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Satire on Materialism in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*

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Abstract:

Through satirical works, Sinclair Lewis evinces the harsh reality of American society, its declining cultural and moral values, its adherence to material possession and transient satisfaction. American culture suffers a huge loss due to rampant materialism of the age. The novel *Babbitt* mirrors life and manners of the contemporary American middle class society. In this novel, the writer voices against alien and deteriorating elements with might and main. It insights into impact of materialism, conformity and social snobbery as he was a keen observer and great interpreter of American life. There is an intense craving in his novels to abolish all misconceptions and malpractices from the society to make it a better place to live in:

Keywords: rampant materialism, social snobbery, satire , moral crisis:

To write satire is to perform a miracle. One must hate the world so much that one's hatred strikes sparks but one must hate it only because it disappoints one's invincible love of it; one must write in denunciation of ugliness and put the thing down in unmistakable black and white, yet keep this, as all written things, within the sphere of beauty. (Schorer 23).

This quotation of Rebecca West interprets the significance of satire and satirist. Sinclair Lewis, the first American to be awarded the Noble Prize in literature, was one of the superb satirists American literature has produced. His novels highlight the vital issues of the contemporary society and are suffused with convincing characters, realistic dialogues and down-to-earth events. Americans were caught in the trap of materialism, smugness, hypocrisy and greed. Their hideous ambition led them to become snobs. Their social pretension made Sinclair Lewis unhappy. With a view to draw out the attention of the people towards their emptiness and pitiable condition of their lives, he mercilessly exposed the growing material culture through his sardonic satire with great wisdom, courage and deep insight. He attacked numerous effete and insignificant elements of the society with great finesse.

This paper is an attempt to explore the satire on materialism and social snobbery in Sinclair Lewis's second successful novel *Babbitt* in which he revealed the shocking truth of the middle class American society. It has vigorous intellectual appeal. He elicits the verismo which denigrates human dignity and its glorious culture by raising umpteen questions with the intention of establishing a genuine way to overcome the declining forces and get back the moral values of life. After successful depiction of the village life in his evocative novel *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis turned to expose the indecent side of the city life of America where a great deal of people resided. Due to industrialization, a large population of rural people migrated from the villages to the cities for a better employment opportunity. Schools, colleges, hospitals and markets were

developed for the fulfillment of the need of the people. All amenities, facilities and opportunities led to the urbanization which constituted the middle class society. The life of urban people was characterized by the artificial manner, low moral values and much of showy appearance. Intense social pressure and materialistic outlook made them greedy and snobbish. They were in the pursuit of being wealthy, superior and special. They had impersonal attitude towards their fellow-beings and a little care for spiritual and moral concern. Everyone seemed to be attracted towards upper social hierarchy and overlooked the people who belonged to lower social hierarchy.

Most of the creative works are the outcome of writers own past and present experience and shards of memory. They have an intense craving to intellectualize the incidents that happened to them and emanated from their own experience. Their writings may cause controversy but finally they are able to make the people understand his intention and motive.

Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*, which appeared in 1922, delineates the commercial culture and contemporary civilization and is a faithful depiction of social ambience and ongoing conflicts of the extant society. Babbitt means worshipper of material success and despiser of intellectual values. Babbitt is a new word which came in American literature after its publication which means to be mean, complacent and snob. This scathing portrayal of a hypocritical and conformist businessman George F. Babbitt ignited controversy, debate and ample discussion through the length and breadth of the country. Lewis was blamed to attack the pioneer image of Americans for they were proud of everything that they had whether it was right or wrong. Robert Morss Lovett observes that :

A leading trait of the American people is a youthful self-consciousness amounting to an inferiority complex, which makes us impatient to all criticism. Everything which we have done is right because we did it. All our wars were just; all our statesmen are pure, all our business is honest. Ours is the land of liberty, of tolerance, of opportunity, of righteousness. (Schorer 32)

The novel *Babbitt* commences with the glorification and pride of materialism:

THE TOWERS of Zenith aspired above the morning mist, austere towers of steel and cement and lime stone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadel nor churches, but frankly and beautiful office building (1)

It presents an accurate picture of the declining culture of the society, people's unswerving fidelity, their adherence to the meaningless social values and material possession.

The novel *Babbitt* named after its principal character George F. Babbitt, who is a forty six year old real estate executive, represents unthinking, smug and hypocritical middle class society. He has a wife Myra Babbitt and three children –Verona Babbitt, Ted Babbitt and Tinka Babbitt, a grand house in the prosperous Floral Height, a flourishing business and a number of friends and acquaintances “there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house. It was not a Home.” (16) In spite of being blessed with prosperity and social status, Babbitt “whose god was modern appliance” (2) is not happy. He is leading a monotonous, dissatisfied and fabricated life

and suffers tremendous psychological problems. Battered with his condition, he gives paramount importance to the things of modern technology “his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism.” (26).

