

Portrayal of Married Women Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*

¹P. Ananthan, ²Dr. K. Balachandran,

Ph.D...(External) Research scholar, Bharathiyar University.
Research Supervisor.

¹Assistant Professor Dept. of English Pachaiyappa's College for Men Kanchipuram Tamilnadu-631501

²Research Supervisor Dept. of English

Abstract: Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is an important American playwright whose work occupies a significant place in the tradition of American literature. He has rich experience about life of the common man in America which gets reflected in his plays. *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) reflected about married women in American society. In his early plays, by depicting major women characters like Kate Keller and Linda Loman as both wives and mothers according to the social condition and dominant cultural value. Miller exposes their bitterness and frustration in the traditional gender world by depicting them both victims and victimizers under the particular society. This paper attempts to study the portrayal of married women in Miller's contemporary American society. Kate Keller is a busy housewife. She asked her husband "will you do me a favour Joe? Don't be helpful." Linda Loman is Willy Loman's wife who loves him, despite all his difficulties. Thus Miller presents the role of married women in family as well as in society

I. Introduction:

Arthur Miller's first Broadway hit *All My Sons* (1947) and masterpieces *Death of a Salesman* (1949) are his early plays of the contemporary American society. His female presentations in these early plays are notable events in America. It shows that women characters are dominated by male characters. Eric Mottram had pointed out that Arthur Miller's plays were written for and largely "from the point of view of a man" (p-127). Mottram implies that Miller's women are unimportant and passive. It seems to be too partial in a family. Miller consistently shows his sides with married women victims confined in domestic sphere in plays like *All my sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Miller is able to reveal women's experience and their own personal responses in a society and gives full humaneness to women. *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* viewed from feminist perspectives reveal new revelation and disprove the claim that Miller is a male chauvinist.

From the very outset, Miller's awareness and criticism of the limits imposed upon female roles and aspiration in the early twentieth century American reality is established in his early plays. He depicts sacrificing and nurturing housewife – mothers entrapped in the male dominated society critics have attached the stereotyping of the women in Miller's early plays; but the male characters in his early plays are represented more negatively than the women.

II. Failure of Men in Miller's plays:

Miller portrays moral failure of his male characters: that moral failing of Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, the self-destructive self-deceit of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, the adultery of John Proctor in *The Crucible* or the abnormal incestuous love of Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge*. In his early plays, Miller actually portrays a gallery of male failures. Joe Keller fails to realize the higher morality; country comes first, home second; Willy

Loman misunderstands his own place in society; Eddie Carbone is never aware that his own love towards his niece Catherine is abnormal.

III. Married Women's Relationships in the Family:

All My Sons considered as a drama of family relationships. Though Miller appears to be arguing strongly in favour of a certain positive relationship between the individual and society, but in *All My Sons* family relationships are predominant. The play deals with the relatives of mother and son, the father and son, the husband and wife, brother and sister and so on.

Joe Keller says that family is everything to him. Kate as a married woman realized her responsibility in her family as well as in the society. Kate says about her husband, "There is something bigger than the family to him" (p81). But Miller makes Keller to say before his suicide:

KELLER: Nothing 'is bigger'

MOTHER: There is something

KELLER: Nothing'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! (AMS 81)

This shows that Keller considers his family as the most important unit of the society. Therefore Kate as a wife and mother is unable to go against her husband wish. Though she understands moral responsibility as a married woman, she has to belong to her husband for her living in the society. Kate is a traditional mother. She cannot bear the idea of her husband as a criminal, nor can she see her sons in distress. She is not prepared to believe that her elder son Larry is dead. Such a way she experiences hallucination of her son being alive. Nobody can convince her of the reality that Larry is no more. She says even to Anne that Anne has to wait for his death. For this reason, she opposes the marriage between Chris and Anne. This shows that Kate Keller has real sense of motherhood and she cannot let her husband die in his guilty. Thus marriage between Chris and Anne would require her to believe that Larry was dead, and if Larry was dead, it means his father Keller killed him like other pilots. So Kate feels that God does not allow a son be killed by his father. A famous critic Orm Overland says "Joe Keller emerges as a criminal. He has sold defective cylinder heads to the Air Force during the war and was thus directly responsible for the deaths of twenty-one Pilots". (371)

