Nature of Self in Arthur Miller’s “A View from the Bridge”

Abstract
This study is an attempt to analyze the nature of Self in one of Miller’s most acclaimed plays, A View from the Bridge. The analysis focuses on the private self and the public self by giving a brief comparison of Miller’s Death of a salesman, The crucible and All my Sons. The study will first have a brief look at the nature of self in Miller’s earlier plays to reach a better understanding of the depth of self in his A view from the Bridge, which is the focal point of this study. Lastly, the paper concludes with suggesting that the only loophole to run away from this tragic duality of self is to accept that any kind of escape from the reality of life is self-destructive, so both the tears of happiness as well as the tears of melancholy should be equally accepted as the inevitable game of this complicated and unpredictable world of indifference; the game, which is the integral part of man’s existence.

Key words: Miller; Duality; Private self; Public self

Introduction
This study is an attempt to display how Miller translates the social world into private anxieties and public betrayals, and tries to reveal the split of the 'self' of the individual who suffers from moral ambiguities. Derrida has emphasized the instability of the notion of “identity,” “that no so-called identity is, or should take itself to be, “homogeneous” or “self-identical,” that indeed it is dangerous to let a group--a family, a community, or a state--settle back down into selfidentity” (qtd. in, Caputo, 2000:113). Lee (2003:2) also believes that “Identity is the individual’s concept of the self, as well as the individual’s interpretation of the social definition of the self, within his/her inner group and the larger society”.

As a social dramatist, Miller has significantly departed from his earlier works in A View from the Bridge. His earlier plays All My Sons (1947), Death of a Salesman (1949) and The Crucible (1958) focus on broader social
issues like economic and political pressures, which govern the individual’s search for self and self-recognition. The emphasis in the earlier plays is on showing the predicaments of an individual in the wake of various social forces. The depiction of search for self in the earlier plays is characterized by the exterior aspect of self which is visible in relation to his/her social encounters, in the context of particular economic, social or political values of the society. However, A View from the Bridge brings into focus the interiority of human self by dramatizing the influence of psychosexual forces on the protagonist’s actions. Thus, by and large, the search for self in Miller’s earlier plays was directed outwards, whereas in A View from the Bridge it is oriented towards the inward aspect of self. In this play Miller fully achieves his vision of social drama, which essentially should be the drama of the “whole man”, as he (1961: 47) says:

Social drama in this generation must do more than analyse 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 at least of the futility of isolating the psychological life of man lest he always falls short of tragedy.

A View from the Bridge provides the other half of the social drama, initiated in Miller’s earlier plays. In order to understand the nature of duality of self in A View from the Bridge, it is necessary to consider the shift from objective existence of characters in Miller’s earlier plays to their subjective existence in the present play. The characters in Miller’s plays experience two types of realities – subjective and objective. In Miller’s earlier plays, the characters are generally depicted as victims of the social system. In Death of a Salesman, the tragedy of Loman family arises out of the rapid socio-economic changes in society. The quest for self in Death of a Salesman is predominantly a process, which is inseparably bound to the society and the playwright does not focus much on the psychology of the individual characters. The self-discovery of characters in the play is the result of the gap between their chosen principles and the demands of society. In The Crucible also the subjective reality of the characters is not dramatized, what is dramatized is a mass hysteria, which initiates the process of self-definition.

However, A View from the Bridge presents a contrast to these two plays, in terms of synthesizing the psychological and social factors, whose twin influence, comprising the objective and subjective realities of the characters, governs the search for self. Although Miller has explored psycho-social motivations of the protagonist, the underlying meaning in A View from the Bridge is codified in the relationship between the individual and the society. This can be said on the basis of the fact that Eddie’s responses are deeply rooted in the social code of his community. It is interesting to observe how Miller has finely balanced a personal passion with social norms and obligations. The play deals with “the awesomeness of the passion.” (Gassner, 1958: 48) However, the purpose of the playwright is not merely to dramatize the passion and its effect on the individual concerned. On the contrary, the real meaning of the play is located at the point where the passion of an individual mediates between the individual and his society and leaves him in the limbo of the duality of self.

