



NEGOTIATING ISSUES OF APPEARANCE AND REALITY: REVISITING ARTHUR MILLER'S THE ARCHBISHOP'S CEILING

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the identity crisis of Arthur Miller's protagonists emerging out of their difficulty in confronting appearance and reality. This is clearly evident in the plays like *After the Fall*, *The Price*, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, *Elegy for a Lady*, *Some Kind of Love Story* as well as some other plays of Miller. The first part of the paper is a study of the philosophical understanding of the issue of appearance and reality. The second part is a study of the plays of Miller in this context with particular focus on his *The Archbishop's Ceiling*.

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The concept of appearance and reality is the subject matter of metaphysics which seeks to define what is ultimately real as opposed to what is merely apparent. Metaphysics, since the time of Plato, tries to explore the ultimate realities of things as they are; not subject

to any change and hence stable objects of knowledge. On the other hand, appearance is not only deceptive and derivative; it also makes no sense when taken at its own level.

In his *Republic* Plato mentions how the sun makes animals and other objects visible to sight. In this context Joseph Milne observes, "Sight is here analogous to the intellect, and the sun analogous to that which is truly real." (Milne 9)

"... this power of elevating the highest principle in the soul to the contemplation of that which is best in existence, with which we may compare the raising of that faculty which the very light of the body to the sight of that which is brightest in the material and visible world – this power is given ... by all that study and the pursuits of the arts which has been described." (Plato 533)

According to Milne, "The arts mentioned here are the various sciences or branches of learning which, for Plato, prepare the mind for the intellectual contemplation of universals but which, of themselves, cannot grasp universals or essences, or true being." (Milne 9)

Reality requires the production of facts and as appearance does not fulfil the satisfaction of common sense the task of the metaphysician is to challenge appearance and finally arrive at the reality of thing that is fully consistent and fully thought-out.

In his *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (1893), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924) discusses many important aspects of his philosophy of Absolute Idealism. Bradley explains how appearance is inseparable from reality and how it helps us in understanding of the universe. Bradley thinks that the objective of metaphysics is to understand reality that is not self-contradictory as whatever is inconsistent with itself is unreal. Appearances can be inconsistent and contradictory; whereas reality does not contradict itself. Bradley further states that absolute reality is a unity and not a plurality; on the other hand appearances may be manifested in a plurality of forms which may be inconsistent with, or contradictory to, each other. Bradley defines primary qualities as real

and secondary qualities as apparent. According to him, an idea is real insofar as it does not contradict itself and is false insofar as it disagrees with reality. He is of the view that truth and falsehood are aspects of reality. Moreover, appearances may be true or false but it has a degree of reality as appearance is impossible without reality. According to Bradley, all appearances can be experienced as a unity in Absolute reality.

Bertrand Russell's (1872–1970) method of approaching his subject in *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) and enquiry into the nature of reality in comparison to appearance begins with the observation of his immediate surroundings. These observations lead to Russell's first distinction between appearance and reality. His method is closer to the Cartesian technique of radical doubt. Rene Descartes (1596–1650) first used it in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Descartes believed that there is nothing that one does not discern as clearly and distinctly true. But he imagined the possibility of a mischievous demon who disordered reality in order to deceive humans; anything was possible if he could not prove that it wasn't the case. Russell acknowledges his debt to Descartes when he makes explicit use of Cartesian philosophy to support the idea that subjective things are the most certain. He uses radical doubt to separate reality from illusory appearance, a distinction not motivated by a demon as used by Descartes, but by the suggestion that reality is simply ordered in a way that is not immediately present to our senses.

The question of the relation between art and reality invariably begins with Plato's famous critique of art as *mimesis*, as imitation, that makes art a second order activity of copying behind philosophy. But when we consider art as a serious activity in life by keeping aside the Platonic limiting paradigm of *mimesis* to adopt the broader approach of art as experience and expression of that experience, we come across a crucial issue concerning art in relation to truth and reality and come to the understanding that illusion or appearance is essential to art. Aristotle, contrary to

the views of his master Plato, defended art against charges of irrationality and irresponsibility corresponding to fixing a consistent truth and constant reality. Aristotelian approach seems to suggest that the borderline between illusion and reality is very thin and ultimately they may not be too much different.

