

Henderson the Rain King: Resolving Existential Despair with Theist Existential Philosophy

Bülent Cercis TANRITANIR (*)

Özcan AKŞAK (**)

Abstract: *Saul Bellow has written in the modern area. Many novelists in this period have seen to problems of man that are distinctive and prevalent in the modern period. Philosophical movements in this period have also influenced writers of the time. Existentialism is one of the philosophical movements by which many writers have been influenced. This essay shows Henderson's dissatisfaction with the post-war society in Modern America and Henderson's spiritual transformation in Africa pointing to the fact that Henderson doesn't reject religion. This essay shows that Bellow uses religious elements in his novel and that he approaches Soren Kierkegaard's theist existentialist philosophy which is based on brotherhood and love.*

Key Words: *Bellow, Theist, Existentialism, Religion, Brotherhood, Love*

Tanrıci Varoluşçu Felsefe ile Varoluşçuluk Sorununu Çözme:

Henderson The Rain King

Özet: *Saul Bellow modern dönemde yazmıştır. Bu dönemdeki çoğu yazar, dönemin kendine özgü ve yaygın olan insan sorunlarına eğilmiştir. Bu dönemdeki felsefi akımlar da, dönemin yazarlarını etkilemiştir. Varoluşçuluk, yazarların etkilendiği felsefi akımlardan biridir. Bu makale Henderson'un savaş sonrası modern Amerika'daki hoşnutsuzluğunu ve Henderson'un Afrika'daki ruhsal değişimini, Henderson'un dini yadsımadığına işaret ederek göstermektedir. Bu makale Bellow'un romanlarında dini öğeler kullandığını ve sevgi ve kardeşlik esasına dayanan Soren Kierkegaard'ın tanrıci varoluş felsefesine yaklaştığını göstermektedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bellow, Tanrıci, Varoluşçuluk, Din, Kardeşlik, Aşk*

*) Dr., Department of English Language and Literature Faculty of Science and Arts University of Yüzüncü Yıl.
(e-posta: btanritanir@hotmail.com)

***) English Lecturer, University of Yüzüncü Yıl.
(e-posta: ozcanaksak@yahoo.com)

After the world wars, the transformation of society in America has influenced the perception of individuals and writers of the time to a great extent. The situation and the environment in which Americans lived have inevitably influenced many individuals and writers. Some American writers of the post-war period naturally and unavoidably thought that society and belief were irrational. They were of the opinion that the only important value that should be paid attention was personal experience of the individual. Donald W. Markos comments on this situation as follows:

The felt sense of many American intellectuals of the post-war period that communal life and belief were chaotic and irrational and that the only valid source of value lay in individual experience echoed both American naturalism of the 1890s and contemporary French existentialism. (1995: 87)

The individual have become more important than ever, because society and religion did not have any impact to stop the emergence of the world wars. The new situation of the individual was similar in Europe. After the world wars, individuals found themselves in a desolate landscape; without any signs to guide them, without any hope that could enable them to create a better world. The result of this situation changed questions that man had asked himself before the wars. M.J. Charlesworth sums this changing situation up in the following way: "...he [the individual] found himself with an existence and a responsibility foisted upon him which he had not chosen and did not particularly want. In this context the questions-"why is life worth living; why go on living; why not commit suicide and end it all?" (1976: 2).

Existentialism is concerned with themes like alienation, anger, lack of meaning, and it rejects "religion" and "submission to faith", because it makes us believe that men are cast on the world and live without any controlling power and have to struggle on their own. Lehan calls this the new American hero and states that the "new American hero is as displaced -- as uprooted and puzzled -- as his prototype in the French existential novel. He is sometimes on the verge of insanity or suicide..." (1973: 80).

Among existential philosophers was Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Martin Buber (1878-1965). Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Albert Camus (1913-1960). The influence of these philosophers was extended to novelists who wrote and used key issues of existential philosophers. Lehan notes that some American writes including Saul Bellow were partly influenced by the existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus,

A number of American writers -- Mailer, Bellow, Wright, Percy, Barth, Heller, among others -- approximated some of the key ideas of Sartre and Camus, adapting these ideas to a more purely American experience which also involved depicting a fragmented world without mythical or moral center. (1973: 80)

Atheist existentialism requires that one abandons any belief in God, because the concept of God contradicts the idea of responsibility that is at the centre of the movement.

Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were atheist. They asserted that the individual must make his own way to reach his identity without the help of God. However, there are elements in *Henderson the Rain King* showing deviation of Sartre and Camus's basic existential philosophy, which totally rejects religion and faith in God.

