



From Seclusion to Community : The Quest for Selfhood in Saul Bellow's Dangling Man

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ABSTRACT

Quests recover fundamental things to human life in encounters between cultures, with strange surroundings, people, animals, nature, or the Other; namely, the waking of individual in the awareness of himself, awareness about others, the world, and the meaning of life. In the world of enormous possibilities, the desire to transcend the given human condition often appears to govern Saul Bellow's major protagonists. Bellow's heroes are usually seem to be on a quest for meaning in life, their own human essence believing that man is free to choose and that he can become better. Joseph, the protagonist of Dangling Man is one such individual who appears to desire a radical transformation of his personality. The quest of Joseph appears to be not only for inner harmony but also for discovery of values that transcends the discords of society and reconciliation with society. The present article is an attempt to trace the development of Joseph, - his efforts to understand his self, establish his identity and achieve spiritual maturity. Moreover, it tries to reveal the educational nature of the writer's works.

Dangling Man (Saul Bellow, 1944) as the first novel of Bellow, when published, received accolades in the literary circles, and was considered as "one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the war."(Edmund Wilson 78) Reflecting Wilson's observation, Bellow, in the novel, is seen to have captured both, the prevailing anxiety arising out of the social disorder and the tormenting effect of this upheaval on an individual's sense of selfhood. Bellow, taking the instability, anxiety and dread from the society, has seemingly filled it into the mind of Joseph – the protagonist of the novel. The novel, then, appears to be about Joseph's triumph over the anarchy of the world, which is bent upon destroying his sense of self. Thus, the novel can be seen as quest of Joseph for his selfhood in a kind of spiritual barrenness of both - his self and the social milieu.

Dangling Man is the diary narration of a twenty-seven year-old protagonist, Joseph, a Canadian citizen living in Chicago, USA. Joseph is a graduate who had to give up his job because of his pending induction in the army, which is being held up by extensive and monotonous bureaucratic manoeuvres. He is classified and re-classified, finally accepted but not drafted. As his call from the army is expected any day, he does not want to take up a job and therefore is completely dependent on his earning wife, Iva. Failing to use his freedom meaningfully, Joseph gradually cuts himself off from the mainstream of human existence. Trapped in his self-imposed exile, alienated from his self, family and friends; Joseph appears to dangle in his peculiar limbo. Tired of uncertainties, Joseph, at the end of the novel, is seen surrendering his inertness to a life of action in the army. Joseph, between the period of

waiting and surrender, appears to undergo an ordeal with disastrous forces within his own self. This ordeal seems to make him realize that any definition of self cannot be achieved in isolation, to define one's own self, one has to participate in the world.

Joseph is seen waiting to be drafted into the army in the beginning of the novel. Due to the confusion that results from his unknown identity, he is classified as an 'alien.'(9) In fact, waiting to be called for a military service is a psychological torture, which gives rise to certain idiosyncrasies, which are translated through his cut with the civilian connections, and which left him dangling and drifting aimlessly. Joseph's dislocation from the group is what Bellow qualifies as strangeness, alienation and loneliness. (Bellow, *Distractions of a fiction writer*, 4) Joseph "suffers from a feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world," (24) In his present state of demoralization, suffering under the victimizing pressure of his peculiar fate, Joseph admits: "I do not know how to use my freedom" so, "there is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited" (12). It is perfectly clear that his freedom is generating a kind of pessimism that is damaging his general sense of well-being. But instead of trying to establish the necessary outer communication, Joseph stores "bitterness and spite" (12) which turns him into "a human grenade" (147) ready to explode. This stored up sourness, indicatively not only hinders his way to affirmation of his self but it also blocks his thought process, and pushes him away from all the probabilities of having a clear vision that can shatter the "narcotic dullness." (18) Joseph's aloofness from society and his limited perception of life apparently has turned him into an individual, who is helpless "to affect, or effect, his own destiny." (Pifer 28) In the light of Pifer's statement, we can see that Joseph is unable to realize his selfhood, as he is trapped in the narrow limits of his isolated situation.

