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## **Holocaust and loss of liberal human values in Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy*: A critical analysis of State Power vs. Individual Conscience**

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**Abstract:** Miller's humanism may be defined as democratic humanism. In his plays, he is mainly concerned with the people who are denied a sense of community. National and international events of early twentieth century were of a very complex nature which caught Miller's attention. In Germany, Hitler and his Nazis represented the loss of liberal human values such as spirit of tolerance, broad-mindedness, love of humanity and brotherhood of man. Holocaust is known as *Ha Shoah* in Hebrew. It dates back to the period between 1933 and 1945. This is exactly the period when Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. During this time millions of Jews were persecuted by the Nazis. To portray the most horrible phenomenon of holocaust which was a challenge to the liberal conscience of human society is, no doubt, a task which preconditions a highly perceptive imagination trained in liberal values and traditions of human society. *Incident at Vichy* is an attempt by Miller to unearth the reality behind holocaust and its repercussions on Jews in particular and humanity in general. If society and state authorities behave in a totalitarian manner, and discriminate and punish on the basis of race, and if we extend the point further, on the basis of caste, creed, colour or gender, it is the moral duty of the individual not to submit to the evil designs of the state power.

**Keywords:** humanism, communism, Jews, values, tradition, holocaust.

Literature is an outlet of human emotions. Drama, while giving vent to the pent up human emotions, presents a realistic picture of the contemporary situation. In drama, imagination runs hand in glove with the reality to present a true picture of human life. As W. David Stacey points out:

Drama and reality stand over each other, mutually dependent and interpreting each other. The drama presents, focuses, interprets and mediates the reality. (132)

American writers in 1930's appear to be greatly enchanted by Marxist interpretation of society. The era of 1930's might be termed as the golden period of Marxist influence in American literature:

The American theatre in the 1930s directly reflected the nation's political and economic crises. Leftist theatre groups proliferated, including the New Playwright's Theatre (1926), Workers' Drama League (1929), Workers' Laboratory Theatre (1930), League of Workers' Theatres (1932), and THEATRE UNION (1933), among the most active. (Wilmeth 21)

This unprecedented influence of Marxism in American literature started decreasing with the severe implementation of the draconian laws such as the Espionage Act (1917), Sedition Act (1918), Un-American Activities Act (1938), Smith Act (1940), Taft-Hartley Act (1947), and the McCarron Internal Security Act (1950).

Though Miller was greatly influenced by Marxist theory, he is however generally regarded as a liberal humanist:

Raymond Williams has shown how the ideology of liberal humanism operates in modern liberal tragedy. Williams notes that Arthur Miller's plays immerse us in

the private world of an individual, such as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy embodies the liberal humanist dreams of self-fulfilment, albeit measured mostly in material terms. (In this respect, liberal humanism has cordial relations with capitalism.) Seeking self-fulfilment in a flawed society that he cannot change, the hero ultimately destroys himself. The liberal dream of self-fulfilment inevitably leads to the death of the hero as the last attempt at verifying the self. At this point Williams writes, 'liberal tragedy has ended in its own deadlock.' In this liberal humanist vision, 'we are all victims'. (Zarrilli et al. 410)

To be more specific, Miller's humanism may be defined as democratic humanism. In his plays, he is mainly concerned with the people who are denied a sense of community. National and international events of early twentieth century were of a very complex nature which caught Miller's attention. The Great Depression of 1929 which affected the whole world for a decade was a traumatic experience for both the rich and the poor. The rise of Nazism and World War II, threat of communism, and McCarthy witch-hunt in America laid the ground for politically oriented plays.

In American political history the decade of fifties is marked by betrayals and "naming names"; the House Un-American Activities Committee took "the role of the grand inquisitor" (Meyers 146). This was a direct threat to liberal democratic ideal of individual liberty. And it is also significant to note that the idea of individual liberty finds prominent place in the constitution of the United States. The idea of individual liberty is deep rooted in the psyche of the American people. Interference on the part of state and government in the individual life of citizens to the extent that how one should think and act run counter to the democratic essence of American political ethos. Miller was summoned to appear before the HUAC to explain his position vis-à-vis communism and communists. Quite fearlessly he appeared before the committee and expressed his stand in unequivocal terms so as to highlight the totalitarian, undemocratic and fascist nature of the HUAC hearings. Miller was a man and artist of integrity. He never

compromised with his principled position vis-a-vis HUAC hearing. He neither succumbed to the temptation of remaining silent, nor buckled under the tyrannical and threatening pressure of the HUAC:

He openly criticised the committee itself, whose 'rather ceaseless investigating of artists was creating a pall for apprehension and fear among all kinds of people.' His testimony covered a wide range of political topics. He advocated the repeal of the Smith Act; defended his contribution to a fund that supplied vitally needed medicines to Red China; discussed the ideas of his plays; condemned Ezra Pound's anti-Semitic broadcasts from wartime Italy. (Meyers 143)

In Germany, Hitler and his Nazis represented the loss of liberal human values such as spirit of tolerance, broad-mindedness, love of humanity and brotherhood of man. There is no place for racial discrimination and hatred in liberal humanism. Nazis were a slur on the part of liberal tradition of Western culture.

Unfortunately, there is nothing else into which we can fit our experience – traditions are broken and culture is unavailable. Our culture is an empty form, standing for a continuity of experience which is now discontinued, for the reality and inviolability of human values that are everywhere violated and denied . . . Today the cultured man is isolated . . . the cultural form that conveyed humanity and assured the transaction from one man to the next has been destroyed. (Rosenfeld 133)

Before World War II, the contemporary atmosphere lacked communication between man and man, between the writer and the reader and decadence of moral and ethical values in matters of economic, social and political importance; all pervasive evil, loss of liberal tradition and lack of culture – in brief, the said atmosphere was the precursor of holocaust. Diabolical forces of death, destruction and doom played havoc with the welfare and peace and prosperity of human

society. Human values of brotherhood and solidarity were set at naught. Holocaust writers may be divided into three categories:

The survivor who writes about the Holocaust; the creative writer who was never there and yet visualises it and translates his vision into creative writing; and, the gentile writer who tries to get into the essence of the horror and gives his own interpretation. All of them have a moral responsibility of creating the structure of imagination in order to communicate it to the reader. The reader or the audience, in the case of drama has a responsibility of familiarising himself with the history to participate in the creative experience. With regard to the survivors, they have to reach into their memory and sort out the reality, put it into an organised system and look for the strategy of communication. There are the inevitable problems and any failure can give the lie to the horror the death camps perpetuated . . . however difficult and insurmountable the task may be, one has to make an attempt to tell it, lest posterity forget that there was one such realm of experience called the Holocaust. Although it is a challenge to the literary imagination, the writers should be conscious of the perils of such an act. (Venkateswarlu 102)

Holocaust is known as *Ha Shoah* in Hebrew. It dates back to the period between 1933 and 1945. This is exactly the period when Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. During this time millions of Jews were persecuted by the Nazis. The fact was that Hitler wanted to eliminate the Jews from this earth by his secret plan which is popularly known as “final solution” (Laqueur 212).

To portray the most horrible phenomenon of holocaust, which was a challenge to the liberal conscience of human society is, no doubt, a task which preconditions a highly perceptive imagination trained in liberal values and traditions of human society. To portray the most heinous act of the enemies of liberal values and tradition and to express in word the pain and suffering and tragedy which befell the Jews during Second

World War, a writer must be gifted with a unique sense of integrity of mind and purity of soul as Lawrence Langer says:

How should art – how can art? – represent the inexpressibly inhuman suffering of the victims without doing an injustice to that suffering? If art, as Adorno concedes, is perhaps the last remaining sanctuary where the suffering can be paid honest homage, enshrining it permanently in the imagination of the living as the essential horror that it was, the danger also exists of the noble intention sliding into abyss of its opposite. (Langer 1)

It can be said that “since Miller’s themes and conclusions are essentially based on Jewish experience, it can still be called a Jewish point of view, for one cannot exist without the ethos” (Venkateswarlu 115). There is no denying the fact that Miller was a Jew. However, we can also assume that even if Miller were not a Jew, he would have treated the holocaust in no other manner than the one we find in his plays. Miller was, essentially a humanist who was the votary of human values and liberal traditions, and thus, his vision was not confined to any creed or race. It goes to Miller’s credit that until his last breath he exhibited exemplary courage in his fight against political tyranny. He was a noble and restless soul who maintained intellectual integrity and sincerity, and never compromised with the political forces which were out to destroy individual liberty and democratic principles, and he consistently fought for freedom of speech. In 1985, Miller accompanied by Harold Pinter, visited Istanbul as a gesture of solidarity with the Turkish writers and political prisoners. As democracy was in peril due to military takeover of state power in Turkey, Miller, in a speech at US embassy, fearlessly stated that “he saw no signs of Western democracy in Turkey” (Schlueter 155).

