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Arthur Miller's *A View From The Bridge*: A Study of Social Conflicts

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Abstract

Arthur Asher Miller, a representative modern American playwright, used the drama as another man uses a newspaper, a pulpit or a platform for expressing his views on contemporary social life. Miller's plays are always concerned with larger issues like man's ultimate status in society and a search for stable human relationship. In *A View from the Bridge* Miller has depicted the social conflicts and barrenness of Eddie Carbone, the middle aged protagonist. The central conflict in this play is between social and psychological obligations. An excess love for his niece makes Eddie to violate the law of his own communal ethics. He suffers from tragic consequences when he violates the social code. Although Eddie understands and accepts the ethics of his society, he violates them. He betrays the social code by which he lives and for which he dies in an attempt to regain his 'good name'. The playwright depicts the tension and conflicts within a family and then broadens his theme and mixes it with larger issues of the society to get a universal sanction.

Keywords- Social Playwright, Identity Crisis, Social Conflict, Social Responsibility

Arthur Miller, an eminent playwright of America, was born on October 17, 1915 in Manhattan. Miller is a social playwright who portrays the socio-economic life of America with the understanding and zeal of a great humanitarian and social reformer. As a sensitive interpreter, Miller has exposed the evils of the contemporary society in the fullest sense of term. His plays *All My Sons*, *Death of A Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge* are the masterpieces in this reference. In addition to his playwritings, Miller has created numerous works in other genres also. His novel *Focus* (1945), a horror story, offers an incisive critique of American Anti-Semitism. By writing this novel, Miller has shown his responsibility as a creative and aware playwright of United States. He wrote play after play with a strong commitment towards the freedom of the individual. His plays besides being highly entertaining are rich in realistic dramatic content. His protagonists are the common man-the poor and down-trodden-not the men of high rank. On the basis of his outstanding

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plays, Miller has been widely recognized and applauded and has been studied from different perspectives-- as a social critic, as a moralist, as a dramatist of ideas, and as a social playwright in the later part of the twentieth century.

A View from the Bridge is Arthur Miller's fifth major play which is usually regarded as a 'social play' as indicated by Miller's long introduction to one act original version of the play. In this play Miller highlights the social conflicts in such an adroit manner that the play explores the nature of man as well as his relationship with the society at large. This play is set in contemporary Brooklyn and centering upon the plight of a longshoreman i.e. Eddie Carbone who is torn between his loyalty to the traditional code of honour followed by his community and the blind forces of his psychological trauma. On the social level, the play deals with the strict code of loyalty of American community in which Eddie lives. Eddie's anti-social act destroys his relationships with his niece Catherine and his wife Beatrice and constitutes his private guilt. He suffers his doom when he violets the social code.

The plot of the plays throws light on an anti-social action---Eddie Carbone's betrayal with two immigrants-Macro and Rodolpho. He violates the Sicilian code of honor operative in this social world by betraying the brothers- and unintentionally the relatives of a friend to the immigration authorities. Eddie Carbone, as a long- established U.S citizen in informing the Immigration Bureau about the illegal immigration of his wife Beatrice' two cousins from Italy proved his allegiance to the U.S law; but in doing so, he being a Sicilian, violated the unwritten law of the Sicilian immigrants. After phoning the authorities, Eddie reveals his insecurities even his fear, that he is losing his accustomed control over the family. When Beatrice questions him what more he wants, Eddie replies, "I want my name! Marco's got my name ... he's gonna give it back to me in front of this neighbourhood or we have it out".¹

Here once again Eddie's desire for his "good name" reminded us of John Proctor who is determined to preserve his good name at any cost, even at the cost of his own life. The crisis of his life burns out his directions and meanings and he provokes his death screaming that he wants his name which Marco took from him. Eddie's need to re-identify himself with society is suggested by his asking Macro to give him back his name. He says "I want my name, Macro.... Now give me my name and we go together to the wedding".²

Like Oedipus, Eddie Carbone is thrust from the community for an anti-social act that harms its values and social codes. Miller's focus in *A View from the Bridge*, besides its psychological aspects remains on the basic theme viz. the individual's dilemma to choose between self interest and the larger interest of the society in which he exists. Eddie Carbone that's why, is "ready to lay down his life... to secure one thing... his sense of personal dignity... his rightful position in society."³ Eddie accepts rules and prejudices of his society and dies as he violates them while earlier in the play, it was he who warned Catherine, his niece, to be close mouthed about the illegal immigrants who were just coming to live with them. Eddie justifies his action of helping Beatrice' cousins in order that may get a start. He claims: "It's an honour, Beatrice I mean it. I was just thinking before, coming home, suppose

my father didn't come to this country, and I was starving ' like them over there... And I had people in America thus could keep me a couple of months? The Man would be honoured to lend me a place. ”⁴

But by the end of the play the passions that had moved in to Eddie's body so possesses Eddie that to get rid himself of the presence of Rodolpho, Catherine's lover, he commits an anti-social act which he abhors as much as his society does. With Eddie's character, we come to notice a quite different force, for Eddie's struggle is not primarily with his society but with himself. Eddie's betrayal thus not only prevents the immigrants feeding their starving families in Italy, but also isolates him from his own community, which recognizes the need of man to help his fellow- brothers. Miller himself says, about Eddie's anti-social act: “The mind of Eddie Carbone is not comprehensible apart from its relation to his neighbourhood, his fellow workers, his social situation. His self esteem depends upon their estimate of him, and his value is created largely by his fidelity to the code of his culture. ”⁵

