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**Identity and the Social Self in Saul Bellow's Novels:  
A Socio-psychological Reading**

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For the degree of Master of Arts

In

Teacher Preparation in Literature

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2017

## ***Abstract***

### **Identity and the Social Self in Saul Bellow's Novels:**

#### **A Socio-Psychological Reading**

This thesis attempts a fresh look at exploring the troubled relationship between the 'true self' and the 'social self' in the American society. The question of self versus society is repeatedly fictionalized in the narrative world of the Jewish-American novelist, Saul Bellow (1915-2005). Bellow is quite aware of the individual's conflict between his true self and social self. Truly, Bellow's individual immigrant experience as a Jew living in an American community is one essential factor that affects him in dealing with the subjects of his fiction and in portraying the struggle of his protagonists. Often Bellow's characters are Jewish-American whose identities are shaped within the American culture. Hence, the subject of my study is the emergence of the self, not the Jewish self in particular. Bellow has been drawn to the suffering, the alienated, the paranoid, and the divided heroes regardless of ethnicity and religion.

This study purports to explore the conditions of the emergence of the social self in two of Bellow's most famous novels: *Seize the Day* (1956) and *The Victim* (1947). In these two novels, Bellow depicts the impact of the surrounding social circumstances on the protagonist's self-perception. Most Bellow's protagonists, especially in these two works, suffer from alienation. They are always amid struggle in the surrounding American society.

#### **Method of Research**

This study applies an interdisciplinary approach that combines a literary and a socio-psychological examination of Bellow's two novels; *Seize The Day* (1956) and *The Victim* (1947). I attempt to study Bellow's

protagonists' identities, in both novels, in their psychological and social manifestations. I use the findings of prominent figures of sociology and psychology, Robert Dalton, Erich Fromm, Heinz Kohut, R.D Laing and George Mead in dealing with the texts under study to investigate the conflict between self and outer world in Bellow's protagonists.

**Key Words:** Saul Bellow- true self –social self- false-self system- schizoid personality- the 'double'

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this thesis.

- First and foremost, to my thesis advisor and first reader Professor Shokry A.M. Megahed for his advice and encouragement. I thank him for his patience and guided support in every step of the way.
- Due thanks are also offered to Dr. Amira Rashad whose feedback has always encouraged me to do better.

If it had not been for both of you, this thesis would have never been as tangible as so.

- I dedicate this thesis to my mother Fidan Alghonemy and my father who enriched my soul with the love of continuing my post graduate study.
- I also dedicate this thesis to my husband Mahmoud Hassan for his encouragement, support, and tolerance and mostly for his belief in me. He has been providing a loving atmosphere that helped me at all times.
- All heartfelt thanks to my dearest sisters, Marwah and Ola, my brothers and my kids for their endless support and their warm personal encouragement.

Thank you

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## Preface

The aim of this thesis is to explore how the Jewish-American novelist Saul Bellow (1915-2005) portrays the nexus of the self-versus society that is repeatedly recounted in his fictional works. Within a socio-psychological framework, I investigate the troubled relationship between the true self and the social self in two of Bellow's most famous novels: *Seize the Day* (1956) and *The Victim* (1947). In these two works, Bellow depicts the impact of the surrounding social circumstances on the characters' self-perception.

The thesis is divided into three chapters as follows:

### Chapter One

This chapter functions as an introduction to the thesis. The chapter traces the two major concepts of the study; identity and the social self in the fields of sociology and psychology. It draws specifically on the work of five prominent figures of sociology and psychology. They are Erik Erikson, Robert Dalton, Erich Fromm, R.D Laing and George Mead. In the work of these figures, the question of identity is almost always addressed in relation to that of social context.

### Chapter Two

This chapter explores Bellow's portrayal of the troubled relationship between the true self and the social self in *Seize the Day*. I use the findings of R.D. Laing and Heinz Kohut in their pioneering studies on the 'schizoid' and the 'narcissistic' disorder in dealing with the text. This is done in an attempt to reflect how Bellow's two main characters, Wilhelm Adler and Dr. Tamkin are representatives of Laing's 'false-self system' and its entailing 'schizoid' state. In a socio-psychological reading, I investigate the manifestations of two characteristics

of the ‘false-self system’, i.e., pretence and contradiction. Bellow traces the theme of duality in the social context of the father-son relationship. Lack of empathy in Wilhelm’s relationship with his father is an essential inner motive that roots for his personality disorder. Both Bellow’s two main characters attempt to give up their original selves and adopt other selves suitable for the surrounding situation. Closely related to such characteristics of Laing’s ‘false-self’ system, both Bellow’s main characters are “ontologically insecure persons” (Laing 42). Wilhelm and Tamkin obviously do not have self-certainty. As a result they are involved in “engulfment”. In this psychological condition, they are absorbed into other persons, a state of merging of being to prevent themselves from losing their true selves (Laing 44).

