

THE BROTHERHOOD AND LOVE IN THE NOVEL OF SAUL BELLOW “HERZOG”

Dr. Asif Anwer

Lecturer in English, Mithila Women’s College, Rajendra Nagar, Patna

Received: Sep. 2019 Accepted: Oct. 2019 Published: Nov. 2019

Abstract: This paper reveals that Saul Bellow is known, foremost, as the writer of *Herzog*. It is a complicated and experimental novel, in which Bellow has scrutinized the protagonist’s mind through his unpublished letters. As Shakespeare was the spokesman of Elizabethan age and portrayed the bloody ambitions of royal families, Bellow was the spokesman of modern American middle class people and portrayed the labyrinth of human relationships, common to most of the Americans. Published in 1964, *Herzog* was at once welcomed with great enthusiasm in literary community. Though it talks about only five days in the life of Professor Herzog, it encompasses myriad of ideas related to philosophy, politics, morality, psychology, and literature et cetera. Professor Herzog is on the verge of insanity because of shocking divorce in his second marriage. The novel records a growth from depression to positive outlook towards life.

Introduction: As an anthropologist, human relationships were Bellow’s forte. He knew that failure of relationships had been causing psychic disorders to several people in American society. These disorders shaped American society into unwanted dimensions. The society indulged into immeasurable depth of negativity and passivity. Even the intellectuals reflected hopelessly on the situation. In this topsy-turvy situation an individual started questioning about his own existence, about his roots, and destination. Even in such adverse conditions, when most of the writers surrendered before this storm of nihilism, Bellow’s faith in human beings remained intact. Bellow criticized the modern scientific and literary intelligence which imposed limits on human capacities in one of his interview:

What I am saying is that the accounts of human existence given by the modern intelligence are very shallow by comparison with those that the imagination is capable of giving, and that we should by no means agree to limit imagination by committing ourselves to the formulae of modern intelligence but continue as individuals to make free individual judgments. (Bellow, “A World” 40)

Such statements render Bellow a ‘hopeful existentialist’. Like a Sartrean followers, he believes that human beings are the creator of their own destiny. However, the peculiarity of Bellow is his optimistic existentialism. His fiction suggests that human being can master his mind to accept pain and pleasure indifferently.

Bellow always smiled in a mystic way as if he knew the keys to success of human puzzles. His novels impart insight into a failing modern man in his wrong going relations. That is the reason why he is so famous among fiction-reading persons. In *Herzog*, he has shown various psychological effects of divorce on an intellectual. He has shown the web-like structure of social pressures and personal egoistic aspirations. When a marriage fails, it not only mars the social image of a person but spoils his self-respect too. Herzog’s second divorce, too, proves devastating for his mental balance as Bellow writes in the first line of the novel, “IF I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog” (Bellow, *Herzog* 1).

Herzog has no traditional plot-structure. Whenever a new idea is struck in Herzog’s mind, he starts writing letters. Thus, the letters record Herzog’s consciousness and the novel is written in stream of consciousness. This structure has made *Herzog* a tough fiction to read. It entertains, but a few, and is not meant for cursory reading. Moreover, it has also been criticized for its excessive intellectualism and

jigsaw puzzle like structure. But one can understand the real value of *Herzog* with a little serious reading.

Intellectual Debate: *Herzog* can be described as an intellectual debate over romanticism and existentialism. Romanticism, which flourished in Europe in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, emphasized the essential goodness of human beings. It rendered human soul as a captive of society. For romantics, society was bondage. That is why they advocated an escape into motherly nature. Romantic literature displayed a number of recurrent motifs: the theme of the individual in rebellion, the symbolic interpretation of the historic past, subjects from myth and folklore, the glorification of nature, far away settings, sentimentalism, the nobility of the uncivilized man, and a humanitarian political and social outlook. For romantics the human soul was pious but sufferer; it was angelic but cried in the clutches of monstrous social institutions. They believed in the uniqueness of human being. Bellow can be assumed as a romantic because he has faith in humanity and its goodness. But he is a believer of an intellectual version of romanticism which is close to existentialism. Like a romantic, he resorts to imagination to realize the goodness of human heart. At the same time, he does not consider society a monstrous bondage over human freedom which makes him different from romantics. Moreover, for Bellow the cause of suffering lies within the actions of human beings. In this sense, he is a follower of existentialist thinking. In Bellow's fiction protagonist can overcome the external struggle with the capacity of mind. If human being suffers due to his own actions, he can regulate his sufferings through his actions.

