



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept. )

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A STUDY OF EXISTENTIALISM IN SAUL BELLOW'S "HENDERSON THE RAIN KING"

TAMILSELVAN.C

PhD Research Scholar  
PG & Research Department of English  
Vels University, Pallavaram  
Chennai, Tamilnadu, INDIA.



TAMILSELVAN.C

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects Saul Bellow's thoughts in the Modern World. The troubles that exist in Modern period are discussed by many novelists. Many authors were influenced due to the trends that prevailed during that period and used Existentialism as the subject for their novels. This paper shows Henderson's dissatisfied life in Modern America and his transformation in Africa due to the hunting of his existence. This paper proves Bellow's existential element is based on love and brotherhood which is reflected in the character Henderson.

Keywords : Existentialism, Kierkegaard, Arnewi, alienation.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

During mid 1940, a great French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel introduced the term "Existentialism". Some philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Soren Kierkegaard executed Existentialism in their works in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Existentialism is nothing but finding meaning within existence. Each and every person should determine their own meaning through existentialism, which is tested by their confusion.

The first individual to write an existential philosophy is Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher. He paved attention in human psychology and Christian Ethics. He used to write mainly on how people reacted under crisis. This famous philosopher Kierkegaard the term Existentialism into practice.

The themes like alienation, anger, searching for identity, etc., occurs under the term Existentialism. These themes make us accept that men live in this world without any controlling power and they are forced to struggle on their own.

The influence of many existential philosophers made some novelists to write the themes related to Existentialism. The writers in this period have used existential element in their novels. Some American writers, including Saul Bellow used their characters in search of existentialism. Most of Bellow's protagonists are isolated and frustrated. They fear, in facing death as they are not capable of living with the reality. They create an artificial world in order to escape death.

Donald W. Marcos comments on this situation as follows:

"The felt sense of many American intellectuals of the post-war period that communal life and belief were chaotic and irrational and that the valid source of value lay in individual only experience echoed both American naturalism of the 1890s and contemporary French existentialism." (Marcos, 1995: 87)

Bellow's fifth novel *Henderson the Rain King* is taken to prove the title. This novel is a good example to find Existentialism. Eugene Henderson is the admirer of the novel who loses his individuality in modern America. This occurs due to his avoidance in taking responsibility for his own spirit. In order to design his false identity, he loses his real identity in life.

A close observation is brought into the life of Henderson. At the beginning of the novel, Henderson is married and he has five children. He is financially secured by three million dollars, which is given by his father. He leads his life by breeding pigs. Even though he has a family and everything, he is dissatisfied with his life.

Karl makes a commentary on American *Picaro* that correctly sets up in describing the life of Henderson. He says:

"Frequently, the American's self-conceived image is that of the *picaro* himself; rebellious but decent, hardy but flexible, resourceful but God-fearing, rugged but loving, Quixotic but ?rrile, realistic but visionary." ("Picaresque" 197-98)

The depression of Henderson is not openly stated in the novel. The opinions and situations related to the protagonist prove us that his riches is not useful in offering him peace and relaxing life. Henderson sees the significance of his lifetime and he often mentions his emptiness in life. It is very clear that from the start of the novel, the protagonist searches his true identity even though he is meant to be well located.

Henderson doesn't have a serious relationship with his wife Lily. It is found that he hurt mostly who are very close to him especially his wife. Henderson behaves strangely when Lily's friends make a visit to her home. In the novel, he expresses himself about his behavior when Lily's friends were present at his house.

"And I wipe my nose and mustache on my fingers and then shake hands with the guests, saying, "I'm Mr. Henderson, how do you do?" And I go to Lily and shake her hand, too, as if she were merely another lady guest, a stranger like the rest....As Lily knows, it was done on purpose, and when we are alone she cries out to me, "Gene, what's the big idea? What are you trying to do?"(5)

Henderson is mostly affected by his presence in America. According to him, the crowd and lifestyle prevailed in America is not suitable to lead a peaceable spirit. Due to this he feels lonely and kept apart. A feel of alienation is highlighted here. His inner voice always asks for a want, "I want, I want ..." (24).