There is also a strong subcategory of existential writers who combines religious feelings with Existentialism. One of them is Soren Kierkegaard. Soren Kierkegaard thought about the question of how to reconcile a belief in God with responsibility of one's own actions. For Kierkegaard there was no contradiction between freedom and God. For him the basis of religious belief was the ability to choose freely to believe.

In the modern era, when hope and belief of individuals in politics and institutions decreased, existential philosophy found a ground to explain and help people in their lives. Accordingly, many writers in this era have used existential elements and themes in their novels. One of them is Saul Bellow. Lehan points out that Bellow and some other American writers used characters in search of existential values: "Saul Bellow's characters have also been in search of existential values and so have Walker Percy's and Norman Mailer's" (1973: 80).

In *Henderson the Rain King*, Saul Bellow makes references to religion. He uses religiousness which is in contradiction with J.P. Sartre and A. Camus's existential philosophy. Throughout the novel, Henderson finds himself in situations where he has to face unusual conditions in Africa. Henderson follows a path that will bring him happiness and contentment in his life, and in doing so, he does not refuse faith in God.

The writer makes the reader familiar with Henderson's private life. He is married and has five children at the very beginning of *Henderson the Rain King*. He has inherited three million dollars from his father, so he has no financial shortcomings with which he has to come to terms. He lives in a farm and earns his living by breeding pigs. We are told that Henderson has almost everything someone else would probably want. However, although he has a family and is financially secured, he does not feel comfortable and isn't satisfied with his present life. We learn and wonder about his dissatisfaction when he asks himself what to do with himself and with his inherited wealth: "So what do you do with yourself? More than three million bucks" (Bellow, 1976: 23). Many times in the novel, Herzog's inner voices state his suffering and claims for a desire, "Now I have already mentioned that there was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said, I want, I want" (1976: 24).

The reasons for Henderson's suffering are not just explicitly stated in the novel. Though, we can read it from his thoughts and from the situation in which he lives. It seems strange that his family and his wealth don't provide him peace and comfort. Henderson often mentions about his spiritual emptiness and the lack of meaning of his life. As a reader we come to understand that nothing makes a contribution to his life; so, there is and must be something else to his family and to money that he possesses. And this is what he is looking for at the beginning of the novel.

One also realizes at the beginning of the novel that Henderson sometimes acts like an unpredictable person. It seems as though he almost intentionally hurts those closest to him, particularly his wife Lily. Henderson often has not got good relations with his wife. At a certain time, when Lily's friends are invited to their house, Henderson exhibits weird behaviors. Later in the novel, he remembers this incident and tells us what he did when Lily's guests were at their house:

And I wipe my nose and mustache on my fingers and then shake hands with the guests, saying, "I'm Mr. Henderson, how do you do?" And I go to Lily and shake her hand, too, as if she were merely another lady guest, a stranger like the rest....As Lily knows, it was done on purpose, and when we are alone she cries out to me, "Gene, what's the big idea? What are you trying to do?" (1976: 5)

Henderson and his wife have a discussion with each other later on. Henderson goes as far as threatening her by committing suicide, indicating that he is reluctant to take responsibility even of his own life. "But as it got her nowhere to discuss it with me she started to cry, and when I saw her tears I lost my head and yelled. I'm going to blow my brains out! I'm shooting myself" (1976: 7). Henderson appears to be bad tempered and sometimes behaves weird. Therefore, at the beginning of the novel, Henderson appears to be a difficult and unlikable person.

Henderson is also influenced by his present life-style in America. He thinks that America is very crowded and is not suitable to live a quiet life. He describes America as, "so big (America), and everybody is working, making, digging, bulldozing, trucking, loading, and so on, and I guess the sufferers suffer at the same rate"(1976: 25). Because of the entire crowd and all the hectic life style in modern America, Henderson feels lonely and disintegrated. His feeling of alienation is another reason for Henderson to be in need of a search for a change, which he expects to bring more meaning into his life.

Henderson's dissatisfaction with his life persistently appears by a voice-an inner voice that always asks for a want, "I want, I want ..." (1976: 24). This inner voice is a signal that Henderson needs to change. This particular inner voice of Henderson is the main reason that pushes him to the search to find a solution for his situation. Donald W. Marcos comments about this inner voice as such: "The voice does not express desire in the ordinary sense, but rather a need for coming into one's identity and a cessation from the neurotic, hyperactive flight from the inescapable human condition" (1995: 110). This comment clearly points to the fact that Henderson has become a part of a modern society.

