DEATH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER AND EDWARD ALBEE

TANIYA SACHDEVA

Abstract: Attempting to look at the nature of the American Dream, a predominant idea in the modern American plays of Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, this research paper aims to unearth and delve deep into its mythic quality. The American Dream poses to be an offer of promises for the common man, but after its momentary boom, it shockingly vanishes, and all that is left is disappointment and disenchantment.

Keywords: Alienation, American Dream, Failure, Modern, Myth, Success.

In "Intertexuality and ontology", John Frow proposes: 'Texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms... and out of other texts' (45). Extending his argument, he focuses on 'the ability to reconstruct the cultural codes which are realised (and contested) in texts' (46). The modern American drama, in its entirety, is coloured with the idea of the American Dream, which later on became a social norm and a cultural code, engulfing the whole of American society. The much-talked about American Dream becomes a theme, which takes on a different hue in the hands of different playwrights. This research paper will explore and look into the structure of the American Dream, its unforeseen yet depressing consequences for society, and its varying meanings in the Arthur Miller's The Death of a Salesman (1949), and Edward Albee's The American Dream (1961) and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962). The concept of the American Dream, a political and social proposition bolstering the image of America, has dominated American drama, and has been dealt with in an ironical spirit. Forming a part of America's ethos, the American Dream envelops the lives of the denizens of America, and also serves as an enticement, tempting people from all over the world to come to the land of endless opportunities called America, as David Kamp reiterates: '...it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands.' But, what constitutes the American Dream? James Truslow Adams defines the American Dream as 'that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.... regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position' (214–215). However, what he does not forget to mention is how the American Dream is not easily understood and interpreted by the European upper classes, and how many do not believe in it any longer. He stresses that it is not only a dream involving fancy cars and high salaries, but envisioning a social order, where all are equal. The irony is that the vision does not become a reality, and the dream remains a dream with its inability to actualise into something tangible. The creation of America as a nation is based on a set of ideals and values, which uphold liberty in general and the idea of individual freedom, comprising the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility attained through hard work. The American Dream then stems from the proclamation made at the time of the United States Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". In effect, America undergoes an unbelievable transformation—from being a real space (land) to becoming an imaginary space (symbol)—in which the American Dream assumes the form of a myth. This myth of the American Dream resides inside the fabric of our social, political, and cultural systems, and keeps on adapting itself according to the changing times. In this process, the myth continues to exist inconspicuously, and its definition gets modernised and revised as time goes by. This mythic representation of America as an alternative paradise, which is similar to John Milton's Garden of Eden, overlooks the tensions and conflicts in the American society. This view of America is emblematic of a utopian land promising the quintessential life, where there are innumerable possibilities for an individual who is willing to work. But, this perspective about the American Dream is only one side of the coin, which guarantees success stories; the other side of the coin unveils the empty promises, and proves to be an exposé of its debilitating effects upon society. Thus, the "promised land" of America and the American Dream it offers ring hollow, and are revealed to be only constructs, which continually ignore the social and psychological concerns highlighted in the American plays of the twentieth century. 'The sense of promises turned to dust, of the individual suddenly severed from a world that had seemed secure, underlies much of their [playwrights] work' (Bigsby 69). This make-believe model of America is torn apart, giving rise to a kind of pessimism, which slowly yet in an unnoticeable way spreads in the veins of every individual. Miller made an important comment