II

The issue of Appearance and Reality has remained one of the important themes in many of Miller's plays even in the first part of his dramatic career. However, the subject receives a fuller negotiation only in some of his later plays.

One of the reasons for the crisis of identity and the subsequent tragic ends of his protagonists in his early plays, such as, *All My Sons*, *Death of A Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*, is their failure to negotiate between appearance and reality. Most of his protagonists try to live in their respective idealized/deluded worlds far away from the realities of life and consequently have to accept their tragic ends. In *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* as well as in *A View from the Bridge*, his protagonists struggle and suffer due to their wrong dreams and due to their inability to comprehend the dichotomy of appearances and realities of life. For Willy Loman, it is an imperfect visualization and result is the identity crisis and the ultimate failure; for Joe Keller, it is his inability to understand the real face of morality as he is deceived by the apparent success principles of American society; Eddie Carbon fails to understand the real nature of parental love and is deceived by his own nature; for Proctor, the deceiving nature of the realities of life which has blinded the moral authorities of Salem has brought his downfall as he could not convince them about the difference between appearance and reality.

In *After the Fall* the protagonist Quentin suffers from the crisis of identity due to his inability to negotiate between his state of appearance and reality until he accepts his responsibility. *The Price* presents the crisis of identity and fractured relationship of two brothers who have reached at the edge of their lives. *The*

Archbishop's Ceiling also presents the duality of appearance and reality and the crisis of identity emerges out of this. In *Elegy for a Lady* the protagonist talks with the lady of the shop about his ailing wife but the discussion proceeds on the borderline of two worlds of existence and the protagonist faces the crisis of identity due to this dual existence. *Some Kind of a Love Story* presents the crisis of the protagonist who is a private investigator trying to find out the reality of a criminal case from a lady who is supposed to be the only witness. But the protagonist is utterly confused by the two opposite worlds presented by this lady and he faces the crisis of revealing the truth and renouncing it. The other plays of Miller also present the same crisis to some extent.

The Archbishop's Ceiling (1977), the major play Miller wrote after *The Price* (1968), was first performed at the Kennedy Centre, Washington DC, in 1977. The play received a lukewarm public response and poor critical attention. To many the play revealed several weaknesses of Miller as a playwright. Some suggested that Miller should concern himself with the themes on which he once had made so successful stage plays like - *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Some were of the view that Miller was now basking on his old fame and he should stop writing plays any more.

The first published version of the play came out in 1984, with a remarkable "Afterword" by Christopher Bigsby that threw new light on *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, and made a serious attempt to look at the plays which follow it from a new perspective.

Christopher Bigsby has rightly pointed out that *The Archbishop's Ceiling* along with two short one act plays, *Some Kind of Love Story* and *Elegy for a Lady*, constitutes a major new phase in the career of Arthur Miller. (Bigsby 237)

The setting of *The Archbishop's Ceiling* is a glitzy room in a former Archbishop's palace in an Eastern European capital and in all probability it is under surveillance by the state secret police. The protagonist

is a middle-aged author, Sigmund, who is faced with the choice of detention and punishment or defection to the West because of his writings which go against the interest of the current regime. In this room he is involved in discussion with two of his former friends and writers, Marcus, an ex-political prisoner now in favour with the regime, and Adrian, a visiting American with strong liberal ideals. The situation becomes intricate by the presence of Maya, herself a poet and an actress who is also involved in relationship with all three. The play explores the complexity of the relationship of these four as well as the inseparable intermingling of politics, art and sex along with the constant awareness of the dichotomy of appearance and reality that makes it an intriguing play which also confronts the issues of morality and individual responsibility.

The Archbishop's Ceiling is arguably the most representative play of Arthur Miller which makes in-depth exploration of the complexities of appearance and reality. It combines and extends the private delusions of Joe Keller or Willy Loman and the public vehemence that we find in *The Crucible* and *Incident at Vichy*. Miller, through the reference of supposed fitting of hidden microphones in the Arch-bishop's ceiling, brings home the point that the demarcating line between appearance and reality is obliterated. The room may or may not be under government surveillance; but that it has vitally affected the behaviours and the thoughts of the people sitting there cannot be ruled out. One of the prominent characters, Adrian Wallach, tries to negotiate his identity being aware of the fact that in this complex world of appearance and reality one's individual action which may not have anything to do with the prevailing power structure may come under public scrutiny.

