

## **Self-Transformation through Self-transcendence- A Study of Saul Bellow's Select Novels**

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### **Abstract**

Man has proved the power of his intelligence through his incredible scientific and technological achievements. This has brought about natural optimism and realization of the command of his will and joy of experience through material wealth. But his own achievement such as the highly sophisticated mechatronic machines, the so-called humanoid robots confronts him and there is a subtle and silent warfare between human beings and, so called humanoid robots. His existence is at stake and he feels meaningless amidst having everything hence he longs for a transformation that can be realized only when man realizes his innate goodness and his noble nature by means of self-transcendence. Saul Bellow applies it in his novels and attempts to explain how Saul Bellow, winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976 meticulously applies self-transcendence as a means towards self-transformation. Even Abraham Maslow, later in his career identified a sixth level of need and human motivation, which he names as self-transcendence. Emerson too views self-transcendence as an indispensable setting to comprehend immanent need for self-transformation in a society dominated by consumerism and selfishness. Bellow points out that though the process of self-transformation through self-transcendence is painful, it is the need of our age to regain and restore the innate goodness and the noble nature of man.

**Keywords:** Saul Bellow, mechatronic machines, humanoid robots, self-transcendence, self-transformation, natural optimism, consumerism.

### **Introduction**

The supremacy of human intelligence is realized more than ever before in its power that has brought about incredible scientific and technological achievements. Man has not only probed into the mysteries of the outer space but also penetrated into the understanding of the inner core of being itself. Every achievement boosts his sense of natural optimism and leads him to the realization of the command of his will, which is behind all achievements. All the unbelievable scientific achievements and the knowledge revolution in other fields keep reaffirming how human beings are endowed with a 'Will' par excellence that leads him to astonishing success. Success is the parameter by which man assesses his achievements. He celebrates his success in an extravagant life style and creates a new trend of the joy out of that experience. Consequently, many are allured to find joy in existing amidst material wealth and they start engaging in amassing, possessing and accumulating more and more

material wealth. But at the end of the day, man gradually realizes that the happiness gained from material wealth is not all.

On Account of it the social life, more than ever before, in the third millennium, is becoming more diverse and highly technology oriented. There is not only confrontation between human beings but there is a subtle and silent warfare between human beings and the highly sophisticated mechatronic machines, the so-called humanoid robots. Man's own achievement questions the meaning and the purpose of his own existence. The value of human person is deteriorating. Hence, man longs for a transformation. This transformation can be realized only when man realizes his innate goodness and his noble nature. This awareness can motivate him to know and identify his noble nature and understand that it is possible to regain it through self-transformation. The present and future welfare of humanity itself depends upon this self-transformation.

Self-Transformation will occur only when one pursues an effective means. In this paper, we have attempted to show that self-transcendence can be an effective and more pragmatic means towards self-transformation.

#### **Note about Saul Bellow**

Saul Bellow won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Thrice he received National Book Award for Fiction for his novels namely *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970). In 1976 won "Pulitzer Prize for Fiction" for his novel *Humboldt's Gift*. He also won Formentor Prize and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Fiction. Bellow is among the major representatives of Jewish-American writers. His works have widely influenced American literature after World War II. This paper will first clarify the notion of self-transcendence and proceed to analyze its role in Self-Transformation and finally we will consider how Saul Bellow applies it in his novels and explain how he applies self-transcendence as a means towards self-transformation.

#### **Self-Transcendence and Self-Transformation**

Transcendence means literally "going beyond." In one sense, transcendence refers to the region of "otherness," whatever lies beyond or is other, especially other than one's self. In a broader sense, self-transcendence is referred to a process of extension, or movement outside one's immediate self-made-constraints. According to psychologists like Maslow, Wilber it is mental disposition that emerges as a result of culminating in a normally stabilized and wider worldview. According to Viktor Frankl self-transcendence as an innate desire to discover meaning. In human life, he refers to self-transcendence as a vital part of the human aptitude to make meaning (Frankl 2000).

According to Abraham Maslow transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos. (Maslow269). Later in his career, he identified a sixth level of need and human motivation. He referred to this level as self-transcendence. In course of his research, Maslow himself identified

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that some individuals have gone beyond the level of self-actualization as a higher motivation. He came to a conclusion that only through self-transcendence that a healthy, fully developed person evolves and not merely by egocentric, selfish behavior. In other words, it is by his or her attitude to transcendence conventional opinions and empirical constraints. Maslow specifically used the term transcendence to differentiate this kind of person from the dichotomization of self and the environment, stating that it refers to a person freed from the “dichotomous way of thinking,” (Maslow (1968) 180). According to him the success of a healthy individual and his personality in his ability to cope up in any social condition must take into account a point where the individual is liberated from the influence of his or her environment, more particularly from the way that environment affects his or her personal development (Maslow (1973) 177-200).

