



## CHANGES AND CONFLICTS: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF SAUL BELLOW'S *MR. SAMMLER'S PLANET*

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### ABSTRACT

Winner of a handful of much coveted awards, including Pulitzer Prize(1975) and Nobel Prize(1976) for literature, Saul Bellow(1915-2005), a Canadian born Jewish-American writer, in his novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*(1970) brings out certain pertinent but unnoticed characteristics of relationships. Here, unlike many of his novels, Bellow painstakingly goes into the depth of changes that had intruded in the Jewish-family relationships. It is at the perusal of the reader to dig out the complicated nature of filial relationship in the contemporary American society. Through Mr. Artur Sammler, a septuagenarian intellectual, one has access to many of the unpleasant and murky sides of day to day life in an American city which indirectly represents the entire nation. Sammler, a victim of holocaust, continues to experience a chiaroscuro of the event in many ways both at home and outside. Amidst all sorts of bitter and heartrending experiences, the protagonist is not ready to give up his hope in humanity unlike many other characters in the lead. One can see two basic trends of Existentialism - nihilistic and Christian- unfolding in the novel through different characterisation and situations. This paper attempts to expose the drastic and reverberating changes in human relationships especially in Jewish families buttressed with the twofold aspects of Existentialism.

**Keywords:** *Saul Bellow, Family, Humankind, Existence, Existentialism, Sartre*

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## INTRODUCTION

Saul Bellow (1915-2005) is purposeful while portraying each minor and major character in his *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, mostly from the perspective of the protagonist, Artur Sammler, a septuagenarian intellectual, and at times through dialogues. One has access to three generations of a Jewish family besides people from other continents such as India and Africa. Bellow is keen in portraying developments, variations, derelictions of familial relationships. His characters, in one way or the other represent certain lines of thought in their personal and particular circumstances.

Bellow, himself a Jew, presents different aspects of relationships in the novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Sammler, who bridges relationships with his own daughter Shula and her husband, between his nephew Dr. Gruner and his children and naturally between his cousins and niece, plays a major role in the novel to disclose the complicated and delicate nature of human relationships trapped in the snare of existential muddle in the context of a Jewish family. A close reading unfurls how complicated the relationships are in a Jewish family thrown into the midst of whirling and turbulent modern human existence. All the characters are on a race and busy with activities both meaningful and meaningless. Written in 1970 the novel still carries memories of wars, holocaust, and the concomitant growth of existential sufferings, conflicts, and anguish of modern man who is eaten up by different ideologies, philosophies, theories and other isms. Each character stands as a prototype of certain existential criterion, caught up in the labyrinthine structure of life, destiny, death, sex, money, power, and so on. A nihilistic and rather cynical outlook ventured by characters like Dr. Govinda Lal, an Indian scientist, Wallace and Angela Gruner, children of Dr. Elya Gruner, Sammler's daughter – Shula is encountered by strong faith in God and humanity expressed by Sammler amidst all sorts of bitter experiences and visitations that greet him daily.

The concept of the "Other" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 302) stands as a great riddle in the novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. The protagonist's feeling of being watched by the Other – the Negro pickpocket and his encounter with the same person

leaves an indelible mark in the life of the old man. He feels along with Sartre who explains the possibility and presence of the Other thus: ". . . it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defence – in short that I *am seen*" (347). He recognises the possibility of being an object "which the Other is looking at and judging" (350) and interestingly that action of the pickpocket, in turn, is a reaction to the same feeling that he is being watched by somebody. Sammler always feels the presence of the Other in his life; let it be in his Holocaust experience, or his war experience at Gaza (Bellow 206-207) or in the street. In all such experiences he seldom repletes his mundane desire to blame and condemn the other, instead figures out the inevitability for the existence of the Other and that of the humanity as a whole. Sammler contemplates over the need of the Other which carries similarity with Sartre's idea of the same who places it in *Being and Nothingness*:

It is necessary that there be a *being* "I-and-the-Other" which has to be the reciprocal scissiparity of the for-others just as the totality 'reflective-reflected-on' is a being which has to be its own nothingness; that is, my selfness and that of the Other are structures of one and the same totality of being. (397)

The hero goes further and tries to see the face of God in human beings who are bound together by the "uniqueness of the soul" (Bellow 189) and requests, "Dear brethren, let us all be human together" (244). Even when he agrees that the Black, "was a megalomaniac. But there was certain – certain princeliness" (243) in him. Likewise he disagrees with and refutes Dr. Lal's ambition for colonising the moon which is the result of his cynical and hostile attitude towards humanity and finds it impossible to continue to live among the Other. Sammler reverberates the idea of Emmanuel Levinas, yet another existentialist philosopher, for whom "[one] is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced [him/her]" ("The Face of the Other" Np) and says "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" (Bellow 155).



