



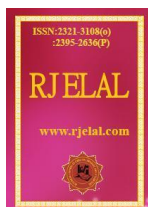
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Tracing the Cultural Dynamics: Indian Ethos in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

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Abstract

Arthur Miller, one of the greatest social playwrights of America, deals with issues like man, society and beyond where the individual is deeply engrossed in the issues arising out of moral ethical issues of the time. The echo of the Eastern perspective of man and his life can be easily felt in Miller's world – how the individual is affected, controlled and directed by the public forces as well as private derives, having a close resemblance with Indian ethos. The Indian socio-cultural mores place a strong emphasis on family where extended families often living together or maintaining close relationships. Family remains at the centre where man is considered the pillar of strength in Indian society and this focus on family resonates with Indian sensibilities, as the plays explore the emotional and social impact of family dynamics on individuals and their choices. The tension between duty to family and duty to society, the consequences of moral compromise, and the longing for redemption all echo with Indian philosophical and cultural values. Indian perspective of life which is determined by concepts like dharma (duty) and karma (action and consequence) find echo in Miller's delineation of American cultural construct defined by 'success myth'.

Key words: Ethos, Perspective, Indian, Family, Success Myth

Arthur Miller, one of the greatest social playwrights of America, deals with issues like man, society and beyond where the individual is deeply engrossed in the issues arising out of moral-ethical issues of the time. The study of his body of works, chiefly his earlier plays like *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* evokes the image of a socio-cultural sensibilities prevailing in the Indian society across the Atlantic. The

echo of the Eastern perspective of man and his life can be easily felt—how the individual is affected, controlled and directed by the public forces as well as private derives, having a close resemblance with the Indian ethos. The Indian socio-cultural mores place a strong emphasis on family where extended families often living together or maintaining close relationships. The concept of family is seen as a fundamental social

unit, and it affects individual behavior and decision-making. Family remains at the centre where man is considered the pillar of strength in Indian society and this focus on family resonates with Indian sensibilities, as Miller's plays explore the emotional and social impact of family dynamics on individuals and their choices. His greatest works like *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, predominantly explore American themes and struggles, they also resonate with universal human experiences, including those found in Indian sensibilities, focusing on family dynamics, societal expectations. Indian perspective of life is determined by concepts like dharma (duty) and karma (action and consequence). *All My Sons* is an American tragedy, its moral questions, ethical dilemmas, and family dynamics resonate powerfully with Indian sensibility. The tension between duty to family and duty to society, the consequences of moral compromise, and the longing for redemption all echo with Indian philosophical and cultural values. Arthur Miller over the years waged a relentless battle against the social forces through his theatrical works to expose man's helpless lot in the present age. Miller's focus remained on the protection of dignity of the individual, his sense of the 'self' about which any individual could be proud of. Indian thought tends to emphasize collective well-being over individual gain. *All My Sons* critiques the American capitalist ethos where personal or familial prosperity trumps social responsibility. In that sense, the play aligns with Indian values that honor societal dharma over selfish interests.

Miller's plays often explore family relationships, including the complexities of parent-child dynamics and marital incompatibilities. His *All My Sons* is often celebrated as a classic American tragedy, rooted in the moral dilemmas of post-World War II capitalism, family loyalty, and personal guilt. However, when viewed through the lens of Indian ethos—encompassing spiritual, philosophical, and cultural principles—this play

reveals universal moral concerns that resonate with Indian thought. In both Indian and American cultures, the family is central. In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller's actions—justifying a crime to protect his family's financial future—echo a deep commitment to family. In Indian society the joint family or the sense of collective family honor is vital; decisions are often made for the good of the family as a whole. The dramatic personae find battling and reeling under the issues governing and affecting the man just like in Indian society. Man's sensibility is developed and moulded as per the kind of experiences he has and gradually he starts looking at the things from the perspective of his outlook framed. The societal expectations and the pursuit of a good, successful life in Indian society are cultural norms which forces man to act as per the demand of the society and this also finds expression in *All My Sons*. Here the protagonist has to find meaning in life by doing some worthwhile for his dependents, even adopting unethical ways to get recognition in life. Joe Keller in *All My Sons* becomes an unwanted person even in his home when he is exposed in his milieu. The fault of Joe is that while trying his best for the welfare of his family, he ignores what is next to his own family—the society—which, along with his son Chris' accusation, leaves him a muted object. He tries to buy support of 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, 1967, p. 119)

Joe Keller fails to be one with the larger family because he violated the social code. The society assimilates only those who realise their responsibilities towards others, only when man understands he has an obligation towards others. Those who fall short will not be entertained, as it happens with Joe Keller, and they will be treated as socially outcast or in exile.