Adrian, an established and prosperous American writer, has returned to this Communist country with an intention to meet Maya, an ambiguous woman with whom he had a relationship before. Adrian was in Paris and suddenly the thought of Maya made him to come here: "In Paris we were in the middle of a discussion of Marxism and surrealism and I suddenly

got this blinding vision of the inside of your thigh . . . so I'm here." (Miller, *Plays: Three* 94) Although the apparent reason behind his decision to fly here is his sexual desire for Maya, but the reality comes out subsequently when he clears his intention of projecting Maya as the central character in his next novel and the problems he is facing in completing it. The expression of disgust and dissatisfaction comes out when he concedes that he has to keep it aside after spending two years writing such a novel. Now, in his conversation with Maya and later on Marcus and Sigmund, he expresses his inability to fathom the truth for which he is searching. Being an American writer he finds it difficult to understand the reason of communist government's confiscation of Sigmund's manuscript.

Adrian has returned to this paranoid country, in which writers are more often disdained as criminals than respected as heroes, after two years and by this time he gets two vital information from Allison Wolfe, which are again have to be measured in terms of appearance and reality: first, Maya and Marcus imported girls and held assemblies for writers, whom they subsequently blackmailed; and, secondly, the ceiling in Arch-bishop's house which is now Marcus' house is bugged. Adrian faces the dichotomy of appearance and reality as although he knows that his source of this information is a gossip, he cannot take the chance and as the play begins with Adrian alone in the Archbishop's room, he is found searching for possible hidden microphones by lifting the cushions and the lamp, peering into the open piano, and looking searchingly at the cherubim in the ceiling. It also brings into the front about the probability that the private lives of Maya and Marcus is also under the surveillance of the state Secret Police. Again the complexities of appearance and reality come forth in Maya's cool reaction to Adrian's reference of his article for *The New York Times* attacking their country. Is it because of her disapproval of Adrian's liberal attitude or her conscious decision to protect him, who was once her lover, from the probable surveillance of every bit of discussion by the Secret Police?

The complexity of appearance and reality which Adrian has to negotiate is not only due to his consciousness about the possible surveillance by the government or Maya's ambiguous behaviour; the recent crisis in his personal life has also contributed in this regard. Ruth, the woman he travelled with last trip and whom everyone always assumed was his wife, returned from this country severely depressed. But after taking a pill she recovered herself and turned into an active and productive woman. She is also freed from the suicidal urge which was earlier a latent overarching danger to her life. Adrian is faced with the dichotomy of accepting or negating the outcome of this medication on Ruth and thereby affecting his own life. The distinguishing line between appearance and reality becomes thinner in case of Adrian as the truth remains unverified.

Although the apparent reason for Adrian's return to this country is his lust for Maya as well as his endeavour to recreate the feelings he requires for the completion of his novel, it is at the same time a kind of quest for identity on the part of an artist to negotiate between life and art. He needs adequate justification to dispute Maya's contention that "It is unnecessary to write novels anymore" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 96). But his endeavour to find out the truth is time and again frustrated by the dubious nature of the reality. Sitting in the Archbishop's room under the probable surveillance of the state Secret Police, he can only see the truth in fragments and not anything whole.

Adrian's quest for identity is closely related to his relationship with Maya and Marcus, who, once upon a time were his good friends and fellow thinkers, but now may be turned into government agents; as well as with Sigmund, a dissident writer who takes up a cudgel against the present government which resulted in censorship of his writings and also threatened with imprisonment. These relationships are based on ambiguity as the trustworthiness of Maya and Marcus is not beyond doubt and their integrity towards Adrian and Sigmund is not confirmed. On the other hand, the true nature of Sigmund's character is not revealed to Adrian as the apparent courageous action of him

against the current political establishment as well as his sharing of views with Maya and Marcus whose latent connection with the authority has a strong possibility, may also be termed as foolish, and being an American, Adrian fails to understand the motives behind their actions.

