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**Revisiting the American Dream: A Study of Death of a Salesman in Post-Covid World**

**Keywords:** American Dream, Dehumanization, Coronavirus, Great Depression, Capitalism Interpretation.

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**Abstract**

Miller's play is not in general a condemnation of the American Dream. He, on the other hand, criticises the dehumanisation of an individual within a society. He discards the belief that the advancement of human life is able to change human ethics as he is opposed to the conception of greed as a principal motivator within a society. Willy's insatiable interpretation of the American Dream becomes the reason for his fall. He might have succeeded if he had a clearer vision of life and its realities. Miller judgement about the dilemma of 'American Dream' is that it is not in itself a problem, but the way it has been interpreted or simply our interpretation of it; it is with how we apply it. Comparing it to the current times and the American Dream is going on within the perspective of a pragmatic economy with reality perception, it seems the dream is over or it needs a hermeneutic update or a new interpretation. This paper compares Willy's deep-rooted ideology which makes him create his 'defence mechanism' in order to uphold the American Dream ideology with the current world scenario with a special focus on China.

**1. Introduction: Defining the American Dream**

The COVID-19 epidemic brought significant transformations not only to the United States but all around the world, ranging from devastating sickness and loss of life to the oddities of social isolation and watching several episodes of television series at once. Following a period of low redundancy and employment, the early economic impact of the virus increased jobless claims in the United States by three thousand percent in just one month. Many American workers and their families can no longer benefit from the American Dream. Even though many academics differ on the issue of the definition of the American Dream, yet, freedom, economic prosperity, and a new beginning — the phrase has enormous resonance in the American psyche. Comparing the situation with China which has not participated in wars like Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria or Ukraine, China has proven to be so potent that Chinese President Xi Jinping started a program which named as 'The Chinese Dream' many years ago. An assessment from Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) quoted by Kewalramani in his book, *Smokeless War: China's Quest for Geopolitical Dominance* follows as:

Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS)...found that Beijing was holding slightly more political power and influence than the United States in Southeast Asia today. It further found that in terms of economic power and

influence, the region views China as much more influential than the United States today, and this gap is expected to grow in the next 10 years. (84)

Furthermore, Jeffrey Wasserstrom in his article "Here's Why Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' Differs Radically from the American Dream" published in *Time* writes:

Xi's Chinese Dream is protean. He associates it with different things at different times in different places. At its core, though, is a vision of national rejuvenation. Xi makes no secret of wanting to see China assume a position of international centrality, as well as to see it modernize while revering its classical traditions. (para 1)

However, in recent years, many Americans have come to believe that the American Dream is dead, dying, or unattainable. James Truslow Adams, a historian, created the phrase in 1931. During the early beginning of the Great Depression, Adams expressed optimism that conventional and traditional American social dynamics for improving one's social standing seems applicable to all classes naturally. Adams' evocative statement encapsulated his view of America. He believed that in a land devoid of traditional hierarchies, the poor could rise through the ranks based on their ability and hard work. Adams failed to recognise that these odds primarily went to white Protestants, with non-whites and non-Protestants contributing to the privileged class' opportunities through hard labour and losses. The American Dream was brutal to displacing Native Americans and enslaved African Americans. The American Dream has sometimes been explained as an ideology that is run by both limiting and declining opportunities for human beings through immigration restrictions or simple bigotry. The reason being, in order to make sure that this ideological dream of ultimate success is made available to only to a selected few members who are then labelled as fortunate enough yet are the chosen people of the same system. "I don't see any American Dream; I see an American nightmare," Malcolm X told a crowd in 1964. Terrill writes in his *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*:

Malcolm X's vision of an "American nightmare" possessed a clarity and sharpness for black Americans that few white Americans, who saw only an American dream, could envision. He spoke to white Americans with a directness that called the dream into question and exposed its moral coherence. (116)

## 2. Historical Background of the Term 'American Dream'

In 1931, James Truslow Adams in his best-selling novel named *Epic of America* used the term "American dream" which envisaged an idea of a country "in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." (qtd. in Smith 27) Several factors aided as well as sustained the American dream by providing the

