

## **Sacrificing the Nation in the Interest of Family as Reflected in *All My Sons***

**- Dr. Marie Fernandes**

The play, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, begins with the economic depression that culminated with the war in Europe. The depression which uncovered the social and political evil of capitalism inspired a drama that celebrated the resistant spirit and presumed that humanity would alter its course and champion solidarity. A similar solidarity had been expected during wartime exigencies. Unfortunately, this was not to be, for after the war, America resumed its material destiny and made consumerism a value and went about its business of conspicuous consumption.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Miller wrote his plays with a frontal assault on the evils of capitalism. He equates big business with gangsters and corruption. Virtue resides in the individual who lends his weight to the cause of the common man. *All My Sons* concerns a manufacturer of aircraft parts, Joe Keller, who under the pressure of wartime production allows a batch of faulty cylinder heads to be supplied to the Air Force, knowing that they may cause calamitous failure and thus endanger life. He does so rather than risk losing the contract and possibly his business, which he wishes to pass on to his sons. In the subsequent court case he denies responsibility, allowing his employee and neighbour, Steve Deever to take the blame. Deever's daughter, Ann, meanwhile, is engaged to Keller's son Larry. Following her father's conviction both she and her brother George, sever all connection with him, refusing to visit him in prison or even write to him. To sustain his own family, Keller, it seems, sacrifices another and, beyond that, a wider family, those who die as a result of his actions.

When Larry, a pilot goes missing in action, his mother, Kate Keller, refuses to acknowledge his death, for to do so would be to accept a connection between her husband's action and her own loss. The play opens as Chris, the other son of Joe and Kate Keller, invites Ann to stay, intending to propose a marriage which will, effectively, signify the public acknowledgement of Larry's death and thus precipitate a crisis for all of them, as past and present are brought into immediate confrontation.<sup>2</sup>

During his discussion with Ann, about their proposed marriage, he talks about the war and tells her how closely knit his war comrades were.

CHRIS: ...For instance, one time it'd been raining several days and this kid came to me, and gave me his last pair of dry socks. Put them in my pocket. That's only a little thing...but that's the kind of guys I had. They didn't die, they killed themselves for each other

He articulates his frustration on finding that life after the war was the same as it had been before. He begins to realise that those killed in the war had sacrificed themselves in vain. The values of co-operation and mutual responsibility which they had carved out of their actions had been lost, and people behaved as if the war had been something like a 'bus accident'.

After Chris and Ann formally announce their intention of getting married, there is a call from George, Ann's brother, who is a lawyer. The call is from Columbus (Ohio) where their father is serving his sentence in jail. Keller and his wife are visibly disturbed with this news. Keller begins to suspect that his complicity in the crime will soon be exposed, for which his partner is in jail.

George returns to try to break-up the marriage between Chris and Ann. He had visited his father on an impulse, to announce the marriage between Chris and Ann. He recounts the story he has heard from his father. Steve Deever, had noticed the faulty cylinder heads and had informed Keller of this. Keller had instructed him over the phone, 'to weld, cover up the crack in any way he could, and ship them out'. Keller had promised to take responsibility.

Keller had not gone to the factory that day on the pretext that he had a cold. In the court case, his alibi was not believed, but in the appeal it was; so Steve was sentenced and Keller set free. After George returns from visiting his father in prison, he confronts Keller. At first Keller denies but ultimately justifies his criminal conduct and says he did it for his sons.

In a materialistic society, money is god that people often worship. It is an almost blinkered view of life that obliterates all else. Concern for another and other altruistic virtues that

once bound people to each other are forgotten. Ironically, Joe Keller who was supposed to be supporting the American Air Force by supplying cylinder heads, works against them by allowing damaged parts from his factory to be shipped to them. He probably did not realise that in doing so he would kill twenty-one young men. He allowed his partner to take the blame and be sentenced to prison, convincing himself that everyone believed he was innocent. The truth was, he was incarcerated in the prison he created for himself and none of his neighbours believed he was innocent. Besides, while he maintains that he did it for his family, his sons cannot accept that. They have been in the thick of war and they have come to realise that the family extends beyond the narrow boundaries of familial relations. They have bonded so closely with their companions through the most trying circumstances that they will die for another. They have after all been commissioned to defend their country and lay down their lives, if need be, for the sake of their countrymen. Never, in their wildest dreams would they imagine that the enemy would be the parents of their comrades. That it was not the outside enemy that was to be feared but the enemy within, caused by greed of materialism. Joe Keller's action was act of betrayal and his sons suffer the consequences too. Larry could not bear the thought that his father was responsible for the death of so many young men like him, who were his companions and he kills himself. When Keller is confronted with this letter and the accusations of his younger son, he can no longer pretend to be innocent. The realization soon comes, that while Larry was his son, the other young men were, as the title suggests, "*All My Sons*". Chris in a subtle way drives Joe to kill himself. His very sons, for whom he was building an empire for reject him. His death at the end comes to remind us that we are all intertwined in the web of life and cannot escape our social responsibility.

The family then is a microcosm of the world we live in. Values that we nurture and support are reflected in the bigger macrocosm. It also reflects how the past is not only linked to the present but how inexorably the past invades and shapes the present. Joe Keller was soon to face the 'consequences of his actions'. The war seemed to be over and it was time for peace but there can be little peace for those who do evil. While they pat themselves on the back and think they have done well for themselves, they are soon confronted with their sins and there is no escape. The 'Golden Rule' is to be respected, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you'. It is unalterable and each of us reap the consequences

of our actions – both good and bad. It is the law of the universe that follows relentlessly as day follows night.

The questions that one might raise are many. Is the Keller family an example of the typical American family that has lost its reverence for God and neighbour? When Joe Keller's guilt is uncovered and his wife and son Chris, suggest that he go to prison, Keller protests saying, 'Half the goddam country is gotta go if I go'. The implication is that criminal acts of the sort he had committed were quite common during the war, and were done for money. Was this act then by Joe Keller caused by the exigencies of war? Or Would Joe Keller have acted differently if there was no war. We all are aware that the Economic Depression impoverished many and the survival of the fittest was the only way out. Religion had failed to provide succour and the only way out, so it seems, was to think only of oneself, even if it meant destroying the others.

### **End Notes**

- 1 C.W.E. Bigsby, **Modern American Drama 1945-2000** (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000)
- 2 Arthur Miller, **All My Sons** (1947)Introd. Christopher Bigsby (Penguin: New York, 2000)