

SELF-SOCIETY CONFLICT IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE*

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ABSTRACT

*The dramatic world of Arthur Miller, one of the greatest modern American playwrights along with Eugene O'Neil, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, revolves around man and his relationships with his milieu. His world is entirely social where the playwright not only locates man in different social positions with regard to family and society but also captures the different, conflicting layers of his mental processes which affect his behavior and conduct in society. Man can never be treated as an isolated entity; he is traced in connection with larger extension of his own self - family and society where he is repeatedly at odds with the latter units. The self and the society if looked closely are at loggerheads because of man's overtures, interventions as well as trespassing of the code of the day, and violations result in denial of any recognition or identity to man. Miller's *A View from the bridge* probes deep into the inner recesses of man's mind and exposes a wide gulf existing between his private, personalized self on the one hand and his social perception arising out of his narrow selfish misdeeds that arr4sts his identity and sullies his image as a man of social, familial integrity. The present paper analyses how man remains mired in a constant conflict within himself as well as the world around on account of his own transgressions on the one hand and his longing for recognition in society for selfish on the other.*

KEYWORDS: *Self, Society, Conflict, Alienation, Transgressions*

INTRODUCTION

The modern complex life has rendered man nothing but a bundle of nerves because of the inimical nature of the forces governing man's life on the one hand and certain aberrations in man as an individual as well as a social human being. This quagmire becomes instrumental in disintegration of the human mind and then to his very existence in his surroundings. Livelihood is not the only concern of man, rather he also wants respect, pleasure, or religious solace in his life. But the pressures of modern day life leaves him with no room for the mental peace and contentment and life becomes full of burden in the form of obligations and responsibilities which suffocate him, and this suffocation becomes the cause of his estrangement and alienation from his larger extension- society. Twentieth century literature captures portrays how man is struggling to come to terms to reality with regard to his own perception of his own self and the society around him, and Arthur Miller, one of the greatest American social tragedy writers, tries to address this issue in his body of works. The problem Arthur Miller explores in his plays is the same which Greek drama has put so powerfully before mankind: 'How are we to live? From what fiat, from what ultimate source are we to drive a standard of values that will create in man a respect for himself, a real voice in the fate of his society, and above all, an aim for his life...' (Miller, 1996, 61) Miller tries to search for an answer to the more fundamental question, 'how to live?', and thus the emphasis in his plays invariably falls

on human dignity. The focus in his plays is always on larger issues like man's ultimate status in society, a search for stable human identity and an endeavour to synthesise that human identity with social needs and challenges. His dramatis personae are depicted as striving to establish their identity or committing the acts of transgressions to pursue false values and ill-comprehended goals. They are victims partially of the powers of society and partially of their own transgressions.

Miller's first two plays *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* have the imprint more of the crash of 1929 and IInd world war, his *A View from the Bridge* is more concerned with the internal conflicts of human beings whose actions were governed by the sexual passions. The play is based on the pattern of Greek classics. Drawing attention to the classical outline of the story in 'On Social Plays', Miller writes: 'When I heard the tale first it seemed to me that I had heard it before, very long ago. After a time I thought that it must be some re-enactment of a Greek myth which was ringing a long-buried bell in my own subconscious mind.' (Miller, 1996, 67) This play is a tragedy of Eddie Carbone, a head-strong longshoreman who has helped raise his wife's niece Catherine, but has developed an unwitting sexual attraction towards her. Here the dramatis personae behave as if they are not watched by the world around. Eddie appears a tormented personality, not by an outside oppressive society but due to his own private perverted thoughts about his niece Catherine who has now blossomed into a beautiful young girl. His possessive nature about Catherine affects his normal behaviour in the family as well in his society. When his wife's two cousins enter the country illegally looking for work, the Carbonees take them in and give them shelter. But, when Catherine begins dating the younger of the cousins, Rodolpho, Eddie gets jealous and jittery as he himself has started harbouring intimacy with Catherine. Finding that his insinuations of Rodolpho's homosexuality and his warning to Catherine that Rodolpho is only after an American passport are ignored, Eddie, in an act of desperation to split them up before they can marry, breaks an unwritten rule within his community by betraying both cousins and informs about their illegal presence to the immigration authorities. The older brother Marco vows revenge, actuated by Eddie's refusal to admit his crime. Out on bail, Marco comes to Eddie, who challenges him to a fight to try and redeem his lost dignity. When Eddie draws a knife, Marco kills him with the same knife; Eddie dies declaring his love for his wife, never having fully come to term with his actions. Feeling depressed at the danger of losing Catherine, he did what the community law does not allow – the act of informing against the illegal immigrants – and this is seen by his fellows as a deception. Had Eddie become silent after giving shelter to illegal immigrants, he would not have faced social boycott, and ultimately would not have been killed in an attempt to regain his lost identity.

