

The Image of Intellectual Survivor in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*

Gian Chand

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Govt. Degree College, Lad-Bharol, Distt. Mandi,
Himachal Pradesh, India.*

The American novelists in the 1960s discarded the country's values of despair, disbelief, and disillusionment in favour of the positive values of hope for future, belief in human life, and respect for human dignity. As a result, the problem of man's survival in the face of the complex social conditions of our time became the chief thematic concern for the major contemporary American novelists. They projected in their novels man set against the overwhelming odds of his chaotic existence that constantly force him to die as broken and defeated in the most unheroic way. But, he refuses to succumb to the adverse circumstances of life and finally rises above them through his indomitable courage and invincible will to live. He is firmly determined to "stay rooted in the wasteland-in the system that attempts to deny his vitality and concentrate all his energies on battling both himself and the mysterious powers that control him, thereby assuring himself that he is alive."¹ During his relentless struggle to stay alive man in contemporary American fiction emerges as capable of facing up to the emotional response to the European holocaust when they heard about it from the immigrant Jews and the native Americans who had participated in it personally. Consequently, contemporary American novelists, more especially the Jewish novelists, including a few actual survivors of the holocaust, responded to the trauma faced by man in the wartime Germany, Poland, Russia, and Hungary equally sensitively as did their European counterparts

demands made on him by a civilization shattered by the two successive World Wars.

Towards the end of 1950's American fiction exhibited a change in the concept of man, a change that was foreshadowed by Ralph Ellison and Hemingway (in their later writings) in the very beginning of the decade. Under the impact of this change, contemporary American novelists created in their novels a different kind of man who respects his life and morality and has adequate physical stamina and intellectual resources to protect them from the anti-human forces of the world. In fact, this change took place in contemporary American fiction as a result of contemporary American novelists' growing concern for the problem of man's survival in the context of the major catastrophes of our time like the holocaust, the World Wars, and the deteriorating conditions of life in America and elsewhere.

The European holocaust did not directly affect the people of America. Nevertheless, the Americans did make an like Andre Malraux and Albert Camus. Elie Wiesel and Jerzy Kosinski, two actual survivors living in America, employ their actual experiences of the holocaust in their autobiographical novels to find, as Earnest Pawel says, a "human language for the ineffable."²

Like the holocaust survivors, the Second World War survivors such as Joseph Heller and Kurt

Vonnegut Jr., have written novels about their experiences of the war. They employ the war as a metaphor for the universal human predicament and reconsider its implications from a new angle. They reverse the painful realities of the war by mixing fantasy with facts to create an acceptable reality, a viable morality, and a hero commensurate with our times. After the Second World War, America has witnessed a colossal phenomenon of scientific and industrial development which has created an extreme situation of anonymity for an ordinary man. As a result, one has to take special measures for one's physical and psychological survival in the post-war American society.

Contemporary American novelists, unlike their predecessors, take an affirmative stance while treating the problem of man's survival in America and elsewhere. They create a heroic image of man which embodies their immense faith in man's physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual potentialities. As a result of their pioneering efforts, man in contemporary American fiction emerges as the survivor hero who has an innate love for his life and dignity, and an inexhaustible strength to protect them from the forces of anarchy. He has adequate skill and imagination to fill the void of moral or spiritual nothingness by creating an alternate value system, and has enough courage and confidence to fight the deterministic tendency of the scientific and technological establishments of our times. The survivor has an exalted notion of his identity and morality which always inspires him to contradict the dehumanizing conditions of life with his fullest force. Therefore he is fully determined to live and fully prepared to thwart any eventuality that poses a threat to his life and morality.

The purpose of this research paper is to trace the emergent image of the intellectual survivor in

Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. Bellow examines the issue of man's survival amidst the anarchic social atmosphere which poses a serious threat to man's life, morality, intellect, and imagination. In such circumstances, Bellow's protagonists take advantage of their intellectual capabilities to evolve their protective strategies against human debasement.

In Moses E. Herzog, the protagonist of *Herzog* (1964), can be traced the image of the survivor. He is a middle-aged Canadian Jew, a professor of political philosophy, who has the ambition to provide a "a new angle on the modern condition, showing how life could be live by renewing universal connections; overturning the last of the romantic errors about the uniqueness of the self; revising the old western, Faustian ideology; investigating the social meaning of nothingness. And more."³ He supports ordinariness, but considers himself an extraordinary person, "a marvelous Herzog". He is an egotist who thinks that "the progress of civilization—indeed, the survival of civilization—depended on the success of Moses E. Herzog". His desire "to live marvelous qualities" keeps him away from ordinary people, and his efforts to shape his life according to abstract ideas from books like *The world as Will and Idea* and *The Decline of the West* keep him unaware about the true forms of human nature. Like his predecessors', Herzog's partial view of life excludes real, irrational, and ordinary aspects of human life. Nevertheless, he recovers them, like Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, after receiving a series of the unpleasant shocks of reality.

