

CHAPTER-I

THE CONFLICT IN ALL MY SONS

I. ABOUT THE PLAY :

Compared with Miller's later plays, All My Sons is not a very powerful tragedy. It is the first landmark in the development of his theatrical art and characterization. Written on the background of the World War-II, it is neither a war-play nor an anti-war-play. It is a social tragedy which treats an anti-social character as a tragic hero. All My Sons is one of his four major social plays in which Miller raises common place - levels to the height of a liberal parable. Henry Popkin observes :

Arthur Miller's regular practice in his plays is to confront the dead levels of banality with the heights and depths of guilt and to draw from this strange encounter a liberal parable of hidden evil and social responsibility.¹

All My Sons is structured around the guilt in a war-time profiteer and uncovering its emotional conflicts in the traditional Ibsen-like form of narration, it leaves

an impact on the American theatre as a social thesis play. It contains the defining characteristics of Miller's theatre which won him recognition in the later years. The theme of the play, which outlines Miller's realism and his social concern, is the American dream of success, and wealth. In All My Sons we find Miller's most recurrent motif - the conflicting father-son relationship. The theme of dichotomy which existed in Miller himself is also evident in this play. This is the play about parental and social responsibility, that is to say an attack upon "unrelatedness". The crime in the play has its roots in a certain relationship of the individual to society.

II. SUMMARY :

Joe Keller is an uneducated, self-made businessman who sells defective cylinder heads to the Army Air Force during the second World War. It causes the death of twenty one American Pilots. Joe's son Larry, a pilot, is reported to be missing during the war. But actually Larry has committed suicide out of his sense of shame and anger over Joe's crime. This fact is withheld till the very end of the play. Joe is taken to the law court, but he manages to escape a long term imprisonment by letting the blame fall upon his rather weaker and less guilty business partner, Steve Deever. Joe returns to his business, rebuilds it, and

by the time the war is over, is operating it successfully. Cris, Joe's beloved son, wants to marry Ann, the fiancée of his in fact dead brother. Taking the shelter of Larry's horoscope Kate, Joe's wife, is not ready to believe that Larry is ~~not~~ dead for the fear that the responsibility of Larry's death may fall on Joe, seeing there is no other go Ann shows a letter from Larry which unveils the fact about Larry's death. This gives rise to the conflict between Chris and his father Joe. Joe finds no other go than suicide in his penitence.

III. IS OPENING OF THE PLAY SUGGESTIVE ? :

Normally a Miller play opens with a note of disturbance or agitation. But ALL My Sons is the only exception to this. The play opens with the leisurely Sunday atmosphere. But even the placidity of the opening scene is constantly threatened by the image of the broken apple tree in the background which forebodes disaster. The image of the broken tree is suggestive of Larry's death. This brings in a tragic note in the play. The wrong is already done. The action of the play is slow unfolding of the tragic conflict.

IV. THE WRONG CHOICE :

Tragedy is undoubtedly the result of the wrong choice of the protagonist. It is characterist of Miller's tragedy

that social forces as well as the individual's guilt precipitate the tragic crisis. And the individual's guilt involves a wrong choice. In All My Sons there is a conflict between two contrasting view-points. The father, Joe represents one view-point. He represents selfishness. But in Miller's tragedy, as in Shakesperean tragedy, the wrong-doer (the protagonist) has his alter ego to represent a correct picture. The alter-ego represents the correct alternative. The alter-ego in All My Sons is represented by Steve Deever. He serves as a foil to Joe Keller. The wrong choice of Joe has another component - social force. Social force of achieving material prosperity makes him choose wrongly. Hence Miller's observation on the nature of man is pertinent : "The idea of realism has become wedded to the idea that man is at best the sum of forces working upon him and of given psychological forces within him . . . he is more than the sum of his stimuli and is unpredictable beyond a certain point."² "He believes we are made and yet are more than what made us."³ Under the spell of American dream of success Joe chooses to sell defective cylinder heads and errs. Here social determinism and free will are the two aspects of the tragic flaw which leads to tragic conflict in the play. Chris hates his father and sympathizes with Deever, the alter-ego of his father. Atma Ram's remarks in this connection are worth considering :

"Chris considers his father a predator; out to destroy his own race, and the guilt of servitude to such malicious designs for self-aggrandisement makes him hate his father and his sympathies are on Deever's side because he has suffered for some egocentric's fault."

Keller acts under the fear of losing his business. Here he acts without the knowledge of the public consequence of his action. He fails to recognize his social responsibilities. Thus there are various social aspects in the play and it becomes a social tragedy. Miller strikes a subtle balance between individual responsibility and social pressures.