Miller’s play, *Incident at Vichy*, too, deals with the problem of holocaust in a poignant and convincing manner. It is the ninth play in the sequence of plays written by Miller since his first play on Broadway *The Man Who Had All the Luck* in 1944. The play presents a graphic portrayal of Nazi atrocities against the Jews unparalleled in the history

of modern industrial civilisation. As regards the source of the play, *Incident at Vichy*, from real life, Miller says:

The root of *Vichy* came from my friend and former psycho-analyst Dr. Rudolph Loewenstein, who had hidden out in Vichy France during the war, before the Nazis occupied the country. But all I recalled was the bare outline of his story: a Jewish analyst picked up with false papers and saved by a man he had never seen before. This unknown man, a gentile had substituted himself in a line of suspects waiting to have their papers and penises inspected in a hunt for Jews posing as French men.

There was second root in an old friend of Inge's, Prince Josef von Schwarzenberg, senior surviving member of a very ancient Austrian noble line, who had "declined" to cooperate with the Nazis and had suffered for it during the war. He was a source for Von Berg, the Prince in my play who steps in to take the place of a condemned analyst. It was not altogether a romantic idealisation, for in some absurd yet logical way Josef von Schwarzenberg embodied an elemental resistance to the fascist spirit, which is fundamentally enforced vulgarity in all its forms. . . . Having denied the Nazi Movement the glory of his name, he never considered any other course; there had simply been no choice, and he could not imagine deserving the remotest sort of credit for his dangerous refusal. That he had spent much of the war doing menial work in France he hardly regarded as a punishment. What I found fascinating in Josef was a mixture of worldly discernment and a naive, almost thoughtlessly pure moral code that perhaps only so protected in youth could possess, and that measured the corruption the world took for granted. (Miller 1990, 538-539)

Thus, it was against the evil and inhuman nature of political power that Von Berg exhibited real moral courage as an individual in the play



*Incident at Vichy*. He refused to become a party to the Nazi persecution of the Jews by the Nazi government. Miller's telling the origin of play in real incidents adds to the effect and imparts authenticity to the theme of the play.

In *Incident at Vichy*, Lebeau, a painter; Bayard, an electrician; Monceau, an actor; Marchand, a merchant; and a boy "six men and a boy of fifteen" have been brought to "a place of detention which suggests a warehouse, perhaps, an armory, are part of a railroad station not used by the public" (1). They are not sure why they have been picked up by the detectives. Marchand, a merchant feels that it is the routine check to identify the strangers:

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. (6)

On the other hand, Lebeau fears "some racial ... implications?" Marchand opines that there is nothing "to fear if your papers are all right" (7). Bayard is votary of Marxist ideology and talks of control of Germany by monopolies. Bayard says, "The monopolies got control of Germany. Big business is out to make slaves of everyone, that's why you're here" (9). He further tells that he "heard they're working Jews to death in the Polish camps" (29).

There are three main arguments in the play. Monceau argues, "... After all, they were picking up Jews in Germany for years before the war; they have been doing in Paris since they came in – are you telling me all those people are dead? ... War is war, but you will have to keep a certain sense of proportion. I mean Germans are still people" (31). Thus, Monceau thinks that it is a routine feature with the German government to pick up the Jews which they continued with even before war, but this does not mean that all those Jews are put to death. He avers, "Germans are still people" (31). He does not consider the

Germans as merchants of death. Bayard argues that the Germans are fascists; it is these fascists who are doing such dirty and criminal things. Thus, it is the fascists among the Germans who are out to eliminate the Jews. Leduc seems to argue that evil is inherent in human nature, Germans or no Germans, and fascists or no fascists:

LEDUC. I don't speak this way because they're Germans.

BAYARD. It's that they're Fascists.

LEDUC. Excuse me, no. It's exactly because they are people that I speak this way.

