

Confined Spirits' Struggle: Housewife-mother Figures in Arthur Miller's Early Plays

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Abstract

Mainly based on textual analysis, the present article attempts to offer a relatively comprehensive and detailed look into Miller's depiction of dramatic housewife-mother figures in a gendered world in his early plays especially in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* and elaborate his female awareness from a feminist point of view and via employing the historical-biographical approach. In his early plays, by depicting his major housewife-mother figures—Kate Keller and Linda Loman as both wives and mothers according to the social condition and dominant cultural value, Miller is still possible to expose their bitterness and frustration in the traditional gender world by depicting them as both victims and victimizers under the patriarchal society. And he also endows them with courage and strength to express their resentment against the male-dominance and release their confined consciousness. So, the portrayal of these housewife-mother images has demonstrated that Miller can represent confined housewife-mothers sympathetically, authentically and admirably in his early plays.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, housewife-mother, victim, victimizer, stronger

1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that the plays written prior to the screenplay *The Misfits* (1961) belong to Miller's early plays. These plays include his first Broadway offering *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), his first Broadway hit *All My Sons* (1947), his masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* (1949), his Salem witch trial play *The Crucible* (1953), his most nostalgia play *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955) and his Grecian tragedy *A View from the Bridge* (1955). These early plays are received a rather high acclaim both at home and abroad. Even so, Miller's female presentations in these early plays are under the severest attack. As early as 1967, Eric Mottram, in his article "Arthur Miller: the Development of a Political Dramatist in America", had pointed out that Arthur Miller's plays were written for and largely "from the point of view of a man" (p.127). Mottram (1967) implies that Miller's women are unimportant and passive, which seems to be too partial and fails to take into account of the roles of all females created by Miller. Two years later, Robert W. Corrigan (1969), in his famous essay "The Achievement of Arthur Miller", offered a similar view, "in the plays of the first period, the woman is always in the background" (p.6). Corrigan (1969) then criticizes Miller's radical attitude towards sex and the role of women.

Corrigan's viewpoint is agreed by many critics such as Neil Carson (1982), Christopher Bigsby (1984), Jeffrey D. Mason (1989), Ann Massa (1990), etc. Neil Carson (1982) assumes that a peculiarity of Miller's early works is the essentially masculine nature and that "his vision of the world reflects some curious anti-feminine biases" (p.154). And he suggests, in most of Miller's plays, "it is only the men who are convincingly portrayed" (Ibid.). And then he further indicates that it is one of Miller's weaknesses for failing to create believable women and that Miller's women can find their sense of self only in their relationship to some men. The leading literary critic, Christopher Bigsby (1984), airs his opinion about Miller's females, "women, in Miller's plays, tend to be conservative forces and thereby to compound the distorting forces of social life" (p.146). And he deems that there is no tension in most of Miller's female characters and that Miller's female presentations are flaccid.

Jeffrey D. Mason (1989), a feminist, voices the severest attack on Miller's sexism in his article "Paper Dolls: Melodrama and Sexual Politics in Arthur Miller's Early Plays", protesting that "Miller's male point of view defines women as Other, either a paper doll devoid of depth and warmth or a source of confusion and the locus of evil" (p.112). And he charges Miller with sexual bias and concludes that Miller distributes "situations, options, and agony along gender lines, creating women who endure and survive and men who fail and fall. If Miller writes tragedy...he makes it a male preserve" (Ibid.). In her article "Some Kind of Love Story: Arthur Miller", Ann Massa (1990) exclaims, "it is surprising that Miller's plays reduce half of the human race, women, to such subordinate roles" (p.123). And she goes even further to attack Miller by putting, "Miller often seems to have made the decision to have neither women nor heterosexual relationship at centre stage" (p.125). Here, she criticizes the dramatist's bias against women.

Very frequently, the critics attack Miller's stereotypical representations of women and criticize the misogyny expressed in his works. They maintain that women in Miller's plays are either Virgin Mary or vicious whore and that women are limited to their physicality and only serve the male protagonists' needs. Neil Carson (1982) holds the view that Miller's women are not presented as individuals in their own right, but rather as mothers, wives or mistress, and maintains that "they are either too good (Linda, Beatrice, Catherine) or too bad (Abigail)" (p.154). Feminists claim that Miller creates stereotypically styled female characters as a didactic rendering to reinforce the position of women as Other. As Jeffrey D. Mason (1989) notes, Miller's plays "divide women into wives and whores, the first loyal, acquiescent and virtuous, and the second tempting, sexual, and dangerous" (p.114).

