

**THE ART OF MANIPULATION OF EXISTENTIALISM AS  
A LITERARY MODE IN THE NOVELS *DANGLING MAN*,  
*THE VICTIM* AND *SEIZE THE DAY* BY SAUL BELLOW**

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*Abstract: Modern writers such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, Samuel Becket, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Lawrence, and Eliot directly influenced the form, content, and style of Saul Bellow's novels, but Bellow's approach towards existentialism as a literary mode was against the tradition. Saul Bellow in his novels shows that at the inside of existential alienation his protagonists remain optimistic till the end. His stories end not in fragments of frustration, but with a redemptive vision of humanity. The thesis of the paper at hand is to demonstrate and establish how Saul Bellow manipulates his fictionist approaches in the novels *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, being influenced by the philosophy of existentialism, and how much he is different in his approach compared to other traditional existentialist writers*

*Keywords: Manipulation, Existentialism, Tradition, Literary mode.*

**Introduction**

The thesis of the paper is to show and ascertain how Saul Bellow manifests his fictionist approaches in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, being influenced by the literary philosophy of Existentialism and how much he is different in his approach compared to other traditional existentialist writers. When Bellow started his literary career in 1940s as a new writer, he found that an existential mode of writing had been dominating the then literature especially the American literature. Basically at that time literature was subjugated by a tendency of elegy from the twenties to the fifties. Most modern novelists and writers like William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Becket, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Lawrence, and Eliot have accepted all the general spirit of existentialism for granted for their own writings. They showed modern life to be a bitter one. But Saul Bellow wanted to go against the wind. He decided to write against the traditional mode of this modernist existentialist formula that there is no hope in life and established an entirely different voice and set of values. 'Life means

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nothingness and life has no hope'-this was the dominant mood of Bellow's time, but Bellow always wanted to go against this mood. He strongly opposed this destructive existentialism, alienation ethics, absurdism, nihilism and aloofness. Bellow tried to go against these apocalyptic fears of the collapse of Western Civilization.

#### **Traditional Approach of Existentialist Writers**

Bellow felt that every aspect of modern civilization was doing harm to our feelings. He tried to state that the elegiac tone of modern literature portrayed the twentieth-century life as divisive and fragmented. And this fragmentation and disorder of the modern novels were too great to be overcome. So he wanted to write against this traditional approach of the modern novelists who were only drawing the elaborated and ugly pictures of the breakdown of society. Bellow wanted to proclaim that modern novels had lost their faith in "man" and could only portray man as a helpless victim of overwhelming forces which he did not like. So he wanted to break that traditional existentialist mode of writing.

As discussed by Sartre (1956), we, the human, are responsible for the choices we make; we are responsible for our emotional lives. In a godless universe life has no meaning or purpose further than the goals that each man sets for himself. Man always dangles between the eternity of his aspirations and the finitude of his possibilities. The monotony from the repetition of situations makes life meaningless. In "Being and Nothingness" Sartre (1956) argued that man exists without purpose. According to Sartre's existentialist view-

"Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth." (Sartre, 1956).

The story of "Notes from Underground" by Fyodor Dostoevsky(1864), is considered to be the world's first existentialist novel. It deals with a man who is unable to fit into the society and dejected with the identities he creates for himself. Even "Crime and Punishment" and "The Brothers Karamazo" are the same kinds of novels by Dostoevsky. But Bellow wanted to focus on the problematic temperament of the human condition, through which man is continually confronted with diverse possibilities or alternatives. During his

time Saul Bellow lived through Socialism, Stalin's betrayals and brutalities, the Ukraine Massacres, the Purge Trials, Trotsky's assassination, the killing of the Jewish writers and intellectuals, the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, Fascism, the Holocaust, the Hungarian Uprising, WWII and the Atomic Bomb. So definitely all these factors impacted in Saul Bellow's writing. In almost all his writings he attempted to portray the existential complexities of modern man. But his heroes were not fully broken down at the end of the novels. There was a hopeful ending in his novels always. That is why; we see his heroes always struggled for survival and meaningful existence in life.

### **How Saul Bellow is Different**

Let us now discuss how Saul Bellow was different in his dealing of the literary mode of existentialism in his novels concentrating on *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*. In these three novels, Bellow created anti-heroes who struggled against the intellectual pressures of the modern world. All these novels *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day* reflect the existentialist mode and modernist literary techniques in their representations of alienated heroes. They also present the hostile environments, and apparently absurd worlds. But Bellow has dealt in a different way with this mode of existentialism showing a positive attitude among the protagonists at the end of the novels. Although Bellow's protagonists are entrapped by the forces of modern complexities, they refuse to resign themselves to alienation and isolation. Instead, they struggle to maintain a sense of human dignity.

