Chapter 4

The Game of Sex

Saul Bellow has time and again been accused of having failed to delineate real women in his work, which is not altogether a lie. He himself has accepted that he understands men better than women. When asked by Ada Aharoni if his next protagonist could be a woman, he replied “Maybe. Women also wear trousers now; it’s easier for me to understand someone who wears trousers.” He might not be capable of understanding women, yet Bellow undoubtedly admires, rather adores them, and that is probably why he had so many of them and so do his protagonists. “Marriages must be made,” says Chick in Ravelstein.

“In adultery men and women hope for a brief reprieve from the lifelong pain of privation. What made adultery a venial sin in Ravelstein’s judgment was that the pain of our longings drives us so mercilessly. ‘Souls Without Longing’ had been the working title of his famous book. But for most of mankind the longings have, one way or another, been eliminated.” (R 83) Adultery is a way of finding temporary relief from the responsibilities of marriage for most Bellow
characters. Herzog had two wives and several mistresses, one of whom, Ramona he finally decides to settle down with, though we are not sure how long their relationship would last, given their habits and past record. Ravelstein says:

Eros was a *daimon*, one’s genius or demon provided by Zeus as a compensation for the cruel breaking up of the original androgynous human whole. I’m sure I’ve got that part of the Aristophanic sex-myth straight. With the help of Eros we go on, each of us, looking for his missing half. Ravelstein was in real earnest about this quest, driven by longing. Not everyone feels that longing, or acknowledges it if he does feel it. In literature Antony and Cleopatra had it, Romeo and Juliet had it. Closer to our own time Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary had it, Stendhal’s Madame de Rênal in her simplicity and innocence had it. And of course others, untaught, untouched by open recognition, have it in some obscure form. (R 82-83)

There is a sex myth that Chick and Ravelstein discuss in order to justify their “longing.” Chick says that “Ravelstein was drawn to irregular behavior. Especially where love was the motive. He rated longing very highly.”
Looking for love, falling in love, you were pining for the other half you had lost, as Aristophanes had said. Only it wasn’t Aristophanes at all, but Plato in a speech attributed to Aristophanes. In the beginning men and women were round like the sun and the moon, they were both male and female and had two sets of sexual organs. In some cases both the organs were male. So the myth went. These were proud self-sufficient beings. They defied the Olympian Gods who punished them by splitting them in half. This is the mutilation that mankind suffered. So that generation after generation we seek the missing half, longing to be whole again. (R 24)

They take the story further to the power question and human depravity and dependence.

To be human was to be severed, mutilated. Man is incomplete. Zeus is a tyrant. Mount Olympus is a tyranny. The work of humankind in its severed state is to seek the missing half. And after so many generations your true counterpart is simply not to be found. Eros is a compensation granted by Zeus—for possibly political reasons of his own. And the quest for your lost half is hopeless. The sexual embrace gives temporary self-forgetting
but the painful knowledge of mutilation is permanent. (R 24)

Chick tells us that the pursuit of love was Ravelstein’s most important preoccupation. Critics have claimed that Bellow is masochistic and chauvinistic in his attitude towards women, whom he presents mostly through the eyes of his male protagonists. With the exception of Clara in The Theft, women mostly play secondary roles in his fiction, confirming to the Jewish view of woman as inferior to man. In ‘The Dean’s December, Albert Corde announces that it is possible to “love a woman for her tactlessness alone.” Now we can see why Corde hates Minna’s “science” and why Madeleine’s “books” annoy Herzog. Yet at the same time, we can observe a concealed appreciation for these women in both Corde and Herzog. Ada Aharoni observes that Corde has “great respect for Minna and is even in awe of her vast scientific knowledge and her probing intelligence.” Same is the case with Chick in Ravelstein, who considers Vela as superior to himself in intellect and respects her devotion towards work, but they anyhow get separated.

His critics maintain that Bellow’s women have no personality of their own. But a closer look into his fiction reveals some independent, confident females, who know exactly what they want and how they
can achieve their goals. Madeleine, for instance, chucks Herzog out of her life, opting instead, for his crippled friend, Valentine. Bellow’s depiction of Madeleine appears negative because we see her through Herzog’s eyes, the very man whom she rejected. We can not expect him to praise her, though he does so, unawares. Some feminist critics consider Bellow as a misogynist, who has failed to deal adequately with feminity. But at the same time there are those who consider him a feminist and still others feel that his attitude towards women is not unambiguous altogether.

