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Existentialism in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*

Ms. P. Suganthi¹, Dr. R. Muralidharan²

1. Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Poompuhar College, Mayiladuthurai, Tamil Nadu, India.
2. Professor and Head, School of Indian Languages, Tamil University, Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Existentialism stresses the self, subjectivism, freedom, alienation and anguish. These are the foremost doctrines of existentialism. Bellow's novels are pervaded by these raw materials of existentialism. In *Henderson the Rain King*, the protagonist is obsessed with the strangeness of human – kind and the cipher of human consciousness. The hero has three million dollars. But he seeks and wants more than the mundane existence of life. So, he sets out on an adventure to Africa, to satisfy his inner self. There he fails in every choice of his with disgrace and humiliation, but he is not ready to return home. Though his choices give him trouble, make him struggle, finally he accepts the existential way of life.

Keywords

Saul Bellow; Existentialism; Fractured Identity; Henderson the Rain King.

Contemporary American literature may be said to have taken two main directions: postmodern literature or “the literature of exhaustion” which reveals a nihilistic attitude to individual existence and life in general and considers humanist values useless in a world devoid of absolutes. The humanist wing representatives of which argue that the novel has not been exhausted and defend its moral humanism and educational power. Bellow, one of the most erudite and intellectual writers of the second half of the twentieth century, belongs to the latter direction as he is a unique spokesman for humanitarian values and ideals in American literature.

As the modern society represents the perversion and decay of man’s hopes, Bellow’s novels one after another deal with the problems of the individuals and the search for their “identity” in one form or other. His heroes’ pathetic struggle represent the universal struggle of all men. The struggle ends in utter failure but without accepting it hopefully, Bellow makes his heroes reach the sublime so as to reflect their tiresome existence.

Bellow does not exclude his heroes from the chaotic, violent, corrupt and dangerous world. They have well-laid foundations in social, cultural and intellectual fields. They are identifiable by their names, families, jobs and so they live in familiar environments. With all things symbolizing their sophisticated life, they have the lurking feeling in their minds that they are the ones completely lost in this chaotic world.

From the existential point of view, it may be seen that Bellow’s heroes are in a constant search for their identity. Their encounter with the world, the choices and the situations force them to make momentary and irrational choices. It also results in their alienation, suffocation, depression and chaos suffused with the existential atmosphere.

The existentialists’ main consideration is ‘the moment.’ The momentary choices are very significant to them. Though the choices are taken at crucial moments, they lead to commitments and those commitments are not for the moment only. The momentary choices of the Bellow heroes lead them to be in

the mess of modern chaos. The present article highlights the existential characteristics of the titular hero in *Henderson the Rain King*.

Eugene Henderson is the representative of post-war America with its growing materialism, consumerism, conformity, and mass culture. The novel represents the dialogue between alienation and accommodation, the battle of determinism and free choice, the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood. The hero face the problem of how to create a unique self within a mechanical money-oriented mass society which exerts a levelling influence on an individual, and where individual undergoes his personal effacement and consequent degradation.

Henderson, a man of fifty five, is very confused, and is in a state of inner turmoil. He is a millionaire, strongly built, graduated from Ivy League University, but is not satisfied with his possessions and behaves like a bum. He gets drunk every day, brawls out in the country saloons, gets arrested by the police, and hits everyone who passes over him or crosses him, whether it is a man or beast. He treats his wife Lily as a stranger, shakes hands, smashes bottles on the beach and behaves in an eccentric manner.

His first wife Frances' philosophical mind paves the way for his second marriage. The twenty yearlong married life breaks up when he says that he wants to become a doctor. His ceaseless inner voice rises up saying "I want, I want" (12) which epitomizes his inner wrath and chaos. To get rid of his rude and aggressive behaviour he tries a lot by "chopping wood, lifting, plowing, laying cement blocks" (23), but is of no avail. But rather it increases his wrath. He starts to breed pigs. He makes the whole of his beautiful ancestor's estate a stinking mess.

He causes the death of Miss. Lenox, the maid by his sheer shouting. When he and his wife quarrel about their tenants, his rage has caused her heart beat violently, thus leading to her death. He starts to play on the violin hoping that he could reach his dead mother and father spiritually. His realization of dejection in his life can be illustrated thus: "things got worse and worse and worse and

pretty soon they were too complicated” (3). To find out a remedy he flies to Africa but even then he could not suppress his inner turmoil.

There, in an unknown land, he makes great choice and fails in it too. There is a terrible drought and the tribes’ water cistern is invaded by frogs. To rid the cistern of the frogs he throws the bomb and the water seeps into the sandy ground. He feels ashamed of this and wants to be punished by the Queen of the Wariri tribes but she asks him to quit at once.

Hence he fails in every choice of his with disgrace and humiliation. In this circumstance he is not ready to return home. This is reflected in his statements thus: “I haven’t got much hope, but all I know is that at home I’d be a dead man” (113). He is ordered to wait near official-looking residence since he has no choice of his own. In the ceremony of rain ritual, the rain goddess, Mummah, the heaviest of all, must be moved over a distance of twenty feet. All the Wariri tribesmen fail to do so but Henderson succeeds in it.

As a rain king of Wariri, he has been treated with respect befitting his status. As there are no royal heirs to the kingdom, after king Dahfu’s death, the rain king must come to the throne automatically, but Henderson realizes that he cannot survive by satisfying his sixty seven wives. So, he decides to escape with the cub, supposed to be the reincarnated Dahfu. On his way back, he meets a young boy whose parents have died recently. He travels to the United States with that young boy in his arms and reaches his land with the knowledge of the nature of ‘love’ and ‘life.’

If he had not gone through his choice of going to Africa, he would not have learnt the lesson of life, love and his own identity. Though his choices give him trouble, make him struggle, he understands the meaning of life within him.

Henderson, though he is placed in a sophisticated life, negates himself by setting out on an African safari to seek out the wisdom of life. So far, he has struggled to accept his existence and the notion of morality in the world but now he begins to accept the existence and the reality of life. He finally comes round to accept the existential ways of life.

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