This play is different from Miller's other masterpieces like *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* in terms of American success myth as Eddie the central character is beseeched with a different question from that of Joe Keller and Willy Loman in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* respectively. The only difference between Eddie on the one hand and Joe and Willy on the other lies in that whereas Joe and Willy are caught up in the web of money success, Eddie Carbone is caught up in a conflict between his psycho-sexual drives and the principles of the society in which he lives. Here success dream appears not in the form of acquisition of wealth, but in the form of power, prestige and identification. Eddie in an effort to realise his hidden dream of passionate longing for his niece, puts his reputation at stake. His desire to get success in his love for his niece makes him irrational and blind, and he breaks the vital law of community living which determines his existence in society. Though, according to the state law, Eddie is justified in informing against the submarines but in the eyes of the Longshoremen community, he had betrayed his fellow men. And to maintain his dignity in the eyes of the "polis", remarks Bigsby, Eddie, not ready to compromise his dignity, sacrifices his life: 'Of course Eddie Carbone's dignity is that.... he will not settle for half. He offers total commitment in an age in which compromise is the

order of the day. But it is a commitment to passion unregulated by morality.' (Bigsby, 205) From the very beginning he is conscious about her hairdo, her short skirt, high heels and her wavy walk. As he wants her to move to a different kind of neighbourhood, a better place, he disapproves her idea of doing a job. When she is offended, he flatters her passionately like a lover, 'With your hair that way you look like a Madonna, you know that? You're the Madonna type.' (Miller, 1967, 386.) Catherine, who wants to go out for the job, says in her defence that the guys may look at all the girls, but Eddie cannot reconcile himself to the fact that anybody should fling a glance at her because she is different from other girls. By distancing her from the rest of the community as such, he complicates his own relationship with the young girl. Eddie fails to realize the "otherness" of Catherine as he had never figured out that she will ever grow up. As the inevitable has happened, Eddie cannot handle the full implications of Catherine's growth. Catherine's feminine maturity represents a potential threat to the innocent affectionate rapport between uncle and niece. Eddie's attitude of protection and fatherly concern is slowly changed into a self-guarded passion for Catherine as a young woman. He tells Catherine: 'Katie, I promised your mother on her death bed. I'm responsible for you. You're a baby, you don't understand these things. I mean like when you stand here by the window, wavin' outside.' (Miller, 1967, 386.) Incapable of even rationalisation or evasion, Eddie finds himself caught up into a conflict between the ancestral code and sexual passion. In the protection of his incestuous passion for Catherine, he forgets about the bounds of decency and propriety which land him into a conflict with his community on the one hand and Marco, on the other. His surrender to irrational attraction is, in fact, anarchic though he himself denounces it ideologically. C.W.E. Bigsby, describing Eddie's passion as incestuous, says:

Surrender to irrationalism was a powerful attraction for a man uneasily located in a society which transforms morality into moralism, one for which charity and love are simple pieties and in which the effusion of passion is regarded as ethically and aesthetically reprobate. But for Eddie Carbone the world is otherwise. Certainly he denounces passion primarily because it is an image of the anarchy which he fears in his own being, but that passion is in his case literally misdirected. It is not simple adultery to which he is tempted, but a symbolic incest, since he acts as Catherine's father. He is anarchy incarnate." (Bigsby, 202)