Herzog starts as a romantic sufferer and ends as an enlightened intellectual. He is a middle aged professor who is facing the blame of insanity after his second divorce. He is much disturbed and needs answer for his unsolved puzzles regarding his existence, his responsibility and cause of second divorce. His over-intellectualism leads him towards a chaotic state of mind. Thus, *Herzog* dwells in the realm of unsolved questions. As it is clear from some lines of his letter:

My God! Who is this creature? It considers itself human. But what is it? Not human of itself. But has the longing to be human. And like a troubling dream, a persistent vapor. A desire. Where does it all come from? And what is it? And what can it be! Not immortal longing. No, entirely mortal, but human. (Bellow, *Herzog* 220)

His mind has become a cauldron of pinching questions. He needs answers but is unable to find. *Herzog's* personal agony has created a highly dissatisfied and complaining self. He is well educated and has a long list of personal, literary, historical and political complaints; he starts writing letters to "everyone under the sun" (Bellow, *Herzog* 1). However, he never bothers to send those letters to anyone and keeps them in his valise. These letters contain much information regarding his past, his reaction to it and his thinking process. In this way, these letters are essential part of the structure of the novel. His letter-writing is both a symptom of his psychological disintegration and an attempt to meditate upon and make sense of suffering and death. He writes, "One way or another the no doubt mad idea entered my mind that my own actions had historic importance, and this (fantasy?) made it appear that people who harmed me were interfering with an important experiment" (Bellow, *Herzog* 106).

At his home in the Berkshires, *Herzog* recalls and meditates upon the events of his recent past. His mind is fogged. He is indulged in his past and almost forgetful about his present condition. That's why one can easily blame him for being insane. Even during his lectures there are long intervals. He suddenly stops speaking and starts writing his thoughts on the papers. In the beginning of the novel, *Herzog* behaves like a romantic poet who tried to escape from the society to reduce his sufferings. He is captivated by heartless beauty just like Keats' knight who searches for the lost maiden in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci".

He is in pain, and criticizes the world for this pain. He tries to run away from the situation again and again. Then in the shelter of motherly nature, he sang sweetest songs of pathos. *Herzog* leaves Chicago after his second divorce and goes to Europe in hope to recover from his break up. But he comes back to

Chicago in worse conditions. Like a typical romantic, he thinks that his soul is victimized by others. Through Herzog's recollections the reader comes to know that Herzog had purchased a house in the Berkshires, where he intended to complete his important book on the Romantics. After one year Madeleine changed her mind. She considered herself too young, too intelligent, too vital, and too sociable to be buried in the remote Berkshires. Soon, Herzog managed to settle in Chicago. He also managed a settlement for Valentine, his friend, as a radio announcer in Chicago with them. Madeleine argued that Valentine was their good friend and they could not leave him in Berkshires. After one year in Chicago, Madeline declared that she could not be married to Herzog any longer.

Gradually, Herzog came to know about the affair between Madeline and Valentine. Herzog had to suffer due to his naivety. Though divorce with Madeleine was heartbreaking for him, the affair between Madeleine and valentine deranged his psyche. He thinks of murdering Madeleine and Gersbach in the name of justice. He reflects, "But Moses E. Herzog, at the top of his lungs, bellowing with pain anger, has to have justice. It's his *quid pro quo*, in return for all he has suppressed, his right as an Innocent Party" (Bellow, *Herzog* 220).

Though, earlier to this incident valentine had been a good friend to Herzog. Even after his divorce he naively thought Valentine as a great source of comfort for him. His faith in Valentine was deep. It was Valentine who first meets Herzog in Chicago after his divorce. Valentine's affair with Madeleine gave a harsh blow to Herzog's faith. This was a deception for him. And he started reinterpreting the past incidents in light of this deception. He suspected several moments of privacy in which Madeleine and Valentine could be sexually intimate. In his letter to his mother-in-law, Tennie, he wrote, "But that beautiful masterful daughter of yours came to your apartment with valentine, didn't she, and sent you with your little granddaughter to the zoo while they made love in your bed" (Bellow, *Herzog* 31).

Herzog feels helpless at the thought of being deceived by his best friend and his beloved wife. His psyche is ruined when he comes to know that Valentine and Madeleine had acted according to a well formulated plan. They tried to prove Herzog insane.

There are several explanations in respect of which Herzog's madness can be understood. According to one critic, Herzog's experience in second marriage can be regarded as a progression from Blake's state of innocence into state of experience. But, this interpretation can be rejected on the basis of Herzog's selfimposed divorce in his first marriage. For such an intellectual like Herzog the use of the word 'innocent' is a little misleading. One can study *Herzog* as the life of an intellectual who is suffering from self-doubt concerning his own social relevance.

