

Realism As A Tool To Portray Desolated Jewish Victims In The Select Works Of Saul Bellow

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Abstract

The assimilation in the American environment post holocaust has proven to be a challenge for the Jewish community. Saul Bellow is one of the writers of 1940s America who has tried to portray the Jewish life of the immigrants in the US. His characters are life-like, wherein their trauma, pain and desolation have been portrayed in a very realistic manner which has allowed all Jewish Americans to relate to his characters and sympathize. The art of realism comes from observing and Bellow has mastered the art which comes out beautifully through his characters. The following paper is a study of two such characters Joseph from *The Victim* and Joseph from *The Dangling Man*. Although both the protagonists have the same name, but their journeys through alienation, family disputes and much more is different.

Keywords: Holocaust, Jewish, Trauma, Alienation, Realism

1. Introduction

In post-war American literature, Saul Bellow is credited with ushering in a new era of optimism and faith. His unquestionable acclaim is based on the quality of his ideology, ideas, and philosophy, as well as the diversity of his work. Technical skill, however amazing it might be, is meaningless unless it conveys equally remarkable insights into human life and experience. Technique is important in relation to the rendering of human experience and communicating to the reader the meaning and significance of that experience, It is worth exploring only when it helps us in understanding and evaluating a work of art better, especially when we live in a time when the novel is changing radically, when new aesthetics are emerging and new ways of reading are needed.

Saul Bellow (1915-2005) is a writer who convey and respond to a lot of what's going on in this new era. His novels are in fact battlegrounds of contemporary intellectual dispositions. They are also the intellectual inheritors of our largest thoughts and concerns. But it is not hard to see behind it a moral, intellectual and metaphysical undertaking of great and classic power. Frank Kermode came near to these descriptions when he said of Bellow that "he is so good that anybody can see it with half an eye." (Kermode; 1984:10) In the years since his emergence as a writer of imaginative literature, Saul Bellow has become one of the leading figures of American letters and the foremost Jewish voice of the Jewish speaking world. With the absorbing classical tales of Jewish Schlemiel, the "Jews for the first time (have moved) into the centre of American culture." (Fiedler; 1957:104) Judaism in his work, "is not only source of nostalgia, but also of guilt and anxiety." (Geismar; 1958:223) The suffocating family ties, the alienated hero, with a messianic vision mixed with Jewish humour is often the theme of Bellow's fiction. So Bellow often returns to the same characters like the dangling man, the gambler and the patriarch. They see metaphysical tensions at home.

Even the close relationship of father and son is evident in the biblical lines of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No doubt, family closeness has always been important in Jewish literature, especially the father-son relationship. Each of Bellow's heroes finds a beast within himself leading to the conclusion that Nature which itself is wild is reflected in human beings too. In this case Bellow has few peers in delineating the particularity, the uniqueness and the topography of a single individual. The Jew becomes a symbol of modern urban man, and the whole idea

of exile that “modern man is an outcast from his own Land of Israel and a wanderer in the Diaspora,” (Feinstein;1960:88) becomes an obsession with Bellow.

During the Second World War when the whole human psyche was trembling with fear, no writer could think of creating a fantasy. Bellow began writing during this period and he was able to probe the meaningful questions of the 1940's by employing the 19th century patterns of realism. His heroes of the early stage were able to see themselves as they are. Hence, the greatest display of Bellow's virtuosity was achieved in his handling of this point of view. Although the three protagonists in the realistic phase, Joseph, Asa Leventhal and Tommy Wilhelm are representees from the Jewish communities they are not the consciousness of minorities. The protagonist's experience in the world were similar to the times. The depression, the war and the fear had led to his own disintegration. So, his fight against his fate, led the reader also to sympathize with him. The struggle of these protagonists to wrest a stillness, under these circumstances of chaos, and to probe the depths of his feelings, to forge the seemingly disparate fragments of his past into a coherent whole formed the basis of the novels of this early phase.

The struggle of the man and his inner self is symbolic because Bellow felt that man has not yet studied man completely. He airs this view in Herzog when he comments “that man has barely begun to comprehend what a human being is.” (Bellow; 1964:64) Hence, his protagonist's consciousness functions as a symbolic mirror, and even when realism claims the eye as a camera, it is the mind's eye that is involved. In Bellow's early fiction the characters are from the middle-class families with familiar and common place as settings. Alfred Kazin describes it aptly in his Bright Book of Life, where he says that, Bellow has “found fascinating narrative forms for the urgency of his many thoughts. He has been clever in finding a distinct style for so much silent thinking...” (Kazin; 1973:135) In his realistic novels, *Dangling man* (1985) and *The Victim* (1947), the tragedy is embedded in the web of social relationships of which the hero is the focal point. Besides the decaying chaotic city and rejuvenating peaceful countryside are juxtaposed to show the decaying ‘Self’ in a machine age. The consciousness of time and space is a special feature of the novelist's apprehension of reality.

