

# Spirit Of Ethnicity In Saul Bellow's Humboldt's Gift

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## **Abstract:**

*The Jewish- American novelist Saul Bellow has written most of his novels full of Jewish ethnicity, views, and characters. However, he always had an opposing attitude to what he calls the parochial pigeonholing tendency. Even though he has dealt with specific Jewish ethnicity, he tries to picture it as emblematic of human beings in general. Bellow has made a name for himself as a humanistic and ethical writer. Critics have a dispute in their opinion that "Humboldt's Gift," Saul Bellow wrote the novel in 1975, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1976, is a work of Schopenhauerian pessimism that favors asceticism. There might be ideological controversy among the critics, but the characters of Humboldt's Gift show the typical way of Jewish life. The metaphysical problem between life and death, portrayed in the novel, is closely connected to Jewish Philosophy. The protagonists of Saul Bellow are the epitome of humanitarianism who abide by the qualities like humanity, dignity, and responsibility. These qualities consist of the optimistic ethical thoughts which are evolved in Jewish ethnicity. Bellow's characters try to find out the way to establish the supreme of humanism. This research paper inspects how far this humanism is interrelated with his Jewish themes and how far his vignette sketches upon the Jewish heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Characters, Ethnicity, Humanism, Culture, Judaism, Jewish heritage*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Saul Bellow's eighth novel, "Humboldt's Gift," reveals personhood in all its characters with a particular philosophical chronicle. The preoccupation with the idea of "soul" and its senseless outcome death shows that Bellow is a novelist of philosophical ideas. In his novels, one of these preoccupations focuses on the spirit of ethnicity, which is viewed as being in chronological decline. The dual understanding of the soul as an integral part of the character entity and culture as a part of humanism is reflected in his writings. Bellow's companionship with the Jewish American poet and intellectual terror Delmore Schwartz is the fundamental theme of Humboldt's Gift. The narrator of the novel Charlie Citrine represents Bellow himself partially. The effort he has put forth in the novel to preserve the spirit of intellectual and literal ethnicity proves his ability to reach the pinnacle of success through his writings. The critics have hardly restricted themselves to question the ethnicity of Saul Bellow's writings, and they found more impressive by the Jewish and ethnic credentials of Bellow, who nevertheless contributes an ethnicity-neutral or psycho-cinematic reading. In Humboldt's Gift, Bellow could reach the apex of success in presenting the Jewish ethnicity clearly and directly. The creative essence of the novel has been in opposition to a writer's conscious and ideological objective, and it has ruined the positive aim of writing. Bellow did not want to be known as a Jewish writer, and if so, he would have taken his pen for the Jewish Community. However, true literature cannot be ethnic; but it can only be rooted in the

ethnic ground. The writings of Bellow generalize to the whole human community even though it transcends its ethnicity.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Saul Bellow has won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976, and in the same year, one of his famous novels, *Humboldt's Gift*, has brought another feather on his cap in the form of a Pulitzer Prize. *Humboldt's Gift* is a novel of ethnic literature in which the story takes place in Chicago. Like many of his novels, it is widely recognized as a realistic eventful story. The story throws light to the life of Delmore Schwartz, Bellow's friend who spent his whole life in the city of New York. The story of Humboldt resembles the brilliant success and deafening failure of Schwartz's renowned life. The novel is a series of events narrated by the biggest friend of Humboldt, Charlie Citrine. The novel reveals the transformation of strength and fortune into success - as Humboldt did with his life. Bellow himself is Charlie Citrine, and the novel is written in an autobiographical manner full of ethnical feelings of Humboldt, who modeled after Delmore Schwartz. Malcolm says about his heroes,

*"He is always a man and often a Jew, and often a writer or intellectual; he is anxious about self, concerned with exploring its inward claim, and about mind [...] around such battles certain prime reminders occur. Man is mortal, and death must be weighed; man is biologically in process, part of nature, and must find his measure in it; man is consciousness and consciousness indeed in history; man is real, but so is the world in its historical evolution [...]"* So we are drawn toward thoughts of extreme alienation, urgent romantic selfhood, apocalyptic awareness, while at the same time we know ourselves to be in a post-romantic universe."(Methuen, 1982)

The coincidence that occurs between poets and society's ethnicity is a major issue that Charlie addresses regularly. It is one of the major issues that he strives to overcome to gain self-esteem. Furthermore, in today's culture, the position of a poet is no longer regarded as revered or respected as an occupation that contributes to a society in which the Jewish ethnicity is at its pinnacle. This can be seen in the words of the narrator of the story,

The nation is proud of its poets who have passed away. The poets' testimony that the United States is too tough, too heavy, too much, too rough, that American reality is overpowering, gives them great pleasure. Being a poet, on the other hand, is a school, skirt, and church thing. The childishness, madness, drunkenness, and desperation of these martyrs demonstrate the divine power's weakness. Orpheus shifted blocks and trees. An On the other hand, an author cannot perform a hysterectomy or send a spacecraft outside the solar system. He no longer can perform miracles or wield power. So poets are adored, but only because they are unable to live here. (P.119).

