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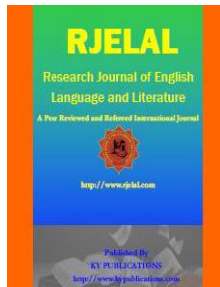


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**TOMMY WILHELM, AN UNCONVENTIONAL HERO IN THE POST-WAR AMERICAN
SOCIETY: A STUDY OF SAUL BELLOW'S *SEIZE THE DAY***

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ABSTRACT

A good number of critics have evaluated Tommy Wilhelm regarding his drawbacks only and have settled him as a complete failure. Many of them have given him the title of an anti-hero. But they have failed to see the luminous traits of Tommy's character. Tommy, though a failure, possesses some rare human qualities alien to the denizens of waste-land like western civilization rendered arid and vapid by Mammon worship. The focal point, in this study, is to establish the fact that in spite of having various negative and un-heroic qualities, Tommy, by defying social structure and network, asserts his non-conformity which, along with his humanity, love and philanthropy, aversion for power and material success and most importantly, his power of overcoming humiliation, makes him a shadow of Jesus Christ and earns him the position of a hero though an unconventional one.

Keywords: Materialism, Success, Humanity, Non-conformity, Unconventional hero

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the American Jewish authors of the twentieth century, Saul Bellow authored an excellent novel, titled *Seize the Day* (1996), that recounts one day in the life of the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm. Unlike the mythical heroes like Achilles or Hercules, who possesses enormous physical and mental strength and serves the entire nation, there is no joyful homecoming for Tommy or a satisfied sense of completion of mammoth task. He does not have the Herculean strength, nor has he Achillean prowess, nor he has the sky-kissing magnanimity of a Shakespearean tragic hero who the audience views with awe. *Seize the Day* is the story of Tommy Wilhelm, a middle aged person who, being a complete failure, jobless, separated from his wife and children, devoid of love and affection, alienated from the social network, unable

to marry his mistress, frustrated of being cheated by a man whom he trusts a lot, and burdened with overdue rent, finds himself tormented and on the verge of collapse. The novel gives vent to the feelings and inner anguish of a modern psyche snared in a maze of all pervasive loneliness and alienation. Tommy is a man who possesses at a superficial discernment, little strength, physical, mental or intellectual to be victorious, failure shapes his fortune- he is a loser and an ignominious failure by the standards set by overwhelming materialism. Despite all these and despite being concomitant with castigating loneliness and isolation, Tommy is a Christ like figure, as he possesses many noble and magnanimous traits, which give him a heroic stature. He is a dangling man, but he has his strength- the openness of a heart, his philanthropic attitude to humanity, and his capacity of love- all of

which are rare human qualities unknown to the denizens of a morally corrupt and materialistic society; a society which controls, structures, and determines its citizens' way of life and philosophy of being. Tommy is placed in a baffling situation of making a choice between humanity and heartlessness where he decides to retain humanity. He gives preference to a life of suffering blessed with humanity rather than enjoying a life of comfort and prosperity with non-human structure. He is crowded by a group of people whose God is Money, who are cruel, unsympathetic, and evil, who go to the market with an intention of murder, who have a long cherish for power and material success, and who have their own network. Tommy feels oppressed in front of this social network and system. He can, by no way, assimilate himself with this social network and therefore resolves to fight a solitary battle against it; by rejecting this network and structure he asserts his non-conformity and heroism. This philanthropic attitude, capacity of love and humanity renders Tommy a Christ like figure.

Tommy, in spite of being a failure, soars up with heroic grandeur because he maintains humanity in the modern wasteland of post-war American society. In *Seize the Day*, Tommy, being caught in an existential crisis, is in quest of identity or meaningful existence. "He is engaged seriously in a struggle for survival. He fails, he suffers, he is spurned, he is prostrated, he is turned into a puppet at the hands of scrubby opportunist, his hope is ever crossed, and his mind suffers the stings of torments" (Obaidulla & Ahmed, 2001, p. 77). Despite all circumstances of oppression, despite violence and threat of being over thrown, Tommy Wilhelm retains humanity. He finds himself on the very verge of downfall, on the brink of ruin; he indulges in self-pity, but is redeemed by being completely human. To retain humanity in a world which has a non-human, animal like framework and where Mammon worship only counts as the highest quality of a hero secures Tommy a position as a deserving hero. So the paper aims to prove that although Tommy doesn't possess the heroic traits in the traditional sense, he gradually gains and shows his power of overcoming ignominy, and turns into a profoundly successful human being from a loser which, along

with his humanity, love, determination, benevolence and defiance, enables him to be a Christ like figure and secures him the position of a hero though untraditional one.

