

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

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

FINDING SPIRITUAL FULFILMENT THROUGH SELF TRANSCENDENCE IN THE SELECT  
WORKS OF SAUL BELLOW

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ABSTRACT

The human soul according to Saul Bellow, A Jewish-American writer and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, is trapped in nihilism and longs to find meaning amidst innumerable ideologies. As a remedy he proposes a constant spiritual concern in his fictions which in the realm of religion qualify and define the humanism. Bellow's approach towards spirituality through self-transcendence was dealt in a very careful, gradual and at the same time in a clear and steady manner. Bellow's earlier novels hint on spirituality as a prerequisite element of wellbeing, but it is his later novels that uncompromisingly speak about the various components of spirituality; such as soul, spirit, the inner voice and the various mysteries pervade the human existence amidst the chaos of the modern life. The explicit emptiness in every human being irrespective of the various parameters of existence calls for a quest to quench the thirst to greater fulfilment and meaningfulness. This calls in for a way in which this deep rooted meaninglessness can be alleviated or overcome. A way that Bellow found appropriate was self-transcendence through which spiritual fulfilment can be attained and it is the one that every person longs for to get liberated from the present state of predicament.

Key Words: human soul, nihilism, spirituality, self-transcendence, emptiness, spiritual fulfilment

INTRODUCTION

Today many have indulged in researching the very physical side of science and at the same time the stream of knowledge is aiming at exploring the fundamental intricacies of a non-mechanical and tangible reality; many started looking at the universe more like a great and infinite thought than simply like a great motion of mechanical system. As the explorations are increasing the mysteries also remain inexhaustible. The same is true with the inner reality of beings as well. Deeper the investigations made into the core of the "being" more enigmatic it appears. The human being can boast of exploring more of the outer space but the inner reality of human existence appears to be the most complicated and unfathomable mystery. None the less in the modern world where everything is apparently necessary yet not worth possessing makes life more

meaningless. The more comfortable and prestigious one is the more he or she feels unsecured. The baffling deceptions of the world makes life more complicated and that too the modern man suffers from a sort of inexplicable emptiness despite the advancement in all the areas which make life easy and comfortable. Paradoxically this is an impetus to probe into the authentic meaning of human existence because nobody wants to spend the life in a milieu of desperate meaninglessness. Many intellectuals have attempted to diagnose this malice in the society and came up with their own solutions. Though there is plausible remedy to this malady in literature, religion, philosophy, psychology etc., none seem to be pragmatically complete. Many attempts have been also made down the centuries, to bring out a clear understanding in a wide range of perspective- some impressive and some are not so applicable. Many have adopted their own life story and hypothetically attempted to render an answer to this profound query that emerges in every human being, irrespective of their state of life. In this regard Saul Bellow, a Nobel Prize laureate, through his novels tries to synchronize the reality with his philosophical ingenuity to find a solution to get out of this vicious circle of meaninglessness and emptiness and implicitly explores the way for a spiritual fulfillment through self-transcendence.

#### **Spiritual Element in the Works of Bellow**

An outstanding uniqueness about Saul Bellow is that he wishes to make art possible for life; where the artist-hero sought isolation, the Bellow protagonist longs for community, and ironic distance gives way to the nearness, if confession as we are on a personal standard (Daniel Fuchs 9). Thus he uses the real time characters in his fictions: for example in *Humboldt's Gift*- a 1975 novel which won him the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and contributed to Bellow's winning the Nobel Prize in Literature – two prominent characters Von Humboldt Fleisher points out to some degree a version of Schwartz and his protégé Charlie Citrine denotes to some degree a version of Bellow himself. Andrew O'Hagan observes, in writing a book review for the London Review of Books: on *The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune*, by Zachary Leader, that Bellow's community was his subject and his subject was his voice (Andrew O'Hagan, 2015). It was all in the particulars: where they came from and how; what they said and how they said it. This approach makes Bellow's work more appealing and practical on finding an answer to the deep rooted query in spite of the inscrutable challenges in the complicated human social network with compelling paradoxes and contradictions.

