

**Man Suffers to Become ‘Exactly Human’: A Critical Inquiry of Bellow’s  
*The Victim***

**Dr Sumneet Kaur**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University  
Amritsar

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**Abstract:**

Sin may be delineated as a moral transgression which generally results in suffering: physical as well as emotional. Both the culpable and the blameless experience suffering, and a discernible rationale for this affliction remains elusive. Nevertheless, upon identifying the cause, a measure of redemption becomes conceivable. Redemption from sin equates to redemption from suffering, potentially leading to salvation. The term salvation assumes diverse interpretations across various religious doctrines, encapsulating the literal concept of delivering or redeeming humanity from inherently negative or debilitating conditions such as suffering, evil, finitude, and death. Saul Bellow, in his second novel, *The Victim*, delves into deep existential issues concerning the interplay between self and other, individual and society, and guilt and suffering. The narrative explores social, psychological, and metaphysical quandaries confronting its Jewish protagonist, Asa Leventhal, portrayed as a representative figure of the modern-age everyman. This essay undertakes an analysis of transformation in Asa Leventhal, scrutinizing his odyssey of grappling with sin, confronting suffering, and ultimately achieving salvation.

**Keywords:** Sin, Salvation, Existential dilemmas, Victim, Dread, Victimiser, Loneliness.

**Introduction and Aim:**

Sin may be delineated as a moral transgression. In ancient Greek philosophy, sin is perceived as a deficiency in a person’s ability to realize their true self-expression and maintain their rightful connection with the broader cosmos, primarily ascribed to ignorance. While Christianity acknowledges this perspective, it posits sin as a purposeful contravention of the divine will, stemming from human pride, self-centeredness, and disobedience. The Christian doctrine emphasizes that sin is a consequence of the misapplication of free will and contends that it should neither be disregarded nor scorned but rather sanctified. Western theological discourse distinguishes between actual sin and original sin. In the realm of Indian

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mythology, sin emanates from covetousness or greed. Sin begets suffering, a phenomenon universal in its scope but distributed in a seemingly arbitrary manner. Both the culpable and the blameless experience suffering, and a discernible rationale for this affliction remains elusive. Nevertheless, upon identifying the cause, a measure of redemption becomes conceivable.

Certain philosophical perspectives assert that existence in this world is intolerable, characterizing life as an unbearable burden. According to Christian theology, the ultimate resolution to the enigma of suffering lies in reconciliation with God. This realization materializes only upon acknowledging one's status as a sinner, with the belief that Christ suffered for the sins of humanity. Reconciliation with God is synonymous with reconciliation with suffering. Redemption from sin equates to redemption from suffering, potentially leading to salvation. The term salvation assumes diverse interpretations across various religious doctrines, encapsulating the literal concept of delivering or redeeming humanity from inherently negative or debilitating conditions such as suffering, evil, finitude, and death. Saul Bellow, in his second novel, *The Victim*, delves into deep existential issues concerning the interplay between self and other, individual and society, and guilt and suffering. Through a synthesis of realism, symbolism, and fantasy, the novel projects the uncertainties, ambiguities, and ruptures characteristic of contemporary urban existence. The narrative explores social, psychological, and metaphysical quandaries confronting its Jewish protagonist, Asa Leventhal, portrayed as a representative figure of the modern-age everyman. The primary male protagonist in this novel, Asa Leventhal, grapples with a sense of discomfort regarding his Jewish identity. He perceives a prevailing hostility or persecution from those in his surroundings due to his Jewishness, causing a profound unease regarding his own sense of identity. Regrettably, he finds himself unable to transcend the role of becoming a victim entangled within the complexities of his own identity. This essay undertakes an analysis of transformation in Asa Leventhal, scrutinizing his odyssey of grappling with sin, confronting suffering, and ultimately achieving salvation.

