Chapter IV

Success Myth and American Dream
CHAPTER FOUR
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Today the success myth or the American dream is considered to be the instant business success of those who are merciless, ruthless, unkind but lucky. Miller points out the flaw with a merely economic interpretation of American dream as business success alone. Joe Keller sacrifices other parts of American dream for simple economic success overtaking all his business partners. Miller suggests the flaws of capitalists who have no grounding in cultural and social morals. While Keller is ready to patch over the flawed shipmen he criticizes a system that would encourage profit and greed at the expense of human life and peace. The criticism of the American Dream which tries at the heart of All My Sons was one reason why Miller was called to appear before the House of Un-American Activities Committee during the 1950s, when America was gripped by anti-communist hysteria. The Modern American dramatists like O'Neill, Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, Arthus Miller and Tennessee Williams interpreted the American dream and the quest for success in different ways (Myth 268).

Historically the American dream meant the promise of freedom and opportunity for all. Anyone who worked hard could expect to have a happy and prosperous life. The critic Harold Clurman wrote "instead of the ideals of hard work and courage, we have salesmanship a certain element of Freud – the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself" (126). The Americans
strongly feel that they deserve money material things as their birthright. Advertising reinforces their desire for possessions often making them want things, they either don't need or can't afford. If they don't have enough money to buy everything they want they are totally upset and dejected.

Mary Mc Carthy, an American critic emphasizes the interpretation that *Death of a Salesman* is a criticism of American System. She asks, "What is the matter with Willy Loman?" Miller would answer America is what is wrong with him and to some extent this is true. The conception of the salesman's house as a house of shabby lies and competitive boasts is sadly close to our national life; it is in fact a close up of the home depicted in full colour by advertisers in the national magazine (Arthur Miller 78).

America is the country where the values of Capitalism, Free Enterprise, Big Business are seen at their most rewarding and their most destructive. Willy Loman experiences both the aspects. Although he is a victim of the system he is its devoted adherent.

The American business adventurer Ben is aggressive and unscrupulous. He advises the school boy Biff, "Don't fight fair with a stranger You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (DOS 1.34). Biff is Willy's idea of success. He and Willy agree about the ideal of the American boy, keen on games, rugged, well liked all around. One side of Willy Loman is completely absorbed in these American dreams, he is very much a conformer, wanting to be in the swim. There was
no attempt to bring down the American edifice, nor to raise it higher. However, American values are powerfully questioned in the play. Robert Falls says "it is a play that for 50 years has never lost its popularity" (2).

Robert Garland considers Death of a Salesman as a Representative of Everyman (American). He observes:

If Everyman will forgive me in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman there's much Every man. Bothered, bewildered, but mostly believed, as Willy Loman is, he's not a great deal different from the majority of his contemporaries. He, even as you and I builds himself a shaky shelter illusion. (New York 24)

Though Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution applied only to biological phenomena, other thinkers drew broader inferences from it. The temptation to apply evolutionary theory to the social order proved irresistible.

Charles Darwin's fellow Englishman Herbert Spenser became the first major prophet of Social Darwinism and an important influence on American thought. Herbert Spenser, whose first works anticipated Charles Darwin, brought forth in eight weighty tomes his System of Synthetic Philosophy in 1893, an effort to embrace all fields of knowledge within an overall system of Darwinian evolution.

Millers' characters are the real characters of life – real characters of contemporary American society. They are true models of their counterparts with the typical American attitude. Almost all his characters are materialists because
they are Americans. Most of his characters are from the business community. There is a fearful personal manager in the *Focus*, an unscrupulous industrialists in *All My Sons*, a frustrated salesman in *Death of a Salesman* and also some capitalists such as Charley, dehumanized labourers in *A Memory of Two Mondays* and a displaced cowboy in *The Misfits*. All these characters uniformly have the American attitude of quest for money and thirst for material world. Ironically most of these characters are disappointed in their ventures which bring unpleasantness and unhappiness to them in the end.

Herbert Spenser argued that human society and institutions, like organisms, passed through the process of natural selection, which resulted in Herbert Spenser’s chilling phrase, in the survival of the fittest. For Herbert Spenser, social evolution implied progress, ending “only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness” (America 902).

