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Alienation and Identity crisis: A study of Saul bellow's Herzog and Mr. Sammler's planet

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Abstract

Among the writers of contemporary American fiction, Saul Bellow indisputably holds a prominent position. His novels center around the relationship of an individual with his family, society, and belief. They can be varied between short, tightly constructed works of great intensity. Saul Bellow is mainly concerned with the means whereby a man may preserve his humanity with great struggle within the frustration of a modern urban society. Saul Bellow, a renowned American novelist, delves deeply into the intricacies of identity and alienation in his works, offering profound insights into the human condition. This paper explores the recurring themes of identity crisis and alienation in Bellow's novels, analyzing how his characters navigate the complexities of modern life. By drawing on psychological, philosophical, and sociological perspectives, this study seeks to elucidate the existential dilemmas faced by Bellow's protagonists, exploring their search for self-definition amidst the chaos of contemporary society. Through a close reading of select novels the paper aims to shed light on Bellow's nuanced portrayal of human consciousness and the quest for belonging in an increasingly fragmented world. Furthermore, it discusses the enduring relevance of Bellow's themes in understanding the challenges of identity formation.

Keywords: Identity, alienation, struggle, society, culture

Introduction

In modernist literature, a total break with the past is a predominant mood. For the 19th century writers outer reality became suspicious then the focus shifted to inner reality. Now life is seen from inside the human psyche. They didn't see the reasons for the loss, but the loss itself of the men's inside world became a substitute for all outside reality. A tragic sense of loss, a deep anguish is the most important attribute of contemporary literature as all the writers of the age mourn this loss. The literature of the 20s is the literature of disengagement, but in the 30s writers strived to find out what went wrong, which resulted in total chaos, so they tried to investigate if there was still any chance of redemption. Literature of the 40s is the literature of engagement as the writers realized that there was no question of mourning over the loss.

But there is a group of Jewish writers of which Saul Bellow is one, who have a humanist view towards life. In most of his novels, he champions, culturally diverse society, were migrants, especially Jewish ones, struggle for the quest of their identity. Bellow's novels depict the struggle of individuals to preserve their personal identities in an indifferent society. He has beautifully portrayed the Jewish themes, ethics, and backgrounds in his writings. The quest for a Jewish identity is a major theme throughout his works. He has concentrated his writings to reflect a rich community through the eyes of alienated people and the characters to evoke pain and suffering in marginalized existence. This research paper focuses on the recurring themes of identity crisis and alienation in Bellow's novels with special reference to Herzog and Mr. Sammler's Planet and analyzes how his characters navigate the complexities of modern life. Herzog is a, "blending of the probing, introspective, well-made novel of ideas with the fast and loose, free-swinging picaresque quest novel," to convey his theme freely. Both novels delve deep into the themes of identity crisis and alienation.

Herzog, which was published in 1964 has its theme, the crisis in the life of a hero, who survives the ordeal of his second divorce- a phase of total disintegration and perceives in his own survival, the survival of man in this mechanized impersonal civilization.

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The novelist has sought to depict the desperate attempts the sensitive intellectual has to make to preserve his dignity or even his human identity itself, against the onslaught of the city forces. The fundamental question of the novel is: how man may survive with all his humanity intact in the tangled world of modern big city? Herzog is a sensitive individual and becomes a victim of the hostile environment of the big city. In Herzog Saul Bellow chooses a protagonist, who is an idealist and dreamer, an intellectual and a professor of political philosophy. Herzog, the protagonist, is very reluctant to subscribe to modern conviction about alienation and desperation. The tangle and confusions in the mind of Herzog take the form of a crisis after his second divorce. The emotional disturbance caused by this throws him completely off his balance. He seeks to impose some pattern, some order on the internal chaos of his life. Herzog's attempts at re-integrating himself and achieving some kind of perception in the state of confusion into which he has been thrown compel him to survey his entire past closely. Most of his recollections of the personal world shoot out from his belated resorts to his enemies through letters. Tony Tanner rightly observes that these letters "are a way of relieving the accumulating Pressure on his mind, also they are part of his vast attempt to take stock, understand and clarify But also serve as a means whereby he can disburden himself of that clutter."

Herzog's powerful memory enables his consciousness to travel back and forth in time and space to serve the wreck of his personal life, and to identify the forces which are responsible for his wreckage. His recollection of the life of the Jewish immigrants is marked by a consciousness of indignity, suffering, poverty, and aggression as characteristic features of city life. This city environment confronted by Herzog is bound to generate an intense feeling of estrangement. He incurs the risk of being dominated by an intense disorder as a price for being different from the mechanical and dehumanized products. According to Malcolm Bradbury in his introduction to the novel, Bellow's Herzog is "the story of the suffering joker, searching and adrift in the modern thought-world: an age of soft romanticism, five cent syntheses, random massing and redundant goods, accumulating and chaotic process, labyrinthine indirections (no journey Herzog takes ever seems to go in the right direction)."

