



A MICROSCOPIC VIEW OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIP IN THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller a prolific American dramatist is associated with the ritual of social dramas of the thirties. The works of Arthur Miller are the upshot of the bewildered and protesting age. His plays are described as time-bombs virtually placed under the edifice of Americanism. Arthur Miller uncovers the stark realities of his contemporary's world with an ethical approach towards life.

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As Literature being study of life, expresses the changing conditions of the society, there is certainly a close relation between individual and society. According to W.H. Hudson, “we have to investigate the literature of any given moment in connection with the then existing society.” Hence, an author is not an inaccessible entity but the product of the age in which he lives and works. The political, social, religious, scientific, and economic conditions of a particular period affect its literature. The thoughts and feelings, interests and ideas of an age enter into the making of its literature. The writer is influenced by the society and he also influences it in return. The element of individuality in a writer's work stamps its impress upon his age. This is how a writer succeeds in giving an abiding and universal appeal to his creation. Both Arthur Miller has presented a microscopic view of the society in his plays. Arthur Miller's social commitment is largely reflected in his discontent with the disintegration of values in the contemporary society.

Miller is concerned with the basic problem of individual in the society and finds that tragedy is the consequence of man's compulsion to evaluate himself justly, 'his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or evil in his environment. Miller has 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 including a brief and rocky marriage to Marilyn Monroe and his staunch refusal to cooperate with the red-baiting House Un-American Activities Committee. His reputation rests on a handful of his best-known plays, the dramas of guilt and betrayal and redemption that continue to be revived frequently at theaters all over the world .His works deal with the social conscience and Great Depression of his era, the event that he believed had a more profound impact on the nation than any other in American history, except, possibly, the Civil War. The impact of civil war and its after effects are well depicted in All My Sons, Crucible and Death of a Salesman. The central characters are seen in dilemma to reestablish the moral and social values which are losing their ground. Miller feels that the ultimate questions involved in any study of man are the questions of value. Plays are also written form moral reasons. Writers want to reorganize

the world morally or to discover the hidden forces of life and death. Usha Dutta says: Miller is concerned with the basic problem of the individual in his society and feels that tragedy is the consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, "his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or evil in his environment." Such statement taken out of context have tempted critics to call Miller a social determinist who sees man as victim of society.

An exclusive, moral code or set of values can be extracted from Miller's work. Miller's moral approach to fulfill the American dream is in line with writers like Milton, Camus, and Hemingway, in whom the moral concern gives the main stimulation to their work. Family is the basic element of the social organization which guarantees security and wellbeing of human being. In fact, "it is the key social unit within where we learn to love, come to terms with our aggressions, develop a conscience and acquire values." The plays of Arthur Miller provide a keen insight into the contemporary American society, highlighting the fractured bonds of family relations. What concerns Miller here in the most of his plays is the impinging of the public issue on the private conscience and the domestic circle of the family. His achievement here, to put it at its lowest, lies in the verisimilitude with which he creates not only a convincing, homely family, but also the sense of the flow of communal life in a suburban neighborhood. Miller felt that the rapport between man and society is the primary concern of man as far as human life in general and family life in particular is concerned. Like the Greek dramatists, Miller tried to highlight the importance of "whole man" which is the ideal model for human civilization. Miller's plays basically highlight the pathetic condition of the contemporary family life of American middle class. Miller was "a preacher who sermonizes on the pathetic martyrdom of an oppressed middle class."

His attempt in the plays is to merge public and private postures of modern man. In *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Price* one of the characters is shown as committed to family – they are Joe Keller, Willy Loman and Victor, respectively. These three plays prove that only genuine love, loyalty, compassion and piety, and moral responsibility in human relations can stop the erosion of cordial family relationships, and damage caused by industrial-commercial pressures of society. Miller imparts great importance to the concept of family: The concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares before the time we were conscious of ourselves. In the contrast, the concepts of Friend, Teacher, Employee, Boss, Colleague, Supervisor, and many other social relations came to us long after we gained consciousness of ourselves. They are thus in an objective rather than a subjective category.

