

The Multiple Reconstruction Out of Crisis: Masculinities in Bellow's Novellas

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Abstract

Saul Bellow's novels mainly focus on social lives of contemporary urban American men. Taking his four novellas covering the second half of the 20th century as an example, this paper aims to reveal in change of social structure and cultural contexts how masculinity is in crisis extrinsically or intrinsically, and how social factors such as work and marriage assist in fashioning it. Through positive dialogues with social changes and cultural turn, Bellow deconstructs the masculinity as well as establishes a new democratic gender order and harmonious gender relations to reconstruct multiple masculinities.

Key words: Saul bellow; Masculinities; Reconstruction; Novella

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INTRODUCTION

American novelist, winner of Nobel Prize, Saul Bellow (1915-2005) mostly writes his works after World War II, whose protagonists are mainly men, covering sociological themes of contemporary urban American men's work, economic status, marriage, family, sexuality, love, friendship, race and so on. Chinese scholar Qiao Guoqiang writes in the essay *American Saul Bellow Studies in the New Century* that, "since the 60s of 20th century", critics mainly focus on Bellow's "thoughts of continental

philosophy", and his "liberalist humanism as well as the notion of common people with divinity", nonetheless, they "rarely pay attention to split subjects, culture positioning and issues of gender" (p.18). Although three waves of feminism improve the development of gender studies, gender studies toward Bellow's novels are stagnated till now. Feminists point out, deeply influenced by the Jewish patriarch, Bellow depicts "a male homosocial world", and his novels are of "stereotypes of misogyny" (Cronin, 2001, p.15); Bellow "imposes some limitations on his portrayal of women characters, as we mainly perceive them through the minds of his male protagonists who often overshadow them" (Aharoni, 100); his novels are lack of women characters and the only woman character Clara in *A Theft* "bears close resemblance to Bellow's male protagonists" (Cronin, 1995, p.319). Thus men in Bellow's novels seem to be a homosocial unity, as the feminist critic writes, "the Bellow protagonist is unarguably a descendant of the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century romantic individualists and, more recently, the great Victorian male autobiographers" (Cronin, 2001, p.11).

However, scholars of masculinity studies think masculinity is dynamic and multiple, which relates to difference, subjectivity, power and identity. It is both the objective reality and the cultural illusion. The origin of masculinity comes from the dichotomy, regarding the representatives of men and women as a series of binary oppositions, which expands the "sexed/biological" differences such as differences of "particular reproductive organs and genetic markers" to that of "corporeal, cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities" (Atkinson, p.4). Nevertheless, as the deconstruction of meta-narrative in the postmodernist context after WWII, masculinity, the cultural discourse closely related to modernity, is not only influenced by the emancipation of women, progress of science and technology, commodity fetishism, change of labor market and multiculturalism, but also itself full of division, fluidity and uncertainty. Poststructuralists

point out power and resistance can be both repressive and productive to each other, and the traditional hierarchy of gender order is replaced by a cyclic new one where the power of various masculinities and other social elements interact with each other. Moreover, the masculinity begins to transit to femininities and male subjects are facing to refashion new masculinities. Therefore, the conclusions mentioned above by some feminists toward Bellow's researches seem to be contradicted to theories of masculinity. Then, what kinds of masculinities does Bellow construct in his novels? Do they happen to vary with the change of social structure? What factors will influence the construction? Through the analysis of Bellow's four novellas *Seize the Day*, *A Theft*, *The Bellarosa Connection*, *The Actual* separately published in 1956, 1989, 1989 and 1997, this paper will try to find answers for these questions.

1. SOCIAL CHANGES, CULTURAL TURN AND MASCULINITY IN CRISIS

Generally speaking, crisis of masculinity is presented in the following seven aspects: work, marriage, education, crime, sexuality, health and procreation. "Work has often stood as the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity" (Edwards, 2006, p.7), and because under the postmodernist context identity becomes especially uncertain and fluid, work is inclined to be viewed as one's identity and income turns to be the standard to judge a man's masculinity.

