

The Self-effacing Woman: A Study of Kate Keller in Arthur

Miller's *All My Sons*

Samita Mishra

Dr. Shruti Das

Reader and Head

P.G.Department of English

Bhanja Bihar

India

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* was first staged in New York in 1947, two years before the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with the famous opening sentence of its Book Two: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". Beauvoir only foregrounded the fact that the prevailing ideas about women are socially and culturally constructed, not naturally created. Summing up Beauvoir's argument, Margaret Walters says: "All through history woman has been denied full humanity, denied the human right to create, to invent, to go beyond mere living to find a meaning for life in projects of everwidening scope ... 'She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject'" (98). Miller's idolization of Kate Keller in the play written before Beauvoir's sensational uncovering of the subordination of women throughout human history, only serves to confirm the feminist attack on male white literature produced by male white authors as being complicit in "othering" women.

Kate Keller appears neurotic from the beginning. She seems to have lost the balance of her mind from the day her son Larry is reported missing in the Second World War. More than three years have passed between the report and the present of the play. But she is not prepared to accept that Larry has died. She believes that Larry is living and he will return. Newspaper reports of men returning home after being declared missing for several years boost her confidence. She resorts to astrology and religious superstitions to convince everyone that Larry is not dead. She asks Frank to prepare Larry's horoscope and find out whether the twenty fifth of November when Larry was reported missing was a favourable day for him or not. When Ann asks her why her heart tells her that Larry is alive, she goes to her and replies: "Because certain things have to be, and certain things can never be. Like the sun

has to rise, it has to be. That's why there's God. Otherwise, anything could happen. But there's God, so certain things can never happen (Miller 78).

Her belief in Larry's survival is completely irrational. This also results in a number of reactions that are almost hysterical. She is visibly disturbed when she hears of Ann and George's arrival in the Keller home. She vehemently opposes Chris's decision to marry Ann because it would be a pronouncement of Larry's death. Her opposition to Ann's stay is so extreme that she abjures all norms of decorum and packs Ann's bags in advance before she decides to go. She does not importune George to stay a little longer and rather seems relieved when he decides to go and insists Ann should accompany him. Her inhospitality infuriates Chris and even Joe Keller.

When the apple tree planted for Larry cracked at 4 O' clock in the morning, everyone is worried about its effects on Kate. Chris saw Kate standing at the window when the tree cracked. She then ran back into the house and cried. She later explained to Joe and Chris how she had a terrible night before the tree broke.

I was fast asleep, and – *Raising her arm over the audience*: Remember the way he used to fly low past the house when he was in training? When we used to see his face in the cock-pit going by? That's the way I saw him. Only high up. Way, way up, where the clouds are. He was so real I could reach out and touch him. And suddenly he started to fall. And crying, crying to me ... Mom, Mom! I could hear him like he was in the room. Mom! ... it was his voice ! If I could touch him I knew I could stop him, if I could only – *Breaks off, allowing her outstretched hand to fall*. I woke up and it was so funny. The wind ... it was like the roaring of his engine. I came out here ... I must've still been half asleep. I could hear that roaring like he was going by. The tree snapped right in front of me - (72)

The short broken sentences bespeak her emotional instability. She seems to be a mother who broke down when her son died untimely. The hope of her son being alive seems to keep her alive. She tells Joe she will kill herself if Larry does not come back (73). She would not listen to reason. She reprimands Joe for planting Larry's memorial apple tree a little too soon as if everyone was in a hurry to bury him. This state of hers affects all others in the family. Chris complains that since Larry was reported missing "we never took up our lives again. We are like at a railroad station waiting for a train that never comes in" (72).

Everyone believes Kate has not recovered from the shock of having lost a son in his prime. Joe is worried that she is still "dreaming about him again. She's walking around at night" (66). Chris thinks that Kate's present state is the result of their dishonesty, their refusal to

contradict her, their failure to declare openly that they all believe Larry is dead. Kate herself knows she is not well. She tells Ann “There are certain people, y’know, the sicker they get, the longer they live”. Sue declares Kate to be “Psychic” (94). Joe complains: “Three and half years you been talking like a maniac” (113).

