

**Invisible Boundaries: Unraveling the Notion of the
Other in Saul Bellow's *The Victim***

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Abstract

Saul Bellow's novel, *The Victim* (1947) explores the theme of the "Other" through the Jewish-American character, Asa Leventhal. Asa is a successful businessman who is forced to confront his own prejudices and biases when he is accused of anti-Semitism by a former friend, Kirby Allbee. The novel delves into the complexities of other, identity, self, belonging, and the fear of the unknown, as Asa struggles to come to terms with his own sense of self and his relationship with those around him. One of the key ways in which Bellow explores the concept of Otherness is through the character of Leventhal. Asa Leventhal is an editor of a modest New York trade paper who being persecuted by Kirby Allbee, a drunken, depraved former acquaintance of Asa's who holds Asa of responsibility for his current condition. Since then, Allbee has continued to descend into a state of near total degeneracy, losing not only his job but also his wife, friends, and self-respect. Allbee believes that Asa is to blame for his earlier loss of employment. Allbee claimed that Asa had reacted angrily to an anti-Semitic statement, Allbee, had made at the time by "getting back at" him. Throughout the novel, Asa is haunted by the idea of the "Other". He is

uncomfortable with his Jewishness. He feels that people around him are against him or persecute him because of his Jewishness. Asa's fear of being seen as different or "Other" is evident in his interactions with his colleagues and acquaintances. *The Victim* is an extraordinarily compelling and perceptive examination of the idea of 'The Other' and how it interacts with other concerns like self, identity, responsibility, suspicion, and loneliness with its compelling characters and narrative.

Keyword: The Victim, other, self, identity, and belonging.

The Victim, Bellow's second work, was published in 1947. But unlike his other works, *The Victim* didn't help him become well-known. As a result, *The Victim* struggled for a long time to get much attention from critics. But as time went on, readers began to appreciate the novel's brilliance, and several reviews of *The Victim* were made public. *The Eternal Husband* (1870) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, critics claim, was Bellow's primary inspiration for *The Victim*. As stated by Allan Chavkin (2000), and Bellow himself has acknowledged that he "was very much under the spell" of Dostoyevsky's novella when he was writing his novel. The plot of the book appears to have been influenced by Dostoyevsky's *The Eternal Husband*. (Adhikari, 2006, p. 9)

Saul Bellow's In *The Victim*, two men are seen to be in an antagonistic embrace: Kirby Allbee, an anti-Semite, is furiously chasing Asa Leventhal, a cautious, protective character who shuns his intimidating, aggressive counterpart. Leventhal also makes an effort to set himself apart from everyone else, naively yet cynically assuming that he is exempt from human responsibility and contingency. *The Victim* explores the fundamental existential questions about freedom and identity that are

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central to the post-war era. The book does, however, delicately bring up the issue of the Jewish author's responsibility for the representation of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. (Aarons, 2016, p. 64)

Asa Leventhal, an editor, is portrayed as someone who values freedom, civic responsibility, preserving the uniqueness and dignity of each person. Leventhal's relationship with his family is not good because of the death of his mother, the way he disobeyed the rules of his father, as well as the fact that Asa does not usually visit his brother. All of these situations lead him to be as the 'Other'. The protagonist is shown as an American who advances in society via tenacity. He can be regarded as a native New Yorker due to his presence in the city and his adaptability to its traditions and powerful forces. But when Leventhal runs across Kirby Allbee his old friend, the collective unconscious of Jews is activated. When Allbee delates Leventhal of being corrupt in society in that particular instance, Leventhal begins to doubt himself and suspects he might be the cause of Allbee's corruption. However, Leventhal uses Allbee as his scapegoat since he believes that Jews are loathed as a result of the collective consciousness of Jews. (Pirimoglu, 2017, p. 12)

Leventhal's suspicious outlook affects him to self-victimize. To put it another way, he makes himself out to be the victim and the Other, growing to despise himself and thinking his existence is pointless. His thoughts and feelings are therefore unpredictable. Leventhal's reconciliation with his foe Allbee enables him to ultimately complete the grueling procedure. Leventhal could be viewed in this light as an assimilationist hero who submits to and abides by American society. But he never loses sight of the fundamentals of Jewish culture. He is capable to comprehend that it is not necessary to be terrified of passing away as a

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result. In other words, Leventhal understands that Allbee's attempt at suicide was not done with the intention of harming Leventhal. In this way, Leventhal is revived as an assimilated hero who embraces both the American and the Jewish cultures as part of his identity as he gets rid of the suffering mode and develops his personality. (Pirimoglu, 2017, p. 13)

