CHAPTER - II

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Arthur Miller is, undoubtedly, a renowned modern American playwright whose plays have been widely discussed and studied by many scholars. Along with the plays of Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams, Miller’s plays have been responsible in large part for extending the significance of American drama beyond the horizons of its national origins, and also for providing a standard of dramatic achievement for contemporary playwrights everywhere. In fact, during the last three decades, Miller has been studied from different perspectives — as a moralist, as a playwright of ideas, and as a social dramatist.

As a self-acknowledged playwright of social plays, Miller defines social drama as “the drama of the whole man.” His strength as a playwright lies in his ability to give dramatic life to the fundamental assumptions concerning the American experience, its values and inflated sense of self-importance, through an imaginative and coherent vision of its immense potential for the individual life and consciousness.¹ As a socially responsible artist Miller tries to assign

values in order to give meaning to life. He is modern as he deals with
the psychological aspects of modern issues such as defeat, despair,
frustration, neuroses, obsessive fixations, perversions of psyche, etc.
For Miller, as for the Greeks, art is a social document and not a private
confession or a purely aesthetic activity. He enlarges the concept of
social drama by focusing on the psychological and social needs and
obligations of the individual which compel him to identify himself and
establish his identity.

Arthur Miller is a serious and consistent critic of modern
American society and he shows a remarkable social consciousness in
his plays. His renown as a dramatist is mainly due to the fact that he
deals with the most dominant and perplexing questions of his day.
Arthur Miller has always maintained that serious drama should concern
itself with important issues that are intimately connected with both man
and society. In his article, "The Shadows of the Gods", the dramatist
clearly brings out his own ideas on man and his society. He observes, "I
hope I have made one thing clear to this point — and it is that society is
inside of man and man is inside his society, and you cannot even create
a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand
his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to
prevent him from being what he is not. The fish is in the water and
the water is in the fish". All his plays deal with themes connected with man in his society and their inter-relationship. More than other modern American dramatists Miller has asked meaningful questions about the relationship of man to his society, his family, and his own fulfilment. He seizes the conflicts of his society to interpret them in the light of human values. His theatre is essentially a critique of the values and prejudices of mid-century American society, of the dilemmas and anxieties that divide the community into many sections and sub-sections holding diverse views on subjects of common concern.

My object in this dissertation is to argue that Miller's plays also constitute an attempt to define the dignity of man in terms of his social ambitions and commitments and also in terms of his sense of guilt and innocence. The underlying struggle in his plays is that of the individual attempting to achieve a place of honour in his own society. His plays are, therefore, a continual search for an inviolable truth about human character and behaviour, and a sense of identity. Obviously, the question of identity figures in almost all of his plays and is treated and worked out in dramatic terms in different ways.

Miller observes that a drama ought not to be looked merely at first and foremost from literary perspectives because it uses words, verbal rhythm and poetic image. The prime business of a play is to arouse the passions of its audience so that it may open new relationships between a man and men, and between men and Man.\(^3\) According to Miller, the end of drama is the creation of a higher consciousness and not merely "a subjective attack upon the audience's nerves and feelings" (C.P., p.21). He views that the conception and manipulation of time in a play has a decisive influence upon style. Another issue which is worth considering is the so-called tragic victory. It is a question closely related to the consciousness of the hero. Miller says that the need to offer greater proofs of humanity of man can make that victory more real.\(^4\) His conception of the tragic flaw is that there is need for a severe limitation of self-awareness in any character. He himself declares that an idea is very important to him as a dramatist.

While analysing Miller's plays one cannot ignore the fact that his characters are shaped by the values of the society in which they live. In his plays the mental make-up of the protagonists is as responsible as the

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4. C.P., p. 53.
society for their destruction. Miller tries to portray the influence of society in the shaping of the ideals and the attitudes of individuals. He puts blame on society as well as the conduct of the characters for being equally responsible for their calamities. It is discernible in his plays that man’s difficulty in keeping his sense of personal dignity is depicted as being partly due to increasing domination of society and partly because of the limitations of the individual.

Miller’s protagonists are no great heroes. They are ordinary human beings but they distinguish themselves by their untiring and continuous struggle to preserve their dignity and honour, two distinguished features of identity, in a hostile and unscrupulous world. The emphasis in Miller’s plays invariably falls on human dignity. He is essentially concerned with man’s psychological and social need to preserve his stature and dignity. Most of Miller’s plays focus on man’s relation to his family and to society, his reason for existence and his personal significance. He considers the common man as an apt subject for tragedy in the highest sense. An analysis of Miller’s plays from the thematic point of view brings certain features to our attention. For instance, his genuine faith in the unbreakable connection between man and his society remains constant throughout his career as a playwright. By amalgamating the significant theme of the dignity of the individual with his social themes and by linking the hero’s death to his concept of
dignity and commitment, Miller’s social plays turn into powerful tragedies depicting the crises of the identity of their protagonists.

