



SOCIO- POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

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ABSTRACT

The story of the twentieth century American drama is the matter of its rise and development from the deep rooted conventions in which the commercial theatre of the late nineteenth century has fallen into and has produced the places with little sense of originality. The commercial instinct dominated the stage and the dramatists yielded to the escapist taste of the exhausted theatre goers who have consumed the effeminate fare of romances and sentimentality. Towards the end of the nineteenth century changes appeared to bring in new awareness among the writers. The new century saw new minds of change blowing across the stage with the emergence of playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Imamu Baraka, Eugene O' Neil, Arthur Miller etc. The senseless melodramatic yarn is rejected and the Broadway theatre came out endlessly and it attempted to create a powerful substitute for it in the form of modern experimentation Television and Cinema appears during this period. The plays of the above mentioned playwrights are adapted to films and television and they contributed in creating awareness on the human problems.

INTRODUCTION

The injustice against the individual is strongly focused in the plays that are written in the post war years. Miller displays much apprehension about the deviation of the consumer -a materialistic tendency which was seen to engulf individual lives in an insensitive degeneration of liberal humanistic values. Miller's characters struggle with the guilt and sacrifice along the way. Their actions rooted in the unpredictable conjunction of social determinism and indestructible free will with family structure always supplying the matrix of interaction. Another aspect is that the family set up which represents the multiple positions or points of view that generates dramatic tension. Miller has proved himself a supreme artist in turning emotional force to overwhelm the audience. In that way *Death of a Salesman* and *All*

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My Sons has left the audience stunned at the final curtain or towards the end. It is the plain simplicity of his plays which has gone straight into the heart of the people and touched the deep core of their feelings and let the audience feel with the characters by touching their sympathies.

Arthur Miller has written many plays and his big plays appeared in the period between 1947 – 1955. He has acquired the position as one of the popular and foremost dramatists. His four famous plays are *All my Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1952) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955) which has won him the distinction as a notable playwright.

In this paper titled “Socio- Political Perspectives in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*”, the circumstances and contemporary economic condition that led to the fatal fall of Willy Loman is discussed in detail by comparing him with some other popular characters of other plays. Even in *All my Sons* the hero of the play commits suicide by shooting himself to death towards the end due to the guilty conscience of having killed many young pilots by supplying duplicate spare parts from his industry just to earn money and lead a better life with his family, the readers can see Loman committing suicide by leading the car he drives, to meet with an accident in order to acquire the insurance money for his sons’ bright future at least after his death. Both the heroes commit suicide but still there is a widely different reason behind their suicides. In this paper, the reasons behind the Loman’s suicide is discussed with reference to the analysis of the contemporary political and economic condition in America.

Willy Loman is a retired salesman and he has made desperate attempts to get employment again. But his irretrievable economical and financial position has created the heart-rending and forlorn situation and scenes and it makes him one of the unforgettable classic portraits in Modern American drama. Loman is an old man, who is fond of his two sons Biff and Happy. Both are grownups and has many youthful and fantasizing dreams about their future. Loman is an average employee and he has grown old and he himself is aware of his slumping abilities. He lives in a society where a man’s energy and ability is utilized

“I might have killed somebody..... I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts” (46). These words of Loman shows his journey towards mere madness.

Linda says, “Well, you’ll just have to take rest, Willy, you can’t continue this way.... Your mind is overactive and the mind is what counts dear” (*Death of a Salesman* 46). But Loman puts up a show of being brave and normal and then he has begun the days of lapsing into forgetfulness. He says,



And then all of a sudden I'm going off the road. I'm telling you, I absolutely forgot I was driving. If I would have gone the other way over the white line the core by the high class employers and own away as the wastages when they grow old (46).

Loman has become a fallen victim to this and he has become a Low – man because of his old age. Loman's boss neglects him and blames and charges him of his inability to work actively. The neglect has made Loman get the feeling of desertion and he thinks that he has become an unwanted person and starts to feel a sense of loneliness. Loman represents the common man like him who are suffering due to unemployment in the contemporary American society. Like Loman, his eldest son also seems to be jobless whereas his younger son is moderately employed.

