

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to investigate Arthur Miller's major plays in terms of the conflict involved in them.

I. CONFLICT DEFINED :

The theme of a literary work is defined as 'the generalization about life based on the results of the conflict in the work'. The Tragedy is the most serious form of literature. So 'conflict' is one of the most essential aspect of the work of literature in general and the tragedy in particular.

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Of Current English 'conflict' is defined as the 'opposition or difference of opinions, desires, etc.'. Conflict can be internal or external. This is to say that conflict can be inside the mind of the character concerned, or it can be between two characters. For example there can be struggle between 'duty' and 'desire' in the mind of character. Similarly there can be difference in the opinions of the two characters.

II. TRAGEDY : OLD AND NEW

Critics like J.W.Krutch¹ and George Steiner² have denied the possibilities of tragedy in the modern times.

There is no doubt, the face of the tragedy has ~~been~~ changed. The same kind of tragedy that there was in the Greco-Elizabethan times is no longer there. But it is only the features and the practice that vary; the essentials remains the same. The modern playwright writes a tragedy that suits to the temper of the modern democratic world. In the words of Ivor Brown³, "... now on both sides of the Atlantic we have stool tragedies, not throne tragedies".

Whether a modern play concerns itself with a grocer or a President is not important, but the intensity of the hero's commitment to his course is important. Tragic feeling is evoked when a character is ready to lay his life, if needed, to secure his sense of dignity. Thus it is the conflicting situation which is obvious.

There is no any radical change or departure from the ancient to the modern times as far as the basic structure of tragedy is concerned. In spite of the apparent difference between the Greco-Elizabethan and Modern tragedy, it is possible to draw out some constants. Santeah K. Bhatia⁴ has enlisted in his preface to ARTHUR MILLER namely conflict, suffering, tragic Irony, Awakening and a Metaphysical dimension. The tragic mode is rather difficult to define, and so is ~~the~~ to reach a consensus on the tragic qualities of a literary composition.

III. SOCIAL DRAMA AS TRAGEDY :

Every dramatist writes so as to suit to the spirit of his times. Modern Age is the age of democracy. So it is natural that modern tragedy is social in nature. Arthur Miller is a dramatist with a 'sense of purpose'. He blends the tragic and the social drama in his plays. Though his themes are social, his plays do not become mere problem plays or social documents, they retain tragic intensity.

One must consider Miller's plays with some basic assumptions. Firstly, the modern tragedy is only superficially different from the Greek and the Elizabethan tragedy; but it need not be judged by Aristotelian principles. Secondly, Social drama can be tragic and vice-versa and the two are not antithetical to each other. Miller has liberalized the concept of tragedy without destroying its spirit. He maintains that the psychological life of man is inextricably linked with his social existence and the two can not be studied in isolation in a tragedy.

Dennis Welland maintained that Miller's "central themes have always been the integrity of the individual towards his fellow human beings, and cost of the integrity for some of the characters has been life itself."⁵ Sheila Huftel holds that Miller provides the best synthesis of the social and the psychological elements in his plays.⁶

Leonard Moss maintains that Miller's plays register indignant protest against injustice and suggest a humanistic thesis on mutual relationship with responsibility. Ronald Hayman thinks that Miller's plays consist conflict between social attitudes. But after he wrote The Crucible, there is a shift, according to M.W.Steinberg, in emphasis from the social to the individual.

About the possibility of tragedy in social plays Lionel Trilling writes :

It would seem that a true knowledge of society comprehends the reality of the social forces it presumes to study and is aware of contradictions and consequences : it knows that sometimes society offers an opposition of motives in which the antagonists are in such a balance of authority and appeal that a man who so wholly perceives them as to embody them in his very being can not choose between them and is therefore destroyed. This is known as tragedy.⁷

In this way the protagonist is left with the choice between two opposite motives, and here in comes conflict. Tragic play writers in general in the twentieth century, and Arthur Miller in particular, have attempted to make society a force powerfull enough to instigate tragic action.

Unlike the Modern Drama, Elizabethan Drama displays no social consciousness.

