

Illusion/Reality Dichotomy in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Abstract:

The institution of family is the basic, fundamental unit in the social structure. All other institutions, be they economic, religious, or educational, come out from the family, and they have developed out of the family. Arthur Miller, one of the greatest modern American playwrights, focuses on the American social values, family life, traditions and rituals, and prejudices of the individual who is a member of family and society. The society comprises human beings, and the existence of man and society becomes mutually dependent upon each other. The working of human relationships – personal, familial, and social- remains the recurrent feature in Miller's body of works; he is of the opinion that family and society play a vital role in determining the fate of the individual with regard to his position in society. Arthur Miller's one major play, *All My Sons* (1947), engages the readers with questions regarding the self of man, his relationship with his outer, extended world-family and society and tries to locate not only the position of man but also discusses the questions which affect his relations with his milieu. The present paper locates man in a dichotomous position oscillating between illusion and reality in Miller's *All My Sons*.

Keywords: Family, Self, Home, Ethics, Accountability

Introduction:

The institution of family is the basic, fundamental unit in the social structure. All other institutions, be they economic, religious, or educational, come out from the family, and they have developed out of the family. The family is an outcome of the harmonious relationship among social forces as well as between sexual ones. According to William M. Kephart, "The family is also one of the chief agencies of sociability... It is important for a variety of reasons, such as those relating to protection, inheritance, property rights, the upholding of moral codes, the care of the sick and the aged, and the transmission of cultural values." (Kephart, 4) Arthur Miller, one of the greatest modern American playwrights, focuses on the American social values, family life, traditions and rituals, and prejudices of the individual who is a member of family and society. He seems to be preoccupied with the idea of unveiling the average American man's spiritual dilemmas, his quest for identity and success,

his inward battles, and mental conflicts in a mechanical competition-ridden society. He wants to unravel the mystery surrounding the 'self' of man in relation to his relationships with the different institutions. Dramatic art is the most appropriate one to communicate with human beings in a realistic manner, and when a dramatic persona comes on the stage to present life, says Miller, the audience feels confused with questions about life:

Who is he? What is he doing there? How does he live or make his living? Who is he related to? Is he rich or poor? What does he think of himself? What do other people think of him, and why? What are his hopes and fears...What does he claim to want, and what does he really want? (Miller, 15, 1996)

The society comprises human beings, and the existence of man and society becomes mutually dependent upon each other. The working of human relationships – personal, familial, and social- remains the recurrent feature in Miller's body of works; he is of the opinion that family and society play a vital role in determining the fate of the individual with regard to his position in society. He writes:

I hope I have made one thing clear to this point, and it is that society is inside of man, and man is inside of society, and you cannot even create a truthfully psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not. The fish is in the water, and the water is in the fish. (Miller, 185, 1996)

His plays present the lives of human beings with flawed natures, going through certain processes finally to arrive at the truth. Susan C.W. Abbotson writes: "Many of Miller's plays center on families, and by concentrating on their pleasures, problems, and relationships, Miller explores in microcosm, society as a whole." (4) The society and the family he knew and the experiences he had, are intimately and feelingly portrayed in his plays. He writes about them because that is the way culture, he believes, comes to us. The family is, after all, the nursery of all our neuroses and hopes and has the capacity to end suffering and so forth. The family constellation is the central matrix of the civilization. As a dramatist of human conditions, Miller tries to probe the mysteries of life and asks questions like: "How may man make for himself a home in that vastness of strangers, and how may he transform that vastness into a home? (Miller, 85, 1996)

Most of Miller's plays deal with some aspect of guilt in the family system; they reveal the social issues through personal dilemmas. The family is a microcosm of a world beyond, and the behavior of an individual in love, sex, or parental relations is evidence of the choices imposed by social necessity. At times, man is ready to sacrifice everything for his family and society, of which he is a part, and then, the very next moment, he does something that is not in tune with the family norms, resulting in his neuroses and, as a result, he behaves irrationally. In "The Family in

Modern Drama,' Miller makes us know the stark reality that "We – all of us – have a role anteceding all others: We are first sons, daughters, sisters, brothers. No play can possibly alter this given role." (Miller, 81, 1996) In his plays, Miller makes an attempt to analyze the role of man in his relationships with other human beings and feels that one should begin with the 'home.' It is 'home,' which is the starting point for every individual. Bigsby observes about Miller's world:

The dominant mood is one of loss – loss of respect, of love, of direction, of sociality. His protagonists long to close the various gaps in their lives, the spaces that separate them from the world in which they wish for an honored place, which divides their lyrical dreams from their practical realities, which separate them from those they had once loved and would again if betrayal and guilt and a yearning for some kind of socially endorsed significance did not weigh on them like the past which they believe so implacable. (Bigsby, 160)

His dramatis personae desire to establish their identity in their society, in their own way, as they know that without society and beyond it, they have no existence; they are not at home in their societies. They either refuse to accept their proper place in society, or they are denied their due. They feel themselves misfits in their own world because of certain faults they possess, which are coupled with the complex and complicated nature of the society they are members of. Stressing on ties between man and man, Avtar Singh comments: "Miller's essential theme is the integrity of the individual towards himself and towards his fellow beings." (Singh 227)

Miller's first major play, *All My Sons* (1947), engages the readers with questions regarding the self of man and his relationship with his outer, extended world family and society and tries to locate not only the position of man but also discusses the questions that affect his relations with his milieu. The play is based on a true story and presents Chris Keller, the son, rejecting his father Joe Keller's criminal irresponsibility, whether the latter is his father or not, and the father, feeling guilty, shoots himself when he realizes that his son knows the truth. He accepts his fate, but so does the son. The business ethic gives financial and self-interest the prime importance, and social responsibility and purpose are the secondary importance. Joe's horror at his own crime is insignificant besides his larger irresponsibility to a universe of people. Alice Griffin describes Keller's family in the following words:

Self-made Joe, devoted Kate, and loving Chris at first appear to be an ideal family. As the play develops, their self-deception and guilt are laid bare as each reacts to the crisis that arises "whenever the hand of the distant past reaches out of its grave.... to reveal some unreadable, hidden order behind the amoral chaos of events. (Griffin, 21)

Miller feels that one must find a bridge that joins his private, small home to that all-inclusive large home of the universal fraternity. Family force must impel the members away from the center to a bigger circle. He wants Joe Keller to be innocent in so far as he is "... the uneducated man for whom there is still wonder in the many

commonly known things, a man whose judgments must be dredged out of experience and a peasant like common sense." (Miller, 12, 1967) But the moment he starts practicing unethical business terms, his sin is not pardonable. Miller clarifies this through the character of Chris, who retains his capacity to love in spite of his capitalistic and war experience. Miller presents a good society in the form of neighbors who help out when the help is required. But they also express their collective disapproval of the wrong done by anyone. For example, they criticize the man who manufactured faulty equipment for the air corps even when the courts exonerate him. The embarrassed man then turns to his family for consolation but, finding no response, shouts, "What am I, a stranger ? I thought I had a family here. What happened to my family?" (Miller, 119, 1967) In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller, the hero, is the embodiment of the evils of capitalism in which the pursuit of minting money leads to the transgression of social as well as human values. Joe has a myopic vision, which is a gift of the same society against which he errs because it is based on the ethics of material prosperity, which blinds him to such an extent that he unhesitatingly adopts the measure of exploitation and criminality. And it is Joe's wife who, while bringing Joe home regarding his social responsibility, remarks that 'The Kellers' family' is not the only 'family' in this world, and she does not accept Keller's explanation, "I don't excuse it that you did it for the family... There's something bigger than the family to..." (Miller, 120, 1967) But Joe is still groping in darkness as far as his role as a human being is concerned; he is still unable to see the meaning of the point put forward by his wife. Having a hazy vision, he replies, "For you, Kate, for both of you, That's all I ever lived for ..." (Miller, 121, 1967). This is the most sensitive issue that Miller raises in his plays again and again: we, no doubt, belong to our family first, but our family should spill over into the world in society. Joe has his own justifications for doing all this for his family and for his son when he asserts that it was a chance, and he took it for himself. He was sixty-one years old when he would not have had another chance to make something for him. At this, the son turns on him with fury, "For me! ... For me! I was dying every day and you were killing my boys, and you did it for me? ... Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you?" (Miller, 90, 1967) But for the father, nothing is bigger than his family, and if there is any, he is ready to put a bullet in his head. The problem with Keller, as Barry Gross says, is that "He is an engaged man but not to man or to men, only to his family, more precisely to his sons, not all the sons of the title but the two sons he has fathered." (Gross 21)

