RESEARCH REVIEW JOURNALS
Volume-04
Issue-01
January -2019

ISSN: 2455-3085 (Online)
RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary
www.rrjournals.com [UGC Listed Journal]

A Challenge for the Hero to Demonstrate his Personal Worth as well as his Faith in Humanity in Saul Bellow's Novel, *The Victim*

Neeta Manrow

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College for Girls, Patiala, (Punjab)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History
Published Online: 20 January 2019

Keywords
Victim, Reality, Existence, Humanity, Persecution, Death, Displaced, Society, Uprooted

ABSTRACT

Saul Bellow connected one novel after another with a representative Jew, in order to represent Jewish experience itself. The emphasis on one people's collective idiosyncratic experiences is so intense that it seems to follow from some deep cut in Saul Bellow's mind. As a novelist, Saul Bellow encounters an urban world where individuality maybe ironized or displaced or sapped by dominant processes and laws of society. Bellow feels that environment is a determining power over man. The assertion of the self or an act of will, are dominated by the laws of social placing. Saul Bellow's heroes, usually intellectuals, often writers and men concerned to discern what he calls in his novel The Victim, the queerness of existence face constant victimization and defeat. They are unable to rid themselves of the feeling that they inhabit an oppressive society whose forces run counter to their aspiration for well-being. They are obsessed by the thoughts of persecution, death and madness. Their anxiety for self-preservation insulates them at least initially against all views of reality other than their own. Repelled by ordinary life, they invent evasive formulae to confront imagined terrors and support their own marginal existence. Reality, however outmatches all their maneuvers, forcing them to come out of the barricades they have built around themselves and to accept the fact of belongingness to a common world.

"There may be some truths which are after all our friends in the universe."

-Saul Bellow

Introduction

From *Dangling Man* to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the Bellow hero has been faced with the challenge of reconciling the views he has of himself with those that others have of him. The major narrative structure is controlled by the hero who must decide whether to confirm to the pattern of existences that surrounds him, or to explore new possibilities. He may ultimately not discover what he seeks, but the search itself is of prime significance. Bellow's novels contain many similar elements: each focuses on a character that appears to be alienated from his environment, each explores the psychological alternatives of commitment and disengagement and each challenges the hero to demonstrate his personal worth as well as his faith in humanity. The idea of exploring the inner emotions of his characters and providing the justifications for their humanistic feelings are basic themes of his novels.

In *The Victim*, the question of what it means to be human is tested out. Unlike Joseph in 'Dangling Man', Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* is not able to ignore the implications of his assailant's remarks, for he is constantly hounded by half-realized figure from his past who accuses him of vindictiveness. Through these repudiators or antagonists, Asa is forced to acknowledge the validity of a statement made by Schlossberg, the reality instructor in the novel. Schlossberg maintains that it is essential for man to realise what it means to be human and that he must also contribute something if life is to have meaning. Schlossberg also recommends choosing dignity and grace. To be human means to acknowledge one's limitations and to care for others who may need your assistance, it does not, however mean sacrificing your own integrity to ensure someone else's survival.

The Victim is regarded by some critics as one of the most convoluted novels in literature. The problem that confronts the protagonist, Asa Leventhal, corresponds precisely to the general and widespread crisis that threatens man today. Uprooted from his social bearings and unsure of his religious faith, the individual can no longer derive meaning from the social structure that is indifferent to him. Asa Leventhal, locked in New York's in human heat, has moments of freshness and deep breathing only near the sea. We are menaced, distracted and overborne by the sheer clutter of things in this modern world. Bellow's cities - Chicago and New York are noisy with streetcars, subways, families, friends, soot and filth.

Generally each of Bellow's characters carries the stamp of modernity with him in the form of his brand of desperate ennui, making the circumstantial world unnecessary, except as a climate or tone or overall condition. The war, the holocaust and the decline of the west, are the very thematic heart of his books. Denial Hoffman comments:

> "In *The Victim*, the urban landscape speaks for the mind in its hidden aspects."[1]

Saul Bellow gives the description of the environment 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 smolder and faced massively, India red, brown, into the sun and across the hot green netting of the bridges."[2]

Here Asa Leventhal's Weltschmerz is represented by the description of an industrial sunrise. Leventhal's hidden rage is known through its projections. The subways, the sweat, the

listless crowds in the parks, the invincible dirt, the struggle for air, is brought upon Asa Leventhal's moral burden.

