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## Issues Of Individual and Group Identities in Modern American Drama and Cinema

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**Abstract:** The twentieth century witnessed a profound shift in the portrayal of heroism within American drama and cinema, where the boundaries between heroism and barbarity blurred significantly. Playwrights such as Maxwell Anderson, Edward Albee, and particularly Tony Kushner, critically engaged with the traditional concept of heroism, systematically deconstructing the myth of heroic nonchalance — an ideal popularized by Baldassare Castiglione during the European Renaissance. This dismantling of the invulnerable heroic figure led to the emergence of the sentimental hero, a character increasingly burdened by internal doubts and the fragility of their own ideals. The trauma of the Vietnam War served as a critical catalyst in this transformation, infusing American cultural discourse with a pervasive sense of victimization. Consequently, heroism evolved into a vulnerable, almost tragic condition, wherein heroes occupy a precarious societal position. The collective hysteria surrounding victimhood became a driving force, sustaining a cycle of internal and external conflicts that demanded new representations of heroism—ones marked by emotional exposure, ethical ambiguity, and political disillusionment. This paper explores how twentieth-century American dramatists and filmmakers reflect the sociopolitical anxieties of their time through such reconceptualization of heroism, ultimately suggesting that the cultural need for heroic figures persists, albeit in complex, conflicted forms.

**Keywords:** War, Identity, Heroism, Barbarity, Sentimental Hero, American Drama, American Cinema, Trauma

The demarcation between heroism and barbarity significantly loses its distinction in the twentieth century American drama and cinema. Playwrights such as Maxwell Anderson, Edward Albee and most importantly Tony Kushner toy with the idea of heroism in their works and have been successful in deconstructing the myth of heroic nonchalance, an idea coined by Baldassare Castiglione that saw its rise to worship during the European Renaissance. The modern heroes that occupied the stage or the cinema screens in America apparently felt the effect of this historical and sociological divorce. This resulted into the birth of sentimental heroes who not only have to overcome their own doubts concerning their competence to protect the interests of others but gradually they also became fragile and often victims of their own heroism. This idea of a hero getting transformed into a victim can be particularly noticed into American cinema and drama post-Vietnam War. The classic war epic of Francis Ford Coppola *Apocalypse Now* explored in great depth the dehumanizing effect of a bloody war. The work being loosely based upon the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad successfully incorporates the darkness of unexplored nineteenth century Africa and juxtaposes it to a new age locale. Some other prominent directors who have carefully tried to capture this dark and somber heroism in their works are Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg to name a few. While Kubrick dwells into such less travelled territories in works like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* both portraying unidealized versions of valor and heroism. And more importantly how the initial fear to defend oneself soon gives way to dominate and suppress. Similarly, Spielberg too attempted to explore this arena in works like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Munich*. Though the former is often considered as a movie that glorifies heroism, one tends to doubt the assertion when noticing the pain and suffering that its protagonist has to suffer in a war for which he was never suited, being a teacher. Similarly in his next work *Munich* which is going to be primary work around which this paper will revolve, he again picked the idea of an ever-going conflict that seems to have plagued two middle-east countries—Israel and Palestine. The film materialized as a result of collaboration between Spielberg, Tony Kushner and Eric Roth. The latter two coproduced the screenplay of the film which is loosely based on the novel *Vengeance* by Canadian journalist George Jonas. The film portrays with great dexterity a hero who has been torn into pieces while trying to avenge the wrong that has been inflicted upon his motherland. The epithet of a vulnerable hero proves most appropriate for Avner—the Mossad agent whose father is remembered by the Prime Minister Golda Meir as a national hero and who has been entrusted with the task of avenging the pride of his nation by eliminating those who were responsible for the Munich massacre of 1972. Avner is a sentimental man who has been brought up in the country without his mother and as a result he considers his country to be his mother, as articulated by his wife Daphna.

