Chapter I

HUMANISM: 
ITS MAJOR TYPES AND FEATURES
Chapter I

The term ‘humanism’ has a long history of three hundred years since the seventeenth century. It has been defined as an emotive sign. But it has been given meanings so liberally that it was left with no specific meaning. It was taken for pietism, scepticism, aristocracy, egalitarianism, and even humanitarianism. Even intellectuals who belonged neither to the discipline of science nor social science were grouped as humanists. Clearly, no specific definition of the term humanism was attempted by scholars. It has continued into various types over different periods of time acquiring new features in each period and in each period becoming identified as a new doctrine.

**The Doctrine of New Humanism:**

Humanism started as a philosophical and literary movement in Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century and then spread to other European countries. In the Renaissance the dominant feature of life and thinking was to stress the dignity of man. Freedom of man was exalted as one of the major concerns of the humanists — both the freedom in nature and society. The empire, the church, and feudalism were socially recognised institutions of the state which could not be challenged. Man had to create autonomous institutions where he could exercise his full freedom. Gionozzo Manetti (1396-1459), Ficino (1433-1499) and Mirandola (1463-1494) were all for exaltation of freedom and man’s capacity to form his world, to vary it, and to improve upon it. They expressed full faith in man’s capacity to create a new world, to realise his

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own nature without any obstacles by the exercise of his full freedom of choice. The role of medieval church or other institutions in restricting his freedom was done away with. This theme of full faith in man’s capacity to shape his life in the world was treated later by the French humanist Charles Boulle (1475-1533) in De-sapiente.

As a result of the thinking of these humanists man was regarded as a part of nature implying some kind of presence of naturalism within humanism. They recognised pleasure as the ultimate end of man’s activities. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) argues in De-Voluptate that pleasure is the sole good for man and the sole end of human activities. All laws made in the city for promoting, virtue, liberal arts, medicine, poetry, oratory, etc. had one common end — to give pleasure. This is how they argued against the conduct of life preached by medieval asceticism and monasticism. They defended the life-affirming teaching of the Greek philosopher Epicurus whom the Middle Ages regarded as impious. They considered moral philosophy superior to physics and metaphysics, and active life superior to contemplative life. Likewise, they appreciated Aristotle for recognising the value of money for the life of society.

The humanists’ call for “return to antiquity” led to recognizing the need for historical perspective of events. To discover the true Plato and true Aristotle (that is their doctrines), it was necessary to go to the founders of the doctrines, not their interpreters. Hence the need for studying the actual language of the philosophers, thus making

3 The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 4. p.70.
philological demands an essential feature of humanism. The study of philology put stress on the study of human personality.

Humanism was not regarded as anti-religious. It did not challenge God or providence but asserted the need for man’s capacity for initiative to improve his world which included even religion. Man’s earthly life was seen as a realisation of heavenly life.

Tolerance became an important feature of humanism. The possibility of peaceful co-existence was stressed by the prevalence of multiple religious faiths preaching and aiming to promote peace.

Pico Della Mirandola was the great advocate and prophet of regenerative peace which would conciliate all religions and all the philosophies of the world. His work, Oration on the Dignity of Man, proposed to lay the foundation of universal peace by showing the common ground in Platonism and Aristotelianism and all religions and philosophies of antiquity, cabala, magic, scholasticism, etc. Pico and other humanists believed that primordial revelation is the single source of all kinds of religious faiths and that it was possible to return to that origin to get back the religious peace enjoyed by the happy ancestors of the human race. It was therefore important that, as advocated by the Dutch humanist, Erasmus (1446-1536) and the Englishman Thomas More (1478-1535) in his Utopia, religious tolerance be defended.

Modern science is the product of humanistic thinking of the Renaissance. In the Renaissance the slogan was “back to nature” through experimentation with the help of tools supplied by nature and the senses of man. Leonardo, Copernicus and Galileo were the prominent scientists

\[\text{4 ibid. p.72}\]
to advocate this views. The act of following Aristotle’s authority blindly was decried by some medical scholars (Ockham, Albary and others). The rebellion against Aristotelianism gave birth to humanism. The coming of humanism marked a distinct break with Aristotelianism even in the field of logic. In the sixteenth century the Indian Mario Nizolio (1498-1576) and the Frenchman Petes Ramus (1515-1542) and the Spaniard Jaun Len’s Vives (1492-1542) criticised formatism and the artificial character of Aristotle’s logic. These humanists called for “a logic better suited to the needs of natural experience and nearer to the form of ordinary language”.  

