Issues of Identity Crisis and Self-Sacrifice in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and Incident at Vichy

Anup Kumar Dey
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Assam University, Diphu Campus
Karbi Anglong, Assam – 782460

&

Dr. Dipendu Das
Associate Professor
Department of English
Assam University, Silchar
Cachar, Assam – 788011

In religion or spirituality as well as in the philosophical doctrines of many civilizations, dying sacrificially on behalf of others is given the highest form of goodness. One can trace this esteemed form of goodness in the text of Luke 6: 32-35: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you … But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Although the “return” may not be in the form of any earthly object of desire, rather it is something more - something spiritual: “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.” In some recent ethical thoughts as well as in the writings of such thinkers as Jan Patočka, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Jacques Derrida, this understanding of the highest good has been given a philosophically systematic expression that the highest ethical gesture is a sacrificial self-offering without any expectation in return.

The idea of sacrifice in Jan Patočka (1907–1977), considered as one of the most important contributors to Czech philosophical phenomenology and an influential central European philosopher of the 20th century, may appear to be of Christian origin. In the “meditation” (1970) he parallels the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the death of Socrates in the context of the “third movement of human existence.” Both sacrificed their lives in order to make something apparent, to show that humanity is fully human only if it overcomes its bondage to life, insofar as it is capable of living above the level of mere sustenance. (Chvátík 10) Both Socrates and Christ could have avoided brutal death, but they willingly endured it and their sacrifice was associated with the idea of immortality. Such is precisely the meaning of the “third movement”: to break through the level of sheer survival and open it up to the dimension which, though no being, is nonetheless the condition of the world of existing things.

Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995), a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry, maintains: ‘Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity [or the self]… is a hostage. The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone’ (Lévinas 114). The ‘I’ is now completely overthrown from its nominative or originate status and is no longer a beneficiary of action: ‘Strictly speaking the other is the end, I am hostage,’ (Lévinas 128), which is to say that the Ego or the ‘I’ is a subjection to the other. The ‘I’ now subsists only in self-abnegation and sacrifice for the other, which Levinas calls ‘substitution.’
Derrida maintains that the ideal ethical act is the gratuitous sacrifice of one’s life for others. He, in this respect, interprets deconstruction from an ethical point of view and considers the “other” as “others,” represented by the marginalized individuals and groups, who are excluded by the existing forces of social and political authority, who use the old metaphysics to legitimate their oppression. Derrida goes for the deconstruction of ethics and he has adopted “Gift” as the main medium for his deconstruction-reconstruction of ethics.

Brian Johnstone offers a simplified schema of European philosophical tradition vis-à-vis the concept of self-sacrifice: “Husserl seeks to bridge the gap between subject and object with the “intentionality” of consciousness; Heidegger seeks to do the same with “being” which shows itself in the comportment of the subject to the world; Levinas seeks to overcome the separation of the subject from the other, by invoking the subject’s ethical responsibility for the other. In the course of these reflections, he introduced the notion of Gift; Derrida and Marion develop further the ontological and ethical implications of Gift.” (Johnstone 7-8)

II

In the plays of Arthur Miller sacrifice plays a crucial role in determining relationship and exploring identity crisis of his protagonists. Miller explores the impact of sacrifices made for one’s family versus humanity as a whole which involves the idea that all sacrifices are actually not conscious decisions and the acts of ‘sacrifice’ in some of his plays could be explained simply by an ‘escape’- escape from the pressure around. Again in some of his plays the act of sacrifice is motivated by a conscious decision of exonerating the sense of guilt of a larger community and an individual’s effort to clean the system by undergoing through an ordeal of penance.

*All My Sons* (1947) is a play about the individual’s responsibility for his own actions and also about the obligations he has to his society. The play is about a man who chooses his personal commercial benefit above value, self above the interest of the nation, and interest of his own family above responsibility to society. It is also, however, about loss, loss of a sense of common humanity. But Joe Keller believes that he has done nothing wrong because he put his family first. And when the truth comes out, he still tries to justify his action by arguing that nothing is more important than his family, than saving the business to give to Chris, his son: "For you, a business for you!" (Miller, *Collected Plays* 146). But Chris believes in a greater responsibility to society and his response is volatile: 'For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the goddam business? Is that as far as your mind can see, the business?' (Miller, *Collected Plays* 146). The final act of killing himself by Joe is in a way an understanding of his failure to negotiate his identity as an individual and a social being. Again the self-sacrifice of his elder son Larry, who himself was a warplane pilot and comes to know about his father’s crime, may be termed as an attempt to do penance for the sin committed by his father, although the latter initially tries to evade it.

*Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a story of a man who sacrifices himself to a false promise and a self-created notion of golden future. Willy Loman has engrossed the values of his society and wanted to live in that make-believe world. Bigsby in *Critical Study* (2005), states: “Willy Loman is a man who wishes his reality to come into line with his hopes, a man desperate to leave his mark on the world through his own endeavors and through those of his children. Though he seems to seek death, what he fears above all is that he will go before he has justified himself in his own eyes and there are few, from New York to Beijing, who do not understand the urgency of that need (Bigsby 101). Willy, being too much obsessed with success, even moves too far to live vicariously through his sons. In the end, he decided to give everything up for his two sons and sacrificed himself so that his sons could be
successful. Willy decides to kill himself in order to give the life insurance money to Biff and Happy. This type of sacrifice, although not so uncommon from parents, is a conscious decision and is motivated by an earnest sense of love and a desire to fulfil his dream through his sons.

Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* (1955) also shows in his character the potential for self-destruction and which in fact has destroyed him. And apart from this improper love, Eddie is a good man; and this love has its origin in the quite proper love of father for child, and Eddie's sense of duty to his family and community. Although acts of self-sacrifice in one form or other is present in some other plays of Miller, but arguably his two most representative plays in these context are *The Crucible* and *Incident at Vichy* which are discussed in details.

Proctor in *The Crucible* (1953) is racked by guilt at his infidelity who, through the crucible of experience, comes to discover his identity. In a way Proctor represents Miller’s definition of the tragic hero: “I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity” (Miller, Tragedy 4). As Terry Otten points out “Predictably some postmodern theorists have assaulted Miller’s conception of ‘heroism’ that simply does not mesh with the cynicism attached to much current theory” (Otten 68). But Proctor’s main conflict is not just with the evil around him, rather it is within himself where he realises the capacity for both evil and good reside. This guilt is the driving force in Proctor that brings him to his defining moment of accepting his predicament.

The initial title of the play was *The Chronicles of Sarah Good* which later on Miller renamed as *The Crucible*. The word “crucible” is contextually defined as a metal container in which metals or other substances are subjected to high temperatures. In this play what we find is that each character is metaphorically a metal subjected to the heat of the surrounding situation and the characters that could morally stand out in the face of this conflict, symbolically refuse to melt.

*The Crucible* is a play that transcends time as although it presents the catastrophe of the Salem witch-hunts that took place in the Province of Massachusetts Bay during 1692 and 1693 as an analogy to the McCarthy hearing of 1953 when the U.S. government blacklisted accused communists, this calamity is a regular happenings in contemporary societies, insofar as it portrays the viciousness of certain individuals against others, may it be in the form of community backlash or ethnic cleansing. Apparently the play is a dramatization of the incident in the life of John Proctor who, notwithstanding his feelings of guilt over an adulterous affair with Abigail Williams, rises above the tragic flaw in his character and becomes a man of integrity and self-sacrifice in the final act of the play. But more than that the play portrays the doldrums of two societies that panicked, one in 1692 and one in 1953, by tracking down innocent victims without any reasonable ground, to feed the fires of hatred and intolerance during a specific era. The post-war situation in America in the 1950’s which has witnessed challenges on all fronts: economic, political, military and social was similar to that of the witch hysteria of Salem, when people, in expectation to end their misfortunes, cling to their Puritan ideals. Both McCarthy era and witch hysteria of Salem threatened the rights of the people and Arthur Miller has addressed both these problems in this play.

“In modern terminology 'witch-hunt' has acquired usage referring to the act of seeking and persecuting any perceived enemy, particularly when the search is conducted using extreme measures and with little regard to actual guilt or innocence. It is used whether or not it is sanctioned by the government, or merely occurs within the "court of public opinion".” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witch-hunt)

There are various reasons for the existence of the climate of fear in Salem in the 17th century. The Puritans were becoming worried about their religion since, in 1686 after the
restoration of monarchy in England, Charles II revoked their charter and sent an Anglican governor to the Massachusetts colony that was hostile to Congregationalism. The result is that the people were unable to govern themselves and faced the challenge of ownership to their farms. The problem was further complicated by the breaking out of smallpox epidemic in 1691-92, followed by conducting of raids on small farms. In addition, the economic disparity between the two parts – Salem Town and Salem Village was expanding by the 1660s and each had established a separate church by 1672. The Townspeople were gradually becoming more modern and more prosperous than the Villagers. Moreover fortunes of major villagers were reduced due to questions over contesting of wills in courts and division over land boundaries. It was in such an atmosphere of unrest that a small incident escalated to hysteria of persecution that left twenty-three people hanged, one pressed to death, and three to die in prison.

