CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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THE AMERICAN DRAMA AND ARTHUR MILLER

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American drama, in the earliest stages, is a most neglected part of the study of American literature. Drama developed inadequately and late in America. "The first efforts at dramatic literature in this country were wild."1 It was not strange that good native drama before 1800 was rare. In retrospect, a study of the American theatrical history, however, presents a fascinating and satisfying panorama. The desire to write, to act and to see plays was strong enough in the seventeenth century. The plays before the turn of the seventeenth century reveal distinctly the immature beginnings of American drama. The theatre in America in fact was based on the model of the English stage. One of the earliest plays performed and perhaps the first one in English was Ye Bare Ye Cubb (1665) by William Darby. The first play printed in America was Androborus (1714) by Robert Hunter. Thomas Godfrey's The Prince of Parthia (1752) was the first play written by an American and performed in America by professional actors. Although weak in terms of craftsmanship a good number of plays show enough passion, wit and ingenuity to make them quite readable.

The course of development in American drama began around 1920. The 20s were the golden period of American drama because it was during these years that the American playwrights beginning anxious to assert their national identity in the theatrical world entered the arena of world drama. In fact, it constituted a real flowering of American drama for the first time in American history. The theatre nurtured a realistic trend marking a break with the preceding genteel, moralistic tradition. Breaking away from the traditions of the past, the American drama and the theatre took a new turn, and began to foster independent theatre companies and outstanding dramatists.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century became the golden age of American acting too. Modern American drama developed with the Little Theatre Movement in America. The Washington Square Players began as an amateur group in 1915. Then there appeared the Provincetown Theatre, which later came to be known as the Theatre Guild. In fact, with the appearance of the Provincetown Players and Eugene O'Neill, American theatre and drama achieved a new status. It was in the 1920s that a vigorous experimentation began in American drama. When the twentieth century began the American theatre was popular and prolific. The American playwrights led by O'Neill gained a world stature. Acting gained in subtlety and conviction through the

influence of psychological naturalism.\textsuperscript{4}

The 1920s were a period of great prosperity in the theatre. The sense of freedom and individual awareness which pervaded the decade became a distinctive feature of drama. There was an increased emphasis on the dramatic activity in universities and communities. The playwrights were accorded a high status by literary people and critics. Consequently, a new group of dramatists -- Sidney Howard, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, Paul Green -- appeared on the scene introducing a refreshing variety of themes and forms in their plays. The experimentation in form (particularly expressionism), the range of ideas, and the quality of the plays distinguished the twenties from the past of American drama.

The first and the most outstanding playwright of the twentieth century was Eugene O’Neill. With his coming the American drama began its long and distinct voyage. Through the technique of “expressionism”, he successfully dramatized the suffering man’s search for identity.\textsuperscript{5} His famous plays -- \textit{The Hairy Ape}, \textit{The Emperor Jones}, \textit{The Great God Brown}, \textit{Strange Interlude}, and \textit{Mourning Becomes Electra} -- are all valuable contributions to modern American drama.

\textsuperscript{4} Wilson, \textit{Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre}, op. cit., pp. 505-96
\textsuperscript{5} A.D. Chekhovsky, \textit{The Face of Illusion in American Drama}, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1979, p. 11.
The nineteen thirties were a vital and moving period in the history of American drama and theatre. In this period, drama achieved a new seriousness and importance as a forum for social commentary and protest. The harsh reality of the Great Depression and the ominous shadow of fascism in Europe sobered the best of our playwrights. The development of American drama continued in the nineteen thirties with the plays of Behrman, Sherwood, Elmer Rice and Clifford Odets. It was a period of growth and turmoil in theatrical activity. At the close of the decade the World War II began, and the playwrights and the theatre had to deal with a different world and a new situation.

The most significant aspect of American drama between the first and the second World Wars was the concern of the dramatist for spiritual and universal ideals. While social consciousness was infused into most of the plays the top playwrights such as O'Neill, Anderson, Barry and others took much interest in the spiritual side of life and the questioning of man's identity and his values. American drama, from its early phase of imitation of ancient models through the later phase of its growth into a profession and an art, had finally reached an unenviable position and importance in world drama.