Along with his peculiar predicament, the war also apparently generates anxiety: "Will it decide, ultimately, the major issues of existence? No. Will it secure us spiritually? Still no." (168) Joseph's musing over here may be regarding his own situation,

his deteriorating sense of self, but largely they appear to reveal Bellow's own humanistic concerns. Bellow firmly believed that: "We are not born to be condemned but to live." (Bellow, *How I Wrote Augie March's Story*, 3) It is this belief in the dignity of human life that one finds throughout in Bellow's works. By relying on a balance between man's participation in the world and man's perceptive ability, Bellow establishes a trend in his novels that breaks away from emphasis upon the absurd and concentrates on individual's ability to make a useful, productive life out of an often incomprehensible yet tolerable world. As we explore the novel, Bellow's concerns become evident in the developing awareness of the need of outer communication experienced by Joseph.

Even though his quest for selfhood is conducted within the narrow limits of his isolated situation, early in his quest, Joseph is greatly impressed by "the philosophers of the Enlightenment" (11) It is indeed ironic, that, Joseph, who valued the power of reasons and had made an in-depth study of Goethe has failed to think in the right direction. Once an ardent reader, a believer in the higher power of intellect seems to find it difficult "to sustain this superior life at all times." (10) The books that "stood as guarantors of an extended life, far more precious and necessary" (10) are found to have become meaningless to him. His aggravated intellectual unrest, his turning away from books and his doubt on their relevance, all appear to be symptomatic of a deeper trouble within his own self.

Without knowledge of the essential nature of his consciousness as it exists in the world, he does not gain proper communication, and his alienation is greatly intensified. Joseph's intense frustration with the outer world is seen being transferred to his domestic life, damaging his relation with his wife Iva. In fact, his wife appears to be trying hard to cope up unsuccessfully with her anxiety-ridden husband. In his isolation he broods over his dying feeling for her, "She has a way about her that discourages talk." (12) Further he notes, "But, as I see it, the main bolt that held us together has given way." (12) What Joseph perceives here is suggestive

of his own failure to make corresponding adjustments. Iva too seems to be acutely aware of his growing indifference towards her: "Lately, for all you care, I might just as well not be here." (94) The rift in their emotional bonding becomes evident in Iva's refusal to obey Joseph's wishes in Servatius's party. He notices her lack of interest in him: "I had dominated her for years. She was now capable of rebelling." (97) His disapproval of Iva's behaviour in the party clearly indicates that he has lost the ability to accept whatever lies outside his own ideology.

Joseph's relations with Iva's family too are found to be strenuous to him. He often appears to disregard his mother-in-law, considering her well-meant gestures as foolish. When he expresses his disgust with the behaviour of Mrs. Almstadt, Mr. Almstadt, his father-in-law, tactfully handles the situation: "some people just turn out different than others. Everybody isn't alike." (21) Joseph failing to understand the statement from right perspective takes it as an insult. In much same way, he considers the glass of juice offered to him with a feather in it, as an evidence of disregard for him. On his visit to their home, in their kitchen besides the glass of juice, he finds "a half-cleaned chicken, its yellow claws rigid, its head bent as though to examine its entrails which ravelled over the sopping draining board and splattered the enamel with blood." (24) Ada Aharoni finds a striking animal imagery which Bellow uses to illustrate his hero's introspective quest for selfhood: 'half-cleaned' seems to indicate that the hero's search is unfinished. The rigid claws symbolize impotence; they stand stiff in resignation while the head bent on its inner pursuits. Like the chicken, Joseph too is congealed, he has stopped working with hands, and his inner search becomes his main concern. (Aharoni 50) However, the researcher feels that Bellow perhaps used the "half-cleaned chicken" (24) as a metaphor for Joseph's self. It appears to be representative of Joseph's self which has not yet attained purity, however, like the chicken, is under the cleansing process. With his head bent, he perhaps is staring perpetually at his own innards, filled with negativity and disgust. Like the stray feather that has spoiled the glass of juice, Joseph, too, perhaps, has spoiled his existence with his negative attitudes.

