

American Dream: A perception on Change in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract -Modernism puts several positive aspects on the life of the people through the materialistic things but on the other side it puts some deadly and negative impacts on the human. It is the story of not a single man or society but of all the societies which are under the influence of modernity. In this way, this study will prove its relevancy with every common man or society. Also, it will showcase its relevancy with every aspect of middle class family that how a failure in any section of life destroys the whole relationships.

Key words- Modernism, American Dream, Death , Salesman,

America is a land of opportunities and dreams. People of various ethnicities dwell here from long. Since 1900's, many migrations were made to America and still going on to the present date. The main motive behind this is to achieve a better and prosperous life. „American Dream“ is the term which defines all these qualities of the nation. This term was first used by a historian James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America* in 1931. According to Adams, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. This concept can be understood by broad and narrow perspectives. In broader sense, it leads to democracy, equal rights for everyone and freedom from all the shackles which hinders the growth of an individual. In narrow sense, it depends on the individual's hard work and dedication.

But the definition of American Dream has been changed from time to time. After the period of Great Depression in the economy of America, the definition also changed. This economic crisis is not the only reason for the change of this but World War II also gave co- operation to this. After the world wars, world lost his belief in humanity, hard work and honesty. With the development in industries and technology, life of a middle class man had changed totally. In this research proposal, it is going to be discussed that how the life of a middle class man goes under certain circumstances and his mentality leads to his failure in life. His biased interpretation of American Dream devastates his whole life. All the features mentioned above are responsible for the downfall of this character Willy Loman. This character of Arthur Miller in his most famous and renowned work “*Death of A Salesman*” gave the insights of a middle class American man. Miller's characterization made this work a piece of art for

the future generations also. This play was first premiered in 1949 in Broadway and it put number of awards in the hand of the writer. In other novels also, Miller portrays the same quality of protagonists in his plays.

The situations that were being used in this play, was inspired from the personal life of Arthur Miller somehow. To understand this, we have to take an insight to the life of this American playwright.

Arthur Asher Miller, popularly known as Arthur Miller (1915-2005) was an American playwright, essayist and a prominent figure of modern American theatre. Miller is famous for the amalgamation of societal pressures and the psyche of modern depressed man in his characters.

„*Death of A Salesman*’ is the magnum opus of the playwright. He was the son of a garment manufacturer in Manhattan. From the childhood, he was very fond of playing the sports like hockey and football. This happy going life of Miller soon got the reflection of gloomy developments of national scale of great economic depression. This put an adverse effect on the mind-set of Arthur Miller. The whole American industrial society had to suffer this. Miller’s father also get burnt by this depression and decided to leave Manhattan and moved to Brooklyn.

Miller was not a very bright student. He passed his school with an ordinary score and failed to continue his graduation studies. Unwillingly, he had to join a warehouse. When he had saved enough money to afford his college education, he joined the University of Michigan. He began to write the plays here. *All My Sons* was the first success of Arthur Miller as a playwright which gained him the award of Tony.

Death of A Salesman, next play of Miller, published in 1949, became the most popular and renowned work of American literature for centuries. Miller again won Tony award and Pulitzer Prize for this piece of art. This play is based on the tragic life of the protagonist Willy Loman. His life rushes to a dead-end through society’s refusal to offer him an opportunity to work and allow him to prove his worth. It established Arthur Miller as one of the major and influential playwrights of the century. Despite of moans and groans from critical quarters, the play drew wide attention and ran more than seven hundred shows. Robert W. Corrigan says about this play

Miller’s passionate concern that attention be paid to the aspirations, worries and failures of all men.....and more especially of the little man who is representative of the best and worst of an industrialized democratic society.....has resulted in plays of great range and emotional impact.... Miller’s own sense of involvement with modern man’s struggle to be himself, is revealed in his own growth as an artist and has made him one of the modern theatre’s most compelling and important spokesmen. (Rajimwale, 2017)

