

Arthur Miller Revisited

Deepak Chaswal and Pradeep Kumar Chaswal

Greek literature is replete with philosophical ideas. One of the earliest Greek philosophers, Thales, tried to find out the explanation of the mysteries of the cosmos and of our planet (earth). Pythagoras was the first man who called himself a philosopher rather than a wise man. In the modern sense the first man who deserves to be called a philosopher was Parmenides who concentrates not on what reality may be but what "being" actually means. In the Fifth Century BC, Greece produced a class of professional philosophers who were Sophists, who were traveling teachers; their aims were more practical than philosophical. Then came Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who were in literary sense grandfather, father and son respectively of ancient Athenian thought and philosophy. All these philosophers endeavoured to solve one mystery after the other. Among the other problems which have captured the attention of philosophers one after the other was the concept of Man. Later this concept of Man has been dealt as the problem of Whole Man. Before analyzing the problem of Whole Man we must be clear about the two terms – Whole and Man.

According to Encarta Dictionary: English (North America) the word "whole" signifies "complete, including all parts or aspects, with nothing left out."

To know about the origin of Man, there are different origin myths which can throw ample light on the origin of Man. According to Robert L. Carneiro:

Beliefs about the origin of human beings fall into three main types: (1) they have always existed on earth, (2) they did not always exist but were created in some way, and (3) they previously existed, but in another world, and had somehow to be brought to this one. ("Origin Myths")

According to Peter Landry:

Man is not of divine origins, nor is he headed that way; he is not perfect, nor is he perfectible. He is what he is; by nature formed.

("On the Nature of Man")

Psychology and theology have different perceptions about the nature of Man. According to Owen C. Thomas:

By psychology is meant the systematic or scientific investigation and interpretation of the mental and emotional life of man, his consciousness and behaviour. By theology is meant the systematic investigation and interpretation of the content of the Christian faith. ("Psychology and Theology on the Nature of Man" 41)

The great Greek philosopher, Protagoras (5th C. BCE) made a revolutionary claim that "man is the measure of all things." This claim gave rise to a discussion whether man is complete in himself and if he is complete then what are the characteristics which complete his being and make him whole in the true sense of the word. In due course of time, questions relating to ethics, morality, determinism and free will also appeared. And all these questions prepared the land for cultivation for the dramatists to come.

Dramatists from Phrynicus and Aeschylus to Shakespeare and Arthur Miller have attempted to investigate the diverse aspects of human life in their plays:

There are three major events in the history of world drama. These are the emergence of classical tragedy in ancient Greece, the renaissance of the tragic form in sixteenth-century England and seventeenth-century France, and finally the more diffuse tragic drama of modern civilization, written and performed in the period of industrial capitalism since 1880. (Orr xi)

Arthur Miller believed in the Greek interpretation of life which insists on the wholeness of life. Similarly Miller's concept of a play is also influenced by Greek concept of play which advocates that a play should include everything which makes man's life beautiful as well as sensuous. Miller, in his plays, never tries to disguise the deficiencies of the individual and society:

The main business of [Greek] life was to illuminate some coherent meaning to the whole human career. And for the plays to be involved so consistently in that kind of quest must indicate that the audience was also. At the same time we know that they were nuts about athletics, human beauty, sensuous life. In other words, we're not dealing with a monastery. There was a wholeness of spirit that is enviable. (Balakian 162)

Miller's plays are a trajectory of the diverse human emotions, feelings and situations. The questions related to individual and family, individual and society, good and evil, appearance and reality, past and present, capitalism and Marxism, individual liberty and state power, determinism and free will haunt Miller's literary output.

Miller's plays are deeply affected by the devastating impact of the Great Depression of 1929 which turned the whole economic system of US upside down. It is this mega event in the history of US which disturbed not only economic system but also human relations. Family as a unit is considered most powerful factor in American society. But as a result of the Depression, disintegration in the family and as a result of it alienation of the individual from society was but natural. As a result of

Depression, American myth of success of individual was shattered to pieces. Miller tells in an interview:

They couldn't cope. The impact was incalculable. These people were profound believers in the American dream. The day the money stopped their identity was gone . . . I do n't think America ever got over the depression. (qtd. in Bigsby, Introduction 1)

Depression had caused problems of survival for writers, actors, producers, and directors and all sorts of people who earned their bread and butter through the theatre. To save these people from starvation, government established Federal Theatre which had nation-wide range. For some time, Miller worked with the Federal Theatre.

