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## ASSORTMENT OF POWER: A READING OF SAUL BELLOW'S *THE DEAN'S DECEMBER*

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### ABSTRACT

Power plays multifaceted roles in the life of every human being or they are susceptible to the diverse aspects of power either by acquiescence or by force. Power pervades every avenue of human life in varying degrees either explicitly or abstractly, and all are associated with power and some are adhered to it. Power creates the ruler and the subjects since humanity by nature aspires for leaders who are powerful enough to protect, provide, guide, and lead them; Bertrand Russell has creatively elaborated this idea. This situation creates the inevitability of institutionalised forms of power in cultures and society as larger forms of archetypal forms of power wielded in human relations as families do. This article presents existence, influence, and effects of two forms of power in two nations, viz. Romania and America with the help of *The Dean's December*, a novel by Saul Bellow; when the former 'suffers' from the autocracy of the Socialist Republic, the latter 'enjoys' the freedom and opulence of Democracy. Romania represents a bleak picture of a nation and its inhabitants devoid of freedom and justice, and economic and scientific malnutrition. It also analyses preponderance of power enjoyed by a selected few in America who thereby gains control over the freedom of others and influence the normal course of the nation through political interference. Common man stands at the receiving end in both cases and remains often unheard and misrepresented.

**Key words:** Power, Bertrand Russell, Saul Bellow, Autocracy, Democracy, Freedom.

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### INTRODUCTION

Jewish American writer Saul Bellow (1915-2005), as a master craftsman undoubtedly tries to present diverse aspects of human life that are closely associated with inescapable and multitude changes occurred to humanity in the modern world by way of picturing some of the cities in United

States of America as prototypes. Being a nonconformist to any of particular theories and ideologies, still an objective and a skewed user of several of them, his works, with special stress on novels, can be read from many points of view even without losing the original charm invested in them. Written in 1982 his novel *The Dean's December*

skilfully portrays withstanding tendencies of human beings against diverse forms of power that rule them. He simultaneously presents the bleak situation in Bucharest, the Capital of Romania prior to its conversion as a democratic state in 1989 and unnoticed but strongly prevalent and perverted forms of power in America. The resistance shown by the denizens of Romania against the Socialist Republican government which proved to be totalitarian receives special attention of the reader.

Situated in between Bulgaria and Ukraine, the country was formed in 1859 and was officially named as Romania in 1866. Eventually it became independent from the Ottoman Empire in 1877 and the Monarchic nation turned out to be a Socialist Republic after the Second World War in 1947 and a member of Warsaw Pact. The monarch, King Michael I was forced to abdicate and leave the country, and the nation witnessed distorted policies of the Communist regime that left the country in poverty and opened to foreign economic exploitation; the situation continued up to the 1989 revolution which resulted in the toppling of the Communist government and formation of the country as a democracy and capitalist economy. The novel discusses one month (December) Romanian experiences of the protagonist, Albert Corde, Dean of a college in Chicago and his synchronized memories of Chicago. He, with his Romanian wife, Minna, flies to Romania to see her dying mother, Valeria who is being admitted in a party hospital in Bucharest. Bellow depicts the situation of a nation devastated by a totalitarian form of power that left both the country and its people undeveloped and insolvent. The colonel, "a tough bureaucrat" (1), who is the director of the party hospital acts as a representative of the regime or as every other forms of power where people are devoid of personal freedom and opportunity for development. He surveys all activities of the hospital where "The staff lived in terror of him" (1) and does not allow anyone to act against will. Corde and his wife are allowed to see her mother only twice in the beginning and once with special recommendation which the Colonel permits unwillingly. This is a situation clearly stated by Bertrand Russell while dealing with Communist form of power with the example of Russia; he says:

"... in every country in such a condition we may expect to find the government falling into the hands of ruthless men, who have not by nature any love for freedom and who will see little importance in hastening the transition from dictatorship to freedom", he continues, "... [they] will relinquish their monopoly of power, and will find reasons for remaining until some new revolution oust them" (*Power* 128). Constrained freedom of the citizens of the land combined with their existential, emotional, and economic turmoil are written large in every narration made by the author regarding Bucharest. In an autocratic nation even justice and truth are at the service of the ruler and whatsoever is at the interest of the established government becomes the law – law for the subjects.