By the end of the nineteen thirties, American drama had acquired a distinctive position in world drama. At the mid-twentieth century, it became a recognized force. American drama of the forties was deeply influenced by the war and its results. During this period American plays largely reflected the agony and anger of people. The major distinguishing feature was a psychological interest in man’s emotional reaction to war. American drama, particularly in the nineteen fifties, concentrated on private issues of individuals instead of public problems. It was rather psychological than social in spirit. The dramatic quality of the earlier playwrights could be seen to continue in the later plays of O’Neill as well as in the works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Miller and Williams, however, captured the attention of international audiences and critics. It is fairly clear that the force of American drama in world theatre could be observed in the plays of O’Neill, Miller and Williams.

The World War II stimulated the dramatists to a large extent. Besides, the writing of challenging dramatic criticism marked an advance in the history of American drama. In the meantime, the production of scholarly journals — Tulane Drama Review, Modern Drama, Drama Survey — and the interest of University presses in publishing scholarly research works on American drama had largely contributed to the growth of American plays and criticism.

The Theatre of the Absurd in America is a post-war phenomenon in which the dramatists, in despair and anxiety, show their sense of the human condition in a world of uncertainties. Abandoning conceptual thinking and logical language, the absurd dramatist deals in paradoxes, illogical behaviour and absurd situations, while attempting to create meaningful insights into the human condition or the identity of the individual. Jack Gelber, Edward Albee and Jack Richardson are the three major absurd playwrights in American drama. This is the way in which American drama originated and developed.

The American theatre has had its dull and active periods, sometimes declining and sometimes emerging again in new shapes and varieties, yet it has not failed to show its phenomenal tenacity and vitality. The forces and conflicts, which are reflected in early American drama, are the forces, the issues, and the conflicts which shaped American identity as such and which gives the country its present-day identity. And although they have taken new forms, these forces have not yet disappeared, and those conflicts have not yet been resolved. The ideals and the concepts of today's America are foreshadowed in the Americanism of yesterday's American drama. It is obvious that American drama has become a force in world drama, and its promise remains rich for a more dominant role in the future.

Arthur Miller, a living American playwright, is one of the major exponents of psychological realism in America. He has undoubtedly been regarded as a prominent dramatist among the great figures of modern American drama. As a modern playwright, Miller has earned international reputation in the annals of world drama. He is a significant modern American dramatist, reflecting the ordinary man’s isolation in this competition — ridden and over-ambitious world of rat-racers whose only motto is success. The dramatist was born of a Jewish (German) couple in Manhattan on October 17, 1915. His parents, Isadore and Augusta Miller, were of a conventional type giving birth to three children of whom Arthur Miller was the second. His father was a manufacturer of women’s clothing. With the failure of the manufacturing business in 1928 during the early stages of the Depression, the Millers moved to Harlem where they lived from Miller’s sixth to fourteenth year. Then they went to Brooklyn in 1932. After his graduation from the University of Michigan in 1938, Miller worked with the Federal Theatre Project for sometime before becoming a radio

scriptwriter for the Columbia Broadcasting System. The University of Michigan where he studied drama under Professor Kenneth Rowe and won the Avery Hopwood Award for his first play, was indeed, a major formative influence on him. As Miller wrote:

The place was full of speeches, meetings and leaflets. It was jumping with issues... It was, in short, the testing ground for all my prejudices, my beliefs and my ignorance, and it helped to lay out the boundaries of my life. 10

By mid-1940 Arthur Miller worked in several places and thus earned his livelihood as a truck-driver, tanker sea-man, factory labourer, and by writing of over thirty radio plays. Influenced by Ibsen and O'Neill as well as Dostoievsky in particular Miller is often called the forerunner of social drama today. Arthur Miller discovered himself deeply affected by the Great Depression of the nineteen thirties. His world-view was formed under the impact of the Depression catastrophe which had indeed crushed the very identities of individuals and families. The Depression philosophy constantly affected his thinking and influenced his dramatic vision. Its echoing ambiguities could be located in Miller's dramatic world spanning over three decades and continuing till the time he wrote The American Clock (1980). The Depression experience also touched his mind and played a significant role in shaping his conception of social drama. He had a tendency to

10. Arthur Miller, "University of Michigan," Holiday, XIV (December, 1953), pp. 70, 143.
comprehend and dramatise the horrors and absurdities of the Depression into an image of human suffering and the individual’s obsessive preoccupation with the thought of preserving his name, honour and dignity in the sweeping disintegration of social and moral values following the Depression impact.

