

Research Paper

Literature



Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: Family Degenerated

*Dr Pradip Kumar Behera

* Lecturer in English, S.K.C.G. (Autonomous) College, Paralakhemundi, Gajapati, Odisha

ABSTRACT

The study of familial relationships and their degeneration in respect of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman is the aim of the paper. The central subject of his play concerned is family of Willy Loman. The play-wright has tried his best to present a subtle study of the smallest unit of the family. But what ultimately the play project is that the collapse of dreams and false nature of protagonist which bring about not only his own ruin but also that of his and her children and finally the family. The society projects confused values. It is the sole American Dream, in which the idea of personal success is of paramount importance. But in the process, the protagonist gets caught in the web of confused values of opportunity, talent and fundamental right. He is trapped by his own surroundings and culture. The causes of being trapped are that, he seeks for integrity toward himself and toward his fellows, but the cost of that integrity is self deviation and family degeneration.

Keywords : Collapse of dreams, Ruin, self deviation, Family degeneration.

The 'Family' has been one of the important issues in the twentieth century American Literature. The American social, cultural and economic scene at the turn of the present century was of great complexity and diversity. This complexity and diversity is fully mirrored in the literature of the modern age, more so as it is the era of the common man and aspirations of the masses find an increasing expression in literature. With the passage of time this complexity continues to increase owing to various causes which include influences from the other side of the Atlantic. The most notable among these influences being the teachings of the new psychology of Freud, Jung and Bergson and teachings of Karl Marx and his followers. Rapid industrialization and urbanization brought with them new problems and difficulties which colour the literature of this century. The anxiety, ennui, boredom, the sense of loneliness and neurosis caused by these developments find their own place in literature. The two World Wars have proved to be nerve-shattering for the Americans and have caused frustration and loss of faith in traditional values. New areas of conflict also emerged as all-important factors in the social life of the nation. The 'Big Business' became the order of the day. Thus, behind the transformation of American's provincial literature of the eighteenth century into the robust myths of the nineteenth, and the complex, ambiguous fictions and plays of the twentieth, stand the forces of political and cultural independence, Westward expansion and the frontier immigration and urbanization, and the nation's unique sense of historical purpose. It is against such a background, images of the family can be perceived. Moreover, the analysis of 'American Individualism' would reflect on the images of the family explicitly.

From the settlement of Massachusetts Bay in the first-third of the seventeenth century, America has been suspended between the vision of a new social compact, joined in love and authority, and the lure of the wilderness. Despite some efforts to purify the recreate European society in the New World, the experience of the Atlantic Migration was to slough off traditional customs, faith and behaviour. When they abandoned their old world homes, the immigrants not only severed their ties with the ancestral village and church but also painfully sundered channels for communicating the family heritage. The abundant open land, extended seacoast, and convenient waterways of the new continent atomized the communities

of newcomers centrifuge-like, spinning them off across the waiting countryside.

The termination of Primogeniture and entailed property at the time of the Revolution recognized in legal terms of the inexorable individualistic thrust. In America, Tocqueville remarked in 1840, "the family in the roman and aristocratic signification of the world, does not exist". (63) Where as families in aristocratic societies served to preserve and transmit property, the family unit in America was less likely to accept such a responsibility in view of the abundant resources and opportunities offered by the new land. Parental authority and the importance of birth declined as fast as new avenues of power were discovered. Inspired by the egalitarian spirit of the Revolution, American writers turned to the rising Artisan- Yeoman class, which was not much bound as the upper strata by family history or community ties. The family orientation of some earlier American writing, poetry in particular gone way in the nineteenth century to images of a new American, liberated from family bonds and socially, geographically and metaphysically mobile.

In the twentieth century the concept of the American frontier has been boarded to include confrontations with new technologies, space, social issues and foreign relations. The character type however persists. David Potter has argued in his evocative study "People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character" that natural abundance holds the key to understanding the mobility and individualism of Americans:

It is this constant change, paced by our economic richness, which, as I believe, has caused each generation to reject its predecessor and to expect its successor to reject it [...]. Where as our forebears have abandoned only one Europe, they have abandoned several outmoded Americas – frontier America, rural America, the isolated America of the river steamboat and the iron horse – and each abandonment has made us more ready to expect another. If we speak of father-rejection, has not the American with colonial forebears rejected his American puritan father even more decisively than the Irish-American has rejected his overseas father on the "Old Sod". (69)

Turner had observed that "complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family". (22) But the family itself has been suspended in a magnetic tension between the poles of solitary individualism on the one hand and a complex of institutions and generation on the other. The democratic ethos, western frontiers, economic abundances have altogether tended to isolate the individual. Pulling in the opposite direction, the family musters little of the status and authority in America that it claimed in historical societies. When the idea of family becomes vague, indeterminate and uncertain, Tocqueville wrote, "a man [...] provides for the establishment of his next succeeding generation and no more". (52) As a result of its continual change, America developed a 'one-generation culture', wherein in the family stands as an existential borderland between the individual and the culture, children and past, innovation and tradition.