In his essay "On Social Plays" Miller writes :

The social drama must delve into the nature of man as he exists to discover what his needs are so that those needs, may be amplified and exteriorised in terms of social concepts.⁸

For Miller, the psychological life of man is inextricably linked with his social existence, and the two can not be studied in isolation in a tragedy. "Miller's protagonists never fall in the ⁿlive of victimised innocents and martyrs Miller's call is not for thesis drama. He tries to search for an answer to the more fundamental question; namely, how to live ?"⁹ writes Santosh K.Bhatia.

Though Miller's plays are social plays "the emphasis in his plays invariably falls on human dignity. He is more anxiously concerned with the status and dignity of man, with the interplay of social relationships rather than with providing solutions to socio-economic problems. Although some of his plays can be defined in terms of social (Death of a Salesman), political (The Crucible), autobiographical (After the fall), or even economic (The Price) issues, his

ultimate achievement as a dramatist lies in his capacity to transcend these realistic and temporal issues by synthesising them with moral, fundamental and universal questions about love, freedom, guilt, justice, etc."¹⁰

Thus tragedy in Miller's hands is social drama which is not narrowly limited to the exposure of social ills. His chief objective is to explore how men ought to live. The focus in his plays is always on larger issues like man's ultimate status in society, a search for subtle human relationships. In his plays social forces as well as the individual guilt bring about the tragic crisis.

Writing on the substance of Miller's tragedy Santosh Bhatia gathers some facts from Miller's plays. About the conflict in Miller's plays he writes :

The debate on social determinism and free will inevitably leads to the question of tragic conflict in his plays. Who are the combatants in this conflict? This is not a conflict between two individuals, nor is this a conflict between two groups. The basic conflict in Miller's plays is always between the individual and the society. Joe Keller follows the social law of success and ^reris; Willy breaks the law of success and makes the corresponding error.



John Proctor, pitted against institutionalized religion, is the best possible representation of the individual struggling against the forces of society. Similarly, Eddie Carbone is destroyed when he breaks the law of community living.

Quentin is a product as well as a victim of the same drive for success and survival. The father and son conflict in All My Sons and Death of a Salesman, the conflict between the brothers in The Price are dramatic variations of the same fundamental conflict between the individual and the society, between private conscience and public issues. Mostly this conflict is presented through external means but sometimes, as in After the Fall, it is presented in the form of an internal conflict.¹¹

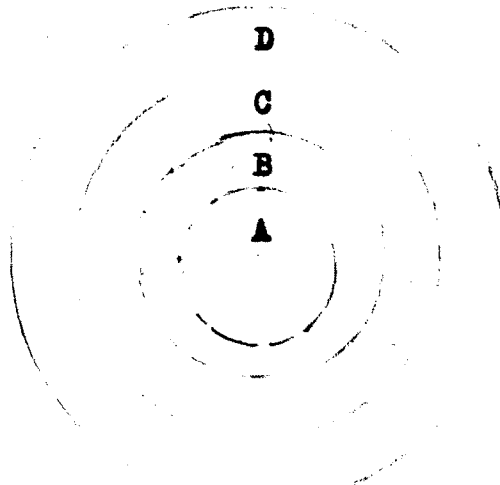
Thus it becomes clear that when we analyse the conflict in Miller's plays neither of the purely psychological view or the purely sociological view alone is *not* sufficient, but we should apply both the views together. If we suppose that our miseries and indignities are born within our minds, then all action is obviously impossible. Similarly if society alone is responsible for hindering our success, then the protagonist must be flawless and it will deny the validity of a character. So an understanding of

the social factors and pressures is very important to an understanding of the action and behaviour of a protagonist which leads to the conflict in the play.

IV. CONSTRUCTION OF MILLER'S TRAGEDY :

Consideration of the structure of Miller's tragedy in drawing out the conflict in his plays will be pertinent. Generally Miller's tragedies ^{shows} on a note of disturbance ^{and} of agitation. Our attention is drawn to some kind of extraordinary behaviour of the character. Willy Loman enters the stage uttering "Oh, boy, Oh, boy."; Quentin enters facing his own pointlessness; The Crucible opens with a scene of sickness, and so forth.

