that follows.

Recent scholarship also helps illuminate this aspect of Bok's concealed identity. Sklar observes that Bok's hiddenness exposes his awareness, whether conscious or subconscious, of the consequences that the antisemitic master-narrative may have for his fate (119). His concealment can therefore be understood as both a strategy of self-preservation and an indication of his awareness of the social mechanisms through which Jewish identity can become a basis for persecution. Once this identity is exposed, the distinction between the alleged criminal and the stigmatized Jew becomes increasingly blurred. The accusations against Bok are consequently sustained not by evidence alone but by the convergence of antisemitic assumptions, social suspicion, and institutional authority.

The mechanisms of scapegoating in *The Fixer* thus operate through the interaction of Girard's stereotypes of persecution. The fabricated murder accusation provides the alleged crime, Bok's Jewish identity provides the stigmatized group affiliation, and his accent and concealed identity provide the supposed signs of difference. These elements converge to transform an ordinary individual into a constructed criminal. Antisemitic prejudice therefore operates at both social and institutional levels: the crowd reinforces the accusation socially, while the police, prosecutors, and prison authorities transform it into an institutionalized form of persecution. Bok's experience demonstrates how an imposed criminal identity can emerge from the combination of a fabricated accusation and a pre-existing ethnic prejudice.

Identity and resistance to criminalization

This section examines the protagonist's redefinition of self-identity in a judgmental, repressive milieu; on the one hand, the institutional failure of justice that imposes a criminal identity on Bok as a minority individual; on the other, the fixer's transformation from scapegoat to a figure of moral resistance. Initially, Bok is presented to the reader as a bitter

and desperate man who has rejected his Jewish identity and religion, despite his father-in-law's advice not to forget his God. To this, the fixer retorts: "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?" (Malamud 19). Influenced by Spinoza's ideas, Bok regards himself a freethinker, and his reasoning is incompatible with Providence or any religious preaching that permits or justifies his deplorable situation. Thus, the oppressive state of affairs forces Bok to leave the Pale, in search of a decent life elsewhere: I've been cheated from the start," Yakov said bitterly. [...] The shtetl is a prison, no change from the days of Khmelnytsky⁵. [...] Here we're all prisoners, I don't have to tell you, so it's time to try elsewhere, I've finally decided. I want to make a living, I want to get acquainted with a bit of the world. (Malamud 14)

To improve his living conditions, he ventures beyond Kyiv's Jewish quarter, hiding his Jewishness under the false name of Yakov Ivanovitch Dologushev. It is only when arrested for having allegedly carried out the ritual murder that he is exposed as a Jew, an identity he immediately acknowledges. Kang (2022) observes that Bok's attempt to evade Jewish traditions and identity ultimately becomes another form of imprisonment, as his efforts to escape the restrictions imposed on Jews cannot free him from the social and historical forces surrounding him (290-1). Upon his incarceration, the Jewish identity is forcibly imposed on him, when Bibikov, the investigating magistrate for Extraordinary Importance, points out to Bok: "Legally you are a Jew. The Imperial Government considers you one even though you twist and squirm. You are so recorded on your passport. Our laws concerning Jews apply to you" (Malamud 81). This discriminatory declaration anticipates the macabre forms of physical and psychological persecution to which the protagonist will be subjected. The legal system depicted in the novel shows many limitations by modern standards, including the impossibility of seeking legal counsel upon arrest. Bibikov explains:

As for consulting a lawyer, that is not possible at this stage. In our legal system the indictment comes first. After the preliminary examination the Investigating Magistrate and Prosecuting Attorney consult, and if both believe the suspect to be guilty, an Act of Indictment is drawn up and sent to the District Court, where it is either confirmed or disapproved by the judges. The defense may begin after the accused is informed that the indictment has been voted, and he is then given a copy of it. Within a week or so, possibly a bit more, the accused may select his counsel and inform the court. (Malamud 78)

While this restriction applies to all subjects, Bok is understandably intimidated by such a pronouncement, given his minor offense. Although he may have a lawyer only before trial, the false testimonies and fabricated accusations against him multiply. Thus, the list of witnesses begins with Lebedev and his daughter Zina, who, testifying against Bok, cannot conceive of the Jew's insolence in interacting with a former member of the Black Hundreds and intimately approaching a Russian woman. Likewise, called as a witness, Proshko

⁵ A Cossack leader who led the 1648-1657 uprising against Polish rule in Ukraine.

invents all kinds of stories to harm Bok while he is in prison. The foreman claims that Bok's concealed Jewish identity reveals his dishonesty and further accuses him of stealing money from Lebedev, portraying his supposed Jewish cunning as evidence of criminal behavior (Malamud 104). Proshko's testimony therefore combines suspicion of Bok's identity with fabricated evidence of criminality, further strengthening the criminal identity imposed upon him.

To corroborate the testimonies against Bok, Grubeshov requests the "expertise" of Father Anastasy, who has also written an antisemitic brochure intended to incite pogroms. The priest repeats a series of traditional blood-libel accusations, claiming that Jews have historically used Christian blood for religious, magical, and medical purposes (Malamud 120-1). Although Grubeshov – and the priest himself – is fully aware that such a commentary is exaggerated, the prosecuting attorney shows no hesitation in turning the fixer's case from a minor civil misdemeanor punishable by one-month imprisonment, as announced by Bibikov, into a serious political offense, while claiming to have notified the Tsar and aroused his interest in the affair.

The accumulation of these accusations shows that Bok's criminalization rests not on a single allegation but on a succession of fabricated claims that reinforce one another. His Jewish identity provides the basis upon which these accusations acquire credibility, while the authorities' willingness to accept false testimony transforms social prejudice into institutional persecution. Thus, Bok is progressively deprived not only of his freedom but also of the right to define himself outside the identity imposed upon him.

