

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE SOCIETY IN SAUL BELLOW'S HERZOG

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Abstract

Saul Bellow, Nobel Laureate (1976) and winner of numerous awards, has been considered an eminent Jewish-American novelist in the post-war period. He has so far written fourteen novels, twenty four short stories, a few plays and several critical papers. Saul Bellow has established himself as a humanistic and conscientious novelist. The primal concern of Bellow in all his creative writings is the self. By projecting this theme, Bellow has made the contemporary American fiction the vehicle of an inquiry into the relationship between the troubled self and the outer world of material abundance and spiritual sterility.

This paper also lays emphasis on the intimate relationship between the protagonists's self and the society in Saul Bellow's novel, *Herzog*. It seeks to explore how the protagonist looks at the problem of the self and how he explains it. He believes that the idea of the self has undergone significant changes. The paper further discusses the starting point of the rediscovery of the protagonist's self. In discovering the meaning of what it means to be human, he has rediscovered his self and its true meaning and purpose. Finally, his quest for self gets itself satisfied only when he returns to society.

Key words: Freedom, Humanity, Self, Society

Saul Bellow wrote two novels by the nineteen sixties, *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1969). And he has established himself as an American novelist of the stature of Mark Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner and Melville by virtue of his being the representative writer of post-modernism. He has made the contemporary American fiction the vehicle of an inquiry into the relationship between the troubled self and the outer world of material abundance and spiritual sterility or between consciousness and history.

Bellow portrays society to be hostile to the individual and the self. The society is ridden by crime, violence, sexuality and the madness of abstractions. It tries to overpower the self but it really can overpower only the false self. The society is not a mere mechanism or a biological organism as some social thinkers hold. It comprises individuals also. And once an individual recognizes his true self discovers his soul, he does not find society hostile to him.

In this novel, the protagonist remains enclosed within his anxiety and does not make adventures in the outer world to seek his identity. If he makes any attempt, it is mental and

moral. He is the prisoner of his perceptions. His problem is how to survive in anxiety which is self-annihilating in a social order and it is full up with tensions and tortures. The protagonist sees everywhere the environment of dehumanization in which the individual self is shrunk and shrouded. In this novel, the study of the self which he thinks is not lost, it is not dead, and it is only over-powered by the modern chaos. He pleads that human life cannot be scorned despite its stinks. In his opinion some despair is likely to occur in the presence of historical complexity but an inquiry through the means of fiction is invariably justified for a revised judgment of the self. He is constrained in his mind, which is in interaction with the social world.

This novel lays emphasis on the intimate relationship between the self of the protagonist and the society. The individual attempts to seek reality within the framework of moral enlargement. The inner life of the self struggles to separate itself from this world and thus feels a sense of isolation. The self of the protagonist is ever alert to the historical presence.

Herzog is the story of a twice divorced Professor of Political Philosophy who reviews his life. The novel is a retrospective meditation by an intelligent Professor who seeks to understand the reasons for his disastrous past. He has divorced his first wife, Daisy, a conventional Jewish woman of worldly and classical taste as he felt bored with her. Then he marries Madeleine, a catholic concert of extravagant taste and intellectual ambitions. Then he purchased a house in Ludey Ville in the Berkshires, where he intended to complete his important book on the Romantics. Later he moves to Chicago with his wife, daughter Junie and friend Valentine because Madeleine cannot bear to live in a village away from intellectual life. Soon they both saw a psychiatrist and Madeleine suddenly announced that she wanted a divorce. Then Madeleine goes with her daughter and his best friend Valentine, who has been cuckolding him. Herzog still loves Madeleine, though she has been willful and unfaithful to him. He has been greatly shaken by the two fold betrayal by his wife and friend. The divorce has caused deep mental tortures to Herzog. His friendships have been failures. He has been denied switches in love and human relationships.

