



**THE INFLUENCE OF COMMERCIAL CULTURE IN
SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *ARROWSMITH***



MS. SAMIYAFIRDOUS B. NADAF

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Studies in English

Karnatak University, Dharwad

E-mail: samiyafirdousnadaf@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Commercialism is a practice which emphasizes excessively on profit-making. Americans in particular are very curious and give more importance to money, prestige, social status and wealth. Materialism is engulfing all the fields of society. Due to materialistic attitude, people are becoming devoid of moral values. The present paper attempts to focus on the influence of commercial culture in Sinclair Lewis's "Arrowsmith". The novel deals with the life of a medical researcher and his experiences in the

medical field. The novel also explores how the medical institutions of America have turned into commercial places. It provides a useful insight into the conflict between ethical values and capitalistic values. Sinclair Lewis in this novel attacks on American society which was heading towards destruction due to the overworship of money.

KEYWORDS

Commercialism, materialism, American society, moral values, capitalistic values, medical institutions

RESEARCH PAPER

Harry Sinclair Lewis was a novelist, critic and realist of the modern American period. He became the first writer from the United States to receive the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature. Lewis is known for his critical views of American Capitalism and Materialism between the World Wars. He was popular for his satirical novels. In his novels, he ridicules the rising materialism, commercialism, fascism and spiritual emptiness of the modern American period as he hates to see the disintegration of his society. Born on 7th February 1885 in Sauk Centre in Minnesota, Lewis exposes the human follies, commercialism, standardization and worship of wealth of early modern American period.

In the early 20th century, the middle-class people of America migrated from villages to the cities in search of a better livelihood due to the development of industrialization, social instability and economic depression that followed the World War I. As Science and technology grew rapidly, people started to depend on machinery invention ignoring the human power. As a result, America saw the rise of economic progress and prosperity. Americans started to embrace “the American Dream”. They dreamt of leading a prosperous and joyful life.

Money is a prominent thing in this world, common man thought money is everything but for the wiseman it is just a thing to buy temporary happiness in this materialistic world. Commercialism is present not only among the businessmen but also among the farmers, scientists and doctors. In the novel *Arrowsmith*, Lewis portrays how commercialism changed the attitudes of the people and how physicians manipulate others for the sake of money in the medical profession which is still relevant today. The commercialism of the medical institutions is not only present in America but also all over the world. As a result of this, moral values and spiritual values went unnoticed.

Commercialism is one of the major themes of Sinclair Lewis’s novels. It is a philosophical aspect in which a person attaches more importance to the material possessions and social status. A materialist person always seeks wealth and works for his own benefit. He always wants the things go in his way. According to Macmillan Dictionary, Commercialism means the activities or attitudes of individuals who think that making a profit is more important than anything else.

Published in 1925, the novel *Arrowsmith* satirizes the American society which gave utmost importance to money, power and prestige. It won the 1926 Pulitzer Prize but Lewis declined to accept it. The novel was based on the Flexner Report which provided landmark report on

medical education in United States and Canada written by Abraham Flexner in 1910. The novel is about the medical profession and its commercialism. It is an attack on the commercial culture of 1920s of America. Lewis tries to show how the American middle-class people struggle and survive in the world of commercial culture. Lewis is one of the famous satirists of America. Lewis has received both praises and criticism for his faithful representation of American society and culture. A critic Harry Hartwick praises *Arrowsmith* in the following words:

We find a vertical depth, magnitude, purity of character, inventiveness, and mastery of form....Carol Kennicott and Babbitt were unfortunately victims of their environment and 'the village virus'...But *Arrowsmith* is the record of a victory (F.A.F, 266)

This critic considers the novel *Arrowsmith* as one of the best novels of Lewis's oeuvre. The novel *Arrowsmith* revolves around the life and experience of a character, Martin Arrowsmith, a promising research scientist in the field of medicine. He exposes the rotten values of commercial medical institutions and its corruption. He always dreamt of serving humanity. The novel is about the difficulties encountered by Martin in the medical institutions. The novel portrays Martin's selfless devotion towards the care of ailing patients and his relentless research for scientific truth. He was born and brought up in a small Midwestern town of Elk Mills. He joined as an unpaid assistant to the doctor Doc Vickerson at the age of 14. At this time, he cultivated interest in amassing wealth by manipulating others.

Martin joined Winnemac University in 1904. During his career as a student, he was very much influenced by one of his professors Dr. Max Gottlieb, a German-Jew immunologist. The ideals of Dr. Gottlieb were completely against money-minded doctors and scientists. He holds the same values and attitudes as Gottlieb has towards capitalism and materialism. He always felt curious to work late night in Gottlieb's laboratory. Gottlieb always wished Martin to be honest in his duty and work for the betterment of humanity.