While balancing the ethnic culture of the society, the writers fell into a predicament and mental frustration. Hyland says, "The dislocation of modern American culture from European history has created a great agony inside every individual poet in the society, the relationship between talent and trade and the relationship between spiritual and material."(Hyland, 1992).

### *The Jewish Ethnicity in Bellow's Novels*

A keen investigation of the novels of Saul Bellow shows that the Jewish themes and the Jewish Identity are the main characteristics of his writings. From his first book, *Dangling Man* (1944), to his most recent novel, *Ravelstein* (2000), his writings have always been influenced by Jewish philosophy. His traditional Jewish theories function on two levels. One depends on the Jewish materials, situations, and relationships. Secondly, he expresses his views on Jewish ethics and norms enrooted in his subconscious mind from his childhood.

Bellow himself approves that Judaism is one of the “key practicalities that I depict into my work.” (Bellow)

Bellow was born to Russian Jewish parents in Canada in the year 1915. Later the family moved to Chicago in 1924, and from that moment, he entered into a new American culture. Despite being raised in a new American culture, Saul Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man*, was inspired by the Jewish heritage of a Canadian-born orthodox Jewish person. The Jewish philosophers were interested in philosophy which is concerned with the creation of man in the world. The Jewish philosopher Abraham introduced the principle of monotheism, which establishes the relation between God and man. Ethical monotheism, which has been mentioned in the bible, is the basis of this philosophy, and it stresses the value of human life. It gives a superior moral value to human life. Saul Bellow highlights such moral values in his writings. The spiritual outlook of Judaism is found in his every work. Bellow gives a Jewish ethnical view that follows an ethical optimism in all his novels. The ethnicity in his novels is a source of inspiration that encompasses the qualities such as beliefs, rituals, and ethics that make the Jewish community unique from other human beings.

Augie March, the protagonist in his novel *Adventures of Augie March*, is a Jewish man born in Chicago who is overshadowed and influenced by those around him. From Augie's quest for ethnicity, the readers could find a meaningful and unique quality in him because “by adopting a style of adventures, the picaresque novel represents a traveling plot of on-the-road in Augie’s journey of life.” (Yang Jingjian, 2006, p.122). Judaism is the par for the course of Bellow’s own life, and it reflects in all his novels. He did not want the aspect of categorization, but it is not the denial of Jewish ethnicity. The traditional characterization of a Jew who has perfect Jewish traits in his character can be found in his other novel *Herzog*. Herzog is a Jewish ethnic parent fond of his family and has great affection for her daughter June. *Herzog* is a novel in which the ethnicity fought against rejuvenation in the persona of its protagonist.

Differentiation of nationality and ethnicity cannot be an accurate evaluation strategy for evaluating the Jewishness of a fictional American character. This is proved in Bellow's other novel, *Seize the Day*. The characters in this Jewish American Literature work, *Seize the Day*, prefer an ethnic sense of Jewishness because they believe that ethnicity should always be flagrant. Most of his characters, as in this novel, are flagrant since they seem Jewish. A cultural war has entrenched the whole society of Israeli Jews, who fought each other. The spirit of ethnicity in the characters of Saul Bellow is the result of understanding the philosophy of Judaism and his perception of Jewish attitude. In Rosette Lamont’s opinion, “*Literature is a way to come closer to God and Bellow has written his novels as if the testimony of a Prophet, from which it can be identified that Bellow is a highly spiritual person.*” (Rosette, 1974).

Bellow's Jewish background helped him reflect the image of Jewish ethnicity in his novels with the traditional cultural flavor. Even though some Jewish characters in his novels are not well educated, their wisdom and knowledge rooted in Jewish ethnicity are adorable. There are so many scripts in Jewish spiritual texts which give knowledge and wisdom through divinity. Such a root of wisdom can be seen in the book called Proverbs, composed of praise and respect for wisdom and knowledge. Jewish parents always bring up their children in the way that they read Judaist holy books. Hence the Jewish children inherit the Jewish ethnicity as well as they learn knowledge from the culture.

### *Ethnicity in Humboldt's Gift*

The Pulitzer Prize in Fiction Category was awarded to Saul Bellow for his novel *Humboldt's Gift* in 1976. It focuses on the victory of the soul over mortality and also the spirit of ethnicity. By virtue of its narrative nature, it spins around the lives of two contemporary writers trying to fight in the battlefield of materialized modern American culture. The novel tries to maintain the ethnicity of its characters throughout the story by dealing with the immorality of Humboldt's spirit, which remains the unique theme of death and the eternity of the soul. The novel expresses the Jewish system of life where all the characters remain with the consistency of ethnicity.

