Deciphering Culpability: Self, Family and Society in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Man's love for 'self' is inherent in him. In his journey from life to death, he wishes only to extend his 'self', and his actions are motivated by his private longing to get the only thing in life – 'identity' - without which he sees his life as futile and meaningless. This lust for 'name' or identity is reflected through what one does and how he behaves or conducts himself in his milieu. As this acknowledgement cannot be got in isolation, a man living in society wants to be different from others, not a part of the masses, but something important and unique, having an independent existence and identity. To seek recognition from the outer world, man labours hard publically and, at times, unethically in private, indulging in acts of perversion which leave him a split personality. This love for identity splits the self into two—dignified public image and perverted private self, and this s-lit existence makes man venture into paths of evil, betrayal, guilt, confession and compass, ion in human life. This poignant search for identity has been pervasive in the literature of all ages worldwide.

However, in the post-World War I tumultuous world, this 'issue of identity' remains a recurring obsession in the theatrical world of American playwright Arthur Miller. Miller depicts on the stage, through his works, how the mind of a human being works – what his longings are, why he lives and why he hankers after wealth, at times full of affection and then hatred – and what remains the most important thing for man which works as a catalyst for him. His plays are not great because of their political statements, although the themes they embody are still as pertinent as ever. They are excellent plays and works of art because they are human stories of enduring power that live, and live again, through these characters—together with Eugene O'Neill, Williams, and Miller, made American theatre a force on the international scene. Williams and Miller presented their times in their works and

created characters who betray themselves in situations where they are betrayed by themselves. The lot of man is determined, in Miller, not by fate, but by social forces which govern the life of man, and the theatre of Miller, observes Bigsby, constantly analyses these forces:

Suppose these complexities are not yet addressed with any great subtlety. In that case, Miller is already discovering the dramatic energy generated by familial relationships in which loyalty clashes with belief, moral value with social theory, and personal commitment with public form. (Centola, 24)

Here, Miller differs from Tennessee Williams, for whom the interior world of his characters is more accurate than their social environment. His characters are not aware of how to bring a change in their world, and hence, their end is the only solution to the riddle. His *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman* and *The Price* address the issue of American consumerism, where only successful persons could survive. Miller's protagonists find themselves caught up in overwhelming situations such as the quest for identity, pursuit of false norms, greed for material goods, or it may equally well be the lack of self-understanding and consequently their inability to save themselves from the uncanny forces of undefinable society in the contemporary context. Miller sees a tendency in a democratic society to bulldoze the individual into a faceless non-entity.

In Miller's world, man is suddenly confronted with a situation he cannot meet, which eventually puts his "name" in danger. His inability to answer the question, 'Who am I?' produces calamity for him and causes his downfall. This situation is analogous to a crisis which R. W. Corrigan presents as "…a conflict between the uncomprehending self and social or economic structure – the family, the community, the system." (Corrigan 3) The depiction of such a situation may look like the condemnation of the exploitation to which human beings are subjected in a system dominated mainly by selfish capitalists. However, neither society nor the individual alone is responsible for the final destruction. The division of blame is shared between man and society. The problem with the individuals is that they long for the "whole"; they "cannot settle for half." (Miller, 1967, 3)

Man is nothing but a product of his social environment. As everybody is intrinsically conscious of his 'self', man, to preserve, protect and further enlarge his 'self', comes into society because here, where every other individual has a separate 'self', his inflated ego is satisfied. Moreover, it is only in society that man's life becomes meaningful because realising his goals is only possible here. Miller always focuses on the workings of human relationships – personal, familial, and social- and thinks that family and society play a vital role in determining the fate of the individual and his position in society. His plays present the lives of human beings with flawed natures, going through specific processes to arrive at the truth. Dramatic art is the most appropriate way to communicate with human beings realistically. 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, and what does he say they are? What does he claim to want, and what does he want? (Miller, 1996, 15)

