

FAMILY AS STRANGLEHOLD: A POSTMODERNIST STUDY OF SAUL BELLOW'S HERZOG

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Abstract:

Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous line "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (*The Social Contract* 14), can be taken as a statement against human bondage not only in society but also the family in which he or she is born. The postmodernists (End Note 1) challenge the concepts of 'home' and 'family' and also regard it as the place where liberty and peace of the individuals are 'butchered' (Delueze 120). The present paper is an attempt at capturing how Saul Bellow, a contemporary Jewish-American novelist, has responded to the winds of change in family relationships.

Keywords: Jean Jacques Rousseau's, Family, postmodernists, traditionalists

The postmodernists reject the view of the traditionalists (End Note 2) who believe that family is an ideal unit of society and that without a strong family bond mankind might be lost. They maintain that in case family as a stable social unit has lost its importance and sacrosanct status it is probably because of the oppressive external as also internal pressures from all sides in the recent times (Boggs 451-452). These include the economic challenges on one hand and the suppressive, unaccommodating environment at home on the other. The postmodernists maintain that what the traditionalists glorify is an unreal picture of familial relationships: only what ought to be and not what actually is (Althusser 1501). Moreover, they opine that the bitterness among family members, conflicting ego ambitions, adulterous liaisons and blown up expectations are some additional reasons that make life in a family suffocating. Not that these causes did not exist earlier but this aspect of family was generally ignored in the interest of family-glorification-theme that existed in all faiths.

The postmodernists also question the views of the traditionalists who on one hand appeal to the members of a family to be caring and nurturing for one another and on the other deny them their individuality and freedom (Woods 31). The view of Hegel has been questioned who said, "Hence in a family, one's frame of mind is to have self-consciousness of one's individuality within this unity as the absolute essence of oneself, with the result that one is in it not as an independent person, but as a member" (*Philosophy of Rights* 249). However, the postmodernists like Tamara Ker Hareven assert that family is not a nurturing unit because it suffocates and stifles individuality. She says:

. . . the private family isolated its individual members from sociability and diversity of role models and exercised excessive control over them. This powerful control by the family over the individual led eventually to the 'cries and whispers'—to rebellion and suffering, as expressed in emotional dysfunction, breakdown, impotence, neurasthenia, and psychosomatic diseases in individuals who felt trapped by the family and confused about their social identity (*The History of the Family* 123).

That is why the metanarrative of ideal family has been replaced by a "relationship based on mutual understanding" (Gilles 15) in which the persons may have the relations with each other though not living together in a home. Gilles says:

. . . the detraditionalisation of social life has freed people from the fixed, constrained social roles of the past, allowing them to create new, more fulfilling relationships based on mutual satisfaction rather than contractual obligation . . . Thus increase in divorce and separation reflects the rise of the 'pure relationship'

with people striving for new associations based on democratic values of respect and negotiations (“Family and Intimate Relationship” 15).

The New Right theorists (End Note 3) are criticized as they want the people to live in traditional especially nuclear family system with a clear division of labour between man and woman as professional and domestic beings respectively (Jameson 478). However, such divisions at home are no longer applicable in contemporary times where man and woman are equal workers. Moreover, with the changing times, the nuclear family system and the discourses (End Note 4) related to it have become rather obsolete: there is open acceptance of single parent or step-parent families, live-in relationships, divorces and so on. Going through the novel, Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964), selected for analysis in this paper, one can find that the need today is to accept life with its varieties and celebrate relationships rather than live in prescribed set-ups of yore.

The norms about an ideal family are regarded as inspired from the ideology to dominate the weak and the average in order to ensure conformism in society. Jean François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida criticize the dominant ideologies prescribed in scriptures. They recognize scriptures as part of the ulterior design of powerful human beings to establish their rule over the common folk (Butler 14-15). They question the philosophy given in Bible of Christians and Torah of Jews as also other scriptures of the world as idealistic and impractical. Following this idea, one finds Ignaz Maybaum’s opinion invalid when he says, “What the church is to a Christian, the home and family are to the Jew” (*The Faith of the Jewish Diaspora* 32), because the ground reality of Jewish culture in America is quite different today. The idealistic family rules thus seem to become decoration pieces in synagogues as Jews no longer wish to follow them due to their oppressive nature.