Willy is very much attached to his family and he is ready to sacrifice anything for the well being of his family. Linda, Loman's wife is not an exception, she too loves her family a lot and always stands by the side of her husband at all times and takes care of her sons and has more concern about their future. She is fully conscious of the fact that her husband is in great danger because of his mental imbalance and the family is going to face a terrible situation. Linda is an ideal woman who shows a graceful face and remains calm and patient even at critical times keeping the worries and anxiety within her. She is helpless to the desperate tragic drama that happens before her eyes.

Linda sees Loman suffering with a sense of loneliness and also he is haunted and tormented day and night by fear. In loneliness, he starts to talk to himself and folds himself in illusion. The two main reasons for his mental imbalance are: He is not able to accept the aspect of his being put aside due to which the sense of importance for him is lost in the company where he worked. Secondly, he feels that he has lost his dignity and according to him a man without dignity has no existence at all. He is not able to understand why a man like him who works for three decades in a firm sincerely can be brushed out like a garbage. The clash of values of two different worlds creates a dramatic tension and mental dilemma in Loman's mind. Loman feels that life cannot be dominated by commercial or money based consideration and it is beyond that. But the fate is that Loman is living in a society in which, accepting this fact is difficult.

Other than the characters of Linda, Biff and Happy, there are characters like Ben and Howard. Ben is his brother and Howard is his boss's son. Loman uses to talk with Ben and Howard in illusion where Ben teaches him the aspects of monetary profits and sacrifice it all for its acquisition. Howard gives him a lecture on it. Biff and Happy are preoccupied with their own dreams of success without steps of hard work to achieve it. The main problem of



Loman is that he cannot change or adjust to go with other's opinion or decisions. He always expects others to accept his opinions and point of views and change according to that. At this juncture, the readers may be reminded of King Lear in Shakespeare's tragedy where King Lear is an old man who has never had the habit of bending or adjusting himself with others and always sticks on to his stand. He too becomes mentally disoriented and finally dies with a tragic end. Likewise Miller points out that Loman's similar plight conveys that new rich and prosperous America is going towards a frightfully arid society.

Though this play, Miller says that the growth of America is towards the worship of capitalism that exploits men and discards them when they become incapable because of old age and needs love and sympathetic treatment. Charles Dickens is also an American novelist who has focused on capitalism in some of his novels like "Hard Times". "A Tale of Two Cities etc., The capitalistic attitude teared apart the systems burgeoning on and elevating and advancing greed and cupidity for reducing human beings to mere machines in the larger wheel of factory culture. In this highly industrialized and capitalistic society, a common man is expected to be slave who will be paid for his work and the society surmises the workers to be fulfilled only when they are subservient to the structured system of injustice.

Loman is never ready to accept it and he wants to hold up his self dignity against this domination, degradation and struggles till the end. Even in illusion, Loman doesn't agree with Howard and Ben against their lectures on industrialization and capitalism. Loman does not want to accept the job from Charley, a man who also follows the principles of Capitalism. Loman is looked upon as a foolish old man who will be bubbling always in the view of the practical minded people. Thus, through the character of Loman, Miller challenges the imbalanced, modern and arid society that looks upon the people in unequal proportion by neglecting and degrading the old and disabled.

One thing is that Biff is basically a lazy buff and Loman tries to get him the job of a salesman. Biff has his own arguments but Loman does not have patience to listen to him and he says,

Linda: You shouldn't have criticized him. Willy, especially after he just got off the train. You must not lose your temper with him.

Willy: When the hell did I lose my temper? I simply asked him if he was making many money. Is that a criticism? (47).

Happy is a unlike Biff, he is worldly wise and very practical and declares that he is not happy as his name. He says "All I can do law is to wait for the merchandise manager to die. After



him, Happy will be the manager”. He has his own apartment, car and company of women. He does not have the responsibility of looking after his father though he has the love inwardly towards him. Unlike Happy, Biff is more caring. The only bitter thing for Biff is that Loman’s company with other women. This also add’s to Loman’s tormenting mental mind.