But Kate knows “I am not completely out of my mind” (75). There is something at the back of her head that makes her act like this. It comes out when Kate tells Joe and Chris: “I want you to act like he’s coming back. Both of you” (73). A question comes to our mind why does she ask them “to act”. Was she herself acting? The doubt thickens when she says “Believe with me, Joe. I can’t stand it all alone” (74). Obviously, the effort that goes into this acting is a little too much for her. Why was she acting then? For whom? The answer perhaps lies in her words to Joe: “You above all have got to believe, you”. Joe does not understand the urgency. He dismisses it with questions like why me above all, what have I got to hide (74). But he has much to hide. He knows and Kate knows that he is responsible for the despatch of those defective cylinder heads for which Steve is in jail and Joe escaped by pretending ignorance. Joe is able to live without remorse because he believes that Larry did not fly a p-40 which were fitted with the defective parts and that he did all this for his family. Kate knows how important for Joe’s life the fiction of Larry’s not being dead is. It is also important that no ghost of his past criminality comes alive to disturb the hard-earned felicity in the domestic front. So she rudely sends Bert home and reprimands Joe for playing jills with the child. She wants Ann and George to go back so that no memory of his criminal act disturbs Joe’s present.

Joe Keller, with his down-to-earth pragmatism, does not believe that he has done anything wrong in selling the defective cylinder-heads. It was an opportunity to make a fortune and he grabbed it. He dismisses Chris’s idealism as arising from the fact that money “came too easy” to him. He was certain Larry would have understood his position and defended his action. He tells Kate

Goddam, if Larry was alive he would not act like this. He understood the way the world is made. He listened to me. To him the world had a forty foot front. It ended at the building line. This one, everything bothers him. You make a deal, overcharge two cents, and his hair falls out. He don’t understand money. Too easy, it came too easy. Yes , sir, Larry. That was a boy we lost. Larry Larry. (121)

Joe’s survival without remorse, therefore, depended on this belief. Kate Keller knows this and therefore insists on Larry’s being alive. She tells Chris: “Your brother is alive, darling,

because if he's dead, your father killed him. Do you understand me now? As long as you live the boy is alive. God does not let a son be killed by his father. Now you see, don't you? Now you see" (114). This is the secret of her neurotic behavior from the beginning. She urges us to "see" it. It is not Kate but Joe Keller whose life depended on a single thread – Larry's survival. When the news of Larry's death finally comes, through the letter to Ann, Kate's reaction is remarkable in its economy of words and of emotional response. A low moan comes from her throat and she just utters "Oh, my God ..." and then "My God, my God ...". She now desperately tries to hide the letter from Joe. She fails. Joe reads the letter and the disaster Kate had been trying to avert all through the play finally strikes. But even in this moment of Joe's death, Kate's calm is remarkable. She stands transfixed and then lets out a soft moan, then collects herself to comfort Chris: "Don't dear. Don't take it on yourself. Forget now. Live (127).

Thus Kate's neurotic behavior from the beginning, her irritability, her inhospitality to Ann and George are either a camouflage or the result of the strain of living a lie. As Jim explains. "It takes a certain talent for lying. You have it, and I do" (118). She tells Chris she fears Ann and George would open the case against Joe. She cautions him: "If they're going to open the case again, I won't live through it". Why does she fear so? Because, Steve held Keller responsible for the crime and the whole family hates the Kellers. She tells Chris "you don't realize how people can hate, Chris, they can hate so much they'll tear the world to pieces" (91). So she turns in desperation to Chris: "Dad and I are stupid people. We don't know anything. You've got to protect us" (90).

Kate's abnormality in the early part of the play is, therefore, a result of her efforts to shut Joe's criminal past out of his mind. The exertion was a little too much because it was against her nature. Kate is "a woman of uncontrolled inspirations and an over-whelming capacity for love" (69). This "capacity for love" is evident when she prepares grape juice for George on hearing of his arrival. The significance of the grape juice is not lost on George. He appreciates Kate's maternal affection. "Good old Kate remembered my grape juice". The soothing effect of Grace's feminine charm on frayed tempers is transparent.

On seeing George she raise both hands, comes down toward him.

MOTHER: Georgie, Georgie

GEORGE: *He has always liked her:* Hello, Kate.

MOTHER: *Cups his face in her hands.* They made an old man out of you. *Touches his hair* . Look, you're gray.