**Background:**

*The Victim* has garnered acclaim as a post-war classic from a multitude of critics who extol its moral expansiveness, psychological profundity, and cultural scrutiny. Robert Alter contends that Bellow's protagonists endeavour "to make some sense out of life," characterizing his novels as "secular equivalents for psychoanalysis" (110). Sarah Blachner Cohen commends the utilization of fantasy for crafting an absurd and humour-laden comedy (40), while Josephine Hendin expiates the incisive critique of the "materialistic and capitalistic ideals" entrenched in American society (105). Since the recurring theme revolves around the psychological and moral ramifications embedded within the intricately woven narrative, Mark Shechner characterizes Bellow as a "diagnostic novelist" (44).

The narrative of *The Victim* delineates the incremental maturation of Asa Leventhal's consciousness as he grapples with both intrinsic realities and external exigencies. Asa, a middle-aged editor entrenched in the realm of business publications, finds himself

momentarily isolated in New York when his spouse departs to visit her maternal relative. In a state of solitude and despondency, he confronts the onslaught of reality on dual fronts. Firstly, Kirby Allbee, appearing unexpectedly, levels accusations against Asa, attributing to him the responsibility for the loss of his employment and subsequent tribulations. Asa vehemently refutes these allegations, yet over time, a perceptible shift in his disposition occurs as he gradually acknowledges a measure of culpability. Secondly, his sister-in-law, Elena, solicits his assistance, apprising him that her husband Max is absent, and their son Mickey is ailing. Subsequently, Asa evolves in his capacity to empathetically engage with their affliction, assuming responsibility for the welfare of his brother's family. Regrettably, young Mickey is hospitalized and succumbs to his illness.

Asa and Allbee experience a complex interplay of intimacy and repulsion in their interpersonal dialogue. Through a charged psychic encounter, they engage in a process of negotiated understanding, unravelling aspects of their repressed and unconscious selves, thereby attaining a heightened sense of 'otherness' and maturity. However, rather than construing the novel as a fictionalized sociological exposition or a dramatic portrayal of psychological and archetypal imagery, the present study directs its focus towards the nuanced evolution of mutual change in the characters. The narrative navigates through a myriad of binaries such as sin/salvation, self/other, individual/society, urban/rural, victim/victimizer, life/death, aggression/timidity, fair/unfair, oppressor/oppressed, facts/truth. Through these symbolic systems, the narrative unveils the intricacies of this intense encounter and its socio-psychic implications.

*The Victim* is adorned with two epigraphs: "The Tale of the Trader and the Jinni," a narrative in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the other extracted from Thomas de Quincey's work, "The Pains of Opium." They serve to delineate the tonal contours of this novel, situated in the urban landscape of New York, portrayed as a contemporary wasteland. The initial epigraph assumes a personal resonance in which a solitary merchant, journeying on business and burdened by the oppressive heat, seeks refuge beneath a tree. There, he partakes in his morning meal, alleviating both his weariness and hunger with a modest fare of bread and dates. Upon completing his frugal yet satisfying repast, the merchant carelessly discards the date pits, unaware that one of the stones strikes the son of an Ifrit who, coincidentally, passes by the tree beneath which the merchant reclines in contented repose. The incensed Ifrit materializes before the bewildered merchant, brandishing a drawn sword, accusing him of culpability, however inadvertent, and demanding retribution: "Stand up that I may slay thee even as thou slewest my son!" This narrative underscores that moral intentionality is inconsequential; it elucidates how the merchant becomes accountable for his inattention and the unanticipated trajectory of the stone's throw. Symbolically, it conveys that human beings are intricately connected to and deemed responsible for the destinies of others, even those unfamiliar to them—those who remain faceless and unknown. This scenario prompts contemplation on the extent of responsibility for unintended actions that inflict harm upon others. The second epigraph adopts a broader and collective frame of reference, derived

from De Quincey, portraying a surreal tableau wherein a countenance emerges from the ocean, encircled by a multitude of visages upturned toward the heavens. These countenances collectively project entreaty, wrath, and despair, invoking contemplation on existential themes. The depicted scene underscores the intricate interplay between the individual self and the collective other, namely, society. Additionally, it alludes to the pervasive prevalence of suffering of the human. These epigraphs, thus, serve as a prelude to the protagonist's contemplative musings on his ethical obligations to his fellow sufferers, a moral predicament initially resisted by Asa Leventhal but ultimately embraced. They function as cautionary tales emphasizing accountability and moral reflection. They not only introduce the novel's inherent tensions and ambiguities but also encapsulate the gradual unraveling of Bellow's intricate and apprehensive central character. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist's anxieties regarding his responsibility towards others loom ominously, threatening to become his existential undoing.