Miller's first major dramatic success, *All My Sons*, is set in the backdrop of American capitalism, where only material success means. Joe Keller, realising that there is no place for failure in society, takes recourse to dishonest means for the welfare of his family at the cost of the welfare of humanity. His unethical deed puts his identity in a state of fix before his family, but as a typical Miller hero cannot live without his identity, Joe commits suicide to save his name. Miller saw and experienced very closely the miserable plight of an average American in the prevalent uncertain decades of the 1930s and 1940. These experiences in the playwright's mind sowed the seed of 'common man tragedy', which later became synonymous with Miller. Miller believed that the position of a commoner was not less important than that of a king in society, and the tragic feeling is evoked when we see a character ready to lay down his life to secure one thing – his dignity and name. The underlying conflict and plot is the individual's attempt to regain his lost ground. Tragedy is the consequence of a man's compulsion to evaluate himself justly

due to the condition of their personality. At some point, human beings must fight a battle they could have won but could not. Fred Ribkoff remarks:

> … tragedy dramatises identity crises. At the root of such crises lie feelings of shame. You might ask: what about guilt? There is no question that guilt plays a significant role in the tragedy. However, tragedy also dramatises how feelings of shame shake an individual's sense of identity and thus propel him or her into wrongdoing and guilt. (Ribkoff, 48)

In *All My Sons,* the protagonist is a businessman who has allowed defective parts to be fitted to aircraft, thus causing a series of fatal crashes, and the consequences come home to him with truly tragic inevitability. Miller's intention to keep the balance between past and present, the actions and their consequences are all part of Ibsen's invaluable legacy. He was so inspired by Ibsen's 'retrospective method' of structuring that he successfully employed it in his first successful play, All My Sons. There is a clear stamp of Ibsen's influence on this play's style, theme and plot: 'When *All My Sons* opened on Broadway, it was called an 'Ibsensque' play.' (Miller. 1967, 19) Since Miller belonged to a business family, the varied experiences that he had in his family finds way onto the state right from the beginning of his writing career, and the scars of the Depression were still evident in his mind when he tasted his first success with *All My Sons* in 1947.

Based on a true story, the play presents Chris Keller, the son, rejecting his father, Joe Keller's criminal irresponsibility, whether the latter is his father or not. The father, realising his complicity, shoots himself when he realises his son knows the truth. He accepts his fate, but so does the son. In wartime, Joe has allowed one hundred twenty cracked cylinder heads to go from his factory into P40 aircraft, directly causing their pilots' deaths. He allowed his subordinate and next-door neighbour, Deever, to be imprisoned and disgraced for his criminality, but at the age of sixty-one, he comes to realise that those pilots were '*all my sons*' and, thus, commits suicide. Keller's life, hence, is a waste; he forfeits his son's love and his own good 'name' for public business ethics, which is strictly unusable in a private family and good neighbourly life. The business ethic gives financial and self-interest prime

importance, and social responsibility and purpose are secondary. Alice Griffin describes Keller's family in the following words:

> At first, the self-made Joe, devoted Kate, and loving Chris 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)

All My Sons, like Miller's many other plays, is a 'social play' where Joe's crime has "…roots in a certain relationship of the individual to society, and to a certain indoctrination he embodies, which, if dominant, can mean a jungle existence for all of us no matter how high our buildings soar." (Miller 1967, 19) Miller feels that one must find a bridge that joins his private, small home to that all-inclusive large home of the universal fraternity. The family force must impel the members from the centre 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." (Miler, 1967, 19) However, his sin is not pardonable when he starts practising unethical business terms. Miller clarifies this through the character of Chris, who retains his capacity to love despite his capitalistic and war experience. 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. Peculiarly… every man does have a star. The star of one's honesty. Moreover, you spend your life groping for it, but once it is out, it never lights again." (Miler, 1967, 118) Miller presents a good society in the form of neighbours who help out when the help is required.

