CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller has now universally been acknowledged as an eminent dramatist, not only in the context of American theatre but also in that of European drama. He is fully alive and responsive to the complex development of this genre in the West. His plays resonate with all the innovativeness of European dramatic conventions from the mid-nineteenth century, through the times of the new wave dramatists to the early seventies of the present century. The measure of the international merit of Miller as a dramatist is the wide popularity of his plays which received strong ovations in Europe, China, Japan and across the east of the Atlantic. The width of his popularity on the stage is well-matched with the plethora of critical reactions and assessments right from the publication of his first successful play. A quick look at some of the critical stances on Miller in the following pages will be helpful in the disentangling of the hitherto, relatively inadequately worked cut elements in his dramaturgy, i.e. the complexity of man’s image that he has shaped from All My Sons (1947) through A View from the Bridge (1955) to The Price (1964).

Among the earliest critics of Miller, Denis Welland, in his book, entitled Arthur Miller (1961),
argues that Miller was constantly preoccupied with people who are denied a sense of community. The American Depression gave him an understanding of man’s insecurities in the modern industrial civilization. Welland’s chief thrust is Miller’s sense of social commitment and a relative reduction of artistic attention to the predicament of the individual in the large macrocosmic context.

Robert Hogan (Arthur Miller, 1964) chimes in with Welland, though he conceded that Miller gave to the individual his reason for existence, personal significance and morality. He was awed by the mystery of what man is, and tries to explore it both realistically and psychologically. But the consideration of the sociological parameter remains the stable critical strand in Hogan’s stance too. Erik Erikson (The Achievement of Arthur Miller, 1964) postulates that there are three periods of psychological crisis in an individual’s life - the crisis of Identity, Generativity and Integrity. They may overlap and coalesce. The first two stages are applicable to Miller’s development as a playwright. Gerald Weales evaluates Miller’s achievement with reference to his view that the true social drama must recognize that man has both subjective and objective existence and belongs not only to himself and his family but also to the world. Henry Popkin blends Erikson’s and Weales’ points of view and asserts that Miller’s regular practice
was to confront the dead level of banality with the heights and depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility. At the centre of each play is the tension between little people and big issues. Each play confirms that little people cannot live up to big standards. In language, culture and capacity to comprehend their fate, these people possess little imagination. Inhabiting the dead centre of dullness they sit and wait for the voice of doom. In this exploration of the sense of despair, we notice that Popkin’s approach also tends to social and societal criticism in Miller’s plays rather than to the archetypal predicament of the humans which we propose to investigate in the present study.

Thomas Porter follows an integrated exploratory critical strategy in his assertion that Miller’s plays are as much about the milieu as about the characters; as much about the territory as about the tormented psyche. But this comprehensive approach fails to do adequate justice to the exploration of man’s image emerging from Miller’s plays. The rather too heavy an emphasis on the individual’s milieu makes Porter’s evaluation more documentary than artistic.

Another notable critic in this camp is Ronald Hayman who focusses on Miller’s social commitment.\(^3\)

Besides the above mentioned predominantly sociological studies of Miller’s plays, there have been several attempts at exploring his characters psychologically in which the deeper recesses of the human psyche have been pointed to justify and explain their external manifestations in the characters’ behavioural patterns. In this regard we can mention the contribution of Leonard Moss who, in his book, entitled *Arthur Miller* (1967) has focussed his attention on the psychological processes of the characters’ inner realities. He believed that Miller compromised his talent by attempting to enlarge the interior psychological question with "codes and ideas of social and ethical importance."

