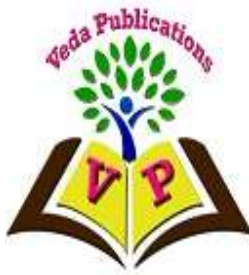


**TREATMENT OF SOCIAL ISSUE IN ARTHUR MILLER'S ALL MY SONS**

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*(Govt. Degree College, Sambhal, U.P.)***ABSTRACT**

Arthur Miller is one of the most popular modern American dramatists. He can be ranked in the category of modern American dramatists. He had studied the plays of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw etc before writing his own tragedies. We find a conflict between good and evil forces in tragedies. He has used his plays to voice his criticism on the values and tendencies of contemporary society and to convey his social, political and moral ideas. Since he wrote many social dramas, he deals with various social issues, especially the relationship between the individual and society. He dealt with Issues related to love, friendship, marriage, business, profession etc. quite realistically. Loyalty & betrayal, intimacy and deception have also been dealt in his plays.

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*All My Sons* is only the arrangement of social evil, capitalism and socialism or communism. "All My Sons" as a title explains the relationship between the play and the biblical themes: what did he hope to accomplish by calling it All My Sons? Obviously, he is preaching, using the Old Testament as both his text and his texture." [1]

As most Miller's critics agree, *All My Sons* is Miller's first work without major flaws. It has a rigid structure with three well-balanced acts, the structure of the play is well calculating and well planned and some unreal and unrealistic elements it it." [2]

Miller is a social dramatist because his tragedies analyze the nature of the society. He challenged the existing corrupt values. For example, he exposed the war profiteering tendencies of Americans in *All My Sons*. Joe Keller earned a lot of money by supplying defective cylinders to the army. Miller exposed Joe Keller who ignored his responsibility to the nation. Adopting the means of drama, Arthur Miller feels the spirit of change. Chris & George opposed Joe Keller. Joe Keller realizes his sin and commits suicide.

Christopher Bigsby says:

This is also a play about fathers and sons, about America, about self-deceit about egotism presented as idealism about self righteousness, about a fear of morality, about guilt, about domestic life as evasion about the space between appearance and reality, .....[3]

Arthur Miller wrote for a new generation. He knew what the audience needed. He dealt with the psychology of his characters in the true colors. As a psychologist he studied the motives and reasons of his characters. He analyzed their behavior and attitude to life. This is the secret of his success on the stage. The actions of his characters are equally important. His heroes are common persons. They don't have high rank. We meet such persons in the streets. His actions are real. We share their feelings. We understand their problems. They are like us.

Through his plays, he gave a new kind of optimism to his readers. He gave the positive values to the people. He doesn't talk of abstract ideas. He dislikes false and hypocritical life. He agreed with Ibsen's approach to realistic drama. He followed

Aristotle's conception of tragedy to a great extent. As a dramatist, he was an advocate of healthy social value.

Unlike Shakespearean tragedies, Miller's tragedy *All My Sons* deals with the tragedy of ordinary Character like Joe Keller and Willy. Miller wrote the tragedies of modern time. His central figures don't belong to high positions. Their actions and struggles are not very heroic either. Their conflict with the society or the family around them is the chief factor responsible for their tragedy. But the short coming of character is responsible for the tragedy in the play.

The biggest flaw, he persists, is that, Miller hasn't really focused upon Joe Keller who is supposed to be a true protagonist.

In developing several strains of action, Miller never clearly focuses his audience's attention upon his tragic protagonist, but keeps it jumping from the dead Larry to Mrs. Keller, to the romance between Chris and Ann, to the intervention of George, to the plight of Steeve Deever.....

Yet if *All My Sons* is a tragedy, it is the tragedy of Joe Keller, who has violated his social contract with humanity. [4]

Joe is a victim of the capitalistic society and it lays emphasis on acquisition of more and more money without caring for the right or wrongs. Through Joe Keller, Miller exposed the war profiteers, when Chris doesn't accept the foul money; Joe Keller gives a lame excuse:

What should I want to do?

Jail? You want me to go to jail?

If you want me to go, say so!

Is that where I belong .....

Chris Keller is one of the best characters in the social tragedy "All My sons". He occupies a significant position in the action of the play. He is the most interesting character and his importance lies in the fact that he brings such a turn in the life of Joe Keller. He defended his country with all determination and helped America in winning the Second World War. Youths like Chris are proud of their nation. He is an amiable youth who knows how to win friends. He has no enemy.

