



Hinduism's Four Stages of Life in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*

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Abstract

The oldest of Hindu's philosophical writings, the *Rig Veda*, which came to being about 4500 BC underlined that, the cause of all misery that befalls mankind is his/her desire; or more promptly said, his/her attachment to the desire. In Hinduism, this physical plane is just a stage with life itself is nothing more than a play. The stage is set in such a way to enable the souls which took the human form to evolve and to find the enlightenment and ultimately to become one with the creator. All the material elements including the complex relationship found in this plane is nothing but a mere illusion. This study aims to explore elements of Hindu philosophy in Saul Bellow's novel, *Henderson the Rain King* (1976). Eugene Henderson, the main character in this novel is portrayed as drowning in the materialistic world. Being constantly mugged by a desirable voice within him whispering, *I want, I want*, it is not an irony if he generated a sense of uselessness and emptiness. This study shows how Henderson's decision to go to Africa to find the meaning of life coincides with the Hindu philosophy of the four stages of life; Brahmacharya (celibacy), Grahasthya (householdership), Vanaprastha (detachment in attachment) and Sanyas (seclusion). Henderson comes to realization in his third stage and proceeds to the fourth stage. Henderson is taught to eradicate fear and to break the cycle of desire. Towards the end, Henderson realises that the voice was actually referring to, "*He wants, She wants and They want*". The voice was actually echoing the desires of mankind.

Keywords: Hinduism, Hindu philosophy, Solace, Enlightenment

1. Introduction

This study aims to explore the elements of Hindu philosophy, the four stages of life, that is present in Saul Bellow's novel, *Henderson the Rain King* (1976). Soloman Bellow or Saul Bellow (1915 -2005) was a Canadian born American writer whose writings are interspersed with philosophic conversations by his protagonists in every novel. For his literary contributions, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, Nobel Prize for Literature and the National Medal of Arts. It is to be noted that he is the only writer to win the National Book Award for Fiction three times. In *Henderson the Rain King*, Eugene Henderson, the protagonist is portrayed as drowning in the materialistic world. Being constantly mugged by a desirable voice within him whispering, *I want, I want*, it is not an irony if he generated a sense of uselessness and emptiness. This study will show how Henderson's decision to go to Africa to find the meaning of life coincides with the Hindu philosophy of the four stages of life; Brahmacharya (celibacy), Grahasthya (householdership), Vanaprastha (detachment in attachment) and Sanyas (seclusion). The two tribes that Henderson meets in Africa, the *Wariri* and *Arnewi* teaches him to overcome his fear and break the cycle of desire. Henderson comes to realization in his third stage and proceeds to the fourth stage. Towards the end Henderson realises that the voice was actually echoing the desires of mankind.

This study is about the four stages in a man's life according to Hindu philosophy. The oldest of Hindu's philosophical writings, the *Rig Veda*, which came to being about 4500 BC underlined that, the cause of all misery that befalls a man is his desire; or more promptly said, his attachment to the desire. In Hinduism, this physical plane is just a stage with life itself is nothing more than a play. The stage is set in such a way to enable the souls which took the human form to evolve and to find the enlightenment and ultimately to become one with the creator. All the material elements including the complex relationship found in this plane is nothing but a mere illusion. And the attachments to these illusions are the cause for all the pain endured by human in this life. This concept was further echoed by Gautama Buddha about two thousand five hundred years ago. One who is well read in the philosophy of Hinduism will surely see the relation of this concept in the life of Eugene Henderson.