Besides the exclusive sociological approach, reading naturalistic determinism in Miller’s plays as well as the socio-psychological method adopted to analyse his plays, we have a number of studies based on the biographical approach where Miller’s personal views, experiences and proclivities have been taken as the tool of analysis of his characters and the situations confronting them. One notable

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instance of this type is the study of Miller’s plays by Benjamin Nelson who postulated that inspite of his social commitments Miller’s personal views do colour the portrayal of his dramatis personae and this indirectly hints at the propagandist strain in his plays.\textsuperscript{4}

A large number of critics have either approached Miller’s plays for biographical references, or treated them as mouthpieces for his theory of playwriting. These plays have quite often been analysed purely from the technical point of view and more often than not as mere extensions or enlargements of the milieu, embodying topically fashionable myths, such as were symbolised by Horatio Alger, Ben Franklin and Dale Carnegie. The human beings treated in his plays, therefore, become an illustration of the man, family and society syndrome. If at all the individual gained any significance it was because of Miller’s own insistence on his common man hero and his tragedy.

Unlike O’Neill and the Romantics in England, Miller was a man of the theatre and like Eliot believed in the great efficacy of the stage for effectively communicating the author’s views and visions. His contact with the theatre began with his reading of \textit{Write that Play}

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by Kenneth E. Rowe whom he found his understanding critic and teacher. Thereafter Miller took up playwriting in a professional spirit, and wrote a number of plays. Within two years of the time when he started writing, he won the Avery Hopwood Award. With each succeeding effort his knowledge of the theatre expanded. Miller consolidated it by producing them also. The Lydia Mendelsohn Repertory Theatre opened in 1929 and offered a workshop for new as well as seasoned productions. Miller attended its rehearsals, performances, and sessions of lighting, set designing, etc. While in Chicago he witnessed a performance of Odet’s Awake and Sing and the core of its message - "Life should have some dignity" - made a lasting impact on his dramatic sensibility. In 1937 one of the Hopwood Award winning plays received a substantial prize from the Bureau of New Plays set up by the Theatre Guild. With his record of prizes, Miller got a post in the Federal Theatre Project. He wrote half a dozen plays in the thirties and forties. They were called "Trunk Plays" and their worth lies in the fact that they contain the seminal characters, situations and thematic directions towards which the dramatist was eventually to move and develop. At about this time Miller took to radioscripting. Most of it was done for two of the more experimental and exciting radio shows in the early forties - the Columbia Workshop and the Cavalcade of America. Miller
wrote numerous radioplays. Apart from their thematic interest his scripts are noteworthy for what they show of Miller’s dramatic technique. His plays manifest a wide range of non-realistic experimentations, such as fantasy situations which were necessitated by the medium in which they were written and by the purpose of catering to the audience’s imagination. The use of a narrator, rapid and plastic shifts of scene, and the breakdown of conventional time barriers are employed boldly in these scripts.

Before we proceed to state our own critical intentions of undertaking the present study it will be profitable to briefly summarise some of the relevant biographical details and influences which shaped Miller’s creative mind and also to cursorily glance over the attempts being made by Miller’s contemporary playwrights.

Miller was born in Manhattan. His Jewish parents belonged to the middle class and resided in the bustling industrial borough of the sprawling metropolis. His father was a garment manufacturer who tried to provide the family with all the advantages he could not enjoy in his childhood and the mother’s interest was also limited to providing maximum comfort to her family of five. As a child Miller was an avid baseball fan, and by the time he reached High School he had emerged as a football star. In 1928, the year of his
Bar Mitzhav when his father's business suddenly declined, the family moved to Brooklyn, a neighbourhood in which many of his relatives lived. Although the Jews shared the neighbourhood with the Italians and the Irish there was relative harmony allowing Miller to grow up in a multi-ethnic homogeneous milieu. However, his novel Focus owes its impulse to the vicious Anti-Semitism in the New York area in the thirties and forties fomented by the Nazi-front hate groups. Repeatedly Miller enumerated his Jewish heritage, his belief in the family, and the millennia-long values of the Jewish people, especially the cry of the individual conscience for self respect.