Bellow appears to reveal Joseph's progressive awareness of his own self through intricate patterns of his self-defeat. Joseph's intense frustrations, probably, surface in his behaviour at his brother Amos's Christmas dinner, where he directs his rage at his niece Etta. The point of conflict concerns who shall use the phonograph. Joseph wants to play Hayden, the Austrian composer, repeatedly because it enables him to realize that he is "still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation" (67) and requires him to look at his own problems "without meanness." (67) Etta on the other hand wanted to play her favourite album. Joseph, however, refuses to allow her to have her way. Joseph's pride is found giving the issue an unreasonable proportion. For Joseph, it seemingly became important that it is he and not Etta, who takes control of the phonograph. He could not endure her shabby words and violently thrashes her. M. Gilbert Porter points out certain parallels between him and Etta: "In several ways Etta mirrors Joseph. They both are vain, young and physically alike. Her bitchiness is matched by his stubbornness; her "movie talk" is answered with movie talk of his own. They both are dangles, Joseph between the ideal and real world, Etta between childhood and adulthood. Her immaturity is paralleled by his extreme reactions." (Porter 14) It is possible that Etta by extension is the quarrelsome and shrewd self of Joseph. Thus, by punishing Etta, he seems to punish himself. He is probably attacking those traits in him that do not allow him to achieve clarity of thought. At the same time, Etta seemingly reminds him of his former self which is a hindrance in attaining the pure freedom that he very much wants. It is ironic that the music, which had recently given him instruction in emotional maturity, could not prevent him from becoming a tyrant.

Joseph's exhaustive reading of the philosophical writings is found to have generated excessive idealism in him. Under the influence of this idealism, he had wished to create among his friends a "colony of spirits" – a community whose "covenants forbade spite, bloodiness and cruelty." (39) But, he perhaps, fails to understand that such a colony cannot be constructed owing to fluid sensitivity of human

nature. Every human being is bound to behave and react in a different manner in a similar situation. Bellow skilfully reveals this truth and the weaknesses inherent in the matrix of a society through Servatius's party. Joseph is apparently disillusioned by the behaviour of those friends whom he considered as having "sensible attitude." (44) When Abt hypnotizes his former sweetheart Minna and subjects her to torture and mental anguish, Joseph is seemingly traumatized by his friend's capacity for violence and hate. This incident made him realize that he, too, "made mistakes of the sort people make who see things as they wish to see them or, for the sake of their plans, must see them." (39) This incident apparently makes it clear that the absence of an appropriate form and a practical approach render Joseph's plan of an idealized society as impossible. Moreover, it is an eye-opening incident, teaching Joseph that there are hidden instincts in every human being and it is difficult to distinguish between good and bad traits of a close friend even.

Joseph's occasional excursion outside his room, into the society is seen bringing him back to his room with increasing irritation on discovering "one weakness after another in all I [he] had built up around [him]." (56) His very detachment from the community, the uncertainty of his life and monotonous routine, all appear to add up to his annoyance. As a result, there is a violent reaction, whenever, a situation or a person gives the impression of being a threat to his sense of self. This annoyance has further turned him into a man who "wants to blaze more sharply, regardless of the consequences." (82) His annoyance not only generates anger but seemingly distorts his judgment and small matters assume irrational magnitude. This is reflected in the attitude that he takes when the maid smokes in front of him. In much the same way, when the bank manager doubts his identity, he instantly reacts with anger. A similar scene occurs, when Jimmy Burns, a former "comrade" (33), refuses to recognize him. His anger and irrational behaviour clearly indicate that he wishes to get rid of his miserable self, but he is perhaps unable to find a way.

