



DR. Kirti Jain

Social Problems in the Plays of Arthur Miller

Associate Professor- Deptt. Of English, Kr. R.C.M. Degree College, Mainpuri (U.P.)
India

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Abstract: Miller's dramas deal with things that distinguish his work quite clearly from the ordinary sociological problem play, for at his best he has seen these problems as living tissue, permanent eternal problems, and his most successful characters are not merely 'aspects of the way of life', but 'individuals who are ends and values in themselves'. Miller's dramas exhibit social realism for which he follows Ibsenian method of showing first an ordinary domestic or social scene into which, by gradual infiltration, the crime the guilt enter and build up to the critical eruption. Miller transforms a normal social materialistic American into a tragic character-tragic hero-by using the technique of self-realization. Joe Keller who had been blind to his inner self on account of his 'money-race' and 'family affinity' now realizes that he has failed as a father and hence there is no meaning left now for him to live any more.

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Miller's dramas are not ordinary social plays. They deal with things that distinguish his work quite clearly from the ordinary sociological problem play, for at his best he has seen these problems as living tissue, permanent eternal problems, and his most successful characters are not merely 'aspects of the way of life', but 'individuals who are ends and values in themselves'. For him the individual is paramount. He must be paid highest attention, but in the perspective of the society in which he is groomed,

"He's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid...Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."

Miller's dramas exhibit social realism for which he follows Ibsenian method of showing first an ordinary domestic or social scene into which, by gradual infiltration, the crime the guilt enter and build up to the critical eruption. and The process of this destructive infiltration is carefully worked out in terms of the needs of the other characters,-as for example in All My Sons,-Keller's wife and surviving son, the girl the son is to marry, the neighbors, the son of the convict-so that the demonstration of social consequence, i. e., Keller's guilt has not been done on is not in terms of any abstract principle, but in terms of personal relationships, which compose a reality bearing upon the truth.

Realism is evident in Death of a Salesman. This drama is a fine realistic tragedy. It is the tragedy of the common man as actually seen in modern commercial America. The salesman is a typical product of American capitalism. Miller does not have mush use of romanticism and can deal with his salesman from a realistic-moral angle to highlight the fact that even while the salesman assumes that he is using the American dream, the American dream is using him, using him only to discard him eventually. It is a tragedy in which we all are made partakers of what happens in the drama. Miller manages to transcend individual tragedy to include us all in his summation of what is wrong with our world. As Jaidev and V. P. Sharma observe, "Ofcourse, Miller understands Willy, empathies with him, extends compassion to him. But this compassion is extended because Miller sees Willy a victim, a necessary victim like millions of others who idiotically continue to endorse and adore a system which, in order to operate for the benefit of the operators, has to bluff the victims into buying its phoney clichés of success, room for opportunity and initiative, and room-at-the-topism. Willy is seen as a rather manipulable type who inflates himself with the clichés and then breaks down when they do not sprout forth into flowers of success."

Death of a Salesman follows the expressionist method. The expressionistic method, in the final form of the play, is not a casual experiment, but rooted in the experience. Death of a Salesman is actually a development of expressionism, of an interesting kind. Miller himself wrote,



"I had always been attracted and repelled by the brilliance of German expressionism after World War I, and one aim in 'Salesman' was to employ its quite marvelous shorthand for humane 'felt' characterizations rather than for purposes of demonstration for which Germans had used it."

Death of a Salesman is different from All My Sons in that while the latter ends with a moral tag that we are all one family and that a selfishness which is prepared to destroy others leads to self-destruction, in the former blames and makes society responsible for all human tragedy. Hence the plot of Death of a Salesman has a realistic base.

Willy's dreams, no doubt, are illusory. They are a fantasy, far from reality. He foolishly thinks that his is a dream-world, entirely different from the actual world. But the tragedy occurs because he forgets the reality of his actual existence in society. The whole of the true drama, which Miller calls the 'Whole Drama', must recognize that man has both a subjective and an objective existence, that he belongs not only to himself and his family but also to the whole world. It is this thesis that is behind all the four major tragedies of Miller-All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible and A View from the Bridge. With a shift in emphasis, it also fits the two plays-After the Fall, and Incident at Vichy-produced in 1964.

All My Sons is said to be the result of mending Miller's earlier errors. It also grew out of the story told to Miller by a lady, Miller tells about it,

"During an idle chat in my living room, a pious lady from the Middle West told of a family in her neighborhood which had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machinery to the Army. The war was then in full blast. By the time she had finished the tale I had transformed the daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind."

Joe Keller is a member of American society as any other citizen including his son Chris. He is a considerate husband, a fond father, and an amiable neighbor. Often man in modern world lives in a dream-world, a creation of his own. His vision of success is often illusory. He is rapt in illusions. He pines for what is not. His world is different from the actual world.

The Great Dream of America virtually made Americans materialistic. An average American began to live largely on the physical level. Joe Keller is such an American. His universe is confined to the physical world of America in which money, success and industry are the key windows. His commitment to this world is sordidly solid. Considerations of right and wrong, higher values of culture and refinement do not come within the purview of his mind. He is 'physico-vital' through and through. For the most part of his life he sticks to the physical level except that prior to his suicide he awakens to the psychic and the spiritual. Even when, at the loss of their son Larry, his wife Kate is plunged in grief and agony, Joe still shows the animal vital in his behaviour. Thus Joe Keller is a man of the world-earth earthy-"a denizen of the lower mental kingdom. The world with its complexity, interdependence, in terms of its web of connections, does not exist for him." He is, in fact, a practical man in all his intent and purposes. The intricate questions of life, of evil and good, do not enter his mind. He cannot even understand why he is being accused by his own son Chris of being a criminal against society. Nor does he comprehend why his wife Kate wants him to go to jail. These are meaningless things for him. He has no moral scruples. He had dedicated himself whole-heartedly to secure worldly goals.

