



Arthur Miller's Plays are both Social Dramas and Tragedies

□ DR. Kirti Jain

INTRODUCTION :

Miller's tragedies deal with burning social issues which affect the characters both on the material plane and the spiritual and psychological plane. He examines the role of modern man in society. All My Sons is a tragedy that arises out of an inner conflict between the hero's affection and loyalty he had for his father and his concept of justice and universal brotherhood which the father has offended. In Death of a Salesman it is the social forces that cause tragedy. The recurring themes of Miller's tragedies are the relationship of the individual to society and the personal responsibility that the individual owes to society and vice versa. In Death of a Salesman the struggle is between father and son on the issues of recognition and forgiveness. The Crucible is a domestic tragedy in which Miller "criticizes or comments upon the structure of society." In this tragedy, Miller dramatizes the principles of human behavior inherent in a civilized society.

Miller's tragedies deal with burning social issues which affect the characters both on the material plane and the spiritual and psychological plane. In them the playwright shows a deep concern for modern man. He examines the role of modern man in society. According to Miller, man is seen constantly in the process of becoming, shaped and not merely stimulated by his environment, i.e., his fate. But this is also subject to change. It has no eternal metaphysical basis. According to Miller, tragedy must question everything, must question man's totality. Hence the onslaught on social conditions in post-Ibsen drama and the optimistic premise underlying the tragedy. Implied is the social reformer's zeal to oppose the social conditions responsible for man's tragic

lot. Miller's strong social consciousness inspired him to analyse the causes of society's evils and the modern man's role in it. In most of his plays, his "focus remains on the family, man, woman, two sons and their relation and responsibility to each one as well as society."

Clifford Odets also shows a deep social concern in his works. Like him Miller presents man placed against the background of his milieu. Therefore, Miller's plays are both social dramas and tragedies. All My Sons is a tragedy that arises out of an inner conflict between the hero's affection and loyalty he had for his father and his concept of justice and universal brotherhood which the father has offended. In Death of a Salesman it is the social forces that cause tragedy. Here Miller tries to justify the

use of common man as the tragic hero. In *The Crucible*, the hero John Proctor is a farmer. In the conflict he gains in 'size', giving the impression of the high-born in our minds, though it is this sense that becomes the cause of the hero's calamity. In *The Crucible*, the focus is on the impact of the social problems and social conditions, both on the tragic hero and the social context in which he is living and working. In *The View from the Bridge*, fate is seen to some extent as external to a man, a condition of environment. But here it is expressed largely through individual persons rather than conventions and institutions. Thus the concern with the social problem, the social injustice and its effect on the lives of the characters is found in the plays of Arthur Miller. And in Miller's opinion the emphasis on social problems does not in any way mar the high seriousness of his plays or diminish their tragic quality.

In *All My Sons*, Miller throws light on the social issues, in the tradition of the social problem plays of Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. He regards the human situations as the product of forces outside the individual. According to him, the tragedy inherent in the situation is the consequence of the individual standing face to face against an order that degrades him. He also believes that the function of tragedy is to reveal the truths concerning our society which frustrate and deny man his right to personal dignity; and the enlightenment of tragedy

is the discovery of the moral law that support this right.

The recurring themes of Miller's tragedies are the relationship of the individual to society and the personal responsibility that the individual owes to society and vice versa. From this interaction evil also comes out which is the outcome of the conflict between the social pressure and the individual's will to exist and succeed. In *All My Sons* Miller pictures the individual's responsibility to society. Joe Keller supplied a number of defective engines to P-40 aircraft directly, thus causing the death of the pilots. When his son who is himself an army officer comes to know of this fact, he disowns his father out of frustration. Now Joe who has lost his son's love feels horrified at his own crime.

Death of a Salesman also deals with a similar theme which here expands itself out of the family circle into society. It "breaches the questions of a social status, social honor and recognition which expands its vision and lifts out of the merely particular toward the fate of the generality of men." The Depression that shook America gave Miller this compassionate understanding of the insecurity of man in modern industrial civilization. John Gassner also finds in Arthur Miller, "a dominant influence of moral passion and strong sense of social responsibility". Thus Miller sees tragedy closely in the background of the family

in particular and the society in general. In *Death of a Salesman* the modern concept of social tragedy is well exemplified. In it the struggle is between father and son on the issues of recognition and forgiveness. But this struggle extends itself out of the family circle and when it comes into society, it "involves the vital questions of social status, social honor and recognition which expand its vision and life it out of the merely particular toward the fate of the generality of men." Willy Loman is "the most representative member of our commercial society." Instead of any tragic flaw in the classical sense Willy's tragedy is the result of his interaction with the society around him. He does not so much suffer or die for his own lapses or faults as on account of the Great American Dream according to which a man can attain material success by means of personal attractiveness, personal charm, personal magnetism and personal contacts. Willy always harbors the belief that his career as a salesman would take him to the top and that his old age would thus be secure. More than that, he has been weaving bright images in his fancy regarding the future of his older son, Biff, who is a handsome young man and a popular football champion. Willy clings to his belief till the end even though Biff himself feels disillusioned. In his case social laws have replaced fate as a man's relentless enemy. In this, this tragedy differs from the typical earlier tragedy.

