
Impact of Holocaust on Saul Bellow. Saul Bellow's Literary Representation of Jewish Experience of Holocaust Trauma

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Abstract:

This essay explores the impact of the Holocaust on the life of Saul Bellow. The Historical Biographical approach is employed to analyze Bellow's life in the perspective of his Jewish American identity, as a writer and as a person. Bellow's biography, written by James Atlas(2000) his memoirs, compiled by his son Gregory Bellow(2014) and the letters written by Bellow, provide valuable insights regarding the personal feelings and views of the writer about the Holocaust. Being the member of the second generation of Holocaust survivors, he has deep rooted memories of the excesses committed against the Nazis. Owing to his Jewish epistemology, his fiction is also tinged with the trauma of the Holocaust.

Key words: Saul Bellow, Trauma, Holocaust, World War II, Nazis

INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow (1915-2005) won two National Book Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976. The personal opinions of Bellow and his emotions, fears, inhibitions,

insecurity and identity as a son of the European Jews are vital reasons in this regard. The application of Historical-Biographical criticism to analyze Bellow's letters, interviews, comments of different critics, his interviews given to various magazines also assisted us in coming to an understanding of Bellow's representation of the trauma of the Holocaust. Bellow had been subjected to racial discrimination and an analysis of evident and concealed signs, metaphors and allusions to the Holocaust present in Bellow's personal opinions and emotions help to comprehend his views about anti-Semitism, his complexes as a Jew and discrimination faced by other Jews in the post World War II American life. Bellow's own stance on the Holocaust and his diffidence in the post Holocaust American society are the key aspects of this essay. During the literary analysis of Bellow's fiction, we discovered traces of trauma in his fictional characters who also show symptoms of the "survivor syndrome" (Chodiff, 1963, 323-33). These syndromes are best described as a set of symptoms present in an individual who has been through the ordeal of living in concentration camps and ghettos during the Holocaust.

FAMILY BACKGROUND OF SAUL BELLOW

James Atlas (2000) states that Bellow's parents were Russian Jews. They were confined to the belt ranging from the Black Sea to the Baltic, and it was not possible to leave that area without taking formal permission from the Russian government. The whole family was subjected to trauma and they had to go into exile and moved to Canada. Atlas describes that Bellow's father Abraham Belo used to live in Saint Petersburg and was a "produce broker" who imported Egyptian onions and Turkish figs. In 1912 the Russian police arrested Bellow's father on charges of residing in at a place that was illegal for Jews to live in. Bellow's maternal uncle arranged

forged papers for them and the whole family migrated to Canada in 1913(Atlas, 2000, 32). Since Bellow's father could not settle in any business in Canada, decided to go to America for good.

The Bellow family had to bear the brunt of mental, emotional and financial stress, initially in Canada. His father had to incur huge loss in his business and could not settle there. In 1924, his father decided to move his family Chicago. This migration to Chicago put an considerable strain on the mind of the young writer. Bellow and his brothers had to face anti-Semitism and they were bullied by Irish and Polish immigrant refugees (Atlas, 2000, 6). The Jewish identity of the Bellows led them to their displacement from Russia to Canada. The Bellows could not easily assimilate into the social, political and cultural spheres and had to endure many difficulties and odds since they were considered "resident aliens" (Atlas, 2000, 32). The identity of Bellows was formed in the backdrop of isolation, alienation and discriminatory attitude of the common masses towards the newly immigrant Jewish population. The Jewish epistemology and worldview also shaped the identity of Bellow since Jews mourn the Holocaust not only individually but also collectively. This mourning is commemorated at homes and in synagogues. Traditionally, Jews share the events of the Holocaust orally and in writing with the next generation.