Thus the theme of the play is woven skillfully, "this is a zoo, a zoo!"(AMS 60). This expression indicates that there is an absence of human feeling and moral values in the world. During the early twentieth century in America, married women have to adjust with the male dominated society. The same idea gets reflected in *All My Sons*. Kate Keller also adjusts herself emotionally to the criminal action of her husband. Dennis Welland also comments:

The play is a social drama, not as an attack on the capitalist business ethic, but as a study of the bewildered common men grouping in a world where moral values have become a shifting quicksand ... Moral responsibility to others – is the hardest to learn. (29)

Kate Keller is a strong woman, stiff and insistent nature. Joe Keller had supplied knowingly defective engines to be shipped to the United States army and this is essential to the story of the play. As Joe Keller's wife, Kate Keller is fully aware that Joe's culpability in the crime from the very start; but she never speaks openly, because Kate as married woman, all her property and rights everything belong to her husband. Hence she cannot go against her husband's choice.

Even in the end of the play after her husband shot himself, she needed male support and her son Chris will have to look after his father death. Therefore she remarks finally in a resigned tone: "Don't dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live" (AMS-90)

Married women as victims of the dominant patriarchal system:

Apart from being the victim of the social conditions and the cultural values, the married women are also victimized by the dominant patriarchal system. In the patriarchal society, men are given freedom and become what they like, even to fail they choose, but women are caged in domesticity and play the limited social prescribed roles. Miller's awareness of women's entrapment and enslavement is shown evidently by presenting the silent, distorted and marginalized house – wife and mothers

Portrayal of married women in *All My Sons and Death of a Salesman*:

Under the long tradition of male rule in society, women usually are voiceless and men have the right to silence women's voices. Though fully cognizant of Keller's crime, Kate Keller as a married woman cannot disclose the truth. Instead she is forced to obey the patriarchal norms and keep mum about Keller's crime in order to protect him. In *Death of a Salesman* Miller presented Linda Loman as a married woman and as mother. Linda unlike all the men in the play offers no philosophy, no opinion on how life ought to be lived. Willy Loman is a travelling salesman always interrupting her voiceless.

In the patriarchal society, men's efforts to achieve their goals often come with the sacrifice of women, and even the distortion of women's life. Joe Keller's crime creates; his wife is in an unknown anxiety and unexplained illness which constantly needs aspirins to relieve pain. Her quite and happy life is disturbed by her husband's moral failing. Linda is always there to support Willy, to participate vicariously in his dreams without being a subject in her own right, without having a vision that is distinct from his false one.

Women are marginalized and live on the periphery of male society. In the Miller's early plays, married women are confined to single domestic places, while male characters are almost given freedom and mobility. It is evident that we know nothing about Kate's background and her own dialogue also fails to reveal anything at all about her. One can also see nothing about Chris' attachment with his mother but witnesses a lot about her son, has attachment to his father Joe Keller. One also knows about Linda, especially about what she is lacking. She does not talk about herself, only about the men in her life. When Linda Loman replied to her sons, "Attention must be paid," (DS 60) it reveals her character, who cares always her family men.

Therefore, "it becomes clear that the flawed America is a male world, a locker room where women are voiceless, marginalized, or perplexed" (Balakian, 116). Miller also reveals this fact:

"My women characters are of necessity auxiliaries to the action, which is carried by male characters, but they both receive benefits of male mistakes and protect his mistakes in crazy ways. They are forced to do that. So, the females are victims as well". (Interview with Miller -370)

V. Conclusion:

Thus Miller exposes clearly the fact that married women are exploited and enslaved in the male dominant society. They are the victim of the patriarchal system. Hence *All My Sons* deals with large social issues revealing interaction of various family relationships. Both married women like Kate and Linda have suffered a lot. It shows their suffering and frustration under the oppression of male superiority and dominance. Simultaneously, Miller shows his capability to transform the times by presenting married women with strength and courage.

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