about Williams' The Night of the Iguana (1961), which could be linked in general to the anxieties expressed in American literature: 'It is the romance of the lost, yet sacred misfits who exist in order to remind us of our own trampled instincts, our forsaken tenderness, the holiness of the spirit of man.' With this statement, the confessional streak in American drama—grappling with what has happened in the past—comes on to the fore, which verbalises a desire for a theatre that would unmask the sham institutions operating in our milieu. The great disappointment related to the degenerate world around makes every character a tragic hero, whose survival in such a world is an achievement in itself. In a corrupt world, a dream becomes the only means of subsistence—a ready defense mechanism—for the bewildered and disoriented souls. The deep despair and hopelessness boiling beneath the calm and dead surface of everyday life contribute in churning out the "morally-maimed hero" of the American drama. The anti-hero in a decadent universe is incessantly pushed to the edge, which point towards the suicidal instinct triggered by a tragic sensibility. In this context, Miller has said: 'The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out.... Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story. People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man's pretensions' (Oakes 239). The American Dream seemed possible, but raising questions about its possibility confirms it non-tangibility. So, what went wrong? America's mission of selling itself to the world, which meant selling lies on a whole lot of levels, exposes the deceptions of American myths of professional success, familial and personal happiness, and individual freedom. Miller's Death of a Salesman is an agonising scrutiny of American life and consumerism, in which Willy Loman, an aging salesman in a changing world, stands for all the insecure anti-heroes, or more precisely, the common men. Rachel Garvin makes a crucial observation: 'Miller lifts Willy's illusions and failures, his anguish and his family relationships, to the scale of a tragic hero. The fear of being displaced or having our image of what and who we are destroyed is best known to the common man, Miller believes.' The pressure to perform and outdo others because of the expectations of the society and its norms happens to be a reason that overrides the personal happiness of a generation. Biff, Miller's original misfit and Willy's elder son, wishes to quit the industrial world of his father to work in the seemingly unalienating countryside. On the other hand, Happy, the younger son, religiously follows the materialism of the age. Willy Loman is an exhausted man, who gets "tired to death" trying to reach his "massive dreams". According to Willy, 'Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such – personal attractiveness, gets lost' (11). Willy's lines that "some people accomplish something" put the definition of accomplishment and success under scanner. Success is a relative term, which can be interpreted in several ways. But, for Willy, his big brother Ben is a success, who went into the jungle and came out a rich man. To be a success, one has to step into the territory of the jungle. The character of Ben is like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899), as both are successful men, who venture into the forest. But, is such success, or wealth, or fame worth sacrificing one's mind, body and soul for? The act of entering the natural jungle is similar to risking one's soul in America's man-made urban jungle. Once embarked upon this perilous journey, there is no turning back, as a price has to be paid to be successful and rich. Inside the city jungle, the "competition is maddening", and only the fittest would survive by "getting ahead", and trampling down the weak ones. Kurtz mutters irresolutely: 'I had immense plans... I was on the threshold of great things' (74). The impenetrable darkness, or "the horror", continues to haunt Kurtz even when he has reached the top of the ladder. Marlow agrees: 'He [Kurtz] was alone... his soul was mad... he struggled with himself, too' (75). Kurtz cannot return to what he was because he had gone too far and too deep into the abyss. The question still looms: Was Kurtz successful? The age of industrialization led capitalism to transform into the obnoxious monster that it ultimately became, turning every citizen into a worker of some kind, who earns his bread by sweating in offices, or simply, factories of the modern world. Willy, then becomes a labourer—another cog in the machine—who is alienated from his surroundings. Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times (1936) speaks of the moribund conditions after London's industrialization, and how Chaplin tries to survive as a factory worker employed on an assembly line. Chaplin's film advanced a stirring condemnation of the "machine men", shown in one particular scene, where after continuously screwing nuts, he suffers from a nervous breakdown. Representing the state of the modern man, who is lonely and despondent, T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland (1922) in a like manner puts forth a cluster of broken images presenting a society, where people are disconnected and dealing with their fragmentary experiences, having lost the will to communicate. The speaker walks through a London populated by ghosts of the dead:

"UnrealCity,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet". (60–65)

Similarly, Happy recounts: 'Everyone around me is so false that I'm constantly lowering my ideals…' (18). Biff's dilemma about choosing between "making a future" and taking "hold of some kind of life" affirms the demystification of the American Dream myth. However, Paul Blumberg questions the alternative western myth: 'to what extent is unalienated and satisfying work possible in the contemporary world, outside of an urban, industrial framework? Can Biff's dream, in other words, be realized? Miller's tentative answer is no' (304). The initial optimism connected to the American Dream is sensed to be gradually wearing off, which make way for the grim ramifications, where the individual is unable to take it any longer, and is standing at the brink, hopeless and dejected. Willy's middle class ideology collapses, when he realizes that 'work for a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it' (10), and 'you end up worth more dead than alive' (77). Biff ingeminates his dissatisfaction with the phony American Dream, when he sums up: 'He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong' (110). The play is an indictment of the American system, and mirrors an absurd world, where the system collapses in the face of fatuity of its values. Another play that explores the possibility of the American Dream being a lie and failure is Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, which entangles society's moral bedlam with the consumerist streak of the American Dream. Bigsby explicates: 'The American Dream, which requires the individual to dominate his environment and seize a promise of economic and social advancement, constitutes a fiat which he cannot bring himself to deny' (317). The predominant cultural norms and social codes, which form the backbone of the American society, seem to be responsible for the springing up of the Dream. All the characters, namely Martha, George, Nick and Honey, continue to live in their madhouse of illusions before the ritualistic exorcism of personal myths happens. Albee's engagement with the falsity of the American Dream continues in The American Dream, wherein Grandma, a character, coolly states: 'We live in an age of deformity. It's every man for himself around this place' (22). Infusing the play with an imperfect family unit, which includes a domineering Mommy, an emasculated Daddy, a witty Grandma, and a non-existent Son, similar to the incomplete American family status quo in Who's, 'Albee has decided to begin his exposé of the American Scene at its roots: the family unit. And according to Albee it is breaking down, in need of immediate repair' (Rutenberg 63). The Young Man becomes the masked face of the American Dream, embodying all its superficial qualities, and poses to be a perfect commodity, which is ready to provide any service for money. This vicious consumerism is visible when he introduces himself flamboyantly: 'Clean-cut, midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile…' (33). In reply to his selling-himself-to-the-world speech, Grandma convincingly yet tauntingly says: 'You're the American Dream, that's what you are.' Offering a sinister account of the American Dream-gone-wrong, Albee in both his plays, works with its leftovers. Albee in his preface to The American Dream acridly remarks: '[It is] an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen.' The unhappy and sham marriages are utilized in a metaphorical way to uncloak America's chaotic condition. Nick and Honey pose to be the perfect husband and wife, but as the play moves further, their "conjugal bliss" starts to crumble. The language of pathology and the indispensability of alcohol in the play suggest the underside of the American Dream in its cynical and misanthropic rendering. George, the historian, takes refuge in the past to evade the present, and the platitudes and certitudes of modern society are attacked through Nick, the self-righteous scientist, who looks forward to the inevitable success of the American Dream. Nick, the biologist and the upholder of scientism, will do whatever it takes to become successful, and live the dream. George engages in an antagonistic battle with Nick, "wave of the future" with a kind of pragmatic idealism, and decimates the pseudoscience that he stands for, when he remarks: 'a rare of scientists and mathematicians, each dedicated to and working for the greater glory of the super-civilization' (35). But, the dystopic world that George loathes as an alternative, 'whereby chromosomes can be altered… All imbalances will be corrected… [there] will [be] a race of men…test-tube bred…incubator born…superb and sublime' (34) would result in a 'certain loss of liberty… [where] diversity will no longer be the goal. Cultures and races will eventually vanish…' (35). Protesting against the sense of order and methodology that scientists like Nick are going to introduce, George steers clear of a neatly arranged universe, "where there is something to lose…" (62). According to Ann M. Fox, George's diatribe against 'this "illusory, hyperidealised fitness" and standardization that would emerge from eugenic efforts' and lead to the 'loss of both "variety and unpredictability"', is to create in 'American drama of

