



Materialism And The Individual's Struggle For Self-identity In Seize the Day

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Abstract: The self-identity of an individual, in the context of America, is threaten under the impact of ruthless materialism defining the values of society anew and brings ruin in common people's fate. After the Second World War people in America were getting more and more preoccupied with self-interest and losing the family values and social integrity: fathers did not care for their sons and wives did not for their husbands, rather their relationships assumed an unusual dimension that was fully based on give and take policy. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to interpret how materialism in post-war American society evaporates the value and consciousness of mankind, love, compassion and tries to slay the simple hearted individual, his self - whether physically or psychologically. Saul Bellow in his novella *Seize the Day* (1956) portrayed this plight of modern men striving for realizing American dream. It attempts to discuss critically on how the quest for American dream, money and success triggers the actions of materialistic characters while specially concentrating on the actions of protagonist Tommy Wilhelm whose life and self-identity is distorted in a capitalistic society due to the thirst for money and success.

Keywords: Money, Materialism, Self-identity, Carpe-diem, Capitalism

1. INTRODUCTION:

"Money-making is aggression. That's the whole thing...People come to the market to kill..."

(Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, p.69)

The society that Saul Bellow depicts in his novella *Seize the Day* (1956) is overwhelmed by materialism, which brings ruin to the common people's fate, humanity, to the death of their self, not necessarily physical, but spiritual/psychological. In the post-war (1950s) American capitalistic society, money stands as a mammon to men. Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of the novel who cannot adapt himself to this materialistic trench of society, is detached from his father, wife, children, and from the rest of the world. He is disillusioned in a world where there is no caring and no real communication among men; falls out of place in this hard world of money, selfishness and exploitation. Except Tommy, each and every character is materialistic and they are being made for material success, spiritual world is totally invisible to them. They are busy to get material success even if it is necessary to murder a person. Materialism evaporates the consciousness of mankind and manifests to slay the feelings of human beings, brings crisis to individual's identity. Concerning the situation, Miller is heard saying, "If only we could stop murdering one another we could be a wonderfully humorous species. (Glencoe, 2000,

p.911)". Therefore, the rise of materialistic world annihilates the soften side of human mind and heart; brings crisis to a person's self-identity.

2. CONCEPT OF MATERIALISM:

Generally the word 'materialism' refers to the theory or attitude that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute and the greatest good and highest value in life (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000, p.1080). Materialism is the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values (Hornby, 2005). Money gets priority to anything in a materialistic society. If a man loses his capacity to produce, he becomes subject to maltreatment from the society; not given due importance to individual's psychology. Materialism declares that "The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real" (Bellow, p.66). It is a belief that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications. In *Seize the Day*, except Tommy, each and every character is materialistic and the spiritual world is totally invisible to them. Material success is the only reality of man's life blood. As Karl Marx in his book *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*(1927) says, "Money is the alienated essence of man's work and existence; the essence dominates him and he worships it". Money alienates those individuals who could not adapt themselves to the materialistic trench of the capitalistic society.

3. MATERIALISM AND THE INDIVIDUAL'S STRUGGLE FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN *SEIZE THE DAY*:

In the era of 20th century, Saul Bellow had outstanding literary influence in the field of American literature. That's why, he is described by Philip Roth as "the backbone of 20th century American literature" (1991). His literary works are unique because of perfect blending of entertainment, extreme distress, venture, realistic portrayal and different cultures with rational conversation of characters. This greatest American novelist is well known for his sincere presentation of distorted modern civilization and capitalistic society; and *Seize the Day* is not an exception too. In this novel Bellow tries to highlight the way of life in the Capitalist America, where materialism is the prominent modern phenomenon which probably begins due to American Dream. As Joyshree Deb says, "Those who couldn't resist the majesty of materialism; they can't retain their existence, loss easy relationship with the family members, and with the people of society." ("*Materialism Precedes Murder: Saul Bellow's Seize the Day*" by Joyshree Deb). Although Wilhelm is defeated materialistically, but this materialistic defeat cannot beat him down rather this defeat elevates him to the salvation and rebirth.

Written during the post world war period, *Seize the Day*(15 Nov., 1956) reflects several factors of that time like disillusionment, depression, anxiety, chaos created by the post war situation of World War II. The social, political, and economic condition of America in 1950s show the conservative atmosphere because of the cold war and its associated conflicts, and it was a time of compliance and conformity. It was a dominant society which controls People's life and philosophy. They were not guided by their conscience rather by the interest of serving materialism. Family relationship falls apart easily.

In this world of chaos, Bellow's protagonist Wilhelm strives to fight against all odds being alone in society. He was brought up during the great depression and his characterization seems to place this alienated protagonist against all the odds of society such as cold war, strong economic boom, use of science and technology as weapons. Basically, the novel is concerned with the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm who is failure in case of economy, family and individual existence in a capitalistic society, trying to survive with the critical circumstances, then disappointed and at last acquiring consolation and salvation.

