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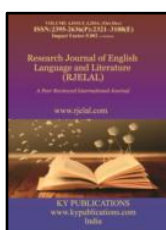
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CONFLICT AND DENIAL IN ARTHUR MILLER'S PLAY, "ALL MY SONS"

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Miller's play, *All My Sons* is one of the most popular plays written by the dramatist. In this play the main issues are conflict and denial. From the very beginning of the play we find denial which results into conflicts. All the characters in this play deny or hide the reality for their benefits. As a result, we find conflict at every level in this play. The conflict between husband and wife, between sons and father, between brother and sister, between business partners and even between society and family plays a dominant role in the development of the plot of the play. In fact denial and conflict, at the every level of the play, make the play a tragic play. In this paper we propose to study the conflicts among various issues raised in the play and the role of the denial in bringing out the tragedy in the play.

Keywords: Conflict, Denial, Plot, Tragedy, Tragic play,

Arthur Miller (1915—2005) is regarded as one of the most important American playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his work continues to be widely performed and studied around the world. Miller has written near about 30 plays in his career as a dramatist. Among his most popular plays are 'All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A view from the Bridge, and After the Fall'. He won Pulitzer Prize for *Death of a Salesman*. Miller was born in New York in 1915 to an immigrant family of Polish and Jewish descent. His father, Isidore, was a successful clothes business man and his mother, Augusta, was an educator. But in the Wall Street Crash of 1929, his father lost everything. So the poor Arthur Miller had to do a few odd jobs to save enough money to attend the University of Michigan. While in college, he wrote for the student paper and completed his first play, *No villain*, for which he won the school's Avery Hopwood Award. He also took courses with playwright under the guidance of Professor Kenneth Rowe. Inspired by his professor, Miller moved back East to begin his career as a playwright. After failure for a long period, he

emerged as a most successful dramatist of America. "Throughout his life and work, Miller has remained socially engaged and has written with conscience, clarity and compression".

([www.biography.com/people/arthur-miller-9408335](http://www.biography.com/people/arthur-miller-9408335), March 22,2017).

The writing of *All My Sons* in 1945 was inspired by the second world war. The story of the play is based on a true story during the second world war which was told to the dramatist by his step mother. The true story was about a woman who alerted the authorities to her father's war time wrong doing. (Christopher Bigsby, "Introduction to All My Sons", Penguin Classic, 2000). The play deals with the story of a successful businessman who once supplied defective machine parts to the military in order to avoid financial loss and for greed for money for his family. He puts the blame on his business partner who is sent to jail. On the other hand , later on, he develops his business and becomes a successful and respected businessman of the town. But eventually his crime comes back to haunt him and so he kills himself in the end.

*All My Sons* was one of Miller's earliest plays which became commercially successful. The play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play in 1947 and with this Arthur Miller became a known and established dramatist of the theatre. In fact this play launched Arthur Miller as a dramatist in the theatre. "All My Sons deserves a special play in the playwright's canon because it constitutes his major theatrical achievement, displays his extra-ordinary skill in handling dramatic form, and presages even better things yet to come from one of America's greatest dramatists". (Steven R. Centola, "All My Sons", in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*, (ed.), Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.), p.51. The critical and commercial success of *All My Sons* proved to be a turning point in the career of Arthur Miller because this established him as a dramatist in the theatre. After struggling for a long period to establish himself as a dramatist, Arthur Miller was upset and there was a time when he had almost decided to quit writing plays and to shift over other career for his livelihood. *All My Sons* was his last hope. Reflecting on his dissatisfaction with his achievement during the early phase of his career, Miller describes the ultimatum he gave himself:

I was turning thirty then, the author of perhaps a dozen plays, none of which I could truly believe were finished. I had written many scenes, but not a play. A play, I saw then, was an organism of which I had fashioned only certain parts. The decision formed to write one more, and if it turned out to be unrealizable, I would go into another line of work. (Arthur Miller, "Introduction to Arthur Miller's Collected Plays", vol.I (New York, Viking Press, 1957), p.16.

The play that resulted was *All My Sons* which became a grand success and established Miller as a dramatist in the theatre.

