

# The Conflict between Materialism and Social & Family Values in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

## An Islamic Observation

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### Abstract

The family tie, in the context of America, is in peril under the impact of ruthless materialism defining the values of society anew. After the Second World War people 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. Saul Bellow in his *Seize the Day* portrayed the plight of modern men striving for realizing American dream. Through a father-son relationship, the writer depicts a deprived son aspirant to communicate and attain love and affection, and the bullying indifference of the advantaged father to filial affection. Saul Bellow, with a sympathetic touch, shows how physical nearness of father and son is of little use since the father Dr. Adler trickily maintains a long spiritual distance from his son Tommy Wilhelm. This paper focuses on the pathetic scenario of the American society as reflected in the novella and studies these aspects from Islamic perspective.

**Keywords:** Materialism, Values, Disintegrated families, Filial affection and Islam.

Saul Bellow, a Nobel laureate, attempts in his masterpiece *Seize the Day* to explore the erosion of father-son and husband-wife relationship in the post world war American capitalistic society. Through unusual father-son relationship, the writer exhibits how the people, with the fallacy that money is all, have started running after materialistic gains. The father, disinclined to his son, measures the success of his son by the goods he has accumulated rather than the qualities he possesses. The son ignoring his father's paternalistic decisions leads an undisciplined life. Sacred husband-wife relationship is delineated with gaps widening relentlessly.

Materialism is the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values (Hornby, 2005). It is an approach to understanding social life resting on the idea that production and reproduction are fundamental social processes that greatly influence, if not determine, the basic character of social systems and the patterns of life associated with them (Crossman, 2014). Money gets priority to anything in a materialistic

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society. If a man loses his capacity to produce, he becomes subject to maltreatment from the society. Materialism declares that “The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real” (Bellow, 1956: 66). Values reflect a person's sense of right and wrong. It can be defined broadly concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes. As such, “Equal rights for all”, “Excellence deserves admiration”, and “People should be treated with respect and dignity” are some examples of values. Values tend to influence attitudes and behavior of human beings (Rokeach, 1973).

Forty four years old Tommy Wilhelm lives in the hotel Gloriana “where a great part of New York's vast population of old men and women lives” (Bellow, 1956: 4). Encouraged and burdened by the materialistic concepts of American society, he lives in a rented room. With the aspiration to be a self made American individualist, at the age of twenty “he renames himself to give birth to a romantic image of himself” (Nesher, 1998: 33). Wilky Adler turns to Tommy Wilhelm. “It was his bid for liberty” (Bellow, 1956: 25). According to him Wilky is inescapable self whereas Tommy signifies the freedom of the person. When he “was just a young man he foolishly thought because of his good looks and the assurance of a bogus talent scout that he might become a Hollywood star” (Littrell, 2005). He makes a journey to the Hollywood to be a star in his youth though the distance between the man he is and the man he desires to be is so far.

The journey to change his name Wilky by Wilhelm and the attempt to be a star of Hollywood in order to better his fortune cannot invite heartfelt reception from his father Dr. Adler since Wilhelm is “indulging too much in his emotions” (Bellow, 1956: 47). Decisions taken emotionally by Wilhelm defying the father's wishes cause Wilhelm to waste his valuable time that subsequently leads him to live an unstable life. His dream does not come true as he cannot flee his past and confronts it daily in his later life through his father who still calls him Wilky. Wilhelm has “never...succeeded in feeling like Tommy, and in his soul had always remained Wilky” (Bellow, 1956: 25). He could have been caring more to his father's wishes but did not, that might result in Adler's indifference latter to his son.

Bored by his son's unthinking activities, Dr Adler wants to by-pass the sorrows of his son. “Dogged pursuit of material gain pulled both parents away from the children, as it separated the young adults from the older ones, thus giving rise to generation gaps which are becoming ever wider” (Faruqi, 1998: 229). He is far from performing his responsibilities to his family members. Despite having affluence, he does not provide any monetary assistance to his son. He lives a lonely life alienated from his son Wilhelm and daughter Catherine thinking that to maintain any relationship with them will necessitate his spending money. According to Wilhelm, his father has lost all his family sense and “fatherly affection and matters of feelings and family are at stake to him, but in his policy Dr. Adler remains adamantly blocked, either to the display of feeling or the recollection of family story” (Weber, 1998: 57). At the time of his financial hardship the comment of his father “And I want no body on my back. Get off! I

give you the same advice, Wilky. Carry nobody on your back" (Bellow, 1956: 56) clearly shows Adler's feelings of isolation. He tells his father, "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, 1956: 29).