The Man Who Had All the Luck (1944) was Miller's first Broadway play. It was not a success. It closed after four days. This failure frustrated him and he tried his hand at novel writing – he wrote Focus which throws light on anti-Semitism. The novel proved a grand success. He had written his play *All My Sons* during war period which was staged in 1947. This play proved remarkably successful. As a result of success on the stage, he got sudden wealth, but his radical views made him feel guilty for his sudden wealth; so he took a job in a factory which he could not continue for more than a week. He says:

"I couldn't think of myself any longer as being allied to the working class because the working class were busy being middle class." (qtd. in Bigsby, Introduction 2)

After *All My Sons* came *Death of a Salesman* at the time of economic boom. The play depicts a strong urge for success, urge for money, urge for name and fame.

During his university days at Michigan, Miller happened to go to Chicago and saw a performance of Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*. This play made a deep and lasting impression on Miller's career as a dramatist:

(The telling line, "Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills", seemed to epitomize the attitude of the thirties toward the false ideals of the twenties.) He thought a great deal about the change the Depression had wrought in his family, as in so many others. He considered the values that had caused so many Wall Street suicides when men were forced to face financial failure. (Gould 249)

In the plays which Miller wrote during his university days, he set the tone and tenor of his future plays, that is, he was to lay emphasis on moral responsibility of the individual within and outside the family and severe indictment of free enterprise and free market concept which did not bother about moral responsibility towards society:

He was forming the concepts of moral responsibility within the family which were to furnish the central themes of his plays, particularly, the relationship between the father and son. Extending from there to the family of man, he placed the responsibility for the general welfare of the masses, or the individual; it was therefore, immoral for one man to amass great wealth at the expense of the many, and it was immoral to hold financial, material wealth the yardstick of a successful life. This in turn led him to an appraisal of the injustices, the sins committed in the name "free enterprise", the tendency to condone any means to achieve success. In his plays Arthur Miller was to question and to sit in judgment against the false values of the past and present, as yet a distant outcome of his college years, but already clearly outlined in his early manuscript plays. (Gould 249 -250)

All My Sons (1947) was produced by Harold Clurman; Elia Kazan directed it. The play opened on January 29, 1947; it was a great success, and won Drama Critics Award. Commercial theatre of Broadway had recognised the merit of Arthur Miller. His next play Death of a Salesman also was a box office success. It won him Drama Critics Award for the best play of the season (1949), and Pulitzer Prize. As regards Death of a Salesman Jean Gould makes a very significant observation:

Here the playwright not only placed on trial the moral values of his central character – Willy Loman the salesman – but a society that by competition compels its individuals to forsake native talents in favour of achieving material success, at the price of human dignity. Willy Loman might have been a superb craftsman, but he is forced by the demands of a mechanised world to run pantingly in search of will – o' – the – wisp, financial wealth. He takes on the vapid, superficial life of the salesman, the false heartiness, the emptiness, the loneliness, covered up by colossal bluff, the fleeting pleasure of a sportive fling, and the anodyne of alcohol. (252 -253)

Anti-Communist hysteria bred by McCarthyism in America was instrumental in setting up HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee). It was a committee of the House of Representatives which started witch hunt of the present and former Communists, and their fellow workers and fellow travelers. In order to expose the evil of Fascist trend in the contemporary American society in the form of HUAC; he went back to the Salem witch-hunt and Salem witch trials of 1692 America in The Crucible and thus reminded the American people in particular and the world in general, of the evil design and evil consequences of the contemporary McCarthyian witch -hunt. Towards the end of 1950's, he wrote A View from the Bridge which highlights betrayal at personal and social level. This play also highlights, through betrayal the denial of responsibilities at personal and social level. During sixties

came *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy* and towards the end of sixties came *The Price*.

After the *Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* highlight the question of Holocaust, Fascism, human betrayal, and moral bankruptcy of Man.

Towards the end of sixties, whole of America itself was a grand stage of demonstrations, public rallies and marches, social and political conflicts against America's military interventions in Vietnam. Miller vehemently abhorred, despised and criticised America's military intervention in Vietnam and declared this act as a "criminal engagement which showed a side of American civilization, "I would rather not think about." (qtd. in Bigsby, Introduction 5)

In 1968 he attended National Democratic Party Convention and mobilised delegates against war in Vietnam. He also became President of an international organization of writers PEN, and raised his voice against victimization and imprisonment of writers including Solzhenitsyn of Soviet Union.