BAYARD. I don't agree with that. (31)

Von Berg hails from "one of the oldest houses in Austria" (33). Nobility in Austria, in general, did not support the political line of the Nazis. The Nazis were not happy with this attitude of the nobility. Bayard says, "Political or something" might be the reason of bringing Von Berg to detention camp, to which Von Berg replies:

VON BERG. No, no, I never had any interests in that direction. *Slight pause*. Of course there is this resentment towards the nobility. That might explain it.

LEDUC. In the Nazis? Resentment?

VON BERG *Surprised*. Yes, certainly. (34)

Relationship between nobility and reactionary Nazi regime is generally not cordial:

LEDUC. ... I suppose I have taken for granted that the aristocracy is ... always behind a reactionary regime.

VON BERG. Oh, there are some, certainly. But for the most part they never took responsibility, in any case. (35)

Nobility is very critical of Nazism because it “is an outburst of vulgarity? An ocean of vulgarity?” (37). Von Berg tells, “Nothing angers them more than a sign of any ... refinement” (37). Von Berg is also very critical of “their adoration of dreadful art; and grocery clerks in uniform telling the orchestra what music it may not play. Vulgarity can be enough to send a man out of his country ...” (37). Von Berg is of the opinion that people who are respectful to art cannot think of eliminating the Jews. Von Berg says, “Can people with respect for art go about hounding Jews? Making a prison of Europe, pushing themselves forward as a race of policemen and brutes? Is that possible for artistic people?” (38).

However Monceau, an actor disagrees with Von Berg and says, “... the German audiences – I’ve played there – no audience is as sensitive to the smallest nuance of a performance; they sit in the theater with respect ... and nobody listens to music like a German” (38). Thus, we can safely infer that the fascists and racists among the Germans were vulgar and brute. It was not proper to call all the Germans vulgar and brute. Actually, political power of the state was in the hands of the Nazis, who were sending the Jews to gas chambers. Thus, they are committing crimes against humanity. The Nazis brought shame to the German people. Political ideology of the Nazis was based on the superiority belief of the German race. They considered the Jews as the other; and this other, in the eyes of the Nazis, was the enemy of the Germans; hence this other should be eliminated. In the opinion of the Nazis, the Jews were guilty simply because they were the Jews. And those who were not Jews were innocent, simply because they were not Jews. Leduc hints at the vulgarity of the Nazi politics when he laments that he should not have been born to experience the Nazi tyranny; he should have been born prior to the Nazi regime. Leduc says, “I am only angry that I should have been born before the day when man has accepted his own nature; that he is not reasonable, that he is full of murder, that his ideals are only the little tax he pays for the right to hate and kill with a clear conscience” (104).

Von Berg does not agree with Leduc. He is the epitome of ideal and moral values which have sustained faith in the goodness of man, in the service of man. Political class may be corrupt and cruel but it is not

proper to apply the same yard stick to the people. Von Berg opines, “There are ideals ... There are people who would find it easier to die than stain one finger with this murder. They exist. I swear it to you. People for whom everything is *not* permitted, foolish people and ineffectual but they do exist and will not dishonour their tradition” (104). Von Berg remains loyal to what he says to Leduc; he gives his pass to Leduc and joins the condemned; he sacrifices his life to register his protest against the political philosophy of the Nazis. It is a sacrifice to uphold the ideal of human solidarity in the face of the evil practised by the Nazi state power. Miller, through Leduc suggests that “each man has his Jew; it is the other. And the Jews have their Jews” (105). This exhibits that all men are guided and governed by evil. There is no place for good in human nature, in human society. Miller laid stress on this all pervasive evil in *After the Fall* (1964). However, he touched upon this element of evil in *Incident at Vichy* too. Miller, in all probability, felt that if evil was not combated through moral and rational principle of good, it will degrade humanity to irrational state of murder and violence which good art could not recommend and appreciate. It is to treat both the Nazis and the Jews as incarnation of evil; both killer and killed as evil. Hence, it is through the sacrifice of the Austrian Prince that Miller endeavours to establish moral order in society and suggests that it is the diabolically evil racial philosophy of the Nazi political power which violates all the basic norms of good governance of protecting the life and property of the ruled and in Jews case the minority irrespective of their caste, creed or class. Brustein says, “It has become obvious that Mr. Miller has given us not so much a play as another solemn sermon on Human Responsibility” (260). Human responsibility means our behaviour with others in society ought to be guided by human values of compassion, charity and solidarity.