Apparently, the above critics have neglected that Miller has created believable housewife-mother figures under specific background in his early plays such as Kate Keller and Linda Loman. And it is an obvious fact that the housewife-mothers in these early plays are very complex and indispensable to the respective play. Though it is generally acknowledged that most of Miller's early plays are dedicated to presenting the life and death struggle of a man's soul, female characters are frequently foregrounded in the majority of these plays. Miller's female presentations, especially his wife and mother figures, begin to gain more attention from some critics such as Kay Stanton (1991), Jan Balakian (1969), and Terry Otten (2002). They begin to reread Miller's female characters and come to provide their insightful and positive views about them. They extend Corrigan, Carson and Massa's positive opinions. Kay Stanton (1991), for example, in his famous article "Women and the American Dream of *Death of a Salesman*", emphasizes the importance of Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and considers Linda "more than she is credited to be" (p.135). On rereading *Death of a Salesman* from a feminist perspective, Jan Balakian (1995) argues, "it cries out for a renewed image of the American woman" (p.114). And she concludes, "*Death of a Salesman* does not condone the locker-room treatment of women. Instead, the play asks us to question whether the dichotomized image of woman as either mother or whore is a desirable cultural value" (p.124). In her opinion, Miller's women characters, especially Linda Loman, are more complex than many critics asserted. Terry Otten (2002) further points out that the female characters such as Kate and Linda actually contribute to the tragic elements of the plays. Besides, he adds, Julie Walter's performance of Kate Keller, along with such performances as Elizabeth Franz's Tony-winning portrayal of Linda Loman and Joan Allen's depiction of Elizabeth Proctor "has helped establish a new appreciation of Miller's ability to create strong female characters despite occasional attacks in feminist criticism" (p.16). Otten's view actually offers us new understanding about Miller's females, especially the wife and mother figures in his plays. In fact, Miller's housewife-mother figures in his early plays are not just flaccid as some critics assumed, but complex, strong, and tragic. As a matter of fact, like their male counterparts, women in the early plays also display the existing situation of females in the specific historical phase. Their situations are worse because of the social significance of their sex identity and they suffer more by being both housewives and mothers.

Being "a chronicler of American culture" (Otten, 2002, p.ix), Miller realistically records women's life in America during 1930s and 1950s in his early dramas. In these early plays, Miller pictures both men and women in typical situations. These early writings present Miller's earliest comprehensive picture of the condition of women and show Miller's keen insights into the unreasonableness and unnaturalness of patriarchal system and stereotypical gender roles. Miller consistently shows his sides with the housewife-mother victims confined in domestic sphere in plays like *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Miller is also able to reveal women's experience and their own personal responses to events, and hence, gives full humanity to women. *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, viewed from feminist perspectives, yield new revelation and disprove the claim that Miller is a male chauvinist.

From the very start, Miller's awareness and criticism of the limits imposed upon female roles and aspirations in the early twentieth-century America is readily established in his early plays. Miller realistically depicts sacrificing and nurturing housewife-mothers entrapped in the patriarchal society. Unlike most male writers,

Miller does not depict housewife-mothers imprisoned in domestic spheres as happy angels in the house and satisfied with their imposed roles. Instead, Miller is critical of male dominance and female predicament and accurately portrays under-represented areas and perspectives of women's lives with a touch of sympathy. He is concerned with women caught up in the familial, economic, and moral nets of their background. Into his early plays, Miller infuses the typical problems of wife-husband struggle. Describing their struggle, Miller overturns the traditional formula by making the housewife-mothers the stronger.

Critics have attacked the stereotyping of the women in Miller's early plays; but the male characters in Miller's early plays are presented more negatively than the females, whether that be the 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.

In contrast to the negative portrayal of males, Miller's depiction of housewife-mother characters in his early plays is much more sympathetic. Miller authentically represents women in their self-sacrificing nursing and serving roles. In *All My Sons*, Kate Keller dedicates herself to family service; Both Willy's mother and wife serve their husband and sons. Critics frequently emphasize Miller's portrayal of women in limited social roles and attack his bias and prejudice on women in his early plays. Actually Miller is quite critical of the patriarchal enslavement of women and constantly penetrates women's consciousness and sides with the women characters. The housewife-mothers in his early plays are frequently trapped in limited domestic situations, which is the social reality. However, the housewife-mothers are always the stronger in life. In the following part, focusing on Kate Keller in *All My Sons* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and combining the historical context, the writer will elaborate the different images and roles Miller's housewife-mothers in his early plays represent so as to prove that Miller is capable of the authentic portrayal of the social reality of women's life and that he begins to show his awareness of women's frustration, predicament and strength in the patriarchal society.

2. Housewife-mothers as Both Victimizers and Victims

Critics are always eager to jump up into the assumption that women including housewife-mothers in Miller's early plays are the prompters of the heroes' downfall. And they are presented as a destroyer or a trap of the other male characters' happiness and dreams. Therefore, they think that women are the victimizers. Harold Clurman (1985) openly blames Kate Keller for being the "the villain in the Keller's home" (p.67). Guerin Bliquez (as cited in Otten, 2002) also condemns Linda Loman because she "makes Willy a victim of her ambition as well as his own" (p.43). But on the other hand, in these plays, the housewife-mothers are also treated with sympathy as victims of the social background, the cultural values and the patriarchal system. As a matter of fact, they are both victims and victimizers, and in some sense, they are more victims than victimizers.