Leventhal is obviously exhausted from living in the city of New York, or the civilized world. He "feels, as he does, that he is in conflict with a world that he has no choice but to affirm" (Wilson, 1980, p. 62). Therefore, Leventhal must adopt and incorporate the American way of life since he has no other option. However, Asa's attempts to blend in are ultimately unsuccessful. When Kirby accuses him of anti-Semitism, Asa is forced to confront the ways in which his own prejudices and biases have contributed to his sense of alienation, isolation, and otherness. Asa's initial reaction is one of denial and defensiveness. He insists that he is not anti-Semitism and that Kirby's accusation are unfounded. However, as the novel progresses, Asa begins to realize that his own sense of self is deeply intertwined with his relationship to the "Other". He begins to question his own assumptions and biases, and he comes to see Kirby as a complex and multifaceted individual rather than simply as a representative of a particular group.

The story progresses with the protagonist becoming more and more attached to his family. It is natural for family ties to get stronger over time. Asa Leventhal, the protagonist, despite not having a close relationship with his brother Max's family, Asa's perspective on family is put to the test by his nephew's abrupt sickness. Asa is in charge of caring for his ill nephew while his brother Max is away from home. Although Mickey later passes away, Asa provides a fantastic performance and makes every effort to

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preserve his nephew. Asa develops a stronger bond with the family of his brother and his wife Mary during the story. Asa goes through a personal crisis that he eventually gets through at the same time that he starts to worry for his ailing nephew. While working to get through his crises, Asa develops as a person, and his perspective on humanity as a whole substantially changes. In Asa's view, the development of positive ideas for humanity coexists with the strengthening of his sense of family. They both involve different types of growth as a result of the intimate proximity of the severe disease in his brother's family and the individual catastrophe in Asa's life. As a result, it is safe to say that Asa's developing sense of family affects his outlook on humanity and the opposite. (Abi Mohammad, 1983, pp. 80-81)

The debate from Allbee and Asa's initial meeting becomes the book's main focus. Asa lets Allbee know, "You haven't got anything to write me for. I haven't thought about you for years, frankly, and I don't know why you think I care whether you exist or not. What, are we related ?" (Bellow, 1947, p. 22). Allbee replies, laughing, " By blood ? No, no . . heavens" (Bellow, p. 22). Because this novel will examine the factors that unite people and come to the conclusion that no son of Adam can say he is without anything in common with another human being, Allbee's laughing is a triumphant sort. Naturally, Allbee's assertion is unimportant. Robert R. Dutton (1982) is right when he says that "Asa is trapped by forces that are surely not of his own making". (Dutton, 1982, p. 20)

One of the most striking aspects of *The Victim* is the way in which Bellow portrays the complexity of identity. Asa's Jewishness is not simply a matter of religion or ethnicity; it is a fundamental part of his sense of self. However, his identity is also shaped by his experiences as an American, a businessman, and a member of various social and cultural groups. Asa's

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struggle to reconcile these different aspects of his identity is a central theme of the novel, and it is one that resonates with readers of all backgrounds. Bellow, however, explores more than only the issue of moral responsibility in the complex modern world. *The Victim* is worth reading for more reasons than just its timeliness or irony. Instead, it appears to have a specific approach that Bellow is using to demonstrate a fresh feeling of possibility unsupported by simple logic. (Katafuchi, 1991, p. 90)

Bellow explores the idea of responsibility in progressively more complex ways. Self-responsibility is one of its most crucial components since it requires self-awareness, and Bellow suggests that Leventhal hides from this awareness. His eyes exhibit "an intelligence not greatly interested in its own powers, as if preferring not to be bothered by them, indifferent; and and this indifference appeared to be extended to others," (Bellow, p. 10). Despite the fact that Leventhal avoids self-knowledge, he is uncomfortable with the significance that self-confrontation, which brings to light the "really important things, the deepest issues," may have (Bellow, p. 38). He keeps putting off the procedure he needs to undertake on himself to heal himself. He only acknowledges one of the fundamental, underlying issues that self-hatred breeds self-depreciation when Rudiger discloses and validates his thoughts of inadequacy:

He himself had begun to fear that the lowest price he put on himself was too high and he could scarcely understand why anyone should want to pay for his services. And under Rudiger's influence he had felt this. He made him believe what he was afraid of Leventhal thought, and he doubted whether Williston could have understood this (Bellow, p. 84).

