Chapter VII

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After receiving Nobel Prize for literature in the year 1976, Saul Bellow published, The Dean’s December in the year 1982 by Harper and Row. The Dean’s December is written in the familiar Bellovian spirit. Bellow suggests that the novel opens new vistas — “heightened focus on political and social issues,” — and rises moral questions.1 Albert Corde, Dean of a Chicago College accompanies his Rumanian-born wife Minna, an astronomer, to Bucharest to be with her dying mother, communist authorities deny visiting rights as a means of punishing the old woman, a lapsed communist, and her daughter because she defected to the west. This example of the states control of individuals, private lives is seen in similar terms is the anarchy in the Dean’s home city. Witnessing a murder on the college campus he writes articles dealing with the violent ways of life to which black people are driven both in the streets and in jail.

Concerned with his humanistic values, Bellow attacks the negative social forces that work against human dignity. The novel is set in low life areas of Chicago and Bucharest. The protagonist, Albert Corde is a former respected journalist who has returned to academic life and is interested in pursuing his love for high culture. In the course of

* The Dean’s December, New York, Penguin (Re). 1982. All further references to The Dean’s December, are to this edition of the work and title will be abbreviated as DD.
the novel, Corde admonishes politicians, liberal intellectuals, journalists, and bureaucrats, in both democratic and communist nations for having failed to uphold humanistic values.

In this novel Saul Bellow presents once again some of the important events/themes from a humanistic point of view which will be discussed in detail in section III.

II

The differences between Chicago and Bucharest are emblematic of the differences between East and West. There is a wide gulf between the temperaments of men and women as between Eros and Psyche. Bellow presents an actual scene of the middle class people of Chicago and also the inhuman nature and woeful conditions of the jail. In Bucharest human dignity and active life are not respected. Even though the United States of America is a democratic country undemocratic regulations are common place practice. The novel reflects the life and conditions of the people of Bucharest, a communist State where no individual freedom or other human values respected. The Dean Albert Corde is engaged in the pursuit of history and politics, Minna of boundless space.

Liberals and conservatives find no common ground between them even in the pursuit of common ends. There is tight thematic unity in the novel and the construction of the novel is complex. The narrative deals

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not so much with the details of present events as with the events of the past which are brought in through a series of flashbacks out of the Dean’s memory. He remembers his early meeting with Valeria and her sister Gigi and their whisperings that he might make a suitable match for Minna in view of his tendency to go closer to women.

The Dean’s December is a horrifying version of the modern world as presented by Bellow which is the brink of an apocalypse of the kind seen in Mr Sammler’s Planet. Chicago symbolising America is an urban hell with a derelict society about to sink into the vast sewer. The Chicago slums are filled by ‘Blacks, Koreans, East Indians, Chippewas, Thais and hillbillies, squad cars, ambulances, fire-fighters, thrift shops, drugs hustlers, lousy bars, alley filth’.4

This passage outlines precisely the contours of the landscape and vision in the novel. Corde presents a measure for evaluating this world of the novel. The barrenness of this landscape of poverty is paralleled by the spiritual bankruptcy of the city’s rich and powerful. Corde thinks of Chicago as the “contempt center of the U.S.A.”5 aptly represented by his brother-in-law Morton Zaehner. Zaehner does not approve of Corde’s view of the world around him which shows his failure to understand the ‘real’ Chicago. Likewise Corde does not approve of Zaehner’s arrogant pragmatism that Corde describes as ‘brutal’.

Chicago is of course, a symbol for American life and values, and the novel focuses as much on Chicago’s as on America’s failure to maintain its historical status as the moral leader of the world. The novel

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4 DD(279-80)
5 DD(46)
presents the loss of direction that has beset the country leading to loss of human values. The sort of lifelessness that characterises human life or institutions are an intimation of an approaching apocalypse visualised in the prophetic vision of the Irish poet of W.B. Yeats in The Second Coming. Confronted by his nephew Mason, a representative of the relativist perspective of youth, Corde looks at his clock and sees the "long-legged fly" which in Yeast's poem of that title represents the mind of Caesar considering how civilization might be saved. To him the masses in the black under classes are the "dying generations" of Yeats's Sailing to Byzantium, a poem in which the aged scarecrow attempts to take shelter in the world of art and intellect so as to get out of the narrow world of sensuality fit only for the young.