As the play progresses, Eddie does not have to wait or passively indulge in unraveling or constructing on the new passion that has begun simmering in him. With the arrival of Marco and Rodolpho, he is forced into the realisation that Catherine does not belong to him; the question of possessing her or even helping her out in life is denied to him. His desire to remain tied to her signifies his helpless dependence on something that he cannot control, rather, in the process it is his own growth which is arrested. Miller underlines the point that Eddie informs on Rodolpho because he is driven by a passion as powerful and as impersonal as fate. The interesting thing about Eddie is not the passion that pushes him, but his refusal to recognise it for what it is. He gets rid of Rodolpho not so much out of jealousy, but because the boy's presence nags at him, almost forces him to put a label on his incestuous love for his niece. He cannot live under the lesser label either, so he moves into battle with the avenging brother Marco, demanding for his lost 'name'. When Alfieri, the lawyer narrator, recognises the danger in Eddie's blind passion for Catherine, he tells him plainly that he cannot marry her. Unable to confess his passion openly, Eddie gives an agitated response: 'What're you talkin' about, marry me! I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about.' (Miller, 1967, 410) Eddie feels shocked and horrified when Beatrice puts the problem quite bluntly, "You want somethin' else, Eddie, and you can never have her." (Miller, 1967, 437) Eventually, in drunken, jealous rage, he expresses through a pose and a gesture the secret he had denied in speech and he reaches out suddenly, draws her to him, and as she strives to free herself, he kisses her on the mouth.

A View from the Bridge exposes the dualism of human nature and this dualism causes friction in establishing healthy relations. Eddie looks at his actions in isolation and not from the view point of what society, or his wife thinks of him. As he cannot share his thoughts about Catherine with anybody because this would have spoiled his name, Eddie tries to give the cover of a lawful acceptance to his deeds whether that of informing against the relatives of his wife or his pretension for the security and safety of Catherine. Inwardly, he is attached to Catherine and this infatuation brings coldness in his relations with his wife Beatrice. His wife senses that all is not well with Eddie regarding his worries about Catherine and she tries to make him see reality. Even his lawyer friend Alfieri reasons out with him that we should accept what we are and we should not try to cross the line. But Eddie is a man of strong passions and so all these advices, counsellings fail to change his attitude towards Catherine. Beatrice puts him in his place in the following dialogue:

EDDIE : What are you mad at me lately ?

BEATRICE : Who's mad ? ... I'm not mad... You're the one is mad. (Miller, 1967, 390)

Eddie's actions of informing against the two immigrants not only isolates him from his society but also from his wife and Catherine as well. Eddie Carbone too suffers for a wrong social code. He is caught up in a conflict between his psycho-sexual drives and the principles of the society in which he lives. From a position of respect within the community, Eddie stoops to a position of contempt. As Eddie's neighbours and his fellow longshoremen scorn him, he defends himself by denying his guilt and retaliates by calling Marco crazy. Eddie knows he had betrayed his community's values, yet he is unwilling to sacrifice his 'name'. C.W.E. Bigsby writes about the lot of Eddie:

Eddie Carbone... is trapped in a moral system which is in fact no more than an aspect of his sexual compulsions. His actions certainly have no cultural or social function. He is pulled outside the society of man by an action which is not willed and therefore not inspected and has no social force. What he does in informing on two illegal immigrants who are also his wife's cousins, not to mention one of them being his niece's lover, is not illegal, it is simply presented as being immoral. (Bigsby, 202)

Thus, Eddie's transgression of the values of the Red Hook community is taken to be an immoral act, not illegal or against the law of the country. When Eddie realises that he has been defeated in his secret purpose of possession over Catherine, he behaves irrationally. Before sending Marco and Rodolpho to jail, he himself has been imprisoned by his own thoughts. He becomes socially outcast where his community people despise him for his betrayal. But Beatrice only knows the real truth behind why Eddie violated the community code. Raymond Williams explains the causes of Eddie's tragedy:

Eddie is shown being destroyed by forces which he can not control, and the complex of love and guilt has the effect of literal disintegration, in that the known sexual rhythms break down into their perverse variations: the rejection of his wife, as his vital energy transfers to the girl, and then the shattering crisis in which within the same rush of feeling he moves into the demonstration of both incestuous and homosexual desires. (Williams, 149)

In *A View from the Bridge*, Miller dramatises Eddie Carbone's individual psychology by presenting his subjective and objective existence. Like Miller's other heroes, Joe Keller, Willy Loman and John Proctor, Eddie Carbone's life too, revolves round his close-knit family. Catherine, the niece of his wife, who lives in the same house, is his most cherished possession and he jealously guards her from everything and everybody. Leonard Moss observes : "... his fatherly concern for his niece is as obsessive as that shown by Joe Keller and Willy Loman for their sons, his dramatic existence as

dependent as theirs upon filial allegiance, his grief after being deserted as sharp." (Moss, 56) Eddie's problem is that he cannot understand his own hidden passions and that he is unable to curb them which strain his relationship with his family and he cannot share his feelings with his wife. Alfieri, the lawyer-narrator knows what is going inside the mind of Eddie regarding Catherine and he counsels him:

You know, sometimes, God mixes up the people. We all love somebody, the wife – the kids – everyman's got somebody that he loves, heh? But sometimes... there's too much. You know? There's too much and it goes where it must not. A man works hard, he brings up a child, sometimes it's a niece, and sometimes even a daughter, and he never realizes it, but through the years... there is too much love for the daughter there's too much for the niece. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? (Miller, 1967, 66)

Eddie understands what Alfieri exactly wants to suggest but he pretends ignorance. When Eddie comes to know about Catherine's love for Rodolpho, an illegal immigrant and a guest in his house, he becomes restless and tries to dissuade Catherine from marrying Rodolpho. In his jealousy and resentment, he insults Rodolpho whenever possible and this naturally intensifies Catherine's solicitude for Rodolpho. Eddie is bewildered and shocked by the attitude of Beatrice in the whole affair, because he genuinely believes that Rodolpho is not good enough for Catherine and hence he does not want the marriage to take place. When he gets no support or sympathy from his family and others, Eddie feels himself as an outcast in his own house. In this crucial lonely period, Eddie has nobody to turn to, and like Joe Keller, he too feels let down by his family. He goes to his lawyer Alfieri for advice and solace but he is disappointed when he finds out that he cannot legally prevent the marriage between Rodolpho and Catherine. However, Eddie cannot restrain the strong surge of his passions and he, in frustration, informs the immigration authorities that Rodolpho and his brother Marco have been staying in the country without proper documents. He does it knowing fully well that it is the most despicable crime one could commit in Longshoremen society. Leela Muralidharan ponders over the causes of Alfieri's alienation: 'With this action his alienation is complete from both his family and community.' (Muralidharan, 34) Catherine leaves his house in the company of Rodolpho, which makes Eddie desperate. Catherine's anger bursts out when she tells Beatrice: "What're you scared of? He's rat! He belongs in the sewer! ... He bites people when they sleep! He comes when nobody's lookin' and poisons decent people. In the garbage he belongs!" (Miller, 1967, 436) Once Eddie loses Catherine and his honour, he has nothing more to live for. He goes to his last duel with Marco in an attempt to save his identity, his name; he dies unwept and unhonoured in the arms of his wife.