Bellow stated his own frustrating experiences in the novel *Dangling Man* in which Joseph, the protagonist, futilely attempts to live on in the modern world. From the very beginning, Joseph's voice attacks the Hemingway model of manly restraint: "the code of the tough boy." Joseph uses his confessional style to confront the world of limits.

In *The Victim*, the psychological harassment of the contemporary world is personified in the character of Kirby Allbee, a bigot who accuses Asa Leventhal of ruining his life and asserts that Leventhal is, thereby, indebted to him. Although the tone of the novel is sombre, Leventhal refuses to deny his responsibility for his fellow man. This novel describes a world in which surfaces are worth beholding and through its protagonist argues that humans have an intuitive awareness of eternal virtues such as truth, beauty, and love.

Again, the novel *Seize the Day* recounts one climactic day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, a man who has failed in his attempts to accommodate himself to American society. This tightly plotted narrative takes Wilhelm through a painful rejection by his father and a betrayal by the fake psychologist Dr. Tamkin to a healing final scene in which Wilhelm is finally able to experience his deep anguish and his sense of human sympathy at the funeral of a stranger. There he learns to accept his existence and to stop his typically American struggle to become something different.

Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize The Day* is a non achiever and by the conventional money standard a failure. He is lonely and depressed. He is cut off not only from his society but also from his friends and family. He is a man in an acute state of self-disorder who yearns to merge with the archaic and omnipotent figure as represented by the psychological fraud. He is too self-seeking. As an egotistic, Tommy Wilhelm tends to be highly self-referential and alienated from work and society. Heide Elam (1995). argues that “Tommy is threatened down to self-destruction by Tamkin in the manner of the Narcissus legend which offers relief from the burden of self.”(Elam, 1995). Tommy is filled with guilt and self-humiliation. He is crushed by the inhuman materialism of the modern world. His own life has become heavily burdensome for him and feels some mysterious weight constantly pressing him.

“The spirit, the peculiar burden of his existence lay upon him like an accretion, a load, a hump. In any moment of quiet, when sheer fatigue prevented him from struggling, he was apt to feel this mysterious weight, this growth or collection of nameless things which it was the business of his life to carry about.” ( Bellow, 1956)

#### **Bellow’s Manipulation of Existentialism in *Seize the Day***

At the surface world of *Seize the Day* we mark the traditional existentialist literary mode undoubtedly. But when the novel comes to an end we mark something different. The novel is deceptively modern in construction. It presents an analysis of human isolation in mid-twentieth-century New York. We do mark huge urban alienation materials in this novel such as its peculiar metropolitan landscape, wretched hero and watchfully constructed patterns of crash, sickness, decay, impotence and drowning imagery. Bellow is actually making here a clever ironic use of such materials to show the absurdist and Freudian estimates of man. And so *Seize the Day* is actually a writing of

seduction in which Wilhelm is forced to trust the modernist notions of Tamkin, which is of alienation ethics and nihilism. In the beginning of the novel it seems to us that life is meaningless and absurd as Bellow shows the 'failures and disappointments' of Wilhelm's life and Wilhelm is shown discontented, confused and trapped. Roberto Birindelli says, man "is bound to find himself trapped, cheated, enriched, and simultaneously saved from the drabness of an orderly existence [...]." (Birindelli, 1998). It seems to us that Wilhelm has slipped and fallen into a watery abyss and is drowning and can't catch his breath. "Dad, I just can't breathe. My chest is all up- I feel choked. I just simply can't catch my breath." (Bellow, 1956). He is desperately alone in his soul. He reaches out to his father, who turns away from him because 'here fathers are no fathers and sons no sons.' (Bellow, 1956). Wilhelm tries to give himself to Dr. Tamkin who betrayed him and then disappears into the crowd of the great metropolis. At last Wilhelm reaches out to his wife even knowing that she will also not extend any helping hand. So Wilhelm says-

"I was the man beneath; Tamkin was in my back and I thought I was on his. He made me carry him, too besides Margaret. Like this they ride on me with hoofs and claws. Tear me to pieces, stamp on me and break my bones." ( Bellow, 1956).

"The journey of Wilhelm's life was simply too rigorous for him, that he really didn't have what it takes to negotiate modern America, and that Tommy cannot 'protect himself from the savages' by building any kind of a fence. He doesn't really want to die; he just doesn't want to be a man." (Nelson, 1972). Life itself has become a burden on Wilhelm's part and he is lost. 'We are all lost, more or less' is what Bellow seems to be saying. But at the ending part of the novel we mark Bellow to be optimistic.

