CHAPTER I

PHOENIX OR ASHES?

One of the most conspicuous aspects of the American drama after World War II is the pervasive vogue of the anti-heroic protagonist. The contemporary playwrights break from the Aristotelian tradition of heroism by substituting for it an anti-hero or a non-hero - the personification of a humanity lacking in force of character, invincible spirit, courage, glory and grandeur. The contemporary American drama, with its smaller-than-life hero, projects a stunted image of man. When a Hamlet or a Lear succumbs to the fatality of his overmastering will, the seismic shock rips open a giant grave in which half-a-dozen other men also tumble to their doom. On the contrary, the fall of a modern hero is about as exalted as a sheeted patient's being wheeled out of the operating room with the surgeon shrugging: "Poor devil, his case was hopeless. He never had a chance." None of the protagonists of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Edward Albee, Jack Gelber is a mythic hero capable of moulding the destiny of an entire nation. In fact, the contemporary hero is himself a victim or a misfit. Instead of figuring as Infinite, as a representative of all mankind, he is "the image of man - modern and strictly
contemporary too — which the lackeys of our culture cannot bring themselves to recognize.” Indeed, gradually the mythic hero has lost his stature and shrunk from the titanic to the puny. Critics like Victor Brombert, C.M. Boura and Joseph Campbell have traced this descent.

Drawing a composite portrait of the traditional hero,’
Joseph Campbell observes:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. . . . Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through the world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. . . . The final work is that of the return. If the Powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread. . . . The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).2

Even if the mythological hero does not emerge from a metaphoric kingdom of dread, his trials inspire a moral order. Always a man of superior divine gifts, he is recognized from the start as an extraordinary being whose development and characteristics are beyond the course of ordinary humanity. There is about him something preordained, and omens of glory and grandeur accompany his birth. "A hero differs from other men by his peculiar force and energy. Just as the Greeks define him as one who has a
special power, or in all countries he has an abundant, overflowing, assertive force, which expresses itself in action, especially in violent action, and enables him to do what is beyond ordinary mortals. 3

Victor Brombert has suggested three stances of the descent of this mythic hero in terms of relationships—"with the supernatural, with society, or the 'group,' with the self." 4 The supernatural stance is generally applied to the classical or medieval hero. It involves hero's confrontation with the supernatural or atemporal powers of the gods, fairies or dragons. An embodiment of gigantic physical prowess and endowed with exceptional gifts of head, heart and hand, he sets out in quest, and gets involved with the supernatural powers. Such were Greek heroes like Ulysses, Hercules, Achilles and Oedipus. In the words of Brombert, "At his best the ancient hero had something of the divine in him. God, demigod, godlike, or intimate with the gods, he provides a transcendental link between the contingencies of the finite and mortal state and the realm of the eternal laws were brought through him into conflict with each other." 5 In great epics, the hero's will and mind are stretched to the utmost and his catastrophes are dramatized as meaningful defeats.

In the medieval ages, there was a notable shift from the pagan to the Christian society. And with the emergence of feudalism, courtly life and complex class structure, the mythical
hero assumed the form of chivalrous hero. The romantic knight displays feats of arms, revealing his loyalty to his sovereign and fidelity to his lady love. This knight-errant of the age of chivalry vanished with the emergence of science and realism. Hegel in The Philosophy of Fine Arts talked about the social heroic stance of his own times. He argued that the changing socio-ethical values left little scope for traditional heroism because a hero has to be representative of his own society. "It is true that under the present condition of the civilized world a man may act independently for himself in many directions, the fact remains that in whatever direction he may turn, he is still only a member of a fixed order of society and appears as such limited in his range rather than the vital representative and individual embodiment of society itself." Indeed, an individual's freedom or his ideology might clash with the social, political, economic and legal pressures of society - a struggle that establishes his uniqueness. His victory or defeat helps to define the acceptance or rejection of the social norms and conventions.

In classical heroism, the hero emerges as a man of extraordinary physical or moral strength. His uniqueness helps define or condemn social conventions; his violence defines or confirms the rules of order; his arbitrariness and unexceptional self-sufficiency illuminate his superhuman individuality. Of this revelatory heroism, Odysseus, Aeneas and Achilles are outstanding examples. The superman hero is
always endowed with special dynamics of human potential. His career, often implying an encounter with the gods, culminates in tragic disaster. But there is splendor in his heroic defeat. In a tragedy, human potential of the hero is dramatized along with the limits. That is why the tragic fall of an Oedipus or an Agamemnon evokes both awe and pity.

