



Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: A Criticism of a Dream Deferred Society

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ABSTRACT

Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* is a criticism of the contemporary middle class American society that was bleeding due to the immense financial crisis of the country. The effect of the crisis was so immense that it demolished the idea of American dream from the mind of the common people and brought them almost at the threshold of utter hopelessness from where there was no way out. Being a playwright of that era of crisis, Miller depicted its vivid aspect and represented it in such a way that it no more remained an anxiety of a single family but the anxiety in general that every American faced during the time.

KEYWORDS

depression, anxiety, American Dream, crisis

According to Miller a play cannot be regarded as a great play until it extends the range of it beyond familiar relations and tends to demonstrate its communication with society. The protagonist of such play should maintain an integral social relationship in order to challenge the conventional social norms. As he says - "He should possess the worth, innate dignity, of a whole people asking a basic question and demanding its answer". (Miller, 'On Social Plays')

Death of a Salesman extends itself out of the family circle to the social. It "broaches the question of the social status, social recognition and honour which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular towards the fate of the generality of man". (qtd. from Tilak p.273) The depression that shook America gave Miller the compassionate understanding of the insecurity of man in the modern industrial society.

The play depicts the days of depression which brought a terrible financial crisis in America. The effect of the crisis was so immense that it demolished the idea of American dream from the mind of the common people and brought them almost to the threshold of utter hopelessness from where there was no way out. Being a playwright of that era of crisis Miller depicted it with utmost artistry and represented it in such a way that it no more remained an anxiety of a single family but the anxiety in general that every American faced due to the Wall Street crash in 1929. Wall Street crash was really the major incident that shook the dreamy life of the New England people after the First World War. It brought extreme depression among people regarding their own life and played a significant role in breaking the financial backbone of so many middle class Willy families. Miller's **Death of a Salesman** is a brilliant instance of that.

Death of a salesman is not so much concerned about with the life of an individual, but the life of a community that Willy represents. In other words it is not only Willy's alone tragedy but the tragedy that the entire community is facing. He, as we find in the play, is a sincere hardworking salesman, who aspires to lead an honourable, successful life and wishes to earn respect for him as well as for his family in the society. His aim in life is to earn comfort in order to provide his family a decent living. But the adverse circumstances compel him to be misfit in the society and gradually crush him along with his 'Dream'. With his suicide Willy intended to refute the accusation that he was in reality a failure in every sphere of life. He wanted to be far away from the range of those fingers that were pointing towards him to remind him constantly not only about his unsuccessfulness in his professional as well as in his family life but also about his inability to estimate himself. He wanted to efface his all failures with his insurance money, but

in reality what happened is that due Biff's rejection of monetary standard success, something that Willy decides to add up to", Willy's last desire also got wasted. The playwright himself describes his protagonist's failure as- "**Willy is foolish and even ridiculous sometimes. He tells the most transparent lies, exaggerates mercilessly, and so on. But I really want you to see that his impulses are not foolish at all. He cannot bear reality, and since he can't do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it.**" (Miller, *Salesman in Beijing*, 1984)

Some critics argue that Willy is the poor victim of the then American society that was progressing towards nowhere. Miller uses the principal protagonist of his play as a tool to criticise American institutions and values. The following typical statement represents this opinion-

"There is hardly an American of recent years who has stood wholly free and clear from the sources of corruption which destroyed Willy Loman and baffled his sons". (qtd. from Tilak p.274)

The play is symbolic of the final break down of the whole concept of salesmanship inherent in our society. Miller himself, despite his propagandist intention, has stated that he wished to counter "the law which says that failure in and in business has no right to live in..." (qtd. from Bloom p.73)

According to Kaveh Khodambashi Emami "This play is an instance of "pseudo-criticism" as termed by Adorno. This is a term coined by him to refer to those works of the culture industry that claim to be critical of the society." (p.357) It is actually so as the play alludes to the impact of the terrible crisis of 1930s on contemporary American middle class society. Willy's memories "bring together some of the contradictions between ideals and actualities that characterized this era in the united states-contradictions between moral purity and self-indulgence, rugged independence and sentimental gregariousness, grand optimism and nagging insecurity, noble generosity and pity vulgarity". (qtd. in Tilak p.275) Miller being an artist with a deep concern for his society uses his play to challenge some of the fundamental American values and institutions.