2.1 Housewife-mothers as Victimizers

Both Kate Keller in *All My Sons* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* contributed greatly to their husband's downfall or their sons' disillusion.

2.1.1 Kate Keller as a Victimizer

Kate Keller is a domineering, strong-willed woman with stiff and insistent nature. Whether Joe Keller had knowingly allows defective engines to be shipped to the United States Army is essential to the story of the play. As Joe Keller's wife, Kate Keller was fully aware that Joe's culpability in the crime from the very start, but she never openly speaks of it in order to keep "her brood safe and her home undisturbed" (Clurman, 1985, p.67). And Kate, in the context of *All My Sons*, is partially responsible for Joe Keller's war-profiteering crime and plays a significant role in the cover-up of the crime. On the one hand, instead of encouraging his husband to face his responsibilities honestly, she protects him from prosecution by corroborating the alibi Joe gives for staying home from work on the day the cracked engine heads were shipped out. On the other hand, she denies his son's death by desperately trying to freeze the moment of Larry's disappearance. In this way, it is her silence and her selfishness that partly cause Steve Deever's imprisonment and his family's breakup. Therefore, she is also guilty by being the conspirator of the crime while Joe the committer. Accordingly, "the play shows that Kate, as much as Joe, destroyed George's family" (Murray, 1995, p.16), and "she [Kate] must be condemned along with Keller because of her active cooperation with the crime" (Flanagan, 1969, p.128). Hence, it is not exaggerated to say that Kate Keller is the victimizer of the downfall of George Deever's family.

Aside from being a victimizer of George Deever's family, Kate is also a victimizer of her own family. Kate

Keller plays a rather indispensable role to Joe's catastrophe. Apart from being the protectress of her husband's crime, she also acts as the avenger on him. Completely cognizant of Joe's crime and Larry's death in the first place, she never truly forgives Joe's criminal act or excuses him from being the cause of her beloved son's death. She constantly uses the knowledge of the crime as a weapon to prick his husband. Soon after the mother's appearance on the stage, when Joe slightly expresses his disbelief about Larry's coming back, Kate pointedly stops him, "you above all have got to believe [in Larry's survival]" (Miller, 1957a, p.74), connotatively blaming his responsibility for causing Larry's death and pricking his conscience. In her mind, she connects Joe's criminal act with the absence of their son. When hearing the news of George Deever's visit, Kate, her angered eyes fixed on Keller, shrilly warns him, "be smart now, Joe. The boy is coming. Be smart" (Ibid. p.89). Obviously, Kate knows the real purpose of George's visit, and her anger and stiffness seems to tell Joe that he is the murderer and his final day comes with George's coming. Mr. Keller is deeply hurt and frightened by her warning and suggestion. In the play, Joe confesses, "the only one still talks about it [the cracked plane's case] is my wife" (Ibid. p.79). Kate frequently uses her knowledge of Joe's actual guilt to revenge against him for his causing of her son's death and her own torture and misery. Miller himself also points out Kate's sinister side. In response to Rosemary Harris's portrayal of Kate in London production directed by Michael Blakemore, Miller comments that Kate is "a woman using truth as a weapon against the man who had harmed her son...there's a sinister side to her in short" (1987, p.369). Meanwhile, Miller observes that Kate destroys his husband ambiguously. In *Timebends*, Miller goes further to argue,

Kate's guilty knowledge, so obdurately and menacingly repressed, can be interpreted as a wish to deny her son's death, but also, and perhaps even primarily, to take revenge on her culpable husband by driving him psychically to his knees and ultimately to suicide. (1995, p.135-36)

Indeed, it is Kate who pushes his husband onto the road of suicide step by step. When George comes for the truth, at the crucial moment, it is Kate, finally, who destroys the pretense of Joe's innocence when she blunders and says: "[Joe] hasn't been laid up in fifteen years" (Miller, 1957a, p.111), this slip of tongue reveals the deception that Joe has perpetrated. George pursues Kate's mistake until Keller is compelled to admit that he ordered the heads shipped out. Kate's slip of tongue, according to Bigsby, can be interpreted as "the desire for vengeance on the part of Kate whose life has been distorted by her husband's moral failings" (1992, p.42). To the end, she hopelessly tries to avoid judgment and places the full weight of guilt onto her husband: "I mean you might make it clear to him that you knew you did a terrible thing" (Miller, 1957a, p.119). Finally, Joe Keller shoots himself to atone for his guilt.

2.1.2 Linda Loman as a Victimizer

As Kate Keller in *All My Sons* is a victimizer of her family, Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* also victimizes her family. In the play, Linda Loman, as the eternal wife and mother, the fixed point of affection both gives and receives, the woman who suffers and endures is, in many ways, the earth mother who embodies the play's ultimate moral value—love. But in the beautiful, amiable complexity of her creation, she is also Willy's and their sons' destroyer. Many critics observe Linda's share in the tragedy. As early as 1967, William B. Dillingham had identified Linda as a "contributing cause" (p.344) of the tragedy. Benjamin Nelson (as cited in McKinney, 1991) sees Linda as a "root figure in the catastrophe of her husband and sons" (p.30). Terry Otten (2002) also points out, "Linda's supplications propel Willy and Biff toward their tragic destiny" (p.43).