ARGUMENT

In A View from the Bridge, Miller attempts to reveal the mind of the protagonist in relation to the latter’s culture. The fundamental problem in Eddie’s duality of self is generated by the social context in which he is placed. Vis-à-vis Eddie’s social context, his betrayal, “achieves true proportions as it flies in the face of the mores administered by (his) conscience – which is also the conscience of his friends, co-workers and neighbours and not just his own autonomous creation.” (Miller, 1957: 52)

Eddie’s character becomes significant since it vividly displays the inevitable game mutually played by the individual and society under different socio-psychological contexts, and ultimately the impact they leave on each other. Crawford and Rossiter (2006: 8) believe that:

Young people’s interest in identity is usually personal and psychological. On the other hand, the focus of community interest in identity is often sociological: the concern is to hand on the distinguishing characteristics of the community, ethnic and religious identities in particular.

Eddie is depicted in the play as a dockworker, who is sexually repressed. He develops an illicit sexual desire for his wife’s niece, Catherine and becomes highly possessive of her. Eddie’s male jealousy causes him to attempt to thwart the marriage between Catherine and Rodolpho, who is an illegal immigrant. In an act of frustration over his inability to win over Catherine, Eddie reaches against the aliens Rodolpho and Marco, whom he himself had secretly provided shelter and protection from law. By reporting against the aliens to immigration authorities, Eddie commits a breach of trust and antagonizes his family and his community against himself. He is alienated from his wife Beatrice and his niece Catherine loses the respect she had for him. To make matters worse, Eddie challenges Marco to a street fight in which the former dies. Thus Eddie does not get even a chance to admit his guilt or repent for his betrayal against the immigrants, his own family and his community.

In his obsession for Catherine, Eddie violates the ethical code of the society. He is unable to fulfil his lust for her, because the social code would not permit it. As a result of this social obstacle, he becomes psychologically repressed and indulges in an irrational behaviour. In his essay “On social plays”, Miller (1961: 33) observed: “A
view from the Bridge seemed to me more psychologically telling than a conventional investigation in width which would necessarily relax that clear, clean line of catastrophe”.

Thus Eddie deprives himself of the psychological reality normal for the culture of his community. Miller uses his characteristic strategy of depicting the central character as isolated from the social reality. However, in Death of a Salesman and The Crucible, the individual is distanced from the social reality directly, whether it is Willy Loman’s failure to understand the economic forces or John Proctor’s inability to realize the flaw in the witchcraft trials. In contrast, A View from the Bridge dramatizes the protagonist’s failure to come to terms with the social reality via a psychological aberration. This makes the action in A View from the Bridge more complex than that in Death of a Salesman or The Crucible, which focuses on the external aspects of an individual’s loss of objective reality. In the world of social relations, Jung claims, “the outward relationship of the individual to the world around him or her is, far from being an expression of individuality, in fact imposed upon the individual by the class and labour relations of society. (qtd. in Bishop, 2009: 157)

The problem of self in A View from the Bridge in some respect is similar to that in All My Sons, through the similarity between Eddie and Joe Keller in All My Sons. Both Eddie and Keller perpetrate acts of disloyalty and breach of trust against their respective societies. Their actions lead to the destruction of their family lives and eventually, to the complete annihilation of their ‘selves’. Besides the parallel to All My Sons, what makes the presentation of self in A View from the Bridge highly important is the fact that Eddie alone is not a participant in his private psychological drama, the other characters in the play too share an awareness of the gradual disintegration of his ‘self’. The quest of self, which is dramatized in a negative perspective in the play, is visibly distinct from the self-realizations of characters in Death of a Salesman and The Crucible. The difference lies at two levels: Firstly, the ultimate self-discovery in A View from the Bridge is an experience of complete self-destruction, as Singh (1998: 76) comments:

When Eddie dies in a fight with Marco, he dies with the knowledge that his public insistence on his name and self-respect is actually a disguise for his misplaced passion and for his guilty awareness that he has destroyed his marriage.

