

A Search for Exit with the help of ‘Existential Dialogism’: A Study of Saul Bellow’s novel “Herzog”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the concept of ‘Existential Dialogism’ in the study of Saul Bellow’s novel “Herzog”. Dialogism is a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work of literary theory ‘The Dialogic Imagination. Existentialism, as mentioned by the Oxford Languages dictionary, is “a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the person as a free and responsible agent determining their development through acts of the will.” Having the blend of these two ideas as a basis, the chosen novel is viewed in the light of ‘Existential Dialogism’. The protagonist’s self inquisition and view of the world are the central themes of exploration.

Keywords: Exit with the help of ‘Existential Dialogism’, A Study of Saul Bellow’s, Novel “Herzog”, Oxford Languages dictionary, Self-reflections, Herzog maintains internal dialogues

Introduction

The American Jewish author, Saul Bellow, got his recognition worldwide by publishing his sixth novel ‘Herzog’ in the year 1964. ‘Herzog’ was a great success to Bellow’s career as a novelist, which placed him amidst other eminent writers of the 20th century. In addition to critical acclaim and financial success, the novel set a distinguished platform for Bellow to receive the ‘US National Book Award for fiction.’

The novel takes the readers along with the central character’s five frantic days of deep self-contemplation, elongated flashbacks, unposted letters and philosophical scribbles in different languages. His action appears as though Herzog has started reflecting on the ‘lesson’ that he had experienced from his life in the past. Through such self-reflections, Herzog maintains internal dialogues with his ‘mind’. The narration oscillates between the past and the present, sometimes plunges profoundly into the character’s stream of consciousness and suddenly surfaces to reality. Laying such a background as proof, this article focuses on the concept of ‘Existential Dialogism’ in the light of the central theme skillfully handled by the novelist.

Dialogism

As mentioned in Wikipedia, Dialogism or Dialogic denotes “the use of conversation or shared dialogue to explore the meaning of something”. The concept of ‘dialogism’ had its first root in the mind of twentieth-century Soviet thinker Mikhail Bakhtin. He first developed the concept in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, where Bakhtin analyzed the concept of ‘polyphony’, the word borrowed from the field of music that meant ‘diversity of voices. Later he developed into a different term as “dialogism”. As a controversial scholar, Bakhtin formed the concept of dialogism in opposition to monologists. ‘Dia’ means ‘two’, whereas ‘Mono’ means ‘one’. Dialogue is possible only between two persons; however, ‘Monologue’ happens from a single person.

‘Monologue’ refers to expressing ideas in a single perspective, but ‘Dialogue’ indicates sharing ideas or information between ‘two’ points of view. Bakhtin strongly supports the ‘dialogue’ as it acts as a sign of freedom to speak, freedom to express, freedom to question authority, freedom of opinion, etc. Bakhtin eliminates the ‘monologue’ that is ‘single voice’, which according to him, is a sign of oppression and authoritativeness. Michael Holquist aptly mentions Bakhtin as,

“a system-builder, but not in the sense of methodological closure. Rather, his system consists of open-ended connections and refuses to view issues in isolation.”

He insists that humans always communicate with other human beings and with every entity in the world around them. He strongly mentions that in the means of communication or ‘dialogue’ with the entity around us, everything around us ‘addresses’ in return. Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism is mainly woven around the ideology of ‘centripetal and centrifugal’ where the focus is directed towards ‘self’. In return, the response to the force is reversed from “self to the society”. He believes that “Each person is ‘unique’ in their way”. One tends to compare oneself with others, but only through external perspectives. Bakhtin states that each human entity is incomparable. An individual’s ‘self’ is invaluable due to constant change in time and space.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical theory that originated in European countries during the 19th and 20th centuries. Existentialism strongly supports that the existence of human life is entirely based on their independence of thought and actions. It insists that an individual shoulders sole responsibility for his life's progress. An individual cannot be blamed or cannot be dependent on any other external force. Rationalism, absurdity, freedom and choices are the keywords associated with Existential Philosophy. Though Existential Ideas share a common platform with the theory of Nihilism, it also opposes a few prominent traditional philosophies of the 20th century.