Linda is a loving, gentle, submissive, and supportive wife to Willy Loman. Paradoxically, Linda genuinely loves and respects her husband, but she is a contributing cause in his tragedy. Linda, as Willy's anima, has helped him exaggerate, falsify, mythicise his sales and his reality, and prompts his illusion. James Hurt (1995) observes, "Linda is an unconscious accomplice in Willy's grandiose self-deceptions" (p.137). *Death of a Salesman* centers on Willy Loman's American Dream. In Willy's American Dream, success is guaranteed to the well-liked. In his opinion, "be liked and you will never want" (Miller, 1949, p.33). Acting as the supporter of Willy's dream, Linda never challenges Willy's false persona and never confronts him with the falsity of his dreams. She allows Willy not only to build his dream castles but also to live in them under her solicitous but unconsciously destructive support. She believes in Willy as the "well-liked" super-salesman. When he complains of his small number of sales, her confidence in him is unshaken: "well, next week you will do better" (Ibid., p.36), she tells him. At times Willy seems on the verge of recognizing his mediocrity as a salesman, he tells Linda, "You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.... I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed...." (Ibid.), but Linda resupplies him with the stuff his dreams are made on. In answer, Linda offers more encouragement than understanding: "but you're doing wonderful, dear. You're making seventy to a hundred dollars a week" (Ibid., 37). As Willy is confiding in Linda about his unpopularity, she is telling him how handsome he is. Later, Linda continues to support Willy's illusion to the extent that he will never get out from it.

As Miller says, “Linda sustains the illusion...she is helping to guarantee that Willy will never escape from his illusion” (1987, p.370). When she actually knows the fact that Willy can’t sell anything, borrows weekly from his neighbor Charley and gives them to Linda, instead of rejecting them and making Willy accept the reality, she accepts the money as his salary in order to insulate Willy from the painful facts of living. To this extent she affords Willy not the love and understanding to a man, but the compassion to a child. Her failure in understanding and her mothering love contribute to the psychological condition—the “loneliness”—which leads Willy to adultery, an act that in turn leads to Biff’s disillusionment with his father and make Biff turn against his father, which is fatal for Willy Loman.

Linda also shares his husband’s dreams to the extent that she believes in the illusion of her husband as the successful salesman perhaps more than Willy himself does. When Willy does want to get out of his dream and gets a chance to give up selling to manage his brother Ben’s timber interests in Alaska—the place and the job he fits best, instead of encouraging him to be himself—to be a carpenter or a plumber or a bricklayer—and to identify himself with real and fundamental values, Linda urges him to remain as he is by beautifying his selling job and boosting his sales. Linda persuades Willy that you’ve “got a beautiful job here...you’re doing well enough, Willy...You’re well liked, and the boys love you” (Miller, 1949, p.85). And she then reminds him of the old man Wagner’s lip promise—if Willy keeps it up he’ll be a member of the firm, which is the dream of Willy Loman. Furthermore, she reminds Willy of his idol eighty-four Dave Singleman, who is Willy’s success goal. Linda’s blind support and belief keep Willy caught deeper in the web of delusion.

Linda’s refusal to challenge Willy’s illusions extends further to her refusal to help Willy get rid of his suicidal idea, which leads immediately to Willy’s death. As Bigsby (as cited in McKinney, 1991) notes, “there is a clear connection between her refusal to challenge those illusions and his death” (p.31). When Willy returns home at the beginning of the play and tells Linda, “I suddenly couldn’t drive any more. The car kept going off onto the shoulder, y’know” (Miller, 1949, p.13), instead of facing Willy’s breakdown, she ignores the obvious fact by creating excuses: “maybe it was the steering again.... Maybe it’s your glasses.... You’ll just have to take a rest.... You mind is overactive, and the mind is what counts, dear.... Take an aspirin.... It’ll sooth you” (Ibid., p.13-14). And in her protective unwillingness to force Willy to accept himself as he is, she counsels him only to “go down to the place tomorrow and tell Howard you simply got to work in New York” (Ibid., p.14). And when Linda discovers the gas pipe with which Willy has been contemplating suicide, she even gets no courage to remove the rubber pipe Willy has connected to the nipple on the gas pipe for suicide. In the end, Willy Loman successfully commits suicide in order to fulfill his wish that Biff Loman will be successful with his life insurance. Willy Loman remains still a victim of his illusions about himself and his sons. Therefore, as Kate Keller contributes to Joe’s downfall by both her protection and revenge, Linda, in her uncritical acceptance of Willy’s dreams and her solicitous support of his dreams and her refusal to challenge them, contributes to her husband’s destruction.