In his personal life, Miller married three times. Firstly, Mary Grace Slattery became his first

wife. Then he separated from his first wife and married Marilyn Monroe, who was a sex symbol at that time. This marriage lasted only for four years. He then married with Inge Morath, a photographer with whom Miller have a daughter named Rebecca. After the play *Death of A Salesman*, Miller wrote many other plays like *The Crucible*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, *A View From the Bridge*, *After the Fall* and *The Price*. But no other play could give Miller that kind of popularity that *Death of A Salesman* did. Miller appears to believe what defines a man are not the social and political factors, though it is difficult to avoid them, but his own inability to control the circumstances, the tragic weakness to come to terms with both the external pulls and the inner conflicts. Depression years undoubtedly caused him to look closely into their impact on family ties, mutual trust and mental health of the individuals. He saw families crumbling under the sense of insecurity, the fear of an unknown future and an urge to change it.

Arthur Miller died in Connecticut due to a cardiac arrest surrounding from his family members and friends. His daughter Rebecca Miller shot a documentary on the life of his father under the name Arthur Miller: Writer. It is the plain simplicity of his plays that went straight into the heart of the people to touch the core of their feelings, bending their sympathies in such a way as to enable them to identify themselves with the characters. This plain structure of his plays can be said to constitute their major force.

Death of A Salesman is the most renowned work of Arthur Miller. It is the story of a retiring salesman Willy Loman. The word „Loman“ describes that it is the story of not a single but every middle or low man. It could be the reason that this play is the most appealing to every kind of the audience. Its impact was greater than any other play of the playwright. Miller employs a little complex character in building up the tragic progression of the play. Willy Loman is a fond father of two grown up boys, Biff and Happy who are given to a lot of dreaming and fantasizing about the future. In a world where an individual's worth is measured on the basis of how much profit he can bring to the company, Loman experiences humiliating treatment and is utterly ignored, since his capacity has been considerably lowered. His desperation grows and panic fills his heart, driving his mind crazy. He daydreams, babbles illogically and mostly to himself and shows alarming signs of mental disorientation. He had a touring job and as long as he was young and capable, he enjoyed it immensely. But his firm, seeing that he is no longer able to work as hard as he used to do before, decides to terminate his services.

Loman is a loving father and quite an attached husband. His wife gives to him and their children all the care and love she is capable of. Nevertheless Linda is fully conscious of the fact he is in great danger of losing his mental balance and the entire family is facing a dire situation.

Her outward poise and patience hide an incessantly worried and anxious mind. She is a

helpless audience to a desperately tragic drama relentlessly unfolding before her eyes. She knows that her husband holds his personal dignity most dear; there is no greater humiliation for him than to be told that he has no social standing and respect because both are beholden to the vagaries of capitalist system. His tragedy is that the world pushed him aside and has ceased to consider him a useful human being. It is this need to protect his self-respect that causes him to persistently reject the friendly offer of job from his old time friend, Charley.

There is also a typical Miller subplot in the play where the parental relation suffers breach to the trust. Happy and Biff are not only anxious about the deterioration in their father's mental health but frantically look for some employment so that they could bring comfort to their father and ease off their mother's mind. But the discovery of Willy's liaison with a woman creates a major upset in their relation. The feeling of betrayal is deeply felt by the boys especially when they see how devoted had been their mother to him all her life. But this soon blows over as they see that their father faces a bigger crisis in his life, his mind is fast becoming disoriented with the gloom deepening. Finally, suicide appears to Loman as the only relief. He has an insurance policy whose premium he has been remitting from the money borrowed from Charley. With the assurance that with this insurance money, his sons may be able to set up a small business Willy Loman kills himself.

The play provoked a great wave of reaction across the country. Arthur Miller has always been interested in the trajectory of man's decline in pursuing his aspirations in a society that does not understand them. There is a larger dream-the much-trumpeted American dream, which sucks up all other dreams, the sense of life and the meaning of human worth. Willy Loman is a small man. He wants himself to be recognized and live peacefully. Even that small desire is snuffed out in the so called competitive society. Family is taken by the author as a microcosm of the society to show the contrast between two sides of modern society-the greedy race for greater acquisition and the basic emotional value to its members for what they are. That humane face of our society is in truth waning under the dispensation of a new society whose „American Dream“ envisages economic power. It also shows that the cost of making others comfortable is the life of another individual.

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