Chris appears before us as an obedient son who is proud of his father and mother. He has a soft



corner for them. He respects them more than his life. He cannot disobey his parents. When his mother opposes his marriage with Annie, he keeps mum. He does not bear any ill will against them. He does not like to be a business man like his father and asks him: "The business does not inspire me." He tries to make his father but he is high disillusioned with him when he comes to know about his guilt. His father's crime is very serious. He says to his mother – "I could jail him if I were human any more. But I am like everybody else now. I am practical now. You have made me practical. But now I am practical, and in spite of myself". His love for his father is so deep that the father commits suicide, he feels himself to be guilty of causing the tragedy.

Chris was very tender, emotional and loving to his elder brother, Larry. He cherishes his memory long after his death. He also plants an apple tree in the backyard of his house with his father. When a strong wind blows and breaks its upper part he grieves. His love for his elder brother was true and sincere.

Chris loves Annie from the depth of his heart. Annie was betrothed with Larry but after Larry's death she begins to love Chris. Chris also loves her. Chris is of shy nature and for a long time he cannot express his love before her. When he finds Annie in his house, he cannot suppress his feelings anymore and he expresses them to her. He wishes to marry her and have a happy married life. He tells his father "If I have to grub for money all day long at least at evening I want it beautiful. I want a family." I want some kids. I want to build something I can give myself to. Annie is the middle of that. Now where do I find it?" (125) Chris does not want to hurt the feelings of his mother. He is prepared to leave his home and go elsewhere, New York, where he can marry her and live with her.

Chris has a moral sense in his character. He grieved at the change of attitude of human being after the war, people were ready to shed the last drop of blood for their country and would make sacrifice to save the honour and respect and freedom of the country. But after war the people have become too materialistic. The world has become too much with them. He finds that people are killing others for their own interests. He finds men like his

father betraying the trust of their friends. He is highly disillusioned and his sense of disillusionment is expressed in the following lines.

"They did not die: they killed themselves for each other ..... a little more selfish and they had have been here today. And I got an idea – watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, because nobody was changed at all. I seem to make suckers out of a lot of guys."

Chris feels great disgust over the situation prevailing in the world around him consisting of money-making, profiteering killing others. He seems to voice the writer's own disgust when he says to Ann about America – "This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That is the principle; the only one we live by it just happened to kill a few people this time that is all ..... This is a zoo, a zoo." (124)

Thus Chris Keller is an important character in *All My Sons*. He is idealist, practical, obedient. He has human values. He presents a contrast to his father, Joe Keller.

Joe Keller is the central figure in Arthur Miller's tragedy *All My Sons* and it is he around whom the main action and chief events in it revolve. He is money minded man. He can take any action to earn money. His lust for money is responsible for his fall. He may, like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and John Proctor in *The Crucible*, be regarded as a tragic hero while he does not have high rank or status. He is a common man having the common man's strength and weakness of character. He forgets his social responsibility and ignores the humanity at large. He fails to understand that his actions will prove dangerous for the soldiers.

In *All My Sons* the dramatist has given two roles to Joe Keller, he plays his role as a father on the one hand and as a citizen on the other due to his selfish nature, he remains dedicated to his family. But he ignores his role as a good citizen. Arthur Miller remarked –

"In *All My Sons* Joe Keller is a father and a citizen, but he could not take the citizen side seriously. He became less of a father and destroyed his own children ....." (17)



The dramatist believes that the responsibility of a person is not confined merely to personal relationship. It must extend to the society at large. Joe Keller suffers mental agony because he forgets his duty to the society for a long time. He tells lies and fails to gather courage to admit his fault. He tells his wife.

“Because he is my son – Nothing is bigger than that – I am his father and he is my son, and if there is something bigger than that I’ll put a bullet in my head.” (120)

But at last he realizes that society is bigger than family. He realizes that the killed pilots were all his sons and hence he commits suicide.

Joe Keller loves Chris and he established business for the happiness of family. He wants that Chris should make wonderful progress in his life. “I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you.”