To the sixteenth and seventeenth century intellectuals or thinkers humanism implied a combination of wisdom and piety, or more precisely, devotion and pagan wisdom. Such an understanding of the term came obviously from the predominance of religion in life and the religious attitude towards life. But with the coming of rationalism in the eighteenth century humanism was conceived of as “belief in humanity”.

Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) defines ‘humanist’ as “a philologer; a grammarian”.  

The humanist’s mind was thus regarded as free, untainted by external influences and yet making broadly a study of human nature which remains unchanged and constant in every place or clime. Clearly, these elements of universality, commonness, goodness, and nobility are implicit in this conception of humanism. This conception of humanism thus minimises such opposite elements as narrow

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5 The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy Vol. IV, p.72.
individuality, particularity, badness and lowliness though it does not quite exclude them.

The orthodox ethical tradition of the eighteenth century formulated its viewpoint on humanism in great detail. According to this ethical tradition there has been an awareness of human nature through the ages. This historical awareness implies that human nature is permanent, uniform and unchanging.

The eighteenth century ethical tradition denied any such proposition as the one that the essential human nature ‘improves’ or progresses (Johnson). From this, therefore, an idea developed in the eighteenth century that even literary genres are permanent as each of the genres addresses itself to one unchanging element of the human consciousness. As a result of this conception of the permanence of human nature and literary genres the idea of ‘Innovation’ was not attached any significance.

Explaining the nature or composition of human nature Gibbon in his Autobiography\(^7\) affirmed that the prejudices and habits of mankind constitute the fundamental permanent human nature. These prejudices and habits are consecrated by the experience of mankind. Edmund Burke also agreed with this view of human nature when he said that the humanist possesses historical awareness and derives his value from the study of human history.

\(^7\) ibid. p.19.
Johnson observed that “human problems cannot be solved because they arise from the failures and defects”\(^8\) of humanity. Human beings can never be free from failures and defects due to imperfection and imperfectibility of man. The humanist view that man is noble and has dignity is therefore intended to mean that nobility and dignity come from his realisation of his own weaknesses and failures and defects as well as his ability to apprehend complex problems which cannot be easily solved.

Human beings possess two essential attributes — mind and imagination — which give him the symbol-making power. Understandably, man becomes fully human when he uses his mind in a uniquely human way. According to Sir J. Reynolds, arts derive their materials from human nature which they work upon and upon which they produce their effect. Man’s uniqueness, therefore, consists in the use of this symbol-making power.\(^9\) The humanist puts great emphasis on this power which is manifest in the artists' effort to create literary works. The humanist, therefore, praises a creative effort. Literature is thus regarded as valuable activity by the humanist because in it the mind of the artist moves between things and symbols, between activities and their metaphors. The humanists, in all ages, show great love for human learning which includes literature.

The humanist is always interested in evaluating experience to classify things vertically according to rank or social status in society, creating hierarchies in society and politics, literary genres and techniques regarded as better or worse, higher or lower, etc. According to these evaluations some periods of history are regarded as more noble than

\(^8\) Fussell, Paul, *op.cit.*, p.5.
\(^9\) ibid.
others. Some elements of human psyche (here 18th century follows 17th century humanists) are ranked. In one such hierarchy, will is at the top, reason and judgement in the middle, and senses and passions at the bottom.10

The humanist delights at veneration of the past — that is, he has a deep feeling for what has stood the test of time in human experience. He prefers the tested, the proven and the experienced to the new, the unknown and the innovative. Obviously, it implies that the humanist has a great respect for antiquity in any field. (Burke, in Reflections, speaks of the British lawyers having this tendency).11

The humanist believes that ethics and expression are closely allied. As Pope’s Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot indicates, good writing is an index of moral virtue. (But the reverse may not be true — e.g. a morally virtuous man may not be capable of expressing himself well in writing.)

The humanist considers moral questions or the obligation to determine moral questions as far more important than scientific or other activities concerning the operation of the world. Man’s moral nature is above other things. As Dr. Johnson says in his Life of Milton, “We are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance”.12

Humanism is therefore obsessed with moral questions. The humanist takes great pleasure in idealising self — restraint against succumbing to temptation.

