

Chapter I

Introduction

Nobel laureate (1979) and winner of numerous awards, Saul Bellow (1915-2005) was one of the most written about in the Post World War II American literature. Over 30 published volumes and over 1500 scholarly essays have been produced about his fiction since 1950. His status in contemporary American literature can only be compared to that of Faulkner and Hemingway in the earlier part of the century. Such interests center on the fact that no post- World War II American writer analyzed so thoroughly and so humanely the effects of American cultural anxiety at the age of technology and high modernism as the legacy of enlightenment and rationalism. Rejecting alienation, absurdism, nihilism, refuting historical pessimism, and arguing against the intellectual cynics and the preachers of despair, Bellow has affirmed not only the embattled masculine self of Western metaphysics but also defended Judeo-Christian religious and social values more than any other writer has.

We have been given a thorough discussion of the writer's own essential beliefs in Bellow's novels. Bellow's central theme- the defense of man- has been constant throughout his career. Indeed, the belief that man is worth saving is Bellow's own as well as his hero's in his novels. Bellow tries to possess our mind with a new image of man, which is very different from alienated wasteland figures of the literature of earlier twentieth century. He calls writers such as Sartre, Ionesco, Beckett and Burrough as the *prophets of doom*. He accuses them of being cultural nihilists who do not provide any answer to his question of *what after absurdity*.

In 1940s, Bellow realized that a Hemingwayesque model of masculinity with its tough, simple, existential stoicism had dominated the values and the

masculine voice in American literary culture. He decided to write against the grain of the Hemingwayesque tough guy model and staged a totally different male voice. In fact, he was moving against the dominant mood of later modernist despair, cultural elitism, Faustian individualism, existentialism, aloofness and apocalyptic fears of the collapse of Western Civilization. He also opposed the destruction of *self*, which created in American fiction defeated wastelanders who lament the collapse of society and human experience.

From this position, he tries to bring back the meaning to the ordinary existence and to restore the integrity of man in the face of disintegrating forces of modern life. Indeed, Bellow knows that the world is violent, chaotic, corrupt and dangerous but he does not see the situation as entirely hopeless. His novels derive from the conflicts between what his heroes long for and the realities of their surroundings. The tension between these two is the grip in which his heroes are caught up. Nevertheless, the important thing is that they do not give up their ideals. The result, however, is an everlasting conflict, but there is no choice for his characters but to stand.

Saul Bellow was born in 1915 at Quebec, a suburb of Montreal. His parents had emigrated in 1913 from Russia to Canada. Bellow was raised until the age of nine in an impoverished district of Montreal, full of Russian, Poles, Ukrainians, Greeks and Italians. When his father was beaten, the family moved to Chicago in 1924. Bellow's mother, Lescha (liza) was very religious and Bellow himself has learned Hebrew and Yiddish as a young man. His mother's death, when he was 17, was a deep emotional shock for him. Bellow entered the University of Chicago in 1933, but transferred to Northwestern University to study anthropology and sociology. He graduated in 1937.

Bellow abandoned his postgraduate studies at Wisconsin University to become a writer. It took years before Bellow published his first book. He is not one of the autobiographical writers, but his Canadian birth, his Jewish heritage and his

