



Impact of Capitalism on Family Values in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

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Abstract: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) revolves around Willy Loman who worked as a travelling salesman for Wagner Company for more than thirty years. The play depicts the mental degradation of Willy Loman, who is a petty salesman and whose ostensible doctrines for material success turn into tragedy when he comes to know that he is no longer wanted by his company. The play effectively deals with the failure of American dream of success, as the tragic flaw of Willy Loman is that he wanted to be rich and prosperous by hook or crook. The research paper explores and examines the impact of capitalism on family values. Moreover, the play also raises the fundamental question - What are the values that a man lives by? It is a tragedy of a middle-class common man who died in common environment/situation. Willy was doomed to his fate because there are certain factors which are beyond his control.

Keywords: Mental degradation, Doctrines, Ostensible, Capitalism, Family Values, Doomed, Middle-class.

The modest endeavour of the present research paper is to study the impact of capitalism on family values in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller who was awarded Pulitzer Prize in the field of drama for this masterpiece. The play very well narrates the mental decline of Willy Loman, a salesman whose frivolous beliefs of success turn into tragedy when he comes to realise that the company no more needs his services. There are certain key factors which directly or indirectly effect his family. In this context, the existing American capitalist system plays a vital role. So the play deals with the clash between an individual and the uneven American dream. Willy is misguided by his false notions of success which ultimately lead to his disillusionment.

Before we discuss the impact of capitalism on family values in the play it would be worthwhile to know what capitalism is? Capitalism is an economic order where the products are owned by private businessmen. Labours who are employed by business owners get their wages for their work. They have no hold on the means of production in a capitalist economy. Under capitalist system, private individuals, businessmen, producers and investors have no restraints, rather they decide where to make investments, what to produce and sell at which price. Workers do not have any claim on the means of production or on the profits which are directly generated by the labour. In this capitalist system of production, the capitalists have their complete possession of goods. In case a worker, in a watch factory, takes home a watch they have made, it will be considered a theft thereby alienating the workers from labour.

In USA, capitalist economic system led to access to education as also economic mobility. Concept of labour over-time and labourers working fewer hours in better conditions, are the by-products of this system. Lakhs of men and women came into service and the production also increased resulting in disappearance of unemployment. More and more African Americans and other minorities got jobs. Between 1865 and 1920, USA became the world's dominating industrial capital nation. USA has been a leading country in the world to clearly follow capitalism. Today, United States have global corporations such as Apple, Amazon Google, Microsoft and Facebook owing to innovations led by capitalism. Interestingly, US federal system of governance does not directly control these establishments. The period of 1950s and 1960s often stand out in the people's minds and have been identified as the golden period of American capitalism.



Aristotle, while defining the qualification of an ideal tragic hero, says that tragic hero should be a person of an eminent status or exalted position. All Shakespearean tragic heroes except a few, also fulfil this condition but Miller's conception of tragedy is altogether different. Miller says in this context: "I believe that the common man is apt a subject for tragedy in the highest sense as Kings were."¹ He upholds the view that the tragic hero may not be a person of an eminent position. The title of the play *Death of a Salesman* makes it clear that Willy Loman is not an extraordinary figure. The play effectively deals with the materialistic aspects of life in the contemporary American society and Willy is a common man working as a petty salesman. The story is told partly through the mind and memory of Willy Loman. The periods of the play oscillate between a point of time in 1928 and another time in 1942. Interestingly, the play is plotted in such a way as to show the happiness of the past, hopeful past and how these hopes and expectations of the past aggravate the pathetic plights of the present.