In Bellow too, we find sub-plots woven around the main frame as in *The Victim*, where his brother's family and subsequent commotion forms the sub-plot. The author describes circumstances on geographic and chronological dimensions, adopting realism as one of the feasible modes of perceiving this actual human reality, rather than dealing with the unchangeable moral verities of life in the abstract. This demonstrates that realism is one of several possible forms for narrative storytelling. Bellow's narratives tell the tale of modern man in America, his terror in the face of dissolving reason his persistent will to alter his destiny, his desire to reaffirm the values of community in an age where loyalties are fickle and allegiances to life are undertaken in the face of flimsy, often conflicting evidence. In this regard Bellow has been described as “a great realist, a follower of Dreiser, Norris, and the American urban naturalist tradition.” (Braham; 1984:07) Bellow's special gift is the creation and advancement of this verbal space. His style consolidates the supernatural eye, his fictions are frictions of struggle of lone victims.

Joseph's alienated and marginalized life in *Dangling Man* is a new impetus to realistic narrators of fiction. As Edmund Wilson notes, the book is “one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the war.” (Wilson; 1944:71) Bellow, in fact, shares this predicament (of growing up during the time of war and experiencing the turmoil and turbulences of the time) with Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus and Sartre. His Jewish protagonist Joseph, shares Bellow's Jewish heritage of persecution and nightmare. However, Joseph's identification with Dostoevsky's protagonists in *Notes from Underground*, is not a coincidence. The frustrated intellectual of Dostoevsky bored with himself and the world is akin to Joseph, in *Dangling man* Joseph, moves all alone one like the alienated existentialist heroes of Camus's *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Nausea*. The dangling and victimised figures of Kafka's novels also find an echo in Joseph. So more than a period fiction it is the realistic application of a universal theme that puts a burden on the lone victim.

The protagonist of *Dangling Man* (1985) is Joseph, and the book is written in the style of a journal. The entry in the Journal spans four months, beginning on December 15, 1942, and ending on April 1, 1943. He had been swinging between the civilian and military worlds for nearly seven months at the time of the first entry. He is a Canadian immigrant; therefore, he can't be conscripted without undergoing an inquiry, and the red tape has slowed his induction to the point that it appears that the war has passed him by. On the assumption that he would soon be called into service, he had quit his former job. He is now living on the income of his wife Iva, a librarian. Here the journal form which “is used for narration, is an ideal construction self-indulgence” (Bellow;1985:07) for the desperate Joseph. For the journal realistically records, his daily travels, in a manner typical of realistic fictions aptly substantiated by Howard Harper:

This fact has been *The Journal* is the perfect form for the portrayal of a man imprisoned within his mind, within an awareness of himself alone. Joseph's consciousness is the subject of the novel, and the journal form

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permits Bellow himself to maintain a certain distance from that consciousness at the same time he makes the consciousness itself overwhelmingly immediate. Joseph's narcissism is not Bellow's own, and the fact that some reviewers complained of it, shows how relatively new the narrative conception was. (Harper; 1969:15)

The protagonist of Bellow's story is on a journey for peace. Despite the fact that Joseph is now free, he is unable to make use of it. He is caught between his own past and the external world as a result of historical events. His friends, brother, mistress, and wife are all estranged from him. He has stopped reading and relies heavily on his intellect. He is forced to withdraw inside and talk to himself as a result of his lost relations.

The novel ends with Joseph, unable to bear the burden of his freedom, asking the draft board to expedite his induction into "regular hours and regimentation" (Bellow;1985:159). Near the end of his journal, he concludes that "the ideal construction is the one that unlocks the imprisoning self." (Bellow; 1985:156) By this time he has realized that he cannot conquer external chaos, and that he must adjust his own grief and values to those of the rest of humanity. Bellow aligns himself with realism by practicing the art. He seems to have adopted this particular narrative in order to prove the dignity of the individual fighting for survival. Bellow largely resolved the uncertainties of his first work in his second work, *The Victim* (1947), by giving a more comprehensive perspective. We perceive everything through the eyes of the protagonist. Asa Leventhal, but the narrative voice is placed at an ironic distance outside of him, allowing us to examine the veracity of his ideas.