Like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, Bellow's Wilhelm (until the last section of the novel) gets no firm or deep beliefs in life and thinks that man only exist for the day, like butterflies and tossed about by condition. Man only sinks down without any ability to rise above their dilemma. The ultimate answer of life is the finality of death. Man lives and goes on saying-"I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want" (Bellow, 1956)-and then become dust in the wind for 'life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying in the end, nothing'. It reminds us of *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus (1942). All our labors are like those of Sisyphus pushing the stone up the hill only to watch it

roll back down again. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus 1942), Camus uses the analogy of the Greek myth to demonstrate the futility of existence. Sisyphus is condemned to roll a rock up a hill for eternity, but when he reaches the summit the rock will roll back to the bottom again. "We value our lives and existence so greatly, but at the same time we know we will eventually die, and ultimately our endeavors are meaningless." (Camus, 1942). So Camus believes that human existence is pointless but Bellow believes that his protagonists find meaning in life by never giving up in life. That is why; at the end of the novel we do mark a sign of hope in the face of Wilhelm which opposes the traditional code of existentialism.

As we all know the existential individual at every moment confronts the nothingness of existence. Existentialism begins with individual anguish and despair and men and women are drastically alone in a world without a clear meaning. For existential men and women, whether religious or secular, life is a difficult process. Life is lived on the edge. That is why J. N Sharma examines "*Seize The Day* as an existentialist novel and emphasizes the aspect of individual choice as the chief principle." (Sharma, 1983). But Bellow has not only scorned absurdity and alienation ethics in his novels but also affirmed social values more strongly than other twentieth-century writers. He has tried to restore the integrity of feeling and the meaning of ordinary existence. John Stephen Martin finds that "Tommy's ultimate accomplishment is to cast off his pretender soul and achieve dignity by experience. He also achieves transcendence by giving rise to his true individuality. His ego too has given him the power to cope and endure." (Martin, 1965).

Generally death looms as a boundary situation leading human to an existential despair. But this did not happen in *Seize the Day*. Wilhelm was not totally overwhelmed by existential despair rather he was reconciled to the emotion of rebirth through his utter helplessness. People may be disappointed in existence but Bellow feels that man has a right to demand something other than romantic disappointment. So, we notice that regardless of all the flaw backs, Wilhelm has his strength of his own kind and he has finally rediscovered his faith in the human endeavor. He has the openness, the ability to make out and understanding the other. He has the ability to love all. Tommy bears and suffers the trouble of goodness. He trusts people. Wilhelm is a person, who being "[...] in the midst of a mid-life crisis, takes steps toward true maturity and deeply connected with the world of human

beings.”(Clayton, 1986). At the end, while he tends to commit suicide or wishes self-annihilation the very sight of corpse brings in him a passion. This passion is an affirmation of the need, not to die, but to live and love. “Bellow leads Wilhelm through a complete progression from foolishness to wisdom [...]. Wilhelm arrives at the heart of his maturity in the funeral parlor.” (Lister, 1984).

The story ends not in fragments of frustration, but with a redemptive vision of humanity. There is a kind of rebirth through which Wilhelm achieves purification. Bellow demonstrates that the individual is not isolated and that Wilhelm's world is a luminous creation of multiple possibilities. (Rephrased: Eichelberger 1998). The powerful ending of the novel shows Tommy as successful in the long run. The oppressive forces could not completely crush Tommy. He finally realized what is to be a man. He remains emotionally alive. He experienced a great love for the whole mankind. The nobility of Wilhelm's heart lies in the fact that in a heartless world based on money culture, he is the lone person who retains his humanity and is capable of love. What Bellow wants to say is that all human beings have a will to find meaning in life. By embracing anxiety as inevitable, a person can use it to achieve his or her full potential.

“The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consumption of his heart's ultimate need.” ( Bellow, 1956)

Like Wilhelm we also learn to return to our duties and responsibilities, to our work although the waves may toss us. So, in this novel, *Seize the Day*, the day has not seized the hero rather the hero has seized the day.