Through a nuanced contextual shift, the dual epigraphs find apt relevance in the journey of Asa's life. On a personal plane, he grapples with the ethical quandary of whether he bears responsibility for Allbee's downfall. Simultaneously, at the societal level, he endeavours to reconcile with the complexities of inhabiting the metropolis of New York, where he recurrently contends with teeming masses of humanity. Consequently, in his association with Allbee, Asa confronts the inhuman and the unconscious dimensions within himself, thereby fostering his acknowledgment of the capricious and inhuman forces operating externally within the metropolitan expanse of New York.

**Analysis:**

As the novel begins, Asa emerges as an upper-middle-class man, characterized by a persistent preoccupation with his contemplative musings. His exterior persona projects an aura of composure and rigidity, encapsulated by descriptors such as "indifferent," "unaccommodating," and "impassive." However, beneath this veneer of tranquillity simmers a tumultuous reservoir of emotions like insecurity, paranoia, aggression, and repression. The genesis of these complex emotional currents is rooted in Asa's past, wherein he keenly perceives that the harshness of life has left an indelible mark on his being (Bellow 19). This origin of his suffering traces back to the dynamics in his family, particularly his parents.

Asa's father, depicted as a turbulent and self-centred man, was a financially struggling immigrant storekeeper, willing to employ unscrupulous means to attain material success. Asa vehemently rejects and recoils from this paternal disposition, harbouring resentment towards the fact that his father passed away in poverty, unfulfilled in his aspiration "to be freed by money from the power of his enemies. And who were the enemies? The world, everyone" (Bellow 94-95). This familial backdrop, coupled with the economic challenges faced by Asa's brother, instils in Asa a profound fear of poverty, dishonesty, and turbulence. He, akin to his father, perceives the world as an adversary. Compounded by initial setbacks in securing gainful employment in New York, Asa develops into a tightly wound middle-class individual, fiercely clinging to the status he has attained and concealing a pronounced paranoia regarding

any perceived threats thereto. The roots of Asa's aggressive demeanour also go back to his troubled past, "I was lucky. I got away with it.... He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity... that did not get away with it - the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (Bellow 22, 23). Concomitant with these considerations are Asa's lingering unresolved psychological intricacies concerning his deceased mother, who succumbed in a mental institution during his eighth year. Inquiries about her fate were met with his father's evasive response encapsulated by the phrase "'gone away,' suggestive of desertion" (Bellow 17). Asa's past assumes a paramount role in shaping his subsequent interactions with women and instilling in him a pervasive apprehension regarding his own mental well-being and stability. Consequently, he enters into matrimony with Mary, ostensibly a surrogate mother figure, embodying the epitome of "normalcy" in his life (Bellow 168).

Asa's conceptualization of self/I, as denoted by the signifiers such as Jew, victim, sane, persecuted, upper-middle-class, absent-minded, confused, paranoid, and judgmental about others, serves to demarcate the boundaries of his identity. As he engages in a charged encounter with Allbee, constituting the 'not-I' or the other, who identifies as Catholic, claims victimhood vis-à-vis Asa, and embodies attributes of poverty, disturbance, and alcoholism, among others. Allbee can be characterized as Asa's 'anti-self,' epitomizing everything that Asa most fears he could himself become: self-destructive, a failure, a drifter, a drunkard, a lecher, and a madman. Evidently, Allbee represents the hitherto repressed facets of Asa's psyche that challenge the ego-ideal. His intrusive presence in Asa's life can be construed as the return of the repressed, wherein Allbee embodies and personifies Asa's most profound fears and anxieties.

