



## ARTHUR MILLER'S PEOPLE AND HAMARTIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Dr. Shubha Vishnoi

Asst. Prof., Applied Science, Vidya College of Engineering

---

### ABSTRACT

*Arthur Miller, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American dramatist, presented realistic approach in his tragedies. He caught the pulse of the people of his age and hence decided not to introduce traditional people on the stage. After all, he was not writing the plays in the age of monarchy and aristocracy. He found no Princes like Hamlet and no military generals like Julius Caesar, Marcus Brutus, Othello and Macbeth. His teacher created his interest in creative writing at Michigan University. Hence he decided to be creative while writing his tragedies for the people who were victims of depression and materialism. He was not prepared to confuse the term 'rank' with the question of Nature and asserted: So long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life, it seems to me that in this respect at least, he cannot be debarred from the heroic role.*

*... But at the same time, his stature as a hero is not so utterly dependent upon his rank that the corner grocer cannot outdistance him as a tragic hero providing, of course, that the grocer's career engages the issue of, for instance, the survival of the race, the relationships of man of God - the questions, in short, whose answers define humanity and the right way to live so that the world is a home, instead of a battlefield.<sup>1</sup>*



He wrote tragedies without bothering for the grand people. As he himself was a product of common society, he decided to present common people on the stage. It does not mean that he had no regard for Aristotle's conception of tragedy. According to Aristotle, four types of people can not be tragic heroes. A tragic hero should be a man like us. He suffers due to hamartia i.e, error of judgment. In other words Aristotle makes the hero responsible for his fall and at the same time attached due importance to plot, character and conflict. Shakespeare introduced conflict to two types - the internal conflict and external conflict and then developed the plot of tragedy. Even Milton's Samson Agonistes falls from great heights and takes revenge from the Phillistines. Arthur Miller was very much concerned with the problems of unemployment, racial prejudices, economic hardship, growth of materialism etc. To him, human passions, ambitions and feelings were very important. He was quite conscious of the tragedy as he said :

if the intensity, the human passion to surpass his given bounds, the fantastic insistence his self-conceived role - if these are not present there can only be an outline of tragedy but no living thing. I believe, for my self, that the lasting appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life, and that over and above this function of the tragic view point there are and will be a great number of format variations which no single definition will ever embrace.<sup>2</sup>

He defines the question of 'tragic victory'. He asked himself - Can the death of the hero make the audience happy? Generally the death of a person is terrifying and hence cannot make anybody happy. But Arthur Miller observed that death may be an act of bravery in many situations. People like Joe Keller, Willy Loman, Cain, Abel etc. do not die like animals. Willy Loman sacrifices himself for the welfare of his sons and Linda accepts this fact. Miller says:

For a society of faith, the nature of the death can prove the existence of the spirit and the posit its immortality. For a secular society it is perhaps more difficult for such a victory to document itself and to make itself felt, but conversely, the need to offer greater proofs of the humanity of man make that victory more real.<sup>3</sup>

He analyzed the question - Why do the people suffer in U.S.A.? Citizens of many countries have high hopes from U.S.A. and yet the people are victims of depression. After a minute study of the psychology of people he reached the conclusion that the people lack self



awareness and hence suffer. They are not fully conscious of the forces at work around them and hence lead miserable life. For example - Had Oedipus been fully conscious of the forces at work upon him, he would not have enjoyed sex with his mother. He is responsible for his guilt to some extent. He accepts that he has broken the law of nature and manhood. In those days the victor of the tribe use to get the fields, the cattle and the women of the defeated leader. As his mother came to his tribe from the defeated tribe, he enjoyed her. Similarly Willy Loman has failed as a salesman and as a father. All his expectations are reduced to nothing. Even his sons do not respect him as and when they come to know this weaknesses. Since he loses his faith and love of family, the result is terrible. His death creates pity and fear in the hearts of audience and this is how Arthur Miller follows Aristole's conception to tragedy.

The people of early fifties develop interest in mysterious things. Nathaniel Hawthorne had already written a novel on the same theme in nineteen century. A sort of terror was created on the stage to cater the taste of audience and the result was *The Crucible*. He says :

In *The Crucible*, however, there was an attempt to move beyond the discovery and unveiling of the hero's guilt that kills the personality. I had grown increasingly conscious of this theme in my past work... Now guilt appeared to me no longer the bedrock beneath which the probe could not penetrate. I saw it now as betrayer, as possible the most realy, our illusions, but nevertheless a quality of mind capable of being overthrown.<sup>4</sup>

Witch hunting was going on in Salem. The prosecutors were appointed to study the guilt of the person concerned. However, Arthur Miller thought of the problem of consciousness while writing *The Crucible*. He accepts.