Thomas Singer puts the blame of heroism to which Avner and his other teammates are subjected to “archetypal defenses of group spirit”. (Singer 7) He develops this idea from Jungian concept of archetypes and proclaims that every community apparently shares this group spirit and collective psyche which though rarely engages in “differentiated dialogue and exchange” (Singer 9) but is nevertheless activated in scenarios where the interests of shared community are either challenged or compromised. In such situations for example external aggression or any other national or local calamity the impulse to get

together and aggressively defend the group becomes stimulated and this either gets transformed into a group aggression or it gets fused into a single heroic leader who represents the image of the heroic avenger. Singer argues that this counter aggression is always reflexive and seldom reflective. He therefore suggests that when the incident of Munich massacre materialized in Germany and the televised reports reached Israel, the scenes of their dead athletes suddenly activated this group spirit in the collective psyche of the Israelites who could identify with the dead athletes as their fathers and brothers. As a result, the state was immediately entrusted with the task of avenging the dead in order to defend and protect the interests of the collective psyche. And as already mentioned this duty successively passed to Avner and his team of assassins.

In modern America the idea of hero as an avenger has gained major popularity in the twentieth and twenty first century and it can also be argued that the successful emergence of superheroes such as Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Captain America, Ironman etc. across various modes of mass culture like films and graphic novels are sufficient proof of this not so peculiar development. The reason why it is not very peculiar is because as already mentioned every collective psyche or a social unit that shares common interests and aspirations inevitably requires a hero who can defend it from acts of external violence. Thomas Singer gives the example of George Bush acting as the leader of American people during times of major distress and anxiety particularly post 9/11 attacks. He also highlights the way in which Bush successfully used this general anxiety to execute two major acts of aggression against foreign countries namely Afghanistan and Iran. And though the premise on which the two wars were declared and fought never proved plausible or empirically correct. Still, he could get away with it because of the stimulated anxiety in the minds of the Americans who were now willing to bend to any level of directed aggression whether justified or not in order to safeguard their own interests.

Golda Meir in *Munich* seems to echo the same sentiments when she articulates that there are times in history when “every civilization finds it necessary to make compromises with its own values” and in the words of Singer this translates into the psychological phenomenon that “when the archetypal defenses of the group spirit are mobilized, the group may betray its own values in favor of what it believes necessary for survival”. (Singer 23) And hence Avner gets the direction from the highest authority in the state to undertake a mission of counter terrorism. Though it is mentioned that the hero is himself known in the concerned circles as a brave and uninhibited soldier but still it is not too difficult to prefigure the ensuing moral doubts that will plague him during the course of completing his assignment. Avner is not an ordinary assassin who can indulge into acts of murdering people and never contemplate about his actions. It becomes apparent as the drama progresses that while he can eliminate his targets with dexterity in the field, he cannot get over the question of the moral righteousness of his deeds. This question of righteousness not only plagues him but infects the other members of the team as well excepting the steel hearted South African Steve, who realizes the ambiguous nature of their enterprise only towards the end of the film. Hans the forger of the documents is most acutely troubled by his conscience and it can be wisely claimed that he plays a major role in infecting other members of the team as well. Though initially Avner tries to keep himself immune from his philosophical contemplation of their murderous deeds, interestingly he succeeds to do so by keeping himself engaged with other household chores particularly cooking. However following the assassination of Hans by a paid assassin, he can no longer delude himself and thus the question of moral legitimacy of his deeds begins to haunt him.

George Jonas and several other critics blasted Spielberg and Kushner for having painted acts of terrorism and counter terrorism in the film with the same brush. Jonas in particular expressed his disappointment concerning the deliberate modifications made by the director and screenplay writer concerning the part in the tale dealing with the moral ambiguity experienced by Avner and his team while fulfilling their duties. He argued that the operatives of Mossad were ruthless agents and because they were avenging the killings of their countrymen there was no question of experiencing any morality crisis. The other account at which he and many other critics hold Kushner and Spielberg guilty is of deliberately equating acts of justified vengeance with that of terrorism. However, in their haste to criticize these authorities perhaps fail to notice that the event of Munich massacre too was celebrated in the Arab world and Palestine as the successful completion of an act of vengeance against people representing a dictatorial and enemy power. At this point the idea of archetypal defenses of group spirit can again be brought at the forefront in order to try and understand the historical response of Arabs and the Palestinians. The scenario is similar and it's not too difficult to imagine Israel as a dominating power in the middle-east and hence either the fear of aggression or acts of aggression by it forces the other Arab groups in the region either to avenge the unjust behavior of the Jewish nation or to act aggressively in order to protect themselves.