Existential ideology demands an individual's freedom of choice and personal responsibility for any action or decision taken on their own. This uncontrollable freedom leads to a vacuum of human existence, especially a lack of purpose in human life or existence. Such emptiness of nothingness is often mentioned as 'absurdity'. Existentialists believe that it is the individual's choice to come forward and feel responsible for finding the purpose and meaning for human existence with the help of rational thinking. One of the existential philosophers Sartre mentions as follows:

"At first [Man] is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he will have made what he will be."

Existential Dialogism

Studies are available under the idea of "Dialogical Existentialism," a philosophical theory used mainly in medical psychology, especially in relational gestalt therapy. This therapy aims "to teach people to become aware of significant sensations within themselves and their environment so that they respond fully and reasonably to situations." An individual is treated by measuring his/her internal and external relations in connection with the 'living through' an 'I-Thou' moment.

This article attempts to perceive Bellow's novel 'Herzog' in the dimension of "Existential Dialogism". Bellow's central character in the Novel "Herzog" holds an existential stance with the dialogical argument within him. Throughout the Novel, Herzog takes responsibility for his deplorable condition and manages to 'interact' with the world around him. His notion was 'centripetal', but later it turned out to be 'centrifugal'. This is referred to as the concept of these two forces introduced by the famous Physicist Sir Issac Newton. He has proved that two different forces are working from the centre to the outer wheel and from the 'outer' towards the 'centre'. They were respectively mentioned as "Centripetal and Centrifugal". Bakhtin's concept of dialogism has its connective thread to this concept, and he mentions those two forces as 'Self' and 'Other'. Naturally, some uninterrupted interactions between these two forces indirectly maintain an equilibrium of mental stability of all human beings.

The plot of Herzog

The plot of Bellow's novel 'Herzog' is woven around a Jewish, middle-aged individual, Moses E. Herzog's despair in his personal life and the contemporary American Society set in 1964. He is completely upset by his second divorce from his second wife Madeline and her illicit relationship with his close friend Valentine Gersbatch. This dual betrayal from his wife and his close friend compelled his mind into a stage of neuroses where fear, anger and worries dominate the mind. Bellow created parallels to his protagonist's condition with Jewish Americans' psychological struggle to cope with the post-war American flamboyant society. Herzog travels from one place to another to exhibit his internal instability in search of solace to his intense mental struggle. At first, he travels from New York to Massachusetts to visit a friend. Suddenly, he flees from them without a word but with a real letter to them. He travels back to New York by plane, finds comfort only in his apartment, and continues writing unposted letters and absurd scribbling. The next day is engaged with Harvey Simkin, his New York lawyer. He wants some legal advice to get custody of his daughter June from his former wife, Madeline. As Simkin sounds biased in his suggestions, Herzog leaves the place disheartened. He is surrounded by the fear that Madeline and Valentine may kill his daughter after being induced by a few incidents around him. So he takes his father's pistol and approaches his ex-wife's house to spy them on. Herzog witnesses that Valentine takes utmost care of his daughter, to his surprise. Feeling ashamed of his thinking, he leaves the place and stays with his old friend Lucas Asphalter that night.

Herzog expresses his wish to spend time with his daughter June and Lucas makes arrangements. Herzog enjoys a drive with June and visits the Aquarium on their way back, his car was hit by a truck, and fortunately, both of them escaped without any injuries. Police took Herzog into custody as he owned a pistol. Madeline blamed Herzog again for his action and took back her daughter June. Herzog's brother Will bails him and takes him to Lydeyville. The plot ends with Herzog's contemplation over his mistakes without any anger in his mind. He stops writing letters now and plans to live his life as a real father to his son of the first marriage and as a good brother to his siblings.

Herzog as an Existential Dialogist

"If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog."(Herzog, 1)

Bellow commences the sentence of the novel as though it is born out of the thinking of the protagonist. Ruminating over the single line clearly explains the mental illness that the character undergoes. Herzog feels isolated and overcomes his loneliness, and he starts conversing with the people around him through his unposted letters. Herzog's dialogic impulse compels him to address people alive and dead, family and friends, public figures and historical personalities. He writes to the newspaper questioning about the problem in the society, then he writes to the people in public life complaining about the unsolved issues; to his friends and family members and later to his death and at last to the famous personalities

who were dead. In search of his existential identity, the hero tries to have a dialogue with the people around him. His absurdities are compensated often with his own “self-reflections”. As Herzog is a polyglot, he writes his letters in English, Yiddish, Hebrew and French. His letters act as proof of the expulsion of his suppressed inner voice. Though his conversation is unheard and unresponded, the hero continues to have a discourse with the world around him. He continues to take responsibility for his actions and situations. In his contemplation at the beginning of the novel, he self examines as follows,

“To his 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 soul, mysterious.” (Herzog 5)

Herzog’s self-contemplation joins hands with a sense of Existential justification. It is expressed in dialogical means such as questioning, arguing, complaining, suggesting, expressing his struggles and worries to the readers.