Joe does not identify himself with others, and when his image has a beating at home as well as in his society, because by his action, he caused a danger to the society, an action symbolic of jungle law where there is disorder and selfishness, he seems to have lost all contacts with his surrounding and keeps on brooding over his fate, and becomes a pathetic lonely figure. It is when he is alienated from all those for whose sake he laboured hard unethically that he decides to kill himself, because that was the only way out for him to get salvation, sympathy, love and finally 'name'. Keller's extreme allegiance to a lesser good, the family, destroys his social consciousness; he becomes merely a shell, a man without conscience. Chris discovers what Joe fails to do; while Keller feels responsible to no one outside his family whereas Chris is aware of the world beyond family. Both Chris and Larry feel the full impact of Joe's anti-social action. Deeply shamed by his father's crime, Larry commits suicide in combat after writing his fiancée of his decision to take his own life. When Chris reads Larry's letter aloud, Joe finally sees that he has isolated himself from the world Chris and Larry had fought for. Earlier, when questioned by Chris about his wrong doing, Joe, in a fit of fury, retaliates: 'You want me to go to jail? ... Is that where I belong? You know I don't belong here ... Who worked for nothing in that war? When they work for nothin', I'll work for nothin'. Did they ship a gun or a truck outa Detroit before they got their price? Is that clean? It's dollars and cents, nickels and dimes; war and peace.... What's clean? Half the Goddam country is gotta go if I go!' (Miller, 1967, pp. 124-125) How can we become so alienated from others? – this is the question that constantly haunts Miller throughout the play. In a way, the alienation of Joe is responsible for his own punishment-death-which he accepts for his 'identity', his name. Pramila Singh writes: "All My Sons is a judgment of man's failure to maintain a viable connection with his surrounding world because he does not know himself." (Singh, p. 55)

The world that Miller projects is a hollowed, pale world where everything appeared phony. Man was nothing but a commodity; his existence was reduced in stature and he was grappling with the forces bent on crushing him. The words of faith, belief, and loyalty were thrown out of the world and here entered evil in the form of perversions. Human relations were reduced to just the level of a mechanical relationship and people looked at each other with suspicion. In such a situation, Miller in his plays makes an effort to uphold the mirror of truth to the Americans, the 'lost generation', and shows them the way to life with dignity. Joe Keller, being the head of his family, does not indulge in the nasty deed of supplying defective cylinder heads only for the prosperity of his family; rather he wants to show the 'others' – family and the outside world – that he is 'something', a man capable of doing great for his family, and this satisfies his ego – 'self'. The fact is that one just cannot live through dishonest means. Joe tries to achieve something for the family at the cost of society but loses both family and society in the process; he just cannot understand why he should ask forgiveness from his son and starts arguing with his wife:

KELLER: I don't 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 didn't want it that way.

KELLER: ... What difference is it what you want ? I spoiled the both of you. I should've put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and make him earn his keep... Forgiven ! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family.... (Miller, 1967, p.120)

The family is a microcosm of a world beyond and the behaviour of an individual in love, sex, or parental relations is evidence of the choices imposed by social necessity. The family is an outcome of the harmonious relationship among social forces as well as between sexual ones. In the words of 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, p.4)

Here the dramatist highlights how the transgressors like Kellers are a part of the larger community. Joe is genuinely unable to visualize 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 that meant security for his family. Miller sees Keller as a simple man who has got on by energy and will-power but who 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're dumb, Chris. Dad and I are stupid people. We don't know anything. You've got to protect us." (Miller, 1967, p 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 as a citizen. His love for the family at the cost of society is bad, so is the concern for the society sinful at the cost of the family. 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, 1996, 81)

Joe's wife like an Indian wife and mother is a rational, caring and concerned and she tries to bring home the point with regard to the actions of Joe and his responsibilities towards beyond his own family saying that '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, 1967, p.120) But Joe is still groping in darkness so far as his role as a human being is concerned; he is still unable to see

meaning in 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, 1967, p.121) 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) 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." (Centola, 51) Joe's neglect of the broader familial idea—his failure to see the soldiers as sons too—is a rejection of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. Chris, on the other hand, represents a more Indian-ethical worldview, feeling moral guilt for the unseen victims of his father's actions. Bigsby while describing the pulls of self and society, says : 'For Miller, the tension between self and society, between an insistence on identity and a simultaneous acknowledgement of the limitations of that identity, is the source equally of his persistent liberalism and his conception of his work as tragic.' (Bigsby, 1984, pp. 156-157) Joe's wife is a simple hearted woman whose comments about Ann rekindle the hope for upholding of 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, 1967, p 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, p 73) Chris' mother stands for what Joe and even Chris fail to observe in their line : moral uprightness and chastity. 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 of changing the name of his concern to his son's is turned down by the Chris. Joe, however, tries to hide the truth but Chris' persistent questioning brings it out. He is possessed with guilt and that is why he sometimes feels as if his son knows all about his crime. He keeps on confirming it through every word he speaks:

KELLER: ... sometimes I think you're ... ashamed of the money.