This sense of worthlessness is a jumbled mess of inferiority Jewish, social, and personal. He believes both Jews and non-Jews are making disparaging remarks. He is dependent on other people's perceptions

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because he lacks a strong sense of who he is. He feels confident if they are encouraging, but a harsh comment shatter his self-esteem. Due to his sense of inferiority, he is more open to Albee's insults and lacks the protecting self-confidence that would deter persecution. Leventhal can only come to accept moral responsibility for himself by taking responsibility for Others, and this is what ultimately "heals" him. (Sacks, 1987, pp. 87-88)

Without a doubt, everyone views Leventhal as the victimization's primary victim and the "Other" since the social, psychological, and physical context play an important role and always in strong and meaningful struggle with (other) Leventhal. For Leventhal, there is no peace and no ease. A social environment has an impact on his loneliness, suspicion, and his isolation. The psychological level produces anguish, neurosis, "psychic overload", rootlessness, coldness, and depression. While physical level has an impact up on his behaviour, and his relationship with relatives and friends. Examining his encounters with Allbee, we conclude that Leventhal and Allbee have both been caught up in an unavoidable victimization game. The fact that Leventhal has mixed feelings towards Allbee is a clear indication that he has been discovered. He has been charged with being responsible by Allbee for losing his job. Leventhal and Allbee cannot, therefore, deny the issues they have brought about between them (Farshid & Zad, 2011, p. 152). Andrew Gordon believes that:

Leventhal and Allbee become each other's victims. Allbee is Leventhal's victim because so long as he insists that Leventhal has ruined his life, Allbee will find no need to change his life. And Leventhal is Allbee's victim because so long as he admits that he is responsible for Allbee, he is simply weighed down by what is base in human nature. Each character becomes locked in the bad faith of the other, becomes fixed by a relationship which prevents the possibility of change (Gordon, 1979, p. 113).

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This endless cycle of victims and perpetrators will lead to a ridiculous action. But the understanding of human nature and how he interacts with the world is the only source of this ludicrous sense. As a result of their ongoing efforts to figure out how to get out of this situation, Leventhal and Allbee's dispute does not become trapped. Whatever the cause, they are victims who, like the stereotypical scapegoat created by Northrop Frye, are "neither innocent nor guilty" Like a mountaineer whose cry triggers an avalanche, he is innocent in that what happens to him is much worse than anything he could have done. He is guilty because he belongs to a great civilization or because he lives in a place where such injustices are an unavoidable part of life. (Frye, 2000, p. 41)

Asa's strange behavior suggests guilt, which begs the question of what kind of guilt is it?. Where does it originate from? Is his actions representative of the city? At the intra and inter-individual levels of activity, Asa's guilt can be justified. In other words, it lies dormant within his internal structures until "The Other" (may be the society, his family, or his friend Allbee) awakens it. It serves as a Sartrean reminder of "The Others" relationship to him (Ristoff, 1980, p. 61). Jean-Paul Sartre states that: " By virtue of consciousness, the Other is simultaneously the one who has stolen my being from me and the one who cause 'there to be' a being which is my being " (Sartre,1956, p. 364). This is the basic condition of being with others , according to Sartre. It is by its nature paradoxical and full of conflict. This Sartrean approach is what informs Asa of his "crime" against Allbee, the crime of aiding in his downfall while procuring employment for himself which constitutes the core of the entire plot. As a classic Bellowian character, Asa is unable to resist feeling guilty about his achievement, as if it means taking too much of the social cake and that doing so will only harm others. In *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal takes

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responsibility for ruining the other man's life and only partially denies it. Asa turns into a more dramatic and conflicted character as a result. (Ristoff, 1980, p. 61)

Both a sense of remorse and a sense of self-worthlessness pervade Leventhal and made him as "Other". Even while Andrew Gordon (1979) claims that "his sense of insecurity and guilt may be traced to the lack of resolution of his feelings concerning his mother, who was taken from him when he was only eight", it is also conceivable to see the problem from Nietzschean perspective. Individuals are raised to adopt a mentality that views other individuals either as extensions of oneself or as alien objects to be used for one's own or one's social good. Even the most well-intentioned individuals are subconsciously influenced by Otherness as a result of this socialization process, which shapes their ideas and behavior. An individual views positive acts by himself and negative actions by Others as reflective of some intrinsic dispositional trait but views positive actions by himself and negative actions by Others as largely contingent on the situation. This dichotomous viewpoint leads to a continual othering that produces an environment where the Other is simultaneously discounted and the Self is elevated. (Todres, 2009, pp. 612-613)