Keller is called upon to play his role as a father on the one hand and as a citizen on the other, but his one-sidedness and disproportionate allegiance to his family make him transgress his role as a citizen. His love for the family at the cost of society is bad, and so is his concern for society sinful at the cost of the family. Through his greedy pursuit for success, Keller desecrates himself in society, and eventually, it becomes clear that Keller's life is devoid of dignity. He forfeits his son's love and his own name for a public business ethic that is found wanting and unbecoming in private, family, and neighborhood life. The business ethics of success

puts financial and self-interest first and social responsibility second. The war exposes the radical moral division: Joe's horror at his own crime is insignificant besides his larger irresponsibility to a "universe of people." This fact is highlighted by Chris when he addresses his father in an ironical tone: "You have such talent for ignoring things." (Miller, 68, 1967) In this way, Miller dramatizes the horrible situation in which every social mischief is found rooted in some ills of success-craving setup. Joe's wife is a simple-hearted woman whose comments about Ann rekindle the hope for upholding moral values: "...she's faithful as a rock. In my worst moments, I think of her waiting, and I know again that I'm right." (Miller, 73, 1967) While Chris harbors the hope of tying the knot with Ann and he has the approval of Joe, Chris's mother, shedding the image of a subdued woman, roars: "Nobody in this house dast take her faith away, Joe. Strangers might. But not his father, not his brother." (Miller, 73, 1967)

The enduring impact of the play emerges from the anger of the younger men against Keller and his generation. The moment Joe comes to know that his sons, for whom he has lived, consider him an animal and do not want to live in the same world with him, he commits suicide, thinking he has shamed them. Thereby, Joe commits his second anti-social crime in the name of the same love that motivated the first. Ronald Hayman, while describing the different attitudes of Joe and Chris, remarks: "The conflict between Joe Keller and his son Chris stems from the difference between their degree of commitment to society. Chris feels the same sort of responsibility towards the whole of humanity that Joe feels only towards his family." (Hayman, 113) In *All My Sons*, what stares is a true social reality, which includes both social relationships and absolute personal needs, enforcing a social fact of responsibility and consequence. Centola aptly remarks: "... Chris succeeds in convincing Keller that he has an obligation to others in society as well. Keller belatedly realizes that his decisions have consequences and that his responsibilities extend beyond the family."(51) Keller's guilt makes him speak his mind, and Chris goes on filling out the details in the framework of his inquiry, and in due course of time, the truth is established. Ironically enough, Keller's guilt is brought home by the son for whose benefit he had acted like a devil. On knowing his father's crime, Chris holds him guilty of causing the death of twenty-one pilots and as a result, the honest son's love vanishes for his father, and Chris, with burning fury, indicts his father with the possession of violent, murderous selfishness and exposes his emotional and intellectual myopia:

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? What is that, the world – the business? What the hell do you mean you did it for me? Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? (Miller, 115-16, 1967)

Ultimately, the truth dawns upon Keller that he had followed a wrong course of attitudes and practices, which made him guilty of transgressing the laws of society and of the country. He was absolutely wrong in thinking that all his activities, including the shady ones, for the happiness of his family would harm no one and would not disturb the happiness of the world, but the truth is that his very family had been disintegrated because of his dubious role in business. In reality, his family is not based on mutual consideration, respect, and a feeling of well-being; all he has is his business. Once Chris comes to know clearly what was hidden from him so far about his father's inhuman action, he feels humiliated by what the people must be thinking of his father's business and wants to run away from the whole thing. Chris realizes that the principle on which the whole society functions is the profit motive in a cut-throat competition that justifies one's deeds, whether black or criminal. 's fault Joe was that while trying his best for the welfare of his family, he ignores what is next to his own family society, along with his son Chris' accusation, leaves him a muted object. He tries to buy support from his wife when he feels completely isolated from his family:

Keller: I'm asking you. What am I, a stranger? I thought I had a family.

What happened to my family?

Mother: You've got a family." (Miller, 119, 1967)

Joe Keller has to refuse alienation when his guilty conscience starts pricking him, not of his own but rather at the persistent trial of his deeds by his own son and his milieu. Whereas whatever Joe did was all for his family at the cost of society

Thus, in *All My Sons*, it becomes clear that one of the obstacles to man's realization of his true self and the society at large is that he is unable to see himself through the right perspective; his ego for the 'self' is primary; next comes to him his 'family,' and for these two he can do anything—unethically—and this in retrospect perpetuates miseries on his 'self' and 'family.' So, the fault lies not in our stars or the system but in ourselves. Miller asks us why we can not say to hell with it and walk away, but we can not, as Jim says to Kate: "We all come back, Kate. These private little revolutions always die. The compromise is always made. In a peculiar way... every man does have a star. The star of one's honesty. And you spend your life groping for it, but once it's out, it never lights again." (Miller, 118, 1967) Through Joe Keller, Miller highlights how individuals are trapped in the quagmire of greed, the notion of identity, and man's position vis a-vis society.

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