

Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge: A Cultural Study**Dr Kavita Singla, Associate Professor****Department of English****S.A Jain (P.G.) College, Ambala City, Haryana, India****Email: kvt.singla@gmail.com**

The play "A View from the Bridge" by Arthur Miller explores themes of masculinity and immigration in 1950s Brooklyn, New York. The story revolves around Eddie Carbone, a longshoreman who lives with his wife Beatrice and their niece Catherine. When Beatrice's cousins, Marco and Rodolpho, arrive from Italy as illegal immigrants and stay with the Carbones, Eddie's protective feelings for Catherine become more dangerous. The stage becomes a crucible of emotional turmoil and harrowing revelations in the shadow of mounting tensions and the relentless unravelling of long-guarded secrets. Each scene, laden with palpable intensity, propels the play towards its tragic and inescapable denouement. Miller's powerful portrayal of complex characters struggling with societal norms and personal desires has made

"A View from the Bridge" a classic of modern American drama. This paper strives to establish a connection between the analysis of human relationships and economic systems. By doing so, it aims to bring to the forefront a nuanced understanding of how human interactions and economic frameworks intersect, shaping our contemporary society.

Keywords: immigration, masculinity, infatuation, psychoanalysis

Arthur Miller, widely regarded as one of the most accomplished playwrights of Modern American Drama, crafted an impressive repertoire of highly esteemed works. Set against the backdrop of America's plentiful natural resources and its claim as the epitome of democracy, this paper explores the evolution of American society, characterised by profound divisions between the privileged and the impoverished. Despite these disparities, the allure of immigrating to America remained undiminished, with individuals seeking new opportunities despite the glaring socio-economic gaps. Through "A View From The Bridge" (1955), Miller presents a compelling narrative that showcases the struggles Italian immigrants face in America, deftly intertwining their economic hardships with the complexities of their shared human experience.

Arthur Miller views theatre as a serious business, one that makes or should make a man more humane, which is to say less alone; and it is to the aloneness of contemporary society that he has increasingly directed his thought and plays. He considers that a great drama is great jurisprudence and is one where people do not spend their emotions only but also learn.

Millions embarked on this journey, some through legal channels while others resorting to illegal means. The struggles endured by these immigrants in unfamiliar territories, encompassing the constant fear of apprehension by authorities, pervasive loneliness, and the absence of social security, can be vividly imagined. Their only solace lies in the communities they form with fellow countrymen in these foreign lands. Undoubtedly, Indian immigrants have made significant contributions to the economy and society of the United States. Yet, their experiences also serve as a testament to the challenges and opportunities inherent in the process of immigrating to a new country. In addition to the external hurdles they face, individuals also contend with their own character flaws and fallibilities. As Shakespeare beautifully avers in "As You Like It":

And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,

And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot:

And thereby hangs a tale. (2.7. 33)

Arthur Miller's play, "A View From The Bridge," explores the persistent theme of immigration and its associated challenges, which resonate across various spatial and temporal contexts. The narrative unfolds within a distinct socio-cultural milieu that caters to the needs of undocumented immigrants. Set in the Italian-American community of Brooklyn, New

York, the story revolves around Eddie, whose tragic downfall stems from his incestuous desires for his young niece, Catherine, with whom he shares a household alongside his wife, Beatrice. The protagonist, Eddie, epitomizes a neighborhood where encountering a lawyer or a priest in public is considered unlucky, as they are associated with misfortunes and disasters. Within this community, the gravest transgression is betrayal, while passion serves as both a language and a way of life. It acts as the binding force that unifies this community and possesses the potential to tear it apart. The longshoremen's union, central to the play, has become infiltrated by organized crime, exerting control over employment and termination processes and providing protection for undocumented immigrants, who form a significant portion of the workforce, with a percentage of their wages taken as payment.

Within the context of contemporary America, "A View From The Bridge" serves as a poignant portrayal of the socio-economic divide between the privileged and the marginalized. The play intricately weaves together the contrasting worlds that exist on either side of the bridge, spanning from the working-class, ethnic neighborhoods of Brooklyn, inhabited by laborers and immigrants with foreign accents, to the cosmopolitan and affluent areas of Manhattan, now dominated by wealthy bankers and financiers. This metaphorical bridge also encompasses the perspective of the play's narrator, Alfieri, a composed and rational lawyer who astutely observes the fundamental human passions at play but remains powerless to halt their inexorable course. By examining the view from the bridge, one can discern the complex dynamics and realities of societal divisions and the human condition within the narrative.