The Victim is Bellow's interpretation of the victim as the entirety of man's ultimate fate. This theme runs across all of his books. Bellow, like many of his contemporaries, believes that man in the twenty-first century is increasingly becoming a victim of forces beyond his control and treated as 'Other', but he uses mythic elements that occur as images rather than as individual objects. The prison is a prominent and frequently used image symbol in the novel. Physical prisons are envisioned in the opening pages of *The Victim*, as Asa is seen squeezing out of a train after nearly missing

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his station. He nearly becomes "imprisoned" on the train till the next stop but, through sheer force of will, manages to break free (Malin, 1967, pp. 154-155). This event serves as both a look back at Asa's past and a glimpse into his impending future. Later, Asa imagines the sight in the engine room as a type of underwater jail when traveling by boat to Staten Island to visit his sister-in-law and nephews, one of whom is very ill.

It was terrible, he imagined, on a day like this, the men nearly naked in the shaft alley as the huge thing rolled in a sweat of oil, the engines laboring. Each turn must be like a repeated strain on the heart and ribs of the wipers, there near the keel, beneath the water (Bellow, p. 36).

According to Malin, these jails exemplify Asa's mentality. Asa "will not gain his freedom, his mind is a box which holds ambivalent attitudes " (Malin, 1967, p. 155). He discusses accountability, futility, and about other things like: "who runs things,....." (Bellow, p. 197). It is said that Asa's early years as a man served as a prison for his spirit and soul. He had become convinced that he lacked the ability to change his circumstances due to his homelessness, lack of confidence, and employment in positions with no future. (Mullins, 1972, p. 31)

Of course, the prison picture fits with the concept of Othering. A man who is briefly imprisoned and captured by his circumstances. Allbee's allegations and demands trap Asa; each is at least temporarily a prisoner of himself (Mullins, p. 27). Also, Bellow uses elements from his own Yiddish tradition to depict the heroism in the lives of the men who are trying to come to terms with these forces. The schlemiel is a small person who maintains dignity while under the influence of a bad star in Yiddish literature. Asa Leventhal is a prime example of this type of protagonist. (Rossman, 1973, p. 42).

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Another important aspect of *The Victim* is the way in which it explores the theme of belonging. Asa's fear of being seen as "Other" is rooted in his desire to belong to the dominant culture. However, his attempts to assimilate are ultimately unsuccessful, and he is left feeling isolated and alone, as a result this can drive him to be the 'Other'. The novel suggests that true belonging is not simply a matter of accepting oneself and others for who they are. Everybody has a different set of beliefs, thus people have different perspectives regarding the same work of literature. Because of this, Saul Bellow's novel *The Victim* has drawn a variety of criticism since it was published in 1947. The treatment of humanism and existential topics in his book has been hotly contested and discussed in great detail. During his main character, Bellow examines what it means to be a person in the current society. Through urban Jewish individuals who remembered their place for their dignity and regard for each person's humanity, he analyzes the nature of humanity. *The Victim* by Earl Rovit, a writer of Bellow's works, affirms the existence of people. It's troubling that he sees humans as both more and less than humans:

. . . But to isolate the problem is not the same as discovering solutions. The research for the 'exactly human' is a direct plunge into the dark heart of our contemporary mysteries. After all it may be that only the desire and the need to know are themselves human (Rovit, 1974, p. 145).

For contemporary men who are continuously attempting to determine where they fit into the world of men today, Rovit has attempted to lay out the permissible bounds. (Rovit, 1974)

In this work of literature, a character's consciousness, alienation, and search for self with the presence of 'Other' are all important issues (Adhikari, 2006, p. 12). For Sartre "the Other doesn't constitute me as an

object for myself but for him" (p. 362). The Other is an ultimate freedom rather than an Other as an object. My relationship with them and how I am for them comes straight from my being a subject of being rather than an object of knowledge. (Sartre , 1956)

Sartre did not specifically state, however, that our conception of the "Other" or "Otherness" in general also results from a specific sense of self. In other words, the idea of the Other, or a "Other-image," which defines what one's own self is not, or at least what it refuses to accept about itself, is at the core of every "self-image." The narratives we tell about our lives both verbally and in writing describe the journeys of the selves we must forge in a world of Others. In the same way that our awareness builds a mythic version of who we are, it also forges a universe of legendary Others that we engage with. The Other's awareness does not merely reflect back to us some of the characteristics that make us who we are, nor do we simply gain insight into ourselves through interactions with others. The important thing to remember is that our perception of the Other's "otherness" is distorted and created by our own consciousness. (Charne, 1991, p. 5)

