

A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF CAPITALISM AND ALIENATION IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AND *THE GOOD WOMAN OF SZECHWAN*

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Abstract

*This article conducts a Marxist analysis of capitalism and alienation in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechwan*. Utilizing Marxist theory, it explores how both plays critique the capitalist system and its dehumanizing impact on individuals. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's tragic downfall exemplifies the alienation resulting from a life defined by economic success and societal expectations, leading to his estrangement from family and self. Conversely, *The Good Woman of Szechwan* centers on Shen Te, whose struggle to maintain her morality within a capitalist framework forces her into a dual identity for survival. This comparative study reveals how Miller and Brecht, through their portrayal of alienation and economic exploitation, expose the class struggles and commodification of human relations inherent in a capitalist system that prioritizes profit over genuine human values and connections.*

Keywords: Marxism, Capitalism, Alienation, Class struggle, Dehumanization

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a seminal work in American theater that critiques the capitalist ethos and the elusive American Dream. The play centers on Willy Loman, an aging and deluded salesman who fervently believes that popularity and personal charm are the keys to success. As Willy's career declines and his mental state deteriorates, his relationships with his family—especially his sons, Biff and Happy—become increasingly strained. Willy's steadfast adherence to an outdated vision of success, coupled with his inability to adapt to changing economic realities, plunges him into a deepening spiral of alienation and despair. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses Willy's struggle to reconcile his lofty dreams with his harsh reality, revealing the tragic flaws in his character and the unattainable nature of his aspirations.

Ultimately, Willy's relentless pursuit of material success and societal approval leads to his tragic demise. His unwavering belief in the American Dream, despite mounting evidence of its futility, underscores the play's critique of a capitalist society that equates self-worth with economic achievement. Willy's inability to achieve his dreams not only devastates him but also severely impacts his family, particularly Biff, who grapples with his own disillusionment and resentment. Miller uses Willy's story to expose the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, highlighting how the relentless pursuit of success can destroy personal relationships and lead to profound psychological

distress. Through the tragic arc of Willy Loman, *Death of a Salesman* serves as a powerful commentary on the destructive nature of capitalist ideology and the human cost of chasing an illusory version of success.

Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechwan* is a parable-like play that explores the complexities of morality and survival in a capitalist society. Set in the Chinese province of Szechwan, the story follows Shen Te, a kind-hearted prostitute who struggles to live a virtuous life amidst pervasive greed and exploitation. When three gods visit Szechwan in search of a good person, they reward Shen Te for her hospitality by giving her enough money to open a small tobacco shop. However, her newfound wealth attracts numerous opportunists who exploit her generosity.

To protect herself and maintain her business, Shen Te adopts an alter ego, Shui Ta, a ruthless and pragmatic businessman who can make tough decisions that Shen Te cannot. As Shui Ta, she is able to fend off the exploiters and ensure the shop's survival, but at the cost of compromising her own morals and kindness. The duality of Shen Te and Shui Ta highlights the conflict between maintaining personal integrity and navigating the harsh realities of a capitalist world.

Through this narrative, Brecht critiques the socio-economic systems that force individuals to choose between ethical behavior and economic survival. *The Good Woman of Szechwan* employs Brecht's signature techniques of epic theater, including the alienation effect, to encourage the audience to critically engage with the play's themes and question the societal structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

Research questions:

- How do the plays depict the conflict between different social classes, particularly the proletariat and the bourgeoisie?
- What dehumanizing effects of commodification are evident in the characters' experiences within capitalist societies?
- How do the plays depict the alienation of individuals from their work, their identities, and the societal structures that govern their lives?

Methodology

In this research, I aimed to shed light on the intricacies of modern human existence by examining how Miller and Brecht connected with and undermined Marxist ideology through a thorough textual study and theoretical engagement. I used *Death of a Salesman* and *The Good Woman of Szechwan* as the primary texts for discussion. Employing a comparative analysis, I highlighted the problems of class division, alienation, and dehumanization in the respective societies depicted in the plays. I utilized qualitative research methods to answer my research questions. Through an extensive literature review, I engaged with existing works on Marxist theory and alienation in literature, informing the development of a robust theoretical framework. Through comprehensive discussion and research, I sought to answer my research questions and contribute positively to the understanding of Marxism and class division in society.