Babbitt, a significant work of satire, is an honest, vivid, noted and comprehensive account of the writer’s experience of American life and manners, a grave concern in a funny and light way, an outstanding endeavor with the intention to wake up American middle class society who indulges themselves in self glorification and pseudo intellect.

Lewis puts a critical gaze on the destructive force of the society which has pushed the people into a situation bereft of spiritual growth and cultural consciousness, hampered their instinct of progress. They can imitate and follow only. The whole America is under the sway of materialism which is the cause of their abysmal condition. They have great regard and acceptance for the people who belong to higher social status and, at the same time, have disregard and rejection for the people belonging to lower social status which is the worst aspect of the society. Being snobs, they have disparaging attitude towards common people and down-trodden.

The novel is set in a medium city Zenith which is the clone of all other cities as similar kind of culture and tradition is developing in every city of America. Zenith seems to be a shining example of the conform society of America and Babbitt, the prominent and memorable character that Lewis has created, represents a large section of the society who is subjected to live a false and superficial life by involving immoral principles. Being a staunch supporter of materialism, Babbitt respects everything that is modern, speedy, famous and has become the order of the day. He has immense respect and love for his material possessions more than anything or anybody else he has because they are symbol of his social status and success.

When Babbitt comes to know that his one office is three storey less than his another office, then, he concludes that his this office is three storey more beautiful than that. Every word he utters, every action he does, every thought and view he has, is deeply rooted in conformity. It is not he but his smug society which has created his ideas, thoughts and actions. He is impelled to stay with power, property and prestige “Zenith’s city with gigantic power-gigantic buildings, gigantic machines, gigantic transportation.”(110) Everything that signifies economic importance attracts Babbitt everywhere and feels dignified to have it as it is a symbol of his progress:

He yearned for a dictaphone, for a type-writer which would add and multiply, as a poet yearns for quartos or a physician for radium (57).

Babbitt’s business ethics is nothing but maintaining the appearance of being ethical in business arena to get acclamation and applause to be a businessman of high caliber, integrity and authenticity. Unethical escalation of values is on the rise with every passing day. Ethics is in the process of blurring its meaning. He violates its righteousness every moment without any embarrassment and hesitation yet talks about it eloquently. He does not know much regarding police force, its alliance with gambling and prostitution, fire proofing building, appointment of teachers etc. as his interest, awareness and accountability are confined to his business which signifies his progress. His speech is suffused with his grand vision and emphasis on

thoroughness of knowledge as well as proficiency about his business and he says, “It is at once the duty and the privilege of the realtor to know everything about his own city and its environment” (47) and “realtor must know his city, inch by inch, and all its faults and virtues.” (48)

Even if he has attained ample wealth by fair means or foul, he finds himself in an entrapped situation, in a state of quandary but still follows the rules made by powerful people without any contemplation. Mencken observes that :

His every act is related to the phenomena of that society. It is not what he feels and aspires to that moves him primarily, it is what the folks about him will think of him. His politics is communal politics, mob politics, herd politics, his religion is a public rite wholly without subjective significance; his relations to his wife and his children are formalized even his debaucheries are orthodox debaucheries of sound businessman.(Schorer 22)

The Zenith Athletic club is neither athletic nor a club but is a miniature form of Zenith. Tremendously influenced by the glittering appearance of it, it thrives on the principles of modern culture. The members of this club evaluate people in terms of their sound monetary status rather than moral, ethical or spiritual ground. They have a little to do with athletics, sports, exercise or any other creative activity. They gather there to have lunch, play games, narrate stories, meet people and cultivate relationship with them to enhance business and have no role in the cultural realm. This club disregards Union Club for its being snobbish, extravagant and arrogant, “its chief hatred is the conservative Union Club which all sound members of the Athletic call “a rotten snobbish, dull, expensive old hole”(60) yet these people could not reject election to the Union Club. Having elected, most of them resign Athlete Club and after joining Union Club, they treat themselves as elite and superior to the members of Athlete Club. They leave no stone unturned to disregard them and say “The Athlete would be pretty good hotel if it were more exclusive.”(60). Being able to reach social upstairs, they underestimate the people standing downstairs, take pride in forgetting their former friends, neighbors and acquaintances, they turn their eyes away from them. Beyond any shadow of doubt, their act indicates that wealth and social status are more important than any other thing. They have little care for human relationship and feel exquisite relaxation being with the elite of the society and expressing solidarity with them.