the time a new kind of "crip consciousness"', wherein the readers are persistently 'haunted by the systemic formation of disability within the American body politic.' The American Dream vouchsafing prosperity results in a breaking away from the institution of family, where there are marriages without children. Honey, the petite blonde, continually destroys the potential child in the womb by the use of pills, which are a product of the new world of science and technology. In this world, having a child, instead of being a nurturing experience, has become a hurtful experience, both emotionally and physically. The never-present child in Albee's plays serves a symbolic purpose, narrating the barrenness and impotency prevalent in a sordid world, where regeneration of any kind seems impossible. According to Bigsby: 'He explores the fate of those animating principles to which America laid claim and which here and elsewhere he suggests have been systematically abrogated. The American Dream becomes a superficially attractive young man sexually incapable of realising the promise which he seems to offer. It is an image which recurs in his work as he establishes emasculation, impotence and incomplete sexual gestures as a metaphor for unfulfilled aspirations and misdirected personal and social energies' (129). Albee, like Miller, creates a "Carthage of New World", where he highlights the false and defunct values of a sterile society, in which personal relationships have become degraded, serving only to materialistic ends. Albee illustrates the family's falling apart in the play due to the socio-economic causes posing as a threat to the moral well-being of a person. Grandma in The American Dream voices out her concern: 'You got to have a sense of dignity... 'cause, if you don't have that, civilization's doomed' (12). Critiquing the rigidity of things, Albee shows how Martha and George's last resort is to invent an imaginary son to sustain in the heteronormative American world. George's offer of a survival kit is to drag everyone out of the pit of their delusions, and accept reality after discarding their fantasy world. The coordinates of the American Dream are reduced to the intellect becoming a means of destruction, not of life, with the discovery of nuclear and atom bombs ticking away. Reading out from his book, George teasingly asserts that "the west, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with a mortality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must...eventually...fall" (92). In the play, 'testing the parameters of the American dream of oblivion' (Rabe 95) takes place subtly. The outcome of this is a dysfunctional society which prefers matter over mind, and ultimately pushes its inhabitants to the precipice. Bigsby notes: 'George, who had allowed himself to be reduced to little more than a cipher, to conniving in his own impotence, is restored to himself as America is called back to its liberal principles' (141). Bigsby further concludes: 'The Constitution, vaguely recalled, is seen as a justification of greed, the frontier as a cover for rapacity. Individualism has collapsed into an alienated solitariness and enterprise into crime. Revolutionary rhetoric has dwindled to aphasia, love decayed to an aggressive sexuality and brotherhood to simple paranoia. His characters come together as conspirators in temporary alliances which form and dissolve and which are motivated by greed and egotism' (204). Loneliness, boredom, existential angst, and the feeling of being empty inside constitute modern American experience and life. The characters in the plays continue living a zombie-like life, unaware that the work they do is indirectly linked to the misleading and unattainable dream perception that eventually damages them. Every play signals towards the impossibility of living "free", unscathed and unblemished, in a society, which is itself a corrupt prison with "hollow men", who are emotionally bankrupt, morally regressed, decayed and rotten on the inside.

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L-61, Vijay Chowk, Laxmi Nagar, Delhi-110092/
Assistant Professor, Delhi University/
taniyasachdeva@gmail.com