ABSTRACT

In the post-modern context, the term ‘identity’ is viewed as a highly complex psychological and social phenomenon. All human beings experience a loss/threat to their identity at one point of their lifetime or the other. Modern man is under constant stress and feels that his identity is highly susceptible in this materialistic world. The threat or loss of identity arises out of various factors. American drama stands as a unique genre marked by its strong associations with cultural phenomena like nostalgia, environmentalism, dichotomy and tension in the American soul. This research work divided into five chapters is aimed at analyzing the theme of ‘quest for identity’ in select plays of two contemporaneous playwrights Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill.

Chapter one ‘Introduction’ presents a broad overview of American drama in its historical context. It includes a list of playwrights and theatre groups who have contributed to its development. This chapter also traces the emergence of experimental plays that deal with expressionism and realism. It explicates the position of the two acclaimed playwrights Miller and O’Neill and their contributions to American Drama. The chapter illuminates the broad categorization of their works and their distinct artistic merits. Along with the synoptic summaries of their major works that deal with the theme of identity quest, a vast review of related literature for both the playwrights are presented in this chapter. The analytical tools used to carry out the thematic study are also included in this chapter.

Chapter two ‘Erasure of Identity’ analyses all the major works of Miller. The study is confined to an in-depth study of his select plays which deal with theme of identity quest. Five of his full-length plays All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The
Crucible, A View from the Bridge and After the Fall are analyzed using both thematic and stylistic tools. The titles of plays, stage directions, language, imagery, characterization, tragic flaws of characters, role of tragic irony, major conflicts and various factors that cause the identity crisis are analyzed in detail.

The third chapter ‘Lurking Identity’ evaluates the early plays of O’Neill’s which can be broadly divided as ‘early sea plays’, ‘later sea plays’ and the ‘transitional period’. In most of these plays, ‘sea’ appears as a predominant archetypal symbol which influences the lives of its characters. It is very obvious in his full length plays like Anna Christie, Beyond the Horizon, Bound East for Cardiff and a short play The Moon of Caribees. His later sea plays like Where the Cross is Made, Ile and The Rope depict the corruptive influence of materialism and obsession for wealth. The plays that fall under the transitional period include The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, All God’s Chillu’n Got Wings and Long Day’s Journey into Night.

The fourth chapter ‘Suffocating Identity’ is focused on analyzing the later plays of O’Neill which include New England Plays such as Diff’rent, Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra, More Stately Mansions, A Moon for the Misbegotten, The Iceman Cometh and A Touch of the Poet. This chapter reveals the artistic maturity of O’Neill’s plays through his treatment of complex issues.

Chapter five ‘Conclusion’ sums up the discussions in the previous chapters. It also analyses the various similarities and distinctions between Miller and O’Neill in explicating the theme of ‘identity quest’ in their select plays. It further illustrates the need and contemporary relevance of the study in the national as well as in the global contexts. The chapter ends with suggestions, providing scope for further study.