I think that my course in *The Crucible* should have been toward greater self-awareness and not, as my critics have implied, towards an enlarged and more pervasive subjectivism. The realistic form and style of the play would then have had to give way. What new form might have evolve I cannot now say, but certainly the passion of knowing is as powerful as the passion of feeling alone and the writing of the play broached the question of that new form for me.<sup>5</sup>

Like Aristole, Arthur Miller also made distinction between didactic literature and the literature which affords aesthetic enjoyments. He had knowledge of the people around him. He never liked to live in the world of utopia and was not a man of dreamer's mind. As a social scientist he observed and analyzed the social, political and economic tendencies of



society with a positive vision. There is no denying the fact the satire, humour and realism are his popular tools. It has got to be accepted that he wanted to be a dramatist of the common man. He had no moral sermons to teach the people though he does not show indifference to morality. The end of each tragedy is highly suggestive and makes the audiences, think. Some of his people show 'grace under pressure' the term that has been taken from The Bible and Hemingway's Santiago, the hero of The Old Man And The Sea does not surrender before the oddities and fate and believes - Nobody knows when luck comes. A man should be ready when luck comes! Even the German philosopher Nietzsche said - Be hard! Some people of Arthur Miller are tough even during tough times and face the situation boldly. According to Brinda Murphy:

... Miller was trying to create harmony between the psychological and social traditions. Miller himself said in The Introduction to A View From The Bridge : The Greek dramatist had more than a passing interest in psychology and character on the stage. But for him these were means to a larger end, and the end was what we isolate today as social. That is, the relations of man as a social animal, rather than his definition as a separated entity, was the dramatic goal.<sup>6</sup>

There was no limit to his joy when All My Sons got success on the stage. This pay confirmed that he had the skill to handle the dramatic form and present contemporary people and analyzed their psychology minutely. Actually he was asked to visit many army training camps and gather information for a film entitled the story of G.S. Joe. Miller conducted many interview with the new and old soldiers and was surprised to know that many American merchants supplied defective thighs to the Army. Miller told himself:

I was turning thirty then, the author of perhaps a dozen plays, none of which I could truly believe were finished. I had written many scenes, but not a play. A play, I saw then, was an organism of which I had fashioned only certain parts. The decision formed to write one more, and if it turned out to be unrealizable, I would go into another: line of work.<sup>7</sup>

Thus success of The Death Of A Salesman (1949) gave him confidence, self-reliance and intellectual strength. In both the tragedies he writes about father-son relationship and remarks ... In writing of the father-son's search for his relatedness there was a fullness of feeling I had never known before; a crescendo was struck with a force I could almost touch. The crux of All My Sons, which would not be written until nearly three years later, was formed; and the roots of Death of A Salesman were sprouted.<sup>8</sup>



Here the conflict is internal as well as external. Joe Keller fails to explain his wife Kate that Larry is dead. Due to his false statement he could escape from the clutches of law though his friend Deever is in prison for no fault of his own. It is true that Joe Keller has reputation in the locality but he leads a life of tension. Every time the past haunts him and he fails to enjoy his present. Steven R. Centola aptly remarks:

In All My Sons Miller builds and reveals dramatic action, that by its very movement - by its creation, suspension and resolution of tension; its inexorable rush towards tragic confrontation - proves that the past is always present and cannot be ignored, forgotten, or denied.<sup>9</sup>

Here the dramatist followed his theory of straight forwardness and reveals the past with the proper process and establishes a relation between events and their moral results. Of course, Miller's moral conception is highly inspiring till the end of the play. Chris and George Deever show grace under pressure and do not compromise with the evil. George Deever is pretty sure that his father is innocent though he has been proved guilty. Steven R. Centola aptly remarks.

