



The Self and the Society in Saul Bellow's Herzog

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Abstract: *Saul Bellow won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. He is a unique spokesperson in Jewish-American Literature. He generally talks about social responsibility, freedom for an individual, life style of a good man or brotherly love, dignity of an individual. He gives an important place for an individual. The characters of Saul Bellow, inspite of all sufferings they do not lose moral values and finally get succeeded. Present paper aims at presenting the self and the society in Bellow's novel **Herzog** (1964). **Herzog** is a mile stone in Bellow's career as a novelist. The novel is about the crisis in the life of the protagonist who survives the ordeal of his second divorce. It is a phase of total disintegration and perceives in his own survival, the survival of man in this mechanized, impersonal civilization. It is related to the protagonist's adventures of the mind. Its hero is constrained in his mind, which is in interaction with the social world at odds. Ultimately, he succeeds and proves his social responsibility.*

Keywords: *Self, Quest, Romanticism, Crisis, Social responsibility, Reality, Society.*

Moses Herzog is a learned Professor. Beginning with a study of Christianity and Romanticism, he has advanced towards developing "the philosophy of history" (6) and formulating his views on the contemporary significance of Romanticism. Following the crisis of his second divorce, he undertakes a journey to Europe as scholar on a cultural tour for the Narragansett Corporation, "lecturing in Copenhagen, Warsaw, Cracow, Berlin, Belgrade, Istanbul and Jerusalem" (7). Apparently all his programmes have floundered under the pressure of personal burdens. His second wife Madeline disliked him for his being insane, and accepts the insinuation. He is isolated and distracted and recollects his past Jewish and American history. He thinks of his attitude, behavior, family, sexuality, and eccentricity. He writes letters to such eminent persons as Hegel, Nietzsche Eisenhower, Nehru and Heidegger to alleviate his temporary isolation. These unfinished and unmailed letters reveal Herzog's nervous crisis and review how he rose from humble origins to complete disaster.

"The energy of his book is aimed at recomposing the decomposing self" (Tenner, 87-88). Herzog is a man of both thinking and reflection. He remembers his past and becomes remote from reality. In spite of this fact he is more alive, more imbued with reality, more vividly present than the people with whom Herzog has actual contact, like his brother Will or his friend Ramona. He is a man of ideas, of the knowledge and the wisdom of history and employs them in his own sense of life. He sees himself in the historical context and is overwhelmed by his own role as an intellectual. He tries to correct the fallacies and misconceptions he encounters. He rejects the wasteland outlook, alienation and inauthenticity in human life. According to him, what is necessary for man is, a new attitude towards the reality of human life, which should be based on the law of the heart, how life could be lived by renewing universal connections.

The juxtaposition of the realm of human values residing in the sensibility and the realm of facts to be found in Chicago and New York sharpens the dramatic conflict in the novel. As James Mellard points out, Herzog's personal life, although it must necessarily be connected with his professional one, "actually forms the battleground for assaults,"(79) by the world of New York and Chicago. The emotional crisis ensuing from Madeline's decision to quit their marital life drags Herzog out of the unreal world of his private passions to confront the harsh and unpalatable realities of the metropolitan world. His intellectual quest as a Professor takes him to deliberate over the loss of individuality in a collective society. As an intellectual who is an outsider even in Chicago, there is this brooding, intellectual concern which keeps him isolated from his environment.

Herzog while supporting the trends of Romanticism considers the inspired condition to belong to the whole human existence. According to him reason is equally relevant, even though Romanticism distrusts the mass civilization – the outcome of scientific innovations. Herzog's intellectual pursuit, his brooding over the problems of the relevance of the inspired condition in the modern context of freedom and individuality occurs simultaneously with his reflections over the ethic of eroticism as a means to resolve "sickness, war, property, money, totalitarianism" (166). Herzog's deliberations to find answer to certain queries relating to the role of

personal life in an industrialized, mass society where all the individual concerns are contemptible, continue all through the novel. He sees through the hollowness of our generation which is carried away by theorizings, and according to him finding an easy solution actually threatens the very foundation of our generation.

