

OBJECTIFIED AND DISTRAUGHT: KITTY IN ARTHUR MILLER'S FINISHING THE PICTURE (2004)

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Abstract: Kitty, the central female character of Arthur Miller's last stage play, *Finishing the Picture*, is a much in demand American actress, on whom are staked tons of dollars but her numbed state inhibits the finishing of her picture. Focusing on Kitty's clinically depressed and distraught state in the play, this paper offers a discussion on the harmful impacts of sexual objectification of women prevalent in most societies across the world.

Keywords: Oppressed Womanhood, Sexual Objectification, Internalization, Need for Change.

Introduction: In Miller's oeuvre of stage plays, this last piece of his is deeply autobiographical; the play is based on the playwright's personal and professional experiences while filming *The Misfits*, the 1961 Hollywood movie in which he and Marilyn Monroe worked together—she as the main female lead and he as the screenwriter for the film. During the film's shoot, Monroe and Miller were going through the final breakdown of their marital union and by the time the movie was released, the couple were already divorced.

When viewed broadly, the play is a satirical commentary on the pseudo creative approach of the American film industry and the commercial nature of the American culture at large. One of the central themes of the play is the trauma caused to women because of sexual objectification; drugged and emotionally distraught, Kitty appears as an embodiment of emotional paralysis, anxiety, fear, and depression. In an oppressive social environment where the actress is viewed mostly as an object, Kitty naturally feels "othered" and used. She is forced to rely more on anti-depressant pills, inconsiderate acting coaches, and psychoanalysts than her own inner voice or acting talent. To the media, to her colleagues, and to the world at large, Kitty is a beautiful vision that must stay alluring irrespective of her personal trauma; finish the picture she must.

OCHSNER: I don't understand it, why is there such a fear of her? I feel it myself. We are only trying to help her.

PAUL: Well, that's not quite the message that comes through, though. Why? What is the message?

PAUL: That we need her.

(*Collected Plays*¹ 525)

Through his portrayal of Kitty's trauma, Miller wishes to highlight how when women are seen only as objects and not as individuals, there is bound to be an inevitable catastrophe. Kitty's character is closely based on Arthur Miller's second wife, Marilyn Monroe who died in 1962 at a very young age; Monroe was and is still mostly viewed as a body and not as a whole human being. As Kitty in the play, Monroe had been struggling with drug dependency and depression during the making of this film, but she was a film star much in demand, forced to act "normal" in a milieu where she was nothing more than an expensive merchandise. Miller's "sex icon" wife was evidently a victim of a very powerful media image, which eventually destroyed her. In his memoir, *Timebends: A Life* (1987), the playwright speaks poignantly of

her saying that hers was “. . . a mind of immense capacity that had been assaulted by life, bludgeoned by a culture that asked only enticement of her...” (425).

The plot of *Finishing the Picture* is chiefly confined to the question, ‘will Kitty finish the picture?’ but indirectly, and often sarcastically, the play critiques the general treatment of women in the American society. It highlights the wicked merchandising of people, especially women in the American film business; by keeping Kitty as a muted presence in the play, Miller successfully conveys his message to the audience. As quoted in Martin Gottfried’s book, Arthur Miller expressed that despite his reluctance to be involved in this project, he stayed at it to save Monroe from a visible “catastrophe” (Gottfried 326).

As can be seen in the play, there is not a single person around Kitty who can completely understand her situation and the deteriorating state of her personal life. The objectifying and vulgar stance of the American film industry is embodied quite bluntly in the cinematographer of Kitty’s film, Terry Case. When Case talks about Kitty, it seems like she is but a commodity out on open public display. The cinematographer’s vulgar and dehumanising opinions on the human body sync well with the popular American lingo often used for describing the female body. He says, “nothing photographs like ass; you can add tits but ass is what’s essential” (CP 516). Edna, Kitty’s assistant, is extremely appalled listening to his vulgar remarks but he wouldn’t stop; in fact, nobody is really able to stop him. Case openly comments, “Kitty has the skin and the ass. But ass stops traffic, every time and she has got it” (516).

To tackle Kitty’s inability to finish the film, Case strongly suggests everyone to threateningly push her out of the bed to start work or else, he feels, she should get back to “modelling underwear” like she did at the start of her career (521). He believes Kitty should be dealt with with firmness to get her to work again; the man is insensitive enough to reduce the actress to an animal who must be tamed; he believes that actors respond best to “threatening gestures” (515). Stardom for Case, is nothing but pure animalism; hence Kitty, the film star, does not figure as a human being at all.

While other people on the film’s sets, which includes the film’s director, Derek, Kitty’s scriptwriter-husband, Paul, and Edna, trust Kitty’s sense of honour, Case is absolutely mistrustful of her; he suspects her of deliberately blowing lines on the sets to settle an ego score with the director (522). No other character in the play thinks as low of Kitty as Case does.

EDNA: ...But she does have a mind, you know.

CASE: I’ll try anything, Edna, but I can’t photograph minds...what are we making here, some fucking French movie? This is America! —The girl’s got to glory in her flesh again! years ago—she could knock around all night...her face shining like a brand new apple... Remember, Derek? (523)

Case is called every day to look at Kitty’s eyes and decide if her face is fresh enough to be shot. Even the film’s producer, Philip Ochsner feels that Kitty’s face has got that “underwater spooky look” in the portion of the film already shot (506). She may be depressed and dozed heavily, but the picture has to be finished, and for that she needs to look fresh and rosy. After all, she is Kitty, America’s darling!

Even though it can be considered as just one of the many forms of gender based discrimination in the society, sexual objectification leads to a “host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialization of women’s work and accomplishments” (Frederickson, Tomi-Ann 174). It is indeed true that “the multiple ways of being female in a society” adversely affect women’s “subjective experiences” and when these experiences hoard for years altogether, they “contribute to a subset of mental health risks” (U.Vindhya 4084).

The fact that worsens the whole scenario for women is that popular mass media such as television and films are often proliferated with their “sexualized images”; hence, “confrontations” with these depictions quite naturally becomes unescapable (Frederickson, Tomi-Ann 177). So strongly has this malaise “permeated our cultural milieu” that all women, irrespective of their age and social setup, find

themselves in its grip (177). When women internalize this kind of objectification, they are bound to suffer its undesirable psychological outcomes.

Concluding the discussion, it can be stated that Kitty's clinical depression and her numbness are not just her personal problems; they are the evils of all societies of the world where women are sexually objectified and abused. It is important to bring a change in the society's mind-set in order to make the environment more conducive and healthier for women.

References:

1. From here on in the text, Arthur Miller's *Collected Plays (1987-2004)* will be denoted as *CP*
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5. ---. *Collected Plays, 1987-2004: With Stage and Radio Plays of the 1930s & 40s*. Library of America, 2015.
6. U. Vindhya, et al. "Women in Psychological Distress: Evidence from a Hospital-Based Study." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, no. 43, 2001, pp. 4081-4087.