In the other two plays of Miller, cited above, the self-realization, to some extent, provides a scope for the correction of a flaw in the personality of the characters. Secondly, in the early plays of Miller, the self-realization is attained by the characters solely on an individual level, whereas in A View from the Bridge, family members, friends, hopeless onlookers and the whole society become participants in Eddie’s journey towards self-annihilation.

Eddie’s abnormal and socially unethical infatuation for Catherine is not hidden from others. He becomes extremely possessive of her, which leads him to the loss of his self as a respected and psychologically normal member of his community to that of Catherine.

The psychological drama in the play is not restricted merely to the depiction of the mental state of anxiety, jealousy and an abnormal desire. Instead, Miller vividly depicts certain catastrophic actions emanating out of Eddie’s psychosexual problem. He becomes so cold and heartless as to forbid Catherine to leave the house in order to marry Rodolpho and exposes the illegal residency of Marco and Rodolpho to the law enforcing authorities. This act of Eddie is against his earlier convictions, which have been nullified by his uncontrollable passion for Catherine. As he stands against the accepted social norms, which are respected as unbreachable metanarratives, he finds himself alienated from his community. The worst part of the consequences of Eddie’s personal and social betrayal is the fact that Catherine for whom he did all this, turns against him. Her reaction to Eddie is reminiscent of Chris’ treatment of Joe Keller in All My Sons. In Catherine’s own words Eddie is “a rat who belongs to the sewer and who bites people when they sleep: He comes when nobody’s looking and poisons decent people. In the garbage he belongs ?” (Miller, 1960: 345, henceforth Miller) After his inhuman act, Eddie faces ostracization from everybody: Lipari, Louise, Mike, all of them shun him and desert him. Eddie’s passion leads to his isolation from the society.

The exposition of Eddie’s ‘self’ in A View from the Bridge is brought about in two stages. The first stage refers to his ‘self-destruction caused by his own action, while the second stage is marked by his self-realization and the consequent desperate attempt to regain his respect and his identity. Miller has made the whole society a witness to Eddie’s psychosexual thinking and the morbid action that follows it. Thus, in the presentation of Eddie’s crisis of ‘self’, Miller makes an attempt to objectify the subjectivity of an individual. This is achieved by dramatizing the intervention of other characters in Eddie’s secret thought processes, including the point of view of his wife Beatrice. The play achieves the overlapping effect of private thoughts of an individual and their social critique. Among the reactions to Eddie’s thoughts about Catherine, the one by his wife becomes the most significant, since family is the basic unit of social organization.

Beatrice poses an opposition to Eddie’s attitude and behaviour, when she grudges his growing frigidity towards her, saying “When am I going to be a wife again Eddie?” (327) She even voices her dissatisfaction over Eddie’s changed behaviour to Catherine by complaining to her: “Was there ever any fella he like for you? There wasn’t there? ….. If it was a prince came here for you it would be no different”(329)

She does not stop here, but goes on to caution Catherine against Eddie’s growing obsession with her:
“It’s wonderful for a whole family to love each other but you’re a grown woman and you’re in the same house with a grown man.”(330) Beatrice’s remarks indicate that she is aware of Eddie’s illicit sexual desire for Catherine. The revelation of Eddie’s innermost passions to his wife is just one of the several examples which suggest that Miller in A View from the Bridge exteriorises the psychological repression of an individual. It is as though Beatrice is facilitated by the playwright to peep into the mind of Eddie. This becomes even more evident when she warns Catherine to act differently and not to “walk around in front of him in her slip” or “sit on the edge of the bathtub talking to him when he’s shaving in his underwear.” (330)

Miller seems to be gradually exposing Eddie’s psyche to the outer world. This begins with his family, when his wife becomes aware of his inner drama, of which she forms an attentive audience in the front row. The second level of audience is provided by people outside Eddie’s family, who are very close to him. His advocate Alfieri forms this audience. The third level of audience to Eddie’s psychological drama is constituted by the society at large, which hates him for his heinous conduct.