Feminists would say that Saul Bellow’s major male characters are all dissatisfied with the women in their lives because they are chauvinists who believe so deeply in the superiority of males that they cannot see the wrongs they do to their women and the sacrifices these women make for them. They look for the traditional slave-minded women in modern, independent beauties, who have every reason to believe in themselves and not be dominated by anyone. This contradiction is what leads to their frustrated blabbering and incessant blaming of the women they claim to love. They crave to rule and feel castrated when their ego is challenged.

Herzog is cursing Madeleine throughout the novel for being a
“bitch,” but the truth is, he himself rejected the simple woman that Daisy, his first wife was. He has and has always had several women in his life and while he was married to Madeleine, he was dating his student Ramona, who soon started taking him seriously and wished to marry him. But Herzog is not ready for commitment. His mistress, Ramona whom he finally decides to marry, is a very strong and confident character, someone who’s “not at war with herself; instead, this woman revels in her given nature.”

This is key to assessing Ramona’s true, impressive prominence in the novel. While Herzog strives to be a ‘marvelous Herzog,’ Madeleine tries to disguise her violence and Jewishness, and Gersbach manipulates the vocabulary of honesty to his own crooked ends, Ramona simply magnifies her real inner self. Her self-acceptance is as much a balm to Herzog’s troubled soul as her sexual acrobatics are to his flesh. (Cohen)

There is nothing artificial about Ramona as compared to Madeleine and Gersbach, both of whom are based upon real life characters. Madeleine is Bellow’s second wife Sondra and Gersbach, his close friend, Jack Ludwig. Anthony Hecht revealed that Ludwig was evil by nature and took an “Iago-like pleasure in double-crossing”
innocent people. Bellow was very close to Ludwig and treated him as a disciple. They had been very close friends “since their Bard days.” It was a “stormy male” friendship, the kind “which Bellow had a particular affinity” for. They had a lot in common: “literary ambition, nostalgia for their Jewish-immigrant roots” and a “fondness for company.” But most importantly, Ludwig's extreme admiration for Bellow, “that verged on sycophancy,” made it much easier for him to come close to Bellow as “Saul was always a sucker for flattery.” In his heart, though, Jack was jealous of Saul as he “wanted to be Saul Bellow.”

_Herzog_ includes many personal details from Jack-Sondra-Bellow relationship. In fact, it is his personal diary for that period of friendship, love and betrayal. Some have even hinted at a homo-erotic connection between Bellow and Ludwig, which also appears in an earlier draft of _Herzog_, later edited and this episode omitted from the book. “The main object of Ludwig’s affections wasn’t Sondra at all, claimed some observers. His affair with Sondra was ‘a gesture of love’–for Bellow. Theodore Weiss summed up Ludwig’s motive best: ‘If he couldn’t go to bed with Saul, he’d go to bed with his wife.’ This may not have been an entirely fanciful interpretation of events,” says
Atlas. In fact, Herzog in a mental letter to Gersbach, writes, “you’re welcome to Madeleine. Enjoy her – rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her, however. I know you sought me in her flesh. But I’m no longer there.” (H 318)

Bellow was confused by and hostile to ‘inverts,’ as he referred to homosexuals; they were ‘America’s chief export to Europe,’ he quipped maliciously. In England and France, they were an integral part of the culture; back home, they were still regarded – by the Partisan Review crowd, at any rate – as decadent and distasteful curiosities. It was a stubborn prejudice – Truman Capote and Gore Vidal were among Bellow’s least favourite writers – but one that he yielded up selectively: Half a century later, he would count as his closest friend Allan Bloom, a flamboyant homosexual. As with other of Bellow’s prejudices, exception could always be made for the particular case. (Atlas 150)

Bellow was averse to homosexuality but he became friends with Allan Bloom, “a flamboyant homosexual,” whose political convictions matched extraordinarily with Bellow. Fifteen years Bellow’s junior, Bloom was the “latest–and last–of his intellectual mentors, succeeding
Harold Rosenberg and Edward Shils in the role of Great Books tutor.” Their partnership was “legendary in Hyde Park” and the literature course they taught together, was extremely popular. Students had great things to say about them. “There always seemed to be a large emotional charge in those exchanges,” recalled one of them, while another said; “many of us sat on the edge of our seats when the big guns began to go off.” In spite of their wonderful bonding, Bellow was charged with betraying his friendship and defaming his best friend after his death.

