



A STUDY ON IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE ARTHUR MILLER PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Literature always talks about human, humanity and society and it is connected with spirituality. Whenever we talk about human beings, we also talk about culture, communication and about the identity. Arthur Miller has highlighted in his plays that courage, truth, responsibility and faith must be the central values in a man. This paper describes the reality of modern society, problem of identity, communication and the importance of spirituality through the select plays of Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, - *All My Sons* and *Broken Glass*). The present article describes and showing that every character in Arthur Miller's plays is controlled by wrong desires and day dreams. It is true that Miller's plays mirrors the present materialistic society in which men (like his characters) are facing the problem of identity. Every character of his plays is from the real world of common man. It is a journey from physical world to spiritual world where an individual under different unsatisfactory circumstances states having conflicts with his existing 'Self' and tries to search for a new spiritual identity.

Introduction

Modern society is an artificial society in which people are struggling every day for their identity. They are trying to find their identity on the basis of status, prosperity and astonishment. But real identity consists in recognition of his inner-soul. Arthur Miller shows this fact in his famous plays such as; *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *Crucible* etc. Miller known as a social dramatist but in his plays he not only highlights the social aspects through his characters in *Death of a Salesman* but he introduces the real connection between man and his soul or we can say the real connection between physical and spiritual views in this globalization world. In 1948, Miller wrote the play, *Death of a Salesman* which opened on 10 February 1949, running for 742 performances at the Morosco Theater in New York directed by Elia Kazan. This play describes the memories, dreams, identity, confrontations, and arguments which make up the last 24 hours of Willy Loman's life.

Arthur Miller has highlighted in his plays that courage, truth, responsibility and faith must be the central values in a man. He was well aware with the life of middle class Americans which has been reflected in his dramatic works. The major dramatic works of Arthur Miller include-- *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955) and *After the Fall* (1964). Arthur Miller expresses the loss of identity in the modern society through his characters. In this competitive society, people are losing their peace of mind without spiritual identity. Physical richness can give man name and reputation but it cannot provide him real happiness. Man is blindly running after money to fulfill his selfish desires. In the plays of Arthur Miller, we can see a great number of characters who are struggling for their identity. They are trying to quest their entity without spirituality. He should think peacefully over the problem of his genuine/ spiritual

identity. Joe Keller, Willy Loman and Biff Loman have been presented as embodiment of modern dreams and desires.

DISCUSSION

The present study explores the issues of identity crisis in the plays of Arthur Miller. The theme of the search for self-identity is crucial to a proper understanding of the *Death of a Salesman* and Miller is in no small degree preoccupied with it. The common theme of Miller's plays is the individual versus society. Miller concentrated on a single subject - 'the struggle of the individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society' or in his family which is a part and unit of society. It is the central point of the author's social philosophy that society and the individual are inextricably linked. P.P. Sharma opines:

Although Willy is aware, may be dimly and imperfectly, that he is not cut out for success in the world of trade and commerce, he nevertheless nurses the dream of getting the better of everybody else. And this bads him into an alienation from himself, hiding his real identity(75)

Thus, we can point out that Miller's heroes are always in search for moral values and their search becomes quest allegory. It should also be noted here that the hidden and underline meaning in the plays of Miller is more significant than that of superficial meaning. Gerald Weales sees Miller's dramatic success and poignancy as residing in his commitment to social problems.

Studies of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* invariably discuss Willy Loman's self-delusion and moral confusion in relation to Miller's indictment of the competitive, capitalistic society that is responsible for dehumanizing the individual and transforming the once promising agrarian American dream into an urban nightmare (Arthur Miller, 1960). In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller depicts Willy Loman's gradual loss of identity as a thriving salesman who is well known, has many friends, and is idolized by his family. These identity issues stem from his relationship to time, as his present does not match the aspirations he had for his future some fifteen years earlier, which triggers his existential crisis.

The theme is the relationship between a man's identity and the image that the society

demands of him. Willy knows the torment of family tensions, the compensations of friendship, and the heartbreak that goes with broken pride and lost confidence. He is aware of the loyalties, not blind but open eyed which are needed to support mortals in their loneliness. The anatomy of failure, the pathos of age, and the tragedy of those years when a life begins to slip down and the hill it has laboured to climb are subjects at which he excels.

Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is a spokesperson of Miller's philosophy of American Way of life. Miller has introduced Willy as an allegory of American business ethics. Both Willy and Joe are same in this sense. They are victims of American Dream. For Joe, an allegory of evil and immorality, there is nothing "bigger than family". Arthur Miller leaves a hidden message at the end of each his play by dramatizing his tragic heroes engaged in the quest of their dignity in the society. "I'm not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman," says Willy to his son Biff when he realizes that his identity is in danger. Similarly, John Proctor, metaphor of honesty and integrity, does not surrender his conscience because he is one who cannot live without good name. He is dishonestly accused for a crime he has not committed. When he is asked to confess for witchcraft and his collaboration with Devil, he bursts out:

"Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (*The Crucible*).

There probably was a cause in Willy's childhood — it most likely was the gap he was faced with after his father's disappearance — which blocked his mental evolution. In the play, however, the cause is mostly perceptible in its effects, that is in the fact that he cannot be a father. It is true that he has two sons, but fatherhood here is to be seen not as a physical reality, but as a mental image, a deep-seated part of one's identity. In this regard, Willy Loman is very much like Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown after the latter left the forest and returned to his wife's bed. Their symptoms are broadly similar. Both men are the prisoners of an ambivalent image of their fathers, which is, in

Brown's case, what he suddenly discovers in the heart of the forest. The models (Brown's ancestors, Willy's mythical father, as well as Willy for Biff in Willy's mind) turn out to be disappointing. Even though he produced an unspecified number of children and grandchildren, Hawthorne's character remains "[a] stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not desperate man." (123-124). He has lost his faith, that is not only his trust in his wife Faith, but also the capacity to believe in marriage, fatherhood and the trappings of society. For different reasons, of course, Willy Loman is similarly incapable of playing the role society expects from him, that is to say be a father and unite the law and desire for his sons, say no when necessary, and allow them to become independent and self-sufficient.

The success in life comes from the person himself rather than seeking it through others opinion, the identity crisis is the tragedy of Willy Loman. It is a social play, which focuses on the consequence of man's evaluate himself, and an exploration of betrayal those values. It is a faith in the supremacy of the material over the spirit

Miller is a staunch critic of contemporary American society and its values. He speaks against injustice, exploitation, competition and vested private interests. He also exposes the human tendency to put one's self above all else, which causes confusion and suffering. This suffering increases on account of the self interests seen in the protagonists. In all the three plays - *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* the common theme is individual versus society. The individual is trying to establish his self identity where a great failure is waiting. As a dramatist he concentrated on a single subject, 'the struggle and suffering of the individual attempting to gain his rightful place in the society, or in his family which is a part of the society.

Miller's first group of plays, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *A Memory of Two Mondays*, Lumley says, deals with the tragedy of the common man, and the second group deals with the nightmare of an intellectual guilt complex. However, he sees despair as the predominant mood of Miller's plays. In *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, Vol. 2 (1984), Bigsby sees Miller as a moral reformer bent on tracing the "social and

psychological origins of cultural anxiety." Bigsby believes that Albee, O'Neill, Williams, and Miller share a belief in the process of transformation involving political action, reform and the restoration of a natural and manifest justice:

"They have all written plays which either directly or indirectly insist on the need to change the world in such a way as to accommodate the needs of the individual or the mass." (Bigsby, C.W.E 1984)

Men have no time for their families and themselves in this competitive society. That's why, families are disintegrating. We can see the reality of capitalism and a business oriented society in which the pursuit of money leads to sacrifice everything and loss of social human values. Morality and money are the main themes of these plays and these are the family tragedy and a real accomplishment. We have to live our family life without any expectation because expectations can destroy the real enjoyment of life as we see in *Death of a Salesman* between Willy and Biff. In this way, present paper discusses the main problem of spiritual identity through Miller's characters, for which we all are struggling in present competitive and industrial society.

Proctor in *The Crucible* (1953) is racked by guilt at his infidelity who, through *The Crucible* of experience, comes to discover his identity. In a way Proctor represents Miller's definition of the tragic hero: "I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity" (Miller, Tragedy 4). As Terry Otten points out "Predictably some postmodern theorists have assaulted Miller's conception of 'heroism' that simply does not mesh with the cynicism attached to much current theory" (Otten 68). But Proctor's main conflict is not just with the evil around him, rather it is within himself where he realises the capacity for both evil and good reside. This guilt is the driving force in Proctor that brings him to his defining moment of accepting his predicament.

