

Exploring Loneliness in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" and Its Reverberations in Contemporary Society

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With the heightened socio-economic inequality, today's class-divided society is known for many problems and pathologies worldwide. The problem of psychic and existential crisis emanating from increasing loneliness among diverse sections of society is an issue that is disturbing people living all over the world. The problem of loneliness is not confined to the rich and developed societies only.

We might continue to pretend that in India, family and friendship ties are stronger and because of this community support, loneliness is not a serious issue to be bothered about so much here. However, the fact is that things are changing fast. If we are sensitive enough to observe, we may find people living in gated societies in big cities completely lost, waiting desperately for a phone call from their successful children settled abroad. The young students running in the mad rat race to become successful in careers are driven to anxiety and depression by their ambitious parents or society. One feels lonely living even in a crowd in present times.

One need not be a professional psychologist to understand why loneliness - an experience of depersonalisation, an alienated existence or a sense of void is eating into our lives. Probably, the steady loss of social disconnectivity that generates warmth and ethic of care seems to be at the root of the malady.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is considered one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century who wrote a remarkable series of highly regarded pieces. Profound insight, humanism and empathy are the hallmarks of his great dramatic works. The focus of the present paper is to draw a comparative analysis of his most popular play "Death of a Salesman" and its implications in twenty-first century society. An eerie sense of loss marks the life of protagonist Willy Loman and the same feeling may also be felt today. Why does there evolve a sense of alienation? Is it a region specific issue? Is the materialistic system to be blamed for it? Or Is this a transnational human being who is responsible for his dilemmas? In fact, one may not generalise things as the Truth lies in between.

About the protagonist of Death of a Salesman, Miller clarifies that he is a man whose fantasy is always overreaching his real outline. He has always been aware of that kind of agony of someone who has some driving implacable wish in him which never goes away, which he can never block out. And it broods over him, it makes him happy sometimes or it makes him suicidal, but it never leaves him. Any hero whom we even begin to think of as tragic, is obsessed, whether it's Lear or Hamlet or the women in the Greek plays.

Like any other play, a clash between pastoral and commercial is starkly visible in this play. Willy laments:

There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighbourhood. The grass don't grow anymore, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. (134-35)

He feels suffocated in the small room and yells at his wife,
Why don't you open a window in here, for God's sake?
(134)

And wife replies with infinite patience,
They're all open, dear.
(134)

Willy grumbles again:
The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows,
Windows and bricks. (134)

From an ecological point of view, Willy's raving about overpopulation, builders massacring elms to construct apartment complexes, and his discomfort in the small home, resonate with the twenty-first century people living in London, Mumbai, Delhi or any major city in the world. His longing for pastoral landscapes and suffocation reflects the uneasiness of the rural class which is attracted towards cities, overlooking its moorings in working with soil in the company of Nature.

Willy loves to work with cement and wood but takes to salesmanship which is not his heart's calling anyway. Biff desires to work on ranches but his father would not allow him for the same:

Is that a life? A farmhand? (134)

Hence the circle of frustrations gets revolving around the family. In one way Willy knows that America is not a country where all people have equal power. This self-knowledge gets bestowed upon him within the marketplace, as evident during the scene in Howard's office:

I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and I can't pay my
insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away -
a man is not a piece of fruit! (181)

American capitalism which is class-based, is divided into higher, middle and lower classes and Willy Loman comes in the lower middle class. But his aspirations are embedded in the high class spurred by capitalism where one wishes to own every consumer item mortgaging a substantial number of years of one's life. He asks the grown Bernard for advice who has no great mantra for success to offer.

Willy talks of Ben who went to the jungle and came out a rich man.

His son, however, is more realistic and knows what he wants in life. For him, there is nothing more inspiring or beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt. He frankly admits:

It is a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the
hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping
stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. . . . And
always to have to get ahead of the next fella. (138)

He believes that he can achieve some respectable position by following his heart's avocation. But Willy wants to absorb him in a business-oriented culture.

I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England,

and the cops protect it like their own. (145)

Arthur Miller, who was mistakenly charged with the anti-American activities, was, in fact, an upholder of the American Capitalism. About Charley in “Death of a Salesman”, he says in Preface to Collected Plays:

The most decent man in Death of a Salesman is a capitalist
whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. (37)

His son, Bernard works hard, and attains a worthwhile objective.