2. Tommy as an Anti-Hero

In his *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel*, Ihab Hasan provides us with a comprehensive definition of anti-heroes in literature. He writes, "In fiction the unnerving rubric 'anti-hero' refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor soul, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the hero in the ashcan and hero on the lash". Viewed from the perspective of this definition, we see that Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's masterpiece *Seize the Day* seems to be an anti-hero. "Wilhelm like other Bellowian heroes has the fatal flaws inherent in his personality; he is an alienated individual living on the margin of the society" (Obaidulla & Ahmed, 2001, p.76). Bellow's writing puts a lot of emphasis on the themes of the individual versus society and individual in self conflict. "In his writing, society is always portrayed as impersonal, mechanical and indifferent to individuals" (Dutton, 1982, p.1). In that cruel society the individual, with his dreams, desires, and ideologies, finds a place for himself, asserts, his identity, and, most importantly, maintains self integrity.

The physical appearance of Tommy Wilhelm does not also go with a hero. Tommy is hardly attractive and Bellow intended him to be so. He is large- "fair-haired hippopotamus! That was how he looked to himself" (Bellow, 1996, p.6). He is even filthy "What a dirty devil this son of mine is, why can't he try to sweeten his appearance a little?" (p.42) thinks his aged father Dr. Adler. The way Tommy dresses himself up, the way he talks and his very style of taking food reveals flaws in his personality- he exhibits symptoms of neurosis and his actions and attitudes are symptomatic of his lack of control or loss of order of his being.

Tommy is overtly emotional and childish and his excess of emotion leads him to nurture a fatal drawback in his personality- his dependence. Being unable to solve his problems, Tommy rushes

to his father for substantial support and he gets nothing but rebuff. This trait in character is made prominent through his act of investing his last means of survival with someone whom he little knows. Despite his inability to give a clear shape to the queer doctor's personality, Tommy gives Dr. Tamkin the power of attorney to deal with the money. This is a mark of dependence and this sense of fatal dependence is evident in the penultimate scene of the story when he thinks that he takes a ride on Tamkin's back-

Tamkin was a charlatan, and furthermore he was desperate. And furthermore, Wilhelm had always known this about him. But he appeared to have worked it out at the back of his mind that Tamkin for thirty or forty years had gotten through many a tight place, that he would get through this crisis too and bring him, Wilhelm, to safety also. And Wilhelm realized that he was on Tamkin's back. It made him feel that he had virtually left the ground and was riding upon the other man. He was in the air. It was for Tamkin to take the steps (Bellow, 1996, p.96).

The childish Tommy fails to fathom the reality.

Like Hamlet, in Shakespeare's greatest tragedy *Hamlet*, Tommy also suffers from the well known modern dilemma of 'to be or not to be'. He seems to be a genius in bringing calamity upon him. Tommy has always chosen the path his intuition warned against and this he has always done when he apparently seems to be resolved and then invites bad consequences upon himself-

This was typical of Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life. He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood, and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married. He had resolved not to invest money with Tamkin, and then had given him a check (Bellow, 1996, p.23).

3. Tommy trapped in a non-human capitalistic modern waste-land

It would be really unwise to judge Tommy in terms of only his mistakes and drawbacks, rather some light should also be shed on his desire and achievements. In his masterpiece *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow masterfully depicts the lurid picture of the capitalistic, competitive America with its moral and social chaos where family unit is fast disintegrating and marriages are falling apart at an alarming rate. In the over materialistic decadently sophisticated society of America the aggressiveness of raw, brute, money forces shakes the very foundation of human relations; commercialism has dried up the fountain of human affections, compassion and fellow feeling. In the world of *Seize the Day* that has a non-human or animal like framework, where feelings and emotions have no significance, human relationships are thoroughly commercialized. But unlike other modern men in the novella, Tommy feels the necessity of human touch and relationship.

In the materially prosperous city of New York the concept of a perfect human relation bestowing blessings upon those involved is almost an alien notion to the city dwellers as they are denizens of waste-land. Alienation or lack of communicability has become congenial with human spirit in urban atmosphere. At the very outset of the novel, the alienation of a modern heart is brought to light. The pretentious tendency, considered as a fatal drawback in the establishment of a perfect relationship, is daily and customary with modern city-bred people and this is underlined in the very first paragraph of the book:

When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow....He had once been an actor- no, not quite, an extra- and he knew what acting should be (Bellow, 1996, p.3).

