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Capitalistic Discourse and Individual: A Social Study of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a well recognized work for its anti-capitalistic inclination. This popular reading arises out of the tendency to put forth the notion that the play is a propagandistic piece of writing. Through this paper an attempt has been made to reveal the ambivalence of the text due to the origin of the work in America. Even though some of the characters other than titular hero, Willy Loman, superficially pretends to be idealistic, they are no longer like that as they also are trapped, and hence victims of Capitalism, who perceives man without capital in Capitalistic society is a tragic figure rather than conveying the idea that Capitalism is bad. The objective of the paper is to reveal how this idea is conveyed through the textual frame work: the character formation, dialogues and plot structure. In this way the paper tries to explore the indirect working of discourse with its strategy of taming the individual.

Key words:

Capitalism, Discourse, Individual, tragedy, success

Obligation and freedom may appear to be contradictory whether in the circle of family or in the wider spectrum of society. At times the legal terminologies such as right and duties could be possibly bind these polarities: rights are supposed to be formed for the well being of the individual and responsibilities for the welfare of the country. But for every country the responsibilities vary as the governing principle of every country will be the outcome of the set of values legitimized by the society consisting of the citizens of the state. This value system is no dictum voiced through divine prophesies. Ultimately the values and morals every society internalized can be the sum total of the societies' observations, the trials and tribulations that made it as it is, the power it acquired through turmoil, the stability or instability of the political structure, the geographical position, the status of the county in the atlas of controlling forces and so on. In the historical progression each society accepted or discarded multiple art forms, which got currency during the development of the society. Sara Mills in her debut book *Discourse* analyses the functioning of power relations in shaping the 'production of utterances, texts' in terms of cultural theory following Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Joanna Thornborrow and says that the influence of the equations of power on the participants can be explained in terms of analyzing discourse.(Mills 9) Michel Foucault calls discourse as a binding force that maintains the structure of the society as it is by controlling and codifying individual's actions,

thoughts and beliefs and observations. Discourse stabilizes the structure of the society by implementing its judicative and veridicative functions. In that way it not only maintains the status quo but also put forth the notions about the validity of the duals such as truth/ falsehood, moral/immoral, legitimate /illegitimate and so on. Discourse being the vehicle of control it is the creation of the powerful and it works through the individual's casual acceptance of the reality. This is effected by means of cultivating special kind of knowledge capable of converting a free individual slave to his own beliefs. This is the way how subjectification of the individual takes place. To use Foucauldian terminology epistemes i.e. preconceptions leading towards the truth, convey messages of conformity towards the individual. But every discourse being impure contains counter discursive elements. These counter discursive elements could, to some extent, blow tempests of unrest in the psychological realm of individuals in whom the conflict between the societal norms of success or failure and the self concept of private virtues pertaining to the notions of success through another looking glass are constantly in tug of war.

Theorizing drama would be an act of redefining the governing principle of an orthodox society for Aristotle, who defines the form of art that he found to be the greatest i.e. tragedy, as the imitation of a serious complete action with the purpose of bringing forth proper purification of emotions. Another playwright and theoretician of twentieth century Bertolt Brecht, by introducing alienation technique, keeps the audience aware of the stage happening as something detached from life. Both of them acknowledge the fact that audience is the integral part of dramatic presentation and each word pronounced in favour of drama should include the actual or implied audience. At this juncture the purpose of writing and producing plays are seriously studied and the result produced is that a play should make the audience empathize with the dramatic realities either immediately or afterwards. The reason for this type of an evaluation appears to be quite simple: drama collects its raw material from the society i.e. from its manners, values, myths, ideals and traumas. Ultimately society creates plays which later contribute to the society either as a mirror or as a reformer.