All My Sons is indeed a tightly constructed play with ideas of importance, but the drama's success derives more from Miller's ability to capture the spirit and rhythm of a life not easily reducible to terse summary in a single assertion. In fact, one could even say that, despite its traditional form and adherence to the conventions of the realistic theatre, All My Sons resonates with ambiguity from the opening certain to its powerful climatic close.<sup>10</sup>

So, All My Sons is a sublime tragedy. Chris is heroic in his approach to life though Ann fails to understand the reality for a long time. George Deever is bold enough to assert his right for justice and gets it ultimately. However, the play ends with the instruction of Kate to Chris-Life. Here one finds the positive vision of Arthur Miller. Chris is not a traditional son. He analyzes the mean mentality of his father and remarks:

This is the land of great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That's the principle, the only one we live by — it just happened to kill a few people that time, that's all. The world is that way, how can I take it out on him? What sense does that make? This is zoo, a zoo!<sup>11</sup>

After the success of All My Sons Arthur Miller remarked:

All My Sons has often been called a moral play, and it is that, but the concept of morality is not quite as purely ethical as it has been made to appear, nor is it so in the plays that follow. That the deed of Joe Keller at issue in All My Sons is his having been the cause of the death



of pilots in which the play is primarily interested. Morality is probably a faulty word to use in the connection, but what I was after was the wonder in the fact that can consequences of actions are as real as the actions themselves, yet we rarely take them into consideration as we perform actions, and we cannot hope to do so fully when we must always act with only partial knowledge of consequences...<sup>12</sup>

Men like Joe Keller are dangerous to society and the tragic heroes have to come forward to face them. Some of his characters show resistance and critics have analyzed this element of resistance in the tragedies of Arthur Miller. He remarks:

In this sense the play is a social play. Its 'socialness' does not reside in its having dealt with the crime of selling defective materials to a nation at war — the same crime could easily be the basis of a thriller which would have no place in social dramaturgy. It is that the crime is seen as having roots in a certain relationship of the individual to society, and to a certain indoctrination he embodies, which if dominant, can mean a jungle existence for all of us no matter how high our buildings soar.<sup>13</sup>

In Death Of A Salesman Arthur Miller describes a person who sacrifices himself for the security of his sons. Matthew C. Roudane remarks:

Death of A Salesman is a deceptively simple play. Its plot revolve around the last twenty-four hours in the life of Willy Loman, the hard-working sixty-three-year-old traveling salesman whose ideas of professional, public success jar with the realities of his private desires and modest accomplishments.<sup>14</sup>

Willy Loman worked very hard throughout his life and yet his sons did not get proper jobs. The American market proved useless for them and the hopes of the father shattered. Matthew C. Roudane remarks:

Realizing that in death he may provide for his family in ways he never could during his lifetime, Willy commits suicide, hoping that his insurance will grant Biff a 'twenty-thousand-dollar' deliverance, an extended period of grace. He hopes the insurance money will somehow expiate, or at least minimize, the guilt which he feels for his affair at the Standish Arms Hotel a life time ago. The simplicity of the play, however, quickly dissolves into filial ambiguity, civic paradox, and philosophic complexity.<sup>15</sup>

Actually, Willy Loman takes a lot of initiatives even at the age of sixty-three. He is proud of the fact that he is known as the best salesman in U.S.A. He has done his best for the family. But his error of Judgement is that he is not prepared to accept old age. How can he defy age



and consumerism? He hopes much from the son of his old employee but alas! His hopes are shattered by Howard as the latter does not regard him fit for dynamic job. Like Willy Loman, Howard understands the tendencies of the age of competition. There is a self-sufficiency in America and yet Biff and Happy failed to get good jobs. The growing materialism of America is useless for Willy Loman though every American has a right to work according to American law. This old man fails to get relief even in old age though he does not analyze the behaviour and nature of his sons. After all, Biff and Happy have to prove their own merit for every job. Arthur Miller does not want to pay attention to gender, race, nationality and ideology. Regarding the hamartia in the play Matthew C. Roundane remarks:

The play embodies, for many, the peripeteia, hamartia, and hubris that Aristotle found essential for all great tragedies. For many feminist critics, on the other hand, the play states 'a nostalgic view of the plot of the universalized masculine protagonist of the Poetics'; ...<sup>16</sup>

In the essay Tragedy And The Common Man Miller asserts that people like Willy Loman are really found in American society. Such people are prepared to commit suicide so as to protect their personal dignity. They have every desire to secure their rightful place in this world. As Willy Loman observed the success of his son on the playground he hoped much from them. In a boastful mood Willy Loman says that his son was -

Like a young god. Hercules — something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me? And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out — Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A stat like that, magnificent, can never fade away!<sup>17</sup>

