

## Reconciling Contradictions, Restructuring Relations: A Study of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*



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### ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller is one of the greatest social tragedy writers of America and his focus always remains on the lot of common man in his milieu. The world that Miller conceives is entirely social where man finds himself battling with issues that affect his position in his family as well as society. Surrounded by a world inimical as well as opposed to his social aberrations of trespassing the moral, social code of conduct, Miller's man is continuously engaged in ceaseless task of coming to terms with his own imperfect, perverted, guilt ridden self that harbours a lofty position with social recognition in society. Being a Jew, Miller remains keenly conscious of his Jewish identity

not only in his writings but also in his personal life, and he repeatedly revisits his roots in body of worked like *After the Fall*, *Incident At Vichy*, *Focus* and his autobiography *Timebends*, and in most of his works Miller tries to find the cause of fractured human relationships. His *After the Fall* deals with issues of betrayal, guilt, commitment, truth, and identity under the shadow of Holocaust. The present article dissects the dichotomy faced by man in a post Holocaust world and offers reconciliation of contradictions by restructuring the human relations.

**KEY WORDS:** Holocaust, Aberrations, Human Relations, Contradictions, Identity



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## RESEARCH PAPER

Arthur Miller regularly keeps on re-visiting his past, his Jewishness and his feelings as a Jew throughout his literary career as a playwright. The trauma of Holocaust reverberates in his important plays like *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy* and *Broken Glass*. In his own life, Miller also courted trouble when he was accused of siding with the communists and this resulted in the depiction of McCarthyism in *The Crucible*.

He grew up in a Jewish home and during his youth he became aware of his Jewish identity, more so during the IIInd world war. Perhaps, Holocaust was the most inimical to the existential dilemma of human spirit in the twentieth century, and its effect on Miller was equally as intense as the crash of 1929. In his later plays starting from *After the Fall* the playwright consistently addressed the issue of Jewishness. When asked, why the question became suddenly acute after the IIInd world war, Miller replied:

I became far more aware of what Jewishness meant to me. I quite honestly hadn't any such situation earlier on. It probably was suppressed by the fact that we lived in a country with a lot of anti-Semitism... And what that does to somebody is to repress his identity in a way. Neither my father nor mother could speak Yiddish... I kind of dug it out of myself... I think the establishment of a new Jewish state probably meant a lot to me. It meant the establishment of an identity that I could never live to have. (Bigsby, 1967, 217)

Miller's thoughts were clouded both by Holocaust and depression and they haunted his senses, and he felt at a loss what to do next and how to meet the challenging situation. During the period of depression, Miller realised the value of standing on one's own feet and also he deeply felt the miseries of the dispossessed and miserable unemployed people. Bigsby enumerates the experiences that moulded the sensibility of Miller:

**For** Miller, the depression was a central experience. Not only had it shaped his own imagination and defined the terms of his own engagement with American values, but it was one of the few



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experiences genuinely shared by the American people as a whole....if betrayal became a constant theme of his work, then it operated on a public no less than a private level. (Biggsby, 1984, 240-241) Miller's fascination for Jewishness becomes more pointed and serious in his later works like *Incident at Vichy* and *Focus*. This horrible testament to human depravity and the capacity for evil and despicable acts of human aggression looms large in Miller's three plays, a novel, a screen play, and even in his autobiography *'Timebends'*. His *Focus* establishes strong parallels between the Nazi movement in Europe and the anti-Semitism promoted in America by the Christian Front and other hate groups who persecuted Jews during the II<sup>nd</sup> world war. In *After the Fall*, Miller creates even greater discomfort for his audiences by asking them to find within themselves the locus of evil that gives rise to such movements as Nazism and the terrible hate crimes associated with the Holocaust. The central character Quentin struggles to understand why his own personal acts of betrayal and cruelty are linked in his mind with the horrors that occurred at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. The play is a documentary of shattered relationships, particularly of family, resulting from various transgressions and flaws in human nature, and the chief among them are betrayals and guilt. The protagonist of this play, Quentin, falls from innocence to the depth of awareness of guilt in him. He takes the trial of his own self by re-enacting his past deeds of betrayals and transgressions. He is faced with the problem of coming to some conclusion about himself and everything in the play takes place in his "mind, thought and memory", that's why Miller calls the plays a "... trial of a man by his own conscience, his own values, his own deeds. To Miller the "Listener " ... is Quentin himself turned at the edge of the abyss to look at his experience, his nature and his time in order to bring to light, to seize—innocent no more—to forever guard his own complicity with Caine, and the world's. (Miller, 257, 1996) Quentin has come to the "Listener" for some advice regarding his future life. Having lived through two unsuccessful marriages leading only to divorces, and feeling as he does generally disillusioned about life, he is afraid to risk a third marriage. He faces Hamlet like problem – whether to marry or not to marry. Throughout his life, Quentin, in his relationships with so many women around him, is always in search of virtue or self knowledge. He commits several betrayals – sexual, moral and material, but he is honest and bold enough to recognize and admit these betrayals which he commits against the people around him, and at the same time is also reminded of the betrayals that he confronted at the hands of his own family and his friend Mickey. Clinton W. Trowbridge regards Quentin as a



