

Analysing Arthur Miller's The Crucible: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

The play "The Crucible" set during the Salem witch trials of the 17th century, is renowned for its allegorical critique of McCarthyism and its themes of hysteria, fear, and abuse of power. Arthur Miller who had tasted the worldwide success with his plays, specially "All My Sons" and "The Death of A Salesman", suddenly came under scanner for his marxist leanings. Though he was an upholder of capitalism, he wanted to reform economic class division in society a bit. In "The Crucible" the playwright chose Salem Witch trials to put things in perspective. Though he came out free from the political allegations in the end, this incident impacted the sensitive soul to a great extent. This paper explores how "The Crucible" remains relevant in contemporary society, drawing parallels between the events of the play and the challenges faced in the modern world. "The Crucible" serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of unchecked authority and the consequences of allowing fear to dictate collective actions. By exploring the play's relevance in today's world, this paper analyses how the lessons from the past can guide discussions on maintaining civil liberties, ethical behavior, and responsible governance.

Arthur Miller(1915-2004) is considered one of the most popular writers of the twentieth century. With a formidable creative work to his credit, his writings had a deep impact on the masses. He himself was a victim of economic recession of 1930s. He was a witness to the crumbling of his father's flourishing business and had to toil hard to earn his college fees. Traversing through the rigmarole of life, he had undergone all that made life rough round the edges. One may not wonder therefore, that in his plays, he talks about economic disparity among different classes and their struggles to deal with it. However, in the play The Crucible, he concentrates more on the political issues of the times.

In new historicism, we don't study the work of art as archaeology; we would study Miller not only in the perspective of mid twentieth century America but in modern times too. As in the modern milieu of consumerism in the world, we find the culture of buy and consume.

In 1950s, there ensued a cold war between America and Russia as America's relationship with Soviet Union cooled. There was a great fear of communist infiltration. In this atmosphere of

general distrust and anxiety stepped in Senator McCarthy who unleashed his fury overreaching himself, on eminent persons having Marxist leanings. By the time Miller came on the scene in the 1950s, Marxism was on the decline. Just to register their huff against Americanism, some writers showed their disagreement to things in America. As there was an obsession with USSR, any small statement was exaggerated. But they were only dissenters, not really Marxists.

Although the Western attraction towards communism which started in 1929 had died by 1950s, Arthur Miller too had to face the music because of his communist leanings. He was pressurised to name names but he refused to oblige the American authorities. Finally Miller came clean out of the proceedings but the incident affected his conscience deeply as he weaved this class struggle sharply in his plays. Public support to the Senator ebbed away soon and in 1954, he was censored by the Senate.

Despite McCarthyism, 1950s was a prosperous period for America. Unemployment was low and living standards rose. However, prosperity was not shared by everyone. The struggle for civil rights really began now. Concerned with “broader social and economic issues which determine the private agony of individual human beings,” (Davidson 338), Arthur Miller, different from the bourgeois writers, started challenging the contemporary social system in his plays.

Arthur Miller, who was mistakenly charged with the anti-American activities, was, in fact, an upholder of the American Capitalism. About Charley in *Death of a Salesman*, he says in Preface to *Collected Plays*:

The most decent man in *Death of a Salesman* is a capitalist
whose aims are not different from Willy Loman's. (37)

Arthur Miller considers that a great drama is great jurisprudence and is one where people do not spend their emotions only but also learn something.

With this consciousness, he draws average men and women in his plays, ground down by an unforgiving system of business and politics

In *The Crucible* too, the division of power can be easily seen when John Proctor refuses to tow the line of Parris, the Judge. Abigail accuses John's wife of witchcraft. The accusation of John's wife, leaving her husband out, and the other female characters lead to some interesting insights into their minds.

The Oxford dictionary defines the word 'crucible' as a situation that severely tests people or events, thereby creating something new or exciting in the process. The play *The Crucible* too, evolved out of the testing times of the early fifties for Arthur Miller. If the reception of *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* won Miller accolades, events of the early fifties quickly turned that warmth

into an illusion. It was not only the rise of “McCarthyism” but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious.

In nineteen fifties, there was a strange fear from those having any streak of socialism. The thought of being exiled and “put out,” was what the fear was feeding on. Even those who had had no Left connections at all were fired from their jobs since they had “nothing to give to the authorities.” And these affected souls could not recover the will to live life for a long time.