While Charley accepts the family as he does the society, fulfilling himself silently, without making a fuss; Willy seeks integration as a fanatic does. About Charley, Miller adds:

He has learned how to live without that frenzy, that ecstasy of
spirit which Willy chases to his end. (37)

So the question according to Miller is not of goodness or badness of society but of self-realization. As in a journal Brian Parker clarifies Miller's viewpoint:

Willy's employer Howard is not presented as a conscious
monster but as a man very like Willy himself, with the same
narrow love for his family, the same love of gadgetry; the
same empty friendliness. Handy-dandy, which is the master,
which is the man? (51)

The perennial dilemma facing a conscious mind, according to the dramatist, as he avers in “The Family in Modern Drama” is “How may a man make for himself a home in the vastness of the strangers and how may he transform that vastness into a home?” (TE 85)

Miller frankly asks about the common man: “How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honour which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family? (TE 73)

Arthur Miller views theatre as a serious business, one that makes or should make man more humane, which is to say less alone. And it is to the aloneness of contemporary society that he has increasingly directed his thought and plays. He considers that a great drama is great jurisprudence and is one where people do not spend their emotions only but also learn something.

With this consciousness, he draws average men and women in his plays, ground down by an unforgiving system of business and politics. In the callous American milieu, there's no place for basic human values. Usefulness is the only buzzword and a man is judged by the yardstick of material success only and that success has to be achieved through short cut methods,

at the cost of others sometimes, but with no moral compunctions whatsoever. Miller avers in *Collected Plays*:

My concept of the audience is of a public each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or a hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind and in this respect at least the function of a play is to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them.
(11)

For Miller, 'idea' is very significant but his world is not that of Shaw, Ibsen or Chekhov. His work is unveiling a truth already known but unrecognized as such due to disinterestedness or lack of insight may be. Miller reminds us in his plays that there is a universe of people outside and we are responsible to it. So what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? G.B. Shaw has tongue-in-cheek comment on this in his *Heartbreak House* - Young people nowadays know better. A soul is very expensive thing to keep; much more than a motor-car.

Over a century ago, Mathew Arnold in *Dover Beach* expressed the same anxiety:
Ah, love, let us be true to one another!

It is the intensity of the passion which brings tragedy in Miller's plays. Common people become fit to be heroes just like high-class people. They all live for their petty, selfish interests and don't know that they just have to walk away when the going gets tough. They sacrifice themselves for their obsession, unable to settle for the half and this innocent error of theirs endears them to us. In "Tragedy and the Common Man" he asserts:

The Tragic feeling is invoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. (4)

And 'Tragic Flaw' is nothing but "his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the fact of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity." (TE 4) Only the passive characters who accept their lot without retaliation are 'flawless'. Most of us are in this category. Miller frankly says in *Preface to Collected Plays* that the Greco-Elizabethan rod cannot evaluate modern crisis as this method "hold no mention of insurance payments, front porches, refrigerator fan belts . . ." (31) It is to be seen "not through the portals of Delphi" (31) but "in the blue flame of the hot water heater." (31)

So the commonest of men may take on the royal stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest. In an interview with James J. Martin, Miller claims:

We're all, I think, in a boiling soup. What one man or woman is doing . . . we change the flavour of what we add, and it changes all of us. (115)

In fact, the basic problem facing man today is the loss of values as the centre cannot hold and anarchy is loosed upon the world. Modern man's insensitivity won't allow him

to love his crooked neighbour with his crooked heart as he had never heard of a world where promises were kept or one could weep because another wept. His is a society where each in his prison is a broken Coriolanus and lonely to the core.

Here arises a query - Why there is such a loss of values? The answer perhaps lies in the vulgar law of success which measures a man's status and ability by how much he can spend. It says a failure in business has no right to live. From here starts that maddening rat race of running after money. This is how Allen Lewis quotes Miller in his essay "Arthur Miller - Return To The Self":

The truth is that, we haven't learnt how to be happy and at one with ourselves. We have gone far in abolishing physical poverty. (46)

A confrontation with society enforces upon us certain reliance upon ritual and artificiality. One may recall Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire" where the sensitivity of Blanche Dubois is crushed by her moving out of the shelter of home and family into the uncaring anti-human world outside. Because the blow was struck outside home rather than within it – which is to say that it affects us more; it is a social fact that we are witnessing.