His central characters are involved in a journey of discovery of their identity in the modern world which they find to be devoid of significance and values. Even though they meet their doom they frequently display an awareness that makes the actions of their lives worthwhile. This awareness is of their own frailty and the imperfection of the world around them. His heroes always crave for their self-awareness, their own identity which they seek to assert. As a dramatist Miller concentrates on a single subject — the struggle of the individual attempting to secure his “rightful” position in his society and his family. His main characters are always motivated by an obsession to justify themselves, and they fix their identities through radical acts of ego-assertion. As a result their fanatical self-assertion has the unavoidable consequence of pitting them into violent opposition against their society and that is the essence of the action of Miller’s dramas.

The central conflict in Miller’s plays grows out of a crisis of identity. Each of the protagonists is suddenly confronted with a situation which he is incapable of facing and which eventually puts his “name” or dignity in jeopardy. In the ensuing struggle it becomes clear that the hero is bewildered and desperate because of having lost his
name which implies the loss of his prestige, his social image and, in fact, his previous identity in the world he lives in and to which he belongs. That means that once his name is damaged or sullied he has no sense of belongingness to his society and the world. Such a loss he feels will be fatal for him. So he becomes desperate and therefore carries out his do-or-die struggle to its conclusion to recover that lost identity. In this case, he fails to answer the question, "who am I?" His inability to define it produces his calamity and his ultimate downfall. In his plays, Miller presents this crisis of identity as a conflict between the uncomprehending self and a solid social or economic structure -- the family, the community, the system. In Miller's view, the drama emerges when the individual breaks his connection with society. He sees the need for such a connection as absolute, and the subsequent failure to achieve or maintain it is bound to result in a catastrophe.

Miller's protagonists can be viewed as those who struggle against a "seemingly stable cosmos" to secure their sense of personal dignity and identity. His heroes are not merely victims of their society. They have their concept of dignity and would rather die for their "name" which in their scheme of things is synonymous with dignity. The dignity of the self is so important to the Miller hero that he is even prepared to die for it. Though varying in degree the protagonists of Miller's plays go through internal struggle before they arrive at a final decision. They are brave souls who die for their own convictions and beliefs. Obviously,
Miller's theme of his plays is the ceaseless struggle of the protagonist to maintain his individual values -- his self-dignity and identity in particular -- in the face of immense social pressures.

Miller's position as one of America's major dramatists is secure. He has seen the problems and questions of his day as living issues. His most successful characters are not merely aspects of the way of life but individuals who are ends in themselves. Hence his approach to life is both highly systematic and artistic and leads to revealing and challenging conclusions. The main conflict in Miller's plays is always between the individual and the society. A distinctive feature of his plays is that their human conflicts are fought out against the background of the great social issues of his day. Yet instead of growing as a social playwright, he has turned to dwell increasingly on the individual "predicament" which only superficially appears to be also a social question. Each of his early plays is a judgement of a man's failure to maintain a viable connection with his surrounding world because he does not know himself. According to Bernard F. Dukore, Miller writes not of mythological figures but of his own countrymen. His plays connect society not only to the individual but also to the family -- that is, the larger society to the smaller social unit. Dennis Welland, in his


first full-length study of Miller's plays, observes:

Miller's central theme has always been integrity - the integrity of the individual towards himself and towards his fellow human beings - but the cost of the integrity for most of his characters has been life itself.8

Miller's conception of tragedy is nearer to that of the Greeks and Ibsen. It is based on the problems of personal and social morality in which choices are wrongly made. His tragic view as expressed in his plays has a definitive and pervasive tone of criticism of contemporary American society.9 In fact, he combines some of the elements of traditional tragedy with those of the modern one so well that it gives him a unique place among the twentieth century tragic playwrights. For instance, his heroes, unlike the traditional tragic heroes, are not great people but common people in society. However, it may be observed that in matters of passions like love and jealousy they are not different from them. Miller makes the protagonist a worthier opposite to the forces he struggles against. By so doing he attempts to give his common protagonist a tragic stature, and the result is a strengthening and an intensifying of the tragic quality of his plays.10 On his genuine

dramatic talent, as Harold Clurman observes, "his talent is for a kind of humanistic jurisprudence".\textsuperscript{11}

Miller's lifework — a rare combination of his philosophy, actions, and writings — is based on an elemental concept of humanity. Thus, "the laws that work in Miller's plays originated when the first person recognised his own individuality in relation to other's. Some might call it a philosophy of Reaction; but when applied to Miller, it is one of Responsibility."\textsuperscript{12} Miller considers the various techniques of drama as tools. In his view, the aim of drama is revelation of life and human motives. Hence, he is not rigid about the use of techniques in drama. He adopts three major techniques - realistic, expressionistic and rhetorical - in his plays. It is Miller's chief merit as an artist that the evidence he presents in his plays seems, on the whole, more balanced than that of some of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{13}

Arthur Miller's plays are always distinctive in their characterisations, tone and ideas. Inevitably his dramas are intellectual, moral and social. The main focus is on an individual's coming to terms

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Harold Clurman, "Attention", \textit{New Republic}, CXX (February 28, 1949), p. 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} June Schlueer and James K. Flanagan, \textit{Arthur Miller}, New York, The Ungar Publishing Co., 1987, p. 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Neil Carlson, \textit{Arthur Miller}, New York, Grove Press, 1982, p. 135.
\end{itemize}
with his past, his recognition of free will, and his assumption of responsibility for the mistakes in his life. In the best of his plays which record this struggle, Miller’s protagonist is male but the woman, usually his wife, is always beside him to influence his developing psyche.

