

# SENSE OF ALIENATION IN SAUL BELLOW'S *HERZOG AND SEIZE THE DAY*

Ms. R.Agilandeshwari,  
Assistant professor of English,  
Bharathiyar Arts and Science College for Women,  
Deviyakurichi

## ABSTRACT:

Alienation deals with a low level of integration or common value and a high level of isolation and distance between individual and society. *Herzog* is a portrayal of the alienated American Jewish intellectual in search of identity. The novel describes the suffering of modern intellectuals, their nihilistic, confused and corrupting moral status which is evident from the commonly existed spiritual crisis in society. Herzog is Bellow's modern man, depicting the possibilities of the individual in contemporary society. Continually, he is assailed by neuroses and forces beyond his control, and he must struggle to maintain his identity and his humanity.

**Key words:** identity, alienation, struggle, society, relationship

Saul Bellow's novels centers around the relationship of an individual with his family, society and belief. They can be varied between short, tightly constructed works of great intensity. 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. His heroes are frequently placed in an isolated environment, dangling like Joseph awaiting his draft papers, writing letters in solitude like Herzog, or deliberately selecting the isolation of a separate continent as done by Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). In the state of isolation, the hero evaluates his concerns such as his inability to maintain belief, his lacking strength and disintegrating relations with family, his failure in sexual aspects. All the heroes created by Bellow tends to be alone and afraid but avoid the self-pity of exclusive concentration on one introspective consciousness by a resort to ironic self-appraisal and a comic inability to function adequately in the everyday world.

The concentration on a single personality directed towards the charge of a lack of real dialogue between characters in the novels and particularly to the charge of stereotyped portrayal of women. The endings of Bellow's novels has considerable difficulty in coming to terms with the apparent ambiguities. In most of the works, the hero frequently makes a positive

attitude towards the humanity which has called in question. Joseph, he himself voluntarily accepts regimentation. In *The Victim*, Leventhal comes to terms with his opponent Albee. Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* weeps for mankind. Henderson dances in the Newfoundland snow. In each case the hero moves away from the self-concern which is the important thing of the book. It is difficult to tell the author's intended direction just like his comic art.

*Herzog* revolves around the story of Moses Elkanah Herzog. He is a middle-aged college professor living temporarily in hills of Western Massachusetts where his country home is located in Berkshires. He is divorced twice and wanted to review his life by staying back at his country home to lead a bachelor existence. Throughout the novel, he makes sudden, wise and unstable decisions and undertakes journeys which provide no perfect results for his struggles, both internally and externally.

At the beginning of the novel, Herzog has made a habit of writing letters to the people known to him such as family, friends, acquaintances, scholars, writers, and the dead and those letters survive as a medium to reveal his life history and inner conflicts. Herzog made a note of his married life in the beginning, which ended in misery and he has relationships with a number of women with whom, he never wanted to extend his continued bond. Therefore, he wanted to evade his lover, Ramona Donsell, who has an adequate interest in marriage. He went to Martha's Vineyard to meet his friend Libbie Sissler as reason to escape from Ramona and after arriving there, he changed his mind to return to New York, where he writes letters as he desired.

Moses Herzog prepares for dinner with Ramona, a dinner that differs in character from the one he shared with her in the beginning of the novel because he is able to relate to women in a new way. His regaining mental health prepares him to write actual letters that he will send out into the world, instead of the unsent and unfinished letters of the past. The signs of transformation come to surface in his effort to define himself in positive terms.

Saul Bellow believes that modern man can find communion and beauty in the midst of bleakness and isolation of the modern world. Although Herzog feels alienated and although the bulk of the novel is about his solitary thoughts in the

end, he rejects alienation and solitude. He comes to embrace society and finds the importance of sharing his life with others.

*Seize the Day* depicts the life of Tommy Wilhelm. He is Jobless, separated from his wife and children, unable to marry his mistress, and with overdue rent to pay, he clings to his successful father for economic and emotional support, which the old man flatly rejects on the ground of deserving a peaceful mind and life at the old age. Then taking the advice given by his mentor and substitute father Dr. Tamkin, Tommy invests his last amount of money on the commodities market. But it turns out to be a bad investment, and he loses all his money while Tamkin simply escapes. On the verge of total breakdown, Tommy, unable to breathe freely, feels being drawn further downward in the trouble waters. On this day of reckoning, his past changing name, failed careers, womanizing and other things flashes back in his mind by fits and starts, aggravating the already chaotic present, and he has to come to reconcile with his father, wife, children, past life, present plight, gloomy future, especially with himself, the wrong kind of Jew in the modern and materialistic society, before he can gain redemption for his soul.

As he looks down on the corpse of a stranger, he feels the basic relationship between himself and all men, a relationship established, in spite of superficial and man-made barriers, by the bond of morality. Wilhelm is no longer isolated. This understanding of relationship grants Wilhelm, the dignity of position in a social order. As all shall die, there is neither triumphant promise here, nor cause for miserable and hopeless lamentation, live with joy and live in harmony is the only answer to the ultimate design. Wilhelm sees it, even if the other mourners do not when he looks down into the casket on his own fate. A parable of hope for modern urban man, *Seize the Day* ends at the moment when the doors of the perception fling open, and Wilhelm realizes his heart's ultimate need, a feeling of brotherhood and a love for all mankind.

To sum up, In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm is materially a failure, but Bellow makes him spiritually a success. He is against money and against materialism and he feels like an outsider in the world of money and materialism. He wants to belong to his family, to his wife, and to his children. He wants to love and to be loved. He is a symbol of affirmation in a mechanized, money oriented civilization. Likewise, Herzog prefers to live among nature and likes to be surrounded by the beauty of the world and to seek love instead of materialism. Beneath the surface of alienation, both of them have a desire to merge in the society and want a self- transformation.

**Works Cited:**

Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. London: Penguin Books, 1964. Print.

---. *Seize the Day*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

Opdahl, Keith Michael. *The Novels of Saul Bellow: An Introduction*. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1978. Print.

Shams, Ishteyaque. *The Fictional World of Saul Bellow*. Atlantic Publishers, 2012. Print.

