

TREATMENT OF FAMILY IN THE PLAYS OF ARTHUR MILLER WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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Arthur Miller is regarded as a social visionary who writes with a purpose and promise. His plays discuss the question of man's being a family member and a social animal in true terms, can be seen as a truthful commentary on the shortcomings and fallacies of American society. In the dramatic world of Arthur Miller, family is the pivot around which all the actions and reactions of the protagonist revolves. The illustration of family as a source of man's true existence and its ever deteriorating aspect and ever-declining importance in the modern times is one of the most crucial concerns of the master-playwright. He depicts contemporary American families in his plays. Most of Miller's plays, except few ones like *A Memory of Two Mondays*, *Incident at Vichy* and *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, deal with family issues in terms of parents-child relationship that in turn determines the central themes with a vigour and commitment. Not only in plays, but also in his other literary works, the importance and the view of parents-child concerns are never out of sight. Miller's depiction and treatment of family is very sensible; it is more comprehensive than most of his contemporary dramatists as he depicts the lower-middle class families of America which constitute the essence of any society or country. This is what Dennis Welland means when he says: "His treatment of family avoids the sentimentality of Thornton Wilder's, the claustrophobic intensity of O'Neill's or William's, or the more tortured and contemptuous attitude of Edward Albee; largely because he relates the frictions of family life to those of the macrocosm outside: his families live in a recognizably real world of parents and children." (*Arthur Miller: The Playwright* 12)

Miller's plays primarily revolve around family units exploring the multifaceted family relationships in all their glory and smallness. Miller seeks to capture the contemporary ever decaying phenomenon of the disintegration of the family institute in the post Depression, post World-Wars America by representing the ever-widening rift in family relations which further disrupts families into individual units or dismantled groups both by the fault within the heroes and by the interventions of the hostile socio-economic forces outside. Miller has been very much occupied with the theme of analyzing family relationships with relation to the wider context of society and nation. In this concern, Miller's views regarding the treatment and concept of the family theme and values expressed in his famous essay "Family in Modern Drama", contributed in 1956 to his famous collection of influential essay entitled as *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, deserves a considerable mention here. The essay provides us a very comprehensive peep into Miller's handling and exploration of family themes with

special reference to parents-child bond in his plays as he speaks of modern drama in general and his own in particular and detects a modern split between the private and social life at large to be the essential characteristic of modern culture. Here Miller undertakes an inquiry into the fundamental question as he asks: "How many a man make of the outside World a home? How and in what ways he struggles, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity, and honour which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?" (The Family in Modern Drama 73)

Miller deals with a united middle-class family disrupted by economic failures leading to the collapse of the father's business culminating into confrontations and tensions within the family members regarding the questions of the best interests of the family and social justice etc. As is beautifully illustrated and evident in *All My Sons* (1947) where Joe Keller is a businessman who finds no relation between social-morality and business loyalty. For him, business ethics has nothing to do with public morality. He considers it to be the prime concern of a business and family. But Joe's business aptitude and professional ethics hinder his thoughts for the society or nation, and this is tragic flaw, his *faux pas*. He believes that the growing prosperity of his factory and his fame as successful businessman has surely enhanced and consolidated his authority as a father in the family. But in his obsession for family commitment, he fails to realize the fact that by allowing the supply of defective war-materials, he betrays not only his country by his own family also, his own conscience. Not only this, but he also betrays his friend, business partner and the next door neighbour, Steve Deever whom he makes face punishment for a crime he himself has committed equally by managing things so cunningly as to save his skin. In this background, the father-son conflict of the play becomes the soul of the play further accentuated by the difference of attitude of Joe and Chris. In a way, the seed of Joe's crime also lies in his hunger for money and success as he is a person who raises himself from nothing to a respectable person, a person for whom only business and family are the true sources of happiness, concern, comfort and satisfaction.

Death of a Salesman (1949) is a powerful dramatic expression and explication of the familial relations, norms and family confrontations cast within an expressionistic framework where the dramatist more intensely and more convincingly depicts the delusions and moral confusions of a business man in conflict with the competitive, capitalist American Society that is responsible for dehumanizing the individual and disintegrating family values in modern times. The play tells the story of Willy Loman who, on the verge of death, wants desperately to justify his life. As he struggles to fit the tattered pieces of his wrecked life together, Willy discovers that to diminish his guilt, he must face the consequences of past choices and questions the values inherent in the life he has constructed for himself and his family. In order to make his sons successful, Willy dictates them several important personality traits. Thoroughly convinced that "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. (146). He is ever conscious of his appearance before others. Probably he is obsessed with personal appearance because, in his mind, he was convinced himself that since he is destined for success, he must always dress the part. But such carefulness also betrays his insecurity, something which often surfaces in his paradoxical statements and

emotional outbursts – these, of course, being a constant embarrassment for his family as well as a painful reminder to him of his ridiculous appearance before others.

Therefore, Miller's plays give us a deep and all-inclusive insight into his vision of familial values and the roles and relations of varied members within a family, thereby reflecting the importance of parents-child relationship that sometimes goes even beyond family to include the larger family of the society or community. Miller's road to society essentially goes through family and particularly the parents-child bond or discord that in turn defines the main thrust of his plays. His plays seek to suggest that it is very mandatory to cultivate a healthy environment if we have to dream of making a healthy family. In his famous essay "The Shadow of the Gods" Miller, viewing himself in the tradition of the thirties, makes one of his most explicit syntheses of the two approaches: "Society is inside man and man is inside society . . . the fish is in the water or the water is in the fish." (The Shadows of Gods 177)

In this way, it is quite evident that Miller's plays in general and *Death of a Salesman* in particular are powerful family plays which represent a true account of the contemporary American society in all its glory and smallness. His plays serve as the most convincing and reliable commentary on the role and importance of family relations, parents-child bond and values in individual life. Miller's plays deal with realistic family situations and issues because he treats the characters primarily as family creatures, as fathers, mothers, brothers, daughters, sons and sisters etc. Though Miller portrays the characters of his plays essentially as family members, he never allows them to ignore their concerns and responsibilities towards the bigger family, towards society. Whatever might be the side-issues of his plays, family concerns and issues constitute the central thematic concern of Miller's plays that both define and determine the main vision of Miller as a social dramatist with familial bonds, explored in the process.

WORKS CITED

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