

Materialistic Pursuits in Arthur Miller's Plays

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Abstract: *In the dramas of the modern and postmodern writers of the twentieth-century, many of the vital and traditional elements are rendered inessential. For example, in the theatre of the absurd of Ionesco, Brecht, and Pinter, action is reduced to a few inert movements, language to mere mono or disyllabic words and short snatches if not to mere noises of hums and whimpers, settings to a mere roadside dried-up tree. In the post-modernist context, wherein human worth is measured in terms of one's materialistic achievements, there has been an inevitable paradigm shift in human values and, by extension, literary pursuits have thrown overboard all that is good and desirable in life and art. This paper throws an overview of drama in the period of Arthur Miller.*

I. Introduction

In the dramas of the modern and postmodern writers of the twentieth-century, many of the vital and traditional elements are rendered inessential. For example, in the theatre of the absurd of Ionesco, Brecht, and Pinter, action is reduced to a few inert movements, language to mere mono or disyllabic words and short snatches if not to mere noises of hums and whimpers, settings to a mere roadside dried-up tree. It happens so in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or at the most a living room as in Pinter's *The Caretaker*, dress to pieces of rags, characters to tramps and so on. In the post-modernist context, wherein human worth is measured in terms of one's materialistic achievements, there has been an inevitable paradigm shift in human values and, by extension, literary pursuits have thrown overboard all that is good and desirable in life and art. Dramaturgy has turned to hairsplitting on the questions of ontology, existential predicament, negation of the individual as also the individual as a limb and part of society and to the creation of characters. There is also a stasis of action as such. The bodily gestures are so mystifying that the plays ceased to put forth claims to any intrinsic worth of their own in terms of spectacle, too.

Even the so called simple, straightforward realistic plays as those of Miller offer endless opportunities for interpretations. The characters can be deconstructed to suit individual reader's standpoint and dialogues shown to carry numerous implicatures. They are mercilessly left to the vagaries of the varying perceptions and mindsets of the readers/audiences who could make as many meanings as their numbers. They may misconstrue a heaven out of hell, a hell out of heaven. There are certain qualities like fragmentariness, randomness, indeterminacy, collage, hybridization and so on which alone unified these plays and bound them into a group from which not a single play or character can stake any claim to the greatness of a Sophocles's or Shakespeare's.

The blame for the above situation cannot be shifted entirely on to the playwright. The salient feature of the above schools of play-writing which is a complete breakdown of values concomitant to the emphasis laid by humanity on economic aspects of life alone to the total exclusion of moral and sentimental aspects is due largely to the human condition. The contemporary life, especially after getting disenchanted with nearly two centuries of industrialization, decades of mind-boggling scientific and technological advancements, and the two great wars, became disenchanted, impartial, dejected, ugly, squalid, fragmented, grasping, irreligious, unspiritual, sexual, directionless, irrational and, to put it in one word, absurd. Naturally in an ambience like this, old conventions are silently swept away under the carpet and new conventions in tune with the changing world-views emerge and come to rule the roost.

Religion, anthropology, and classical learning which, in the past, served as rich repertoires of myths and rituals for the dramatists to draw parallels from vanished from the domain of dramatic art. The writers started exploring every avenue of modern life with its unashamedly materialistic orientations to create new myths, archetypes and legends for symbolizing the condition of the contemporary individual and the social milieu in which he exists. The contemporary life, especially that of the U.S. which is spreading its tentacles quite silently but speedily, making a virulent foray into the tradition-bound, convention-centric, ethnic-oriented African, Asian and Arab societies and unobtrusively replacing the human equations, has become ugly, sordid, fragmented, materialistic, disoriented, dehumanized, random, and indeterminate. These tenets of contemporary life have led to a shift in the notions of syntax, semantics, semiotics, and pragmatics of language and redefined the rhetoric and metaphor of literature.

In an absurd situation like this, one is dismayed over where life and art, as its reflector, are heading for. In a meaningless situation like this, we can not at all argue in favour of a going-back to the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare and other Classical and Renaissance writers. At least we can demand that plays dealing with social realism or the so-called problem plays/plays of idea invented by the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, and effectively and extensively utilized by G. B. Shaw, may be re-studied/re-enacted. Following the tradition of Ibsen and Shaw, Miller, in *All My Sons*, presents Joe Keller, the protagonist who is a member of the typical American bourgeoisie, as a corrupt, callous and selfish businessman selling his conscience for materialistic considerations. He also makes it clear through the dialogues between Keller and his son Chris which powerfully deliver the theme and sustain the tempo that the former is motivated to be what he is by the dictates of the American society and its dream for a wealthy, comfortable, and successful life. Keller is a product of a system which can be defined as follows in the words of Poupard: "The business of America is business." (1) Joe Keller is a limb of a corporation that is madly rushing towards success. Miller, in his "Introduction" to his *Collected Plays*, writes, "He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member ." (19) Keller tells his son Chris: "You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?" (CP115). This is the typical American mind-set. A man's life is his business, his money and nothing else. And a little later he adds: "Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya?" (CP 115). Joe Keller's statements are the quintessence of the murderous materialistic ground reality of the American society and throw light on the aspirations of an average American in the existing situation. He, in his mad-rush for economic success in a stiffly competitive society, symbolizes the American Dream.

