

CHAPTER – II

AFFIRMATION IN DANGLING MAN

Dangling Man, published in the mid 1940's took its term from the forties and pushed a dour hero over the arc from the impossibility of alienation to the death in accommodation.

Intellectuals have often used the major catastrophe of their age – its plague or war or fire – to describe the human condition. Joseph, the Dangling Man of Bellow's first novel, is no exception. He views his imminent draft into World War-II as the epitome of death and determinism.

The opposition between an enslaving world and man's desire for freedom is of course a common literary theme. The conflict, which Bellow defines, however, lies not between the self and the world but tow attitudes toward the world. Joseph speaks of preparation rather than action. He admits the victory of the world over his physical being and seeks a source of value that is inherent in his inner self. He seeks not to do battle with the world, like the ordinary hero, nor to make those symbolic gestures by which the Hemingway hero proves his dignity, but to discover within himself the reality which renders such conflict superfluous. Since Joseph's consciousness is central to the novel, all else being peripheral, a valid approach to the theme can be made through an analysis of his view of himself. To himself, Joseph is the 'I', the participant in

experience and the source of contemplation, as well as the he, an object to be discussed and commented upon. This ability to view himself as a separate entity is both liberating and limiting in its range: it brings into perspective not only the two places on which Joseph lives, but also the crippling inability of the viewer in him to remedy the sickness from which the viewed suffers. The viewer can note the symptoms but cannot define the causes and diagnose the ailment. As a participant in experience, Joseph is time bound and history ridden – he cannot escape the society in which he is born and the challenge that it poses:

“Whether I like it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together. I was aware, also, that their existence, just as it was, made mine possible. And if, as was often said, this part of the century was approaching the nether curve of a cycle, then I, too, would remain on the bottom and there, extinct, merely add my body, my life, to the base of a coming time.”

(Bellow: 1945 : 25)

As a spectator and thinker, on the other hand, Joseph would stand no finitude; in fact, he would jump time and space, if possible, and attain being, for ordinary existence disgusts him, though he considers it a prerogative to answer the vital existential question. “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” (Bellow: 1944 : 39) *Dangling Man* is about Joseph’s confrontation with these questions during the period of waiting which follows his

resignation from his job in the American Travel Bureau to respond to the Army's call for induction. Joseph's peculiar position in society gives him both the leisure and the impetus to discover his self. He seeks the answer to the questions by submitting himself to a painful trial of loneliness and self-scrutiny, discovering in the process that all possible avenues of escape into life-status, ideology, aestheticism, religion, family and friends have been barred to him. Being unemployed he has lost his sense of place and security in the society. His disillusionment with Marxism derives from his recognition that vital answer cannot be sought in radical political ideologies. The superior world of imagination, of art and books, which represented to him earlier "an extended life, far more precious than the one I was forced to lead daily." (Bellow: 1944 : 10) now appears inadequate for his purposes, though it continues to serve well for his artist friend John Pearl who has discovered in it a connection with "the best part of mankind." (Bellow: 1944 : 91) His quest for a happy citizenry, however, excludes God, since the pre-condition for religious initiation, to him, is a "miserable surrender... born out of disheartenment and chaos." (Bellow: 1944 : 68) He also turns away from his family and friends, thus rejecting another source of purposive and cohesive living. He refuses the offer of his brother Amos to help him out of his difficulties and does not feel impelled to renew contacts with his friends. From his wife he already feels alienated, though he continues to live with her and be supported by her in his unemployed state.

"We no longer confide in each other", he says, "in fact, there are many things I could not mention to her. We have friends, but we no longer see them... the main bolt that held us together has given way, and so far I have had no incentive to replace it."
(Bellow: 1944 : 12)

This distrust of others finds an eloquent expression in Joseph's behaviour with his father-in-law, when the latter falls ill. Joseph regards his mother-in-law as insufferable and asks his father-in-law rather tactlessly how he had managed to tolerate her so long. Old Almstadt's complacent fondness for his wife puzzles Joseph, particularly because he knows that it does not result from hypocrisy or passive resignation. Joseph does not share Old Almstadt's acceptance of life's ordinariness. While he is able to sense the exact nature of the old man's sentiment for his wife, he is unable to recognise the necessity of such an outlook for himself. In Bellow's moral framework, he is therefore, found lacking "in the determining quality of humanness – the power to love, to believe in the existence of human beings as such."
(Bellow: 1962 : 30)