Emerson, one of the pioneers of transcendental movement, views self-transcendence as an indispensable setting to comprehend the relevance of immanent transcendence in our day, an age characterized by consumerism, which leads to variety of inhuman activities and unnatural human behaviour. He is the first one to point out the significance of self-transcendence as an essential component of the human self. He illustrates the mid of nineteenth century as the victim of conventional traditions, dogmas and practices, partially as a result of the tyranny of rationalism. According to him it actually suppressed the original component of human nature, hence the people are -to a greater extent, cut off from their emotional roots as he says, “The primary deficiency of the age was ... its inability to connect with the primal, erotic, instinctive, and intuitional element within, the affective side of humanity that connects us with divinity itself and also binds us to one another” (Gougeon 2007:4).

By attempting to excavate the emotional roots in connection with the self-transcendence Emerson attempts to unify the harmonious integration of self-transcendence and Self-Transformation at three levels of a person’s individuality, inherent within each individual self, namely, that individuality which is exclusive and typical, that individuality essential for an ethnic or cultural tradition which is shared with a community and the uniqueness, which defines our commonality and thirdly, differentiates the common features of all human life. The individual self with this threefold harmonious unification leads to a realization of a mature and uncompromising self-identity which in turn is prepared for self-transformation and optimizing the human relations that sustain life. Consequently, self-transcendence is viewed, perhaps paradoxically, as the perfection of our biologically driven force toward a comprehensive growth that continues towards the maturation progression and results in affecting our life and to make a commendable impact on human life. According to Erik Erikson, these stages of development and growth leads to the so-called ego-identity that manifests the successive transitions that distinguish an ever “widening social radius”(Erikson 54). The one who falls into this social radius actually reconstructs his character and be prepared for self-transformation that can create a world of harmony and revitalize transformed international community in a broader sense.

Aldous Huxley an English novelist, essayist, critic and poet explicitly remarked that humans have a “deep-seated urge to self-transcendence.” He further adds, “Always and everywhere, human

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beings have sensed the radical inadequacy of their personal existence, the irony of being their insulated selves and not something else, something wider” (Huxley 22-25, 23). He called it as an urge toward self-transcendence, which is typically an urge for a kind of emancipation that goes beyond the boundaries and confinement of the insulated ego.

In the twenty first century, some tend to differentiate between the transcendence in present-day consumer society that is entirely different from all earlier transcendental movements. But self-transcendence is described not by ‘movement towards’ but by ‘movement within’. We move in, through and with technology, which has become an extension of self. It is not so much that self-transcendence is influenced by the unconscious, by affectivity or by inner creativity. It rather related to a way in which self-identity is governed by the technologically extended self.

### **Self-Transformation through Self-transcendence in Saul Bellow’s Novels**

On his deathbed, Saul Bellow asked a question of himself that he might have asked at the time of his first novel and his first marriage, ‘Was I a man or a jerk?’ (Shakespeare) We could say that it is a good question for anyone to ask, especially someone who wrote eighteen books and had five wives. This query from a reputed and highly respected noble prize laureate demonstrates his longing for a higher meaning that he has already been trying to illustrate it in his novels.

The heroes in the novels of Bellow are unique in such a way that they seriously keep asking, “How should a good man live; what is he to do?” (*Dangling Man* 37). The same question is raised in a variety of forms in all his novels. The answers involve an argument against the standards of the conventional tradition that only focused on the physical strength and material success as criteria for transformation. But Saul Bellow proposed an alternative approach and that is rooted in self-transcendence. It is a process of pondering within the self, and an authentication of one’s undefiled identity, which tends to last long despite the attempts of the worldly forces to erase it from the face of ideal human society. He is aware of the fact that negative forces and the pessimistic views will continue to exist in the global setup and he expresses it through the inward struggles of his characters and he allows his protagonists to empower themselves; “You must train yourself. You had to be strong enough to live with disintegration ... to be able to bear the tangles of the soul, the sight of cruel dissolution to sustain your dignity” (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* 61).

Saul Bellow's protagonists in six of his novels are American citizens who are actually looking forward with hope for a modern Promised Land that often refers to an inner transformation. As a matter of fact, the whole of America and its society longs for transformation. The heroes are faced with different problems in a variety of situation in his novels, "when the sense of existence and the sense of self come into conflict" (Bradbury 37). The protagonists are Jewish intellectuals and sensitive to the consumerist society dominated solely by selfishness, the life seldom having values. In a nation which is slowly becoming devoid of a thought true and personal to nurture personal relationship make them search for an alternative to have a cultural, social, spiritual and emotional liberty for themselves and for the whole nation. According to Bradbury, the novels actually look for the "recovered community" (Bradbury 39), the sense of self, in the material world. They, in fact, are

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aware that they are being victimized as a result "a random fall into the outcast state" (Bradbury 43). They are sensitive and reactive to their plight. Repeatedly they exhibit a "suppressed racial anger" (Bradbury 41) and "a sense of general injustice rages" in them (Bradbury 41). It is interesting to note that invariably all of his heroes show similar reactions.

