

New York City Under the Scrutiny of Holocaust Survivor in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

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Saul Bellow's seventh novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* combines the urban narrative of New York City with the Holocaust narrative, revealing the crisis of postmodern American society. This paper explores Sammler's unique perspective as a witness to the Holocaust history and the social phenomena of the 1960s, so as to excavate the characteristics of New York City. Under the shackles of modern instrumental rationality and social order, the feverish Holocaust turns into fanatical destruction that subverts traditional ethical values. Sammler discerns the destructive factors in history and the darkness in human nature, but he is not entirely pessimistic and makes exploration for the future of New York City.

Keywords: New York City, Holocaust, Sammler

Research Context

The novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1969), written by American Jewish writer Saul Bellow, combines the urban narrative of New York City with the Holocaust narrative, revealing the crisis of postmodern American society. The 1960s is one of the most socially and culturally transformative periods in the United States, and at the same time an eventful time of conflict and contradiction. The whole American society was in a state of incomprehensible madness, experiencing a profound spiritual, cultural, and moral crisis. New York City in the 1960s, the economic and cultural center of the United States, became the central microcosm of social contradictions.

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Sammler observes from a detached point of view the recklessness of the urban residents and the deformed urban living space in New York City. The various problems of present New York City in the countercultural chaos make him think of the devastating Holocaust and explore the future of New York City. Based on the urban features of the novel, this paper attempts to analyze the features of New York City in the novel from the perspective of Mr. Sammler, a Holocaust survivor.

Features of Mr. Sammler, a Holocaust Survivor

New York City in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is presented from the perspective of the protagonist Mr. Sammler, an aged Polish Jew and "a city odyssey" (Fox, 1986, p. 234). This perspective is quite unique and meaningful for

the representation of the existential problems in postmodern American society. Sammler is a Holocaust survivor living in New York, so he is both a witness to the Holocaust history and a witness to the social phenomena of the 1960s. Holocaust experience and hardships bring him special sensitivity, profound insight, and a unique perspective of observation, making him perceptively uncover the problems in the city.

Although Sammler survives the Holocaust, he suffers a series of physical injuries. His left eye was shot blind. Decades have passed, but he still wakes up with a buzzing sound in his head every day, his feet burn badly at night, and he also suffers from itching. Due to his handicapped status, his range of activities is quite limited, and he mostly relies on inner thinking to obtain the richness of life, which makes him devote more time to thinking about life than healthy people and thus have a more profound view of life. His good right eye, "full of observation", inevitably provokes or stimulates those "inward processes" he would rather hold aloof from the world (Pifer, 1985, p. 25). Therefore, although Sammler is one-eyed, he is not a victim (Salter, 1972, p. 57), and his tragic experience became a legacy in a certain sense.

Mr. Sammler's Planet uses memory to reproduce the tragic scene of the Holocaust, which greatly impacts Mr. Sammler's reflections on life. Sammler has experienced the miserable life in the concentration camp, the terrifying situation of being buried alive, the loss of his wife, and the harrowing months hiding in the tomb. During the holocaust, he, together with millions of Jews, was shot and fell into the mass grave dug by themselves. Luckily, he managed to crawl out of the piled dead bodies and survived to join the partisans in the Zamoshit Forest in Poland to fight against the German invaders. Towards the end of the war, he was shot by anti-Semites in the partisan group. He then hid in a cemetery and pretended to be dead for three or four months. The dark, isolated tomb not only smelled of death, but the world also seemed to stand still. In his mind, the Holocaust is the highest manifestation of ethical and moral decay, an overwhelming experience of evil, and event which "marks not only the death of man, but the idea of man as well" (Berger, 1986, p. 81). The past scenes flash into his present life constantly, and deepen his understanding toward contemporary New York City.

As a Holocaust survivor, Sammler's experiences are highly respected by others as a "confidant of New York eccentrics; curate of wild men and progenitor of a wild woman" (Bellow, 2007, p. 96). Angela and Wallace, who are second-generation immigrants, have a kind of wonder and admiration for Sammler's experience, so they are happy to confide in him about their troubles. Sammler is an objective and non-judging listener and always tries his best to exhort and enlighten them with his own experience, which gives him a unique perspective on the young people in New York City. With "survivor mission" (Berger, 1986, p. 81), Sammler documents and examines New York City in the 1960s through his own eyes, and struggles for meaning.

New York Under the Scrutiny of City Observer Sammler

Irrational Behaviors of the Urban Residents

In the 1960s, the highly developed material civilization and the consumer culture brought about hedonism and mammonism. The modern instrumental rationality and social order imprisoned people's individuality and spiritual world. Young Americans advocated the replacement of traditional rationality and morality with spontaneous impulses and madness, creating a sizable counterculture movement (Wang, 2008, p. 19).

Mr. Sammler senses sexual liberation sweeping the United States in the 1960s. He is raised as a Polish Jew in the traditional way of civility and ethical order and is astonished and distressed by the crazy worship of sex among the youth. In order to escape from the repression and control of modern industrial society in terms of

technical rationality and political institutions and realize self-liberation and individual freedom, the advocates of the counterculture movement chose to immerse in sexual desire, totally disrupting conventional sexual ethics. They are portrayed as “hedonistic, narcissistic, ignorant, and—a crystallizing symbol for all of these—sexually wanton” (Goffman, 1997, p. 709). The way they walk and the style they dress give a sense of excessive sexuality. The pursuit of sexual satisfaction in American society is similar to the ecstasy of Holocaust killing.