Where parental values are cast in doubt and fathers and mothers themselves may represent widely disparate social histories, children tend to look to the broader culture for ideals to live by. In the nineteenth century the extension of American frontiers geographic, economic, social, and spiritual made it almost mandatory that individuals remain mobile. As Erich Fromm has written; "In order that any society may function well, its members must acquire the kind of character which makes them 'want' to act in the way they 'have' to act as members of the society or of a special class within it. They have to 'desire' what objectively is 'necessary' for them to do". (Potter, p.11) In America the will to perform what was necessary generated an 'inner-directed' individual, trusting in his or her own ethical and physical resources and prepared to step outside the family and conventional society.

However, against such a background, the familial relationship and its degeneration in respect of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can be studied. The central subject of his play concerned is family of Willy Loman. The play-wright has tried his best to present a subtle study of the smallest unit of the family. But what ultimately the play projects is that the collapse of dreams and false nature of major character bring about not only his own ruin but also that of his and her children and finally the family. The society projects confused values. It is the sole American Dream, in which the idea of personal success is of paramount importance. But in the process, the protagonist gets caught in the web of confused values of opportunity, talent and fundamental right. He is trapped by his own surroundings and culture. The causes of being trapped are that, he seeks for integrity toward himself and toward his fellows, but the cost of that integrity is self deviation and family degeneration. The head man of the family is schizophrenic a more, practical a less, which prevents him from becoming a successful man.

With Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman* the account of the family in American literature comes full circle. The play projects Willy Loman, the marginal man, as the metaphysician of American wilderness and abundance, staying with his wife and family in New York City. His mind is full of images and hopes clearly outdated as regards the intricate social network of the modernity. He is an everyday sort of man caught in a web of mortgage payments, refrigerators repairs, fallen arches, and making ends meet.

When the play opens, Willy is already an old man of sixty years and something of an anti-hero. In his stage direction, Miller portrays Willy's ideal world of open spaces being pushed to the limit by coils of the metropolis:

A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises. Before us is the "SALESMAN'S" house. We are aware of towering angular Shapes behind it, surround it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and foreground; the surrounding areas show an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment

houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place a dream rising out of reality. (*Death of a Salesman*, p.7)

At the beginning of the play, this stage direction serves as an exposition of Willy's World, he is set against. A small man with a small home is projected against the great American dream of success. As everyone, he has been captured by the dream. With a view to translating his dream into reality, he has been struggling as a salesman but in vain. At the cost of his long sixty years of struggle, he has earned frustration and exhaustion. The psychological tension being added with the physical morbidity has made Willy totally imbalanced. As a result, he is entrapped by a series of misjudgments and misconceptions.

However, Willy's lack of self-understanding incapacitates him to teach his sons how to live in the world. He is an 'erring father', business minded and careful of money. He is of the view that life should have some dignity and not merely "be printed on dollar bill". So he tries to infuse his own idealism and dream into the sons. He injects the false dream and dishonest habit into the sons. He destroys in a way, the peace of domestic life with false business ethics. That is why Biff's schooling is carelessly taken. His theft of foot ball from the school- locker room is supported. Willy infact justifies Biff's action on the ground that, after all Biff has got to practice with a regulation ball. He also appreciates Biff's initiatives which the coach will also appreciate, says Willy:

Willy: If somebody else took that ball, there'd be an uproar. (23)

This very support makes Biff to a practitioner of the act of theft throughout. When Bernard, the friend to Biff informs that Biff may get pluck in mathematics because of his negligence, Willy is not very much worried. Rather he scolds Linda, who thinks, Bernard says the right. Says Willy:

Willy: (exploding at her): There's nothing the matter with his! You want him to be a worm like Bernard? He's got spirit, personality [...] (31).

Willy has the false notion that a man with personality can prosper in the business world as well as in life. So he assures Biff that, "Bernard is liked but not well liked". In one of his long assurance, Willy suggests:

Willy: [...] Bernard can get the best marks in school, Y' understand, but when he gets at in the business world, Y' understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him [...] (27).

