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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES IN MODERN DRAMA: A STUDY ON MILLER'S PLAY
'ALL MY SONS'

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ABSTRACT

This research paper introduces the American modern drama as a very important genre of literature that deals with social issues of the contemporary American society of the 20th century. It critically analyzes the contemporary social issues discussed in the Arthur Miller's 'All My Sons'. The main focus of the study is on the conflict between the interests of the country and the personal and familial interests. The study depicts how this play has treated this important issue of the contemporary society of modern America.

This study examines the role of the hero 'Joe Keller' the manufacturer who dispatches cracked head cylinders to the American Air force during the war in order to gain money for his family. Then the playwright extends the picture to show us the corruption of the authority and how Keller was made innocent and be released. The play ends with Keller's suicide: A punishment that he has made against himself after he was made to realize his mistake through the letter of his son 'Larry' and the words of his other son 'Chris'. The play shows clearly its message that those who betray their countries should be ready to receive the punishment of their misdeeds.

Keywords: Modern American drama, Joe Keller, social issues, All my sons

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INTRODUCTION

Modern American drama is characterized by its modest ways to deal with contemporary social issues of its time. Playwrights usually depend on realistic characters and their personal issues in order to address social problems. During the twentieth century, the field of American drama grows up with the realism. Comparison with the classic drama, the modern drama doesn't often depend on imaginative tales with supernatural elements. It employs social contemporary stories existing in the society. The playwright, then, adds his imagination to the basic story in order to create the play in an artistic pattern. Its hero is usually a common person who represents any one of the society.

Social tension begins to preoccupy the American drama during the period the first world war. Then the economic crisis of the 1930s, its depression and second world war, as well as the psychological issues related to such events were depicted in the American modern drama. In the period of the post- world war II,

the most renowned playwrights of the period were Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams whose main themes are social contemporary issues from their contemporary life as: family issues, individual and society, alienation, depression... etc.

This research paper introduces the American modern drama as a genre of literature that deals with social issues of the contemporary American society of the 20th century. It examines Arthur Miller's play 'All My Sons' to show how Miller depicts one of the most important issues of his period which is the betrayal of the country for the purpose of gaining financial profits. Miller succeeds in this play to communicate with his society that the interest of the country has a precedence when compared to the interest of the family and that those who betray their countries must be ready to be punished by the society whatever they do to escape the punishment.

Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller is an American playwright, born in New York on 17th October 1915. Among his works, *All My Sons* is considered to be the most prominent work. He writes in a simple language and deals with themes of his contemporary life. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He received the Prince of Asturias Award and the Praemium Imperiale prize in 2002 and the Jerusalem Prize in 2003, as well as the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Lifetime Achievement Award. (*Wikipedia*)

Miller writes in a very simple language and includes some humor incidents even in his tragedies. He doesn't go back to get the root of his play from the classic tales but he usually takes an incident from the daily life of his society, then he adds his imagination to it in order to make it artistic and interesting. In *all my sons*, for example, a female neighbor narrates to Miller a story of one girl from her neighborhood who handed over her father to the police when she had discovered that he had been selling faulty machine to the army. Miller then made some changes in the characters and added his imagination to it in order to treat this problem of betraying the country. Miller after the success of his play 'All my Sons' which "established him as a major force in the theatre", (C. W. E. Bigsby) "He wanted to do something that would convey to his audience a sense of simultaneity that he felt existed in people's life, to give audience a sense of what went on in a person's head as his life played out around him". (Susan C. W. Abbotson).

The conflict between the interests of the family and the interest of the society

Miller's main purpose of this play is to make Joe Keller realize the sense of his guilt and to accept the punishment he deserves. Keller is a manufacturer whose factory had a contract with the American air force to supply some aeroplane instruments. Once, he was requested to supply airplane head cylinders. When the factory produced the head cylinders, Steve Deever – Keller's partner- found out some cracks with them. He reported the problem to Keller and Keller ordered him to repair the cracks and dispatch them to the American air force. In case of anything, Keller would take the responsibility. When the cracked cylinders caused the death of twenty-one pilots, Keller denied his responsibility and threw the responsibility on his colleague, Steve Deever. Keller was released and came back to his work while Deever was sentenced to imprisonment. Keller thinks that what he has done was right as he doesn't want to lose the benefits of his family if he doesn't sell the cylinders. When Larry, Keller's elder son reads about the incident, he couldn't bear the shame of his father's betrayal and committed suicide. Before committing suicide, he had sent a letter to his sweetheart in which he explains the reason of his decision to commit suicide. The issue remains hidden till the end of the play when the preparation of Annie's and Chris's marriage begins. Kate, Keller's wife, was against this marriage as she believes that Larry is still alive and his sweetheart, Annie, should not marry his brother. The tension arises with George's arrival at the house of Keller. George gets news from his father, Deever, that Keller is the responsible for the dispatch of the cracked cylinders to the air force. There were different arguments here that forced Keller to admit his guilt.

Keller at the beginning of the play thought that he escaped from his guilt. He comes back to his factory to restart his life of business. He was thinking that the business interests of his family is over all the other interests. He did not realize at that time that he owes some responsibility towards his society. Larry and Chris have completely different views. They consider the interests of the society over the family's interests.

Larry can't bear life after hearing of his father's crime. His letter forced Keller to realize the sense of his guilt. Chris, too, is against his father's business viewpoint. When Keller was forced to feel his crime, he says that he made that for the benefits of his family. He believes that "Nothing is bigger than the family, I am his father and he is my son, and if there is something bigger than that I will put a bullet in my head". (*All my sons*) Chris replies "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 you 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?" (*All My Sons*) Here Chris makes his argument with his father clear that nothing justifies a crime against the country. Which business is it that makes profits for the family on the account of the whole society. He makes it clear that one's responsibility to his country is the greatest. One can't compromise the value of his society for the purpose of making business for his family. These words, with the letter of Larry forced Keller to realize the sense of his guilt and to carry out self-sentence of death against himself. When Kate tries to convince Keller that Larry doesn't want him to go to the police, he replies " Sure (Larry) was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were. I guess they were." (*All my sons*)

By the end of the play, Keller was made to realize the sense of his guilt and applied self-sentence of death. Here the audience, as Keller, are made to realize that the interests of the country have a precedence over the interests of the family and the personal interests. They realize that whatever one does to escape his guilt against his country, he will be forced to admit it one day.

Conclusion

Modern drama gives a great concern to the contemporary social issues of the society. It has the aim of educating the audience and treating social problems. In Miller's play '*All my Sons*', he discusses a very important issue which is the betrayal of the country for the purpose of gaining financial profits for the family through the story of Joe Keller. The playwright succeeds to show his audience that the interest of the country has a precedence when comparing to the personal interest or the interest of the family. The play could convince the audience through the Keller's self-sentence of death that those who betray their countries should be ready to receive the social punishment.

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