If as Herbert Spenser believed, society naturally evolved for the better, then individual freedom was inviolable, and governmental interference with the process of social evolution was a serious mistake. This view amounted to a more ponderous version of Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth*. And *Gospel of Wealth* used biological laws to justify the working of the free market. Social Darwinism implied a governmental policy of hands-off; it decried the regulation of business, the graduated income tax, sanitation, and housing regulations and
even protection against medical quacks. Such interventions, would help the unfit survive and thereby only impede progress. This argument of Herbert Spenser is not acceptable in the modern world.

To Herbert Spenser the only charity that was acceptable was the voluntary charity, and even that was of dubious value. Herbert Spenser warned that "fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty" (America, 903). For Herbert Spenser and his many American supporters, successful businessmen and corporations were the engines of social progress. If small businesses were crowded out by trusts and monopolies, that too was part of the evolutionary process.

In this context, the pointed observation of John D. Rockefeller is worth quoting here, for it argues to the point:

The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest. The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance, which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds, which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out the law of nature a law of God. (America 903)

Andrew Carnegie is best remembered for his monumental essay, entitled, "The Gospel of Wealth", published in 1889. In this basic statement of his philosophy he drew upon the ideas of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spenser, who had invented the phrase, the survival of the fittest.
In the evolution of society Andrew Carnegie argued, the contrast between the millionaire and the laborer measures the distance society has come. His pointed argument is worth quoting here.

Not evil, but good has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have the ability and energy that produces it. The process had been costly in many ways, but the law of competition was best for the trade, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department. (854)

David Carnegie’s gospel of wealth found widespread acceptance in the late nineteenth century’s worship of success, an attitude of respect for the self-made man that owed perhaps more to Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and the sayings of Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard rather than to Charles Darwin and his interpreters. The popularity of such attitudes spawned a huge market for inspirational literature touting the ancient verities of truth, integrity and hard work.

Among the sages of that school none was better known than Horatio Alger, whose very name became a byword for success. A Unitarian Minister in New York, wrote novels for boys, mostly about poor boys, who made good, with titles such as Ragged Dick, Luck and Pluck, and Tattered Tom. More often than not, however, Horatio Alger’s heroes made it like, Andrew Carnegie, by winning the favor of some well-placed person.
At this juncture it is necessary to take into consideration the pointed and definitive statement of Luther S Luedtke on the popular metaphor, American Dream, which reads thus:

A popular metaphor in writing about life and aspiration in the United States, the American Dream usually implies social mobility and material success: a rise from rags to riches through sacrifice, hard work, perseverance, and luck. One also finds the term associated with democratic self-government, religion, freedom, racial equality, educational opportunity, home ownership, quality of life, and a variety of sensual indulgences. The motto came into currency in the early 1930s, when the nation was sliding into the Great Depression, and has maintained an undercurrent of false expectations, illusion, betrayal, especially in literary representations. (Reader’s Guide 85)

This concept of America Dream is better appreciated in conjunction with John Winthrop’s sermon called a Model of Christian Charity, in which he beseeched his fellow men to create a City Upon a Hill, a Christian Commonwealth that would offer both a civil and a religious model for the reformation of the world.

But in reality the American city as witnessed by intellectuals such as Arthur Miller and Theodore Dreiser does not meet the requirements of John Winthrop’s the City Upon a Hill concept. These intellectuals consider that the American city could be terribly cruel as well as fascinating.
In fact, the American city could devastatingly ruin the ill-equipped, and at the same greatly delight the financially secure persons. The cruelty of the American city with its scenes of human degradation and man's inhumanity is a vital primer in Herbert Spenser's doctrine of the survival of the fittest. There is ever the frenzied pursuit of wealth. There is the desire to go after money. But there is a lack of will power to accept failures and endure disillusionments and frustrations. Everyone is caught by the American spirit of American materialism and material advancement. Here is no land or day to be satisfied with well enough.

Anyone could legitimately aspire to be anything in America, and nearly all aspire. Not to want to be rich or to be willing and able to work for riches is to write yourself down as nobody. Material possessions are already the goal as well as the sum of most American life, and so no one could help feeling the state of isolation and indifference, which accompanies a lack of means. This is precisely the fate of Willy Loman, the protagonist of Death of a Salesman. He does not want to go down as nobody. The textual passage of Willy's statement is worth quoting here, for it is his conception of happiness and success in life, which is to possess immense wealth hoard it, and spend it.