2. The Soul Searching

Bellow said that of all his characters Eugene Henderson, of *Henderson the Rain King*, was the one most like himself (Gussow 2005). Saul Bellow's decision to send his protagonist or his alter-ego, Henderson, to the African wilderness which was constructed to his own fancy through reading the works of travellers in Africa such as Sir Richard Burton's, *First Footsteps*, in East Africa, and of anthropologists like his one-time teacher, Melville J. Herskovitz, who studied cattle raising tribes in Africa, goes a long way in explaining the reasons behind this highly philosophical novel (Hyland

1992:48). Henderson, is a wealthy man who finds himself drowning in the materialistic world. Being constantly mugged by a desirable voice within him whispering, *I want, I want*, it is not an irony if Henderson generated a sense of uselessness and emptiness. Being burdened with unfulfilled desire, he becomes frustrated and begins to behave and do things which are not socially accepted. This voice makes him angry and he behaves uncontrollably. There are two incidences that gave warning about death to Henderson. The first is the octopus that Henderson sees in the aquarium in France. The sight of the octopus actually reflects Henderson, whose soul is suffocating. He realizes that he must break out and restore his soul (Bellow 1976:19). Henderson seriously decides to find a meaning to his life after he walks into the cottage of Miss Lennox, his helper whose death he has just inadvertently caused. He finds mountains of useless objects, the collection of a lifetime that actually defines that life. Henderson becomes very disturbed looking at Miss Lennox's room.

Why do we allow ourselves? What are we doing? The last little room of dirt is waiting. Without windows. So for God's sake make a move, Henderson, put forth effort. You, too, will die of this pestilence. Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left. While something still *is-now!* (Bellow 1976:40)

This incident and the anxiety drove Henderson out to Africa, a land beyond civilisation and materialism to look for solace. Here, he meets the two different tribes, the Arnewi and the Wariri. Henderson's fleeing to Africa with the quest of soul searching can be viewed in the existentialist point of view. The existentialists believe in human freedom and that a man is free to choose his own course of actions. Because individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists have argued, that they must accept the risk and responsibility of their actions. 19th century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, held that a feeling of general apprehension, which he called dread, is God's way of calling each individual to commit to a personally valid way of life. Similarly, a 20th century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, felt that anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with the impossibility of finding ultimate justification for his or her choices. He also believed that what we are or our essence is the result of what we do or our existence. According to him what we are, is the result of our decisions and choices. Human beings exist in order to produce their essence, which is completed at death because only at the time of death we cease to determine our essence. In this novel, the setting which is created through Bellow's imagination turns out to be a perfect place to do soul searching. Henderson's decision to go to Africa to find the meaning of life coincides with the Hindu philosophy of the four stages of life; Brahmacharya (celibacy), Grahasthya (householdership), Vanaprastha (detachment in attachment) and Sanyas (seclusion). Henderson comes to realization in his third stage and proceeds to the fourth stage. One who took sanyas gave up all wants, had no needs, would not accept money and renounced the materialistic world. He used to live on alms and the fruits of trees in the forest and spent time in meditation. Henderson too lived on simple food in Africa. However, in the end of this novel, Henderson returns to the civilized world of his, equipped with a better understanding of life and with the lion cub, which is believed to have Dahfu's soul in it. By doing this, he actually reverses the stages by going to the third stage, Vanaprastha and the second, Grahasthya. A man in the third stage is supposed to have all his children settled. In other words, at this stage one has to detach oneself from worldly desires and attachments and retire to the sylvan peace of contemplation, meditation and spiritual pursuits. They may live among their family but remain unattached from within, like a lotus which is in the water yet out if it (Dharam Vir Singh, 2003: 83). After learning the meaning of life in the wilderness of Africa, Henderson returned to live a more meaningful life where he failed to fulfill his duties. He was a man who did not even know the names of his children. A man in the second stage of life is supposed to practice the right conduct, earn material wealth, permit himself a life of love and passion with his wife and attain salvation by following the rules of conduct. This is considered the most important stage in a man's life as he is expected to give happiness and joy to his wife, look after his children and educate them. Charity and hospitality were essential. All these qualities lacked in Henderson's life. He behaved as an irresponsible father and husband. He was never friendly to his neighbours and he was constantly annoying them by raring pigs and making a lot of noise.