In this novel, Bellow depicts, through his protagonist Herzog, the chaos of a self in the modern dehumanized environment. He is already troubled and confused by a mess of ideas and his consciousness is in collision with the version of reality, both in history and in society around him. Bellow rightly hints at the theme of Herzog, when he says:

To me, a significant theme of Herzog is the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy. He feels humiliated by it, he struggles. Comically with it, and he comes to realize that what he considered his intellectual privilege has proved to be another form of bondage. Anyone who misses this misses the point of the book. (76)

He is an intellectual humanist Professor and his rich intelligence makes him a scholar of repute. But it comes to mock him, because it cannot provide his self with any universal connections to relieve his sense of misery. His problem is that he cannot cope with a world which appears hostile to his own heartfelt vision and his own orderly view. He ceaselessly attempts to liberate his self from such decaying forces and makes adventures those occur mainly in his mind.

To focus the anguish of Herzog's inner self, Bellow therefore makes his protagonist undergo a series of experiences both in his private and public realms. Most of these come up with negative results for him. His private life becomes store house of miseries and misfortunes, in public life; he fights with most of the idea makers of the history. Most of the quarrels Herzog

gets himself involved in the realm of ideas are concerned with the dignity of self and human values.

The world for Herzog both internal and external has become a mighty oppressor. In his self-examination, Herzog has to reach his true self tearing the veils of all illusions, doubts, contradictions and abstractions which have collected around it. In the process of reaching out towards reality, Herzog examines various interpersonal relationships especially towards women. Worried over his recent divorce from Madeleine, Herzog has become obsessed with writing letters to everyone connected with that event as well as to important thinkers who concern him. These letters reveal his nervous crisis and review how he rose from humble origins to complete disaster. He is always hunted by her memory and cannot enjoy peace of mind. In fact, Herzog seems to be a sufferer because of the attitude of Madeleine towards him. The problem of the self has been considered most baffling and various social, biological, psychological and philosophical theories have been put forward to explain it. Herzog's quest for self reaches its climatic point when he dashes to Chicago to protect his daughter from Madeleine and her lover with the intention of killing the adulterous couple.

Herzog believes that 'Man's life is not a business', so he plans a comprehensive history of mankind, making account for the disturbed human condition of the present century. He tries to correct the fallacies and misconceptions he encounters. He rejects the wasteland outlook, alienation and inauthenticity in human life. According to him, a new attitude towards reality of human life is necessary which should be based on the law of the heart, so that life could be lived by renewing universal connections. He realizes that only the change of heart may improve life.

However, Herzog leaves his scholarly pursuits and attempts to be out of his wreck and to keep his dignity intact. But reality poses as a blockage and would not allow an individual to assert his freedom. The intellectual Herzog cannot agree with the idea-makers of history. Herzog's disagreement is mainly with those propagating nihilistic ideas. He battles against the idea-makers in whom he finds nothing but the hollow intellection, which collides with his own idea of importance of human heart. These reality instructors, in fact, with their version of reality, threaten to crush the basic human virtue represented by Herzog.

Herzog is more clear what it means to be a human and how should a good man live. He exhibits an innate potentiality to overcome his crisis through a process of corrective self-comprehension. He thinks that the function of man now is to discover new areas of potentialities under changed circumstances because man is still capable of realizing his potentialities, man has to assert his individuality in the face of nothingness. This is in fact, the main issue of contention between Herzog and the reality instructors, both in history and in time. With a keen desire to affirm the human against the inhuman elements of the present civilization, he seeks for those values and enduring human qualities which are crucial to make human life a decent one. Herzog rightly perceives that it is values in a devalued materialistic world which are of supreme importance to make human life significant.

He believes that more intellection can provide nothing worthwhile to mankind. He is convinced that human life is far subtler than any of its models. He makes it clear that the idea of the self has undergone significant changes. Aware of the fact that the image of the individual self has been turned from 'I or we' into 'It' in a mass society, Herzog repeatedly affirms his faith in the human and believes that the individual self is still with its inherent potentialities. Herzog expresses his firm faith in the inner resources of man, that may help one to realize one's potentialities and thus proves the worth of the self in the present mechanized environment. To Herzog, the changes brought forth by the government with technological aid seldom help to

human growth. These changes are hardly life-enhancing and do not count human values, for which Herzog relentlessly aspires. While attaching importance to one's own inner resources, Herzog feels the urgent need of a total reconsideration of these formulations so as to enable the individual self a life based on dignity.