On the contrary, the modern playwright is confronted with the baffling problem of depicting a self that seems to have lost its reality. Darwinism led to the formation of the idea of the machine-man and the image of the mechanical self. Kepler's laws and Freud's explorations of the unconscious gradually brought home the realization that man is but an infinitesimal fraction of the energy that flows through the universe. In the age of Freud and Einstein, God ceased, as it were, to reveal Himself in man. Losing the potential divinity of the self, man began to question himself as well as the universe around him: everything became problematical, even the phenomenon of consciousness. Today uncovering the hidden truth of reality is regarded as something impossible and what Friedrich Nietzsche had called a philosophy of "perspectivity" has adopted itself readily to the Einsteinian theory of relativity. No wonder, in the modern atomic society, when God is dead, there can be no heroes. Ours is an age of irony, not of heroic grandeur. Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Archibald MacLeish have given us a negative saint who distrusts truth, justice and love, and negates all traditional values.
Of course, the trend started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the emergence of "modernism". In the age that split atom, much else has also been split. The War, the Depression, the social changes, the technological advancement and the new concepts in science and technology - all influenced the entire pattern of life in the West including the arts and literature. No wonder, it is commonplace to talk of modernism in terms of alienation, fragmentation, and lack of coherence, centrality, poise or purpose. Confronting the terror and mystery of the universe absolutely alone, modern man stood stripped of all his self glorifying illusions. The Great War brought the first realization that the old heroic individual had gone. Oswald Spengler published The Decline of The West proving with references to history and philosophy that human existence having deteriorated to the level of a robot or an insect, modern man's life consists in the performance of a series of political, economic and social functions, and that beyond these functions, it has neither value nor relevance.

Since the aftermath of the Great War disintegrated humanity and shattered the age-old patterns of economy, new science and philosophy emerged with a new set of morality in respect of sex and spiritual ideals. At times it meant reversing mercilessly the old traditional heroic mores. The new sense of historical crises and the new social and political forces unleashed in Europe and America such physical, moral, spiritual and psychological strains as burdened man with new responsibility
and forced him to recognize new areas of experience. The genesis of the anti-hero can be traced back to the social and cultural crises which were the product of this modernism. Irving Howe, while tracing the genesis of the anti-hero in a volume entitled *Literary Modernism*, observes: "The modern hero discovered that he cannot be a hero. Yet only through discovery can he salvage a portion of the heroic." No wonder the post-War socio-economic forces transform the protagonist from a definable entity into an "occasion for a flow of perceptions and sensations."

The modern anti-hero has neither the capacity nor perhaps the inclination to go beyond the terms of his existence - terms determined by the ethos of a ruthlessly competitive society. Being a trapped animal of a rigid social structure, the anti-hero has to act within the framework of ideas and activities allotted to him by the gods of commercial houses. Again, since the traditional heroes had rock-like will to grapple with the external forces, their "private will" often clashed with the "collective Order," and their personal "virtues" and "merits," ideas and revolutionary fervour, inspired them to live alone displaying heroic energy and challenging powers that escape human understanding. But the modern anti-hero lives and dies in confusion; he neither understands himself nor the world.

The traditional heroes devote their talents to some concrete cause which provides scope for action and an end to which they can direct their efforts. The hero is usually a leader of men
and feels an obligation toward those under his command. Behind the noble figures of Ajax, Achilles, and Antigone loom serious moral and social commitments. They are ready not only for epic heroism but also for an epic sacrifice of self to a broader ideal. In spite of tragic flaws, the tragic protagonists defy the evil forces to bring order out of chaos. A Hamlet feels that time is "out of joint" and he assumes the responsibility to restore order. The modern anti-heroes are creatures afflicted by dilemma and confusion — sightless people groping about in darkness. The struggles and fumblings of these unheroic heroes are dramatized in an uncertain volatile society in which values are changing so fast that the establishment of human dignity seems to be impossible. The unfulfilled dreams and the lifelong futile struggle of these anti-heroes neither evoke pity nor tragic grandeur. The classical drama describes the tragic path of self-discovery of the hero and the discovery of the missing link to assert the sense of human grandeur. In the altered social condition, with social pressures too complex to be fathomed by undistinguished citizens, the anti-heroes became the inevitable substitute for the classical heroes.

For three decades after the Great War, the West was caught in a struggle to create new visions of the importance of life in a mass culture. Since "bourgeois environment affords little scope for exploits and passions on the epic or romantic scale," in the "modern" novel, the hero totally vanished, for the readers became accustomed to an essentially anti-heroic fiction
after the Great War. The protagonists of Fejdor Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and James Joyce are lost souls lacking in heroic strength of character. No wonder, Sean O'Faolain expressed deep concern about the fate of the hero in a society where "most of the traditional certainties have become progressively less and less certain." After examining the novels of Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, William Faulkner, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, the Irish critic came to the conclusion that there is a virtual disappearance of "the conceptual hero" in the modern writers. He goes on to observe that the contemporary writers are "anti-humanist and anti-heroic, highly sceptical about man's inherent dignity."

In America, with the end of "innocence," the old American dreams relating to the farms, the grandmothers, the small towns, the Frontier, the river boats, the gold mines had become obsolete because they were dreams of great individual, working alone, exploring alone and fighting alone. That kind of heroism and individuality became impossible in the vast impersonality of a big city where common men, frustrated and shattered, desperately struggled to adjust themselves to the new dehumanized culture. Each decade had its own reaction to this modern dilemma. The hero changed in accordance with the changing society.

