



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

**MYRIAD SHADES OF WOMEN AS DELINEATED IN
THE NOVELS OF SAUL BELLOW**



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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with a minute critical evaluation of the Nobel Laureate, Saul Bellow's work from feminist perspective and it categorically churns out the myriad faces of women portrayed by him. Bellow's art of characterization does not allow him to portray the female characters as complete human beings with the zeal and honesty as they are deserving to be depicted through his world of fiction. His depiction of female characters shows that women are destined to serve their husbands whether they are housewife or career women. He has presented some female characters who have some peculiar destructive quality –like Thea in Adventure of Augui March, Margaret in Seize the Day, Madeline in Herzog and Denise in Humbolts Gift. The portrayal of women in his fictional world is not peopled only with the submissive and destructive women but also they represent the age in which women are forging meaningful lives for themselves, struggling, researching and asserting to realize their hidden potential.

KEYWORDS

submissive, predicament, feminine, feminism and sublime

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

With the dawn of human civilization the predicament of women in this male dominated society might have been a hotly debated topic because the complex of being superior inherited from Adam never allowed men to recognize woman's potential as equal to him. On the basis of the uncivilized dictum of "might is right" the half of the world population of the women class was subjected to torture, victimization and injustice irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion and cutting across the geographical boundaries of the nations. Even the oldest civilization of the world like India and Greece has very artistically articulated the images of women as Goddess of learning, Goddess of wealth, and Goddess of strength but unfortunately even those civilization of antiquity remained failure in providing women equal status on par with men. There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of women and her actual situation in life. In Hindu society the submissive sublime women have been personified by Sita as she was always ready to efface herself at the instance of her husband who abandons her only due to the derogatory remarks of a commoner. The radical image of Draupadi has been overshadowed by the submissive image of Sita. Actually, the revolutionary and highly spirited philosophy of Draupadi should have been instilled in the consciousness of the race in order to teach a lesson to the autocratic and whimsical people like Duryodha. But there is hardly any religion in the world that advocates equality in every walk of life for woman because of the traditional mind set of the male dominance. The prayer made by a Jew crosses all codes of a civilized society when he utters:

"Blessed be God... that he did not make me a women".

However, the Vedic period reveals that women enjoyed equality with men in all spheres of life. There were more than twenty women seers who were supposed to have composed the hymns of the Rig Veda. And this Vedic period produced sublime women like- Gargi, Ghisha, Godha, Vishwavara, Apala, Maitrayi, Arundhati and Lilawati . In those days women were at large to choose their life partner. Thus,

"The Veda distinguishes itself from all other literature by the high regard in which it holds women".

Human experiences for centuries have been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. From the days of Manu Smriti women are destined to survive right from the birth to death under the shelter of man. Men have been underlining women all over the world for centuries in a very derogatory manner. An Old Italian saying is as 'a horse whether good or bad requires spurs, so a women whether good or bad required thrashing.' The so called wise men of China also advice husband in these words: "Listen to the counsel of your wife but act against it." The old men of Russia say: "There is only one soul among ten women." The Spaniards say:

"We shall save ourselves from wicked women and should never be captivated by any that have good looks"

It was a very cruel irony of human civilization that maximum literature was written by men and they delineated women's characters as per the fashion of the day. Had the world literature been drafted by women writers the scenario of women projection would have been something else. As we are witnessing a slight change in the faces of women since then the feminist writers took the cudgel in their hands.

Thanks to the Britishers who exposed the world to the Western ideas by educating the world through English language. In pre- independence India before the arrival of Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Savitribai Phule and Mahatma Gandhi the condition of women was extremely painful and miserable. In the West the feminist movement started with Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Latter on Simon De Beauvoir's The Second Sex and Toril Mori's Sexual Textual Politics. A close critical evaluation of the world literature reveals that harbingers of the rights of women were conscious of the male-female imbalance in society. It was the period of renaissance in Europe in which women were glorified and equated with men. The Victorian age also witnesses the emergence of male and female writers who pioneered the cause of feminism for the betterment of the half population. But, unfortunately, the representative poet of the age Lord Alferd Tennyson confined the activities of women within the ambit of house.

"Men for sword and women for needle"

With the publication of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land modernity blooms in its full swing giving full expression to human emotions, feeling and frustration as well, and it caught

the contemporary, urban, educated upper class and middle class in the transitional period between tradition and modernity. The women of today stands poised on the threshold of social change. We have examples in abundance to prove the changing scenario pioneered by women in every walk of life. Despite all the attempts made by the writers hailing from all over the world, the real and complete projection of women as human beings are yet to be portrayed. Having gone through the innumerable scriptures, myths, religious books, classical literature, modern literature as well as the contemporary pieces of literature articulated by the literary genius of the international community, we are unwittingly bound to make a minute critical evaluation of the Nobel Laureate, Saul Bellow's work from feminist perspective and categorically churn out the myriad faces of women portrayed by him.

