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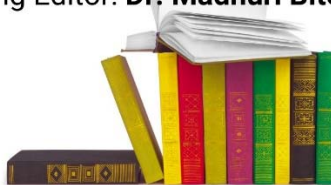
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Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* in the Light of Sanatana Dharma

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Abstract:

This paper aims to discuss Arthur Miller's '*The Death of a Salesman*' in the light of Sanatana Dharma. Analysing Miller's play '*The Death of a Salesman*' through the lens of eternal Dharma offers an enriching perspective by juxtaposing the play's existential dilemmas with the timeless principles of duty, and righteousness. The familial ties in the play illustrate the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities to loved ones. Willy's failures and aspirations impact his relationships with his sons Biff and Happy, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals within their duties. The play focusses on themes like duty, reality vs. illusion, and the pursuit of wealth/material wealth. Miller portrayed the character of Willy to battle the materialistic world in the then American society and drove home the point that Dharma is victorious and beyond time and space. Willy's relentless pursuit of success reflects the illusory nature of the American Dream, paralleling the philosophical concept of maya. Willy is trapped in the illusion of the "American Dream," equating worth with wealth and popularity. The play serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of living out of sync with swadharma.

Keywords: Eternal Dharma, existential dilemmas, responsibilities, aspirations, swadharma.

What is sanatana Dharma? The term "Sanatana" means "eternal," 'living forever', deathless, beyond time etc and "Dharma" refers to duty, righteousness, or the moral order. *Dharma* comes from the root word *dhṛi*, which means *dhāraṇ karane yogya*, or "responsibilities, duties, thoughts, and actions that are appropriate for us. Living in harmony with the truth ensures alignment with Dharma. Sanatana Dharma is considered eternal because its core principles, such as compassion, peace, and seeking truth, are universal and timeless, not limited to a specific culture, era, or geography. Sanatana Dharma is not a religion, it's a way of life. It's not confined to a single scripture, prophet, or set of morals. It is an extensive philosophy that promotes human Values.

Willy Loman's Struggles

The concept of **Dharma** (duty, righteousness, and the moral order) offers a valuable lens to analyse Willy Loman's struggles in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Willy's inner turmoil and ultimate downfall can be understood as a consequence of his inability to align with a meaningful "dharma" that reflects his true nature and responsibilities. In Sanatana Dharma, *dharma* refers to one's duty aligned with their innate nature and the cosmic order. Willy Loman, however, struggles with his *swadharma* (personal duty). Instead of accepting his strengths and limitations, he chases an illusion of success defined by societal norms. His inability to align his actions with his true nature leads to inner turmoil and suffering, showing the consequences of *adharma* (a deviation from righteousness).

Willy's Unrealistic Aspirations

Maya in Sanatana Dharma represents the illusory nature of the material world. Willy is trapped in the illusion of the "American Dream," equating worth with wealth and popularity. This attachment to a false ideal blinds him to the reality of his family's needs and his own limitations, leading to his downfall. Willy's unrealistic aspirations are his *hamartia* (tragic flaw), driving

his actions and ultimately leading to his downfall. His unwavering belief in a flawed ideal blinds him to the more meaningful aspects of life: love, self-respect, and personal authenticity. “The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead.” (text)

Just as Maya seduces individuals with illusions of material wealth, Willy is captivated by the American Dream and its promises. Maya/Illusion perpetuates suffering by distracting individuals from spiritual truths, similar to how Willy’s aspirations lead to disillusionment and despair. “After all the highways, and the trains, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.” (text)

Worldly Success vs. Spiritual Bliss

Willy Loman's quest for material success in ‘*The Death of a Salesman*’ is a central theme that drives the narrative and ultimately leads to his tragic downfall. Willy’s fascination with material success is often rooted in grand illusions. He clings to the idea that being a successful salesman will validate his life choices and elevate his family’s status. Willy’s obsession with an illusory version of success diverts him from his true Dharma. He idolizes people like Dave Singleman, a successful, charming salesman, and aspires to a similar level of admiration. Willy projects his dreams onto his sons, especially Biff, expecting them to achieve the success he could not. Willy’s inability to accept his limitations and circumstances highlights the dangers of living in denial.

The play highlights the conflict between societal expectations or an illusion of success defined by societal norms and the pursuit of authentic existence. It calls into question the values placed on material success, urging a deeper exploration of duty, self-awareness, and the quest for true fulfilment in life. In the beginning of the play, Willy portrays himself as a highly successful salesman, but in reality, he is mediocre. Initially, Willy boasts about how good his last business

trip was, but as the discussion progresses, Linda gently presses him to confess that the trip was only somewhat successful. This moment reflects a recurring theme throughout the play: people concealing their failures to live up to the heavy societal expectations imposed by the American Dream. Willy's vision of success is rooted in materialism and superficial charm rather than genuine effort or moral living. He believes that Biff's charisma and athletic talent will secure a prosperous future, despite Biff's growing disillusionment.

