
TWO CITIES, TWO CULTURES, ONE WORLD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SAUL BELLOW'S *MR. SAMMLER'S PLANET* AND T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*

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Abstract: T. S. Eliot and Saul Bellow, two master craftsmen of 21st century, spend their genius and intellectual assets to explore the obvious but ignored, striking but painful realities of the modern world in *The Waste Land* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* respectively. Even though the settings differ in both works, London for Eliot and New York for Bellow, search for a higher truth, truth that is disturbing for a few and forgotten by majority plays the key role in both works despite the fact that one is a long poem and the latter a novel.

Both writers try to explore the causes of the much affected and discussed sexual anarchy and its aftermath. If Bellow concentrates more on family matters Eliot with umpteen allusions and inter-textual methods go for a wider circle. They unite at one point and find out senseless, insane, heedless sexual, unethical, and amoral practices paved the way for the disintegration and spiritual deterioration of great cultures. Meaninglessness of human effort in their quest for pleasure and meaning in life, deviated human relationships, weakened spiritual, social, and ethical scenarios of the world become the points of discussion in both works. However, with all the murky sides of their perspectives they display hope and faith for a better world, and Bellow does not reject his faith in humanity and hopes for a better world when Eliot too seeks spiritual solutions for a deplorable and barren human situations.

This paper is a humble attempt to draw a comparative note on these two works by two brilliant authors in two different genres. Though written decades back they still hold a place in the current situations of the humanity in the world as a whole.

Key words: Meaninglessness, Quest, Rebirth, Sexual and spiritual deterioration,

Introduction : Mr. Arthur Sammler, the seventy-plus protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, who is far from a misanthrope, a pessimist to some extent but not a cynic, explores the great city, New York, "which makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world" (252). Unlike many of his predecessors Bellow's one-eyed Sammler comes out of his carapace and puts on a spiritual robe to withstand the ebb and flow of the falling apart of the human culture and becomes pedagogical in his dealings with the younger generations. Published in 1970, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* takes New York and its cultural, political, economic, and social scenarios to expose ruthlessly the naked picture of the city. Even though similar is the situation in *Seize the Day* by Bellow, the scene becomes worse in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. A close reading of the novel unravels certain similarities between London, the "unreal city" (60) in *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot and New York and further the affinity is closer when it comes to the matter of subjects and themes dealt with.

When spiritual barrenness, reduction of sexuality to mere lust, meaningless and ineffectual copulation, sacrilege of human body, and cultural and moral disintegration become some of the main themes in the cerebral, mosaic poem strewn with umpteen allusions and references, Bellow also deals with the same lines of thought, of course with variations and distinctiveness. When one broods over the line

"London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Eliot 427), s/he is taken to the crumbling down of a great culture and tradition of London or of the entire Europe or of the entire humanity, and it forms the central idea of the poem. Things, which were considered divine, sacred, and productive, lost their original purity and rottenness infringed the places of rich heritage and legacy and they were reduced to the spots of sheer physical pleasure and sexual orgy, and the "Murmur of maternal lamentation" (368) explains the sordid and murky side of Europe. He deals with loss of purity and integrity and the subversion and profanation of everything. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* also comes in the same perspective. Bellow explores changes in the society in different aspects and according to Ishteyaque Shams "Sammler's voice of authority appears to be impotent in a city caught by sexual madness" (125). This madness and distortion can be taken as recurrent themes in both Eliot and Bellow.