The Crucible is a dramatization of examining one's conscience as well as search for inner values, morals and identity in the lives of both John Proctor and Reverend Hale. Reverend Hale, although is considered as an expert on demonology and witch-craft, undergoes a process of examining

his beliefs and own sense of identity which ultimately leads him to question the very basis of his faith. Initially being guided by the sense of authority and position, Reverend Hale fails to see the real issues behind the ordeal of witch hunt in Salem. His main objective and stimulus behind his choice to come to Salem is his curiosity regarding the dark aspect of life and experiment the nature of the "invisible world" of spirits and the devil for medical practices. Initially, because of his position in the church and society, Hale is left with little space to self-reflect and to see the things from an angle different from that of the church and the authority. He feels a sense of pride and worthiness of a specialist upon arriving to Salem that his knowledge in the field is publicly acknowledged. He is not motivated by greed or personal material gain as his intention is good to discover and clean any sign of evil in Salem. So he does not contradict the position of the church believing that it is also motivated by the same spirit. But his presence adds to complication of the situation and as Hale unintentionally contributes to the condemning of innocent towns folk he starts to suffer the guilt that leads him into a quest for justice and a sense of identity. Miller treats the historical account of witchcraft in a manner which depicts "the Quest for Identity" of the characters in the play who are involved in difficult moral choices. Man is conditioned by the prevalent circumstances, and above all, he is leashed by the different context-based psychological, cultural, moral, religious and socio-political values, that are what push man into a world of alienation and make him grope for his real identity. Ganguly (2001:145) rightly remarks:

"In a world in which horizons of value are as dispersed as geographical or historical ones, alienation itself takes on new meaning and makes it all the more difficult to distinguish economic from cultural estrangement, contaminated as the categories are of culture and economy".
Ganguly (2001:145)

In terms of search for identity, Hale represents a balance between Danforth and Proctor. While Danforth is too adamant to change his position on the issue, Hale is quick to dissociate himself from the inhuman legal process. He says, "I denounce these proceedings. I quit the court!" (Miller: 393).

His openly denouncing the court is the most visible indicator of his achieving self-realization, though it was too late. In spite of his dissociation from the trials, Hale cannot be equated with Proctor, as has been expressed by Nelson (1970: 171): "Hale lives in the comprehension of his unworthiness; Proctor dies in the awareness of his value." Hale tries to retrieve his lost self by earnestly imploring Elizabeth to convince Proctor to choose life, saying, "Quail not before God's judgment in this, for it may well be God damns a liar less than he that throws his life away for pride" (398). This clearly reflects a profound change in Hale's 'self'. However, his search for self does not lead either to his rising above the guilt of siding with the wrong nor is he able to stand by a cause. Thompson (1976) pointed out that, Miller's protagonists struggle within themselves to find out the reason of not gaining a "rightful place". They are faced up with the questions of blame, of moral certitude as they painfully search their inner selves and outside forces for the answers to what "hedges" and "lowers" them, denying them "self-realization."

All My Sons (1947) is a play about the individual's responsibility for his own actions and also about the obligations he has to his society. The play is about a man who chooses his personal commercial benefit above value, self above the interest of the nation, and interest of his own family above responsibility to society. It is also, however, about loss, loss of a sense of common humanity. But Joe Keller believes that he has done nothing wrong because he puts his family first. And when the truth comes out, he still tries to justify his action by arguing that nothing is more important than his family, than saving the business to give to Chris, his son: "For you, a business for you!" (Miller, *Collected Plays* 146). But Chris believes in a greater responsibility to society and his response is volatile: 'For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?' (Miller, *Collected Plays* 146). The final act of killing himself by Joe is in a way an understanding of his failure to negotiate his identity as an individual and a social being. Again the self-sacrifice of his elder son Larry, who himself was a warplane

pilot and comes to know about his father's crime, may be termed as an attempt to do penance for the sin committed by his father, although the latter initially tries to evade it.