WILLY. You and Hap and I and I'll show you all the towns. America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know m up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring
you fella up, there’ll be open sesame for all of us, ‘cause
one thing boys: I have friends. I can park my car in an
street in New England, and the cops protect it like their
own. This summer, heh? (DOS 1.19)

Miller writes the suppression of the individual by placing him below the
imperious needs of the society or technology seems to have more Willys in the
world (Roundane 1-2). He aspires to concretize the American Dream. But in the
end knows only failures. He fails to make himself a billionaire and remains and
commits suicide as a salesman. He fails to raise his son Biff to great financial
heights. Howard brands him a failure. Arthur Miller distills the myth of the
American Dream quite effectively in the dialogue between Happy Loman and his
elder brother, Biff Loman.

HAPPY. (enthralled) That’s what I dream about, Biff. Sometimes I
want to just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and
outbox that goddam merchandise manager. I mean I can
outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store, and I have
to take orders from those common, petty son-of-bitches till I
can’t stand any more. (DOS 1.12)

In Death of Salesman Biff opposes strongly his father’s desire and attitude.
Just opposite to his father he chooses to be poor and to do things he loves rather
than sacrifice his freedom in the mad pursuit of money. The tustle between father
and son provides the central dramatic tension of the play. But his brother Happy follows the footsteps of his father and he wants to be great and successful. Charley is a self contented man with modest wealth. But his son tries his hand in law. All these characters have chosen their way of responding to American dream. It is concluded that it is not a criticism of Salesman alone but of a pursuit of money as an end to itself.

Home ownership or estate ownership is very much a concept associated with American Dream and it becomes a myth in the case of the Lomans who are yet to clear the housing loan, and that of the friend of Happy who owns an estate but has lost his peace of mind. The success story runs counter to contentment, which is the fundamental base of peace.

Willy Loman is a perfect example of someone who feels defeated and betrayed because he cannot achieve the financial goals the society has conditioned for him. Though the Salesmanship is his chosen career, he doesn't have the talent or temperament. Once he fails in his salesmanship and fired, he is totally at a loss and even the love of his family his talent as a carpenter cannot comfort him. His American attitude of believing that a person who fails in the business has no right to live is well exposed in many places.

Arthur Miller cautions against dreaming far off things. Life is full of desirable situations, but unfortunately one can only occupy one at a time. Most people do not realize this and never taste contentment, because they neglect their
particular desirable situation and long for others. This is precisely the expectation and end failure of Willy Loman. And Willy Loman is greatly enthralled and delighted to learn from Biff Loman that he intends to meet his benefactor Oliver and get fifteen thousand dollars, which he wishes to invest in a new business venture.

Immediately, Willy Loman flies on the wings of imagination thinking that his son Biff Loman has already become a millionaire. He has sent Biff to meet Oliver for a better fortune. Linda does not believe this and asks:

LINDA. I'm just wondering if Oliver will remember him. You think he might?

WILLY. (coming out of the bathroom in his pyjamas) Remember him? What's the matter with you, you crazy? If he'd've stayed with Oliver he'd be on top by now! Wait'll Oliver gets a look at him. You don't know the average caliber any more. The average young man today (he's getting into bed) is got caliber of zero. Greatest thing in the world for him was to bum around. (DOS 1.49-50)

It must be considered that if desire be rife in the mind and no channel of satisfaction is provided, if there be ambition, however weak, and it is not schooled in lovely principle and precept, if no way be shown, be sure it will learn a way of the world. This is what Willy Loman and his son, Biff Loman learn when Oliver refuses any help to Biff Loman.
Through Willy Loman, Arthur Miller shows the perceptive and critically oriented reader that even simple people can be bewilderingly complex in their need to satisfy their own incompatible longings. One easily identifies with Willy Loman precisely because the search for substance, wealth, and material progress of Willy Loman is precisely the search of every modern man for wealth in the modern world. There is ever the magnetism toward wealth experienced by every individual in the present century.

But it does not take long for many to realize plainly the importance of money. But still people hanker after money. Their aim is to do better and to move higher and for that they require more and more money.