Besides victimizing her husband, Linda Loman also causes her sons’ tragedy. For Linda, Willy is her only focus and she has reduced her own life to this single focus. She gives all her power and energy to support Willy’s illusions, including her love for Biff and Happy. As Willy is deeply obsessed with the success values, both Biff and Happy are also infected with the false values. In order to sustain Willy’s dreams, she also prompts her sons’ delusion because Biff and Happy’s success is essential to Willy’s. And she doesn’t allow her sons to achieve their selfhood that involves denial of these values because she knows that their denial is lethal to Willy. Biff Loman, her elder son, is also Willy’s hope and at first naively believes that being well-liked is utmost important to success. However, after many defeats and humiliations, he begins to realize what he really is and the falsity of his values, and is ready to give up the false values. Instead of encouraging the development of his son’s self-awareness, Linda pleads him to continue his illusion—loan money from Bill Olivier—in order to save Willy. Later, when Biff fails in loaning money and is preparing to tell Willy what he really is, Linda stops him and tells Biff to leave home. Therefore, Linda Loman plays a rather significant role in Biff’s disillusionment and tragedy. Happy Loman is in some sense another Willy Loman. He is deeply trapped in his sexuality and the well-liked dreams. Happy has caught the infection (self-deception) worse than his father. As a mother, Linda gives less consideration to her younger son and indulgently lets him develop his pompous dreams. But in Happy’s heart, Linda is an ideal mother and wife. He confesses to his brother that he longs for “somebody with character, with resistance! Like Mom, y’kow” (Ibid., p.25). Happy exaggerates his position in the company in order to attract Linda’s attention and delight her. However, Linda still simply ignores him and even pays no attention to his announcement of his impending marriage. Happy never acquires Biff’s ultimate self-knowledge and realization of the truth, even after Willy’s death, he still insists his wrong dreams,

I’m not licked that easily. I’m staying right in this city, and I’m gonna beat this racket.... I’m gonna to show you [Biff] and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It’s the only dream you can

have—to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him. (*Ibid.*, p.38-39)

Typically, Happy has not learned the lesson of Willy's death, retaining the same beliefs and ideals that he had before. We can assume that he will live a life Willy lives and we are suppose to witness the tragedy of Happy Loman soon after, which is also connected with Linda Loman.

2.2 Housewife-mothers as Victims

As a sensitive writer, Miller is fully aware of the housewife-mothers' torments and sorrows. Besides picturing housewife-mothers as destroyers of their family or other family, Miller also depicts housewife-mothers in his early plays with a touch of sympathy and authentically represents their confined life in the early twentieth century by penning them as victims of the social background, victims of the American Culture and victims of the patriarchal system.

2.2.1 Housewife-mothers as Victims of the Social Condition and the American Culture

Miller's plays can be read as the reflection of the times. *All My Sons* (1947) is almost a quintessential depiction of American middle-class life in the post-war era. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) narrates the failure of the American Dream, along with the actual presentation of the social milieu in the 1940s. *The Crucible* (1953) retells the Salem witch trail. *A View from the Bridge* (1955) gives us an accurate account of the longshoreman's life in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. Both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* are rooted in the social milieu during the 1940s and 1950s, especially the post-war era.

The Second World War has created numerous job opportunities for the women. During the war, millions of women rushed into the male working places, which broadened their horizon and put new ideas into their minds. But immediately after the War, many women who had gone to work during the war were forced to return home. And "men and women commonly assumed that women would want to return to work when the nation needed them and quit when the need was past" (Goldfield, 1998, p.523). But on the contrary, women were unwilling to go back to their domestic realm—the kitchen and refused to replay their traditional housewife-mother role. In order to persuade the women back to their domestic life, American conservative force in the forties and fifties who held that women employment would undermine families started to propagandize the image of a true woman—a good wife and a good mother. Meantime a feminine mystique was created in the media, making the housewife-mothers the ideal models for all women. Promoting women's ideal reality within the domestic realm, this mystique had reduced the identity of women to sexual and social passivity. Their ideas were widely publicized by newspaper, magazines (including women magazines), advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychoanalysis, etc. Guided by the feminine mystique, televisions, broadcastings and newspapers tried their best to shape a happy satisfied domestic housewife-mother. Influenced by them, many young women considered marriage and childbearing as their only life objective and the source of happiness, and tried their best to accord their life into the image of housewives. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, criticizes the dominant cultural image of the successful and happy woman as housewife and mother. According to Betty Friedan (1963), this feminine mystique is promoted especially during the 1940s and 1950s, by making the housewife-mother the model for all women, portraying women's ideal reality as a narrow domestic round of "cooking, cleaning, washing, and childbearing" (p.38). And Friedan further points out, under the shadow of the mystique, women can find fulfillment and achieve identity "only through sexual passivity, acceptance of male domination, and nurturing motherhood" (p.73).

