

Devaluation of Human Relationships in a Materialistic Society as Reflected in *Seize the Day*

Chandra Shekhar Sikder

Lecturer

Dhaka Shiksha Board Laboratory School and College

Abstract

The plight of an individual in a highly materialistic society is explored in *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow. The novelist portrays the American capitalist society where material goods are considered more valuable than the relationships of family members. Money and success become the defining factors of all relationships. People are becoming more and more obsessed with self-interest and losing family bonding, values, and social integrity. Relationships turn into an unusual dimension that is the ultimate result of a materialistic capitalist society. In this novella, the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm fails to adapt himself in this materialistic pursuit of society and has been apart from his father, wife, children, and the rest of the world. This paper tries to uncover how materialism degrades family relationships, social bonding as well as human relationships.

Keywords: Individual, Relationship, Money, Pursuit, Materialism.

Introduction

Saul Bellow (1915-2005), an American novelist, is widely known for his critique and sincere presentation of post-war American capitalist society. His masterpiece *Seize the Day* (1956) represents the trouble beneath the modern materialistic system practiced in American capitalist society. The poisonous fruit of materialism where money and property are the reflections of a successful individual devaluates human relationships. This materialistic mindset interrelates with their lifestyle, ideology and personality degrade the relationships among the people in the society. *Seize the Day* is a simple plot story of Tommy Wilhelm who, in his mid-forties, is living temporarily in the Hotel Gloriana of New York City. His father, Dr. Adler, has taken residence in the same hotel for several years, but on different floors. His father doesn't show any affection for him. Wilhelm is jobless and he seeks assistance and compassion from his father and firmly believes that if his father helps him, he would be able to overcome easily the problems he is confronting. Even he doesn't get love from his wife Margaret, who always tries to keep his husband under pressure just for money. In such a situation, Wilhelm believes and depends on a father-figure man, Dr. Tamkin who deceives taking the last means of Wilhelm. So, the rupture of the family relationship is symbolized through the parents-children relationship and the husband-wife relationship whereas the fraudulence of Tamkin implies a debased relationship of humanity. Materialism stands as a catalyst for these relationships.

Materialism is the dominant spirit that is marked by the standards of Post-War American society where new economic trends emerged. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby, 2005) Materialism is the belief that money, possessions, and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values. Money gets priority to anything in a materialistic society. As a result, tremendous changes in forms of relationships turn the humane treatment into a materialistic one. The situation becomes worse after the two disastrous World Wars. It has changed the sentiment of people and led them to think only about materialism, not humanity. People are always talking about boredom and the routine life of the modern age. There prevails a depression everywhere because of economic fluctuation and the lack of intimacy and affinity in the relationship. If a man loses his capacity to produce, he becomes the subject to get maltreatment from society. Materialism declares that "[t]he past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real—the here-and-now." (Bellow, 1956, p. 66). These beliefs deconstruct human relationships specifically related to social bonding. As a result, the family bonding and relationship are breaking apart; men become crazy about material possessions, property, and personal belongings more than morality. So, the rise of materialism brings the degradation of the spiritual side of human beings that slackens familial bonding and disintegrates the intimate relationships of the Post-War American people. Bellow relates the traumatic condition of society, loss of affection, and breakdown of humanity. *Seize the Day* is an artistic exploration of the devaluation of human relationships and their effects in a Post-War materialist society.

Relationships in a materialistic Society:

Materialism creates a gap in the family relationship as well as human relationships. . After the Second World War, satisfactory human relationships or intense bonding among family members degrades with the presence of intense materialism. The novel describes a materialistic society. To depict the mechanical and rootless life of people in a money-oriented society, Bellow uses New York City as the background of the play. The city dwellers are busy with their own business and the warmth of human relationships seems to be slackened, uncommon and rare. Bellow wonderfully depicts that everybody is crazy in New York with its complexity and machinery, bricks and tubes, wires and stones, holes and heights. “And was everybody crazy here? What sort of people did you see? Every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking; he had his own ideas and peculiar ways.” (Bellow, 1996, p. 83) The society as manifested in the novel overtly indicates the aggressiveness of raw, brute, money forces, which bewilder and crush human relationships. Money has become a substitute for religion and the only ritual that exists in such a society is ‘money worship’. “How they love money, thought Wilhelm. They adore money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth.” (Bellow, 1996, p. 36) Joyshree Deb (2014) points out that “Materialism or money causes the degradation of human relationship, concisely alienation, meanness, as well as loss of human love and passion” (p. 60).

