

Internal Social Conflict within the Characters in Arthur Miller's All My Sons

Dr.Ashok B. Yawale

Asstt.Professor,Arts,Comm.& Sci. College,Maregaon Dist-Yavatmal

Email ID-ashokyawale@gmail.com

Abstract: *Produced by Harold Clurman, Walter Fried and Elia Kazan, and directed by the latter, "All My Sons" began the first of 328 performances at the Coronet Theatre in New York on the evening of January 29, 1947. The play registered its impact in the American theatre. The audience were impressed with the seriousness and intelligence of the work. The play proceeds from the guilt of Joe Keller, uneducated, a small factory owner who sold cracked cylinders' heads to the Army, Air Force during the period of Second World War. It caused the death of twenty one American pilots. His elder son Lary, a pilot, was also reported missing during the war. The fact that Lary committed suicide because of the sense of shame and outrage over Joe's crime is withheld till the very end of the play. Joe managed to escape a long prison term by manoeuvring his business partner Steve Deever taking the blame. Joe returned to his business, rebuilt it and by the time the war is over, operating it successfully. When the play opens we are introduced to the leisurely Sunday atmosphere of Keller's family life. Chris, the younger son wants to marry Ann, the fiancée of his dead brother Lary. Mrs Keller is against their marriage because she refuses to believe that Larry is dead. As the play proceeds, the playwright lifts the veil on the events of the past, leading to an implacable exposure of the main character and the social philosophy that he represents.*

Introduction:

Act I of the play gradually prepares its characters for the catastrophe that will follow. In the earlier

draft of the play Kate Keller, a wife of Joe, is the dominant character and there is a great stress on her belief in astrology. Keller and son worry about how she will respond to the destruction of the tree,

the family planted in tribute to Larry. Though Miller later shifted the main focus to the father son relationship, Kate remains a dominating personality. As play proceeds we see Kate's obsession only deepens when Larry's girlfriend Annie, returns for a visit at Chris's invitation; she strenuously opposes an alliance between her second son and the woman, she still perceives as 'Larry's girl', we also get our first focus on two very important points; the closeness of relationship between Joe and Chris, and difference between their attitude to the family business. Joe is intensely possessive toward his business. He does not view the factory as an end in itself, but as the means by which he can enable his son to make the best possible life for himself. But Chris is different in attitude to life:

Chris ... I'd hoped that if I wanted, Mother would forget Larry and then we'd have a regular wedding and everything happy. But if that can't happen here, Then I'll have to get out!

Keller: What the hell is this?

Chris : I'll get out I'll get married and live Some place else. May be in New York.

Keller : Are you crazy?

Chris : I've been a good son too long, a good sucker. I'm through with it.

Keller: You've got a business here, what the Hell is this?

Chris : The business! – The business doesn't inspire me.

Keller : Must you be inspired?

Chris : Yes, I like it an hour a day. If I have to grub for money all day long at

least at evening I want it beautiful I want the family, I want some kids, I want to build something I can give myself to. Anne is in the middle of that. Now... where do I find it?Keller: You mean – (Goes to him) tell me something, you mean you'd leave the business? Chris : Yes. On this I would.

Keller : (after a pause) well...you don't want to Think like that?

Chris : Then help me stay here.

Keller : All right, but – but don't think like that. Because what the hell did I work for. That's only for you, Chris, the whole shootin' match is for you

Chris : I know that, Dad. Just you help me Stay here.¹

Joe Keller is pre-occupied with the world of inner circle of family and family business. The outer world for him is a blur, and he is unable to understand a complex result or what he considered the private act. He is short sighted. And this is why he can honestly refer to the deaths of twenty-one pilots as a 'mistake'. Passionately attached to the family, Joe Keller appears to behave for the prosperity of his business and consequently for the bright future of his family and only remaining son. In the inner circle of the family he did not commit a crime, and consequently the guilt he feels does not involve the twenty one fliers early as much as it does the man whom he allowed to take all the blame for the 'mistake'. Both the fathers, Willy Loman in 'Death of a Salesman' and Joe Keller are egocentric. Although to a degree each father egocentrically seeking a kind of personal immortality through his sons, overtly his life for his family has been the driving force and justification of his life.

The drama unveils like stretched tightly written mystery story. Keller's family life is disturbed by the arrival of Ann and then by the announcement

of the George, Ann's brother, will also be coming to visit. The first act ends with ominous tension between Joe Keller and his wife Kate and with her cryptic warning to him to 'be smart'.