several divorces are shared with his characters. Later, in an interview, he said that his Jewish heritage is a gift, a piece of good fortune with which one does not quarrel but he also insisted that he is not a Jewish writer but an American writer who happens to be a Jew. His first book, *Dangling Man*, depicted the intellectual and spiritual vacillations of a young man waiting to be drafted. It is loosely based on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864). His second novel is *The Victim* (1947), a paranoid story of a doppelganger set against the realistic background of New York City. However, in *The Adventure of Augie March* (1953), Bellow let himself loose and put aside some of the formal restrictions he had observed in his earlier books. The book was regarded as a rich picaresque novel, which narrates the seemingly unconnected experiences of its hero in his quest for self-understanding. In 1956, Bellow wrote Seize the Day, a moving piece of fiction which was celebrated in the time by critics. The next novel, Henderson the Rain King, undoubtedly Bellow's most loved book, was published in 1959. This novel offers Bellow's most cutting analysis of literary modernism. While in Henderson the Rain king, Bellow begins to attack modernism and social science, in Herzog, Bellow's most celebrated novel, published in 1964; he goes further to question the entire modern philosophical tradition. Mr.Sammler's Planet (1970), Bellow's seventh novel, is an indignant depiction of America during hippie era from the point of view of one of his intellectual characters. With a distinct change in tone from Mr. Sammler's Planet, Humboldt's Gift (1975), Bellow's next novel is a humorous account of the spiritual plight of its protagonist. Humboldt's Gift was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. But Dean's December (1982), another novel of Bellow lacks the humor of Humboldt's gift. In this novel, the protagonist tries to escape from what he believes to be a false modern description of history and human experience. More Die of Heartbreak (1987) Bellow's eleventh novel, though falls short of the intellectual scope of his other novels, evokes much of his old energy and comedy. Theft (1989) is a novella which focuses on the dynamics of human pair. The Actual (1997) tells the familiar Bellow story of an old adolescent love which is finally admitted. Ravelstein (2000), Bellow's last novel is very much his

career endgame and indeed final word on all the major Bellowian philosophical themes.

Although stylistically varied, Bellow's novels are thematically connected. *Gender* relations, one of his main themes have always been constant throughout his career. In his novels, Bellow reflects uniquely masculinist anxiety of modern heterosexual relations through male protagonists who obsessively seek comfort in women but that they rarely find. Many women, of course, appear in his fiction but they are delineated either cruel or stereotypical. In his works, major roles are usually given to men while women function on the sideline and often in destructive roles.

Nevertheless, this is not the whole story. Bellow is aware of his gender construct in his novels. His exploration of issues of gender is far more subtle, sophisticated and amusing. In his account of masculinity in post World War II, he exploits American gender ideologies, their comic dimensions and explores their psychological, social and intellectual origins. Out of all these, Saul Bellow weaves his own high comedy to make us laugh and think over his male characters and their struggle to come up with a solution for their masculine problems in late capitalist America.

Despite the humor, sophistication, and cultural irony, it is not difficult to see, in Bellow's text, a virulent antagonism to women, which seeks the sympathies of like-minded men. As a result, this destroys the seriousness of Bellow's investigation into the failure of heterosexual relations, modern marriage, and love affairs in Post World War II America. Indeed, Bellow's text fails to provide a full vision of responsibility towards its representation of *women* characters.

Bellow uses different ways to seek the sympathy of the readers for his male protagonists. One of these ways is that in his texts the narrative center of consciousness is entirely located in male characters. Indeed, the readers have to see what Bellow's male protagonists perceive. This dependence on a masculine perceiver creates in the novel a misogynous atmosphere, which attracts like-

minded male readers. In other words, Bellow's rendering of male protagonists as the narrative center of his novels makes it possible for patriarchy's attitude and values penetrate the whole structure of the novel. Another indication of misogyny in Bellow's texts is the banishment of women from the area of higher consciousness. Unlike men, women in his novel can never be seen as having brainpower. It seems Bellow sees intellectuality as a male attribute only.

Bellow's male characters cannot get along with women. Either they submit to their warm advances or they rebel against their strong determination. This lack of balanced relationship between genders has been a matter of scholarly investigation. "In a book length study, Joseph Francis McCadden sees in Bellow's novels a battle of sexes and concludes that the novelist in his portrayal of female characters belongs to the misogynistic tradition in American literature" (9). This conclusion does not seem baseless, as Bellow's rather apparent tendency for masculine rendering of gender issues has placed restrictions on his vision of women in his texts.