In Girard's words, "the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society" (15). Grubeshov, deeply ingrained with prejudice and stigma against Jews, considers the evidence of history as "significant evidence," which is rightly objected to by Bibikov, who states that: "History is not law" (Malamud 117). The prosecuting attorney retorts, "We will see about it" (Malamud 117). This verbal confrontation confirms that Bibikov favors relevance, truth, and proof, while Grubeshov relies on stereotypes and persecution, incessantly pressuring Bok to confess. The prosecuting attorney proceeds in line with the policies of the Ministers of Justice and Interior, who are also interested in prolonging Bok's incarceration for their own political purposes and as a means to divert attention from serious social and economic problems affecting the majority of the population.

As a consequence, Bok comes to the full realization that he is subjected to a historical pattern of antisemitic persecution encouraged and perpetrated against Jews on a social, legal, and political level. "There was 'no reason'; there was only their plot against a Jew, any Jew; he was the accidental choice for the sacrifice. [...] Being born a Jew meant being vulnerable to history, including its worst errors" (Malamud 141). In this regard, Girard emphasizes: "The victim is a scapegoat. [...] Scapegoat indicates both the innocence of the victims, the collective polarization in opposition to them, and the collective end result of that polarization" (39). Such perpetual discriminatory and persecutory attitudes translate into overt violence and excessive suffering for the fixer. While awaiting trial, Bok is mercilessly beaten by other antisemitic inmates. In addition, he is regularly subjected to inhumane conditions by the guards: "The fixer was chained to the wall all day, and at night

he lay on the bedplank, his legs locked in the stocks. The leg holes were tight and chafed his flesh if he tried to turn a little. The straw mattress had been removed from the cell” (Malamud 236).

While Bibikov comes close to revealing that the murder was committed by the boy’s mother’s lover and his gang as an act of revenge against her, the authorities, fearing that such a disclosure would cause a public scandal, falsely accuse the investigating magistrate of peculation. Ashamed and weak-willed, he commits suicide in his cell. In contrast, Bok remains consistently defiant against all forms of injustice, both from malevolent witnesses and from the machinery of institutionalized persecution. His decision not to kill himself, despite profound suffering and despair, is a powerful act of resistance. Likewise, by refusing to confess, the fixer challenges the accusation and the unjust criminal identity imposed on him, while preventing further implication of his community in the alleged crime.

Regarding Bok’s evolution from the beginning, Harold Bloom, in an introduction to *Bernard Malamud: Modern Critical Views* (1986), has rightly remarked: “If part of Bok’s birthright as a Jew is being vulnerable to history’s worst errors, there is another, a tempering of the will that turns Bok against time’s injustices, and makes of this simple man a rebel against history, like so many of his people” (3).

The act of rebellion is symbolically finalized in a dream in which Bok kills the Tsar, having thus become “[...] the irascible man with the courage to stand against his oppressors and fight for his identity and inner dignity as a human being” (Sant 179). Eventually, as he is being taken to trial, the hero comes to the full realization that: “[...] there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. [...] You can’t sit still and see yourself destroyed. [...] Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live Liberty!” (Malamud 299). In this regard, Mehra (2023) emphasizes Bok’s transformation through unjust imprisonment and suffering, portraying him as a figure who gradually develops the capacity to confront systemic victimization and affirming his inner freedom (130). Similarly, Pritchett (1966) observes: “The virtuous man grows to his proper human dimension and becomes large or noble not by what is done to him but what he does” (n.pg.).

Bok’s transformation is therefore not simply a movement from Jewish identity toward resistance, but a gradual redefinition of the self under conditions in which both his ethnic and criminal identities are imposed upon him. Initially, he attempts to escape the restrictions associated with Jewishness by concealing his identity and seeking a new life outside the Jewish quarter. However, persecution forces him to confront the historical and social implications of being Jewish. His refusal to confess ultimately becomes an assertion of moral autonomy, as he rejects the criminal identity the authorities construct and refuses to let their version of him determine his understanding of himself. His resistance thus develops from personal survival into a broader rejection of injustice and oppression.

Conclusion

René Girard’s scapegoat theory, as manifested in its four stereotypes of persecution, reveals the mechanism by which an individual or group is selected, repressed, and persecuted in times of crisis on the basis of ethnic or religious differences – or the perceived

absence thereof. The marginal status of minority members is typically exploited to hold them responsible for various socio-economic problems or crimes they have not perpetrated, as is the case in *The Fixer*. The novel shows how such mechanisms can turn prejudice into accusation and, subsequently, into institutional persecution.

The murder of a Christian boy, categorized as blood libel, triggers overt hostility against Jews, subjecting innocent Yakov Bok to ethnic identity-based criminalization manifested and constructed on a social and institutional level. Girard's scapegoat theory helps illuminate the blatant violation of justice rooted in prejudice and manipulation of truth. However, through enduring relentless suffering and refusing to admit a false accusation at the expense of other Jews, Bok effectively resists the antisemitic and morally corrupt legal system sustained by the entire state apparatus. His initial attempt to conceal his Jewish identity and escape the restrictions imposed upon Jews is gradually transformed by persecution into a confrontation with the historical and social implications of that identity. His refusal to confess therefore becomes not merely an act of personal survival, but an assertion of moral autonomy against the criminal identity imposed upon him. At the novel's end, Bok has achieved his moral victory and envisions true freedom for himself, his community, and society at large. His transformation from a man seeking to escape his identity into one who consciously resists injustice ultimately reinforces the novel's broader critique of ethnic prejudice, collective blame, and the abuse of institutional power.

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