

Language of Agony of Clowns: A Study of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*

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ABSTRACT

The late twentieth century and the first decade of the 21st century have seen brutal wars waged by the “most aggressive nation” on developing nations such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq apart from interfering with the internal affairs of Latin American nations such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti. Back in India, Kashmir has been suffering from terrorism and state terrorism for a couple of decades. In this historical background, this article makes a comparative study of American novelist Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Indian English novelist Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. In Saul Bellow's *Herzog* as well as Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, one finds the protagonists struggling to find the meaning in their lives in an objective world. They feel quixotic in the face of crisis but react differently to it under the impact of different historical and ideological currents. *Herzog* seeks to achieve freedom through main consciousness. *Shalimar*, a Muslim turns to terrorism to avenge the stealing of his wife by an American ambassador. In both cases, the masculine notion of honour accentuates the crisis. This notion of honour resting mainly on one's physical strength, sexual prowess, or capacity for violence makes a person subjective. The worship of Intellect minus love and emotion of hatred unseasoned by mercy causes suffering to *Herzog* and *Shalimar* respectively. Relationships based on objective and historical thinking provide a balm to pain produced by possessiveness and intellectual chaos born of egocentric thinking.

KEYWORDS

Herzog; *Shalimar the Clown*; Clown; Suffering.

The late twentieth century and the first decade of the 21st century have seen brutal wars waged by the “most aggressive nation” (Chomsky 164) on developing nations such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq apart from interfering with the internal affairs of Latin American nations such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti. To America, terrorism means, “terror targeting us (them), excluding what we do to them” (Chomsky 2003, 238). Back in India, Kashmir has been suffering from

terrorism and state terrorism for a couple of decades. Butalia notes that the conflict has led to the deaths of nearly seventy thousand people, the missing some four thousand people, and taking the number of widows and half-widows to more than fifteen thousand. She queries whether it is possible to create a space within which all Kashmiris irrespective of their religion can feel free to “discuss and decide how they want to live in safety, and freedom and dignity” (267). In this historical background, this article makes a

comparative study of American novelist Saulbellow's *Herzog* and Indian English novelist Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*.

In both the novels mentioned above, the protagonists suffer from marital crises worse confounded by social, political, and ideological crises of modern times. They feel like clowns in the face of overwhelming historical and intellectual burdens. The desertion of their wife sets Herzog on a fantastic voyage of consciousness to find a way of living with honour like a cerebral militant. In a similar condition, Shalimar turns into a jihadi to safeguard his masculine honour dented by his wife's preference for an American ambassador. Herzog finds his sense of self after much soul searching whereas Shalimar ends up as an international terrorist seeking vengeance.

Herzog is the story of an ivory-tower intellectual trapped in the complex structures and chaotic consciousness during the period of the cold war. At times he sees himself as "an Industry that manufactured personal history" (3). He is a suffering clown disillusioned in the era of receding prospects of the world revolution. He is a modern student of Romanticism in the post-modern city of New York. He argues with the available interpretations of the world but does little to change the world.

Professor Herzog's wife Madeline, a smart, assertive, and worldly-wise woman leaves him for his friend Valentine Gersbach. Herzog who feels like the Atlas of Modern civilization is caught in a mid-life crisis. He starts expressing his angst in letters to the familiar and the famous people living as well as dead. He recollects his lower-middle-class life, his intellectual pursuit of Utopia, sexual escapades, and the edge of the condition of man and civilization. He runs to analysts, friends, lawyers, mothers-in-law, rabbis, scholars, and amorous allies for getting in touch with reality. Herzog, a fly resting on the wheel of

history and a kid looking at his grotesque reflections in a chamber of errors sinks into relentless ruminations. He who cheats on his wife feels personally wronged by his wife who deserts him. To him, world revolution means "the victory of death, not of rationality, not of rational faith" (290).

Herzog who himself is an unfaithful husband thinks that he has been wronged by his wife Madeline who leaves him along with their daughter. To him justice has been eternally elusive and "people by the billions died and for ages sweated, gypped, enslaved suffocated, bled to death, buried with no more justice than cattle." He tells Ramona who loves him traditionally that Madeline has taught him a lesson about treating life as a subject. He muses whether his goodness is simply a joke and whether his sin lies in searching for grand synthesis minus love.

Herzog also relates his personal suffering to the condition of the Jewish race which has suffered "two millennia of exile and savage persecution culminating in the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human history" (Chomsky 2003, 46). He bemoans his personal condition:

Have all the traditions, passions, renunciations, virtues, gems and masterpieces of Hebrew discipline and all the rest of it... brought one to these untidy green sheets and this ripped mattress? (170).

Herzog is uncertain whether one could become a power-monger, bureaucratic scientist, or organizational man instead of becoming a clown. He observes that the hysterical individual sees life in polarities- strength-weakness, potency-impotence, health-sickness and seeks sex or the Leviathan of the organization when he is not able to fight for justice. Alternatively, the man with unrecognized needs yearns for activity, fraternity, and desperate longing for reality or God and would fall himself

“wildly upon anything resembling hope” (208). He questions the essence and meaning of humanity, and his humanity, and muses that history, memory, and the knowledge of death make people human.

Herzog’s neurosis has been due to trimming life into models available. He feels the mental burden as a result of being a man in the city in a hopeless age under the hegemony of science and industry. The individual self is trivial in a mass society that spends billions for order abroad and permits savagery at home and in the conflict between the vanishing values and ravishing mechanization. At last, Herzog refuses purposeless consciousness and claims freedom “from the chief ambiguity of intellectuals- subjective truth as the only human reality” (304).

Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Shalimar the Clown* portrays the friendly relations between the Hindus and Muslims which deteriorate in the wake of terrorism as well as hostile contradictions between the New world order under the hegemony of America and terrorism represented by Max Ophuls, an American ambassador to India and Shalimar, a Kashmiri respectively.

The amity reigns between two communities in a fusion of food habits and religious practices, “To be a Kashmiri, to have received so incomparable a divine gift was to value what was shared far higher than what divided.” (83). The villagers of Pachigam in Kashmir agree to the inter-religious love marriage of Noman Sher Noman or Shalimar, an innocent Muslim boy and Boonyi, the daughter of Pyarelal Pundit. The attempts of one Gopinath who wants to blackmail the young lovers and sow the seeds of division turn futile. After a while, Boonyi yearns to escape from the narrow life of Pachigam. She finds that Max, the American ambassador is mesmerized by her dance performance on his visit to the valley. But Shalimar has already shown her possessiveness even before their marriage, “Don’t you leave me

now, or I’ll never forgive you, and I’ll have my revenge, I’ll kill you and if you have any children by any other man, I’ll kill the children also” (61). Boonyi goes to Delhi for a dance performance before Max decides to stay back with him. Shalimar, the tight-rope walker, and clown turns vengeful and thinks of the grabbing of Boonyi by Max as the grabbing of a Vietnam peasant girl by American soldiers who in turn symbolize the stifling presence of the Indian army in Kashmir.

When Shalimar’s mother advises him against joining his terrorist-brother Anees and his men, he says,

Be glad you’re not a man... once we stop being asleep we can see that there are only enemies for us in this world, the enemies pretending to defend us who stand before us made of guns, khaki and greed and death, and behind them the enemies pretending to rescue us in the name of our own God except that they’re made of death and greed as well, and behind them the enemies who live among us bearing ungodly names, who seduce us and then betray us, enemies for whom death is a too lenient punishment... the last enemy, the invisible enemy in the invisible room in a foreign country far away; that’s the one I want to face. (248-249).

Shalimar’s story is one of the many tales of the unwritten history of Kashmir. He does not forget his past and thinks that love is a passing lie and Jihad is the absolute truth before which human desire, illusion, intelligence, and character bow down.

The novel also shows the increasing alienation among the two communities, the rise of Iron Mullahs, and ‘accidental’ killings by army officer Kachwala and his men who decide to teach a lesson to the locals. What follows are the punitive measures by the army, the destruction of the statues of Hindu gods, and the dislocation of the lives of the pundits.

Pyarelal, the father of Boonyi remarks to his daughter "We are no longer protagonists but agonists" (295). Rushdie seeks the whys of the pogrom of the pundits, the negligence of the welfare of the refugees, the unhygienic conditions in the slum camps, the diseases of the camp inmates, and the death in the life of the people despite the presence of the army (297). The increasing distrust of the army leads to disasters. The novelist seeks to know the perpetrators of arson, shootings, maiming, arrests, missing, demolition of homes and the elimination of the young and the old, boys and girls, burning of libraries, whippings, rapes of the living and the dead women (308-309). The critic Urvasi Butalia observes

Kashmiri women face the combined wrath of the patriarchal practices of all men surrounding them, whether militants or security forces, of their own families or indeed the state (xxi).

India or Kashmira, the daughter of Boonyi and Max has been taken away from the real mother to America by Max's original wife who stood by him in opposing Nazism during the Second World War. When the dejected and rejected Boonyi returns to Pachigam Shalimar is prevented by his parents from killing her. Abandoned by Shalimar, she lives like a ghost on the outskirts of the village awaiting her death at the hands of Shalimar. The latter turns into a terrorist, robotic killer, a jihadi in Afghanistan, and a car driver of Max who appoints him a driver despite his knowledge of Shalimar as the husband of Boonyi whom Max used as a sex-object earlier. Now, Max is retired after serving American interests in various capacities such as ambassador, spy, and architect of the post-war world, its international institutions, and its diplomatic conventions. Shalimar becomes a valet, body servant, and shadow-self and awaits patiently to butcher Max in a gory manner.

Shalimar's broken English indicates his struggle to gain a grip over the language of 'modernity'. He uses silence and his imperfect English to avenge the wrong done to him. Kashmira or India visits India and visualizes many deaths her real mother suffered for the crime of opposing tradition. She understands the murderous nature of Shalimar and reciprocates hatred and death on behalf of modernity.

In *Herzog* as well as *Shalimar the Clown*, one finds the individuals struggling to find the meaning in their life in an objective world that overpowers them. Both protagonists feel clownish in the face of crisis but react differently to it under the impact of different historical and ideological currents. Herzog seeks to achieve freedom through main consciousness and fails to fire the gun against his friend Gersbach who takes Madeline, Herzog's wife. Shalimar, a Muslim turns to terrorism to avenge the stealing of his wife by an American ambassador. Both of them desperately try to become heroic through understanding and triumphing over their clownishness. Herzog finally understands the limitation of the subjective and seeks justice and a sense of sanity through a process of reconciliation whereas Shalimar prefers the individual and sows and reaps vengeance to objectivity. In both cases, the masculine notion of honour accentuates the crisis. This notion of honour resting mainly on one's physical strength, sexual prowess, or capacity for violence makes a person subjective. Herzog's mental agony is expressed in the language of ideas and fine phrases in beautiful prose whereas Shalimar utters broken English and language of action. The worship of Intellect minus love and emotion of hatred unseasoned by mercy causes suffering to Herzog and Shalimar respectively. It seems that both Saul bellow and Rushdie make the point that relationships based on objective and historical thinking are a balm to pain produced by possessiveness and

intellectual chaos born of ego-centric thinking.

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