As early as the 1920s, the protagonist is more often than not a contemptible and funny creature, a cog in a big machine,
a cipher lost in the anonymous masses of the city. The American playwrights projected him as a sorry product of social conditions. Thus, the expressionistic plays are peopled by soulless robots, corrupt, brash dehumanized anti-heroes belonging to society which is nihilistic and unheroic. Maxwell Anderson, S.N. Berhrman, Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder and Eugene Gladstone O'Neill turned to Europe for inspiration and ideas - to the realism of Ibsen, surnaturalism of Strindberg, psychic iceberg of Freud, philosophy of Bergson, and that intellectual ferment called "modernism".

Absorbing the new ideas and techniques, the playwrights dramatized the unheroic situation in an inhuman society. Thus in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), the protagonist is Mr. Zero, a waste product in a society which coldly replaces him with a machine. In O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Yank can find no significance in his life in the contemporary world and, having tried in vain to "belong" to this and that, at last discovers that he can feel at home only in the deadly embrace of a real ape. In other plays of O'Neill, too, the characters are anti-heroic protagonists because, trapped by a hostile reality of life, they long for death. O'Neill discovered that all conviction was transient and that no absolutes existed, except in emptiness and death. Likewise, Clifford Odets recorded the universal sense of frustration in *Awake And Sing!* (1935) in which the protagonist unheroically struggles in vain to hold her family together. Robert Sherwood introduced gangsters as
anti-heroic protagonists in *The Petrified Forest* (1935) to highlight the spiritual bankruptcy of the contemporary society. Sidney Howard's *The Silver Cord* (1936) dramatized mother as an anti-heroic monster who schemes to destroy her son's marriage just to ensure his incestuous dependence on her. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), characters are mere abstractions—"docile creatures, incapable of heroism or villainy, passive shadows, theatrical stereotypes."

In the 1920s and 40s, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder and Eugene O'Neill tried their hand at various dramatic forms—Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Sur-realism and Epic Theatre. These playwrights reduced the character of man to a question mark, projecting alienated heroes as struggling with Nothing and illusions, the "pipe dreams" being the only reality in their life. They lack moral and spiritual grandeur of the Greek heroes because they are rooted in the modern society which is morally and spiritually bankrupt. In fact, the thing that is most characteristic of this period is the emergence of the anti-hero protagonist.

The loss of "character" in classic sense being a big problem for the modern playwrights, their protagonists are victims rather than heroes. Epic protagonists were heroes with superhuman dimensions, tragic protagonists were victim-heroes, while the modern protagonists emerge as mere victims. Epic hero represented man in relationship to gods, tragic hero...
was related to humanity at large, while the modern anti-hero is totally alienated. Too weak to confront the sordid realities of life, he seeks escape in a world of illusions. He lacks the superiority in knowledge, physique, character and endurance which characterized the heroism of the traditional classical protagonists. In *The Great God Brown* (1926), characters actually use masks to bring home visually the illusions that dominate them. Nina in *Strange Interlude* (1928) and Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) are but prisoners of their own illusions: they wear masks to deceive themselves and the world.

Now, by definition, a hero has got to be basically superior in some way - in passion, social status, spiritual awareness. The modern anti-hero, on the other hand, is only a by-product of the socio-political and naturalistic forces. In fact, naturalistic insistence on commonness has taken away that aspect of superiority and thus what we have is a misfit lacking in tragic strength, force of character, spirit of invincibility, or a sense of moral or social commitment. Contrary to the classical, neo-classical, Shakespearean and romantic heroism, the modern anti-hero clings to neurotic illusions instead of facing the predicament of human existence. Whereas the classical hero had the heroic spirit that dares, defies and risks all, the modern anti-hero is a weak conformist. Dull and uncreative, he suffers from the maladies of alienation, anxiety and despair. Sensitive and vulnerable, he easily becomes prey
to internal and external forces.

The essential core of modernism being anti-heroic, it is not surprising that all efforts at reviving tragedy in modern times proved counter-productive. The Greeks had a firm faith in the cosmic order of the universe and they saw a law governing it; but the modernists discern no such rationality in the cosmos. In a "valueless society," the heroic literature is not possible. Unlike the Greeks, the modern playwrights cannot distinguish between the individual and the cosmic sufferings. For the Greeks, the sufferings had a secret divine cause, whereas for the modern playwrights there are sufferings without any cause. Unlike the Greeks who had a glorious vision of tragedy and equated it with beauty, the moderns give existence a precedence over essence and brood over the helplessness of man. H.D.F. Kitto observes that the Greeks had an organic sensibility that enabled them to see unity in diversity while today "man's analytical mind sees diversity even in unity." A literature that seeks to highlight the absurdity of human situation and dramatizes the collapse of cultural world, there cannot be tragic affirmation. No wonder, there are no more Utopias, no quest for ideals. Nor do we have the fertility ritual and divine sacrifice that might lead the hero to rebirth, renewal and rededication. Instead, what characterizes the typically "modern" literature is the nightmarish experience of the loss of self - the loss of the Prometheus or heroic image of man. "Our authentic contemporary literature is accurately called,
by a logic of contradiction, anti-literature, or a-literature, or a sabotage of literature. Much of this literature has a new degree of impersonality; the self is neutralized much as it is neutralized in avant-garde science."  

