

REVIEW ARTICLE



ECHOES OF THE OUTSIDER: VICTIMIZATION AND THE QUEST FOR BELONGING IN SAUL BELLOW'S PROTAGONISTS

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ABSTRACT



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This paper examines how Saul Bellow's fiction captures the complex psychological and moral struggles of modern individuals in an expeditiously transforming world. Especially his central characters struggle through alienation and displacement, seeking a true sense of identity in a world dominated by material pursuits and moral confusion. His protagonists—Joseph in *Dangling Man*, Asa Leventhal in *The Victim*, and Moses Herzog in *Herzog*—reflect the profound spiritual unease of modern existence, standing as intellectuals and idealists who suffer not only from society's alienation but also from the burdens of their own self-awareness and moral vision. The research demonstrates that Bellow's harassment experience is not only a form of societal persecution but also a phenomenon that is associated with internal struggles and the desire to be a part of a group. The protagonists of Bellow's novels are alienated; however, their anguish frequently leads to moral development and self-awareness. Additionally, he regards immigration as a moral indicator of the spiritual decline of civilisation, rather than a symbol of defeat. Lastly, his writings emphasise the *ability to learn from adversity, human resilience, and moral awareness*.

Keywords: *Alienation, Victimisation, Belonging, Survival.*

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INTRODUCTION

Jewish literature has a significant role in global literature and culture. Centuries of exile, persecution, faith, and the fight for survival have all contributed to its development. Jewish literature examines identity, belonging, memory, pain, and hope in everything from ancient Hebrew texts to contemporary diasporic tales. The conflict between modern life and tradition is also reflected in it.

Jewish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries went beyond religious themes to examine social development and daily living. While discussing assimilation and modernity, authors such as Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer depicted Jewish communities with humor and emotion. Writers like Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Anne Frank addressed pain, loss, memory, and survival as a result of the Holocaust, which constituted a significant turning point.

American authors who examined Jewish-American identity, alienation, spirituality, and belonging included Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Cynthia Ozick. All things considered, Jewish literature remains a living tradition that conveys tenacity, empathy, optimism, and a pursuit of connection and purpose.

SAUL BELLOW (1915-2005)

He was an outstanding novelist in the U.S. In many of his novels, the marginal man, an alienated person, appears. He suffers from his own inadequacies and those imposed by society. His first novel, *The Dangling Man* (1944), contains several of his major themes. The title itself is symbolic of the central character's position in his fiction. His second novel,

The Victim (1947), stresses a frequent theme of Jewish writing: the Jew saw himself as a victim. The third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), is in the picaresque mode. His other novels are *Seize the Day* (1956), *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), *Herzog* (1964), and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1976). Except for Henry Jamin, Saul Bellow is unique among American novelists in describing the complexities and mores of city life. Three of Bellow's novels, *Seize the Day*, *Herzog*, and *Humboldt's Gift*, may be described as novels of manners. Mark Shechner classifies Bellow's novels into two kinds: Depressive and Expansive. The depressive novels deal with violence and gloom, the predicament of the marginalised man, and alienated person for example *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *Seize the Day*, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. The expansive novels are novels of affirmation which suggest that man recognise the absurdity in the world but live in it as well as he can for example *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Herzog* *Humboldt's Gift*.

The joy of the novels of the second category somewhat offsets the gloom of the novels in the first category. Violence, the Holocaust, and the decline of the West are central to the depressive novels. Even the setting in these novels is depressing. For instance, we find in *The Victim*: "Already, at half past seven, the street looked deadened with heat and light. The clouds were heavily suspended and slow. To the south and east, the air was brassy, the factories were beginning to smoulder and faced massively, India red, brown, unto the sun and across the hot pen netting of the bridges." (35)

The Adventures of Augie March is a picaresque novel written in different parts of Europe and



America. It depicts the zest for life that imposes order on the chaos of the modern world. The infinite variety and endless experimentation in the world provide joy. Augie March, the protagonist, wants to be free, but he is not unaware of society's demands. He sifts ideas and experiences through his consciousness; he rejects those that are transient or not relevant. He is attracted by the physical and mental temptations, but resists being a slave of either. He knows the alienation of man, symbolised in the Jew, but refuses the path of scapegoating. The family has lost its role as a binding force in the contemporary world. So, man must look for other means of reconciling himself with the world. The world may be hostile, but man abides. Men like Simon March (Augie's elder brother), whose desire for wealth and power is insatiable, face psychic annihilation. Augie Marsh finds comic possibilities in adversity and sees himself as a man laughing. Bellow insists that one has to go through experience, suffer it, enjoy it, and feel it to survive. While despair seems to be the general trend in the work of other writers, Bellow leads the opposition. He affirms life vigorously. In *Seize the Day*, he emphasises that man must recognise the absurdity of his world and live in it as well as he can. *Henderson the Ram King* also explores a similar theme, but it is set in Africa. Herzog is praised as Bellow's finest novel; it describes the spiritual essence of Moses Herzog, a college professor.