Literature review

In (Othman & Khalaf, 2023), Ali tells us about the hollowness of the American Dream and its disastrous effects on the proletariat class. In this paper, he adopts Marxist critical theory to reflect the role of the ideology of the American dream in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy spends his whole life chasing the prosperity that American Dream will offer him. However, in the end, he realizes that he is merely a piece of fruit discarded by his employers because they do not

compensate him in his work as a traveling salesman. This realization compels Willy to reevaluate his life and follow a different path.

Society is divided into two groups: the bourgeoisie, the upper class, and proletariat, the lower class. Marxism aims to create a classless society based on the common ownership of means of production, distribution, and exchange. As Berry states (peter,1996) that Karl Marx believed the ruling class dominates a society's culture. Every literary work reflects culture, so it cannot be studied in isolation from the social background.

Dr. Mushtaq Ahmad 2020, in *"False Consciousness Governed in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: A Marxist Analysis"*, says that Willy Loman is everyman and everyman in Willy Loman. The study deals with the Marxist analysis of the play and explores the role of false consciousness formulated by bourgeois in capitalist society. A person can only be freed from commodification and alienation if he demystifies the state of false consciousness that he is put into by the dominant society. Willy Loman's version of the American dream no longer applies to present-day America. He summarizes the situation in Biff's remark on his father's death.: "He (Willy Loman) had the wrong dream. All, all wrong."

Enggar Juni Astuti 2022, in *"Marxism in the Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller"*, explains Marxism through the lives of Willy Loman's family in the play. Because of capitalism, they are described as having materialistic properties that alienate them from themselves and society. According to a capitalist society, only three types of good people exist. The first is the person whose economic activities are in business, the second character is the person who makes money, and the last is the person whose name is listed in the newspaper because of his success. If there are people who do not have these three characteristics, then they will not be considered human.

Hira Niyamat Ali (2016), in *"A Conflict between bourgeoisie culture and Indigenous Value System in The Murder of Aziz Khan: A Marxist Study"*, explores the ideology of the dominant class and how it suppresses and controls all the actions of the working class. She revels in the ill-treatment of the dominant class and how they turn heaven into hell for ordinary people. Indigenous people always remain under the suppressed influence of capitalism, and this is the biggest hurdle in their way towards success and progress.

Habeeb Lateef Kadhim AL-Qassab 2017, in *Anti-capitalism in Miller's Death of a Salesman and Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross* says that Willy's job was so important for him that he stopped to exist when he was fired. Each salesman longs for dominance over the others. The competitive world of the play is portrayed as a Darwinian world where survival for the fittest is survival for the greediest. Willy realizes how the society works "...after all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than live"(Miller, 1998, p.78).

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2013) is his own death of a salesman. It is about the dehumanizing effect of a capitalistic society. Class conflict is present in this novella. Gregor represents the working class of the society, who is bound to obey his boss's instructions, who represents the proletariat class. *Metamorphosis* also represents Gregor's alienation from himself, his family, and society. In *Metamorphosis*, there is not only the physical transformation of a man into an insect but also the metamorphosis of relations and family dynamics.

Melisa İnal 2019, in *"A Study on Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan"*, says that Bertolt Brecht aimed to create societal consciousness. For this, he adopted Epic theatre and created a gap

between the audience and the play so that the audience could gain critical insight through their reason rather than feeling. The Good Woman of Setzuan is the best example of Epic theatre. He encourages the audience to question the capitalist society. He was not content with the capitalist system and wanted the revolution. He tried to break automatized perceptions of people and showed them a different world.

Yubraj Tiwari 2007, in his thesis *"Work Alienation of Characters in Miller's All My Sons and Death of a Salesman"*, says that Miller's characters are subject to meaninglessness, powerlessness, normlessness –distrust and unlimited individual competition in society. Both his protagonists are victims of the capitalist economic system, so they are alienated from their worlds. Lowman's work does not make him powerful; rather, the firm in which he works becomes more powerful. Lowman becomes poorer in his inner life and belongs less to himself because he puts his life in the firm; he works, but that firm no longer belongs to him.