Declaring that "modernism and tragedy are incompatible," Joseph Wood Krutch had rightly pointed out that modern malaise, nausea, angst, alienation, loss of identity, entropy, nihilism were forces that had dehumanized and deflated the heroes. No wonder, in "modern" literature, we have a minimal, puny image of man, and the hero is an anti-hero. That is what prompted Van Wyck Brooks to compare modern writer to "a grasshopper looking for dung to stick his nose in." Suffering does give a certain dignity to a man, but if it is mute suffering without comprehension, the protagonist fails to achieve heroic grandeur. In Greek and Elizabethan plays, the sufferings lead to dignity and the heroic fall of the tragic hero is a source of his "enlightenment." But the modern playwrights dramatize sufferings which are incomprehensible to the protagonists who understand neither themselves nor the world. Introspection, reverie and psychoanalytic confusion deflate these protagonists who look like abstractions in an eternal vacuum. In the psychological plays, there being an exclusive exploration of the realm of psyche, instead of a hero with a hubris, we invariably have an obsession incarnated into flesh and blood. In any case, plays depicting the triviality and perversity of human nature or presenting common man either bedevilled by
self-defeating ignorance or trapped by environment, cannot lead to tragic exaltation. Indeed, as Eric Fromm observes, modern man is too weak to acknowledge "the awareness of the reality of death." Charles I. Glicksberg too opines that "there is no tragedy in the modern world because of growing nihilism."18

After World War II, the new sense of uncertainty, anxiety and pessimism, coupled with theological revolution, imparted a new awareness to the contemporary dramatists. This was the age in which existence came to enjoy precedence over essence. There being no final truth or an ultimately "real" picture of the universe, each man today is supposed to apprehend only a fraction of the total "truth" of reality - a part glimpsed from where he is a mere dot in the space-time continuum. Reality thus breaks up into a series of individual, and therefore partial and differentiated, perspectives. Truth thus assumed is a life-sustaining illusion. Mind, consciousness, soul are treated as illusive and meaningless things. For the existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers, failure is the fate of man whose every project is doomed. In this situation, action is futile and aspiration absurd. The existentialists thus gave eloquent expression to the current metaphysics of despair. A representative of the "lost intellectual," the existentialist hero is introspective, irrepressibly subjective, and tormented by doubt. His acute spiritual sufferings exemplify the predicament of contemporary
man who, like the neurotic characters in Kafka's novels, lives in a cosmos without direction, meaning or purpose. In the past, "the dramatic hero was seen in contrast to a world of unified individuals, at peace with themselves or at least without conflicts. In today's theatre the inner struggle is not considered to be exceptional or caused by circumstances, but constitutes the very definition of man."  

The predicament of the contemporary anti-hero is his split personality, his paradoxical efforts to project an image of himself which his society rejects. His alienation leading him to anxiety and despair, the keenness of this protagonist is not for the character development but for a "well-liked" personality. His quest for the secret of success is central to the dramatic action. Lomans and Joe Kellers follow only business ethics of maximum profit. Orestes, Oedipus, Macbeth had a vital relationship with nature and with society, but Willy Loman, Blanche DuBois, Jerry, Peter, have little kinship with their cosmos. They are "unaccommodated" protagonists, leading a life-in-death. These anti-heroes cry for their identity as "the rift between thought and action, the inner split of the personality, the subject-object relationship in the recesses of the mind, are widespread manifestations of an identity crisis."  

The Greek or Elizabethan drama always presented a "great character" who enjoyed a sense of personal immortality and dared a confrontation with the Void, but the anti-hero today suffers from spiritual bankruptcy and decadence. No
wonder the nature of quest has changed - instead of love, order or salvation, self is the object explored in our drama.

The contemporary playwright sees in the democratic society a tendency to bulldoze the individual into a faceless non-entity. Having killed off God, the existentialist finds himself alone in the universe. The problem of the intellectual today is how to escape the terror of pure contingency, the absurdity of existence. Born without reason and dying fortuitously, man appears superfluous on earth, a waste in the cosmic dust-bin. In this age of "doubt and demythification", the Olympian heroes cannot be conceived. In the words of Ihab Hassan, "In its concrete encounter with absurdity, with dread and the obscene corporeality of death, with mystical anarchy and organized nothingness, with abstract truth and experienced reality, the modern self discovers ways of affirmation that heroes of yore did not envision." The contemporary American theatre voices this excruciating mood of nihilistic despair - a despair that is an expression of protest against life that has been drained of ultimate meaning.