In form, *The Victim* is not nearly as self-conscious as Joseph's journal. It is a straight forward, third-person narrative of Asa Leventhal, whose perception is the main focus, it does not enter into the minds of other characters or into scenes in which Leventhal is not present. This technique allows Bellow (rather than a narrator) to organize the events and to provide some atmospheric commentary. It achieves an intimacy characteristic of first-person narrative, but with great control. *The Victim* abounds in large number of realistic details: "There was still redness in the sky, like the flame at the back of a vast baker's oven the day hung on, gaping fiercely over the black Jersey shores." (Bellow; 1947:147) The New York landscape is portrayed in a familiar manner to any New Yorker, the colours symbolically evoke an image of a threatening city. There are instances of observed reality like the memorable one in *Herzog* wherein a well-lit room, Valentine bathes June and *Herzog* in the darkness watches it. In *The Victim*, Leventhal watches a quarrel with a husband and wife-a soldier had stepped in the night and it is early morning when the quarrel began II "the air was gray and soft in the defile of the street." (Bellow; 1947:43)

Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* is also an alienated, intellectual victim of circumstances. However, before the final version was published in 1947, it seems there were two drafts of *The Victim*. This story, however does not confront the Holocaust directly, but much seems to be implied through its narration which focuses on the irrational hatred around. It reflects the anti-Semitism and six million deaths caused by hatred.

The tale opens with a solitary, disillusioned middle-class Jewish newspaper editor (a trade magazine of Burke Beards Co., situated in Manhattan) who is left alone in his New York apartment. His wife has abandoned him to care for her mother. His alone promotes emotional confusion, making him more open to the changes of an old acquaintance, Kirby Allbee, whom he runs into in a park. Allbee assisted Leventhal in meeting his employer, Rudiger, for a job when he was unemployed. Bellow skilfully manipulates the plot to create maximum psychological vulnerability in his gradually increase the pressure, treatment, pushing his character to pushes, but it is the controlled protagonist in a kind and then of shock the limit. Bellow aesthetic weight of language and situation, not the blind failing of his hero. The conception of Allbee (universal being, or Everyman) is brilliant. Entirely believable as a realistic character, he is equally real as the symbolic manifestation of Asa Leventhal. Howard M. Harper says that :

The structure of the book is also impressive Because of the double role of Allbee as realistic character and as projection of Leventhal's consciousness, Bellow was faced with the problem of making *The Victim* convincing at both the realistic and symbolic levels. He merges the two so successfully that the novel may be read either as realism or as symbolism (as many critics see it) without reference to the other level: yet each level is powerfully strengthened and in no way twisted, by the other. For example, the reader who wants realism is convinced by the first encounter of Leventhal and Allbee in the park because of the chain of circumstances, though complex, is entirely probable; the reader who wants symbolism is convinced because Allbee's materialization at that point is psychologically necessary. Bellow's economy and control in the book are masterful; they enhance rather than limit its richness. (Harper; 1969:23)

In fact, the major themes of Bellow's novel are the alternate worlds that intellectuals try to create sometimes comically sometimes tragically. Bellow's reality is the world out there, as well as the world of noumena. Since Bellow's focus is not the minority community but the larger humanity, his realistic narration, "has traditionally formed the aesthetic counterpart of the controlling, ordinary idea of America culture." (Carter; 1977:249)

Bellow began writing as a realist, developing fantasy as a major tool to probe the depths of his protagonists' feelings, viewing comedy as a series of mistakes arising out of pain; yet his basic interest never changed. He is concerned with the psychological subtleties of life and, therefore, his technique required superior minds in his readers as well as in his characters. Bellow was conscious of it and so he feels that innovative forms are needed to explore the self for, "we have barely begun to comprehend what a human being is." (Chavin; 1979:327)

Saul Bellow's novels have certainly shown a realistic framework, meditative, philosophical and transcendental, taking the narrative forms as the necessary mode of mediation between the world of process and the world of consciousness. The resulting perception is indeed, comedy in its seriousness. The narrative techniques which Bellow has employed from his early novels to the present have behind it the same intentions which have been noticed continuously. The memory, the epistolary method, the dramatized consciousness, all these devices are designed to heighten the desired effects and authenticity. They do so by locating experiences in the individual consciousness

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