Saul Bellow, a Jewish-American novelist, in his novel *Herzog* takes up the eroding family ties on one side and reveals the rising desire for more psychic space on the part of the individual on the other. He shows that a culture of multiple marriages, divorces and extra marital affairs has become quite established in America. Expectations from marriage to be loving and supportive, sharing household responsibilities, family income and nurturing cultural values are fast coming out untrue. Life in America is moving in the fast groove: if they find marriage disappointing, they experiment with other partners in or out of marriage and do not shy away from adulterous sexual adventures thus violating all the sacred rules of Jewish married life. Torah, the Jewish holy book, however, strictly prescribes against deception by either spouse through establishing adulterous relationships. For Jews, God’s presence dwells in a pure and loving home where the principles of marriage are followed as ‘*Kiddushin*’—the union of *arus* (bridegroom) and *arusah* (bride) for carrying out the purpose of life and ‘*nissuin*’—reception of the wife into husband’s home for their performance of household duties jointly. The novelists however show that these rules are observed more in their violation: a happy, healthy and harmonious life remains a distant dream even in Jewish-American families because such a rule can only be prescribed, not applied.

In the novel *Herzog*, Saul Bellow shows the erosion of family ties in a matter of fact way. Moses Herzog, the protagonist of the novel, a man in his mid-forties and a college professor, goes through a breakdown after divorcing his second wife, Madeleine. Moses does everything for Madeleine, but she does not value his feelings. Herzog quits his respectable University position and buys a big old house in the Berkshires using a twenty thousand dollar (his only inheritance) from his father in order to please Madeleine. He intends to finish the second volume of his book, *Romanticism and Christianity* in this house as his home is a dream house full of nature around, however, he is not able to complete his scholarly studies because he has to spend his time renovating the house and writing articles to pay for his wife’s extravagant purchases. And after the divorce, the dream house of Moses Herzog again makes him feel deserted and isolated as it is now plagued by Madeleine’s memories.

Herzog suffers because of mainly two reasons: first he has been desperately in love with Madeleine, but unfortunately gets deceit in return. He is not able to accept the fast moving ways of the world in which divorce has become a rampant phenomenon. Second, Herzog is torn between his Jewish ethics and American modernity. Being Jewish-American Herzog hangs between two cultures knowing each of them well; yet does not fully belong to either. In the novel, he criticizes all his Jewish friends like Shapiro for forgetting their immigrant and Jewish roots. Herzog has seen his parents struggling in the slums of Montreal on Napoleon Street: his father, Jonah Herzog, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who moved his family to Canada, working as a bootlegger for long hours to support the five members of his family, has seen his mother working as a seamstress and a washer woman to support her husband. The latter looked after her home and the children, whereas in comparison Moses Herzog finds that Madeleine does not want to lose her intellectual or love pursuits while cooking and cleaning in the country house. Madeleine leaves Herzog and his home because she feels, “her family life does not give her sufficient scope, challenge or satisfaction; she feels the deep need for further growth and for pursuing a career” (Aharoni 99). Madeleine’s parents had earlier pushed her to marry “Mr. Moses E. Herzog Ph. D” (*Herzog* 7) as the union would help their daughter get her a doctorate but she felt totally disillusioned after her marriage with Herzog. Herzog now

finds how different Daisy, his first wife, was from Madeleine. He regrets that for Madeleine, he divorced Daisy, a cool, conservative Jewish woman and an organized person from the country and thus an absolute anti-thesis of Madeleine. Moreover, he left his son, Marco (from Daisy) too.

While Herzog is the portrayal of the rather conservative Jew, Madeleine represents a woman belonging to the new world demanding and expecting freedom at all levels—freedom without responsibility. Thus Bellow depicts Madeleine as a woman unsuited for the traditional life Herzog offers to her. Within one year of marriage, Madeleine becomes dissatisfied and considers herself “too young, too intelligent, too vital, and too sociable to be buried in the remote Berkshires” (*H* 6). Moreover, Madeleine being a modern woman and mad for her paramour, Valentine Gersbach, does not want to live in the country and decides to shift to Chicago where Valentine lives. Herzog, unaware of his cuckolding, has helped Gersbach find a radio job in Chicago where Madeleine joins him. She even does not care for her husband’s academic position, intellectual reputation or stigma of adultery on Gersbach and herself both.