Similarly, after World War II when Cold War was gradually dominating the foreign and internal policies of America, the federal government under the President Truman was apprehensive of the danger posed by Russian Communism. Truman stated in policies that no one who held beliefs contrary to the current form of government should be allowed in teaching profession and other literary activities and that vigilance over Communists would be such that almost any action against them would be allowed. The threat of Communism was considered almost a national crisis as the extermination of democracy by the Russians was imminent. Against this background, the House un-American Activities Committee was set up under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy which began an investigation into the lives of citizens who had advocated the doctrine of Communism. This intensive interrogation by way of using tactics of distortion led to a witch-hunt resulted in black-listing, termination of services and in some cases, isolation of its citizens from the country for more than thirty years. Miller himself was questioned by the House un-American Activities Committee in 1956 and convicted of "contempt of Congress" for refusing to identify others present at meetings he had attended.

The Crucible dramatises the events of a small village falling prey to a collective fear about witchcraft. Reverend Hale, a specialist in demonology, is summoned to search for the devil and a court of justice is set up to do away with the evil by hanging witches. As stated by Jean-Marie Bonnet, the play “constantly shifts between two related poles: the individuals must be purged separately so that the community as a whole may be preserved. We then may wonder whether the play is about an individual's discovery of his true self or about a whole community getting out of hand.” (Bonnet 32) Northrop Frye has mentioned that the play has the 'content' of 'social hysteria' but the 'form' of a 'purgatorial or triumphant tragedy' (Frye 37). Regarding the context of the play we get two entirely contradictory statements of Arthur Miller. In the Introduction to his Collected Plays he writes: “The central impulse for writing at all was not the social but the interior psychological question, which was the question of the guilt residing in Salem which the hysteria merely unleashed, but did not create.” (Miller, Introduction 156) Again, a few years later, in his interview with Richard I. Evans he said that “… the predominant emphasis in writing the play was on the conflict between people rather than the conflict within somebody.” (Evans 15)

Miller was in search of an allegory through which he wanted to expose the ruthless conduct of the House un-American Activities Committee and the Salem witch hunt hysteria provided him with the raw material for his reaction to the contemporary terror unleashed in the American society. The action of the play reaches its climax when the protagonist, John Proctor, is caught in a dilemma of moral choice: in order to save his wife who has been accused of witchcraft either he has to confess his adultery as well as accuse his friends as witches or he has to accept his death. Proctor initially accepted the charge of adultery in order to free his wife; but when he was asked to name others he prefers to die rather than destroy
the reputation of people who were innocent. It draws parallel to McCarthy era when reputed people were asked to appear before the committee and name their fellow beings as communists.

*The Crucible* is a dramatization of examining one’s conscience as well as search for inner values, morals and identity in the lives of both John Proctor and Reverend Hale. Reverend Hale, although is considered as an expert on demonology and witch-craft, undergoes a process of examining his beliefs and own sense of identity which ultimately leads him to question the very basis of his faith. Initially being guided by the sense of authority and position, Reverend Hale fails to see the real issues behind the ordeal of witch hunt in Salem. His main objective and stimulus behind his choice to come to Salem is his curiosity regarding the dark aspect of life and experiment the nature of the "invisible world" of spirits and the devil for medical practices. Initially, because of his position in the church and society, Hale is left with little space to self reflect and to see the things from an angle different from that of the church and the authority. He feels a sense of pride and worthiness of a specialist upon arriving to Salem that his knowledge in the field is publicly acknowledged. He is not motivated by greed or personal material gain as his intention is good to discover and clean any sign of evil in Salem. So he does not contradict the position of the church believing that it is also motivated by the same spirit. But his presence adds to complication of the situation and as Hale unintentionally contributes to the condemning of innocent towns folk he starts to suffer the guilt that leads him into a quest for justice and a sense of identity.