The episodes where Henderson, is constantly exposed to human nakedness in the midst of Wariri tribe is another striking element of Hindu's soul searching. Most of the Africans that he meets appear to be semi-nude or nude. However, in the village of the Wariri, Henderson himself is stripped. This happens after he moves the idol of the Goddess Mummah. He is told that whoever moves the Mummah attains the position of the Rain King of the Wariri and therefore he is given the title Sungo.

I amidst those naked companions, naked myself, bare fore and aft in the streamers of grass and vine, I was dancing on burnt and cut feet over the hot stones. I had to yell, too (Bellow 1976: 198).

The realization of nudity and the shamefulness because of it is the foremost demonstration of one's egoistic and individualistic life. It should be noted that Adam and Eve were both naked while leading a perfect and harmonious life in the Garden of Eden. It's only after giving way to the temptation of Satan and consuming the forbidden fruit that they realised their nudity and thus incur the wrath of God. It's only those who are pure in heart that is capable of staying care less towards nudity. As a matter of fact, nudity is none existence to the heart that sees one's self and others as the zenith of perfection in the creation of God. Thus, nudity is one of the elements of soul searching in Hinduism. It's not an isolate incident for one to come in contact with Hindu *Sadhus*, who wander semi nude during their soul searching in India. Most of the Hindu temples have sculptures which envision the coupling of the male and female as union with the divine and the total release of the soul in the godhead. The erotic is but a means to the eternal Brahman. Another theory

for erotic sculpture around the temple walls is that it is also a test for the devotees to see whether he has purged his mind of all sensual and worldly thoughts before he enters the temple. Just like the enlightened *Sadhus*, Henderson, never felt any attraction or have any desire when was exposed to these naked people. When he himself was dancing naked, he feels liberated and his soul freed from the entire burden.

The Wariri taught Henderson to overcome fear and live life to the fullest. All the knowledge and teachings that Henderson obtained in the African wilderness through the two tribes are similar to the teachings of Hinduism. Hinduism is self-realization – who I am, which is the core of every question who am I, how do I stand in the cosmos, and what is my future. Ways, paths and philosophies are many but the goal is the same. The fundamental codes of the Hindu religion are:

- Clean thoughts to replace unclean ones which often invade the mind.
- Polite behaviour and compassion for all living beings.
- Execution of one's duty to the best of one's capacity without fear or favour.
- Contentment on results achieved, which reflect the appropriate outcome of efforts (Sanyal 1994:6).

It cannot be denied that Henderson has actually received all these teachings of life while doing his soul searching in Africa. The solemnity of Africa, its untouched people and the majesty of its wilderness has apparently awakened his conscience.

Henderson too seems to be aware of the journey of the soul. The Bhagavad Gita assures that if one pursues a goal in this life and does not attain it, he will have further opportunities. The Supreme Being which is known as God is all but love and the infinite love offers infinite chances for the soul to elevate itself. This refers to the reincarnation or the rebirth.

“Know that which pervades the entire body is indestructible. No one is able to destroy the imperishable soul”. (Bhagavad – Gita Ch.2:17)

This element too is obvious in this novel where Dahfu believes that his father's soul is in the lion's body. In the end of the novel, Henderson leaves Africa with the lion cub which he believes is the reincarnation of King Dahfu. Henderson is also exposed to the simple life of the Africans. The Arnewi tribe taught him to love and be passionate to animals. Their love for the cows and their refusal to harm the frogs show their inclination towards nature and god's creations. His encounter with the women of *bittahness*, Mtalba and Willatale taught him about the wisdom of life. They thought him about life and death. He learnt that:

“The world may be strange to a child, but he does not fear it the way a man fears. He marvels at it. But the grown man mainly dreads it. And why? Because of death. So he arranges to have himself abducted like a child. So what happens will not be his fault. And who is this kidnaper-this gypsy? It is the strangeness of life – a thing that makes death more remote, as in childhood” (Bellow 1976: 84).

