

Extraordinary Or Ephialtes: An Enquiry Into Arthur Miller's *Death Of A Salesman*

Aishwarya Bhutoria
Ma English Semester III
St. Xavier's College
Kolkata.

Abstract

Arthur Miller has poignantly amalgamated the social situation and human drama underscoring the dreams, desires and responsibilities of an American family man, Willy Loman, who is subsumed by the contradictory operation of his compunctious mind. The unbridgeable gulf between illusion-reality, past-present, idealism-pragmatism, self-confidence and self-doubt haunts the existence of Willy. The aim of fulfilling the American dream gives rise to a nightmare. He is presented to be under the misapprehension that personality (or being "well-liked") is the integral ingredient of success and effort, endurance as well as expertise were extraneous. Biff and Happy have before them an extremely erroneous representation of the Great Dream which guides them to a debauched and degenerative youth. The callous capitalist society created an exploitative system which gives rise to false needs reducing man as mere cogs in the wheel of the entire economic set-up such that Willy decides to commit suicide in order to provide Biff with an inheritance to establish himself.

Key Words: Capitalist, Great Dream, Idealism, Personality, Pragmatism.

INTRODUCTION

In 1776 on the establishment of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson stated that all men will have unalienable rights to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. *The Declaration of Independence* was a charter of the American Dream, the political manifesto had a significant role in the conditioning of the mass' mind. There were several public figures who were greatly admired, for instance, Abraham Lincoln's rise from anonymity to prominence and pinnacle of success became a major inspiration for upward mobility in society. The old American Dream that the Puritans had seen was the accumulation of wealth over time. This was supported by Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard. However, the new dream, of instant wealth earned in a twinkling by audacity and good luck, was developed after the discovery of gold in California in 1849.

John Winthrop in his famous address "A Model of Christian Charity" gave a communitarian American Dream- "We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together". In the 1931 book *Epic of*

America, James Truslow Adams popularized the phrase “American Dream” and remarked that it aimed for “a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world.” In the epilogue of *The Epic of America* he wrote it was “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man.” The American Dream makes everyone aspire to conquer the world however the question remains that, can everyone conquer the world? The American Dream “is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways.”(Cullen 6)

Arthur Miller had highlighted the theme of American Dream and its frustration and foundering in the Keller family of *All My Sons*. Joe Keller in the pursuit of happiness becomes so self-absorbed and materialistic that he forgets his social responsibility and commits a major ethical breach by supplying cracked cylinder heads to American Air Force and makes his partner Steve the scapegoat. He vehemently remarks “What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddamn business? Is that as far as our mind can see, the business? What is that, the world- the business? What the hell do you mean you did it for me? Don’t you have a country? Don’t you live in the world?” (Miller *All My Sons* 100)

Rodolpho in *A View from the Bridge* states that he did not come to America for the technologically advanced lifestyle but for work, “I want to be an American so I can work, that is the only wonder here -work.” The American dream for these expatriates was a decent wage and opportunities for earning wealth. They believed in the highly approved concept of “from rags to riches” as popularized by American author Horatio Alger.

Miller emphasizes the connection between individual and society, the past and the present, actions and their consequences, for he believed that, society is inside man and man is inside society. “Miller has always been concerned with the question of guilt and innocence, which is to say he is concerned with the moral life” (Biggsby 81). The Ibsenian and naturalist assumption became the ground for Miller’s several plays. In his plays he tries to take settings and dramatic situations from life which involves real question of righteous and unrighteous.

DILIGENCE, DEDICATION AND DREAM

Hard work was an integral ingredient of accomplishing the American dream, it came with the conviction that the consequences of determination and dedication would be success, recognition for the job well done, greater opportunities, a sense of pride and fair compensation. The capitalist world was considered to be at the crux of employment and advancement however, it also misrepresented the world to men like Willy Loman who were made to handle the tools but set out to become a cog in the wheel of the insouciant capitalist American society.