Terminologies such as public sphere and private sphere tend to overlap when it comes to the question of whether a separate kind of existence of the individual is possible in the culturally fluid territory. Analyzing literature through the premises of cultural studies opens up novel arenas of insights to estimate the normalized patterns which are significant to our everyday life. If viewed through the perspective of cultural studies the proliferated notions of autonomy of art appear to be no longer existent. The pitfall of putting the ideology of the writer on the text considering it to be the ideology proposed by the text could have been a fatal blunder which was questioned by post-structural theoreticians. Cultural studies being a critique of the critique analyses the negotiations of celebrated critique of capitalism i.e. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a construct containing the elements of capitalism. If described as a tragedy of a man who cannot satisfy the criteria of success put forth by the capitalistic society, would be an oversimplification of the complex ramifications imprinted in the multifaceted textual framework of the play. Coming to Christopher Lasch's terminology,

‘Cultural Narcissism’, culture is seen as the notion of competitive individualism, where the ultimate aim is the hedonistic need to acquire wealth, to become a better consumer. This is narcissism in the sense that it limits the creativity to materialistic gains. (Peters 107) But it moves side by side with the concept of American Dream. Though the notion American dream seems to be collective, due to the competitive nature of society, this sense of unity is threatened to the level of decay.

The play *Death of a Salesman* was considered to be a modern tragedy and the protagonist, Willy Loman was elevated to the level of a tragic hero, even though he could not capture the legacy earlier tragic heroes attained. Was he an Estragon or Vladimir, waited for Godot? Such a thought brought forth some images pertaining to the very existence of Willy. Willy lived in the nostalgic imaginary realm of the Edwardian twilight, where Britain was the superior power and America did not achieve its then professed glory. Nostalgia is an idealistic notion that appears before the individual as mirages of future. This was the unique problem of Willy. When the reality of the existence of the desert of America, where the oases of material wealth and the corresponding apparent success is revealed, the only remedy he found is committing suicide. Embracing of death by the individual before it comes to conquer a person is essentially tragic. But as far as Willy is concerned, the reason of his tragedy is ambiguous in the sense that more than the society, the inertia of his sons and the sense of guilt arising out of the patriarchal concept he internalized i.e. a father should invest something for the future of the family resulted in his tragedy. So Willy’s tragedy is more personal than political. But everything personal is political. Willy being depicted as a man having a family, and the family is more or less appear to be a traditional kind of it as the father is a working man, mother house wife, children beneficiaries. The title leads to the notion that *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy because Willy dies at the end. But that is not the structural end of the play. It contains a requiem. That requiem though intends to mourn the death of Willy Loman, undoubtedly establishes the fact that it being a calamity of everyman, it could not induce tears even in the eyes of his own wife, Linda. Another view pertinent is that it would be Linda’s tragedy. The reason for putting it is manifold. If a person could not cop up with the societal norms struggled to overcome it by small scale measures. If she lost the only soldier, it would be a tragedy. So it is Linda’s tragedy. Also she was deceived by her husband whom she loved very much despite all his mannerisms and failures. So she is an idealistic wife. Even if the guilt made him die, the loss is hers as the two sons could not offer much to her is a realistic thought. Possibly, Linda would be ‘Mother Courage’ without avarice in another sense. She is like the Brechtian heroine in the sense that she tries to be practical internalizing the dictum: “wherever life has not died out/ it staggers to its feet.”(Brecht 93)This could be probably the reason why she could not cry at Willy’s death. She consoles Willy saying that the last installment of their mortgage is about to be paid and after that it would belong to them. (51) She believes in gradual growth and mediocre success that Willy rejects. Also she did not accept utopian notions like “The Jungle is dark but full of diamonds” (100) .

The working principle of Capitalism is money: the acquisition and consumption. Again its primary concern is the contentment of the individual by materialistic gains. Its motto is that of success and the definition of success is in terms of wealth. This is the way how the equation moves on. This is well highlighted in America by adopting the name New England. In a profit oriented society the ideology being Capitalistic, the deciding factor regarding the worth of the individual is his productivity i.e. his ability to execute the plans within a short period. This is what the employer, whether it is Wagner or Howard, expected of Willy. When he could satisfy the criteria he was a comfortable employee for them and when he fails he deserves termination. Howard cunningly puts it to Willy when he says: "Kid, I can't take blood from a stone" (58). Willy might have also believed in retirements. But the paraphernalia of success and contentment prevented him from accepting it. Dave Singleton Willy's epitome, the success incarnate at the age of eighty four beckoned him back to selling where he thought of improving himself by means of technological devices such as telephone.

