

Assertion and Subversion in Saul Bellow's Herzog with Special reference to Women Characters

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Abstract - This paper deals with the manner in which Saul Bellow asserts and subverts in Herzog with the help of major women who come in the life of Herzog. The Jewish identity of Bellow thus gives him a subtle freedom to project the deep intricacies of the Jewish women characters in this work. These women characters play a major role in his journey towards maturation and imbibing in him a new understanding of the reality and meaning of life. This renders Herzog with a better healing after his traumatic divorce with Madeline after which life has seemed meaningless to him. But he realises that life is a panorama of ups and downs and victory lies in acceptance of situations of our life that we can't change. Women in his life teach him this simple reality of life.

Index Terms - Assertion, subversion, semitism, orientalism, hegemonising.

INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow is a writer who comes in the domain of those writers who do not ascribe and propound a single ideology given the modern complexities and perversion of globalised man. In his later writings, he refrains from hegemonising a single idea in the Bakhtinian sense because he is well aware of the futility of the dominance of a single philosophical proclamation during the age of multiculturalism, post-structuralism and post-modernism. His voice is the voice of modern man entangled in the mire of chaos and labyrinth in as Malcolm Bradbury puts "materialistic, a narcissistic, a Freudianized and a litigious modern America, where everyone seems to be administering the common medicine now known as Reality or the Truth" (Herzog, Introduction, xviii). Reality, for Bellow, is not universal or a pinioned idea, but something which differs from one person to another and that which is incessantly in a flux. Another

important factor that propels Bellow's distinct perspective is his Jewish identity.

In his essay "Culture, Multiculturalism and the (Post) Modern City", in the book Culture, Multiculture, Postculture, Joel.S.Kahn, while talking about the condition of American Jews writes : "To some extent clearly the differential success of African American and the Jewish intellectuals in negotiating the boundaries imposed by the discourse of culture and ethnicity has been due to the greater strength of American- racism than of American anti-Semitism. To some extent, too, these differences are entwined with the greater economic strength of the Jewish community, although in the early decades of this century these differences were far less marked than they were to become" (Culture,119). In this manner, Bellow has been able to achieve huge success as an American writer rather than just as a Jewish writer. Also, Bellow has been a writer whose Jewish identity has prompted him to portray Jewish heroes in almost all of his works probing into their distinct problematical explorations.

In Herzog, a semi-autobiographical novel of Bellow, multifarious identities foreplay on the character of Herzog whose life is in quite a messy state at the beginning of the novel owing to the divorce from his second wife Madeleine. Herzog's trauma is incited by the fact that he had been betrayed by none other than his best friend Valentine Gersbach, a radio jockey who had been having an affair with Madeleine behind his back. After having moved to Chicago on Madeleine's demand, Herzog had been trying unsuccessfully to write a book. The personal entanglements and emotional upheaval simply render him in a tight spot wherein he is forced to believe by Madeleine that he had started becoming insane. In this condition he feels as if he has almost a broken identity, and he proclaims about his character:

What sort of a character was it? Well in the modern vocabulary it was narcissistic; it was masochistic; it was anachronistic. His clinical picture was depressive---not the severest type; not a manic depressive. There were worse cripples around (Herzog, 4).

He is unable to accept his isolation because:

He was in love with Madeleine; he couldn't bear to leave his daughter. But

Madeleine refused to be married to him, and people's wishes have to be respected (7).

Herzog's inherent familial bonds emanating from his Jewish identity somehow play an alleviating role in his quest for identity and peace because they help him in comprehending the human values and the incessant struggle of every human life. He remembers the strength of his mother Sarah in all adverse circumstances and her ability to move on in life without succumbing to any type of emotional or physical pressure. Herzog's father Jonas who had delved into various ventures but without success, taught Herzog, the lesson of perseverance. The love and support of his brothers Shura and Will and the sincere sisterly concern of his loving sister Helen help Herzog from recovering from the point of self-destruction. By and by he gained insight into the strength that the ties with his family since his childhood had given him and how in his present moment of crisis they had provided him with a positive energy which he could not exactly put into words or to some extent was not even aware of it. The definition of religion in the modern world, according to Herzog, shifted with the interests of different people and he fails to find any sincere effort of spiritual quest in Madeleine who makes useless efforts to convert into Christianity. The vain attempts of Madeleine connote these searches more attuned to fashion and social climbing than the real need for spirituality and connection with the divinity. In one of the unsent letters addressed to Monsignor, the Christian priest, who gave sermons to Madeleine for converting her into Christianity, Herzog writes that:

Conversion was a theatrical event for Madeleine. Theater---the art of upstarts, opportunists, would-be aristocrats. Monsignor himself was an actor: one role but a fat one. Obviously she had religious feeling, but the glamour and social climbing were more important. You are famous for converting celebrities, and she went to you. The Jewish interpretation of the high

minded Christian lady or gentleman is a curious chapter in the history of social theater (112).

He is also struck by the absurdity of the term 'religious woman' ascribed to Madeleine by Dr. Edvig, their psychiatrist. Herzog could not see anything religious about Madeleine since she had very shrewdly and cleverly used him for her selfish ends. He writes to Dr. Edvig:

I don't quite understand what you mean by "religious". A religious woman may find she doesn't love her lover or her husband. But what if she should hate him?.. I don't expect a religious woman to be loveable, a saintly pussycat. But I would like to know how you decided that she was deeply religious Somehow I got a religious competition. You and Madeleine and Valentine Gersbach all talking religion to me---- so I tried it out. To see how it would feel to act with humility. (64)

Herzog's concubine Sono Oguki, a Japanese girl who was studying design in New York had an impactful relationship with him to the extent that after his divorce with Madeleine Herzog proclaims:

You were right about Madeleine, Sono. I shouldn't have married her. I should have married you(167).