CHRIS: No, don't feel that.

KELLER: Because it's good money, there is nothing wrong with that money. (Miller, 1967, p 87)

Keller's sense of guilt makes him speak out his mind and Chris goes on filling out the details in the frame-work 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 a 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 everyday 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, 1967, pp. 124-125) Ultimately, the truth dawns upon Keller that he had followed a wrong course of attitudes and practices which had made him guilty of transgressing the laws of society as well as 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, 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 feeling of well being; all he had 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 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:

Do I raise the dead when I put him behind bars? Then what'll I do it for? We used to shoot a man who acted like a dog, but honor was real there, you were protecting something. But here? This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man here, you eat him! That's the principle; the only one we live by - it just happened to kill a few people this time, that's 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, p 125)

Joe Keller is a good husband and a fine father, but he fails to be the good man, the good citizen that his son Chris demands and which human values call for. Miller in Joe presents a character who is caught in a Catch 22 situation but all the blame for his failure as an individual and member of a family and society can not be thrust upon him: 'The depiction of such a situation may look like the condemnation of the exploitation to which human beings are subjected in a system largely dominated by selfish capitalists. But it is neither society nor the individual alone who 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, p.34) In Joe Keller Miller conceives man as an amalgam of social instincts, psychological

drives, and creative will. But among all the components he considers the human will supreme and dominant over other factors and by so doing, he liberates the individual who is capable of independent action and self-judgment. Drawing the picture of Miller's characters, Bart Barnes and Patricia Sullivan say: "His characters were good people who frequently acted badly under pressure. They were insightful, but they had blind spots. They avoided reality and denied the truth when it was painful." (Barnes, 2005) *All My Sons* shows how family becomes instrumental in destruction of their own family- father destroys one of his sons, while at the same time, to the other son, father offers a future, and the son, in rejecting it, destroys his father, in pain and love. So Joe's tragedy is the result of not weighing family and society equally; he does not strike balance, and hence, fails to see family in society and vice-versa; he is a victim of the success-myth which arrests his dignity. He, no doubt, succeeds through his "guts" and "smartness" but this success is not acceptable in social terms. Joe attempts to evade responsibility for his actions, but karma ultimately manifests through the tragic arc of his family: Larry's suicide, Chris's disillusionment, and Joe's own demise. Bigsby writes that Miller "...sees an awed society as an extension of a deeply fallible human nature." (Bigsby, 1995, p. XXXIV)

Conclusion

Miller's theatre is also an attempt to define the dignity of man in terms of his social ambitions and commitments, his sense of guilt and ignorance. 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 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 retrospection perpetuates miseries on his 'self' and 'family'. Through Joe Keller, Miller highlights how individuals are trapped in the quagmire of greed, false dictum and quest for

identity. The struggle exists in personal relationships; the over-all message appears to be that it is also this kind of discord which exists between man and his milieu. The failure to find an honourable relationship in the recourses man takes is reflected in man's conformity to the norms his social set-up gives him. But his transgression of this acquiescence provides him place neither in the family nor in his society. The *Bhagavad Gita* explores the idea of righteous action without attachment to results. Joe, in contrast, is attached to outcomes—material success and familial prosperity—even at the cost of ethical integrity. Joe Keller's actions—knowingly selling defective airplane parts—represent a violation of righteousness. He justifies his actions in terms of familial duty but from an Indian moral perspective, this would be seen as unjust (adharma) as he sacrifices the larger duty to society and humanity Joe is not just a tragic figure in the Western sense; he also embodies the downfall that comes from moral deviation, a concept central to Indian spiritual traditions. Indian sensibility places great emphasis on intergenerational bonds, respect for elders, and sacrifices made by parents for children. *All My Sons* reflects upon the generational rift and sense of righteousness as father-son due are loggerheads in their own perception of self, family and society: Joe believes he acted for his son's future whereas Chris represents a newer generation that prioritizes ethical integrity over blind familial loyalty. Joe undermines the moral order, leading to tragic consequences not only for himself but for his entire family. His actions stand in stark contrast to the ideal of righteousness that guides Indian ethical thought. His downfall is not just a personal failure but a cosmic correction of imbalance—a return to moral order, reflecting the Indian belief in the eventual triumph of justice. Under the assumption that society creates only false faces and false values, Miller, according to Gerald Weales, conceives the idea that "a good society will follow when men choose not to live for themselves." (Weales, 1. 5) In other words, personal responsibility and

social responsibility are equally necessary to maintain harmonious and stable relationships to make the world good. To conclude, *All My Sons* transcends cultural boundaries and affirms a universal moral vision—one that aligns closely with the spiritual and ethical traditions of India.

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