As a playwright whose plays "have presented a critic consciousness of the times with realistic insight coupled with a cynic's perception" (Ram, 1988, p.75), Miller is also aware of the fact that the social background of the forties and fifties forced women into their domestic sphere and the dominant women cultural values devalued their existing significance into endless round of domestic duties. In his early plays, Miller authentically reflects this harsh reality of housewife-mothers. In nearly all Miller's early plays written in the 1940s and 1950s (with the exception of *A Memory of Two Mondays*), housewife-mothers are available, and none of them escape the narrow domestic round of cooking, cleaning, washing, and childbearing. For instance, Kate Keller in *All My Sons* is confined in her "home in the outskirts of an American town" (Miller, 1957a, p.58) and devoting herself to cooking, cleaning, washing and childbearing; Linda Loman has also suffered the same fate as Kate Keller. In Willy's reliving of earlier days, Linda mends clothing, carries wash, and keeps the household accounts. While the men leave home for work, sporting and social events, Linda is never seen away from the house. Both Elizabeth Bishop and Beatrice Cabbot are also caged in their domestic duties.

Meanwhile, Miller is also conscious of the unfair social condition women encountered by making them sexual passive. In the plays of the first period, the housewife-mothers are never sexually interesting. Kate Keller and

Linda Loman never show any sign of their sexuality. Elizabeth Bishop even admits, “it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery” (Miller, 1957b, p.114). Though Beatrice Cabbot dares to complain to his husband about his being sexless with her for three months, “when am I gonna be a wife again, Eddie?” (Miller, 1957c, p.399), she still can’t take any initiation to be active in it.

Furthermore, Miller ventures to expose the sinister nature of the dominant cultural image of the successful and happy woman as housewife and mother by stereotyping his female characters as mothers. All the heroines in Miller’s early plays are always mother figures even when they are wives, and sacrifice themselves in the nurturing motherhood. Both Kate and Linda are the caretakers of their two sons, and devote their youth to the growth of their sons. Elizabeth is contributing herself to the bring-up of her two young sons. Though Beatrice is childless, she also takes up the responsibility of bringing up her niece Catherine.

Miller goes even further to criticize the social condition and the cultural values which oppress women by depicting them as victims of male dominance. Kate Keller is actually more intelligent, more capable and better educated than Joe Keller. Though she seems dominant at home, has to help his husband conceal her criminal acts and disobey her own moral values, which tortures her and results in her own tragedy. Linda Loman actually holds her own American dream—to be successful in the city. In the male-dominated cultural milieu, it is improper for a woman to achieve her dreams. Though more articulate and literate than her husband, she has to rely on her husband to realize her dreams, which leads to the family’s catastrophe and her own tragic destiny. Therefore, both Kate and Linda are victims of the male dominance.

These housewife-mothers are confined in domesticity by the social background, imposed as the caretakers of the male-dominated family and nurturer of their children by the dominant cultural values, so they live boringly and oppressively. In order to be submissive wives and selfless mothers, they experience great torments and sacrifice their dreams and their moral integrity, and live miserably. Hence, all of them are the victims of the social background, victims of the American cultural value as well. Feminists, who claim that Miller’s early plays do not attempt to redefine women but instead contribute to the perpetuation of female stereotypes, forget that Miller is accurately depicting a postwar American culture that subordinated housewife-mothers. In some degree, Miller’s plays help people especially housewife-mothers realize their predicament and their misery and cry for a renewed American woman image.

2.2.2 Housewife-mothers as Victims of the Dominant Patriarchal System

Apart from being the victims of the social condition and the cultural values, the housewife-mothers are also victimized by the dominant patriarchal system. In the patriarchal society, men are given freedom to be and become what they like, even to fail if they choose, but women are caged in domesticity and play the limited social-prescribed roles. Miller’s awareness of women’s entrapment and enslavement in the phallogocentric system is evidently shown by presenting the silent, distorted and marginalized housewife-mothers.

Under the long tradition of male rule in society, women usually are voiceless and males have the right to silence women’s voices. Though fully cognizant of Keller’s crime, Kate Keller can’t disclose the truth. Instead she is forced to obey the patriarchal norms and keep mute about Keller’s crime in order to protect him. Linda Loman, unlike all the men in the play, offers no philosophy, no opinion on how life ought to be lived. And Willy is always interrupting Linda, silencing her, and rendering 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. Tortured by Keller’s crime and her own guilt in the crime, Kate Keller develops an unknown anxiety and unexplained illness which constantly needs aspirins to relieve pain. Besides, unable to bear the misery of losing her beloved sons and the cruelty of the fact that father kills son, she turns to believe astrology—a kind of superstition, warping herself up in self-deception. Her quiet and happy life is distorted by her husband’s moral failings. Like Kate Keller, Linda Loman’s life is also destroyed by her self-deceiving husband. In the play, 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.

Under the patriarchal oppression of women, women are marginalized and live on the periphery of male society. In all Miller’s early plays, housewives are confined to single domestic places while the male characters are almost given mobility. It is true we know nothing about Kate’s background, and her own dialogue also fails to reveal anything at all about her. We also see nothing about Chris’ attachment to her but witness a lot about Chris’ attachment to his father Joe Keller. We also know little about Linda, especially about what she is lacking. She does not talk about herself, only about the men in her life.