In Arthur Miller's plays, it is the profound intensity of passion that serves as the catalyst for tragic outcomes. Irrespective of social class, both ordinary individuals and the elite can assume the role of heroes within Miller's narratives. These characters are driven by their personal desires and self-interests, often unaware of the option to disengage when faced with adversity. They make personal sacrifices in pursuit of their obsessions, unwilling to compromise or accept anything less than their idealized visions. This unwavering commitment to their passions ultimately leads to their downfall. In the essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" Miller asserts:

The Tragic feeling is invoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. (4)

And ‘Tragic Flaw’ is nothing but “his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the fact of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity.” (TE 4)

Miller writes in Preface to his Collected Plays :

“dramatic obsession, so to speak, was with the twofold nature of the individual – his own concept of his deeds, and what turns out to be the “real” description of them.” (18)

As the plot of "A View From The Bridge" unfolds, the exploration of gender dynamics emerges with significant nuance. Eddie's relationships with the two women in his life are portrayed in a subtle manner, shedding light on the complexities that arise. His relationship with his wife is notably intricate due to his inappropriate attraction to his niece, a fact that his wife is fully aware of. However, she exhibits remarkable patience, echoing the traits of other female characters in Miller's renowned plays such as Linda, Kate, and Elizabeth, who also endure challenging circumstances without daring to sever their ties with their husbands. Whenever she questions Eddie's obsession with his niece, she is brutally silenced by her dominating spouse. Similarly, the young niece herself is greatly indebted to Eddie, seeking his approval in various aspects of her life, including her attire, hairstyle, career choices, and even her selection of a life partner.

The play raises pertinent inquiries regarding the status of women in the 21st century. It prompts us to question whether women are genuinely emancipated to exercise agency in decisions concerning their education, perspectives, careers, and marriages. Despite the passage of time, there appears to be limited progress in breaking free from the metaphorical glass ceiling imposed by patriarchal norms and societal expectations. The complex interplay of power dynamics and gender roles depicted in the play serves as a reflection of the ongoing struggles faced by women in their quest for genuine liberation and autonomy within a male-dominated society.

Hira Bansode, a Maharashtrian Indian poet who herself underwent a lot of struggle, in her translated poem ‘Woman’ reminds one of the women in Miller:

She, the river
Said to him, the sea
All my life

I've been dissolving myself
And flowing toward you . . .
You never thought
Of becoming a river
And merging
With me. (84)

In contrast to a Shakespearean hero, Eddie lacks the introspective and articulate qualities typically associated with such characters. As an unsophisticated dockworker, he grapples with the task of reconciling and accommodating his disparate and often subconscious psychological emotions. Wrestling with complex human ambivalences, he experiences strong paternal or avuncular instincts towards Catherine, his niece. However, these sentiments progressively cross boundaries into tabooed realms of sexual desire. Beatrice, as well as the audience, discern the connection between Eddie's waning marital intimacy with his wife and the redirection of his erotic feelings towards Catherine, but Eddie himself remains oblivious to this underlying link.

In his introduction to the revised version of the play, Miller wrote:

“It seemed to me then that the theatre was retreating into the area of psycho-sexual romanticism, and this at the very moment when great events both at home and abroad cried out for recognition and analytic inspection. “ (TE 219)

In a word, the dramatist was tired of mere sympathy in the theatre and the spectacle of still another misunderstood victim left him impatient. He remarked at the improvised version of the play,

“ Eddie is still not a man to weep over; the play does not attempt to swamp an audience in tears. But it is more possible now to relate his actions to our own and thus to understand ourselves a little better not only as isolated psychological entities, but as we connect to our fellows and our long past together. “ (TE 222)

She demands her conjugal rights from her husband who has been ignoring her for a long time:

BEATRICE. When am I gonna be a wife again, Eddie?

EDDIE. I ain't been feelin' good: They bother me since they came. (CP 399)

In the second act, he brazenly declares –

I'm gonna have it out with you one of these days, Beatrice.
(426)

It appears as if he is going to give alms to a beggar. When the wife shows no enthusiasm, the mad man shouts –

I want my respect, Beatrice, and you know what I'm talking about. (426)

He has his own rules and parameters which wife has to conform to:

I do what I feel like doin' or what I don't feel like doin'.
(426)

However, after a pause, he accuses her that she used to be different earlier:

You didn't used to jump me all the time about everything.
The last year or two I come in the house I don't know what's gonna hit me. It's a shootin' gallery in here and I'm the pigeon. (426)

In everyone's recollection, there are things which one does not reveal to everybody, but just to one's friends. Sometimes there are things which a person is afraid even to disclose to oneself. As Dostoevsky puts it about such feelings in "Notes From Underground" - "every decent man has quite an accumulation of them." (243) Eddie Carbone is not an exception who harbours secret love for his niece, which he cannot disclose even to himself.

The arrival of an attractive young foreigner disturbs Eddie's apparent equanimity. The young Catherine is on the verge of womanhood, already anxious to enter a new life. Beatrice seems disturbed by her husband's reluctance to let her go. The young niece, unable to comprehend her uncle's disoriented feelings, accuses her aunt for his bad moods. She remarks:

If I was a wife, I would make a man happy instead of going at

him all the time. I can tell a block away when he's blue in his mind and just wants to talk to somebody quiet and nice. . . .

