

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS GOVERNED IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*: A MARXIST ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The research intends to probe into Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman (entitled as the best American play of country) in order to analyze it from the Marxist point of view and to investigate the element of false consciousness in the text. The characters of the play are the example of 20th century people who resort to illusion in order to gain some dignity. The present study will deal with the play in a Marxist perspective by exploring the role of false consciousness and ideology formulated by bourgeoisie in a capitalist society. Arthur Miller has won a lot of awards: A Tony Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and a Molière Award one of the most prized of American dramatists. He is one of the top most of American playwrights. He is one of five major American dramatists of international repute. Miller's plays have the ability to attract, amuse and provoke the readers and the audience alike Miller is the fountainhead of heat and energy enthusiasm and bubbles, creativity and controversy in the field of dramatic literature. Death of a Salesman is the story of a man who always lives a life of illusion and blindly follows American Dream which is based on the false consciousness. In fact, Willy Loman is everyman and every man is Willy Loman and he represents the morality of common working class. The tragic end of the play is not difficult to accept for a common reader because he is also a part of the same social circumstances.

Key words: False consciousness, American Dream, ideology, fetishism of commodity

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller is the most prized dramatists of American dramatists. He is one of the five major American dramatists of international repute. Miller's play has the ability to attract, amuse and provoke the readers and audience alike Miller is the fountainhead of heat and energy enthusiasm and bubbles, creativity and controversy in the field of dramatic literature. *Death of a Salesman* (published in 1949) is a play written by Arthur Miller, an American playwright. He is considered one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century. His best known plays include *All My Sons*, *A view from the Bridge*, *The Crucible* and the Pulitzer prize winning *Death of a Salesman*.

Death of a Salesman is the story of a man who always lives a life of illusion and blindly follows American Dream which is based on false consciousness. In fact, Willy Loman is every man and every man is Willy Loman and he represents the morality of common working class. The tragic end of the play is not difficult to accept for a common reader because he is also the part of this same social circumstances.

Marxism is a social, political and economic philosophy that examines the effect of a capitalism on labor, productivity and economic development. Marxism posits that the struggle between social classes specifically between the bourgeoisie or capitalists and proletariat or

workers defines the development of the state and the bourgeoisie seek to gain control of the factors of production from the masses. Only by eliminating the control of the economy from private ownership the economy will continue to grow.

Marxist literary theories tend to focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions through the medium of literature. Marxist theorists use traditional techniques of literary analysis, rather than subordinate aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature. Marxist theorist often champions authors sympathetic to the working classes and authors whose work challenges economic equalities found in capitalist societies. In keeping with the totalizing spirit of Marxism, literary theories arising from the Marxist paradigm have not only sought new ways of understanding the relationship between economic production and literature, but all cultural production as well.

False consciousness is a concept derived from Marxist theory of social class (Marx & Engels). The concept refers to the systematic misrepresentation of dominant social relations in the consciousness of subordinate classes. Marx himself did not use the phrase concepts of ideology and commodity fetishism. Members of subordinate class (workers, peasants, serfs) suffer from false consciousness in that their mental representations of their social relations around them systematically conceal or obscure the relations of subordination, exploitation, and domination those relations embody. "The term false consciousness was coined by Engels in a private letter to Franz Mehring in 1893 it refers to ideology dominating the consciousness of exploited groups and classes which at the same time justifies and perpetuates their exploitation. The representation of private interest abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions in their stead, the immoral, and irrational and soul less abstraction of a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object. The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling class for example the classes which are the ruling material of force of society is at the same time its intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production is its disposal has controlled at the same time over the means of material production." (Marx German Ideology, 1845)

The ideology of the American Dream can be traced back to the flood of immigration in the early twentieth century. Families from European Countries sailed on boats from months to reach the great promise America held. They left their home countries and everything they had to lead successful and prosperous lives in the US. Another form of the American Dream arose in the 1950s after the US successfully won World War II. Young men came back to their young wives and had many children, hence the name baby-boom generation. Soon Levittowns sprung up around the country, cookie-cutter houses divided by pristine white picket fences, to handle the population increase.

The American Dream is based on the *Declaration of Independence*. We believe that all men are born with these inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This *dream* consists of a genuine and determined belief that in America, all things are possible to all men, regardless of birth or wealth; if you work hard enough you will achieve anything. However, Miller believes that people have been 'ultimately misguided' and Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, is a moving destruction of the whole myth.

Research Objectives

- To find out the elements of class distinction in the text.
- To explore the aspects of ideology leading towards false consciousness.
- To determine the elements of false consciousness in the text.

Research Questions

- How class distinction is represented in the text?
- How does ruling class impose their ideology on the masses in an unfelt way?
- How is the ideology of false consciousness formulated by Bourgeoisie?
- How is false consciousness cause of the destruction of lives of the characters of play?

