

Saul Bellow as an Optimistic Humanist

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Abstract : Saul Bellow is a modern American Jewish writer who has attained international status through his writing. He has published many novels, including novellas, five plays, a number of short stories and essays. His first novel, 'Dangling Man' appeared in 1944 and the second novel, 'The Victim' appeared in 1947. His third novel, 'The Adventures of Augie March', which was published in 1953, enabled him to receive the National Book Award. 'Seize the Day' followed in 1959. 'Henderson the Rain King' was written in 1959. 'Herzog', which was published in 1963 won the National Book Award and International Literary Prize. Later on, published his 'Mr Sammler's Planet' and 'Humboldt Gift' in 1970 and 1975 respectively. Again, he wrote more books and got awards and prizes. He has been the recipient of many honours and awards like National Book Award for fiction [1954, 1965 and 1970], the International Literary Prize [1965], the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the Nobel Prize for Literature [1976] and many such awards.

In the beginning of the 20th Century, the famous Irish poet, W.B. Yeats predicted the end of Christianity soon in his poem, 'The Second Coming'. He presented a parallel between the shape of a cone and the growth of Christianity. Yeats's comparison auspicated the second revelation in the form of an awful strange creature. But, dejected Yeats could not imagine the second coming as a deity. Instead of merciful Christ, he predicted an emotionless scaring beast as the second revelation. Thus, not only the image of human being but of God, too had changed when Bellow started writing. Eliot's poem, 'The Waste Land' truly captured the spiritual vacuum of early 20th century people. In his poems, Eliot harshly compares the world as spiritually barren wasteland, where no love could be produced.

In his fiction, Bellow never intended to restore the religious faith, nor was he ever angry at the morally abused behaviour of human being. The sole endeavour of Bellow was to restore human dignity irrespective of religion and morality. He wrote such fiction, which tried hard to establish a positive approach towards life and humanity. To quote Richard Lehan in this regard—

"Sartre, Camus, Bowles, Bellow, Wright, Ellison are concerned with the meaning of identity in the modern world, the nature of good and evil, the possibility of fulfilment in the contemporary society, the course of values in the world without God, and the possibility and meaning of action in an ethical vacuum. The new American hero is similar to the French existential hero because he shares a common world and a similar worldview."¹

Bellow was a real seer of humanity, who instead of moralising, showed faith in self judgement of the individuals. He tried to emancipate human psyche, from disheartening and pessimistic ideologies. Bellow created imperfect

protagonists like Leventhal and Herzog, who finally through their acceptance of life as it is, show to the reader the way how to live. Bellow was highly intelligent and original writer. In the words of Swedish Nobel Committee—

"His [Saul Bellow's] writing exhibited the mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of our culture of entertaining adventure drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation, all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue and penetrating insight into the outer and inner complications that drive us to act, or prevent us from acting, and that can be called the dilemma of our age."²

We cannot judge what the accomplishments of our own time may be, and presumably this is the reason so many of Bellow's critics guard their praise with words such as 'probably'. To quote Irving Malin, Earl Rovit and Richard Chase respectfully to prove it—

"Saul Bellow is probably the most important living novelist"³

"Probably the most significant American novelist to come to maturity since World War II has been Saul Bellow."⁴

"With the publication of 'Henderson the Rain King', Bellow confirms he is just about the best novelist of his generation."⁵

Bellow was a free thinker and never let any bondage hinder his thought-process. Most of his novels are related to the middle class American society. The struggle, that attracted Bellow's attention was neither political nor ethical but this struggle was related to social and psychological aspects of human mind. He believed in purposeful art. For him, the

conception of art is not possible without its being didactic. As literature always copies the real life, it may show the idealized picture or present the true picture; in each case it intends an improvement. Saul Bellow says in this regard—

“It apparently makes no differences what the artist should decide about his commitment, whether he considers himself a moralist or a purely objective artist. The writer in any case finds that he bears the burdens of priest or teacher. Sometimes he looks like the most grotesque of priests, the most eccentric of teachers, but I believe the moral function cannot be divorced from art. This means that the artist had not strain so to be didactic.”⁶

In 1976, Bellow made his way to Stockholm and made the appropriate speech of acceptance, affirming the importance of the novel as an expression of humanism in an age dominated by the partial explanations of sociology, politics, psychology and science. The speech displayed him as a humanist seeking more comprehensive account of what we human being are. To quote from ‘Contemporary Literary Criticism’ [Ed. D. G. Marowski, Vol- 33] in this regard—

“.....In a period when it has become common for writers to champion antiheroes, Bellow has been condemned for creating deeply human characters with whom readers can identify.”⁷

There are several remarks by critics on Bellow’s affirmation which captivate one’s attention and insist on understanding Bellow’s thinking. To quote R. Berets here to prove it—

“Bellow began his fiction-writing career by arquiring against the values of an established tradition, one which admired physical strength and stoicism. He advocated an alternative approach, which commended the more feminine virtues associated with the heart and the emotions.....Bellow has never diverged very far from this central position, since the idea of exploring the inner emotions of his characters and providing the justifications for their humanistic feelings remain his basic themes.”⁸

Bellow can be called an optimist for he is hopeful of survival of humanity. He has faith in human capacity to bear. His novel does not talk about avoiding suffering. None of his protagonists’ life is devoid of pain and anguish. The end of the fiction does not reward his protagonists with wish fulfillment. Rather, the end posits the peak of adverse situations. In plain words, Bellow’s optimism does not ask the avoidance of sufferings, but acceptance of it as an essential part of life. In this concern, we may quote M.A. Klug and L. H. Goldman respectively—

“While Bellow rejects both orthodox optimism and orthodox pessimism, both the idea of human impotence and romantic striving after self perfection, the tension

between these two contrary forces supplies much of the drama of his work. His minor characters are for the most part grotesque incarnations of one or the other of these extremes. His central characters contain these extremes.....”⁹

“One of the striking contrasts between Bellow’s philosophical stance and that of his contemporaries is that whereas most of the writers of the twentieth century nurture and agonize over nihilistic outlook on life, Bellow’s world-view is refreshingly optimistic. This cleavage is caused in the main by Bellow’s [subconscious] indebtedness to Jewish philosophers and possibly the influence of their writing on Christian thinkers with whom Bellow is familiar.”¹⁰

Thus, this article has been designed to study the humanistic vision of Saul Bellow. On the one hand, his novels are filled with real human trauma and on the other hand, he talks about affirmation of life. In his novels, his hero faces the worst conditions possible; his hero never gets a break from his struggles, still at last he starts a new life. Bellow is a way far from the optimism of Browning for whom whatever is happening is for the good. Nevertheless, Bellow’s optimism is more crude and fascinating. He is a post war Jewish writer, teaching the world the importance of being a human. His novels are the texts, which enhance the pride of human being without surrendering to fictitious and hyperbolic description and without misinterpreting human life.

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