



Research Paper

Seize the Day: Sustained Ambivalence in the Relationship of Father and Son

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ABSTRACT: Russian immigrant Saul Bellow won Nobel prize in 1976 for his extraordinary writing much concerned about Jewish victims who suffered Holocaust trauma during World War II and experienced a never-ending grief of being Jew even after their survival. Bellow wrote about the multifaceted problems of the Jews while living in America. Bellow was a keen observer of human nature; he found human beings trapped in the complex situations of life and most of his novels are based on the themes of nihilistic darkness, doubts and uncertainties of life. Bellow's *Seize the Day* deals with the inner turmoil of Wilhelm, a man in his early forties, a jobless struggling Hollywood actor, escaping from his responsibilities all the time. He is a complicated character who persistently fails in every aspect of life. The present article focuses on the ambivalence in the relationship of Wilhelm with his father and conflicts in their thought process.

KEY WORDS: Holocaust, *Seize the Day*, ambivalent.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Bellow published his novella *Seize the Day* in 1956 exploring various themes of love, freedom and identity of the Jewish protagonists who settled in America after the World War II. The novel deals with one day from morning to evening events of Tommy Wilhelm's life who considers himself unfortunate and 'alone in crowd'. Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of the novel is a very complex character who longed to be a Hollywood actor and to be recognized in the society but has failed to do so. *Seize the Day* depicts his constant struggles with the worldly things resulting into existential angst. Tommy's father is a successful and renowned physician. His mother always wanted him to join medical profession. But Wilhelm's reaction was rebellious and complains that he can't bear hospitals. Besides, he might make a mistake and hurt someone or even kill a patient. On the contrary, his father was a grand success, a well famed diagnostician in New York who never liked cinema and acting career and calls it sham. Tommy leaves his college in the mid and struggles to become a Hollywood actor. Wilhelm changes his name into Tommy Wilhelm so that he can change the image of a loser. The parent-child relationship is fundamental in Judaism because it is recognized that the survival of Jewish life depends on the bond. Bellow referred "The Twelfth Commandment" saying "Honour thy father and mother". Dr. Karen Horney in her book *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, observes that the feeling of guilt (and shame) came from a basic fear for the missing approval from others, and she speculated in that fact that we try to make others feel guilty (and shameful) comes from neurotic interpersonal motives. With this, she turned traditional psychoanalytic theory "upside down". Horney states that:

However, almost all neurotics are aware of the results of self hate: feeling guilty, inferior, cramped, tormented. Yet they do not in the least realize that they themselves have brought about these painful feelings and self-evaluations.

Tommy is suffering in the same way and feels guilty, inferior as his father always does it; may be unintentionally. He is tormented and suffers a distressed environment around him all the time. Tommy experiences this depression gnawing all the time and he is unaware of the fact that he is responsible for this more than anyone else, whereas he finds his father to be a culprit and villain of his tale of life. His father Dr. Adler is a tough German, stiff, dominating, efficient, thrifty and a self-made man. But Wilhelm is after his mother who was sensitive, brooding, lazy and self-indulgent. Wilhelm was the only member of the family who had no education and Dr. Adler didn't like him much. His father was "ashamed of him". Adler does not like the manners of Wilhelm, the way he lives, talks and even eats. He remembers how he visited his room and found it

dirty and untidy. Adler wants to retain his stature in the society and boasts to his friends of Wilhelm's sound financial status but in reality, he refuses to be involved in his failures.

Tommy is engaged to explore a meaning in an absurd world. It is a daring task, he is involved in a conflict with the outside world, his Jewish culture and values, his hopes and ambitions clash with the American society and the result is his alienation, fear of death, and the disintegration of self. His life becomes desperate battle against the wants and wishes of family members, friends and strangers. Even in huge crowd of New York Tommy Wilhelm finds himself alone lost in his thoughts.

Dr. Adler is the representative of Jewish culture as he is depicted as a symbol of money culture. Jews have been engaged in money lending business since centuries. He represents Shylock as far as financial matters are concerned. Jew and money are typically overlapped with each other. Tamkin is a charlatan and a fraud who has befooled Wilhelm many times. He is partially responsible for Wilhelm's plight as he lost his all money being duped by him. He is the one who instigated him to join Hollywood saying that he was having a charming personality appropriate for film industry. Wilhelm gives 700 dollars to Tamkin and wishes to multiply it in the commodities trading in the Wall Street. He takes keen interest in his money and anxiously waits for the outcome of that investment during whole day. Wilhelm leads a miserable life because he is without money. Bellow depicts father-son confrontation and estrangement because of money. It is not so difficult to suggest that money and father have some relation in common because Wilhelm feels an ambivalent sentiment to both of them. Wilhelm uses money as a tool to express his love for his father. Wilhelm thinks that there can be no love without money and Dr. Adler is a traditional Jew like Shylock as he doesn't like to throw away money to the idlers and inefficient men like Wilhelm. In the world of Adler and Wilhelm the values of the heart and emotions are figments of imagination because everything revolves around materialism. Wilhelm struggles to establish a connection with others but nobody bothers him because he is bankrupt. The image of money dominates father and son relationship; there is no understanding between the two. There is no affection between them, even though Wilhelm would love to communicate with his father better.