Willy's unquestioning faith in the American dream seems to have made it unnecessary for him to develop any high moral ideas. He has been turning a blind eye to Biff's thefts, petty as they were. When Biff fails in the examination, Willy blames the teacher whom he describes as "that son of a bitch". He is not even prepared to listen to Biff about his interview with Bill Oliver. This American dream prevents him from accepting. Ben's offer of a golden opportunity in Alaska where he could have become rich. He deceives himself to such an extent that he thinks that his funeral will be "massive" affair and will be attended by very important people in the trade. Actually only Charley and Bernard attended the funeral beside the members of his family.
This is the aim of Joe Keller of *All My Sons*, and Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*. In *All My Sons*, the protagonist, Joe Keller, betrays his business partner Steve, and has him thrown into the jail. After that he basks in ill-gotten wealth. But soon he suffers from guilt complex.

In *All My Sons* the challenge is to recover the full American dream of healthy communities with thriving families. Economic mobility alone can be detrimental for example George's Abandonment of his home town for big city success. There is a rift in the Bayliss's marriage over Bayliss's unprofitable research because his wife wants him to make more money instead of to do what he enjoys and what will help others.

Arthur Miller by making Joe Keller suffer accusation at the hands of his eldest son Chris Keller and drive to a psychic state where he finds suicide is the only way out from him to escape his mental crisis and guilt-ridden worries.

It testifies to the fact that Joe Keller still maintains that the ill-gotten wealth is not tainted money, whereas in his heart of hearts he experiences the guilty feeling that the money is raised over his betrayal of Steve and over the deaths of twenty-one young pilots.

Joe feels that George never visited his father after he was imprisoned. Like that Ann did not call on Kellers so far. Keller feels that Ann does not hold anything against him, even though her father blamed him even to his last day in court. Chris gets excited but Keller asks him to forget everything.
Keller wants Chris to make use of the fortune he has made for his sake. Though the means is bad, Chris need not be ashamed of it which is good. Till the end of the drama Keller does not feel a pinch of remorse about his ill gotten money. An American's ambition and his dream about the future of his son is very well exposed in the following passage:

KELLER. (With great force, moving about). I want a clean start for you, Chris. I want a new sign over the plant Christopher Keller, Incorporated.

CHRIS (a little uneasily). J. O. Keller is good enough.

KELLER. We'll talk about it. I want to build you a house, stone, with a driveway from the road. I want you to use what I made for you (He is close to him now). I mean, with joy, Chris, without shame . . . with joy. (AMS 1.39)

There is a complete turn around when Chris starts accusing his father of murdering twenty-one young pilots and of betraying Steve.

The points to the fact that ill-gotten money sours familial relationships and ends in tragic consequences. In that one evidences the decreation of the soidisant American Dream.

During a heated discussion Joe tries to justify his criminal conduct and says that his subsequent lies were for the sake of Chris. Rejecting and disapproving the
idea that Joe is a businessman and could not miss an opportunity in business, Chris lashes at the greed of his father.

In a tone of burning fury, Chris scolds his father for his short sightedness. He reprimands him for being too narrow in his outlook to think of the world. So when he hears his father defending his criminal action in the name of business imperatives, he asks him angrily, “Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? You are not even an animal, no animal. Kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?” (AMS 2.76).

After the exit of Chris who goes out in a fit of rage, Kate has a discussion with Joe. She reveals to her husband that Chris wants his father to be punished some way or other, atleast going to jail. This very idea shocks Joe who is not at all satisfied with the behaviour of his son. Of course, his involvement in the criminal act is purely for selfish reasons. He wanted to earn more money only for his wife and son because family is everything to him. But Kate disapproved this idea telling that she does not want to have money that way. But for Joe it is immaterial how money is earned. He knows the value of money and how hard it is hard to earn that money. He cries, “What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you, I should've put him out when he was ten like. I was put out and made him earn his keep. The he'd know how a buck is made in this world. Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family” (AMS, 3.81).
Chris argues that he is ashamed of his father resorting to guile, knavery and murderous design to amass wealth, which he, like George, considers is tainted with the blood of twenty-one young pilots.

Chris's ideas do not suggest any kind of exaggeration. He speaks in a way, of the post-war disillusionment of both civilians and soldiers those who survived after seeing the horrors of war. As soon as Chris comes to know that his father has 'Killed twenty one men', the image of a father is broken in his mind. When his father wants to talk to him he says, “don't do that, Dad. I'm going to hurt you if you do that. There's nothing to say, say it quick” (AMS 3.86).