Bellow's Novels are neither exclusively spiritual nor social. He is looked upon by his contemporaries and critics as a humanist. But the spiritual element in his writings has not been paid enough attention to. His works are the blend of finding real and spiritual worth of human life in a given historical situation enlivened by multiple and complicated cultural and social nuances. He affirms that it is the personal responsibility of every individual to discover. In his very first novel *Dangling Man*. He rhetorically states, "Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code." (9). Even the Transcendentalists including Emerson regarded the process of self- cultivation as a central value.

In Bellow's novels it is the spiritual concern that qualifies and defines the human life. At the same time he attempts to strike a balance between spirituality and humanism. This is portrayed in his preoccupation with the transcendent, that is, with the details of human experience and components of human personality that fall beyond the purview of positivistic science, psychology and rationalistic philosophy.

#### **Transcendental View**

Bellow's career as a writer existed during the "post-positivist era". Richard Rorty comments that this era was characterized by the philosophical skepticism. (Qtd. in Gloria L. Cronin 2012). In this era everything was viewed in with a skeptical mind and nothing is certain unless it is empirically proved. There was a sort of distrust of language too because the philosophers observed that the language was socially contingent and therefore incapable of transmitting anything transcendent or universal. Saul Bellow was aware of it and had been facing this dilemmatic difficulty as he tries to put forward his transcendental views and thoughts in a more acceptable and at the same time comprehensible to the skeptical mind. But all the transcendental thought cannot be expressed in a mere linguistic expression. So Bellow tries elucidating that the human nature is too mysterious and complex to become exhausted by empirical methods to find existential meaning. At this

junction it has to be taken into account that Bellow does not blindly follow the prevalent ideological and linguistic pattern to express his views though the various concepts of American Transcendentalism namely angle of vision, innocent eye, transparent eyeball and eternal now are familiar to Bellow as he uses them in his writings. (Stephen L. Tanner 1992, p.286).

The inner longing to find an all inclusive view of one's purpose of existence and the genuine significance of existence runs as a central theme in Bellow's writings because according to him the human soul was trapped in a condition of nihilism and lived in an age of ideology which made events such as the Holocaust possible. The projects of the Enlightenment, liberalism, and humanism had failed to stop the mass slaughter of wars and exterminations (Gloria L. Cronin 2012 p.44). He openly states, "My Jewish history gives me an entirely different orientation. The heavens in all their glory can open up above a ghetto sidewalk, and one doesn't need Gothic or Renaissance churches, Harvard University, or any of these places, in order to condemn the nihilism of the modern age from a viewpoint sufficiently elevated. (Gray, White, and Nemanic 220-21).

Marilynne Robinson rightly recognized this idea and states, "He was a writer of the highest seriousness. [...] The scale of his interests, of his meditations, were in the highest traditions." (Qtd. in Sanderson 2005, 12). His thoughts are obviously transcendental as stated by Gloria L. Cronin:

Bellow's belief in the spiritual and imaginative capability of language can be placed in opposition to the modernist tradition of Eliot, Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, and Hemingway, as well as modern philosophical rationalism. This opposition came from his continual love of British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Biblical Judaism, Eastern philosophy, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthroposophy. (47)

He constantly and consistently brings in the inner longing of his protagonists for more meaning full life which is sought through self transcendence. Self transcendence is nothing but Self- the capacity to reach out beyond oneself and discover or make meaning of experience through broadened perspectives and behavior. In *More Die of Heartbreak* Kenneth Trachtenberg, the narrator, goes and stays with his uncle Benn Crader, a distinguished Botanist. During his stay with him, Kenneth comments on Benn saying, Benn, "is one of those passionate natures who long to find and see what perhaps does not exist" (141)

