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Alienation, Failure and Resurrection of Tommy Wilhelm as the Nonconformist Hero of Saul Bellow

Research Paper

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Abstract

The paper examines the alienated journey of Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist as a failed man in every aspect of his life and the epiphanic moment (day of reckoning) in his life at the end of Saul Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*. Tommy is depicted as a figure of isolation among crowds, a character in turmoil and a person in search of his true self. The paper shows Tommy as the predicament of modernity because of his isolation, spiritual hollowness, psychological suffering, financial crisis in materialistic society and inner struggles. The paper discovers how the materialistic society and the material attitude of people made him a complete outsider and how materialism expunges the family and human relationship. He is portrayed as a dangling man, suffering from existential crisis and is in desperate quest of identity, survival and meaningful existence. He fails, suffers and finally he is rejected everywhere as a human being. In order to free himself, Tommy must put down his mask (social control, egotism and vanity) and allow his true soul to replace the "pretender", he must stop playing the roles he is supposed to and be the man he really is and the final element is love. The paper attempts to investigate the psychological resurrection of Tommy as the nonconformist hero in spite of his unheroic and negative qualities.

Keywords: Alienation, failure, psychological resurrection, nonconformist

Saul Bellow, one of the protuberant American writers of the twentieth century wrote *Seize the Day* that expatiates on a very significant day in the alienated, failed and unhappy life of Tommy Wilhelm in the midst of the American materialistic society and the material attitude of people. Tommy is portrayed as both burdened and inspired by the American myth of success and ultimately, he has drifted from marginal middle-class decency to unemployment, despair, alienation, failure and existential crisis. But Tommy is the embodiment of modern urban man who has been affected by the society but not destroyed in the true spirit. Moss (2006) aptly commented in this context:

Being successful was both the goal and the tribulation of 1950s males, and this novella captures the angst and despair of a man who makes bad decisions and suffers the consequences, which are compounded by the blind certainty of both his separated wife and his retired, successful father that he alone is

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responsible for his failures. In the course of a typical New York day, his mistakes and his inability to take a decisive course of action come to a head, and he faces the ultimate resolution of all life's trials, death (Moss, 2006).

Tommy is psychologically suffering as there is no one to support him mentally and outwardly. He is undergoing financial crisis as he is jobless. He is in desperate need of assistance both financial and emotional. Just like the embodiment of a modern man, he is spiritually hollow, suffering due to his whimsical nature after being both emotionally and mentally broken. He was sacked from his job, drifted through his life, alienated himself from his family and father, failed to get the divorce from his wife and subsequently couldn't marry the girl he was infatuated with, and ultimately his financial disaster made him a complete outsider in the midst of the society. He is a flaccid man, suffering from existential crisis and is in desperate quest of identity and meaningful survival. He is in serious struggle for his own existence. He fails, suffers and finally he is rejected everywhere as a human being. His soul becomes tormented at the hands of a scrubby opportunist. He becomes a complete broken man (financially and psychologically) when the fraudulent Dr. Tamkin betrays him and his financial disaster occurs because he loses his last saving as well. Tommy always wishes for two things from his father Dr. Adler namely a pat of appreciation on the back and a small push from his father to be financially well off. But Dr. Adler is the representative of the materialistic society who believes in the myth of success. He can even sacrifice the father son relationship just for this materialistic attitude as Tommy is a complete failure to him. Instead of giving a push financially and showing little bit of appreciation and esteem, he sees Tommy as a disappointment and a burden to him. Dr. Adler didn't show any sympathy towards him let alone assisting him financially and psychologically. Karmakar (2020) asserts that:

Tommy made a whole lot of mistakes throughout his life. That was very typical of him. He seemed to be hopelessly trapped in the conflict between desire and limitation, aspiration and ability. He had to experience a conflict between head and heart. He thought it's going to be a big mistake to go to Hollywood to be a movie star, but he went. He was a very determined man not to marry Margaret, but he did. He didn't think of investing his last money with Tamkin in the commodity market, and then he just did. He was lonesome, miserable, cut off not only from society but also from friends and family. He was an orphan, metaphorically speaking. In his case, he needed to be loved, but his narcissistic father was incapable of giving love to him and his sister Catherine as well (Karmakar, 2020, P. 5).