Tommy Wilhelm is the rent asunder man of capitalism, pushes the American Dream into nightmare, as he craves for success but do not have knowledge of success, rather devoid for inner resources, led a solitary life seeking for his self-identity. Wilhelm is, in his mid-forties, temporarily living in the Hotel Gloriana of New York City and in the same hotel his father has taken residence for several years, but in the different floors. Dr. Adler,

father of Wilhelm, doesn't show any affection for his wasted son. Like the sinking of the elevator of Hotel Gloriana, Tommy's life is also degraded. In search of self-identity, Tommy made many mistakes. Choosing a Hollywood career is his first mistake and his marriage against his parent's wish is another mistake in his life. Even he doesn't get love from his wife Margaret, rather she always tries to keep his husband under pressure just for money. Wilhelm, in such a situation, believes and depends on a father-figure man, Dr. Tamkin who soon escapes taking the last means of Wilhelm.

Bellow primarily focuses on the struggles faced by the less fortunate Americans like Tommy. Not all Americans participate equally in the expanding life opportunities provided by industrialisation, modernisation and the growing economic prosperity. The image and reality of overall economic prosperity and the upward mobility it provided for a few Americans like Dr. Adler, Mr. Pearls etc., who have largely excluded many others from the full meaning of the 'American Dream'. While thinking about Rojax Corporation, Wilhelm feels as:

"Every public figure had a character neurosis. Maddest of all were the businessmen, the heartless, flaunting, boisterous, business class who ruled this country with the hard manners, and their bold lies and their absurd words that nobody could believe...they spread the plague." (Saul

Bellow's *Seize the Day*, p.63)

Bellow dramatizes a moral crisis, arising from man's dehumanisation which, he believes, is responsible for an ongoing dichotomy in the modern world i.e. have and have not category. Materialism or money causes the degradation of human love, mutual understanding and compassion; there is only frustration. It is ironical that a person feels alienated within a family or within society. The human relationship is that of artificial and superficial and the warmth of human relationship collapsed. "No one seemed satisfied and Wilhelm was especially horrified by the cynicism of successful people. Cynicism was bread and meat to everyone..." (Bellow, 1996, p.16). A modern man is imprisoned within himself. In the after march of World War Two, satisfactory relationship degrades with the presence of intense materialism. New York City embodies as 'unreal city' as T.S. Eliot terms it in *The Waste Land*, where materialism triumph over human relationship, Wilhelm also feels uncomfortable within. Eliot also claims that there are many 'dead' within the crowds. This symbolic death points to the fact that modern man seems only to be going through the motions of things. As one of Wilhelm's friend Maurice Venice says, "Everywhere there are people trying hard, miserable, in trouble, where there are people trying and trying. They need a break, right? A break-through, a help, luck, or sympathy..." (Bellow, 1996, p. 22). Although he committed many mistakes while running after 'American Dream', Tommy also needs sympathy and help from his father and the society to make his own identity.

Tommy is a loser and ignominious defeater in a money-worshipping world. He can neither comprehend nor adapt himself to the changes of the society where he belongs. Tommy falls in whirlwind of the society where everything is determined by money and the humanistic sense is led to death. Tommy says, "The world is full of murderers. So it's a kind of hell..." (Bellow, 1996, p.71). He always trusts the wrong people. He makes the same mistake again and again due to his honesty. Though he is a habitant of 'wealth-driven world', he is helpless, poor, unsuccessful and unemployed. Tommy even prays to get this point across, "Oh, God...let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself...Have mercy..." (Bellow, 1996, p.26). More than money, however, he needs communication with an understanding heart. Tommy appeals repeatedly to Dr. Adler for compassion. But he endeavours vainly to penetrate the boundary that surrounds his material-minded father. He receives nothing from Mr. Adler, but a selfish advice. He says, "I want nobody on my back. Get off! And I give you the same advice, Wilky. Carry nobody on your back." (Bellow, 1996, p.55). Tommy could not speak his mind or ease his heart to his father.