The social contract was disintegrating and America was losing its moral and economic footing, Edmund Wilson had remarked in *The Thirties: From Notebook and Diaries of the Period* “between 1929 and 1933 the whole structure of American society seemed to be going to pieces” and this collapse meant “personal life also had its endings.” Henry Ford had remarked that machinery was the new messiah however the further transition shows that money would be the new messiah. Bruce Barton manifested his unflinching optimism in a 1925 book called *The Man Nobody Knows*, which discusses Jesus Christ as history's greatest executive, who had elected and established twelve men from the bottom ranks and made them into “an organization that conquered the world.”

The concept of American dream and success was problematic and elusive. Prosperity began to be considered as a kind of morality and as a journalist Silas Bent stated- “The dollar is our Almighty”. Charley and Bernard stand as the assiduous and industrious people who become successful and possess assets though they were unadventurous, upright and not simpatico (not “well-liked”). Howard and Happy become iniquitous individuals without any compunction, the representative cases of callous and remorseless individuals who succumbed to the lure of material advancement. Frederick Lewis Allen stated in his book *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* that- “Prosperity is more than an economic condition; it is a state of mind” and with the decline of the Big Bull Market the Americans found themselves “living in an altered world which called for new adjustments, new ideas, new habits of thought, and a new order of values.”

WILLY AN EMBODIMENT OF THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Miller never shows us Willy dealing with his customers, we are only provided with the statistical information by Willy himself which raises question at the credibility of the facts. Charley in the Requiem says that Willy had no alternative but to create illusions- “A salesman is got to dream” (Miller 111) however, a pertinent question is about the fons et origo of the dream. Willy's father and Ben stand as the paragon of success, they were pioneers in their respective works and were capable of taming the wild West. They were unrestrained and uninhibited people however Willy had a sense of caution and responsibility, despite the difference of temperament Willy aspired to emulate them. His perspective is an amalgam of conflicting ideologies, he has faith in both, his adventurous upbringing and the secure cultural myth and values, therefore he is unable to achieve contentment and happiness.

Willy does not realize the value of aptitude- Ben, Biff and Bernard were all industrious in their respective fields and competent enough to be successful. Biff was elected by three universities not because of his personality or contacts but due to the necessary qualities he possessed. However, Ben and Bernard succeeded finally as they were palpably aware of their dexterity, free from illusions and invested themselves unconditionally to it. Willy becomes a

prisoner of his own concocted tales, he imagines himself to be father of a great hero, and associates Biff with a great player - “They’ll be calling him another Red Grange” (Miller 68) The idea of emulation emerges as he himself wanted to be like Dave Singleman, who could make money without leaving his room at the age of eighty-four and this made Willy decide that “selling was the greatest career”. He wanted to be like his brother Ben who “knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he’s rich!” (Miller 28)

The actuality was he was good with his tools, in the Requiem, Linda says, “He was so wonderful with his hands.” (Miller 111) The audience are reminded that Willy inherited a manual skill from his father but refused to use it in his working life as he considered it to be an inferior job. Biff’s comment, that he “never knew who he was” (Miller 111) reverberates Regan’s remark in King Lear Act I, Scene i- “he hath ever but slenderly know himself”

It is an inherent human tendency to dream of being successful however the error that he commits is of substituting the dream for the reality. Willy’s psychological condition is to be held accountable for his contrived attempts to suicide however, he also stands as a prototype American who is defeated by the very myth that drove his life. The dream is a momentary solace however it is a destructive force in the long run.

He was unable to continue his job due to his debilitated condition as well as his inability to be psychologically in the present. His past constantly haunts him, he loses control over time and exists simultaneously between the ideal past and the brutal present. He tells Linda that he opened the windshield to enjoy the warm air while driving and later he says that the windshields don’t open on the new cars—and realizes that he was thinking of “the chevvy” that he had in 1928. The reveries emerge whenever he is in a crisis. Miller in the “Introduction” to *Collected Plays* wrote- “There are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile concurrency of past and present” (122)

THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

The significance of this idea is evident in the assertion- “It is native personality, and that alone, that endows a man to stand before presidents or generals, or in any distinguish’d collection, with aplomb -and not culture, or any knowledge or intellect whatever”. (Whitman 397) Willy began believing that some people possess inherent virtues that they can achieve success not by working hard for it but simply by being “very well-liked”. He tried to commodify himself by being “well-liked” so that people would buy his products for his sake.