### **Chapter Three**

The final chapter reflects how Bellow deals with the question of self-versus society in the quite different social context of Jew-Gentile encounters. The chapter examines Bellow’s *The Victim* as a representative of this Jew-Gentile dilemma. In the first part of this chapter, I apply the socio-psychological concepts of ‘memory’ and ‘motivation’ to investigate the feelings of oppression, paranoia, and alienation in Leventhal, Bellow’s Jew-American hero. These feelings lead Leventhal to live in his conditioning binary of Jew and Gentile. He seems determined to interpret the surrounding reality in terms of his own prejudices. The second part is devoted to prove that, at a deeper level, Leventhal’s hostile confrontation with his Gentile Allbee is an encounter with his ‘double’. This is done in an attempt to reflect the psychic split of Leventhal’s self.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion is a synthesis of the findings of the study.

## Chapter one

### The Concepts of Identity and the Social Self

Many of the people [we] have to deal with are cut off from their first soul. This is in itself a revelation [. . .]. Other people have a personal history so very different from [our] own [. . .] it was there somewhere, a core of the self from first to last. It need[s] not be – often it is not – a good or desirable core [. . .] who can deny that we are confronted daily with a mass of artificially constructed egos? (Bellow, *It All Adds Up* 322)

One basic human need is to form and possess a unique self-image; such feeling of distinctive identity/individuality is indispensable. Man, as Erich Fromm argues, can be aware of himself as ‘a separate entity’ as he needs to realize that “‘I am I’ not as somebody else” to experience himself as he really is not as what he should be (60). Social conformity, on the other hand, can probably make the person a copy of others. This, in a sense, causes some human abilities to disappear, as Megahed A. Megahed explains (57). To be socially accepted, man begins to think how to satisfy the wishes of the others and overlook his own thoughts.

This question of self- versus society is addressed by many psychologists and sociologists. This study draws specifically on the work of five prominent figures of sociology and psychology: Erik Erikson, Robert Dalton, Ronald Laing, Erich Fromm, and George Mead. In the work of these five figures, the question of identity is almost always addressed in relation to that of social context. The concept of ‘ego identity’, as the psychologist Erik Erikson argues, consists of essential elements such as awareness, perception, behavior, and community (*Identity, Youth and Crisis* 50). Personal identity, as Erikson notes, requires being aware of who the individual is or an awareness of oneself by oneself and how he fits into society or in other words an awareness of oneself as an object of someone

else's observation. Such awareness influences the way a person perceives himself in time and space as well as how he is perceived by others in social situations.

Such perception of one's personal identity is highly influenced by certain factors operating within a person. Robert Dalton speaks about the two essential factors those of 'memory' and 'motivations'. Personal identity, as Dalton elaborates, is defined through its 'history' (160). This is because personality is a social product that results from the kinds of experiences and situations which man has had with others throughout his life. 'Motivation' is highly influenced by the household structure that produces changes in perception. Parents, who represent the backbone of the household structure, play an important role in producing such change in one's own perception of his personal identity.

Parents are one of 'self-objects' which man experiences as part of his self. The general argument of the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, in his pioneering studies on the narcissistic disorder suggests that lack of empathy which is a trademark of narcissistic parents makes the individual lack a 'cohesive self' from his childhood (Kohut14). The individual, then, is dominated by the regressive needs of the "archaic idealized parent imago" (Kohut9-10). The child wishes to hold an image of idealized parental figures for whom he can feel admiration. The two psychoanalysts Heinz Kohut and Ernest Wolf assert that parents should be aware of "responsive-empathic self-objects" (416). In the early childhood, the child has needs of "mirroring and idealizing" needs that should be sufficiently responded to (416). Failure in the responses of such "mirroring and idealized self objects", as Kohut & Wolf maintain, leads to a "gradual replacement of the self objects and their functions" by another self and its functions (416). Consequently, parents' lack of empathy causes the individual to grow up lacking sustaining self-esteem and inner ideals. He grows with a defect in the self because of traumatic empathic

failures on the part of the parents during the early stages of development. The child grows with a need to form an idealized image of significant others and to experience a sense of merging with the resulting idealized self objects. As a consequence, the “narcissistic personality disorder” emerges (Kohut & Wolf 416). Such disorder causes one’s self-esteem to be low and subject to failures and disappointments (Kohut & Wolf 413). The self, then, suffers “the trauma of unshared emotionality” which in turn leads to grow up with a fragmented self that implies an “intense need for the merger with an external ideal” (Kohut & Wolf 419- 420).