Arrival of George begins the weakening of several of the strands, for it prompts Sue, a neighbour, to speak contemptuously to all of Chris' 'phoney idealism' and it reveals the restoration of George's belief in his father. Chris is an idealist but sincerely felt and his idealism is tinged with a hollowness that an unsympathetic neighbour labels hypocrisy. The wife of physician whom Chris has been urging to abandon a lucrative practice for research career, she pours out her resentment to Ann:

Every-body knows Joe pulled a fast one to get out of jail... I have got nothing against Joe. But if Chris wants people to put on the hair shirt, let him take off his broadcloth. He is driving my husband crazy with that phony idealism of his.²

Chris's idealism is not phoney it just eludes its spokesman. He after all, is attached to his parents, and his love for his father is particularly intense. He is an heir to his parent's principles and

morality, yet he is an honest man and an idealist. He can believe only in the purity of his father's behaviour. With his parents, he had joined in the lie though clearly without any awareness that he is doing so.

George's arrival changes the tone of the play. He himself is a lawyer, a man who should see clearly the difference between right and wrong but who has himself been duped for years too ready to accept Joe's story. Kate works at George's sense of nostalgia. Relaxed, George confesses he never felt at home anywhere but there. During the talk of childhood experience George comes to know the alleged illness that kept him from the plant on the day the defective cylinders heads came off the line. As Kate, endorsing her husband's pride in his good health, speaks the fatal line; 'He hasn't been laid up in fifteen years'. George, now, with full of anger asks Ann to leave and not to marry Chris, but Ann joins Chris in telling her brother to go. Very next to this, in the quarrel between Kate and Chris that ensues, Kate finally reveals the truth : "Your brother's alive, darling, because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand

me now ? As long as you live, that boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father."³ Miller tries to weld two themes together through Kate.

It has become common place of criticism to link 'All My Sons' with Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright, to whom Miller indebted much. Miller's play is carefully structured and tightly plotted like most of the Ibsen's plays. Miller himself in his book 'Introduction To The Collected Plays' believes "the shadow of Ibsen was seen on this play for another reason, and it is of that 'All My Sons' begins very late in its story.' Miller has obviously learned from Ibsen how to withhold information about the past until it is most useful dramatically, and how to create a sense of an inexorable web of cause and effect. Generally it is in the Ibsen's dramas that the themes of the sin of the parents visited on the children, and of the house built on a lie, are also relevant to 'All My Sons'. A noticeable feature of the plot mechanism in this play is the leisurely introduction, and the slow building up. In the true

manner of an Ibsenesque well-made play, it begins at a late point of action.

In the plot pattern of the play, the over-importance attached to the element of intrigue resulting from Chris's decision to Marry Ann tends to obscure the rising line of tragic action. Kate's neurotic insistence that Larry is alive and he will return to claim Ann, and Ann is "Larry's girl" creates obscurity in the unveiling of the main theme. No doubt Kate adds very little to the basic thrust of the play. Her insistence that Larry is alive is a source of the conflict in the play. Her slip of the tongue makes George aware of Joe's guilt and brings about the turning point in the action. Her obstinacy compels Ann to reveal the secret of Larry's last letter, thus forcing the plot to its climax and conclusion.

The tragic irony of the play is that Joe's crime against outside world eventually becomes a crime against his own family and in destroying those to whom he considers himself unrelated, he finally destroys those to whom he is most intensely bound.

"The fortress which 'All My Sons' lays siege to is the fortress of unrelatedness"⁴. Miller wrote while explaining the didactic design of his play in his 'Introduction' to 'Collected Plays'. 'Unrelatedness' is a telling epithet to describe Joe's illness which was the most important and influential part of his crime against society. Although Keller's crime is the supply of defective cylinders to the government, this crime is the consequence of the pervasive illness of unrelatedness. And in the play, Chris himself hurls against this barrier of unrelatedness. Joe acted within the confines of his family-based philosophy of life; his crime was quite in conformity with this unauthentic and unexamined mode of life which is unsettled by queer turn of events in the play. Joe believed that family loyalty should have priority over everything else, he took chance for the sake of Chris. But Chris's sense of moral responsibility unlike his father's, extends beyond the personal, beyond the family to the larger family, the world outside. When Chris confronts him with a direct accusation, Joe's apologia merges the business ethic of survival into

his love for his son. He begs his son to understand his reasons;

Keller : You're a boy, what could I do I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business; you got a process, the process don't work you're out of business; you don't know how to operate, your stuff is no good; they close you up, they tear up your contracts, what the hell's it to them? You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away (His voice cracking) I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop 'em before anybody took off.

