

The Jewish Motif of Intellectualism and Saul Bellow's Heroes

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Abstract—Based on the ‘intelligence motif’ in Jewish culture, this paper explores the heroes depicted in the novels by Saul Bellow. The authors hold that Saul Bellow repeatedly delineates his heroes as intellectuals embodied in the Jewish intelligence motif and associated with the Jewish tradition of intellectualism. The authors propose that Saul Bellow’s writings about the heroes are shadowed by the collective unconsciousness of the Jewish people.

Index Terms—motif, Saul Bellow, Jewish literature, intellectualism

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of national literature are closely associated with its history. It is true whenever it refers to the Oriental literature or the Occidental ones. There are always some people and events occurring in some stage of the national history that offer vivid images of literary prototypes. The people or events are repeatedly portrayed, mentioned or sung, as they embody the national spirits, which echo to George Brandes (1842-1927), a Danish critic who thought literary history is a representation of its national spirit. The people or events still have some things in common, though they are often changed or adapted in writings by authors. Thus, quite often, not only are they borrowed to be thematic materials, but they are also regarded to impose some special connotations of the racial culture. Gradually, the people or events are evolved and woven into all types of motifs in literary works. So, it is essential for us to understand and recognize them. In the very beginning we are supposed to know what a motif is. The authors of the paper consider a motif as “a shared theme in literary evolution, which is repeatedly written or renewed. It is derived from an epoch in history and borrowed in literary writings and developed into a kind of archetype because of its universal representation of core emotions” (Dong & Zhang, 2001, p.103). Therefore, readers of literary works are not only enjoying the disinterested pleasures, but also the interested knowledge of a national history and culture when it comes to the literary reading. To conclude, the literature reflects the history and culture from which it originates.

Readers of Saul Bellow find some unanimous features in his works, such as heroes with similar characteristics, who are a sort of intellectuals, like a professor, poet, scholar or somebody associated with higher education. For example, Moses Herzog of *Herzog*, a history professor with a Ph.D., studies intellectual history and has published a book called *Romanticism and Christianity*. In *Humboldt's Gift*, which tells the lives of American modern intellectuals, one hero is a drama-writer and the other is a poet. Still, Albert Corde of *Dean's December*, as the title indicates, is the dean at a Chicago college. Furthermore, Benn Crader of *More Die of Heartbreak* is a world-renowned botanist and Abe Ravelstein in *Ravelstein*, which was published in 2000 when Bellow was 85 and tells about the life of a modern thinker, was a renowned professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Despite these examples, there are some exceptions in Bellow's writings. One is Augie March, the hero of *The Adventures of Augie March*, who has only two years' attendance at college. Another is the college graduate, Joseph, of *Dangling Man*. Yet, they are still associated with higher education.

We find that themes, writing techniques, and the style of the novels are multiple-faceted, though the heroes are a kind of intellectual. However, they are not flat characters or static ones, but rather fully developed into round or dynamic ones with their own image. We cannot help asking the following questions: why does Bellow often focus on intellectuals? Is there any relation between the heroes and the Jewish settings of Bellow? Boarded on Jewish motif of intellectualism, this paper is going to explore these issues.

II. THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF SAUL BELLOW

Bellow's parents immigrated to Canada in the Immigrant Rush to North America in 1913. Born in 1915 in a Russian Jewish family, Saul Bellow was immersed into Jewish culture and history. The family background greatly confined him

to his outlook to the world and life. His father was an average Jewish dealer, who supported his family by selling onions or potatoes. Bellow's Jewish background was recounted in the following autobiographical account of his early years written in 1955:

My parents emigrated to Canada from Russia in 1913—my father, a business man, he often told me that he imported Egyptian onions into St. Petersburg—and settled in the town of Lachine, Quebec. I was born there in 1915, the youngest of four children. Until I was nine years old we lived in one of the poorest and most ancient districts of Montreal, on the slope of St. Dominick Street between the General Hospital and Rachel Market. (Bellow, 1955)

His mother was an heiress of an impoverished Jewish family, who had faithfully lived on a life of Judaism in the 19th century. The grandpa of Bellow's mother's side was a rabbi in a synagogue. So, his mother hoped for him to be a scholar of *Talmud* like his grandpa.