In the metropolitan environment of New York people do live, pass their days, do business, but they do these somehow superficially; the human heart is never reached. Tommy's conversation with Robin, the newspaper vendor brings home the theme of isolation and the gap between hearts created by the pretentious tendency. Both of them pretend that they are intimate in their talking, but neither of them talks about important issues. Their issues involve only trivial matters such as the weather,

Tommy's clothes, the last night's gin game etc. though both men know many intimate details of each other's lives, "None of these could be mentioned, and the great weight of unspoken left them little to talk about" (p.6).

Social structure plays an important role behind Tommy's loneliness as well as heroism. Looking at the characters surrounding Tommy we find that they are cruel, unsympathetic, and evil. Power and material success are the only important things to them; they have their own network and they share common interest. In this capitalistic modern wasteland money determines all the relationships. The estrangement between the father and his issue in *Seize the Day* is the fruit of economic gap. Wilhelm also sees the economic fissure as the driving factor in his relation with his father. His father Dr. Adler is a cruel and indifferent person, who is very much rational, and who believes only in power and success; his thoughts and actions are reduced to money. At one point we hear Tommy's passionate outcry: "No, but you hate me. And if I had money you wouldn't. By God, you have to admit it. The money makes the difference. Then we would be a fine father and son, if I was a credit to you- so you could boast and brag about me all over the hotel. But I am not the right type of son. I'm too old. I'm too old and too unlucky"(p.55). Dr. Adler can only create of a lovable son by fabricating a successful one whose income is 'up in the five figures.' Dr. Adler always turns deaf ear to the earnest supplications for help; he hesitates little to turn his son's appeals down. He, being out and out pragmatic and an epitome of money-culture, without the least hesitation indulges in brazen rejections of his son's earnest prayers for help and assistance. Tommy begs his father for love but Dr. Adler, sprawled himself up and rejects his son:

"You want to make yourself into my cross. But I am not going to pick up a cross. I'll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ; before I let you do that to me..... go away from me now. It's a torture for me to look at you, you slob!" (Bellow, 1996, p.110)

Tommy's failure with his natural father turns him to queer Dr. Tamkin – a creature of darkness – "I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, if I could turn to him. At

least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed"(p. 10). The paternal indifference leads Tommy to establish a bond with the morally deprived Dr. Tamkin and look upon the enigmatic doctor as a sort of surrogate father. But here also he is painfully deceived. This beast of prey cheats Tommy by taking his last savings of seven hundred dollars. The first paragraph of the last chapter of the book best illustrates Wilhelm's tribulations-

I was the man beneath; Tamkin was in my back and I thought I was on his. He made me carry him too, besides Margaret. Like this they ride on me with hoofs and claws. Tear me to pieces, stamp on me and break my bones (Bellow, 1996, p.105).

Later in the novel when Tommy realizes that he has been deceived by Tamkin, he comes to his father for help and mental peace but his father simply refuses him on the ground that he does not want to take any burden in his old age. Dr. Adler's indifferent attitude to his son's misery confirms the validity of the sense of persecution that emerges as Tommy's dominant feeling in this scene. "This estrangement of son from father as a result of the father's self-centeredness is established dramatically here as a condition of long standing, a major contributing factor to Tommy's present problems" (Porter, 1975, p.64). Tommy's wife Margaret is a cold, harsh and unsympathetic woman who does not feel for him at all, and only asks for money. She refuses to grant Tommy a divorce and has made settlement difficult. Tommy, on the other hand, is a naturalist and an idealist. He does not understand the financial ways of the city. He feels oppressed in front of the social network and system. He cannot think the way other people think; he can, by no way, identify him with this evil network, and feels lonely and isolated. But, most importantly, he does not stop rather goes against this network of materialistic people and decides to launch a lonely battle against it. By defying social structure and network he asserts his non-conformity and heroism.

If we have a glimpse of the social, political, and economic condition of America in the 1950s, when the book was written, we find that there prevailed conservative atmosphere because of the

cold war and its associated conflicts, and it was a time of compliance and conformity. People were not guided by their conscience rather by a dominant society which controls their life and philosophy. In *Seize the Day*, New York city is depicted as a soulless place in which the authenticity and individuality of people's life are distorted in the interest of serving materialism. Tommy could have been saved if he had decided to be controlled and shaped by the society but he refused to do so, and asserted his individuality and non-conformity. Here we can compare him with Augie, the protagonist of Bellow's one of the most famous novels *The Adventures of Augie March*(1999) , who never wants to pursue material success as he refuses to engage in this corrupt world. Although he has plenty of heroic qualities such as intelligence, compassion, and clear observation, he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position and material wealth, and most importantly by social structure. This is typical of Bellow who sets most of his protagonists against the evil of society.

