



Breaking Boundaries: Gender Roles and Conflict in Arthur Miller's 'A View from the Bridge'

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Arthur Miller (1915-2005) was one of the most prominent American playwrights of the 20th century and was known for his ability to write engaging plays that dealt with complex themes such as the American Dream, identity, and morality. He was also known for his political activism and outspoken criticism of the government and society, which led him to be called before the House of Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy era. Although considered a votary of working class, a significant deviation in his thinking came, with his entry into Hollywood when he fell for glamour and married Marilyn Monroe divorcing his first wife after sixteen years of marriage in 1956. This union, too, ended in 1961 and he married Austrian photographer Inge Morath the following year.

In this study, however, the focus would remain on the first phase of his thinking, before his entry into the world of cinema and glamour. *A View From the Bridge* (1956) is a play that deals with the issues of illegal migration and the problems coming with it. Miller may be radical in his economic views deploring the abysmal gaps between the rich and poor classes but not so in his perspective of woman as she is never vociferous in speaking out her turmoil, trial and tribulations. She is content with her role as a mother; wife or daughter obliterating her personal interest in other arenas of life. This suffocation of the suppression of her identity gets pronounced pathetically at many places in the characters of Catherine and Beatrice in the play taken here.

Arthur Miller is Jew and Jews have been a minority, on the margins in Europe. In America, however, they were not so. As Miller once remarked that America was the golden



land. It was possible for Jews to do almost anything they wanted to do here. They were flourishing in business, creative writings, science and other fields.

Julius Novick in *Beyond the Golden Door* seeks to demonstrate that Jewish American Drama chronicles and analyses the Jewish American version of an all but universal experience. We all live in the tension between what we came from and what we have come to; we are all faced with the challenge of making some accommodation between them. (189)

For Jewish Americans, this tension is particularly rooted in the traumatic migration from Europe to “The Golden Land” of America. How does an immigrant culture retain its identity after immigration? - this struggle for self definition goes on.

Now these things are very regressive as tradition becomes a regressive force, not allowing progress. A very conventional view of woman never allows her to move forward, which is conspicuous in Miller’s plays.

In the heart of Brooklyn, amidst the vibrant Italian-American neighborhood, Arthur Miller's masterful drama unfolds. This tale revolves around Eddie, a man whose tragic downfall is spurred by a forbidden desire that has festered within him for years. Living under the same roof with his wife Beatrice and their niece Catherine, Eddie's obsession with the young girl takes a sinister and tumultuous turn.

As Catherine blossoms into a young woman, Eddie's jealousy intensifies, unable to bear the thought of her embracing the affections of other men. When Catherine becomes enamored with Rudolpho, a charming Italian immigrant, Eddie's dark impulses drive him to betray Rudolpho to the immigration authorities, setting in motion a chain of events that will ultimately lead to his own fatal reckoning.

In this gripping narrative, we witness the collision of passion, betrayal, and fate within the tight-knit Italian-American enclave of Brooklyn, as Eddie's tumultuous emotions become a catalyst for a tragic and inevitable clash with Rudolpho's formidable brother, Marco.



The question of gender gets addressed in a nuanced manner as the plot unfolds Eddie's relationship with two women in his life. His relationship with his wife is quite complex because of his attraction to his niece and wife is aware of this. Yet she is shown to be patient, like Linda, Kate and Elizabeth in his other plays, never daring to leave his side. Whenever she questions Eddie's obsession for his niece, she is ruthlessly subdued by the dominating husband. This is the predicament of a wife in Miller's works. Though the dramatist does not give her a strong role, one feels the unequal distribution of power.

Meanwhile, the young niece herself is deeply entwined in Eddie's influence, constantly seeking his approval in matters ranging from her attire and hairstyle to her career choices. Her dependence on him is palpable, underlining the intricate power dynamics at play within the household.

The life and working conditions of longshoremen in *A View From the Bridge* indicates the abysmal rift among the different strata of society. The dilemma of the niece who is provided with all financial and home security by her uncle rips one apart when she is denied the right to choose her life partner. The uncle, the representative of the working class, has his own little goals and obsessions for the name and dignity in social milieu. On the other hand is the wife who tries her best to make her presence felt in the house but husband just ignores her being swept away with blind passions. Thus the female continues to remain a puppet in the hands of male consciously or sub-consciously delving in Hamlet like situation of 'to act or not to act'.

Struggling with complex human emotions, Eddie finds himself torn between two contrasting sentiments. On one hand, he nurtures deep, protective, and almost paternal instincts towards Catherine. Yet, concurrently, these emotions morph into forbidden and taboo sexual desires. Beatrice and the audience grasp the profound connection between his decision to cease intimate relations with his wife and the subsequent redirection of his erotic desires towards Catherine. However, Eddie himself remains oblivious to this intricate web of emotions. Such is



the dexterity of the delineation of complex emotions that make Miller more of a psychological playwright than a social one, he is popular for.

Initially conceived as a one-act play, Miller had envisioned it to have the impact of an arrow swiftly released from a bow, much like the intensity found in Greek drama. However, the initial productions of the play failed to capture attention, prompting the playwright to revisit it. He incorporated additional dialogue and action to enhance its stage presence and make it more suitable for performance.

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

It seemed to me then that the theatre was retreating into 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)

Bernard Shaw's plays and Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage too attempt to drive home the same point. Though the audience prefers to see pathos where the dramatists want them to see the point, is another story to go about. Arthur Miller too does not want sympathy for Eddie. He starkly says that Eddie is 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.

Beatrice in the second version of the play is shown to be assertive, though is unable to control the events. 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 brazenly speaks in a masculine tone

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)

The husband puts the blame on his wife for all the chaos in marital life forgetting his
own incestuous desires. He would have his cake and eat it too. All philandering is permissible



to him. How can he forget the fact that all kinds of relationships he can have except that of a spouse? Here the question rises - Has the position of woman changed in present times or she still does toe the line of her spouse in order to maintain peace outwardly.

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 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 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)

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)

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)



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)

Eddie seems to conform to the views of W.B.Yeats when he is on the reckless voyage of breaking boundaries -

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

(Yeats 29)

When Catherine labels him ‘a rat’ in her rage and asks her aunt not to be afraid of him as “he belongs in a sewer!” (436), the aunt, like the typical Millerian wife jumps to his rescue at once:

Then we all belong in the garbage. You and me too. Don’t
say that. Whatever happened we all done it, and don’t you
ever forget it, Catherine. (CP 436)

Such is the mould in which Miller’s women are made, a male perspective to look at, may be. They do nudge the hierarchy of unreasonable power structures but are not given the wings to fly with their heart and soul on an equal footing with men.



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