Bellow spent his childhood in an English- and French-speaking community. Because of the family, he started the traditional learning of Jewish culture at the age of 4. He often recited part of *Genesis*. The families even spoke Yiddish as well as English and French, which laid a good foundation to his translating Yiddish texts into English. As achievements, Bellow translated Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpel the Fool* and Sholom Aleichem's *Eternal Life* (both are written in Yiddish) into English, and edited *Great Jewish Stories*. Because of his translation abilities, Bellow was asked to preface an anthology of the Jewish short stories. At the age of 9, he moved to Chicago in the United States with his family. At the age of 13, he was given the traditional ritual of adulthood, whose ritual not only meant his mastery of Hebrew and Judaism, but also a new identity of Jewish organization, and some kind of leadership. The ceremony was significant to him, which marked his transition from secularity to the state of being in quest for the holy sublime. Bellow himself recalled the importance of this event to his creative writing: "it was a very good base, upon which I drew a lot into my works of arts. It is in my memory. Actually, every artist is affected by the events in his childhood if I were bound to be in the label" (Goldman, 1989, p. 37).

Being from a Jewish family, Bellow's familiarity with Jewish culture helped him pick up abundant and various materials from the Jewish culture and history. The themes, motifs and images of the Jewish culture are used to depict or express his moods or ideas about the United States. It is true as John Jacob Clayton (1979) pointed out that Bellow's writings were originated from two mainstreams: the Jewish experience and the American experience. Therefore, without doubt, we can conclude that the Jewish cultures of Bellow with some Russian heritage are part and parcel of his writing materials in life. Especially, intellectualism is closely connected with the heroes of intellectuals repeatedly described and depicted in his texts.

III. THE INTELLECTUALISM IN JEWISH TRADITION

Jewish intellectualism is not only the content of Judaism but also part and parcel of Jewish tradition. In Judaism it is stressed that every disciple should learn the creed and the covenant of Judaism. Therefore, Jews are supposed to learn the holy books of Judaism at an early age. In the Jewish tradition, to learn the religious creed is the first important part of life. A child often learns to read and write the basics as well as some Jewish creeds and covenants, which he finishes at around 10 years old. Generally speaking, many families begin to teach children at home from 4 years old on. But, if a family could not afford to support a child to attend school, other Jewish families or charity organizations at the ghetto of the family would give help to the family. For example, they would invite the children to eat at their home as a guest week after week by turns. The children would be supported until they could go to a Rabbinical institution, a higher level of school education.

After some years of learning the creed and the covenant, a youth is allowed to learn some practical or technical arts of a trade. In Judaism, the faith is emphasized before the art of a trade. In fact, when children are learning the religion, such as religious rituals, techniques to make religious objects, they have also acquired a lot of practical knowledge.

We would know why Jews are keen on learning if we read ancient Jewish books of law. Almost every book of law in Judaism has written such content, that it is necessary for a Jew to learn the Word of God and the Jewish laws. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (*Proverbs* 1:6). In the books it is said that it's equal for everybody, whether a noble or a lower, to learn wisdom or knowledge. The Jewish intellectualism is recorded throughout their classics. There are records about the intellectualism among the *Old Testament*, *Talmud*, *Torah* and *Bible Code*. For example, it is written that there are two trees in the Garden of Eden: one is the tree of life, the other the tree of wisdom. For Hebrews, they believe that the tree of wisdom lives together with their Supreme God Jehovah, which shows that knowledge and wisdom are deified in ancient Hebrew classics; and wisdom is part of God's wisdom. For the Jewish to love knowledge is to love God. To love God is the beginning to learn knowledge and to gain wisdom.