From his first novel *The Dangling Man*'s protagonist Joseph, Bellow portrays a lot of men with an unsuccessful career losing their ever privilege and predominated position in the society and their families. In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm is idle all the day together with his father and a group of retired old men after losing his job and expects to earn a fortune by gambling and investing bonds, however, he always loses money. Although his father, the retired doctor Adler feels contempt for him and blames him for his slovenliness, his father still usually mentions that "he was their northeastern sales representative" of the Rojax Corporation (p.35), and "his income is up in the five figures somewhere" (p.13) when introduces him to strangers. After Wilhelm loses his job, his masculinity and identity are both in crisis. His father begins to suspect that he takes drug, is alcohol addicted and of sexual promiscuity. All these symptoms refer to the corporeal indulgence, which is considered to cause "structural dislocation of masculinity" (Atkinson, 2011, p.15). Wilhelm resigns because he is not content with the corporation's personnel decisions, yet his father thinks he is lying:

"Since you have to talk and can't let it alone, tell the truth. Was there a scandal – a woman?" Wilhelm fiercely defended himself. "No, Dad, there wasn't any woman. I told you how it was." "Maybe it was a man, then," the old man said wickedly. (p.51)

His father obviously knows that Wilhelm has two sons and beloved woman besides his wife, yet purposely suspects he is a gay. Sociologist Michael Atkinson points out that social factors related to work may make the role set of masculinity to be ambiguous (p.15). Gays are regarded as the marginal "other", the castrated men, and are subordinated and oppressed in the hierarchy of masculinity. While Adler is retired and old, he still expresses his antipathy and despise to the marginalized masculinity.

Similarly in *A Theft*, the heroine Clara also expresses her disdain to her unaccomplished husband Velde and comments on him that: "Velde was big and handsome, indolent, defiantly incompetent. He worked on the average no longer than six months at any job. By then everybody in the organization wanted to kill him" (Bellow, 2001, p.118).

Clara frequently complains that Velde is incompetent about his career, never cares about the immense expense of the family and loses much money in stock investing. The only reason why successful woman Clara marries to unsuccessful man Velde is that she wants to get his sperm to have children. She says that: "He's the overweening overlord, and for no other reason than sexual performance. It's stud power that makes him so confident...but what really settles everything, according to him, is masculine bulk" (Bellow, 2001, p.119). Besides, Bellow makes a strong contrast between Velde's career and her lover Ithiel's with Clara's two oppositional attitudes toward them. Velde usually stays at home and gets along well with their children. He spends so much time reading detective stories on the sofa that Clara once is extremely angry to drop his novels out of the window. Velde, a husband lacking of manhood, is of subordinated masculinity, a term named by scholar R. W. Connell. Connell notices that different groups of men are in a hierarchy and men lacking of manhood are often regarded as of being subordinated masculinity.

On the contrary, Ithiel is a powerful and successful man and Clara values him as precious as her life. Ithiel lives in the American capital Washington, frequently attends the Congress and goes in and out the Pentagon. He is "to the negotiating table in Geneva, facing the Russians", and "in the Persian Gulf, with a Japanese whiskey firm looking for a South American market", as well as "with the Italian police tracking terrorists" (Bellow, 2001, p.126). Ithiel is a man of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, also a term defined by R. W. Connell, "embodied the currently most honored way of being a man" and "required all other men to position themselves in relation to it"(2005, p.832). In the novel, both Clara and Velde worship Ithiel and view him as a standard of being a man. Different from her scornful attitude toward Velde, Clara loses reason and even sometimes goodness in order to get, possess and control Ithiel's love eternally.

Moreover, Bellow also portrays a large number of accomplished businessmen whose achievements are mainly in the field of service sector. In *A Theft*, young and successful Ithiel works on policy consulting in

Washington; in *The Bellarosa Connection*, Rose works on entertainment industry as a Jewish multimillionaire in New York; in *The Actual*, Adletsky builds his commercial empire of luxurious hotel industry in Chicago; in *Seize the Day*, nevertheless, Wilhelm who loses his job in the middle age, is driven to desperation when leaves from the furniture manufacturing company Rojax Corporation without money and residence. Due to the change of industry structure and labor market, the previous unitary masculinity splits into masculinities.