The Dean's December is, without question, a book which gives a grim picture of contemporary life in America. Because of its negative outlook on life many reviewers, consider misfortunes of Corde's life as direct representations of Bellow's own misfortunes. The Dean's December is therefore a novel of the protagonist's meditation or self-dialogue, and a book generally sombre in its setting of Chicago as well as contemporary communist Bucharest. Bucharest is seen as a city pervaded by a melancholy atmosphere, a "livid death moment" in its air as the right approaches Bellow seems to be concerned with presenting an adequate account of a possible commonplace perception of this bleak world which cannot be fully explained. It is a world where life runs not naturally but in terms systems of explanations, formulas and concepts. Bellow attempts to present a protagonist who is a new man of feeling,

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6 DD(40)  
7 DD(226)  
8 DD
who like Sammler and Citrine, is aware of his own complicity, feels low because of his own self-questioning. But he is surely a protagonist who tries to understand his own fundamental human nature, and to discover the truth of what the soul of man feels. Bellow’s protagonist is more contemplative given to than confrontational or given to strange behaviour or outbursts of wrath, delight, lamentation. In The Dean’s December, according to a critic Daniel Fuchs, the characters lack “personalist charge”; “event is disproportionately retrospective”, the author “dismissive of everyday life.” There is no real conflict or comedy in the novel. The mode is so dominant and meditative. Fuchs adds, that “affirmation is itself at a remove . . . barely expressed in reflection, let alone action.”

The Dean’s December also exposes, to an unprecedented degree, the “clairvoyant’ quality of Bellow’s insight and his increasingly radical perception of reality. Bellow believes that the technological advancement of civilization had made an unhealthy impact on man’s sensibility. Modern technological civilization undermines the basic human values and aspirations. The Dean’s December unravels the dreadful facts about the life in Chicago. Chicago becomes in fact metaphoric representation of what may be regarded as some major attributes of the American civilization as a whole. The novel makes pleasant reading but it is not so powerful as novels of ideas are expected to be because of loose rhetoric. The introduction of some novel intellectual assumptions.

The Dean’s December lacks a profoundly mature technique. There is hardly any dramatic irony as the protagonist may be seen as identifiable with the novelist. Bellow seems to depend quite a deal on commentary and rhetoric which weakens the novel’s structure. The Dean’s December embodies an engaging tale, one as complex and multivalent as any Bellow fiction to date. The novel reveals a successful fusion, in the Coleridgean sense, of idea and image. Bellow takes interest in presenting an individual’s struggle with the complex business of living. Code’s world is an imaginative version of his creator’s world. The meditative perceptions of Corde’s mind provide the shaping principle of the novel. Criticisms of the novel’s inertia, the lack of dynamism in its plot do not become relevant. As Allan Chavkin rightly states, “The style of the novel is in accord with the meditative form. Bellows has created a language that captures the process of Corde’s mind as it explores its problems.” Bellow’s protagonists are placed in the context of their social environment, Bellow’s protagonists do not act freely. They seem to be “oppressed by personal natural forces that obscure the resulting tensions by developing them in oblique relation to their framing situations.”

The Dean’s December has some of the elements, events or theme which can be better understood from a humanistic point of view which will be analysed in the next section.

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13 Stanley Trachtenberg, Ed. Introduction: Critical Essays on Saul Bellow (Boston G.K.Hall, 1979), XIII.
III

As stated earlier in the Section I and II, Dean's December is a novel by Saul Bellow which contains the humanistic elements in term of theme, character and even some important critical observations on the Jewish situation more emphatically than is done in the earlier novels. The novelist is deeply involved in portraying the situation of an American Jew living in the modern world.

The protagonist of The Dean's December Albert Corde is a journalist who subsequently become a Dean of Students in a Chicago College. As Dean, he has embroiled himself in controversy by writing a series of articles charging Chicago for its racism, its clubhouse politics, and its lack of what he calls "moral initiative". He has also pressed for the conviction of a black man who murdered one of the college's white students. By doing so he has endeared himself neither to the college provost nor to the young liberals, including his nephew on the campus. In short, the dean is morally passionate for Chicago. He has jeopardized his professional standing both as journalist and college official by his absolute moral considerations. While dean is far away in Rumania he is not mentally free in thinking of his problems in Chicago. His articles in Harper's Magazine have caused lot of trouble in his college and in Bucharest is not without worry. He and his wife Minna spend the month of December in Bucharest visiting her dying mother, Valeria. But from the outset of their stay, they find that a Rumanian official restricts their visits to the dying woman, apparently because of Valeria's having fallen

out of favour with the socialist government for which she had due. This is one way the official chose to provide the woman thereby causing worry to Corde. He is in one sense a familiar Bellowian figure. In his incessant brooding over the biggest human issues, he reminds the reader of Joseph in Dangling Man, Asa Leventhal in The Victim and Moses in Herzog. He is part idealist, part oracle and part disillusioned realist. But more than any of his predecessors, he is deeply disturbed when he finds things contrary to his expectations. He finds a great deal of pettiness in Valeria that offends his own large-mindedness, he is nevertheless drawn to her affectionately, just as he is drawn to other markedly different from himself.