This social law suggests that a person who has failed in society has no right to live. This social law is not administered through any legislation, but it keeps man in its powerful grip rendering him helpless, much in the same manner as Fate or Destiny renders the tragic hero helpless and cripples his judgment. Miller, through the tragedy of Willy Loman, suggests that the law of success has a powerful grip on the majority of Americans and it is this grip that is responsible for the tragedy, and not any inherent tragic flaw.

Thus the sole cause of Willy's tragedy is the American society and not the traditional 'hamartia'. His sufferings are due to the nature and set up of the American society, which is highly commercialized and competitive. The social system of which Willy is a typical product has an iron hold upon him. This system crushes him under its grinding iron wheel. In this respect Miller's tragedy is close to Galsworthy's. The law of success dictates that America is a great country and that there is no room in it for a man who proves a failure. In other words a man who cannot make use of the formula of success has no right to live in America. Thus, Miller intends to convey that a man is a victim of his environment and of social forces in the midst of which he lives. The social forces in this play have a role comparable to that of Fate or Destiny in ancient Greek tragedy.

Miller does not treat drama as a mere aesthetic exercise. He writes with a strong social and moral purpose. Miller knew that audience too needed this kind of drama. Once he spoke in an interview, "Not only modern drama, but literature in general-and this goes back a long, long distance in history-posites the idea of value, of right and wrong, good and bad, high and low, not so much by setting forth these values as such, but by showing, so to speak, the wages of sin. In other words, when for instance, in *Death of a Salesman*, we are shown man who dies for want of some positive, viable human value, the play implies, and it could not have been written without the author's consciousness, that the audience did believe something different. In other words, by showing what happens when there are no values, I, at least, assume that the audience will be compelled and propelled toward a more intense quest for values that are missing."

His work is flavored by ethical fervor rather than aesthetic exuberance. He finds his dramatic art a god-given gift to stir the people from their slumber and make them understand what direction the great issues of life are taking. He plays the role of a missionary who awakens the people and leads them to think great and noble. In most of his dramas, Miller strives to improve the state of the world. Thus, he associates tragedy with social and moral reform.

The *Crucible* is a domestic

tragedy in which Miller "criticizes or comments upon the structure of society." In this tragedy, Miller dramatizes the principles of human behavior inherent in a civilized society. John Proctor struggles to secure his personal dignity in the society and prefers to accept death rather than to live without a name. He is an ordinary person like an ordinary salesman in the *Death of a Salesman* who becomes the victim of existing social order. But in his situation, he is a true tragic hero. Miller asserts that the modern tragedy may dramatize very well the predicament of a common man. He says, "I believe that the common man in as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were." Opposing the idea of associating the tragic hero with the status of a king or a noble man of traditional tragedy, Miller shows the influence of Ibsen on his dramatic thinking and approach. This influence is certainly very profound and pervasive. Henrik Ibsen broke away from the traditional role of the tragic hero by his writings like *An Enemy of the People* (1882), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), all of which successfully established that tragedy could be conceived around the lives of professional middle class men and women and that there was no need to search a highly placed person to be seated on the throne of the tragic hero.

John Proctor, the protagonist, is shown as swimming against the current

of popular beliefs and conventions. In the drama, he represents the modern consciousness that refuses to confirm to the popular beliefs. He is living in the midst of greed and jealousy of the people. He raises his voice against the dictator of a theological state that is intolerant of the act of non-conformists. Proctor is a strong individuality. He cannot fit himself in the mould of the society. The Proctor-Abigail episode serves to emphasize the conflict between individuality and authority. In fact, he acts as a deifier of society. But Miller makes it clear that in sleeping with Abigail Williams, Proctor has become a sinner not only against a moral norm of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct. In fact, "Miller's intention here is to write an ethical social play, that would be sharp, that would lift out of the morass of subjectivism, the squirming, single defined process which would show that the sin of public terror is that it divests man of conscience, of himself. The play undoubtedly has set for himself a high degree of ethical awareness and it is this what makes the play an excellent work. In this play, the social and artistic approach of the playwright is quite revealing. In the beginning, the primary aim of the playwright is his consciousness of social and historical truths but as the play advances, by the choice of his moral design, Miller imparts a new meaning to it. Miller himself admits, "the form, the

shape, the meaning of *The Crucible* were all compounded out of the faith of those who were hanged."