Hale, out of his frustration and sense of guilt, starts questioning and relocating his beliefs and moral ideals. He voices his doubt regarding the authority of the court: “We cannot blink it more. There is a prodigious fear of this court in the country –” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 418). He comes to realize that the court itself is used to carry out injustice to people: “Excellency, it is a natural lie to tell; I beg you, stop now before another is condemned! I may shut my conscience to it no more - private vengeance is working through this testimony!” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 431). It is not only the questioning of the nature of (in)justice in Salem court; but more profoundly, by doing so, he challenges and questions the very fundamental of his belief and thus he is bound to reconstruct it in search for a sense of identity. His real journey for the search of identity begins when he tries to seek the truth within himself which prompts him to alienate himself from this system: “I denounce these proceedings, I quit this court!” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 435), and this denouncing of the court symbolizes his attempt to abandon all his past false beliefs and move towards a new perspective of the meaning of life.

In contrast to Reverend Hale, John Proctor is always consciously aware of his own identity and this consciousness brings a sense of integrity as a human being in him that has helped him to set high standards of nobility, honesty and integrity which he maintains till his death. These qualities have distinguished him from others and render him his own sense of complete happiness. He puts a great emphasis on the value of one’s name: “We vote by name in this society, not by acreage” (Miller, *Collected Plays* 367) and is conscious about the fact that one’s name represents the identity about self and the family: “A man will not cast away his good name”, he says. (Miller, *Collected Plays* 428) He considers that his greatest possession in his life is the respectability in his name: “Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! . . . How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” he urges Danforth (Miller, *Collected Plays* 453)

In spite of having so many good human attributes, Proctor’s conscience is plagued by guilt because of his adulterous affair with Abigail which creates a conflict in his personality and identity. He claims to consider his affair with Abigail a thing of the past: “I have forgot Abigail” and wants to remain faithful towards his wife Elizabeh. It is his sheer sense of love and responsibility for Elizabeth that prompts him to compromise with the authority, even
going against his own conscience, so that she may be freed at the cost of his name. With the
conviction of Elizabeth, Proctor feels that he has become a part of the affairs and problems in
Salem. Although initially Proctor claims: “I have no business in Salem” (Miller, Collected
Plays 386) he never has the idea that he will be involved with the affairs of Salem against his
choice, primarily to save his wife from prosecution. However, the irony of the situation is that
his presence in the court weakens his position. In a desperate bid to free the name of his wife
from the prosecution, he confesses his act of adultery with Abigail but that enables him the
courage to confront his guilt-ridden conscience. Now he becomes scornful to himself and
feels that he has betrayed his wife: “I wish you had some evil in you so that you might know
me”. This has also enabled him to negotiate his guilt and re-established his position as a
human being. He recognizes the true nature of both Abigail and his wife and it provides him
the courage to recognize his self and realizes that he must stand up to the morals he has set
upon himself; and with this strength and determination he resolves to face the situation and
confronts his imminent death. John Proctor has already made up his mind, as he would rather
die than to corrupt his and his family’s name.

Thus, his act of self sacrifice can be analysed from the context of Jan Patočka’s view of
the “third movement of human existence.” Like Socrates and Christ, John Proctor also could
have avoided his death if he had confessed his involvement in witchery, but like them he also
willingly endured it and his act of self-sacrifice is intended to exterminate the real evil
inherent in Salem society.

In Incident at Vichy (1964) Von Berg sacrifices his own freedom for the freedom of a Jew,
knowing that there was little chance either of them would survive. This action of Von Berg is
in a way a kind of penance that he volunteers for the ill treatment perpetrated by the Nazis
against Jews. The play is based upon a real incident narrated by Miller in his essay “Guilt and
Incident at Vichy” (1965). It was shared by one of Miller’s European friends who told him
the story about a man of his acquaintance who, in 1942, was picked up on the street in Vichy,
France, during a sudden roundup of Jews and after taking to the police station was asked to
wait. In the police station the arrested person found others waiting on line for their turn to be
interrogated. At the instruction of the policeman the people on line went one by one inside
the room and only a few of them came out and walked free into the street and most of them
simply disappeared. The rumour was that it was a Gestapo operation and the detainees were
required to produce immaculate proof of their identity. That fellow was a Jew and as he got
closer and closer for his turn, he got assured of his imminent death. At last there was only one
man standing behind him and that man was asked to go inside ahead of him. After some time
that man came out and instead of walking past him with his pass to freedom he stopped in
front of him and handed over the pass and whispered him to go, never to be seen again.