So, the mutual parent-child relationship in modern capitalistic world becomes insignificant. Dr. Adler, being a worshipper of materialism, is so indifferent that he could not remind his wife's death date even. Adler and Tommy stand as two different generations. As L.H. Goldman says, "This of course brings forth the cardinal conflict; the dominating, respectable, independent, secure, successful father against the oppressed, debased, dependent, insecure son." (Goldman's *Saul Bellow's Moral Vision: A Cultural Study of the Jewish Experience*,

p.66). Adler symbolizes as a successful character of post-war world of America whereas Tommy symbolizes as an unsuccessful man who cannot cope up with this materialistic world. Tommy's mind heaves under the pressure and weight of the modern city, takes pills for the cherished touch of natural sleep. As in Dr. Adler's words, "God knows! These things get to be as serious as poisons, and yet everyone put all their faith in them..." (Bellow, 1996, p.8). But Dr. Adler is realistic, unsympathetic and practical man who believes in American Dream of success that determines his own fate. He is a self-made person. The estrangement between Wilhelm and his father is the result of money. Not only for money itself, but also for getting father's love, Wilhelm always hovers over money as if it is expressed in his passionate outburst:

"No, but you hate me. And if I had money you wouldn't...The money makes the difference. Then we would be a fine father and son... you could boast and brag about me all over the hotel. But I'm not the right type of son. I'm too old and too unlucky."
(Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, p.55)

When Tommy appears at the door of his father, seeking compassion and assistance, he has furiously been rejected, "I'll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ; before I let you do that to me... Go away from me now. It's torture for me to look at you, you slob!" (Bellow, 1996, p.110). Wilhelm, on the other hand, doesn't understand the financial ways of the city. He is not attached to the prevailing materialism. He is a man of feeling and emotion, but Adler eschews the heartiest cry of Tommy.

Being deprived from his father's love and affection, Tommy then sets himself in quest of an understanding, loving heart, father-figure for which he becomes an easy victim of Dr. Tamkin. The mysterious Dr. Tamkin, a sort of surrogate father to Tommy who can conceive the heartiest agony of Tommy to make him trust worthy. But in reality, Tamkin is both narcissistic and materialistic. Eventually, Wilhelm turns as a puppet at Tamkin's hand and Tamkin ceases every scope to dupe and exploit Wilhelm. As the proletariat class acts according to the ideologies of dominant class, Wilhelm is also controlled by Tamkin, not by force, but by consent or hegemony. In such a capitalist and competitive society, there is not a bit place for simple-minded, passionate people like Tommy. They could easily fall in deceiver's eyes and lost their last means. Showing sympathetic side, Tamkin actually tries to manage a friendly environment to exploit Wilhelm. In spite of his failure to understand Tamkin, Wilhelm listens to Tamkin's advice, suggestion, logic and his established sensitive bond. Tamkin persuades Wilhelm to invest his last means, his six hundred dollars, in lard business. But Tamkin cunningly escapes with all money. If Adler stands by Tommy as a guardian, mentor and affectionate father, Tommy would not incline to Tamkin, a fraud, who constructed the superstructure on the basis of lies and deception. Tommy can comprehend what is the real face of Tamkin, but forgets at the very moment thinking that, "...at least Tamkin sympathies with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed..." (Bellow, 1996, p.11). Though Dr. Tamkin deceived Tommy, but he acts as a healer.

Money ruins the usual existence of Tommy as, "...money is of course destruct." (Bellow, 1996, p.77). Wilhelm cannot comprehend the grim reality of Tamkin's poem "Mechanism vs. Functionalism" (Bellow, 1996, p.75) where he explains the theory of 'real soul' and 'pretender soul'. Though Wilhelm suspected Tamkin's personality and intention, but Tamkin always keeps Wilhelm in a whirlwind of deep thought as well as hallucination and exploits him. Wilhelm is murdered not physically, but psychologically. The mental state of Wilhelm reminds the Freudian concept of 'id, ego and superego'-the three stages of human psyche discussed by Sigmund Freud in his essays, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) and "The Ego and the Id" (1923). In his past life, Wilhelm unconsciously (id) made mistakes. At present, his mental state is in the stage of preconscious (ego), and yet, since he believes and doubts Tamkin simultaneously, which leads him to be murdered. It leads Wilhelm's preconscious to conscious (superego) in future which is uncertain. In capitalistic society, people who are like Wilhelm, remain in unconscious and preconscious stage, they destined to be duped and exploited. As Tamkin talks about the theory of 'true soul' and 'pretender soul', he says:

"The true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and get sick, and it realizes that the pretender can't be loved. Because the pretender is a lie..." (Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*, p.71)

The true soul, in this novel, is none but Wilhelm himself who falls in trap of a pretender soul, Dr. Tamkin. Towards the end of the novel, Tommy sounds, "I was the man beneath; Tamkin was on my back and I thought I was on his. He made me carry him..." (Bellow, 1996, p.96). He comes to know that he has merely been used. So, materialism murders the family relationship in capitalistic society, which is symbolized through the parents-children relationship and the husband-wife relationship whereas the murder of humanity is symbolized through Wilhelm – Tamkin relationship.