Towards the end of seventies, Miller wrote *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, which depicts his experience in 1970's in Czechoslovakia where the room of his hotel was bugged with microphones by government spies. He had a meeting with the writers in this room, but the writers remain fully alert and conscious of the presence of unseen listeners, therefore, to save themselves from the eyes and ears of the spies, they had to manipulate language which carried double meaning, though this manipulation of language may not be treated as a healthy characteristic of the art and artist. It refers to the totalitarian tendencies of the powers of the State. US President Richard Nixon during seventies had himself bugged his own office! This phenomenon posed a very pertinent problem and question – how to define reality. In 1984 he told the audience of National Theatre in London:

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. (qtd. in Bigsby, Introduction 6)

Miller's obsession with the past in play after play is not simply a prank, whim or gimmick of an eccentric, but the conscious effort of a committed artist who treated past as the integral link in the chain of time, and decried and denounced the tendency of the Americans to deny history or wipe out the past. And past also carried some sort of lesson or warnings so that we may not repeat the blunders or mistakes severing our connection with moral values and social responsibilities.

American authors, in general, are prone to ignoring the past, as if they have no roots and they perceived their beginning with themselves

only as if they had no ancestors, no cultural background. Miller hits at this tendency of the American artists and writers in a very eloquent and ironical manner. American writer treats himself "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)

In *Death of a Salesman*, *After the Fall* and *Timebends*, Miller brings past into play simply because we carry past in our head and this very past is the substance of our present. Past carries moral relevance for the present. It is in the light of this significance of the past that Miller says:

I've come out of the playwriting tradition which is Greek and Ibsen where the past is the burden of man and it's got to be placed on the stage so that he can grapple with it. That's the way these plays are built. It's now grappling with them, it's the story of how the birds came home to roost. (qtd. in Bigsby, *Arthur Miller and Company* 201)

Miller, in *The Crucible*, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, *The Ride Mount Morgan* lays emphasis on human fallibility. If public behaviour is corrupt, it is projection of private flaws. Thus, Miller pays greater attention to individual and private relationships and the moral flaws found in individual and human relations get prominence in his plays. Miller says: ". . . the way I see, there are no public issues. They are all private issues." (qtd. in Bigsby, *Introduction* 8)

Bigsby rightly remarks:

The dilemma of Willy Loman, of John Proctor, and of Phillip Gellburg, has to do with the substance and integrity of their identities, yet the battles which they wage with themselves are related to larger issues. Denial and betrayal are marks not only of the individual but of a society whose leaders deny that very mutuality which is their justification for existence. (*Introduction* 8)

Actually, Holocaust lurks behind *The Crucible* and *After the Fall*. *Incident at Vichy*, and *Broken Glass* treat Holocaust as the subject matter of the play – it is because of "his commitment to reinventing the moral world whose historical irrelevance was declared so peremptorily merely sixty years ago. The lessons which he learned from Depression, as the familiar world dissolved leaving only the necessities of survival, were projected to some ultimate point in Nazi Germany." (Bigsby, *Introduction* 8)

Arthur Miller was also quite aware of "the coercive power of myth and the constant temptation to deny responsibility for the world we make." (Biggsby, Introduction 8) Miller warns against the above said myth and temptation, and exhorts the writers to be truth tellers.

One of the most important critical essays Miller wrote is entitled "On Social Plays". This essay served as an introduction to *A View from the Bridge* (1955 edition). The essay reveals Miller's concept of "Whole Drama". Gerald Weales remarks:

Although there is a kind of vagueness about the essay, as there is so much of Miller's critical writing, it does make clear that he believes that the serious playwright must write social drama. For him, however, the genre is not simply "an arrangement of society's evils". The term social drama which he calls the Whole Drama must recognise that man has a subjective and an objective existence that he belongs not only to himself and his family but to the world beyond. This definition fits the four plays that made Miller famous – *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). With a shift in emphasis it also fits the two plays produced in 1964. (96)

As a consequence of his faith in subjective and objective existence of man, Miller deals with his characters at psychological and social levels. Characters are portrayed with their identity and image in society:

If a playwright is to be concerned with both psychological man and social man, as Miller's definition of social drama says he must, he is inevitably forced to deal with the problem of identity. This is what Miller has always written about, and it is as clearly the subject of *Incident at Vichy* as it is of *All My Sons*. In Miller's early work, each of his heroes is involved in a struggle which results from his acceptance for his rejection of an image of himself – an image that grows out of the values and the prejudices of his society. That society may be as narrow as Eddie Carbone's neighbourhood in *A View from the Bridge* or as wide as contemporary America that helped form the Willy Loman we meet in *Death of a Salesman*. Although this preoccupation may be found in most of Miller's short stories, in his novel *Focus*, and in his very early plays, it can be seen most clearly where it is most effectively presented – in his major plays, beginning with *All My Sons*. (Weales 96-97)

At the time of publication of his essay "On Social Plays" in 1955, theatre in the United States was preoccupied with the individual and its psychological analysis. Social context did not find place in the plays; it was limited to the boundaries of the family, Miller endeavoured to expand the vision of theatre:

. . . for him [Miller] there were means to a larger end and the end was what we isolate today as social. That is, the relation of man as a social animal rather than his definition as a separated entity, was the dramatic goal. (Miller, "On Social Plays," 51)

In this essay Miller opines that integration of the psychological and the social was Greek playwrights' marvellous contribution to the domain of drama. Miller argues that the value of drama increases "as it deals with more and more of the whole man, not either his subjective or his social life alone, and the Greek was unable to conceive of man or anything else except as a whole." (Miller, "On Social Plays," 54)

Thus, it is amply clear that the concept of "Whole Man" treats man not in isolation from society. This concept given by Greeks treats individual as integral part of society. A man achieves the status of "Whole Man" only when he realises that he is responsible to society for the actions he performs:

The wholeness or integration could be achieved by the individual only when the individual considered himself as a citizen of an entity larger than the nuclear family. (Murphy 11)

Individual's relationship to family and further to society is marked by conflict between the interests of individual, interests of family, and interests of society. However, characters in Miller's plays are forced to identify and evaluate themselves in terms of society, and thus the conflict between individual and society resolves in the realisation of individual's social identity, duty, and responsibility:

The concept of the drama of the "whole man" – psyche and citizen, individual subject and social actor – has driven Miller's own playwriting from very early on. The dialectic of personal self actualisation in conflict with social responsibility informs his work from beginning to end. (Murphy 12)

Miller traces the concept of the "Whole Man" in the Greek drama. He observes:

In Greece, the tragic victory consisted in demonstrating that the polis – the whole people – had discovered some aspect of the Grand Design which also was the right way to live together. If the American playwrights of serious intent are in anyway the sub-conscience of the country, our claims to have found that way are less than proved. For when the Greek thought of the right way to live it was a whole concept; it meant a way to live that would create citizens who were brave in a war, had a sense of responsibility to the polis in peace, and were also developed as individual personalities. (Miller, "On Social Plays," 55)

Thus, it is amply clear that in Greek drama there was a lot of emphasis on individual's responsibility to society during war and peace, and in being responsible to state and society for his conduct and actions, he also gained a highly dignified stature as individual in society, and as integral part of society. We can safely presume that in Greek drama individual was not allowed to shirk his social responsibility. And it is through the performance of social responsibility that he attained the stature and status of the "Whole Man".

In Miller's plays we come across heroes who are very touchy about their self respect, honour, and dignity in their family, and their name and respect in society. Due to guilt and betrayal on their part they lose their respectable status in family, and name in society. And in order to regain their respect and name, the heroes in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* commit suicide and in *A View from the Bridge* the hero, Eddie Carbone, challenges the offender, Marco; the hero fights against the offender, and ultimately meets a heroic end :

The respect which Miller's heroes long for is, not so much their own as society's. 'Give me my name', they all insist. The individuality they crave must be endorsed by their neighbours. (Gascoigne 176)

As regards political overtones in *The Crucible*, it is pertinent to point out that witch-hunt in Salem created mass hysteria, and the individual had to make a false confession before a false court. During witch-hunt trials Salem was governed by theocracy. Contemporary similarity of the Salem trials lies in the fact that at the time of McCarthy trials too, in 1950's, mass hysteria was generated and created, and individuals were pressed and coerced to confess their allegiance to communism, and to save themselves from punishment they were asked to name the fellow travellers.