All changes that have come into being after the world wars have affected American society. The transformation of life after the world wars had brought about new ways of a life-style to which individuals had to adjust themselves. The transition had caused changes for which individuals had to pay the price, like Henderson. In the same vein,

Grandville Hicks remarks about the urge for change of Bellow's characters as: "Like almost everything else Bellow has written, it is an account of a man's struggle to find and transcend himself..." (1995: 100).

As the novel progresses, Henderson says that the lack of meaning and the feeling of alienation have almost become the destiny for most Americans and that it has become widespread to go and search for meaning outside of America. "It's the destiny of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life" (Bellow, 1976: 277). He emphasizes how common this situation is and that he is not the only one that intends to go abroad where he can find wisdom.

Although Henderson was given many chances in life that many would never be offered, he is still not satisfied with what he has. Henderson would be completely free if not for an enemy he created in himself through his own habits and thoughts. In the second paragraph, Henderson complains about his life. He thinks all about his possessions and about his attitudes towards the people around him and he feels unenthusiastic about everything he has and everything he does:

[...]my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, 'No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!' But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns to chaos. (1976: 1)

Before Henderson decides to go to Africa, he tries out different sorts of activities that he thinks might help him to get out of his distressful situation. The desire in him to have a better life is so great that he almost tries everything he can think of. His efforts are not very helpful and they do not serve as a remedy. We witness that he is almost helpless:

I tried with all my heart, chopping wood, lifting, plowing, laying cement blocks, pouring concrete, and cooking mash for the pigs. On my own place, stripped to the waist like a convict, I broke stones with a sledgehammer. It helped, but not enough. (1976: 23)

And he adds, "Among other remedies I took up the violin" (1976: 25).

The lack of meaning and his sense of isolation continually force Henderson to go on with his search for a potential solution. D. Pipher claims that, "And thus there is the centering of an oblique value on the seeker of the unknown in himself and life" (1982: 87). In the end, after many unsuccessful attempts Henderson decides to go to Africa. His journey will not only be a regular vacation to see new distant places; but, it will have a particular function to fulfill an obligation. When Henderson says that "It was with Charlie that I took off for Africa, hoping to find a remedy for my situation." (Bellow, 1976: 41), we know that this journey to Africa is a continuation of his search for himself.

After Henderson arrives in Africa, he meets Romilayu, his guide who is going to lead him through Africa. They start to walk towards the heart of Africa. After a while they meet the Arnewi tribe. The Arnewi can't use their water supplies because it is invaded by frogs, so the tribe suffers a draught. The tribe does not show a challenging spirit for solving their problem with the drought; they do nothing to solve their problem. Because the Arnewi believe in tradition and fate, they do not believe that the frogs in the cistern can be removed, they only lament about their unfortunate situation. Henderson wants to help the tribe, so he offers his help. However, he is unsuccessful in his attempt. He causes more harm than good and having realized what he has done, he wants to take the responsibility, but the tribe just wants him to leave. So Henderson and Romilayu leave the village and go on with their journey.

Henderson and Romilayu meet another tribe, the Wariri after a while. The Wariri believe that one can create one's own future and that activity and power are important. In contrast to the Arnewi, the Wariri always take measures and they always try to overcome problems in taking measures. "Dafhu" is the king of the Wariri tribe. He has an extraordinary personality. He is always patient, always calm, and he is a powerful personality. King Dafhu believes in faith and he is constantly in action trying to improve conditions and difficulties related to his life.

When Henderson and Romilayu are with the Wariri tribe, Henderson and King Dafhu become friends and Dafhu is determined to help Henderson with his inner conflict. Dafhu symbolizes the fully integrated human being. In Dafhu, man's animal nature is unrepressed and is integrated with his conscious mind and this is the source of his power. Because Dafhu is so close to nature, his energies are not wasted in neurotic conflict unlike Henderson. He has achieved the state of "Being" and is going to help Henderson. When with the Wariri, Henderson contemplates about the idea of "becoming" and "being" and he talks about this with Dafhu: "King I am a Becomer. Now you see your situation is different. You are a Be-er. I've just got to stop Becoming. Jesus Christ, when I am going to Be?" (1976: 191)

Men are constantly making efforts to possess or to become something. Whether it is happiness, fame, money or a better life is the goal for many people. In this regard, Henderson's aim is coined with the term "becoming" which indicates Henderson's self-transformation. The term "becoming" portrays a state which can be described as a struggle which caused by a dissatisfaction with any unfulfilled present moment of Henderson. Constantly trying to "become" is always linked to the idea to find inner peace and serenity. The first step in changing and becoming a "be-er" is to realize the fact that the urgent feeling of change is holding someone back from living in the present moment. This progression in *Henderson The Rain King* is called "bursting the spirit's sleep" through which Henderson will go.