Miller’s caring attempt is to show man struggling against the society of which he himself is a part. This is the most valid and fertile soil-soil of his dramaturgy. As Hogan(1964: 9) points out:

The one thing a man fears most next to death is the loss of his good name. Man is evil in his own eyes, my friends, worthless and the only way he finds respect for himself is by getting other people to say he is a nice fellow.

This concern is precisely what bedevils John Protocor at the end of The Crucible and Eddie Carbone at the end of A View from the Bridge. Eddie makes an unsuccessful attempt to hide his guilt from others. Instead of admitting his sin to himself he tries to defend his excessive concern for Catherine, by accusing Rodolpho for putting “his dirty, filthy hands on her like a goddam thief.”(Miller:332). The characters who are aware of Eddie’s mind seem to transform into his other self, which does not support his emotional involvement with his niece. Alfieri can be aptly cited as an example of such a character who acts as a foil to the irrational Eddie. He makes futile attempts to prevent Eddie from treading the path of self-destruction, by continuing to be possessive of Catherine, thus ignoring the social reality. Alfieri tells Eddie very curtly: “She wants to get married, Eddie. She can’t marry you, can she?” (332) Thus the function of Alfieri in the play is to provide Eddie a possibility of withdrawal from the endgame of his life, by correcting his sexual attitude. He keeps on reminding Eddie of the latter’s mistake, as in the following:

There are times when you want to spread an alarm, but nothing has happened. I knew, I knew then and there–I could have finished the whole story that afternoon. It wasn’t as if there was a mystery to unravel. I could see every step coming, step after step, like a dark figure walking down a hall toward a certain door. I knew where he was heading for, I knew where he was going to end … (332)

Kesel (2009: 53) rightly comments:

The deathly universe of guilt psychoanalysis hears about during the cure makes it conclude that we are not only guilty with respect to a moral law (the law of the super-ego), but that our guilt also refers to what lies beyond such a law, that is, to the feeling of not having satisfied our desire as such.

Miller has successfully presented the intermingling of the personal and the social selves in A View from the Bridge. The entry of the two Sicillian immigrants into Eddie’s family world has a serious dramatic purpose, besides the role of the two gentlemen in highlighting Eddie’s betrayal. With the presence of the two immigrants, the domestic conflict of Eddie, involving his infatuation for his niece, acquires a larger societal dimension. The true nature of man becomes visible in the play only through the intersection of personal and social elements. The presence of the two immigrants also helps the playwright to explain, through Alfieri, the helplessness of ordinary human beings in preventing a fatality and catastrophe in their lives. Therefore, the two immigrants play a decisive role to display the nature of self in Eddie. They concretize the abstract conflict in the mind of Eddie and spell out the hypothesis that one should not be leashed by his/her untamed wishes and desires, which eventually lead to a mysterious world of alienation.

Eddie’s actions arising out of his psychosexual abnormality lead to an ironic contrast with his own self. Miller has effectively dramatized the influence of psychological forces on the self of an individual in the play, by showing how Eddie was before this crisis in his life. The depiction of Eddie’s lost goodness also serves the purpose of foregrounding his present degradation. Eddie’s compassionate heart is revealed in his opinion of Vinny Balzano who betrayed his uncle by informing the Immigration Bureau. His wife Beatrice also shares his sympathy for the betrayed man, saying:

Oh, it was terrible. He had five brothers and the old father. And they grabbed him in the kitchen and pulled him down the stairs – three flights his head was bouncing like a coconut. And they spit on him in the street, his own father and his brothers. The whole neighborhood was crying…(322)

Eddie’s search for self, which remains unfulfilled though, has a pattern in it in terms of the past, present and future. He falls from a past goodness in his ’self’, transforming into a brutal beast. The degradation he faces after his act of informing the immigration authorities motivates him to make an attempt to regain his honor in the society and therefore, his ’self”. Habib (2005: 579) has pertinently quoted Freud who has supported this idea:

As people grow up, says Freud, they cease to play, but they do not give up the pleasure they once derived from playing. As always in mental life, we can never give anything up; we
only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the substitute or surrogate. What the growing child does instead of playing is to phantasize, indulging in day dreams. There is one difference, however: whereas the child takes no pains to hide his play, the adult is “ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions. The difference in behavior between those who play and those who phantasize, says Freud, can be attributed to a difference in motives: the child’s play is motivated by a wish, the wish to imitate adults. The adult’s phantasies are also motivated by a wish, but in many cases this is of a nature that he would prefer to conceal.