Chris: Then why'd you ship them out ?

Keller: By the time they could spot them I thought I'd have the process going again, and I could show them they needed me and they'd let it go by.

But weeks passed and I got no kick-back, so I was going to tell them.

Chris: Then why didn't you tell them?

Keller : It was too late. The paper, it was all over the front page, twenty-one went down, it was too late. They came with handcuffs into the shop,

what could I do? (He sits on bench) Chris ...Chris, I did it for you... for you.⁵

In Joe's eyes there is nothing bigger than the family. Miller's themes, whether harsh or tender, are always dramatized and transmuted into his plays with the emotional dimension and psychic depth of human relationships. The 'ontological weakness' of striving for substantial human relationship is sure sign of hope and ray of sunshine in the midst of a predatory, dismal and highly materialistic society. When Miller does not see any possibility of escape for his characters, from a life of exploitation, injustice, cruelty and unhappiness, he adopts a compromising attitude and points at 'hopeless hope' by projecting them into human relationship patterns and this become the basis of his existence. Miller is definitely a social critic with strong moral vision.

Chris is an idealist, the individual who is his father's antagonist. We see the conflict between Chris's idealistic attitude and his father Joe's short-sightedness and unrelated attitude towards society, in the play. Miller has featured love and hate between the grownup child and the parent, in

the every major play, except 'The Crucible' and 'Incident at Vichy'. In the 'Shadows of the Gods' a lecture he gave before the New Dramatists Committee and published in "Harpers", Miller pointed to the movement of revolt against the parent as the starting point of individual development. "We are formed in this world when we are sons and daughters and the first truths we know throw us into conflict with our fathers and mothers". In 'All My Sons' the love between the generations is both more prominent and more convincing than the love between Chris and Ann which is rather tamely written, and Chris's love for the soldiers who serve under him in the war, which is rather overwritten. It is an idealism contained in his explanation to Ann of what the war has meant to him.

Chris: Because they weren't just, men. For instance, one time it'd been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little things – but... that's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die : they killed themselves for each other. I mean that exactly; a little more selfish and

they'd've been here today. And I got an idea--- watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, see, but it seemed to me that one new thing was made. A kind of ---responsibility. Man for man. You understand me?--- To show that, to bring that onto the earth again like somekind of monument and everyone would feel it standing there, behind him, and it would make a difference to him. (Pause). And then I came home and it was incredible. I- there was no meaning in it here; the whole thing to them was a kind of bus accident. I went to work with Dad, and that retrace again. I felt what you said – ashamed somehow. Because nobody was changed at all. It seemed to make sackers out of a lot of guys. I felt wrong to be alive, to open the bank book, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator. I mean you can take those things out of a war, but when you drive that car you've got to know that it came out of the love a man can have for a man, you've to be a little because of that. Otherwise what you have is really loot, and there is blood on it.⁶

This is too obviously a direct statement of something Miller felt. 'He felt it deeply and

sincerely, Ronald Hayman⁷, comments ‘but the sentiment, though certainly relevant to the drama, is not sufficiently dramatized’. The seeds of the impending conflict between Joe and Chris are anticipated in Ann’s outburst against her father, who is in prison. Surprisingly for Ann, Joe makes light of her father’s crime, in his view he is a fool, a man prone to mistake but not a murderer. As against this, Chris is drawn as a person with a tender conscience, as preceding opinion reveals, he has known life in a manner, his father could never understand. Having seen what war was like, and how people died for others, his life with his father with bankbooks, refrigerators and cars produces guilty feeling in him. Money appears to him like ‘loot’ and ‘covered with blood’. This contrasting attitude to moneymaking and the resultant social attitudes provide the basis for the conflict in the play.

There is little doubt that Joe Keller’s values are derived from his social environment, and that his crime had its roots in the dog-eating-dog morality of American Capitalism. In a brilliant study of the realistic social vision in Miller’s tragedies,

Raymond Williams⁸ has noted that Joe Keller’s alienated consciousness is essentially derived from the false values of his society. In ‘All My Sons’, as in “Death of a Salesman”, Miller condemns commercial society with its worship of strange Gods.