Adrian came from Paris in the middle of the symposium on the contemporary novel to this country with the expectation that he could "sit down again with writers who had actual troubles" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 93). But after staying with his fellow writers under the presumed surveillance of the secret services, he is still baffled with the question: "Whether it matters anymore, what anyone feels . . . about anything. Whether we're not just some sort of whatever power there is." (Miller, *Plays: Three* 159) The same kind of perplexity is also expressed by him on earlier occasion when he tells Maya, "it's hard for anyone to know what to believe in this country" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 102). But the irony is that he returned to this country primarily for Maya who is the fictional centre of his incomplete novel, whom he has made a secret agent in the novel, much like the real Maya working in a country in which the demarcating line between appearance and reality is very thin. In his act of pleading Maya to cooperate, rather to expose herself freely so that he may portray her in his art, Adrian is actually trying desperately to negotiate his identity in a situation where he is perplexed by the dichotomy of appearance and reality.

Adrian's quest is further intensified when his observation "Sigmund isn't permitted to write his books. . . ." is countered by Maya's response, "My God—don't you understand *anything*?" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 104). His typical American vision of life is unable to provide a reasonable explanation of these intricacies which, in turn, encumbers his creativity as he fails to negotiate the dichotomy between art and life. He is further perplexed by Sigmund's contention that lying is our only freedom, which alienates truth from art and life and thus brings Adrian to face more perplexity in the process of his quest. This has also brought forth a situation where, not only Adrian, but

all other characters sitting under the Archbishop's ceiling, are faced with the perplexity of making a meaning out of the world dominated by the dichotomy of appearance and reality.

The contentious nature of appearance and reality presented under the presumed surveillance has put all the characters to construct their own reality by interpreting and revisioning the truth from individual perspectives. Both Sigmund and Adrian are unsure about the reality of the secret surveillance and the two present residents of the house - Maya and Marcus – also claim that they do not know for sure either. But when in the corridor outside the Archbishop's room, Marcus confides to Adrian that he has always warned writers who come to this place about the possible secret surveillance and existence of hidden microphones, Adrian, unsure about the trustworthiness of Marcus, dares him to repeat this statement inside the room. The problem of appearance and reality does not resolve as Marcus does not give any heed to Adrian's suggestion and thus the latter's quest is also unresolved.

Again when the information regarding the returning of Sigmund's manuscript by the government is revealed, Adrian's perplexity is further intensified as he finds it hard to understand the whole situation. He fails to understand whether it is a kind of plan of the government to get rid of Sigmund and his anti-government writings by way of providing a passage to him to leave this country and moreover, whether it is Marcus who has done it behind the screen and acts as an agent of the government to snuff out any dissident voice. Adrian's quest to know the truth is further baffled by Maya's explanation, "it is nothing. . . . They have the power to take it and the power to give it back" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 164); and Adrian's endeavour to make out a meaning of this perplexity is further problematized by the interference of political power and the quest remains unresolved.

Adrian has come to this country with an intension to resolve his crisis regarding the epistemological question of art and life and thought that the company

of Maya would help him to resolve this crisis. But after meeting her, his crisis is intensified as it leads him to self-evaluation of his identity. Moreover, his own understanding of the situation is hindered by Maya's interpretation; and whenever he doubts the intentions of the government or of Marcus or Sigmund, she dismisses his doubts as idealistic and also asserts that being an American he cannot understand this country. Not only Maya, but Sigmund also questions his veracity and accuses him of pretending commitment when he is merely a scientist observing specimens.

Being an American and is imbued with liberal thoughts, Adrian verbalizes overtly of how he would react in the event of the destruction of Sigmund's manuscript. As Marcus encourages him to continue, he ventilates his mind to go on national television and thus bring the matter to the attention of the United States Congress. But Marcus challenges the sincerity of Adrian's concern for Sigmund's manuscript suggesting that he is merely motivated by his plan to record and write for *New York Times'* feature on Socialist decadence. ". . . To whom am I talking, Adrian—the *New York Times*, or your novel, or you?" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 157) At this Adrian remains silent, probably he does not know the answer himself. Thus the borderline of appearance and reality becomes obliterated in a place where there is suspicion of the room being bugged, where the integrity of friends is not beyond doubt and relationships are based on ambiguity. Sigmund's comment in this connection is very pertinent: "Is like some sort of theatre, no? Very bad theatre—your emotions have no connection with the event" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 165).