Bellow's entrance into wisdom and the seriousness of what would be his last phase of spiritual pursuit is best accounted in 1994 in Sanford Pinsker's classroom when Bellow spoke openly of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual tradition of metaphysical skepticism, "I think a person finally emerges from all this nonsense when he becomes aware that his life has a much larger meaning he has been ignoring – a transcendent meaning. And that his life is, at its most serious, some kind of religious enterprise, not one to do with the hurly-burly of existence." (Pinsker, 1994, p.96). Biographer James Atlas suggests that by this time in life Bellow's skepticism was overshadowed by his yearning to believe and that it was really the Emersonian soul residing within of which Bellow he was speaking (Qtd. in Gloria L. Cronin 2012, p.48). This is no longer the speaking position of a cultural historian, Nobel Laureate, and student of metaphysics, but the speaking position of a ghetto Jew, perhaps even a pre-Holocaust figure. In this lies his final spiritual statement of triumph over the skeptical twentieth century, as a man with a lineage of two thousand years of Jewish persecution who nevertheless manages to maintain the spiritual power of the imagination over the exigencies of a life. Now he is dreamer and ghetto dweller. Skeptical of the seriousness of any of these commitments, Roger Shattuck labeled these bouts of spiritual inquiry as intermittent "fits of noticing [...] just that – fits." (Shattuck 1975, 21–25)

The various predicaments of unwarranted maladies experienced by everyone of Bellow's fictional characters has a direct reference to the real persons, as already stated, who strive for the natural sufficiency and adequate strength to overthrow the bondage of emptiness. In *Humboldt's Gift* we could see two absolutely contrasting personalities namely Fleisher who yearns to lift American society up through art but dies a failure And Charlie Citrine who makes quite a lot of money through his writing. By juxtaposing these two compellingly contrasting characters Bellow analyses the most important element of fulfillment through his thoughts about spirituality. A deep longing which was unquenchable by the wealth and the fame. Charlie Citrine who made a lot of money from his one successful play, suddenly found inspiration for transcending the

malicious clutches of commitment, by using his rediscovered knowledge of higher worlds. Bellow here demonstrates one practical application of Charlie's study of spiritual science.

Okay, they weren't going to let me knock lawyers. Pinsker belonged to the club. Who, after all, was I? A filmy transient figure, eccentric and snooty. They disliked my style entirely. They hated it. But then why should they like it? Suddenly I saw the thing from their viewpoint. And I was extremely pleased. In fact I was illuminated. Maybe these sudden illuminations of mine were an effect of the metaphysical changes I was undergoing. Under the recent influence of Steiner I seldom thought of death in the horrendous old way. I wasn't experiencing the suffocating grave or dreading an eternity of boredom, nowadays. Instead I often felt unusually light and swift-paced, as if I were on a weightless bicycle and sprinting through the star world. Occasionally I saw myself with exhilarating objectivity, literally as an object among objects in the physical universe. One day that object would cease to move and when the body collapsed the soul would simply remove itself. So, to speak again of the lawyers, I stood between them, and there we were, three naked egos, three creatures belonging to the lower grade of modern rationality and calculation. In the past the self had had garments, the garments of station, of nobility or inferiority, and each self had its carriage, its looks, wore the sheath appropriate to it. Now there were no sheaths and it was naked self with naked self burning intolerably and causing terror. I saw this now, in a fit of objectivity. It felt ecstatic. (HG 212)

It could be noticed that the same idea permeating in *Herzog*. In one of his letters to dead and living people, Herzog writes to "Harris Pulver, who had been his tutor in 1939 and was now the editor of *Atlantic Civilization*". Since Pulver is a historicist, what intrigues Herzog is the dialogue he can have with Pulver about the notion of transcendence which challenges it:

Listen, Pulver, he wrote, a marvelous idea for a much-needed essay on the 'inspired condition'! Do you believe in transcendence downward as well as upward? (The words originate with Jean Wahl.) Shall we concede the impossibility of transcendence? It all involves historical analysis. I would argue that we have fashioned a new utopian history, an idyll, comparing the present to an imaginary past, because we hate the world as it is. The hatred of the present has not been well understood. (H 163)