Thus Eddie’s quest for self, in terms of the elements of character, can be seen as embodying the cyclic pattern of good-bad-good. However, after having taken the decision to betray his community, out of his “free will”, Eddie is never allowed to return to his original goodness and is condemned to die in dishonor. By not allowing the cycle of good-bad-good to complete itself, Miller departs from a predictable option as a playwright and is able to avoid a happy ending to the play, by providing a resolution of the crisis within the plot of the play.

The quest for self in A View from the Bridge reaches its catastrophe when Eddie makes an attempt to redeem his identity, which he lost because of his betrayal. There is a stage of self-realization in Eddie’s life, after he commits the sin of breaking the faith of his family and community. Out of this self-realization, perhaps he agrees to attend the wedding of Rodolpho and Catherine. This indicates a reversal in Eddie’s point of view toward the world around him, which signifies his attempt to recover the lost goodness for his ’self’. Eddie simultaneously feels guilty and insulted after his irrevocable act against the immigrants. However, it seems that Eddie is not destined to regain his lost honour, because while trying to atone for his behaviour towards Catherine and Rodolpho, he antagonizes Marco against himself. The apparent reason for Eddie’s ill-feeling against Marco is that the latter had spat on Eddie’s face and spoilt his name in public. He abuses Marco and threatens a revenge shouting: “I’ll kill him.” (Miller:343) This leads to the climax of the play, involving a duel between Eddie and Marco.

Miller has shown the heroic struggle of an individual to retrieve his image, which he lost due to his irrational thinking and behavior. However, there is a resemblance in the two phases of Eddie’s search for self, one comprising his impulsive behavior and the other involving his attempt to regain his connection with his family and his community. In both situations he acts in a self-contradictory manner. While reporting against the immigrants, he certainly acted against his earlier convictions. Similarly, while trying to atone for his wrongdoing, he negates the very purpose of his reconciliation with his niece Catherine and Rodolpho. The only difference in the two situations being that in the second phase the target of his irrational wrath shifts from Rodolpho to Marco.

Eddie’s tragic end though similar to that of Proctor, is also different from his. Both Eddie and Proctor are anxious to retain their name, which stands for their identity and thus, connects them to their respective communities. When Beatrice asks Eddie 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.”(345) It is evident from Eddie’s remarks that ultimately all his attention is diverted to his name, which becomes a symbol of his ‘self’. Thus, Miller begins the play by depicting the psychological conflicts of an individual, but ultimately leads to a duality of self in relation to the particular community of which the protagonist is a part.

Eddie’s quest for self culminates in a self-evaluation, a necessary pre-condition of self-discovery. He, although lacking in Proctor’s high consciousness in The Crucible, shares with him, as with Joe Keller and Willy Loman, the intense urge to claim what Miller (1961:40) calls “his whole due as a personality.” In this aspect, A View from the Bridge merges with Miller’s concern in his other plays about the individual’s need to be integrated into his society, though the play begins with the depiction of a secret personal desire of the protagonist. In his essay “Tragedy and the Common Man,” Miller (1961:39) writes about such a character:

Who is ready to lay down his life if need be to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity…. his ‘rightful’ position in his society. Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of dignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In The Crucible Proctor is successful in his rebellion because the society is against individual. However, in A View from the Bridge, it is individual who turns against the society through his breach of the socially accepted morality. In Eddie’s ultimate destruction of himself, Miller hypothesizes his unique outlook on morality. Although Miller almost religiously admires personal inviolability of the individual, he makes this freedom conditional in the action of A View from the Bridge. Any extremity of an individual’s attempt to be “himself purely” is likely to lead to disastrous consequences, as it did in the case of Eddie. Eddie represents the contradiction in his ability to betray and destroy while remaining “himself purely.”