I can tell when he's hungry and wants a beer before he even says anything. (421)

However, the words spoken here reflect the subjugated and conditioned mind of a woman who cannot think in any other terms than to please the dominating male member of the family. Rudolpho puts it beautifully:

If I take in my hands a little bird. And she grows and wishes to fly. But I will not let her out of my hands because I love her so much, is that right for me to do? I don't say you must hate him; but anyway you must go . . . (421)

The mature aunt who is in the knowing of things confronts her husband:

“You want somethin' else, Eddie, and you can never have her!“(437)

When he defends himself - “That's what you think of me – that I would have such thoughts,” (438) he acknowledges a possibility, even as he rejects it.

His constant worry is about Catherine and her lover-

EDDIE. B., he is taking her for a ride!

BEATRICE. All right, that's her ride, what're you gonna stand over her for till she's forty? Eddie, I want you to cut it out now, you hear me? I don't like it!

(399)

Eddie is just not ready to listen to her and yells at Beatrice:

I don't like it! The way you talk to me and the way you look at me. (426)

Alfieri too, suggests him to stay clear of her –

Morally and legally you have no rights, you cannot stop it; she is a free agent. (424)

But ‘she is my niece’ and ‘this is my house’ – such like clichés escape his lips. According to him, the guy she is dating is not good and she has to be protected from him. The wife’s admonition that Catherine goes around shaking all the time and she cannot go to sleep falls on deaf ears.

Beatrice, like Linda Loman and Kate Keller in his other famous plays, is left to lament a man whose mystery she could never penetrate, yet is content to remain with him when it is time to choose between to live with him or quit. And the dominating husband Eddie, like Willy and Joe in his other plays, takes for granted this unconditional support of his wife. He admits to Catherine:

You got a good aunt but she’s got too big a heart, you learned bad from her. (CP 387)

This pouring of heart reflects soft feelings of the man for his innocent and meek wife but at the same time his ranting at her ignorance about the outside world tears one apart:

You lived in a house all your life, what do you know about it?
You never worked in your life. (387)

He insists that Catherine should not go for a job, and sermons over the bad world outside:

Most people ain’t people. She’s goin’ to work; plumbers; they’ll chew her to pieces if she don’t watch out. (387)

And his advice to Catherine – Believe me, Katie, the less you trust, the less you be sorry - refers to the male subjugation of the female. In the heated discussion with his wife, he shouts:

Don’t tell me okay, okay, I’m tellin’ you the truth. A wife is supposed to believe the husband. If I tell you that guy ain’t right don’t tell me he is right. (427)

In spite of his disloyalty to wife, he suppresses her all the time like a typical feudal lord. When the girl is about to marry against his wishes, the aunt who has raised her, would not join her niece’s wedding, who has no other relative except her aunt, as per her husband’s

wishes. Her trials and tribulations raise certain serious issues about the position of woman who is suffering for no fault of her own in the male dominated structure.

And the irony of situation is that he prefers to die in the arms of his wife to save his name or seeking her forgiveness which he could not do in his life. It is interesting to see the dialogues in the last scene –

CATHERINE. I never meant to do nothing bad to you.

EDDIE. Then why – Oh. B.!

BEATRICE. Yes, yes!

EDDIE. My B.! [He dies in her arms, and Beatrice covers
him with her body.] (439)

Having, in his eyes, succeeded in realizing the American dream himself, he understands what drives Marco and Rudolpho, two illegal immigrants from Italy, his wife's cousins and takes pride in allowing them in his home. As we enter the play, however, there is already a tension brewing up.

Beatrice is worried speculating as to whether her poor relatives would get a befitting welcome by her husband. In patriarchy, would the husband be as anxious, in case of his relatives come to stay with the family is a question that comes to mind here. Miller's portrayal of women in the system is patriarchal to the core.

As Dostoevsky puts it that a clever man living is morally bound to be preferably a spineless creature while a man with a strong character, a doer, must preferably be a narrow-minded creature He writes:

A clever man can never seriously get to be anything, and
only a fool does.

(Dostoyevsky 215)

. Hamlet in Shakespeare grapples with the question of to be or not to be. Another literary giant Alexander Pope writes - Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Eddie seems to conform to the views of W.B. Yeats -

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

(Yeats 29)

His two fixations, incestuous feelings for the niece and obsession with name, hasten his downfall bringing him closer to a man whose conflicts we do understand but find it difficult to resolve them in clear-cut manner. Eddie is not a nice fellow but the playwright thinks that it is what gives someone, who is watching the action from a distance the understanding that life is not just a lot of chaotic impulses pushing us this way, pushing us that way, most of them unfulfilled. The idea of a man fulfilling his destiny is absolutely compelling as a certain old, wise lady has ‘to pray’ for Eddie in the play. One learns to see the frailty of human beings with pity and fear rather than to deem them angels or villains.

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