Atlas states that Saul Bellow was influenced by his position as a Jewish immigrant, a Canadian, a Midwesterner, and heir to the Anglo American novel. Victoria Aarons writes, "Bellow admitted to his son Gregory that he 'came late' to the Holocaust - that somehow Holocaust escaped his notice, a political reality he failed to engage" (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 131). In a letter to Cynthia Ozick Bellow admitted that he kept on 'brooding' on the Holocaust. The visit to Auschwitz in 1959 was an unforgettable one, with its total impact on Bellow.

SAUL BELLOW'S MEMORABLE VISIT TO POLAND

The trauma of the Holocaust indeed left indelible marks on Bellow after his visit to Poland and Israel during the Six Day War in 1967 (Atlas, 2000, 388). In Poland Bellow saw sofas made with the human hair. The ultra sensitive writer was deeply moved by the inhuman treatment meted out to the Jews (Atlas, 2000, 289). James Atlas refers to Bellow's letter written to Pascal Covici, in which Bellow expressed his disgust about the Holocaust in these words, "I can't tell you what an expression Poland makes on me. It's too deep as deep as death and economic life of the USA as Bellow put it, "you never felt American in the beginning they were to more familiar than I admit at the top of my mind. It's family history" (Atlas, 2000, 289).

Bellow's visit to Auschwitz and that horrifying exposure to the sites of the concentration camps of the Holocaust made him cognizant about the inhuman crimes committed against the Jews and he decided to write about the Holocaust. Atlas also states that Bellow regretted that he could not write on the theme of the Holocaust after writing his famous novel *The Victim*. After that visit, Saul Bellow not only himself was convinced to write about the Holocaust but also influenced his contemporary writers to write about this mammoth event in their writing/s. Atlas also mentions a letter written by Bellow in 1980s to a fellow writer named Cynthia Ozick, "It's perfectly true that the Jewish writers in America missed what should have been for them, the central event of their time the destruction of the European Jewry. We should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it" (Atlas, 2000, 546).

IMPACT OF THE HOLOCAUST ON SAUL BELLOW

Atlas describes that Bellow also watched news footage of the Holocaust scenes aired on the national American TV in which the US bulldozers indiscriminately buried mutilated corpses of in-numerable Jews in mass graves. It also profoundly moved the writer who abhorred such atrocities perpetrated against the humanity. Bellow after witnessing such heinous crimes regretfully felt “a deeply troubling sense of disgrace and demotion” (Atlas, 2000, 126). Bellow’s parentage, his family’s forced migration and displacement from Russia, failed attempts of his father to settle down in Canada and the manner, he and his brothers were bullied by Polish and Irish refugees put considerable strain on the mind of Bellow and all these events changed his personal opinion and feelings for the oppressed Jews that too are aptly manifested in his fiction. Thus Bellow wrote *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) in which the protagonist experiences the havoc of the Holocaust. He kills a German soldier, but his wife along with other Jews of Europe, is killed by the Nazis.

BELLOW FACES DISCRIMINATION

Sternlicht describes how Saul Bellow had faced disturbing discrimination when he wanted to enroll at the English Department of Northwestern University, to study literature. He could not get admission since the department did not allow Bellow to study there because he was a Jew and Jews were not allowed to pursue their studies in that department. He was informed that Jews were not “equipped to study English literature.” Bellow therefore had to rethink about his plans and enrolled in anthropology and sociology (Atlas, 2000, 76).

Owing to his Jewish family background Bellow vehemently identifies himself with the other members of the Jewish community. His own identity is divided between his American

state of mind and European ancestry, and he is American and European, at the same time. Atlas writes that although Bellow was a Jewish writer but he did not admit this as a fact. He informed his critics that he was an American first, a Jew, by lineage and a writer by profession (Atlas, 2000, 128). Atlas also notes that *The Victim* was a repressive novel that reflected Bellow's upbringing as a "child of Jewish immigrant parents" (Atlas, 2000, 129-30). Quoting Time magazine, Atlas states that *The Victim* is "a study of the Jews in the U.S society" and that Bellow was deeply influenced by the Holocaust, which limited his identity to Jewishness whereas he thought himself to be an American writer (Atlas, 2000, 127).