In this sense, there is a dynamic relationship between identity and the circumstances of the surrounding environment. Man, as Erikson states, is ‘an organism’, whose roles grow out of the third principle of organization, ‘the social’ and he is “organized into groupings of geographic and historical coherence” such as “family, class, community, [and] nation” (*Childhood and Society* 31). Thus, self has a different nature as a function of the social context in which it evolves. The social psychologist, Abraham Tesser, identifies three aspects of the self namely: public, private, and collective (55). The individual’s identity, as it is shaped through social interaction, includes “objective public identity”, “subjective public identity”, and “self-identity” (Herman 28). Man’s identity, in this sense, implies the two domains of ‘true self’ i.e. the domain of individuality, and ‘social self’ or domain of collectiveness which grows out of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces.

The social self, which is the second major concept of this study, is introduced by George Mead and Erich Fromm. Mead’s general argument suggests that the individual encounters within the social process depend on certain social factors such as the customs, mores, and traditions that represent the “other” to the

individual. The others' responses to the individual are incorporated into 'a social self', which reflects the social scene (Mead 144). On the same vein, Erich Fromm relates the concept of 'social self', "a secondary sense of self", to the many roles that man plays in relations to others (143). Fromm's general argument is that society and culture enable mankind to recognize the ways in which individuals are alike and different at the same time (142-143). Therefore, the sense of identity is based on one's experience of self as "the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality" inside and outside of himself, that is, by the development of "objectivity and reason" (Fromm 203). Identity, in this regard, should be understood as a relational term that runs between two main domains: the individual domain which refers to personal or true self, and the collective domain that refers to social self. However, the conflicting sense between 'private' and 'public, collective' or 'social' selves eventually leads to a split. Man becomes in this case as a dual character with two persons, two different selves inside him which are two separate "me's" and "I's" (Mead 143). To summarize, a troubled relationship between the two main constituents of man's identity: the 'true self' and the 'social self' may lead to the emergence of personality disorders exemplified in the 'false-self' that Laing discusses.

In his classic work on existential psychology *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (1960) Ronald David Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist, sheds light on the characteristics of the 'false-self system'. According to him, false-self system "exists as the complement of an inner self" (94). Laing relates the characteristics of 'false-self system' to "the particular schizoid mode of being in the world" (94). Hence, schizoid can be considered a variation of 'false-self system'. The schizoid character is usually caught in the dilemma of the "actual duality" of his "overall unity into two selves" (117). These two selves refer to "the secret inner self

and the behavioural false systems” where there are two versions of ‘hims’, one there and the other here (Laing113-117).As R.D Laing adds, the 'schizoid' person keeps his true self concealed and he presents to others a false front. Therefore, as Laing notes, the social self is regarded in a sense as “false and futile” (114).

In such a case a person may also be involved in the dilemma of ‘engulfment’, a psychological condition in which person encounters a “complete loss of being by absorption into the other person [. . .] merging of being” (Laing 44). Laing clinically relates such condition to that of ‘ontological insecurity’ in which the individual “feels more unreal than real; more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question” (42). The ordinary circumstances of living threaten the ontologically insecure person’s threshold of security (42). This individual does not have self-certainty; he has to be ‘absorbed’ in contriving ways of trying to be real, of preserving his identity to prevent himself losing his self (42). This is where a person possesses a split or double consciousness that- as a result- has two persons with two different selves inside him.

Such division of the self is represented in literature by the ‘double’ theme. The double is psychologically seen as not "an object but a feeling, usually fleeting", a feeling that makes people estranged to themselves (Royle132). Another definition of the 'double' is a “personification of man’s dual nature” (Meckled 109).The double “does not stand for the true, socialized self of the individual but for what he has to repress in order to comply with socio-cultural demands” (Meckled 109). In other words, the double personifies one’s tendencies rejected or unwanted by the surrounding culture and society. Hence, the creation of the ‘double’ shares the same principle found in the personality splits.