Miller writes in Preface to his Collected Plays about All My Sons and Death of a Salesman:

In both plays the dramatic obsession, so to speak, was with the twofold nature of the individual – his own concept of his deeds, and what turns out to be the "real" description of them. (18)

Willy's sons too, realize that their father has wrong dreams, all, all wrong. When he wants his employer Howard to regard him as a father figure, he, at the same time treats the prostitute as more than equal to his wife Linda. It is at this point that his favourite son Biff challenges him.

One can seek all familial relations in society except that of the spouse. It is, for Miller, nothing short of prostitution. In patriarchy, the females are largely mute spectators, although they understand every nefarious design of their husbands or the uneasiness of the sons. Linda may side with her husband in his false illusions, giving all care and support to him, fetching his jacket for him, snubbing sons for not behaving properly with their father, waiting happily at home while the male members are enjoying themselves in a restaurant. But one cannot deny the seething anger in her heart. The loneliness of this woman is palpable, though it never gets expressed in the narrative. She has almost no social life outside the family. Home sweet home is her whole world. The hurtful unspoken feelings are bound to generate loneliness for this woman.

Willy's fanaticism of imposing his unrealised dreams on his children gives way to loneliness in the sons. As the Captain in Strindberg's The Father says – Children are materialist's only hope of immortality. Miller himself explains this in Preface to Collected Plays that man has -

a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumb print somewhere on the world. A need for immortality, and by admitting it, the knowing that one has carefully inscribed one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day. (29)

However, all these desires for immortality are futile. Linda asks her husband – Why must everybody conquer the world? (183) But the salesman believes – One has got to add up to something. Dreams to rise high in life no doubt, are an *élan-vital* but this is also a fact that just by dreaming, one cannot become Dave Singleman and Radison Goodrich. Miller asks – Why cannot we simply walk away from the rut of individual success and say to hell with it? Charley has no mystique to offer when asked about the secret of his success:

My salvation is that I never took interest in anything.

(191)

The irony of situation is that we pity the victim with an air of superiority. We thank God that we, at least, know how to fit in the crass commercial heartless system. In fact, the problem is not aggravated only by the system, which thrives on the division of classes into two – the privileged and the non-privileged; as man is not just the product of society as a Marxist says. The individual factor is to be included. One person may be fond of reading and the other may like sports or some other thing. Geography, religion, education, race, language etc. are all factors in the constitution of culture. It is not just terrestrial. In cultural materialism, this limitation is there. Man is not a car or an object after all.

Henry Popkin in “Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter” exclaims :

Arthur Miller’s regular practice in his plays is to confront the dead level of banality with the heights and depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility.

(34)

Tears don’t well up in Linda’s eyes at Willy’s suicide as she is unable to understand why Willy has done so. It seems to her that Willy is just on another trip. She feels free as she has paid all the instalments of the house loan and now she can claim her nest as her own. But ironically, the husband has already taken a flight to another world leaving her all alone.

W.H. Auden beautifully asks about the successful modern man, who enjoys all modern amenities in life, in his poem *The Unknown Citizen* :

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd..

Had anything being wrong, we should certainly have heard.

The malady of loneliness that Mathew Arnold was talking about in 19th century, or, Arthur Miller, WH Auden and TS Eliot expressed in the 20th century, has worsened in the 21st century. We are terribly lonely people, cut off from each other. Time and speed are our two latest obsessions. As this fast, mobile and technologically driven world transforms every fragment of the clock into some use value, we have no surplus time for unproductive purposes just as to stand and stare, to borrow the words of W H Davies. The unconditional friendships or deep conversations with old parents are no more our cup of tea as nurturing of relationships needs time. Digital friends are the latest fad instead of the real people. Our Express Highways, Metro stations and Airports reek of some sort of sickness in this fast pace of life.. From fast food to dating apps, everything is to be consumed as quickly as possible. The only solution to this topsy turvy situation is a cultural revolution that would only restore what really matters to our sanity, and that is love, calmness and the flowering of the self.

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