That's why for a time being, Herzog alienates himself from the society. Herzog recollects his past incidents in order to figure out his share of guilt. For a time being he starts loathing himself in this confusion. His mind is occupied with questions regarding his individuality. In his first marriage with Daisy he felt it hard to follow a monotonous life, "I gave up the shelter of an orderly, purposeful, lawful existence because it bored me, and I felt it was simply a slacker's life" (Bellow, *Herzog* 103). His extramarital affair with Sono Oguki, and after that with Madeline, was an effort to lead an energetic life, according to Herzog. He himself admitted that his jump from Sono Oguki to Madeline created lots of confusion, which caused the lack of self-respect as Bellow writes, "the confusion was ugly, and he despised himself for creating it" (Bellow, *Herzog* 104). In his book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the famous romantic poet, William Blake, presents Hell as a region of dangerous but vital energies, and Heaven as a lifeless deistic abstraction. Herzog's inner fire could not let him appreciate the defunct life of heaven. That may be one of the explanations why he separated from his first wife, Daisy. It was not peace, which Herzog demanded from his life. He craved for romantic sufferings and struggle that he finally got.

In the second marriage Herzog turns out to be a victim himself. He tries to figure out the causes why Madeleine reacted in such an absurd way. Madeleine acts to create great chaos in Herzog's life. She is spendthrift, refuses to clean up house, and betrays Herzog with his best friend, Valentine Gersbach.

Irresponsible and extravagant, she is everything that the dull Daisy was not. He remembers the remarks of Madeleine's parents, the Pontritters, when he met them before his marriage with Madeleine. Her father remarks, "Hope Sleeping Beauty will wake up" (Bellow, *Herzog* 108). These arguments prove that Herzog himself chooses chaos in his life. It was his decision not to live an ordinary life.

Herzog puts forth the question whether it is healthy to allow individuality or free will in respect to social justice. Herzog did not want to lead an unadventurous and meaningless routine life of a professor in his first marriage and without any substantial cause he broke his marriage. In this way his freedom of taking decision resulted in an unwanted life conditions for Daisy. Bellow has chosen basic social problem for his novels. Who is responsible for the breaking up of the relations? Who is responsible for Herzog's misery? Should he blame God for his unlucky second marriage? When Will asks him, "why did you marry her?" Herzog answered, God ties all kinds of loose ends together. Who knows why! He couldn't care less about my welfare, or my ego, that thing of value.

All you can say is, 'There's a red thread spliced with a green, or blue, and I wonder why.' And then I put all that money into the house in Ludeyville. That was simply crazy. (Bellow, *Herzog* 305)

This statement seems to be in contradiction with Herzog's other thoughts. These lines give an impression that Herzog blames God for being illogical and insensitive Master. God's irrational decision renders Herzog the status of a genuine sufferer. Herzog is much romantic towards his suffering as he thinks himself to be a great sufferer. Being a Jew, Herzog respects Valentine most because he is a greater sufferer than Herzog himself, and "under his own rules the man who had suffered more was more special" (Bellow, *Herzog* 62). Thus, greatness of suffering is equated with greatness of character. This particular ethic of suffering is displayed by Valentine Gersbach in Herzog's consciousness.

It is through Herzog and Madeline's responses to Valentine that one sees how deeply ingrained this conviction in Herzog's mind. Herzog's views regarding suffering are in conformation with the orthodox Jewish concept of suffering. Like Bellow himself, Herzog is a Jew and for a Jew, 'the Promised Land' can be achieved only through suffering. Due to his faith in suffering Herzog enjoys the idea of being a victim in the hands of society. In the beginning he becomes poetic while over viewing his life: "Not that long disease, my life, but that long convalescence, my life. The liberal-bourgeois revision, the illusion of improvement, the poison of hope" (Bellow, *Herzog* 4). Like a typical romantic he is extremely dissatisfied with the present conditions of his life and of the world in general. Thus, he turns out to be a severe critic and satirizes his relatives, friends as well as celebrities from different walks of life. He scrutinizes his past and concludes that the whole world is making him suffer. He tries to recollect others' opinion regarding their divorce to confirm his own status as a victim. For it is in his past that Herzog is seeking some lost reality, some necessary key, which will help him to align himself with the norms from which he has wandered and blundered into his personal chaos and separation. He tries to expose himself to everything before he can learn a true acceptance and a new orientation.