Thematically, the city is a background on which the hero Wilhelm struggles to find his identity. “Dad, I can’t take city life anymore, and I miss the country.” (Bellow, 1996, p. 44) He is in constant struggle with the odds of the society and stumbles at every state to cope himself up with the flow of it. His mind heaves under the pressure and weight of the modern city and the innumerable problems of the modern age. He feels out of place in the money-grabbing world of New York and in his untold despondency and isolation he feels like howling from his window like a wolf. Wilhelm says, “If you only knew one percent of what goes on in the City of New York! You see, I understand what it is when the lonely person begins to feel like an animal when the night comes and he feels like howling from his window like a wolf” (Bellow, 1996, p. 67). Frustration reigns in such a materially prosperous city of New York and there is hardly any peace or rest. In such a money-oriented society, everybody takes pills to get the much-desired natural sleep and in Dr. Adler’s words- “God knows! These things (pills) get to be as serious as poisons, and yet everyone puts all their faith in them.” (Bellow, 1996, p. 33). All actions are the direct outcome of the anxiety that modern city dwellers undergo. In depicting anxiety as part of the human condition, Bellow has seized the prevailing mood of the society and skillfully exhibited the state of the individual trapped in the chaos of an egoistic and driving society, which is detached, cold, and refusing, where the implications of the individual for meaningful and endearing relationship stumbles at every step in the periphery of materialism.

The picture of a materialistic society as manifested by Bellow is a spiritual desert, relationships are hollow that is to say materialism triumphs over the human relationship. According to Bellow, love, obligation, principle, feeling, and thoughts, everything is being pulled into a fatty and nerveless state of ‘well-being’. The fat gods of new materialism are all about us demanding our energies. We are menaced, distracted.

Social intimacy is also hampered by Materialism. Through the portrayal of Rubin, Bellow shows that in a materialistic society everybody tries to hide in their respective shell. They behave as if they were alien to one another. They are so self-centered that they feel fear to disclose their heart to others. In the novella, when Wilhelm stops to get his morning newspaper from Rubin, neither of them talks about important issues. Though they are very intimate and know many details of each other’s life. Their issues involve only trivial matters such as the weather, Wilhelm’s clothes, gin game, etc. “None of these could be mentioned and the great weight of the unspoken left them little to talk about.”(Bellow, 1966, p. 6)

Wilhelm faces a materialistic spirit everywhere. He meets another consumerist, named Mr. Rappaport who is blind, takes his money from Wilhelm but he is very alert about his interest as he does not disclose any information or game of the stock market. He has made a lot of money by running a chicken business in New Jersey. Wilhelm understands the plight of animals in unsanitary chicken farms. Then, he observes something written on the notepad of Rappaport who is unwilling to show it to anyone. Wilhelm then “thought this was the way a man who had grown rich by the murder of millions of animals, little chickens, would act”. (Bellow, 1996, p. 86)

Father-Son Relationship in a materialistic Society:

The father-son relationship i.e. Dr. Adler and his son Tommy Wilhelm reflects the devaluated relationships which emerged as a consequence of the commercialized materialistic society. Bellow's *Seize the Day* is mostly concentrating on the impact of materialism on the familial relationship especially the father's materialistic treatment towards his son. From the very beginning, Bellow manifests the anxious nature of the father-son relationship throughout the portrayal of Wilhelm who does not achieve his dream in this capitalistic society where almost all the people are self-centered and narcissists. In other words, the novella sheds light on the dissatisfactory relationship between father and son. Because of Wilhelm's worthless position, his father Dr. Adler, a rich and successful physician in American money cultured society always repulses Wilhelm to have a paternal bonding. In the first three sections, we see the conversation of Wilhelm with his father over Wilhelm's lifestyle, taking pills, and his mother's death. But Adler being the worshipper of materialism and German mannerisms is so indifferent that he could not even remember the date of his wife's death. Wilhelm confesses his "bad luck, weariness, weakness, and failure" to his father. (Bellow, 1996, p.11) But Adler does not pay any heed to his son although he witnesses his "son's hardships" (Bellow, 1996, p. 26). Even the situation turns into a quarrel when they discuss family matters. Wilhelm thinks –"You were set free when Ma died. You wanted to forget her. You'd like to get rid of Catherine, too. Me, too. You're not kidding anyone." (Bellow, 1996, p.29). According to Stephen H. Norwood and Eunice G. Pollack (2008), Saul Bellow is a writer who rejects materialistic life and focuses on the importance of human principles in sustaining the familial bonds. Dr. Adler can be referred to as the representative of the materialistic world and power since his philosophical teachings are based on the concepts of money, power, and success. Adler's psychology reveals that he wants none on his back except his professional success. Adler cherishes "a young, smart and successful son" (Bellow, 1996, p. 45). But Wilhelm has no way of backing up his family in such a time of financial disaster. So, Adler has no affection for his son and keeps blaming him. Wilhelm's deep heartache is expressed for being harshly rejected by his father. "If I had money you wouldn't drive me away. By God you have to admit it. The money makes the difference" (Bellow, 1996, p. 55). Their conversation apparently denotes that Wilhelm wants financial help from his father. But Wilhelm's psychology reveals that his heart craves kindness and mercy from his father. He wants his father to stretch his helping hand on his shoulder. His inward agony is expressed here. "It isn't all a question of money- there are other things a father can give to a son.[...] You are not a kind man. When I suffer-you aren't even sorry. That's because you have no affection for me. You don't give the little bit I beg to you". (Bellow, 1996, pp.109-110) Tommy's confession and his father's harsh rejection are very pathetic. Kannambal (2014) argues that "In *Seize the Day*, Dr. Adler personifies social pressures inherent in the urban setting while Wilhelm, the protagonist, rejects the materialistic world (p.272). "He (Dr. Adler) evaluates human relationships according to economic profit and loss: to help someone is to be used by them" (Eichelberger, 1999, p.118). In the novel, the father-son relationship unveils the conflict of modern father and son in a materialistic society. The novella wonderfully depicts the loss of humanity which has been replaced with the lack of confidence and worship of materialism. It also focuses on how the pursuit of money keeps us detached, forlorn, and alienated from family ties. "Material success is the only reality of man's life in Post- War world. Materialism acts as a sucker that sucks the lifeblood. Materialism evaporates the consciousness of mankind and manifests to slay the human being" (Deb, 2014, p.59).