An examination of the interactions between Asa and Allbee unveils a discernible transformation as the narrative unfolds. "When pressure was put on him," Asa introspects himself on his tendency which and "he behaved like a fool" (Bellow 25). "Troubled" by these reflections, he "felt threatened by something while he slept... He was sure he was unwell" (Bellow 26). The absence of his wife exacerbates his solitude, culminating in a surreal episode wherein he hallucinates the ringing of the doorbell and is overcome with dread. As Allbee confronts him in the street, Asa perceives that "he had been singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process" (Bellow 31). He metaphorically characterizes Allbee as both an "actor" and "a fish" and acknowledges a sense of entrapment, declaring, "Damn him, he's got me, he's got hold of me" (Bellow 27, 30). The confrontation intensifies as Allbee launches a frontal assault on Asa, alleging him to be the orchestrator of his professional downfall. Allbee asserts that Asa deliberately insulted Rudiger, his supervisor, leading to Allbee's dismissal. This, Allbee contends, was an act of reprisal for Allbee's earlier affront to Harkavy, a close friend of Asa, at a social gathering. Asa vehemently rebuffs the accusation, asserting, "I have nothing to do with your losing that job. It was probably your own fault" (Bellow 34). Departing from the encounter, Asa harbours agitated thoughts of physical confrontation, contemplating the act of knocking Allbee down. Ironically, in this initial exchange, Asa poses the rhetorical query, "What, are we related? By blood? No, no. .

.heavens!” to which Allbee laughs in response (Bellow 29). The irony becomes more intricate as Allbee, identifying as a Christian, levies the accusation against Asa, who perceives himself through the lens of a conventional Jewish victim, as being his victimizer. In a concerted effort to circumvent the issue, Asa dismisses it, rationalizing that “Allbee must have been fired for drunkenness” (Bellow 35).

Asa’s repressed emotions manifest prominently when he responds to the plea for assistance from his sister-in-law, Elena, in caring for her ailing son, Mickey. In stark contrast to Asa’s tendency to merely envision his own ailment, Mickey is genuinely unwell. Asa attributes the situation to what he terms as Elena’s “Italian excitability”, “slovenliness,” and “obstinacy,” vehemently expressing, “Don’t be such a peasant, Elena” (Bellow 9, 14). A pervasive sense of oppression engulfs Asa in this domestic context, wherein he perceives “everything here oppressed him - the house, his sister-in-law, the sick child” (Bellow 15). Ostensibly, his aversion to suffering leads him to recoil from the underprivileged, those who have not gotten away with it. Asa criticizes his brother for abandoning his family, attributing it to a familiar narrative: “it was the same old story; Max had married young and now he was after novelty, adventure” (Bellow 10). Contrary to Asa’s perspective, Elena is not “greatly concerned about Max’s absence” (Bellow 16). Sexual repression becomes palpable as Asa consciously avoids Elena while subtly observing “her white and very smooth skin” (Bellow 13). He hesitates to divulge that his wife is away for a few weeks, anticipating Elena’s insistence that “he stay” (Bellow 16). A symbolic incident occurs as Asa accidentally knocks his wedding ring against a bedpost when alone with Elena, prompting a startled reaction from her. In a subsequent interaction, he deliberately fastens the ring onto his shirt buttons before contacting Elena, embodying his latent feelings. These occurrences foreshadow the manifestation of his repressed sentiments, a theme that becomes even more apparent in subsequent sexual emotions, notably with Mrs. Nunez, the superintendent’s wife.

Secure and self-satisfied in his ego-ideal, Asa perceives himself as faultless, evidenced by the narrative’s assertion that “No one could have persuaded Leventhal that he was wrong” (Bellow 56). However, the unfolding narrative delivers a stark revelation, laying bare the influence of mystical unconscious forces that grip him. Confronted by Allbee, Asa once again negotiates with the energies of the shadow archetype, this time grappling with accusations of paranoid anti-Semitism. Allbee espouses a fear of a Jewish “conspiracy” in America, characterizing New York as “a very Jewish city” (Bellow 64). In a sagacious dismantling of Asa’s self-image as “‘self-made’—attributing success to ‘brains and personality’”—Allbee astutely contends that individuals like Asa are merely recipients of luck, akin to those handed a bucket when it rains (Bellow 63). Allbee accuses Asa not only of job loss but also of the demise of his wife and subsequent degradation, utilizing metaphors of high and low, “It is quite a height, this.” He admits, “I’m used to low places and ‘I’m on the bottom.” He calls Asa “an empyrean” while he is in, “the pit” (Bellow 61). Allbee declares, “I take it for granted that we are not gods, we’re only creatures.” This declaration sparks Asa’s imagination, leading to a moment where Allbee becomes, to Asa, “no more human than a