For Eliot it is the quest for regeneration which encompasses soul, culture, body, tradition and so on that leads the journey of Tiresias, an event that connotes a journey from death to life or a wish for resurrection from the debris of total corrosion. Akin Tiresias, an "old man with wrinkled dugs (who)/ Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest" (Eliot 238-239), Sammler, the brooding protagonist, too meditates upon his world and foresees things which are unpleasant and hopes for a rebirth. Some of the

important characters in the novel also reverberate a similar tone of deterioration; a tone of decadence and decay, both spiritual and moral. If the ambiance is Europe for Eliot, the entire Western scenario comes at the centre for Bellow and New York takes the prime position just like London for Eliot. Two sections viz. "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon" of *The Waste Land* deal exclusively with sexual disorientation and distortion of the modern man. Characters like Walter Bruch, Angela Gruner and her boyfriend Wharton Horricker, a Negro pickpocket, Wallace Gruner, Shula, even the young audience at Columbia University represent different strata in the society. They can be juxtaposed with Eliot's characters like Marie, Stetson, Lil, Albert, Mrs. Porter and her daughter, Mr. Eugenides, the typist, and Phlebas who represent people from all walks of life.

Bruch, who "fell in love with women's arms" (Bellow 47) especially Puerto Rican undergoes sexual ecstasy when their hands are exposed in summer season and tugs himself against a metal rode (47). Angela, Sammler's nephew's daughter who is totally given to lust and sexual experiences, explains how she with her boyfriend enjoyed sexual pleasures at Acapulco with another couple by exchanging each one's partner. She reminds one of many female images in *The Waste Land* like Marie, Mrs. Porter and her daughter who clean themselves in soda water for a safer and effective sexual encounter which is "So rudely forc'd" (Eliot 205), and the rich lady on the chair which is like a "burnished throne" (77). For Sammler, even though her sobbing reminds him of an infant her "eyes did not give up their look of erotic experience" (Bellow 130). He wonders how the "things poor professionals once had to do for a living, performing for bachelor parties, or tourist sex-circuses on the Place Pigalle, ordinary people, housewives, filing-clerks, students, now do just to be sociable" (130) and now everything is felt as "Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (Eliot 103) to the modern generations.

Bellow in a way jeremiads and recollects how technological amalgamation and postmodernism edged out ordinary human beings and also elucidates how "a sexual madness was overwhelming the Western world" (53). For him "the world is a terror, certainly, and mankind in a revolutionary condition becoming, as we say, modern - more and more mental, the realm of nature, as it used to be called, turning into a park, a zoo, a botanical garden, a world's fair, an Indian reservation" (187). The humanity, in the words of Eliot, is mad like a woman who "drew her long black hair out tight /And fiddled whisper music on those strings" (Eliot 378-379). Sammler, like a clairvoyant envisages how the Western world "wading naked into the waters of

paradise" (Bellow 129), a paradise of pleasure which reciprocates "always a certain despair underlining pleasure, death seated inside the health-capsule, steering it, and darkness winking at you from the golden utopian sun" (129). He experiences how his own daughter, Shula, who develops a sexual attraction towards the Indian scientist Dr. Govinda Lal, "was experiencing the Age" (133) by stealing the documents on H G Wells from Dr. Lal and grabs the hidden money from Dr. Elya Gruner's home. According to her father she also behaves as the Negro pickpocket who was often seen in the same bus in which Sammler travels. While this young, healthy, gorgeously dressed, well built man represents the lower class people, Angela stands for the elite group and Bellow also fashions, though not so elaborately, different groups of people in the social ladder just as Eliot deals with various classes in the society. The Negro, understanding that he was caught red-handed by the one eyed old man, follows Sammler. What is followed is a disgusting, brutal experience for Sammler which produced an indelible mark in his memory. The pickpocket, representing the exotic image, an erotic image which is a pure, conniving construct of colonialism that proved to be insidious for the upcoming generations, cornered Sammler in the lobby where he was hold against the wall. Even without a word "the pickpocket unbuttoned himself. Sammler heard the zipper descend...He was directed, silently, to look downward. The black man had opened his fly and taken out his penis. It was displayed to Sammler with great oval testicles, a large tan-and-purple uncircumcised thing-a tube, a snake" (39).