These words of wisdom compare the fear faced by children and the adults about death. Children are innocent and are ignorant about death. However, the adults fear death and fail to come to terms with it. Instead, they find other escapisms in order not to think about it. Thus, they live in illusion. The words of wisdom in the Arnewi village is put into practical use among the Wariries. When Henderson first arrives to the Wariri village, he is forced to spend the night with a corpse. Romilayu and Henderson try to get rid of it but to no vain. The people brought it back to the hut again. Later, Dahfu explains to Henderson that the corpse was a Sungo candidate, who was killed after failing to lift the Goddess Mummah. This was the first lesson to teach Henderson to avoid fear. He was not supposed to be afraid of the lifeless body. This is similar to the Hindu philosophy where life on this earth is seen as an illusion or *maya*. The dead body is merely an object of illusion on earth, therefore it is not something that need to be feared. This is why Henderson who has refused to face the reality of life is put into the lioness, Atti's den. Here, he comes face to face with death. This makes Henderson realize that the materialistic world is just an illusion and what is important is the truth and the reality of being.

In his letter to his wife Lily, he writes about how bad he had been and his realisation about the virtues that were left in him. However, the letter never reaches her as Romilayu is caught before he could post the letter. The wise King Dahfu dies after being attacked by a lion in his mission to capture Gmilo, the lion which is believed to be the reincarnation of his father. He says that the Sungo is supposed to be his successor after his death. Before his death, King Dahfu delivers one of the most philosophical speech referring to the desires of mankind.

“No, graves are not deep but insignificant, a mere few feet from the surface and not far from fearing and desiring. More or less the same fear, more or less the same desire for thousands of generations. Child, father, father, child doing the same. Fear the same. Desire the same. Upon the crust, again and again and again. Well, Henderson, what are the generations for, please explain to me? Only to repeat fear and desire without a change? This cannot be what the thing is for, over and over and over. Any good man will try to break the cycle. There is no issue from that cycle for a man who do not take things into his hands.” (Bellow 1976: 297)

This is the same desire which the Hindu philosophy has underlined as the root cause of all the misery of mankind. After King Dahfu's death, Henderson sneaks out of the village with the lion cub. He realises that it was all a conspiracy to have the King dead because of his refusal to get rid of Atti, the lioness which he had mistakenly caught thinking that it had his father's soul. Dahfu taught Henderson how to get rid of fear and to break the cycle of desire. Towards the end, Henderson realizes that the voice was actually referring to, "*He wants, She wants and They want*". The voice was actually echoing the desires of mankind.

3. Conclusion

Man, in his ignorance fail to comprehend the fact that his surrounding is nothing but just an illusion. The moment he leaves his mother's womb, he succumbs to the selfish desire which in turn drowns him in the web of suffering. Forgetting the true goal of his dwelling in this physical plane which is to undo his past *karma* and to submerge with the Supreme Being, he indulges in the quest for wealth, power and fame. But, just like Henderson, for many, the realisation of the futility of this life, do come with age. It's the goal to eradicate this desire that lead Hindus to renounce their wealth, belongings and relationships and hibernate in isolation since the dawn of Hinduism. *Henderson the Rain King*, is a novel which has deep philosophical meanings of life and death. Although in the beginning, the author has presented his characters in a rather comical manner, towards the end, he brings the readers to a realization of life along with his protagonist, Henderson. King Dahfu, a learned man, who is almost a doctor, who had left the modern and civilized world to succeed his father's place in the deep wilderness of Africa goes a long way in explaining the purpose of life. The author may not have intended the Hindu philosophy that is found in this novel. Instead, it is most likely a coincidence. But its existence in the novel can be understood. Hindu philosophies on soul searching, which dates back to almost six thousand years are universal and governs the conduct and thinking of any individual who is serious in the quest of self realization, spiritual liberation and finding the path of God; which is the case with this man, Henderson.

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