The name "Pulver" is an allusion to what is happening to human kind: it is being pulverized" by historical and technological forces and it is this which causes the "hatred of the present" and a desire of a "downward transcendence." But that desire is overshadowed by cynicism and what Herzog calls "self-revenge." The drama of this stage of human development seems to be the drama of disease, of self-revenge. An age of special comedy. What we see is not simply the leveling *de Tocqueville* predicted, but the plebian state of evolutionary self-awareness. (H 164)

Apart from seeking meaning there is a perpetual search of Truth which is the nucleolus of spirituality. Discovering the meaning of life and the Truth are in fact the two major components of spirituality. "The Truth, whatever it is, is strange" (Leon Wieseltier, 2014) said Saul Bellow. This is not casual comment but an expression of a very serious longing or untiring quest for the truth. All through his life Bellow searched for the strange truth" of what might lie behind the appearances of life which perhaps what Jesus may be hinting upon to Pilot. When Jesus of Nazareth told the Roman governor Pilot, "I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Immediately Pilot asked Jesus, "What is truth." (The Prophecy Study Bible, 1997, p.1312) This kind of query already took root in him when he was still a child as he was already committed to memorizing most of Torah which is reflected in all of his writings. (The full depth of Saul Bellow's lifelong immersion in Hebrew and Judeo-Christian sacred texts has come to light with Ruth Wisse's and James Wood's accounting of biblical, Yiddish, Jewish, and other religious references throughout his works). It is easy to observe that Bellow wrote his works literally out of the roots of this Judeo-Christian tradition and brought it into deliberate comic collision with the secular world of late twentieth-century America. Bellow's masterwork spiritual comedies read more like spiritual autobiographies in the tradition of Job, St. Augustine, and Cervantes. Out of this mix Jewish scripture, Yiddish culture, and the twentieth-century crisis of faith, we find threaded throughout Bellow's works his seemingly quixotic spiritual quest. (Gloria L. Cronin, 2012. p. 43).

Bellow does not attempt to seek the truth in oblivion or it is a hopeless adventure. In other words his search for truth was a real one. It is the capacity to experience in the everyday life and it is a personal phenomena. It is reflected in the words of Corde in *The Dean's December*:

I meant that we'd better deal with whatever it is that's in us by nature, and I don't see people being willing to do that. What I mainly see is the evasion. But this is a thing that works on the substance of the soul-the spirit of the time, in us by nature, working on every soul. We prefer to have such things served up to us as concepts. We'd rather have them abstract, stillborn, dead. But as long as they don't come to us with some kind of reality, as facts of experience, then all we can have instead of good and evil is... well, concepts. Then we'll never learn how the soul is worked on. (243)

This statement gets more specific assertion as Corde realizes his personal challenge to assess the qualitative significance of the world around:

Thus he had taken it upon himself to pass Chicago through his own soul. A mass of data, terrible, murderous. It was no easy matter to put such things through. But there was no other way for reality to happen. Reality didn't exist "out there." It began to be real only when soul found its underlying truth. (266)

This quest in Bellow was not only from his judeo-christian tradition but was motivated in part from the historical events of his time which was primarily packed by transcendentalism, enlightenment, liberalism and humanism. Both these compelling factors made him to think that the human soul was trapped in a condition of nihilism nonetheless these two inevitable factors compelled the Nobel Prize laureate to explore the meaning life beyond death and it became the key to all the puzzles posed by the various religious and philosophical systems for Bellow.