Sociologist Daniel Bell defines three developing periods of a society as preindustrial society, industrial society and postindustrial society. In the preindustrial society, people mainly work on mining and excavating industries depending on human labor related to natural resources; in the industrial society, machines replace human labor as the predominant power and the society is consisted of commodities; in the postindustrial society, "most labors do not work on agriculture or manufacture industry any more but on service sectors such as trading, finance, transportation, health care, entertainment industry" (p.20). Besides, the postindustrial society is fundamentally established on the service sectors where people compete with each other mostly in knowledge and specialized skills. Fredric Jameson also points out that the postindustrial society is a new developing stage of the capital society, which could also be called "consumer society", "information society", "high technology society", post-capital society, late capital society, transnational capital society and so on (p.425).

Contrasted with the rising of service sectors in the postindustrial society, manufacture industries step into decline:

In the beginning of the 20th century, only 3 of 10 Americans work in the service industries; in 1950, the ratio of American employees in the service industries and commodity producing is 1:1; in 1980, nearly every 7 of ten Americans work in the service industries. From 1847 to 1968, the number of employees working in the service sectors increased by 60%, yet that working in the manufacturing industries increased by less than 10%. (Bell, 1997, p.145-146)

The dramatic change of working market forces the masculinity to become divided in the field of work and profession and this phenomenon is well reflected in Bellow's four novellas.

The traditional masculinity once has an absolute advantage in the preindustrial and industrial societies, especially in the historical process of war and violence, sexual conquest, material acquisition, imperial expansion and colonialism, domestication of animals and exploitation of earth's natural resources. Representing the mainstream and predominant ideology of a society, masculinity symbolizes the example of ideal men. Nevertheless, with the change of American social structure from industrial society to postindustrial society, the traditional industries decline while the service sectors

and high technology industries begin to take off. All these changes of producing relationship and way may weaken the privilege of traditional masculinity that is unshakable before. Furthermore, in the postindustrial society, commodities speed up upgrading and updating because of the profit oriented market, which makes jobs of specific and technical personnel to be unstable. After the feminist movements, women begin to get increasing education and occupation opportunities and consequently compete with men in the career. Service-sector jobs also demand "care, deference and docility"- "characteristics that are more commonly identified as feminine than masculine traits and it seems that women rather than men are now preferred employees" (McDowell, 2003, p.3). All these changes are harmful to men's ever dominated position in the working aspect as breadwinners, and as the privilege of patriarchy disappears, the traditional masculinity is in crisis.

Marriage is another factor causing the traditional masculinity to be in crisis. After WWII, the reform of American divorce law actually becomes the contesting field of feminists and supporters of patriarchy. Many American states do not enact unilateral divorce legislation until 1960s, and with the aim to maintain the stability of marriage and protect women's rights, the law then regulates that:

Only if (a) it found that one spouse committed a specific violation against the other (typically something like adultery, chronic drunkenness, or physical abuse), and (b) both spouses agreed to the divorce, courts would grant a divorce. (Drewianka, 2008, p.486)

Seize the Day, published in 1956, is called by Bellow a novel that "all the divorced men in America will buy it" (Atlas, 2000, p.246). Marriage is an essential theme throughout all Bellow's novels which may be related to his own 6 marriages to some extent. In the novel, due to the complex divorce law at that time Wilhelm becomes a victim of marriage, who is threatened by his wife Margaret to keep paying her money out of his ability in order to divorce soon and remarry to the girl he loves. Margret "would regularly agree to divorce him, and then think things over again and set new and more difficult conditions" (p.29). Wilhelm cried, "take everything I've got, Margaret...Don't you want to marry again?" No. She went out with other men, but took his money. She lived in order to punish him". (p.94) Margaret turns to be the winner of this divorce war, revenging by asking for a huge amount of alimony, dating with other men and taking their children as a weapon to defeat Wilhelm. "I'm deprived of my children." Wilhelm bit his lip... 'I pay and pay. I never see them. They grow up without me. She makes them like herself. She'll bring them up to be my enemy" (p.98).