In his debut novel *Dangling Man*, Joseph realizes that his present way of living is not the one that he wishes to live because his world is elsewhere. He introspects to find out his "inward transactions" (9) and finally discovers an answer through self-transcendence. The existence common to everyone gives him only aversion and he is concerned to know the life that a good man should live, namely a self-transformed life. He remotely demonstrates a notion that, if one pays less or no attention to the alluring material life, one could possibly actualize his entire potential of self-transcendence, because the main concern for him is to lead a transformed life useful both for himself and for others. Hence, he joins the army. But at the same time he learns that the reality of life cannot be evaded, rather it must be encountered with all its difficulties. In all his difficulties, he manifests notable moral concern. This concern and consciousness in Joseph can be referred to the consciousness of the self towards self-transformation. He writes, "In my present stage of demoralization, it has become necessary for me to keep a journal--that is, to talk to myself" (*Dangling Man* 9).

Herzog in *Herzog* (1964) and Asa Leventhal in *The Victim* (1947) are portrayed as the ones who are denied their homes and unjustly blamed for their uncommitted mistakes, which actually refers to their deprivation of originality and a state of being victimized. Their home, their own space, is their refuge. Both try very hard to get back their home. While Asa succeeds by banishing the encroacher, Herzog goes back to his old abandoned country house, which brings everything that was near and dear to him. This is actually a manifestation of an inner journey that is pursued in a sort of self-transcendental experience towards achieving self-transformation. Herzog's obsession towards self-transformation is expressed in his habit of writing letters to the President, writers, doctors, psychiatrists, friends, philosophers and even to God. These letters could be mistaken as the expressions of a sick mind. But this possibility is ruled out when it is found out that his letter writing is to:

. . . go after reality with language (He adds), Perhaps I had liked to change it into all in language, to force Madeliene and Gersbach to have a conscience. . . .

If they don't suffer, they have gotten away from me and I have filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. (*Herzog* 272)

That is a very clear indication how Bellow portrays his intellectual protagonists with a thirst for transformation. The process of self-transformation through self-transcendence is a painful one in which one should be prepared to give up what is futile and unnecessary. Ramona helps Herzog to recognize this by gradually leading him towards self-transcendence; she tries to help him achieve "fullness of self-transformation." Ramona told Herzog:

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. . . that he was a better man than he knew. A deep man, beautiful . . . but sad, unable to take what his heart really desired, a man tempted by God, longing for grace, but escaping headlong from his salvation, often close at hand. (Herzog had to pay for his gifts such as) . . . his intelligence, his charm, his education and free himself to pursue the meaning of life, not by disintegration . . . but humbly and yet proudly continuing his learned studies. She, Ramona, wanted to add riches to his life by the art of love . . . to renew the spirit through the flesh. (*Herzog* 184-85)

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* Mr. Sammler is portrayed differently from the previous protagonist of Bellow with respect to the state of mind and his reaction to the social surrounding. He is gifted with a well-groomed and balanced personality and has learnt to be sober amidst the bitterness generated by terrific experiences. He watches the prevailing American scene in a detached and unaffected manner. This is exactly an attitude of the one who is endowed with the gift of self-transcendence. He does not entertain Lal's excitement in establishing colonies on the moon; his perspective sets to focus on worrying about the future of humanity, if it fails to transform.

As for the World, was it really about to change? Why? How? By the fact of moving into space, away from earth? There would be changes of heart? There would be new conduct? Why, because we were tired of the old conduct? That was not reason enough. Why, because the world was breaking up? Well, America, if not the world. Well, staggering, if not breaking. (*Mr. Sammler's Planet* 284)

Bellow's fear of "Neolithic life in an automated society" (*Mr. Sammler's Planet* 227) invites the readers to be aware of the invisible threat the humanity is facing in spite of scientific and technological advancements. Henderson's absurd existence in a meaningless and dull American life combined with his concern of humanity adequately explains why he tries to flee from American society. Henderson says, "Society is what beats me. Alone I can be pretty good but let me go among people and there's the devil to pay" (*Henderson the Rain King* 49). After the first unsuccessful encounters of Joseph, Leventhel and Wilhelm with the society, and Augie March's *schlimazel*-type escapade (Popkin 329-34) the inclination to consider the possibility of an escape is not only comprehensible, but also expected. What deserves special and critical attention here is the course of this escape-movement. That the escape actually denotes an entry into the primitive past—"the real past, no history or junk like that. The pre-human past" (*Henderson the Rain King* 46) - indicates a backward realization of the original meaning of human existence in its fullness, in other words towards self-transformation.