Both father and son seem to be directed by materialistic concepts but "Christianity and Islam are strongest in their denial of the material world... both religion rightly asserts there is a higher order than the material-the spiritual; and it is to the spiritual that ultimate control belongs (Faruqi, 1998: 231). According to the faith of Christianity both father and son should have exercised spirituality but they did not. Islam suggests everyone to comply with his parents without any disrespect to them. The Almighty Allah puts stress to obey parents and makes it as compulsory as to worship Him. Allah (SWT) says in His holy Qur'an:

And your Lord had decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents (Qur'an, 17: 23).

Islam as a religion of humanity enjoins on its followers to be sympathetic and emphasizes telling at least honeyed words if one has no ability to help someone who is needy. The Almighty Allah's words in the holy Quran:

And thou turn aside from those that are in want, because thou thyself art seeking to obtain thy sustainer's grace and hoping for it, at least speak unto them with gentle speech (Qur'an, 17: 28).

Wilhelm views that financial solvency will bridge the gap and near him to his father. He says "if I had money... 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'm not the right type of son" (Bellow, 1956: 55). According to him money determines the filial bond and bars any smooth relationship to stem out between the father and the son. He intends to share his every distress with his father but fails. He endeavors both to be heard and to hear his father to tranquil his mind but in vain. His father behaves "as he had formerly done toward his patients" (Bellow, 1956: 11).

The life of Wilhelm is distraught by the problem of incommunicativeness. He tells his father "Oh, father, it's nice of you to give me this medical advice, but steam isn't going to cure what ails me" (Bellow, 1956: 45). Wilhelm's distressed condition fails to move stone-hearted Adler. What he craves for from his father "isn't money, but only the assistance; not even assistance, but just the feeling" (Bellow, 1956: 56). The father fails to understand that it is not the physical ailment or any other neurological disharmony that gives pain to his son; rather it is the very insouciance of Dr. Adler himself that causes intolerable sufferings. He tactfully avoids shouldering the burden of any problems Wilhelm is overwhelmed with. Islam instructs its followers to be caring and to extend helping hands to everyone either relatives or neighbors who are needy. Allah (SWT) orders everyone to pay the dues if any:

And give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the wayfarer.  
(Qur'an, 17: 26).

According to the theology of Islam, spending money for family members or close relatives is the best way to spend from one's properties. The Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) terms spending money for one's dependents as the best charity in the world. He encourages people to spend upon their relatives.

The best charity is that which is practiced by a wealthy person. And start giving first to your dependents (Bukhari, 2002: 685).

In this regard prophet (SAAS) also says:

Every one of you (people) is a shepherd. And every one is responsible for whatever falls under his responsibility. A man is like a shepherd of his own family, and he is responsible for them (Bukhari, 2002: 459).

True happiness lies in an integrated family but Wilhelm's has been delineated as a hellish place. Failing everywhere in his life and wasting valuable time, Wilhelm cannot meet any demand of his wife and therefore, like his father he also wants to unchain him leading a single life. It is as if "he seems intent on unburdening himself of the attachments and responsibilities that limit his freedom" (Ozick, 2006). His highly ambitious wife Margaret torments him every while with her sky-high demand of luxuries. "She demands more and more, and still more" (Bellow, 1956: 47). She behaves as if she were to make her husband's life a nightmare. Wilhelm tells his father that "whenever she can hit me, she hits, and she seems to live for that alone" (Bellow, 1956: 47). To focus on the ordeal between husband and wife he "took hold of his broad throat with brown-stained fingers and bitten nails (Bellow, 1956: 48)". Islam wishes to ensure a silky relationship between husband and wife and terms them as supplementary to each other. The Messenger prophet (SAAS) ordains women to be loyal to their husbands as obedience and/or disobedience of a wife to her husband may decide her fate in the Hereafter. He says:

Whichever woman dies while her husband is pleased with her, then she enters Paradise (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: 1161).

The sacred marriage vow between husband and wife is forgotten which could ensure the satisfaction of both. Islam advises to overlook any trifle mistakes occurred between husband and wife. Islam upholds the relationship saying that Allah (SWT) has created both out of themselves so that one can seek love and peace from the other. Allah (SWT) announces:

And among His signs is that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy (Qur'an, 30: 21).

Social nearness is also prone to be hampered by Materialism. Two close persons behave so artificially as if they were two strangers. Wilhelm and Rubin, despite being so intimate and knowing many details of each other's life, talk about some trifle matters. Saul Bellow delineates the picture:

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 ... The fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons (Bellow, 1956: 83).