When Keller asks Chris if too much money bothers him, Chris replies in the affirmative in a sarcastic manner. If money is crux of the problem, Joe suggests:

KELLER. If you can't get used to it, then throw it away. You hear me? Take every cent and give it to charity; throw it in the sewer. Does that settle it? In the sewer, that's all. You think I'm kidding? I'm yelling you what to do; if it is dirty, then burn it. It's your money, that's not my money. I'm a dead man. I'm an old dead man, nothing's mine.

Well, talk to me! What do you want to do? (AMS 2.87)

Before taking leave of his father, Chris remarks, “I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you
as my father. (Almost breaking). I can’t look at you this way, I can’t look at myself!” (AMS 3.87).

Willy tells his sons that he has visited Providence, Waterbury, Boston, Portland and Bangor. He was given rousing welcome by his customers. In fact he wants to bring up his sons in that line making them successful businessmen. He promises to take Biff and Hap and show all the towns where he enjoyed his popularity as a salesman. According to him America has beautiful towns and quite understanding people. He is very familiar in New England. He says that "And when I bring you fellows up, there'll be open sesame for all of us ... because I have friends" (DOS 1.19). Willy thus boasts of his friends, high connections and his status in America. All this has ironical implications. The truth is that a salesman has no significant place in America.

To heighten the seriousness of the play and to bring out the contrast between two extremes, Miller introduces Charley as a successful businessman much opposite to Willy Loman who is sinking. He is really an embodiment of those human virtues which make life tolerable. Willy lives on the mystique success which has continually evaded him. Charley symbolizes 'good neighbourliness'. He respects the feelings of Willy and somehow or other wants to help him. When Charley and Willy are playing cards their conversation reveals how Willy spurns the good intended offers of Charley who knows the reality about him. But Willy's pride of being an American Salesman with a lot of
successful records with him does not permit him to budge in and instead he tells lies about himself and his work. But Charley can see through the façade of his salesman personality. The unhappy Willy feels insulted at every remarks of Charley. Indirectly he advises Willy not to worry about his sons who are a great failure in the American atmosphere. But for Willy his sons are the only reality in the world of illusion that he is in.

When Willy feels that America has beautiful towns and pleasant atmosphere, his second son Happy has altogether a different view. When Happy is talking with Stanley, a young waiter of the restaurant who is totally disenchanted with American way of life which is quite meaningless. He feels "I only wish during the war they'd a took me in the Army, I could have been dead by now". Suddenly there appears a call girl and Happy tries to entice her. Here Happy remarks to Stanley, "Isn't that a shame now? A beautiful girl like that? There's not a good woman in a thousand. New York is loaded with them" (DOS 2.80). That is how Miller explodes the myth of American dream though his characters.

Turning the focus on Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, it ought to be stressed, that Willy Loman is an ageing, confused salesman in decline has centered his life and that of his family on the notion that material success is secured through personal popularity. And personality component is an important feature in the success story enunciated under the broad banner of American Dream.
WILLY. Don’t be so modest. You always started too low. Walk in with a big laugh. Don’t look worried. Start off with a couple of good stories to lighten things up. It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it because personality always wins the day. (DOS 1.48)

The pity of it is that Howard, the boss of Willy Loman, abruptly tells Willy Loman that he has sacked him because he is a failure.

And Willy Loman tries hard to raise his sons Biff and Happy in his own image encouraging them to be athletic, outgoing, popular and ambitious. But then he suffers from vacant loneliness. Willy Loman for all his puffery about being well liked admits in a fit of candor that he is terribly lonely. He has no real friends; even his relations with his family are neither honest nor intimate. He never knows who he is.

When Willy Loman finally realizes that he has been leading a counterfeit existence, he is so haunted and dumbfounded that he decides he can endow his life with meaning only by ending it. Thus, it is established that through the life and death of Joe Keller and Willy Loman. Aruthur Miller’s works intricate musings on the darkness at the heart of the American Dream, Struck a Chord with a whole generation of theatre – goers throughout the world (Obituary 1). Arthur Miller explodes the myth of the success story, as enunciated under the broad banner of American Dream.