

CHAPTER-VI

THE CONFLICT IN THE PRICE

I. ABOUT THE PLAY :

Arthur Miller's The Price is a conventional piece like Incident at Vichy in which there is little physical action. The at first sight appears to be a conglomeration of Miller's earlier plays particularly All My Sons and After The Fall. In fact the same themes of love and betrayal, success and survival have been dealt with in this play. It shows "that Miller is consistently concerned with the treatment of human values like love and loyalty and corresponding socio-economic pressures which compel a man to pursue success at the lost of these values in a bid to survive in the rat-race,"¹ observes Santosh Bhatia.

In The Price Miller takes certain questions which lie at the bottom of the present day social dilemma. The plot is straight and flat. The conflict between the two brothers, lying at the centre of the play, is the soul of the tragedy. The Price is a domestic play but the main force of the tragedy is derived from the underlying tension between individual freedom and socio-economic pressures. The economy of characters is wonderful, for there are only four characters.

'Money' is certainly the most important metaphor in the play. The title The Price is not only the price of the old furniture to be sold, but also it is the price of one's career, one's happiness, and above all, one's integrity, the recurring theme in Miller's plays. To quote Morris Freedman : "Repeated variations are rung on the concept of price. What price does one pay for a happy marriage ? For a successful career ? To fulfil ambition ? For breaking off family ties ? For fill all sacrifice ? ... Nothing is bought, nothing is bargained for, nothing is received without an appropriate payment."² Hereby 'appropriate payment' Freedman means everything that we suffer to establish a stable life. The payment is not in terms of money but it is sacrifice that matters much.

Love and money do not seem to live together. These are exclusive concepts. Both of these factors are necessary for a successful life. But once the balance is disturbed, or if there is utterly absence of one of them happiness says good-bye to life.

In The Price, what Miller challenges is the whole idea of moral debt based on "price". Whenever people try to relate to each other in terms of the price to be paid, they will always get less than they bargained for; the price is never enough. Both Walter and Victor have been wrong. In

life there can be no question of success or failure or "I have more than you". This is the significance of Gregory Soloman, the furniture dealer. Soloman, the wise man, is one of Miller's greatest theatrical creations. He is Miller's first major comic figure. He represents an expanded view of life that incorporates all of the most significant ideas and attitudes that the playwright has been working with throughout his career. For him, we can never deal with life's real issues in terms of 'price'. He appears from the bedroom, where he is asked to remain to provide others privacy, at very proper times with a well calculated remarks. His one single remark, for example : "Time you know is a terrible thing" (p.29), emphasises the tragic awareness that lies behind the brothers' powerlessness to alter the role each has played for more than half of his life. Soloman stands for 'endurance rather than death' principle. Salvation for Miller's tragic heroes lies in self-knowledge rather than death. So Soloman's remark is the gist of Miller's philosophy.

II. SUMMARY :

The two brothers Victor and Walter have come to their old house to sell the old furniture. Soloman is a furniture dealer. Victor and Walter have been estranged for sixteen years. Victor is tormented by the prospect of his impending retirement. Walter has apparently been a success in the rat

race, has also paid a heavy price for his success by way of a divorce and a nervous breakdown. He owned three nursing homes but he has pulled himself out of the market and fifty percent of his time is now spent in city hospitals.

Both the brothers are agnosted with their respective, independent decisions and each thinks that the other made a better choice after their separation. Before them there is a heap of furniture which the two have gathered together to dispose of before the building is demolished.

Walter has forsaken his parents, his brother, his friends. Recently he has taken divorce. The lacerating confrontation, in which they are putting forth their respective cases and justifying themselves, is often interrupted by Victor's wife, Esther who is rather money minded. Walter wants to help Victor by giving him employment which Victor rejects. Victor is shaken throughoutly when Walter tells him that their father had four thousand dollars when Victor wanted Walter help him in his education. After the vigorous argument Walter leaves the room rather angrily.

III. WRONG CHOICE :

The conflict of the play 'The Price' is the result of the choices the two brothers, Victor and Walter have made sixteen years before. The basic question involved in this tragedy is that of choices.

Both the brother have made their choices in the past and now both feel agonized with their respective, independent decisions. Each of them thinks that the other has made a better choice. This situations brings to our mind the sharp irony concealed in Robert Frosts poem - "The Road Not Taken" - where the traveller feels at the end of the journey that it was the choice of the wrong road which made all the different. The dreadful irony of the situation in the play is that there is no way going back and starting all over again.