Moreover, Atlas also refers to Alfred Kazin who observes "Jewish equaled ghetto." The term ghetto here relates to the limitations imposed upon Jews regarding the places where they forcefully made to live in, and how their freedom and liberty were restricted (Atlas, 2000, 128). This analogy between the ghetto and the Jewish writers also manifests the restricted Jewish identity of Bellow who was negatively identified as a Jew and not as American.

Bellow writes a letter to a contemporary writer Cynthia Ozick, "Jewish writers in America heedlessly missed the opportunity to shape public response to the incalculable loss of human lives and to the atrocities instituted by the Nazi regime" (*Letters*, 2010, 438-39). He also referred to his own limitations to explicitly explicate the theme of the Holocaust by saying that he just missed the "central event of their time" in his fiction. Bellow also says, "I was too busy becoming a novelist to take note of what was happening in the forties except the... terrible events in Poland" (*Letters*, 2010, 439).

Bellow's son Gregory Bellow observes that in the 1940s academic departments of English would not hire Jews who were supposed to be incapable of comprehending literature and not

to speak of creating it. Such an organized exclusion of the Jews made his father angry. Describing his indignation, Gregory refers to Mitzi McClosky who states that Bellow's nostrils flared at even a hint of that pervasive anti-Semitism (*A Son's Memoir*, 2013, 57).

Ben Siegel in his article *Bellow as Jew and a Jewish Writer* observes that in 1940s and 1950s America's well-known writers were being labeled as "Non Jewish". He claims that the high-flying writers like Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe also manifested extreme discrimination towards the Jews in their fiction. Bellow also felt these writers, prejudiced towards the Jews. Bellow could also refer to anti-Jewish lines in the works of T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound, Henry James and Goethe (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 29). Edmund Wilson never reviewed any of Bellow's books after *Dangling Man* and Bellow deemed it as "the whole Wasp effort to suppress the Jewish novel" (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 30).

Siegel explains that in 1953 Bellow achieved Pulitzer Prize for *The Adventures of Augie March*(1953) and a critic named Porter told the American nation that Bellow was "bastardizing the English Language" (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 37). Bellow confessed that being a Jew he could not resist the societal pressures, and said, "I think that when I wrote those early books I was timid"(Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 44). Siegel also quotes an essay *A Laureate for Saul Bellow* published in the Time magazine that was also rejected by Bellow when he was termed as a "god-father of a Jewish literary evolution" (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 47).

Bellow in one of his interviews assert, "I think myself as an American Jewish heritage, when people call someone a Jewish writer, it is a way of setting aside.... I felt many writers during the 50s and early 60s treated their Jewish colleagues with unpardonable shabbiness and anti-Semitism after the

Holocaust is absolutely unforgivable” (*Conversations with Bellow, 1994*, 185-86).

BELLOW'S FEARS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Gregory Bellow recalls his father's words, “Not a day goes by that I do not think of the horror of those last moments as the gas was released in the showers, the yelling, the screaming, the suffering” (Gregory, 2014, 19). In an interview to Cathleen Medwick in 1982 Bellow conceded that he felt like an insider/outsider, “even though I went to grammar school and high school and college in Chicago, lived in the streets and knew it so well; I felt there was a kind of exoticism about the place”(*Conversations with Bellow, 1994*, 192). Bellow also narrates how he was not given admission to a university and exclaims, “I should add that for a young man in my position there were social inhibitions too. I had good reason to fear that I would be put down as a foreigner, an interloper. It was made clear to me when I studied literature in the university that as a Jew and the son of Russian Jews I would probably never have the right feeling for Anglo-Saxon traditions for English words”(*Conversations with Bellow, 1994*, 63).

