



## Ethos of Survival in Extremity in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*

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### Abstract

Saul Bellow, one of the most fabulous postmodern writers of the American fictional world, champions the cause of restructuring the broken layers of the desperate human spirits. The chief protagonist Henderson's flight into the deserts of Africa and his confrontations with multitudes of tribesmen and varied ethnicities tend to reincarnate his inner psyche. Henderson's proximity with Wariri and subsequently his meeting with King Dahfu enable him to conciliate his fear-psychosis-fear of death and regain his physical and mental strength. Saul Bellow epitomizes the enigma of life through the characterization of Henderson that absolute love in life is attained only through inexpressible tribulations.

Key words: invigorate, astuteness, idiosyncratic, picaresque, voluptuousness.

Saul Bellow, one of the most fabulous postmodern writers of the American fictional world, champions the cause of restructuring the broken layers of the desperate human spirits. Bellow's protagonists, even on the face of ceaseless agonies, strive for uncovering the meaning of life. The writer is always in a crusade to invigorate the oppressed individuals who are otherwise crushed under the varying facets of contemporary gluttony. Saul Bellow is always at war with the predicament of individual's subsistence in the midst of the rebellious societal milieu which poses a dangerous hazard to individual's existence, ethics, values, compassion, astuteness, intuition and ingenuity. In Biyot K.Tripathy's perception: "He (Bellow) is not putting the individual as good in the face of evil, nor is he depicting man as a helpless victim caught in the crossfires of a cosmic battle between good and evil. He is dealing with the act of living, an act that has to integrate man's inner perceptions and interior

identities with those external to him."<sup>1</sup> Dissimilar to the other contemporary American novelists, Saul Bellow's writings unveil a balanced and embryonic obsession with the transition of an individual who, through his agonizing tribulations, attains mystical redemption at length.

The protagonists in Saul Bellow's narratives are the prototypes of the contemporary men in conflict. These characters enable the writer to depict his tragic vision of life. Saul Bellow was fair enough to admit this when he was interviewed, "Which of your characters is most like you?" Saul Bellow responded, "Henderson, the absurd seeker of high qualities".<sup>2</sup> Saul Bellow always advocated the cause of the redemption of human soul in his fictions. This unique philosophy of life, which is predominant in *Henderson the Rain King*, singles out the writer from other contemporary American novelists. The narrative recounts the tale of an aristocratic American who is in the doldrums owing to his own

excessive obsessions with materialism. The protagonist's obsession with materialism is so intense that he loses his intrinsic poise-leading to his spiritual corrosion. Everything around perturbs him. His aversion towards lushness and the voluptuousness that it follows permeates in the entire narrative. The protagonist is now elevated to a sublime state of celestial and conjectural pedestal. Elopement is the only choice left before him. The protagonist's flight into the deserts of Africa and his confrontations with multitudes of tribesmen and varied ethnicities tend to reincarnate his inner psyche. Henderson's proximity with Wariri and subsequently his meeting with King Dahfu enable him to conciliate his fear-psychosis-fear of death and regain his physical and mental strength. In Wariri Henderson undergoes some heroic and appalling encounters under King Dahfu's supervision which ultimately shapes his refurbished persona.

Saul Bellow pursues the idiosyncratic picaresque narrative technique in the novel *Henderson the Rain King*. This distinctive narrative technique embodies the myriad exploits in the life of the major protagonist. Regardless of the enormous fortunes does Henderson possess, he is destined to lead a tormented life. In spite of his huge physical appearance, immense material possessions and envying grasp of all the branches of learning, Henderson seldom gets even an iota of solace. Instead, he resorts to raise pigs in his inherited Connecticut land, prefers to play violin to sooth the departed souls of his parents and shoots cats to mitigate his agitating inner psyche. The intensity of Henderson's frustrations come to the fore when he laments, "I want, I want, I want, oh, I want...." (15)<sup>3</sup>. The protagonist's fear psychosis and his frustration with the ineffectuality in real life attribute to his present state of mind. The irresistible quest of the contemporary Americans to amass wealth is portrayed through the personification of Henderson. He is a mouthpiece of the gluttonous temperaments of the affluent Americans. Identical to the mental stature of majority of the well-heeled Americans, Henderson, though he knows that he has everything, is ignorant about his own aspirations. The protagonist's aristocratic parentage and all the prosperity that has come along fails to usher him. On