However on the other side, Madeleine's resistance to housewifery is even more understandable considering her background. She hated her mother for giving up her life in order to serve her famous actor father who used to beat them. She objects to female servitude, and cannot bring herself to serve Herzog. Her anger bursts out when she says, “It needs four servants and you want me to do all the work” (*H* 123). When pregnant Madeleine finds it difficult to manage a huge house in the solitary Berkshires, she finds Gersbach a helping hand in her household chores. The latter leaves his devoted wife, Phoebe Gersbach, and also his child for marrying Madeleine.

The instability in sexual relations of Moses Herzog has also been commented in the novel. Aunt Zelda of Herzog also accuses him of womanizing and having affairs with many other women like Sono, Zinka and Ramona. She calls him a dictator and a tyrant. The name ‘Herzog’ also means ‘Duke’. Moses says of himself too, “I do seem to be a broken-down monarch of some kind . . . like my old man, the princely immigrant an ineffectual bootlegger” (*Herzog* 24). He also says:

Daisy, his first wife, he had treated miserably, Madeleine his second wife had tried to do him in. To his son and daughter, he remained loving but bad father. To his own parents, he has been an ungrateful child. To his country, an indifferent citizen. To his brother and sister affectionate, but remote. With his friends an egotist. With love, lazy. With brightness, dull. With power, passive. With his soul evasive (*H* 4-5).

Through Herzog’s narration, we also guess how Madeleine went through a mental crisis: in her, we can perceive a woman in conflict who had a hard time living with a husband she did not love and tried to avoid. Madeleine of course had her genuine grievances. Actually both the spouses Madeleine and Herzog seem to be pulling in opposite directions: the wife is a down-to-earth realist, wishes an intellectual and social position and is ready to give up the old values of a pious married life for her love with the other person, while the husband is a man of traditions and wishes the wife to acquire the role of a simple home maker. The result is obviously disastrous: divorce seems the inevitable reality.

After divorce, Herzog comes close to psychic disintegration because he is not able to cope with the mundane existence his wife values and prefers. Judith Stacey, a contemporary American sociologist and cultural critic, says, “The modern family included the seeds of its own destruction: the dependence on love and affection. That idea logically required the outlet of divorce when affection waned, and divorce proved to be the Achilles’ heel of the modern family when the women’s movement and economic changes reoriented marital relations expectations” (*Brave New Families* 09). Herzog, in the novel, begins to write unsent letters to the dead and alive, in a way finding catharsis to his dangerous emotions. In his self-analysis, he tries to find out where his mistake lies when Madeleine breaks with him. What he realizes is that he is a romantic struggling in a world of realists. The strain of second divorce is too much for him and even thinks to “knock her [Madeleine] down, clutch her hair, drag her screaming and fight around the room, flog her until her buttocks should bleed bust” (*H* 17). He calls himself a suffering joker who in his posture of collapse, lies on the sofa like a chimpanzee muttering over his ruined life. His condition becomes so pathetic that a rat “chewed into a package of bread, leaving the shape of its body in the layers of slices. Herzog ate the other half of the loaf spread with jam” (*H* 1-2).

Before marriage with Madeleine, Herzog was quite a satisfied man. He made a brilliant start by writing his Ph. D. thesis entitled “The State of Nature in 17th and 18th Century English and French Political Philosophy.” The Narragansett Corporation had paid him fifteen thousand dollars over a number of years to continue his studies in Romanticism. But after the divorce with Madeleine, the rest of his ambitious projects have dried one after another. His disorientation results in the loss of focus: manuscripts lay in the closet, in an old valise—eight hundred pages of chaotic argument—which were totally abstruse and diffuse. In his lectures, he begins to speak the odd things and have sometimes long pauses in his lectures. Dr. Edvig and Lawyer Sandor Himmelstein put fuel into the fire. Both declare Herzog a psychic person. Sandor tells him that he will never receive custody of the child because he looks