Dr. Adler's notion of perfection and his avoidance made Tommy a complete stranger and a deserted person which resulted in his physical and psychological alienation. Kalay (2014) emphasizes that, "Dr. Adler is depicted as a narcissist who does not care for either of his children" (Kalay, 2014, p. 3). His father deserted him as he is a complete failure. He measured him with monetary success and left him cower in the darkness.

Richmond (1973) opined about Tommy as "the maladroitness, suffering middle-aged hero of the book, is the pathetic heir in post-war fiction to the failure of the American Dream" (Richmond, 1973, p. 15). As his father deserted him, Tommy started to find shelter in Dr. Tamkin who showed fatherly love to him. Tommy believed him as he had no other person to support him and invested his last savings in the commodity market as Dr. Tamkin suggested. Dr. Tamkin bragged that he is a proficient market analyst. Ultimately, he fled with the money as he is a fraud. Tommy also had an unhealthy marital relationship with his wife Margaret. Margaret doesn't do anything but relies on Tommy's subsidy because she thinks that she is doing a favor

to him by raising his children. Throughout the novella, he is having existential crisis because he made so many mistakes in his life. Solotaroff (1959) asserts about Tommy that he is suffering from identity crisis.

There is the same drama of the heart under its burden of baffled love, aspiration, and guilt, the same stern payment for confusions and mistakes, the same brutal suffering that leads to the indication of the hero's true identity for the suffering of Wilhelm's "true soul" and his "heart's ultimate need" are one and the same. (Solotaroff, 1959, p. 94)

Tommy is a person who has been deeply affected by the materialistic society but not destroyed as he is a nonconformist. The novella comes to an end with three epiphanic moment in Tommy's life- one major (the final climax) and two minors. First, there is the final confrontation with his materialistic father in the massage room in which he is denied any assistance (monetary and psychological). Second, he has a loud and raving conversation with his wife on the telephone in which he claims to be "suffocating" and unable to "breathe". The final one happens within the chapel where the funeral of a stranger is taking place. He releases pools of emotion and cries with all his heart. The deceased is a stranger but Tommy, however, is left in this "happy oblivion of tears" and thus he frees himself from everybody and everything. After seeing the deceased, he can comprehend that death is the ultimate destination of human being not the monetary success or worldly pleasure. He can understand that it will be futile to ponder over the past. He realizes the implication of seizing the day and enjoying the brief moment to the fullest. Thus, Tommy's self-realization is one kind of resurrection to him. It is a shift from one consciousness to another. Tommy's self-comprehension is his psychological rebirth or resurrection.

Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* is forty-four years old, father of two sons and at present living in the Hotel Gloriana. His father Dr. Adler who used to teach Internal Medicine and was a Diagnostician, one of the best in New York and he is also living in the same hotel. But he lived in an entirely different world from his son's. He doesn't care about his son's troubles and is very reluctant to listen to them. Bullock (1995) depicted Tommy's mental condition stating "Inside, though, his mind is seething with trouble" (p. 153). From the very beginning of the novella, Tommy is depicted completely a different person, a complete stranger in the midst of so many people around him.

Among these old people at Gloriana, Wilhelm felt out of place. He was comparatively young, in his middle forties, large and blond, with big shoulders; his back was heavy and strong, if already a little stooped or thickened (Bellow, 2015, p. 4).

Wilhelm failed to cope up with these people because they are from another generation. What he believes in respect of his capacity and capability, it proves wrong for himself. At the very beginning of the novella, it was said that "when it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow" (Bellow, 2015, p. 1), but it also proves wrong because he fails again and again to conceal his troubles and emotions. He wanted to avail everything as support but he fails miserably. He went to Hollywood to become a screen artist by skipping his college education and spent seven years in vain.

There for seven years, stubbornly, he had tried to become a screen artist. Long before that time his ambition or delusion had ended ..., but those seven years of persistence and defeat had unfitted him somehow for trades and

businesses, and then it was too late to go into one of the professions (Bellow, 2015, p. 7).