Miller feels that this, as well as other kinds of social compliance, is the result of the sense of guilt which individuals strive to conceal by complying. Generally it was a guilt, in this historic instance, resulting from their awareness that

they were not as Rightist as people were supposed to be; that the tenor of public pronouncements was alien to them and that they must be somehow discoverable as enemies of the power overhead.

(CP 40)

There was a new religiosity of confessions and forgiveness in the air. New sins were being created everyday. It became an accepted notion that conscience was no longer a private matter but of state administration. As Miller makes a tongue-in-cheek comment in his introduction to *Collected Plays*:

I saw men handing conscience to other men and thanking
other men for the opportunity of doing so. (CP 40)

These suffocating times rewound in Miller’s mind the trials of the Salem witch hunt of 1692, which earlier had remained an inexplicable darkness to him, but now, they began suddenly unfolding in the contemporary situation, providing the playwright a perfect foil to speak his mind. For good purposes, the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies.

But the time came when the repressions of order were heavier than seemed warranted by the dangers against which the order was organized. The witch-hunt was a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom.

When one rises above the individual villainy displayed, to quote Miller:

One can only pity them all, just as we shall be pitied someday.
It is still impossible for man to organize his social life without
repressions, and the balance has yet to be struck between order

and freedom. (228-229)

The society of Salem was “morally” vocal. Their creed forbade anything resembling a theatre or ‘vain enjoyment.’ They did not celebrate Christmas, and “a holiday from work meant only that they must concentrate even more upon prayer.” (226)

People there avowed principles, sought to live by them and die by them. Issues of faith, conduct, and society pervaded their private lives in a conscious way. Miller got attracted to this historical moment as it seemed to give him the poetic right to create people of higher self- awareness than the contemporary scene affords. (CP 44)

Miller had explored the subjective world in *Salesman* and he wanted now to move closer to a conscious hero.

Probably more than the creed, hard work kept the morals of the land high in Salem. There was also a two-man patrol party whose duty was to keep an eye on shirkers. The playwright tells us:

This predilection for minding other people’s business was time-honored among the people of Salem, and it undoubtedly created many of the suspicions which were to feed the coming madness.
(226)

And this madness called witch-hunt was a long overdue opportunity for everyone so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims. As Miller writes:

One could cry witch against one’s neighbour and feel perfectly justified in the bargain. Old scores could be settled on a plane of heavenly combat between Lucifer and the Lord ; suspicion and the envy of the miserable toward the happy could and did burst out in the general revenge. (229)

Abigail Williams, the prime mover of the Salem hysteria, had a short time earlier been the house servant of the Proctors and now was crying out Elizabeth Proctor as a witch. But she was refusing to include John Proctor, Elizabeth’s husband, in her accusations despite the urgings of the prosecutors.

Abigail’s meanness evolves out of her frustrations reflecting her economically marginalised class that has no hope to rise high in life and her failure in love. The rich class like the Putnams has

its own axe to grind in the garb of witch-hunting. The members of Putnam family conspire maliciously with some of the girls whom it is desirable to cry out upon next.

John is one of the few who has a liberated cast of mind. He not only refuses to admit consorting with evil spirits, but persists in calling the entire business false. John's guilt over the brief affair, his considering the sexual sin as an indication of utter depravity, his unwillingness to forgive himself, and his need to be punished are what drive much of the later action in the play.

Miller believes that there are people dedicated to evil in the world; that without their perverse example we should not know the good. Evil is not a mistake but a fact in itself. As he writes:

I have never proceeded psychoanalytically in my thought, but neither have I been separated from that humane if not humanistic conception of man as being essentially innocent while the evil in him represents but a perversion of his frustrated love. I posit no metaphysical force of evil which totally possesses certain individuals, nor do I deny that given infinite wisdom and patience and knowledge any human being can be saved from himself. (CP 44)

When John Proctor decides to reveal his lechery publicly, he exalts that now "all our old pretense will be ripped away" (284) – both the lies about witchcraft and any mask of personal godliness – so that "we are only what we always were, but naked now." (284)