In The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard had foreshadowed, as it were, the anxiety neurosis of the post-World War II era, its precipitate flight from inwardness, and its traumatic loss of self. He perceived salvation "only in one thing - in becoming a single individual." With prescient insight he analyzed the ontological despair that seizes upon an individual who cannot endure life with ultimate meaning. It is this type
of despair, this "sickness unto death," which accounts for the
inevitable split of contemporary man. The anti-hero in this
perspective is the projection of man who fails to discover
meaning in life, "a skeletal character, a personality split
by considering the problems of sincerity and hypocrisy, conformity
and dissent, commitment and indecision, loneliness and complicity.
We might call that character the unheroic hero." The Greek
hero also suffered from isolation as his aristocratic self
urged him to revolt against fate and God. However, his identity
crisis did not make him a neurotic misfit; rather his quest for
identity inevitably led to the age old questions of meaning,
salvation, and survival in a spiritual sense. On the contrary,
the quest of the anti-hero today is futile; his despair grows
to a degree of intolerable anguish because he "cannot get rid
of himself, cannot become nothing." The existentialists took the cue from Kierkegaard and the
concept of the self presented in Sartre's Being And Nothingness
is abstract and beset with irreconcilable contradictions. The
self, though free, is trapped in a solitude from which there
is no escape. Therefore the most conspicuous characteristic
of selfhood is that "man is always separated from what he is
by all the breadth of the being which he is not." Man is the
being who confers meaning on the world, but this meaning is
never certain. Human reality is a perpetual becoming so that
"what is not determines what is." The self at all times
confronts its own negation.
Sartre's *Being And Nothingness* it was that inspired Albert Camus to evolve the concept of modern hero in *The Myth of Sisyphus* - a serious study of the helplessness of man, the futility of human labour. Highlighting the absurdity of human situation, it attacks the very existence of man. Everywhere man feels torn between infinities, between absolutes, and between odds. Thanks to the decline of spontaneous life into a mechanical routine, existence today is marked by one's awareness of isolation from others as well as from one's own self. Whatever may be the channel of recognition, the result is always intense despair as it implies utter loss of meaning and value in the world, in society, and in one's own immediate life. This despair being rooted in a sense of fundamental absurdity, Camus defines "absurdity" as the "disproportion between man's intention and the reality he will encounter." Absurdity becomes a defiance of the universe, an extreme tension which will never permit the hero to rest, just as the tormented Sisyphus can never pause in his futile but never-ending task. With the absurd hero, achievement ceases to be a question of victory or defeat because success lies in sustaining an elemental "disproportion." "Emphasis is shifted from attainment to performance and in the process of sustaining his performance, of defending his passion for the absurd, the absurd hero achieves fulfillment simply by defending a truth." The emergence of the absurd hero in the post-World War II era was a significant stage in the evolution of anti-heroi
protagonism. In the avant-garde theatre of France, Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet dehumanized the hero completely. The protagonist is a dumb animal bellowing back and forth across a crowded space that seems to him a void. Adamov's best play, *Tours Contre Tous*, deals with the social persecution of a group of people within the society. "The characters are skeletal puppets, stripped bare of all dignity and feeling—obsessed only by their desire to survive at any cost." Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes characters who are defined not in relation to time, place or social circumstance, but in relation to eternity as well as to human cravings for a sense of purpose.

From Greeks to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to Brecht, dramatists portrayed life-like characters and thus what happens to Oedipus and Lear is partly result of what they are. In epics, the problem of the hero is placed in a double perspective historic and metaphysical. For instance, Oedipus's fate is linked with the destiny of Athens; he himself is a presence making history. Action and limits, violence and organization, the individual and collective norms—these are the polarities that the epic hero has to experience. On the level of ritualistic pattern, the hero's experience culminates in rebirth. He passes from guilt through suffering to purgation and emerges a "new man." But in the post-World War II Western drama, the myth of rebirth, renewal, and redecoration have degenerated into a grotesque parody of their classic versions.
The heroes of the quest are tattered and fallen beings suffering from eternal disillusionment and frustration. Possessing solid personality traits, Oedipus and Macbeth are able to confront the problems of human existence; but the contemporary anti-heroes are incapable of acting in a situation. Nor do they remind us of anyone we have ever met. In the Greek and Elizabethan plays, heroic action prompts one to identify with the heroes: we picture ourselves wielding Orestes's sword or Hamlet's rapier. But an absurdist "gives us nothing we can envy or admire: no courage, no gallantry, no glamorous lovers, beautiful costumes, handsome settings or desirable furniture."²⁹