To add to his miseries, Joseph is seen living in a decaying neighbourhood. Everyone around him appears to be sick or dying, unhappy or struggling or waiting for some good to happen or ill-tempered people getting flared up at trifle matters. Joseph appears to be constantly irritated with his old and weak neighbour, Mr. Vanaker. Finding many parallels in the lives of the two men, Gilbert Porter infers that "Vanaker is his alter ego, a Conradian secret sharer." (Porter 20) Mr. Vanaker perhaps represents Joseph's diminishing sense of self through his degenerating health. The old, isolated and unhappy man can be identified as Joseph's isolation and detachment. Joseph appears to be annoyed with him, because of the old man's coughing at least is "a sort of social activity" (16) to "draw attention to himself" (16) which, probably, he fails to do. Most important of all Vanaker appears to project a future condition of Joseph, if he continues to live in his present state – detached, demoralized and debased. Joseph's final violent outburst against Vanaker is suggestive of his awareness of such a future that he wants to avoid. His action, to establish his supremacy over a weak old man, also manifests his own will to kill the inactive self.

In the period that followed this incident, Joseph is seen cutting himself off from the outer world totally. During this period, as Peter Hyland notes, Joseph "gradually separates himself from the external world; he begins to depend completely upon what goes on in his own mind." (Hyland 18) The social, intellectual and spiritual experiences that he goes through seem to intensify his self-scrutiny further. Totally moored into his isolation, Joseph, in a moment of introspection, ponders: "Great pressure is brought to bear to make us undervalue ourselves. On the other hand, civilization teaches that each of us is an inestimable prize." (119) The weight that he feels is perhaps his own making. By creating an ideal world of resolute standards and pure ideas in his own mind, he has apparently distanced his own self from the real world, which renders such ideology superfluous. Perhaps as the "most serious matters are closed" to him and he is "unpracticed in the

introspection,” (9) he finds the “spiritual climate” of his self (110) dull and colourless.

During this period of self-exploration, Joseph, “Oscillates between corrosive inertia and compulsive self-inquiry, wrestling with irresolvable paradox of the world and spirit.”(Tanner 18) Lacking a vision that can help him reconcile with the realities of the world, differing thoughts arise in his mind. Most of the time, he is found to be questioning or searching for some form of truth, a mode which can bail him out of his problems. Enforced by a necessity to find out “what I [he] myself [himself] am[is]?” (119) Joseph begins an inward journey to explore the depth of his own being. As a consequence, questions about the mystery of his own life appear to arise in his mind: “What I am for? Am I made for this?” (123). But far from finding the answers, he is seen, being bogged down by the mystery of human existence that is increasing at every juncture in his endeavour. The problem for Joseph perhaps lies in his disintegrated self. No one, in his situation, can find answers to those questions which require deep thinking and balance of mind. Similarly his efforts to find “clear signs ... of humanity” (25) within his own self too appear to fail because of the “bitterness” (12) that he has stored in his heart. Thus, by pitching his irritation against his own self, he has separated himself from the “good man” (39) he desires to be.

Joseph appears to harbour another impossible hope to deal with the chaos of the world in his formulation of “ideal construction” (140) that “unlock the imprisoned self.” (153) His formulation reflects his desire to free his self from the imprisoning conditions. But Joseph perhaps fails to realize that he is surrounded by elements like fear, anxiety and impulses that pose as threat to the self from unexpected corners of life. The most serious threat to his self perhaps is the “fear of lagging” (89) behind in his race for survival. This fear “lies in us [him] like a cloud. It makes [his] inner climate” (89) full of darkness and this darkness perhaps blocks his vision. It apparently fails him to realize that every plan needs to be envisioned keeping in mind the realities of the society in which one lives. Perhaps an apt correlation between the personal idealism and the social reality can only free the self from the

imprisoning inwardness and enable it to participate meaningfully in the world. Thus, the satisfaction of a meaningful existence seemingly lies in participation of the real, not in existence entirely alone.