Commercialisation has driven away the compassion, love and emotion, even from nuptial relationship. In the world of *Seize the Day*, this relationship is also thoroughly materialised where the word 'love' is totally meaningless. Wilhelm's wife, Margaret doesn't allow him divorce, rather prolonged the process with increasing demands for money. Because of Margaret, Wilhelm always stays under pressure. Margaret acts as an exploiter and murderer who ceaselessly not only exploiting poor Wilhelm, but also doesn't show any compassion in his severe plight. Wilhelm says, "...from the time I met her I have been a slave. The Emancipation Proclamation was only for coloured people. A hundred like me is a slave, with an iron collar..." (Bellow, 1996, p.49). Wilhelm feels she is turning his two children against him even as she sends him bills. Being cheated by Dr. Tamkin, Wilhelm says to his wife, "I'm at the end of my rope and feel that I'm suffocating..." (Bellow, 1996, p.113). But his heartfelt agony doesn't help to shake her heart a bit. Tamkin, on the other hand, advises Wilhelm, "...don't marry suffering. Some people do. They get married to it and sleep and eat together, just as husband and wife. If they go with joy, they think it's adultery. It is the practice living in the 'here-and-now' and to 'seize the day'..." (Bellow, 1996, p.98). Among others, Maurice Venice is another agent of disillusionment who "refused to encourage him, tried to get rid of him" (Bellow, 1996, p.23) due to his difficulty in speaking. Mr. Pearls, a German refuge from a concentration camp who loves money, adore money. "It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. It is the world's business..." (Bellow, 1996, p.36). Money determines one's position/status in the materialistic society.

Everywhere Wilhelm goes he encounters the materialistic spirit. Old Mr. Rappaport, for instance, with his blindness presents as a symbolic character signifying that people are hankering after money even in their old age. His blindness symbolizes the blind pursuit of money by the people in capitalistic society.

Regarding capitalism Karl Marx remarks that the exploitation of one social class by another is seen especially in modern industrial capitalism, particularly in its unrestricted nineteenth century form. The result of this exploitation is alienation (Barry, 2002. P.157). Though Tamkin talks much about the profit of lard and rye business, but his intention is not to help Tommy, rather absorbs the last blood of his vain. The poor become even poorer and rich become more powerful, dominating. In this novel, the sense of despair and isolation of a modern city dweller is conveyed by the image of 'a howling wolf'. Wilhelm is a city-bred man, but still he feels out of place in New York City. When night comes, he feels like howling from his window like a wolf. He is painfully aware of his isolation.

The title of this novel itself provides a final ironic commentary on the story's central idea. The *carpe diem* theme- literally, "seize the day" was a classical pronouncement that urged humans to make the most of their time, to extract from each moment the joy of life that time was ever stealing away. Tommy's dilemma is that he cannot subscribe to that pronouncement. Tommy's failed investment in futures is an ironic assertion of his need to live beyond the day, beyond the commercial grind- to seek for a deeper meaning of life and its sufferings. However, at the end, a ray of hope reflected in Tommy's life as he manages to salvage his feelings, he realizes what it is to be a man. Wilhelm's identification of himself with the dead man asserts that the day has not seized him; rather he has seized the day.

After being deceived and exploited by everyone in this materialistic world, when Tommy is at the point of being lost totally, like the sinking of the elevator of Hotel Gloriana, when he feels sinking downward and about to be drowned, he finds his true self in a funeral procession. When looking down at the dead man's face, he sees himself, and starts to cry to his heart's content where he finally relinquishes his egoistic-self and comes to

reconcile with himself. All the unpleasantness passes through like soothing sea waves. Drowned in his cathartic tears, ultimately Tommy reaches the consummation of his heart's desire at a stranger's funeral. After reckoning of past errors, through compromising with present plight and ultimately restoring anguish soul, the day is at last seized. He has found the "consummation of his heart's ultimate need." (Bellow, 1996, p.118). While standing beneath Time Square, Wilhelm tried to realize his problems, communicate with larger body, the humanity.

4. CONCLUSION:

Thus, Saul Bellow, through his novel *Seize the day*, has attempted to show the 20th century post-war American society where human fellow-feeling is trivial to materialism and owing to material success, people are being murdered, both literally and symbolically. Tommy's biological father, Dr. Adler doesn't care about him and not interested to be involved in his son's destitute condition. Dr. Tamkin also murders his dream, eluding with his last means. It is indeed a social picture of the capitalistic society. The emotional aridity, lack of fellow feeling has rendered Western civilization, a true wasteland. But, in the end, Wilhelm does have access to the deepest registers of the self. He witnesses a funeral and bursts into tears. His habit of being emotional is the prerequisite to be a human being that "helps him break through the empty, impotent civility that his new-world father employs in defence against dangerous emotion" (Weber, 1998: p. 63). Wilhelm finally found his true self and understood that one should uphold the humanity over anything else, because money and materialistic prosperity become meaningless after death. Therefore people should lead a moderate life with no extravagance and perform their duties accordingly. As the *Holy Quran* proclaims:

"And the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment" (Qur'an, 57: 20).

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