Bellow’s last novel, Ravelstein became controversial due to embarrassing truths revealed about Bloom’s life and death. Ravelstein was a Roman a clef in the form of a memoir based upon the life and death of Allan Bloom, Bellow’s close friend and a homosexual who died of AIDS. Bellow claimed it was Bloom’s wish, but his critics continued to accuse him of betraying his dead friend’s trust. Bloom had a boyfriend and supposedly died of AIDS. In spite of being the closest of friends, Ravelstein hesitates in discussing with Chick, his relationship with Nikki, his boy friend. He had never spoken in favour of homosexuality and he would “sometimes lower his voice in speaking of Nikki, to say that there was no intimacy between them.
‘More father and son,’” (R 69) reveals Chick. Ravelstein was reluctant in accepting that he was in a relationship with Nikki as he considered Chick old fashioned and conservative in certain matters.

In matters of sex, I sometimes felt Ravelstein saw me as a throw-back, an anachronism. I was his close friend. But I was the child of a traditional European Jewish family, with a vocabulary for inversion going back two millennia or more. The ancestral Jewish terms for it were, *Tum-tum,* dating perhaps from the Babylon captivity. Sometimes the word was *andretygenes,* obviously of Alexandrian, Hellenistic origin—the two sexes merged in one erotic and perverse darkness. Mixture of archaism and modernity were especially appealing to Ravelstein, who could not be contained in modernity and overflowed all the ages. Oddly enough, he was just like that. (R 69)

Ravelstein is Bloom and Chick, Bellow. Not just Bloom, *Ravelstein* features a bitter portrait of Bellow’s marriage to Alexandra too and once again, we have a “one-sided account” of a relationship “that mars all his marital self-portraits.” Bellow depicted “Alexandra in the person of Vela,” as a cold, unemotional and mean spirited “professor of
physics” who ignores her husband because she is too absorbed in her work. Just as Bellow was “utterly enraptured” with Alexandra, Chick is madly and deeply in love with Vela, he almost stands in awe of her. Ravelstein warns him against his “uxorious tendency” and even prophesies there break up years before they actually part ways: “Vela will soon be through with you. She’s off to conferences all over the world. She’s never home for as much as a week … all you’ve got to live with now are her clothes hanging in the closet. It’s only to be respectable that she needs a husband. I don’t think men are her top preference.” (R 84)

While Chick had always considered her beautiful, Ravelstein tells him that “she’s got the “makings of a beauty but she’s not a beauty, no matter how she dresses and makes up.” It is quite clear that Ravelstein is jealous of his best friend’s wife, who draws more attention from Chick and “she’s got some sort of European military correctness about her. And when she inspects you, you just don’t make the grades with her.” Vela does not like Abe and he dislikes her. “Mentally speaking,” he tells Chick, “she comes toward you but then walks away as fast as her high heels will carry her. She’s an odd one, Chick. But you’re pretty odd yourself. Artists fall in love, of course,
but love isn’t their primary gift. They love their high function, the use of their genius, not actual women. They have their own sort of driving force.” (R 84)

Chick reveals that “Vela’s demand was for twenty-five percent of my bank account, tax-exempt.” (R 85) Now, this annoys him and he is reminded of her haircuts, eyebrows, dresses, shoes and other extravagances.