Wilhelm has already paid the tuition fee for Margaret to get her bachelor degree, but she refuses to find a job after graduation and even when she knows that Wilhelm is cheated to be without a penny and residence, she insists on asking for money and blames him.

Since the 1950s, the change of American cultural context from the modernism to the postmodernism

indirectly has raised the status of women and also improved women's position in marriage. Different from the dominated culture modernism in the industrial society, the postmodernism does not value center and order any more. It is a rejection of meta-narratives and under this cultural context all that is solid melts into air and appears to be unstable. The subjects splinter in to pieces and identities are fluid but not fixed. Meanwhile, the boundary between the elitism and popular culture is broken. Furthermore, being commercialized and of collage, the postmodernism is multiple, democratic and neutral. Under this background, a series of movements such as feminism, civil rights movement and gay liberation on purpose of eliminating hegemony and pursuing equality boom after WWII.

In the 1960s and 1970s, as women get increasing job and education opportunities by the sustaining efforts of feminists, many states begin to apply the reform of divorce law, adopting the unilateral divorce or "no-fault" divorce. Despite that this reform seems to advocate gender equality, it is generally recognized that this act is actually inclined to protect women and mothers' property rights in the divorce, and the reform, making the divorce process to be simple rthan before, causes the significant "rise in rates of divorce" (Nakonezny, 1995, p.480). Moreover, "the divorce is more commonly filed by women than by men" (Edwards, 2006, p.10). The sociologist Whitehead finds that: "More women are choosing (happily) to live alone"; while a "brave new world dawns for (single) women", (single) men face an increasingly "sad, lonely and unhealthy" existence (2002, p.49). In *A Theft*, although the accomplished statesman Ithiel Regler is of hegemonic masculinity, what his wife does to him just after his mother's death makes him be through trauma and in crisis:

The third Ms. Regler had hired a moving van and emptied the house one morning as soon as Teddy left for the office. Coming home in the evening, he found nothing but the bed they had shared the night before (stripped of bedding). (2001, p.144)

Ithiel is "depressed", "then ill" (2001, p.143), but he still refuses to talk about it and to be taken care of when is asked by Clara and "in a state of sick dignity" (2001, p.144). He says "if there's one thing I can do without, it's this picture of poor me, deep in the dumps" (2001, p.144). The gender studies researcher Brain Taylor says that "masculinity is a performance of mastery and self-mastery", "which needs to be continually defended against all that is softer 'feminine'", "repressing any sense of passivity, vulnerability and weakness" (2006, p.53). Being soft or being of feminine characteristics turns to be a type of derogation for men, especially for a man of hegemonic masculinity like Ithiel. Restrained by the remnant of patriarchy, when they are experiencing failures in work and marriage, men definitely have to burden many stresses physically, emotionally or psychologically, most of all in such an age changing so drastically.

2. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES AND NEW GENDER RELATIONS

Bellow does not only focus on the crisis of men in social lives but adjust himself to the social and cultural changes happening in the second half of the 20th century positively. By negotiating with social factors in the postindustrial society and under the postmodernism, he deconstructs the unitary masculinity which is the monologue of heterosexual white men of the middle class as well as reconstructs multiple masculinities consisting of various ethnics and sexual orientations. In Bellow's later novels, the masculinity in crisis converts into multiple masculinities; the hierarchy of masculinity is broken; the fierce sexual politics fighting for power once presented in many early novels turn to be the new gender relations of harmony.