Albert A. Shea considers **Death of a salesman** as a scathing social commentary on capitalist America. As Shea writes Miller casts a score of dart -at advertising, credit sailing, and the family automobileand the subversive attitude towards sex characteristic of our time. But this man attack against the view that man is a fool if he does not get something - as much as possible -for nothing more than a smile being a good fellow and good contacts." (qtd. in Tilak p.274)

Eleanor Clarke approaches "**Death of a Salesman**" from a Marxist point of view and acknowledges it as a diluted version of the propaganda plays of the Depression decade. Asserting that it is a capitalist system that has done in Willy, Clarke says that the scene in which Willy is brutally fired after some forty years with the firm, "comes straight from the party line literature of the thirties." (qtd. in Yawale p.62)

In an article entitled as **Intra Societal Conflict in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman** Dr. Ashok B. Yawale upholds the point that society cannot be called innocent for sometimes it plays a vital role in compelling an individual to commit faults. As he writes "The play reveals both callousness of society and the exhaustion of Willy. In the very beginning of the play, Willy tells his wife Linda: "I am tired to the death". During the course of hallucination also Willy says to Ben: "I am getting awfully tired, Ben." This is not just exhaustion of a sixty years old man. The society of which he is a part has given him exhaustion and nervous breakdown. Willy is trapped by his own culture. Earlier events of Miller's life, his experience in the Depression years, collapse of the business of his father and grandfather as a result of the Depression, all these compels us to think about Miller that he may be thought to be making an attempt to present the evil of capitalism and suggest socialism as remedy in the play." (p.63)

Dr. Yawale further adds that during his early days Miller "expressed iconoclastic views on the economic order of his country, namely capitalism and that his elders were shocked by his attitude. It may be said that the play shows that conflicts are inherent in the economic structure of the country (capitalism) to which Miller belongs or to which Willy belongs in the play. There are business tycoons like Howard, Charley and Oliver, the flourishing salesman like Dave Singleman and also the failed salesman like Willy. Thus the idea of the big business is involved along with the system of capitalism. Willy's loss of job can be interpreted as the helplessness of a bourgeois, if not a proletarian, and the callous action of the capitalist Howard. In his exasperation Willy cries out, "you can't eat the orange and throw the peels away---a man is not a piece of fruit." This may be interpreted as the capitalistic exploitation of the worker. The capitalistic world, of which Willy is an inseparable part, is the world of competition where you must excel others in 'selling'; here old and tired man Willy does not sell. And Miller in 'Introduction to the Collected Plays' views that Willy Loman has broken a law, without whose protection life is insupportable, the law which says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live." (p.63)

Willy gave his life or sold it in order to justify the waste of it. The play throws a challenge to the idea of American Dream because it is the tragedy of a man troubled by the society. Willy believes in American myth that success is obtained being well liked. But he fails to realize the hidden truth that the age in which he is living does not bother about good look, what matters to the age is the wealth you have. In fact **Death of a Sales Man** is a red light for America society and Willy's death to 'New England' capitalist concepts. (<http://docslide.us/documents/american-dream-death-of-a-salesman.html>)

Eugene O' Neil comments on the failure American dream in the following lines-

"I am going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world is the greatest failure." (<http://www.cssforum.com.pk/css-optional-subjects/group-v/english-literature/10228-death-salesman-american-dream.html>) To conclude it is apt to comment that Miller has skillfully exposed the sordid condition of the contemporary American society, that was not only bleeding and lacking of some motivations but was also playing a significant part in extracting from an individual his dream, desire by making him a dream deferred man. In other words he deliberately criticises the American society with the intention of rebuilding it in such a way where liberty, equality and fraternity will predominate with the message of dispersing 'shantih ,shantihshantih'(qtd. from *The Wasteland*, 434) among people.

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