When supplies ran low, Vela went to the supermarket and bought up a storm– apples, grapefruits, meats for the freezer, cakes, tapioca puddings for dessert, canned tuna and tomato herrings, onions, rice, dry breakfast cereals, bananas, salad greens, cantaloupes. I tried several times to teach her how to choose a melon by sniffing it at the bottom, but evidently she didn’t want to be seen doing anything out of line for a person of beauty and delicacy … Toward the last, without realizing how near the end-zone was, I was still trying to puzzle out Vela, to get a handle on her motives. She preferred deeds to words, conceding that she couldn’t compete with me verbally. (R 85-86)
She leaves Chick in a very strategic manner, making him realize or rather feel that he had been unfair to her. “But I wonder whether there are facts which might have escaped you, Chick. I don’t blame you for demanding that she should behave as a wife ought, according to your lights. But they have lights too, the women. She has a considerable reputation in her own field. She’s a high-grade scientist, they tell me,” (R 87) and she might have expected due respect from her husband too. “In the eyes of the world it’s a big deal to be a chaos physicist – I don’t know what it’s about but it’s considered highly prestigious. Only you give her no credit,” (R 87) Ravelstein tells Chick.

Initially, Alexandra had appeared to be a Jewish motherly type of woman to Bellow and his well-wishers, who were very glad to see him in her company. Bellow loved his mother too much and had never recovered from the shock of her death. She was probably, always looking for her, in his wives, but all of them were extraordinarily brilliant and furiously independent, who could never be tied down to household simplicity. “But your idea was that she would come to love you. She’d love you because you are lovable. But this Vela of yours reserves her intellect for physics. The idea of leading a warm family
life is her number one antipremise,” (R 88) Ravelstein tells Chick.

Instead of cooking for her husband, she would buy groceries and get them “delivered in boxes by young criminals who have parole officers keeping an eye on them. You can cook this shit yourself and eat it by your lonesome, and then scrub the pots. Just as your mother did after feeding her family a real meal, cooked with love.” (R 88) Ravelstein is explaining to Chick how dead his relationship with his wife has become. She does not love him any more and he should stop expecting things from her. “You thought that if you could get her to prepare your dinners with love she’d come to love you. So her comment on this is satirical; she sends you the groceries. Just as she belongs to a different universe altogether. And you belong to a third universe, the vanishing one of old-fashioned Jews. The soul of another is a dark forest, as the Russians say,” (R 88) says Ravelstein. “She notified you that you have no more access to her body. Your lease has expired. But it was never meant to be permanent. People can’t be expected to live without love or the simulacrum of love. A nice friendly sexual connection is what most have to settle for,” (R 88-89) Ravelstein further says.

Chick remembers how she had unexpectedly turned up in court,
“in a high-buttoned jacket, more like heraldry than feminine dress, brass buttons from the throat to the knees, with the make-up and tight hair of a ballroom dancer.” (R 89) She made him feel really bad about himself. “It is probably impossible to convey the messages she was emitting. I had had my chance, given with extraordinary queenly generosity, and it was obvious that I just didn’t have what it took.” (R 89) Chick’s frustration is quite obvious here, and Chick is not alone, all Bellow protagonists go through similar humiliating situations, all based upon his real life and relationships. Just like Bellow, his protagonists go through strings of unfulfilling relationships. Vela tells Chick once, “You talk to me in a very superior way, as if you are putting me down as an ignorant woman. You should please remember that I stand as high in my field as you do in yours.” (R 104) Chick replies, “‘Of course you do. And even higher,’ … So I allowed Vela to be as superior as she pleased, while Ravelstein said I should have more proper pride and that it was phony of me to be so meek.” (R 105) Ego, arrogance and unrealistic expectations mar all his heroes’ relationships. Chick sarcastically remarks:

    The considerate man, the only right kind, remembers birthdays, honeymoons, and other tender anniversaries. You have to kiss
the ladies’ hands, send them roses; you cringe, move back the chairs, you rush to open doors and make arrangements with the maitre d. In that set, women expect to be petted, idolized, deferred to, or romanced. (R 106)

And when a woman realizes that she cannot continue with her relationship, she quietly distances herself from the man. Chick observes that the simplest of women are smart enough to “understand when it’s time to draw the line with a difficult husband – when to siphon the money out of their joint bank account.” (R 16) Chick remembers and describes the artificiality of his wife in the following words:

Unless you had lived with her (Vela), you wouldn’t know what she did in the morning with her hair, her cheeks, her lips (especially the upper lip) – the phases of her preparations. She had to be seen as a beautiful woman. But it was beauty-parade beauty, and required preparation at a West Point or Hapsburg hussar level. I will be suspected of prejudice. But I assure you that I happen to be a serial marrier and I had here a problem of self-preservation. (R 107)
He is evidently enraged and infuriated at the divorce, but he has to share the blame for it. Why was Ravelstein allowed so much freedom and say in a husband-wife relationship, especially when Vela did not approve of Ravelstein? It also appears that Abe had a special feeling for his friend and he actually did not want his marriage to work. Chick narrates an instance of Abe’s visit to the countryside.

A few days in the country led me to conclude that Ravelstein’s visit was a proof of his affection. He didn’t care about the fields, trees, pools, flowers, birds: These wasted the time of a superior man. Why did he give up his bank of telephones, his restaurants, and all the conveniences and erotic attractions of New York or Chicago? Because he wanted to see firsthand what was going on between Vela and me in New Hampshire. (R 108)

Chick has no objection and instead he seems pleased with his friend’s intrusion into his marriage. Feminists have then, rightly complained that “the solicitude Bellow displayed toward his male characters didn’t extend toward his women characters, except the elderly ones.” Herzog remembers his second wife, Madeleine, as extremely dominating and “magnificently imperious,” throwing tantrums, and “disparaging her timid husband’s prowess in bed.” Bellow accepted later that he was
“blind with rage” while writing those passages. But Herzog very conveniently forgets that he too had several other women in his life while he was married to Madeleine. These women were there just to entertain him, to satisfy his physical needs.

Ramona is indeed presented as a sexual priestess for whom, body is the “true and only temple of the spirit.” This portraiture indeed hurt Rosette Lamont, the basis for Ramona. Indeed, everyone accept Ludwig felt insulted by the way they had been depicted in Herzog, especially Sondra’s lawyer, Mr. Jonas Schwartz, to find himself portrayed as the “hectoring, dwarfish Sandor Himmelstein.” Everyone who favoured or helped Madeleine, was depicted as trapped in the web of her beauty. Madeleine, according to Herzog, used everyone, even God for her personal benefit. In a mental letter to Dr. Edwig he writes; “And you fell in love with her yourself, didn’t you? Just as she planned. She wanted you to help her dump me. She would have done it in any case. She found you, however, a useful instrument. As for me, I was your patient…” (65)

That Madeleine could make anyone fall in love with her was Herzog’s view of her and he could see that “Edvig was fascinated by every
word about Madeleine. Nodding, he raised his head, his chin rose at every sentence, he touched his neat beard, his lenses glittered, he smiled.” (H 54) When Dr. Edvig calls her a deeply religious woman, Herzog is reminded how she often changed her faith and went to pray as if she had been doing it all her life. She was that pretentious.

Madeleine dresses for her false role as a Catholic, while Ramona undresses for her role as a genuine ‘priestess’ of love and sex. Ramona’s ‘religion’ even demands that she observe ‘rituals of undressing,’ and she delivers ‘sermons’ on ‘how to renew the spirit through the flesh.’ While Madeleine believes strictly in God, sin, and death, Ramona ‘does not believe in any sin but the sin against the body, for her the true and only temple of the spirit.’ In Ramona’s case, the body is indeed the temple of the spirit. (Cohen)

Ramona is there in Herzog’s life even when he is happily married to Madeleine, so in a way, he has no moral right to blame his wife, of cheating. Still, he does and hates her for everything, even for things that had made him love her. After the divorce, he finds solace in Ramona, but only for a while, then he leaves for a holiday, declining Ramona’s offer of marriage, which he would eventually accept. She
was his student and he was opposed to having affairs with students, but she is drawn towards him. “Ideas excited her. She loved to talk. She was an excellent cook” and “her interest in him quickly became serious, and he consequently began to worry about her, to brood.” Thus he runs away from her. But she remains an important source of relief and comfort to him. He compares his second ex-wife to this naturally attractive woman.