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portrait of thinking man in our society, his tragic flaw being his inability to lie to himself ... The truth that he discovers in himself and in his world is that all men are touched with guilt. (Trowbridge, 131) Many images are formed out of Quentin's relationship with his parents, his friends and three women – Louise, Maggie and Holga – he loved. These images crowd upon him and enable him to discover his true nature. He realizes that guilt in him is only a part of the universal evil. Miller writes about Quentin: "His desperation is too serious, too deadly to permit him to blame other." (Miller, 1996, 256) That's why, Quentin confesses his own guilt in the prevailing evil and asserts that no human being can be innocent again because "Paradise keeps sleeping back and back." (Miller, 1996, 257) The protagonist comes to a conclusion that in the real world, '*After the Fall*', evil cannot be dealt with by denial or even by guilt, but, rather, one must assume responsibility; only then can one hope, love and forgive.

*After the Fall* is somewhat different in its approach to life from Miller's earlier plays as the protagonist Quentin, unlike the heroes of earlier plays, prefers life to death and tries to reconcile with the world around. He accepts the inherent evil in human nature, and he firmly believes that life becomes meaningful only by acknowledging this evil. Miller is after the point that life becomes worth living when man accepts his sense of guilt and realizes his responsibilities, and Quentin's acknowledgement of evil and his reconciliation with his lot is nothing but a veiled effort for the assertion of his identity. Miller analyses the issue of human relationships, citing the cause of the breakdown of these relationships and consequently, throws the light upon the question—who is responsible for the snapping of ties between human beings – particularly family relationship. Here Miller creates a character who is quite neurotic, and in whose mind the whole action takes place – an expressionistic technique – and through this, the dramatist reveals the true human nature. Miller suggests in his 'Foreword' to the play: "The play is not 'about' something; hopefully it is something. And primarily it is a way of looking at man and his human nature as the only source of violence which has come closer and closer to destroying the race." (Miller, 255, 1996)

When the ties between Quentin and his first wife are snapped because of suspicion, accusation and betrayal, Quentin marries Maggie who is a popular singer. She is quite innocent and so wins Quentin's respect and values in his eyes. But Quentin's relationship with Maggie also fails because she is not a separate person as she merges her 'self' with him



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and falls back on him for support. He begins to feel tired of her though she reconciles herself to him. Maggie is desperately in need of love which she expects from Quentin, who abhors separateness, as was the case with Louise. But very soon after Maggie's marriage with Quentin, she realises what is going on when Quentin frankly admits the sense of separateness: "Yes, I lied. Everyday. We are all separate people, I tried not to be, but finally one is – a separate person." (Miller, 1964, 104) He becomes increasingly aware of his inability to offer love to Maggie and feels that it will be hypocritical on his part to pretend innocence on the face of the horrible truth that he is "all the evil in the world...All the betrayals, the broken homes, the murderous revenge." (Miller, 1964, 104) Maggie fails to realise the guilty conscience in Quentin and thus attempts to commit suicide. Quentin pathetically confesses, "Maggie, we ... used one another." (Miller, 1964, 107) But Maggie does not want to be a party to the guilt of Quentin and defends herself saying "Not me, not me!" (Miller, 1964, 107) Thus, in his relationship with Maggie, Quentin tends to move up against the wall, raising his arms in a gesture of crucifixion.

The play is mostly about Quentin's relationship with women, yet he is constantly aware of his roots – his family comprising father, mother and brother. The father and the brother Dan, are little more than shadows, but their voices are trumpets of guilt. Whenever Quentin does something, he considers himself shameful because his family reminds him that despite his desertion his family is always behind him. Miller exemplifies Quentin's sense of detachment and indifference regarding human relations: "I looked at life like a case at law." (Miller, 1964, 3) Quentin looks at his two previous marriages for the evidence of his responsibility for their failure; he must review these because he has found a third relationship with Holga, an Austrian woman who has survived world war-II and knows its horrors at first hand. Quentin's professional life may be reviewed as well; just as in his personal life he suffers from the guilt of failure with his first wife as well as second wife, Maggie, so he is plagued by remorse at his relief when Lou's suicide saves him from defending himself before the House of Un-American Committee, a defence that would have cost him his job as a lawyer. Survival, he realizes, is a powerful motivation which metamorphoses into betrayals. Quentin's mother provides one of the female role models in the play, and in many ways the protagonist's life is a reaction against her manipulation of the family. His earlier memory is his



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mother deserting him for a week while she goes to the beach with his elder brother and then tries to buy back his love with a toy. His mother treats his father in the same way and then she takes great pleasure in being the comforter. Quentin's mother reminds us of Elsie, the wife of a Law Professor, who treats her husband like a boy by continually reminding him of his dependence on her: "Lou's not like you, Quentin... Lou's purely academic person." (Miller, 1964, 26) Quentin's life is a flight from the first kind of woman to the second, but he never realizes that the second kind of woman creates a grater dependency on his 'self' than the first. He is always lost in his image of saviour, and seems at a loss when there is no one to be saved. He cannot use anyone because he has a principle: "I can't even go to bed without a principle". That's why he sleeps with Maggie only when he has begun to save her. Being a person of principles and away from practical life, Quentin feels that he has never paid for his sins, so he is wrecked by his guilt. Several things prick his conscience – he has not stayed with his father and supported his family, he has not communicated with Louise, he has not died at Auschwitz, he has not been forced to choose between his friend and his career as he expected and his 'self' is tortured. The more he feels the burden of responsibilities, the more he becomes an idealist.