However, our perceptions of Otherness are not solely created by the particular self. There are common perceptions of others in every community that mirror the standards of the dominant group for a reasonably reliable and stable self. Only by defining the qualities and ideals that go beyond the bounds of selfhood and by identifying the people or objects that exemplify these qualities can a society sustain and safeguard its collective identity. Social change must be accompanied by an instability of the self because the solidification of these categories is frequently the root of oppressive practices in society. (Charne, 1991, pp. 5-6)

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All of the main protagonists are lonesome (Others) individuals who are all by themselves in a human crowd jungle. Allbee has no one to support him because his wife has passed away. He has no optimism for the future. Similar to Leventhal, who teeters on New York City's streets in his loneliness. Despite having pals, he doesn't seem to have a good relationship with any of them. Leventhal was extremely wary of his surroundings and the individuals he encountered. He had a bad attitude toward people. He lacked self-assurance and confidence. Everywhere he went, he felt uneasy. Leventhal gradually comes to terms with his shortcomings and life's blunders. The person who never considers others begins to do so. In Allbee's presence, Leventhal changes into a new person, yet their time together is exceedingly trying. In Allbee's company, he is unable to ever breathe a sigh of relief. (Adhikari, 2006, pp. 31-33) *The Victim's* ambiguous conflict structure generates more complex insights that Leventhal alternatively rejects and accepts. The work explores more than just how it is impossible to be other and a victim. It also addresses the challenge of separating those responsibilities in adult, public life. (Selvaraj, 2015, p. 42)

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, Saul Bellow's *The Victim* depicts a strong exploration for Other and how The Other influenced by circumstances, situations, levels, whether they are social, physical, or psychological. Through the character of Asa Leventhal, Bellow delves into the complexities of the other, self, identity, belonging, and the fear of the unknown. Bellow places a premium on the problems of the individual versus society and the individual in self-conflict. Conflict is not unrelated to conflicts between man and society or man and oneself. However, individuals are what matter most. Because of the existential nature of man in his universe, according to Bellow, he is independent of society, fate, and history and is accountable for his situations, conflicts, and issues. Regardless of whether he is conscious of these obligations and powers, he

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is also seen as having the ability to change those circumstances. Man must accept the physical and mental constraints that society, culture, the past, his own past, and he himself have imposed on him. Man may, however, transcend culture, history, and the ego. To completely realize himself, or to put it another way, to become truly human, man can and must transcend the limitations imposed by his past

المستخلص

تستكشف رواية "الضحية" (١٩٤٧) لسول بيلو موضوع "الآخر" من خلال شخصية اليهودي الأمريكي آسا ليفنثال. آسا رجل أعمال ناجح يضطر لمواجهة تحاملاته وتحيزاته الشخصية عندما يُتهم بالمعاداة للسامية من قبل صديق سابق يدعى كيربي ألي. تستكشف الرواية تعقيدات "الآخر" والهوية والذات والانتماء وخوف المجهول، حيث يكافح آسا للتوفيق بين مفهوم الذات الخاص به وعلاقته بالآخرين من حوله. واحدة من الطرق الرئيسية التي يستكشف بها بيلو مفهوم "الآخر" هي من خلال شخصية ليفنثال. آسا ليفنثال هو محرر في صحيفة تجارية متواضعة في نيويورك يتعرض للاضطهاد من قبل كيربي ألي، معروف سابقا بالادمان والفساد حيث كان يعرف آسا سابقاً ويراه آسا مسؤولاً عن حالته الحالية. منذ ذلك الحين، استمر ألي في الانحدار إلى حالة اقرب الى الانحطاط التام، لم يفقدوظيفته فقط ولكن أيضاً زوجته وأصدقاءه واحترام ذاته. يعتقد ألي أن آسا هو المسؤول عن فقدان وظيفته السابقة، حيث زعم أن آسا رد بغضب على تصريح معادٍ للسامية أدلى به ألي آنذاك. يُطارِد آسا طوال الرواية فكرة "الآخر". وهو لا يشعر بالارتياح بوجوده اليهودي. يشعر بأن الناس من حوله ضده أو يضطهدونه بسبب يهوديته. يتجلى خوف آسا من أن يُنظر إليه على أنه مختلف أو "آخر" في تفاعلاته مع زملائه و معارفه. رواية "الضحية" هي دراسة استثنائية ومتفهمة لفكرة "الآخر" وكيفية تفاعلها مع قضايا أخرى مثل الذات والهوية والمسؤولية والشك والوحدة، بفضل شخصياتها المؤثرة والسردية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الضحية، الآخر، الذات، الهوية، والانتماء

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Note

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