Research Statement

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is analyzed from a Marxist point of view in this study. It explores the aspects of class conflict, ideology and false consciousness which are lying under the heading of Marxism in the text. The play's protagonist state of false-consciousness that he is put into by dominant culture in which he believes in the version of American Dream that is no longer applicable to modern day America. It is by comparing the life's experiences of play's two main characters Biff and Willy that they start their journey in a state of false consciousness. One gets rid of it and the other remains in it. Through a Marxist perspective the study will deal with the representation of false consciousness in the play and its consequences.

Literature Review

Althusser (1971) also discussed false consciousness in *Lenin and Philosophy*. He gave structuralism interpretation of Marxism. In *German Ideology* he describes the role of ideology in social system. For him ideology is an attribute of consciousness instead he refers to an ideological state apparatus. He disputes the assumption that there is an external social reality independent from ideology rather, all features of reality are expressed in language and are inseparable from the features of consciousness singled out as ideological.

False consciousness in American dream is also discussed in the movie *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) directed by Gabriele Muccino in which there is the story of a person who invests heavily in an expensive medical device that does not offer a great benefit over its cheaper emotions. As a result he finds it hard to sell them and his life hits a downward spiral. His wife leaves, he loses his house and he is forced to live on the street with his son. Then he takes a job as a stockbroker, but before he can receive any money, he has to pass six months of training and sell the medical devices. This movie shows that even when it seems like you're living the American dream, it can feel away due to a twist of fate and the surface can become fixed against you.

The American culture of middle 20th century is vividly present in Tennessee Williams' play (2003) *A Street Car Named Desire*. It is manifested through references to food, music, place, names, shop's names and typical American traditions. The characters are people of post-war USA, who come from different social classes and bear different nationalities, each of them struggling for success using the resources they have. They struggle, dream of get close to and lose the American dream. The stanza of the poem *The Broken Tower* is the epigraph to the text of *A Street Car Named Desire*. It's lines issues discussed in the play. The broken world seems to allude to post war America, where values and social conventions were reconstructed.

Eugene O'Neil comments on the failure of American dream in following lines:

"I am going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country."

In O'Neill's (1941) *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he also deals with the issue of false consciousness of American Dream for individual and social environments and he criticized the whole structure of American society. He reveals the reality of the American Dream in the capitalist society. The failure of American Dream, its values and culture of America is discussed and criticized by O'Neill in his piece of literature. A man is showed by him who wanted to fulfill his desires and dreams that were desired to him by the American Dream but he failed because of imbalance conditions that were created by Capitalism.

In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* there is a great deal of criticism offered for the two dominant socio-economic theories of the day, capitalism and Marxism. Before we can get to how those ideas are portrayed in the play, let's first make sure that we really understand what they mean. In capitalism, individual citizens control different elements of the economy. If you happen to own a mountain that has gold inside of it, you get to sell that gold and keep the profits. If you have a mind that lets you perform brain surgery, you get to sell that ability and keep the profits. At the end of the day, the most important economic unit is the individual, since it is in the individual's interest that any business enterprise is done. For example, because a lot of individuals don't want to buy VCRs anymore, not a lot of individuals spend time working at places that make VCRs. In short, individual hard work and individual choices are the foundations of capitalism. Meanwhile, Marxism is a bit less of an economic theory and more of a social one, despite being very closely related to economic theories like socialism and communism. Instead, Marxism likes to look at history and society through the lens of different economic classes. While other historical approaches may look at how different nations or even genders are treated, Marxism focuses on the relationship between different social classes. With a Marxist view, an individual's hard work, if they belong to the wrong class, only benefits the capital class, those who own the businesses and factories. As Willy has to contend with a higher social class in *Death of a Salesman*, this is relevant. In *Death of a Salesman*, there is plenty to examine from both angles, especially within the context of the American Dream.

Dissolving the boundaries in the perspective of Marxism has been investigated from the themes of the play. In this perspective, in order to fill the lapses and gaps in the present research a review of the previous different researchers is given. The previous researchers analyzed the play from the other key notions of Marxism for instance class conflict, alienation, hegemony and interpellation but the present research has explored the presence of one of the vitals of Marx's Marxism key notion '*false consciousness*'.

Importance of study

Without any doubt in *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most important literary works in the field of drama. The script won Pulitzer Prize for drama the 1949 Tany Award for best play as well as the New York drama critics' circle award for best play in short time. It received many enthusiastic reviews and won fame for its author. The present analysis presents a detail and in depth study of the play with all the key notions of Marxism especially false consciousness. This research comments that the study of the play is not so unique and it is the story of more than three million people of modern world who have become the victim of class conflict and like Willy Loman, they become the prey of false consciousness and they remain in it for their whole lives.