From the psychological point of view, Herzog's ideal self is hurt by Madeleine when she dumps him and tries to prove him insane. Herzog starts inspecting the past in order to retain his ideal self as it was. But being a highly intellectual man, Herzog has several thinkers debating on his situation inside his mind. Sometimes he feels himself to be a great sufferer and craves for justice and at other times he acknowledges the fact that 'slavery is dead,' and Madeleine and Valentine love one another. That's why they have right to live together. These contradictory impulses keep Herzog busy in his speculations. In the murder scene, he questions his own self:

And I apparently believe that if the child does not have a life resembling mine, educated according to the Herzog standards of "heart," and all the rest of it, she will fail to become a human being. This is sheer irrationality, and yet some part of my mind takes it as self-evident. (Bellow, *Herzog* 258)

Observing June's reaction to the accident Herzog realizes that he does not wish her to be seeing any of it. His own vivid memory makes him understand the gravity with which an event may traumatize a

child, and he wishes to protect June from any psychological scars. By assuming parental responsibility, Herzog has finally transformed from a man in need of care into a caretaker. This incident removes the ambiguities which has troubled his mind up to now.

The letter, written for Dr. Edvig by Herzog while in jail, expresses an acceptance of “ambiguities” which has eluded him until then. He writes, *Allow me modestly to claim that I am much better now at ambiguities. I think I can say, however, that I have been spared the chief ambiguity that afflicts intellectuals, and this is that civilized individuals hate and resent the civilization that makes their lives possible. What they love is an imaginary human situation invented by their own genius and which they believe is the only true and the only human reality.* (Bellow, Herzog 304)

Through this letter Herzog asserts that over-intellectualism mars one’s perception. The various theories filled in the mind jumble together to misinterpret the real world situation. In this case, a human being creates a desirable aura around him. He sees what he wants to see. His perception is limited within his world of experience. This makes him obstinate against acceptance of truth. In Herzog’s case, Madeleine perceives Herzog as highly suppressive and menacing. Thus, she interprets all events in the light of her perception. In the same way, Herzog limited his perception with his over-intellectualism. His scholarly mind creates an egoistic Herzog, who is unable to accept the reality.

Bellow once writes:

My novel deals with the humiliating sense that results from the American mixture of private concerns and intellectual interests. . . . To me, a significant theme of *Herzog* is the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy. . . . He comes to realize at last that what he considered his intellectual “privilege” has proved to be another form of bondage. Anyone who misses this misses the point of the book. (Bellow, Interview 73)

In his fiction, Bellow reveals his great knowledge of human mind. *Herzog* is also a journey of a mind from negativity to positivity. His mind is well versed in all knowledge. Though there is an absence of much outer action, there is almost a volcano of thoughts in Herzog’s mind. Some critics argue that Bellow wanted to prefer humanitarian values over nihilistic impulses, yet his method is unconvincing. There are contradictions in Herzog’s nature. In his thoughts he prefers Blake’s brotherhood over alienation, but he himself prefers to stay aloof from his family in Ludeyville. One of the Critics further points out that Bellow wants to attack the literary tradition of despair and alienation and the negation of self; but he himself is in despair. One finds his characters weighed down by guilt, masochism, and the burden of them imposed upon reality. Bellow presents a unique combination of intellectualism and optimism. Many thinkers use their energy to prove the negativity of life as the only reality. But Bellow has maintained a fine balance between asserting the ‘negativity’ as a fact of life and between redemption from the same through self scrutiny. This seemingly nonsystematization is not his lack of vision. This is his way of writing. It is a patented way of writing to impress the reality as it is. He does not try to clear things out because in real time things are fuzzy. Bellow does not try to portray an artificial structure on human life because one fails to see such structures while living the life. To the extent he is successful in creating an impression in the readers mind, he is a successful writer. Bellow tries to recreate that state of ambiguities through his apparently discordant writing style. To some extent, *Herzog* resembles Expressionist fiction, in which higher realities are indicated through distorted presentations. Thus, his methodology is never bogus.

Conclusion: Bellow through his writings creates the feeling in the reader which his characters undergo. On the contrary Bellow’s aptness is comparable to that of Mark Antony, a character in Shakespearean Roman play *Julius Caesar*. Antony knew that it was not easy to turn the Roman mob in the favor of dead *Julius Caesar*. Thus, he argued impressively and put forth proofs to support his argument. Bellow knew that to show hope to the world after the two World Wars was not an easy task. His novels are emphatic arguments in favor of affirmation of life.

References:

1. Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. USA: Penguin Books, 2007. Print.
2. ---. Interview by Gorden Lloyd Harper. "The Art of Fiction: Saul Bellow." *Conversations with Saul Bellow*. Ed. Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel. USA: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 58-76. Print.
3. ---. "A World Too Much with Us." *The New Romanticism: The Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Eberhard Alsen. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. 31-40. Print.
4. Clayton, John J. *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*. Second ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979. Print.