The American playwrights today do not seek inspiration from the Greeks; their ideals are Adamov, Beckett and Ionesco who have successfully dramatized the dehumanized condition of the post World-War II society. In their avant-garde theatre, setting, plot, character and form have totally vanished and there is no heroism, nothing to admire, not even much illusion. No wonder Leonard Cabell Pronko sees in Beckett's *Endgame* "as a picture of the disintegration of a human universe"³⁰ where human beings are reduced to mechanical atoms. Horace Gregory compares Beckett's characters to ancient Roman gladiators because they live outside the conventions of society.³¹ Indeed, Beckett's world is populated by lame and sick tramps who just play out their moves in the endless, aimless game of life with robotlike submissiveness. Ionesco, on the other hand, wrote
without any specific point of view because, for him, all points of view are useless. Life is projected as a hell in which each person is imprisoned in his own private cubicle, invisible and inaudible to others. The so-called communication being nonsense, the world of Ionesco is populated with weak, helpless and artless anti-heroes who "cannot defend themselves either against machinations of bourgeois society . . . or against the demands of their spouses . . . or least of all against their own natures." Genet's characters live in the world of illusion and when all the layers of illusion are stripped off, the characters are doomed to face emptiness. They don't exist at all. Living in the world of illusion, they have no selves, except as illusions. Non-human and anti-heroic, they are not even protagonists, for they do nothing. In fact, the avant-garde theatre of France demolished the very concept of hero. Influenced by it, Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, Jack Gelber and Jack Richardson heralded the absurdist brand of anti-heroic tradition in the American theatre.

Thus, the post-World-War II period witnessed an unprecedented deflation of the traditional "hero." The new socio-economic, scientific and philosophical forces reversed the old classical ideals of "goodness", "nobility" and "courage". No wonder these forces evolved a new anti-hero in contemporary drama who is more self-seeking, lonely, desperate and absurd. Earlier, Elmer Rice, Sherwood, Odets and O'Neill had still presented living human beings but the heroes of this period are tramps and cripples.
Dehumanized and trapped in unheroic situations of life, this new anti-hero lives in a world of nihilism, absurdity, despair and meaninglessness. No wonder the American absurdists walk through the modern megalopolis and discern bestial features behind bland physiognomies. Their image of man is an incoherent sequence of states of consciousness, and their theatrical record of human reality is kaleidoscopic, illusory, ambiguous, grotesque, pointless and absurd. Their protagonists are symbols of negation - moving images of surrealist futility, although insinuating the existential revolt against life and values.

The Greek and Renaissance literature often convey images of protagonists whose central preoccupation is romantic agony or passionate involvement. Oedipus, Orestes, Othello, Romeo are very passionate but their passions inspire them to act and fight till the end of life. Virgil's tale of Dido's love is an interesting instance of epic heroism. When love assumes the form of yearning for the unattainable, it can become an analogue of a mythical quest. The great lover-heroes of literature are victims of destruction and degradation but the grandeur of their calamities evokes awe. The "loves" of the anti-heroes, on the other hand, are sexual, perverse or nymphomaniac. Not love but sexual anxiety turns out an irrevocable force which deflates their personality. Sensitive and vulnerable, they thus easily become victims of internal and external forces. Conscious of their harrowing guilt, they lose their balance and indulge in perversion, fornication and even cannibalism. It is sexual
morbidity and sexual repression that inevitably lead them to alienation, frustration, and despair. In traditional heroes, love was a spiritual force as it perfected and sublimated their being; but the anti-heroes of contemporary drama seek sexual gratification by indulging in the dirty game of sex-exhibitionism. Blanche, Shannon, Maggie are sex-neurotics; their motives are selfish, mean, and lustful because they are spiritual derelicts.

Thus, conceived in anti-traditional terms, the post-World War anti-hero is an outcast, an alienated neurotic suffering from anxiety. Of course, intellectually he is a "Protean," but culturally he is weak and sterile. He is fit to be a hero neither in a tragedy nor in a comedy. His personality is marked by baser elements like stupidity, tenacity, disappointment, reluctance, and mediocrity. The classical heroes were men of transcendental will which defied heaven and hell, but the anti-heroes today lack guts to fight with destiny. Thus overwhelmed by the mysterious working of Nature and God, they submit to economic determinism. Willy Loman and Rubin Flood are the victims of material forces as they struggle in vain to buy honour, recognition, dignity, and peace of mind from market. Their false illusions reveal not only their helplessness in a business world, but also their incompetence to comprehend complex social forces that crush them. Instead of facing reality, they turn escapist. Their undeserved sufferings fail to excite passions in them and thus, belying the hopes of the audience, they only express their pathos in an agony of something
unconventional in tragic literature. Too weak to cope with the reality of human existence, and victims of their own passions, sensual desires and guilts, these anti-heroic protagonists are cases of neurosis. Willy, Rubin, Brick, Amanda, Laura, Maggie, Alex, del Lago, Serafina, Alma, Blanche, Shannon, J.B. have nothing to give to humanity, for they live and die for their own sake. No wonder, Robert Brustein observes: "Our serious drama is informed by a debased Freudianism, our comedies are set in motion by man-chasing women." 33