The appearance of Saul Bellow on the literary horizon of America added a new dimension to American consciousness with his Jewish American articulation. Born at Lachin, Quebec (Canada), in 1950 of Jewish parents and brought up in orthodox, poor and deeply religious family. Bellow's writing deals with his explorative tendency about "what it means to be human". And through his novels he emerges with hope and affirmation in his dealing with human beings. However, in his dealing with human beings, Bellow seems to have neglected more than half the human species, for all his central characters are middle aged male who belonging to the Jewish community. The women character always occupies the secondary position to protagonist. In this regard Susan Koppelman Cornillion laments:

"American Literature is not about men and women equally. It is by and about men. Women exist only in relation to the protagonist who is male"

Women, numerically constitute half the human species deserve to be treated equally in every walk of life regardless of men domain. Bellow's fear and disdain regarding the proper representation of women prove that American literature was deprived of the adequate sensibilities and emotion required for the glorification of women owing to the traditional mindset of the autocratic society. Here, Norman Mailer's view is worth quoting:

“Women are low sloppy beasts... and the prime responsibility of a woman probably is to be on earth long enough to find the best mate possible for herself and conceive children who will improve the species.”

A number of critics have criticized Bellow for his negligence in dealing with female characters. According to Robert Baker:

“The most apparent of Bellow’s fault is his incapacity to deal convincingly with women and inferred that female figures in his novels repeatedly fall into one of two categories; they are either nogs or nymphomaniacs.”

Obviously, Bellow’s art of characterization does not allow him to portray the female characters as complete human beings with the zeal and honesty as they are deserving to be depicted through his world of fiction. It might be either his Jewish identity or his sexist stance that is responsible for this kind of attitude with which he portrays female characters. Abraham Bezanker says:

“Bellow’s women as - “shadow, used to reveal some aspects of the males, but without any substance of their own.”

Malin, one of the seasoned critics of Bellow identifies three categories of women, “The career women (Iva and Mary), the housewife (Marie or Anna), the wise old woman (Grandma Lausch or will-atale).”

In *Dangling Man*, Bellow presented Iva, as a female character replete with all the virtuous qualities of a traditional Jewish wife, but despite all the submissiveness in her the communication gap between Joseph and Eva remains unbridged. He feels convinced that his wife would not be able to understand him due to her dim comprehension. Therefore, Joseph slips in the mire of illicit relationship with other women for his physical gratification, ignoring his ideal loyal wife who always ready to make herself available for his every requirement. In such tense situation he prefers to live in his own isolated tower instead of developing communication with his beloved wife. Joseph expects from his wife that she will fulfill all his intellectual aspirations by moulding herself as per his desire. Another career woman presented by Bellow in *The Victim*, is Mary Leventhal, the wife of Asa Leventhal. Mary is also portrayed as a traditional Jewish wife who feels satisfied by serving her desperately insecure husband. Iva and Mary are

altogether in conformity with the Jewish image of women who merge their life with that of their husbands.

Lily Henderson and Daisy Herzog are considered as pure housewives who are made to serve their husbands by every means. Bellows's depiction of female characters shows that women are destined to serve their husbands whether they are housewife or career women. Despite denial from the charges of being Jewish dominated culture, Bellow's work bears an inefaceable stamp of Jewish reflection. Bellow has presented some female characters who have some peculiar destructive quality –like Thea in *Adventure of Augui March*, Margaret in *Seize the day*, Madeline in *Herzog* and Denise in *Humbolts Gift*.

“The presence of the destructive and nurturing women in Bellow's work, has prompted Victoria Sullivan to classify Bellovian female characters into two categories: “the victims and the victimizers,” she further observes that while “the nurturers tend to be the victim of protagonist, the destructive ones victimize him”

Olivia of *Seize the Day*, Ramona in *Herzog*, Angela in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Hattie in *Leaving the Yellow House*, Ranata in *Humbolts Gift* are the symbol of sexual revolution. Sensual women in Bellow's fiction nurture the harried protagonist by offering a kind of psycho-sexual sanctuary with the hidden desire of marrying him. This category of women portrayed in Bellow's fiction does not play very vital role as far as the development of the novel is concerned because they are treated as a commodity to be paid and used.

Conclusion:

The gradual evolution of women in Bellow's fiction represents the changing scenario of the situation of women in American society. With the maturity of Bellow's art, his portrayal of women characters also achieves the state of maturity and we can spot the difference between his early novels and his later ones. In short, portrayal of women in Bellow's fictional world is not peopled only with the submissive and destructive women but also they represent the age in which women are forging meaningful lives for themselves, struggling, researching and asserting to realize their hidden potential.

Bellows effort has always been considered as against the backdrop of American Literature, for his own background was the shaping influence of his creation. Bellow enriched American literature by introducing the Hebrew culture with a unique flavor of twisting modernity. But his portrayal of women even in the 20th century fails to establish

a healthy democracy wherein the two parts of the same coin can have poetic justice. Had he allowed his female characters to grow spontaneously, Bellow would have been conferred upon the highest prestigious award as a writer from feminine perspective.

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