the contrary, Henderson is now reduced to an abject persona, a character whose enormous wealth and noble ancestry seldom ignite any hope of spiritual rejuvenation in him. Henderson attempts to theorize the futility of life. Though technology plays a pivotal role in man's prosperity, it hardly assists an individual in his spiritual rebirth. Henderson's realization about the emptiness of his life amid affluence is the general attitude of most of the Americans. However, Henderson never yields to destiny. Instead, he strives to find out a solution to his fear psychosis-his nervousness about his own impending annihilation.

Saul Bellow portrays Henderson as an archetype of survival hero, a protagonist who with ease outsmarts his fear-psychosis with "a knack for survival"<sup>4</sup> and begins to confront with his dilemma with absolute self-assurance. Henderson's quest for the unending solace induces him to move to the wilderness of Africa. For this he has no hesitation to renounce even his second wife Lily and children. The protagonist's fascination with Africa and its divine serenity is linked with his sharp discontent and discord with the pleasures of the material world. Henderson is in quest of divine deliverance from "all the unbearable complications" (21) in his inner psyche. Henderson and his local aide are accorded grand welcome at Arnewi. They are moved by the soothing affability offered by Prince Itelo and his fellow tribesmen. Henderson's meeting with Queen Willatale and her sister, Mtalba has far-reaching therapeutic effects on his melancholic inner psyche. The Queen is an incarnation of unyielding staunchness and enviable restraint. Henderson acknowledges before Willatale that he is constantly haunted by the phobia of death. Henderson implores Willatale, "what's the best way to live?" (78). Willatale's philosophy of life, "Grun-tu-molani: Man wants to live" (81) fascinates Henderson.

The ancient form of civilization and culture of the tribesmen of Arnewi go in harmony with the scenic beauty of Arnewi. Modern civilization has not yet touched the very fabric of Arnewi. They are still inhabiting in make shift arrangements, mostly in thatched mud huts. It takes no time for Henderson to mingle with the natives and gain their confidence.

The local tribesmen are still pursuing the primitive form of farming and cattle raising as their main vocations. Henderson's arrival in Arnewi is coincided with a catastrophe. The entire village is draught affected. There is no water even for the cattle to drink. Though there is enough water in a nearby pond, the superstitious people of Arnewi are reluctant to let their cattle drink water from it as the pond is filled with frogs. In spite of Henderson's consistent efforts to break the embargo, the villagers remain firm and there is no breakthrough in it.

Henderson is now totally changed. His approaches and perceptions about the meaning of life and death are refurbished. Henderson's indebtedness to the Queen for uncovering the mystery of life inspires him to do something for the people of Arnewi as reward: "God will reward her, tell her, for saying it to me. I'll reward her myself. I'll annihilate and blast those frogs clear out of that cistern, sky high, they'll wish they had never come down from the mountains to bother you" (81-82). Subsequently, Henderson detonates a handmade bomb and succeeds to eliminate frogs. However, Henderson's barbaric act of slaughtering the rain gods irks the ethnic community, "J.C. Frazar records that the frogs and the toad are custodians of rain and that some Indians of the Orinoco hold the toad to be the God or lord of the waters, and for that reason fear to kill the creature"<sup>5</sup>. Ever since this ferocious frog catastrophe, Henderson finds it tough to reconcile with the tribesmen as their very sentiments are associated with it. Henderson, filled with remorse, is constrained to retreat from Arnewi: "I hoped to learn the wisdom of life from her but I guess I am just too rash." (105).

