

CHAPTER-II

THE CONFLICT IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN.

I. ABOUT THE PLAY :

In Death of a Salesman Miller presents the picture of a common salesman in a highly competitive commercial world where success is the only key to one's survival. The play is one of the four social tragedies by Miller. The theme of the collapse of the Great American Dream is presented through the tragedy of Willy Loman. The play turns upon Miller's analysis of the disfiguration of human reality in the American capitalist system owing to the 'Work Alienation'. The problem treated in the play is closely concerned with economic survival and work. The play is Miller's formal experimentation. As V.Rajakrishnan puts it "Rice's Expressionistic denunciation of the ugliness and moral decay of the machine age proved to be one of the elements which went into the making of Death of a Salesman".¹ The play is structured around the point of view of Willy Loman, and in a sense, Willy's mind is the stage. Willy's individuality has the peculiar mixture of defiant longing and comic vulnerability which carries an ageless appeal and a legendary air is imparted to Willy Loman like such archetypal figures as King Lear and Don Quixote.

Death of a Salesman is not only a record of the particular plight of one man, but it is obviously a criticism of the moral and social standards of contemporary America, and it shows Miller's abilities as a serious and consistent critic of modern American society. It also shows his remarkable social consciousness in his plays. The play reveals Miller's systematic belief in the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In both technique and the subject matter Death of a Salesman owes much to the Expressionist drama of the thirties. Eleanor Clark remarks :

It is, of course, the capitalist system that has done Willy in; the scene in which he is brutally fired after some forty years with the firm comes straight from the party line literature of the thirties."²

Though the play can be given various labels, it is certainly ^{more} a social tragedy, ~~mere~~. There is a blending of the tragic and the social elements in this play. It is the play in which commitment goes to the background and personal identity comes to the foreground.

II. SUMMARY :

Will Loman finds it difficult to travel a long distance in his old motor car at the age of the sixty three. He sees Howard, the son of his dead boss, and requests him

to consider his case sympathetically. But Howard instead of showing kindness toward Willy fires him. Willy's elder son ^{is} was an excellent football player but not good at his studies. Happy, the younger son, works as assistant manager in a shop. Instead of scolding, Willy encourages his son's thrifts.

Once Biff goes to see his father at Boston and discovers his father in the company of bad women. It strikes Biff at heart. Willy is truly sorry for deceiving his wife, Linda who is faithful to him. Willy suggests that Biff should go to his previous owner, Bill Oliver who liked him much, and borrow some money to start his own business.

Billy thinks that it would have been better if he would have joined his own brother Ben who went to Alaska and returned as a rich man. Biff is not helped by Bill Oliver. At last a horrible idea of getting for Biff to start a business enters Willy's mind. His life was insured for twenty thousand dollars. If he were dead, Biff could get money. So Willy in his car, drove it madly and met ^{with} an accident and thus it was the death of a salesman.

III. THE WRONG CHOICE :

The capitalistic economy is not sufficient ^{at} due to explain Willy's tragic^o death. This is so especially because Charley, his neighbour, is living prosperously in the same

economic conditions. Social pressure do play a part, but Willy the individual is equally responsible for his failure as a salesman. Thus the tragedy is the combination of social as well as individual issues. Willy's illusions have made incapable of coping up with the realities of life. No doubt, the social forces are responsible in forming of the illusions. But he is not a passive victim of the hostile system. He is swollen by self-conceit and he willingly chooses salesmanship. Had he chosen any other profession, or had he joined his brother Ben, his case would have been different. In Willy's ethos, hard-working, honest living, common place, people like Bernard and Charley have no place. His dreams are illusory and his whole family lives under the spell of his dream. Driven by the images of the success myth-made manifest in Ben and Daves Singleman, he spoils his sons, overlooks their petty dishonesties and tortures them with his ambitions for them. Thus Ben and Charley serve as the alter-ego to the character of Willy. Willy's wrong choice leads him to the tragic conflict and his downfall.

IV. THE CONFLICT IN DEATH OF A SALESMAN :

In his plays Miller tries to search an answer to the more fundamental question, namely, how to live? We find that the ways in which Miller's protagonists lived is are wrong ones, because they inevitably lead to the tragic conflict. "The basic conflict in Miller's plays

is always between the individual and the society,"³ Santosh Bhatia observes. Thus Willy breaks the law of success and errs.

The conflict in Death of a Salesman is external one. It is the conflict between the individual and the social forces. The father-son conflict is a dramatic variation of the conflict between individual and society, between private conscience and the public issues. This conflict is presented through external means.

In order to draw out the conflict we must note the salient features of Willy's character. Willy is always led by the outward appearance. He thinks that his son, Biff must succeed in the greatest country in the world, because he is a young man with such personal attractiveness. He likes to live on sensations and likes to create sensations about himself. Throughout his life, he tries to project his exaggerated images of himself in an attempt to impress his sons. He tells him, "I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own" (p.145). The following conversation suggests the extent to which Willy is capable of self-deception :

Biff : Where you go this time, Dad ?

Willy : Well, I got on the road, and I went north
to Providence. Met the Mayor.

Biff : The Mayor of Providence ?

Willy : He was sitting in the hotel lobby.

Biff : What did he say ?

Willy : He said, "Morning". And I said, "you got a fine city here, Mayor." And then he had coffee with me. (pp.144-45).