In this play Arthur Miller raises social, political and moral problems which have universal effect and are relevant to every age. Although written in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his plays are still relevant to every society only because of the

universal and everlasting issues raised in his plays. One's responsibility to one's family or society remains the same in every society of any time. Joe Keller's responsibility to his family and to a larger society in the play makes *All My Sons* a grand and ever relevant play even in our days. Joe Keller, the hero of the play, is a successful business man. He commits a mistake when he orders to send the defective cylinders to the airplane at the war time. Here he fails to perform his social responsibility. Under the impulse of greed for money and love for his family, he forgets his responsibility towards the society in which he lives. As a result of the supply of defective cylinders, twenty- one pilots are killed in the war. But Keller refuses to take the responsibility of the death of twenty- one pilots which remains haunted him throughout his life. For his refusal of the responsibility towards society, he pretends to do all these for the sake of his family. He says that he did everything for his family. He wanted to earn more and more money for his family. He wanted to give a prosperous and luxurious life to his son. So, he did wrong things while dealing with the business. He supplied defective cylinders and put the blame on his innocent partner only to save his family from the financial devastation. In the end of Act II, he tells his son, "...Chris...Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya?" (*All My Sons*, Act II) For Keller, to supply defective cylinders was only a business which he did for his son and family as he repeats to Chris, "For you, a business for you." At other place, in Act III, he tells his wife, Kate, "You wanted money, so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn't you?" But when he comes to know that, for Chris, "There's something bigger than the family..." and so his only living son is going away from him due to his crime, he is shocked :

Keller: Nothin' is bigger.

Mother: There is to him.

Keller: There's nothin' he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son.

Mother: Joe. I tell you---

Keller: Nothin's bigger than that. And you're goin' to tell him. You understand? I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head !

Mother: You stop that !

Keller: You heard me. Now you know what to tell him. (Pause. He moves from her---halts) But he wouldn't put me away though... He wouldn't do that...would he?

Mother: He loved you. Joe, you broke his heart.

Keller: But to put me away...

Now Joe Keller realizes the importance of having a son and the sufferings of those parents who lost their sons in the war due to his greed for money. Here we have a genuine sympathy for him for his sufferings. As a father he suffers a lot because his only living son for whose welfare and to give a better life to him, he committed a mistake and the same son is leaving him for his mistake and also the whole family turns against him. At this moment Keller remembers his eldest son, Larry, who was lost in the war. "Goddam,if Larry was alive he wouldn't act like this. He understood the the way the world is made.... That was a boy we lost. Larry. Larry." But when he comes to know Larry's view about him from the letter which Larry wrote to Ann that "...if I had him there now I could kill him---." Knowing the reality that his son, Larry committed suicide due to the shame of his crime, Joe Keller is shocked too much. The rejection by both of his sons is unbearable for him. Knowing that he has been guilty in the eyes of his sons and family, he is unable to control the agony of rejection. So, he commits suicide by shooting himself in the end of the play, realizing that the society is larger than the family as he says "...Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were...." In the end of the play Joe Keller realizes that those twenty-one pilots who died in the war due to the defective cylinders were also the sons of some fathers and mothers as Larry was his son and they also had a family but lost their lives in the interest of a larger society. It is only at this moment he understands the agony of other fathers of losing their sons. Now he realizes the importance

of the society and feels that society is larger than the family and everyone has a bigger responsibility to his society than his family. Society comes first and the family is secondary. This new realization makes him ashamed of his guilt and haunts his mind and compels him to end his life like the tragic heroes of Shakespeare.

Thus we see that in *All My Sons* the dramatist does not deal with a single issue but a multiple issues which are rooted very deep in every society of the world. Besides the issue of family and society, which we discussed above, Miller is simultaneously dealing with the issues of relationship between father and son, relationship between husband and wife, denial of the facts, appearance and reality, sense of patriotism, revenge, evasion of the responsibility etc. All these issues are still relevant in our society that's why the play, *All My Sons* has a universal appeal and an ever lasting impact.