GEORGE: *Her pity open and unabashed, reaches into him, and he smiles sadly:* I know,
I. (104)

When Kate reprimands Ann for telling that George is fine when he really looks like a ghost, George relishes her solicitude. After a few minute's tete-a-tete with Kate, George's resentment against Joe vanishes and he announces:

GEORGE *stops, looks around at them and the place:* I never felt at home anywhere but here. I feel so – *He nearly laughs and turns away from them.* Kate, you look so young, you know? You did not change at all. It ... rings an old bell. (111)

This is Kate, a woman with “an overwhelming capacity for love” and with a “pity open and unabashed”. But she passes for a “psychic,” a “maniac”. Why? The answer perhaps lies in the burden of femininity she carries on her head. Betty Friedan rightly sums up this reigning ideology of femininity as “content in a world of bedroom, kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (36). Susan Bordo observes how a “domestic conception of femininity” is widely advertised in Western culture and how there is a “dualistic sexual division of labour” in which the woman is cast as chief “emotional and physical nurturer” (2367). Kate's concept of the woman as the physical nurturer is obvious from her conversation with George:

MOTHER: I am sick to look at you. What's the matter with your mother, why don't she feed you?

ANN: He just hasn't any appetite.

MOTHER: If he ate in my house he'd have an appetite.

TO ANN: I pity your husband! *To George:* Sitdown. I'll make you a sandwich. (104)

After some moments she sees the juice and asks Ann why she didn't give him some juice:

ANN; *defensively:* I offered it to him

MOTHER, *scoffingly:* You offered it to him! *Thrusting glass into George's hand:* Give it to him! *To George, who is laughing:* And now you're going to sit here and drink some juice ... and look like something!

GEORGE, *sitting:* Kate, I feel hungry already. (105)

As the “emotional nurturer” Kate tried frantically to hide Larry's letter from Joe to save him from emotional disturbance. When the truth finally explodes on Joe and he commits suicide, she goes to Chris and comforts him.

As a result of this she is without any self, any significant identity of her own. In Susan Bordo's words:

The rules for this construction of femininity ... require that women learn to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desire for self nurturance and self feeding as greedy and excessive. Thus, women must develop a totally other oriented emotional economy. In this economy, the control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger- for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification - be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited. (2368)

Kate has internalized this concept of femininity, willingly circumscribed her public space, confined herself to her domestic affairs and catered to the needs of her husband and children.

The relationship between the sexes as, Kate Millet has pointed out in *Sexual Politics* (1970), is one of dominance and subordination. Women like Kate have willingly accepted the subordinate role. Kate tried to persuade Joe to confess his crime, tell Chris that he is ready to surrender before the police so that Chris can return home. But Joe needs the family to back him at this ordeal. When Kate expresses her helplessness Joe shouts at her and Kate complains: "Joe you're doing the same thing again; all your life whenever there's trouble you yell at me and you think that settles it". (119). Kate is here complaining for all the women who suffered the same fate for all their sacrifices for their family. It is worthwhile to quote Friedon in this context. She says that if a woman asks herself what she truly wants, she would realize "neither her husband, nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, can give her a self" (qtd. in Walters: 102)

Miller's idolization of Kate Keller betrays his partiality for the ideals of femininity. The suspicion becomes a conviction when we consider Miller's own account of the genesis of the play. The play, Miller says, grew out of "an idle chat in my living room" when a pious lady from the Middle West told of a family in her neighborhood which had been destroyed when the daughter turned the father in to the authorities on discovering that he had been selling faulty machinery to the Army. The war was then in full blast. By the time she had finished the tale I had transformed the daughter into a son and the climax of the second act was full and clear in my mind. (17)

Why did Miller change the daughter into a son? If the crisis of the play is "the revelation of the full loathsomeness of an antisocial act", did Miller think that a woman's sphere is the domestic one and larger social issues should be left for men to handle? Kate, for instance, tries to cover Joe's crime and even solicits Chris's support for his father. Even Ann promises

not to tell anyone about Joe's crime, if Kate permits Chris to marry her. Miller seems to be deliberately blocking larger social issues from women. So when Miller says that he revised the play several times to develop a "true climax based upon revealed psychological truth" and to open up Kate's astrological obsession to reveal its "core of self-interest and intention" we cannot but ask what Kate's self interest is , whether she has any self at all ? The truth is Miller has made Kate a self-effacing woman and in idolizing her character has become complicit in the construction of the prevailing concept of femininity.

Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body". *The Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Vincent B. Leitch, Gen. Ed. W. W. Norton & Norton Company, 2001. 2360-2376. Print
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell, 1962. Print
- Miller, Arthur. *Collected Plays*. Bombay: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1973. Print.
- Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.