#### **Bellow's Manipulation of Existentialism in Dangling Man**

Saul Bellow's another novel *Dangling Man* is also greatly influenced by the 1940s anxiety of American intellectuals with French existentialism. *Dangling Man* is the quest in the search for the strength to overcome the fear of choice. Joseph, the protagonist of the novel, is a would-be writer and intellectual caught waiting for the Draft. So central to the novel is the theme of search for the value of individual freedom. It also deals with the theme of moral responsibility, and the demands of social contract. The novel talks about the lament of a young American artist Joseph who does not know how to join the

mainstream of Chicagoan or American life without losing the spiritual value of his isolation. He believes that intellectual and spiritual enlightenment is to be attained by isolating himself within the boundaries of a room in a cheap New York boarding house while studying the great writers of the Enlightenment. As the months go by Joseph quarrels with nearly all his friends and relatives. He lives off the earnings of his faithful wife and succumbs to fits of obsession and anger. He engages himself into an aimless affair. He also learns to hate the physical decay of his elderly neighbors. Ultimately he is haunted by death anxieties. He always dangles between civilian and military. But at last Joseph is seen standing in a line of naked military recruits being prodded and poked by an elderly military physician, prior to entering the Navy. So Davis (1986) considers "Joseph of *Dangling Man* as an all-American adolescent dangling between action and inaction, acceptance of tradition and denial of tradition, participation and isolation, love and hate, and his old self and his emerging self. [...] in order to dramatize the inner struggles of his protagonist." (Davis, 1986).

Lehan compares Joseph to 'Roquentin' in Sartre's *Nausea* and 'Meursault' in Camus's *The Stranger* and develops an elaborate discussion on the existentialist issues of freedom and death both central to *Dangling Man* (Lehan, 1959). *Dangling Man* talks of belonging and Joseph, whose surname is undeclared, waits for his call-up by the Army after enlisting, when "there is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited." (Bellow, 1944). That is why the question comes: "Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them" (Bellow, 1944). But at the same time Lyons argues that *Dangling Man* is not simply an updating of Dostoevsky, nor merely an illumination of the American 1940s moral dilemma. It is an elaborate working out of the many stages, kinds, and degrees of alienation and assertions of the basic goodness of life. (Lyons, 1978).

In *Dangling Man*, there grew a sense of desperate isolation in Joseph, imposed by the ideology of individualism. Again, it became redoubled by the isolation of self-scrutiny. This sense of isolation brought Joseph to the verge of insanity. In all his wanderings, both physical and mental, his problem is destiny. Joseph is unable to live up to the lofty expectations of his making. That is why we find him saying: "I am unwilling to admit that I do not know how to use my freedom. I, in this room, am separated, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail." (Bellow, 1944). We mark that all the actions of *Dangling Man* are the



demonstration of Joseph's troubled mind. Joseph is always lost in his thought. He is always hesitant to what to do. He always dangles between civilian and military. He expresses his spiritual boredom as an imprisoning and inadequate whiteness. But Donoghue (1964) considers *Dangling Man* to be the turning point in American cultural history where Bellow throws down the gauntlet to Hemingway and argues that Bellow is the new spokesman for an altered America. He remarks that Joseph's sole talent is for being a good man. And this Goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love. That is why; we notice Joseph's increasingly desperate quest for self-knowledge never ends till the end. This is the reason why Baim says, though "at first Joseph see-saws between reason and nihilism but finally experiences illumination through an intuitive experience." (Baim, 1970).

#### **Bellow's Manipulation of Existentialism in *Seize the Victim***

Bellow's other novel *The Victim* (1947) explores the ability of twentieth-century man to cope with victimization and fear. At the very outset of the novel we mark that Asa Leventhal, the protagonist of the novel, possesses nothing with perfect certain. He possesses perfectly neither his wife, nor his brother, nor his job. He has been emotionally scarred in childhood by his mother's madness and screaming fits. He also failed to form a good relationship with his own father. Ultimately he losses both of his parents and enters the post WW II American workplace carrying with him his personal fears and a keen sense of the prevailing anti-Semitism. *The Victim* is simply one of many unwelcoming accounts of a modern life in the thin manner of American naturalism. Basically *The Victim* is the story of Asa Leventhal who is a natural victim; a man uncertain of himself, never free from the nagging suspicion that the other guy may be right. He is at loose ends until he bumps into a former friend Kirby Allbee whom he does not recognize at first. Allbee confronts Leventhal and blames him for his ill fortune. Because once he got Leventhal to a job interview and found out that Leventhal had insulted his boss rather publicly. Allbee was fired soon-after that and that is why he still blames Leventhal for what had followed. Allbee lost his wife and has not been able to find a decent job since. He is at the end of his savings with nowhere to turn. So he latches on to Leventhal. Leventhal feels guilty for what has happened; and thinks if he can help Allbee. Leventhal is persistently motivated not by what he thinks to be right but by what other people may think of him. Allbee soon becomes the guest in Leventhal's house who wouldn't leave. He is kept showing himself at all hours and asking for increasingly disturbing favors from Leventhal. But Allbee is never seen grateful for Leventhal's help. Rather, he continues to blame him. How long