Family relations are directly affected by societal perceptions and economic phenomenon which have become corrupt with the disintegration of the set of values that used to govern the human society in pre-industrial civilization. These values were based on the ideal of universal love, compassion, and shared commitment. *All My Sons* is based on real incidents in the life of a family during World War II. He says:

During an idle chat in my living room, a pious lady from the Middle West told of a family in her neighborhood which had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machinery to the Army. The war was then in full blast. By the time she had finished the tale I had transformed the daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind. Keller and Willy both do not let their sons face difficulty. Lost in the dream world of his own, Joe tells Kate that Chris will never raise an accusing finger at him: KELLER. There is nothing' he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son.

MOTHER. Joe, I tell you

KELLER. Nothing's bigger than that. And you're going' to tell him, you understand? I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head. In *Death of a Salesman*, we come across a very depressing portrait of sons paying no notice to their old father revealing that culture of commercial and industrial civilization, commanded by capitalist economy which plays havoc with the warmth of human relations in family and society. Linda remarks pathetically, "It sounds so old-fashioned and silly, but I tell you he put his whole life into you and you've turned your backs on him." And as an ideal wife, she makes her son understand the situation of their father:

A small man can be just exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty six years this March, opens up unheard of territories to their trademark and now in old age they take his salary away . . . For he's been on state commission, like a beginner, an unknown!

Family situation in *A View from the Bridge* relates to possessive nature of the protagonist, Eddie Carbone. He is so emotional and sentimental about his obsession with his wife's young niece, Catherine that he does not allow anybody even to look at her. He does not want that Catherine should do a job. Even the narrator Alfieri tells him in very plain words:

Eddie, I want you to listen to me. . . . A man works hard, he brings up a child, sometimes it's a niece, sometimes even a daughter, and he never realizes it, but through the years – there is too much love for the daughter, there's too much love for the niece. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

The Price is the continuation of *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, but this play, records a change in Miller's attitude towards family relationships. In this play the discord in familial ties is not attributed only to society. Human nature and human imperfections also play a significant role.

Arthur Miller's plays like *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Price* contain the theme of father son relations. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen had great impact on Arthur Miller, so Miller developed an inherent interest and fascination with this theme. *The Man Who Had All the Luck* contains the theme of father son relationship not so inherently, yet Miller saw the full potential of this theme in this play.

Miller never puts these relationships at the forefront of his plays, but uses them effectively to enforce and enhance the central plot and theme. Miller has dealt with the theme of 'father-son conflict' on a wider canvas. The conflict, crossing the domestic walls extends to the diverse implications of American idea of success. The conflict represents struggle between ideologies and values juxtaposed against materialistic approach towards life. Miller has himself said in *Death of a Salesman* that the play is not a simple struggle between father and son but it extends itself out of the family circle into society, it broaches those questions of social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular, towards the fate in general men. It may be said that "Willy's relationship with his sons is chiefly intended to increase his own reputation and sense of self-worth. He is proud of his sons' physical prowess and boasts of this to his neighbour Charley, clearly seeing his sons' physical success as a reflection of his own."

All My Sons is also the story based on father son relationship where Joe Keller, a small manufacturer, during the war allows some faulty engines to be shipped to the air force. When a number of planes crashed, Keller and his partner were brought to trial. Keller was finally released and his partner blamed, although Keller himself was really responsible. The theme is one of morality and money and the action centers on the attempt of Keller's son Chris to find the truth and to fix the responsibility and of Keller to avoid his responsibility.

Thus Miller's chief concern occurs in family and in the din of social, economical and political advancement; the marital relations are also not an exception to be escaped from the effect of over advancement. From the perusal of the plays, it becomes crystal clear that only genuine love, loyalty, compassion and piety, and moral responsibility in human relations can stop the erosion of cordial family relationships, and damage caused by industrial-commercial pressures of society. Miller talks of "love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family."

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