As for wisdom and knowledge, they are the theme of the holy books. In *Proverbs*, we can see the praises and hymns to wisdom and knowledge. The excerpt quoted above (*Proverbs* 1:6) is only a small example of the theme and purpose in the book. Besides *Proverbs*, there are other books of the *Bible* that discuss the importance of wisdom and knowledge. They are *Job*, *Psalms*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Exodus*, *Deuteronomy*, *1&2 Samuel*, *1Kings*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Lamentations*, *Ezekiel*, *Hosea*, *Amos* and others. *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* are nicknamed the "book of wisdom". Because of the books, we can conclude that the pursuit for wisdom and knowledge are rooted in Jewish tradition, history and culture. The intellectualism is like a thread which ties Jewish tradition and culture throughout Jewish history. So, the majority of the Jewish families make their children read the *Bible*. They think reading the *Bible* is the best choice for them to gain

wisdom and to worship their Only God. The custom to learn knowledge and wisdom verifies that Jews are nations of books.

Another fact to show Jewish intellectualism is their *Old Testament*. It is not only a required textbook of Judaism but also an encyclopedia of education. Every Jew absorbs what he needs, from philosophy to general subject matter. The *Old Testament* provides the best choice of content for family education, school education and community education. For instance, the Jewish parents often use the *Old Testament* as an enlightenment of common sense, and a moral textbook as well.

The intellectualism is part and parcel of Jewish traditions, which can be traced back to King Solomon. It is written that King Solomon built schools of prophet to train religious and practical talents to meet his needs. Perhaps the schools are attached to the First Palace. After Judah was conquered by Babylon in 586 B.C., Jews were endangered to be assimilated and they established Synagogues to learn and pass down the covenants of Judaism; later they set up libraries and primary schools. At about the 1st century, they had intermediate schools of the religion and higher ones. As we mentioned above, the children less than 10 years old attend the primary school to learn how to read and write; the adolescents enter the intermediate school to learn the laws; and the youth begin to study the Jewish classics. In Synagogues priests, prophets or would-be priests are teachers. In the 3rd century B.C., there were 394 synagogues in Palestine. Hence, after several centuries, a new type of community education formed.

In addition to the synagogue schools, there is another kind of combination of academy of the law studies: the Rabbinical Institution. It is a good place for ordinary people to study God's Word and think about worldly questions.

It is known to the world that the Jewish history is characterized as Diaspora, which refers to the Jews' exile in their history. If we think about the time span from 70 A.D., in which the Second Palace was destroyed, up to 1948, in which Israel established their home country of its own, Jews had been scattered over the corners of the world over 1,800 years. During the long years of Diaspora, they formed their unique culture and history, which were recorded in the *Old Testament*, *Talmud* and other books. Intellectualism is regarded as the most valuable heritage by Jews. In addition, intellectualism is embodied throughout Jewish life, history and tradition, in brief, in Jewish culture. There is no surprise that Israel is considered the nation of wisdom and knowledge, nicknamed as "the nation of the book". Homeless as they had been, they had not been extinguished, but stood out among the forests of nations on the Earth. The authors of the thesis hold that it is the intellectualism that has played a big role in Diaspora.

Therefore, intellectualism has shaped the unique Jewish history; the tradition is general and widespread among average families. That explains why Jewish people are keen to read books. It is said that every adult Jew reads 50 to 60 books per year. The intellectualism is turned into an act of reading books. To a certain degree, every Jew is a vehicle of the culture. However, the individual representation is only a dimension of the collective unconscious. In fact, there is no individual consciousness that is isolated from the collective, the nation; there is only collective heritage. Jewish intellectualism is heritage passed down from their ancestors.