In his letters to fellow writers like Pascal Covici (Atlas, 2000, 289) and Cynthia Ozick Bellow observes, “Jewish writers in America heedlessly missed the opportunity to shape public response to the incalculable loss of human lives and to the atrocities instituted by the Nazi regime” (Atlas, 2000, 546). Bellow tried to persuade them to write about the Holocaust. Bellow's son Gregory Bellow (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 131) also referred to his father saying that Bellow missed writing about the Holocaust. Atlas refers to Bellow's visit to Poland in 1959 when he himself visited the sites of Auschwitz and these places put a considerable impact upon his mind (Ruth Miller, 1991, 185-86) and watched the TV Series went on air in

America about the Holocaust (Atlas, 2000, 126,388). Bellow also regrets that he could not write about the Holocaust in his earlier fiction and said, "I was too busy becoming a novelist to take note of what was happening in the forties except the... terrible events in Poland" (*Letters*, 2010. 439).

Bellow admitted that initially as a writer and being a Jew he could not resist the societal pressures, and said, "I think that when I wrote those early books I was timid." (Cronin and Trepanier, 2013, 44) In one of his interviews Bellow admitted that his non-Jewish colleagues in 1950s and 1960s treated their fellow Jewish writers with "Shabbiness and anti-Semitism" (*Conversations with Bellow*, 1994, 185-86). Later on, however, he wrote about the Holocaust in his novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) and stories like *Mosby's Memoirs* (1968) and *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989).

Initially, in his fiction, Bellow did not directly mention the traumatic event of the Holocaust, especially the earlier novels like; *The Adventures of Augie March*(1953), *The Victim*(1947) and *Herzog*(1964) until the unfolding of events after the 1967 Arab-Israel War and the re-opening of the Eichmann Trial. Bellow writes explicitly on this theme in his novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*(1970) and his two short stories *Mosby's Memoirs* and *The Bellarosa Connection*(1989). His son's remarks also made it clear that Bellow himself was afraid of the ravages of the Holocaust which were indelible after his visit to the gas chambers at Auschwitz, where Jews were tortured and killed.

Bellow conveys the fears and inhibitions of Jews and their cultural and social identity of the ones who were repressed for fear of persecution in the Post Holocaust American society. The writers of Jewish ancestry were ruthlessly labeled, as being part of a 'Jewish mafia' by American critics. The 1960s was the highest water-mark for those writers who wrote on the themes depicting the Holocaust.

The way Bellow described and portrayed the Jewish sensibilities in his fiction, show that his is a testimony literature since it implicitly and explicitly revealed to us, the trauma of the Holocaust. Since the Jewish writers were not given their due place and regard in the post Holocaust American society, they suffered from an inferiority complex, so did Bellow, who could not write about the subject of the Holocaust, in his earlier fiction.

The fiction of Saul Bellow reflects his solidarity for the victims of the Holocaust. He wanted his readers to take serious note of the trauma that was forced upon the European Jewry. Bellow mentions indirect and subtle allusions as well as direct references to the Holocaust. In a 1990 interview given to *Bostonia* Bellow asserted, "Somehow I managed to miss the significance of some very great events [of the Holocaust]. I didn't take hold of them as I now see I might have done. Not until *The Bellarosa Connection* [My own Parenthesis] (*Conversations with Saul Bellow, 1994, 277, Bostonia 47*).

CONCLUSION

Bellow's fiction lays bare the historical and political perspectives of the Holocaust, as he himself wanted to share his own feelings for the oppressed Jews and act as a Jewish spokesperson. He wrote on the subject of the Holocaust to create mass awareness about the excesses committed against the European Jewry by the Nazis. His letters, memoirs written and interviews with journalists and fellow writers also show that he wanted to write about the Holocaust in his fiction in spite of the fact that he faced discrimination. In the initial decades after World War II the Jews were financially weak and it was only after the passage of twenty years that they got sufficient strength to start talking about the Holocaust. They also lacked political influence in the country.

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