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Identity crisis in soul bellow's 'Herzog'

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Abstract

The paper attempts at exploring the crisis of identity in Bellow's novel 'Herzog'. The novel deals with alienation, despair, nothingness and complexity. The central message of the novel is that man must be saved, humanity must be preserved and towards the end of the novel, the Protagonist recognizes that happiness lies in forging others and sharing with others.

Methodology: Research based.

Procedure: Protagonist attitude towards society.

Conclusion: The finding of the study reveal that one must seek his new self in the company of other fellow men, in loving and sharing with each other. This message, though simple and very straight forward but enhances our knowledge about the way a good man should live.

Keywords: Protagonist, alienation, quest, identity

Introduction

Saul Bellow's sixth novel *Herzog* (1964) is his most ambitious, complicated and multifaceted novel. *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.

The main protagonist of the novel is, Moses E. Herzog. Though most of Bellow's heroes are endowed with intellectual capabilities, *Herzog* is the first real intellectual among them. He has been twice divorced, has failed in his relationship and fallen for short of his literary ambitions. He seems terribly isolated and cut-off moving about in the choked city lanes, meditating in the haunting stillness of lonely rooms. That make the protagonist wish to be out of his mind, "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog." (H:1) He realizes that he has failed to manage the 'Terrible forces' of the mind. To overcome his state of isolation and demoralization, he conveys his ideas to writing imaginary letters to everyone under the sun to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives, to politicians, philosophers and even to the dead. There unsent letters to communicate, or by the curious project of attempted communication". (H: 162)

Tony Tanner rightly observes that these letters "are a way of relieving the accumulating pressure on his mind, also they are past 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 has come under the state of depression because of his relationships. He recalls that when he was married to Daisy, he had led the perfect ordinary life of an Assistant professor, "respected and stable". When he divorced her and married to Madeleine, he sacrifices almost everything, emotionally, financially and intellectually in order to please her. Madeleine, a brilliant, beautiful, ambitious, aggressive and calculating woman. She is unsympathetic, unstable, domineering and even cruel towards *Herzog*. She deprives him of his scholarly position, his wealth, his confidant, and above all his daughter June. She hurts his strong Jewish family sense by denying him the custody of his daughter.

Herzog has suffered real anguish; therefore, he is highly suspicious of those who revel in alienation, anguish and despair. (As an intellectual, *Herzog* universalize his particular experience and the ugliness of his condition becomes the ugliness of the modern man. But his idealism became futile by his previous experience. "Faced with the collapse of personal relationships haunted by snickering existential foot." As an alienated intellectual, *Herzog* reflects on the spirit of his fine through his "wistful reflection on the values of the past and

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his ultimately regenerated hope for the future, both of which are distilled in a crisis of the present.”)

Herzog's sense of alienation is to be found in his relationship with other people like his two brothers and one sister, Helen. He felt cut off from his family once he had grown up. It is his sense of separation from his childhood family world that is at the root of his alienation.” He has been betrayed by everyone in his life and that too, up to some extent account of his alienation. Even, at his father's funeral, Herzog is rebuked by his elder brother for weeping loudly before his high-bred acquaintance. His brother reprimands him because he fears that his behavior may seem ridiculous or unwelcome to his rich acquaintances. From Herzog's elder brother's point of view, even a death in the family is an occasion for a get together of his rich business colleagues and not a moment for sharing the genuine feelings of grief. Herzog reads somewhere else that people in New York had restored to calling the police for relief.

“Send a squad car, for the love of God! Send someone! Put me in the lockup with somebody! save me. Touch me come someone..... please come” (H: 203). This incident shows how the individual has been segregated alienated and almost completely cut-off from human connections during a mad race of progress and material advancement.

Herzog has come to realize that if he is to be human he must accept the conditions imposed upon him and acknowledge his responsibility without resulting form alienation, so he wants to change the world and becomes a new law giver to mankind but his mind has reached a dangerous point where it can think. “If I am right, the problem of the world's coherence, and all responsibility for it, becomes mine” (Ch: 155). He feels himself that his own life is a catalogue of errors”, self righteous, sufferer, egoistical and flirting a little with the transcendent. But for all his absurdity he is Herzog for good or bad.

“I am Herzog. I have to be that man. These is no one else to do it. After smiling, he must return to his own self and see the thing through” (H: 67). Herzog returns to his country house with a new experienced self that emphasizes on freedom in spite of the dreariness of the alienated society. He realizes that his habit of indulging in letter writing far from attaching him with other people, alienates him and makes people more distant and unreal.

If he has to gain truth and self knowledge he cannot afford to lock himself up in a narrow sphere of inner consciousness. His ultimate concern is human goodness and the brotherhood of man. Herzog, through his quest for selfhood, gains both his freedom and a sense of “belonging to his external surroundings. He ultimately gains his identity in his social surroundings. He does not lose his freedom and sense of belonging in the world by clinging to his individuality. He alienates himself and fails to communicate with others because he lives in the city of words and letters. He does not have any dialogue with the people around. At last, he ceases to write any more letters that shows he has rejected his artificial means of communication. He rises beyond the absurd and nihilistic forces that threatened his very existence to move effectively towards a ‘change of heat’ so as to lead a life of sanity and coherence. Herzog realizes that man is larger than his ‘characteristics’ and social obligation, emotions, desires and ideal constructions. He feels “not to burst, not to die, to stay alive was all he could hope for” (H: 45).

Herzog deviates from the absurd man and by overcoming the terror of his loneliness and establishing new relationships, he reveals his authentic new relationships, he reveals his authentic existence. Such kind of realization enables Herzog to transcend the despair of the alienated hero, whose situation is described as, “precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question.”

He discarded his futile attempt to concentrate on his past failure and tries to find a purpose and meaning to his life with the world. “Luckily for me, I did not have the means to get too far away from our common life. I am glad of that. I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my remaining years” (H: 392).

Through out the novel Herzog is an isolated character completely alone and unhappy and has a desire to find new place in the society. He tries to emphasis on personal existence and must find order and communication with the world when he becomes free from his life burdens of doubt and meaning lessness. He recognizes the external world as an importance source to gain knowledge of his existence. He admits that he always seems to be too late with his ideas and methods and his way for attempting communication is not effective. Through his relationship with Ramona, he recognize that he must know himself as he exists in the world. In order to maintain his external relationship and internal perception he himself admits:

“..... to live in an inspired condition, to know truth, to be free to love another, do consummate existence, to abide with death in clarity of consciousness is no longer a rarified project. And therefore Reason exists! Reason and belief bason or reason. He through deeply, intensely and work, each to change his life. To change ! (H: 205).

Herzog finally redeemed because he accept himself and recognizes his need for others. Unless he lives in brother hood, a man is not human. He tries to move away from selfhood, toward brotherhood, to community as he realize “Brotherhood is what makes a man human” (H:280). In his country house, on a couch, Herzog feels comfortable and admits,”. But that's just it – not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy” (H: 340). He rejects the existentialist view of life with humanity and integrity. He gets rid of his suffering and alienation and shows his ability to do more and more, “I have certain things to do. And without noise I hope”, rightly asserts Herzog. At last, no messages are to be written or imagined, “... This time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing, not a single word” (H: 341). He enjoys the state of not being involved in any institution.

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