After revelation of father’s guilt, Chris continually up to the end of the play hammers at Joe’s unrelatedness. Now Joe realizes that, despite his desperate efforts to hold it together his family is beginning to disintegrate, and even when Kate tries to explain that for Chris there is something bigger than the family, Joe still can not understand. His comments in the last Act, at the final moment of the life illustrates his growing uncertainty and despair. In bewilderment he asks Chris :

Keller: Exactly what’s the matter? What’s the matter? You got too much money? Is that what bothers you? You think I am kidding... well, talk to me what you want to do!

Chris :It’s not what I want to do. It’s what you want to do.

Keller : What I should I want to do ? Jail?
You want me to go to Jail ? Is that where I
belong? What's the matter? Why can't you tell
me...⁹

While these efforts to find a logical reason, do not serve as an excuse for Joe's criminal deed, they do open up an angle to the underlying horror of the play. Finally, the revelation of Larry's letter, by Ann, brings on catastrophic situation. Joe's strong wish about Larry that if he was alive 'he wouldn't act like this' breaks violently into pieces. In the last moment of his life he is totally isolated from the family and the community. The man who asked everyone for answers comes to realize that he can only supply the ultimate ones. It is moral condemnation from his other son, who crashed his plane out of shame that drives Joe to a change of heart. He says he will give himself up to the police. Despite Kate's attempt to convince him that Larry would never have advocated such a move, he says, looking at the letter, "Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down."¹⁰

Several critics have pondered over the abruptness of Joe's conversion, by the manner in which Miller has shown him over-throwing sixty years of thinking and feeling in a minute. Edward Murry who shrewdly remarked that there is a shift of dramatic focus from Joe to Chris in Act Three as a result of which Joe's movement towards suicide is not made dramatically credible.¹¹ C. W. E. Bigsby has also criticized Miller for his failure to dramatize Joe's final statement that "they were all my sons".

The playwright has provided a little symbolic detail of the character and philosophy of Joe Keller. He is characterized by simple geniality and naive high spirits. He is presented as an ordinary man surprised that, 'every week a new book comes out'. Miller has done everything possible to emphasize the ordinariness of his protagonist through his drab speech. It is precisely his dullness and incomprehensibility which renders Joe into a fascinating objects of attention when he is on trial, and hearing the voice of his doom. According to Denis Well, Miller sees Joe as the simple man who has got on by energy and will

power but who is hardly clever enough to know how he has done it. He opines that to this extent he is another David Friber, a man who had all the luck. He quotes Kate saying "We're dumb, Chris. Dad and I are stupid people. We don't know anything. You've got to protect us."¹² Keller knows he is responsible for the pilot's death, and he knows that his neighbours know of his guilt. Kate, his wife, also shares his knowledge.

Steve Deever, of course, has been the victim of the Keller family's deception, and George has just returned after meeting his father. He suffered from his father's disgrace, and was a frustrated dreamer. The grim business scandal involving his father revealed to him something of the human operations of a profit seeking business world.

Conclusion

Chris, a stern idealist, wants to be different from his father. Miller in one of the interview with Evans¹³ answers about Chris that he by overlooking his father's crime, is of the chance to live a peaceful life without conflict. He would not have participated in a moral decision of some kind, but at the same time, he would have lifted

that vision behind that anger, that remorse that pathos that he felt... There is an instant where he was immediately connected to a social or moral or transcendent issue, namely the question of his own emotional attachment to the men he had led in the war..." Watching his comrades die for each other and for him, he has become aware of a 'kind of responsibility, Man to man'. From his speeches in the play we should infer that since then he had been wavering between a contemptuous rejection of this intolerably unchanging world and a sentimental urge to find solace in his love for Ann and to settle down eventually. Miller says that the way it happens to him is unique. Joe Keller, finally in the last act, with a moral crisis-whether to confess his complicity or look to Deever as a scapegoat, he chooses the later, necessitating a life of deception afterwards. Once Chris understands what his father has done, once he has identified the heinous consequences of Keller's having placed the personal above the social, the final act moves inexorably toward restitution of the social order through the offender's death. The man who is caught up in this social shaping process loses his identity and his individuality. Miller is

variously criticized by many critics, for this play, as the 'least original' and 'least exploratory in theatrical technique, of all his major plays. Since "All My Sons" critics have typecast him as a realistic playwright. But despite that, the play is interesting as a preparation for the later plays. Though he has been underrated as an innovator of dramatic form, the fact remains that, after 'this play Miller was not content to create another realistic play. Speaking in his own defence, the playwright notes that 'Death of a Salesman' was not, of course in the realistic tradition, having broken out into a quite new synthesis of psychological and social dimensions, and 'The Crucible' was a work of another tradition altogether, and so on.'"¹⁴

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