Babbitt is extremely cautious about his business ethics and shows brazen intolerance in disobeying it. When Stanley Graff, the outside salesman in Babbitt’s business, gets engaged and asks him for bonus and rise in salary, he gives convincing argument to justify the business ideology and expresses his helplessness in raising his salary. He delivers eloquent lecture on integrity, sincerity and equality that if he raises his salary, he ought to do the same for the other employees. Even though he has great affection for them, he cannot bear spending much money on them:

He liked to like the people about him; he was dismayed when they did not like him. It was only when they attacked the sacred purse that he was frightened into

fury, but them, being a man given to oratory and high principles he enjoyed the sound of his vocabulary and the warmth of his own virtue (78).

The novel *Babbitt* is Sinclair Lewis's strong, sincere and forceful effort to evince the pitiable condition of the middle class society with the aim of self-revelation and introspection as well as it inspires the people to refrain from doing evils, to live their life with originality, spontaneity, youthfulness, truth and simplicity. Fed up with artificial and false life that has robbed him of real happiness, Babbitt's inner self seeks the truth which would impart him peace, pleasure and raises his life. To get rid of monotonous routine life of Zenith, Babbitt and his friend Paul Riesling plan to go to Maine and spend some quality time together. Throughout their journey, they find same kind of people, same kind of situation. The problem, pettiness, provincialism that they meet day in and day out in their own city can be found everywhere in the world. Having arrived there, they engage themselves in fishing and late night poker games. Far from every din and bustle, they indulge themselves to get refresh, relax and comfort. They act as if their college days have come back. "But when they did talk they slipped into the naive intimacy of college (B165). Devoting time with extraordinary gusto, they are living their lives to the fullest and share their happiness, grief, disappointment and the vital truth of their lives. "we've never done anything the way we thought we would; (165). At the end of the second week, they begin to feel calm and interested in life. Now they are enthusiastic and desirous of doing something innovative and creative. They come back with zeal and zest but their tour could not transform them; they return to their previous life of chaos and confusion.

Lewis was worried to witness people's weird and idiosyncratic attitude towards life. He has taken realistic approach in his writings, exposes dominance of materialism that has grabbed the culture and created multiple atrocities on the people. It has held the position of centre of attraction and stays as synonymous with revolutionary change in the society. It has become major and prominent topic of conversation in family and society. While purchasing anything, Babbitt keeps his status in mind "It was an aspiration for knightly ranks. In the city of Zenith, in the barbarous twentieth century, a family motor indicated its social rank as precisely as the grades of the peerage determined the rank of an English family" (81). Material possession is the need of the hour else they would have to face apathy of the conform society. It has become the culture of mass and finds its space even in the realm of wisdom:

and every other sign of wisdom and prosperity. Above the picture was an inspiring educational symbol no antiquated lamp or torch or owl of Minerva, but a row of dollar sign.(84)

Babbitt takes over as an official delegate of the State Association of real estate board. He is asked to write a paper for the convention expressing his views about the real estate. At the beginning, he is confused on his interpretation of facts about style, order and many other aspects of writings but after much labour, he produces a concise paper which solely aims at the progress of real estate business leaving behind many other matter of great importance like welfare of workers etc. He reads the paper eloquently before the convention and receives great applause. When a few newspapers publish his speech focusing his vision about real estate with admiration, then he comes to know about his quality of being an orator.

Seneca Doane, who was a lawyer, is candidate for Mayor on labour ticket, he fights for the welfare of working class to raise their wages and provide with them better working facilities. His candidature and campaign threatens the people of middle and upper classes who are hell bent to hold on wealth, power and position. Lucas Prout, who was a mattress-manufacturer is supported by Democratic and Republicans all together. He is also backed up “by the banks, the Chamber of Commerce, all the decent newspaper and George F. Babbitt.” (194) His candidature suits the higher and commercial class of the society and they get united to support him for their own betterment and keep the working class at bay, and not to save the democratic values and common weal. Lucas Prout wins the election “and Zenith was again saved.”(197) The Chamber of Commerce celebrates the victory of election. There, in his powerful speech, Babbitt not only throws light on growing new civilization of Zenith but also glorifies standardization of same civilization all over America and says “that Zenith is the finest example of American life and prosperity to be found anywhere.”(199) He further adds:

Zenith and her sister cities are producing a new type of civilization. There are many resemblances between Zenith and these other burgs, I’m darn glad of it. The extraordinary growing and sane standardization of stores, offices, streets, hotels, clothes and newspapers throughout the United States shows how strong and enduring a type is ours. (203)

With a view to make reunion of his college friends, he arranges a get together at the Union Club. There, special attention is paid to Charles Mckelvey because he is the most successful person among them and so most respectable and adorable. Babbitt is extremely enthusiastic to be with him and invites him to dinner. He accepts his invitation reluctantly and comes to him after repeated request and reminding. Ed Overbrook, who is one of their college classmates, is considered a failure. Desirous of cultivating relationship with Babbitt, he invites him to dinner. Babbitt accepts his invitation with same disdain and reluctance as Mckelvey did. The culture emanating from the vicious ideology has degraded the people; it thrives on unprincipled way of life. After attaining social success and height of eminence, everyone is worried about his status and position and keep the people of lower status at bay to be considered as superior. They don’t spare even their their kith and kin and show discrimination and social snobbery blatantly..