When a friend tells him that he is "all fenced around" (Bellow: 1944 : 54) Joseph ignores the remarks, mistakenly believing that by withdrawing from the suffocating actuality of life, it is possible to arrive at a more refined conception of the self. Joseph fails to see that such an attitude pre-supposes ideal categories and that it can inflate the ego and intensify loneliness. Isolation, as Karl Jaspers puts it, seldom leads to a refined state of being:

"The individual cannot become human by himself. Self-being is only real in communication with another self-being. Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation – only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of natural discovery... isolated or self-isolating being remains mere potentiality or disappears into nothingness." (Kaufmann: 1959 : 147)

Joseph can be compared with the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. Both can theorize efficiently about ideal possibilities but cannot transform them into existential realities. But important as the parallel is, it is also very essential to distinguish between the situations of the two protagonists. To Dostoevsky's hero the events have already happened: the recall of what he calls his evil memory is thus necessarily tinged with the insights he has gained in the course of his trial. Bellow's hero, on the other hand, is in the midst of experience: events are happening to him and he is unable to chart his mental growth as perceptively as Dostoevsky's hero can. He, therefore, does not realize that in his quest for an intangible world of the spirit as opposed to the tangible, visible world, he has ceased to be authentic. The underground man's description of the generalized man fits him perfectly:

"We are oppressed at being men – men with a real individual body and blood, we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace and try to contrive to be some sort of impossible generalized man. We are still born, and for generations past have been begotten, not by living fathers, and that suits us better and better. We are

developing a taste for it. Soon we shall contrive to be born somehow from an idea." (Shishkoff: 1969 : 140)

The impossibility of translating his dream of the "Colony of the spirit" into reality is brought home to Joseph at the Servatius party. Joseph is revolted by the insult heaped on his drunken and hypnotized hostess Minna Servatius by Abt, an old suitor she had rejected long ago. His own wife gets drunk and has to be helped into the cab. Feeling let down by the imperfections of human nature, Joseph realizes that there are many "treasons" that corrupt his cherished ideals: "they were a medium, like air, like water; they passed in and out of you, they made themselves your accomplices, nothing was impenetrable to them." (Bellow: 1944 : 56) He is also conscious that a search for the ideal to the exclusion of everything else is self-defeating because the ideal might never be reached. This makes people place a high premium on greatness, on the notion of being exceptional, unique, and set apart.

Joseph learns soon that the ordinary and the dismal, the crass and the stubborn, in fact all that constitutes reality cannot be avoided. His day to day encounters with relatives and friends and even with total strangers force on him the recognition that he too is common, vulnerable to anger, suspicion and humiliation, often an object of pity. His maidservant arrogantly smokes in his presence, making him feel that he is of no consequence. He flares up when an old communist acquaintance deliberately ignores him in a restaurant. He quarrels with his wife when she asks him to cash

her pay cheque and suspects that she is making him run errands because she supports him. Accused by his niece Etta of attempting assault on her person, Joseph is struck by her facial resemblance to him and recalls with discomfiture that the mother of a boyhood friend had once called him Mephistopheles. Joseph is unable to rid himself of the feeling that in his semblance with Etta and Mephistopheles he shares with mankind its evil. Identified, thus, with the sordid aspects of life almost involuntarily, he discovers that there is another fact of reality – the fear of death, which he cannot evade. Although in his waking hours Joseph tries to ignore his fear of death, in his dreams he is unable to control its projection. The inescapable truth of morality dawns upon Joseph in many of his dreams. In one dream he hears foot-steps behind him in a muddy backlane and, overtaken, finds the swollen face of the man who has collapsed in the street coming toward him, “Until I felt its bristles and a cold pressure of the nose, the lips kissed me on the temple with a laugh and a groan. Blindly I ran...” (Bellow: 1944 : 122) The dream suggests that howsoever strong one’s claims on uniqueness, the kiss of death is implanted on every face. The laugh and the groan indicate the irony and the pain involved in the inevitable condition of being human, a condition shared by all men. The insights Joseph gains in the course of the novel are brought to a focus in his dialogues with the spirit of Alternatives. Bellow uses these dialogues with a double advantage: they offer the reader an additional angle to view Joseph’s situation, but, more significantly, they help Joseph to arrive at the truth about himself through a process of self-analysis.

In his first session with the spirit, Joseph confesses that though in many ways he himself is alienated, he considers alienation a fool's plea because the alienated individual is so much a part and product of the world he sets out to reject that his very denial implicates him (Bellow: 1944 : 137). His attempt to renounce the world merely prompts him to move away from himself.

