

Winds of Change: Family Dynamics in 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 in the family in which he or she is born. The postmodernists challenge the concepts of home 'and family' and regard them as a place where the freedom and the individual's peace of mind are destroyed. The present paper is an attempt to capture how Saul Bellow, a contemporary Jewish-American novelist, has responded to the winds of change in family relationships.

Keywords: Change, domestic life, family, tradition.

Introduction

The postmodernists reject the views of the traditionalists who believe that the family is an ideal unit of society and that without a strong family bond, mankind might be lost. They maintain that in case the family as a stable social unit has lost its importance and sacrosanct status, it is probably because of the oppressive external as well as internal pressures from all sides in 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 the 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 (Hegel 249). However, the postmodernists like Tamara Ker Hareven assert that the 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 Family123).

That is why the metanarrative of the ideal family has been replaced by a relationship based on mutual understanding in which the persons may have relations with each other, though not living together in a home.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

. . . the detraditionalization 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 (Gilles15).

The New Right theorists are criticized as they want people to live in a traditional, especially nuclear family system with a clear division of labour between man and woman as professional and domestic beings respectively. However, such divisions at home are no longer applicable in contemporary times, where men and women are equal workers. Moreover, with the changing times, the nuclear family system and the discourses related to it have become rather obsolete. There is open acceptance of single-parent or stepparent 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 in today’s world, it is essential 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 inspired by the ideology to dominate the weak and the average to ensure conformity 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 the Bible of Christians and Torah of Jews, as well as 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 extramarital 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 to be untrue. Life in America is moving in the fast lane. 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, for twenty thousand dollars (his only inheritance) from his father 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. After the divorce, the dream house of Moses Herzog turns out to be a deserted and isolated place, as it is now plagued by the memories of Madeleine.

Herzog suffers mainly because of two reasons: first, he has been desperately in love with Madeleine, but unfortunately gets deceived 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., as the union would help their daughter get her a doctorate, but she felt disillusioned after her marriage to 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 antithesis 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 does not even care for her husband's academic position, intellectual reputation, or the stigma of adultery on Gersbach and herself. 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 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, so she finds Gersbach a helping hand in her household chores. The latter leaves his devoted wife, Phoebe Gersbach, and also his child, to marry Madeleine. The instability in the sexual relations of Moses Herzog has also been commented on 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, and Madeleine, his second wife, had tried to do him in. To his son and daughter, he remained a loving but bad father. To his 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. 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

whereas, the husband is a man of traditions and wishes the wife to acquire the role of a simple home maker. The result is 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 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. He realizes 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 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 he was married to 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 several years ago to continue his studies in Romanticism. But after the divorce from Madeleine, the rest of his ambitious projects dried up 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 has sometimes long pauses. 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 dishevelled, giving the impression of instability. Sandor gets Herzog to agree to an insurance policy that will give him a monthly allowance if he should die or suffer a mental breakdown.

This disturbs Herzog 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 of June, Madeleine and Herzog's daughter, Moses decides he must act somehow and 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 the 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.

Herzog is able to accept the family ties between Madeleine and Valentine, as at the end, he writes a reconciliation letter to both of them and he also gives up writing the bizarre, unsent letters. 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 spouses used to compromise and continue 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 deceived in marital relations, the only option is to divorce and accept life and whatever it offers. Judith Stacey, a contemporary sociologist, writes that relations nowadays are free to exist based on intimacy and pleasure rather than that of on procreation and socialization, and 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.

The Postmodernists raise their voice against the illusory 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.

Conclusion:

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 a 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 are a group led by Functionalists and Conservative political leaders of American and British governments (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 the nuclear family system, and are against the lone family system, single motherhood, and gay and lesbian families (Murray).

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