Herzog divorces his first wife, marries Madeleine, resigns his job, and retreats to an old villa in Ludeyville. But after some time Madeleine seeks a divorce and moves in with Herzog's closest friend Valentine Gersbach.

Thus his dear wife deprives him of his livelihood, and his faithful friend deprives him of his beautiful wife and lovely daughter. The second divorce immensely hurts Herzog's ego because he never imagined that such a nasty thing would happen to an extraordinary person like him. The crisis throws Herzog off his track putting his morality and sanity to stake: "the strain of the second divorce was too much for Herzog. He felt he was going to pieces—breaking up..." (p. 7) Consequently, Herzog loses his touch with himself and with others as well. He loses his self-control and self-confidence too. He becomes erratic in behaviour and bitter towards women.

After the second divorce, Herzog realizes that "he had mismanaged everything. His life was, as the phrase goes, ruined." (p. 3) He thinks that he has not been able to fulfil his responsibilities as a human being:

...He had been a bad husband—twice, Daisy, his first wife, he had treated miserably. Madeleine, his second, had tried to do him in. To his son and his daughter he was a loving but bad father. To his own parents he had been an ungrateful child. To his country, an indifferent citizen. To his brothers and his sister, affectionate but remote. With his friends, an egotist. With love, lazy. With brightness, dull. With power, passive. With his own soul, evasive. (p. 5)

But Herzog doesn't sit idle and bemoan the futility of his life. Thrown to his own resources, he takes upon himself to set everything right: "I'm going to shake this off. I'm not going to be a victim. I hate the victim bit..." (p. 82) He exhibits a great capacity for life because, in his view, it is one's moral obligation to survive the odds of life with full humanity and dignity: "You have to fight for your life. That is the chief condition on which you hold it. Then why be halfhearted?". Hence, he commits himself fully "Not to burst,

not to die—to stay alive..." (p. 44) Lionel Trilling observes that "the characters of Shakespeare are complete before they die."⁴ Similarly, Herzog also intends to achieve the same completion through his heroic struggle against his crisis:

But I am diligent. I work at it and show steady improvement. I expect to be in great shape on my deathbed. The good die young, but I have been spared to build myself up so that I may end my life as good as gold. The senior dead will be proud of meI will join the Y.M.C.A. of the immortals. Only, in this very hour, I may be missing eternity. (p. 152)

Therefore, Herzog resists his malady vigorously and regains his composure at the end. In doing so "he surpasses Bellow's earlier heroes in the scope and complexity of his response to life and his determination to meet it head on, without evasion, without 'ideal constructions' of any kind."⁵ In order to present the full complexity of Herzog's character and to display his growth "from disease to convalescence," Bellow adopts narrative devices like letter-writing, mental flashbacks in between the texts of the letters, and the first person point-of-view shifting into the third person point-of-view. "Herzog narrates the novel, shifting in and out of the first person. When he is in the first person he is Herzog the narrator examining Herzog the protagonist. The emotions are checked resulting in an analytical objectivity otherwise impossible, but extremely necessary to Herzog's mental health."⁶ Herzog's letters constantly intrude upon his past reminiscences and constitute an important part of the plot which spreads over a period of five days preceding his return to his old house in the Berkshires. His glimpses into the past fill up the gaps within the narrative; and the main action of the plot moves in terms of Herzog's growth from "complete disaster to recovery."

As the story begins, we find Herzog “overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to make amends.” (p. 2) He wants to reconsider his experience to give a meaning to his life. He takes to letter-writing and writes “endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally to the famous dead.” (p. 1) Herzog writes these letters because in his opinion “a letter gives one a chance to consider—think matters over, and reach a more balanced view.” (p. 101) These letters (which remain unmailed in his valise) are addressed to the people from every walk of life: to Gersbach, Sono, Madeleine, Ramona, Daisy, Lucas Asphalter, Dr. Edvig, Shapiro, Mermelstein, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Nehru, Eisenhower, Bhabe, Martin Luther King, and many others. He takes up an issue with each of them concerning the survival of human beings in contemporary society and refers his ideas constantly to his lived experiences. In fact, Herzog moves towards recovery on two levels. He resolves his intellectual confusions through his letters and thereby regains his mental balance. Though later Herzog calls his letter-writing an abuse of consciousness, the practice helps him clear his confusions and acquire a new perspective on life. While writing these letters, he recalls his painful experiences in the past through a process of psychological association and refines them from all the unbearable complications through a process of objective assessment. In this way, Herzog saves his sanity by turning the unpleasant experiences of his life into pleasant perceptions. And he achieves spiritual recovery on witnessing such incidents as the courtroom scene, the car accident, and his meeting with Luke Asphalter which acquaint him with the true forms of human nature. Interestingly enough, when we

meet Herzog as an intellectual writing his letters, he is quite consistent and convincing; but when we observe him as a human being responding to his emotional problems, he is quite inconsistent. His inability to control his emotions becomes the main source of his miseries.