Paper

The son of Jewish immigrants, who were never assimilated into American life, solitary and suspicious by temperament, Asa Leventhal, is wrestling with the related problem of his Americanisms and his Jewishness. One pole of the novel perhaps is to be found in his father's contemptuous words which Asa Leventhal has rejected:

> "Call me Ikey, call me Moe, but give me the dough. What's it to me if you despise me? What do you think equality with you means to me? What do you have that I care about accept the groschen?"[3]

Leventhal is a large, heavy and seemingly impressive man. But he is deeply sensitive and feels insecure. Because his formal education and manners are limited and because he has known poverty and unemployment he has a gripping fear of failure. He feels that the harshness of his life has disfigured him and that this disfigurement will be apparent. Sensitive also to the guarded anti-semitism of his employers, he responds to it by withdrawing further. When Leventhal is lonely and nervous, as his wife is away, he is confronted by Kirby Allbee and his wild accusation. Leventhal is picked upon by Kirby Allbee, a dead beat, a drunk, and an anti-semite. He accuses Leventhal, to his bewilderment, of having once lost him his job, hence his present degradation. He blames it all on Leventhal.

Aware of being singled out to be the object of some freakish insane process, Leventhal heatedly rejects Allbee's charges, but at the same time he is filled with dread because of his unconscious awareness that there may be some truth in them. He had never intended to hurt Albee in any way, as he believes that suffering does not have to be inflicted intentionally. And when Allbee says that Leventhal wanted revenge for an Anti-Semitic remark made by Allbee at a party, Leventhal is unable to dismiss that possibility.

Jonathan Baumbach, in his analysis of *The Victim*, says:

> "Leventhal, a victim of real and imaginary persecution, feels guilty because he believes that his sufferings, like all suffering is deserved yet he cannot recognize his own mortal sin, which forces him to listen to Allbee's accusations and the need to expiate it which moves him to shelter Allbee and to try to rehabilitate him."[4]

Compelled to help Allbee, Leventhal is compelled also to find some rational justification for that help. Leventhal becomes more obsessed with being persecuted and correspondingly more guilt-ridden. Leventhal's realization leads him to admit to Allbee that there is some justice in his claims:

> *"… I'm letting you sleep here tonight to return a favour and that's all."*[5]

But once acknowledged the claims grow insistent and encompassing until Leventhal returns to the apartment to find him locked out and his own bed defiled by Allbee and a whore. Enraged he throws them out though afterword he feels getting involved once again.

Asa Leventhal must balance what he owes a man who is at once his prosecutor, his victim, and also his companion in this universe against what he owes himself. Allbee starts living parasitically upon him in a relationship that becomes increasingly complex. But the two do not meet each other for several years. Psychologically there is a change in Leventhal:

> *"Something recalcitrant seemed to have left him… he lost the feeling that he had, as he used to say, got away with it, his guilty relief and the accompanying sense of infringement."*[6]

He had never tried to find out what happened to Allbee and did not care to think too much or too literally about it. But when they both see each other after many years, Allbee says he has come to terms with life.

"I'm not the type that runs things. I never could be I realized that long ago. I'm the type that comes to term with whoever runs things. What do I care? The world wasn't made exactly for me. What am I going to do about it? .... "Anyway, I'm enjoying life." Suddenly he looked around and said, 'Say, I've got to run, Yvonne, will send them out looking for me." "Wait a minute, what's your idea of who runs things?" said Leventhal.[7]

On this seemingly inconclusive note the novel ends. Leventhal is left groping at the end of *The Victim* for are idea of who runs things. Saul Bellow tries to show that a step towards self-discovery is taken. Leventhal is aware that real suffering may be caused in the absence of a secure social placement. He believes it is wrong to blame someone with a place. Such an error he seasons derives from a misplaced. Kulshrestha comments:

> *"In a world in which the idea of 'Who runs things' is uncertain. The only course left to men is to come to terms with one another, to accept their particular destiny within the general framework of human destiny to feel for the plight of those who have been less fortunate in the 'egg race' of life, and to become conscious of the sense of profound responsibility that the interdependence of freedom confers upon them."*[8]

Asa Leventhal, the Jew is a victim not merely of anti-Semitism but of his own sense of insecurity, of his own conviction that he has muscled in on an alien world where his precarious position is daily called into question. He is deeply anxious about his place. Actually both the men feel alienated. Allbee as an intellectual, Asa as a Jew. Their alienation is aggravated by exasperation, violence, maladjustment etc. Their condition is not simply a consequence of what society has done to them; it is a result also and this is of even greater importance to Bellow – of their own short-comings. Neither man achieves a full sense of what it means to be a mature human being. The specific problem of *The Victim* that Asa is a man who falls short of love and understanding and humanity. He is self-engrossed, but blindly, not in a way that will enable him to discover the self. Loaded with these disabilities and thus in the worst possible condition to do so, Asa is asked to consider the nature and extent of one human being's responsibility to another.