V. THE CONFLICT IN ALL MY SONS :

The Conflict is External : The conflict in All My Sons is an external one. It is the conflict between the father and son. Joe and Chris represent two different attitudes. As Santosh K. Bhatia observes : "The Central conflict in the play is between familial and social obligations."⁵ Also Benjamin Nelson has rightly observed :

"The thematic image of All My Sons is a circle within a circle, the inner circle

depicting the family unit and the outer representing society, and the movement of the drama is concentric with the two circles revolving in a parallel orbits until they ultimately coalesce."⁶

The play depicts that man can not disown society for his family. But Keller does that, because he does this out of the fear of losing his business. He is a stolid and unintellectual businessman. For the welfare of his family he puts society at stake.

WHO ARE THE OPPONENTS ?

Apparantly Joe, the father and Chris, the son are the opponants. Joe is a selfish, narrow minded and unintellectual man. When asked about the news he says, "I don't read the news part any more. It's interesting in the want ads." (p.59). He is surprised to know that all books are different. He says, "I don't know, everybody's getting Goddamed education in this country.... It's a tragedy. You stand on the street today and spit, you are going to hit a college man." (p.96). He does not understand the difference between "Brooch" and "Broach". All this helps us understand his character and the low cast of his mind. He, like Miller's other protagonists, "belongs to a strange breed. In every instance he is unimaginative inarticulate and physically nondescript."⁷ He loves and

wants to be loved by his family members, but unfortunately he fails. For him nothing bigger than his relation to his son. To his wife he says, "... 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 !" (P.120). Drama emerges when the protagonist breaks his connection with society. Miller thinks that such a connection is absolutely needed, and the failure to maintain it is bound to result in catastrophe. He writes :

"Joe Keller's trouble is not that he can not tell right from wrong, but that his cast of mind can not admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society." (P.19).

Chris, on the other hand, is aware of his responsibility to others and his father lacks it. The confrontation between the father and the son actually springs from this awareness of Chris. He is an idealist whose entire loyalty is to society. He tells his father :

I don't know why it is, but every time I reach out for something I want, I have to pull back because other people will suffer. (P.68).

The business doesn't inspire him. Thus Chris serves as a foil to Joe. Chris' egalitarian vision is set against Joe's myopic vision. For him as he says, "... A kind of responsibility, Man for man." (p.85). When he returns from the war he feels ashamed "to live, to open the bankbook, to drive the new car, to see the new refrigerator" because he feels it is "really loot and there' blood on it" (p.85). The revelation of his father's guilt comes as a shock to him. He 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 can't look at you this way, I can look at myself !" (p.125). Through a number of speeches he lacerates his father. The imagery used by Miller here seems to suggest that human civilization is retreating to mungle existence. Chris says :

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 persons that time, that's all. The world is that way, how can I take out on him ? What sense does that make ? This is a zoo, a zoo ! (p.124).

Chris' speech touches upon such questions of human behaviour, choice and responsibility that form the true subject of tragedy.

Thus in this play anti-social character is treated as a tragic hero by focusing his human aspect as against his commercial side so that we feel sympathy for him.

THE COSMIC DIMENSION OR UNIVERSALITY OF THE CONFLICT :

On the family level the conflict in All My Sons is the conflict between the father and son. But if we consider it on social level, we find that the conflict is between family centred dream and society centred responsibility. As Robert W. Corrigan puts it, "The central conflict in all of the plays in Miller's first period ... grows out of a crisis of identity. Each of the protagonists is suddenly conflicted with a situation which he is incapable of meeting and which eventually puts his "name" in jeopardy. In the ensuing struggle it becomes clear that he does not know what his name really is; finally his inability to answer the question "Who am I?" produces calamity and his ultimate downfall ... and their deaths are caused by their lack of self-understanding. In every case this blindness is in large measure due to their failure to have resolved the question of identity at an earlier and more appropriate time in life. Miller presents this crisis as a conflict between the uncomprehending self and a solid social or economic structure the family, the community, the system. The drama emerges either when the protagonist breaks his connection with society. Miller sees the need

for such connection as absolute, and the failure to achieve and maintain it is bound to result in catastrophe."¹

Thus Joe failed to achieve his relation to the society and it resulted in his death. But before his death an awakening dawned on him that he has got some responsibility towards society, that he owe something to the society, that he can not be "an island", that he was "related" with the society, that the twenty one pilots for the death of whose he was responsible were "All His Sons". A sense of relatedness is awakened on Joe, and Miller's All My Sons has really laid siege to the fortress of "unrelatedness". The success of the play is that it evokes a sense of "Social commitment" in the audience and the readers, and here in it achieves the cosmic dimension.

REFERENCES

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