In fact, here Bellow makes fun of the educated American whose higher learning has failed to offer him a solution in the time of crisis. While commenting upon the problems of Herzog, Bellow says that “Herzog is a comic portrait of the enfeeblement of educated man, a man of good instincts, and decent feelings who, in the crisis of life, casts about for help from his ‘education’ and finds that this ‘education’ is little more than a joke. Herzog then reviews his life, re-enacting the roles he has been taught.”⁷ He re-enacts the roles of a “suffering joker” and a “philosophus Gloriosus” in order to unburden himself from the mass of learning which cannot show him the way through his crisis. He begins to write letters which are “both an apology for his life and an attempt to regain his psychic balance through quixotic humour and philosophic monologue.”⁸ He becomes comic in these letters and brushes aside the most serious happenings of his life through covert irony. For example, in his letter to Dr. Edvig, Herzog directs his anger against Valentine Gersbach, who seduces his wife and advises him to read Martin Buber. Herzog distorts Martin Buber’s philosophy of I-It making, what Bellow elsewhere calls, a “comic use of complaint.”⁹

Similarly, Herzog playfully turns Heidegger’s existential abstraction topsy-turvy by asking a humorous question: “Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression ‘the fall in the quotidian.’ When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened”. (p.49)

Such a diatribe eases the mounting tension in Herzog's mind and serves a therapeutic function. On the novelist's part, however, this method involves, what he calls in *The Last Analysis* (1965), "the mind's comical struggle for survival in an environment of ideas."¹⁰ In fact, Bellow thinks that humour or laughter is a divine gift to man: and it is the most sublime expression of the human soul. While discussing Herzog's confusion in his "Foreword" to Allan Bloom's most recent book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bellow says:

Herzog's confusion is barbarous. Well, what else can it be? But there is one point at which, assisted by his comic sense, he is able to hold fast. In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as our education. But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgements and put everything together.¹¹

Herzog laughs away his personal problems and prevalent ideology of apocalypse and alienation. In this way, he develops an independent consciousness. "The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life's struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether."¹² Though Herzog is in a state of emotional disillusionment, he bluntly disagrees

with those philosophers who present nihilistic and gloomy picture of modern life.

While writing to Monsignor Hilton, Herzog again criticizes Heidegger's theories in his attempt to make a correction:

Very tired of the modern form of historicism which sees in this civilization the defeat of the best hopes of Western religion and thought, what Heidegger calls the second fall of Man into the quotidian or ordinary. No philosopher knows what the ordinary is, has not fallen into it deeply enough. The question of ordinary human experience is the principal question of these modern centuries, as Montaigne and Pascal, otherwise in disagreement, both clearly saw.— The strength of a man's virtue or spiritual capacity measured by his ordinary life. (p. 106)

Similarly in his letter to Nietzsche, he prescribes the commitment to survival as the precondition for realizing the ennobling effects of deep pain:

I also know you think that deep pain is ennobling, pain which burns slow, like green wood, and there you have me with you, somewhat. But for his higher education survival is necessary. You must outlive the pain... No survival, no Amor Fati. (p. 319)

By reviewing his painful experiences from a comic perspective and the pessimistic theories of modern philosophers from an optimistic perspective, Herzog realizes that he is still useful to society. And he derives confidence from the realization that he has not been completely dwarfed by his predicament. Herzog's confidence in his intellectual capabilities cures his mental imbalance. On the intellectual level, it is easier for Herzog to arrive at a point of personal understanding. But it is difficult for him to control his emotions while

responding to his personal predicament. Being an imaginative person, Herzog is more sensitive to his environment, and has more capacity to feel and suffer. Ramona's love does help him contain his grief, but his ambivalence towards women always deters him from making a permanent communion with her. In the end we are left guessing whether the affair develops further or breaks up after Herzog's return to his villa in the Berkshires. But, Herzog undergoes some shocking experiences before his return which certainly prove helpful in bringing moral refinement in him.

