A *Most Violent Year*. Dir. J. C. Chandor. Perf. Oscar Isaac, Jessica Chastain, Albert Brooks, David Oyelowo, Elyes Gable. Before The Door Pictures / Washington Square Films / Film Nation Entertainment / Participant Media / Imagenati on Abu Dhabi FZ / Old Bull Pictures. 2014. Film.

The year 1981 in New York recorded about 1.2 million crimes and it was this crumbling period of the city which writer and director, J. C. Chandor, decided on as the setting for his latest drama. The title of the film might appear misguiding since instead of dealing with the substantial aspects of such violence in the shape of gun battles and blood, it rather engages with the visceral aspect of it thus presenting an intricate plot engendered with simmering intensity that pervades throughout the film. The film tells the story of the immigrant and Brooklyn heating-oil dealer, Abel Morales (Oscar Isaac) and his wife Anna (Jessica Chastain) who are trying to expand their business in troubled times while being surrounded by obstacles in the form of oil stealers, cunning competitors and the invasive law. Abel's enterprising streak is established at the beginning of the film when we see him fix an important deal with the Jew owner to buy the Bay Front terminal which will enable his business to prosper. As part of the deal, Abel has a month's time to pay the balance of $1.5 million and if he fails he loses the terminal as well as his down payment and risks ruining his entire business. It is the ensuing struggle to complete the deal that becomes the narrative of the story.

The aspect of violence that Chandor focuses on is more along the lines of the yield of corruption, crime and lawlessness and their effect on ordinary people who are planning to achieve extraordinary heights in fulfillment and aspiration towards the American dream. In the beginning of the film, we are introduced to two immigrants - Abel and Julian (Elyes Gable). The latter is one of Abel's oil-truck drivers who aspires to be like Abel - successful and magnetic. While Abel chases his ambitions relentlessly, Julian's aspirations fail him at the end as we see him succumbing to the weakness and the character flaws that make this fall imminent.

Chandor takes the trope of the gangster genre recalling films like *Serpico,* but subverts it in order to make it more subliminal and nuanced. Early into the film, we can observe the underlying seething conditions that breed violence and one man's denial of that acting as the driving force of the film. Also contrary to the genre is the film's slow pace and its focus on

creating an intense atmosphere and exploring the protagonists' engagement with it. As viewers, it is difficult to see through the ambiguity surrounding Abel's moral compass. Even though his motives are clear, his means are not necessarily so. We do not know for certain whether he is a hero or a villain. As Chandor explains, Abel was in no way meant to be a moral crusader but someone who understood the times and its perils and also its opportunities. It is reflected by Abel himself when he answers a financer's question on why he was insistent on owing the Bay Front Terminal at such a time. Abel replies, "When it feels scary to jump, that is exactly when you jump, otherwise you end up staying in the same place your whole life, and that I can't do." Chandor in his own words considers "A *Most Violent Year* along with his earlier films *All is Lost* (2013) and *Margin Call* (2011) to complete a trilogy on the coming together of the capitalist world, the regulatory world and the real world"("I Wanted"). While *Margin Call* registered the events marking the beginning of a global financial crisis, *All is Lost* concentrated on a former Wall Street executive struggling to break away from the system that made him.

Anna's father is a mobster who originally owned the oil company and Abel's desire to be honorable perhaps stems from this background from which he tries to distance himself throughout the film. His choices and business standards are repeatedly questioned by the District Attorney (David Oyelowo) and he forever finds himself being dragged into the path he so desperately tries to escape from. Anna, in a reversal of roles, stands out as the fierce one, not averse to getting her hands bloody if need be. One such moment is when Abel and Anna while driving back from a dinner hit a deer and she asks him to free it from the pain. While Abel contemplates his options, Anna shoots the deer with her gun almost nonchalantly thus establishing the fundamental difference between them.

It is also the coming together of the formidable talents of Isaac, Chastain, Oyelowo and Albert Brooks that makes everything fit seamlessly. Isaac wins with his compelling, understated, and temperamental performance, Chastain with her avowed toughness and aplomb (a bit under used though), Oyelowo with his ambitious fit and Brooks as their sly, dour mentor.

The cinematography by Bradford Young adds perfectly to the looming threats and anxiety-ridden atmosphere of the film, bringing forth the

decaying city with its low-key lighting and the blotched New York skyline pitted against the graffiti-filled borough walls, bringing alive the New York of early 80s. We see dimly-lit rooms, grey exteriors and barren streets. In a chase scene, wonderfully executed, the camera follows Abel all across the New York outer boroughs as he pursues his stolen truck. When he finally catches up with the man and in rage points his gun at him, we witness his inner struggle as he straddles the line between morality and vengeance. And when he chooses calmness over blood, it accentuates his strength thus defying the stereotype.

Ultimately, the film can be understood to be a parable for the murkier side of the American dream, where to find success, there is a price to pay. The pasts of Abel and the other characters are revealed to us gradually and tangentially, thus making us realize that their past is inconsequential even though it will impede repeatedly. At the end, the only thing that matters are the decisions they make because that reveals their true mettle.

Works Cited

All is Lost. Dir. J. C. Chandor. Perf. Robert Redford. Before the Door Pictures, 2013. Film.

Margin Call. Dir. J. C. Chandor. Perf. Zachary Quinto, Kevin Spacey, Stanley Tucci, Jeremy Irons. Before the Door Pictures, Benaroya Pictures. 2011. Film.

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"I wanted to make a good, old-fashioned gangster flick." *Daily Telegraph,* 7 Dec. 2014. Web. 29 Jan. 2015.

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