In *After the Fall* Miller tries to address the question: "What is the most human way to live and where in all the profession of materiality we have created around us is the cup where the spirit may reside..." (Lewis, 36) Quentin is troubled by the separateness and is pained to find the world as a concentration camp. When Louise, his first wife, assesses her own identity and separateness, "I am not a blur and I am not your mother, I am a separate person"(Miller., 1964, 41) Quentin is bewildered. His wife turns her back on him in bed and in the living room, because he was cold and remote but in Quentin's eyes, Louise is cold and self-centred. Although they may have been in love when they married, what Quentin recalls now is the death of love because of suspicion, accusation, betrayal and guilt, and all these are enough for snapping the ties between husband and wife. In the fleeting memory of Quentin, Felice and Elsie also appear; Elsie, too, betrays her husband Lou by tempting Quentin and thus divorce between the two take place. The true self of Quentin is revealed in his relationship with Maggie, his second wife. He leaves Louise because she has become a separate person not dependent upon him for emotional support, nor existing to provide him with praise and comfort and Maggie strikes when iron is hot i.e. emotional ties between Louise and



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Quentin are dissolved. Maggie is a popular singer who does not know how to live. She is natural, spontaneous and innocent, and thus gains Quentin's respect and value in his eyes. The quality which unlike Louise, struck Quentin was that she was not possessive and calls Quentin a good man. For Maggie, Quentin is the living embodiment of truth, and both conspire to disregard the past. He is man of contradictions. On the one hand he does not like separateness as with Louise, on the other, he becomes fed up with Maggie who reconciles herself with Quentin. In fact, Quentin is a man of contradictions, like a true intellectual, who is always a misfit in every system he lives in and the same is the case with Quentin in his personal as well as professional life. Maggie begins her relationship with adoration for Quentin and ends with blame, but her self-image is always based on him, not on herself. Miller remains preoccupied with depicting man's relationship to the world he lives in, particularly with family and society and this makes Miller more than a moralist. He tries to find out the reason behind the disintegration of the structure, nay the break down of the family. Quentin is portrayed as a thinking man and his tragic flaw is his inability to lie to himself. That's why when Maggie asks, "What's moral?", he replies, "To tell the truth, even against yourself." (Miller, 1964, 74) Well aware of his own human nature, Quentin generalizes that every human being is touched with guilt and concludes that even the cruelest people have some seeds of goodness in them while good people have evils. That's why he calls the Nazis as our brothers because the atrocities perpetrated by them also exist in us.

Man is always wearing a mask to hide his true self, projecting himself a totally different man from what he actually is before the society. And peaceful family and social life is possible when "... that gap, the friction, would be able to be minimized... One has to make a conscious choice between his public self and private one." (Miller, 1996, 399-400) Miller says in 'Forward to *After the Fall*': "Through Quentin's agony in this play there runs the everlasting temptation of innocence, that deep desire to return to, when it seems, he was in fact without blame." (Miller, 1996, 256) He is a neurotic person who has several temptations – sexual, moral and material – which become the cause of disorder in his life. In place of achieving success in his married life, Quentin goes on committing betrayals against the people around him. This ultimately leads to the disintegration of his family life. Thus, the success-myth, directly or indirectly brings successive failures in marriages for Quentin, who instead of relying on his voice of conscience, seeks for other



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temptations outside home and commits sins. Quentin tries to answer the most potent question raised by Miller 'How may a man make outside world a home' in his address to the 'Listener':

I swear to you, I could love this world again! ... Is the knowing all? To know, and even happily, that we meet unblessed; not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of Eden, but *After the Fall*, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all? ... And the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of love – as to an idiot in the house – forgive it; again... forever?"(Miller, 1964, 113-114)

Thus, in trying to fulfill his dream of leading a successful life Quentin, through his betrayals on the personal, professional and social levels, becomes a victim of his own lurking desires, the forces of American success-myth which gives birth to evil, betrayal and guilt. In such a situation, For Miller, life should be full of compromises, and Quentin trying hard to preserve his 'self', fails to compromise in his life with the people around him. Whatever he witnesses at his home, particularly from his mother, he does the same thing in his dealings with his friend as well as with his different wives. Miller's characters are always torn between their individual longings and social obligations, and these are poles apart from one another. Darshan Singh Maini sums up Miller's body of works: "The entire work of Miller is full of ghastly betrayals, broken faiths, fractured loyalties and diminished relationships." (Maini, 93) Miller argues, the responsibility rests both on the individual as well as on the forces which the protagonist has to confront in order to be a man of dignity which is sustained only by love, hope and self knowledge, by a life devoid of betrayals and perversions.



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