



Existential Struggle in Saul Bellow's Herzog

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Abstract

Saul Bellow was one of the great Jewish-American writers of the modern period. He gave change to the existing writing style of American literature. Bellow's writings showcased the lack of awareness in the modern civilization; materialism is the most notable concept in the modern era. Existentialism is a kind of philosophical theory that deals with the matter of human existence. One common aspect of Bellow's writing is all his protagonists suffered from midlife crises and also existence in life, or purpose in life. This novel is complex in the view of the protagonist Moses E. Herzog. In the novel, Herzog's life is portrayed as a person who loses his focus. Herzog is struggling to come to grips with his best friend betraying him. This paper focuses on how the main character Moses Herzog, constructed a dream-like state of reality out of the chaos of French existential philosophy. The main focus of the novel is how a modern man comes to an acceptance of 20th-century life in America.

Keywords: Existentialism, Jewish culture, Materialism, Picaresque.

Saul Bellow was an influential Canadian-born American writer. Bellow has written books, novels, novellas, short story collections, plays, and volumes of non-fiction. He received the most prestigious literary awards Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize for his literary contribution. He is one of the most gifted writers ever to the readers. His works widely influenced American literature, especially after World War II. He was the only fictionist to win thrice the National Book Award. He is also a well-known

writer to be awarded the Foundation's Lifetime Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in the year 1990.

Saul Bellow's distinction as a novelist lies in his projection of man as a potential hero who exhibits enormous physical strength, moral uprightness, and intellectual resourcefulness while confronting the adverse conditions of life in post-war American society. In all of his novels, the protagonists of Bellow battle with themselves and the world. According to the Swedish Nobel Committee, his writing exhibited "the mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of our culture, of entertaining adventure, drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation, all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue"

His famous novels are "*Herzog*", "*Seize the Day*", "*Henderson the Rain King*", "*The Adventures of Augie March*", "*Mr. Sammler's Planet*", "*Humboldt Gift*" and "*Ravelstein*". As Christopher Hitchens describes it, Bellow's fiction and principal characters reflect his yearning for transcendence, a battle "to overcome not just ghetto conditions but also ghetto psychoses".

Bellow's themes include the quest for identity in the new world as an immigrant; most important theme seen in most of the novels by Bellow is Alienation. Bellow's writings showcased the lack of awareness in the modern civilization; materialism is the most notable concept in the modern era. Another important aspect of his writings is the influence of Jewish life and culture in his works. His works depict the life of Jews in America and their experience of Jewish culture and identity.

Saul Bellow was the great Jewish-American writer of the modern period. He gave change to the existing writing style of American literature. As a reader, we can see the influence and experience of the World Wars reflected in most of his works. Bellow was notably identified for his change in writing style. The one important characteristic of his works is Jewish characters struggling to adapt and live in the new modern world.

Bellow's style of writing is often written in Picaresque style. In American literature, the main characters were traditional heroes but in Bellow's characterization were rough and always had ethical motives in their acts and speech.

Existentialism is one of the important themes used in the writings of Saul Bellow's works. Existentialism is a philosophical theory that deals with the matter of human existence. Existentialists explore the existence of human life. Their life seems to be Absurd in Nature, according to them the whole world is Absurd which doesn't make any sense. Existentialism is a philosophy originally introduced by the European philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who is known to be the first philosopher of Existential theory. Other important existentialists Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre are the followers of Soren and they too contributed to the further development of this theory. This philosophical theory was prominent during the 19th and 20th centuries and in the 20th century leading existentialists were Simon De Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger.

This philosophy encompasses a range of perspectives, such as personal freedom, individual responsibility, and deliberate choice are essential to the pursuit of self-discovery and the determination of life's meaning.

Saul Bellow's *Herzog* was his sixth novel published in the year 1964. *Herzog* has won the prestigious National Book Award for Fiction and the Prix International Prize. *Herzog* was selected by Time Magazine as one of the 100 best novels in the English language since 1923. *Herzog* is one of the most important works ever written by the Canadian-American writer Saul Bellow. Most of his novels portray the themes of Existentialism, Alienation, Modern-era issues, and the Quest for self-discovery. *Herzog* explores the protagonist's struggle for existence.