What’s more, young people are eroded by materialism and money-worship while desecrating humanity and kinship. Sammler’s grandnephew Wallace and grandniece Angela are financially dependent on their parents but show no human love or respect for their family. Wallace is a madman whose madness lies not only in his lawlessness and audacity but also in his feverish desire for money. In the moment of his own father’s critical illness, instead of being by his father’s side and caring about his death, he was preoccupied with a sum of money that his father had hidden in the house. His sister Angela refused to admit her mistakes and reconcile with her father even before his death, not even willing to visit him for the last time. All she could think of was the possibility that her father would disinherit her because of her promiscuity. The looseness of kinship is like the inhumanity of the Holocaust.

1968 was the climax of the students’ movement. College students were frivolous exaggerated and irresponsible. They refused to be bound by any prohibition and regarded cursing and public urination as inalienable rights. When Sammler was giving a lecture at Columbia University, some students interrupt him and speak rudely to him. They arrogantly assumed Sammler’s point of view should be despised and trampled on just because he was an old man and had a foreign accent. The recklessness and madness of the college students is comparable to the irrationality of the Holocaust.

Deformed Urban Living Space

The great economic changes in the 1960s brought destabilizing factors to society, with urban space being forced to be redistributed. Because of urbanization, the wealthy white middle class left for the suburbs which were inhabited by the poor before. Almost at the same time, a swarm of African Americans poured into the northern cities from the south, creating a great migration wave. Under the dual effects of the departure of the rich and the influx of the poor blacks, the formerly prosperous business districts were gradually stagnant and ghettos began to appear in every corner of New York City, resulting in rising violence and crimes and continuous deterioration of the urban environment. Sammler’s encounters in New York City often remind him of the Holocaust.

The late 1960s was the peak of violence and riots in American society. New York City had become one of the few notorious crime cities in the world that was once a symbol of civilization and glory. Sammler has constantly seen a black pickpocket steal blatantly on the bus. The black pickpocket is used “as a sign for the potency of those pathological forces that claim the city for themselves” (Charlson, 1997, p. 532). The black pickpocket was brutal and bullied victims with his physical superiority when stealing. Noticing Sammler had witnessed him stealing, the black pickpocket then intimidated him by forcibly exposing his genitals in front of him which was a blatant mix of violence and sexual display. And what Sammler could see on Broadway are alcoholics, perverts, snooping thieves, idlers, and bloody street violence.

In “quivering, riotous and lurid New York” (Bellow, 2007, p. 117), Sammler lives on Manhattan’s Upper West Side with the Lincoln Art Center and Columbia University. However, it became the venom for artists, and what he saw was an ugly, deformed road littered with rubbish, environmental pollution, and crumbling

infrastructure. The decadent appearance of the city reminded Sammler of the images of the Holocaust. He compared the asphalt road to a rotting body, and the sewers seemed to flow out of guts. The crowded buildings form a forest, the TV antennas seem to be a series of branches, and the people living in the apartments seem to be prisoners trapped in this primitive jungle. New York made him think of the end of the world.

Sammler's Exploration for the Future of New York City

Sammler is able to treat the countercultural movement dialectically, not only seeing its revolutionary side but also sensing that it carries a wave of radicality and insurrection. His attitude is not indifferent, and he is not completely pessimistic. Actually, his observation is mixed with the profound reflections on the social chaos in New York City at that time, and he makes efforts to find the solution in different ways, including a balance between rationality and irrationality and the reconstruction of traditional ethics.

Rationality used to be a light of enlightenment for human beings and played an important role in the process of overcoming ignorance. But rationality is not omnipotent. The modern instrumental rationality and social order objectified urban people and made them suffer spiritual emptiness. Therefore, irrational students in the counterculture movement rejected any prohibitions and caused escalating violent incidents, resulting in the corruption of society and the degradation of human nature. Sammler believes that excessive display of sensuous individuals and unchecked brutal passion are detrimental to mankind (Quayum, 2004, p. 159). In response to the disadvantages of modernization, they should not throw away rationality and cultural tradition and seek a balance between the rational and the irrational.

Sammler's upbringing in the Jewish community which attaches great importance to traditional morality made him have a sense of personal responsibility to reconstruct the ethical values in New York City. This can be reflected in his close relationship with Dr. Elya Gruner and his appreciation for Gruner's virtues and ideal qualities. Faced with the social chaos in the 1960s, Sammler stresses that the endless pursuit of freedom will inevitably lead to the confusion of identities and the evasion of responsibilities, and it is the root cause of the decline of morality in contemporary society and the oppression and neglect of vulnerable groups. He "struggles to make a life of dignity for himself" and clings to the values such as reason, order, tradition, and self-respect "against the hostility of his environment, the indifference of many of his acquaintances, and the perversity of circumstance" (Galloway, 1973, p. 22). Sammler is not entirely pessimistic, and he "bluntly discards Lal's philosophy of irrational escapism in favor of the rational acceptance of life on Earth despite all its flux and follies" (Singh, 2015, p. 308).

Conclusion

Sammler's painful and nightmarish experiences during the Holocaust deepen his understanding of New York City where he lives. With penetrating insight, he is wary of the changes in the social and ethical order and makes his reflections on social chaos. There are some common points between the Holocaust and social chaos in the 1960s. Under the shackles of modern instrumental rationality and social order, the feverish Holocaust turns into fanatical destruction that subverts traditional ethical values. Both of them contain destructive factors and darkness in human nature. The Holocaust destroys the Jewish people, and the countercultural movement destroys the human spirit. Postmodern New York City is facing serious crises, and Sammler is always full of deep concern for the state of human survival, and he is filled with the moral responsibility of an intellectual to solve the problems with a positive attitude.

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