To Bellow, the presence of human life in a vast inanimate universe is in itself a matter of considerable satisfaction. The sheer joy in existence experienced by the Bellow hero is one aspect of the significance sought by him; another important aspect may be located in his recognition of the need to cultivate "pro-social" attitudes in a society in which mass-behaviour generally tends to be self-directed. Asa Leventhal's uneasiness leads him to reflect on what it is to be human and he decides that it must mean to be accountable in spite of weaknesses. Leventhal believes in total involvement in life. It is

the feeling of interconnectedness and fellow feeling that is needed. Jews believe that it is the moral duty of man to be just and helpful to his neighbour.

In *The Victim*, Bellow's spokesman for this conception of humanity is Schlossberg, the old Yiddish journalist. As Chester E. Eisinger remarks:

> *"Schlossberg is in the novel to represent the concept of humanity that Bellow generally advances in his work and to provide a scale against which we may measure Asa's failure, as he himself does."*[9]

Schlossberg tries to answer the question, what is human? Life is a great thing, because it has beauty and dignity. The only meaning of life is what we give it Schlossberg says:

> *"Why be measly? ... Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down."*[10]

In another conversation he says he has to be himself in full. He conceives the full range of human possibilities. Finally, he says that man is born once and he will die once. It is to the degree that Asa fails to measure up to Schlossberg's standards that he fails to be a good man. Schlossberg says that we pretend that we have eternal life because we don't know what to do with the one we have.

Mickey's death, Allbee's troubles, and the whole sum of Leventhal own experience have revealed to him that there is no department of weights and measures, that we are all human, all victims. Asa Leventhal is denied that definition of self that is very important to become a responsible human being. The difficulties one has to face in order to discover one's identity are complicated by Asa's relations with Kirby Allbee, who poses problems for him of responsibility and guilt which he is unable to resolve. He is forced to pay for his guilt by living with a man who despises him.

Conclusion

Asa, Allbee believes, must believe that if man suffers he deserves suffering which comes to him as a punishment. Life itself is not evil, but man may be, thus bringing punishment down upon himself. This is Jewish point of view found everywhere in the Bible. By accepting it, Asa frees himself of any blame for Allbee's ruin. Asa cannot establish a philosophical position or take the long view because he is submerged in his self, a frightened insecure Jew. Bellow's achievement is to have seen all around the theme of anti-Semitism in such a way as to elevate it into something of general significance. Bellow understands that anti-Semitism is a superficial social phenomenon. He has succeeded in getting at the profound social and psychological truths that lie beneath the surface of anti-Semitism. American life is dynamic, where clash between the new and the old constantly creates tensions. Solutions to these, it any, lie in time, when men like Asa Leventhal will have achieved self-hood.

The Victim is a magnificent achievement. In it the philosophical richness characteristic of all of Bellow's work is given its perfect form. The conception of Kirby Allbee is brilliant. Entirely believable as a realistic character, he is equally real as the symbolic manifestation of Asa Leventhal's darker nature. There are flaws in Leventhal's goodness and in Allbee's evil. The moral overtones and reverberations of the novel seem to be inexhaustible. In trying to heal Allbee, the clumsy physician heals himself, though only partially and though he saves Allbee's life, he cannot save his soul; only Allbee himself could do that and when we last see him he radiates decay, a death in life.

Bellow's economy and control in the book are masterful; they enhance rather than limit its richness. However M. Harper Jr. remarks:

> *"The Victim achieves to an extent approached in Bellow's work only by the shorter 'Seize, the Day; an overwhelming reality and relevance as a vision of life…. It is a unique vision of life, so rich and so subjectively true and coherent that whatever we "think" of it. We find it deeply moving, permanently interesting and analytically inexhaustible."*[11]

Reference and Notes

1. Daniel Hoffman, ed., *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 223.
2. Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (Penguin books Ltd., 1966), p. 35.
3. Ibid., p. 94.
4. Jonathan Baumbach, *The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in The Contemporary American Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 51.
5. Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (Penguin Books Ltd., 1966) p. 137.
6. Ibid., p. 230.
7. Ibid., p. 238.
8. Chirantan Kulshrestha, *Saul Bellow: The Problem of Affirmation* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1978), p. 63.
9. Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 380.
10. Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (Penguin, 1966), p. 113.
11. Howard M. Harper Jr., *Desparate Faith* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967), p. 23.

Bibliography

1. Baumback, Jonathan. *The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in The Contemporary American Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1965).
2. Bellow, Saul. *The Victim.* Penguins, 1966.
3. Bradbury, Malcolm. "Saul Bellow's *The Victim*", *The Critical Quarterly*. 5 Summer, 1963.
4. Clayton, John J. *Saul Bellow: In Defence of Men*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.
5. Eisinger, Chester E., Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).
6. Galloway, David D., *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*. Austin, 1966.
7. Hoffman, Deniel, ed., Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).
8. Kulshrestha, Chirantan. *Saul Bellow: The Problem of Affirmation* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1978).

