



## JEWISH EXPERIENCE FOR GENTILE'S EXISTENCE: UNIVERSAL SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN SAUL BELLOW'S NOVELS

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Modern man in the pursuit of material accumulation makes the very existence of human relation flimsy. He evades his responsibility and lacks compassion for his personal gain. Bellow admits that society with its increasing materialism threatens to suffocate the soul with its profusion of things. But he asserts, the human spirit is inextinguishable. Society may move towards its death with false concepts of progress and prosperity but somewhere, somehow, the human spirit will start to disengage itself, to protest, to assert its need for true values, for real freedom. He rejects the tradition of alienation in modern literature and his fiction emphasizes the value of brotherhood and community.

Saul Bellow, twentieth century American Writer whose parents migrated from Russia was born of orthodox Jewish parents and without much difficulty, he assimilated into the WASP American culture. He is the winner of 1976 Nobel Prize for his literary contribution to the mankind. Though critics are reluctant to acknowledge Bellow's indebtedness to his Jewish heritage Bellow admits that his Judaism is one of the foundations from which he drew his art. Despite the ambiguous and equivocal insistence that he is not a Jewish writer but an American writer who happens to be Jewish, Bellow's use of his Jewish heritage is pervasive and functions on two levels one is the conscious and other is unconscious. It is conscious when he chooses material for his fiction –characters, themes, relationships etc. since almost all his protagonists are Jews. It is unconscious because the Judaism that ingrained into his psyche as a child and has remained as perspective throughout his, more mature years. He presents consistently Jewish philosophical views in all his works, which reflects his universal behaviour.

Judaism with all its rituals and appurtenances, is anthropocentric and, therefore, humanistic. Most of its laws pertain to relationships between human beings. 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' is what Torah the Jewish scripture taught. *It is bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human* is what Bellow writes in one of his novels *The Victim*. In the humanism of Judaism, life is with people. Bellow highlights the importance of this view of humanism in his first novel, *Dangling Man*. by stating that alienation is a "fool's plea" "it is all right to feel alienated but one should not make a doctrine out of a feeling". He prefers the term "dangling," which encompasses alienation and estrangement, yet suggests that one's problems cannot be resolved by removing oneself from the society. At the person who dangles is not in limbo, one "dangles" from a string that is attached to something. In using this term, Bellow suggests that the moment the umbilical cord is severed at birth, separating the child from its sustaining maternal ties, a person becomes intimately bound up in another tie linking him or her with the universe. This is both a human link with flesh and blood and also an attachment with the divine soul of cosmos; The individual is thus connected to the moral and cultural imperatives of the world. Bellow's first novel indicates the need people have for belongings and their sense of loss when they do not feel themselves an integral part of society. His subsequent works continue this image of a man who pendulously moves through life, longing to grasp at meaningful relationships.

Bellow's second novel *The Victim* centres round the guilt and responsibility. It tells us the issue of accountability which is closely linked with the need for the positive values of human dignity through an intricate pattern of human relationships. Responsibility and Jewish identity are interwoven in the novel through the mutually hostile but inescapable bonds, which tie the characters Asa, and Albee together.

Jewish cultural background to Bellow's belief in men and alliance to life served as armour against the despair resulting from blows inflicted on the Jewish community throughout history. All Bellow's protagonists are social creatures who consider solitude anathema. Consequently, most of his novels conclude with their reintegration, happily, into society.

The apocalyptic vision of World War II indicated the devastating results of a loss of societal connectedness and those imperatives that govern a harmonious world. In the mid-twentieth century the ethical values of Judaism were severely attacked by Hitler and his Nazi philosophy. Hitler and his exponents thought, recognized that their war against the Jews was against twentieth century humanism. The philosophy of Nazism was a clearly defined system of thought diametrically opposed to the philosophy of Judaism.

Bellow's works reaffirm the sanctity of life and strive to re-establish the foundations of society by maintaining the world's need for morality, for the return to the humanism of Judaism. Through his works he seeks to re-establish the nexus between human beings to re-create the bond of humanitarianism that resides in such words good humanity, dignity and responsibility.



The humanism in Saul Bellow's fiction is manifest by his sensitivity to the individual caught in the major moral dilemmas of the times which is depicted so effectively in his serious comic mode. Bellow's deep humanistic concern appears as a correlative to his own sensitivity to the modern age.

*Henderson the Rain King* though it has a Gentile for a protagonist exhibits a marked Jewish sensibility that charts out a course of recovery for modern man from the existential wasteland. The protagonist's sense of alienation and suffering identifies him as a Schlemiel. Schlemiel is a philosophical fool who is suffering through all the insults and deceit of the world and morally succeeds because his perception of life is both human and divine. Suffocating in the morally deleterious atmosphere of New York, Henderson rushes forth into the arcane land of Africa to gain wisdom. He is actuated by a child like desire and his forwardness would not rest till he finds answer to the queries of his spirit. He finds himself a stranger in the world because his inner aspirations are at variance with his conscious self and the attitudes of the world.

The philosophy and message of Henderson is unmistakably Jewish. The whole dynamics of the work is sustained by the surging power of love Henderson exhibits for life and creatures. It is this love which redeems him from the depths of the existential wasteland and assures meaning to life. Towards the end Henderson says 'whatever gains I ever made were always due to love and nothing else' (464-65)

*More die of Heart Break* assigns the Jewish experience a vital role in evolving a positive world –view that counters the excess of the wasteland look. Benn Crader, the protagonist signifies the moral approach of the Judaic way of life and this moral consciousness guides him through chaos into clarity.

Bellow's fiction in general is moral fiction. It is not concerned with style. It considers moral-metaphysical problems as the demarcation of human responsibility and the relationship of the individual to the world of power. It is concerned with the question of goodness. It believes in man and in the potentiality of holiness and joy within the common life, the possibility of meaningful existence.

The Jewish experience Bellow manifested in his novels is to resist the nihilistic despair of the wasteland ideology. Life is a wondrous experience to be enjoyed by living, in the company of others. This is the guiding principle of Bellow's heroes. The quality of Bellow's Jewishness is incontrovertible. Saul Bellow's perspective is unmistakably Jewish. His humanistic voice pulsates the anthropocentric concerns of his heritage which will redeem all.

#### References

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5. Neelakantan G, *Saul Bellow and Modern Wasteland*.