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Jewish Angst: An Ambivalent and Beleaguered Overview of Emplacement of Jews in America with Special Reference to Saul Bellow's *Herzog*

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Abstract:

Angst can be understood as a mental response to the external phenomena that are endowed with life by the presence of consciousness. In diaspora, Angst often manifests itself as a by-product of the mind experiencing the problematics of time and space. Hence, analysing a novel as intentional experiences of the extrinsic phenomena entails examining the consciousness of characters. This leads ultimately to conceive the author's own consciousness of the realistic social and psychological surrounding as projected on fictional characters and scenery. The researcher in this article makes an attempt to analyse how the author has shaped the protagonist and thereby has reflected his own consciousness and anxieties of being in a foreign land.

Keywords: diaspora, anxiety, victimisation, instability, homelessness, psychic trauma.

The roots of the word diaspora can be traced back to the Greek word *Speiro* meaning "to sow" and the preposition *dia* meaning "over". In Greek, the term indicates "scattering about" and is used to refer to the Greek migrating campaigns to colonise new lands. The phenomenon however existed much earlier to the Greeks and has its biblical reference in the Jewish exile to Babylon at the hands of the Mesopotamian emperor Nebuchadnezzar. This takes place after the destruction of the First Temple and later during the Roman Empire following the destruction of the Second Temple. But comparing the two earlier forms of diaspora, one learns that the Greeks are active agents of colonisation and expansion while the Jews are passive victims of persecution. For Jews, diaspora signifies a collective trauma, a banishment where one dreams of home but lives in exile. It is this sinister and brutal meaning that the archetypal Jewish diaspora shares with the modern diasporas of Palestinians, Armenians, Africans, and so on. Most obviously, however, the meanings of the contemporary concept have acquired a new understanding coloured by the post-modern mode and cultural rubrics of identity politics.

Jean Paul Sartre's book *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1945) traces the root of all Jewish problems to their social pluralism, which defends him as a man but nullifies his life in the

world as a Jew. He observes that “the democratic crucible whence he will emerge naked and alone, an individual and solitary particle like all the other particles” (40). Arguably, the diasporic history of the Jews train them to adapt to the position of being part and parcel of pluralism regardless of the privileges or disadvantages that arise from such a stance. Considered to be a rupture in the Jewish exile, half of the world's Jewish population live in America and the prominence of American Jews in almost every field is a proof of Jews' full participation in American life and their integration into the mainstream culture but this adaptation fails to erase the borderline between two areas, primarily designated as mainstream and marginal, majority and minority and gives no full freedom from the emotional and psychological feeling of being homeless as long as they are away from the biblical centre. Remnants of being exile haunt their mentality, especially after the Holocaust, and all Jewish dreams about their promised land get disillusioned. America is a peaceful island unto which the Jew has been cast away only to ponder about how miserable his condition once was. A study of the Jewish-American experience, is prevailed by the existential and psychological intricacies of the Jewish people in the pre- and post-war periods. They are involved in the problematics of their encounters either with a hostile environment (Holocaust, pogroms, anti-Semitism) or with themselves in a friendly surrounding as they struggle to affirm their identity and particularism against assimilation and universalism.

Man's anxiety to occupy a space, literal or metaphorical, represents the essential trait of his existential status. The striving for space, chiefly stimulated by insecurity as a manifestation of angst is an ontological necessity, and the positive character of the category of space must be recognised. The negative side of space, however, surfaces with the possibility of losing, reaching, or growing beyond the limits of or even having been denied the right to gain a space. Man's anxiety over space is expressed through the feelings of concern about the future. It is also expressed in man's attempt to provide a secure physical space for himself and to create social and political systems for the maintenance of general security.

In *Powers of Diaspora*, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin prefer to use the Hebrew word *galut* rather than “diaspora” for the Jewish experience, since it denotes “the situation of displacement that is to be reflected on and not rejected” (132). It leads to understand as well as characterise the protagonist's response to dwelling-in-displacement that Bellow consciously represents in his novels. Bellow's displaced millionaire in *Henderson the Rain King* states the Jewish crisis in a nutshell: “Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more. There are mostly people who feel that they occupy the place that belongs to another by rights” (22). These words could tell what almost any of Bellow's characters is and, to a certain extent, how Bellow himself views the world.