In *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* as well as in *The Price* we are asked to witness the struggles of his protagonists who suffer due to the wrong dreams and due to their act of embracing too completely the ethics of American society intent on success at any price. Moreover in *Death of a Salesman* as well as in *All My Sons* we find his protagonists' sudden awareness of the futility of their lives and the identity crisis emerges due to their inability to negotiate properly the societal changes and their dreams. Miller's protagonists in these plays may be analyzed from the perspective of Alfred Adler who felt people are predominantly motivated by a search for superiority. For Willy Loman it is an imperfect visualization and result is the identity crisis and the ultimate failure; for Joe Keller it is the indecision of acceptance and negation of responsibility.

While most of you, I believe, must be familiar with Miller's successful plays from the 40s through the 60s, I would like you to become familiar with one of his major plays of the 90s, *Broken Glass*. In *Broken Glass* (1964), Miller tackles the theme of his Jewishness along with the nature of Jewish guilt, amidst marital discord. The play is set place in 1938, the height of the Holocaust. The title is presumably inspired from T.S. Eliot's *Hollow Men* (1925), a poem that agonizes over the moral and intellectual decay of modern man. In *Broken Glass*, Miller further explores the theme as he goes back to the night of November 9, 1938, or Kristallnacht (German, "Night of *Broken Glass*"), when the windows of thousands of Jewish shops and homes were shattered across Germany and Austria. The attack on Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues was carried out by the Nazis. The reason cited for such mass extermination of Jews was revenge for a fatal attack two days earlier by Herschel Grynszpan, a seventeen year old Polish Jew, on Ernst vom Rath, a third secretary in the German embassy in Paris. It is believed that over three thousand Jews died that night, almost eleven hundred synagogues were destroyed, and nearly thirty thousand people were arrested and deported to concentration camps. Miller makes the protagonist, Sylvia Gellburg, view this event with

horror, not only because of the violence towards people for their race and identities, but also because of the failure of the rest of the world population to protest. Phillip Gellburg and Margaret Hyman, the two characters whose irritable conversation begins Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* (1994) find themselves defined by and defying particular identities in the opening scene. Phillip, who is waiting for his appointment with Dr. Hyman discovers that Hyman's wife, Margaret, also works as his nurse. Phillip's sceptical amusement suggests a possible conflict between their marital and professional relationship, but Margaret's good-humoured response refutes this. Meanwhile Phillip is repeatedly questioned by Margaret about the pronunciation of his surname, a seemingly incidental detail which will become increasingly important as the play unfolds. Phillip's defensive spelling out of his surname literally spells out the theme of identity that will be so central to the play as a whole. The image of *Broken Glass* that gives the play its title serves to underline the centrality of Phillip's conflict with his Jewish identity. The shattered windows of Jewish shop fronts in Nazi Germany echo Phillip's use of a glass mirror for his habitual self-examination. Only by looking again, and turning the mirror outwards, Miller suggests, can Phillip begin to see a more hopeful reflection of the future. Yet if Phillip's central identity crisis seems to relate to his Jewishness, Miller makes this less black and white than the horrific newspaper images of 1930s Germany that his wife finds so disturbing. Miller complicates the issue of Phillip's ethnic and cultural identity through Hyman's liberal relativism. In the penultimate scene of the play, Hyman argues that all groups in society are persecuted, and Margaret's earlier description of Phillip himself as a dictator links him briefly with Hitler, suggesting the impossibility of fixing either a group or an individual identity.

Conclusion

The present article reaches its conclusion by showing that every character in Arthur Miller's plays is controlled by wrong desires and day dreams. It is true that Miller's plays mirror the present materialistic society in which men (like his characters) are facing the problem of identity. Every character of his plays is from the real world of common man. It is a journey from physical world to

spiritual world where an individual under different unsatisfactory circumstances states having conflicts with his existing 'Self' and tries to search for a new spiritual identity.

At the end, it is exposed here on the basis of Arthur Miller's major dramatic works such as *Death of Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Crucible* that Miller has been very vigilant playwright of his era who has articulated severe realities not only of the society in which he lived but of the whole world. Through his allegorical protagonists, Miller has drawn our attention to the social evils prevailing in our society. The underlying moral and message, which Miller has disclosed at the end of his each play, is applicable to all human beings and the subject matter of plays is appropriate in Indian context also. As a matter of fact, culture, climate and soil differ across the world but man is the same, mankind is the same, so Miller's plays can be studied in Indian context too. The study reaches its conclusion by showing that, an individual under different unsatisfactory circumstances starts having conflicts with his existing 'self' and tries to search for a new identity.

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