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Death of a Salesman: Miscarriage of American Dream and the Blight of Loman Family

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Abstract

This article focuses on the play Death of a Salesman written by Arthur Miller in which the concept of American dream aborts in Willy's life. The abortion of American dream results in American nightmare enervating hope and progress for everyone. Upward mobility of an individual as well as family in job, house, marriage, children, social status becomes the hope of everyone as American dream promises. However, the play Death of a Salesman reveals nightmare life of Loman family who are struggling for their better, richer and fuller life. Willy Loman's pathetic end ridicules American dream that is thought to be panacea for all. This article, in terms of Willy Loman, analyzes how the concept of American dream 'all men are created equal and everyone has skills and aptitudes to pull themselves up by their own efforts' has been superficial and the country fosters American nightmare.

Keywords: American dream, American nightmare, miscarriage, underclass, aristocracy, discrimination

Introduction: American Dream and Its Promise

American dream entails a concept of giving hope for better life providing with opportunities to all people born poor or rich, male or female, black or white, or whatsoever their identity is. Having the promise of American dream millions of people from around the world have immigrated to the United States. Such hope of better life is not self-centric and limited to one generation, for the large majority of the immigrants it was the chance to provide a better life for their families, especially for their children. To achieve such life, they have given up the lands of their ancestors, traditions and their old dreams to acquire new dreams which are believed to be affluent in the United States. In this regard, . . . America is a land of almost infinite possibilities in which everyone, however humble their origins, has the opportunity to succeed in their lives. . . . ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that amongst these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (Fitzgerald 174). This concept subsumes all entered in America to progress and promises better life.

Moreover, American dream has tempted people to prosper by avoiding social evils like violence, persecution, repression, or poverty prevalent in their society. The new immigrants who have left their homelands for their better future have re-created new dream -freedom, justice, opportunity, and upward mobility-American Dream. Reeve Vanneman admits that “The American Dream seemed the perfect immunization against the dangers of a militant class consciousness. It promised a common vision to all Americans- workers and bosses, the poor as well as the rich. In an open America, class struggle would be unnecessary. Discontent with one’s position would inspire workers to change their positions within the system, rather than trying to change the system itself” (257). American dream prevails in all lives, be they are in the USA or hope to be in that country sometime in their lives. These people dream of being free from the shackles of the problems they are bearing, and moreover, economic sufficiency and the end of discrimination and oppression of all these people involve the essence of their life. America champions the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness other countries are lacking. So America is . . . a land where men of all races, of all nationalities, and of all creeds can live together as brothers.” (King10). Furthermore, one who is born equal bears ability and resources to pull themselves up by their own struggle. One who has capability and resources can improve his/her condition without the support of others and through his own hard work.

American dream has disseminated the belief that progress is likely and even inevitable, and that they have the ability to control their own destinies. This is an optimistic attitude toward the future which aims at the dream of good life, upward mobility and their share of material possessions. Such an optimistic attitude gives the

sense that they can do whatever they want with their lives, and with hard work and determination, most people can achieve the American dream. So, the American dream implies “that the dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Hauhart 66). Man inheres multiple intelligences but the deprivation of the opportunities does not allow him to make progress in life. America provides people with opportunities as their skills and aptitudes demand. The ground of American dream develops with the belief in justice and the reward for effort.

However, the spirit of American Dream has begun to lose its grip from individual freedom and social harmony. People are skeptical to the faith that hard work and determination guarantee the upward mobility of people entering America from outside in search of change in their lives. It is getting more and more difficult for future generations. Life has become difficult because of the undefeatable competition and the corporate alliances. Alfred Hornung, on the dwindling gravity of American dream, observes:

. . . the development of American politics and economics had reached a point where the uncurbed individualistic realization of private goals met with insurmountable limitations in terms of competition and corporate combines. Abroad, adventurous and industrious emigrants still saw in the United States the land of unlimited opportunities for the creation of happiness and the realization of private dreams. It is more than ironic that the allurements of the American Dream, which had motivated so many hopeful people to come to the United States, had lost its realistic nucleus and had turned into negativity at the time when figures of immigration were their highest. (545)

American life has begun to change from an individualistic conception of the world to a corporate conception of reality in public life. The public of America has given priority to the self-made man and the individual self has been connected with corporate self in the industry. ‘Survival of the fittest’ has become so severe that those who are unable to make progress in life have been ignored by family and the society. An individual has undergone alienated from family and the society in the land of unlimited opportunities and freedom.