In his medical school, Martin gets engaged with Madeline Fox, who was pursuing Ph.D. in English. As she belonged to the upper middle-class, she loved to attend parties. She always dreamt of leading a luxurious life. She tried to change Martin and kept him away from achieving his ideals as a pure scientist. The novelist observes:

Fudge parties, skating parties, sleighing parties, a literary party with the guest of honor a lady journalist who did the social page for the Zenith Advocate- Times- Madeline leaped into an orgy of jocund but extraordinarily tiring entertainment. (*Arrowsmith*, 44)

Madeline's love for material things represents upper middle-class woman of America. They are often social climbers and are always after seeking wealth and social status. A few of Martin's classmates who were studying medicine, are all commercial-minded fellows. They study for the benefit of social status and money. Martin was disturbed by his money-minded classmates. He says:

Well these darn' studes, they aren't trying to learn science; they're simply learning a trade. They just want to get the knowledge that'll enable them to cash in. They don't talk about saving lives but about 'losing cases' losing dollars! And they wouldn't even mind losing cases if it was a sensational operation that'd advertise 'em! They make me sick! (*Arrowsmith*, 24)

Lewis shows his disregard and contempt for the students who got involved in making money. For instance, Lewis satirizes Angus Duer who is studying medicine to acquire social status and respect because society accorded money-minded doctors. Cliff Clawson is the perfect example for this.

Lewis also condemns the Universities for their costly equipments and money-making schemes. One of the professors of the University, Dr. Roscoe Geake was money-obsessed who discoursed on "money-making plans" and he inculcates negative perception in students' mind, saying that knowledge is only as good as its commercial values. Geake says:

Knowledge is the greatest thing in the medical world but it's no good whatever unless you can sell it, and to do this you must first impress your personality on the people who have the dollars. Whether a patient is a new or an old friend, you must always use salesmanship on him. (*Arrowsmith*, 83)

American people give utmost importance to money. They consider money as the most valuable thing in the world. For a doctor like Geake, it is important to use salesmanship in the medical profession to accumulate wealth.

Lewis criticizes technological advancement which paved the way for the widespread use of media to advertise the product. As Sheldon N. Grebstein says, it is "the exploitation of the many for the profit of few" (B.G.D, 71). This is best illustrated when Dr. Max Gottlieb decides to join with Hunziker Pharmaceutical Company of Pittsburgh, he found that most of the young technical experts were all commercial minded. The novelist observes:

In the enormous staff dining-room Gottlieb found scores of competent young chemists and biologists who treated him with reverence. He liked them. If they talked too much of money—of how much this new tincture of cinchona ought to sell and how soon their salaries would be increased—yet they were free of careful pomposities of college instructors. (*Arrowsmith*, 136)

Though the Company offered him much money, Gottlieb decided to leave the company because of its unethical practices

In Wheatsylvania, Martin starts practicing as a country doctor. He tried his best to serve humanity. When he invented a vaccine to control blackleg in cattle's, the veterinarians of the country showed him a kind of denouncement for this invention. Martin gave up because the people of Wheatsylvania were too snobbish to accept the changes. He and his wife Leora decided to move to another place called Nautilus.

Martin becomes public health physician under Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh in Nautilus. He acted as a salesman than a doctor. Martin was providing free clinical facilities for the poor people. This outraged other doctors who disregarded Martin's policy of opening free clinical facilities. As they were too greedy to come to terms with Martin's humanistic approach, the doctors filed many complaints against Martin because they were only concerned with money and fame.

Sinclair Lewis uses the character of Martin as a true idealist against the American materialistic society. The novelist states:

...the Group had a monopoly of all Freedom and Amusingness, and they expected the Arrowsmiths to appear for cocktails and poker every Saturday and Sunday evening. They could not understand why Martin should desire to spend his time in a laboratory, drudging over something called "streptolysin", which had nothing to do with cocktails, motors, steel windmills, or insurance. (*Arrowsmith*, 261)

This shows how Martin chose to spend his time in laboratory rather than to attend party and other things. At the end of the novel, Martin decides to abandon his wife and child to pursue his idealism as a pure scientist and he did not compromise with the commercial standards and institutional pressure. As Walter Lippmann says "Martin has left a soft bed for a shanty bund in order to be pure. For he had perceived the horror of the shrieking, bawdy thing called Success". (*C.C.E*, 89)

The novel has also been an inspiration for many medical students. Commercialism is one of the key concepts which we can find throughout the novel. Thus, the novel ridicules the commercialism of medical institutions and commercial-minded doctors.

Conclusion:

The novels and short stories of Lewis are acclaimed with a number of awards, prizes and publicity. Through the literary devices like satire, irony, humour and realism, Lewis tries to amend these flaws of the society. In the world of commercialism, people give utmost importance to money, power, prestige and wealth. In order to achieve it people get immersed in immoral activities such as cheating, stealing etc. The novel from the beginning till the end is about the experiences of Martin Arrowsmith among greedy doctors and commercial medical institutions. Through this novel, Lewis tries to change their attitudes and awaken their moral consciousness. Thus, Lewis depicts the influence of commercial culture in Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*.

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