So, we can say that the figure of the father here is economically designed as he always prefers a materialistic profit over his son and family. Bellow shows how Wilhelm admonishes his father for the deprivation of his affection and support, "When I suffer you aren't even sorry. That's because you have no affection for me, and you don't want any part of me." (Bellow, 1996, p.54). Wilhelm's biological father, Dr. Adler, becomes an alien to him for his continuous rejection of his son's needs especially when it concerns parental care. Wilhelm says, "Dad was never a pal to me when I was young, he reflected. He was at the office or the hospital, or lecturing. He expected me to look out for myself and never gave me much thought." (Bellow, 1996, p.14). Tommy's confession and his father's harsh rejection are very pathetic. Wilhelm is victimized in a society that is controlled by materialism. His victimization begins with the estrangement between him and his father. The role played by the father towards a son can be taken place elsewhere in a materialistic society. For this reason, Bellow writes, "The fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons." (Bellow, 1996, p.84).

Rejected by his biological father-Dr. Adler as reflected in the speech of Dr. Adler, "I will see you dead, Wilky, by Christ; before I let you do that to me away from me now. It is torture for me to look at you, you slob!" (Bellow, 1996, p.110) Wilhelm helplessly throws himself at the mercy of a fatherly figure, Dr. Tamkin. "I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, he thought, 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" (Bellow, 1996, pp.10-11). Unfortunately, when Wilhelm is deprived of his father's love and affection, he sets himself in quest of a father-figure in the hope that he could understand and love him and thus he becomes an easy victim of Tamkin. Wilhelm intrudes himself in a business puzzle with Dr. Tamkin so that he can fulfill the needs of his children and pay his debts as well as the alimony of his wife who is separated but not divorced. We see, in the novel, none feels a bit sympathy for the miserable condition of Wilhelm. The enigmatic psychologist Dr. Tamkin is the only one who is eager to listen to Wilhelm. In fact, it is not the actual feeling or sympathy rather it is an initial step of Tamkin to deceive Wilhelm. Whatever Tamkin shows to Wilhelm cannot be considered sympathy, rather it's a pretension for exploiting the last means of Wilhelm. He is persuaded by Tamkin to put his last money into the lard business. Tamkin is saying "I think about people, just because they have a few bucks to invest, making fortunes. They have no sense, they have no talent, they just have the extra dough and it makes them more dough." (Bellow, 1996, p.9). Finding out a way of success, Tommy expects "to earn a little sum of money in the commodity market in his forties, he lost all he had" (Wu, 2013, p.439). Eventually, the charlatan Tamkin cunningly escapes with all this money. In such a capitalist and competitive society, there is no little place for the ones who have a simple heart, and passion. They can easily fall into the deceiver's eyes and ruin his last survival of life. Here Dr. Tamkin represents a fantasy that disappears distinctly with the presence of materialistic interests. He destroys the figure of fatherhood in his cheating Wilhelm for the sake of materialism, regardless of all the morals that give humans value in life.