In the same way Willy erects false image of Happy. He says that Happy has a best position in the business field than Uncle Charley. Willy comments:

Willy: [...]! Because Charley is not-liked. He's liked but he's not well liked. (23)

However, the disillusioned and failure salesman sees the dreams of success in his sons. That is why; he forces his son Biff to take to business life, a life which does not suit his temperament. He points out:

Biff: Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, Salesman, business of one kind or another [...]. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still that's how you build a future. (16)

But the most vital point that serves as the cause of degeneration of the relationship between sons and father is that, Willy is guilty of forsaking his "native talents" for "material success", even at the cost of "human dignity". He hankers madly after financial growth. His self-aggrandizement shapes the way

upto his self-deception. The following lines reflect Willy's self-assessment:

Willy: America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England...boys. I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own [...] (24).

Willy's self-assessment is nothing more than his self-delusion. In the real sense, he is not a successful salesman. Only to support both his physical weakness and weak status in the business world, he has been boastful in manner, telling his sons that he "knocked down" everybody "dead" in providence and "slaughtered" everybody in Boston. But the old age of Willy does not support to his boastfulness. It becomes ironic, when he is rejected by Howard, the company owner. Willy has nothing but to raise a voice uncared:

Willy: You mustn't tell me you've got people to see – I put thirty-four years into this farm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit! (64)

Such is really Willy's position. His efforts to keep a small patch of garden alive in his backyard, amid the concrete and the claustrophobia, are barren. His packages of Burpee seeds bear not fruit. The hotel, which is staged a half-level above Willy's home is a world of escape from domesticity and debt. He can visit it any moment by wish alone. It is poised like the Saloons and dancehalls of the West between civilization and the open road. But Biff, who respects his father as a wonderful man, takes him for a loyal husband to his mother is shocked to discover a naked- woman in his room of the Boston hotel. He sits motionless and dumb on the suitcase and his faith on his father is shattered. The figure of a guilty person replaces the image of an ideal father. He calls his father:

Biff: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake! (95)

Biff is shocked to see his erstwhile heroic father as no more than "a dribbling liar" and a profligate. On the other side Willy's hopes of Biff are also shattered and his dreams destroyed. Thus the athletic Biff, his imagination forever darkened from discovering his father with a prostitute in the Boston hotel, wanders aimlessly through the ranches and farms of the West in search of something to hold onto. Happy, puffed up by his father's teaching that being "liked" is not enough; one must be "well liked", loses a series of menial jobs in New York stores and spends his time with chippies, parodying Willy's life. Willy fails to communicate sustaining values to his sons out of profound ignorance of his own roots.

Moreover, another most vital point that stands up as the cause of degeneration is that Willy and Biff represent two different cultures. The former stands for the modern, material culture, the latter for the old primitive one. Biff takes interest in swimming and whistling; while Willy trusts Biff unwisely into the business World. The consequence is that, Biff is a character lost between the new and old World. When the trust claims upon him, he is out to shatter Willy's illusions and holds his father responsible for his own failure:

Biff: And I never get anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody! (104)

Thereafter Biff's fury is gone and he breaks down sobbing, crying. Willy is deeply moved to see all this. He realizes that Biff actually loves him. Such realization persuades Willy to face the consequence of his action and repay his sin through his self-committed death. His sole triumph in the Urban-jungle of the twentieth century is committing suicide to give his sons insurance money for a new start. Thus, with the death of Willy the family degeneration is over. Being amidst the erring men and supportless society, the Loman family is shattered. In the end, the future does not belong to them, because they do not possess a past. The true hero of the day is Charley's son Bernard, a bookish, unathletic, thoroughly novelistic lad, who in time argues before the Supreme Court, plays tennis on private courts.

REFERENCES

Miller, Arthur. (1961) *Death of a Salesman*, Pub. Penguin Group, Great Britain. | Potter, David M. (1954) "People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character", Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, P.69. | Ibid. p.11. | Tocqueville, Alexis De. (1954) "Democracy in America" 2 Vols (1835, 1840) ed. Phillips Bradley from the Henry Reeve and Francis Bowen Trans, New York, Vintageknopf, p.63. | Ibid. p.52. | Turner, Fredrick Jackson. (1972) "The significance of the Frontier in American History", The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History, ed. George Rogers Taylor 3rd ed., Levington Mass, D.C.Heath, p.22.