Some time later in the novel, we get introduced to Atti, a lion that is kept by King Dafhu. Dafhu wants to confront Henderson with Atti. Dafhu thinks that Henderson can change and can get rid of his continuous fears and can "burst the spirit's sleep".

Henderson is ultimately has to face this difficult situation. Dafhu tells Henderson that if he comes face to face with Atti, it will help him to overcome his fears. "Atti will force the present moment upon you ... lions are experiencers. But not in haste."(1976: 260) Dafhu suggest and forces Henderson to observe and think about Atti, to watch the way she strides, saunters, gazes, and the way she breathes. However facing the lion and not fearing it and staying calm and peaceful is not something familiar to Henderson who is already filled with a terrible sense of fear and discomfort since the beginning of the novel.

Henderson and his guide are both anxious and are afraid to come near Atti. Because of their fears, Henderson and Romilayu begin to pray and ask God for help. This is the section where the thematic climax of fear of Henderson and Romalyiu are at its highest level. This is the part when Henderson and Romilayu pray most and ask God urgently for help and mercy. Henderson tells Romilayu to pray more and as well to put a word for him in his prayer too, "That's right, Romilayu, I said, pray. Pour it on. Pray like anything. Give it anything you have got. Come on, Romilayu, pray, I tell you" (1976: 253).

Afterwards, Henderson goes on to pray himself, "And I prayed and prayed ...help me to do Thy will. Take off my stupid sins. Untrammel me. Heavenly Father, open up my dumb heart and for Christ's sake preserve me from the unreal thing." (1976: 253) Henderson tells Romilayu that this wasn't the first time he prayed, but he also prayed before, "If you want to know something, it wasn't the first time in recent years by any means that I had addressed some words to God" (1976: 253). We see that Henderson is religious and he tells that he prayed before. In his most difficult moments when he feared, Henderson turned towards God and asked him for help and at the same time he supports Romilayu in his prayers too.

When Dafhu and Henderson are talking about Henderson's situation, Dafhu convinces Henderson that he has the ability to change, because Dafhu believes that Henderson has the basic qualities that he needs to transform himself. Henderson just has to follow what Dafhu tells him to do, and that is to confront Atti:

[Henderson]: "Teach? You really think that she can change me." [Dafhu]: "Excellent. Precisely. Change. You fled what you were... once more, and a last time, you tried the world. With a hope of alteration... You have rudiments of high character. You could be noble. Some parts may be so long buried as to be classed dead." [Henderson]: "Is there any resurrectibility in them?" [Dafhu]: "This is where change comes." (1976: 260)

Ultimately, Henderson confronts Atti. After this difficult confrontation with the lion Henderson convinces himself that he can change, at least that he is willing to change. At a conversation with Dafhu, he says:

For his sake I accepted the discipline of being like a lion. Yes, I thought, I believed that I could change; I was willing to overcome my

old self; yes, to do that a man had to adopt some new standards; he must even force himself into a part; maybe he must deceive himself for a while, until it begins to take. I would never make a lion, I knew that; but I might pick up a small gain there in the attempt. (1976: 250)

With the suggestion and help of King Dahfu and with the help of Atti, Henderson awakens to a new awareness of human possibilities. He starts to feel reality and the need of love and humanity and brotherhood. He comes to understand that he can change and that change is possible. The spirit's sleep has burst and Henderson now has become a new vision towards life, a new perspective.

Henderson's sense of emptiness gives way to a sense of life, and his sense of despair to joy. Being alive and ready to start a new life with new possibilities that each man must carry in his heart, Henderson realizes that the voice inside his head wanted reality. The sense of reality that Henderson discovers with the help of Dafhu and the lion Atti has shown him that love and brotherhood is the most important aspect of life. And once you perceive the world through a sense of love and brotherhood, people can transform themselves by looking at life from a different angle.

Etham Fishman comments about the reality Henderson has discovered: "[...]that he is able finally to burst the spirit's sleep" (1983: 68), "[...]and know, truly know, its love that makes reality" (1983: 241) Henderson appears to realize an alienated transformation, as a person in existential despair. "Once again, the alienated condition at the start of Bellow's story is overcome by its end" (Louise, 1987: 619).