Wilhelm continues to appeal to his plight to his father, but Adler does not care about at all and even despises his son. It is clear that the relationship between father and son is distant and even hostile. Wilhelm desperately needs money; he appeals to his father for financial support. He tries every tactic to please his father and to win his confidence. In the post- War America money culture governed the life of the people. Materialism acts as a sucker which sucks the life blood. Money culture corrupts the sensibility of both Adler and Wilhelm. Adler passionately loves money and success, and German mannerisms. Their relationship goes down in such a step that Wilhelm doesn't feel any happiness in his father's presence. Even the situation turns to quarrel when they discuss the family matters. Wilhelm feels depressed when Adler cannot answer the day of mother's death. Wilhelm had a strong affection for the dead mother and expresses his antipathy with Adler who doesn't feel anything about the dead wife. Bellow has depicted the conflict between Jewish culture and liberalism of Wilhelm who strives for assimilation. "There is an interesting conflict between the dominating, respectable father against the oppressed, debased, dependent, insecure son". Dr. Adler is realistic, unsympathetic and believes in American dream and success and has become selfish, cold and indifferent. The estrangement between Wilhelm and his father is the result of money culture. Wilhelm always runs after money, uses all tactics to bring round his father who hates him. The typical Jewish attitude of Dr. Adler irritates Wilhelm since he is trapped in the money culture of America. His father has struggled very hard to become rich so he doesn't want to part with his hard-earned money. He is full of discontentment as the indifferent attitude of his father kills him from inside. Dr. Adler enjoyed the company of his students who were sycophants, flattered him to get good credits. He was always surrounded by his medical students and from his aged friends in the hotel. Dr. Adler is selfish and insensitive and instead of monetary help he gives lectures to Wilhelm. His father has rejected him as a slob and he has no friends. He turns hostile because of the rigid attitude of his father who had decided not to give money to anyone. Adler cannot understand Wilhelm's trouble and never had any like them. Tommy is self-contempt and this attitude leads him towards poisoning his relationships, whether it's with his father, wife or sister. As Karen Horney says that:

A second consequence of self-contempt is vulnerability in human relationship. Self -contempt makes the neurotic hypersensitive to criticism and rejection.

Tommy Wilhelm always feels alienated and rejected. According to him, Adler comes from a different world and emphasizes on the difference of position from Wilhelm. Wilhelm doesn't want to admit this truth though what Adler says is purely true. He is made to suffer alienation and breakdown as he grows into a disaffected and rebellious Jew.

Wilhelm is acquainted with the money culture governing American society including his money minded father who worships money. He has no job for many months and he cannot pay for the rent of his hotel. His wife Margaret has put pressure on him, always demanding money, as she has to pay the insurance installments. She needs money for the education of children and to manage the house as well. Margaret continues to ask for money to meet expenses of child-bringing and living. If Wilhelm has money, he can fix on

the divorce and live a sound life. Wilhelm has been like a drowning man and as the plot progresses, his situation worsens. Dr. Adler feels that Tommy is the architect of his own fate; he has brought all his problems. He has no job, no money, no wife; he has ruined himself in a country like America which is a land of opportunities. Wilhelm admits his blunders of life as he confronts his father, but to Adler Tommy is of no worth at all as he expects Wilhelm to act responsible and mature in handling his life.

But Adler has no interest in his son as Wilhelm says: Another father might have appreciated how difficult this confession was so much bad luck, weariness, weakness, and failure Wilhelm is confined to himself and doesn't share his feelings to his parents. This gap is widened after his mother's death. None of them is an ice breaker and assume the situation on their own. According to Wilhelm, Dr. Adler never leaves the chance to make him feel disgraced. There is a generation gap and they fail to understand each other.

Dr. Karen Horney in her book analyses and states, Instead of making his own efforts, for instance with regards to human relations, the neurotic insists that others should adjust to him. Instead of putting himself into his work he feels entitled to having it done for him.

Tommy Wilhelm acts irresponsible and finds himself alienated all the time. He suffers because of his bad company and rebellious nature, but blames his father for his plight. He consistently asks his father for financial support and expects him to be little sympathetic towards him, but it did never work. He does not want to hear about him and will not help Tommy because it is his own problem. He feels no sympathy for Tommy, Dr. Adler is disgusted with his son and calls him a "slob". He realizes that money was the main cause of aversion of his father towards him. Adler would have treated him patiently and with honor if he had been rich. He finds himself unfortunate and he remarks that "caught between conflicting demands, the common man is crushed".

II. CONCLUSION:

Throughout the novel Tommy struggles really hard to know himself, seeking support from his father but fails in his expectations. Wilhelm's frustration and angst are the outcome of his conflicts with his father whom he failed to understand. His mindset works as a barrier in between him and his father. The communication gap between the two deepened and created a worse situation to deal with. The last chapter deals with the confrontation of father and son where Wilhelm again asks Adler for money and Adler again refuses to help him. Meanwhile someone calls him Adler's son and this remark makes Tommy suffocated and choking. He realizes that he needs to be more than just Adler's son. Bellow dramatizes the funeral scene in the denouement of the novel to depict the fall of the Jewish salesman. His crying at a stranger's funeral symbolizes his self-realization of his identity in a new phase. For the first time in his life, to be a Wilhelm feels the need to connect with other human being. He wants to belong, to love, to feel for someone and part of humanity. He loses his balance of mind and starts identifying with the dead body, the tears start flowing as he drowns in his own tears. He cannot stop crying, for the source of all tears is his pent-up feelings. Black, deep, and hot, tears pouring out and convulse his body. He cries with all his heart.

Just as another novel *Dangling Man*, Bellow makes an open ending on an optimistic note and shows that life can be resumed at any time period of life whenever person realizes his follies and decides to work on it. Bellow in the denouement shows death of the old self, and hopes for a better and mature Wilhelm.

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