If the Depression proved to be a turning point in Miller’s life, the theatre born out of the Depression experience left its permanent mark on his inner development. Miller devoted his writing talents to various patriotic efforts and at this time, his first play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) was produced. It was his observation of civilian life that gave him material for his first successful play *All My Sons*. In fact, the dramatist’s popular success came with *All My Sons* (1947), a family drama in the style of Ibsen, for which he was given the New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award. His next play *Death of a Salesman* (1949), directed by Elia Kazan, also received this award as well as Pulitzer Prize. It is a modern tragedy in which the main character is preoccupied with maintaining an illusion of success in business and society. *The Crucible* (1953), based on the witch trials of the seventeenth century, was at the same time an attack on McCarthy’s ‘Witch-hunt’ against Communism and the play got the Antoinette Perry Award. *A View from the Bridge* (1955) is a social drama, set among longshoremen and illegal Sicilian immigrants. His other play *A Memory of Two Mondays* was also published in the same year. It was, indeed, *The Death of a Salesman*
that had brought Miller to the level of a renowned dramatist in the world. Miller’s thematic emphasis on “questions of right and wrong” and his attempt to locate “the moral dilemma” in realistic situations, suggest his theoretical inclination to merge objective and subjective forces. It extends from All My Sons to Death of a Salesman and continues, with only minor modifications, into The Crucible and A View from the Bridge.\textsuperscript{11} All these plays of his early career contribute to Miller’s tragic view of life. They have something common in substance and structure. These plays have for their main focus the family in crisis trapped in moments of stress and conflict resulting from past or present actions that threaten to destroy its members individually or collectively. After the production of Death of a Salesman, a masterpiece of his dramatic art in 1949, Miller was considered by many as one of the world’s most important living dramatists.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{After the Fall} (1964), the opening production of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center, is Arthur Miller’s first play in nine years since he wrote \textit{A View from the Bridge} (1955). It offers us a vantage point in his career as a playwright. It is a bridge from which we may


look backward to his starting point. His other later plays are: *Incident At Vichy* (a one-Act play, 1964), *The Price* (1968), *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972) and his most recent play, *The American Clock* (1980). Miller also showed his literary talent in a novel, *Focus* (1945), a reportage, *Situation Normal* (1944), and a screen-play, *The Misfits* (1961). Besides, his essays and articles represent his theoretical analysis of the nature and possibilities of modern drama. Most of these essays were published in *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, edited by Robert A. Martin. Of all his plays, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A View from the Bridge*, *After the Fall*, *The Price*, and *The American Clock*, have been considered as Miller’s major family dramas.

While discussing Arthur Miller as a modern American playwright, one cannot overlook the dramatic world of O’Neill, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets and Tennessee Williams. At least one can find out certain similarities and differences in their dramatic vision. It is no doubt a fact that O’Neill stands as a point of reference and a touchstone for American drama. He is followed by a number of prominent playwrights like Rice, Odets, Miller and Williams. They use more or less similar dramatic structure and devices in their plays with some minor variations. The most common dramatic tools frequently used by these playwrights are symbolism, expressionism, realism, narrative
technique, rhetorical device, flash-back, etc. Besides, mysticism is yet another important feature which is discernible in most of their plays.

One can see that O'Neill's tragedies dramatise the conflicts of inner emotion rather than of external action. Like Miller he brings in the common man as his hero. Yank, a stocker, in The Hairy Ape is such an example. He is a victim of his society. He is a frustrated and tormented soul. Both O'Neill and Miller make a strong protest against human exploitation. Their heroes always claim a rightful place in their society. For they are very much aware of their social image wherein lies their identity. We can also see that the story of Willy Loman in Miller's Death of a Salesman follows the literary tradition of O'Neill, and more particularly Mr. Zero of Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine. Like Willy Mr. Zero is also a victim of a harsh economic system and his mechanical life is the cause of his death.