10 ibid, p.6.
11 ibid. p.7.
12 ibid.
The eighteenth century humanist accepts the traditional Christian bias that human nature is essentially flawed and corruptible and beyond remedy. He refers to the myth of the Fall of Man and the myth of the Decay of Nature. Hence the view (Johnson's) that man's chief merit consists in resisting his nature. Man's dignity consists in his perception of this weakness and self-distrust. Satire becomes his chief literary weapon to attack this weakness or corruption in himself or in others.

The humanist considers the world of physical nature as morally neutral and, therefore, irrelevant to man's moral existence. Physical nature participates in man's corruption and can disturb his moral nature. Man's nature is moral nature; the natural world of plants and trees and animals is entirely different. With the help of his imagination man uses moral images.

According to the humanist man's tendency is to regard his nature as a simple thing, and overlook his mysterious complexity. Man is not merely rational. There is also an unpredictable, capricious element present in his mind.

The humanist also believes that man's relation to art and literature is primarily moral and only secondarily aesthetic. The primary purpose of literature is to teach, and to teach through aesthetic delight. This teaching function of literature is because of the flaw in man's nature which calls for such corrective help as may help it towards becoming flawless.

The humanist holds that man as a species is unique. Though in some functions men and animals are identical (e.g. in salivation, breeding) yet the humanist does not use such analogies. Analogies as a
mode of thought are discouraged. As Reed puts it, analogies do not lead to knowledge as knowing by experience. The humanist lays stress on man’s free will or choice.

Modern humanist revivalists such as the American writer and critic Joseph Wood Krutch and others hold that human nature is an independent reality and not a product.

The general humanist view is that man has free will/choice and he can always alter his condition to promote his happiness. This meaning which has also been read into Socrate’s Apology is interpreted as a good man will never suffer either in his life or after his death. As Joseph Wood Krutch sums up the humanistic creed:

“A humanist rejects any attempt to describe or account for man wholly on the bases of physics, chemistry, and animal behaviour. He is anyone who believes that will, reason and purpose are real and significant; that value and justice are aspects of a reality called good and evil and rest upon some foundation other than custom; that consciousness . . . is the most tremendous of actualities, that the unmeasurable may be significant; or to sum it all up, that those human realities which sometimes seem to exist only in the human mind are the preceptions, rather than merely the creations, of that mind.”

In the nineteenth century, the humanist – moralist intellectual such as G.E. Moore (1873-1958) in his Principia Ethica (1903) emphasized the inner state of being, personal relations and the contemplation of beauty as the most valuable things in man’s life. By the end of the century due to the predominance of science and the reaction against naturalism

13 ibid. p.10.
humanism took a variety of forms among which Neo-humanism was the prominent one.

**Neo-Humanism:**

The Neo-humanism or new — humanism was basically an American movement that originated in the literary criticism of Irving Babbitt and P.E. More. It aimed at reaffirmation of the humanist principle of man’s ethical sense — the higher will pointing to a spiritual order beyond man.\(^{15}\) Babbitt remained more or less silent on religion, but More found in this movement a dynamic discipline which could be used for the organisation of human life. In this way More struck a new path as an exponent of religious humanism. As a matter of fact, neo-humanism developed in America in the 1920s as a reaction against the romantic tradition and captured the mind of academicians. Ethical and secular in its emphasis, this brand of humanism was derived from Oriental, Greek and Christian sources. In opposition to efflorescent romanticism and naturalism which identified man as a part of nature, Neo-humanism asserted a dualistic point of view which kept man apart from nature as a rational and responsible moral agent.

Reacting against Rouscualistic Romanticism these neo-humanists accepted the authority of the past and rejected the idea of natural goodness. Unlike the Renaissance humanists they were conservative and aristocratic rather than liberal and democratic in outlook. After a debate on the principles of the movement a collection of papers entitled *Humanism and America* (1930), was edited and published by Norman Foerster followed by *The Critique of Humanism* (1930), edited by

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Hartley Grattan. Close on their heels came George Santayana's *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (1931) which characterized the movement as a late phase of the decline of Puritanism. During the 1930's a period marked by a wave of social consciousness, Neo-humanism lost its impact but the trend of thinking associated with it continued to influence the work of writers including T.S. Eliot.

Some Christian thinkers began to use the ideas projected in the humanist movement. This new trend known as Christian humanism rejected the traditional concepts of God, Church, prayer, and worship as anachronisms and emphasized the fact that the ultimate reality was to be found within man.