On several occasions the historical experience of a collective psyche, here the nation state, also plays a crucial role towards shaping the reflective or reflexive behavior of its subjects. The historical experience of the Jews of being oppressed and subjected to barbarity in non-Jewish lands, particularly Germany where millions of Jews were executed based on their racial identity, also seems to have shaped this anxious and aggressive collective psyche of Israelites. In this context Michael Fordham's formulation of the nature of archetypal defenses in the life of an individual infant proves equally plausible for group spirit as well. He ascertains that

... a persistent overreaction of the defense-system may start to take place; (attacks on not-self objects) may become compounded with parts of the self by projective identification, so that a kind of auto-immune reaction sets in; this in particular would account for the persistence of the defense after the noxious stimulation had been withdrawn... little or no inner world can develop; the self-integrate becomes rigid and persists. ... all later developments based on maturational pressures result not in deintegration but disintegration and the predominance of defense systems leads to the accumulation of violence and hostility, which is split off from any libidinal and loving communication with the object that may take place. (Fordham 91)

Thus, the historical memory of the Jews concerning the atrocities which they were subjected to during the rule of Hitler in Germany, compels them to be an extra notch anxious and aggressive as and when they assume their collective interest to be endangered. Therefore, what the hero of *Munich* has been entrusted to do is essentially an act of preserving and protecting the dream of a country from being vandalized. The means employed by the hero to perform this task are of no interest to the national dream and thus it can be argued that in a way the protagonist of the historical drama not only becomes a victim of

his own super ego, to borrow the term from Sigmund Freud but also of the collective dream of his social group. The question of a national dream acquires significance here because in this scenario the object of analysis is a foreign state which is being invoked by two craftsmen. The argument that they can both identify with Israel being Jews does not hold much merit here because their primary point of identification and reference inevitably remains the United States. Therefore, when Kushner is attempting to demystify the idea of a national dream, it becomes important to take into account the concept of American dream that has been invested in its civilization since the time of its founding and which is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence. The ethos of American dream today implies opportunity for an American to achieve prosperity through hard work, an opportunity for their children to grow up and receive a good education leading to a career without artificial barriers. It is the opportunity to make individual choices without the prior restrictions that limited people according to their class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity. Considering these several provisions granted to the American population, it becomes interesting to note the amount of latent anxiety the entire community or may be a part of community might become subjected to in case it is denied a share of this dream.

At this point it becomes crucial to introduce another joint venture of Kushner and Spielberg another historical drama *Lincoln* that reflects the anxiety of a part of the American society—the Afro-Americans who were denied their part in this shared American dream because of being subjected to slavery by their White masters. In a bid to liberate and empower this marginalized part of the American society Abraham Lincoln whose character is tactfully played by Daniel Day-Lewis, brings to the House of Representatives a bill that seeks to abolish slavery in its totality within the nation state of America. As a result of this heroism displayed by the President the southern states of America whose economy badly depended upon slaves, not only severs its ties with the Union State but also enters into a civil war that fetched the lives of millions of Americans from the north as well as the south.

Therefore, it is aptly perceived in *Lincoln* that a heroism which attempted to realize the dream of a section of people also in the process resulted into the loss of millions of innocent lives and eventually that of the hero as well. So, within the dramatic universe that tries to reconstruct historical events concerning Abraham Lincoln's life and the passage of the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment Bill, the question concerning the legitimacy of an act that resulted into loss of millions of innocent lives for the sake of the realization of the national dream by a hitherto marginalized group goes largely unanswered. It can even be argued that Lincoln would have rarely undertaken any such heroic enterprise had he been aware of the massive harm which it will inflict on the nation as well as on him.