This research paper deals with the existential problems of most of the characters, such as Moses E. Herzog, Ramona, Madeleine, Valentine Gersbach, etc. The plot of this novel is a bit complex to understand because it contains too many autobiographical elements. The novel centres on the character Herzog and his five days of living in his late forties. One common aspect of Bellow's writing is all his protagonists suffered from midlife crises and also existence in life, or purpose in life. The novel opens with Herzog in his house in the Berkshires. Herzog is about to divorce his second wife, Madeleine, and is in a relationship with a young woman named, Ramona. Even after his consequent divorce, he is not responsible for his commitment to Ramona.

In the whole novel, he writes letters which he never sends to anyone. He writes letters to friends, family, famous personalities, and even to dead people and strangely to unknown people. Herzog's nature is always he seems to be disappointed, that too about his failed marriages and he often apologizes to the people whom he disappointed very often. Bellow's view on Herzog:

“I think a good deal of Herzog can be explained simply by the implicit assumption that existence, quite apart from any of our judgments, has value, that existence is worthwhile. It simply points to the comic impossibility of arriving at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands...”

Herzog is mentally disturbed due to continuous failure in his life; even in his forties he is not stable in his life. Herzog always questions himself about his existence in the world. Due to all such confusion in his life, he sometimes runs away from his present responsibilities. This kind of attitude was very much disappointing to the character Ramona. Saul Bellow has employed a lot of absurd plotlines and existential themes in most of his works.

However, the existential struggle becomes common thing during the 19th and 20th centuries. Bellow has wonderfully created his real unsuccessful heroes like Moses, Tommy, Joseph, etc. Moses frequently changes his life partner very often. He always likes to change his environment and the people around him. Moses is moreover like the character Wilhelm, who also wants to make a new existence to escape from their questions or inner consciousness. The existence of financially unstable men in the material modern world. Jean-Paul Satre says the same:

Man makes himself. He isn't ready-made at the start. In choosing his ethics, he makes himself, and the force of circumstances is such that he cannot abstain from choosing one. We define man only in relationship to involvement. It is therefore absurd to charge us with arbitrariness of choice.

(43-44)

Herzog was mentally suffered due to his past events which haunts him throughout the novel. In the middle of the novel, then and there he is affected by the flashbacks of his unsuccessful past life. He

lives in the present but suddenly remembers his first marriage to Daisy and his son Marco. Then in another flashback, he remembers his sexual harassment by a stranger in Chicago.

Herzog was deeply disturbed after their separation from Madeleine. One day he received a call from Junie's babysitter that once Junie was locked inside the car during an argument between Madeleine and Valentine. Herzog becomes very anxious about this and plans to kill them but later he realizes the truth and becomes silent. Herzog was convinced by his brother Will to go back to Ludeyville. Later, Herzog finally plans to repair his lifestyle. He thus ends by saying that he no longer writes a letter to anyone. Herzog, decision at the end of the novel gives him real inner happiness: "Something produces intensity, a holy feeling, as oranges produce orange, as grass green, as bird's heat" (II, p.340). Thus the author makes the readers realise that life cannot be captured by any intellectual system of modernity.

In "To Jerusalem and Back Bellow" once again invites our attention to the futility of intellectual means is not always wrong. However, we must not forget, he says, that "history and politics are not at all like the notions developed by intelligent, informed people" (T JAB, P.8)

Throughout the novel, the protagonist struggles to accept his imperfect self. Other's wickedness is less troubling for him than his imperfection. As much action precedes the beginning of the novel, the protagonist has a vast stock of memories to ponder about. The protagonist, finally, accepts his true nature in the end and the acceptance of reality provides the calmness of mind, essentially needed in the beginning. Bellow moulds the fiction optimistically, showing his faith in human strength to strive. L. H. Goldman establishes a connection between Bellow's optimism and his legacy of Jewish philosophy. Goldman writes:

One of the striking contrasts between Bellow's philosophical stance and that of his contemporaries is that whereas most of the writers of the twentieth century nurture and agonize over a nihilistic outlook on life, Bellow's worldview is refreshingly optimistic. This cleavage is caused in the main by Bellow's (subconscious) indebtedness to Jewish philosophers and possibly the influence of their writings on Christian thinkers with whom Bellow is familiar.

(53)

This research article explains how the main characters of Bellow suffered from alienation in the modern world. All his protagonists were shattered because of their consecutive failures in their lives and they also have problems mingling with everyone. One common aspect among all the characters was finding themselves in the lost modern world.

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