He wanted to be an artist but he failed there miserably as he didn't have any quality of an artist. After the screen test, Maurice Venice "refused to encourage him. He tried to get rid of him. He couldn't afford to take a chance on him."

From the novella's opening, while descending downstairs for breakfast, Tommy could sense that there is something different about the day. For example, he and his father generally meet in the elevator. But today his father is already downstairs when Tommy descends. Also, Tommy claims, "he was aware that his routine was about to break up and he sensed that a huge trouble long presaged but till now formless was due." This day also brought about a huge change in his life. His father started to avoid him and he will be alienated from everybody eventually.

Tommy was a college dropout and he never went back to college after spending seven years in vain in pursuit of becoming an actor. He thought that he was matured enough to go back as a college kid. His family members are all well-educated. His father is a retired doctor and his sister Catherine had a B.S. degree and she wanted to be a painter in her forties. But compared to them, Tommy is nothing:

Wilhelm respected the truth, but he could not lie and one of the things he lied often about was his education. He said he was an alumnus of Pen State; in fact he had left school before his sophomore year was finished. His sister Catherine had a B.S. degree. Wilhelm's late mother was a graduate of Bryn Mawr. He was the only member of the family who had no education. This was another sore point. His father was ashamed of him (Bellow, 2015, p. 13).

So, he is a disgrace to the family and Dr. Adler behaves with him just as he behaved with his patients. Besides, Tommy also changed the family name from Wilky to Tommy Wilhelm. His father didn't like this change at all. He always calls him Wilky. Tommy is isolated from his own family, the father and the sister and above all from his beloved Olive. He is also not living with his wife Margaret and two sons:

Margaret would not give him a divorce, and he had to support her and the two children. She would regularly agree to divorce him, and then think things over again and set new and more difficult conditions (Bellow, 2015, p. 29).

As a result, he wouldn't be able to marry another woman named Olive whom he loves. He is alone in his journey of life and does not get any support from any person. Rather he is all alone and has to bear the burdens of all these people. He was also sacked from his job in the Rojax Corporation. He was their northeastern sales representative for a good many year but recently ended the connections. His father believed that there was a scandal with Olive in the office and he was sacked from his job for that reason. This jobless state creates his financial crisis as he doesn't have any other source to add to his income. For mental and financial support, he relies heavily on his father. But his father shows his reluctant face towards Tommy. By being bewildered, he said to himself:

The money! When I had it, I flowed money. They bled it away from me. I hemorrhaged money. But now it's almost all gone, and where am I supposed to turn for more? (Bellow, 2015, p. 40).

Tommy also started business in commodities market with the fraudulent psychologist Dr. Tamkin. When he mentions the name to his father, his father warns him about Dr. Tamkin. He thinks that he is a liar and hypocrite. His father said:

Wilky, perhaps you listen too much to this Tamkin. He is interesting to talk to. I don't doubt it. I think he's pretty common but he's a persuasive man. However, I don't know how reliable he may be (Bellow, 2015, p. 10).

But Tommy thinks highly of Dr. Tamkin because he has relied on him as he fails to get emotional support from other people. He thinks to himself:

They were laughing at the man to whom he had given a power of attorney over his last seven hundred dollars to speculate for him in the commodities market (Bellow, 2015, p. 41).

Due to his trust and absolute faith in Dr. Tamkin, his financial disaster occurs because the price of the commodities decreases significantly. So, Tommy loses his final mental support and loses his last savings as well. He has become a penniless person. He thought to himself after losing everything:

I was the man beneath; Tamkin was on 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, 2015, p. 105).

Dr. Adler hates Tommy for his shabby, dirty and addicted nature. Once he visited his room and after visiting, he couldn't bear it to visit again:

The doctor couldn't bear Wilky's dirty habits. Only once- and never again, he swore- had he visited his room. Wilhelm, in pajamas and stockings had sat on his bed, drinking gin from a coffee mug and rooting for the Dodgers on television (Bellow, 2015, p. 36).

