Chapter V

_theme of identity_
CHAPTER FIVE

THEME OF IDENTITY

The theme of the search for self identity is crucial to a proper understanding of the *Death of a Salesman* and Miller is in no small degree preoccupied with it. What Willy really cares for is not identity or integrity but personality which would include such outward characteristics as wearing a smile and winning friends. The common theme of Miller’s plays is the individual versus society. Miller concentrated on a single subject – ‘the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society’ or in his family which is a part and unit of society. It is the central point of the author’s social philosophy that society and the individual are inextricably linked. P.P. Sharma opines:

> Although Willy is aware, may be dimly and imperfectly, that he is not cut out for success in the world of trade and commerce, he nevertheless nurses the dream of getting the better of everybody else. And this bads him into an alienation from himself, hiding his real identity. (75)

The theme is the relationship between a man’s identity and the image that the society demands of him. Willy knows the torment of family tensions, the compensations of friendship, and the heartbreak that goes with broken pride and lost confidence. He is aware of the loyalties, not blind but open eyed which are
needed to support mortals in their loneliness. The anatomy of failure, the pathos of age, and the tragedy of those years when a life begins to slip down and the hill it has laboured to climb are subjects at which he excels.

Dillingham feels that Willy Loman is a tragic hero fit according to Hegel's description of the tragic hero, the characters who seek a “good” too far or in the wrong directions so that he loses his identity, his necessary values, and is carried to destruction (49). The whole question of Willy’s hidden identity is curious like that in Oedipus. To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience, and experience always involves suffering (Comparative Literature 162).

Arthur Miller’s characters suffer and struggle. They pass through anxieties and tension Angst and experience stresses and strains Sturm-und-Drang and confront several hardships. The life of Joe Keller and Willy Loman get reduced to one of suffering.

Yet gain, the environment, is fatalistic and deterministic, and over which they have absolutely no control, and it controls them. As such to better appreciate Joe Keller of All My Sons and Willy Loman of Death of a Salesman as the suffering and struggling selves, it is imperative to have knowledge of what existentialism stands for and what is meant by naturalism.

To begin with existentialism is a philosophy and a cultural impulse, with roots in Biblical thought and ancient Socratic concept. Existentialism embraces a
variety of styles and convictions. However, its one constant characteristic, as indicated by the origin of the word, is concern for human existence, especially for the affirmation of freedom and the refusal to subordinate personal awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures.

It represents rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility. The equivalent term for existentialism is found in German *Existenzialismus* and in French *L'existentialisme*.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, was the founder of modern existentialism. It is true that he had a host of forerunners and that the entire romantic movement of his century shared in the protest against the dominant rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Yet it was Kierkegaard who established the concepts and vocabulary that influenced subsequent existentialists. He criticized reigning philosophies for their abstract speculations and their pretensions to answer grand questions without even asking the immediate questions of self-understanding.

Truth is subjectivity is the argument of Kierkegaard. He means that truth is meaningful only as it applies to a personal subject. In his understanding of existence, Kierkegaard emphasized the dizziness of freedom as man decides his destiny and the anxiety of the contingent being who can find no meaning in the universe except as he makes a **Leap of Faith**.
At this juncture it is necessary to examine the distinguishing properties of the concept of existentialism. The theist existentialist headed by Soren Kierkegaard and the atheist existentialists headed by Jean-Paul Sartre are of the view that man’s first existentialist condition is his singleness and loneliness of life.

Man is alone in the Universe. He has the will to choose. He chooses and regrets the choices made. Man suffers from Angst – anxieties and tensions. He dreads death. But he appreciates the fact that death is inevitable. He is unable to find answers to the mysteries, doubts, irresolvable, unanswerables, indeterminacies, and uncertainties. He is naturally filled with nausea.

In sheer struggle he finds the meaning and substance of existence. He realizes that he cannot jump any situation. He becomes aware of the fact that suicide is no answer to the problems, plights and predicaments faced by humanity.

And the atheist existentialists hold on to the view that life begins in void and ends in void. This idea is dramatically projected by Samuel Becket who persuasively opens his archetypal play of the Theater of the Absurd, Waiting for Godot, with the loaded term, Nothing, and ends the play with same loaded term, Nothing, to demonstrate the validity of Jean-Paul Sartre’s thesis in his classic work, Being and Nothingness.