Leventhal will put up with Allbee and how far Allbee will go are what make up the conflict of *The Victim*. Leventhal is indeed guilty of Allbee's ruin. It seems like Leventhal has usurped a place which a superior right would assign to Allbee. Indeed their positions are inverted—the one belongs where the other is. If Allbee is a paranoiac, Leventhal is an extremely suspicious person. Allbee, though claims to be Leventhal's victim, really victimizes Leventhal. Insofar as Allbee is Leventhal's negative self, Leventhal is his own victim; insofar as Allbee exists independently, Leventhal is the victim of another. This is why, when Leventhal meets a down-at-heel stranger in the park one day and finds himself being accused of ruining the man's life, he half believes it. He can't shake the man loose and can't stop himself becoming trapped in a mud of self doubt. He can't even help himself becoming a victim of situation. Ultimately, Asa Leventhal becomes the person who must deal with a world not of his making.

At last, we see, Asa Leventhal is accompanied by his wife and somewhat healed from his obsession. He is also reconciled to his brother. And, most importantly, he is finally distanced from his horror and awaiting the birth of his first child. Thus, like Joseph in *Dangling Man*, he has also learned how to conquer the anxieties, fear, anger, and self-isolation and admitted his thirst for love and friendship, as well as his moral and social responsibility to others.

Basically, *The Victim* is a new kind of conscience in the era of existentialism and alienation. Bradbury discusses his understanding of Bellow's attempts to describe the perils of humanism. He calls *The Victim* a book illuminated with moral vision and intellectualism. Bradbury (1963) carefully traces the nature of Leventhal's moral development through nightmare and anarchy into social complicity. He feels Bellow has extended himself far beyond realism into the larger sphere of the poetic, the lyrical and the psychological, thus rivaling the best of the French existentialist writers. (Bradbury, 1963).

#### **Bellow's Optimistic Approach to Existentialism**

We see that Bellow seeks to bind human beings in his novels always. Bellow's heroes always struggle for survival and meaningful existence in life. But all the other novels of other existential writers represent a certain culmination in American literature of over forty years of modernist ideological debate. This debate is all about the philosophical premises of European existentialism versus traditional Judeo-Christian humanism, and the "wasteland" mentality of the Anglo-American cultural tradition. Both reflect Bellow's profound engagement with such writers as Kierkegaard,

Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hobbes, and Sartre. Both portray the failure of the romantic quest and affirm the necessity for social responsibility. They also represent the moral exhaustion of a generation of young men and the moral bankruptcy of derived humanism. As such, they are preoccupied with absurdity, death, frugal loneliness and existential anxiety.

But Bellow's works are distinguished by his humanistic approaches for character and clear-sighted analysis of contemporary society. He has rejected the prevailing attitude of modernism. Bellow's anti-heroes are beset by all of the well known alienating forces of the modern world no doubt but at the end they all manage to maintain a life-affirming dignity, freedom and goodness. They represent a courageous struggle to gain a grip in our tottering world. He agrees that modern man stands "open to all anxieties" and that "the decline of everything is our daily bread," but he also believes that man's "purer, subtler, higher activities have not succumbed to fury or nonsense." (Porter, 1974). Thus, Porter views Bellow as a "neo-transcendentalist," a writer reacting against the existentialism of his age.

### **Conclusion**

We observe that Bellow's novels are characterized by a new wholeness of positive vision. His protagonists always try hard to find meaning and purposes of life. The three novels *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, represent Bellow's affirmative belief in essential humanistic values. He always complains that other novelists always tried to adopt the early modern "waste land view"(Bellow's term) of man in order to be considered intellectually respectable. But, Bellow feels that the duty of such writers should be to look for the truth about human nature, not to try to apply inherited historical estimates of man. That is why; we do mark Bellow as an affirmative writer. May be humans are disappointed in their existence but Bellow feels that man has a right to demand something better than only disappointment. Bellow expresses that man does not need to call for the destruction of the world in the hope of a phoenix. That is why; at the end of his existentialist novels we do mark a sign of hope in the face of his protagonists which opposes the traditional code of existentialism. At the inside of existential alienation, his protagonists never lose heart or are defeated totally; rather, they remain optimistic till the end. His novels end not in fragments of frustration, but with a redemptive vision of humanity. And thus, Bellow is different in his approach towards existentialism compared to other traditional existentialist writers.

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