Miller says about the writing of Incident at Vichy and the above incident:

“In the ten years after hearing it, the story kept changing its meaning for me. It
never occurred to me that it could be a play until this spring when Incident at
Vichy suddenly burst open complete in almost all its details. Before that it had
been simply a fact, a feature of existence which sometimes brought exhilaration
with it, sometimes a vacant wonder, and sometimes even resentment. In any case,
I realize that it was a counter-point to many happenings around me in this past
decade.” (Miller, Echoes 70)

The image of that “faceless, unknown man” who sacrificed his pass to freedom to the Jew
haunts Miller again and again as he says: “Whenever I felt the seemingly implacable tide of
human drift and the withering of will in myself and in others, this faceless person came to
mind.” (Miller, Echoes 70) Miller through this play tries to demonstrate the prevailing racial
or ethnic violence across the globe and is against the view of limiting the play within a
specific frame. He asserts:
“... I must say that I think most people seeing this play are quite aware it is not “about Nazism” or a wartime horror tale; they do understand that the underlying issue concerns us now and that it has to do with our individual relationships with injustice and violence.” (Miller, Echoes 70)

Miller’s Incident at Vichy also takes place in 1942, in France and till then there was no sign of any Jewish resistance to the Nazi regime in Germany though there were reporting of the existence of the concentration camps where thousands of Jews had been killed already. In the German-controlled Republic of Vichy, citizens, regardless of their racial status, could stay by producing papers which were not so difficult to get. The play Incident at Vichy is about a group of detainees in Vichy waiting for the interrogation by German officers during World War II. At the simplistic level it deals with the issues of human nature, guilt and responsibility as well as the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis against Jews. In the first half of this one act play, the discussion among the detainees bring out their struggle to ascertain their predicament. All the detainees except for a gypsy, Von Berg, and possibly Bayard are Jews, and they are unsure about the purpose of their detention:

MARCHAND: It’s perfectly obvious they’re making a routine identity check.
LEBEAU: Oh.
MARCHAND: With so many strangers pouring into Vichy this past year there’re probably a lot of spies and God knows what. It’s just a document check, that’s all.
LEBEAU: turns to Bayard, hopefully: You think so?
BAYARD: shrugs; obviously he feels there is something more to it: I don’t know.
MARCHAND: Why? There are thousands of people running around with false papers, we all know that. You can’t permit such things in wartime.
The others glance uneasily at Marchand, whose sense of security is thereby confined to him alone. (Miller, Plays: Two 247)

As the discussion proceeds further, Bayard warns the detainees about trains going to Nazi concentration camps in Germany and Poland and reports of mass killings. He, being a man of strong socialistic leanings, bids the detainees to develop political consciousness and make an intellectual stand against the pressure of detention. “It is faith in the future; and the future is Socialist.” He continues: “But they can’t torture the future; it’s out of their hands. ... they can't win. Impossible." (Miller, Plays: Two 265-66)

Leduc, a psychoanalyst and a French veteran of the 1940 fighting against Germany, unsuccessfully tries to unite the prisoners to attempt an escape. Von Berg tries to understand the reason of the holocaust as well as the fundamental issues of human existence: “Many times I used to ask my friends- if you love your country why it is necessary to hate other countries? To be a good German why must you despise everything that is not German?” (Miller, Plays: Two 269) One of the notable incidents in the second half of the play is the discussion between Leduc and the Major of German Army, as the former tries to persuade the Major to let them go free. It also reveals the character of the Major as well as the larger issues concerning the workings of the authoritarian rule. Although the Major resents his assignment thinking it beneath the dignity of a regular Army officer, he is left with no other alternative but to carry out the order, feeling himself entrapped by the system. He feels that whether or not he helps the detainees to escape is irrelevant: “There are no persons anymore, don’t you see that? There will never be persons again.” (Miller, Plays: Two 280) It shows the predicament of individual as well as the future of civilization in an authoritarian society where human beings are reduced to nonentity.

There is a major difference between the two versions of the play. In the 1964 version, there is no real attempt by the prisoners to escape and at the end, Von Berg gives away his pass to freedom to Leduc and thus involving in the act of self-sacrifice. In the 1966 version
there is an escape attempt in the middle of the play which is foiled by the sudden appearance of the Major.

In the play Miller creates a gallery of portraits representing people from different professions and strata - a prince, a painter, a businessman, an electrician, an actor, a waiter, a psychiatrist, a young boy who is terrified, and an old Jew. All of them have been brought into the police station for interrogation by the German officers to ascertain their Jewishness. They sit on benches outside the office and arguing and questioning about their future. Each of them has a tale to share how they have been brought here and though their stories and their fears one of the darkest aspects of human history is revealed. They come to realize that in the eyes of the Nazis, Jewishness is indeed the “crime” for which they’ve been rounded up.

**Works Cited:**