Very often, he suggested Tommy to give up drugs and use the water treatment. But Tommy didn't listen to him. For these reasons, he is suffering mentally and financially. In order to free himself, Tommy must put down his mask (social control, egotism and vanity) and allow his true soul to replace the "pretender", he must stop playing the roles he is supposed to and be the man he really is. The last element he needs is love to free himself from everything and be the successful man. The novella comes to an end with three epiphanic moment in Tommy's life: one major (the final climax) and two minors.

First, there is the final confrontation with his materialistic father in the massage room in which he is denied any assistance (monetary and psychological). After losing everything, when Tommy confronts his father, he expected assistance both financial and psychological support. But he gets nothing. His father said to him:

I don't want to listen to the details, said his father. And I want you to understand that I'm too old to take on new burdens. I'm just too old to do it. And people who will just wait for help-must wait for help. They have got to stop waiting (Bellow, 2015, p. 109).

But Tommy said that it isn't all a question of money. There are other things a father can give to a son. But his father's reply is very shocking:

You want to make yourself into my cross. But I am not going to pick up a cross. I will see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me (Bellow, 2015, p. 110).

After losing the support from his father, Tommy also loses contact with his own wife. He had a very loud argument with her on telephone:

Once again she was reminding him that it was he who had left her. She had the bringing up of the children as her burden, while he must expect to pay the price of his freedom (Bellow, 2015, p. 113).

Then Tommy claims to be “suffocating” and unable to “breathe” and hangs the telephone on her. By this way, Tommy actually loses all his support and ultimately unburdens all the burdens from his shoulder. Then the final climax happened in the chapel. He has freed himself from everything and everybody. What he needs now for his ultimate freedom and psychological rebirth is love. He feels love while a funeral is taking place in the chapel. He fails to control himself after seeing the dead body of a complete stranger.

His efforts to collect himself were useless. The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart (Bellow, 2015, p. 118).

Tommy is not acquainted with the departed person and the dead man is not a relative to him. He is a total stranger and he feels love for the person. And ultimately, he frees himself from everything and everybody and achieves his true freedom. His consciousness shifts from one state to another. What other people fail to conceive in this materialistic society, Tommy can perceive that. That is his true conversion and he is born again. He can feel that death is the ultimate end of everything. So, he should forget about his past and start from the scratch.

It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need (Bellow, 2015, p. 118).

The society Bellow depicts is beleaguered with materialism and every person is determined by dint of his material success. Materialism numbs the senses of affection, love and sympathy. All characters except Tommy in this novella are the embodiment of materialism. They don't understand relationship and they don't care about the feelings of other people. Joyshree Deb talks about the impacts of materialism to Tommy who is the burning example of non-conformist in the midst of materialistic society. Deb (2013) commented:

Those who couldn't resort the majesty of materialism: they can't retain their existence, lose easy relationship with the family members, and with the people of society. They may be alive physically yet murdered psychologically. In this society, there are particularly found two types of murder – murder of family relationship and murder of human relationship (Deb, 2013, p. 59).

Material attitude and money centric thinking of people is the sole cause of Tommy's suffering and alienation. He faces struggles because he is a nonconformist. He fails to conform to the norms of the society and that is why he suffers. He has the human qualities which other people lack in that society. That is why as he fails to conform to the go of the world, he has his psychological rebirth and ultimate realization about the true knowledge of human life. Wu (2013) points out Tommy's journey by describing it as “the loss, search and reconstruction of self” (p. 438). He becomes a completely different person by undergoing three epiphanic moments in his life and has his rebirth.

Tommy can be seen as the predicament of modernity. He is the victim of the situation and prevailing conditions. Though Tommy has several unheroic qualities, he is more human than any other character in this novella. Hoque (2016) asserts:

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 (Hoque, 2016, p. 23).

Tommy transcends from materialism to humanity and he identifies himself with the dead man. He has a deeper understanding of life now and the day has not seized him rather he has seized the day. Abdullah (2015) commented that “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” (p. 41). He is redeemed and has the deeper meaning of life because he is more human than any other. So, Tommy has several negative and unheroic qualities but he is not the conformist. Rather he is hero who has unique human qualities.

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