

Sense of Place and the Idea of Promised Land in the American Jewish Consciousness: A Study of Saul Bellow's Novels

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The Greek word *diaspora* that means 'dispersion' was originally used to refer to the Jews living in exile after Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. Then onwards, it referred to all the Jews who lived outside Palestine, the present day Israel. Now, the word has acquired extended meaning and refers to all people who live outside their nation.

Place has a special meaning to people all over the world. The place may be one's room, home, native town, ancestral village, holiday resort or nation. The place, with its space and environment, connects with people.

The human relationships, smell, colours, weather, food, festivals and many other pleasures a place offers, bind with human experience and get embedded in individual and collective memory, emotionally and spiritually. When one misses all the familiar elements of one's place by circumstance or compulsion, the pain and suffering become lingering ones.

The Diasporas experience place attachment too frequently. Many of them move out of their own place in search of material comfort. Some move because they are forced to. Hence, they may have affinity with their new place because it offers them comforts in life. Or, they may have sense of loss of familiar place when they miss it and would want to go back to it.

Jews have been great wanderers since the origin of their tribe and living in Diaspora for more than two millennia. And this life was not their choice. In some places, they were accepted and in most places they were completely subjugated. The words ghetto, pogrom and Holocaust have Jew-specific connotation and origin. The Jews, wandering and the sense of place are inseparable, and the Jews have a special emotion for place. It is a part of their collective unconscious. Many writers of the Jewish Diaspora have written their stories with a strong sense of place- of home, city, nation and even planets.

The Jewish history begins with Abraham, the grand old founder of the Jewish tribe according to the Bible, who along with his idol-worshipping clan emigrated from the ancient city of Ur, and reached the city of Haran, in what is now called Turkey. He was inspired by a heavenly instruction and renounced his ancestors' gods. He left his clan, travelled with his own train and flock until he reached the land of Canaan, a place promised by his new God. This place is referred to as the Promised Land by the Jews and their scriptures.

Abraham's descendents were great travellers. They were shepherds. One of his descendents, Joseph, who was sold as a slave to the Egyptians by his jealous brothers, became a very powerful man in Egypt through his special gifts and honesty. He found his family during a great famine, brought them to Egypt and they flourished in Egypt for many years until an unfavourable Pharaoh ordered the Jews to be enslaved. They toiled and suffered for long until Moses, the Jew who grew up in the Pharaoh's family without anyone knowing his origin discovered his past and joined his people, redeemed them from slavery and led them back into their Promised Land

The Jews ruled the erstwhile Palestine and present day Israel for long. They had great leaders like Samson and kings like David and Solomon. The prosperous nation lacked leadership after Solomon. Soon Romans colonized it. Repeated reprisals against the Romans led to the banishment of Jews from their Promised Land. Most of the Jews left their dear place and settled in different parts of the world. But their suffering continued until the middle of the twentieth century. The nineteenth century Russia unleashed Pogroms, or ethnic cleansing, on the Jews. Tens of thousands of them were systematically massacred. The Second World War saw the largest human extermination, the Holocaust, which claimed six million Jewish lives because of Hitler's racism and greed for global power.

When they were slaves in Egypt and throughout their stay abroad for two thousand years, Jews never forgot their Promised Land. Every religious ceremony ended with the refrain 'next year in Jerusalem'. This unshakable faith sustained their identity and hope for the return to their Promised Land. Even the new converts of Judaism accepted this collective faith as an integral part of their life as Jews

In 1948 Israel was born. Many Jews went back to their Promised Land after two thousand years. However, only a third of the total world Jewish population went to Israel and settled down. Others remained in various countries. Most of them settled down in the United States of America. Many American and European Jews who immigrated to Israel went back to their adopted nations not being able to live in Israel.

David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel was unhappy about the American Jews because only about ten thousand of them settled in Israel. Bellow acknowledges this displeasure by Ben-Gurion in his non-fiction *To Jerusalem and Back*. In the book David Ben-Gurion is quoted as calling the American Jews as 'deserters' and urging them to immigrate to Israel to strengthen Israel's democratic system.

The reason for the American Jews' behaviour could be found in the basic philosophy of Jewish faith, Judaism and also in the attitude of the influential American Jewish leaders and thinkers. According to Torah, the Jewish scripture, the Jews are a nation. But this nation is not a territorial or political entity. It is not a country with economic and military might. It means a group of people with common history, destiny and a sense of connection with each other. Susannah Heschel in her essay 'Imagining Judaism in America' quotes a 1898 resolution by leaders of Reform Judaism which declares that "America is our Zion". Zion is the idea of re-creating the Jewish nation. Hence, the Jews in America became content with

their adopted nation and took deep roots. In short, they consider America as their new Promised Land because it is safe, compared to Israel.

Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow is one of the most celebrated American writers of all time. He is a son of Canadian Immigrant Jewish parents. Many of his novels deal with Jewish themes and experiences. In particular, some of Bellow's novels have protagonists whose life, destiny, character and even their sanity depend on the places they love and cherish. These novels and characters underscore the fact that place has emotional and spiritual influence over personalities. Thus, the novels also show that there is an element of environmental determinism in human behaviour that determines the power and richness of culture.

The two novels by Bellow, *Herzog* and *The Victim* deal with the protagonists' loss of their home. The stories tell how the Jewish protagonists struggle to get back their home with their families. Thus the novels highlight the value the protagonists attach to their place.

Herzog and Asa, protagonists in the two novels, are denied of their home. People whom they lived with or had been close to blame them for the mistakes they never committed. They are victimized. Their home, their own space, is their refuge. Both try very hard to get back their home. Asa's home is under siege from an anti-Semitic old acquaintance who blames Asa for all his miseries. Herzog, a professor of English is cheated by his wife and a dear friend, who develop extramarital relationship. He is chased away from his home and beloved daughter. While Asa succeeds by banishing the encroacher, Herzog goes back to his old and abandoned country house, which brings everything that was near and dear to him. Even though the concrete buildings and loneliness are not permanent protection from the degenerated modern materialistic society, both of them surrender themselves to the personal and emotional comfort their home offers.

The next two novels, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *Dangling Men.*, discuss how the protagonists, for whom America is a refuge, struggle to escape the corrupt society. Sammler is Holocaust victim, whose wife died in the Auschwitz concentration camp. He reaches America with his only daughter and is patronized by a relative. He is scared of the free American society and the future of the Jewish youth. He wants to escape the earth and go to another planet to save all the young people from moral degeneration. The old Mr. Sammler realizes that only death would take him to a new planet. Till death relieves him of his troubles, he accepts that he must live in America for the sake of his daughter. Joseph is the Dangling man waiting to be enlisted by the Army during World War II. His enlistment is delayed because he had recently migrated from Canada. Joseph is desperately seeking a job in the army as a token of acceptance from his adopted nation and also a source of livelihood to save his family from disintegration. When he gets his enlistment he is happy that he has gained a place in America as a patriotic citizen, and in his home, a place as a responsible breadwinner. Both the protagonists realize that their search for an ideal place always leads them to their home and families.

In the last two novels *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Dean' December*, protagonists are non-Jewish, white American characters. But, they are as Jewish as other

Jewish protagonists because they have the Jewish spirit with regard to attitude to life, family and most importantly, place. Henderson, a retired army officer and a millionaire, lives a withdrawn life in a large estate. His war experience has given him a guilt complex for all the killing he had made in the battles. He needs purgation for his war guilt and being a rich and useless farmer. Like a one-way pilgrimage, he goes to Africa to purify his soul. However, Africa does not give him the relief he expected. Disappointed he comes back to America, his farm and family. In Italy, the protagonist Corde is an academic and a former journalist. His disgust for morally corrupt American elites, their flamboyant life style and their indifference to the people living in slums and their poverty, makes him look upon Romania, his wife's native country with love and longing. Romanian people seem warm and human. Yet, the iron fisted government is inhospitable to him and his wife. For the sake of his wife's safety and happiness he comes back to America and leads a journalist life again. Both the protagonists search for consolation in exotic locations. They are disappointed and come back to their own nations to take refuge in their hitherto ignored sanctuary, their home and families.

Thus, Bellow's Jewish protagonists show a strong sense of place. Even the non-Jewish protagonists behave similarly because they are the creations of a Jewish writer. This sense of place does not deal with physical landscapes. It deals with mental landscapes, which are figurative and matured. They represent what their creator has in his Jewish collective unconscious. Not only Bellow, but also other prominent North American Jewish writers demonstrate similar trait. Mordecai Richler's 'The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz', Asimov's 'Forward the Foundation', Bernard Malamud's 'The Tenants', and Jerry Siegel's and Joe Shuster's 'Superman' comics series are but a few examples of how Jewish writers represent sense of place in their works. The writers and characters are representatives of the Jewish Diaspora that have a strong sense of place, wherever they live outside Israel.

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