Bernard was a good friend to the Loman boys, he comes to remind Willy- “if he doesn’t buckle down he’ll flunk math!” Willy due to his conceited attitude is contemptuous of the hard-working and talented Bernard, he vehemently responds- “there’s nothing the matter with him!

You want him to be a worm like Bernard? He's got spirit, personality..." (Miller 27) The father and sons mock Bernard for being a dedicated student. The irony of the situation becomes evident in the second act when he has to acknowledge the capability and confidence of the young man- "I regard you as a very brilliant man, Bernard. I value your advice" (Miller 71) and Willy asks the 'secret' behind his advancement. However, he has to lie about Biff's position and tell that Bill Oliver (a great sport goods manufacturer) has invited him for assistance from the west- "he's been doing very big things in the west. But he decided to establish himself here. Very big." (Miller 70)

He is astounded that "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such- personal attractiveness, gets lost" (Miller 6) though he himself is adrift in a sea of debt and has lost his bearings. When he elucidates to Biff the etiquettes he should present before Bill Oliver he proclaims- "It's not what you say, it's how you say it- because personality always wins the day." (Miller 50) He is deluded by the idea- "Be liked and you will never want" (Miller 21) and he tries to sell 'himself', ultimately, he does so by selling his life for \$20,000. Charley later enunciates- "Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked." (Miller 75)

Charley requests him to give up the infeasible illusion as the "only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that." (Miller 75) However, Willy continues to wallow in his insubstantial and delusory ideas: "Go to Filene's, go to the Hub, go to Slattery's Boston. Call out the name Willy Loman and see what happens! Big Shot!" (Miller 45) Willy's false pride, ego or envy makes him turn down the job offered by Charley, which could be the last alternative to redeem himself. He also tells him, not to be such an insouciant and doting father as because of him Biff "never trained" himself for anything thus could not "ever catch on".

Willy is beguiled by the idea of popularity to an extreme extent that he buys a car that has a name and a refrigerator that had the best advertisement, both these products do not achieve the standards that were promised (Charley's refrigerator though less advertised assuaged the users) thereby, accentuating their misleading nature. His fatal error is that he built his life and self-esteem on the opinion of others thus, he was stuck between the two diametrically opposed fatal pulls- to be better than his brother and to be loved by him. These impossible contradictions conclude disastrously.

MATERIALISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Miller represents capitalism as creating an exploitative system which gives rise to false needs. He deals with the themes of needs, desires and responsibilities of the American family and even more specifically the American male. Miller's achievement rests in successfully

bridging the gulf between a social situation and human drama. Joe Keller, becomes a victim of remorseless forces of capitalism which only recognizes economic value. Thus, arises the question that who worked for no gain during the war?

Willy is badly treated by his employer, after many years of faithful service, he loses first his salary and then his job. Willy has an outburst- “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit!” (Miller 62) His lifestyle is compared unfavourably with that of his employer. The Wagner firm is not a huge enterprise and Howard’s concern for the expansion of the business is justified however the ruthless business efficiency that he demands is untenable (“I can’t take blood from a stone”). Howard belittles Willy by referring to him as ‘kid’. He has access and availability of leisure and luxury (maid, coke, radio) he is concerned about and boasts of his recorder which is a “fascinating relaxation” though worth a hundred and a half dollar.

THE PERPETUATION OF THE CYCLE OF DISILLUSIONMENT

Happy, like his father, is a delusional character, he too has got a misconception about the American dream and the very notion of being successful. He subscribes to the conventional aspirations of an individual that is to get married and establish his own family. When Biff enquires to him “Are you content?” he gives an agitated reply- “Hell, no!” (Miller 11) Biff surmises the truth of Happy’s professional life as- “You big blow, are you the assistant buyer? You’re one of the two assistants to the assistant, aren’t you?” (Miller 104) His idiosyncratic beliefs or impressions

Are contradicted by reality or rational argument, in the Requiem, he continues to possess the uncomprehending clamour of Willy and contends- “I’m gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can have— to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I’m gonna win it for him.” (Miller 111) When a person fails to make sense of his own life or achieve his aspirations, he tries to make sense of it through the lives of their children however, Willy apparently seems to be failing in this aspect as well.