His two sons, Chris and Larry, and the children of his partner, Ann and Frank, on the other hand, symbolize the other side of the American national character, viz., the concern of the well-meaning individuals for the common good of the society. They are the proponents of the rational man's love for his fellow men. In fact Chris and Larry are scathing and virulent in their attack on the inhuman, materialistic aspirations of their own father. Chris seethes with rage and fury: What is that, the word - the business? What the hell do you mean, you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? - What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? (CP 116). And that Larry also suffers from similar sentiments will be understood through our knowledge of how he felt when he read about the wicked deed of his dad through the papers. He writes about it to his love, Ann: I can't tell you how I feel - I can't bear to live any more. How could he have done that? I tell you, Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him - . (CP 126)

With the utmost economy of words, the author effectively creates explosive situations and fire-brand characters. Just four words: "I could kill him." The grand image of a soul in distress emerges. The same economy of words is adopted in the creation of other characters and situations also. The American dichotomous attitude to life is poignantly brought out in the dialectical materialism of the mother, Kate Keller. She wanted money, of course, but not the way her husband made it. She is categorical that her husband's evil cannot be exonerated even though he committed it for the welfare of the family. She tells him: "I don't excuse it that you did it for the family." (120) What a situation the man who did whatever he did only out of love and concern for his family finds himself in! With an extreme economy of language, the author arouses the imagination of the audience or readers, and there emerges a colossal picture, looming larger and larger, in the mind's eye leaving indelible impressions.

Following the great realistic and socialistic dramatic tradition of Ibsen and Shaw, Arthur Miller promoted such plays in the American scenario. Most of his plays are very sensitive dramatizations of contemporary problems arising out of the materialistic pursuits of man. They have potential enough to make a tragic hero of none too extraordinary a wartime arms manufacturer like Joe Keller or none too significant a salesman like Willy Loman. True to his realistic leanings and a flair for attacking the materialistic ambitions of the Americans, he raises ordinary citizens who could be the neighbours of anyone of us to the exalted position of tragic heroes. He does not invest his characters with any heroic, romantic, or divine qualities. There are no old world charms about them. Still they carry about them all the tragic aura of a king or a prince of the classical dramas. According to G. J. Watson,

Arthur Miller, who has been deeply influenced by Ibsen, clearly agrees with the great Norwegian's implied position, that the social status of the protagonist is irrelevant to the tragic effect, and emphasizes rather the importance of 'the self-conceived role'. (125) According to Raymond Williams, "Tragedy, for us, has been mainly the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him." (1) This exactly is the thesis of Arthur Miller. He places his characters in a context bombarded by materialistic and humanistic forces and ensures the destruction of those individuals who stand by materialism.

Miller's heroes, Keller and Loman are two very real products of the post-wars, economically-depressed but morally not bankrupt America wherein everyone was madly engaged in a pursuit for success, the infamous 'American Dream', by the side of a few fellow citizens voicing a serious concern about the depleting humanism in interpersonal and social contexts. The constructs were and still are: materialism sans humanism, an amalgam of materialism and humanism, and a humanistic materialism. In the complex American dichotomous situation, Miller's tragic protagonists get trounced. He wants the Americans to introspect and find a way out of this moral chaos which could be the worst form of a society's malaise.

In the American dramatic tradition of realism, though Eugene O'Neill, Strindberg, Albee, Miller and Williams are all shining stars with an irrefutable place and importance of their own, it is Miller who has successfully portrayed the American Dream with its merciless materialistic pursuits and the tragedy of the next door neighbour who has fallen a pathetic victim to and risen as a tragic hero in the race for success. Willy is also a tragic figure in that he woefully lives in a world of limited knowledge about his own ultimate success. He is not able to perceive the reality that he has already conquered the world materialistically as the last due on the housing loan has already been cleared by his wife out of the savings from his own proud selling career.

II. Conclusion

In his perseverant attempt at a realistic portrayal of the American Dream which means hard work and lot of money, Miller candidly analyses and lays bare how unethical and unsocial the pursuit of his fellow citizens is. And this he does without any recourse to any of the orthodox views and beliefs, a creative pitfall which many a writer could never fully and successfully escape all through his career. In the case of Miller, in spite of his well-known Marxist affiliations, one cannot come across any display of his ideological leanings.

Reference

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