We can see in Bellow's novels that at the end the beleaguered hero begins to let go the images of self that distort reality in order to accept painful truths about his own character. In this regard, Clayton sees Bellow's novels as an assertion of human dignity and human possibility even in a dehumanized age. It is rather interesting to note that every one of Bellow's heroes attempt for self-transformation in unprecedented events. In their own way, each one normally carries out this endeavour by personally opting for self-transformation. Actually, in this event of their ordeal

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attempt the world does not change at all, as they sometimes expect. Rather it is the individual and his attitude towards it that undergoes transformation so that the individual is able to relate with the external world without any rapture. As described by Barfield in his *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, the modern man views the world and its realities completely in a different perspective when compared to the primitive man (40). The recent anthropological researches suggest that any attempt to develop a deliberate relationship with the external phenomena has to be initiated by the individual only. The logical understanding is that first man has to be conscious of his unique existence in the external world in order to recreate his affiliation with the external world through 'imagination' as Barfield terms it. Steiner states clearly that "Only when we have transformed the world-content into our thought-content do we recapture the connection, which we had ourselves broken off" (16). In relation to it, McCormack observes transcendence in his article: Outside of the Self: Subjectivity, the Allure of Transcendence, and Jazz Historiography, as a mechanism of self-determination of "highest aesthetic ideals." In other words, as Tanner puts it, "The problem of what the self owes the self and what the self owes the rest of the world" (26).

Once on a climactic day, Tommy Wilhelm in *Size the Day* recalls all that happened to him in the past. His self-transcendental potentiality enables him to review every one of his past mistakes and spiritual malaise. Wilhelm is finally "Tired of losing" (7) faces genuine "anxiety" (66). All these internal processes lead him towards transformation that would allow him to meaningfully connect to a wider community. This resolution of Wilhelm is directly related to the dilemma in choosing between the way of his father's self-proclaimed upholder of "tradition and his way "for the new" (14). Determined to better himself in his longing for a new life, he says, "let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted, I am sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life" (26). This move towards self-transformation, in fact is the outcome of his perceptible self-transcendental attitude:

All of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and his sisters. He was imperfect and disfigured himself, but what difference did that make, if he was united with them by this blasé of love? And as he walked, he began to say, "Oh my brothers-my brothers and my sisters," blessing them all as well as himself. (85)

His expression manifests his ability to apply the principles of self-transcendence to break the clutches and resuscitate from the void created by the chaos and meaninglessness. This is a mysterious philosophizing moment is common to all the heroes of Bellow for they learn to celebrate the glorious, illuminating truth to understand the human existence and offer one last hope by which they resolve to completely live a self-transformed life.

The new life or the self-transformed life in *Ravelstein*, Bellow's final novel is shown in the light of new Athens (283), which is obviously derived from the self-transcendental components such as intuitive, adherence to the internal self and an intelligence rooted in the purity of nature. He

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himself states, “Too many years of inwardness!” He used to say I badly needed to be in touch with politics - not local or machine politics, nor even national politics but politics as Aristotle or Plato understood the term, rooted in our nature”(11).This enables a person to head towards the realization of self-transformation by incorporating the uniqueness of human existence with all its superiority and bringing order in the family and finally in the society and in the world. In an age of discouraging, massive psychobiography, Bellow proclaims the fact that it is high time that everyone understands the importance of self-transcendence to overcome the various barriers and emerge as self-transformed persons.

Saul Bellow believes that modern man through his self-transcendental potentialities can discover the beauty amidst the austerity and alienating isolation of the contemporary world. He portrays his protagonists as the persons who finally transcend everything both internal and external realities and embrace society and share their life with others. In this process a person’s self-transcendental attitude enables him to strike a balance between self and the world.

### Conclusion

The self-transformation that defines the future of human existence not only restructures the revived humanity but also establishes the identity of the individual. One becomes aware of who one is and what one can become. This process continues to take place through the relation and adherence to one’s self-transcendental potentiality. This self-transcendence is radical simply because of a relation of the self to something other than its self-made constrains and affective social factors. We have seen that in Saul Bellow’s writings, the longing for self-transformation is realized through the power of self-transcendence that does not so much presuppose self-identity but powered with self transforming vitality. As Peter Axthelm puts it in a specific context, “Clearly Bellow does not intend to let his...(protagonists) off easily (their power of self-transcendence) must be deep, sincere, unwavering relevant, (illusory perhaps but not fantastic).Simple answers and bland generalizations will be exposed by the author’s ironic comment, in a manner more direct, informal and gently humorous (132).

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