Herzog, considered to be Bellow's best novel, never departs from the realm of his old anxieties. When the Nobel committee cite Bellow for portraying “a man who keeps on trying to find a foothold during his wandering in a tottering world” (qtd. in Jacobs 194), they probably had in mind the novels belonging to the second phase of his career namely, *Herzog*. The entire story of a Jew's struggle to gain a foothold in the New World is epitomised by the

eponymous persona as he wanders clumsily from the beginning of the novel to the end involving himself in more trouble, and more entanglement since he is no peer to the surrounding world. Bellow emphasises: “Herzog’s folly! Monument to his sincere and loving idiocy, to the unrecognized evils of his character, symbol of his Jewish struggle for a solid footing in White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America” (Herzog 309). Herzog, the protagonist, is a displaced person in the sense that he is robbed of his wife, his children, his house, his sanity, and even his dreams. But, he has a hand in his victimisation. Essentially, he is a self-proclaimed victim whose reflexive contemplation reveals to him how his victimisers’ aggressive strength is the result of his own weakness, “But he had asked to be beaten too, and had lent his attackers strength” (4). Such a masochistic trend represents the essence of Herzog’s clinically depressive picture which, though marking a digression to perversion, is not of the severest type since he is still able to question his mental efficiency and trace the genesis of his present chaotic condition. By his contemporary standards, Herzog’s non-normalcy lies in lacking “an aggressive paranoid character, eager for power” (4). He is not ready to fight to keep his dreams intact and in case those dreams are robbed, Herzog is not brave enough to restore them. His self-examination comes to the conclusion that he is a failure at all familial, social and personal levels.

Throughout the novel, Herzog has to fight at two fronts: the intellectual weight of the world’s ideas; and the injustice done to him by the unfaithful demonic wife. Apparently, the former is no more than a symptom of the latter. Cuckolded by the beautiful Madeline and betrayed by a friend, Valentine Gersbach, who never scruples to displace him, Herzog is a husband whose dignity is severely hurt.

Thinking of himself as a convalescent, who is trying to recover from a traumatic conjugal disaster, Herzog is tormented that “his sexual power had been damaged by Madeline” (5). A convert to Christianity, Madeline plays the role of a parasitical leech that after sucking life out of Herzog, seeks for another source of vicarious satisfaction. He sacrifices his legacy and academic life to please an ego-centric wife: he quits an academic position which is perfectly respectable and buys a big old house in Ludeyville, Massachusetts. The academic success led perfectly while married to Daisy, his ex-wife, is completely wrecked by Madeline’s demonic desire to monopolise the submissive Herzog to herself. She assumes the role of the villain in the novel with a destructive egotist and narcissist trend supported by the league of flies hovering over her beauty. That abrupt fall in Herzog’s life witnesses a synchronically gradual change in the mood of writing and pre-occupations.

Observably, there is a kind of subjugation in Herzog’s relationship with the domineering Madeline. He is enslaved by his passive, idle love for her. This situation gives her a point of active strength over him because she knows well how weakly he reacts. The moment she decides to end up the entire matter, she does so with dignity and pride and without hesitation. “It’s painful,” insolently declares Madeline, “to have to say I never loved you. I never will love you, either. So there is no point in going on” (9). Her underestimation of any possibility of action on Herzog’s part makes her careless about the time and manner of declaring her desire of separation. A week before demanding divorce, she asks him insolently

to leave the house getting his stuff so that she can gain more closet space. With this act, Herzog is uprooted not only from his house and love altogether but also from Madeline's memory and from whatever that belongs to him, even his own daughter. And to further get rid of him, Madeline gives his picture to the police reporting that he might, under psychopathic seizures, attempt to do some menacing act against her. In such a way, Herzog becomes unable even to come near his own house on Harper Avenue less he disturbs the amorous life led by his persecutors. But a person who since the beginning has seen Madeline as a precious prize to win, is too naive to react in a manner appropriate to his position as Madeline's benefactor. He justifies his inaction as the wisdom of avoiding a scandal. Herzog is quite aware of the bitter fact: "A person of irregular tendencies, he practiced the art of circling among random facts to swoop down on the essentials" (10).

