ARThUR MILLER: A PLAYWRIGHT OF
THE 'COMMON MAN'

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The article provides insights into the life and works of America’s greatest playwright, Arthur Miller, born to Jewish parents who died on 11 February 2005. Heralded as the playwright of the ‘common man’, Miller has unraveled in his several plays the tragedy of ‘American Dream of Success’, which the rest of the world is eager to emulate, today.

Born in 1915 in New York in a humble Jewish family Arthur was brought up during the Great Depression years. Miller had to encounter many obstacles in his pursuit of academic career. Before he could establish himself as America’s significant playwright, Miller had to struggle for making a living working in warehouse and such other small time jobs. A Memory of Two Mondays, a short play is one of Miller’s autobiographical works to relate such accounts of the writer’s struggle. Ordeals never came in the way of Miller’s pursuit of the life of the mind. Miller himself to relate later, the work that initiated him to the literary career was the famous The Brothers Karamazov – the novel that he read during his travel time between his home and warehouse. Needless to speak of Miller’s leftist leanings and his compassion for those ordinary mortals who failed to fulfill ‘the dream’ that would be traceable in each of his plays.

Tragic Vision

Fundamentally Miller’s plays provide insights into the nature of American tragedy, which is indeed the tragedy of ‘every man’ everywhere. Born in a country (America) that has no tradition, history or mythology of tragedy (as in Europe or in the East), Arthur Miller investigated tragedy in the life of American ‘common man’. The concept of tragedy is alien, as it were, to American nation, which is personified by its ‘rugged’ individualism, courage, endurance and sacrifice right from its inception. American history relates only the ‘success story’ in all walks of life – whether in prairie or factory. There are but few tragic heroes like the one – Abraham Lincoln or Woodrow Wilson who died for a cause. As such there is but little source in American history for ‘tragic outlook’. It doesn’t mean the American life is completely free from all pangs of sufferings.
Arthur Miller is a notable exception who unravels the tragedy in American life in the portrayals of such protagonists as Willy Loman (Death of a Salesman, 1948), Joe Keller (All My Sons, 1947) and John Proctor (The Crucible, 1953). Heralded as the best of modern American playwright Arthur Miller is widely known for his Pulitzer Prize winning play (Death of a Salesman).

Significance of Miller lays in his admirable artistic ability to hold the mirror up to some of the gruesome tragic realities that surround the ‘common man’ in a rat race, man-eat-man society. The ordinary man is the hero of Arthur’s imaginary world. The theme of common man becoming a victim of the vicious environs that he inhabits is dealt with in all his plays.

The Crucible: ‘McCarthyism’

Of all Arthur’s plays, The Crucible, presents a different problem – ‘witch-hunting’ – that haunts almost every modern democratic state. Witch hunting is a mania of the modern state, which suspects often its individuals of anti-state activities. The state frames false charges and conducts unfair trials to persecute the people who ‘do not cooperate’ in it’s functioning. Miller weaves the tale of The Crucible based on an actual incidence of witch hunting that took place in 1692 in a town called Salem in Massachusetts Bay Colony. American nation was yet to be founded at that point of time.

The Crucible is an allegory on ‘McCarthyism’. The word, ‘McCarthyism’ became a synonym with ‘witch hunting’. In 1950’s a Congressional investigation was instituted under the leadership of senator Joseph McCarthy to investigate into the ‘un-American activities’ i.e., the suspected communist activities carried out by some Americans. The inquest was cruel and irrational that several innocents were proved to be the victims of McCarthyism, which was infamous for insane and vindictive trials.

It was significant that in order to dramatize the contemporary American realities, Miller turned to an event that occurred in 17th century America. The historical and psychological past perhaps better enabled Miller to reflect on the present McCarthyism in an objective and impassioned manner.