However, they also express their collective disapproval of anyone's wrongdoing. For example, even when the courts exonerate him, they criticise the man who manufactured faulty equipment for the Air Corps. 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?" (Miler,

1967, 119) Susan C.W. Abbotson writes: "Many of Miller's plays centre on families, and by concentrating on their pleasures, problems, and relationships, Miller explores in microcosm, society as a whole." (Abbotson 4) His plays portray the society, the family he knew, and his experiences intimately and feelingly. He writes about them because that is the way he believes a culture is developed. As a dramatist of human conditions, Miller engages himself in the ceaseless task of delving deep into the nature of human existence and tries to probe still deeper into the mystery of life and asks questions like:

> How may a man make the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle? What must he strive to change within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and the honour that all men have connected with the idea of family? (Miller, 1996, 73)

The family is, after all, the nursery of all our neuroses and hopes and can end suffering and so forth. The family constellation is the central matrix of the civilisation. Joe's wife is a simple-hearted woman whose comments about Ann rekindle the hope for upholding moral values: "… she is faithful as a rock. In my worst moments, I think of her waiting, and I know again that I am right." (Miller, 1967, 73) While Chris harbours 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, 1967, 73) Chris' mother stands for what Joe and even Chris fail to observe: moral uprightness and chastity. Joe tries to achieve something for the family at the cost of society but loses both family and society in the process; he cannot understand why he should ask forgiveness from his son and starts arguing with his wife:

> JOE KELLER: I do not know what you mean! You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven for? You wanted money, didn't you?
>
> MOTHER: I did not want it that way.

> JOE KELLER: … What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should have put him out when he was ten like I was put out and made him earn his keep… Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day but had a family…. (Miler, 1967, 120)

Joe's wife, while bringing him 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 do not excuse it that you did it for the family… There is something bigger than the family to...." (Miller, 1967, 120) However, Joe is still groping in darkness, so 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 is all I ever lived for…"(Miler, 1967, 121) 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. This is an idealistic view of life, which is hard to practise but is worth trying. This is why the idealist Chris' pathos touches our hearts: "I could jail him! I could jail him if I were human anymore. However, I am like everybody else now. I am practical now… The cats in that alley are practical; the bums who ran away when we were fighting were practical. Only the dead ones were not practical." (Miller, 1967, 123) Joe has his justifications that he did all this for his family, for his son, when he asserts that it was a chance and took it for him. He was sixty-one 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?" (Miler, 1967, 115-16) However, for the father, nothing is more significant 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 11)

Joe Keller is presented as an avaricious, egocentric businessman nearing sixty. He embodies the evils of capitalism in which the pursuit of minting money leads to the transgression of social and 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 closes his eyes to such an extent that he unhesitatingly adopts the measure of exploitation and criminality. He is engaged in shrewd commercialisation and is not prepared to part with his achievements already made: "You lay forty years in business, and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?" (Miller, 1967, 15) So, to continue his achievements, he intentionally asks his subordinate, Deever, to supply the defective engine heads to the Air Force. He gives the instructions on the phone so that he may easily escape the trap if the defect is traced because a phone call is not enough evidence to be accepted in court. His cleverness and shrewdness are exposed by George, Deever's son, when he says:

> However, he promised to take responsibility. Do you understand what I mean? On the telephone, you cannot be responsible! In a court, you can permanently deny a phone call, which is precisely what he did. (Miller, 1967, 102)

Joe's reason for committing this crime is not that he never knew what was wrong and what was right but because, as Miller writes in 'Introduction' to the Collected Plays, "his cast of mind cannot admit that he has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." (Miller, 1967, 19) Excess of love for his sons makes Keller succumb to the socioeconomic pressures of society. The only motivation with him now is to provide his sons with a future based on substantial wealth. He tries to convince Chris by telling him, "Chris… Chris, I did it for you; it was a chance, and I took it for you. I am sixty-one years old; when would I have another chance to make something for you?" (Miller, 1967, 115) Thus, Keller avails the opportunity and believes that war is a business for the producers of military equipment. He finds the ready-made societal images attached to himself and, in turn, becomes the victim of the attachment and consequently transgresses social norms to amass wealth through immoral means of betrayal and distrust at the expense of and to the detriment of others. Hence, in this play, Miller leads to an appraisal of injustice, the sin committed in the name of "free enterprise". The playwright deeply probes into the nature of personal and social guilt and the nexus

between the two, and the guilty passion of the hero becomes significant only when some broader commitment finally challenges it. According to Henry Popkin, "Miller's "regular practice in his plays is to confront the dead level of banality with heights and depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility." (Popkin. 53) Miller depicts the loss of moral sanction through the protagonist who, to gain his identity, tries to set up a flourishing business by transgressing all the codes of society and humanity. Joe has submerged his guilt in social and economic success. For most of the play, the guilt remains private and bears the façade of respectability and success. However, the protagonist never escapes the dire consequences of his action of transgression.