The mysterious disappearance of Larry during the war time shows his sense of patriotism and the intensity of his shame of his father's crime of deceiving the country for money. He is unable to show his face to the society for the wrong doing of his father as we come to know from his letter to Ann in which he expresses his anger against his father and is even ready to shoot him for his wrong doings, "Ann, if I had him there now I could kill him." It is clear that Larry is a patriot, fighting for his country. For him his country is above anything. He cannot tolerate anyone who harms his country. But his father's action and wrong doings shatters him from inside. In the letter to Ann he expresses his agony and also anger against his own father, "...how could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business....I don't know how to tell you what I feel... I can't face any- body..."

Everybody accepts the death of Larry Keller, except his mother, Kate, who again and again insists that Larry is alive and one day he will come back to them. That is why she is opposing Chris and Ann's marriage. To accept Chris' and Ann's marriage is to accept the death of Larry because Larry was Ann's lover and was engaged to her. If Ann marries Chris, her lover's brother, it means to accept that Larry is

dead in the war and to accept the death of Larry is to accept that Joe Keller is a liar and is guilty of supplying the defective cylinders to the airplane and is responsible for the death of twenty-one pilots during the war which may send Joe into the jail. Here we see that Kate knows, from the very beginning, that her husband is guilty but she pretends that her husband is innocent. Being a loyal wife she is trying to save her husband and so she has covered herself with a false belief that Larry is alive. But when the second and real alive son, Chris, deserts them, her motherhood is at stake. In order to save her motherhood, she pressurizes her husband to accept his crime and surrender to the police, at least to accept his crime to his son Chris. Kate's attitude and opinion breaks Keller into pieces and he realizes that society is larger than family and so he accepts his crime by committing suicide in the end of the play because he is unable to face his son who is a realist.

Here we find that Arthur Miller is a great critic of American society and its values. Some critics are in the opinion that *All My Sons* is a critique of American Dream which was very common during the war. The people in America wanted to earn a lot of money to live a luxurious life. For this they struggled hard, did hard labour, and did everything—moral or immoral--- to lead a luxurious and prosperous life. Joe Keller sells defective cylinders only to earn more profit so he can give a good and prosperous life to his sons and wife—his family. For the sake of his own family he sacrifices the sons of other families which constitutes a society altogether. It is only in the end of the play, when he fears to lose his only living son, Chris, that he realizes that all the twenty-one pilots, who died due to his greed for money for his family, were also the sons of some family and so accepts that, "they were all my sons."

*All My Sons* is the best representative play of the American capitalist society. In this play almost all the characters are hypocrites. They hide the facts from one another in some ways or other. This hypocrisy of their nature is, in fact, the demand of the society in which they are living. In a materialistic world one has to be hypocrite if he wants to survive in a capitalistic society. By believing this Miller is criticizing the capitalistic American society in this

play. Chris becomes the dramatist's mouthpiece when he bitterly says to Ann, "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's that way, how can I take it out on him? What sense does that make? This is a zoo, a zoo!". This is one of the bitterest criticisms of the American capitalistic society. Bradford has rightly observed that, "Like other works by Arthur Miller, *All My Sons* is a critique of an over zealously capitalistic society. It shows what happens when humans are ruled by greed. It demonstrates how self-denial can not last for ever." (Bradford, Wade. 'All My Sons--- The Main Characters'. Thought Co, Oct.29, 2016, [thoughtco.com/all-my-sons-character-analysis-2713021](http://thoughtco.com/all-my-sons-character-analysis-2713021)). Apparently everyone behaves normally--- Joe Keller is doing his business, his wife Kate, is looking after her house and waiting for his lost son, Larry, their son, Chris planning his marriage with "Larry's girl", Ann and all the neighbours are normally mixing up with the Kellers family—but inside their heart they have a secret which they do not want to disclose because it may harm their interest in the society. In this way the American people, after the war, are following pseudo-idealism and they are very much loyal to their ideologies. This loyalty to their ideology brings tragedy in the play. From the very beginning of the play we are hinted at that Joe Keller is guilty of supplying defective cylinder heads to the Army Air Force during the war time and has put blame on his business partner, Steeve, Ann's and George's father. Joe knows that he is guilty. His wife also knows it but she keeps it secret to save her husband and her family. The neighbours also know this but they do not say it openly because they are afraid that they may lose the favour of a rich man, Joe Keller, who may hurt them if they go against him as it happens in our time too. Even Joe's son, Chris suspects Joe but has no courage to accept it. When, in the end of the play, it is proved by George and Larry's letter to Ann that Joe Keller is really guilty, Chris does not have courage to accuse his father. Rather he accuses himself of cowardice:

Mother...I'm going away. There are a couple of farms in Cleveland, I think I can get a place. I mean, I'm going away for

good. (To Ann alone) I know what you're thinking, Annie. It's true. I'm yellow. I was made yellow in this house because I suspected my father and I did nothing about it, but if I knew that night when I came home what I know now., he'd be in the district attorney's office by this time, and I'd have brought him there. Now if I look at him, all I'm able to do is cry. (All My Sons, Act III).

After knowing the fact that his father has committed a crime against the nation, Chris is totally shattered. His idealistic nature compels him to get his father sent to jail but his love for his family prevents him from doing so. The only one way better for him is to leave the house for ever. This is the agony of Chris. When he discovers that his father is guilty, he turns against him. He argues with his father and angrily says, "Dad...Dad, you killed twenty-one men....you killed them, you murdered them....Then explain to me. What did you do? Explain it to me or I'll tear you to pieces." After giving a lot of excuses Joe Keller is unable to satisfy Chris. Then he uses his last emotional weapon, "Chris...Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you... For you, a business for you..." But this confession of the reality of Joe makes Chris more furious and expresses his anger in a series of a question which is also the main theme of the play.

Chris: ( with burning fury ) : 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 is that, the world—the business?... Don't you have a country? Don't you live in the world? What the hell are you? You're not even an animal, no animal kills his own, what are you? What must I do to you? I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?...What must I do. Jesus God, what must I do? (All My Sons, Act II ).

Chris is totally shattered and passing through an agonized situation but he is unable to do anything against his father. He has no courage to get his father sent jail. He only wishes he could do it. He confesses to his mother that, "I could jail him ! I

could jail him, if I were human any more. But I'm like everybody else now. I'm practical now. You made me practical." The capitalistic society has brought a change in his idealism.

Now Chris has understood that in a capitalistic society there is a hard competition and the sense of co-operation has completely gone away. He realizes that his father has become a victim of the competition of the capitalistic society. So, somewhere in the corner of his heart, he has some sympathy for his father and so he cannot gather courage to get him sent jail. The capitalistic society has made him weak and coward. The only way he can compensate his weakness is by "going away" from his house for ever.

Thus we see that in this play the relationship between a father and a son becomes the victim of one's self convictions. Joe Keller's both sons are idealistic. They are very loyal to their ideologies. They both have idealistic feelings for his father. In fact they have idealized him. For both of them their father is an ideal father who can never do anything wrong. So, Joe's guilt is unbearable for them and their idealism is shattered. That is why Larry commits suicide and Chris is ready to go away from home for ever because, "there is something bigger than the family for him." To know that his only alive son is deserting him, Joe Keller is totally broken off. He cannot see his family, which is everything for him, being destroyed in this way. So, to save his family, Keller shoots himself.

To conclude we can say that the play, All My Sons, is family and society, about fathers and sons, about greed for money, about one's selfishness, about self-denial, about loyalty to one's ideology and much more. In this play the dramatist does not deal with only one issue but a lot of issues which are found in a civilized society after the war or in a normal situation. Christopher Bigsby has accurately observed that:

this is also a play about betrayal, about fathers and sons, about America, About self-deceit, about self-righteousness, about egotism presented as idealism, about a fear of morality, about guilt, about domestic life as evasion, about the space between appearance and reality, about the suspect

nature of language, about denial, about repercussion, about a kind of despair finessed into hope, about money, about an existence resistant to our needs, about a wish for innocence when , as Miller was later to say in his autobiography, innocence kills, about a need for competition, about the gulf between the times we live in and the people we wish to believe ourselves to be, about the fragility of what we take to be reality, about time as enemy and time as moral force and so on....(Christopher Bigsby, " A British View of an American Playwright", in Steven R. Centola(ed.), *The Achievement of Arthur Miller: New Essays* (Dellas: Contemporary Research Associates).

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