In the 1940s and 50s, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams dominated the stage in America. Of course, Eugene O'Neill too was a force to reckon with, but incapacitated by disease and shocked by the traumatic experiences of World War II, he stood totally disillusioned. Anyway, it is worth noting that his last masterpieces, although written before the end of the War, anticipate, as it were, the existentialist despair. The vision of Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey Into Night borders on absurdism. Harry Hope's saloon is a wasteland in which men are huddled together to sustain one another's illusions which make living so putrid that here the savior is one who murders. The four Tyrones too torment themselves into stripping away illusion after illusion. Miller's plays reveal the modern man's desperate quest for identity, his helpless confrontation with social conventions, his alienation and failures, his tyrannical victimization of the post-World War industrial America. His
anti-heroic heroes are victims of false and hollow values of material success as their body and soul are thrown into the industrial cauldron, and both are consumed. The reckless game of money-making debases moral standards, corrupts human spirit and turns all fine instincts into shoddiness and vulgarity. Debasement and stultification of men and women who espouse the creed of success is the theme of both *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Price* (1960). Failure as husbands and fathers, the protagonists here are quite unconventional for what stands out is their greed for profit in business, their care for their job, and their sexual passion. Willy Loman, Eddie Carbone or Joe Keller are lost in sordid and mundane complexities of the industrialized consumer society of America; hence unfit for any heroism. That is what makes Miller's approach to social drama "human rather than heroic."

The problem of self-despair that tortured a Nietzsche and a Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century persists, unsolved, in the post-War American drama. T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence struggled in vain to find some "integral self." The potential vogue of nihilism meant recognition of the dark side of human reality, the loss of faith in God, truth and justice. Having lost his identity, the contemporary man suffers nausea, alienation and metaphysical despair. No wonder, the playwrights of the post-World War II era projected negative-saints rootless and aimless, engaged in a spiritual struggle without end. Contrary to the traditional heroic norms, Eugene O'Neill,
Tennessee Williams and Archibald MacLeish, dramatized a nihilist hero as an image of man. This anti-hero, having lost faith in the divine order, is tormented by an anguish of fruitless living. He cannot make sense of the catastrophes of his world. Reality has become not only problematical but frightening. No wonder, the nihilistic hero no longer knows his place in society, the purpose of his destiny on earth, his responsibility to the rest of mankind. Sex, violence and sense of guilt characterize the vision of The Iceman Cometh, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, The Night of the Ignana and J.B. In them the contemporary playwrights seem to be brooding on the vague absurdist sense of nothingness as the basic fibre of existence.

The protagonists of Tennessee Williams are trapped and truncated borderline personalities suffering from alienation, impotency, nymphomania and sexual repressions. Following the complex motivations of Freudian and Jungian Psychology, Tennessee Williams dramatized the mental and physical diseases of contemporary men. They are weak, fragile, and unheroic heroes who merely wait to be physically or psychologically emasculated. They are emotionally displaced people who generally suffer from an inability to face reality of human existence. Rejecting the traditional heroism, they seek ecstasy in fantasy, alcohol or sexual promiscuity. The stress in the American drama after World War II is upon the dramatization of neurotic and irrational elements in human life.
as the traditional values have lost their meaning for this brand of anti-hero. Conceived in anti-traditional terms, Brick, Kilroy, Val, Chance, and Shannon are people who are not meant to win. Crippled or misfit, they are neurotics or fugitives — images of a humanity perverted by time and history. Their quest is a parody of the traditional heroes who struggled to bring order out of chaos. Williams's protagonists, instead, brood and contemplate over the human dilemma or become the victims of their profound guilt — a "sickness unto death."

For Achilles, Hamlet and Macbeth, love, truth, honesty and bravery are such attributes as prompt them to explore the mysteries of the universe; on the other hand, Blanche, Alma, Catherine and Maggie resort to lies, falsehood and treachery just to escape from their metaphysical guilt. With Tennessee Williams, an anti-hero is a symbol of man in flight from the consequences of his own transgression, an image of humanity afflicted with a constant threat of diminution.

Edward Albee dramatized the spirit of anxiety, despair and alienation of the 1960s. Conceived under the influence of Freudian and Neo-Freudian theories of self, Albee's protagonist is essentially a sick neurotic, a disintegrated self, too weak to confront existence. Reacting against mimetic, humanistic, psychological or aesthetic theories of drama, Albee's hero is trapped by necessity and engulfed by spiritual gloom. Orestes, Agamemnon, Oedipus, and Hamlet were men of fine sensibility, noble tastes and aesthetic magnificence; Albee's hero exults in crime, sexuality and savagery. Inspired
by Antonin Artaud who derided the theatre preoccupied with "character delineation" and psychology, Albee projected the erotic passions and violent actions of his protagonists. His people, whether we find them on a college campus, a prosperous suburb or a white hospital, stand naked within a horizon more barren than the empty landscape of Beckett's Godot. Whether a bum like in The Zoo Story (1960) or 'cultivated' people like those in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962) and in Delicate Balance (1966), all his characters are 'primitives'. They appear to have no past to sustain them or future to which they aspire. . . ."35 With Albee, the characters deflate into caricatures as in vaudeville, slapstick and fantasy.