But realization comes to him, though too late in his case. A real product of the American dream-the man of business and money-suffers from the guilt feeling, self-disgust. His guilt feeling erupts finally,

"I was a beast, the guy who sold cracked heads to the Army Air force, the guy who made 21 P-40's crash in Australia.....walking down the street that day I was guilty as hell"

Miller transforms a normal social materialistic American into a tragic character-tragic hero-by using the technique of self-realization. Joe Keller who had been blind to his inner self on account of his 'money-race' and 'family affinity' now realizes that he has failed as a father and hence there is no meaning left now for him to live any more. His



tragedy is now complete. His tragedy "is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly". S. P. Ranchan rightly says, **"How such a physico-vital, lower vital man with a crepuscular psyche hovering like a moth around his family, through his encounters with his wife and his son Chris, with his resistance worn down, his assumptions on life and reality shattered, is hurled into the abyss or on to the summit of realization that not only is he responsible for the death of his favorite son Larry, but also for other young men like him is the crux of the tragedy of All My Sons."**

Miller does not make his tragic hero look great in tragic moments as Hardy does in his novels. There is not conscious attempt to hide the hero's littleness in the garb of greatness. Through the fall of Joe Keller, Miller intends to expose the human tendency to put one's self above all else, which causes confusion and suffering. In Miller's plays, as also in *All My Sons*, tragedy occurs when a man fails to recognize his place in society or when he gives it up because of false values. Miller's chief object is to show that there is a world-society-in which the human being can live as a political, private or an engaged person naturally. The Greeks called this world polis in which people "were engaged, they could not imagine the good life excepting as it brought each person into close contact with civic matter. . . . The preoccupation of the Greek drama with ultimate law, with the Grand Design, so to speak was therefore an expression of a basic assumption of the people, who could not yet conceive, luckily, that any man could no longer prosper unless his polis prospered. The individual was at once with his society; his conflicts with it were, in our terms, like family conflicts the opposing sides of which nevertheless shared a mutuality of feeling and responsibility." Likewise, *The Crucible* is a tragedy of human conscience. Darshan Singh Maini rightly observes, "Perhaps in no other play of Miller's is the issue of conscience so powerfully dramatized as in *The Crucible*." Elder Olson also considers *The Crucible* as one of the most modern approximation to tragedy. The play explores the complex relations between moral good and evil. This complex relation manifests itself in the interaction between the social self of the protagonist and his conscience. As Porter remarks, the "motivations and the actions flow from them in relation to the guilt or innocence of individuals and of the community." Miller himself suggests that this play concerns itself with true evil, and its characters are like figures in a morality play. *The Crucible* encompasses several levels of conscience, individual, social, political and institutional. Darshan Singh Maini considers the play a tragedy built of moral fiber. He writes, "The five constituents of the tragedy individual, family, society, church and state-are so interlocked in a grim, relentless struggle that the criss-cross of conflicting loyalties presents a most challenging test of the protagonist's moral fiber."

The Crucible is a powerful dramatization of the notorious witch-trials of Salem, but it is technically less interesting than *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Through the action Miller brilliantly expresses a particular crisis-the modern witchcraft-in his own society, but it is not often, in our own world that the issues and statements so clearly emerge in a naturally dramatic form. The methods explored in the earlier plays are not necessary here, but the problems they offered to solve return immediately, outside the context of this particular historical event. *The Crucible* is a fine play, but it is also a quite special case."

In this play, Miller explores the human psyche-the problem of sin and the problem of conscience. On the one hand, he floats the idea of evil, quite reminiscent of Iago, "I believe merely that, from whatever cause, a dedication to evil, not mistaking it for good, but knowing it as evil and living it as evil, is possible inhuman beings who appear agreeable and normal." On the other hand there is Proctor, different in many respects from the traditional tragic heroes, because he is struggling to overcome his small hesitations and hypocrisy. Proctor refuses to accept the level his society tries to force on him. Society kills him but his death is a kind of triumph and affirmation of the individual. Proctor tells Demforth that his name is above all in his life :

"Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hand! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul: leave me my name!"

In *A Memory of Two Mondays*, Miller adopts the direct dramatization of modern living. Here he seeks to



make a new form out of the very facts of inconsequence, discontinuity, and the deep frustrations of inarticulacy, which is at once a failure of speech and the wider inability of men to express themselves in certain kind of work and working relationship. Instead of concentrating these themes in a particular history, pointed by plot or single crisis, he deploys them in the scattered form of a series of impressions, with the dramatic center in memory rather than in action or crisis.

When *A Memory of Two Mondays* was written in 1955, in United States, there was plenty of patriotism, plenty of fear, plenty of money and surprisingly no issues. Social seers were announcing 'the end of ideology', a world without social conflict, swiftly clothing itself with rich and smooth materials. As Pramila Singh observes, "Society, which had been the arena where men fought out their conflicting interests was fast becoming outmoded. Now fate was insight or lack of it, and the private man in his private life the whole of reality. And Miller dared to step out with all of it. 'The country had followed itself to stand for. I am, of course, speaking rationally of what was only a mood; a feeling.' This is all Miller admitted himself which led him to write this play *A Memory of Two Mondays*." When he was writing this play, Miller noted that "he desired to be abrupt, clear and explicit in setting forth, which is so easily let in to drown all shape, meaning, and perspective, might be held back and some hard outline of a human dilemma to be allowed to rise and stand."

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