Mei Sun 2022, in *"The Collapse of a Low Man's Great Dream: Reading the Fusion of Traditional Marxism in Death of a Salesman"*, says that Loman's American Dream is unrealistic. Willy is a "Low Man" most obviously because he has been a small and insignificant failure. Willy's issue is that he has complete confidence in the established values of his society so he becomes unable to take proper measure of himself. The wages capitalists pay to labors are only for their labor rather than their work. The "work" is the result of the "labor", but more valuable than the "labor". Surplus value is the balance between labor and work which capitalists hold. This is how capitalists exploit workers.

Theoretical Framework

Marxism is viewed as a key factor in understanding the dichotomy between the proletariat and bourgeoisie classes. Marxism deals with the economic, social and political system of the society. It focuses on the ideology of bringing change and improvement to society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are the joint founders of this school of thought. In their joint book, **The Communist Manifesto 1884**, they announced the advent of communism. In the starting, they called their economic theory "Communism". The manifesto condemns the inherent instability and crises of capitalism, referring to its tendency to promote economic ups and downs, intensifying poverty and insecurity among workers. Marx and Engels argue that capitalism's constant pursuit of profit leads to overproduction, underconsumption, and ultimately, economic crises that affect the most vulnerable members of society.

Leon Trotsky says in **Literature and Revolution (1924)**, that *'there are many people in this world who think as revolutionists and who feel as Philistines,'* but Engels and Marx are not of that kind. Marxism criticism is not only the "Sociology of literature", concerns with the publication of a novel or the discussion of working class but it aims to explain the literary work completely; and this means a sensitive attention to its meanings, form and style. According to **Applebaum (1988: 15)** "there is a need to understand how Marx linked the concerns of both philosophy and science in the development of a theory that operates simultaneously at the levels of structure and action..." According to Marx and Angel the economic system of the society should be under the control of the government so that they may treat the people equally.

Marx criticizes capitalism that it creates classes in the society. Capitalism creates the unbalanced distribution of wealth. On the basis of that, Marx divided society into two groups: the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. The bourgeoisie or upper class of the society refers to the capitalist class of the society. They mostly own the means of production by which they exploit the proletariat.

On the other hand, Proletariat are the working class of the society. They are the wage earners who do not own the means of production. They sell their labor and are exploited by the bourgeoisie. They follow the rules created by the dominant class of society and are also poorly paid. Capitalism allows ruling class to exploit the working class and creates conflicts between the classes. It causes the alienation of workers and also increases it.

According to **Berry**, Marxism aims to create a classless society based on the common ownership of means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism tries to explain things without assuming the existence of the world. It tries to change the world, not only seek to understand it.

In **Marxism and Literary Criticism**, Eagleton says, "*Literature may be an artefact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision, but it is also an industry*"(p.55). Books are not just structures of meaning; they are commodities like other things, written by authors, produced by publishers and sold in the market at a profit. Drama is not just a collection of literary texts; it is also a capitalist business that employs certain men, i.e. authors, directors, and actors, to produce a commodity to be absorbed by the audience at a profit. Critics are not just analysts of texts; the state also hires them to prepare students ideologically for their functions within capitalist society. Writers are not just transposers of trans-individual mental system but also workers hired by publishing firm to produce commodities. Marx comments in **Theories of Surplus Value**, "*A writer is a productive laborer not in so far as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publisher who publishes his works, or if he is a wage-laborer for a capitalist*"(p.158).

Marx in his work **Das Kapital 1867** says that economic conditions and social relations are interlinked. It is the ideology of Capitalist or Bourgeoisies class by which they rule over or exploits the proletariat. Ideology is a major concept in Marxist criticism. According to **Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms**, "*ideology refers to the system of ideas used by the ruling group in society to justify its dominance*" (p.114). This concept is directly related to the class system of Capitalist society. Ruling class of the society holds the view that what is good for them is good for all the society. Capitalist system works in the form of Cogged Wheel where every human is a cog of this wheel. In this system humans are replaceable commodities. If a person undergoes some fault, he will be immediately replaced by a new one. This economic system overpowers our independent thinking.