Jack Richardson, Arthur Kopit and Jack Gelber further extended the scope of anti-heroism by dramatizing such junkies and narcotics as embrace isolation and live in an eternal vacuum. While George and Martha seek illusion as an antidote to impotency, the junkies seek dope to escape metaphysical loneliness, nausea and despair. Unlike the Greek hero who was committed to a certain noble cause, the junkies think that euphoria is the best source of happiness and spiritual bliss. The Greek heroism was creative, resurrective and glorifying, the junky heroism is destructive, vicious, corrupting and anti-social. Indeed, the "narcotic-hero" is one of the many interesting facets of the post-World War II anti-heroism.

The process of atrophy of the hero perhaps reached its
climax with the pervert protagonists in the contemporary drama. In his desperate need to end alienation and embrace harmony of human relationships, the modern protagonist often indulges in perversions like homosexuality, promiscuity and hetero-sexuality. The classical hero used to draw strength from his ability to act for himself alone and to end his alienation through his metaphysical confrontation with the supernatural powers; but since the struggle of the contemporary hero is no longer with the gods, it is internalized. Unmindful of victory or defeat, the anti-hero today has only one passionate, bitter concern "to reach finally another human being with love, and to do so in terms that society may censure." Love was a tragic passion in Oedipus, Hamlet and Romeo but the anti-hero today seeks sex sans sublimation - not tender love but violent gratification of the sexual desires. Tennessee Williams introduced Stanley Kowalski in A Street Car Named Desire (1947) who is the champion of the promiscuous, "the gaudy seed bearer." In Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (1955), the guilt resulting from Brick's homosexual intimacy with his friend Skipper leads him to disgust, nausea and cynicism and he turns "alcoholic" to escape from the dismal past that haunts him. In William Inge we have "Cowboy heroes" whose exotic virility and physical masculinity excite the sexual passions in women. Turk in Come Back, Little Sheba (1955), Hal in Picnic (1953), and Bo in Bus Stop (1955) are victims of perversity in one form or the other. These "studs" lack the noble aspiration and
idealism of the traditional heroes. They are crude in manners, sensual in actions, rash in thinking and uncouth in outlook. Indeed, perv/ert heroism is another form of neo-heroism evolved by the contemporary playwrights to articulate the absurd situation of post-World War era.

The Negro playwrights evolved yet another anti-heroic protagonist - the rebel. Projecting the contemporary black consciousness, this brand of heroism is diametrically antithetical to the traditional revolutionary heroism. The classical heroes too would revolt against the cosmic orders to bring about "something new", and in the process they made epical sacrifices. Their revolution was constructive and redemptive because they fought against some evil in the social order; the rebel hero, on the contrary, imbibes in him savage aggressiveness, militant violence, and fiery spirit of destruction. Though heroic according to the black aesthetic norms, the black hero aspires not for a change of values but for a total bloodshed, not for renovation but for annihilation. Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones, Jimmy Garret find this new rebel hero as the most suitable spokesman of the Negro America - the only Black Messiah left to fight against the forces of oppression, persecution, segregation and abject poverty. The rebel in this context was not a heroic idealist with noble aspirations born of the love of humanity; instead, the motivating forces were hatred, anger and violence. A symbol of the black aesthetics, he is as black in deeds as in looks; indeed he is
all out to wreck the traditional values of love, mercy, clemency and humility. Richard and Walker Vessels stand not for love, peace or human brotherhood but for racial hatred of the white culture.

In Greek or Shakespearean drama, one can easily distinguish between man and his environment, between the hero and his destiny; in the contemporary drama, these lines of distinction have become all-too-blurred because the post-World War II scientific and technological advancements have demolished "the vital centre" on which the old human values were nurtured. In the good old days, love, humility, mercy, sacrifice, kindness, faith were a source of moral and spiritual strength to the classical heroes; now the basic assumption is that there is no God, no purpose, no higher world beyond. No wonder, the new hero, anti-heroic in the traditional sense, is more passive than active; his heroism, if there is any, is a heroism of anguish, of metaphysical despair and loneliness. The problem of the contemporary neo-hero is essentially one of identity as all the efforts and assumptions are directed in quest of such identity. The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that the anti-hero is too weak and fragile to carry out the quest seriously. Instead, the course he/she follows is an ironic parody of the quest of the great epic heroes. Blanche resorts to sexual promiscuity, Shannon to "epic fornications," Brick to "alcoholism," George to "illusion mongering," Clay and Vessels
to "merciless annihilation". In short the gradual atrophy of the hero has brought the cycle to a stage where hero is exactly the antithesis of what he was originally supposed to be. From mythological to epical, tragic, comic, romantic, neo-classical, bourgeois, Freudian, Marxist, Sartrean, absurd - it has been a process of constant deflation. Thus in post-World War II era, we are left with lowly and lonely salesmen, neurotics and heretics, trapped and truncated women, homosexual perverts, and anarchical rebels.
Chapter I

Notes


5 Ibid., p.11.

6 "The Philosophy of Fine Art," The Hero in Literature, p.199.


11 Ibid., p.81.


17 Escape from Freedom (New York: Rinehart, 1941), pp.245-46.
22 Raymond Giraud, "The Unheroic Hero," Hero In Literature, p.229.
25 Ibid., p.87.