In this play, Miller has shown a different approach to tragedy writing. Here the historical, social and tragic merge together and thus he succeeds in creating a mounting tragic intensity in the play. In *The Crucible* Miller is not content with the writing of a realistic social drama, but he has created a universal work by blending the realistic and the social with the poetic and the tragic. Hence, *The Crucible* impresses us as an effective tragedy.

A View from the Bridge is equally a grim and effective tragedy. "At times it assumes mythical dimensions, chokes the reader or audience, forces on them a sense of insecurity, imbalance and fear, and ultimately calls for a kind of order, reformation or metamorphosis. Some critics have called this play a melodrama, which seems to be a harsh judgment. A View for the Bridge is undoubtedly a deep and disturbing tragedy." This tragedy, as Robert Hogan also points out, "seems an attempt to utilize the austere technique of Sophocles in a modern setting."

In his discussion of tragedy, Miller differentiates the Greek tragedy from his own vision of the form. Greek tragedy is substantially different from the Christian tragedy. In Greek tragedy Fate is projected as a factor residing for most part in forces outside of the man

concerned, i.e., the tragic hero. The destiny of the hero is foretold by oracles, or made the consequence of actions by the gods-the consequence of their quarrels and judgments. In Greek tragedy the action is prompted often by events for which the hero is not responsible. But in Christian tragedy, there is a sense of greater personal freedom implied. In this tragedy, man is free to act morally, according to the basic assumption commonly accepted. The battle ground in this tragedy is the soul of the hero. In Greek drama, the situation is given and prefixed. The dramatist concentrates on the way in which his characters respond to the grip the events have on them. In a Christian tragedy, neither the situation nor the destiny is known beforehand. But there is a fixed system of moral imperatives resting on divine authority. There is an established order, and the tragedy works itself out largely in terms of the hero's conscious or accidental violation of that order.

In Arthur Miller's tragedies can be seen a fusion of the Greek and the Christian elements. According to M. W. Steinberg, "Miller's tragedies, then, tend to fluctuate, often uneasily, between Greek drama with its emphasis on external causes (though Miller tries to avoid its fatalism) and Christian drama, which involves freedom and responsibility and which seeks the source of tragedy in the individual. His drama is unlike both in that for the most part it

rejects a religious framework. Miller, like most modern tragedians, has been seeking a new explanation of the human situation with its tragic aspects. He seeks it in naturalistic and humanistic terms, not transcendental ones."

As in Christian drama, the situation is not given; but as in Greek drama, the forces making for tragedy are often outside the protagonist. In these tragedies, the protagonist is caught in circumstances not of his own making. But unlike Greek drama, the forces that determine or are the fate of the protagonist are not beyond his reach. Hence, in Miller's plays the possibility of decisive action is held out, and the will of the hero is called into play.

Thus, Miller should not be seen merely as a social dramatist. His tragedies are certainly above the level of 'social' dramas. No doubt, Miller is a part of the tradition which descends from Ibsen to Shaw, but "few of his plays are 'social' in the usual sense of that term. Their thrust does not seem to be outward towards the changing of political systems so much as inward the world of private relations and emotions."

References

1. Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays.
2. Pramila Singh.
3. Robert Brustein, Why Americans Plays are not Literature.
4. American Theater', in Realism in

-
- | | | |
|---|-----|--|
| Modern American Theater, ed. John Russell, etc. | 9. | Tragedy and the Common Man. |
| 5. Arthur Miller, <i>The Family in Modern Drama</i> , pp. 34-35. | 10. | Brewed in <i>The Crucible</i> , <i>The New York Times</i> (March 9, 1958). |
| 6. Henry Popkin, <i>Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter</i> Quoted by Pramila Singh. | 11. | Kailash Chander, 'Neurosis, Guilt and Jealousy in <i>A View from the Bridge</i> ', ed. Atma Ram, <i>Perspectives on Arthur Mille</i> . |
| 7. 'Morality and Modern Drama', Interview with Philip Gelb, <i>The Theater Essays of Arthur Mille</i> . | 12. | 'Arthur Miller and the Idea of Modern Tragedy', ed. R. W. Corrigan, <i>Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays</i> . |
| 8. Gerald Weales, <i>American Drama since World War II</i> (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962). | | |
-
-