US with a competitive edge over many nations. Owning a house and getting superior schooling or to be general, better education, are commonly cited as paths to the American dream. Though the meaning of the term 'American Dream' has 'evolved' as well as 'developed' to suggest several ideas and things to each specific generation, it is indisputably embedded in the American culture and seems to remain so for the foreseeable future. Adams went on to explain as Kelly Bulkeley in *American Dreamers* quotes Adams:

It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (13)

### 3. American Dream within *Death of a Salesman*

This play surrounds the theme of advancement and upward mobility, the idea which in the English language is often expressed as a 'rags to riches' notion. It is explained as a condition in which an individual's hard work and determination, in a company with enormous hopes and the struggle that also brings troubles with it, whether being internal or external problems, paves the way towards success. Miller devised the role of a salesperson without a product, allowing the audience to empathise even more with him. The play portrays a situation that parallels the reality within the ideology of American dream. The idea of a worker who is suffering or made to suffer by corporate industrialists by their unjust system is the highlight of the play. The play, *Death of a Salesman*, is a simple summary and indication of what capitalism and corporate culture breeds. It is a simple explanation of consequences that will follow if the injustices of the system or idea called American Dream go unchecked. It's this fact that exists now (at the time of Miller) and that will go on producing more greed and injustices in future that Miller condemns and thus can be interpreted as being negation of a specific summary of American Dream that differs from its forefathers outlook.

The ideology or the notion behind the term 'American Dream' as Miller has portrayed it in *Death of a Salesman*, states that each person may achieve financial prosperity and material comfort. For example, Howard Wagner internalizes this ideology through his father's business, while as, Bernard, who appears like an extraordinarily dry intellectual, turns into a competent lawyer being patient and working hard in destitution throughout his life. Ben goes to Alaska and Africa and being lucky earns a huge amount of money when he discovers a diamond mine. Willy Loman's version of the ideology is that a man who is macho, handsome, personable, and popular deserves to win and thus will achieve success naturally, as evidenced by his brother Ben's success.

Throughout their lives, Willy as well as his children possess no effect over the 'American dream' and fail miserably regarding the unachievable parameters of their aspirations. Nevertheless, the true tragedy of the play is not that Willy fails to achieve the financial prosperity promised by his American dream, but that he believes in it so completely that he ignores the physical things, the real pragmatic world, around him as Sartre calls it 'bad faith' in his existential philosophy and as Heidegger calls it 'inauthentic' in his *Being and Time*.

The things that Willy ignores comprise the reality that is contrary to his vision; the reality like his love for the family and vice versa, in pursuit of the success he believes will provide security for his family. Willy ends up killing himself, as his urge demands him because he is aware of the money his family will receive from the insurance policy he had already opted for. Willy effectively murders himself for money by killing himself at the end of the play in order to get the money from his life insurance policy for his family. In an ongoing process within the play, Willy's character provides an idea about the ideology that is at work within the American dream 'model' which in itself is a powerful motivator. The model is able to turn a person into a monster and Willy himself acts as such while thinking of the act as being noble. Harold Bloom in his book *The American Dream* quotes Harold Clurman in his review of the play, and summarises the essence of the term American dream, as he writes:

Death of a Salesman is a challenge to the American Dream. Lest this be misunderstood...Instead of the ideals of hard work and courage, we have salesmanship. Salesmanship implies a certain element of fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness. The goal of salesmanship is to make a deal, to earn a profit- the accumulation of profit being unquestioned end in itself. (53)

William White, a famous Canadian economist is often quoted about the fact that many Americans adhere to their old ways of accepted wisdom. Similarly, Willy Roman was an instance of someone who held such firm convictions. He is unable to live a normal life while being trapped in the past. He had beforehand been successful to some extent and at present is, nevertheless, unable to match the success requirements at present. "You know, the thing is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me..." he admits to his wife, Linda, as he approaches her with this conflict. "I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed" (Act-I. 28).

The main issue that keeps Willy out of the context about the real world is his belief that he can go anywhere in the business by forcing himself to have a personal perspective, regardless of other considerations or simply the real pragmatic world and its demands. Willy while talking to Happy and Biff confirms his ideology as:

Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. 'Willy Loman is here!' That's all they have to know, and I go right through. (Act 1. 64-68).

