



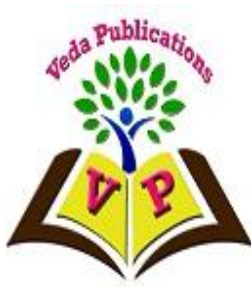
SAUL BELLOW-JEWISH CULTURE IN FICTION

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ABSTRACT



A writer is but the product of his culture and age. His art reflects the dramatization of various aspects of that culture. Saul Bellow's fiction strikes us an apt medium for dramatizing the day complex and troubled Jewish-American situation of his days. For a writer's work to have validity and significance, it has to be structured within the codes and climate of his age. In other words, it is the received culture that gives a work of art authenticity, historicity or existence in time and space.

Bellow's fictional world is subsumed by his experiences both as an immigrant-settler Jew and as an American intellectual, and his art dramatizes a dialectical confluence of two cultural streams-the Jewish culture and the factual part of his psyche, and ultimately get synthesized into an aesthetic world in the smithy of his creative imagination.

Keywords: *American Culture, Jewish culture, Psyche.*

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Saul Bellow has been acknowledged as America's most important living novelist and his work, as many critics suggest, demonstrates a nice confluence of two cultural streams-American culture and Jewish culture. Though he has vehemently repudiated his credentials as a Jewish writer, yet his work exhibits the scars of his Jewish culture tradition and heritage, as well as its sustaining strengths. Indeed, it becomes subsumed in the very texture and structure of his novels. Sometimes, it seems an arduous and puzzling task to determine whether writers like Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth are Jewish writers or American writers who happen to be Jews. This is, for instance, the kind of difficulty we encounter in the case of a writer like Franz Kafka. Shall we treat him as Jewish writer or as a German or Czech writer of Jewish origin? Is it enough to write on Jewish theme to be called a Jewish writer? These are some of the disquieting questions we are confronted with at the outset when we enter into any discussion of Saul Bellow or of any other American writer of the Jewish faith or origin. The difficulty in defining their actual identity lies partly in the fact that these writers are at once a product of the immigrant-settler culture and the far-from settled American culture. The answer to the question of determining their identity and credentials lies in mapping out the effect of the inherited Jewish and the adopted American Culture upon each other. In other words, it remains to be seen as to what degree the modern American experience has shaped the writer's Jewish imagination, obliterating the line between the inherited culture and received culture.

Historically as well as sociologically, the unique figure of the Jew has been of great interest and importance to the American because of the successful way he has accommodated himself in the adopted country's pluralistic set up. How this bruised and humiliated figure-the abomination of Christian orthodoxy-has managed to pervade all aspects of American life, and create a unique place for himself is one of the greatest success stories of all times. So far as Jewish writer is concerned, it has furnished him with sinews of his thought and imagination. For this "success story" is bedevilled at each step by failure, misery and pain. What, therefore, has been won in

the teeth of opposition and absurdity testifies to the moral vigour of the Jews.

In fact, it had an added advantage for the Jewish-American novelist, because a Jew's unique condition, his tale of woe, his tragi-comic and quixotic position, provided him with a point of view and a peculiar attitude, essentially Jewish, to delineate the existential postures of man in general. One might feel some hesitation in calling such Jewish-American writers "Jewish" as one might speak of the black or Chinese because their response to their "Jewishness" varies so greatly that to consider them in terms of religion or nationality alone is to do injustice to their unique sensibility. Obviously, there is no easy definition of the "Jewishness" of a writer possible when he identifies himself only marginally with the Jewish religion and culture. As Philip Roth Warns:

The truth is that many writers are Jewish in descent without being in any appreciable way "Jewish" in feeling and sensibility.... It is one thing to speak factually of a writer's Jewish extraction and it is something else again to speak of his "Jewishness" which is a very elusive quality and rather difficult to define.

Jewish intellectuals and writers have dwelt on the borderlines of various civilizations, religions and national culture. The Jewish-American writers, in particular, have matured where the most diverse and discordant cultural streams crossed each other. The Jewish American writer was, thus, exposed to the paradoxes and contradictions of various religions and cultures which existed at the impressionable period of his life. The Neo-Hasidic philosophies of Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, have made some to live amidst these contradictions and paradoxes in a sort of beatitude and quietism-a thing that has given the Jewish American fiction a peculiar colouring and significance. Saul Bellow himself has admitted, though casually, in an interview with a writer, Chirantan Kulshrestha, that "Jewishness," apart from being a part of the power of imagination and reservoir of cultural energy, was to him a fact of life. The problem of identity in the great democracy was of paramount importance, because these descendants of the Jews were always aware, painfully aware, that there was tremendous difference



between their position and that of the Irish, for instance, in America. They somehow felt that in the new world they were another type of "Negro" a white-skinned one. Irving howe writes in his essay, "Strangers," about the "complex fate" of the Jewish Writer in America.

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