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A Study on the Protagonist's Quest for Assimilation with the Society in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*

T. Devaraj^a, Dr. G. Manivannan^b

^aAssistant Professor of English & Research Scholar, Rajah Serfoji Government College (Autonomous), Thanjavur-613005 Tamil Nadu. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli - 620 024).

^b Research Advisor & Assistant Professor of English, Rajah Serfoji Government College (Autonomous), Thanjavur-613005 Tamil Nadu. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli - 620 024).

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Abstract

Because of the dehumanised environment a man has a strained relationship with the society. But, at the same time, if an individual does not behave in accordance with the larger group, his life gets disintegrated. He has to integrate his 'self' with the 'society' to have a meaningful existence. This paper analyses how the protagonist manages to integrate his 'self' with the society in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*.

Keywords: Society, Quest, protagonist.

1. Introduction

A society is a web of social relationships (McIver, 6). An individual is the basic component of a society. The negotiations between individuals paves way to the formation of a group which, on a larger scale leads to society. In this chain, a man and society are entangled entities. If an individual does not act in accordance with the group, the chain is delinked. Therefore, for a meaningful existence, one has to integrate himself with society (McIver, 6). This paper analyses how the protagonist manages to integrate his 'self' with the society in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*.

Herzog is a retrospective contemplation by Moses Elkhana Herzog to understand the reasons for his devastating past. Moses Elkhana Herzog is a twice divorced professor. He has the habit of writing letters, in his mind, to family, friends, acquaintances, scholars, writers, and the dead. Many of his letters deal with the frustrations that resulted from his life in the society. Riesman et al. argued that Americans had been coerced into conforming to social dictates set by politicians, religious leaders, and the media. Though often resulted in surface unity and serenity, on a deeper level, this overshadowed individual values and beliefs. The result was feelings of estrangement and frustration, which created the sense of being alone in a crowd.

Herzog's life appears to be disintegrating - he is alone in a big, old house, sharing slices of bread with rats (Datta). Herzog relentlessly struggles to gain a measure of freedom from the conditioning forces of both history and time. He struggles with the conflict between his intellect and his emotion. He cannot cope with a world which appears hostile to his intellect. The threat caused by the chaos of modern, but hollow culture, disturbs his inner peace of mind.

The opening line of *Herzog* “If I am out of mind, it’s all right with me...” clearly outlines Herzog’s insight into his own troubled self. His introspection and realization neither prevents him commenting on the adverse situation nor allows him to blindly accept whatever happens. The series of incidents Herzog encounters reminds us the American city life and its inhumanness. When Herzog appears at the city courthouse where he is scheduled to meet Simkin, he sits in on a few court cases that are being tried that day. As he watches testimony about a mother who beat her son to death, he becomes incensed and runs out of the courtroom. He determines that New York could not hold him now, and flies to Chicago to see his daughter Junie and to confront Madeleine, his wife and Gersbach, his friend who cheated him and living together with Junie. As soon as he arrives in Chicago, he goes to his father’s house, where he reminisces with his stepmother, Tante Taube. He soon leaves with his father’s pistol in his pocket with murder in his heart. When he looks through the window and sees Gersbach giving Junie a bath with fatherly tenderness he changed his mind.

The mind which is reluctant to the fundamental human nature needs willing acceptance. The confrontation of the self with the ‘untaught’ results in its conflict with society. Unable to handle fundamental challenges of society, the self undergoes severe problems like the loss of individuality and the sense of the nothingness in individual life. Bellow attacks the cheapening of individual life and senses the difficulty of dignifying the individual. He seeks a new conception of individuality, distinguishing between the presentation self and the true self. What makes man incompatible with society is the ideal construction of the self. His rich intelligence makes him a scholar of repute. However, it cannot provide his self with any universal connections to relieve his sense of misery. In constant search for order and meaning, his soul finds only chaos and disorder.

The indignities Herzog has to suffer in this world cannot subdue him to the surrounding worldly cynicism, and he insists on a better fate. He carelessly attempts to liberate himself from such decaying forces and makes adventures mainly in his mind. Bellow presents the dichotomy between the private and the civil self through his protagonist, Herzog himself becomes a universal figure in his struggle against the dehumanizing forces and standing as the eternal sentinel for the human and the enduring values. To focus the anguish of Herzog’s inner self, Bellow makes his hero undergo a series of experiences both in his private and public realms. Aware of the inconsistency and fragmentation of a modern individual, Herzog begins to live in his own “ideal constructions”. With keen desire to affirm human against inhuman elements of the present civilization, he seeks for those values and enduring quality, the absence of which makes him sick and which for him are indispensable to make human life a decent one and thus enabling each individual to have genuine human dignity and complete his life in meaningful terms.

Life, based on values, can attain meaning. It spontaneously urges each individual to share his life with other individuals. Again it is the manifestation of absolute love. Herzog’s spiritual rebirth has made a kind of realization possible for him to feel a bond of oneness with the entire humanity. With his renewed faith, he is now aware that identity is found in communion through love. The feeling of love urges him to make his life meaningful in brotherhood. In discovering the meaning of what it means to be human, he has rediscovered his self and its true meaning and purpose. He has attained a state of gentle reasonableness in accepting limitations.

2. Conclusion

Herzog struggles to find their self-value and attempts hard to preserve his dignity. Being aware of his ‘self,’ he realizes his mismatch with society and is willing to adapt to fit in and finally reconciles with society. In other words, his quest for the self gets satisfied only when Herzog returns to the community. Herzog has finally learnt that only dialogue can render meaning to one’s life –not monologue. Bellow thus shows that to celebrate life, one must accept limitations and join humanity. Only then can a man discover his true identity.

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