As a result, Bellow's *women* are just types and images, without distinctive idiosyncratic and individualizing uniqueness that make them human and believable. Victoria Sullivan classifies Bellow's women as two basic types- the destructive ones who victimize the hero and the nurturers who tend to be his victims (101-102). Easter Marie Mackintosh in her study of the women characters in Bellow's fiction finds "four distinct types of women, the *defeated*, the *sensual*, the *destructive* and the *good*" (Anand 4). Earl Rovit says that the gallery of female characters in Bellow's novels tends to be composed of almost identical stereotypes (30). Robert Baker also sees Bellow's women figures repeatedly fall into one of two categories; nags or nymphomaniacs. (11)

However, as Irving Maline rightly points out, there is no lengthy discussion of Bellow's women (9). Indeed, as far as this topic is concerned, no scholarly work has addressed Bellow's text in a straight feminist manner. Critics

only say that women in Bellow's texts are stylized or unreal but these adjectives are not enough to explain the complexity of the whole gallery of women in Bellow's fiction. In fact, the study of the politics of gender in Bellow's fiction have not gone beyond just seeking and classifying the types of women in his novels, but gender politics in Bellow's text is very sophisticated and nobody can reduce it to just typology. Therefore, a feminist reading of Saul Bellow's fiction seems imperative. The significance of this reading lies in the fact that a feminist reading of Saul Bellow's novels would indicate how deeply embedded patriarchy is in the works of this winner of Nobel Prize. In fact, it is important to note that Saul Bellow flourished in an era when feminist criticism had already established its place alongside other poststructuralist approaches as critical discourse in humanities, but, his harshness toward women in his novels was simply ignored- even in late twentieth century- and he won a number of prizes. These prizes were given to him for his investigation into what it means to be human but his investigation seems to be at the expense of women who numerically constitute half of human species. In fact, it seems he presumes his readers are all men.

Hence, to seek the nature of the Bellow's text in terms of politics of gender, it is not enough to examine the types and images of women in his works. Since Bellow's text is very manipulating, one should be aware of its potentials to subjugate the reader. In other words, Bellow's exploration of gender in his works is far more subtle, sophisticated and amusing. His account of gender issues is so witty and his exploitation of American gender ideologies is so clever that the readers cannot resist his text and go along with it as far as the writer wishes. Indeed, the real danger in Bellow's novels is not just in the images of the *women* they present, but in the images of the *men* they provide. In other words, the real art in the works of Saul Bellow manifests itself in the way he renders his male characters.

Bellow's male characters are *freedom seekers*, although it is not clear from what they want to be free. On the other hand, Bellow always depicts them very

vulnerable to different forms of tyranny which may come from everybody or everything- social convention, a job, a lover, a wife, a friend, almost everybody who may want to victimize them. These forms of tyranny, fraud and victimization of male protagonists are usually described vividly in Saul Bellow's novels to create some sorts of tragic air around his male figures. For example, in Herzog the protagonist is an outcast, an outsider, indeed, a victim whose sexual power has been damaged by Madeline, his wife. "She has her heel in his groin. She wishes to do him in, she votes for his nonexistence, she wants to bleed him, to take his money. Not only has she betrayed him; so have his lawyers, his psychiatrist, Mady's mother, Mady's aunt and others" (Clayton 192). Repeatedly all these images recur to show that how nice and innocent a man he is to tolerate all these tyranny.

Of course, Bellow knows that some of the problems, which his male characters have to cope with, originate from their own psychological problems. Moreover, these male characters cannot get rid of American gender ideologies, which define the politics of gender in American society. These ideologies and their psychological, social and intellectual origins all contribute to his male character's masculine problems. Of course, Saul Bellow tries to examine various aspects of these ideologies and wants to expose their comic sides. Nevertheless, his attempt to do so is aborted, as the writer's own virulent hostility towards women takes the control of the text. In other words, not only Bellow's male characters cannot get rid of the gender ideologies, but also Bellow himself produces a powerful ideological text, full of misogyny.