The story unveils the relationship between the state and the people by focusing on the life of Valeria, the former Minister of Health of the state and her late husband, Dr. Raresh and their family, and the hospital that is established by Valeria herself becomes the arena of conflict between the power-holders and the subjects. Raresh was the country's first neurosurgeon and "had been naively ideological, a Christian and a moral Communist, praying for God's help before he opened a patient's skull. . . [and] had been too emotional, too good, too much the high-principled doctor to make a Communist official" (D D 6). The picture of the state becomes darker later with the arrival of the Russian troops in Bucharest and he was there to receive the soldiers with roses. Sarcastically, "Within a week they had taken the watch from his wrist, put him out of his little Mercedes and driven it away. . . He did not move into a villa like other ministers. His austerity was too conspicuous" (6) that made Raresh a fool before the authorities, and he was appointed as ambassador to U.S.A as they did not "want him around protesting the disappearance of his medical friends one after another" (6). Similar was the fate of his wife, perhaps more cruel, that she, the former Minister of Health "was denounced publically by press and radio, expelled, threatened with prison, with death too" (4). When she was the minister "There was typhus. There was starvation. Valeria asked Truman for supplies. He sent them. The Russians put their own labels on. Requesting drugs

and food from America was one of her crimes” (184); her good deeds were reciprocated with expulsion, threats, injustice, and curtailed freedom. Terrifying deeds of the autocracy continued in diverse forms in Romania and the common people remained as lumpenproletarians who are denied of even the basic things to prolong their lives. Many sent their children to foreign countries for good education and thereby to find a better future. A murky picture of the state is given by yet another character, Vlada Voynich: “Now and then chickens turn up. You stand in line for eggs. Meat is hard to get even on the black market. Fish, never. Other Eastern bloc countries have changed from the original Stalin agricultural plan. This one never. You can’t even buy potatoes” (222). Beggars in the graveyard proclaimed widespread poverty in the nation. Whoever raised their voice against the regime were eliminated ruthlessly like colleagues of Rares (doctors) and Valeria (the Minister of Health) and all activities of the people are always checked by the panopticon vision. Even the public libraries come under surveillance; taxi drivers were asked to report details of their passengers; whoever has a chance to talk with a foreigner is ought to report it to the authorities and wanted to have “official clearance from something they call *protocol*” (218), without which one cannot give even a cup of coffee to a foreign friend; even elderly women have to be in queues for an entire day to get provisions. The office room of the colonel remains one the situation of the nation; his room was narrow, even the table was small and “Nothing was big except the Colonel’s authority” (3); big pictures of the President covered the important points of the state and it even resisted the Christmas sentiment.

Amidst all such overshadowing forms of power that directed, controlled and limited people’s life and freedom, there are examples of strong resistance. Many of the womenfolk guided by Valeria fought tooth and nail to keep their freedom. Those elderly ladies – Valeria, Tante Gigi, Ionna – proved to be real fighters even when “they were getting nowhere. They couldn’t get anywhere. But they were bind to try” (25). It was this spirit of resistance that helped Valeria to send her daughter to America for higher studies and which really

offended the authorities. Many parents came seeking the help of the American dean to get their children out of the country as they could not see any bright future in the Communist country. Once a zealous, humanistic supporter of Communism Valeria understood the flaky nature of the authorities as she had been expelled from the party and they would even “disconnect the life supports when they had enough of her” (106). If this is what they do to the very founder of the hospital one can easily assume the situation of the common man. The power structure with all its state apparatuses such as secret police, army, and judiciary proved to be inefficient in keeping the life of the people progressive and comfortable. They primarily followed a policy of repression and steps were taken to keep away all possibilities of public uprisings and never liked to be questioned. The situation becomes clearer when Corde states that “if emigration were permitted, the country would be empty in less than a month” (54).

Some of the usual characteristics of all such autocratic regimes are secrecy, surveillance, and suppression by which the state tries to take control of all the activities and even the thought patterns of the people. Stripped off their freedom, freedom of all sorts, people are reduced to the position of slaves and they become highly dependent on the state for everything. State apparatuses are used to gain control over the people and thus, police, army, judiciary, and media become handmaids of the state. Rules are either amended or made for the sake of authority by which they secure their power over the subjects. Obscurity becomes a major tool by which government policies are kept away from the masses as a means to keep them away the often inhuman and misanthropist methods of the state. By bringing them under constant observation an internal fear is created among the people which forces them to retire from public life and immure themselves at home mainly in order to avoid necessary/unnecessary conflicts with autocratic policies of the state.