He wished to go to the University of Michigan, primarily because of its nationally known football team. After High School Miller worked for his father in the garment factory. Very early in life he became acquainted with the loud vulgar aggressiveness of the customers. They treated his father with contempt, forcing Miller to become aware of the value and meaning of self respect. Miller Senior, like many of his contemporary businessmen, was hit by the Depression and could not afford to send his son to school. For two years the playwright had to work as a loader.

and shipping clerk in an automobile warehouse saving all he could for his tuition money. As the job was routine and mechanical it allowed him time to think and read. In contrast to Williams who found his experiences at the shoe company ‘a season in hell’ ‘a cage’ and ‘a prison’ Miller saw it as a liberating force that released his inner being. It was about this time that he read *Brothers Karamazov*. The complexity and depth of this saga left him bewildered and dazzled, particularly the conflict between brother and brother, and father and son, leaving him with a sense of wonder. After saving enough money Miller discovered that he did not have sufficient marks to qualify for the entrance examination. A letter to Clarence Cook Little got him the necessary introduction and he was admitted. At Ann Arbor, Miller devoted most of his time to writing plays, the recurrent motif being the depression and its after effects.

The American imagination of the twentieth century oscillated between idealism and despair on the one hand and struggle and promise of reward on the other. The dramatists were committed to the delineation of conflict in terms of human ability to control the chaos created by him. In its final analysis the modern American drama appears symbolic of a battle of survival and identity. It highlighted the predicament of man, revealing areas of strife, tension and darkness in modern life and consciousness. The inspiration
for playwriting was gathered from the liberal realism of Ibsen, the psychology of Strindberg and the psychiatry of Freud. These combined under the banner of expressionism. To this phase of expressionism in which action was symbolic, scenes were elusive and closely shifting, Hauptmann and Kaiser added the theme of contemporary social and economic issues. No longer an individual, the protagonist, became a member of a class, a collective hero, engaged in a class struggle. From the twenties the theme of success permeated the subject matter of the majority of the playwrights. The myth of Franklin conformed to the need for enterprise, adventure and ambition. The Horatio Alger hero believed in the potential greatness of the common man, glorification of the individual’s effort, and equation of the pursuit of money with pursuit for happiness. Emerson’s doctrine of self reliance fitted in with this broad framework, and it also had the sanction of protestant ethics. The social dramas of the twenties and thirties for the first time reflected the familiar realities of the old world. In the thirties drama achieved a new seriousness and importance not so much for traditional theatrical endeavour, but as a forum for social commentary.

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The theme of loneliness is by no means modern but this does not detract from the significance of its appearance in some peculiarly American manifestations in dramas since the nineteen twenties. The present day American life with its corrosive disease of the soul finds reflection in the theme of loneliness. David Reisman explains this as a recent phenomenon being a necessary adjunct to the highly industrialized consumer society where each individual strives to conform as he is petrified of ridicule and hankers for name, self-respect and self-sufficiency.7

Both critics and biographers have commented on the biographical leanings of O’Neill’s plays. However, his desire was a portraiture of contemporary life in dramatic terms. With this as his aim O’Neill experimented with various forms, from Realism in Desire under the Elms to Expressionism in The Hairy Ape and Emperor Jones, besides adaptations of Greek stage conventions, like masks and chorus for the purpose of the stage. O’Neill’s plays can be classified into two categories, expressionistic and realistic. The former is a dramatization of the conflict between the individual and society and the latter portrays the conflict within the family. But behind the apparent was

the single purpose- to find an idiom with which to express human tragedy. Each play is an attempt to come to terms with the same old familiar problem-the eternal conflict between man's aspirations and the ineluctable quality in life that circumscribes him.\footnote{8} O'Neill's dramatic antecedents date to Strindberg but scholars have also demonstrated the influence of Shaw and Ibsen on his work. The impetus of this dynamic personality was immediately felt by other dramatists. Not only did they carry on O'Neill's work in symbolic and naturalistic drama but even continued the more conventional forms of playwriting.