IV. JEWISH ADORATION FOR INTELLECTUALS

Jews have highly adored intellectuals because of their appreciation of knowledge and wisdom. When invaded by Romans, a group of Jewish villagers begged to the Romans to keep their prophets alive so they could pass down their history and traditions. This story indicated that the prophets were indispensable to the Jewish culture. For thousands of years, their intellectuals have collected, selected, constructed, canonized, spread, and interpreted cultural signs of Jews, which had written the Jewish history. They had adapted some of the historical traditions to survive and keep up with the times. It is evident that the intellectuals have contributed a lot to the heritages and preserved the culture and history. We may say, in a way, that they have protected one of the origins of the Occidental civilization—Hebrew civilization. For the viewpoint, we posit that Western civilization owes something to Hebrew intellectuals. The Hebrew intellectuals, or Rabbi, had been the actual leaders or spiritual props of Jewish communities since 70 A.D., when the second Palace was destroyed. From then until 1948, Jews had no national territory. But, ironically, Jewish people were not assimilated and extinguished by other nations in the Diaspora. The intellectuals deserve praising for their protection and preservation of national culture and tradition. One of the typical heritages is that every Jewish family studies the classics of their culture and history, such as the *Holy Bible*, *Talmud* and the like. Moreover, they have never altered the custom but kept well the interpretations given by ancient Rabbis in the Diaspora. Even today there are some extremists of Judaism, who claim that 'we must adhere to *The Pentateuch* in spite of the progress of science and technology, and follow the heritages stipulated by Rabbis'. Rabbis are the intellectuals of Jewish people, who are regarded as the heart and soul of the nation. So, as far as the Jewish intellectuals are concerned, they are supposed to stand out anywhere to speak for the nation, to criticize the dark side of reality, and to rescue the nation, even facing any danger. As Malcolm Cowley (1898—), an American writer, remarked:

"They are such kind of people of a nation, trying to think about all kinds of schools of thought independently without taking other prejudices and the interests of his own into his account." (Ma Lin, 2003, p.30)

And Edward Said (1935—), a Palestine American critic, defines an intellectual as subsequent characteristics:

"An intellectual should be the organ of the public, a representative of the justice, the exploited and the fragile. He shall express his own opinions to the public in front of frustrations." (Said, 2007, p.11)

Throughout Jewish history people can see that, whether it is in Judges' times, or King's times or in Diasporas, the

Jewish intellectuals, such as Rabbis and prophets, were leaders of Jewish fights against foreign invasions. They criticize the dark side of reality and have succeeded in preserving the Jewish tradition, customs and culture. To some extent they promoted their national image or rank among the forests of the world nations. The Rabbis, Judges, and prophets played big parts in the history and culture. In Judges' times, Judges or prophets were actual herdsmen of Jews to protect the nation's survival; in King's times they were King's helpers to govern the nation; and in Diasporas they tried to maintain national traditions and culture to awake the Jewish national confidence, pride, and faith in the future.

Among the ancient intellectuals, prophets, such as Amos, Samuel, Elisa, Elijah and Jonah, are especially renowned for their outspokenness. They are regarded as the representatives of the racial image and have been recorded in the *Old Testament*. Therefore, they are remembered as the examples to follow for Jewish intellectuals and kept in the memory bank of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious, that is, the Jewish memory, has had an impact on Saul Bellow's initiative and creative writing.

V. THE ARCHETYPES OF BELLOW'S CHARACTERS

Karl G. Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychologist, referred to the archetype as the collective unconscious or vice versa: literature is rooted in the collective unconscious (Zhang et al., 2003). The writing of a writer is dominated unconsciously by the unconscious, which are primordial images as well, like ancient heroes, a monster or a series of acts or events repeatedly occurring in the history of a nation. The archetypes are formed and kept in distant memory of racial ancestors; they were collected, written down, and descended as a racial memory of history and culture. Thus, the archetypes foreshadowed the characters of works of Bellow. Ironically, the contemporary intellectuals in his works are not spokesmen or heroes of the community, with little patriotism compared with the ancient prophets. They are intellectuals, a kind of knowing-people but unlucky in daily life.