Family as a Microcosm of Dharma

The *Grihastha* (householder) stage in Sanatana Dharma emphasizes responsibilities toward family and society. Willy sees himself as the family's breadwinner, bearing the duty of securing their future. "A man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime. Your dad is at the mercy of this world." (text) He prioritizes external validation over nurturing authentic relationships.

Linda holds the family together, often bridging gaps between Willy and his sons. Her role highlights the often-unseen labour and sacrifices that uphold familial dharma. She embodies patience, unconditional love, and unwavering duty. Linda: "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him." (text) Willy's unrealistic aspirations strain his relationships with Biff and Happy, creating tension and alienation. "The man who creates personal interest is the man who gets ahead. Be liked, and you will never want." (text)

Willy's failure to accomplish his familial duties with understanding and honesty leads to dysfunction within the Loman household. Linda Loman's enduring support reflects the *dharmaic* virtues of loyalty and compassion, though her enabling behavior also perpetuates Willy's illusions. The play critiques societal values that prioritize materialism over ethical and familial responsibilities. It also highlights the importance of self-awareness and authenticity in fulfilling one's dharma.

Suffering and Loss

The guilt and conflict arising from Willy's infidelity ripple through his relationships with Linda and Biff. While Linda remains a tragic figure of unknowing devotion, Biff becomes a vessel for Willy's unresolved guilt and the ultimate victim of his father's failures. The interplay of these emotions underscores the tragedy of the play, with betrayal and guilt driving the characters toward inevitable suffering and loss. The discovery of Willy's affair by Biff shatters Biff's admiration for his father. This event becomes the turning point in their relationship, fuelling ongoing tension and contributing to Biff's aimlessness. Willy's guilt over this rupture is evident in his frequent attempts to justify himself and regain Biff's respect.

Attachment (*Raga*) vs. Detachment (*Vairagya*)

Sanatana Dharma focuses on balancing the four Purusharthas (life goals): Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (desires) and Moksha (liberation). Wealth (Artha) and desires (Kama) are considered legitimate pursuits when aligned with Dharma. It acknowledges the importance of wealth for fulfilling worldly duties, supporting family, and engaging in charity. However, it warns against materialism governing life, as excessive attachment to wealth may lead to suffering and distraction from spiritual goals. Sanatana Dharma views wealth as a tool to fulfil responsibilities, support one's family, and contribute to society. It focuses on both Swadharma (individual duty) and Samajdharma (social duty). True fulfilment comes from balancing societal roles and personal truths, a lesson the Loman family fails to grasp.

Sanatana Dharma advocates detachment from material pursuits and outcomes. Willy, however, is deeply attached to societal validation and the notion of legacy, which prevents him from finding peace. He equates happiness with material success, believing that wealth will secure his legacy. To quote: "Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home

anymore.” (text) Willy’s inability to practice *vairagya* results in emotional dependence on superficial success, leading to existential despair.

Karma and Its Consequences:

The Loman family’s struggles reflect the principle that actions rooted in ignorance and attachment perpetuate suffering. The doctrine of karma emphasizes that actions (and inactions) have consequences. Willy’s unethical decisions—such as neglecting his family, living in denial, and his infidelity—create negative outcomes that ripple through his family, particularly affecting Biff. Biff is torn between his father’s expectations and his own self-awareness; he struggles with his sense of duty. He eventually rejects Willy’s distorted dharma, seeking authenticity over illusion. On the other hand, Happy focuses on his personal ambitions and fails to support the family emotionally or morally.

Self-Realization (*Atma Jnana*)

The concept of *Atma Jnana*—the realization of one’s true self—is deeply rooted in philosophical traditions and can offer a profound lens to explore Willy’s tragedy. In Sanatana Dharma, self-realization involves understanding one’s true nature beyond material and social identities. Willy’s lack of introspection and his refusal to confront his inner self contrast sharply with this ideal. Biff, on the other hand, begins a journey of self-realization, rejecting his father’s delusions and seeking authenticity. Willy’s life is an embodiment of *maya*—the illusion of worldly success and fleeting material goals. He is unable to discern between reality and illusion, investing in dreams that ultimately betray him. His demise symbolizes the futility of living a life devoid of *Atma Jnana*.

Swadharma

The Bhagavad Gita advocates for performing one's swadharma, even if it is imperfect, as it aligns with one's true nature and purpose.

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।

स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ (Chapter 3, Verse 35)

"It is better to perform one's own duty (swadharma), even imperfectly, than to perform another's duty (Paradharma) perfectly. Death in one's own duty is better; the duty of another is fraught with fear." Swadharma promotes authenticity, self-realization, and harmony with the cosmic order. It is more enjoyable to be ourselves than to pretend to be someone else. The duties born of our nature can be easily performed with stability of mind. The Bhagavad Gita warns against engaging in paradharma, as it can lead to conflict, confusion, and failure to achieve one's spiritual or material goals.