The apparent force that drives Joseph to indulge in construction of ivory towers of idealism is his “desire for pure freedom” (153). The freedom that perhaps Joseph seeks for his self is freedom from society’s threatening and degrading influences. But by isolating himself, by separating himself from common humanity, Joseph, has withdrawn his self from all the curative experiences of the world. Even though, he is quite aware that “goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love”, yet, he is found to have cut down all the connectivity, only to find “not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail.” (92) Tanner makes an apt observation here that by “withdrawing to preserve the integrity of the self, he finds himself in a prison which damages his sense of reality and devalues his life through stagnation.” (Tanner 21) The period full of freedom and opportunity in which Joseph could have achieved whatever he wanted is apparently lost in his attempts to evade the reality. It is perhaps his own attitude governed by negativity that makes his own life oppressive to him. In this negative environment and problematic phase, Joseph aspires for self-knowledge. He admits: “We are all drawn toward the same craters of spirit – to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.” (153) But his own faulty perception of the reality apparently has created an abyss, in which he dangles perpetually without any aim or purposive action. Thus, he has seemingly closed all the doors for the divine grace or self-knowledge to enter. Joseph, in his own brooding, appears to ignore the fact that an individual needs to participate in the given conditions, then only he will be able to understand the purpose of his existence. The wisdom of life perhaps cannot be attained in isolation or in the absence of constructive initiatives. It is perhaps also equally important that he has to analyze his own actions to know, realize and value his own self.

As his isolation grows more personalized, he appears to develop a kind of dialogue within his own self. In a brief diary entry dated December 18, he marks the radical transformation that his self has undergone and draws a sharp distinction between his “old self” and “newself”. He admits: “I am that older self ... very little about the Joseph of a year ago pleases me. I cannot help laughing at him, at some of his traits and sayings.” (26) For his “old self” though the world was a crude place but perhaps there was a possibility of a meaningful living if one could manage one’s freedom and divert his desires and impulses in right direction. However, Joseph’s “new self” apparently fails to reconcile with the realities of the world. Hence, the world for him is predominantly hostile and uncontrollable. His “old self” had faith in the goodness of man but to his “new self”: “Theories of...good or...malevolent world strike...as foolish. Of those who believe in a... good world ...do not understand depravity. For him, the world is both and therefore it is neither” (29). But his old self still has strong faith in the “common humanity” (26) as “Everything is good because it exists. Or good or not good, it exists.” (29-30) In the light of his demarcation and realization, the older self was “a friendly alien” (11) and his newer self appears to be an unfriendly alien, meaning, the new Joseph seemingly has developed a negative idea of human existence as “nasty, brutish and short.” (40) Joseph’s differing thoughts and his analyses of his own self reflects that he has begun to realize that in his desire to enjoy total freedom he has lost his true self in falsities. These falsities have turned him into a man of negative attitudes, a man who finds everything unfavourable. Jonathan Wilson perhaps rightly observes that the transition that Joseph has made from optimistic to pessimistic self-reveals to us: “a divided personality, one who simultaneously entertains antithetical notions of the world and of self” (Wilson 41). A part of Joseph’s self is clearly aware of his own search for meaningful existence, this part is also seen as being conscious of the inexorable nature of the world which “comes after you... whatever you do, you cannot dismiss it.” (113) However, throughout the narrative, he is seen to have evaded this reality.

Bellow’s intention behind creating “Spirit of Alternatives” (135) or a kind of an alter ego, perhaps is to rouse Joseph’s self from the slumber of ignorance. In doing so, Bellow apparently enables Joseph to realize his true self and find answers to the fundamental questions about his own existence. Sarah Blacher Cohen observes that through his discussion with his alter ego, Joseph “arrive[s] at particular truths about himself through a kind of whimsical Socratic questioning.” (Cohen 35) When “Spirit of Alternatives” concludes that Joseph is in an alienated state, Joseph appears to refuse the label and refers to alienation as “a fool’s plea.”(137) Joseph’s refusal to accept the truth about his own self apparently indicate that he still wants to evade the reality. But when the “Spirit of Alternatives” probes him further: “If you are not alienated then why do you quarrel with so many people?” Joseph apparently fails to answer, but admits: “I was wrong, or else, put it badly. I didn’t say there was no feeling of alienation, but that we should not make a doctrine of our feelings” (138). His confession over here reflects that Joseph perhaps accepts the claim but his habit of idealizing everything hinders his way to pure affirmation. He probably knows that by his aloofness from the society as well his own self, he, himself has done much harm to the peaceful nature of his self. When Joseph asks “Spirit of Alternatives” for a solution to bridge “the gap between the ideal construction and the real world”, (141) his divided consciousness apparently refuses to answer, reminding him that his territory is of alternatives and not answers. It indicatively means that the answers to his questions lie within his own self, thus, Joseph needs to bring clarity in his ideas and his thoughts. In such a situation, Joseph is apparently thrown back to his own resources to find both the solutions to his problems regarding his existence and the ways to maintain his sense of self in the chaos of the world.