Dramatically, Madeline, Valentine, and Dr. Edvig constitute a league of "reality-instructors" against whom Herzog has to inefficiently fight a battle of self-assertion. While preaching religion to Herzog, their actions know no religion and no morals. Valentine, the direct source of displacement to Herzog, is a hypocrite who gives him Martin Buber's books and contradicts in reality what those books instruct in the same way. Madeline often goes to the church but finds no sin in cuckolding him. Herzog ironically adapts Buber's philosophy to the reality of displacement he undergoes commenting: "God comes and goes in man's soul. And men come and go in each other's souls. Sometimes they come and go in each other's beds, too. You have a dialogue with a man. You have intercourse with his wife" (64). A significant theme of *Herzog* is the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and impotent privacy. Herzog, aware of his limitation, refers the entire affair of Valentine's entrapping Madeline to his sexual attractiveness and rigorous overtake. Valentine possesses a manly charm that Herzog lacks: Valentine Gersbach, her lover, was a charming man, too, though in a heavier, brutal style. He had a thick chin, flaming copper hair that literally gushed from his head, and he walked on a wooden leg, gracefully bending and straightening like a gondolier. The wooden leg, symbolically, stands for a sexual power that persistently reminds Herzog of his impotent, emasculated Jewish essence in a Christian world that reduces a circumcised old Jew to the status of an effete.

Displacing Herzog from his wife, house and daughter, Gersbach, with an efficient determination that foils Herzog's submissive passivity, can stand in the latter's shoes even as a sufferer. Gersbach assuming the role of a tragic lover is a means to blackmail the world and gain popularity through his TV shows. This complete dispossession of even a man's right to suffer and to keep to himself the emotion of loss tortures Herzog fiercely. He complains with agony, "If he took away my wife, did he have to suffer my agony for me, too? Because he could do even that better?" (216). In short, Valentine wins because he is a good impostor. In Mark Cohen's view: "Both Tamkin and Gersbach incorporate into themselves a wide range of incompatible identities that make them unknowable and untrustworthy" (365). By contrast, Herzog fails because of inability to establish a firm standing of identity for himself. He can never take the responsibility of making the right decision that might deliver him and thus he roams within the boundaries of inauthenticity. The irony of it all is Herzog's helpless attempts seeking sympathy and consultation from his rival, Gersbach, who does not hesitate to malignantly and meanly encourage the gullible man's blind trust in him so as to serve his

own ends. While he likens the hypocrite conspiracy of Gersbach and Madeline to a stab by knife that never stops bleeding, he is aware how his idiocy encourages them to go to greater heights of perversity. Valentine continues to play the role of a sincere friend while coming to collect Madeline's stuff and the first thing is her "diaphragm". Like actors in a farce, Madeline and Valentine underestimate Herzog's dignity as a husband reducing him to a mere inefficient person whose life is run for him by Valentine claiming to act in his best interests. When Herzog talks openly to Gersbach about his affairs with Madeline, Gersbach feels indignant as if it is Herzog who violates something his right by nature.

As a father, Herzog is tortured by the agony of being deprived of having his children growing up under his care. He feels his Jewish lineage insulted by the very idea of being a father isolated and forced to stay away from his children so as not to hurt their feelings: "It was painful to his instincts, his Jewish family feelings that his children should be growing up without him" (23). This is why upon seeing June and embracing her, his delighted emotions, restored for a moment to normalcy, look poignantly painful since they are preceded and followed by a certain parting. What tortures him at that moment is the thought of his status reduced to a visiting father to both June and Macro. When there is no more precious thing to lose, Herzog, stripped of his protection as well as factors of settlement, is made to confront the basic facts of his existence under the pressure of anxiety. Fragmented by the disturbing experience of displacement, Herzog resorts to wandering with the entire collective unconscious of the race in quest of a stable home. The long journey, however, that covers Copenhagen, Warsaw, Cracow, Berlin, Belgrade, Istanbul, and Jerusalem, does not help better his condition. Such a physical wandering, paralleled, if not motivated and directed, by a mental one, epitomises the Jewish state of instability and homelessness. In the words of Howard Eiland, Herzog is "a comical failed Moses, wandering in search of a homeland and looking to law, to 'Hebrew discipline', aspiring after selfless reason and a rational life" (101). Earl Rovit makes a similar observation that views Herzog as a wandering Jew "uprooted, displaced, always as detached and alien as consciousness itself" (196). In the novel, this is reinforced by the image of the grasshopper fiddling over the fields in June's favourite song.