This attempt to understand death was also personal for Bellow, as he was distressed by the dying children he had befriended during his childhood hospitalizations and finally the death of his mother. Indeed, research shows that the death of a loved one, among other negative life events, increases people's interest or involvement in spirituality as well as in religion. We could find the impact of the emotional consequences of the break-up of his family during his childhood throughout his writings especially his novels as his protagonists desire to recover their families and end up in sort of failure. The very fundamental questions to reiterate the necessity for spiritual fulfillment through self transcendence in a more practical attempt finds its outcome in Bellow's own words found in *Mosby's Memoirs*:

One after another you gave over your dying. One by one they went. You went. Childhood, family, friendship, love were stifled in the grave. And these tears! When you wept them from the heart, you felt you justified something, understood something. But what did you understand? Again, nothing. It was only an imitation of understanding. A promise that mankind might – might mind you – be a divine gift, comprehend why it lived. Why life, why death. (Bellow 1968, 82–83)

The expressions such as "understand why it lived? Why life, why death?- are not mere queries for the sake of raising questions but a manifestation of deep longing for the self transcendence which ushers new dimensions of realities beyond the empirical knowledge. Death itself becomes a starting point for Bellow to probe into the facts of discovering the reality of human existence. The ways and means of comprehension without any apprehension of death enkindled his spiritual and imaginative convictions. As his son, Adam, recalls:

"My father believed strongly in the soul – in its powers, its eternity, and above all its connection with loved ones. He believed that parents and children were parts of the same soul, and that we are reunited with our family after death. When he talked about this I used to listen respectfully and inwardly roll my eyes. Now that he is gone, however, I finally begin to understand what he was talking about." (Bellow 2005, 21)

Bellow's surrogate son, the British writer Martin Amis, reported similar conversations to a Sunday Telegraph interviewer. On the subject of the afterlife he reports Bellow saying:

[I]t's impossible to believe in it because there is no rational ground. But I have a persistent intuition [...] call it love impulses. What I think is how agreeable it would be to see my mother and my father

and my brothers again, to see my dead. [...] In death we might become God's apprentices and have the real secrets of the universe revealed to us. (Qtd. in Sanderson 2005, 12)

In the modern sense spirituality can be defined as the "tendency to orient oneself toward a larger transcendent reality that binds all things into a unifying harmony. It reflects the personal search for connection with a larger sacredness." (Piedmont, R. L. 1999, 67). Bellow discovers that self transcendence, that is to go beyond self defined boundaries and manmade ritualistic paths, to find fulfillment in spirituality. That is why even death has a clue for him to find that way. This way is a reconciliation with nature, and through nature, with God, The rebirth euphoria at the end of Herzog is contrived. It gives its hero a momentary relief from his suffering; however, the reality is that the suffering is an unending process of the self. Thus the self at this point is a sort of dramatic redeemer of the psyche from the binding shackles of obsessions, illusions, fears, anxieties, emotional disparities, and problems of money, sex, marriage, violence, corruption, resentment, alienation, death, question of God, truth, religion and sense of guilt that issue forth from the predicamental existence.

Self-examination enables the writer to seek an essence beyond temporal existence and thereby transcend historical circumstances. In Psychology these emotions have been studied as the self transcendent positive emotions which Bellow tries to solicit. For instance in *Henderson the Rain King*, Henderson introduces himself to Itelo with the words: "Who-Who was I? A brutal and violent man driven into the world. A man who has fled his country, settled by his forefathers" (76). Throughout his life, Bellow strives to realize the sacred dimensions of daily activities with the deep self examination. What he attempts is to show man's ability to transcend historical circumstances and find spiritual fulfillment.

In his "Essay on Transcendentalism," Charles Mayo Ellis explains: "Transcendentalism is predicated on the reality of the spiritual or religious element in man; his inborn capacity to perceive truth and right, so that moral and religious truths can be proved to him with the same degree of certainty that attends mathematical demonstration" (Miller, Perry, 1957, p.31). All this leads to a spiritualization of the phenomenal world in the highest and purest sense. Accordingly the human soul could conceive the whole of experience in its deepest interrelations, investigate all the minute detail in their totality, and become aware of the unity which includes them all. This is echoed in the in Herzog's confrontation with Kierkegaard:

I do not claim to be an expert in this matter. I don't compare the evils I have known to truly gruesome evils such as we have all heard of. My life is a fairly ordinary one. But what is this truth or seriousness that Kierkegaard thinks Hell must teach us? Is it that eternity must be recovered for the present moment, that that man who fingers all universals must disintegrate? (371)