Though O'Neill seeks approximation for the predicament of contemporary man in Greek and Christian mythology with its concepts of divinely ordained fate, sacrifice, moral affirmation, heroic transcendence and tragic dignity, his tragic vision like that of Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg is essentially an affirmation of the naturalistic determinism of human predicament, an affirmation that continues to shape the imagination of the American playwrights in the succeeding decades. George Kelly's \textit{The Show Off} deals with the common ordinary American type, a mature grown up boasting of imaginary adventures.

beyond his capacity and understanding. His *Craig's Wife* describes the experiences of a woman whose notion of life and marriage are phoney. The American tradition of dramatic realism gains a new intensity with Clifford Odets who mixes doctrinaire socialism with ethnic realism. His *Awake and Sing* records the major ambition of the characters as also their longing for success, decent income and middle class prerequisites, like marriage and settled home. In this play Odets achieves authentic ethnic realism. His *Paradise Lost* relates success to bankruptcy, disease and death. Odets twin convictions of economic determinism of the human predicament, and pre-eminence of family in society exercised a powerful influence on Miller and the other playwrights.

Elmer Rice could not go to the theatre as much as he wished to. Hence he read plays ranging from classical drama to Shakespeare and the translations of Ibsen and Chekhov. *The Adding Machine*, written in 1922, created a furore because of its unique innovations in staging. It has been called impressionistic and expressionistic, the first of its kind on American stage. Rice borrowed heavily from German expressionism for this allegory of modern man, but in *The Street Scene* and *Judgement Day* he gives his social protest a more realistic form. The predominant image of Williams' plays was anti-success or unsuccess which probably originated in a perverse rebellious denial of the all
pervasive American ambition of material success and its fulfilment. His later works embody the physical deformity, decay of many a heroic figure.

The modern theatre has been the most experimental and therefore the most varied in history. The flexibility of dramatic and theatrical conventions is recognised everywhere because theatre has reflected the instability of modern civilization. Development has been a matter of form rather than content except insofar as the struggle has been motivated by special means of expression. Styles like Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism follow each other with increasing rapidity. It is also possible to encounter an amalgam of two or three different styles of composition in the same play as Miller’s Death of a Salesman which is a blend of realism and expressionism. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that social situations in particular can provide engrossing drama when they are presented largely through discussion or argument. Miller’s plays also prove that undistinguished lines can have emotional power in the context of strong dramatic situations. There is no hesitation in mingling the realistic and symbolic styles.\(^9\) Expressionism could supplement Realism but could not

Supplant it. Variety and eclecticism were the dominant characteristics of the twentieth century. Dramatists, such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Gorki, Shaw, Odets, Miller, transcended the dogmas of restrictive theories to create drama of imaginative power and deep human significance.10

The experience of the war trauma in the mid-fourties, disillusionment with the cherished individualism of American drama brought a tragic perspective in realism. In Miller for the first time dramatic realism became an intelligent reflection of socio-economic determinism. Miller’s tragedies followed the Odetsian concept of human relationship in terms of psychological centrality of family and economic determinism, leaving a model of an organically cohesive dramatic art for the playwrights of the fifties and sixties. Notwithstanding his experimental digressions into theatricality Miller, like Odets, Rice and O’Neill essentially continues the tradition of illusionistic realist drama.11

With regard to the early influences on himself Miller traces his dramatic antecedents to Ibsen. He has more


in common with Shaw, Brecht and Ibsen than with O’Neill and Wilder. The recurrent motif in Ibsen was the discrepancy between the potential energy of the individual and the narrow scope of fulfilment. He believed that the individual must adjust and develop only certain features of his personality to a state where he in his totality ceases to exist. The family is no haven where a hurt suffered in public could be healed. Personal relationships to him were more fearful than comforting and men confronted each other as strangers. Ibsen draws on society as a realistic force embodied in social mores, taboos, and the internal subjective force within the character. Ibsen’s idea of fate was the inevitability residing in the conflict between the life force of his characters and the abortive attempts of society upon them. Ibsen provided motivation, inspiration and answers to Miller’s quest for style, subject matter, dramatic structure and form. The Master Builder and Pillars Of Society have close parallels in Miller’s own plays, and The Enemy of the People was adapted by him for the American stage.