Most of his plays concern the impinging of the public issue on the private conscience and the domestic circle. Miller highlights how the transgressors like Kellers are a part of the larger community. Joe is genuinely unable to visualise the public consequence of what was, for him, a private act. To have stopped production when the flaw was discovered would have endangered the future of the business, which meant security for his family. Miller sees Keller as a simple man who has got on by energy and willpower but is hardly clever enough to know how he has done it. There is more than a grain of truth in his wife's comment, "We are dumb, Chris. Dad and I are stupid people. We do not know anything. You have got to protect us." (Miller, 1967, 90) 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. His love for the family at the cost of society is terrible, and so is his concern for society sinful at the cost of the family. Bigsby writes that Miller "…sees an awed society as an extension of a deeply fallible human nature." (Bigsby, XXXIV)

The confrontation between Joe Keller and his son Chris springs from Chris' awareness of one's responsibility towards others and his father's lack of it. Chris' character is the exact antithesis of his father's. Joe is committed only to the welfare of his children, whereas Chris is an idealist whose entire allegiance is to society. He tells his father: "I do not know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer." (Miller, 1967, 68) Chris's

concern for others and society is in direct contrast to Joe's lack of concern for others. Chris tells Ann how a realisation dawned upon him when he was in command of a company during the war:

> It had been raining for several days, and this kid came to me and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That is only a little thing – but … that is the kind of guy I had. They did not die; they killed themselves for each other. I mean that strictly: selfish, and they have been here today. Moreover, I got the idea of watching them go down. Everything was being destroyed, but it seemed that one new thing was made. I am responsible. Man for man. (Miller, 1967, 85)

However, afterwards, when Chris returns home, he is appalled by the gross indifference, selfishness and all-round corruption prevailing there. He discovers a painful split between his high moral idealism and the ugly reality of a highly corrupt society. He is not proud of his father's money because he suspects that his father was in some way responsible for causing many deaths. Joe's proposal to change the name of his concern to his son's is turned down by Chris. Joe, however, tries to hide the truth, but Chris's persistent questioning brings it out. He is possessed with guilt, so he sometimes feels as if his son knows all about his crime. He keeps on confirming it through every word he speaks:

> JOE KELLER: … sometimes I think you are… ashamed of the money.
>
> CHRIS: No, do not feel that.
>
> JOE KELLER: Because it is good money, nothing is wrong with it. (Miller, 1967, 87)

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 degrees of commitment to society. Chris feels the same responsibility towards the whole of

humanity that Joe feels only towards his family." (Hayman, 113) In *All My Sons*, we see an actual social reality, which includes social relationships and absolute personal needs, enforcing a social fact – responsibility and consequence. Centola aptly remarks: "…Chris succeeds in convincing Keller that he also has an obligation to others in society. Keller belatedly realises that his decisions have consequences and that his responsibilities extend beyond the family." (Centola, 51)

Keller's guilt makes him speak his mind, and Chris fills out the details in the framework of his enquiry, 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 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, 1967, 115-16)

Finally, the truth dawns upon Keller that he had followed a wrong course of attitudes and practices, which made him guilty of transgressing society and the country's laws. He was wrong in thinking that all his activities, including the shady ones, for the happiness of his family would harm no one and not disturb the world's happiness. However, 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 being healthy; all he has is his business. Once Chris knows clearly what has been hidden from him so far about his father's inhuman actions, he feels humiliated by what people think of his father's business and wants to run away from the whole thing. Chris realises that the principle on which the whole society functions is the profit motive in a cut-throat competition

which justifies one's deeds, whether black or criminal. In sheer agony of experiencing the greatest perversion of values, he cries out:

> This is the land of the great big dogs; you do not 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. The world is that way; how can I take it out on him? What sense does that make? This is a zoo, a zoo! (Miller, 1967, 124)