The main characters created by Bellow have not enjoyed their life and fate. They are "unlucky guys", whose situations of life are full of "anguish" or "disgust". Although they are knowledgeable, they cannot find the life style that they hope, the peace and calmness and spiritual homeland in the crazy world. Some of them are divorced and estranged with friends or families, such as Herzog and Citrine; others are unlucky and poor like Humboldt and Tommy. While some are distorted and not capable of using their talents like Abe Ravelstein and Albert Corde, others are lost in seeking their own dream or identity like Henderson, Joseph and March. In brief, they are a kind of "dangling men" like Joseph, or a wanderer with no foothold over the "wasteland". They are just like what Bellow (1965) had said about Herzog: "Herzog lives a life of American intellectuals. However we may say that at least he finds the life is very unsatisfactory."

However, the characters harbor wonderful ideas, love, and humanism, though there are gaps between the ideas and the reality. We may say the irony of fate, which can be dated back to *Oedipus King*, is formed here again. There is only one optimistic character—Augie March among the characters; others are similar to Joseph, who is moody, isolated, alone and painful. They can see little hope of the world. For them, this world is not the place to get a spiritual foothold but only a trap to get hit and be tolerated to survive.

Because of the characters' misfortune, Jewish literature is referred to as a mourning literature (Hoffman, 1983, p. 275), which means the characters' lives are teemed with anxiety, suffering, failure or fear. And they are not tough heroes portrayed by Earnest Hemingway, but rather a new style of characters, a series of anti-heroes, which have paved a new way in American literature. In Yiddish they are called *schlimazel* (a chronically unlucky person or the recipient of unlucky events) not *schlemiel* (a habitual bungler or a dolt), often described by Singer and Malamud. *Schlemiel* is referred to as the first Jewish immigrant, poverty-stricken without much education like the characters described by I. B. Singer or Bernard Malamud. *Schlimazel* is the second generation of Jewish immigrants to the U.S.A., economically successful but mentally unhappy in life.

If readers take a comprehensive look at the Jewish history, they can better understand the characters. They have failures, frustrations, and hits in their life as they are isolated from the community, which is a hint to the Jewish fate, that is, the Jews were isolated from the world community for over 1,800 years. Because of the long isolation, most Jewish writers have a historical complex and make their characters moody. Their fate is similar to their national history to some extent, which is filled with paradox and irony. The Jews claim that they are 'chosen people' favored by God; on the contrary, they are not given any grace or blessedness but rather racial extinction. Is it not the greatest irony to the claim? If some people say they have cherished humanist ideals, it shows they have yearned for Messiah, who is considered as their Savior and will establish a world of justice for them in the future.

VI. CONCLUSION

Wisdom or intelligence is a main domain in Jewish culture, history and tradition, which have been stipulated as part of Judaism for several thousand years. Bellow, as a Jewish heir, has repeatedly described the similar type of characters, a series of kind of knowing-men. It is apparently closely connected with the Jewish intellectualism, whose writings are influenced by Jewish collective unconscious as well. As Belinsky (1811—1848), a Russian literary critic, stated, fiction is a real reflection of national spirit. So is it to Bellow. Boarding on the Jewish motif of intellectualism, readers of Bellow can understand something about Jewish history, culture and his writing mode as well. Bellow's mode goes

according to the following sketchy outline: he traces back into Jewish memory of the collective unconsciousness to express his ideas about contemporary intellectuals, kind of knowing-men in the USA. Bellow's texts are a kind of representations to describe racial history, of which defamiliarization is used. Today's readers of Saul Bellow cannot help but think of why Bellow's heroes are unhappy. Sharp contrasts of images between the old intellectuals and the new ones have formed easily in mind. The old ones are heroes seen from traditional viewpoints, while the new ones are anti-heroes against the traditional mores, even when they are a sufferer, joker, moaner, cuckolds, charmer, a man of our time seeing themselves as a survivor. Of course we see irony is used here by Bellow, which is a popular technique used in contemporary American novels. The moody description of characters can arouse reader's thinking of Jewish history and culture and lengthen the readers' aesthetic effect.

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