Corde has a philanderer’s contempt\textsuperscript{15} for women and generally fails to acknowledge their major contribution in conducting the ordinary business of life while he is busy devising intellectual theories.\textsuperscript{16} Corde can understand Minna’s scant involvement with the real world, finds that being herself a world famous astronomer. Consequently, Corde has to manage her affairs, which has obviously become his chief occupation after their marriage.

The reality of Chicago life can be seen from the manner in which the middle class people struggle for survival. But the intriguing question that promotes long-drawn suspense is: why Mason, nephew of Albert, commits crime? Understandingly, the reason for it is poverty. Following the death of his father and his mother becoming a widow there was none

\textsuperscript{15} ibid. p.181.
to care for them. Having failed to obtain a suitable employment elsewhere to earn for their livelihood Mason had no other option except to become a thief. Despite his moral sense and desire to work he is ultimately compel to make a compromise with his principles. This shows how an individual has to struggle for survival in this complex world. Lastly, the novelist also exposes the slum life and the rape of victims in Chicago:

"More recently he had been a busboy; and in the kitchen of the delicatessen — restaurant that employed him, he became intimate with a black thin man’s rap slut. His crimes were the familiar ones — theft, possession of stolen property, etcetera. He was how changed with homicide".17

The death of Rickie Lester becomes the root cause of the enmity between the white and the black students of the college. This points to the ethnic politics of the people of Chicago. The question of colour and racial discrimination continues to prejudice the minds of the people of Chicago, even though Chicago is a developed city. The incident exposes America’s internal politics between the black and the white people and also the suffering of the innocent middle class people, whose choice of a dignified existence is nearly impossible in their democratic country-

"The radical student live was that the college waged a secret war against blacks and that the Dean was scheming with the prosecution, using the college’s clout to nail to black man. Resolutions were passed and published in the student daily, which took up the case in a big way."18

Bellow’s interest in literary skill is combined with his love of nature showing thereby that his nature has a place in his humanistic

17 DD(32)
18 DD(35)
thoughts. The following lines express his sentimental feelings for nature. In these lines Bellow recalls an incident of his childhood. His uncle Harold tried to burn down all his books while his mother was suffering from cancer. These unforgettable incidents in the life of the protagonist are compared to the winds coming from the Arctic. Corde’s struggle, his moral philosophy, his values and belief in humanity are put in bold relief against the natural environment:

“It was exactly this time of the year, Christmas week, getting on for January. The wind came down unchecked from the Arctic — white mow, black chain fences, trees bare, sky blue. Four decades and two continents didn’t make such difference, for the present day was much like the other one — freezing blue, the sun light and women dying or dead.”

The protagonist realizes how complex one’s life in the world can be. The thought of death reflects the mind of the protagonist. His mother-in-law is dead yet her death invokes a sense of love in her son-in-law as well as in the heart of the people and we also know that death is unavoidable and living beings cannot ignore it. Such inevitable experiences promote the feeling of oneness and tolerance in human beings and provide awareness of the moral nature of man’s earthly life and strengthen belief in humanity:

May be on this death day Corde was receiving secret guidance in seeing life. Perhaps at this very moment the flames were finishing Valeria, and therefore it was especially important to think what a human being really was. What wise contemporaries had to say about this amounted to very little.

\[19 \text{DD}(239)\]


\[21 \text{DD}(243)\]
The following lines show the protagonist's human feelings towards animals implying that animals also need to be treated like human beings. They also have the feeling of love and look for love and also they want their freedom of choice. If we care for them they reciprocate by waging their tales, licking with their tongues, falling prostrate before their human masters. Thereby making theirs and own on the other hand, the novelist is also satirizing living more delightful and peaceful: human beings by showing that they care more for animals than human beings. Since the modern world is a world characterized by selfishness and corruption, we are no less than animals in our conduct, in trying to out do one another because due to the development in science and technology there is cut-throat competition everywhere and in every fields. So there is no love and tolerance, one’s value and dignity and freedom are not respected. Human beings have stopped to the level of the animals. They are more excited in organising a birthday party for a dog rather than helping out those in need and distress:

Corde would have guessed a party for the newly weds. Not at all, it was the dog's birthday party. Champagne, sturgeon, lobster, Russian eggs for starters, and lunch to follow. The dog was black, huge, gentle – a Great Dave, You were introduced to him in his circular wicker bed, almost a divan, where he laid indent. Touching, Corde as he bent down to stroke the soft animal. The dog sighed his hand. Wrapped and ribboned birthday presents was stacked beside his bed, and there were congratulatory telegrams.

In this novel the element of Judaism can be found. Corde does not seem to have regard for persons who are against their own culture. He believes that our indifference to cultural values makes the society
uncivilized. In order to have a decent society believing in humanity, the elite and the intellectuals should come forward and share their ideas for the betterment of the society. Though the world is changing with the advancement in science and technology yet the protagonist wants to preserve his own old tradition. Preserving a tradition means preserving culture of a civilized society. Bellow is also trying to say that there should be academic freedom and the academicians should come out with the ideas for promotion of a better society. This may be seen as the message of this novel:

“Philistinism is his accusation. Philistine by origin, humanistic academics were drawn magnetically back again to the philistine core of American society. What should have been an elite of the intellect became instead an elite of influence and comforts. The cities decayed. The professors couldn’t have prevented that, but they could have told us (as the Dean himself somewhat wildly tries to do) what the human meaning of this decay was and what it argued for civilization.”

While summing up, in this novel Bellow shows the real situation of the middle class people living in Chicago fighting for their survival and their moral dignity and liberty. The racial discrimination between white and black people and their inhuman morals make the novelist feel pity in his heart. In the same way the novel also shows the inhuman conditions of the communist country Rumania. When Corde and the wife visit Bucharest, to see his dying mother-in-law he finds that the people were strictly bound by rules and there was no air to breathe freely. Individual freedom of choice to express their ideas and aspirations was impossible and in the name of economic inequality
people were under the command of one authority. Bellow further shows his talent and his feeling towards animals; his love for the animals can be seen from the manner in which the birthday party of the dog is celebrated. But at the same time he satirizes human beings by comparing them with animals. Corde criticizes politicians, intellectuals, journalists and bureaucrats of Chicago and Bucharest for their selfishness, corruption, injustice and inhuman nature.

What distinctly marks at *The Dean's December* from other novels of Bellow is the meditative and introspective mood of its protagonist Albert Corde. As the Bellow critic Ellen Pifer has noted "Bellow's protagonist is more contemplative than ever less given to confrontation, antic behaviour or outbursts of wrath, delight, commutation" 24 another critic Daniel Fuchs points out that there is not much of action in the novel, nor is there any conflict or comedy and there is less of affirmation of life. Meditative mode is so dominant that "affirmation is itself at a remove... barely expressed in reflection let alone action." 25

Corde does not try to escape from this stark reality that he finds around him; he is not an escapist. On the contrary, he observes and tries to see how he may go closer to this reality. He does not try for detaching himself from it. He looks for exploring how to get himself connected to this reality. Like other protagonists before him Corde wishes to establish his connection with his native Chicago, with his society, with the community to which he belongs. Perhaps his academic profession might help him to find the right people to talk to. He gives up the journalistic

career wherein he had to deal with reporting the daily events and resumes his more serious intellectual reflections by going back to Aristotle and Plato and other ancient light givers.

Corde seriously believes that the moral values of contemporary society are collapsing and life is becoming directionless. Though in the early novels Bellow does not accept the wasteland situation visualised by T.S. Eliot yet in *The Dean's December* it seems he begins to accept it. In the words of Ellen Pifer, “At both ends of the world, Bellow suggests, the values by which humankind has aligned itself with creation are being obliterated. Ethical principles, the distinction between good and evil, have been forsaken; mechanistic concepts and data are the only approved signposts of reality. Machines multiply, the mighty prosper but the novel centre is crumbling. To Corde, contemporary society is a monstrous superstructure precariously erected.”