Wife-husband Relationship in a materialistic Society:

Bellow masterfully depicts such a materialistic, competitive American society where the family unit is fast disintegrating and marriages are falling apart at an alarming rate. Materialism has driven away from compassion, love, and emotion, even from the nuptial relationship. In *Seize the Day*, Margaret, Wilhelm's wife is an unsympathetic woman who considers their nuptial relationship as nothing but a matter of money. Here love is totally absent and meaningless to her. She does not think even to sustain her familial ties at all. Typically, the wife-husband relationship depends on love, affection, feeling, and fascination, but in *Seize the Day* Bellow presents how this adoring and compromising matrimonial relationship turns to be a disappointment and aggression.

Margaret is portrayed as a materialistic woman because she is not concerned with her husband's will rather she rejects to grant him a divorce and makes his settlements difficult. It seems that Margaret makes up the schemes to prolong the divorce to ensure material success. Therefore, it is obvious that "[t]he only connection between Margaret and Wilhelm is money" (Wu, 2013, p.437). Getting no other way to get rid of this thorny situation Tommy tells his father, "I just couldn't live with Margaret. I wanted to stick it out, but I was getting very sick" (Bellow, 1996, p.51). Ram Prakash Pradhan (2006), in his vision of the woman in *Seize the Day*, states that Bellow "attacks the lust for money through the person of Margaret who has been described as the nagging and the exploiting wife of Tommy Wilhelm" (p.58).

Family bonding is totally invisible to them. Margaret is so obsessed with money and material success that she never cares for the family unit and considers her husband as a source of finance instead of a loving life partner. Margaret tells her husband "I have great confidence in your earning ability" (Bellow, 1996, p.112). So, "she has no interest in him, but only in what he can pay her" (Eichelberger, 1999, p.118). Similarly, Moogk (2000) emphasizes that "Margaret is hot upon Wilhelm for overdue alimony." (p.149) This love for money eliminates marital feelings and leads to the death of familial ties.

Margaret's emotional gap is evident throughout the conversation that she makes regularly with her husband to ask for her money. She used to answer Wilhelm harshly, scream and hang up her phone with him. Bellow manifests this materialistic treatment in more than one situation as seen in the following conversation between Wilhelm and Margaret. "Haven't I always done my best?" he yelled, though his voice sounded weak and thin to his own ears. "Everything comes from me and nothing back again to me." [...] In a firm tone, levelly, Margaret said to him, "I won't stand to be howled at. When you can speak normally and have something sensible to say I'll listen. But not to this." (Bellow, 1996, p.114). Then she put down the phone.

Wilhelm's rupture from his wife is therefore heightened in her domination over his will and control. He tells his father, "Whenever she can hit me, she hits, and she seems to live for that alone. And she demands more and more, and still more." (Bellow, 1996, p. 47) Bellow (1996) explains how Wilhelm complains to his father about his wife's maltreatment and how he prefers death to her, "she hates me. I feel that she's strangling

me. I can't catch my breath. She has just fixed herself on me to kill me. She can do it long distance. One of these days I'll be struck down by suffocation or apoplexy because of her. I just can't catch my breath" (Bellow,1996, p.48) "The crushing problem of money caused by his separate wife has made him physically emaciated [...] it is through the reaction of the protagonist that we come to learn about the nature of Margaret who pesters her husband for money even after the failure of the marriage." (Pradhan,2006, p.58). She acts as a representative of the materialistic society where familial ties are constrained by the forces of private interests and where human values are lost and demised.

Wilhelm is obsessed with the feeling that she, like a ghost, is haunting him all the time. Like authoritarian Madeleine in *Herzog*, Margaret orders him to neither send any postdated checks nor to skip any payments. "You sent me a postdated check, [...] I can't allow that." (Bellow,1996, p.111) In reply, Wilhelm says, "Well, I have no money. I haven't got it." (Bellow,1996, p.111) Therefore, he has a feeling of repulsion toward money, and finally he "condemns the materialistic society which worships the God of Wealth." (Pradhan, 2006, p. 58). This financial burden leads him to the verge of a mental collapse.

On the contrary, towards the end of the novel, Wilhelm resolves to break his marital knot with his wife and makes up his mind to live with his beloved Olive. Olive is also insisting on him leaving his wife. Here, the husband-wife relationship indicates the degradation of conjugal life in the contemporary American capitalistic world. So, we can say that the materialistic aspect has brought the familial relations into contempt and in *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm strives to release from the marital bondage that his wife imposed on him.

Conclusion:

Materialism degrades human behavior and relationship. In such a materialistic society the traditional ways of life like marriage, conjugal life, family, and fellow-feeling have become optional rather than earning money, and staying up with the changing money-mongering world become the primary goal for all. The traditional values, norms, customs, traditions have been very immaterial before the capitalistic mentality of the modern people. Wilhelm symbolizes the simple-hearted common people in a materialistic society and the rest of the characters- Dr. Adler, Dr. Tamkin, Margaret, Rappaport, Rubin symbolize the exploiters, money mongers who are losing personal contact, familial relationship over time.

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