The play, *Incident at Vichy* set in World War II, refers to the horrors of holocaust, that is, the murder of millions of Jews at unprecedented scale. The play concentrates on the politics of evil which all of us are part of by virtue of the Fall of Man in Biblical terms. Miller unveils the face of evil which was present in the past and is present today also. He tells Barbara Gelb in 1964: “The occasion of the play is the occupation of France, but it’s about today. It concerns the question of insight – of

seeing in oneself the capacity for collaboration with the evil one condemns. It's a question that exists for all of us" (80). It is surprising and intriguing that Miller seems to condone the political evil of which Hitler was the most ignoble example during World War II who sent millions of Jews to gas chambers and concentration camps to die. If we stop evaluating politicians' and dictators' social and political behaviour and actions in moral and ethical terms, we are going to open the floodgates of barbarism. To pass a sweeping judgment that we are all accomplice of evil is to devalue the moral concerns of man in favour of good. Miller's pessimistic statement in favour of evil inherent in man's nature relegates all of us to the level of murderers:

When we live in a time of great murders, we are inhabiting a world of murder for which we share the guilt... We have an investment in evils that we manage to escape, that sometimes these evils that we oppose are done in our interest... By virtue of the circumstances, a man is faced with his own complicity with what he despises. (Evan 74)

Miller points to the fact that man is basically an animal like other animals inhabiting the earth and is busy in the game of murdering and killing and devouring his own kind. Thus, man is worse than other animals because they do not kill and devour their own kind. However, man has also evolved moral and ethical code of conduct to remain away and aloof from evil. Miller seems to have ignored the fact that man is man because he is morally bound not to succumb to evil. Hence, evil acts of any type on the part of individual or society should not be treated as justified on psychological or any other ground. To justify the inevitable presence of evil in human nature and human affairs amounts to saying good bye to moral and ethical values and standards of conducting and regulating social orders and political affairs.

Von Berg hands over his pass to Leduc to save his life, but by doing so he risks his own life. Thus, we may treat and evaluate Von Berg as bulwark against evil designs and policies of the Nazis. Von Berg also reminds us that evil cannot defeat good provided the man representing

good is bold enough to risk his life. It is Von Berg who exhorts us to retain firm faith in the goodness of man.

State power and political authority – fascist or non-fascist – just don't bother about the murderous role played by evil in society and state policy. France and USSR refused to stage the play due to political reasons. It is the political considerations which matter, not good or evil. Miller says:

The first of my works (*Incident at Vichy*) to be banned in the Soviet Union during one of its anti-Jewish convulsions in the late sixties, it was optioned in France by three different producers, each of whom decided to relinquish the rights for fear of resentment at the implication of French collaboration with Nazi anti-Semitism. Finally, in the early eighties, Pierre Cardin produced it in Paris, but the defensive bitterness of the reviews was unmistakable.

It was not until 1987 and the Gorbachev liberalisation that *Vichy* finally made it on to a Soviet stage, produced by the same Galina Volchek whose 1968 Maly Theatre production had been shut down the night before the premiere, after six vastly successful previews. (1990, 540)

State power, generally, does not care for moral and ethical principles. It simply cares for its political interests. State power acts out of expediency, not principles. The individual must resort to freewill to combat the evil prevalent in state or society: “The only solution to the plague that Miller depicts is responsible and free human action: *Incident at Vichy* affirms that we cannot flee from commitment and responsibility into determinism” (Balakian 125). Thematic concern of the play implies universal overtones in the sense that atrocities committed by the Nazis may be treated as part and parcel of a ubiquitous social and political injustice being meted out to the minorities anywhere and everywhere on this earth.

In brief, we can say that if society and state authorities behave in a totalitarian manner, and discriminate and punish on the basis of race, and if we extend the point further, on the basis of caste, creed, colour or gender, it is the moral duty of the individual not to submit to the evil designs of society and state. Von Berg in *Incident at Vichy* did the same – he refused to submit to the evil designs of the state. Thus, individual conscience can counter the pressure and evil designs of the state, the only thing needed is that one should pay due attention to the voice of conscience.

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