Miller is particularly interested in the destructiveness of this inadmissible and irresistible passion – a passion, which becomes the cause of the disintegration in the play, despite its contradicting the self interest of the individual it inhabits, despite every kind of warning, despite its destruction of the moral beliefs of the individual and proceeds to magnify its power over Eddie until it destroys him. Miller uses a love triangle to magnify the power of this passion. M. W. Steinberg rightly observes:

... the illegal immigrants, the two women in the play – Eddie's wife and his niece – important as they are to the plot, even the moral law by which Eddie lives and of which he runs a foul, all take their importance from the way in which they precipitate Eddie's passion and are the agency of his destruction. (Steinberg, 90)

Eddie, under the spell of rage, tries to haze Rodolpho through lessons in boxing and the grossness of this act, the irrationality of his accusations, which could have no effect other than to further alienate Catherine, indicate the intensity of

the dock worker's desperation. His utterances like, "I mean it's eatin' me out, Mr. Alfieri, because I struggled for that girl, ... I worked like a dog twenty years so a punk could have her..." (Miller, 1967, 408-09) etc. are a further proof of Eddie's titters. Alfieri further warns him that he would be friendless and everybody will turn against him if he breaks the community law. But Eddie convinces himself that protecting Catherine from the manufactured dishonour of a marriage to Rodolpho is more important than honouring the communal law that protects Rodolpho. By going against the community code, Eddie resembles Joe Keller of *All My Sons*. whose transgression, however, is not limited to his immediate community but extends to the society at large, whereas Eddie violates the ethics of a "polis". But the pressures generated by both kinds of transgression are the same. In either case, the hero crumbles under those social pressures. Miller says about the death of Eddie: "What kills Eddie Carbone is nothing visible or heard, but the built-in conscience of the community whose existence he has menaced by betraying it". (Miller, 1996, 260) Whatever name is given to the relationship that Eddie had with Catherine – incestuous fixation, too much love, a self-guarded dream or an instinctual projection – it controlled and directed Eddie's actions, made him regret, and consequently he lost the right to love the community. Responsibility gives way to self-love which finally culminates in self-destruction. Eddie faces boycott – familial and social - and Catherine who had been sympathetic to him so far, turns against him and derides him in a tone similar, in violence, to the tone Chris uses against his father in *All My Sons*. Bigsby sums up Eddie's betrayal which brings him down in the following words:

Eddie sacrifices his honour in order to save his honour. If his betrayal can be seen as being spawned by self-interest, it is possible to see it also as stemming from a desire to sustain the notion of innocence. Seen in this way he doesn't betray Rodolpho in order to gain Catherine for himself but to preserve her purity. If he be a rebel, it is not against a social code but the whole natural process which pulls the individual into an adult world in which betrayal, corruption and pride are the other side of maturity, sexual fulfillment and honour. His dignity and irony alike thus stem from his struggle to sustain a model of the world which is doomed to collapse.' (Bigsby, 205)

Eddie, according to Miller, is guilty on two accounts-first, his violation of the community code and second his harbouring of sexual feelings for his wife's niece Catherine, and these two wrong doings put his future in dock. In *A View from the Bridge*, in place of social forces, psycho-sexual ones play their role in causing the alienation of the man called Eddie Carbone. Miller writes:

Social drama in this generation must do more than analyze and arraign the social network of relationships. It must delve into the nature of man as he exists to discover what his needs are so that those needs may be amplified and exteriorized in terms of social concepts. Thus the new social dramatist, if he is to do his work, must be an even deeper psychologist than those of the past and he must be conscious of the futility of isolating the psychological life of man lest he always fall short of tragedy.' (Miller, 1996, 64-65)

Miller here means to say that the psychological life of a man cannot be isolated from his social life. And as the tragedy happens when the common man refuses to settle for the half, Eddie craves for his name, and his craving leads him to his death in a fight with Marco. Eddie's alienation is caused by his own imperfections and not by the world around, and when he does not feel at home with his self-esteem compromised, he cries at his wife that Marco should give him his name. Sex plays a vital role in the plays studied so far and Miller calls it a divisive force which puts the human relations under scanner. The playwright introduces an important character, the lawyer Alfieri, who seems to be the sanest creation

by Miller after Charley. It is he who makes the most memorable statement in all Miller's works: "Most of the time now we settle for the half and I like it better." (Miller, 1967, 439)

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