Most protagonists in Bellow's novels before are heterosexual white men of the middle class, until Bellow creates the first female protagonist Clara in *A Theft* published in 1989, which may imply a piece of transition in his writing. In another novel *The Bellarosa Connection* published in the same year, Bellow portrays an ethnical hero Billy Rose who saves many Jews from the Nazi prisons in WWII by his own money and connections. Rose is a multimillionaire, a Broadway producer, the boss of a famous night club, a tycoon of the entertainment industry, an estate businessman and a Zionist. Nonetheless, he is also a gossip columnist, the business partner of Prohibition hoodlums and the suspect of arson and bribery. Rose is undoubtedly a man of transnational business masculinity, who is even able to "act alone on a spurt of feeling for his fellow Jews" in America, "outwit Hitler and cheat them of their victims" in Europe by his power and vast wealth (2001, p.41). The notable scholar of masculinity studies R. W. Connell thinks that "the transnational business masculinities appear as they do on a global stage", and it is the most predominant and powerful masculinity in the global gender order (2001, p.24). Yet Bellow does not depict Rose as a commonly virtuous hero. As a man, Rose is not of strongly physical masculinity and he has "the sexual development of a ten-year-old boy" (2001, p.68), but he is still fond of chasing beautiful women crazily; he spends a great amount of money to rescue his fellow Jews and helps to fund Israel but he is extremely stingy and underpays his staffs; he rejects meetings and thanks offered by people whom he saves as well as denies he is the lifesaver who protects them from death, but he likes to seek popularity by saying words sensational and show himself before the public; he is a hero taking risks to save others but he is mean, cold and usually hysteria or profane to people because of trifles. Through the tension of Rose's conflicts, Bellow deconstructs the homogeneous concept of masculinity and refashions the multiple aspects of it.

Then in his last novel but one *The Actual* published in 1997, 82 years-old Bellow changes his writing

significantly comparing with before by firstly portraying a non-white protagonist Harry Trellman. Harry has “a Chinese look” and “an East Asian expression” into his face with “a round head”, “a pair of fat black eyes” (p.2), “the black lank hair” (p.99) and “Chinese lips”(p.22). Harry's parents are both alive and his mother's relatives are rich, but he is unusually “put in an orphanage” when he is very little and hence is “in an ambiguous category, an outsider, an orphan” (p.2). Few people know he is a Jew and he is too shy to express himself just as an easterner. Thus, he loses Amy who he has loved secretly for nearly half of a century and exiles himself to the Far East until he resettles in Chicago at the middle age. Harry blames his difficulties of communicating and expressing for his non-white appearance. He is upset about his “desperately unwanted Chinese profile” (p.99), and thinks that he becomes an “outsider” due to his “insidious Fu Manchu look” (p.3). Fu Manchu is an Asian character created by the British writer Sax Rohmer in the first half of the 20th century, and then is widely used in the movies, TV plays and books for more than 90 years as an insidious criminal archetype. Fu Manchu is the westerners' castration to the Asian men due to the racial discrimination and also their demonized imagination of the eastern men for fear of “the Yellow Peril”. However, Harry who is once excluded to be a marginalized other from his childhood turns to be rich when comes back to Chicago opening an antique shop, becomes the trustful consultant of the billionaire Adletsky and finally captures Amy's heart. By portraying the “other” Harry as the protagonist with a happy ending, Bellow successfully rewrites the position of marginalized masculinity in the gender order making the other to be the centre.

The character Harry is not the end of Bellow's transition and in his last novel *Ravelstein* published in 2000, Bellow firstly portrays a gay protagonist die of AIDS, whose archetype is Bellow's good friend, the famous scholar Allan Bloom. The reason of Bloom's death revealed by Bellow in this novel shocks the public and causes fierce controversies after its publication, while Bellow says this biographical novel is his “fulfillment of a deathbed promise” (Atlas, 2000, p.598). Obviously, Bellow does not think that to open a well-known scholar's sexual orientation as a gay will be harmful to his reputation after his death. Therefore, Bellow in his late years has an absolutely tolerant attitude to the differences of male subjects and expresses his humanistic care to various male individuals.