The gender ideology in Bellow's text is so cunningly woven that only a *resisting reading* can expose the real attitudes towards genders in this text. In fact, to explore ideological inscriptions and literary effects of gender in the Bellow's text, one should go beyond the writer's patriarchal logic and look for those spaces that can be invoked to deconstruct such logic. This *deconstruction* seems necessary, as there is no other way to get rid of the hegemony of the patriarchal

ideology in the text. Indeed, like all other ideological structures, all the spaces are attempted to be closed down for *others*, and this is what all the ideologies have to do in order to keep their dominant position. In other words, ideologies try uselessly to fill up in constructs gaps, slides and inconsistencies to present a monolithic identity. Nevertheless, there *are* gaps in every construct and the more ideologies try to remove them, the more they are endangered by these inconsistencies. In fact, the severest ideological pressure will generate its own counterforce.

Saul Bellow's rendering of gender issues has not left much space for women readers to see themselves of any significance in the world of his fiction. Indeed, the only voice in his fiction belongs to men. Women do not play central role in the plot of his stories. In other words, they cannot initiate any important development in his fiction. The only role for women is to make the situation more problematic for male characters and to add to their tragic vision of themselves. In other words, Bellow makes use of women types and stereotypes to extend his male character's personality. Put simply, women are important in his fiction as far as the characterization of his male characters demands. Thus, for a woman reader there is nothing about her gender in Bellow's novels to identify with. Therefore, there are just two options for a female reader. She either forgets her gender and reads the text as a man or deconstructs the whole text. In such cases, the dynamic female readers are caught in a sad condition. They have to read a text which negates their gender.

Saul Bellow's novels particularly are rich in *language*, indeed, they are feasts of language and this richness takes the readers into the experiences, which are masculine in their essence "Contemporary feminist activists are preoccupied with language. They take language seriously. They describe the ways in which verbal minutiae are used by patriarchy to create and maintain cultural values" (Humm 52). Indeed, language is more open to the masculine experiences and less flexible for feminine ones. The theory that language is *masculine* is proposed by Dale Spender in her book Man Made Language (1981). In this book, Dale Spenser

argues that language is not neutral in its role as an instrument for communication; it is rather an instrument through which patriarchy finds expression. Of course, this is not the case only with Saul Bellow's books. The so-called great literature with its language system, presumes its readers male.

The whole arguments in previous paragraphs were to prove that Bellow's text does not leave much space for the female readers to identify with their gender in his fiction. Yet large numbers of women read his novels and enjoy them. What happens to these female readers? Indeed, this is one of feminist's main concerns. Judith Fetterley argues that in such circumstances women are forced to experience some sort of self-denial in order to participate in the discourse of literature. This self-denial of women is exactly what patriarchy achieves through literature. Indeed, literature, as a significant part of culture, helps the process of women's conditioning and makes them see themselves as patriarchy assumes them to be.

Then, Saul Bellow's text, though readable in many aspects, has the potentials to subdue the women readers, but it also provides some spaces for resistance. Indeed, Saul Bellow's fiction, like any other text, is not a monolithic, one-dimensional construct intended to subjugate readers. On the contrary, it is a scene of clashes between multiple, contradictory ideologies which are attempting to control the whole text. In this battleground, however, one of the conflicting ideologies acquires supremacy over the others. What characterizes Saul Bellow's fiction is the supremacy of masculine experiences over feminine ones. In his fiction, not only male experience, but also voice, tone, and narration are obviously masculine, and this quality in his stories has made them ideologically gendered.

Ideologies always tend to keep *others* out. From an ideological point of view, others should not be allowed to play a central role in the game. Here in Saul Bellow's books women are *others*. Therefore, they do not play essential roles in his fictions. On the other hand, Bellow's fiction, due to its ideological nature, tries to establish its harmonious *truth* around the concept of *man*. Perhaps the commonest

pattern in his novels is the struggle of a *man* to unburden himself of his troubles. In other words, female readers have to accept *man* as a universal truth and, in an uneven relationship to man, woman is either a resort for *him* to take a rest or part of his troubles. In either case, "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" (De Beauvoir 16).