Like Madeleine, Ramona also applies makeup. However, Ramona’s body, unlike Madeleine’s, does not gainsay her makeup. In fact, her physical self outshines it: ‘Ramona’s rouge was superfluous, her face was glowing, even burning.’ If Madeleine’s crucial scene is the one in which she uses costume and makeup to veil her real self, Ramona’s preeminent scene is the moment in which she employs costume and makeup to showcase or accent her authentic self. Importantly, the parallels and divergences between these two female characters become even more marked when both women clothe themselves for the express purpose of enacting religious rites. (Cohen)

Ramona has mostly been described as a sexual goddess, “but there was something intensely touching about her, too. She struggled, she
fought. She needed extraordinary courage to hold this poise. In this world, to be a woman who took matters into her own hands! And this courage of hers was unsteady. At times it trembled,” (H 337) observes Herzog. He had never wanted this affair because “In principle, he opposed affairs with students, even with students like Ramona Donsell, who were obviously made for them.” (H 14) Trying to be earnest, he draws Ramona’s attention even more strongly.

Within a few days Ramona was saying that this was no ordinary affair. She recognized, she said, that Moses was in a peculiar state, but there was something about him so dear, so loving, so healthy, and basically so steady – as if, having survived so many horrors, he had been purged of neurotic nonsense – that perhaps it had been simply a question of the right woman, all along. (H 15)

While Ramona was trying to comfort him, he was losing hair over Madeleine and “this rapid deterioration he considered to be a surrender to Madeleine and Gersbach, her lover, and to all his enemies.” (H 18) For a long time he had remained in the dark, but now he knew “the whole funny, nasty, perverted truth about Madeleine.” (H 42) He is so hurt by the breach of trust from his wife
and best friend that he, at times, dislikes “having a face, a nose, lips,” because Valentine has them. He remembers how Madeleine used to turn violent at times with him, and somewhere believes that he could have won back her love, if he had been a little aggressive himself instead of being so docile with her. He remembers once when he had complained about the unclean room, how she had started screaming at him and thrown herself on the bed, “tearing off blankets and sheets, slamming books on the floor, then attacking the pillows with her nails, giving a wild, choked scream.” (H 57) And when he had suggested psychiatric help and tried to soothe her, she had tried to hit him in the face, “too clumsily to hurt him. She jumped at him with her fists, not pummeling womanlike, but swinging like a street fighter with her knuckles. Herzog turned and took these blows on his back. It was necessary. She was sick.” (H 57)

The relationship between Iva and Joseph in *Dangling Man* is comparatively relaxed. Even though Joseph has another girl, he more or less, remains loyal to his wife. She does not always listen to him, and in one instance when Joseph tries to dissuade Iva from having another drink and fails, he is “irritated enough to consider, for a moment, striding up and snatching the glass away,” (DM 178) but he
decides to ignore, starts a conversation with Abt on the first subject that comes to hand, the ‘war in Libya’ and wanders into the kitchen, talking. He is a self-respecting man, who happens to be unemployed and waiting to be drafted in the Army. His ego therefore, takes the better of him at times and he starts feeling unwanted and a burden on Iva because she is earning presently, not him.

Don’t make fun of me, Iva. Things have changed. You’ve become the breadwinner, and whether you know it or not you resent the fact that I stay at home while you go to work every morning. So you think up things for me to do. You want me to earn my keep … ‘You aren’t aware of it yourself, Iva. I’m not blaming you. But you are the provider. After all, it’s bound to have an effect on you … (DM 178)

Iva frustrated, says; “You’re having an effect on me. You’re making me sick.” (DM 178) Ultimately, she starts crying. “Jesus, Jesus! Can we never have a talk without a flood of tears? It’s easy for you to cry. But what can I do? I’m getting out. I should get out for good. This is no sort of life. Stop that crying!” (DM 178-179) She tries to stop crying, but “her efforts” end in a “grotesque sound brought up from her throat. She rolled over on the bed and concealed her face from
me,” says Joseph. They quarrel and get angry and mad at each other at times, but when Joseph is leaving for the Army, he feels bad only about leaving her behind. “This is my last civilian day. Iva has packed my things. It is plain that she would like to see me show a little more grief at leaving. For her sake, I would like to. And I am sorry to leave her, but I am not at all sorry to part with the rest of it.” (DM 179)