Actually in the scenes of the past we see how Willy Loman has based his life on false notions because of which he trapped himself in a situation inescapable. Working as a travelling salesman with the Wagner Company, for the thirty-four years, one day he suddenly came home as he couldn't concentrate on his driving due to fatigue. He says to his wife Linda, "I'm tired to the death. (The flute has faded away. He sits on the bedside beside her, a little numb.) I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda."²

At this juncture, he enquires about his son Biff who came home after a long time. He goes in the past when Biff was a senior in High School and playing great in football consequent upon which he was offered a scholarship. But the frustration level of Loman increased when Biff failed in Maths and couldn't succeed in life. Biff tried in many jobs but he couldn't do well. His father had high expectations of him when he says: "Never leave a job till you are finished - remember that" (P.16). Biff wanted to explain his failures to his father and goes to Boston where he found his father in the company of an unknown woman in a hotel which disillusioned him. It would be pertinent to quote Jean Gould in this context:

"Here the playwright not only placed on trial the moral values of his central character - Willy Loman, the salesman - but a society that by competition compels its individuals to forsake native talents in favour of achieving material success at the price of human dignity."³

Throughout the play, Willy struggles while fighting with the oddities of capitalist American society thus adversely affecting his family values. When Willy is to meet the boys, during dinner, in a restaurant, he is so overwhelmed in the company of his boys that he decides to ask young Howard Wagner, the owner of the company he works, regarding a job in New York for him. The problem with Willy is that he wants "to evaluate himself justly"⁴.

When Willy was without job, he goes to an old friend and neighbour, Charley to borrow some money so that he can pay his insurance premium. Moreover, to make his plight more pathetic he posed that fifty dollars a week, which he was getting from his friend, was his salary. Earlier Charley offered him a job in New York but he refused to work for him. On the other hand, Biff and Happy meet in a restaurant where Biff tells Happy that he wants to tell everything to his father about his failures as he had no job now. But Willy, who always lives far away from the harsh realities of life, refuses to listen to what Biff says. Biff, out of frustration, leaves the restaurant. Happy who is in the company of two girls follows Biff leaving Willy all alone. The problem with Willy is that he is also a victim of circumstances and is exhausted as said by his wife Linda. What she says to Biff, her elder son, in this context, will help the argument:

"I don't say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He is not the finest character that ever lived. But he is a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He is not to be allowed to fall into a grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. You called him crazy" (P.38).

Ultimately, Willy becomes symptomatic of hallucinations as he started talking to his brother Ben who has died nine months ago. When Wagner Company threw him away, dark face of capitalism becomes crystal-clear. Willy, out of frustration and dejection commits suicide. He resolves on suicide because he thinks that with the help of twenty thousand dollars of his insurance money, Biff could settle down in life. He always used to think that larger number of people will come to attend his funeral but, ironically speaking, no one came to attend his funeral which is also reflective of the failure of American capitalist society.

Thus we can say that Willy Loman and his family are direct victim of the myth of American dream of success as also of the prevailing capitalist system of society. The tragic-flaw in his character is



that he wanted to be rich and prosperous at any cost. When he was thrown out by the Howard Wagner's firm, American capitalist system can be held responsible. The play very well projects the mental degradation of Willy whose frivolous and ostensible parameters of success turn into tragedy. His shaky ideals ultimately make his sons revolt against him. To be more clear, he almost ruined his sons as one of them becomes a womanizer and the other becomes a thief. He could not uphold familial values due to himself as also because of social system. Moreover, in the existing capitalist system of America, every business or salesman could not be successful. Besides, money cannot be everything in life. It can be a means to lead life smoothly not an end itself. The play very well depicts the failure the myth of American dream of success which ultimately led to downfall of the social and familial values.

References:

- [1]. Arthur Miller, In Introduction to *Death of a Salesman*, (New Delhi; UBS Publishers, 2003), P.vii.
- [2]. Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, (Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2008), P.2. All subsequent references to the text of the play are from the same edition with relevant page numbers given with parentheses immediately after the quotation.
- [3]. Jean Gould, *Modern American Playwrights*, (Bombay: Bombay Popular Prakashan, 1969), P.252.
- [4]. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and Common Man", *The Theatre essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 4.