pale and disheveled giving the impression of instability. Sandor gets Herzog to agree to an insurance policy that will give June a monthly allowance if he should die or suffer a mental breakdown. This disturbs him because it proves that Sandor thinks Moses is unstable. Dr. Edvig explains that Madeleine has a warrant put on him so that he cannot go near the house. But after reading a letter from June's babysitter about Valentine's ill treatment to June, Madeleine and Herzog's daughter, Moses decides he must act somehow and determines to fight Madeleine for custody of his daughter. In the court scene, he becomes appalled by the alleged crimes of a mother accused of murdering her child. He mistakenly compares her crimes with Madeleine's treatment of June. The thought of this evil that humanity can do makes him even more physically and mentally sick.

Herzog's psychic disintegration finds its cure in his observance and deep analysis of the lives of Americans around, the reminiscences of his childhood at Napoleonic Street, his amorous relations with Ramona, his acceptance of his father's second marriage with his now widowed step-mother, Tante Taube's love for her step-family, Valentine Gersbach's fatherly treatment to June, rejection of Valentine's ex-wife, Phoebe Gersbach to accept Valentine as a bad husband and her quite acceptance of Valentine and Madeleine's marriage, Herzog's encounter with death in a car accident with June and his brother's extended help to save him from police custody. He becomes able to accept the family ties between Madeleine and Valentine as at the end, he writes reconciliation letter to both of them and thereafter, he also gives up the bizarre unsent letter writing. He leaves remaining in the world of imagination and accepts the world as it is.

The novelist tries to show that the days are over when the spouses used to compromise and continued living together along with their differences with each other. In contemporary times, one would like to live one's life in one's own way without any interference or restrictions. If one gets deceit in marital relations, the only option is to divorce and accept life and whatever it offers. Judith Stacey, a contemporary sociologist, writes that now relations are free to exist based on intimacy and pleasure rather than that of on only procreation and socialization and the contemporary families are struggling to embrace diversity and flux to generate more egalitarian relationships (Gillies 10). Novelists like Saul Bellow talk about and accept extra-marital affairs, live-in relations, divorces and fragmentation in relations as the direct outcome of repression and brutality existing in traditional family set-ups.

End Notes:

- I. The Postmodernists raise their voice against the illusionary notions of peace and progress embedded in the traditional theories of Liberalism and Enlightenment. These critics including Louis Althusser, Jean François Lyotard, Giles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida and Félix Guattari reject the exploiting nature of all the old cultural, religious and political institutions surrounding social, familial and personal life of individuals, because these institutions create their dominance over individuals through metanarratives—the elaborated but impractical moral, religious and idealistic philosophies (Woods 18-19).
2. The traditionalists include the theorists of Liberalism and Enlightenment discussed as follows:
 - a. Liberalism: John Locke is the major theorist of the philosophy of liberalism. The philosophy guarantees rights to life, liberty and property which governments cannot violate. The Postmodernists find liberalism a philosophy too idealistic to be possible and too good to be true. Liberalism in real life is impractical (Vincent 245).
 - b. Enlightenment: The Enlightenment theory of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Emanuel Kant states that human beings are the subjects with coherent, stable and unified reason through which they can attain supreme position, excessive freedom and also alter and shape the social environment in which they live. But the postmodernists find that faith in reason and human logic cannot lead to peace; reason is a tool of political, economic and social leaders through which they control, repress and destroy and at the same time legitimize their coercive actions (Vincent 356).
3. New Right traditionalists is a group led by Functionalists and Conservative political leaders of American and British government (from 1979 to 1997) and many contemporary philosophers like Sir Keith Sinjohn Joseph, Anthony Giddens and Charles Murray. These critics believe in traditions of unified family systems especially nuclear family system and are against the lone family system, single motherhood, gay and lesbian families (Murray 15).

4. The word 'discourse' is derived from Latin word '*discursus*' that means running to and from. In linguistic term it denotes written and spoken communication. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, traces the role of discourses in wider context of legitimation and reflection of power of a domineering group. From literary point of view, "Discourses are the variety of different language structures in which we engage in dynamic inter-changes of beliefs, attitudes, sentiments and other expressions of consciousness, underpinned as they are by specific configurations of historical, social and cultural power" (Woods 14).

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