The displayed thing reminded Sammler of the ghost of sexual madness that engulfed the Western world, which accepts phallus as the centre in many ways, and that had its effect even on the medical field where the doctors "made sexual gestures to their patients. (They) put women's hands on their parts" (Bellow 133), with insatiable thirst for fellatio and other carnal desires. Sammler ponders upon an age, an Age, where the "physicians who rejected the Oath, (and) joined the Age" (133) and left behind a great medical ethics. One can see similarities between "Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant" (Eliot 209) and Wallace who has been "brought up to think that for your health you have to throw a father down" (Bellow 83), a spokesperson of the age. The introduction given to him by Sammler explains that "Wallace nearly became a physicist, he nearly became a mathematician, nearly a lawyer, nearly an engineer, nearly a Ph. D in behavioural science. He was a licensed pilot. Nearly an alcoholic, nearly a homosexual" (72). He, again like Phlebas, the Phoenician, enters into the whirlpool of profit and

loss. If sweet Thames turns out to be the receptacle of the leftovers of pleasure making, Acapulco becomes the centre of experiments in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. According to Sammler apart from rivers and seashores, "Great cities are whores. Doesn't everyone know? Babylon was a whore...Penicillin keeps New York looking cleaner. No faces gnawed by syphilis, with gaping noseholes as in ancient times" (134) and they involved themselves in all sorts of physical pleasures and suffered the aftermath. Here he goes along with Eliot who explains the fall of great spiritual / philosophical centres "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London" (Eliot 375-376).

When London becomes the "unreal city" for Eliot, New York reminds Bellow, according to Shams, of a "gas city" (125) and it "was getting worse than Naples or Salonika...You opened a jeweled door into degradation from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of color erupting from beneath. It might well be barbarous on either side of the jeweled door. Sexually, for example" (Bellow 4). In a way Sammler laments at the spiritual barrenness of the modern civilization where one has "to be strong enough not to be terrified by local effects of metamorphosis, to live with disintegration, with crazy streets, filthy nightmares, monstrosities come to life, addicts, drunkards, and perverts celebrating their despair openly in midtown" (60). He was treated with words of abuse over his sexual infertility while addressing a seminar at Columbia University on the topic "British Scene in the Thirties" (129); the young audience grew restless and one among them shouted at others: "Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He is dead. He can't come" (34). An aching Sammler remembers how "humankind had lost its old patience. It demanded accelerated exaltation, accepted no instant without pregnant meanings as in epic, tragedy, comedy, or films" (133). And the young American Pepsi generation expects everything to be gay, pleasure-giving, exuberant, free, beautiful, healthy" (56), that is, everything is reduced to utility, profit and loss, longevity of life, and carnal celebration and forgot celebration of humanity and love. He universalises this phenomenon by stating an example from London where he sees "more drunkards in the streets, that the British advertising industry had discovered the female nude, and that most posters along the escalators of the Underground were of women in undergarments" (209) which itself gained momentum in the entire world whether it is the East or West. In short Bellow draws the picture of a world where the human soul suffers like anything which is entangled in perverted human passions.