Loman does not have a peace of mind because of his joblessness and also of his beloved sons and their irresponsible behavior. That is why the takes refuge in his drama and illusions. As like the writers of romantic era, who takes refuge in nature to escape from their personal life and its tormenting thoughts, Loman also escapes from his present life and takes refuge in nature which is evident from his love for plants and trees. The dominant likeness towards nature and gardening in his mind shows that he is able to get a feeling of rootedness mixed with pastoral bliss. From this, Miller tries to say that, in the era of industrialization agriculture is not given due importance only though which one can acquire the raw sources of food. Dr. Pradhan observes,

An escape into the beauty of nature becomes one of his impossible dreams the interest in the pastoral becomes a recurrent aspect of Loman’s character and provides him with an escape from his immediate environment. It also becomes a symbol far – off unattainable happiness that Willy dreams of all his life. When his life fails to guarantee the security of his family, we know that his debts are a cause of great worry to him; Loman decides that his death must ensure it. There is a great dignity in this gesture; he kills himself preserving the precious thing he posses, his self respect.

Loman commits suicide with a thought that his insurance money which can be claimed after his death will help his son in setting a small business. Loman’s wife Linda knows that her husband holds the self dignity and the only insult for him is the humiliation by telling that he has no social standing and respect in the whims of the capitalist system.

Thus, in this play the readers can see the hero sacrificing his life itself for the sake of securing better future for his son by commit suicide. Loman is symbolized as the representative of many common men who died at the contemporary period in the arid society of America. The readers can take up the point of making a sixty year old man who is a travelling salesman as the hero of the play. He is taken off his salary because he doesn’t seem to work hard as he did in his young days, due to his declining efficiency. The objection of salary and reducing ability of him creates a sense of fear and insecurity in him. He doesn’t appear normal, looks disturbed and nervous and he starts to talks about the past continuously. His abnormal and abstracted behavior worries almost everybody in his family. The objection of salary and reducing ability of him creates a sense of fear and insecurity in him. He doesn’t appear



normal, looks disturbed and nervous and he starts to talk about the past continuously. The domestic life is disturbed because of his worried behavior.

Loman is simple and he is highly satisfied with his middle class happy life and he expects only the basic right of living happily with his family. Loman is shown as one of the victim of the business world that has persistent quench for profit alone and does not seem to have any norms or rules or laws that can support the salesman like Loman in their old age who have worked all through their life honestly for the firm in which they worked with the only aim of developing it gradually to a bright, and prospering status and for the welfare of their owners.

Loman offers to his boss to give him an office work. In act two, the readers can see him making poignant appeals to Howard, the chief of the office and Loman worked under his father in his young days as a salesman. "In those days there was personality in it Howard. There was respect comradeship and gratitude in it. Today it's all cut and there's no chance for friendship to be or personality". Loman literally pleads to Howard to retain his job.

Howard : (rolling up the card) *Willy, look....*

Willy : *I'll go to Boston.*

Howard : *Willy, you can't go to Boston for us.*

Willy : *Why can't I go?*

Howard : *I don't want you to represent us.*

I have been meaning to tell you for a long time now.

Willy : *Howard, are you firing me.*

Howard : *I think you need a good long rest, Willy*

Loman is a man who has given his best to the company and he has become absolutely useless Loman says,

I put 34 years into this firm and now you know I can't pay my insurance".

This shows that he is in need desperately and he says "you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away a man in not a piece of fruit.

Thus, he has been the symbol of many American's position whose lives were filled with inescapable misery by the capricious trends of an economy entirely dependent upon vagaries of market moods and way ward capitalistic direction.



In *Death of a Salesman* Arthur Miller shows the quick maturity which American drama attained in two or three decades of the twentieth century, emerging as one of the foremost theatre personalities of the era. He combines in his plays the realistic treatment of the contemporary life of common American and a judicious use of modernist techniques like symbolism and expressionism which provides depth to his portrayal.

Death of a Salesman can be understood both as an indictment of such a system and a sensitive portrayal of a common man's tragic end.

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