Bellow does not only reconstruct the multiple masculinities, the gender relations in his late works also change to a large extent. The excellent philosopher Michel Foucault points out that power is a network and its nodes will spread to every corner. In the interview with Lucette Finas published in *Quinzaine Litteraire* in January 1977, Foucault says that various power relations exist in every node of the social organization, between men and women

and among family members. The gender power and family power will affect the construction of the male subjects on the microcosmic level. In Bellow's many novels, the male and female characters' struggle for power is a violent war, overt or covert, legal or illegal, and moral or immoral. All their fights end with the deterioration of the relationship as well as one or both become the victim.

From 1960s to 1980s, Bellow's depiction of the gender relations in his novels is changing gradually. The critic Schechner notices that “these days we find Bellow more restrained and less noisy, turning out modest novellas such as *More Die of Heartbreak* (1987), *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), *A Theft* (1989)... and now *The Actual* (1997) (p.349)”. The Chinese scholar Liu Wensong also points out that the gender relations in *Herzog* published in 1964 are repressive while they are productive in *The Dean's December* published in 1981.

In his last novella *The Actual*, he portrays two oppositional male characters Harry and Jay, and two kinds of contrary gender relations. Harry, Jay and Amy grow up together and Harry begins to love Amy secretly since they are in the middle school. Harry is kind, modest and constant in love but he is too shy to tell Amy and finally loses her to Jay. In contrast, Jay is extremely good at chasing women and is called “a ladies' man” (p.46) since he is a boy and then marries to Amy. Jay advocates sex liberation, has an affair with many married female clients, regards sex as a game and takes delight in showing off his affairs to Harry. During the process of Jay and Amy's divorce, Jay makes the case against Amy “extremely ugly” (p.28) as a divorce attorney. He hires “an agency”, and the specialists “bug Amy's phone for months”. “Even the bed was bugged. There were microphones in the mattress”. “Jay made the perfect adultery case” against Amy, and she did not get even a penny in the divorce. Moreover, “he played those tapes to everybody who would listen to them” (p.28), which makes Amy's reputation to be blown up. It is not the first time for divorce war to happen in Bellow's novels, yet it is the first time that the victim is not a man but a woman. Conversely, Harry is a loyal husband and constant in love. When he meets Amy again after his divorce, he finds out that “half a century of feeling is invested in her, of fantasy, speculation, and absorption of imaginary conversation” (p.20). The development of plots in this novel is that Harry being together with Amy plans to relocate the grave of Jay. Due to Jay's teasing wildness, his coffin is buried together with Amy's mother's coffin and now Amy's father is dead, so his has to be moved away. In the end of the novel, as Jay's coffin falls into the new tomb, covered by soil, Harry takes Amy's hand and proposes to her. The past marriage between Amy and Jay is like the absurdly misplaced grave, and the previous betrayal and hurt is dug out of the memory gradually while they excavate the coffin, besides, what is dug out meanwhile is Harry's actual feeling to Amy. Ultimately, as Jay's coffin is placed in the new cave,

his sexual promiscuity and the previous divorce war are all buried permanently; a kind of new and harmonious gender relation between Harry and Amy will begin.

CONCLUSION

Men in Bellow's novels are of various manners, but in his early and middle works the privilege of traditional masculinity is reduced by degrees because of the social changes and cultural turn happening in the second half of the 20th century. In Bellow's later period, the established and well-known author who keeps writing assiduously until over 80 years old still concerns and dialogues positively with the social and cultural changes to reconstruct the multiple masculinities. These masculinities constitute a group of discourses which are fluid and split, in which various masculinities share similarities and meanwhile keep differences, as well as their positions in the gender order may reverse. Under the postmodernism tending to be increasingly democratic, equal and neutral, masculinities would aggravate splintering. However, masculinities would not disappear, and new masculinities are being reconstructed actively by each social member in daily practice. Although the traditional masculinity is in crisis once in Bellow's novels, his reconstruction of masculinities actually makes more individuals, especially the ever marginalized ones, to articulate their own voices and to become the genuine male subjects.

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