Bellow lived in Chicago, which provides the setting for his novel. Augie March Bellow's descriptions of Chicago are like Dickens's London or Joyce's Dublin. Such cities impact their citizens by shaping their attitudes and conferring a collective

identity on them. When Augie announces that he is an American, Chicago-born, he is not merely telling us his birthplace but conveying the character he derives from being a Chicagoan who is tough and enjoys the good things in life. Chicago evokes myriad impressions in the minds of those familiar with the city.

JOSEPH IN *DANGLING MAN*

Joseph, who is cut off from both society and himself, represents the archetype of the contemporary outcast in *Dangling Man*. He finds himself "dangling"—suspended between action and inaction, belonging and estrangement—while he awaits his military draft during World War II. He expresses his ambiguous position in life by reflecting that he is dangling, suspended between two worlds—the citizen and the army. Joseph's intellectualism becomes a double-edged sword that both deepens his awareness and sets him apart from others.

It should not be thought that Joseph, when he speaks of the "less reflective" or of his "element of the comic," is being harsh. He is not severe toward the world. He calls himself a sworn upholder of tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner. (Saul Bellow: 28)

In the novel *Dangling Man*, Saul Bellow portrays Joseph as an isolated individual who labors to identify a sense of belonging and fulfillment in his life. He refuses the ordinary routine of society because he sees constant busyness as a form of limitation. However, his refusal to participate in everyday life leaves him increasingly isolated. His alienation is therefore both social and spiritual,



reflecting the condition of a modern person who wants freedom and individuality but struggles to find a meaningful place in society.

Joseph's unemployment and uncertain future make him feel like a victim of circumstances. The long wait before his army enlistment becomes a symbol of stagnation, while bureaucracy and purposelessness gradually affect his sense of dignity. At the same time, Joseph is also trapped by his own thoughts. His constant self-examination makes it difficult for him to act, creating a conflict between thought and action, freedom and conformity.

Although Joseph dislikes conformity, he still desires companionship and a sense of belonging. His loneliness makes him realize that isolation can be painful and destructive. His eventual decision to accept the army draft represents a turning point, as he chooses structure and purpose over complete freedom. Through Joseph, Bellow suggests that belonging and human connection can give life meaning, even when that belonging comes with restrictions.

"I am not at all sorry to part with the rest of it. I am no longer to be held accountable for myself. I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled.

Hooray for regular hours!

And, for the supervision of the spirit!

Long live regimentation." (Saul Bellow: 154)

ASA LEVENTHAL IN *THE VICTIM*

Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* reflects the quintessential outsider—an urban man burdened by guilt, anxiety, and isolation. Living in postwar New York, Leventhal feels alienated from both society and himself, because "More than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you do not either" (116) and "I am all I have in this world. And with all my shortcomings, my life is precious to me" (77). His sense of dislocation intensifies after his strange encounters with Kirby Allbee, who accuses him of ruining his life. Leventhal's own words, stating that he lives in the midst of men and yet feels alone, reveal his inner estrangement. Bellow presents him as an individual who cannot escape moral self-questioning.

Joseph, in *Dangling Man*, is caught between reason, emotion, conscience, and hatred. Leventhal's loneliness is spiritual; he epitomizes the modern man's confusion in a morally unstable world. His alienation, guilt, and constant introspection reflect the plight of an immigrant seeking meaning in a society that demands conformity yet offers little compassion or understanding.

Asa Leventhal's life is filled with suffering; he feels mistreated and unintentionally hurts others, especially because of Kirby Allbee's accusations.

"You try to put all the blame on me, but you know it is true that you are to blame. You and you only. For everything. You ruined me. Ruined! Because that is what I am, ruined! You are the one who is responsible. You did it to me deliberately, out of hate. Out of pure hate!" (Saul Bellow: 67)



In the novel *The Victim*, Saul Bellow depicts Leventhal's suffering as both psychological and moral rather than simply social. He is troubled by guilt, responsibility, and prejudice, and often questions whether he is partly responsible for the problems around him. The anti-Semitism he faces, along with his own insecurity, increases his emotional struggle. Through Leventhal, Bellow shows the difficulties of a modern person who tries to understand what is right and wrong in a confusing world. His conflict with Kirby Allbee represents a larger struggle between blame and forgiveness, cruelty and compassion. Bellow suggests that suffering can come not only from other people but also from the guilt and doubts we carry within ourselves.