Henderson's settlement in Wariri, the kingdom of King Dahfu, enables him to associate with an altogether different set of people. The heroic standing of the people of Wariri stands as a striking contrast to the stoic disposition of the people of Arnewi. Henderson is shocked to witness animal slaughter in Wariri, that too by the women folk, sans mercy in order to appease their deities. In due course of time the protagonist learns more about the most atrocious acts of the natives that

they are insensible even to eliminate their own mates for fun. The most heinous act of killing their own brethren for frolic sports has brought defame to the village. Henderson and his associate are confined to imprisonment. During the dreadful night, Henderson is confronted with an uncanny life-death experience. He realizes with horror the fact that he is sharing the prison cell with a dead body. However, Henderson, though longs for, cannot flee away from the prison cell and instead he reconciles with his tragic plight of spending the dreadful night with the dead body. Soon he begins to feel pity about the tragic kismet of the dead individual. In a frantic mood, Henderson comes in close contact with the dead body and sometimes he even lifts the dead body upon his shoulder culminating in his spiritual transition. Henderson's intimacy with the dead body throughout the night washes away his fear-psychosis-the protagonist's fear of death. Thus, during the night the protagonist attains spiritual salvation-giving an end to his unending search for the meaning of life.

Saul Bellow's depiction of King Dahfu, a prodigy of human psychology and medical science, gives a new twist to the novel. The mystical philosopher's disposition attracts Henderson. "Sometimes Dahfu seemed to be three times his size; he loomed over me and spoke with more than one voice" (201-202). The protagonist's perception of Dahfu, an incarnation of un-conquering heroic exploits, instills more self-assurance in Henderson. For Henderson the King is, "an intenser gift of being" (209). Henderson is relieved of his fear-psychosis-fear of death through his association with the king. Henderson is introduced to Atti, a lioness, which is tamed by the King in an underground chamber. Though frightened, on King's advice, Henderson tries to establish friendliness with Atti. The King teaches him all the tenets of man-animal bond. Henderson is instructed to assimilate all the characteristics of a lion so as to attain absolute pluckiness. On Dahfu's advice Henderson impersonates like a lion:

"...Give more sound. Now, with your hand-your paw-attack! Cuff! Fall back! Once more- strike, strike, strike strike! Feel it. Be the beast! You will

recover humanity later, but for the moments, be it utterly" (249). These nerve-wracking acrobats with the lioness have therapeutic impetus on Henderson's inner psyche. He feels as if he is reborn with enormous human benevolence.

The tribesmen of Wariri exert themselves in hosts of chivalrous exploits to appease the spirits of the dead ones. In hopo, another audacious native ritual, the King and his fellow tribesmen venture to capture the ritualistic lion, a manifestation of his father's soul. The King is of the conviction that the lioness is the source of his unyielding zing. In his audacious zeal to snag the lioness, the King is immortalized. The events that led to Dahfu's death teach Henderson the mystery of life and death. Henderson smears the dying King's blood on his body and achieves spiritual reincarnation. When blood is oozing out profusely from the fatal wounds of the dying king, Henderson, out of human empathy, ties his wounds with his trousers. Henderson has a blood bath: "As I had tried to stop his bleeding, there was blood all over me and soon it was dry. I tried to rub it off. Well, I thought, maybe this is a sign that I should continue his existence?" (p.293). Dahfu is reincarnated. This time the dead King has assumed the manifestation of a cub. Sensing some foul play, Henderson and Romilayu tactfully evade the death trap set by Bunam, the priest and his fellow tribesmen. Finding it hard to part with the cub, the spiritual reincarnation of the dead King, Henderson tells Romilayu while fleeing away with the cub that, "the sleep is burst, and I've come to myself...." (306).

Saul Bellow epitomizes the persona of Henderson to an elevated position with his sublime craftsmanship. On his arrival in Newfound Land Henderson befriends with an orphan boy-a refugee by destiny. Here, Henderson identifies himself with the cub and the boy-two facets of absolute innocence. Henderson's joy finds no bounds as he is fully engrossed in the company of the cub and the boy. After his initiation with the horrors of death, Henderson is born-again-an absolute revivification from his fear-psychosis-fear of death. Without further hesitation, Henderson rushes to Lily and enjoys her unfathomable love and thus putting an

end to his un-quenching search for the meaning of life and death. Henderson is now a completely changed human being that he knows only to love, love every creature that comes along: "You know why I'm eager to know how it will be now that the sleep is burst...." (312). Saul Bellow's magnificent novel *Henderson the Rain King* epitomizes the enigma of life through the characterization of Henderson that absolute love in life is attained only through inexpressible tribulations.

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