Research Methodology

Steps of Research

The research is conducted in the following two steps:

- i. Analysis of the text with the perspective of false consciousness
- ii. Analysis of variations found.

Sample of Study

Sample of study is the text of the play *Death of a Salesman* and the secondary source are the books, articles, internet and journals.

Type of Research

The research is qualitative in nature.

Textual Analysis

Miller's (1949) play *Death of a Salesman* is the closed study of American dream in the society of Europe. There is no doubt that *Death of a Salesman* cannot make up its mind whether the trouble is in Willy or in society. No doubt, Willy is one moment the pathetic object of our pity and the next is being defended as a hero of tragic dimensions. To pass a laborious life and also die an inglorious death from frustration is the typical picture of the life of an individual in a third world country. But it is absolutely an unlikely happening for a citizen of America, the land of plenty and wealth. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* presents a very similar situation and thus indirectly poses a challenge to the American dream, that to be an American is to enjoy a life of plenty, equality and happiness. No American should get lost and die an unlamented death.

American Dream means the dream of becoming rich overnight. The scale and merit of success is money, big house, a costly car and other material things. Nobility, truth, honesty are not merits. Values have been changed through this dream. Instead of hard work and courage, there is salesmanship. It implies fraud, the ability to sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic uselessness. The goal of salesmanship is to earn a profit. So, in these circumstances, man ceases to be man and spiritually he is hollow. He constantly wears a mask hiding his deceptive frauds.

The only reality, the only goal is that of material success. The same situation happens with Willy Loman. By this way, Willy, to a large extent, represents Every Low-man in America. His fall, his death reflects the total break down of the concept of salesmanship, an integral part of America setup.

Willy says,

“I've got to get some seeds. I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground”. (act II)

Willy's false consciousness is clearly depicted through these lines,
I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman! (Willy, Act II)

Through Marxist perspective, Arthur Miller suggests in his book the *Death of Salesman* that one can only be freed from alienation and commodification if one is able to demystify the state of false consciousness that one is put into by the dominant culture. It is by comparing the life experiences of the play's two main characters Biff and Willy that the reader can make this conclusion. Both Biff and Willy starts the play in the state of false consciousness leading them both to being alienated and commodified. Unlike Biff however, Willy does not come out of this state and will bring his beliefs to his grave. Only after realizing just how fake his whole life was, Biff finally able to be freed from this prison created by a capitalist society and the false consciousness of American Dream.

Willy Loman's state of false consciousness is that he believes in a version of the American Dream that is no longer applicable to modern day America. Like may out there, Willy Loman covets the possibilities of success that define the American Dream with the firm belief that success could be only achieved through charm, style and popularity. In fact he says that “[...] the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, in the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want,....”

He cites himself as an example of a man who is liked immensely and gets his business done every where he goes. Going deeper and deeper now totally immersed in the world of illusion, dreams and fantasy. This shows that Willy suffers from false consciousness that leads him towards the alienation because, he has the wrong dreams, all wrong. He considers himself as a vital man and he goes to Howard to tell him that he is unable now to go to farther areas and requests him to give him job in this city but Howard replies,

“I can't take the blood out of the stone”.

Howard's behaviour towards Willy shows the failure and hollowness of American Dream that is fail to fulfill its promises and this social injustice compels him to commit suicide.

Death of a Salesman is centered on one man trying to reach the American dream and taking his family along for the ride. Loman's life from beginning to end is a troubling story based on trying to become successful or at least happy. Throughout their lives the family encounters many problems and the result is a tragic death caused by stupidity and the need to succeed. During his life, Willy Loman caused his wife great pain by living a life not realizing what he could and could not do. Linda lived sad and pathetic days supporting Willy's unreachable goals. At the end of the play, it is certainly realized that the forces which led Loman towards his death. His society of false consciousness compels him to embrace death as the possible solution and that very society helps him to act like a brute. His family is brutally treated to its doom and uncertainty though he sacrifices himself in the alter of a capitalist society that brutally holds the oppressive guillotine of manipulation, exploitation and profit making attitude.

“After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive.”

Miller himself says,

“Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable to him and to many, it is the law in which says that a failure in society and business has no right to live.”

A characteristic weakness of the Loman brothers which they do not fail to realize is that they were not brought up to grub for money, making them misfits in an acquisitive society of American Dream and they both don't know how to do it. These two individuals cannot feel themselves to be attached to this society. They lack a sense of belonging and this is the result of false consciousness and class based society. Biff feels that it is no use wasting one's life to build an estate and not having the peace of mind to live in it.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that Miller in *Death of a Salesman* has tried to show the failure of American dream which governs people in the way of false consciousness. Implicitly, he tells us that man is not a machine, he has emotions too. Thus placing all the values on riches is wrong. The whole situation he sums up in Biff's remark who says on his father's death.

“He had the wrong dream. All, all wrong.”

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