Hence, “it becomes clear that the flawed America is a male world, a locker room where women are voiceless,

marginalized, or perplexed” (Balakian, 1995, p.116). Even Miller concedes 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. (1987, p.370)

Clearly, Miller exposes the fact that the housewife-mothers are exploited and subjugated in the phallogentric society and that they are the victims of the patriarchal system.

3. Housewife-mothers as the Stronger

Critics often hold that Miller is apt to trivialize and misinterpret women in his early plays by stereotyping women either as housewife-mothers who are selfless, docile and passive, or whores who are destructive. This accusation may be right in judging Miller’s secondary and foiled female characters, but it can’t stand firm in appraising Miller’s representation of housewife-mothers in his early plays. Different from other male playwrights who depict housewife-mothers as the fragile and the weak physically and spiritually, Miller portrays all his housewife-mothers as the stronger by endowing them with courage and strength.

Though being victims of the male dominance, Miller’s housewife-mothers are never seen as inferior to their male counterparts. Kate Keller is easily the strongest individual in the play. We can sense her strength in Miller’s stage direction, “a woman of uncontrolled inspirations...” (1957a, p.69). Under the dominant patriarchal tradition, women are supposed to be passive and are unable to move to action, in direct opposition to a man’s activity and aggression. However, Kate Keller is shown as superior in force of character to all the others and as quicker to act than all the males, especially in times of emotional crisis. When Geogre Deever comes to visit, it is Kate who first welcomes him and pacifies his anger with her mothering love. Besides, she doesn’t only talk about feminine business or blindly follow men’s opinion, and also ventures to air her opinions about the war—the most masculine realm. And significantly, in the play, it is Kate who makes the most forceful and moving criticism of the war when she rebuts the official views expressed by the rather sanctimonious Chris Keller, which also shows her superiority in mind. In his depiction of Linda Loman, Miller also sides with her by attributing the best characteristics of human to Linda other than Willy Loman. Linda Loman, besides being the most articulate member of the household, “represents human dignity and values: cooperative, moral, human behaviors as opposed to lawless assertion of self over all others through assumed superiority” (Stanton, 1991, p.137). She is the most decently moral member of the family and retains a belief in the need to treat human beings properly. Besides, she is presented as a tough and perceptive woman. She understands that Willy is exhausted from the complexity of social factors that have dehumanized him, and says, “he works for a company thirty-six years this March, opens up unheard of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his salary way” (Miller, 1949, p. 56).

Apart from being superior to the male counterparts, Miller’s housewife-mothers are the real supporters of their respective family. According to the patriarchal hierarchy, males are the breadwinners, accordingly, they are assumed to be the props of their families. Though fathers are still the breadwinners of the families, they are actually not the supporter of the family in Miller’s plays. Miller overturns the tradition by subverting male’s absolute role in the family and placing housewife-mothers as the centers of the family and the authentic managers of the family.

In *All My Sons*, Miller makes Kate the center and the genuine manager of the Kellers’ home. Kate Keller is a dominant housewife-mother in the Kellers’ home. In the play, it is an obvious fact that Kate dominates both her husband Joe and her son Chris. Both Joe and Chris seldom invade the faked myth Kate has created for Larry’s death. When they venture to break the myth, they are usually defeated by Kate’s strong belief and threat. Once Joe Keller wants to persuade Kate to forsake the myth, Kate threatens him by her own suicide, and says, “because if he’s not coming back, then I’ll kill myself” (Miller, 1957a, p.73). In the phallogentric system, the father’s position in the family is absolute. But here, Kate doesn’t completely submit herself to Keller’s absolute rule. On the contrary, Mother Keller has dominated Father Keller by her knowledge of his actual guilt and threatened her husband into the belief that Larry is alive. Furthermore, Kate even forces her husband to join in her disapproval of Chris’ marriage with Ann Deever, which is also against the patriarchal norms. Prescribed by the patriarchal norms, fathers have the final say in the children’s marriage and mothers usually have no voice in it. Accordingly, Ronald Hayman (1972) admits, “Kate remains a dominating personality and she has the first speech in which the language rises above the pedestrian level of chat, argument, and wisecracks” (p.24-25). Besides, Mother Kate is the real supporter and manager of the family. Father Keller is actually a criminal and a moral failure. Though he still earns money for the family living, he physically and spiritually can’t handle the family’s business. As a man, the news part on newspaper is the most attractive part. But Joe Keller turns his

interest into the want ads part, which usually is the part fascinates women, and he says, “I don’t read the news part any more. It’s more interesting in the want ads” (Miller, 1957a, p.59), which shows the degradation of his masculinity. And he also “keeps on playing policemen with kids” (Ibid., p.79), which further exemplifies the degeneration of his masculine power. In the patriarchal family, it is the husband-father who deals with the big event and faces the crisis. But in the Keller’s family, the person who faces crisis is Mother Kate. When George comes for the truth, Kate manages it while Joe Keller evades into the room. According to the patriarchal standard, it is the son who keeps the home after the father’s death. But, in *All My Sons*, Chris Keller, being an idealist, is unable to manage the home. Indeed, it is still Mother Kate who supports the home after Keller’s death. In the end, it is Kate who ends the play by comforting and ordering Chris, “Don’t dear. Don’t take it on yourself. Forget now. Live” (Ibid., p.127), which reveals her ability to put unpleasant facts out of mind and keep the home after the catastrophe. Here lies Kate’s strength.