Miller exposes the layers of transgressions and self-deceptions with which people wrap themselves in the hope of somehow surviving amid a world that constantly reveals the signs of collapse and disintegration. The various characters of the play have to engage themselves in serious combat with the social issues that threaten them, with the presence of uncomfortable questions and equally uncomfortable answers. In their efforts to find their human bearings, they discover the inhuman imperatives that constantly deter them from accomplishing what they desire. No character in the play can assert his identity without realising first how difficult this assertion becomes in the face of dehumanising forces that compel him to become who he is and what he ought not to be. Joe Keller finally exposes the insensitivity and hollowness of the American system and the attitudes of the people there and offers the same kind of justification when he says:

> Who worked for nothin' in that war? When they work for nothin', I will work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck out of Detroit before they got their price? Is that clear? It is dollars and cents, nickels and dimes, war and peace, nickels and dimes; what is clean? Half the Goddam country has got to go if I go! (Miller, 1967, 125)

It is only towards the end that Joe understands that not only Larry but all the pilots who flew the planes and got killed were his 'sons'. Reading Larry's letter leaves no doubt in Joe's mind about the enormity of his crime against humanity. Joe does not find any reason to live now that both his sons have virtually condemned him to death. He suddenly begins to see through Larry's eyes and realises that only his flesh and blood were not his sons but all those who fought in the war: "Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were." (Miller, 1967, 126) When Joe realises that his concept of identity for

which he has transgressed all moral codes and betrayed his society, country, and the world is not the right one, that there is something more significant than the family, and that those who were killed were all his sons, he does put a bullet in his head. When Kate asks Chris what their fate will be, Chris replies: "You can be better! Once and for all you can know, there is a universe of people outside, and you are responsible for it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that is why he died." (Miller, 1967, 126-27)

Miller underlines that man is not merely a bundle of psychological drives, whether inborn or created anew by his family loyalties; he is also endowed with a creative will powerful enough to instil in him a sense of human values. This sense of human values regulates and adjusts human life in its changing relationships between man and man. It also exalts and distinguishes the human personality by enabling it to be free from being a tool in the hands of outside forces alien to its innate nature. Thus, Miller considers man an amalgam of social instincts, psychological drives, and creative will. Drawing the picture of Miller's characters, Bart Barnes and Patricia Sullivan said: "His characters were good people who frequently misbehaved under pressure. They were insightful, but they had blind spots. They avoided reality and denied the truth when it was painful."(Barnes) Through his play, Miller emphasises the need for social harmony and peaceful co-existence among the masses. One's identity can be achieved only by realising one's responsibility to society, country, and the universe, not by transgressing and betraying them. The dramatist tries to establish the fact that these anti-social acts may be beneficial for a particular individual but for a short time, and that one who shuts his eyes to the stark realities of life and goes on committing crimes without caring for the consequences of his acts of transgressions, as Joe does, he is likely to end up tragically. The play shows that seeds of evil always exist in the human mind, and this evil becomes instrumental in making the man transgress the bounds of decency, as the individual becomes a torn personality and a neurotic in himself. Individual desires and passions always stand in the way of dignity; tempting evils like marital infidelity or sex, which are different faces of transgression, give a jolt to a healthy-looking social life. In such a depressed situation, Miller suggests that man

should learn to compromise, but the latter fails to understand. Instead of striking a balance between honest means to support the family and asserting conscience, he resorts to violating the moral code of conduct and consequently falls prey to guilt. 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 alter this given role."(Miller, 1996, 81) Any other role we take up in our professional or private life comes much later.

While portraying personal failures and discontentment, Miller sets his eyes on his objective "…to achieve a coherency out of the chaos, and, of course, the deeper the chaos, the more difficult it is to symbolise in a coherent, integrated symbol… It is illumination… It is to arrive at that point of illumination." (Miller, 1996, 498) So, to achieve this coherency out of chaos, Miller depicts the growing complexities of life, sterilisation of human relationships, loss of values and a gap existing between man and man, thus forcing the man to take shelter in his world of transgressions. At the same time, the individual, in a desperate situation, plunges himself into guilty actions at all levels – social, sexual and moral. Thus, in *All My Sons*, it becomes clear that one of the obstacles to man's realisation of his true self and the society at large is that he is unable to see himself through the proper 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 retrospection perpetuates miseries on his 'self' and 'family'.

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