The Crucible relates the tragedy of whole Salem village in terms of the tragic tale of its protagonist John Proctor. John Proctor is a simple
and candid farmer, who at the end of the play ‘gives up’ (sacrifices) his life to uphold the ‘principle’ (truth) he believed in. Dweller of a remote country, Proctor whose ‘faults’ in life were: To till his land even on Sundays; Frequent absences for Church Sermons; Inability to remember the Ten Commandments and more importantly his disbelief in the existence of devil. He was a scrupulous man who followed his ‘conscience’ in the absence of well-meaning Church and the Pastor. But he was ‘accused’ of practicing ‘witch-craft’ for ‘not cooperating’ with the ways of Church, which were also the ways of theocratic government. The conflict between Proctor, the farmer and Rev. Parris, Rev. Hale and the Governor Danforth – the representatives of the State-Church Authority reaches the crucial stage in the play when Proctor refuses to ‘lie’ for the sake of ‘saving’ his own ‘life’. The moment is dramatic when the Governor Danforth suggests Proctor to ‘confess’ the ‘guilt’ that Proctor had not committed and thus avoid bloodshed and save life:

Cleave to no faith when faith brings blood. It is a mistaken law that leads you to sacrifice. Life... life is God’s most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it.

But most precious gift of God is not life at any cost. The precious gift for this simple farmer Proctor was the moral integrity and human dignity. By preferring to die rather than living false life, John Proctor raises human nobility to the highest level.

The Crucible is influenced by Henry Ibsen’s play The Enemy of the People. Ibsen’s play is a commentary on the democracy, which is a rule of the majority where even the truth is perverted. Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist of The Enemy of the People diagnosis the towns drinking water as been contaminated and write about it. The Municipal authority that was unwilling to provide good water for the citizens for reasons of financial crunch instead decides to pass a resolution by majority vote in the meeting that Dr. Stockmann has gone mad and people should not listen to him. Thus truth teller becomes mad and enemy of the people. Since democracy is the voice of the majority the people believe. Thus Ibsen dramatizes the limitations of the democracy. Similarly in The Crucible the truth teller becomes a victim of the authority and dies.

Death of a Salesman

Death of a Salesman is Miller’s most acclaimed play, which was to bring him fame and fortune at once. The play is a parody of the
American dream of success. The tragedy of the dream is well epitomized in the character of the protagonist, Willy Loman (‘low-man’). Sixty years old and married with two children, Willy Loman at the fag end of his career was goaded by the demon of success – to have more money, more comforts and took to salesman job. It was in fact he toiled all along his life for his business success. Drives through the country day and night, away from his home, dreaming the dream of fortune: “He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him any more, no one welcomes him. And, what goes through man’s mind, driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent?” But being aged and exhausted he finds himself misfit but he was unwilling to compromise and accept the reality and to give up the dream. At times he feels defeated when he thinks of the Company, which he served thirty-six years unceremoniously sends him home. The pressure of success even makes him schizophrenic. He thinks the time his dream is a delusion “I’m tired to the death. I couldn’t make it. Just I couldn’t make it Linda”. As he fails to fulfill his dream in life he decides to fulfill it in death. At the end, in order to fulfill the dream he chooses to die in an accident so that his family gets (20,000 dollars) insurance money, and his dream of success is fulfilled. In a tragic manner like Dr. Faustus who sold his soul to the devil for the sake of power and glory, Willy Loman for the sake of his dream dies an untimely death. Willy Loman has become an American every man; every American identifies himself in the character of Willy Loman.

The tragedy of Willy Loman is wrought by the ‘wrong dreams’; wrong values. In his mad pursuit of success, Willy alienates himself from even from his family and is left alone. He is self-deluded by his own ‘false pride’ and ‘false notions’. When Linda, Willy’s wife (was partly responsible for his dream) speaks of her husband’s pitiable state, she speaks for the millions of American average men who build castles in the air:

I don’t say he is a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.
All My Sons

Set in the World War II, All My Sons was Miller’s first successful play, which parodies the ‘greed for riches’. It relates a tale of the protagonist Joe Keller, who guided by the wrong ideal of ‘success’ supplies defective aeroplane parts to meet with the military order during the wartime. Then he regrets the deaths of the airmen for which he was responsible and calls them all my sons.

In an increasingly acquisitive modern society, Miller’s plays offer insights into man’s problems today, which are, by and large, the creations of man’s lack of values and his misguided notions of success, performance and ideals.