Sartre presents his argument thus:

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must annihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk
of still establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the very heart of immanence unless it nihilates 'Nothingness' in its being in connection with its own being. The Being by which 'Nothingness' arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the 'Nothingness' of its Being is in question. The Being by which 'Nothingness' comes to the world must be its own 'Nothingness'. (Being 57-58)

If the theist existentialists maintain that existence originates and culminates in Nothingness and that life is marked by negativities and negations, the theist existentialists believe that existence begins in Essence and finally merges with that Essence.

The theist existentialists find, therefore, meaning, substance, significance, relevance, and consequence in living by a leap of faith, and valuing intersubjectivity, and practicing, in letter and spirit, the Christian concept of love.

Yet again, existentialism is concerned with human existence in its concrete reality. Existentialism as a literary movement and philosophy places the entire emphasis on the existence of the individual, an existence that postulates man as free from any natural or human standard in terms of which he must act.

The existentialist creates his world of experience through a choice of alternatives, a choice, which makes him free from all other men, but a choice, which enslaves him to his own doubts, and uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choices. He has a consciousness, which considers what his choice has done to others.
And the crisis of modern man is unique in its intensity through which one comes into contact with reality. Crisis is the way of life for the existentialists. And crisis comes with each experience, for there is always that moment when the decision either to make a choice or not to make a choice brings agony, Angst, and despair.

For Kierkegaard to think in existence is to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. One finds oneself constantly in an existential situation. For this reason, one's thinking ought to deal with the problems of alternate choices. Subjectivity is what makes up each person’s unique existence.

In fine, the philosophy of existentialism is concerned with human existence. Webster’s definition of existentialism is worth recoding in this context.

Existentialism is chiefly a twentieth century philosophic movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering an analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who may assume ultimate responsibility for his acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. (Dictionary 435)

On the literary side, Existentialism as a philosophic movement was considered to be the principal expression by a group of writers who wrote during
and after the last Global War, as Celine, Malrux, and Camus in France, Moraria, Rensi, and Vittorini in Italy, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger and Jung in Germany, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck in America.

Apart from these writers, many religious thinkers like Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Rudolff Buttmann, Helmut Thielicke, Stephen Neil, and Martin Buber acknowledged the impact of existentialism and convinced themselves that neither authority nor rational argument can take the place of commitment or ultimate concern (Paul Tillich’s phrase) as a condition for religious understanding (Encylopedia 763).

These existential philosophers insist that one must understand one’s self. And that is precisely what Arthur Miller insists in Death of a Salesman. The failure on the part of Willy Loman in understanding, who he is, results in his sufferings and struggles.

And in the case of Joe Keller of All My Sons, it is who by his wrong and sinful deeds of betraying his business partner, Steve, and being indirectly instrumental in the deaths of twenty-one pilots invites and heaps troubles on his own self. In this regard, Paul Rubliczek offers pertinent remarks, “we may believe that everything is meaningless – nevertheless the quest for meaning remains an essential part of our apparently meaningless life” (Existentialism 6). In this connection, Kierkegaard insists that one should have knowledge of one’s self by directing one’s mind inward and by analyzing the situations in which one exists.
Yet again, Gabriel Marcel discusses the relationship between the external and internal life thus:

\[\ldots\] the more one strives to understand the meaning of existence, the more surely one is led to the conclusion that the outward is also the inward, or rather to the realization that this distinction has no meaning where the actual growth of a being is involved. (Homo 78)

It is of interest to read this statement of Gabriel Marcel in conjunction with that of Stephen Neil that the man who has chosen authentic existence is related to his own self in a new way (Christian Faith 786). According to Heidegger man is confronted with two possibilities of existence, which are characterized as authentic and unauthentic. The man who lives an unauthentic existence does not make any deliberate decision for his life, and he goes on living with the crowd in an oblivious state of himself. Most of the Christian existentialists condemn this kind of unauthentic existence. Stephen Neil opines, the reality of existence is to be found only in choice, in decision, in the deliberate acceptance of the authentic and rejection of the unauthentic existence (184).