Humboldt was a Jewish Hungarian immigrant of Chicago who became the victim of mental depression due to his sudden loss of destiny, leading to his heart's failure. Citrine narrates his passion for modern poetry and his sufferings for the profession. In his words, "His real worth was literary" (P.7). The novel has a characteristic of double protagonists Humboldt, and Charles Citrine, who are aware of the darkness caused by persecuting the Jews under the Germans. Both characters have sympathy towards the people who pursue literature in the modern world of America, and it is due to the spirit of ethnicity in their inner traits.

*The Author expresses that "Perhaps America did not need art or inner miracles. There are a lot of them on the outside. The United States of America was a massive venture. The more of it there is, the less of us there are." (P.41)*

Saul Bellow searches the spirit of ethnicity in the lives of these two characters all through the entire novel. The study proves that the artist is an intellectual and, at the same time, a Jew concerned with a life of mind and spirit. The life of an intellectual and ethnic poet passes through hardness in the alien ambiance. The poet is spiritual, intellectual, metaphysical, and above all, with the spirit of Jewish ethnicity. The novel sheds light on the sufferings of such an ethnic poet and shows how his dreams become worthless. Humboldt is a twentieth-century American poet who continued his journey with the spirit of ethnicity to create a myth out of his power of poetry.

*He desired to be magically and cosmically expressive and articulate, capable of saying something, as well as wise and philosophical, able to find common ground between poetry and science. (P.119)*

The mystery in *Humboldt's Gift* is a metaphysical concept united in the novel's plots but associated with the phenomenology of perception and the theosophical belief in the "seer," the one who perceives a perfect reality. *Humboldt's Gift* is a typical example of this concept. Humboldt's gift is his soul and intellectual talents and the creativity he gives to Charlie, and it is considered an exemplary, courageous, and intellectual temperament and disposition. Bellow's fictions are full of humorous cranks and didactic and moralizing phonies. The idea of ethnicity, which accesses a fast-shrinking value, is related to the cultural death; in Bellow's reckoning, it has been provided with the sharpened and ennobling sensibilities of the western human ethnicity. The language of *Humboldt's Gift* is heavy-novelistic, and the epiphany language of earlier modernism that emphasizes the perception of a modern materialized world exemplifies and shapes an inspirational aesthetic experience.

Saul Bellow tries to emphasize the moral values of human life in his writings. Abiding on his faith, he travels through the ethnic outlook, which sticks to the existence and purpose of human life. This ethnic approach of Judaism and Jewish customs can be seen in every work of Bellow. He uses the bible as his source of ethnical philosophical view. Bellow strives to re-establish the moral society and struggles for the return of the humanism of Judaism after Hitler attempted to eradicate humanism from humankind. Citrine has taken up Humboldt's unfinished works linked to the influence of art as she becomes his successor. Humboldt's goal

is to transcend the limitations of twentieth-century society and to fulfill the great dream. He travels through the path, surrounded by the quest for poetry and power.

*"He wanted to be magically and cosmically expressive and articulate, able to say anything; he wanted to be wise, philosophical, to find a common ground of poetry and Science."* (P.119)  
The protagonists of Humboldt's Gift, Humboldt, and Charles Citrine, search the ethnicity all the time because they wanted to establish an ideal of humanism all through their lives.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Saul Bellow handles all the issues of human beings and the spirit of ethnicity in his writings, through which he is considered an international literary figure. The integral part of Jewish philosophy is the basic quality of humanism. This Jewish philosophy has provided his writings rich resources related to the human condition and civilization growth. Those aspects contributed a great essence and magnitude to his writings.

When Charles Citrine starts thinking about the greatness of Humboldt, he could identify the spiritual importance of a human being who is in search of the meaning of human existence. He even feels that he could meet Humboldt in the other world after his death. He values the belief that the human soul is eternal and immortal. He contemplates life after death and makes a quest to know the truth of life and death. All these metaphysical problems of life are related to Jewish philosophy, and hence the spirit of ethnicity is well reflected in Bellow's characters. Judaism is the primary material that has provided a rich essence of sources to his writings that are highly related to human circumstance and the evolution of ethnicity. These sources added value to the greatness of Saul Bellow as a writer of autobiographical fiction. The ethnicity of a perfect Jewish man has been portrayed in the novel in a real way of writing. The first commandment given to a Jewish child is "Be an ethical human being." The characters of Bellow are typical examples of preserving this quality of human being. The qualities inherited by the Jewish culture end up in the portrayal of ethnicity in every character of Bellow's writings. In this way, the Jewish ethnicity contributes to the wide configuration of Bellow's novels.

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