The characters in the novel make choices in their respective subjective nature and the setting of the novel echoes the concept of Sartre on Existentialism, that is, “a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 10). One can witness how each character makes his/her own choices in life in order to make it meaningful or just to prolong effectively. A few of them feel the anguish and forlornness while making their free selections in life. They anguish because in subjectivity these people make choices out of free will in order to establish themselves human beings and in doing so they feel the weight of their own action and even more their responsibility towards the Other, other fellow human beings. To make it clearer, as Sartre places it “when we say that a man is responsible for himself. We do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but he is responsible for all men” (16). This responsibility haunts them throughout their life provided they are involved in humanism with a special accent on subjectivity and free will. Sartre opines: “the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is , at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, can not escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility” (18). Gabriel Marcel, yet another existentialist philosopher, opines that freedom is “always about the possibilities of the self, understood within the confines of relationship with others” (Hernandez, NP). Characters like Sammler, Angela, and Shula experience such an anguish in lives in given circumstances which has tremendous role in their choices and which in turn constrain and ennoble their lives. Sammler always has the Other in his mind and puts himself as the custodian of his relations to which he gives the colouring of theistic aspects and which is obviously the selection of his free will. Shula, while stealing documents on H. G. Wells from Dr. Lal, is convinced of the intention of her action and it is to help Sammler. But later she too, doubtlessly due to the influence of her father experiences the same anguish of her deed which involved the other party as well. Angela is yet another specimen as the one

who undergoes this existential anguish. She feels responsible for the plight of her father because of her unethical, amorous dealings in her relations. When she or even her would be husband, Wharton Horricker, had agreed to exchange each other with yet another couple at a tourist spot was unaware of this anguish and forlornness at the moment, but late they experienced the nightmarish spell of the result of their choices.

On the contrary, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow has portrayed characters who do not express such anguish such as Wallace, the Black pickpocket, and Eisen, Sammler's son-in-law and even when they execute their free will they forget or rather they pretend to forget the other. The pickpocket while choking the old Sammler and displaying his genital (Bellow 39) and Eisen, when knocking down the pickpocket (240-141) were shrugging off their responsibility for the Other or they maintain a sort of “double-dealing” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 19) as Sartre views it.

Even when one sees characters and situations which uphold an existential disposition and outlook, Bellow is accurate in portraying the effect of this philosophical line also. He places his alter ego, Sammler to explain the after effect of certain ways of life devoid of divine and ethical formulations and attaches himself to Christian Existential approach formulated by thinkers like Jaspers, Marcel, and Levinas. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* depicts the influence of Existentialism in the United States and even when he tries to be nonchalance in his approach, Bellow seems to be critical in his dealings when he says through Sammler that “certain European importations were remarkably successful in the United States – psychoanalysis, existentialism. Both related to the sexual revolution” (55). When Ponge affirms that “Man is the future of man” (qtd. in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* 23) he is vehemently supported by Sartre for whom man is condemned to be free by which he meant “man with no support and no aid, is condemned every moment to invent man” (23). Bellow explains a steady decrepitude in human relationships especially in the context of Jewish characters who are supposed to be ardent followers of Yahweh and famous for their mutual bonds despite bitter and unimaginable



sufferings throughout history. When Sartre says that “everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can’t start making excuses for himself” (22), he explains how Existentialism is structured upon the nonexistence of God and thus reaffirms the subjectivity of human being in this world. The Jewish characters, almost all, make attempts to establish themselves, an effort to give meaning to their life with complete trust on themselves and free will leaving behind their rich tradition and culture. Even Dr. Lal, a scientist from India, a land of spiritual revolutions, ardently longs to settle in moon as a means to escape from the world and humanity. He represents many who are fed up with present life situations and want to establish themselves as free thinkers.

A reader gets the delineation of a family from the account of Sammler – a family of “free thinkers” (Bellow 68). And a deeper reading detects a gradual but steady deviation and dereliction in their attitudes and tendency especially in the younger generations. One feels a drift which is ever growing and induced and accelerated by Existentialism in their relationships. The characters become at times funny and paradoxical in their approaches. Bellow is sarcastic in his word picture of the characters.

### CONCLUSION

*Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, by all means serves different purposes in drawing the picture of a world, of a family engulfed in and led by existential criteria. Even though the circle is small and characters are limited in number it carries out its purported goal. One can see characters who pursue both authentic and inauthentic existence and they are either see the Being (Dasein) as it really is or are alienated from it and thus carry out an inauthentic existence. This paper attempts a study to show the various aspects and results of Existentialism in the context of a Jewish family and succinctly discloses the changes and conflict there.

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