Herzog carries within himself the marks of his type of elated sensibility. Herzog's tangled state of mind turns into a deep emotional crisis when suddenly one day Madeleine, his second wife, announces her decision for a divorce. Madeleine is a representative figure of the city attempting to throttle and crush all claims of individuality. She destroys his control over his life and aggravates the mental disorder already present in him. The very decision to marry Madeleine was a masochistic act on the part of Herzog. As he himself admits, by marrying Madeleine and resigning from the university, he showed a taste and talent for: "danger and extremism, for heterodoxy, for ordeals, a fatal attraction to the 'City of Destruction'." The strain of these persistent attacks on that part of him, which gives him a sense of personal identity, produces unpredictable reactions in Herzog. His attempt to murder Gersbach, his involvement in a car accident and subsequent confrontation with Madeline at police station, bring him a realization that the main reason for his neurotic condition is "his inability to tolerate ambiguous situations." There is a growing feeling

that to be human is to accept and believe amidst the ambiguities and uncertainties of life without any impatience or irritation. Thus, Bellow's appeal as a novelist in Herzog lies worse in the presentation of the conflicts between big city environments, than in the resolution of the conflict.

In Saul Bellow's other novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the protagonist Arter Sammler, a holocaust survivor experiences a profound sense of alienation in the chaotic landscape of New York City. America, which is known for tremendous material progress, is haunted by insanity and disintegration of self. American writers, especially after the Second World War, have been haunted by all these things and have made these the subject matter of their creation. Sammler the protagonist is somewhat different from the earlier Bellow protagonist. He is a Polish Jew. In the Nazi's Jewish massacre, he has been fully exposed to violence and naked death. Sammler is an old man, a widower, with only one eye left. He and his wife both were shot, but he managed to escape from the pit with so many dead bodies around him and has risen from a grave when Nazis tried to kill him, "His near death in the Nazi massacre, his loneliness, his race, his intellect, his age, all place him at a distance." (From a review by Kieth Opdahl).

In this novel, the planet is the world of America, where Sammler feels alienated. He has come to the USA from the hell of war time and post war Europe. His world whose memory lurks again and again in his mind. He is jobless and financially supported by his nephew, Gruner. Sammler does not belong to society where basically he is living. His world of peace and glory ended in 1940. His values, religion, and nationality are totally different from American society.

There are several reasons which make him silent, confined to himself. He is surrounded by those young men and women, who are money mongers, valueless and never try to listen to his views. Sammler notes the things with a detached and purified dryness as it is clear from his attitude towards Angela, "She wore the odd stylish things which Sammler noted with detested and purified dryness, as if from a different part of the universe." (p.27.).

He only thinks and contemplates, but never speaks. Sammler finds that there is complete topsy-turvydom of values in the society with people, "justifying idleness, silliness, shallowness, distemper, lust- turning former respectability inside out" (p.9). Criminal instincts hold sway in society. Angela, daughter of Dr Bruner, who is a sexually perverted woman. She has no genuine feelings of love and sympathy. Equally distracted is her brother Wallace. Human beings now enjoy unlimited freedom, and the result is lawlessness and disorder. All social relations are commercialized in modern society. Even the relations between children and parents are based on monetary gains. Children care for money more than their parents and if the parents are not able to meet their monetary demands, they assume that their parents do not love them. They have no family feeling. No love for their roots, the glorious old does not fascinate them. Sammler rightly says that contemporary contexts are somewhat unsatisfactory. Faithful relationships are rare now. During Sammler's talk with Angela about HG Wells when she asked whether they are bosom buddies, Sammler states the very fact of modern society, "Oh? My dear girl, despite my years, I am a man of modern age. You do not find David and Jonathan, Ronald and Oliver bosom buddies these days" (p.26).

Margotte, the niece of Sammler, Who talks endlessly, is obsessed with intellectual cliches. Even Sammler's own daughter Shula is more of this valueless world than that of her fathers. Sammler finds himself in a state of confusion. He is so disgusted that he tries to withdraw from this chaotic world. He criticizes everyone except Elya, whom he likes due to his family feelings, which he himself cherishes. This bitter attitude of Sammler makes him more and more alienated. He is completely burdened with alienation and finds himself on the verge of disintegration. Finally, the sense of alienation becomes a burden for him, as he tries to unburden himself with this. The inner traits of his personality do not aggravate his malady as they're in the case of Herzog. Sammler still believes in the dignity of men, despite facing chaos and disintegration in life. We find Sammler's tone changed. He now tries to find out why people behave so abnormally and why they are so indifferent towards ethical values instead of exclamation and expressions of disappointment etc. He starts finding out the real cause of malady. Similar desires that relations between human beings should be fruitful. This is possible only when they are based on common feelings of love and respect, not on money and self-interest. Such kind of fruitful relations exist between Sammler and Elya, "Elya gives Sammler security in his old age and Sammler loves him, even though he has weaknesses. He tells Angela that Elya is touchy, boastful, he repeats himself. He is vain, proud." (p.243.) Through Sammler's introspective observations, Saul Bellow explores themes of belongingness, displacement, and search for identity in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that both the novels highlight the complexity of human existence and the inherent struggle to find one's place in society, grappling with questions of identity, purpose, and belonging, amidst feelings of alienation and disillusionment. Saul Bellow in both the novels explores the sense of alienation and identity of the individual in society. The main characters are shown to be ill adjusted and alienated in a strange world. They find the environment, contrary to their aspirations and beliefs, unable to cope with the objective reality.

Saul Bellow's exploration of human struggle and identity in modern society, depicted vividly in "Herzog" and "Mr. Sammler's Planet," delves deep into the complexities of existence. Both novels poignantly portray characters grappling with alienation and disillusionment, striving to find their place amidst societal upheavals. Bellow's insightful narratives illuminate the enduring quest for identity, belonging, and purpose in the face of overwhelming challenges, resonating with readers through profound reflections on the human condition.

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