But the reality is that he is a small fry. But to Linda he confesses the truth that people don't seem to take him. He assumes the airs of V.I.P. before his sons because that is exactly how he would have imagined himself to be. His trouble is that he can not live with reality. The gap between his hopes and reality contains the essential tragic irony. There is the same gap between Willy's dreams about his son, Biff whom he views not as a mortal but "Like a young god, Hercules - sometimes like that. And the sun, the sun all around him" (p.171). But the reality turns out to be the opposite of his dreams. Biff proves to be a failure. On the other, Bernard, whom he considers to be a "pest" and an "anaemic", proves to be a success. Thus there is a wide gap between promise and fulfilment. The speeding car which is a symbol of material success and rat-race competition, is used to suggest Willy's loosening "grip on the force of life".

The essential paradox of the tragedy lies in that Willy finds it difficult to walk away from the central conflict. In Miller's own words, "the less capable a man is of walking away from the central conflict of the play, the closer he approaches a tragic existence."⁴

The central conflict of Death of a Salesman is dramatised on two levels - the domestic and the social. On the social level Willy is struggling as a salesman and is trying to regain his lost image. The climax of this struggle is reached in the Howard scene. Willy tells Howard, his employer : "I put my thirty years into this firm, Howard, and now can't pay my insurance : you can't eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit." (p.161). The salesman is selling himself. He starts from sixty five dollars a week, then lowers to fifty, and finally comes down to forty. The basic question involved here is : "how can a person keep his sense of right and wrong while grappling for a living in a business world which recognizes only the principle of the survival of the fittest ?"⁵ When in the final encounter with Howard Willy accidentally switches the recorder on and just after the clumsy behaviour of Willy Howard fires him.

Another level of conflict in the play is personal and domestic level. Here the conflict is between the father and the son. But this struggle has larger social implications. Willy represents the culture of the business world which he tries to inculcate ~~it~~ in his son. But Biff likes to whistle in the elevator to take shirt off and swim in the middle of the day. He is against the principle of 'keeping up appearance' which Willy practices. Thus the

conflict is also between the urban and commercial culture on the one side and the pastoral and agrégian on the other. The hollowness of the former is revealed to Biff when he discovers his father who was an ideal for him so far, with a half-naked woman in a room of the Boston Hotel on which Biff says "You phony little fake". Thus Biff loses his faith in his father. After this Willy struggles to regain his fatherhood. Now he takes recourse to farming which he has been opposing all his life.

The most important, suggestive and simple image from which the play grew that Miller mentions is "the image of a need greater than hunger or sex or thirst, a need to leave a thumbprint 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."⁶

The climax of the tragic effect reaches when Biff makes a determined attempt to make his father face the truth. He tells Willy : "we never told the truth for ten minutes in this house" (p.216). Further he says : "You are never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like the rest of them" (p.217). Their argument rises to higher pitch and finally Biff breaks down crying. And revelation dawns upon Willy. In an elevated mood Willy says :

(after a long pause, astonished, elevated) :
 Isn't that - isn't that remarkable ? Biff
 - he likes me ! ... He cried ! Cried for
 me. (He is choking with his love, and
 now cries out his promise) : That boy -
 that boy is going to be magnificent !

(p.218).

The moment of tragic awakening is reached when Willy discovers that he is loved by Biff. Miller says : "In this he gives his existence, his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve"⁷. John Gassner rightly observes :

Willy, who is otherwise so unimpressive, is translated into a father for whom the love and success of his favourite son, Biff, is a paramount necessity and a consuming passion. He has been made into a dramatically charged father-hero, and as such becomes a heroic figure in active pursuit of father-son ideal. He may be a fool, but he becomes a monolithic figure of some tragic dimension in this aspect. This man as a failure even as a bourgeois recalls somewhat the obsessed and self-consuming heroes of Elizabethan tragedy.⁸

Willy decides to sacrifice for Biff's success. In this moment of enlightenment Willy is able to see that "he can prove his existence only by bestowing 'power' on his posterity, a power deriving from the sale of his last asset, himself, for the price of his insurance policy."⁹

Willy's act of self-assertion and triumph because it is not motivated by cowardice or despair, but it is joyful and epiphanic. It is to be taken as an act of victory over circumstances. "It is an act of love intended to redeem his house."¹⁰ The suicide is an act of heroism.

V. THE COSMIC DIMENSION OF DEATH OF A SALESMAN :

The above discussion shows that the results of the conflict can be generalized in such a way that gives the play some cosmic dimension or universality. The generalization can be done in the following manner.

Death of a Salesman is a social tragedy in which Miller handles the questions of a social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of merely particular towards the fate of man in general. Thus the conflict in Death of a Salesman is between an individual struggling to attain a place in tune with his idea of self respect in the society and the social forces

which prevent him from doing so. The play also shows the dreams of success and glory are blown away under the pressures of society. And in this the play achieves universality.

REFERENCES

1. V.Rajakrishnan - The Crucible And The Misty Tower (Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1966), p.28.
2. Eleanor Clark, "Old Glamour, New Gloom", rpt. Gerald Weales, ed. Death of a Salesman (New York : Viking 1967), p.218.
3. Santosh K.Bhatia "Introduction" Arthur Miller : Social Drama as Tragedy (Arnold-Heinemann, 1985), p.22.
4. Arthur Miller "Introduction", Collected Plays (London Cresset Press, 1958), p.128.
5. Clinton W.Trowbridge "Arthur Miller : Between Pathos and Tragedy," Modern Drama 10, No.3 (December 1967), p.224.
6. "Introduction" Collected Plays, p.29.
7. Ibid, p.34.
8. Eleanor Clark, "Old Glamour, New Gloom", rpt. Gerald Weales ed, Death of a Salesman (New York : Viking 1967), p.236.
9. "Introduction" Collected Plays, p.34.
10. Esther Merle Jackson, "Death of a Salesman : Tragic Myth," C.L.A. Journal, 7, No.1 (Sept. 1963), p.65.