In America, this movement grew out of Unitarianism, a Christian movement which promoted the principles of freedom of belief, free use of reason in religious matters, universal brotherhood of man, a creedless church, a united world community, and vigorous programmes of liberal social activity. In this way, the American movement deviated from traditional humanism which was anticlerical in its approach. These new humanists who were involved in a lot of literary activities emphasized the fact that man was to strive for his own progress unhampered either by theological or scientific determinism.

**Marxist Humanism:**

In yet another important development in the nineteenth century humanism came into contact with Karl Marx's (1818-1883) human programmes. Marx considered religion as the opium of man which destroyed his real potentiality. In his *Economics and Philosophic Manuscript* (1844) Marx opined that man is possessed of vital powers
given by nature but he cannot utilise these powers because of the unfavourable conditions of his existence. As a result he became a suffering, dependent and limited being. But compelled by his instinctive needs he strives for realization and confirmation of his substantial powers.

Marxist humanism, thus, asserted that human activity was essentially a struggle with nature that must furnish him with the necessary means for satisfying his natural as well as intellectual and artistic needs. These struggles led to the creation of an entire world of culture in which man had to humanize nature while he was himself naturalized in the process. This complex process of humanization and naturalization was close to the Greek point of view which gave expression to the necessity of giving intelligible and beautiful forms to the phenomena of nature. The crux of the Marxist humanism is that man is the supreme being who does not need to involve himself with metaphysical problems like creation and existence of God. 16

In line with the Renaissance humanist’s stand against the Evangelicalism of human life, the Marxist humanism emerged as a revolutionary movement against Capitalism. The Marxists discovered that with the advent of materialism the world had to face a problem of alienation undermining human values. In short, Marxist humanism, taking the form of a collective and radical movement preached a kind of “positive humanism” which would release man from the chains of Capitalism.

Existentialist Humanism:

Existentialist humanism is another important form of humanism. Protesting against the views of the world and its policies of action in which individual human beings are regarded as the helpless playthings of historical forces witnessed before, during and after the two World Wars, all existentialist writers began to emphasize the freedom and importance of human personality. Kierkegaard himself emphasized the uniqueness of the individual persons. He did not entertain the idea that any metaphysical or scientific system could explain this uniqueness. Existentialism rejected any such Marxist view that the human crisis may be considered as a collective problem resulting from the conflict of social classes. The existentialists held that the root of the problems of the modern world could be traced to the problems concerning the individual or the human self. This way of thinking had some similarity with the Greco-Roman thinking. Emphasizing the subjectivity of the individual, existentialist humanism upholds the cause of human spirit against the oppressive features of mass society. It stresses man's despair and alienation and his birthright to freedom as a condition of his existence. The communists and the Christians do not support the existentialists emphasis on ignoring human solidarity and considering man as an isolated being. However, the French existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre, affirmed that

— by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.\(^{17}\)

Thus, it is not far from the point when we say that the common trend found in all the forms of humanism from Renaissance till the present age is its persistent concern with human interests which may also include seeking awareness of God or spiritual life as advocated by Neo-humanism. The purpose of humanistic religion is to humanize the whole of human existence.

According to the twentieth century thinkers, humanism is a philosophical and literary movement in which the focus is on man and his capabilities. F.C.S. Schiller and Irving Babbit called themselves humanists. Thus, in the present time humanism has had different connotations. Some contemporary thinkers\(^\text{18}\) put emphasis on:

(a) lasting human values,
(b) cultivation of the classics, and,
(c) respect for scientific knowledge

Humanism in philosophy denotes an attitude that stresses the worth and dignity of man and the human and secular aspects rather than the supernatural aspects of life.

Considering the development of humanistic thought through the centuries down to the twentieth century and the variations on the essential elements or tenets of humanism, I would like to argue that Saul Bellow's brand of humanism has a mixture of elements which are nearly common to several types of it. It strives for nobility and dignity of the individual man, his inclination to live in society, his emphasis on love and

brotherhood, his desire for achievement of enlightened rationalism, social and individual justice, his love of the intellectual and creative life, his desire for establishing a just and secure world, his emphasis on freedom of choice and belief in one's God and his craving for social equality. If there is one humanistic theme that unifies all his work it is this theme, stated in the manner of a central question — who is a good man? And how should a good man live?

Within the framework of this humanistic thinking which pervades the novels of Saul Bellow I would like to argue that this writer's humanistic concerns seem to be influenced by a suppressed Jewish psyche which has been deeply hurt by the intense suffering, torture and inhumanity that the Jews have been subjected to through the centuries. With this objective I now undertake the analytic study of most of his novels beginning with The Dangling Man.