In the play's final act, John destroys the written "lie" because, though it would save his life, it would ruin both his own good name and that of his children. The notion of one's name assumes a significant power in Miller, an outward sign of an inner integrity. John cries when forced to sign the papers:

Because it is my name! I cannot have another in my life!
Because I lie and sign myself to lies! . . . How may I live
without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my
name! (328)

John finally takes charge of his destiny discovering his identity in the process. Perceiving a threat to his "sense of personal dignity," he "evaluates himself justly," to use Miller's phrase from his essay "Tragedy and Common Man." Then he consoles his weeping wife –

Give them no tear! Tears pleasure them! Show honor now,
show a stony heart and sink them with it! (328)

Hale pleads with Elizabeth:

Be his helper! – What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust
praise him? Shall the worms declare his truth? Go to him,
take his shame away! (329)

Supporting herself against collapse, Elizabeth affirms:

He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!
(329)

One may sum up the protagonist's conflict saying that Proctor is a man who is confronted with the opportunity, the possibility of negating himself, of calling true what he knows is half-truth. He has been asked by the court to condemn himself to a spiritual death. He can't finally do it. He dies a physical death, but he gains his soul.

Thus Proctor grows from a guilty neurotic into a workers' hero first class. However, he makes no effort to remind Danforth and his clan that God damns those who refuse to bring men out of their ignorance. Thus like Willy and Joe, Proctor too, does not exhibit the broader socio-political awareness of his times. He does overcome his personal guilt, no doubt, but does not play a strong role as catalyst for change.

Another interesting phenomenon that emerges out of the reading of this play is – Are we free from the age-old practice of witch-hunt today? And the answer is a big no. The Tribune dated July 20, 2011 issue reported a news story titled "Assam's Scourge : Witch-hunting," giving details of the weird practice claiming 116 lives in past decade in the remote tribal areas of the state, mired in superstition and illiteracy. And the police find it difficult to nab the crime as the whole community participates in it.

Man has befooled the other in order to cater to his personal needs from time immemorial. And this menace has worsened in the modern age, for man is crawling into his cocoon further, leaving social and spiritual moorings far behind. Hence the mushroom growth of fake spiritual gurus on Indian scene or anywhere else may be, as one has to seek solace somewhere for the disorientation of one's mind and spirit.

Financial status being the yardstick of social recognition; the economically and thereby socially deprived classes, including the woman as a marginalised class, seek refuge in the black magic. It is their coming together "to celebrate life and their victory over male character." (Schissel 175)

We see the evil rich who have no need to fear, who describe the farmers as “rabble,” and who deliberately use the witch-hunt to dominate people, knowing it to be fraud. The farmers are all poor, all noble and all political martyrs.

Danforth warns Parris that unrest in the country is caused by “witches and men of the lower classes.”

Going beyond the division of classes, it becomes more the matter of politics and the individual. As no class, whether the rich or the poor, is shown to be free from the motive of taking revenge from the other, whenever it gets a chance to do so. One may also divide all men into two ranks, either they are good or bad, either they are polluted or clean. There is no middle sort of men in the world whatsoever.

Thus the class conflict gets vividly pronounced in this play. On one hand is the powered class, blind with authority unleashing the terror on innocents; and on the other hand is the marginalized section; landless, suppressed and exploited, finding an outlet in black magic and thereby enjoying the perverted power that comes with it. John, the protagonist who could see through the vicious designs of the powers that may be, has to justify his own guilt first to himself and then to others outside his personal self.

As societal dynamics evolve, "The Crucible" continues to resonate with us even today due to its universal themes. The play's portrayal of how fear and manipulation can lead to the erosion of civil liberties remains eerily reminiscent of present-day instances of political polarization and social unrest. In the age of social media and rapid dissemination of information, the play's depiction of the rapid spread of misinformation and mob mentality strikes a chord with the phenomenon of viral misinformation that can influence public opinion and incite hysteria.

Furthermore, the portrayal of individuals' struggles with morality, integrity, and the quest for justice reflects the ethical dilemmas faced in contemporary society. The abuse of power by authorities, as depicted in the Salem witch trials, finds relevance in modern contexts too, where systems of authority may be compromised by political agendas or corruption. The play's exploration of human behavior, power dynamics, and the consequences of societal hysteria provide a valuable perspective on navigating the complexities of the world we inhabit.

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