According to **Cambridge Dictionary**, Dehumanization is depriving of human being from all the basic human qualities, independent thought and feeling for other people. Marx criticizes capitalism in **Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844** due to the dehumanization of labors. He also gave the idea of Alienation. He defines Alienation as: separation of things that naturally belong together, and the placement of antagonism between things that are properly in harmony. Labor causes unhappiness in workers through which they ruin mental and physical health. Modern economic system has alienated man and has taken away the basic human values. As a result of alienation, worker loses his ability to determine his life and density. Marx argues that capitalism causes the dehumanization and alienation of labors and disconnects them from fundamental human properties, in four aspects – labor, products of labor, species-being, and human-human relations. Marx says, "*the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer*" (p.29).

Analysis

Class Struggle:

The word class denotes a category of people who are not similar based on mode of production, land they have occupied, the role they play and the commonality of their social prosperity. The society is divided into two groups the bourgeoisie that owns means of production and the capital and the proletariat that labor. In the eyes of Marx, the history of all the existing society is the history of the struggle of the classes. History of the whole world is the history of struggle of these two classes. Such a war is called a class struggle. It is a battle of classes, determining the economic and social relationship of the individuals. The struggle of classes is a situation whereby the proletariat is the one who is hired by the bourgeois to produce something that they can sell. The workers are also deprived of the chance to determine their wages and what they earn as the labor cannot exist without work and money. The unity of the bourgeoisie according to Marx can only be disturbed with the unity of the proletariat.

The plays are both symbolic representations of a society of class warfare in which the bourgeois exploit proletariats. The representatives of the lower working classes are Willy Loman in *Death a Salesman* and Shen Te in *The Good Woman of Szechwan*. They are toiling day and night to earn a living. The weak people are not entitled to any hope and peace of the capitalist structure. This machine noises and spreads ad hoc concepts about success and conspiracies to destroy an individual, who does not fit into the social norms. Such is the case with Willy Loman.

Death a Salesman

Willy Loman is a half-breed salesman aged sixty. He works with Wagner company and has been employed by it over the last thirty-four years. He likes to consider himself as being indispensable to the company and more so in the New England territory that was his best. Willy is exploited by the capitalistic system represented by his employer, Howard Wagner. He had just come back to New England at the beginning of the play. He says to his wife, Linda,

I am tired to the death. I could not make it. I could not make it, Linda. (Act I)

This sentence is taken to represent the emptiness of the American dream. Willy Loman believed in the American Dream and devoted his entire life to the pursuit of it. He was in pursuit of the fortune that the American dream would bring to him. At the end, he understands that he is only a fruit, who is thrown away by his employers since they fail to pay him to work as a traveling salesman.

They do not need me in New York. I am the New England man. I am vital in New England. (Act I)

This play informs us about the lives and economy of families that reside in big cities in United States, where the capitalists are the rulers of economy. The family of Willy is not happy with him as well due to low wages. Both of his sons, Biff and Happy, are not employed themselves, yet they accuse Willy of their poor standards. In response to their allegations, Linda says,

'You cannot do that, can you? I do not say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made much money. His name was never on the paper. He is not the finest character that ever lived. However, he is a human being'. (Act I)

Ben tells the story of his success to the sons of Willy, Biff and Happy. He applies it as a method to motivate them and as a means to demonstrate his interpretation of the American Dream. The story of American dream as narrated by Ben is a respite to the lifetime journey of Willy towards success.

“Why, boys when I was seventeen, I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one, I walked out. He laughs. And by God I was rich”. (Act I)

In *Death of a Salesman*, Ben tells about his acting success in the jungle, the powerful and glamorous symbol of the American Dream. It is a reminder that Willy Loman is fixated on magical success within a short time frame, which leads to the fact that there is a radical difference between his dreams and reality. This is the summary of the criticism of American Dream in the play and it is used to show that such wishful thinking stories can form false hopes and lead to serious disappointment and breakdown of personalities.

In life, one must strive and strive. When Willy is talking to his son Happy about ambition and success, he is telling him the same lesson. Willy advises Happy that

The world is an oyster, but you do not crack it open on a mattress! (Act I)

It is a term which presupposes this world to be a totality of opportunities and possibilities of wealth as a oyster which might contain a precious pearl. This metaphor is quite appropriate to the American Dream, where every person can become a successful and prosperous one due to his/her willingness and determination. This line was ironic on the life of Willy himself. Willy has tried hard and has laboured extensively yet his efforts have not paid off as he envisions. This demonstrates the sad lack of touch with the ideals and reality of Willy.