Leventhal's journey also becomes a search for belonging and inner peace. His loneliness is connected to his guilt and his desire to build genuine relationships with others. The death of his nephew and his responsibilities toward his sister-in-law help him develop greater empathy and a sense of duty. He gradually comes to understand that he cannot live completely apart from other people. This realization becomes an important moment of personal growth. By the end, Leventhal learns that people cannot always be seen as completely innocent or completely guilty. Accepting his own weaknesses and understanding others helps him find greater peace, connection, and a stronger sense of belonging.

MOSES HERZOG IN *HERZOG*

Moses Herzog in Saul Bellow's *Herzog* personifies the intellectual outsider—isolated, overanalytical, and alienated from both society and himself. Recently divorced and emotionally shattered, Herzog spends

much of the novel writing unsent letters to friends, enemies, and even philosophers—his desperate attempt to reconnect with a world that feels distant. He confesses, "If I am out of my mind, it is all right with me," (2) suggesting both awareness and resignation to his outsider status. Herzog's brilliance and sensitivity make him incapable of living simply; his intellect isolates him more than it enlightens him. He struggles to reconcile thought with action, mind with body, and ideals with the chaos of human life. Bellow portrays him as a man burdened by consciousness—alienated not because society rejects him, but because he cannot find harmony within himself. Like Joseph in *Dangling Man*, Herzog stands as a voice of modern dislocation: intelligent yet powerless, yearning for meaning yet imprisoned by reflection.

In *Herzog*, Moses Herzog experiences deep victimization—emotional, psychological, and existential. Betrayed by his wife, Madeleine, and his best friend, Valentine Gersbach, he feels stripped of his dignity and self-worth. He exclaims that he has been made a fool by love, and he is the fool of his own mind, he admits, revealing that his suffering stems not only from others' betrayal but from his own obsessive introspection. Herzog perceives life as a conspiracy against him, an endless cycle of humiliation and self-doubt. His intellectualism—once a source of confidence—turns into a tormenting force, imprisoning him in relentless self-interrogation as he wonders about the true purpose of human life: whether to be a hero, a saint, or a philosopher. Bellow uses Herzog's pain to explore the modern condition, where awareness magnifies suffering and victimhood becomes self-inflicted. However, Herzog's



victimization also leads to insight; it forces him to confront his illusions of control and superiority. Bellow portrays how, through this process, suffering—no matter how intense—purifies the soul, awakens moral clarity, and transforms the sufferer's state towards self-realization.

Moses Herzog's journey in *Herzog* is a search for belonging, as he struggles to find peace within his family, society, and his own confused identity after his marriage fails. "I know that my suffering, if I may speak of it, has often been like that, a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion" (403).

Herzog writes unsent letters because he struggles to communicate and feel accepted. He wants to be loved for his true self. Gradually, he realizes that belonging comes from accepting himself rather than seeking others' approval. Stopping the letters represents his movement from isolation and confusion toward self-acceptance, peace, and renewal. "At this time, he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word" (436). This silence reflects peace rather than emptiness. In this way, Herzog's quest transforms from a pursuit of external validation into a journey toward achieving inner harmony. Bellow portrays the 'sense of belonging' not merely as a social connection but as an internal state of acceptance—demonstrating that true connection begins only when a person stops running away from themselves.

CONCLUSION

The main characters in Saul Bellow depict the contemporary intellectual's battle with identity, morality, and alienation. A distinct stage of Bellow's

developing depiction of the outsider—people burdened by intense self-awareness and the chaos of contemporary life—is revealed by each character. The human yearning for purpose, connection, and belonging is explored in Bellow's books. Joseph in "*Dangling Man*" is a character who is torn between responsibility and freedom, and his sense of loneliness is heightened by his confusion and indecision. His acceptance of the army conscription provides him with direction and organization. In *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal battles moral obligation and guilt as a result of Kirby Allbee's charges. Through his trip, he learns that innocence and guilt are not always absolute, which helps him develop empathy. Moses *Herzog* struggles with emotional suffering and perplexity in *Herzog*, which he conveys through his unwritten letters. He finds more serenity when he stops writing.

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