In this respect, he differs from Proctor and other heroes of Miller. The power of A View from the Bridge lies in Miller’s ability to dramatize a unique interplay of self-commitment and betrayal.

The flaw in Eddie’s search for self lies in the fact that instead of admitting his guilt to himself, he makes a desperate attempt to mislead others about his motives. His action after the betrayal, therefore, does not constitute a repentance of his sin. On the contrary, it appears as
though he makes a vehement attempt to correct the notions of others about him. For example, when Beatrice pleaded with him to give up Catherine, he reacted saying: “That’s what you think of me – that I would have such a thought?” (Miller:345) This clearly shows Eddie’s compulsive desire for something, which he himself morally disapproves of. It would not be inappropriate to argue here that there seems to be a split in the personality of Eddie, in terms of outwardly condemning a motive, but inwardly nurturing it. Thus, his attempt for regaining his lost honor does not really involve a purification of his ‘self’, it merely constitutes his social hypocrisy. At the most, his attempts lead to a personal reconciliation with his wife Beatrice, by dying in her arms. It does not lead to his social redemption. This unfilled search for self in A View from the Bridge intensifies the tragedy in the play and adds a unique dimension to it in Miller’s plays.

The study tries to unfold the fact that individual under different unsatisfactory circumstances starts having conflicts with his/her existing self, which gives him a sense of alienation and consequently tries to search for a new identity in order to get away from the solitary dungeon of alienation. Webber (2009: 146) rightly supports the same by giving the following comments on an individual who is trapped in such situations:

If we accept the Aristotelian view, then the only advice we can give to someone unhappy with some aspect of their personality is to try to get out of the troubling habit. But if the Sartrean account is right, then this advice may well prove useless: the unhappy person should rather work out which projects of theirs are responsible for whatever is troubling them, decide whether or not the value of that project makes their difficulty worth while, and if it does not then abandon that project. For if the Sartrean account is right and the troubled person merely works hard at breaking a certain habit, then they may well replace it with a new one that is just as troubling or perhaps even worse. The new habit, that is to say, may be just another way of pursuing the same project, and if it is the project itself that is causing the problem, then the new habit will be no better than the old.

CONCLUSION

The study has tried to display the isolation of the individuals, their ceaseless search for self and identity both in the family as well as in the chaotic world of indifference. Love, hatred, jealousy, power, greed and revenge seem to prompt them to disaster. Great passions move and disillusion them. The forces, which destroy the lives of the individuals, are uncontrollable and they lie outside the boundaries of reason and justice. In day-to-day encounters the individual has to put up a mask out of willingness or necessity, it can be concluded that the ultimate feeling of tragedy and duality of “self” are associated with irrevocable deeds and irreparable loss and the individual is made to reckon with social forces that can neither fully understand nor overcome by rational prudence. As Abbotson fairly comments “failure, in Miller’s eyes, should not be blamed on an indefinable hostile fate or social system but on individuals who refuse to accept their responsibilities and connection to fellow human beings”. (2007:342)

The study has also tried to show that the characters find themselves trapped in convulsive ocean of boredom which is the result of their oscillation from one ‘Self’ to another. As Toohey (2007:129) states:

Anyone who has ever experienced boredom of anything more than the simple frustrated variety will have felt that awful intrusion of the ‘self’ between, as it were, one’s emotional being and the world around, between sensation and volition. The indisputable painfulness of this condition is heightened by an oppressive sense of almost otiose inner self. Boredom, in its more intense phases, is built upon the self’s sense of estrangement from the world around it. Perception is therefore directed relentlessly and sharply inward but in a dulled fashion outward.

The study has made an attempt to show that the best way to get away from the tormenting duality of self is to try to change the binary oppositions into binary concepts. Individuals cannot think alike, so respecting one another’s differences can free them from their alienated world and lead them to a world where they do not find the necessity of changing masks.

REFERENCES