At the end of the novel, Henderson has ultimately undergone a change that he was hoping for at the beginning of his journey. Now he has reached his goal in Africa:

King Dafhu, with the aid of Atti and her animal power, awakens Henderson to a new awareness of human possibilities, to the reality and need of love and human brotherhood, to the fact that human nobility can be realized even in our terrible technological day. (Rodriguez, 1995: 122)

When Henderson is on a plane back home the plane lands in Newfoundland. The name of the airport refers to Henderson's changed state; implicitly, referring to it as *new found land*. The name of the airport symbolically reminds us of Henderson's new spiritual discovery. We can immediately see the outcome of Henderson's changed state as a new person. Henderson acts and behaves different than he was used to be. The first sign is the way he treats people around him. We can see this when he is on the plane back home. Henderson shows affection to a young Indian boy whose parents have died and he takes care of him. "I held him close to my chest. He didn't seem to be afraid that I would fall with him. While to me he was like medicine applied, and air, too; it also was a remedy" (340). We can also see that Henderson is happy to see his wife Lily which would normally

be not expected of him. “Plus the happiness that I expected at Idle wild from meeting Lily” (Bellow, 1976: 340).

At the end of all his efforts, Henderson ultimately has found a new reality in Africa which helped him to transform his former unsatisfied life and personality. The reality that Henderson has found is love and brotherhood. In *Henderson the Rain King*, Saul Bellow takes us beyond the existential despair and the emptiness of the individual men gives way to a meaningful life which takes its power from love and faith. Michael Bancroft, refers to the theme of *Henderson the Rain King* and asserts that,

The central theme of Bellow’s work is that amid the alienation caused by social and personal upheaval in life, we must cling to the belief that there is more to life and this something more is bred of love. In an age that accepts determinism, Bellow affirms that there is another reality. (1976: 77)

In his most fearful situations Henderson has often prayed to God for help. Hereby, we can assume that Saul Bellow has been influenced by Kierkegaard’s basic philosophy. Kierkegaard doesn’t object faith and doesn’t reject religion, by trying to find the meaning of life and existence in the life of men. Kierkegaard’s philosophy encompasses religion and faith through the medium of love which he thinks shall be of help to people in life. George B. Connell, (1992) states this in “Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard” as:

This is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s central text, “Works of Love”, is this passage, a most compact and compelling statement of his theology: “As Christianity’s good news is contained in the doctrine about Humankind’s kinship with God, so its task is humankind’s likeness to God. But God is love; therefore we can resemble God only in loving, just as, according to the apostle’s words, we can only “be God’s co-workers-in love. (I Cor. 3:9)

Henderson was alienated, unsatisfied and unhappy at the beginning of the novel. On his way of transformation in Africa, Henderson was often in need of help. At his most feared situations, Henderson asked God for help. He prayed in feared and difficult situations and also asked others to pray for him. From the point of existentialism, we may say that Bellow does not refuse religion. We can say Bellow thinks that people in need of help need faith. Bellow thinks that to be alone in the world without a belief and without faith is difficult for men. His inclination towards belief distinguishes him from atheist existentialism. He wants to show that life without religion and belief is a hard ideology for men and he emphasizes that atheist existentialism is difficult and therefore incomplete.

References

- Bancroft, Michael (1984). "Recommended: Saul Bellow". *The English Journal*. Vol. 73, Pp.77- 78.
- Bellow, Saul (1976). *Henderson the Rain King*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Charlesworth, Max J. (1976). *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre*. George Prior.
- Connell, George B and Evans, C. Stephen (1992). *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*. London: Humanities Press International.
- Fishman, Etham (1983). "Saul Bellow's Likely Stories". *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 45 No.3, (Aug.), Pp.61-634.
- Gerhard, Bach (1995). *The Critical Response to Saul Bellow*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Harap, Louis (1987). *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s-1980s.*, Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Hicks, Grandville (1995). "The Search for Salvation". *The Critical Response to Saul Bellow*, Ed. Gerhard Bach, Westport: Greenwood Press, 100-102.
- Lehan, Richard (1973). *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Marcos, W. Donald (1995). "Life against Death in Henderson the Rain King" in *The Critical Response to Saul Bellow*. Ed. Gerhard Bach, Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Pfizer, Donald (1982). *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*, Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rodriguez, Eusebio L. (1995). "Saul Bellow's Henderson as America". *The Critical Response to Saul Bellow*. Ed. Gerhard Bach, Westport: Greenwood Press.