fish, crab, or any fleshy thing in the water” (Bellow 67). Allbee, thus, embodies the less-than-human or primal self in Asa’s perception. Perturbed by this realization, Asa accuses Allbee of being crazy and resorts to aggression, pushing him against a wall as their encounter concludes. While Asa acknowledges a general guilt stemming from the “great unfairness of one person having all the comforts while another possesses nothing,” he becomes noticeably disconcerted when Allbee provokes him to accept personal responsibility, as being “directly blamed was entirely different (Bellow 69, 70).

As an existential seeker, Asa engages in a dialogue with his friend Harkavy in an earnest pursuit of truth. Harkavy embodies the voice of ‘experience,’ assuming the role of a sagacious figure characterized by helpfulness and kindness. In responding to Asa’s inquiries, Harkavy adopts a diplomatic yet candid approach, referencing Williston’s opinion on the Rudigar matter, wherein “he kind of hinted that it was intentional” (Bellow 77). Offering prophetic counsel, Harkavy advises Asa on the virtues of acceptance and humility, emphasizing the inherent preciousness of life despite its imperfections, stating, “I am all I have in this world. And with all my shortcomings, my life is precious to me” (Bellow 76). Consequently, Asa’s endeavour to attain self-validation through external sources proves unsuccessful, compelling him to confront ‘the truth’ without recourse to alternative options. Despite his inherent limitations, Asa does not lack the courage to pursue the truth, “he had only to insist that he wasn’t responsible and it disappeared altogether” (Bellow 83). Demonstrating a steadfast refusal to seek refuge in escapism, he contemplates the intricate relationships between the self and others. Rejecting the notion of being a passive entity, akin to a “swinging door” allowing unrestricted entry and exit, Asa also acknowledges the impracticality of complete isolation, comparing it to a hibernating bear or a mirror wrapped in flannel. Recognizing the potential for human growth, he reflects “everybody wanted to be what he wants to the limit” (Bellow 85). Engaging with his nephew Philip on an outing and encountering Allbee once again, Asa undergoes a transformative experience described as a “peak experience” where he perceives himself through an unfamiliar lens. This vision underscores the unity of self and other, metamorphosing him into his own observer. The intimacy and surreal quality of this revelation both astound and profoundly affect him (Bellow 32). In his relentless pursuit of truth, Asa confronts Williston, seeking clarity on his culpability in Allbee’s dismissal by Rudiger. Williston, affirming Asa’s wrongdoing, asserts “You were wrong,” and to the question of responsibility he replies, “You ought to. You certainly ought” (Bellow 101). Disheartened and astonished, Asa recognizes the necessity of accepting some blame for Allbee’s decline, conceding, “I am not infallible” (Bellow 98). Faced with his own fallibility, he engages in a critical self-examination, reviewing “his mistakes,” and question, “Had he unknowingly, that is, unconsciously, wanted to get back at Allbee?” (Bellow 103). Through this “moral effort,” Asa recognises “the dark aspects of the personality as present and real [and] this act is essential for any kind of self-knowledge, and therefore meets with considerable resistance” (Jung 8).