Herzog tells us: “Much of my life has been spent in the effort to live by more coherent ideas” (164). He tries to get hold of these 'coherent ideas' of his own because it is evident by now, he loves life and wants to survive as a human being against all the oddities of a modern existence. Herzog expresses his faith in the ennobling power of suffering, but what he insists on is that to experience this, one must possess the desire to exist. It is his desire for survival his love for life that urges him to continue life and leads him toward the recovery of his mental health. Herzog acknowledges in clear terms the tempering effect of suffering as an important ingredient of man's transformation and salvation. It is his ability to employ suffering in the right direction that enables him to outlive pain and in a sense to come to terms with reality. It works out finally a transformation: “...I know that my suffering...has often been like that, a more and an antidote to illusion, and therefore I can take no moral credit for it. I am willing without further exercise in pain to open my heart.” (317)

Thus, suffering for Herzog has been a more extended form of life and he comes to his complete wakefulness through it. His wish to open his heart marks the starting point of the rediscovery of his self. Herzog thus out of his struggles, manages himself to exist. This struggle against doom seems to be inherent in the human condition. Herzog himself makes it clear that this realization has come to him from his within—not from any constructs of the intellect. It is the innate power of his own self that makes this new awareness possible.

He stresses his firm faith in humanity which he tries to revive by his scholarly writings. In pursuit of a grand synthesis, he wants to give history a newer interpretation. With his all humanitarian outlook, he resists the differing systems by which other people account for the way reality is. He rather wants a system that may eventually make each individual life a meaningful one. To effect such a change, Herzog believes no outward remedy would do any good. It must originate in each heart, wherein springs love. For Herzog, love has the power to effect such a change.

Herzog comes to defend humanity against all the apocalyptic ideas preached throughout history. Besides, the report that Madeleine and her lover not been treating his daughter properly commoves him to avenge upon the lovers. He visits a courtroom and waits for meeting with his lawyer to discuss the lawsuit against Madeleine. In the mean time, he hears a brutal child murder case which causes the distressed Herzog to relate Madeleine and her lover with the brutal child murderers. He becomes afraid in case valentine should do any harm to his little Junie and rushes to Chicago. He takes his father's pistol from his desk and wants to kill his friend and his wife. When he goes there he happens to see Valentine bathing Junie with all care and tenderness:

As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual....bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into theatre, into something ludicrous. He was not ready to make such a complete fool of himself. Only self hatred could lead him to ruin himself because his heart was 'broken' His breath came back to him, and how good it felt is breathe. (258)

There he observes how tenderly the lover is bathing the child, he changes his mind and thus he is saved from committing murder by this scene. He realises his assumption is meaningless and thinks that it is an act of love which he performs. It is a holy act that touches Herzog's heart. The next morning Herzog takes his young daughter Junie for an outing but has a

car accident and is arrested by the police for possessing a pistol without license. Later, he is released. He withdraws from the city to find peace at his country home. He has dedicated himself to social issues and enjoys the peace. He realizes that experience is deeper than idea, and that chance events are greater than synthesis. By making his protagonist to take his first real step, Bellow makes him to learn to live with reality without sacrificing heart the vital part. Only contact and engagement can keep the law of the heart alive. Only brotherhood can ennoble human feelings. Herzog has finally learnt that only dialogue can render meaning to one's life not monologue. He can now cherish the joy offered by life.

Herzog has now learnt how a good man should live. He is now aware that identity is found in communication through love. The feeling of love urges him to make his life meaningful in brotherhood: "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. If I owe God a human life, this is where I fall down? Man lived not by self alone but in his brother's face.... Each shall be holding the Eternal."(272-73) Herzog has achieved a new consciousness. He recognises he has been selfish and excessively absorbed in intellectual abstractions. He affirms that life is free from all intellectual categories, all definitions and theories. He thinks that the private life of a man may be an illustrious monarchy for him but it is to be assimilated with the social life. In discovering the meaning of what it means to be human, he has rediscovered his self and true meaning and purpose of it. Bellow thus shows that to celebrate life one must accept limitations and join humanity. Only then can a man discover true identity. His true identity consists of the fact that he is a small part of the society. Such a feeling renders him the sense of dignity as an individual. Finally, his quest for self gets itself satisfied only when he returns to society.

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