Willy's adherence to Paradharma leads to his mental and emotional disintegration. He remains trapped in illusions, unable to break free from societal expectations or accept his true nature, ultimately resulting in his demise. Biff begins to understand and accept his true nature and individual duty (swadharma). While initially influenced by Willy's grandiose dreams of material success, Biff eventually recognizes that he is not suited for the business world and finds joy in working close to nature. He realizes that his Dharma lies not in fulfilling his father's unrealistic dreams but in pursuing a simpler, authentic life connected to his true passions, like working on a farm.

Willy's Tragic End

Willy's suicide can be interpreted as a misguided attempt to provide for his family and leave a legacy, reflecting a misunderstanding of true liberation (moksha). In Sanatana Dharma, moksha is attained through self-awareness and aligning with one's true purpose, not through external sacrifices. Willy's suicide, intended as a means of providing financial security, can be seen as a tragic misinterpretation of sacrifice. In the Requiem, Linda questions Willy, "Why did you

do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home." (Text:34)

Linda's monologue, delivered at Willy's graveside, provides the emotional climax of the play. The phrase "We're free...we're free..." is particularly haunting. It reflects her relief that their financial burdens are finally lifted, but it is loaded with tragic irony because it comes at the cost of Willy's life. She refers to their mortgage being paid off, a long-standing source of stress. Ironically, this achievement coincides with Willy's death, making the "freedom" bittersweet and hollow. Willy's death can be seen as his escape from the pressures and expectations of his life. For Linda, however, this "freedom" comes at the cost of losing her partner. The irony of her declaration of freedom highlights the futility of Willy's sacrifices, making the ending both heartbreaking and thought-provoking.

In Sanatana Dharma, true liberation (*moksha*) comes from transcending attachment, not escaping through death. Detachment encourages individuals to live authentically by focusing on intrinsic values rather than external validation or societal expectations. Willy's death underscores the futility of materialistic pursuits and the importance of living a life aligned with eternal truths.

Transcending Attachment

The idea that transcending attachment is the solution to existential dilemmas is deeply rooted in spiritual and philosophical traditions across cultures. In many spiritual traditions, attachment—to people, material possessions, outcomes, or even identities—is seen as a root cause of human suffering and existential anguish. Attachment binds individuals to impermanent aspects of existence, intensifying fear of loss, anxiety about the future and dissatisfaction with the present, etc. Buddhism teaches that attachment leads to *dukkha*

(suffering) and that liberation (nirvana) comes through detachment and mindfulness. *The Bhagavad Gita* advocates Karma Yoga, acting without attachment to results.

Willy Loman as the Everyman

Willy embodies the struggles of a common man caught between personal aspirations and societal expectations. His life is a moving reflection of humanity's struggle with maya—the pursuit of fleeting, materialistic goals. His tragedy is a critique of societal norms that equate worth with wealth, urging readers to seek meaning beyond illusions. Miller carefully criticizes the consumer society and its capitalist logic. In fact, Willy himself, as salesman uses the language of advertisement to earn money. But this consumer world has harsh rules; it exploits everybody, and as Willy affirms: “eat the orange and throw the peel away” (Miller: 61) although “a man is not a piece of fruit” (61)!

Willy represents the average individual, burdened by societal norms and personal aspirations. His struggles are universal, transcending his specific context. Willy’s life reflects a clash between societal expectations (maya) and the hollowness of the American Dream. The play urges individuals to question societal values and seek deeper truths. True liberation (*moksha*) comes from recognizing the futility of hollow dreams and embracing the eternal truths of existence. Modern consumerist societies often promote attachment to material success and personal relationships as markers of fulfilment. The play critiques post-war American society's emphasis on consumerism and individual success, highlighting the human cost of such ideals. Miller examines how capitalist systems marginalize and dehumanize individuals like Willy Loman.

Universal Lessons from Sanatana Dharma

In light of eternal dharma, Willy Loman’s tragic journey is a reflection of human vulnerability to illusion, attachment, and misplaced priorities. The play invites a dharmic reinterpretation

that underscores the importance of self-awareness, duty, and the pursuit of higher truths over fleeting material achievements. It offers a timeless reminder of the need for alignment with one's true nature and the universal order for a life of meaning and harmony.

Death of a Salesman serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of living out of sync with one's *dharma*. It echoes the Upanishadic teaching that the pursuit of transient goals leads to suffering, while aligning with eternal truths brings fulfilment. The play invites readers to reflect on their values, actions, and the nature of true success, which aligns with the dharmic emphasis on inner contentment over external validation.

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