Encountering Harkavy on a Sunday afternoon in a cafeteria, Asa coincidentally engages with Schlossberg, who articulates a fundamental philosophy embedded in Bellow's fictional realm. Functioning as a sagacious elder figure, Schlossberg posits that human life can attain dignity only when one adheres to an 'exactly human' standard, neither falling into subhuman categories nor exceeding human limitations. He articulates, "I am not too good for this world ... It's bad to be less than human, and it's bad to be more than human... good acting is what is exactly human" (Bellow 112). Evidently, Asa's ego-ideal appears to be constructed around a self-image that transcends the human norm. However, as he grapples with the challenges presented by the less-than-human Allbee, Asa undergoes a transformative process, aspiring to achieve a balanced self: "he liked to think 'human' meant accountable in spite of many weaknesses at the last moment, tough enough to hold" (Bellow 129). This newfound perspective is encapsulated in his preference for the term 'human,' signifying accountability despite inherent weaknesses, and the ability to withstand challenges at crucial moments. Accepting responsibility becomes a catalyst for the cultivation of dignity and humility in Asa's evolving self-concept.

In their subsequent encounter, Allbee alludes to his aristocratic New England lineage and expresses his unease with metropolitan New York, characterizing it as a place where "it's really as if the children of Caliban were running everything" (Bellow 122). He censures Asa for maintaining an innocent worldview in an absurd reality, emphasizing that individuals often face undeserved adversity and endure suffering without apparent cause. Allbee contends that the existence of evil is as palpable as the presence of sunshine. Accusing Asa of keeping his "spirit under lock and key," he critiques Asa's life as one that has "nothing dangerous and nothing glorious." Confronted by these candid and disconcerting remarks, Asa hastily departs, exclaiming, "Millions of us have been killed. What about that?" (Bellow 122).

The subsequent meeting of Asa and Allbee signifies the mutual acknowledgment of their interpsychic connectedness, as Asa extends an offer to Allbee to reside in his apartment. At the onset, Asa recognizes the imminent occurrence of a 'showdown' in this emotionally charged interaction. He elucidates that this preoccupying 'showdown' alludes to as "a crisis which would bring an end of his relatedness to something he had no right to resist. Illness, madness and death were forcing him to confront his fault" (Bellow 131). It is as though repressed and less-than-human elements have infiltrated his psychic terrain. In a metonymic transposition of the zoo scene, he experiences a "feeling of intimate nearness" with Allbee, almost sensing the "physical weight of his body and the contact of his clothes." Allbee, too, undergoes a notable transformation, characterized by a "serious expression" and the absence of the customary "insane element." He appeals to Asa for assistance, confessing, "I'm not under control" (Bellow 132). In a gesture laden with symbolism, Asa grants him permission to stay in his apartment, creating space for the emergence of repressed elements.

The looming 'showdown' takes on varied dimensions in Asa's consciousness upon receiving news of Mickey's demise. Preceding this revelation, he sees a dream where he finds himself amidst a bustling railway station, fervently attempting to board a departing train. As



he navigates through the crowd, he encounters impediments posed by two individuals, preventing him from progressing due to on-going construction work on that side. The surreal train metaphor encapsulates an earnest desire to advance and harmonize with the capricious rhythms of the metropolis, thwarted by an impassable deadlock. Upon awakening, Asa undergoes a transformative experience, characterized by a “marvellous relief, lucidity... happiness.” Convinced of newfound insight, he asserts, “He was convinced that he knew the truth.” Symbolically integrating his shadow, he acknowledges, “Admittedly like others, he had been in the wrong. That was not so important, either. Everybody committed errors and offences. But it was supremely plain to him that everything, everything without exception took place as if within a single soul or person” (Bellow 139).

Asa experiences a revelation regarding the veritable relationship between the self and ‘others’ as he embraces his own inherent creatureliness, aptly explained as “The acceptance of oneself as including a dark aspect and shadow actually springs from a deep and humble recognition of the invisible creaturlieness of man, which is part of the purpose of his creation” (Newmann 143). This awakening finds poignant expression in the peculiar sensation that “Asa has on waking up after the ‘birthday party’ at Harkavy’s, there was not a single part of him on which the whole world did not press with full height, on his body, on his soul, pushing upward in his breast and downwards in his bowels” (Bellow 209). This occurrence signifies the psychic rebirth of Asa, signifying a metamorphosed and expanded self. Another instance of metonymy transpires during Mickey’s funeral, where Asa perceives “an overwhelming human closeness and thickness... of innumerable millions, crossing, touching, pressing” (Bellow 151). This episode serves as another displaced image echoing the theme embedded in the second epigraph at the commencement of the novel.