Suppression becomes a major means with which they can restrain all forms of protest or conflict or uprising and thus eliminate possibilities of future revolutions. All these aspects invest large

quantity of power in the hands of the autocrat and that will result naturally in the absence of any sort of power or freedom to the denizens of the land. Picture of Romania reminds one of the statement made by Russell over the necessity of taming power, power of all sorts. The underlying wish for a leader expressed by humanity is often exploited by the stronger one who comes into power either by selection, succession, or as self proclaimed leader of the masses; unless the leader is guided by greater human values s/he can easily be turned as oppressors for whom power becomes an obsession and a shield of protection. In the words of Russell, "There is no hope for the world unless power can be tamed, and brought into service, not of this or that group of fanatical tyrants, but of the whole human race, white and yellow and black, fascist and communist and democrat" (*Power* 24). In short, Romania recalls this idea of untamed power of Socialist Republican form of government that eventually turned out to be autocratic where only the interests of the ruler is served and preserved at the cost of larger public interest. Even the possibilities of the merits that are expected from a socialist form of government, if at all any, are largely at stake in such a situation. A socialist republic, nonetheless it claims unconditional affinity with the proletarians finally fails to keep its promises or rather vocation and it, as Edward Said recalls, proves to be inefficient to solve problems of the society. As a result the autocratic government begins to fear the people and that leads to more imposition of restrictions to keep its preponderance, which further heightens dissatisfaction of the people. In such a situation permission is denied to Minna and her family to expose her mother in public in the lobby of the medical school as the government was afraid of a demonstration there (D D185). Necessary steps are taken by the autocratic government in Romania to prevent all forms of public assembly as it would spread common distrust and discontent of the citizens; rules are made not to build up the nation but to relish power of the government and safeguard it. Nonetheless people in large number turned out for the funeral as a clear sign of public support for the former Minister of Health for her humanitarian works performed for the nation and as

a reaction of the people against the suffocating government policies. Despite all forms of precautionary methods adopted by the rulers, the nation underwent a Revolution in 1989 which resulted in the ousting out of the autocratic government and establishment of democracy. The relentless resistance shown by Valeria and other ladies symbolises the national feeling towards their government to which they looked once with hope and admiration.

While describing the gloomy picture of a nation governed by an autocratic government, Bellow simultaneously draws the attention of the readers to diverse forms of power in America which is a democracy known for its freedom, opulence, and liberal economy. Two groups of power holders, as envisaged by Russell, appear in America besides the democratic government which is lauded by many as the best form of government. The first group is a new generation of individuals who enjoy much power in the society as official and executive builders of the nation and the latter is the group of wire-pullers. Bellow by putting words into the mouth of his protagonist, Corde, pictures Chicago as a prototype of American cities where power plays many roles both implicitly and at times conspicuously. The power-loving executives formed an entirely new group in Chicago and they gained control over underlying issues of the society and they emerged to the forefront with spread of economic organisations that in turn played decisive roles in keeping the direction of the nation. So all these are interlinked, and power rests there as the foundation for each and every act of such people. Lawyers like Mason Sr., Max, and Sam Varennes, journalist like Dewy Spangler, officers in County Jail in Chicago where the gang leader decides everything, and numerous media and political tycoons pulled the strings and often remained behind the curtain. These people, as Russell observes are the ". . . less prominent men (or women) who acquire influence over the leaders by personal methods. . . They are men who love power more than glory; often they are socially timid" (33). When journalists try to wield power over the readers and act as voices of the authority indirectly, lawyers and judges interpret law mainly in favour of

the powerful and politicians. Rufus Ridpath, who was appointed as the director to purge the County Jail had done a wonderful job and began to be considered as a political threat to the top guys and was accused and put behind the bars. Even his acquittal could not regain his reputation. Many of the incidents recalled by Corde appear to be instances of power played among the officers and political bureaucrats who rule undercurrents of the social life in Chicago by manipulating possibilities of freedom and economic liberty provided by the state.

#### **Conclusion**

Bellow's *The Dean's December* provides one sufficient proofs for execution of power in different forms in two diverse modes of government. When the autocratic government in Romania enjoys total power over its subjects by means of both negation of freedom and assertion of unquestioned authority, various forms of power relished by politicians, judges and lawyers, gang leaders, media giants in America whereby take control over the daily life of the common man reveal yet another form of manipulation of power in indirect forms but with venomous effect. One becomes a direct violation of all sorts of human freedom by untamed political power the other directs freedom in a liberal democratic nation by unjust and dehumanising ways.

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