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Being ‘Good’: A Search into the Psyche of Joseph, the Protagonist of Saul Bellow’s Novel *The Dangling Man*

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Abstract: The idea of “being good” or the concept of “morality” cannot be measured by an ultimate referring point due to the epistemological complexities of the 20th century. The dilemma of what is good and bad is one of the perplexities of the modern human psyche. An axis or pillar to support one’s belief or hope like that of the God is lost. This and many other changes in the century made the man’s psyche stuck and stagnant resulting chaos and tumult. The literature of the age provides testimony for this. The present article analyses how Joseph, the protagonist of *The Dangling Man* by Saul Bellow becomes a victim of such an indefiniteness and complexity of the 20th century Europe. Bellow has done it well in the complicated social labyrinth of modern society. The word “dangling” in the title of the novel symbolizes the wavering nature of one’s self which verges to insanity. Research in exploring the characteristics of such heroes and the bilateral relationship between the human psyche and the social milieu makes one more reflective and enlightened..

Key Words

Dangling, post modern, hardboiled, construction, encapsulation.

20th century was an age of transition and paradigm shift. In 1924, Virginia Woolf wrote, “On or about December 1910 human nature changed. All human relations shifted, and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature” (Mr. Bennet 14). Similarly, In the book *Civilization and its Discontent* Sigmund Freud says human beings are painfully and inevitably caught between their values on the one hand and their desires on the other (85). There was a fear of an impending war and turbulence in socio-political life; shift in power relations, the onslaught of industrialization and the dehumanization of consumer capitalism. The publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859 marked the erosion

of religious beliefs and Nietzsche made his infamous statement then, “God remains dead and we have killed him” (The Gay 90-91). T. S. Eliot depicted the fragmentation of the modern world in his famous poem *Waste Land* by depicting “the heap of broken images” (Line 22) in the *Waste Land*. Such was the socio-political and academic scenario of the 20th century which had a deep impact in the human psyche.

The *Dangling Man* is Saul Bellow's first novel written in the year 1944. As the title of the novel indicates, it depicts the condition of human beings in the modern age, i.e., the human psyche that dangles finding no solid rock to anchor one's beliefs or thoughts. The modern man gets victimized to this meaninglessness. It makes his life superficial and materialistic. Bellow perceives it as the world for the ‘hardboiled’ who do not think or introspect about the subtle elements of inner life. For them life is superficial and their business is to enjoy the material or outward life alone. Introspection or thinking about one's self is of no point for them. The hero of the novel, on the other hand, becomes a victim of the traditional logo-centric thought. The novel begins by indicating this contrast as stipulated in the quotation below. There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. ... Do you have inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, closemouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring. (Dangling 3)

The novel is in the form of a journal written by the protagonist Joseph. His entries in the journal unveil his desperate quest for self-knowledge due to his deep introspection. Joseph is in search of humane qualities which he thinks would help a human being to have an ideal and elevated life. He introspects: “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” (Dangling 78) For this, one should know himself first, as Joseph realizes, “But I must know what myself I am” (Dangling 80). Quite contrastingly, he fails in understanding himself and in understanding the world around him. Joseph keeps on forming

ideal constructions which go against the contemporary society and makes him self-alienated.

In many ways Joseph is peculiar to the society. His external appearance contradicts with what really he inside is. He looks older than what he really is. He does have prominent eyes but lacks an open look. At the most he is completely aware of himself and terribly conscience of what is happening to him.

In the same way, Joseph's life in his solitary dwelling connotes the same contrast. He says, "In a city where one has lived nearly all his life, it is not likely that he will ever be solitary; and yet, in a very real sense, I am just that. I am alone ten hours a day in a single room" (Dangling 3). The ten hours in day of vacuum, nothingness, confinement in a room detached from the society makes up the entire experience of his life. The journal is, in fact, his one way of confronting this existential nothingness of his life. On the other hand, "The hard-boiled are compensated for their silence: they fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon, whereas I rarely leave my room." (Dangling 3)

The novel encapsulates the psychology of the age in general. It reverberates extremely in the introspective nature of the hero which becomes his inevitable tragic flaw. Mr. Joseph, who relies on reason or a system to comprehend the world around him, gets thoroughly disillusioned. The word "dangling" becomes a metaphor for the hero and the age. They oscillate not just in opposite but multiple directions and cause disharmony between the self and society, the ideal and the actual, and makes one experience the unavoidable sense of victimization and disillusionment.