The approach of the writers who are sitting under the Archbishop's ceiling towards life and art is also in variance with their basic human nature. Marcus, who used to write in the realistic mode, has stopped writing, as Maya observes, "he can't write anymore; it left him. . . it left him!" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 161). Sigmund's concern is more on exposing the government and its policies, rather than making any sort of experimentation in literature. Maya, who is also a writer, leaves no indication about her approach

towards art. Adrian suffers from stagnation, the penultimate stage of Eriksonian concept of psychosocial development, when he fears that he can no longer contribute anything significant and this brings his crisis of identity.

The play is thus in a sense a study of appearance and reality and the characters' negotiation of this dichotomy. Adrian's motive of coming to this country is baffling as whether he is motivated by the genuine compassion for the suffering of the writers of this country, or his decision is merely for the sake of passion and lust for Maya. The reality is unauthenticated as whether his quest is for repositioning his creativity which suffers from stagnation or he is merely serving as a tool of the capitalism in recording the so-called decadence of the socialism. Marcus seems the writer turned government agent whose integrity is doubtful. So also is Maya, but her concern for Adrian and Sigmund may be genuine. So, in the Archbishop's palace, everything is fluid: friendship is not based on mutual trust, relationships are ambiguous, and the operation of political power is perfidious. Thus in this perplexing world the characters suffers from the crisis of identity in order to negotiate between appearance and reality.

The character of Adrian in *The Archbishop's Ceiling* gives Miller a scope for self-introspection, his own role as an artist. Miller stayed away at America safe from the Nazi persecution while the Jews were massacred at different places; as Adrian in the play, too, has missed both the experiences of Korea and Vietnam. Adrian is accused of passing naïve and simplistic comments on the conditions of writers in the communist controlled eastern European state. In such accusations the playwright seems to have put himself on the judgment box and tries to scrutinize his own reaction to Nazi atrocity and the Jew massacre. When Adrian, the novelist, is accused by others of being motivated by a desire of success, we feel that such accusations might well be directed against the playwright too.

The Archbishop's Ceiling, in fact is a depiction of Arthur Miller's personal experience in 1970's in

Czechoslovakia when his hotel room was bugged with microphones by government secret agency. He met the writers in this room, and as they were fully aware of this surveillance, they manipulated language which carried double meaning. US President Richard Nixon during seventies had himself bugged his own office at the White House. It has often been used as a tool by totalitarian governments. But it creates a very significant problem vis-à-vis art and life, i.e. how to define reality. In this connection while interacting with the audience of National Theatre in London in 1984, Miller told: "What I've become more and more fascinated by is the question of reality and what it is, and whether there is any, and how one invites it into oneself, that's a moral issue, finally." (Introduction, *The Archbishop's Ceiling* 6)

The play is also a kind of Miller's criticism of the tendency of the American authors to deny history or eliminate the past. Miller treated past as the integral link in the chain of time which reminds us of moral values and social responsibilities and helps us in negotiating the dichotomy of appearance and reality. Miller in his autobiography strikes at this tendency of the American artists and writers who treat themselves "as though the tongue had been cut out of the past, leaving him alone to begin from the beginning, from the creation and the first naming of things seen for the first time. . . . American writers spring as though from the ground itself – or drop out of the air all new and self-conceived and self-made, quite like the businessman they despise." (Miller, *Timebends* 114-115)

Maya in the play says to Adrian, "I have never met one writer who did not wish to be praised and successful...and even powerful. Why do they condemn others who wish the same for themselves?" (Miller, *Plays: Three* 97) This assessment of Maya also resonates Miller's attempt to make a re-evaluation of his whole artistic career as he now seems able to attempt to look at the mirror as he has reached a stage of his life when he can look back at his lifelong endeavour from an objective distance and attempt to

negotiate with the issues of appearance and reality behind all the façade of success.

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