Donald W. Marcos comments about this inner voice as:

"The voice does not express desire in the ordinary sense, but rather a need for coming into one's identity and a cessation from the neurotic, hyperactive fight from the inescapable human condition" (Marcos, 1995: 110).

his voice makes him to search a remedy for his problems. Even though Henderson is gifted with everything in his life, he is not satisfied. He laments about his life. He feels unhappy about everything in his life. He finds difficult to understand his existence in his present lifetime. In order to find his existence, he is involved in many activities. He thinks that he may get rid of his distressed condition. His only desire was to search a better life, but he couldn't find a solution for his difficulties. He finds himself alone. He couldn't remain in his present place and people as he cannot demonstrate his authority there. At final, when he finds failure in all his efforts to show himself, he fled to Africa. It is very easily conveyed in this novel that his conclusion is due to the search for his existence.

Henderson feels:

". . . may be every guy has his own Africa. Or if he proceeds to sea, his own ocean. By which I implied that I was a turbulent soul. I was experiencing a turbulent Africa. This is not to say, nevertheless, that I believe the world exists for my sake. No I really believe in reality." ( 275-76)

Later going far in Africa, he takes on his guide Romilayu and along with him, he leads his path towards Africa. Along with his guide he meets Arnewi tribe. Henderson attempts to resolve the troubles of the tribal people, but yet here he attempts failed. At last the tribe sends him out of that situation.

Henderson goes on his journey. He meets another tribe Wariri. He becomes the friend of king Dafhu. A lion Atti is introduced by the king Dafhu to remove the fear of Henderson. Dauphin advises Henderson to face the lion boldly to overcome his fear, which remains as an obstacle. But he couldn't face the lion and starts to pray God for help.

Dafhu tells Henderson to change his posture as he delivers the talent to change from anything else. Atlast Henderson challenge Atti and he realizes that he can change when he is willing to change. With the assistance of king Dafhu and Lion Atti, Henderson finds new awareness in himself.

At last he finds his reality that love and brotherhood are needed for a genuine spirit. He realizes that the repeated voice in himself wanted a tangible existence in spirit. And this is discovered at last in Africa.

According to Ralph Freedman:

"..., Bellow moved towards a reinterpretation of reality. Gradually, the minute examination of consciousness against the background of the external world is supplanted by a human charade played against the scenery of a spurious environment." ("The Illusion of Environment"22)

At the conclusion of the novel, he learns a new change which he was searching from the start of the novel. He sees his goal achieved in Africa. We can discover that Henderson is all varied and he behaves like a young soul. He still feels happy to see his wife Lily. After confronting a great deal of troubles in his long life, Henderson finds his existence in Africa, which made him to change his unsatisfied life to a fulfilled one.

He found that love and fraternity are the reality he looked for. At the beginning of the novel, Henderson was isolated, unhappy and was not satisfied with his life. When he reached Africa atlast, he was in need of help but he approached God to help him.

According to Koy,

"By far the most significant integration of anthropological literature in Henderson the Rain King is cited in the "Wariri" tribe section of his novel based on surveys on the Dahomey. Bellow extracts heavily from Richard Burton's popular book. Making particular use of Burton's description of King Gelele, taken from his visits to the king in 1863- 1864, Bellow created Henderson's mentor "King Dahfu". The physical description, demeanour, clothing, eating habits, and behavior of the wives of Burton's King Gelele and Bellow's "King Dahfu" are virtually identical, down to detailing the exact manner in which tobacco was consumed" ("Picaresque and the American Experience" 161-62)

Henderson not only sees the lioness at Wariri, but also had an encounter with another lion. This happened when Dahfu had a quest for becoming a king at the end of the novel. As the lion caused the death of Dahfu, Henderson raised as an unbelievable man by sparkling his image of reality. At this point he achieves a form of transformation.

Marcus Klein says that Henderson's transformation is an achievement of soul by using its freedom in which it transforms from the isolation of ordinary life which easily prevails in the World.

He tried\* to find his existence from the beginning, but at last he finds satisfied by realizing that love and brotherhood in the reality of life which he was searching for a long time.

#### **Works cited**

##### **Primary Sources**

Bellow, Saul. (1976). *Henderson the Rain King*. New York: Penguin Books.

##### **Secondary Sources**

FREEDMAN, R. Saul Bellow: The Illusion of Environment. Saul Bellow and the Critics. New York: New York University Press. 1967. p. 53.

Karl, Fredrick, R.:"Picaresque and the American Experience"; *Yale Review* 57.2 (1967):196-212

KOY,Ch.Saul Bellow and His Fictions of Black Culture. Antropologic ké Symposium III AlešČeněk, 2004, p. 161-62

Marcos,W.Donald(1995).“Life against Death in *Henders on the Rain King*” in the Critical Response to SaulBellow.Ed. Gerhard Bach, Westport: GreenwoodPress.