This oscillation due to lack of definiteness and clarity creates severe psychic problems in Joseph. Inertia, divided self, inability in thinking and hallucinations are some of them. Joseph had resigned from his job at the Inter American Travel Bureau. He wanted to use his leisure time to study but, he feels himself heavy and disoriented. He says, "Now, however, no that I have leisure and should be able to devote myself to the studies I once began, I find myself unable to read. Books do not hold me. After two or three pages or, as it sometimes happens, paragraphs, I simply cannot go on" (Dangling 3). Similarly, he is held by a feeling of inertia. He doesn't want to move, or act. He cannot pace himself with the outer world. He says, "I have begun to notice that the more active the rest of the world becomes, the more slowly I move, and that my solitude increases in the same proportion as its racket and frenzy"

(Dangling 4). His passiveness becomes such intense that from the psychic it encompasses his whole body too. To quote, “. . . I grow rooted to my chair. It is a real, a bodily feeling. I will not even try to rise. It may be that I could get up and walk around the room or even go to the store, but to make the effort would put me in a disagreeable state” (Dangling 4). Similarly, in the middle of the winter he could have the hallucination of a wall with sunlight on it despite the surrounding ice. Also, he could reverse the summer and make himself shiver in the heat. He realizes that this common trick carried too far perhaps damage the sense of reality.

Joseph continuously feels distant from others. He is always afraid of running into a familiar person who will express surprise at seeing him and ask questions. For the same reason, he changes the restaurants regularly because he does not want to become too familiar a sight to anybody including the sandwich men, waitresses and cashiers. Also, he finds himself of less significance. He feels that he is the only person before whom the house maid dares to smoke. His own father treats him less considerately. He knows that he is poor at finding reasons and cannot key his mind to the sentences on the page or the references. He thinks about his “older self” which was different from his present self. Thus, creating two selves, he dangles between the two. Joseph is a good man, once a revolutionary who wanted to change the society. Contrastingly, he realizes that the world and the people around him are not ideal or are not as he believed they ought to be. In a party he was shocked by the true nature of his friends whom once he praised as a “colony of the spirit”. What he wanted was a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty. But, he finds the world to be opposite: crude and dangerous. He fears that if no measures are taken the existence could indeed become ‘nasty, brutish, short.’ He dreams that a number of people should combine against or defend this danger and crudity to save the world. On the other hand, desperately hopeless, he gets alienated from his brother, his daughter, from his in-laws, from his mistress, from his wife, and lastly from himself.

In a nut shell, in the complexities of the world around: where the traditional values and morals cannot hold together, where Industrialization and capitalism dehumanize society, where the epistemological pursuits are vague and multifarious, men become alienated and disillusioned. The question how a man should live and what should be his moral principles are apparently critical but in vain in the modern context of the society. It is always perplexing to find out the ways to adapt one’s inner moral principles and the outer social

milieu. This hampers oneself resulting multiple injuries and wounds in the psyche.

Towards the end of the novel we can see an epiphany by which the protagonist realizes his condition. To quote, "I even saw in a brick passageway an untimely butterfly, out of place both in the season and the heart of the city, and somehow alien to the whole condition of the century" (Dangling 77). However, whether one can have a separate identity from the society bewilders Joseph. A man who lives in the society cannot abandon it. He finds out a solution and some sort of reconciliation with the society. He says, "You can divorce your wife or abandon your child, but that can you do with yourself? . . . You have gone to its schools and seen its movies, listened to its radios, read its magazines. What if you declare you are alienated, you say you reject the Hollywood dream, the soap opera, the cheap thriller? The very denial implicates you" (Dangling 137)

Thus, in the extreme disorder and inability in finding solidity, he prefers the order and obedience of the military life. There, he would be defined as a soldier, which would give him an identity among the group and abandon his solitude. He exclaims: "Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!" (Dangling 191) Military life is such a discourse where obedience and discipline is the primary thing. This obedience is not part of a choice or selection but implemented by order and force. Reason finds only a second place there. When Joseph finds it extremely difficult to find order, definiteness, and purpose in the civil society, the military life which is constructed in strict discipline and order enthralls him and life becomes easier for him. His brooding will come to an end which will be replaced by obedience and orders. Also, he is not alone there, as he is the part of an entire regiment.

To conclude, Dangling Man portrays the chaos and complexities of the outer world which reverberates in the psyche of man in the convoluted modern society. In the plural, multiple identities and de-centered or displaced consciousness, one cannot expect man to move into a unilateral pattern where the characteristics of the roles are not well defined. Survival becomes the order of the day and scruples or moral elements are pushed aside which do not find an ontological or epistemological support. Dangling becomes a metaphor for the modern condition and to those who cannot accept and adapt, victimization is the consequence. Saul Bellow has effectively come up with

the peculiar traits of the century and made one understood the inevitability of the survival through it.

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