In order to bridge the gap between the self and the world, most people invent their own ideal constructions of reality. But Joseph wonders whether the gap between the ideal construction and the world can really be bridged. Although Joseph is unable to find an answer to this question, he is convinced that the basic urge behind the invention of all ideal constructions is the same – the desire for pure freedom:

"The quest, I am beginning to think, whether it be for money, for notoreity, reputation, increase of pride, whether it leads us to thievery, slaughter, sacrifice, the quest is one and the same. All the striving is for one end, I do not entirely understand this impulse. But it seems to me that its final end is the desire for pure freedom. We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit – to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace. And, if the quest is the same, the difference in our personal histories, which hitherto meant so much to us, become of minor importance". (Bellow: 1944 : 154)

The highest ideal construction, according to Joseph, is "the

one that unlocks the imprisoning self." (Bellow: 1944 : 153) obviously, Joseph is here distinguishing between the "public self" and the "true self" without taking into account the contradiction inherent in his formulation. If the quest of all men is the same and if differences in personal histories are of little value, how far is one justified in conceiving a self – a personal, separated self – which has to be realised from the prison of the public self? And, then, if a personal self is non-existent, where is the need for an ideal construction to liberate it? Not aware of this dichotomy, Joseph fails to see that his acknowledgement and affirmation of the fate of mankind, in life and death, runs counter to his quest for an autonomous identity that may preserve him "in this flood of death that has carried off so many like me." (Bellow: 1944 : 167) He is conscious of the duality of his position, but cannot reason it out.

Joseph's uneasiness and confusion derive from his growing feeling that his search for an autonomous self has been futile and that he has not found a satisfactory answer to the problem of good life. As a result, he is at a loss to make any use of his freedom. He precipitates his draft call after a quarrel with his neighbour and his landlord, finding it impossible to withstand the unceasing and relentless pressure of the world around him. He feels that loneliness has not helped him in his struggle and hopes to evolve a more accommodating and comprehensive attitude to reality by participating in war and violence, which evoke unexpected responses in men and reveal them in their essential form:

"I had not done well alone. I doubted whether anyone could. To be pushed upon one entirely put the very facts of simple existence in doubt. Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room. Perhaps I could sound creation through other means. Perhaps."

(Bellow: 1944 : 190 - 191)

The pattern of Joseph's self-discovery has greater affinity with Antione Roquentin's in Sartre's *Nausea*. Both the heroes, alienated from themselves and their environment, view their respective situation as observers and hope to find security in the neat roles they attempt to construct for themselves to overcome the nausea of a meaningless life. Like Sartre, Bellow qualifies his affirmation in proportion to the limitation of his hero and makes it more a matter of perspective than of explicit statements and overtly suggestive actions. Though by enlisting himself in the army Joseph does not reach an ideal positive freedom, yet he is spared the predicament of Dostoevsky's underground Man who suffers from spite and inertia and delights in degradation for its own sake. Joseph is also saved from creating ideal constructions of reality, which give an illusion of meaning and do not allow men to know the truth about themselves. Then, there is Joseph's assurance that he would "be a member of the Army but not a part of it." (Bellow: 1944 : 133) using the period of his service as a "spiritual preparation" (Bellow: 1944 : 191) for sounding "creation through other means." (Bellow: 1944 : 191) This is not an altogether hopeless desire because it is accompanied by the recognition that reality cannot be captured in

ideal constructions, that "there are no values outside life" (Bellow: 1944 : 165) and that a belief in an autonomous self to the exclusion of all human relationships is illusory.

It is true that Joseph's request for induction fulfils the thematic requirements of the social and psychological stories, and thus is an affirmative decision. Joseph's sense of strangeness, as we have seen, may be taken as a symptom of his alienation from the world. In joining the army Joseph joins society, accepting historical limitation, and takes his place among other mortal men, accepting physical limitation. But the issue in *Dangling Man* is not Joseph's evasion of the army but his preparation for it. When Joseph hopes that "the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room." (Bellow: 1944 : 191) he confesses that he has failed in his goal. Bellow's portrayal of an evil world which cannot merely be accepted, his sympathetic treatment of Joseph's instinctual answer to that world – the need for an essential transcendent self – and the evidence that Joseph is close to just such a sense of the self, all seem to rule out the optimistic interpretation. Joseph gives himself to society and possible death because he is unable to give himself to imagination or faith. Joseph seeks the freedom to be found in meaning rather than meaninglessness. Seeking a reality higher than the self, finding none in a society which, as Bellow has said of "the greatest human qualities," has "no vocabulary for them and no ceremony (except in the churches) which makes them public." (Bellow: 1960 : 414)

Joseph might well argue that only the self is proof of the greatest reality. Joseph dangles, he is rational, he is defeated because he withdraws from society to the self but he also sees that it is the self, which is morally aware and thus representative of whatever moral order may exist.