Unlike the Romantic writers who become conscious of an alien self, removed from the phenomenal world Saul Bellow tries to synchronize the individual self with its cosmic dimension — a subject-object differentiation when he becomes acutely conscious of his subjectivity. He then moves away from it to a vision of unity - when all things that exist, the phenomenal, including his individual self are enfolded in harmony. Through this sort of self transcendence where the subject and object, mind and matter are unified in a common entity which is called the Universal spirit. Alcott, George Ripley, Theodore Parker and others emphasized the faculty of "higher reason" which enables instantaneous perception of God. The concept of "higher reason" is at the heart of Transcendentalism. Religion for them is a matter of individual intuition or inspiration. So it is necessary to make it clear that spirituality what we are writing about here does not completely refer to religion or religiosity. The focus is on that profound, interior and essential space that encompasses the realm of spiritual insight, of meaning not derived through the senses.

Bellow comes to the conclusion that it is possible to have a "transcendent conception of the unconditioned, to rise beyond the limits of all possible experience from a practical point of view and thus to satisfy the great ends of metaphysics. In this manner he places importance on a transcendent power beyond all sense-experience which cannot be reached either by observation or reflection. Thus Bellow reflects the idea of Aristotle, We cannot directly will to be different from what we are, (but) we can choose what we shall be by choosing now the environment that shall mould us, so we are free in the sense that we mould our own character by our choice of friends, books, occupations and amusements. (Aristotle, Qtd. in Will Durant 1923, p.

58). Thus the idea of Bellow is to identify the true realism without being sentimental, optimism does not come from an evasion of facts, but from a recognition of them. It is where the beauty of Bellow's writings reflects a distinctive philosophy of finding spiritual fulfillment through self transcendence in the actual reality.

### Conclusion

Bellow's fictions manifest itself through variety of character blend in its optimistic and straightforward approach to human existence and sees every individual as an angelic figure. This idea is deeply rooted in him from his careful study of Torah where it is said that man is created in the image of god, but he is a little lower than the angels. Bellow refuses to accept the idea of the twentieth century that humankind has reached its terminal point. Saul Bellow is convinced that a human being can justify his existence, that he has sufficient power to overcome his ignominy and to complete his own life and self transcendence would take him to a deeper understanding of the authenticity of human existence in the face of uncertainties. As for Bellow, it is not external reality, or social forces or other people – but man himself who determines his own destiny. Bellow's heroes may grieve, complain, lament, and they even despair about the future as every one of the real living characters. Yet they are constantly on a quest for meaning in life and they firmly believe that man is free to choose and that he can become better by transcending the palpable natural realities. For the Bellow's heroes, society is uncomfortable for them, indifferent to them; disagree with their behavior and with their ideals. But finally they realize that the best part of man is found not in what he is but in what he would be or wills to be. The reality that they experience does not match with their ideals. All of Bellow's heroes are nowhere better described than in the phrase: "the feeble-minded children of angels." (DM 137) For Bellow life is the source and measure of all values. The problem of evil disappears and the conception of sin loses all its meaning. The concern for what it is to be human is the central preoccupation of Bellow's novels which we call the real spiritual essence and reality. At the same time Bellow has immense belief in the holiness of his heart, in the self and the soul. He understands that man is disjointed and life is meaningless, but still he believes that man can find meaning in this meaninglessness too. Man is able to survive and laugh at the meaninglessness of life by the very discovery of spiritual fulfillment through self transcendence in a more practical way was something unique to Saul Bellow because he suggests not a way away from day-to-day life but in the very real life itself:

His personal idea was one of human beings conditioned by other human beings, and knowing that present arrangements were not, *subspecie aeternatis*, the truth, but that one should be satisfied with such truth as one could get by approximation. Trying to live with a civil heart. With disinterested charity. With a sense of the mystic potency of mankind. (Mr. Sammler's Planet 125-26)

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