Miller’s concern for dramatic theory, his effective combination of the realistic and expressionistic elements in his plays, and his basic interest in the dignity of man, link him with the best traditions of American drama in the early twentieth century. Although his plays are written in prose he uses such poetic devices as symbolism. The use of the broken apple tree in All My Sons, the automobile in Death of a Salesman, the broken tower in After the Fall, the old furniture in The Price, are a few outstanding examples of the use of symbols in his plays. He also uses expressionistic technique in Death of a Salesman and After the Fall where he brings the past into the present through the protagonist’s memory or dream sequences and reality. The whole action of these plays centres around Willy Loman’s and Quentin’s memory sequences. Miller also uses two types of narrative technique -- one in the traditional method and the other is the technique of interior monologue. In the first kind the story develops through dialogue as it is evident in All My Sons, The Crucible and The Price. In the later technique, the story of the play unfolds itself through a process of loud thinking on the part of the protagonist as in Death of a Salesman and After the Fall.
As a matter of fact, the central theme of his plays is the problem of relating one's deeds to one's conception of oneself. In the plays, his main characters desperately cry to reaffirm their lost identities. This desperate search for identity raises Miller's heroes to the stature of classical tragic heroes. The only difference is that his heroes are "Common men" or average men. Yet they have the dignity of tragic heroes because of their strong passion to assert their individuality. Indeed the desire for and their ultimate failure to assert their individuality is a universal theme and the problem of identity as such is paramount in modern life.

Arthur Miller has occupied a central place in the American theatre for more than three decades, ever since his first play *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) were successfully staged. Since that time new plays by Miller have appeared at regular intervals. More than other modern American dramatists, Miller has asked meaningful questions about the relationship of man to his society, his family and his own fulfilment. Most of his characters are undistinguished citizens who do not understand themselves or the overwhelming social forces that destroy them. Miller seizes the conflicts of his society so as to interpret them in the light of human values. The heroes of his drama are creatures afflicted by dilemma and confusion. The struggles and fumblings of these men, little men as they are, their desperate and vague
search for their identity acquire a tragic dimension. Their unfulfilled dreams and futile struggle constitute the substance of the tragic material. Miller's protagonists are certainly ordinary men but each of them displays a degree of heroism, and each of them is intent on asserting, gaining and maintaining his own identity - his 'name'. In his 'name' lies his stature as a human being, for it involves a sense of self which is often at odds with an antagonistic society.

The problem of identity is indeed a paramount theme that recurs in Miller's plays. Yet he takes up the problem at different levels -- personal, social and national -- respectively. It may be observed that the principal characters in Miller's plays always give more emphasis on their self - dignity and identity than their social consciousness. Each of the individuals betrays the code of the community or society in which he exists, and even acts against the common interest of his society. Finally, as is generally seen, he comes to grief when he, consciously or unconsciously, overlooks the limited common interest of that society. The departure from that inevitably makes the individual face the problem of his own self-image and dignity, that is, his own identity.

In order to assess Miller's development as a playwright and examine the significance of the problem of identity as a central theme, his major plays may be grouped as 'Early Plays (1947-1955)' and 'Later Plays (1964-1980)'. The present study focuses on examining and
analysing the problem of identity which recurrently figures as a major issue in the plays — *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), *Incident At Vichy* (1964), *The Price* (1968) and *The American Clock* (1980). It is Miller’s belief that the problem of identity proves to be a matter of serious concern to all sensitive and thinking individuals in society. Thus, it is my main purpose in this study to analyse the dimensions of the problem of identity as it afflicts the members of the given society in the plays and as Miller explores the problem in each of these plays. I shall also try to demonstrate mainly by character and thematic analysis that the protagonists display a rare sensitivity to the problem of maintaining their identity by adhering to the larger values and norms of the society for they feel that by upholding such values and norms there is hope for survival of the human race. As such they feel that they carry a special responsibility on their shoulders to confront with this problem. Besides, an attempt is intended to be made to investigate how the playwright in these plays tries to put emphasis on the exploration of faith to give meaning to man’s existence, and how he focuses on the spiritual dilemmas, inward battles and mental conflicts of the torn and withered personalities.

Having discussed in brief the general features about the American drama and Miller’s contribution to it, I would now proceed to analyse
and assess each one of his early plays beginning from *All My Sons* to his last play *The American Clock*. The main focus in the study is on the problem of identity as a paramount theme. What is said in these preliminary chapters would hold good within certain limits about the individual plays that I propose to discuss in the chapters that follow.