Similarly, Corde’s relationship with his wife Valeria in The Dean’s December is quite healthy. They both stand by each other and support one another. The novel tells the story of Albert visiting his dying mother-in-law along with his wife, Minna, who is not being allowed to meet her mother as much as she should, due to some old political rivalry of her mother’s. In order to arrange for them to meet more often, Corde goes to see the ambassador and tells him, “We’ve been here for eight days—I think. I can’t even keep track of the dates. My wife has seen her mother twice.” (DD 62) She had seen her mother only twice and the second time without the hospital superintendent’s permission. “You can imagine what a state she’s in. She last saw her mother five days ago. She’s grieving,” (DD 62) Corde tells the ambassador.

Corde is quite considerate and genuinely concerned about his
wife’s feelings. Finally, when her mother dies, he takes her anger quietly, only trying to comfort her, but failing terribly. “What comfort is it to hear that everybody is some kind of schizophrenic tapeworm? Why bring me out in the cold to tell me this? For my own good, I suppose,” (DD 263) complains an irritated Minna. “It was no ordinary outburst. She was tigerish, glittering with rage. Her altered face, all bones, turned against him,” (DD 263) Corde tells himself. “Subdued by his failure with her, he considered how he might do better. It was worse than nothing to be so elementary on such a subject, to misjudge his wife’s feelings, to sound like a high-class educated dummy. Academic baby talk,” (DD 264) Corde repents his lecturing to his wife. But gradually, he manages to reach out and comfort his grieving wife.

Then, we have Henderson who loves his wife, Lily, in spite of all her drama and lying. Lily is a fiercely independent woman who wants what she wants and knows what she does not want in life. When she is engaged to someone she does not love, she clearly tells Henderson;

“He’s a nice man. He’s not what you think. He’s very decent and he supports his parents. But when I ask myself whether I could live without him, I guess the answer is yes. But I am learning to get along
alone. There’s always the universe. A woman doesn’t have to marry, and there are perfectly good reasons why people should be lonely.” (HRK 27)

She is crazy about Henderson and does not hesitate in expressing her feelings for him. Henderson, too loves her in spite of all her blackmailing and manipulativeness.

She’s not naturally truthful. Look at the way she lied about all her fiances. And I’m not sure that Hazard did punch her in the eye on the way to the wedding. How can I be? She told me her mother was dead while the old woman was still living. She lied too about the carpet, for it was the one on which her father shot himself. I am tempted to say that ideas make people untruthful.

Yes, they frequently lead them into lies. (HRK 245)

Henderson was shocked when he came to know that Lily had been lying about her mother’s death. “That’s a hell of a way. You can’t do that. Are you playing chicken-funeral with your own mother? You were trying to con me,” (HRK 27) he told her. He is well aware that she is “something of a blackmailer,” still admits that he dearly loves “that big broad” and goes on to say; “Moreover her face blushes
white, which touches me more than anything else. Nevertheless she is reckless and a spendthrift and doesn’t keep the house clean and is a con artist and exploits me.” (HRK 245) Like Herzog, he too is unhappy with his wife’s disinterest in household chores, as Lily too, like Madeliene, fails to keep the house clean. Describing his married life with Lily, he says;

Family life with Lily was not all that might have been predicted by an optimist; but I’m sure that she got more than she had bargained for, too. One of the first decisions she made after looking over the whole place as lady of the house was to get her portrait painted and hung with the rest of the family. This portrait business was very important to her and it went on until about six months before I took off for Africa.

So let’s look at a typical morning of my married life with Lily. Not inside the house but outside, for inside it is filthy. (HRK 28)

Childhood sexual abuse also finds place in Bellow’s stories. Herzog and Madeleine, both have been sexually abused as kids, and both have traumatic memories of the respective incidents. He dismisses Madeleine when she complains of her past once. “Rather
than expressing sympathy for Madeleine’s trauma, Herzog summarily
discresses her story, not merely because Madeleine is a drama queen
(though she most certainly is) and not even because her story may be
false, but precisely because it may be true. True, but altogether too
commonplace for serious consideration,” (Brocious and Muhlestein)
because it happens to many, many people. Herzog says that it is not
important or big enough to “base a whole life on that.” This behavior
appears extremely insensitive at this time, but “near the end of the
novel, the psychodynamics behind his curt response become clear,”
(Brocious and Muhlestein) when Moses is reminded of his own abuse.