To examine politics of gender in Saul Bellow's selected novels, this study will concentrate on the theory of Judith Fetterly's The Resisting Readers, a fertile branch of *women's image criticism* and then will apply it to Bellow's Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet and More Die of Heartbreak. This study would rely on a feminist critical approach that views act of reading, like all language activities, as embedded in culture and ideology and has the potentials to subjugate readers. This critical approach rejects hierarchical modes of reading, which regards *authors* as godlike authority to be humbly listened to; instead, it emphasizes the reader's right to measure the text against her own experiences. Indeed, in this approach, the reader is advised to control the process of reading, because, according to Fetterly, there is a danger for female readers in being passive in their readings. These dangers arise from the fact that in male-authored literature- to some extent in women writings also-women readers cannot find any space for femaleness to identify with. On the other hand, women readers have always been raised in a language system and literature that still presumes its authors and readers all men, and this increases the risk of identification of women reader with a masculine system of values.

In other words, this research is to show how in Saul Bellow's fiction the text's creation of its world reflects assumptions about gender. Moreover, it will attempt to see the ways in which these assumptions about gender affect the readers. Lastly, the main task of this study is to show the readers how to resist the ways in which they are manipulated by the text.

This study will largely be based on critical reading of Saul Bellow's selected novels on premises derived from feminist critics, such as Kate Millet whose Sexual Politics is a cult book among feminist critics, especially with its politics of women representation in the texts of established male writers, Mary Ellman's somewhat humorous treatment in her Thinking About Women of the stereotypes of women by men, Adrienne Rich's argument in her "When We Dead Awaken", for resisting ways of reading that subjugate women in limited, false, or passive identities, Toril Moi's favoring the freedom of readers over power of writers in her Sexual/Textual Politics.

On the other hand, as we deal with the power of text in subjugation of readers, it is also necessary to reveal that there are some differences, gaps, slides, discontinuities and inconsistencies in it, which can be invoked to dismantle the false ideological unity of Bellow's fiction. It is also necessary to reveal that how Bellow's readers' response change if they happen to be resisting readers. Indeed, readers' awareness of their gender and their insisting on bringing their own subjectivity into the text affect the process of reading and will yield a very different set of meanings from the same text.

In the second chapter, allocated to the elaboration of the critical theory in the thesis, the attempt is to locate *resisting reading*, as a specific feminist approach proposed by Judith Fetterley, within the general framework of feminist theory. To do so, an account of main tendencies in feminist literary theory in their historical setting is provided. Thus, this chapter draws on the theories of *feminist criticism*, in general, and the theory of Fetterley's resisting reading, in particular, to develop a theoretical basis for the kind of reading that the researcher tries to apply to Bellow's selected novels.

In the second chapter, based on this theoretical basis, an analysis of Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet, and More Die of Heartbreak will be made to show how Bellow weaves his usual themes, characters and images into an impalpable design

with underlying patriarchy, of which women readers are not usually aware. In this chapter, the goal is to show how Bellow's female characters in these three novels are rendered as just stereotypes and images without taking into account the distinctive human sophistication that are necessary to make them human and believable.

The attempt, in the fourth chapter, is to have a *resisting reading* of Herzog, a reading which is not meant by the text. The goal is to show what happens to our reading when we resist the limited and hegemonic vision of the text, and instead, encourage another vision, that is suppressed under the tyranny of hegemonic text. It seems Herzog will yield very different implications if a new vision is set up against the text's hegemonic one which confuses our consciousness.

In fifth chapter, the study will attempt to show how in Mr. Sammler's planet and More Die of Heartbreak, Bellow has created protagonists whose misogyny have overwhelmed the whole novels. Indeed, in these novels, the readers are not given any thing to believe that the obvious misogyny in the text is not the ultimate politics of the novels and the writer himself.

In concluding chapter, discussion of the previous chapters will be provided in order to obtain a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the gender politics in Saul Bellow's selected novels. It would also highlight the striking fact that how deeply embedded patriarchy is in the selected novels of a writer who won Nobel Prize in the midst of great waves of feminism. Therefore, the final chapter of the project will sketch what the project has attempted to achieve in preceding chapters and it will sum up the conclusion arrived at through the research.