At the next meeting with the “Spirit of Alternatives”, Joseph appears to justify his stand and explain his position: “I would be denying my inmost feelings if I said I wanted to...savor my life when it is in danger of extinction” (166). Joseph’s point of worry here clearly reflects his awaking consciousness of the treacherous condition that his self is facing.

Intending to escape the common human fate, he enquires: “whether I can claim the right to preserve myself in the flood of death that has carried off so many” (167). It is indicatively clear that Joseph is probably not yet prepared to accept that he, too, is a common human being and the natural laws apply to him also. But “Spirit of Alternatives” refuses his demands: “Everybody else is dangling, too. When and if you survive you can start setting yourself strait.” (165) Perhaps at this juncture Joseph understands the truth in Spinoza’s statement: “no virtue could be considered greater than that of trying to preserve one’s own self” (167). The self that Joseph is trying to preserve perhaps is not his body or the physical being which he knows can be acted upon by the external forces, but his efforts are to save “the self that we must govern” (167). In a way: “Joseph continually returns to his need for a self which exists in its own right, whatever its dependence on the world, a self which is essential rather contingent” (Opdahl 43). When “Spirit of Alternatives” enquires whether he has a separate destiny, or, can he define himself in any essential way apart from others? Joseph fails to answer, but he seems to realize that his obstinate assertion of his ideology upon his self has separated him from common humanity. And in his persistent efforts to implement them has destroyed the very values which he had hoped to cultivate in his self.

Disillusioned with his experiment in freedom, in formulation of ideal society and in efforts to construct personal destiny, Joseph ultimately learns that life cannot be lived by abstract formulations. Joseph realizes that: “His search for an autonomous self has been futile and that he has not found satisfactory answers to the problem of designing a “goodlife”. As a result he is at loss to make any use of his freedom” (Kulshrestha 74) Joseph perhaps also comes to realize that he must learn to see the world as it is, without trying to make it different by philosophical interventions and without the protection of an imagined colony of affable people.

Joseph’s awakened consciousness seemingly forces him to surrender, he admits: “I believe I had known for some time that the moment I had been waiting

for had come... I must give myself up. I was done.” (183) Andrew Gordon aptly observes: “After indulging in one temper tantrum too many, he recognizes the destructive behaviour on self and those around him.” (Gordon 51) In his surrender, Joseph, perhaps, gains freedom from the routine of self-assessment. The realization that there cannot be any existence devoid of regulation and order in life, seemingly lead him to accept the regulation of the army expressing joy for regular hours, “supervision of the spirit” (191) and regimentation. By joining the army he is perhaps going to join the ranks of “hardboiled” (9) – the men of action for whom he held contempt at the beginning of the novel. The movement of Joseph that is seen at the end of the novel is a movement for getting definition of his self.

Thus, the novel seems to move from the cold barrenness of the heart to the warmth of hope. Joseph’s search for self perhaps is not in vain as it enables him to realize that the self cannot be defined in isolation, and reality cannot be captured through ideal construction. His illusion of an autonomous self with the exclusion of all human relationship is apparently shattered. His deliberate choice implies an affirmation of his self. Though the army grants only a nominal individual freedom, yet he is hopeful that “Perhaps, the war could teach me [him]...what I [he] had been unable to learn during those months in the room”(191). It is his movement from inertia to action and his escape from barren freedom to a community to affirm his selfhood.

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