The question arises — Did such a situation arise only in one town of U.S.A.? Can Willy Loman tolerate the unfulfilment of his dream? Does he hope too much? Is it not the desire of every father? Actually Willy Loman is sad as all fail to understand him. Perhaps his dreams are not real. Hence he always feels exhausted and helpless. Even in the office of Howard, he is misunderstood. Now he finds himself restless and tense. He is prepared to take small amount then before and yet he is sacked. Matthew C. Roundane remarks:

Eugene O'Neill had also painted portrait of American salesmen in Marco Millions and The Iceman Cometh. But Arthur Miller was not prepared to forget his moral optimism and social seriousness. In the essay Tragedy And The Common Man he asserts that he presents his moral and social commitment in a new form. After all, economic freedom is the need of the





hour. Secondly, even the salesman need old age security and pension schemes and contributory funds etc. The economic traditions have got to be improved.

Thus, Arthur Miller knew how to grapple with the social power and limitations of realism. He does not take his audience to any utopian world. Through all his play he brings them face to face with reality. All My Sons and Death Of A Salesman, like other tragedies have got to be admired for photographic realism. As his approach to life is realistic, he minutely analyzes the various aspects of hero's hamartia. Through different expressions and symbols he could convey his message to the audience. Miller wants to tell the audience that even the salesman has his one dignity and personal life. In an interview with Matthew C. Roudane Miller said : Nothing explaining itself of it simply inevitable, as one structure, as one corpus. All of those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had, still have, of being unable to deal with it, which we all know now. All of this, however, presented not with speeches in Salesman, but by putting together pieces of Willy's life, so that what we were deducing about it was the speech; what we were making of it was the moral of it; what it was doing to us rather than a romantic speech about facing death and living a fruitless life. All of these elements and many more went into the form of Death Of A Salesman.<sup>18</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. Arthur Miller (1973). Introduction to Collected Plays, Bombay, Allied Publishers, p. 32.
2. 1973 "a", p. 33.
3. 1973 "b", p. 33.
4. 1973 "c", p. 41.
5. 1973 "d", p. 45.
6. Christopher Bigsby (1947). The Cambridge Companion To Arthur Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 11.
7. Arthur Miller (1957). Introduction to Collected Plays, Vol. 1, New York , Viking Press, p 16.
8. Christopher Bigsby (1947). The Cambridge Companion To Arthur Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.49.
9. Steven R. Centola (1947). All My Sons p. 15 in Christopher Bigsby's The Cambridge Comapnion To Arthur Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp., 49-50.
10. 1947 "a" p. 50.
11. 1947 "b" p. 124.





12. 1947 “c” p. 18.
13. 1947 “d” p. 19.
14. Mathhew C. Roudane (1947). in Christopher Bigsby's The Cambridge Companion To Arthur Miller, Cambridge , Cambridge University Press, p.60.
15. 1947 “a” p. 60.
16. 1947 “b” p. 61.
17. Arthur Miller (1973). Death Of A Salesman, Bombay, Allied Publishers, p. 68.
18. Arthur Miller (1947). (Interview with Roudane in Christopher Bigsby's The Cambridge Companion To Arthur Miller), p. 84.

Arthur Asher Miller (October 17, 1915 – February 10, 2005) was an American playwright and essayist in the 20th-century American theater. Among his most popular plays are *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955, revised 1956). He wrote several screenplays and was most noted for his work on *The Misfits* (1961). The drama *Death of a Salesman* has been numbered on the short list of finest American plays in the 20th century. Miller successfully synthesized diverse dramatic styles and movements in the belief that a play should embody a delicate balance between the individual and society, between the singular personality and the polity, and between the separate and collective elements of life. Miller is a writer of social plays whose concern with the moral problems in American society led him to probe the psychological causes of behavior. The *Arthur Miller Journal* is published by the Arthur Miller Society, in cooperation with the Arthur Miller Centre at the University of East Anglia and St. Francis College, students can apply for internships where they will take part in the complete creative and publishing process that goes into the creation of the journal. Susan Abbotson. *A Critical Companion to Arthur Miller: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Performance Reviews. 83. X, 514 pages ; 23 cm. "Christopher Bigsby explores the entirety of Arthur Miller's work, including plays, poetry, fiction and films, in this comprehensive and stimulating study. Drawing on interviews conducted over the last twenty years, on unique rehearsal material and research archives, he paints a compelling picture of how Miller's works were influenced by and created in the light of events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is an enjoyable insight into a great playwright that will interest both theatregoers and students of modern drama."--Jacket. Includes