Accordingly, the ‘double’ is an essential embodiment of Laing’s ‘false-self system’ in which man’s ‘social self’ does not represent what he actually wants, desires, likes or dislikes. It is a mask that man wears so as to be socially accepted. The inherent paranoid feeling of being threatened may lead the self to duplicate itself. In other words, the unpleasant feelings of self-consciousness may sometimes lead to the emergence of paranoia. In such mental illness, the person is involved in belief of conspiracy or perceived threats towards himself. He sees himself threatened by others surrounding him. In this proposition, the ‘double’ stands for the psychic split of the self “carried out by the ego as a defensive measure to counteract the fear of death”, or fear of persecution danger (Meckled 108). In his article, “The Theme of the Double”, S. Meckled categorizes two forms of ‘symmetrical and asymmetrical pairs’ in which the ‘double’ may appear in fiction. In the symmetrical form, the two selves have opposite characters and traits. However, they look physically alike, if not exactly alike such as twins or twin-like pairs. In other asymmetrical form, the two selves may be represented by two brothers, relatives, or even strangers. They reflect opposite features and character traits (109). Both forms of the ‘double’ in which he appears in fiction are closely related to each other. They are pairs of real people that obviously appear to themselves or to the reader as complete entities, “but who actually conform two halves of a third divided personality” (110). In such divided mind, there is traditionally established separation between better and worse selves.

More involvement in social life, in this regard, results in more social roles to be played which, in turn, may lead to the division of self into personal and social selves which are alien to each other; albeit not contradictory; each has its hopes, desires, thoughts and wishes. This duality causes the person’s self to be dual and fragmented. The person who perceives only his inner world and who is incapable

of perceiving the outer world in its objective context is considered “insane”, in Fromm’s terms (207).

Sane man should be aware of ‘the polarity’ between inner and outer forms of perception (Fromm 207). Moreover, a sane man should not feel a gap between his individual and social needs. The real self-discovery, as Fromm observes, occurs in man’s feeling his uniqueness with others as well as his difference from them. Man can fulfill his happiness through successful socialization that is based on the establishment of coordination between the objective and subjective realities, which occur in a “productive relatedness” to the outside world and to himself (Fromm 203). However, if the individual could not achieve successful socialization, he feels a detachment between his true self and his social self and consequently, he becomes as “an alien” who wants to withdraw gradually from public life to live in psychological isolation from other people and from his true self (Fromm 120). Alienation, as Fromm observes, is a deep sense of separation or estrangement from the one’s true self, others, and the society’s institutions. Such “alien” person, as Fromm adds, is “estranged from himself” (120). He also lacks a “productive love” with its special features of care and respect (33). This failure to have a loving relationship with one’s fellow men-his parents, wife, colleagues, neighbours, etc., as Fromm adds, the person suffers from social isolation and marginality which are typical features of alienation (32:36). Such ‘alien’ person seems to be “out of touch with himself” and also “out of touch with any other person” (120). Thus, this ‘insane’ individual may be seen as suffering from social as well as self-alienation.

Within a socio-psychological framework, I attempt to study the conditions of the emergence of the social self in two of Bellow’s most famous novels: *Seize the Day* (1956) and *The Victim* (1947). In these two novels, Bellow depicts the impact of the surrounding social circumstances on the protagonist’s self-perception. Most

Bellow's protagonists, especially in these two works, suffer from 'alienation'. They are always amid struggle in the surrounding American society. In Bellow's own consciousness the Jew and the American merge. Bellow, born of Russian-Jewish immigrant family on June 10, 1915, in Lachin, Montreal, is "a descendant of East European Jews" who moves later to Chicago in America in 1924 (*It All Adds Up* henceforth *IAAU* 152). Such incorporation of Jewish-American consciousness has a great effect on Bellow's own self-perception. He declares the pressure of such incorporation, stating that he "feared that [he] would be put down as a foreigner, an interloper"(qtd. in Levin & Papasotiriou 83). While studying literature at the university as a Jew and the son of Russian Jews, Bellow believes that he "would probably never have the right feeling for Anglo-Saxon traditions, for English words" (qtd. in Levin & Papasotiriou 83). However, Bellow declares that he "[fights to] free [himself]" from such sense (qtd. in Levin & Papasotiriou 83). The pressure of such incorporation in Bellow's own Jewish-American consciousness appears, for example, in his main protagonist, Wilhelm Adler in *Seize the Day*. Such pressure is an important challenge that the Jewish-American consciousness faces. Bellow speaks his own 'Jewish voice' for "an integrated America" (Nesher & Kramer 205). He reflects the Jewish themes and personalities as parts of the whole American experience.

Truly, Bellow's individual immigrant experience as a Jew living in an American community is one essential factor that affects him in dealing with the subjects of his fiction and in portraying the struggle of his protagonists. Nevertheless, it would be an underestimation to measure Bellow's work solely based on this Jewish factor. Hence, the subject of my study is the emergence of the self, not the Jewish self in particular. Bellow has been drawn to the suffering, the alienated, the paranoid, and the divided heroes regardless of ethnicity and religion.