Competition paved the way for rat race in an industrialized society where fittest would be good competitor rather than an individual whose faith is in co-existence. Capitalism is individualistic as it underlines the success as success of individual than a collective venture. The only objective of life is as Willy remarked "Lick the world." (44). Pride and jealousy are the outcomes of this unhealthy competition. This could be the reason for Willy's denial for the job opportunity offered by his friend Charley. In such a society the means of acquisition of plenitude through the medium of business is better appreciated. This idea, due to its charm of becoming an employer who has not only wealth but also power, is the destiny of the next generation- Biff and Happy are the representatives. The writer uses different moulds to carve the nature of the young men. Biff was, at the outset, inclined towards idealism. But this idealism is only limited to family and he, instead of doing introspection thrusts his idealism on his own father. His attitude is rather ambivalent than idealistic. Though he believes in capital as the source of success, his method of gaining money is through the medium of agriculture and farming. In that he resembles Konstantin Dmitrich Levin in *Anna Karenina*. He was a misfit in deviating from the common and modern notions of living as Willy says, "a man who can't handle tools is not a man" (28).

The message of Capitalism is not something vest to one generation but to generations. The children who uphold the values of capitalism as an inheritance would be the future proponents of this ideology. Miller suggests this concept when he makes Howard's son read 'The Capital..'(54) though in a different context. Here Willy would be the authorial voice when he says, "He will make an announcer someday". (54) Another striking characteristic of Capitalism highlighted in *Death of a Salesman* is the vacuum in relationships. Not only children but also parents would be interested in getting profit from the capital they invested upon their children. Howard's son may be uttering what he is, without fully understanding what he says. The moralistic code of capitalism is not Victorian. It would be capable of pleasing others at any cost, whether you are true to the second person or not. Biff is a failure according to Happy, the

man bearing pleasure in his name itself, because he never tries to make people pleased (39). This is what Willy proposed when he tells the children not to give any promises to girls. A man who has values in a valueless society would fall into his tragic fate due to lack of identification. This alienated self would be the spokes person of cynicism. Biff is a cynic in this regard. His attitude is a double edged sword pointing to both the individual and the society alike.

Interestingly Willy Loman perceives individuals collectively are responsible for competition as he says the material prosperity giving rise to rise of population and consequently maddened competition. The effect of such a competition is expecting growth at the cost of the death of others. The conversation between Biff and Happy is evidence good enough to substantiate it:

Biff: ...You're a success, aren't you? Are you content?

Happy: Hell, no!

Biff: Why? You are making money, aren't you?

Happy (*moving about with energy and expressiveness*): All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to die. And suppose I get to be a merchandise manager? He's a good friend of mine... (11)

Linda is the only person who is free from such trifles. She tries to dissuade Willy when he lays the insurance card on the table. Capitalism gives rise to the development about private property and importance of individual and the inevitable result was the rise of insurance companies. Individuals, finding out the loopholes in the offer document, exploit the company for the future of the family. As far as Willy is concerned, when he felt that he is invalid, he wished to end his life. Curiously enough the method he adopted for suicide is a money making strategy as he hides his suicide under the guise of an accident. That is what Capitalism does on the individual: expecting one's own or others' death for material success. But contrary to the expectation of the individual who embrace death for money, such an individual would not be perceived as a martyr or a man who had done a sacrifice. So Capitalism, against every other ideology, will not produce martyrs but victims. But as Charley remarks: "Nobody dast blame this man." (105). Individual and society are equally responsible for this disgrace. But the dominant pattern of discourse being monetary, no option is left other than wait for a counter discourse. With the Salesman, the whole human race has got to dream; 'it comes with the territory'.(105)

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