Miller’s social plays are an invective against the evils of society. The single theme of most of his plays is the frustration of the individual. In a progressive machine

dominated society the individual exists as an 'Integer'. 13 
The social dramas according to Miller needed to probe the nature of the individual, discovering, amplifying and exteriorizing his needs as social concepts. He believed that "society is inside man and man is inside society." His plays are voyages of exploration into the complexity of being American. His concept of the human being whether in isolation, or in proximity with his family members and society, develops through the form and framework chosen by him. In his Family in Modern Drama Miller states:

It has gradually come to appear to me over the years that the spectrum of dramatic forms, from Realism over to the Verse Drama...consists of forms which express human relationships of a particular kind, each of them is suited to express either a primarily familial relation at one extreme, or a primarily social relation at the other. 14

The twentieth century literature lays emphasis on the common man and his environment. The individual is visualised as both a product as well as a victim of his surrounding. Miller insisted that the individual should be treated as a private entity because his failure to achieve

and maintain the required sense of dignity was the fault of society. However the individual is not flawless. Miller’s own attitude towards his protagonists was contradictory. On the one hand, he held them responsible for their failure to conform, and to neglect to carry out the ascertained role in the established social framework, while, on the other hand, the approved social system is held guilty for the catastrophic downfall of the heroes. These calamities do not stem from the inevitability of fate nor are they the consequence of man’s nature. Tragedy is an affirmation of faith in man and even though the result is calamitous the spirit survives to reassert itself unequivocally, narrating its own tale of woe. Suffering becomes the instrument employed by tragedy to purge and cleanse the human spirit of its baseness. The exaltation of the spirit is the primary concern of the genre. Every age and generation has its own definition. Miller defines it thus:

Tragedy creates a certain order of feeling.... Tragedy brings us not only sadness, and sympathy, identification, even fear; it also... brings us knowledge and enlightenment.... Tragedy, called a more exalted kind of consciousness, is so called because it makes us aware of what the character might have been. Tragedy, therefore, is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal. 15

All of Miller's common-man heroes suffer from a guilt complex. In the early plays they do not acknowledge that the very source of guilt lies in their lack of self-awareness. Miller insisted that courage, truth, trust, responsibility and faith must be the seminal values of life. The view presented by him is that man is not just a microcosmic representative of the world macrocosm, but also stands apart from the world. He is not just an abject subject to its laws, disciplines and forces but can and should resist them, and even strive to change them. The underlying premise is that though man is an object of nature he is more than nature. The true social drama which Miller calls the 'whole drama' must recognise the subjective as well as objective existence of the human being.\textsuperscript{16} The individual as an entity belongs not only to himself but to the total world community. If the playwright is concerned with the psychological and social aspects of man, then he must deal with the problem of identity. Miller maintained that drama and its production must represent a well-defined expression of social needs which transcend any form of society or any particular historical moment. His approach to drama was organic. It was a means for communicating his

\textsuperscript{16} Arthur Miller, "On Social Plays" in \textit{The Theatre Essays}, pp. 57-64.
views and opinions. The symbolic significance of a Miller character lies in the commitment he makes or refuses to make. The moment of commitment is important as it was, at that point of time, the individual approached tragic existence. As he reaches complete tragedy his concentration on the fixed point of commitment becomes more intense. Miller explains it thus:

The quality of such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world... Infact, it is the common man who knows this fear best. 17

Miller fluctuated between the Greek version of tragedy with its emphasis on external causes and the Christian version with its idea of freedom and responsibility.

The brief survey of the formative influences on Miller and his own theoretical assumptions and committed involvement in his milieu almost beg an exploration into the image of man which the complex mechanism of the dramatist’s sensibility has created in his plays. As in Ibsen, in Miller’s dramatic world, too, the supernatural and the mysteriously divine, have no ostensible role to play. With

the withdrawal of God from human affairs man’s existence and concommittant struggle have become more onerous and poignant. We have to see whether through topical dramatic corpus and predominantly conventional realistic dramatic tradition Miller has succeeded in presenting an image of man which has an identifiable contemporary, local habitat as well as acquires universal or even archetypal and mythical dimensions. This is proposed to be worked out in the following six chapters of the study.