Money is to pass. Be quiet, delicate, and profound. Everyone likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money. (Act I)

The meaning of this term means that money as an end is not but an exchange of control and should not be. Willy considers money as the power of life and should be serious about it. This assumption leads out the reality of Willy whose mind was on money as a tool in attaining respect and credibility in the dealings of the society and business.

This passage shows the distinction between liking and trust. Willy acknowledges that the people can like a light minded and humorous person but they can never trust the same person when it comes to letting him handle serious responsibility especially money. Here the significance of being perceived as a truth and a reliable person in the world where money and respect are the things of paramount importance.

Not only is Willy struggling with economic problems, but has been bullied by his boss. Willy Loman is a failed salesman who is destined to retire his career and tries to persuade his boss, Howard that he needs to alter his mind and stay at his position. Willy is several decades into his service and he is heading towards financial ruin, let alone that he should get himself a job and dignity.

I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I cannot pay my insurance!

Willy cites the dedication and the loyalty that he had to the company. He believes that his work should pay off and he should be employed and respected in the old age. Willy uses this metaphor:

“You cannot eat the orange and throw the peel away - a man is not a piece of fruit.” (Act II) to argue that his years of service must not be wasted because he is no longer as productive as he was previously. It is possible to consider the orange as a symbol of the productive years of the career of Willy and the peel as a symbol of his actual state and it implies that the company has exhausted all the merit of him and wants to discard him. The last sentence shows that Willy is a human being who, according to him, should not be viewed as a commodity. Willy is demanding to be treated as a human being and not a productive economic being. This is the cry of dignity, which substantiates the play argument that capitalism is dehumanizing since individuals are only valued based on their

economic contribution. Howard replies to Willy and tells him, “Kid, I cannot take blood from a stone,” and kicks him from the company by saying that.

I don’t want you to represent us. I have been meaning to tell you for a long time. (Act II)

The custom in our society is that a person must retire at the age of sixty. But the trouble with our society is that, having served his company over a long period of time, a man is not even able to sustain life afterwards.

The death and life of Willy are symbolic to failure of the capitalist promise that hard work will make one successful. The speech of Happy, however, depicts a way people are brainwashed to believe and perpetuate this false promise, despite being shown evidently that it is not working.

Happy says on the funeral of Willy,

Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It is your only dream – to come out number one, man. He fought out it here, and this is where I am going to win it for him. (Requiem)

The quote of Happy emphasizes the fact that he absorbed the American Dream, according to which individual achievement and the establishment of yourself as the number-one man are the main themes. Capitalist system does not retain its grip only through the economy but ideology as well. The fact that Happy passed by the dream of his father demonstrates how the system has imbedded its values in the minds of people to the extent that they have been fooled and even made to celebrate the exploitation against them.

The Good Woman of Szechwan

The Good Woman of Szechwan is a work by the German author Bertolt Brecht written in 1938. The scene of the play is Szechwan, China, and the character of the play is a young woman known as Shen Te, who finds it difficult surviving in the world full of greed and corruption. The Marxists view history as being a struggle of classes with the bourgeoisie (the capitalist group) exploiting the proletariat (the working group) to maintain their control and wealth. The protagonist of the play, Shen Te, is a representative of proletariat. She is a poor young woman who struggles to survive in a ruthless and corrupt world. In order to avoid being abused by the people she lives with, she must take the role of a man by the name Shui Ta. This character provides her with an opportunity of becoming a successful businesswoman but she has to go to unscrupulous business practices that have the disadvantaged in our society suffer. Shui Ta is an insignia of the capitalist group meaning that he can accumulate money and power at the expense of other individuals.

Shen Te, in her communication with Wang, says

I am not so well off. And if I do not pay my rent by tomorrow morning, I will be thrown out. (Prologue)

The modern economic system is a paradox in the sense that no matter the situation or state of events, the bourgeoisies will never cease to exploit the proletariat. Shen Te is a poor prostitute who is making ends meet with her hands. She is telling Wang that she should pay the rent, and otherwise she will be kicked out of the house.