His meeting with an accident when he is with June makes him
worry for his daughter and the “potent combination of a child’s
anxiety, a father’s concern, and the circumstances attendant to the
automobile accident suddenly trigger in Herzog a cascade of long
forgotten or partially repressed childhood memories.” (Brocious and
Muhlestein) Herzog was molested as a child but he never speaks to
anyone about it. He buries deep his memories of the rape because he is
ashamed and traumatized. “And because, as a poor Jewish boy from
the wrong side of the tracks, he had already learned that some truths
must never be spoken.” (Brocious and Muhlestein) Herzog after his
recollection of this traumatic incident, says; “there is a piece of famous advice, grand advice even if it is German, to forget what you can’t bear.” (H 289) He goes on to say, “you can’t go on transposing one nightmare into another, Nietzsche was certainly right about that. The tender-minded must harden themselves.” (H 289)

Elizabeth Brocious and Daniel Muhlestein have noted in their article entitled ‘Childhood sexual abuse as a determinate source of trauma in Herzog’ that the “partially repressed scene of primal trauma, which we take to be the determinate cause of Herzog’s distempered mind, is not concerned with betrayal, marital strife, the Freudian family romance, an infantile death wish, prejudice, philosophy, language,” etc. “Rather, it is the trauma caused by sexual abuse. The trauma caused by rape. The trauma caused by the molestation of children in general and of Moses Herzog in particular.” Albert Corde, in The Dean’s December too gets disturbed when he learns about child abuse at a court hearing.

The next case is one of the sexual abuse of small children. Pictures are produced of screaming kids whose faces are spattered, covered with gobs of semen. Who would do this? And who had the presence of mind to take such pictures,
waiting until the thing has been done? Some undercover-agent photographer? (159)

He is appalled and shocked at the lack of sensitivity of the media; reporters, photo journalists and secret agents, who take pictures of crime instead of trying to avert it, and then sell these stories for large sums of money. He believes that instead of utilizing their strength to protect the innocent, “the media are more comfortable with phonies, with unprincipled men.” At one occasion he points out the insensitivity of a lawyer towards a woman client, Lydia Lester. Her husband’s murder trial is being handled by Max Detillion, who unknowingly hurts her by wooing her.

Corde’s presence may have made things harder for Lydia Lester, whom he had come to protect and support. In fact he saw that his being there aggravated Max’s sensationalism, made Max more melodramatic. He sent continual eye messages to the two newspapermen who covered the trial (Don’t miss this, hear?). He did not give the girl a hard time on the witness stand, because juries sympathized with young women whose husband had been killed. Knowing this, he intended to be tactful. He did not know that he oppresses her by wooing her. He wasn’t at all
aware of it—simply didn’t know what he was doing. It would never have crossed his mind that she was mourning, sick, shaky, frightened. The message he transmitted was that he was doing his professional best to obtain testimony favorable to his client, but that when this ordeal was over he would show her the other side of his nature, which was tenderly erotic. He sent the same sexual message to all females from a full heart. The innocence of it had in the course of the years become clear to Corde—for it was in a sense innocent—corrupt innocence. (DD 93)

Bellow’s critics have often claimed that we as readers are locked up inside his heroes’ heads and this tendency is more pronounced when he is dealing with his relations with women. If we are listening closely when Herzog describes Madeleine and her disloyalty, we can sense that it is not the truth that he reveals, but what he is feeling about his ex-wife and her boyfriend, his own best friend, at the given moment. Bellow’s discourse is an emotional rhetoric, which says a lot about what goes on inside his characters’ minds. In other words, Herzog’s discourse is actually a veiled rhetoric which reveals a lot when closely scrutinized. His attitude towards women is more “power struggle” than love. His protagonists cannot bear being subdued and want to
rule their women, but make it difficult for themselves by choosing women who are strong-willed, independent and indomitable. Hence, the unrest and anxiety.