Along with the problem of assimilation, there is the problem of identity. Herzog, the intellectual cannot be emotional in his attachment of his family, his past and his Jewish heritage. The Napoleon Street of his Montreal days, his parents and his brothers Shura and Will, his sister Helen and his aunt constitute his Jewish background which he cherishes with pride and pleasure. The Jewish family as an integrated unit symbolizing peace and stability is presented as a background in the changed perspective when the protagonist faces the precarious fate of disintegrated family life with multiple wives and children, but all adrift in the vast world. There is recollection of this family life, his parents are constantly alluded to with great deal of love, adoration and nostalgia. His childhood spent amidst poverty and squalor, as the son of a bootlegger subjects to all sorts of privations and fear. Herzog yet reminisces that phase of his life wistfully account of his emotional richness.

“Herzog is not a victim hero; he is a sufferer” (Weinberg, 105). Towards the end of his ordeal, Herzog matures remarkably and attains a calm of mind and an attitude of acceptance. The novel shows “how life could be lived by renewing universal connections, overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self.” (39) It expresses that the ultimate values of human life to be brotherhood – “The real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us.” (272).

The last scene is set in Herzog’s country house where Herzog is seen in a comparatively relaxed state of mind. He is still scribbling notes and writing letters but the tone is less polemical and more conciliatory. His reflections are more balanced and do not carry the earlier bitterness. At this stage of his explorations, Herzog has realized the futility of an intellectual’s role as a separatist. He observes, “And what kind of synthesis is a Separatist likely to come up with?” This observation is closely followed by a more self-assured statement of his own priorities in the present mood. “I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my remaining years in the same way” (329). The emphasis on sharing with other human beings marks the emergence of the other positive factor in the new Herzog that has come out of the ordeal. Herzog has obviously managed to withstand not only the fury of the environment but also to achieve some valid perceptions through his relationship with the external reality. He also has developed a clearer understanding of the nature of life under metropolitan conditions and wants to evolve a mode of peaceful co-existence with what he does not like but cannot change or wipe out. In the end, he does succeed in imposing a minimal coherence on the experiences he has gone through and in finding a way of accommodation with the world of the city that would enable him to preserve his integrity and save him from being absorbed or destroyed.

Thus, Herzog’s quest on intellectual and emotional levels also entails his quest for self, for his integrity and gradually his goal become clearer while still he is haunted by the fear of disintegration. “I am Herzog. I have to be that man” (67). “I am going to shake this off. I am not going to be a victim, I hate the victim bit” (79). This speaks of his determination to maintain his integrity. His preoccupation with self-development, self-realization enable him to go deep into his self, while at the same time he keeps up an effort at communicating with the outside world through his unmailed letters – all the time waging war against the evil in his surrounding. K.M.Opdahl says, “Herzog turns inward as well as outwards. If it is an affirmation of society, it is also an affirmation of the inspired condition or man’s highest subjective experience”(45). Moses Elkanah Herzog means the great hearted sufferer, one who values love and emotional life to be more important than mere intellectual attainments. Thus he appreciates Bhave’s Bhoodan movement, a practical solution to the dire poverty of the people of India. He has the intention to do good and offers to give away his Ludeyville property to Bhave in his mental letter. “He makes a complete decision for social service, finding his salvation in a practical, hard-headed manhood” (Opdahl, 141). Herzog is clearly better equipped at the end of the novel than he had been earlier to face the external turmoil of the big city. The equanimity and confidence he has gained could ultimately grow into a stable equipoise.

To conclude, Saul Bellow through his character Herzog presents the social responsibility of every human being by overcoming all the odds that are brought by the family and the society as a whole through analyzing the self and it is equally important that one has to sublimate experiences into valid perceptions.

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