While Eliot concludes all wars in the history as one

war in the background of World War I by stating the "Mylae" naval battle (260 B C) which was fought between Carthage and Rome in the Punic Wars. A clearer and blatant account is given by Bellow on World War II with the portrayal of Sammler, a Holocaust survivor. A few pages of narration take a reader into the world of massacres, untold cruelty, bloodshed by Napoleon, "a gangster who washed Europe well in blood" (Bellow 118) and Stalin "for whom the really great prize of power was unobstructed enjoyment of murder" (118). Sarcastically the modern middle class "loved the man strong enough to take blood guilt on himself" (118). Sammler explains how he himself along with Father Newell experienced the post-war picture of Gaza and for the modern man a war meant nothing at all irrespective of all sorts of suffering and death; those who "involved in it, the boys, after fighting, played soccer at Al Arish" (208). In short, the picture of a world is clear where everything is common and even wars are taken for granted. As Sammler recollects there was a time "when Love seemed life's great architect" (143) as it was for the nymphs of Thames and now they are departed and "The river sweats / Oil and tar" (Eliot 266-267). In the modern days one has to orchestrate the disorders to get them cured and transformed, and s/he would want to "change Sin to Sickness, a change of words, and then enlightened doctors would stamp the sickness out" (Bellow 143). It denotes a total departure from the divine fire which kindles the human soul and a resultant experience of estrangement from the divine which compels the human heart to be silent. The final result would be pathetic where, as Eliot envisages "the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (Eliot 216-217). Eliot depicts two journeys: a quest for the lost Holy Grail by Parcival, and a quest for spiritual revivification, which is interrelated with the former one, by the modern man especially the Europeans. The former succeeds in obtaining the Holy Grail but the latter uprooted from its original dignity and integrity itinerates aimlessly and hopelessly. The "hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" (369-370) stands for the members of modern waste land where they have only "empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (385) that resonate spiritual emptiness from which they hardly expect either a rebirth or an escape and are often exposed to nightmarish experiences of barrenness. They fail to have resurrection by water, which is the source of life and purification and in the present world there is "Rock and no water and the sandy road" (332) and there even the thunder is sterile. Even though the poem radiates rays of hope when the Queter experiences "a flash of lightning... (and) a damp of gust / Bringing rain" (394-395) the future is

not so profound for Eliot. He borrows Indian spiritualistic aspects for regeneration against the fragmented and dilapidated image of the European civilization. However it is not so explicit comparing to the distorted images of Europe given by Eliot.

Bellow, against the vague implications of Eliot comes up with lofty thoughts of spiritual rejuvenation. The protagonist makes it clear that, despite all sorts of clumsiness and decadence, humanity has still the possibility to rise to a new dawn, dawn of hope and life. When Dr. Lal, yet another witness of terror and bloodshed – fight between Hindus and Muslims during the partition of India - explains his plan to have a settlement in moon, “an engineering project, colonising outer space” (Bellow 196), he is opposed by Sammler who appears as a staunch believer in humanity. Dr. Lal, a representative of India, a land of spiritual heritage and mysticism, who dislikes “the modern religion of empty categories” (186) believes that “colonies on the moon would reduce the fever and swelling here, and the passion for boundlessness and wholeness might be found more material appeasement. Humankind, drunk with terror, calm itself, sober up” (145). But Sammler, contradicting Dr. Lal, takes the other route with unwavering faith in humanity notwithstanding all his bitter and heartrending experiences from his fellowmen and prefers to sympathize with the world. His belief in eternity even when “man plays the drama of universal death” (181) helps Sammler to see the hand of God in the abstract form of spirit or truth which is something shared by all. His words reverberate the voice of a real humanitarian and for him “there is the same truth in the heart of every human being, or a

splash of God’s own spirit, and that is the richest thing we share in common” (155) or in other words a universal brotherhood and which is under question. Nothing affects this “idea of the uniqueness of the soul” (189) but it is suffocated inside the human existence and its eagerness to reach back to God helps humanity to survive in a corrupted world. And finally the journey would be accomplished in God and not in moon.

Conclusion: Nevertheless written in different genres, both *The Waste Land* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* share with the readers almost a same message. One can experience the scorching heat that has overwhelmed the Western world, or in general the entire humanity. Human beings, over- baked in the kilns of carnality, avidly devote themselves to all sorts of pleasures leaving behind legacies of culture and morality that helped humanity to form itself down the centuries. Even when they aspire for revival, humanity disowns the way of suffering without which, according to Eliot, rebirth is unattainable. Towards the end of their respective works both the authors take refuge in God with the hope that only a spiritualistic approach would help the Western world (humanity) in such a predicament rather than industrial, technological, or rational revolution and the works end with prayers. A prose narration gives more freedom to Bellow to deal with many of the aforesaid aspects. *The Waste Land*, a harbinger of modernism, on the other hand functions as a sign, a sign to multitude of possibilities and interpretations. However they share something in common when it is concerned with a common thread that connects the West and even the world as whole.

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