Speaking of Linda Loman, critics commonly refers to her as a sentimental sop, which is against the playwright’s original intention. To Miller, Linda is a very strong character. According to Brenda Murphy (1995), in writing the play, Miller was intent on showing Linda’s toughness, “he even cut the famous ‘Attention must be paid speech’ at one point for fear it made her too sentimental, and he took out of the original dialogue references she made to Biff and Hap as ‘darling’ and ‘dear’”(p.45). And at various times, Miller has expressed his concern that Linda not be sentimentalized. When observing Mildred Dunnock’s original portrayal of Linda, Miller (1995) puts, “it has Linda filled with outrage and protest rather than self-pity and mere perplexity” (p.189). Miller (as cited in Singh, 1998) also explains the strong side of Linda to the actress playing Linda in Beijing,

She is not a woman to follow meekly behind her husband, wiping up after him. She has strength; she has held this family together and she knows this very well.... It is she who is marshaling the forces, such as they are, that might save Willy. (p.52)

Elsewhere, Miller (1987) has protested, “critics generally see my female characters as far more passive than they are...my women characters are very complex. They have been played somewhat sentimentally, but that isn’t the way they were intended” (p.370). As a matter of fact, Linda is a woman with strength and courage. She attacks her sons with fierce indignation when they abandons their father; She slams the table in the “attention must be paid” speech, just as Nora in *The Doll House* slams the door and abandons her patriarchal husband Helmer. Both her acts demonstrate her strength and courage to resist patriarchal limits. Though she doggedly supports Willy, she still demonstrates strength in her support by dismissing Biff’s concern about his father’s strange behavior and saying, “Oh, my dear, you should do a lot of things, but there is nothing to do, so go to sleep” (Miller, 1957a, p.53). As Elia Kazan (as cited in Otten, 2002) writes about Linda in his directing notes on the play, in fact, “in life she is much tougher...she is terrifyingly tough” (p. 46). Kay Stanton (1991) has also seen her strength as a “common woman who possesses more tragic nobility than Willy” (p.96).

Just as Kate Keller being the heart of her family, Linda Loman is also important to all the men in her life. She can be considered the source of life for Willy, Biff and Happy and the mother to all of them including her husband Willy Loman. As a wife, she is her husband’s “foundation and support” (Miller, 1957a, p.18). As a mother, she is “the source of binding love for her children” (Brown, 1967, p.135). In fact, she is the foundation and support of the Loman’s family and the real manager of the house. In the play, all the Loman men are lost. The husband-father Willy Loman becomes psychologically maniac and is trapped in the past. The elder son Biff Loman is a man good for nothing and steals himself out of every good job since high school. The younger son Happy Loman is a dyed-in-the-wool faker who cajoles his managers’ fiancés and then discards them. All of them are unable to support and manage the family. And though they are the breadwinners of the family, what they earned and submitted are not enough for the home expenditures. Willy Loman has no salary now and has to borrow from his neighbor Charley, what Biff has earned is not enough for himself, and Happy Loman seldom submits money to the house. It is Linda who is in charge of everything and trying to make the ends meet, which requires strength. Kay Stanton (1991) gives a fair judgment to the role of Linda Loman,

the Loman men are all less than they hold themselves to be, but Linda is more than she is credited to be...she is the foundation that has allowed the Loman men to build themselves up, if only in dreams, and she is the support that enables them to continue despite their failures. Linda is the one element holding the family façade together. (p.135)

So, it is not an overstatement that if Linda is weak, the whole family will be in total chaos.

4. Conclusion

In his early plays, Miller creates a gallery of housewife-mothers in his plays. Though he gives them the stereotypical roles—being both wives and mothers according to the social condition and dominant cultural value,

he is still possible to expose their bitterness and frustration in the traditional gender world by depicting them as both victims and victimizers under the patriarchal society. And noteworthy mentioning, he also endows those housewife-mothers with courage and strength to express their resentment against the male-dominance and release their confined consciousness. As a matter of fact, the portrayal of these housewife-mother images has diverged from the representation of the female in the traditional male works as angel or demon, fairy or witch and shows that Miller has the ability to create authentic housewife-mothers living in the 1940s and 1950s by both representing their sinister side and showing their suffering and frustration under the oppression of male superiority and dominance. Simultaneously, he shows his capability to transcend the times by endowing his housewife-mothers with strength and courage.

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