Santosh Bhatia's observation in this connection is worth considering. According to him "Unlike Williams' plays which move in from the society to the individual, Miller's plays seem to reach out from the individual to the society."¹² Bhatia's following drawing will help us in understanding the movement of a Miller play :



Action of the play starts with the individual (Circle A), expands into the family (Circle B), involves the society as a whole (Circle C) and finally encompasses cosmic questions (Circle D). Thus the family serves as a symbolic cell for the society at large and the conflicts. Occasionally, as in The Crucible and A View From the Bridge, the individual is presented in direct conflict with social forces.

About Miller's treatment of his protagonists and their relation to the society in his plays Robert W. Corrigan writes "..... he finds them guilty for their failure to maintain (or fulfill) their role within the established social structure On the other hand, while it is certainly true that the system is ultimately affirmed, it can not be denied that the system is shown to be in some way responsible for creating those very conditions which provoke the protagonist's downfall."¹³

Each of the plays of Miller's first period is filled with a sure sense of human relationship. The individual struggles for his name in an unfriendly and callous world. But always there is an alternative open to them for him to choose. Corrigan comments "..... the issues facing each of the protagonists are clearcut, and we cannot help feeling that if they had chosen otherwise, the conflict would have dissolved."¹⁴

V. THE IDEA OF COMMITMENT :

The idea of commitment and responsibility is at the heart of Miller's dramatic theory and practice. It is a part of Miller's basic cast of mind. It manifests itself in Miller's basic concern in the evaluation of human attitudes and activities. The idea of commitment and responsibility has formative influence on Miller's art.

'To commit' means 'to make oneself responsible'. The society will cease to be and resemble the jungle sans commitment. One can not isolate ^{him} from self from his fellow beings. The idea of commitment always existed. However, as V. Rajakrishnan maintains "In the present century the idea burst on the literary scene with a seminal polemic thrust. The idea of commitment received its first coherent expression in post-War France."¹⁵ "The current popularity of the idea of commitment could be attributed to the dissemination of existentialist philosophy in the post - War years. Commitment has emerged as a slogan, a rallying cry for artists who assume the writer's obligation to participate in the political and moral struggles of our times. Drama since World War II has involved itself with the problematic fate of the modern intellectual, caught up in the shifting pulls of commitment."¹⁶

Miller's protagonist faces moral choice. Most of

Miller's heroes find themselves in the most ambiguous possibilities of the post-War world. They face acute problem of choice and naturally commitment creeps in. The protagonist overlooks his commitment to his fellow beings and that leads to the tragic conflict. Miller was a social dramatist with argumentative vision who used the worn-out technique of his Norwegian Master, Ibsen to articulate his obsessive preoccupation with guilt-laden life of the bourgeois middle-class. According to some his plays seem to be Marxist as they sometimes tend to be partisan critiques of the American way of life. There is affinity between Marxism and social commitment.

"Commitment" is a major term concept that is commonly used in the literary debate of the post-war epoch. It manifests itself in Miller's basic concern in the evaluation of human attitudes and activities in his plays. It is an outlook on life and organizing principle to the large body of Miller's works. Miller used realism and 'social' expressionism at the height of his commitment and developed his political and social view-point. After the Fall and The Price seem to be Miller's sermon on guilt and responsibility respectively. But at the basis of Miller's existential introspection in these plays there is commitment.

In this dissertation I do not presume to study all the plays of Arthur Miller. Among his plays only those which

are significant from the view point of 'conflict' are selected. One-actors such as A Memory of two Mondays and Incident at Vichy have been left out because the former is more lyrical and pathetic, while the later is a mere thesis play in which action fails to grow. The six of Miller's plays viz. 1) All My Sons, 2) Death of a Salesman, 3) The Crucible, 4) A Veiw from the Bridge and 5) After the Fall are discussed in the ensuing chapters. But the accent of this study falls on the conflict in them.

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