Joe Keller lacks wisdom, generosity, Kindness and prudence which Chris possesses. The commonly known things and general principle of life are neglected by him. On the contrary, Kates remarks:

“Certain things have to be, and certain things can never be, like the sun has to rise, it has to be that is why there is God. Otherwise anything could happen. But there is God, so certain things can never happen.” (78)

Joe Keller is a tragic hero. Arthur Miller has focused here human as well as materialistic aspect of character in such a manner that the audience do not lose sympathy for him. He has lost one son in the war. His fundamental motive is to do his best for the comforts of Chris. When Macbeth loses his sense of reason the audience feels sympathy for him. Similarly Joe Keller supplied defective cylinders for the war and yet our sympathy for him is never lost. He appears as a villain on many occasions. Yet he realizes before his death that he had a social responsibility. In a mood of hopelessness and desperation he tells Chris:

“You are a boy, what could I do? I am in business, a man is business; a hundred & twenty cracked you are out of business; you got a process. The process do not work you are out of business you do not how to operate. Your stuff is not good. They close you up they tear up your contract – I never

thought they’d install them. I swear to God. I thought they had stopped them before anybody took off. (115)

Chris did not like Joe Keller’s method to earn the money when he came to know the reality, his nerves shattered. He fails to understand the wicked and tricky business of people. Joe asserts: What the hell did I work for? That is only for you, Chris. The shorting match is for you. (69)

Examining the confrontation between Joe and Chris in *All My Sons*, We notice two different contradicting each other at a deeper level. For one thing, Joe represents the old generation in his realistic and practical thinking as opposed to Chris who is quite romantic and full of idealism. For another, while Joe puts his family before anything else and sticks to securing the father image and paternal dignity at home. Joe's following words indicates the situation:

Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nation, I'll work for nothing. Did they ship a gun or a truck out of Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace, it's nickels and dimes what's clean?[5]

Joe sense of guilt is awakened when his sons Chris confronts him with his responsibility in the crime and makes him acknowledge that all dead pilots were his sons. The Americans indulged in money making and profiteering. This may be taken as Miller's own indictment of this society. Miller makes Chris remarks “This is the land of the great big dogs you don't love him here, you eat him. That is the principle; the only one way we live by.”

The tragedy occurring in such society is not merely the tragedy of the individual, but also that of society. Dealing with such a tragedy, *All My Sons* may be called to be a social tragedy. *All my sons* presents the tragedy not only of one man, Joe Keller but also Larry, his eldest son, Chris his younger son and others. Larry has to die for no fault of his own, because of his father's guilt.

Pathos is the soul of tragedy. *All my sons* is full of pathos. There is pathos in the bereavement of the mother Kate, who believes that her son is still alive and would return home one day. Steve Deever's



miserable suffering in the prison due to denial of Joe Keller of his telephonic conversation is also pathetic.

Chris has a broader human outlook rather than a narrow personal view of things around him. His outlook is different to his father. His father gives the importance to his family. While his father regards the family as biggest or most important thing in his life, he puts his arguments. You can be better! Once and for all you can know there is a universe of people outside and you are responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away, your sons because that is why.

Miller's portrayal of Joe Keller's downfall, he suggests that every individual has the power to make free choice and the obligation to convert those choices into responsible action. When one refuses to accept his freedom and denies his responsibility to society, he lives in bad faith. *All My Sons* shows the danger of such bad faith by exploding what Miller calls the "exclusiveness" of private life in America.[6]

Joe Keller is not a merely a particular individual. He is a type of representing the common human beings. He is everyman possessing the traits of ordinary man. If Joe cannot overcome his weakness, he is not much to blame. He is a man. He cannot be saint or God. He tells Chris: "A man cannot be a Jesus in the world."

In the beginning Chris fails to accept whatever George says. But the final stage comes when he insists that his father must be punished for his guilt. Now it becomes different for Chris to accept him as a man yet Chris says:

"I know you are no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father. I cannot look at you this way, I cannot look at myself."

Joe Keller is moving character whose place in *All My Sons* is quite important. Miller has succeeded in portraying him as a representative of modern man, a highly disillusioned man, a product of the contemporary society.

Joe Keller is a unique character from the pen of Arthur Miller. He accepts reality only too late.

This disbelieves in the play shows in the character of Kate. She convinced Joe that Larry is not dead. She wants that Chris should not marry with Ann. She believes in horoscope of Larry.

In 1977 a Jerusalem production of *All my sons* was the longest running dramatic play in the history of Israel and captured the soul of the Israeli audience, aware of the play's parallels to their own war-torn world. Miller himself visited Jerusalem with his wife that year and saw a production of tremendous power, together with the president of Israel, Ephraim Katzir and the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

"*All My Sons* had broken the record by then for length of run by a straight play in Israel, and the audience sat watching it with an intensifying terror that was quite palpable ..... At the end of the play the applause seemed not to dispel an almost religious quality in the audience's attention and I asked Rabin why he thought this was so. "Because this is a problem in Israel – boys are out there day and night dying in planes and on the ground, and back here people are making a lot of money. So it might as well be an Israeli play."

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