Sono was like a breath of fresh air for him and a wonderful encounter with the oriental culture for Herzog who regretfully introspects that he was during that time too much weighed down by the painful proceedings of divorce with his first wife Daisy and the constant insistence by Madeleine to marry him that he had failed to understand the depth of joy that only Sono could produce in him. He writes in a letter to Sono:

To tell the truth I never had it so good. But I lacked the strength of character to bear it. That was hardly a joke. When a man's breast feels like a cage from which all dark bird have flown---he is free, he is light. And he longs to have his vultures back again. He wants his customary struggles, his nameless, empty works, his anger, his afflictions and his sins. In this parlor of Oriental luxury, making a principled quest--- principled, mind you---for life-giving pleasure, solving for Moses. E.Herzog the puzzle of the body (curing himself of the fatal disorder of worldliness which rejects worldly happiness, this Western plague, this mental leprosy), he seemed to have found his object. But often he sat morose, depressed in the Morris chair. Well, curse such sadness! (170)

The spiritual gurus of the East too opine that man cannot easily accept the fact of having lots of joy and a blissful life because we tend to digress from the real purpose of our life and a blissful state of mind takes our attention towards the real purpose of our lives. We want to evade this purpose and so we imbue complexities in our lives.

With Sono, Herzog entered a different type of world where togetherness is celebrated as a blessing rather than a state laced with materialistic approach. Her oriental philosophy of enjoying the present moment with him was rejuvenating for him in the world where he was surrounded with people of malicious outlook, self-centred perspective and dried-up souls. The widening gap between Daisy and him due to his immersion in writing the book on Romanticism (it is ironical that while doing research on Romanticism his own romance with Daisy was withering) and the acute attacks of Madeleine on him to provide her with the security of a husband had somehow taken away all the joy and vigor from his life. Daisy's silent tolerance of him and Madeleine's surprisingly cold behavior at certain times were difficult for Herzog to deal with. But Sono asked for nothing which energized Herzog: *Sono asked for no great sacrifices. She did not want me to work for her, to furnish her house, support her children, to be regular at meals or to open charge accounts in luxury shops; she asked only that I should be with her from time to time. But some people are at war with the best things of life and pervert them into fantasies and dreams. The Yiddish French we spoke was funny but innocent. She told me no such broken truths or dirty lies as I heard in my own language, and my simple declarative sentences couldn't do her much harm. Other men have forsaken the West, looking for just this. It was delivered to me in New York city.* (173)

The difference between the Western and Oriental women's attitude towards understanding the importance of relationships is implicit in Herzog's attraction for Sono and a peculiar type of charm and contentment inherent in the relationship. It was the purest and the most innocent type of relationship devoid of any role-playing or entrapment. In comparison to Sono, Madeleine had tried to use Herzog for her financial security and stability disregarding the emotional injury that she had caused to him. This type of cultural intersection between Sono and Herzog enhanced his ability to comprehend Madeleine's manipulative behavior in contrast

to Sono's purity of heart. He could now decipher the distinction between Western pragmatism and eastern innocence.

Another woman who rescued Herzog from falling into the mire of hopelessness and low esteem was Ramona Donsell, one of his students of the evening school. She was the attractive outcome of mixed nationalities:

She came from Buenos Aires. Her background was international---Spanish, French, Russian, Polish, and Jewish. She had gone to school in Switzerland and still spoke with a slight accent, full of charm. (14)

Herzog thought of entering into matrimony with Ramona. He wondered what Ramona would say if he offered to enter her flower business. The idea appealed to him because it meant meeting new people which would diffuse his scholarly isolation:

He had read lately that lonely people in New York, shut up in their rooms, had taken to calling the police for relief. "Send the squad car for the love of God! Send someone! Put me in the lockup with somebody! Save me. Touch me. Come. Someone---please come."(203)

Going through this phase of life, Herzog was greatly relieved to find the company of Ramona whose philosophy was that sexual pleasure was all that the spirit wanted and if the spirit is satisfied then everything would be fine. Though Herzog could not entirely rely on the truth behind this theory because despite so many relationships with women, he had never experienced serenity in his life, he knew that Ramona's generous nature and humanitarian outlook would give solace to his jolted self-esteem and self-confidence. In the world, she had the responsibility to do everything on her own including the business of the florist and this somehow showed how courageous and independent she was with her dealings. Herzog thought that:

But there was something intensely touching about her too. She struggled, she fought. She needed extraordinary courage to hold this poise. In this world, to be a woman who took matters into her own hands! And this courage of hers was unsteady. At times it trembled! (337)

Ramona's fierce independent approach towards life helped Herzog overcome his irrational fears. Her beauty and her attraction brought in a new type of lease of life in him and after having been dumped by Madeleine in a very cold manner, she sincerely rescued him from getting swept into the tide of

hopelessness and insanity. When Herzog tells her that he has worked for a number of ladies and was “developing the psychology of a runaway slave” (189), she sharply answers him, “It’s your own fault. You look for domineering women. I’m trying to tell you that you’ve met a different type in me,” (189).

It’s clear from the interaction of Herzog with these women that he learnt much from them. From the biting effect of Madeleine’s divorce to the healing influence of Sono and Ramona, he understood a lot about life and finally resolved to move on with his life without trying to hold on to the idea of reality because it is as conceptual as are guilt and salvation because similar point is raised by Lucy Lurie when she remarks in *Disgrace*, “Guilt and salvation are like abstractions” (*Disgrace*, 112).

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