Grasshoppers three a-fiddling went.
 Hey-ho, never be still.
 They paid no money towards their rent
 But all day long with elbows bent. (51)

Suggestively, like the grasshoppers, it is in the Jewish instinct to be always prepared for the next jump that would take them repetitively to a new place. They do not have to pay for rent because they are not certain to which land they will be carried by the wind. Herzog's sin, or rather tragic flaw is, like Hamlet's, inaction. He thinks much but acts a little to keep or restore his promised land. The New World in this context is a callous place in which the Jew is thrown into ugliness, deception and betrayal unequipped for confrontation. The memory of the Montreal ghetto of Napoleon Street, the failure of his father to establish a good living for his family and Herzog's disintegration are all evidences of the alienation that world imposes on minorities. "The ghetto feeling," observes Rita D. Jacobs, "of being set apart and yet making a kind of virtue of this separateness, is strong in Bellow's work. His characters are

often outside the mainstream of society and go through internal conflicts about whether this is a condition imposed or chosen.” (194) Herzog has to face an anti-assimilating sentiment from Chicagoans who consider him as a foreigner. This gives insight into Bellow's view of the flawed and imperfect emplacement of Jews in America.

The entire body of the text analysed here encompasses various but relevant faces of the response to dwelling-in-displacement. The writers, quite aware of the original loss, project that consciousness on two discursive themes: an encounter with what they figure out as an unhomely world; and a series of figurative dislocations and dispossessions. These experiences are dramatized largely in the protagonists' consciousness as they struggle to understand their own essence. This is not to say that what is seen as homelessness takes place entirely in the characters' anxious imagination, neither does having homes mean that the Jewish protagonists feel at home in their own homes. It is rather a complexity of living through the burdens of a history of displacement assuming variable shapes (real and imagined). Those who have homes just like Herzog do not stop wandering in search of the accommodating domesticity their American houses are lacking. People who do not have homes are more prone to the anxiety of homelessness. Both categories contemplate the transient nature of their dwelling. Furthermore, they feel alienated and embittered as the personal versions of the American dreams they have toiled to attain get shattered due to encounters with external adversities and internal weaknesses alike. The lack of security, the sense of alienation, and the overwhelming feelings of unhomeliness are, to a large extent, caused by the protagonists' ambivalence and beleaguered worldview. This is why their compulsive journey towards detachment always reaches an impasse.

Acknowledging homelessness as the authentic state of man in the world, paves the way for contemplating the possibilities of creating a meaning out of meaninglessness. The writer projects that existentialist equation on the microcosmic world of the Jewish diaspora in the New World's urban setting. In the novel that has been discussed, the anxieties of diaspora is depicted not in order to propagate home-returning but to contemplate the possibilities of finding one's real and authentic being that emerges out of hardships. If it is accepted that Man's fall is the archetypal displacement with the subsequent life on the earth as an eternal homelessness, all other resultant and minor experiences of homelessness lose their initiative power to distress. This is why, while representing variable rubrics of the diasporic anxiety, Bellow nowhere in his novel preach homecoming or even speak to a diasporic centre. This approach is consistent with Stuart Hall's emphasis on the metaphorical rather than literal use of the term. “Diaspora does not refer to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea” (235). By returning home which is anti-diasporic, diasporic angst can be overcome but that might lead to catastrophic ends. The journey of home-returning in the ontological diaspora takes place only after death. Likewise, for a Jew, whose essence is naturally and historically diasporic, returning home is a negation of the self. In that case, the anti-diasporic stance internalises violence that is directed not only against the individual's nature but also against the potential human resources of other beings. In short, diasporic angst inspires the freedom to create a self out of the limits pre-set by the narrow

horizons of a utopian home. The way to this self-creation, then, embarks from sacrificing the mythological and parochial for the real and universal.

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