Like Eddie Carbone Macro, Beatrice' immigrant cousin, is not settle for half in the play. When he comes to know about Eddie's betrayal to them, he cannot control his anger. Under his fury, he spits on Eddie's face publicly to show his utter hatred and remorse for the person whom he trusted. Marco's this act shatters Eddie's whole personality and his social-status. Macro in a fit of anger pointing back at him and said: That one! He killed my children! That one stole the food from my children! ”⁶ For him, Eddie has stolen a chance of a better life from his children. Macro's symbolic killing of Eddie- of spitting on his face-does not fulfill his appetite for revenge. He wants to kill Eddie for his shameful act of betrayal. Macro cries: “In my country, he would be dead now. He would not live this long.”⁷ Macro wants to punish Eddie as it is he who degraded his brother Rodolpho, robbed his kids and spoiled their lives when Macro realizes the fact there is no law for the persons like Eddie, he finally takes his revenge on Eddie by killing him.

Eddie suffers a lot for violating a wrong social-code. For his sinful act, he has to face a social boycott. He is condemned by everybody around the neighbourhood including his own family members. For his betrayal Catherine, who had been very caring to him so far, revolts against him and teases him by calling him by his name. She calls him "rat" who "belongs to the sewer" and who "bites people when they sleep. He comes when nobody's lookin' and poisons decent people. In the garbage, he belongs.”⁸ Even Lipari, the butcher, and Mike and Louis, Eddie's friends, do not pay any heed towards him and walk away without caring for him. Hence, in order to regain his social-prestige and his self-respect, ultimately, Eddie has to leave the world crying to regain his name.

Eddie's dignity is that, he offers total commitment in an age in which compromise must be the order of the day. In *A View from the Bridge* Arthur Miller exposes the basic malaise of society, which is responsible for the nerve racking tension and worries of modern man. Eddie sacrifices his honour in order to save his honour. His action of informing the

Immigration Bureau about illegal submarines was fully legal, indeed he was doing his civic duty. Indeed, Miller's social convictions are, if anything, expressed indirectly by his assumption, that honour and justice are matters which exist at a tangent to the public world of law and social responsibilities. If Eddie's betrayal can be seen as being spawned by self – interest, it is possible to see it always stemming from a desire to sustain the idea of innocence.

Seen in this reference, Eddie does not deceive Rodolpho in order to gain Catherine for himself but he commits this anti-social act in order to preserve Catherine's purity. He disturbs the ordered way of life and passes away to preserve his sense of himself and his vision of Katie viz. Catherine. Eddie dies to restore the order, he has violated two- times over, once in his lustful feelings for her foster child Catherine and other in his betrayal of his wife Beatrice' cousins.

Eddie is not a vindictive man or a rebel because he is not against a social-code but against the whole natural process which pulls the individual into an adult world in which corruption, guilt, betrayal and pride are the other side of sexual fulfillment. Eddie's dignity and irony alike, thus stem from his struggle, his misdirected sense of survival and honour. In fact, Eddie Carbone represents the true picture of the society not only reflecting its values and attitudes but also applying those values and attitudes in his attempt to realize himself. Miller's this authentic play *A View from the Bridge* reveals his deep rooted belief in the family as the symbolic cell or the foundation of social structure. Raymond Williams feels that in Miller's play, "neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process."⁹

Miller, in fact, wants Eddie to judge in relation to the social context and the social codes and values of the community in which he inhabits. The dilemma of a man--Eddie--betraying the code of his social milieu is of paramount significance to Miller, and is what engages his creative energy. With Eddie's character Miller also wants the readers to realize that Eddie's tragedy is that he is a failure and all his sufferings can be directly attributed to a wrong social code. There is a great gap between the audience' understanding of the "betrayal" of illegal immigrants and its understanding by the longshoreman community. The audience or the readers might feel that Eddie is justified in informing against the immigrants since it is wrong to protect or give shelter to them but in the eyes of the longshoreman community it amounts to a betrayal of the 'polis.'

From the way this play has been constructed, one can say Eddie violated the social code in two ways—one by the violation of his community and other by breaking the trust of his own family. In transgressing against his society he resembles Joe Keller's transgression, however, he is not limited to his immediate community but extends to the society at large, whereas Eddie violates the ethics of a 'polis.' He earns the contempt and disapproval of the Sicilian Community of the Red Hook Section of Brooklyn, not only on account of the breach of trust of his own community but also on account of his having incestuous feelings towards

Catherine, his foster daughter. Eddie crumbles under the pressure of his inner and outer conflicts which are beyond his control. Miller has rightly remarked about this, “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.”¹⁰

The play *A View from the Bridge* thus an praiseworthy illustration of an individual, who trapped emotionally, psychologically, powerless at the altar of the shadowy forces inside himself i.e.; his passions, seeking release and getting it at the cost of his own life performing his social responsibility. Through the character of Eddie, Miller has created an egocentric character who violated the value of social morality to serve some irrational demands of his eccentric ego. Eddie sacrificed himself as he could never settle for half, never make compromise and was thus profoundly harsh on himself. Eddie's betrayal begets not only miseries to the immigrants' starving families back home in Italy, but also his isolation from his own community, which still acknowledges the need to help one's illegal immigrant brethren. The irony is that Eddie, through the helpless plea for his name, nurtures an ardent desire to re-identify with his very society the ethics of which he already had violated knowingly. Eddie also feels to assert his individuality before the neighbourhood where he had been challenged and humiliated by Marco. Thus, helping immigration authorities now is no solace: he still stands an offender in the eyes of law. Here, once again, Miller conveys a message through Eddie's tragedy that man can neither ignore the norms of the society and nor can he live in the society like a conformist without realizing his social responsibility.

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