For O'Neill his picture of life is a life without foundation, without creeds or beliefs, struggling for a symbol of security. Elmer Rice's view of life is essentially Darwinian. But the revolutionary process in his plays is a cosmic waste and it moves from nothing to nothing. On the other hand, Miller's approach to life is both highly systematic and artistic. It thus leads to revealing and challenging conclusions.
American playwrights continue to explore the variety and richness of the myth of Eden. They always seek relationships in it with contemporary situations and dilemmas in different ways. As for instance, Rice takes his protagonist to the Edenic setting just to emphasize the magnitude of the futility of existence and the utter hostility of the controlling universe. In case of Miller, he uses the image of Eden and its archetypes to re-examine the relationship between authority and obedience, innocence and sin, forgiveness and love. In fact, he tries to project his view of human condition through readjustment and reinterpretation of the original situation of the myth. We can also mark a distinctive feature in Clifford Odets. The characters in his plays are engaged in a quest for paradise which is identical in his early plays with economic success. His plays reflect the hopelessness of the dreams of the American middle-class. However, in Miller this quest for paradise becomes a search for identity. It ultimately results in the recognition that the dream of perfection is hopeless. Robert Warnock remarks:

Both Miller and Odets have excelled in grim studies of middle-class people in which the struggle for economic security has compromised their personal integrity and led them to humiliation and defeat. We find criticism of the American economic system in their plays. Yet as artists Odets and Miller are far apart.  

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Meanwhile, Tennessee William’s plays also indicate the persistent presence of the ‘quest’ theme in American drama. Yet it is interesting to note that in his plays, the quest becomes romantic and escapist. We also see that his characters are placed in a recognisable social framework. He is more interested in portraying the effects of family and social environment on the individual. One can see him as the observer of frustrated lives. His plays have both social and political meanings. Basically sexual frustrations and maladjustments are his subject matter. His main characters are therefore mostly women. As for instance, in A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche Dubois is presented as a character of some dignity who strives for rising above her circumstances. Her tragedy is that she is unable to integrate the sex drive and to reconcile the physical hunger with tender and spiritual yearnings. She cannot find her security by other means than her sexual drive. She has been betrayed and seduced several times in her life. This is in fact the disintegration of a personality by the evil forces of society. One of the distinguishing features of Miller and Williams is that Miller’s conception of tragedy is based on problems of personal and social morality. But for Williams his main interest is the tragedy of the individual in society. As such, Miller’s plays move out from the individual to society as a whole, whereas William’s plays move in from society to the individual. Another striking feature between these two playwrights is that Miller’s plays are mostly concerned with men. His
characters like Joe Keller, Willy Loman, John Proctor, Eddie Carbone, Quentin are all male protagonists. But William's main characters are mostly women.

The economic disruption of the Depression years have produced a strong social consciousness in these playwrights. It drives them to examine the causes of society's evils and the role of the individual in promoting such evils. As a matter of fact, the American "depression" has both psychological and economic troubles. Consequently, it has weakened confidence in all American traditional systems - the business system, the family system, the political system and the great American dream. We see that the socio-political environment forms the background of the plays of Odets, Williams and Miller in particular. Their protagonists are trapped in their social surrounding. Some of the most popular plays of this period have dramatised the collapse of the American dream of money-success. One can easily mark that the plays --*Awake and Sing* (Odets), *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams) and *Death of a Salesman* (Miller) -- are all condemnations of the American impulses of ambition and success. Above all, modern American playwrights like O'Neill, Miller and Williams have given strong emphasis on the exploration of faith that gives meaning to man's existence. In this process, their dramatic art reflects the spiritual dilemmas, inward battles and mental conflicts of the torn and withered personalities. And, besides, the individuals in their dramas are all the
time struggling to realise their individual identities to impart a meaning to their human existence.

There is considerable variety in Miller's dramatic art. However, if we view it as a whole, we can easily discern its essential unity. All ideas in his plays are parts of one idea. But it is constantly renewed and enriched. In him the theme of one play becomes the seed of another. Each new work has a link to others. The problem of identity is no doubt a paramount theme that recurs in Miller's plays. The next chapter focuses on the statement of the problem. It also highlights Miller's views on identity and the critic's overview on the subject as well.