At this juncture in the discourse a new idea of collateral damage can also be introduced and with its aid it can be argued that in any battle loss of life and property is inevitable on both sides. Hence heroism cannot be disregarded because of the amount of damage it might inflict upon the self and the others. Therefore, talking in his review of *Munich* Aaron J. Klein rues that “while Spielberg's and Kushner's *Munich* goes beyond the simplicities of Hollywood espionage and assassination movies like *Bourne Supremacy* that glorify assassination, the film would be better if it understood the complexities of counter terrorism rather than dramatized Israeli actions as purely vengeful.” (Klein)

So, it is not difficult to witness in literary scholarship many takers who would willingly compromise with collateral damage in order to protect or salvage a dream and this of course acquires greater significance when the dream represents an entire nation state. Now if an attempt is made to analyse the question of heroism in *Munich* and *Lincoln* it can be easily noticed that both consist of characters that are unafraid of sacrificing their life for a cause but the line that demarcates their position is one of having the legitimate belief in one's actions. Lincoln is effectively certain about his actions even in the face of adverse situations on the other hand Avner suffers from a loss of belief in his enterprise. The events that unfold around him in the wake of the people he and his teammates execute forces him to encounter the naked truth which was the fact that the people whom he killed or was going to were fighting for the same cause as him, the only difference was their sides. This moment of epiphany dawns into his life when he is conversing with an Arab revolutionary named Ali who explains to Avner the reason that pushes him into the battlefield. When Avner asks him in a partially inebriated state whether “You really miss your father's olive trees? The crappy villages he came from? You honestly think you have to get back all that...nothing. Chalky soil and stone huts? That's what you want for your kids?” Ali stares into Avner's eyes and replies—“It is. It absolutely is. It will take a hundred years but we will win. How long did it take the Jews to get their own country? How long did it take the Germans to make Germany? ...You don't know what it is not to have home...you say it is nothing but you have home to come back to... We want to be nations. Home is everything.” This arguably sums up the entire conflict that has plagued the Middle-east till today. The reason person like Avner and Ali are willing to sacrifice their life is to either protect or salvage the dream of their nation states. Though there are logical differences for example while the former is fighting to safeguard a land which exists in reality while the latter is fighting for an imaginary homeland. However, the tragedy of *Munich* and its protagonist lies in the metamorphosis of that concrete homeland of the hero into an imaginary one and thus eventually the fate of Avner seems to fuse with that of Ali and all the other revolutionaries who assumed that their fight was for a noble reason. This transformation turns the life of the hero upside down and not only forces him to reconsider his loyalty but perhaps also helps him in realizing the ephemeral nature of heroism. Because the heroic virtue with which he tried to safeguard and avenge the harm inflicted upon the collective psyche of his people is not only forgotten but the same archetypal defenses of group spirit suddenly seem to have reached a consensus to direct its aggression now towards its former leader. So, the role of a crusader not only fails to reap any dividends for Avner in fact it finally culminates into a threat to his life as well as that of his family.

So Avner's heroism in *Munich* seems to resemble Abraham Lincoln's fate in *Lincoln*. But does this mean that heroism eventually culminates into a life-threatening impulse? This inference holds partial validity at least when one pursues the heroic characters in modern American drama and cinema. Spielberg's canon in particular contains a number of such heroic personalities like Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* and Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List*. However, heroism alone cannot be considered the erring virtue that endangers the life of its practitioners. The social attitude towards such noble virtue is equally responsible for shaping its function in a society and as Thomas Singer argues that in the absence of reconciled group spirit it is inevitable

that the collective psyche will keep pushing its Avners towards the chaos that grows out of the ever emanating conflict between the social and political communities, only in order to sacrifice them in order to earn some moments of internal peace which in turn transform into mere illusions because like Fordham said that the archetypal defense persists even “after the noxious stimulation had been withdrawn.” (Fordham 91) Singer accounts an interesting anecdote in this regard by describing the historical evolution of atom bomb in America. He suggests that what began as a justified attempt to check the dominance of Hitler in Germany and to develop nuclear competence to outmatch him, refused to come to a halt even when Hitler surrendered because very soon that competence became transformed into a device to not only prevent any chances of foreign aggression but also to be used as a decisive instrument in foreign policy and now in the era of terrorism again as an instrument to counter its effects. In short when once the hysteria of being victimized enters the cultural discourse of a society and develops into a collective spirit to defend itself, it never ceases to exist in that culture and in fact it keeps translating itself into the forms of internal and external conflicts only to keep the aggressive part of the culture actively engaged and this in turn results into the emergence of heroic characters like Avner and Ali whose position in the society inevitably remains vulnerable.

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