Being an American has become materialistic rather than idealistic and each and all elements of society have been associated with materialism. There is a big chasm in socio-economic condition. Unusual socio-economic lifestyle has soared and divided society in terms of “. . . America’s underclass, lower class, middle class, upper class, and ‘aristocracy’” (Tyson 55). In this regard, all Americans are not sure about the myth of American Dream that is claimed to be better, richer, and fuller life for every man. “Americans are increasingly pessimistic about the opportunity for the working class to get ahead and increasingly optimistic about the opportunity for the poor and immigrants to get

ahead in the United States” (Hanson 570). The understanding and reality of American Dream is different thing to different people while the experience of people in America is uneven.

Moreover, the citizens of America have begun to feel excluded from the blessings of nationhood on account of race, creed and economic status. The soul of American Dream does believe in inclusion and this has been guaranteed by the American constitution, but it is getting reversal in the later days. Many leaders are cynical to American dream and one of them Malcolm X observes that “You and I have never seen democracy; all we’ve seen is hypocrisy. . . . We don’t see any American dream. We’ve experienced only the American nightmare” (84). Action proves the worth of words inscribed in American Constitution and the document of the Declaration of Independence but people in America are skeptical to the implementation of constitutional values, which are inclusive in words. America has been a land of prosperity to all in terms of its words but the actions taken place till days have proved this narrative otherwise.

Variation in words and deeds in America is dividing people in the name of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender. The exclusion of the marginals and the uneven lifestyle of diverse social groups have been permeating in the nation known as the land of freedom, justice and equality. “The promise of opportunity contained in the American Dream and its frequent and inevitable denial in reality affects not only social classes differently but also members of different social groups” (Musick 20). The rich and the powerful people in America have trust on American Dream and subscribe it but the poor and meek people are forced to live routine and dull life and have little faith on it. There seems contradiction in American Dream between appearance and reality and thus the rationality of American Dream is dubious and causing America a land of nightmare.

Loman Family Nightmare: an Inversion of American Dream

Death of a Salesman manifests the nightmarish life of dreamer who keep on struggle in the hope of upward mobility. Here, Willy Loman, an old salesman, is realized by his wife Linda that he cannot travel and suggests to request his boss to give him local office. His two grown up sons Biff and Happy provide their father with hope that the talent of Biff should get on the track and help materialize their dream of prosperity lacking in the family though Willy has been waging his effort. Though his life sustains scant achievement he is hopeful to the potential of his son. On the prospect of his son:

Willy is extremely proud of his sons’ athletic prowess and popularity. His is particularly fond of his older son Biff, his favorite, who is a star on the high school football team, has three scholarship offers to college, and is a leader among his peers. Because his sons show all the signs of conforming to the values Willy believes are necessary to succeed in life—namely, attractiveness and popularity—he is confident that their futures will be bright, and he essentially lives vicariously

through Biff, believing his son will achieve all that he never did in his life.

(Wattley 4)

Success in one's life does not entail his/her progress in person, it is the overall thing connected with family members. Since family achievement and success revolves around the talent of children Willy's hope from his sons seems natural. He hopes upward mobility of his family via his sons, especially Biff. However, Biff's talent does not function properly in the individualistic and competitive surroundings and inverts Loman family's hope for success.

The inversion of American dream is apparent in the text since Willy and Linda are struggling financially and hoping for the improvement. Until the day Willy dies, he never reaches the point of success whether it is material or emotional. He works all his life with the hope of material gain and status but he never gets anything to show for his efforts. Recognition is so far away for him, he cannot be a good contributor for his family. "He does not seek wealth any value it has in itself; financial prosperity is simply the visible sign that he is a good provider for his family" (Centola 33). Human being thinks and acts as the environment outside influences him/her. In this sense, Willy cannot segregate himself from the environment of American lifestyle outside his family and surrounding. He finds himself under the pressure of the society he is living in to show the achievement that he has but his efforts are futile.