Herzog gets a letter from Gerald Portnoy, a friend of Luke Asphalter, stating that Madeleine and Gersbach are treating his daughter, June, badly. Once they left her outside locked in the car while they quarrelled inside the house. Advised by Simkin to seek legal possession of the child, Herzog goes to the court to see his lawyer. There he has to wait for his appointment. While waiting for his turn, Herzog wanders in the dark corridors of the court where he witnesses the proceedings of some criminal trials. One of them is about the murder of a child by its own mother.

The trial moves Herzog to imagine Madeleine and Gersbach murder his own daughter in a similar manner. It provokes him to murder Gersbach by way of revenge: "The decision was not reached; it simply arrived." (p. 241) Herzog picks up his pistol and sets out for Chicago with an intention to shoot his enemy. But to his utter surprise, Herzog finds his enemy bathing his daughter tenderly. The whole episode turns into an "absurd thought" in Herzog's mind:

As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into *theatre*, into something ludicrous. He was not ready to make such a

complete fool of himself. Only self-hatred could lead him to ruin himself because his heart was "broken." How could it be broken by such a pair? (p. 258)

Herzog encounters the reality of human nature in a different form, contrary to what he had imagined. After hearing the proceedings in the court, Herzog concludes that human life is a "wicked dream," completely devoid of human emotions. On finding Gersbach bathing his daughter so affectionately, Herzog's anger turns into surprise. He realizes that even a wicked man like Gersbach can have the potential for goodness and a good man like himself can have the potential for evil. This realization liberates Herzog from his romantic notions, leading him to understand the complex human nature. It rectifies his moral and emotional imbalance, giving him self-control. Also, Herzog undergoes a kind of catharsis as he moves from a violent emotional excitement to a peaceful realization for the truth about human nature: "His breath came back to him; and how good it felt to breathe! It was worth the trip" (p.258)

From the above incident Herzog learns that "man is somehow more than his 'characteristics; all the emotions, strivings, tastes, and constructions which it pleases him to call 'My Life.' We have ground to hope that a Life is something more than such a cloud of particles, mere facticity." (p.266) And that the "incomprehensible" aspect of man's nature is more meaningful than the comprehensible. "Go through what is comprehensible and you conclude that only the incomprehensible gives any light." (p.266) After this episode Herzog becomes aware of the fact that the comprehensible aspects of human life—its readymade realities given by the Reality Teachers—can at times be thoroughly misleading. He realizes more intimately the

hollowness of his "higher learning" or "bookish idealism" which has covered his "real soul" with a "synthetic soul." And he realizes that one has to learn the "conduct of life" from one's personal experience rather than from books. With these realizations, Herzog becomes rather than from books. With these realizations, Herzog becomes ready to learn all over again and comes closer to ordinary human beings.

Bellow makes Herzog's recovery articulate through his conversation with Luke Asphalter. Luke is a victim of his immense love for his ailing monkey, Rocco. He unsuccessfully tries to revive the dying monkey by giving it mouth-to-mouth respiration without knowing that the monkey is suffering from T.B. After Rocco's death, Luke undergoes a long fit of depression which he tries to overcome by taking Tina Zokoly's lessons on facing the fear of death. Instead of doing any good these lessons give him absurd visions of his old aunt's buttocks and burlesque girls. Herzog tells Luke not to live on lies propounded by false philosophers. He advises him to live with other human beings, which is more purposeful and humanizing than other things: "Man liveth not by self alone but in his brother's face....Each shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy around." (p.272) Otherwise, human consciousness, says Herzog, "When it doesn't clearly understand what to live for, what to die for, can only abuse and ridicule itself. As you do with the help of Rocco and Tina Zokoly, as I do by writing impatient letters..." (p.273) This gives a positive indication of Herzog's growth towards self-awareness and self-control.

Afterwards Herzog meets with a car accident while taking his daughter to the museum. It proves to be another shock of reality which leads Herzog towards further moral refinement. The cops arrest him for keeping a pistol without

licence, and take him to the police station. There he finds himself "Down in the ranks with other people – ordinary life." (p.287) Surrounded by ordinary people at a public place, Herzog behaves in a sane and dignified manner, completely contrary to his earlier posture of defiance – "no defiance, no special pleading, nothing of the slightest personal colour." (p.294) Thus Herzog gradually relaxes his egotism. He overcomes his obsession for an incomplete view of life and accepts life with all its complexities and ambiguities. Having undergone the whole gamut of experience, Herzog is purged of his neurosis. He regains a posture of repose and returns home where he feels "confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong." (p. 1) He recovers "the original sense of being, a being that precedes social shaping."¹³ His recovery is the result of "a personal response made with full awareness of the social, intellectual, moral, political, and religious issues that condition human existence in society."¹⁴ Herzog thus exhibits "an innate potentiality to overcome his crisis through a process of corrective self-comprehension"¹⁵ and emerges as the intellectual survivor.

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