According to Kierkegaard, eternal happiness is not a static conception. It is not a goal attained once for all. It consists in living now and here. A miniature imagistic masterpiece of Edward Estlin Cummings makes the point quite clear:

\[
\text{now is a ship}
\]

\[
\text{which captain am}
\]
sails out of sleep
steering for dream. (Complete Poems 781)

Moreover, man is endowed with freedom. So he is responsible for his actions whether they are good or bad. And every individual is emotionally impelled to act. He is pushed to act, and he wills to act. After choosing everything according to his desires, he regrets. Life then becomes a series of regrets.

And the intellectual understands that in his existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is never compatible with comfort. Suffering and struggle is part and parcel of the life of a man in his existence. In fact, struggle is existence. And man is filled with nausea when he is not able to probe beyond the mysteries as it happens to Bartleby. Man is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the fear of death. Then he starts searching for identity in any form. If he fails in his endeavour, he gets depressed.

When Joe Keller of All My Sons and Willy Loman of Death of a Salesman are judged against the parameters of existentialism they are classic sufferers, whose freedom is not compatible with comfort, and they find themselves pitted against a fatalistic and deterministic environment, the forces of which two factors overwhelm them. They favor rich comparison with the old man Santiago of Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea.

In fact, it is the environment that has an iron grip over them and controls and determines their life. To appreciate this aspect of the life of Joe Keller of
All My Sons and Willy Loman of Death of a Salesman, it becomes imperative to have the theoretical knowledge concerning Naturalism, at this juncture, for in the plays it is realistic naturalism that operates.

Naturalism, in philosophy, is a belief that nature represents all that can be known of reality and that the scientific method is the only means of determining the truth. Rather than being a rigid philosophical system, naturalism has been described as a particular way or method of approaching philosophical problems and as certain set of conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems.

Naturalism denies the existence of the supernatural anywhere in the universe and holds that if any non-natural entities exist they may be known only by their observable influence on natural objects. Many naturalists describe their beliefs not as a theory of the nature of reality but as specific temper of mind – namely, a confidence in the empirical, experimental, or scientific method as the man and the world. They reject faith, revelation, authority, tradition, deductive reasoning, and intuition as sources of truth and guidance.

All meaning originates in experience and all beliefs must be tested by experience in accordance with the general canons of scientific method. In general, naturalism is opposed to the characteristic doctrines of religion, supernaturalism, and idealism.
The main tenets that are ascribed to naturalism are the following:

1. Every taste of the world or event in it can be explained causally or mechanically by reference to previous states or events or else in the result of chance,

2. No god or other supernatural being is necessary to explain the world. The natural world of objects and events in space and time is all that is real,

3. Man is wholly a part of this natural world, and he is only an incidental product of the world process and

4. There are no absolute values or transcendental norms, known in no empirical ways. All values and norms are in some sense a function of human attitudes, needs and satisfactions.

Parallels are drawn between naturalism and other systems such as empiricism, materialism, determinism and pragmatism. All share to some extent a belief in the natural order and in experimental science. Naturalism differs from the others in its disavowal of traditional philosophy, believing that human problems can be solved through critical intelligence.

Naturalism is traced back to British empiricism, and other European doctrines, but it came to flower in the United in the 1930s and 1940s following the pioneering efforts of George Santayana and John Dewey and Dewey’s disciples. Moreover, suffering gives rise to a genuine sense of self and promotes
self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. The pity of it is that the Jew by his Jewry remains outside the social compact of the society where he lives, but ironically is existentially right in the middle of the social drama.

In fact, one learns to be a compassionating soul embracing humanistic concerns of love, kindness, goodness and mercy. The point that is made here is that suffering promotes humanism in the sufferer. After all what is against the credit of the individual is how he gives credit to the other as a human being. As the compassionating soul he has to show great sympathy to the other person.

James Hastings argues to the point and it is worth recording here:

> Suffering, it will be urged, is a splendid moral discipline. God is present in all pain. He suffers in all suffering. He is the chief sufferer in the world. (Encyclopedia 22)

The dominant existential predicaments that Arthur Miller explores in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are Angst, fear psychosis, and suffering. He underscores the fact that life is one of struggle and that in struggle is existence.

In the manner of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Arthus Miller maintains that suffering is the unavoidable part of human existence and it is a condition of freedom and mature awareness. In fact, the qualification of a sufferer as enunciated by Fyodor Dostoevsky defines Arthur Miller’s Joe Keller of *All My Sons* and Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*. Like it or not, it is our nature to be free
and under the sting of suffering to choose between good and bad. And the romantic attitude is based on the concept of the inextricability of suffering, maturity and freedom.