I sell myself in order to live. (Prologue)

The line is a statement of the harsh financial condition Shen Te, the main hero of the novel, is faced with. Shen Te is left to the choice of selling her own body in a society where there is poverty and scarcity to just meet her survival needs. Shen Te is thrust into the unfair and exploitative world of capitalism where she is forced into the role of powerlessness and her body to be commodified to make ends meet. This highlights the systemic injustices that perpetuate a cycle of poverty and

exploitation and dehumanize and commodify people who are unable to control an economic system that they exist in. This system does not only use the protagonist of the novel but other characters are also used. Sun says,

Go on, sister, go on. I have no money, nothing, not even a penny. And if I had a penny, I would not buy you. First, I would buy a cup of water. (Act III)

Sun is a pilot, who is a victim of bourgeoisie at the same time. He is jobless and does not even have a penny. These lines depict the inequality of wealth between the rich and the poor. Even Sun does not have a penny to drink water himself.

Mrs. Yang, who is the mother of Sun, explains the condition of her son to Shen Te,

But the job. Costs a lot of money. Five hundred silver dollars. (Act IV)

High cost of securing employment is a challenge to the poor in a capitalistic society where most prospects and resources are often marked by affluence and social status. This leads us to the systemic inequalities which have continued to make the working population economically marginalized and to limit their social mobility. The mention of the price of the work establishes the commodification of labor in the capitalistic society in which the jobs are commodities that can be bought and sold.

Alienation and Dehumanization.

As per the theory of alienation by Marx, individuals are not permitted to be themselves, their own humanity since the division of labor and the presence within the society of classes separated by a distance. To him, Alienation is the separation of things that should be mixed and the formation of enmity between things that should be mixed. Work is something that makes people unhappy and also ruins their mental and physical health. Contemporary economic structure has alienated man and has eliminated the primary human values. The alienation leaves the worker without the right to choose his life and density. According to Marx, capitalism results in dehumanization and alienation of workers and the separation of workers with the fundamental human properties in four aspects, labor, products of labor, species-being, and human-human relations. In Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx says, in his work, object produced by labor, labor product, rises against it as something alien, a force that is independent of the producer (p.29).

Cambridge Dictionary describes dehumanization as the loss of all the fundamental human attributes by human beings i.e. the power to think and feel just like other human beings. Put in other words, as long as we have nothing to say about what happens to us, then we are alienated: we are affected by it. When we render it the alienation of our own selves, when we render it the realizing of it, through our own efforts, we are dehumanized: we effect the result.

Death a Salesman

Death of a Salesman is able to pass its anti-capitalist mission and is rooted in the tormented reactions of the author Miller to the depression when he is very young. Marxism had taught him that this disaster and oppression was the whim of the capitalist system. Other items which cannot be converted to cash have no value and they are not attended to in this system. Charley feels the following in his conversation with Willy:

Willy, where are you gonna realize that the things do not mean anything? You named him Howard, but you cannot sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you are a salesman (Act II)

Frustrated that Howard is not listening to him, Willy explains to Charley what he, Willy, has done to the family of Howard and his business. However, he ends up losing his job because he can no longer sell his labor.

Willy is old and everyone who was close to him is dead. He is not involved significantly in sales at the point. He can never sell to two people which places Willy outside of him. He tells Linda the case and says to her,

I do not know why, but they just pass me by. I am not noticed. (Act I)

In a capitalistic society, individuals are valued in economic contribution. Becoming unconnected with reality, Willy experiences alienation which occurs when the work he does is not appreciated or appreciated. This emotion also relates to how Willy attempts to be acknowledged and justified in the world where success and exposure are rewarded and the fact that he is unnoticed is a consequence of the commodification of the world that is a side effect of capitalism. Workers are mostly perceived as fungible cogs within the larger mechanism of the economy.