Bentley does not find any parallel between the Salem witch -hunt trials in 1692 and McCarthian witch -hunt of communists in 1960's. He observes:

You may say of *The Crucible* that it isn't about McCarthy, it's about love in the seventeenth century. (Eric Bentley, "What is Theatre", Dobson, 1957, Quoted by Gascoigne (Bomber) *Twentieth Century Drama*, Chapter: Arthur Miller, qtd p. 178, article: 174 -183)

However, to seek only love and ignore political aspect in The Crucible is simply to overlook the political implications of the Salem witch-trials, which are very relevant to explore and evaluate the motivations and objectives which McCarthy and his cohorts had in mind while generating mass hysteria against communists in America simply to punish the adherents or sympathisers of communist ideology. Joseph Wood Krutch, in a very convincing manner, finds parallel or similarity

between Salem witch-hunt trials and McCarthyian witch-hunt of communists. His observation merits our serious attention. Joseph Wood Krutch is of the opinion that while writing *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller had McCarthyian trials had at the back of his mind:

The *Crucible* laid its scene at the time of the Salem witch trials with the obvious intention of drawing a parallel between them and the 'security trials' of the present day. Its validity depends upon the validity of the parallel and those who find it invalid point out, whereas witchcraft was pure delusion subversion is a reality, no matter how unwisely or intemperately it may be combat ed. (325)

Joseph Wood Krutch comments, actually express the general reaction of those who did not approve of the victimisation of communists in the name of danger to national security. Gascoigne finds similarity of a deeper significance both trials generated "mass hysteria". The crux of the matter is that both trial generated fear in the p syche of individual and society:

The *Crucible's* validity in no sense depends on the validity of the parallel, though it is understandable that the date of its appearance, 1953, should have made its first critics judge it by the narrow standards of topicality. Its only connection with the security trials is that Miller's own experience of the McCarthy scare (and he has described how his friends were soon cutting him in the streets) was the stimulus for a play about mass hysteria and the individual caught up in its evil. (Gascoigne 178)

About Miller's status among his contemporaries, Gascoigne finds Tennessee Williams exhibiting emotional streak and his plays lack in depth but Miller's intellectual, didactic and deeply embedded personal occupations find place at the centre of his plays.n In brief, Miller through his plays tried to bring in the same moral order which the Greeks introduced in their plays and which in the later ye ars almost vanished from the plays. The concept of "whole man" keeps Miller's plays at par with the Greek plays. Like Greeks, throughout his life he tried to construct a moral world.

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Deepak Chaswal

Assistant Professor

Dept. Of English

Maharishi Markandeshwer University

Mullana, Ambala 133001

Haryana, India

Pradeep Kumar Chaswal

Assistant Professor

Dept. Of English

Maharishi Markandeshwer University

Mullana, Ambala 133001

Haryana, India

NAME: Arthur Miller OCCUPATION: Playwright BIRTH DATE: October 17, 1915 DEATH DATE: February 10, 2005 EDUCATION: University of Michigan PLACE OF BIRTH: New York City, New York PLACE OF DEATH: Roxbury, Connecticut BEST KNOWN FOR: Arthur Miller was an American playwright who combined social awareness with a concern for his characters' inner lives, such as in *All My Sons* and *The Crucible*. Photo by Elliot Erwitt. Marilyn Monroe, with quote by Arthur Miller. He could just as easily been talking about... The stage on screen *The Salesman*: Arthur Miller's American classic reframed in Iran. Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning film about two married actors has intriguing parallels with the play they are performing. Published: 11 May 2021. *The Salesman*: Arthur Miller's American classic reframed in Iran. June 2020. Top 10s Top 10 books about witch-hunts. As Wendell Pierce takes on the role of Willy Loman at the Young Vic in London, revisit the history of Arthur Miller's classic play. Gallery. Published: 6 May 2019. Arthur Miller Revisited. Deepak Chaswal and Pradeep Kumar Chaswal. Greek literature is replete with philosophical ideas. Arthur Miller believed in the Greek interpretation of life which insists on the wholeness of life. Similarly Miller's concept of a play is also influenced by Greek concept of play which advocates that a play should include everything which makes man's life beautiful as well as sensuous. Miller, in his plays, never tries to disguise the deficiencies of the individual and society When great American playwright Arthur Miller died in 2005, *The New York Times* wrote in his obituary: "Mr. Miller grappled with the weightiest matters of social conscience in his plays and in them often reflected or reinterpreted the stormy and very public elements of his own life."