A candid and composed Asa directly addresses Allbee with his own evaluation of the situation, prompting Allbee to concede, “I feel worthless. There were things in me” (Bellow 160). Expressing a profound sense of loss for his deceased wife, Allbee implores, “If she were alive, it wouldn’t hurt me so much to be a failure” (Bellow 160). The symbolic image of the victim becomes palpable in this scene, as Asa, both literally and metaphorically, assists the inebriated and distressed Allbee to his bed. Subsequently, Asa discovers Allbee at his workplace the next day, symbolizing a gradual infiltration of all facets of Asa’s life by Allbee. Presenting an “earnest and impressive” demeanour, Allbee confides in Asa, stating, “I want to do something about myself” (Bellow 165). Employing metaphorical language, he advises Asa, “You mustn’t forget you’re an animal” (Bellow 166). Demonstrating benevolence, Asa provides financial assistance to Allbee upon request. Embracing responsibility, he dispels feelings of guilt and paranoia. Consequently, a “steady, balanced, and confident” Asa readies himself “to confront Allbee” (Bellow 171).

Asa seizes the opportunity to assert himself when he reproaches Allbee for perusing the personal letters of his wife, Mary. Even in the midst of their argument, he experiences a peculiar affinity, a sentiment characterized by a kind of affection. When Allbee runs his fingers through Asa’s hair, the latter “finds himself caught under his touch and felt incapable

of doing anything” (Bellow 183). The evident psychic intimacy becomes apparent as Asa is “disturbed to see himself so changeable” (Bellow 182). Allbee encapsulates the prevailing mood by expressing, “I know you want to settle. And so do I.” Drawing a metaphorical parallel, he likens himself to an Indian who “sees a train running over the prairie where the buffalo used to roam” and articulates his desire “to get off the pony and be a conductor on the train” (Bellow 189). It signifies his aspiration to acclimate to the mechanized and impersonal rhythms of urban existence.

Simultaneous to these developments is the evolution in Asa’s perspective towards his brother, whom he initially accused of abandoning the family. When his brother visits him after Mickey’s funeral and expresses that he is “half-burned out already,” Asa empathetically relates, stating, “There are times when I felt like that too.” Embracing his own vulnerabilities, he extends an offer to Max: “If you need me for anything...” Upon leaving the subway after bidding farewell to his brother, “he felt faint with the expansion of his heart” (Bellow 197-198). This signifies a pivotal moment in the psychic transformation of Asa.

Under the sagacious counsel of Harkavy, who advises him to discard the “dangerous stuff” of a childlike dependence on Allbee, Asa recognizes the imperative need to resolve the relationship: “He could not continue this way with Allbee. It was enough. It had to be ended” (Bellow 215). The anticipated confrontation materializes when Asa returns from Harkavy’s residence to discover that Allbee has brought a prostitute to his apartment. In a visceral reaction of disgust, Asa forcefully ejects them after breaking open the chained door. Notably, in a momentary confusion fuelled by his repressed desires, he mistakes the woman for Mrs. Nunez. Experiencing relief upon realizing his error, he emphatically expels Allbee, asserting, “You’re not even human.” Allbee astutely counters, “Don’t you people claim that you’re the same as everybody else? That’s your way of saying you’re above everybody else” (Bellow 220-21). Asa is filled with exultation and relief, acknowledging that “this disorder and upheaval were part of the price he was obliged to pay for his release” (Bellow 222). Subsequently, he experiences compassion for them and regrets the entire incident, marking a profound shift in attitude: “Allbee and the woman, moved or swam towards him out of a depth of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended. There lay horror, evil, all that he had kept himself from” (Bellow 224). Having confronted his inner darkness, Asa transcends his profound apprehension that his wife, Mary, has forsaken or abandoned him. Summoning the courage he had hitherto deferred, he ultimately calls to her. On that same night, Allbee revisits his apartment and endeavours to commit suicide in a manner that poses a threat to Asa’s life. In a definitive break signifying his liberation, Asa forcibly ejects Allbee from his house. Confronting the irrational, he reconciles with its existence.