But I gotta be at it ten, twelve hours a day. Other men – I don't know - they do it easier. I don't know why – I cannot stop myself – I talk too much. (Act I)

In these lines, Willy admits that the hard work is necessary to live in this capitalist world. The exploitation of the labor in capitalism as workers are supposed to give up their time and efforts with little or nothing in terms of payments has been noted, as they are required to work long hours to earn a living. Still, there might be a deeper feeling of alienation and isolation when Willy admits that he talks too much. The fact that Willy cannot control his words may add to his sense of being marginalized and disconnected in a world where success is typically determined by the skill to navigate through the societal interactions and networks. In her conversation with her sons, Linda informs them of what was happening to Willy Loman and states,

No, a lot of people think he is lost his – balance. But you do not have to be smart to know what his trouble is. The man is exhausted. (Act I)

Linda confesses that some think of Willy as being mentally ill or losing his sense of balance. But it is this capitalized system that is his real issue. The specified perception reflects consequences of Willy attempting to make a name in the capitalist world in which the necessity to show and the systematic gain of the American Dream might lead to psychological instability and stress. The exhaustion of Willy is an expression of the manufacturing labor in the capitalist system. When employees are valued based on their economic performance only, their physical and emotional needs are pushed into the needs of the market.

And what goes through a man's mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent?

Why should not he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it's his pay? How long that can go on? (Act I)

Living in a capitalistic society where the worth of an individual is commonly linked to financial prosperity, the shortage of money in Willy causes him to feel incompetent and defeated. The shame and desperation of Willy can be seen in the fact that he must lie to his family regarding his financial situation. Debted to maintain the appearance of the good life, he increasingly grows addicted to a vicious cycle of debts and lies, which leads to the structural pressures that bring individuals like Willy to the verge of frustration.

Willy fails to attain the expected success in the society and consequently, he is alienated and dehumanized. Howard says,

Child, I cannot make blood flow out of a rock. (Act II)

The sentence shows how financial constraints are cruel and the institutional constraints restrain individuals in a capitalist society. The fact that Howard disregards the cry of Willy can be attributed to be a dehumanizing aspect of capitalism where one is reduced to an economic being and his value is only attached to his productivity and profitability. The destiny of Willy exposes the insensitivity of a system that does not focus much on human life but money. Although Willy has served the company a period of thirty-four years, Howard does not pay any thought to him, but rather kicks him. In the last section of the play, Willy, before his death, considers his isolation and alienation to Charley and states,

You are all my friend, Charley. Isn't that a remarkable thing? (Act II)

In a capitalistic society where the measure of success is sometimes perceived as the measure of the own value, the fact that Willy acknowledges that he has little or no friends is one of the signs of the alienation and the socially unfitness of the person. The lines of Willy represent the utter opposite of the capitalistic ideas of self-sufficiency and autonomy. When the idol of success and material wealth is Willy in confessing that he has just one friend, the whole idea of individual worth as being measured by social status or wealthy achievement is called into question.

The Good Woman of Szechwan

The alienation of the characters of The Good Woman of Szechwan and their dehumanization by the society is also present. Sun tells Shen Te of his situation by saying,

Shen Te: Don't you have any friends?

Sun: Lots, but none who wants to hear I am still without a job. They make a face as if someone was complaining that there's still water in the ocean. (Act III)

The economic alienation that one goes through under capitalism is manifested in the frustration that Sun loses as his friends fail to support him in his unemployment. When the socio-economic position of many people in a system is largely reliant on employment, unemployment renders Sun an outcast and socially incomplete among his group of friends.

Conclusion

Both "Death of a Salesman" and "The Good Woman of Szechwan" vividly illustrate the devastating effects of capitalism on individuals and society through the lenses of Marxist theory, particularly focusing on class struggle, alienation, and dehumanization. In "Death of a Salesman," Willy Loman's lifelong pursuit of the American Dream and his eventual downfall highlight the exploitative nature of capitalist systems that value economic output over human dignity. Willy's experiences reflect the broader struggles of the proletariat, who, despite their hard work and dedication, find themselves discarded and devalued once their economic productivity wanes. Similarly, in "The Good Woman of Szechwan," Shen Te's transformation into Shui Ta underscores the harsh realities of survival within a capitalist framework. Her moral compromises and the resulting internal conflict reveal the dehumanizing pressures faced by individuals striving to maintain their integrity while being compelled to adopt exploitative practices. Through these narratives, both Arthur Miller and Bertolt Brecht critique the socio-economic systems that perpetuate inequality and alienation, urging audiences to question and challenge the fundamental structures of capitalism that prioritize profit over people.

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