4. Tommy's redeeming and heroic qualities

In *Seize the Day*, the alienated hero is a terribly oppressed individual and it is with the feeling of his oppression that the fiction begins. Human beings with insidious sinister design in their hearts crowd upon the Bellow hero and attempt to subjugate him. The non-human, diabolic forces of materialism pose serious menace to overthrow him and subdue or demolish his human traits. The Bellow hero begins in a condition of individuality imperiled and his career is a series of adventures through chaos to attain freedom, to retain humanity. Tommy Wilhelm journeys through chaotic situations, through a metropolis of perils; he fights a solitary battle against what is annihilating for mankind. He is tempted frequently to accept the extreme forces of materialism, but resists allurements to secure 'the consummation of his heart's ultimate need' (p.118).

The notions of inherent baseness of human nature sharing the bestiality and of love as an imperative lurk everywhere for the personalist hero. At some point of his adventuring, each of Bellow heroes finds the beast within. Tommy Wilhelm is also confronted with Dr. Tamkin's notion of a

corrupting 'pretender soul' turning all human beings into murderers. But he bluntly rejects the idea and refuses to become a heartless money-thirsty maniac. Tommy is placed in a perplexing situation of making a choice between humanity and heartlessness. Though he sees nothing but a bleak future before him, he decides to retain humanity, admits love and longs to have a place in the human community. Toward the end of the novel, we see him resolved to start anew erecting a world based on love with his beloved Olive. To remain humanity in a world which has a non-human framework makes Tommy a Christ like figure and renders him the position of a deserving hero.

The isolation of human spirit in modern society is one of the major themes of the novel and Bellow argues that "a loving recognition of natural bond between hearts is the only answer to a society which seems to have lost all social kinship" (Dutton, 1982, p.77). Tommy recognizes this kinship when he finds himself at a funeral. When he looks at the dead body of a stranger, he recognizes or at least feels the basic relationship between himself and all the men. He finds that in spite of external barriers, mankind is tied by the bond of mortality. He is no longer isolated; he can now completely grasp the full meaning of the line of poetry which he failed to do earlier. This understanding allows him to be free from humiliation, and helps him secure the position of a hero.

Tommy shows human traits; despite being tormented with ceaseless oppression, he is ever competent to give life to the fountain of love. He spurns the idea of 'the pretender soul' and adheres firmly to the real one from whose fountain flows forth the balmy passion called love- "And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them"(p.84). The magnanimity of Wilhelm's heart lies in the fact that in a heartless world based on money culture he is the lone person who retains humanity and is capable of love.

Viewed from his father's perspective, the outburst of Tommy at the funeral is the ultimate pathetic gesture, a final mark of his failure and incompetence. But from another point of view, there is something noble, something transcendental in his overwhelming grief at the coffin of an unknown man. Though some critics are of the opinion that the corpse is the Wilhelm's fantasy of his own end, an overwhelming majority sees it in a completely different light. Wilhelm's identification with the dead man asserts that the day has not seized him; he has seized the day. He has discarded the animal world of Dr. Tamkin, which is unnatural and morally chaotic. He is finally redeemed. He realized what is to be a man. He remains emotionally alive and is redeemed by being completely human. According to Pifer-

Wilhelm proves, all the same, to have a special talent, a real gift, for feeling. [...] To feel from the heart- to feel not just intensely but generously, humanly, even selflessly- such capacity for feeling is not, as the novel's other characters attest by default, a trifling matter (Pifer, 1996, p.133).

5. Conclusion

The ambiguity of Tommy's drowning, which is both a failure and a victory, is the focal point of *Seize the Day*. The water in which Tommy is immersed represents the vast distortions of his own character, and reflects the conflict in Bellow's view of human nature. Tommy has his natural drawbacks but finally he is redeemed, he is fighting a solitary battle against the encroaching selfishness, cold heartedness, and cynicism of the modern and dehumanized world. Bellow sees human as hard, isolated, and a killer. Tommy denies the loveless world and the existence of the predatory in human and in doing so exemplifies one of Bellow's most frequent themes: the destruction of human by his humane ideals. This being humane is the strongest trait of Tommy's character which in spite of all suffering and obstacles, elevates him to the position of Jesus Christ and earns him the position of a hero but in an untraditional sense.

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