This profound upheaval in the unconscious renders Asa a healthier and more contented individual. He undergoes a remarkable transformation, as “the consciousness was fainter and less troubling... As time went on, he lost the feeling that he had, as he used to say, ‘got away with it...’” The physical manifestation of this psychic change is evident in his improved health and a more unguarded demeanour. He exhibits an attitude of gratitude, “He

was thankful for his job... He was lucky, of course” (Bellow 230). The psychic rebirth is metaphorically linked to the impending arrival of a new baby, as Mary is pregnant. Asa relocates to a new apartment “closer to the Puerto Rican slum than to the opulent canopies of the Sixties and Seventies” (Bellow 232). This spatial shift symbolically signifies his movement towards the less privileged, effaced, and marginal—those deemed less than human. When Asa encounters Allbee at the theatre, his persona has also changed, even though he admits, “I wasn’t the one that was going to change so much” (Bellow 236). Nevertheless, he is aware of his attitudinal transformation, stating, “I’ve made my peace with things as they are. I’ve gotten off the pony. . .I’m on the train” (Bellow 237). He clarifies that he is a mere passenger, not a conductor, remarking pragmatically, “All that stiffness of once upon a time, that’s gone, that’s gone” (Bellow 238).

**Conclusion:**

Hence, defence and accusation, action and consequence constitute the frenetic and unrelenting dialogue in the novel. The narrative revolves around two principal characters, Asa Leventhal and Kirby Allbee, initially presented as antagonists who ultimately reveal themselves to be alter egos. The ultimate irony lies in the identification of these two antagonistic figures with one another. The affirmative visualization of Saul Bellow subtly but forcefully manifests in this novel through psychic transformation and its interpersonal dynamics. Bellow posits that actions, even the slightest unintentional ones, set in motion a chain of psychic, social, and moral implications. The discourse encourages a movement towards confronting the truth of oneself and others, both in particular and in a broader sense. He does not negate the modern urban industrial nightmare, as evidenced by his choice of a metropolitan setting. However, he steadfastly rejects despair and upholds the belief in the human capacity to transcend or overcome such challenges. The manner in which he envisions the connection between the self and the other underscores a process of experiential learning wherein one grows to recognize the unity of all, encapsulated in the character of Allbee. Through his psychic dialogue with Allbee, Asa discovers his own creaturliness and achieves a sense of oneness with all of humanity. This transformative process leads to a change in Asa’s personality as he embraces the truth about himself and others. He cultivates an attitude of acceptance, humility, and gratitude, inching closer to the ideal of becoming ‘exactly human.’ The narrative actively engages the reader in a journey of progressive attitudinal growth, prompting introspection and existential choices. Within the dynamics of Asa’s psychic transformation, the novel’s ethical stance is conveyed. Allbee’s pointing out Leventhal as the target of his wrath, an inculpate for his own failures and insecurities, serves as a microcosmic representation of the broader assault on those victimized by the wilful pathology of others. Leventhal, ensnared in the clutches of an incomprehensible force, becomes a victim both of his own phobic dread, fearing exposure and pursuit, and of Allbee, who designates him as the victim with no possibility of escape. Thus, *The Victim* delves into existential concerns surrounding identity and freedom, characteristic of the post-war period. Bellow’s novel may be construed as an extensively crafted cautionary narrative, elucidating the scope

and consequences of moral accountability for both intentional and unintentional actions. Simultaneously, it serves as a warning about the profound cost, borne by both victim and victimizer, of remaining indifferent to the depths of human suffering. The concept of victimhood emerges as a central theme defining the protagonist in the novel. The term 'Victim' is employed to characterize an individual who attributes their suffering or failure to external factors beyond their control. This perspective forms the primary stance adopted by Bellow's hero in relation to the world. Loneliness, alienation, hopelessness, and betrayal exemplify the existential challenges faced by the protagonist. Throughout the novel, the protagonist discerns the interplay between individual responsibility and the preservation of human dignity. This transformative journey leads him from a state of self-effacement to the attainment of moral strength, thereby imparting a novel dimension to his existence.

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