Babbitt meets with a disagreeable incident. Paul Riesling has a massive argument with his wife Zilla, loses his temper and shoots her. Consequently, he is sent behind the bars. This incident stirs Babbitt up violently and he is saddened at this to the core. This incident shows the dissatisfaction of people with their lives, their abominable condition in spite of having every comfort.

Lewis remarkably and commendably evinces the reality of the Zenith’s society, even their religion and spirituality suffers a shift from spiritual to material. Religion is no longer a matter of personal concern, it has become standardized. Being indulged in self glorification and having adopted new culture, they have forgotten that it is a matter of self awareness, self exploration and self consciousness. Materialism is not only deeply rooted in culture and customs

but also find its prominent space even in religion. It is, too, in the fetters of rampant corruption and moral laxity which is the worst aspect of servility of human beings. In the long run, artificial religion cannot transform humans and enlighten them.

Being deprived in devotional feeling, their business and profession have influenced their religion heavily “It has been reported that he is the world’s greatest salesman of salvation (108)” People feel great charm and enthusiasm towards Mr. Mike Monday who was a distinguished evangelist, for “his celebrated vocabulary and his stage presence (108) and not because he has enlightened people and has led them in the right direction. “He has converted over two hundred thousand lost and priceless souls at an average cost of less than ten dollars a head” (108) and due to achievement of this massive task with great wisdom, spirit and foresight, he is widely acceptable among the people. Some people oppose his being invited but when the secretary of the Chambers of Commerce has reported the committee of manufacturers that in every city Mr. Monday appeared to preach “he had turned the minds of workmen from wages and hours to higher things and thus averted strikes” (18). The uproar comes to an end and he is cordially invited. His sermons have very powerful impact on the workers and after receiving it, they cease to make their demand.

In spite of the fact that Babbitt is extremely conscious of his social status, at some stage of life, he feels an undercurrent of inner conflict to escape, to get rid of the values imposed by the society, to go with his own consciousness yet he does not dare to rebel because he is afraid of dire consequences to be eliminated from the conform society. He is in persistent struggle with his own conscience, emotion, values and thoughts. He longs for real happiness but he is forced to compromise which shakes his determination .When Myra falls ill, Babbitt feels deeply for her and takes great care of her. He ceases to be a rebel because he thinks it becomes very late. Disgusted and disturbed, he comes back to his previous life. At this juncture, he is helped and supported by his companions. When his son decides to drop out of his studies and elopes with Eunice, he backs him up and tries to nip the coming persecution in the bud which he has suffered. He provides his son with ample opportunity to grow his own vision and awareness; supports his stand in his crucial period of life so that he lives his life with dignity and self respect. His creating an ideal environment for the forthcoming generation shows an abrupt deviation from the past and zeal for the liberation from the shackles of mental slavery. Lewis is of the view that human hypocrisy exceeds its limits and it is high time that people must access their follies and must cease their irrational race to materialism which will lead them to nowhere. Uniformity of thought and action, meaningless life, being languished and confined themselves to their own self-made prison vitiated their life, culture and progress. Lewis, the novelist of social reform, was extremely vocal against abuses, degradation, hypocrisy and bizarre pursuit to material success of the people. He garnered great applause and appreciation from a large section of the reader to expose the indecent face of the American society which comes under the purview of open debate. Therefore, a number of critics, reviewers and writers gave their valuable opinions about this well-received novel. H. L. Mencken states that:

Babbitt gives me great delight. It is shrewdly devised; It is adeptly managed; it is well written. The details, as in *Main Street*, are extraordinary vivid... I know of no American novel that more accurately presents the real America. It is a social document of high order. (Hall 247)

To conclude, Sinclair Lewis was profoundly stirred by the prevalent moral crisis in the life of America Culture which is going to succumb to the lure of materialism. It has led to numerous corruptions, physical and mental disorder and consequently it gives the shocking blow on the culture. Their unceasing desire to become powerful, superior and affluent has turned them into insensitive and immoral. Blatant corruption and competition for the sake accumulation and grabbing of wealth and undeterred desire to rise socially is the root cause of people's bizarre whims and blind race. Sinclair Lewis highlights the urgent need to cure them in favor of humanity. He appeals to the people to brood over its outcome and make an effort to come out of their trapped and pitiable situation to establish the inherent value of humanity. Society cannot be transformed overnight but proper action ought to be taken to trigger a great change.

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