Willy, in other words, still believes in the paradigm of the old frontier salesperson, whose definition of success was leaving the house for an extended period of time and returning with a significant sum of money "riding on a smile and a shoeshine" (Requiem XXXVIII). Miller, interestingly, uses various symbols to help express the play's meaning. The vehicle, for example, is utilised as a symbol of familial unity. As a result, Willy begins to believe that he is losing control of both his car and his life once he sees his anguish. As a result, Willy chooses to commit suicide by car in an act of unconscious self-defence. It's as if he's trying to convince himself that he's right. As a result, Willy chooses to commit suicide by car in an act of unconscious self-defence. It's as if he's attempting to persuade himself that his life will come to an end with a final act of control: power over his car. As a result of his father's failure, Biff regards all of Willy's lessons as lies. He proclaims, "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (Act-II.104). On the other hand, Willy does not possess the potential to confront the impasse that is the result of Sartrean 'bad faith' and Willy seems to have no answer. Consequently he has no solution to his misperception of reality but to commit suicide as Harold Bloom explains that Willy's decision to commit suicide is due to the fact that he cannot restore his reputation that he envisages in his mind and finds reality opposite to that fact. The only way out for him from the humiliation is to end it by death in order to restore his lost sense of honour. The thought of self sacrifice as ritual to purge oneself to become pure and be loved persuades Willy to commit such an act. (32)

#### 4. Willy Loman's Perception of Reality

It important to highlight the fact that Willy's deep rooted ideology makes him create his defence mechanism in order to uphold the American Dream ideology. Bloom writes, "When he (Willy) realizes that he never lost Biff's love, Willy declares he must die immediately so that he can preserve that love and not jeopardize it with further altercations." (32) This is in agreement with Fred Ribkoff's view as he writes in his article "Shame, Guilt, and-the Search for Identity in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman":

Driven by shame, he kills himself in order to preserve his dream of being "well liked" and a successful father and salesman. Of course, the irony is that because of his suicide the odds are very good that neither of his sons will benefit from his sacrifice, and nobody from his world of sales comes to his funeral. Linda's words at the end of the play, and especially the words, "We're free and clear" ([39), reveal the degree to which she and her husband lived in denial, in fear of exposing the man who hid in shame behind the idea of

being a successful salesman and father. To be "free and clear" is, ultimately, an impossibility for Willy Loman. His vision of success perpetuates crippling feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that drive him to destroy himself. (54)

In a similar vein, Louis Stagg's article "Death of a Salesman: Overview" focuses on Willy's cowardice in killing himself arguing that "Willy appears to see death as a means of avoiding the consequences of actions with which he can no longer cope" (53). Miller's most fundamental statement regarding the 'American Dream' is that success and wealth are better obtained through facing the challenges of everyday life rather than romanticising fantastical ideas based on one's 'inauthenticity' towards reality.

In this aspect, the play offers two successful examples, Ben and Charlie, who contrast with Willy's example. Ben's personality is unusual in that it blends aspects of traditional values with expressions of contemporary trends. As a result, Ben has a strong chance of succeeding in the workplace. Ben's advice to Biff reflects his grasp of the futility of resisting modern life's requirements: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (Act- 1. 1085- 6). Willy, conversely, is by no means capable of understanding this concept as he thinks rigorous individualism and rapid achievement are directly proportional to each other. Charlie, comparatively, stands for rationality and reason as he persistently tries to instruct Willy as help and for the sake of the welfare of his children; however, Willy shows that he is stubborn each time Charlie tried to help him. His rejection of Charlie's suggestion, on the other hand, is part of the rivalry he perceives between them. As Gardner (1965) puts it, "(Willy's) acceptance would have been tantamount to admitting that Charlie's philosophy had proved to be the right one, and Willy simply isn't big enough a man to make such an admission" (320). In this regard, Miller skilfully offers contrasting versions of one idea called the 'American dream' corresponding to different characters of the play.

The 'American Dream' is a conviction that a person can attain anywhere and anytime in one's life provided a person is ready for hard work and determination. This idea is defined in many ways as is seen by the lines said by various characters of the play. Willy's failure is shown not just in his clinging to historical models, but also in his references to mythological beings, as Miller demonstrates. Willy gives Biff and Happy some advice: "Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises" (Act -I. 25). This allusion to Adonis is designed to demonstrate that Willy's entire worldview stands on an unstable base. Miller's critique of the American ideal is part of a bigger reflection on cultural shifts, so it's worth noting.