Joe Keller of *All My Sons* suffers. The sufferings are of his making. He is caught in realistic naturalistic environment that lays the heavy demand on man that success in life has only one equation with money. To the extent that one amasses wealth one is termed successful. That is the reason why he gives deliberately the wrong direction to Steve to somehow hide the cracks in the airplane cylinder heads, and pack them away to Army Air Force.

The net results are Steve is jailed and twenty-one pilots meet with cruel death. He suffers from guilt complex. His sons get estranged from him. One son, Larry Keller commits suicide, and the other son, Chris Keller rebels against him. Joe Keller has lost his total identity without consciousness. He is endlessly searching for his identity which does not exist.

Family relationships suffer a severe jolt because of his wrongdoing. The community amidst which he lives remorselessly and unabashedly begins to hate him. But in the end, when he is faced with the letter of Larry Keller, written to Annie, the daughter of Steve, whom he has betrayed, he is cornered. He turns sad and suffers. No one is ready to pardon him. The only way open to him is suicide and he courts it. It is the commercial and money oriented society that drives Joe Keller to worship Mammon at all cost and ultimately suffer. Money is everything to him.
The old verities such as truth, candor, brotherhood, and moral compunction, to quote a few are of no significance and relevance to him. But then he suffers from fear psychosis. He fears whether Annie and her elder brother, George, will reopen the case and whether he will be jailed. This fear psychosis causes tension and anxiety Angst and he suffers and ends his life because he finds himself at the end of a dark tunnel so to say.

No doubt, Miller criticizes society, a business oriented society in which corruption, selfishness, indifference, a system that turns men into machines or submarines. Yet it is increasingly clear that his primary concern is with personal morality, the individuals' relations to a society in which the various goods are almost as suspect as the vicious methods. Gerald Weaks remarks, “the theme that recurs in all his plays – the relationship between a man’s identity and the image that society demands of him-is a major one” (21).

Miller is a staunch critic of contemporary American society and its values. He speaks against injustice, exploitation, competition and vested private interests. He also exposes the human tendency to put one’s self above all else, which causes confusion and suffering. This suffering increases on account of the self interests seen in the protagonists. In all the three plays – All My Sons, Death of a Salesman and The Crucible the common theme is individual versus society. The individual is trying to establish his self identity where a great failure is waiting. As a
dramatist he concentrated on a single subject, 'the struggle and suffering of the individual attempting to gain his rightful place in the society, or in his family which is a part of the society.

When Kate Keller wants Joe Keller to stop playacting the police and the thief with the neighbor's children, Joe Keller turns furious with his wife. In a way his anger is at his own self for he wants to hide the truth of Larry Keller's death from her and his complicity in the deaths of twenty-one young pilots and his betrayal of Steve.

It is he who wants to hide for he is afraid to face the consequences of speaking the truth. But then he shouts at Kate, which is nothing but delusory tactics. He suffers from guilt complex and passes through fear psychosis.

When Kate says that his guilt cannot be excused simply for the reason that he did it for the family, Keller emphatically says that "It's got to excuse it". When Kate and Keller talk about Ann, Kate says that she does not know what Ann is doing. When Keller wants to know what exactly Ann is doing, Kate irritatingly asks Keller to 'figure out' his life. Suddenly Keller begins to feel like a stranger in his own family. He has lost Larry. Chris considers him a culprit. Kate holds responsible for all things. Naturally Joe Keller feels dejected and disgusted. He expressed his feelings, "What am I, a stranger? I thought I had a family here. What happened to my family?" (AMS 3.80).
This is finest expression of the deep anguish that lies in the heart of Keller about his disintegrating family. This is the attitude that drives him crazy to commit suicide.

Kate is highly emotional, frantic and obsessed with the idea of her son being alive. But her motherly feelings always surface then and there. To a very great extinct, she also helps to bring out the truth from Keller. Kate’s belief in Larry being alive is a complex psychological aspect which plays a major role in the development of the plot of the play. Kate is so firm in her belief that she emphatically declares:

KATE KELLER. Because if he is not coming back, then I’ll kill myself. Laugh, Laugh, at me. But why did that happen the very might she (Ann) came back? Laugh, but there are meanings in such things.