Moreover, Willy cannot expect anything from his sons in any constructive way. His older son, Biff, has gone in the worsening situation after his college football career which he had hoped to be better but never. His younger son, Happy, does not have any aim in his life and money for party and pleasure is enough for him which are really temporal and superficial. He is not concerned with career which provides money and recognition but his concern is job for money which is momentary. Willy Loman's family prosperity is almost impossible while his neighbor's son, Bernard, is acquiring success be it money or reputation through academic accomplishment. It is the very society of America where others are nearing their dream whereas for Loman family material prosperity has become a mirage. Regarding the failure of Willy Loman, James E. Walton admits "Willy Loman, its central character, as the quintessential American loser who fell short of his dreams" (55). Achieving success, most people pursue, in any form denotes the materialization of American dream. However, the promises of success in America are not real but mere illusion for Loman family.

The downhill condition of Loman family has made Willy unhappy and has been attempting suicide. Linda thinks that her sons are the cause of this situation, especially Biff. Biff comes in discussion with father and plans to see Oliver the following morning for business loan. The situation goes reverse since neither Biff gets loan nor Willy gets a

transfer, rather he gets fired. In this situation Willy decides to commit suicide so that Biff could use the life insurance money to run a business. Willy is compelled to make decision in committing suicide when all the efforts are in vain and the dream goes reversal. Willy's such decision reflects the outcome of his illusion that success in America transcends the thought of gaining economic and social status in the society. This delusion of Willy manifests:

Even while yearning for success, Willy wants more than material prosperity; he want to retrieve the love and respect of his family and the self-esteem which he has lost. Yet he goes about striving to achieve these goals in the wrong way because he has deceived himself into thinking that the values of the family he cherishes are inextricably linked with values of the business world in which he works. (Centola 32)

Willy confuses in agrarian American dream and urban nightmare. Happiness, prosperity, recognition and hope are the basic promises of agrarian American dream but these promises are in question in urban nightmare whose grounds are competition, individualism, and capitalistic society. Willy, living in the urban culture, embraces false values of progress and upward mobility that agrarian American dream fostered. Capitalism has resulted in urban nightmare which has evaded pro social attitude of human beings and promoted individualism in American society. Nonetheless, it is the hope that propels Willy to struggle but when there is the end of hope in Willy's life he commits suicide. The events and circumstances that Willy goes through do not support for what he is struggling to achieve.

This play ridicules American dream by projecting the opposite track of dream that Willy wants to share with his family especially his wife Linda. Willy's one of the hopes of changing the nature of the work as a traveling salesman terminates being fired from his work. He observes his termination from his work:

WILLY. I was fired, and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered. The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff (104).

The hope of his wife in getting good news of being fixed in a place ends with being sacked. Though Willy works hard to provide his family with happiness and promote his status in the society slips and the long suffering of his wife for hopeful change ends with her husband and sons' failure.

Conclusion: Ostensibility of American Nightmare in the Play

American dream is believed to gear the spirit of the people for upward mobility whether they are poor or rich, white or black, Jews or gentiles, and whosoever. It is a land of freedom, justice and equality. Those who are hardworking are supposed to achieve their goal- material achievement. This achievement includes job, house, family, position,

upward mobility and so on. The concept of American dream assures that these things approach an individual with his/her hard work. Moreover, an individual, whatever his/her identity, born with capacity and resources can make progress without the support of others. Progress is likely in the life of all. So America is taken as a land of opportunity and progress for everyone.

However, such claim is not absolute in the life of the people who are living and struggling in America. Injustice and inequality is still prevalent in America. There is still big chasm in economic condition among the people. Capitalism has escalated severe competition and people are indulged in crab mentality. Personal progress by ignoring the communal traits of human being matters. The sweat of the people has not been paid properly. Upward mobility has been rare to the people who are working hard and there are a lot who are suffering in the land of dream and opportunity. Though the dreamers do their best in the pursuit of achievement, the dream is getting proved as a burden to people.

Willy Loman and his family have been affected by practices developed in American urban life and survive the reversal of American dream. The struggle of Willy and the talent of his sons indicate the upward mobility of his family. Such hope of Loman family exists as long as Biff deviates from his father's anticipation. The miscarriage of family's progress makes Willy think about suicide and ultimately does so to save family from bankruptcy.

Overall, *Death of a Salesman* grasps the dwindling grip of American dream—upward mobility and its leaning to American nightmare. Willy's personal as well as family failure in achieving success of material gain encompasses that American dream has been a figment to the dreamer who comprehend accomplishment as a result of hard work and skills. Thus, Miller by projecting the character Willy conveys the message that American dream has been a myth for those who have experienced America as a land of nightmare.

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