In the progress of narration, Bellow presents his protagonist as a learned individual who has concerns about society with a philosophical approach. To escape from his mental struggle, Herzog travels from one place to another. While Herzog travels to his friend’s home in Massachusetts, he carries Pratt’s short history of the Civil War and several volumes of Kierkegaard, who is the father of philosophical theory called “Existentialism.” Herzog cites Kierkegaard’s words as follows, ‘faith is an uncertain relief’ (Herzog 108) if existence is not realized. Herzog adds on by continuing his reading of Kierkegaard, ‘be demolished by suffering, and you will feel the power of God as he restores you’ (Herzog 108). Bellow indicates here that existential observations help relieve humans from the strong clutches of a depressive state. As he draws his central character suffering a lot, he helps him seek the expected balance with the help of dialogic notions.

As an outburst of his internal war against his personal life, Herzog addresses the political figure General Eisenhower, the Chief Executive, who is known after the Cold War in America at the end of World War II. He criticizes General Eisenhower’s political ideology about the Civil war and mentions, “I seem to have been stirred fiercely by a desire to communicate, or by the curious project of attempted communication.” (Herzog 169). Herzog’s dialogic impulse compelled him to question famous people in politics. He also suggests him with the law of Gresham, an Economist. He made a variation in the law to suit his political suggestion. He thus changed Gresham’s famous law “Bad money drives out Good money” into “Public life drives out private life....the more political our society becomes, the more individuality seems lost” (Herzog 169). Herzog comments here that if people in society start thinking more from political perspectives, they will lose their individuality. Though the protagonist appears to be self-centred initially, he moves to have a social-centric approach by maintaining a dialogue with the current political impressions on an individual’s nature that

may compel the individual to lose their courage to question the nation’s authority. These authorities’ major concerns are manufacturing commodities that are important for the ‘political survival of the country’. (Herzog 169)

Bellow’s existential dialogic stand is vivid through Herzog’s letter to Nietzsche, one of the existential philosophers but contradicting a few ideologies with Kierkegaard. Herzog thus starts as “My dear Sir, May I ask a question from the floor?” (Herzog 334), and he goes on to ask him after commenting on his notions about ‘Dionysian spirit’, ‘Luxury of Destruction’, “where are the heroes who have recovered from it?” (Herzog 334). Bellow goes on to strongly remark Nietzsche through Herzog. Herzog condemns Nietzsche that his ideas made humans live in the void rather than appreciating their good qualities. He adds that rather than simply following the general way of “good-naturedness, trust, ordinary middling human considerations”, Nietzsche guides the human beings “to question as has never been questioned before...., with iron determination, into evil...The most absolute, the most piercing questions. Rejecting mankind as it is...” (Herzog 335). Bellow sarcastically comments about his ‘Amor Fati’, which means ‘one must love their life on earth irrespective of its struggle.’ Bellow uses a word from Indian Hindu scriptures to closure Herzog’s letter to Nietzsche as “Yours, under the veil of Maya, M.E.H “According to Hindu scriptures, ‘Maya’ means one who is covered under the charms of worldly pleasure or vanity.

Conclusion

In almost all his works, Bellow’s application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogical approach and Kierkegaard’s Existential stance is worth noticing. Bellow’s profundity of knowledge in various fields of thought enriches the novel’s content. Though the novel is full of unposted letters and thoughts that are not exposed to other characters, it served the exact purpose through such dialogical means of communication to society and its people. At the end of the novel, Bellow thus brings a solution to the protagonists’ struggles from within. To prove his sanity, Herzog decides to stop writing letters and starts conversing straight with the people he wants to communicate with. The author now addresses Herzog, Bellow, like Moses, to indicate a change in his mind. Moses starts admiring nature, and for the first time in the novel, he smiles, looking at its beauty. He wants to say Mrs Tuttle to wet the floor before sweeping as it may reduce the dust but stops himself from conversing for a while with anything around him. Bellow ends the novel with these words, “At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.” (Herzog 358).

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