Victor remains with his parents when Walter deserts all of them and prospers. This Victor chooses the way of love and Walter chooses the way of money. They should have remained together contributing their respective contribution in terms of what they choose. But they chose only half of the happiness and carried their points to the extremity. And once they have chosen their ways they can not alter their choice. Victor can not retrace and start his career all over again; Walter can't begin his family life afraish. Victor tells this to Walter when the letter offers him a job :

Walter, I haven't got education, what are you taling about ? You cant walk in with a spalsh and wash out twenty-eight years. Ther's a price people pay. I've paid it, it's all gone, I haven't got it any more. Just like you paid,

didn't you ? You've got no wife, you are lost your family, you're rattling around all over again from a scratch ?²

None of them can start all over again from a scratch. Throughout the play there is a dominant feeling of loss, an irretrievable loss, and that is one of the most essential features of this play which contributes to its ultimate impact as a tragedy. Each of them thought he was taking the right decision, both of them took the wrong decisions and that made all the difference. The tension between freedom and determinism is very well maintained throughout, like in his other plays, by Miller. The crisis in Miller plays is partly because : "man lives in a world full of socio-economic pressures and his choices are always governed by glorious uncertainties"³ maintains Santosh Bhatia. Thus it is the wrong choice by the characters that leads to the crisis and ultimately the conflict arises.

IV. THE CONFLICT IN THE PRICE :

The debate on social determinism and free will inevitably leads to the question of tragic conflict in Millers' plays. This is not only a conflict between two individuals but between two approaches to the human life.

In 'The Price' there is an external conflict. It

is the conflict between two brothers, Victor and Walter. Both of them represent two different attitudes.

In The Price "family is the locus of action".³ But The play is not merely a domestic play, because the main force of the tragedy springs from the underlying tension between individual freedom and socio-economic pressures. Walter, here, represents the American Dream of Success.

The question involved is who acted wisely ? Victor or Walter ? Whose decision was the right one ? The answer to this question is, however, not as simple as it appears. It involves an examination of their entire background and circumstances. Their father, though not as an acting character in the play, seems to be a great force acting on Victor. Victor does not quit his home for filial duties. But it is strange enough that his father does not give Victor required money for the completion of his education even though he had four thousand dollars. Walter deserts all of them and runs after money. He is inspired by the American Dream of Success.

The main conflict in the play is seen in the open confrontation between the two brothers, Victor Franz and Walter Franz. The basic question involved is that of choice. Thus The Price is an existential tragedy. In this connection

Santosh Bhatia's views are pertinent : "Existentialists claim that man is surrounded by objective uncertainties and that in a world full of possibilities man has to make a choice."⁴ Both the brothers were called upon to make their choices at a critical stage when their father went bankrupt. One of them decides to stay with the father and support him; the other decided to walk away in order to brighten his own prospects of success. They live according to their choice. They are made to examine the quality of life, they have lived and the price each has had to pay. This shows the anguish of their hearts. The tragic feeling is evoked through the enactment of the whole process of frustration; and the irony that they can not go back and start a fresh. This is the social dilemma.

Victor is disillusioned with his life sacrificed to unrewarding moral scruples about love and fidelity. His life seems to have been a pure waste to him. His wife, Esther, too is frustrated and has become alcoholic.

Walter, on the other hand, has been a success in the rat race. He also has paid a heavy price by way of a divorce and a nervous breakdown. He realizes how fruitless and meaningless his whole material success has been. He owned three nursing homes and fifty percent of his life is now spent in City Hospitals. He feels alive for the first time

after having given up the chase for material success and money-making. But it has been at the cost of his own health and domestic happiness.

In the "Author's Production Note" to the play Arthur Miller has drawn attention to an important fact :

As the world no operates, the qualities of both the brothers are necessary to it, surely their respective psychologies and moral values conflict at the heart of the social drama

The playwright, here, affirms his social commitment and the play is an embodiment of his social vision. His social vision has certainly matured. But society, in the play, goes to the background.

Walter's transformation in the play is important for an understanding of the play. Here Miller suggests the hollowness and futility of the materially successful life. Victor, on the other hand, is disillusioned and has allowed his fate say last word. A little of the solution is provided in the character of Solomon. He is "a multimentional figure".⁵ He is not only age but wisdom and experience that go with age. He serves as a foil for Victor and as a chorus in this drama.

V. THE COSMIC DIMENSION OF THE PRICE :

The most common structure of a typical Miller play is the family structure. The action of the play starts with the individual the inner most circle; it expands into the familial, the outer circle; it involves the society, still outer circle; and finally it encompasses the cosmic or metaphysical questions, the outer most circle.

Miller's primary interest in The Price lies in portraying the tragedy of life. It expresses the inter-connection of man and his world of action, of man with man, and human hopes and values with their situation. Miller suggests that when the threads of human pattern are broken, the fabric of the society falls apart. He brings out the never-failing predicament confronting mankind and presents it in universal⁶ terms. Man's endeavour to accomplish something in life ultimately amounts to inscribing "one's name on a cake of ice on a hot July day."⁶ This is partly because the world is full of socio-economic pressures and his choices are always governed by glorious uncertainties.

REFERENCES

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4. Ibid., P.103.
5. Benjamin Nelson, Arthur Miller : The Portait of a Playwright (New York : David McKay, 1970), P.310.
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