Bellow sees for intellectuals like Corde a positive role for redeeming contemporary society which is in this state of collapsing moral values. These intellectuals may not theories or deal in abstract theories or detach themselves from the life around them. Goodness of human beings must necessarily consist in their finding how to connect themselves with this kind of moral degradation both inside and outside the heart of the individual. Bellow views a constructive role for language in the reconstruction of this morally fallen society. Jargon and abstract theorisations and statements contribute to the decay of the society. The objective of Corde in writing the articles for the *Harper's Magazine* was to suggest a language of connection rather than of

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detachment which is "pictorial", factual rather than analytical and

critical in nature. Corde's articles provoked the anger of the readers who

remarked that abstract theories or words were verbal 'corpses' which

only help further destructive social conditions. However Corde

confessed and deplored his own stylistic excesses in the articles and the

introduction of poetical passages in his narrative of facts. But he points

out that the first important moral act on the part of a humanistic writer is

to explore and represent reality as art would represent. If it were done in

an analytic manner these would be greater emphasis on standards of

measurement rather than moral insight.

Clearly Bellow's humanism is moralistic. It is one that reunites

spirit and nature. It turns down the rationalist discourse of "head culture"

which has all the public respect and exalts the private language of

'internal beliefs' which remains a well kept 'secret' among the ranks of

the educated.27 As if echoing T.S. Eliot, Bellow admits that the spiritual

disarray of contemporary society has come abut as a result of denial of

moral knowledge, which is "Universal, the common property of all

human beings".28 The denial of moral knowledge shows that the slums

are not merely in the outer city of Chicago or Bucharest but also within

the inner being, or innermost city, of man. The common point between a

scientist and a moralist is that while the scientist points to, or tries to

find the material cause of the decay, the moralist points to the spiritual

cause. The problem of Professor Beech or any scientist is that he cannot

find or proper language to communicate his research. Corde arrives at

the conclusion that scientific formulations are inadequate because

27 Boyers, Robert "Literature and Culture: An Interview with Saul Bellow",
28 DD (201)
science has taken away and exhausted "all the capacity for deeper realizations out of the rest of mankind and monopolized it. This left everyone else in a condition of great weakness". It is therefore great triumph of Corde's inner quest that he finds the language of metaphor and moral vision capable of penetrating the dull and blunt mind of contemporary humanity. Attending and witnessing the funeral and conservation of his mother-in-law Valeria Raresh to flames in Bucharest gives a boost to Corde's resolve to pursue his quest for finding the connection between soul and the material reality. Obviously, Bellow is intensely humanistic. He emphasises greater attachment to and concern for the human reality. His concept of reality includes the moral and spiritual reality which is the ultimate goal of all civilised human beings. It is by seeking a connection or accommodation of the two realities that a true humanistic approach to life can be achieved. Below aims not at existence or survival but at life which is certainly a true human value. Comparing with other protagonists of Bellow's novels, Albert Corde is not faced with any Jewish problems as such nor does he suffer from the impact of the hurt psyche. But he is certainly deeply interested in lecturing on "Western humanism civilized morality, nihilism East and West". In effect this means that he is intensely concerned with the ills that trouble the world around him. As L.H. Golden States, "He is essentially a strong individual with a moral mission to right the wrongs of the world or at least to disseminate information concerning troubled mankind."

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29 DD (142)
30 DD(68)
However, even though Saul Bellow as a writer is able to transcend the Jewish perspective. He attains the universal perspective of a writer generally concerned with human beings human situation and moral humanism. Yet his as well as his community's hurt psyche is throughout reflected in his novels. His protagonists seek their absorption and social recognition and security in the larger society of the Gentiles. This can be better understood though in a passing way from the important concluding observation of L.H. Goldman on Albert Code:

Albert Corde is a protestant. All Below's protagonists concept Eugene Henderson, are Jewish. They are burdened with problem, and many of them are related to this Jewishness: assimilating into the Gentile community while not being able to full divest themselves of their heritage. Albert Corde also has problems. They are not the monumental problems that interfere with life but rather the disturbances of everyday living. They call for an inner strength that comes with security of place, self-acceptance, and social acceptance, i.e. being a WASP in America.  

While highlighting the novel's concern with life whether in America or in Rumania, The Dean's December presents also the Bellovian emphasis on developing a humanistic rather than a racial approach to all kinds of ills and prejudices that trouble the world. In Albert Corde, thus, he finally presents an ideal human being who has an affirmative view of life, who is a man of principle, who endeavours to provide solutions and answers to human problems, and who indeed appears to be an enlightened man ready to tell and suggest to the afflicted world that a good man is a humanist who affirms life, that humanism is his philosophy of life, that the betterment of human brotherhood is his religion.

32 ibid.