THE SPIRIT OF REJUVENATION AND THE RECTIFICATION OF ERROR

Biff as a high school boy basks in the moment of glory and enjoys all the adulations and attention that he receives. He idealized and idolized his father however, when the truth of Willy’s adultery dawns upon him he rejects not only his father but also his beliefs. He was a promising youngster who could have grown into a sensible adult (like Bernard) had his father guided him to be diligent and dedicated towards his goals instead of merely focusing on charismatic personality, contacts and charm. He realizes that the perceived pinnacle of the American dream is a facade and a surge of anger overpowers him as he cries out- “I’m nothing! I’m nothing!”

(Miller 106) as his inflated ideals and vainglorious boast of personal infallibility made him incapable of working.

He has a perspicuous outburst- “Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?” (Miller 106) at such a crucial point too, Willy is unable or rather incapable to gauge the futility of his dreams. There is a lingering uncertainty regarding renouncing the corporate world, however, he would ultimately be happier as he recognizes his true self- “I know who I am”. At the conclusion he presents an accuracy of perception on his father’s basic failing – “He had the wrong dreams.” (Miller 112)

THE FEMALE AS A VICTIM OF THE MISINTERPRETED DREAM

Linda’s existence is overpowered and overshadowed by Willy, the description given about her by Miller is only associated to her husband- “Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy’s behaviour -she more than loves him, she admires him”, her love for him is akin to worship. She grasps the strangulating reality (aware of the complex financial situation) however, indulges in Willy’s silly excuses and delusions, further encouraging him in the self-deception. Willy remarks “You’re my foundation and my support, Linda” (Miller 7), she assists him in evading the exigencies of his psychological condition- “Maybe it was the steering ... maybe it’s your glasses ... why not take an aspirin?” (Miller 4) She had always tried to protect him (boosting his confidence by calling him the “handsomest man”) however, at the conclusion of the play she realizes that the illusions she had participated in were utterly false, - “Where are the people he knew?” (Miller 110) His defeat is her defeat as well thus, the female is a victim of the inadvertently misconstrued dream.

FAMILY AN INTEGRAL PART OF AMERICAN DREAM

The American dream saw a family as the foundation of a man and the society, in the 1940s, the father was still viewed as the provider of family and there was a sense of awe and devotion towards him. Willy is accepted and adored with his shortcomings. Until the discovery of his infidelity Biff idealized and idolized him. Their dreams have a sense of complete unanimity, they have dreamt together so are deceived and defeated together. The ethos of family also binds employees in business, for instance, Willy feels emotionally attached to Howard as he had named him and it could be seen as a deliberate action by Mr. Wagner. Howard greets Willy as if he was a family member and makes him hear the recorded voice of his child however, when Willy attempts to seek favour from him he is outright rejected.

CONCLUSION

The commencement of the play presented a picture that is absolutely true to the title of the play, the idea of ‘death’, ‘dying’, ‘dead’ and claustrophobia (‘boxed in’) hovers in the air however this termination carries no sense of eternal peace. The concept of dream and deceit are

seamlessly integrated into the psyche of the Lomans, Willy and Happy never realize it though Biff commences to acknowledge the schism. The statement- “Be liked and you will never want” (Miller 21) proves to be downright flawed. Thus, the question remains that “How can a person keep his sense of right and wrong while grappling for a living in a business world which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest?” (Bloom 42) one who is not merely physically but also psychologically, emotionally and economically fit.

Miller was a radical playwright his plays did castigate the American society however he also had the political-economic aspects in mind. The colloquial is blended with the consequential in his plays. Miller underscored the element of morality and ambition amalgamated in an individual’s life which affected the familial and the fraternal relationships. Mutual trust and respect which are the touchstones of a relationship is weakened. It shows the callousness of a capitalist society where wealth overpowers humanitarian values (humans reduced to a piece of fruit).

Robert A. Martin wrote in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, it is through his “essays that Miller speaks most directly of his social and dramatic convictions and of his craftsmanship as a playwright, they comprise a body of critical commentary that is both distinguished and significant in the history at American drama and culture.” The dramatization of the concluding hours of Willy’s life is highly realistic and manifests the workings of human psyche impeccably. The theme as well as its treatment fits in well with the reality of our existence, portrayal of characters and human motives are genuine, there is nothing impracticable or fictional about it

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