(AMS 1.21)

The fear psychosis persists in Joe Keller for he is guiltily conscious of the wrongs committed by him. When he hears of the impending arrival of George at his home, outwardly he pretends to be unafraid of meeting with George but inwardly he suffers from neurotic nervous tension and anxiety, He fears that the case may be reopened and that he will be squarely nailed for the crime and jailed.

In spite of putting on a bold exterior, inwardly Joe Keller is afraid of George’s arrival. He fears that he comes to his home to have him arrested. His fear
surfaces when he wants Ann to blurt out the truth by deliberately asking her, whether her father is sick. It is clear that there is identity crisis.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Joe Keller suffers because of his guilt-ridden soul, and because of his fear that the case will be reopened and that he will be jailed. His existential suffering is acute when Chris comes to know of his criminal past.

With loads of misery and anguish Joe Keller remarks that he has done all that he has done for the sake of Kate Keller and his son Chris Keller. It is painful to hear Keller saying about his past mistake:

KELLER. I didn’t want it that way, either! What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should’ve put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and made him earn his keep. Then he’d know how a buck is made in this world. Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I … (AMS 3.81)

During a discussion with her sons Biff and Happy, Linda throws new light on Willy and their own characters. Linda Blames Biff for Willy’s situation because she thinks. Biff’s aimless and goalless life has been a great disappointment to his father. But Biff behaves indifferently using harsh words against his father and persists in accusing Willy of selfishness and having no character. Linda defends her husband in the following words.
LINDA. Then make Charley your father, Biff. You can’t do that, can you? I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into the grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person. You called him crazy.

(DOS 1.40)

The passages of meeting of Willy with Howard captures deep suffering of Willy Loman in a commercial society of cutthroat competition, where the salesman is the sufferer and the business magnate is the super boss, under whose mercy small fry like Willy Loman can have existence according to the whims and fancies of the super boss without any identity.

The famous scene, in which Willy meets his young employer Howard to ask him for a permanent posting in New York so that he doesn’t have to travel out of town anymore, is very painful and insulting. Willy is not respected and not properly responded, Willy a human being, is desperate and dying to catch his attention, but Howard is fully absorbed with the toylike machine. He recalls the story of Dave Singleman, the ideal Salesman who inspired him to become the Salesman. He feels that “I realized that selling was the greatest. Career a man
could want". (DOS 104). Actually Willy tells this story with a purpose, which is, to express in his own way his sense of failure and his knowledge that the world and its values have changed from what he believed to be two years ago. Willy says:

In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear – or personality.

You see what I mean? They don’t know me any more (DOS 105).

Willy Loman’s life is a sociological tragedy showing man as a victim of an indifferent society. However, as Miller has himself clarified in the ‘Introduction’, the play is a psychological tragedy in which certain aspects of Willys’ character contributes to his downfall.

Towards the end Willy is fired and has no money to pay his insurance debt. He has not other option except going to Charley to borrow money. When he tells about his philosophy of being well liked, Charley gives a final blow to his philosophy by telling him that J.P. Morgan looks like a butcher in a Turkish bath. “But with his pockets on he was very well liked”. So it is not the personality or personal attractiveness that counts but the money which a man has. Yet he is skeptical to Charley’s statement. He wants some proof that his philosophy has been wrong. He is counting on Biff’s being successful with Oliver. Charley is ready to give him a job which is strongly denied by him. Charley is trying to convince him.
In the final meeting Biff openly insults his father Willy with very harsh words. He directly blames Willy, "I stole myself out of every good job since high school.... And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody" (DOS 2.105)

Then Biff tells his father how a sudden thought strikes him at Oliver's house. He bursts out, "I am a dime a dozen, and so are you... I am nothing, Pop I am just what I am, that's all" (DOS 2.105). This painful and serious meeting of father and son is also an example for identity crisis. The play is a fervent query into the great competitive dream of success as it strips to the core castaway from the race for recognition and money.

Death of a Salesman is the tragic suffering of modern man. It is the suffering of realism. It concerns with his life, it reveals to us his mind, his conflicts and difficulties, his predicament, his agony and suffering, his confusion and illusion, his expectations and disappointment. Moreover the play does not conclude with its protagonist's death. It continues through his funeral, a solitary affair in marked and bitter contrast to the one Willy dreamt.