Miller provides a viewpoint on the societal shift ideals in this drama. In more detail, the author explains how technological advancements, progress, and

capitalism can change human ideals. The ‘American Dream’ is an example of these values that have evolved over time. Willy is unable to adapt to the changes, resulting in a clash between personal and society values. As Bloom in his *Bloom’s Major Dramatists: Arthur Miller* quotes Professor Brucher that the disparity between capitalism and agrarian ideas are portrayed explicitly in *Death of a Salesman* that reflects a change in American spirituality to Dale Carnegie’s material pragmatism opposite to Thomas Jefferson’s spirituality. (51)

The clash between the old agrarian ideal and capitalistic enterprise is well documented in the literature on *Death of a Salesman*, as is the spiritual shift from Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Carnegie to Dale Carnegie that the play reflects. (51)

### 5. Conclusion

To summarise, Miller's play does not directly critique the American Dream per se in its entirety. Rather, Miller's criticism is more focused on the dehumanisation of humans the way ‘American Dream’ has been portrayed as such. He rejects the notion that progress in human life alters human ideals. In addition, Miller is also opposed to the concept of greed. Willy's selfish American Dream, the way he has misperceived it, causes him to fall apart. He might have succeeded if he had a greater vision of it. Finally, Miller believes that the issue is not with the American Dream, but with our interpretation of it; it is with how we apply it. Comparing it to the current times and the ‘American Dream’ is going on within the perspective of pragmatic economy with reality perception, Kılıç Buğra Kanat, Research Director at the SETA Foundation at Washington DC., writes in his article, "From American Dream to American Nightmare," "There is no talk of an American dream however there is a very high degree of skepticism that each group will try to turn the life of the other into a nightmare. It may be too early to discuss that nightmare ending." (para. 21). Matthew Shaer wrote an article “When the Virus came for the American Dream” in *New York Times Magazine* where he explained the effects of pandemic over the American economy and its consequences over the American Dream. The essay reflects the problems and anxiety that workers and similar groups face whether being immigrants, minorities, or simply the poor. He writes:

When the coronavirus arrived in the United States in January, it was briefly possible to believe that Covid-19, for which no cure or treatment was available, would be a great leveler of societal and economic difference. After all, New York, the financial capital of the country, was also the city hardest hit in the pandemic’s first months. The rich contracted Covid as easily as the poor; big department stores saw their business erode alongside that of neighborhood cafes. But as the number of infections increased, it became obvious that the virus, far from ignoring inequality, was actually worsening it. (para.11)

إعادة النظر في الحلم الأمريكي: دراسة وفاة البائع المتجول في عالم بعد فيروس كورونا

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحلم الأمريكي، التجرد من الإنسانية ، فيروس كورونا

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جامعة الامام جعفر الصادق

إن مسرحية ميللر ليست إدانة للحلم الأمريكي بشكل عام. من ناحية أخرى ، ينتقد تجريد الفرد من الإنسانية داخل المجتمع. إنه يتجاهل الاعتقاد بأن تقدم الحياة البشرية قادر على تغيير الأخلاق البشرية لأنه يعارض مفهوم الجشع كمحفز رئيسي داخل المجتمع. أصبح تفسير ويلي النهمة للحلم الأمريكي هو سبب سقوطه. كان من الممكن أن ينجح لو كانت لديه رؤية أوضح للحياة وواقعها. إن حكم ميلر حول معضلة "الحلم الأمريكي" هو أنه ليس مشكلة في حد ذاته ، ولكن الطريقة التي تم تفسيرها بها أو مجرد تفسيرنا لها ؛ إنه مع كيفية تطبيقنا له ، ومقارنته بالأوقات الحالية والحلم الأمريكي يجري في منظور اقتصاد براغماتي بإدراك للواقع ، يبدو أن الحلم قد انتهى أو أنه يحتاج إلى تحديث تأويلي أو تفسير جديد. تقارن هذه الورقة إيديولوجية ويلي العميقة الجذور التي تجعله ينشئ "آلية دفاعه" من أجل دعم إيديولوجية الحلم الأمريكي مع سيناريو العالم الحالي مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الصين.



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