The issues to talk in a materialistic society are so insignificant that "None of these could be mentioned, and the great weight of unspoken left them little to talk about" (Bellow, 1956: 6). Mr. Rappaport is an elderly and experienced man in the commodity market. He does not evince any interest to share anything with Wilhelm who expects to have some tips with regard to the market. "He only wrote memoranda on a pad, and put the pad in his pocket" (Bellow, 1956: 86). The old man could have been more affectionate and friendly to Wilhelm but let none to see what he had written. This does not allow Wilhelm to think otherwise except for "this was the way a man who had grown rich by the murder of millions of animals, little chickens, would act" (Bellow, 1956: 86). The people like Rubin and the old Rappaport seem to be imprisoned within themselves and understand the language solely of their own.

When hearts cannot be reached, money works as catalyst to intrigue souls to come nearer. In a capitalistic society:

as soon as money was mentioned, Mr. Perls' voice was eagerly sharper... How they love money, thought Wilhelm. They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth (Bellow, 1956: 36).

To live in a materialistic society provokes the people to feel proud of money and therefore, we see Adler is puffed up with a false pride while introducing his son to Perls. He thinks of a son "whose income is up in the five figures somewhere" (Bellow, 1956: 13). He tries to uphold the honor mentioning the hefty salary of his son though the income is not so handsome. He attempts to determine the status of his son with money wearing a mask of fake pride that "the modern world shrouds in the name of material and technological progress" (Weber, 1956: 43). Dr. Adler wants to present him as a product rather than the human being. Wilhelm says: "It's Dad who is the salesman. He's selling me. He should have gone to the road" (Bellow, 1956: 13). Islam does not lay any importance on wealth rather it directs its believers to be content with what they possess. Money adds no value to one's honor whereas profound conscience about God bears the testimony to honor and dignity.

Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most deeply conscious of Him (Qur'an, 49: 13).

The Almighty Allah expresses His discontent about giving priority to the worldly affairs over the life after death:

... would you content yourselves with the comforts of this worldly life in preference to the life to come? But the enjoyment of life in this world is but a paltry thing when compared with the life to come (Qur'an, 9: 38).

Wilhelm was "Separated from his wife, jobless because of his own impulsiveness, bedeviled by money worries, resentful of his father for withholding both cash and emotional protection" (Kazin, 1956). He pins his hopes on a quack psychologist Dr Tamkin who was "pigeon-toed, a sign perhaps that he was devious or had much to hide" (Bellow, 1956: 62). Physically, "his bones were peculiarly formed" (Bellow, 1956: 62). Dr Adler suspects his ability of writing prescriptions. Tamkin doesn't "really know what he does, ... He is a cunning man" (Bellow, 1956: 40). At the beginning Tamkin tries to bring hopes in Wilhelm. He nets Wilhelm with his alluring words in disguise of a well-wisher.

Both of them agree to run a business of one thousand dollars. It is based on equal partnership where each of them is supposed to contribute half the money. Because of fund shortage, which was actually a deceitful excuse, Tamkin pays only three hundred dollars with a cheque whose "color was disheartening and the handwriting was peculiar, even monstrous; the e's were like i's, the t's and the l's the same, and h's like wasps' bellies" (Bellow, 1956: 58). Enamored by Tamkin's sweet talks, Wilhelm invests his last penny in the market. Tamkin is so trusted that he is entitled the power of attorney of the money but he betrays Wilhelm's dream of a solvent life. He ultimately sucks him fleeing with the money invested in the commodity market. Islam enjoins on men not to betray the trust of others with warning of severe punishment for who embezzle others' wealth. Islam suggests advising with brotherly feelings and strictly forbids pocketing the properties of others. Allah (SWT), the all Knowing, calls upon men not to make any embezzlement:

O You who have attained to faith! Do not devour one another's possessions wrongfully- not even by way of trade based on mutual agreement- and do not destroy one another (Qur'an, 3: 29).

Dr. Adler and Tommy Wilhelm are the spiritual victims of materialism. Dr. Adler is not completely devoid of fatherly feelings. He lives an alienated life partly because of his son's emotional decisions and partly because of his will to retain the amassed wealth and not to spend them for the sake of own family members. Wilhelm wastes his potentials taking important decisions of his life desperately disagreeing with his father. It is because he is strongly motivated by materialism. In the end, he becomes disillusioned. He does have access to the deepest registers of the self. He witnesses a funeral and understands the true reality of human existence. He 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 defense against dangerous emotion” (Weber, 1998: 63). Islam wants to uphold the humanity over anything and, therefore, inspires men to lead a moderate life with no extravagance. People are asked to perform their duties accordingly. They have been warned repeatedly in the holy Quran about the futility of worldly things. The word of the Allah (SWT) reminds us of the vainness of this world. He proclaims:

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

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