



Negotiating Re-alignments: Man and Milieu in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Abstract

The theatrical world that Arthur Miller conceives is entirely social and his dramatis personae belonging to different social set-ups with their own individuality are without a single exception, common people with average figure and stature. He attempts to address a crucial question i.e. how to establish a harmonious relationship between man and his milieu, and further emphasizing on the relationship between man and society, he says that an individual is related to his society as fish is to water, and for a working out a solution where individual's survival can remain dignified, both man and the outer world will have to understand each other's complex nature. The world of Miller always remains same – insensitive and hostile to the every individual's existence, for every individual harbours in himself some flaws. But those

*who are unable to adopt the middle path are crushed and while those doing so, are spared. Miller strongly advocated that one should learn to compromise in life, should know "how to settle for half", as suggested by Alfieri the wisest of Miller's characters - and if they do so, the world will accept their existence. The play *The Crucible* discusses the reasons behind incompatibility and acrimony between man and his milieu and suggests alternates to develop a cohesive homogeneity between these two that can make life meaningful, as Miller says the greatest hope for human race lies in the individual's capacity to strive for a better tomorrow.*

Key words: *Integrity, Identity, Self, Imperfections, Home*

Arthur Miller through his dramatic explorations attempts to address a crucial question i.e. how to establish a harmonious relationship between man and his milieu, and further emphasising on the relationship between man and society, he says that an individual is related to his society as fish is to water, and for a working out a solution where individual's survival can remain dignified, both man and the outer world will have to understand each other's complex nature. The theatrical world that Miller conceives is entirely social and his dramatis personae belonging to different social set-ups with their own individuality are without a single exception, common people with average figure and stature. Though not outstanding and a class apart, these personae never remain passive in the world they

inhabit. They think that the outside world or the society is not receptive to their existence and accuse the outside authority as responsible for their miseries, misfortunes and displacement. Miller was profoundly influenced by the experiences of his life in his writing career and the uncertainty prevailing regarding the existence of the individual in an oppressive society find expression throughout the literary works of Miller. Man's quest for his identity and the need to acknowledge his right to dissent against oppressive authority finds the most articulate manifestation in *The Crucible*. The hero of this play John Proctor refuses to accept the label that society tries to force on him. No doubt, he dies; he is killed by the society of his time, but his death is a kind of triumph, an affirmation of the individual even at the cost of the happiness of his family. The play is, to quote Miller, "an attempt to move beyond the discovery and unveiling of hero's guilt, a guilt that kills the personality." (Miller, 1996, 155) In Miller's plays, the identity, the 'name' is what an individual strives for and protects it, as indicated by Willy in *Death of a Salesman* and now by John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and this struggle leads to frequent betrayals and perversions. Man, Miller believes, is a misfit in a system of which he is a part and here, he tries to find out the reasons of disintegration in this world and therefore *The Crucible* is an effort to answer "the questions of integrity – not moral integrity alone, but the integrity of the personality. The difficulty is to locate the forces of disintegration..." (Miller, 1996, 229) The play asserts that man can create conditions that may turn the society into his home. It gives man his due in the society by pointing out that he has the possibility of making a forceful comment upon the conditions of his milieu. Darshan Singh Maini sums up Miller's outlook in his plays: "The entire work of Miller is full of ghastly betrayal's, broken faiths, fractured loyalties and diminished relationships." (Maini, 93) Miller's protagonists find themselves caught up in overwhelming situations such as quest for identity, pursuit of false norms, greed for material goods or it may equally well be the lack of self-understanding and consequently their inability to save themselves from the uncanny forces of indefinable society in the contemporary context. Miller sees in the democratic society a tendency to bulldoze the individual into a faceless non-entity. Each of his protagonists is suddenly confronted with a situation which he is incapable of meeting and which eventually puts his "name" in danger.

The Crucible (1953), "the blood brother of *Death of a Salesman*," (Miller, 1996, 172) is an expression of Miller's passion to write about 'what was in the air'. The play exposes a shameful period in American history when fanaticism destroyed reason and witch-hunts reduced man to a fearful animal. Related to the contemporary McCarthy hysteria, the play reconstructs the Salem Witch trials of 1692, and through this Miller gives a bold reply to the McCarthy investigations. Senator McCarthy launched a campaign against those having soft corner for Communism right in the middle of the power centre and the fear propagated by this campaign made people believe in the facts that were altogether untrue. Miller while describing 'McCarthyism' says : "It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only terror, but a new subjective reality a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance." (Miller, 1967, 39) In *The Crucible*, John Proctor, the protagonist, though not a modern hero, a representative of reason against evils in the seventeenth century, ultimately acquires a universal stature when he decides to kiss death in order to preserve his integrity, his 'name'. The struggle of Proctor against the corrupt and perverted authority can be compared to those of Joe and Willy. Whereas Willy has to put an end to his life because of the callousness of the society of his time, in *The Crucible* society joins authority and sentences protagonist to death and thereby destroys his dream of a happy family life. Dr. Avtar Singh says about the Proctor family:

"The family claims what the state refuses, love requires what honor forbids. It is the nature of tragic hero, at once his greatness and his doom, that he knows no shrinking or half-heartedness, but identifies himself wholly with the power that moves him, and will admit the justification of no other power."(Singh, 3)

The Crucible creates a belief among the people that men, inspite of their error, are capable of enduring everything for their sense of decency. In the play, the witchcraft hysteria spreads in Salem from the house of minister Parris whose daughter Betty is found under a mysterious trance, and very shortly after Abigail Williams, the teenage servant girl of John Proctor plays the vital role. Later on, John Proctor himself, his wife Elizabeth Proctor, and few others become a party to this scandal. Parris is unaware of the cause of the girl's illness and he obviously prompted Abigail to pretend to have fallen into mysterious trance. Parris is worried about his official position in the midst of these rumours, and so he asks Abigail to tell him the truth because his ministry is at stake. In this act, Proctor washes his hands off the town's problem and refuses to be involved in the absurd charges of the witchcraft. When Abigail denounces Elizabeth as a witch, Proctor gets himself involved and legally tries to defend his wife before Danforth from the charges of Abigail, and in the process, accuses Abigail:

I have known her – in the proper place – where my beasts are bedded. On the last night of my joy, some eight months past. She used to serve me in my house, sir. A man may think God sleeps, but God sees everything, I know it now... My wife, my dear good wife, took this girl soon after, sir, put her out on the high road... She thinks to dance with me on my wife's grave. ... I lusted, and there is a promise in such sweat. But it's a whore's vengeance, and you must see it."(Miller, 1996, 304-05)

The play examines a conflict between a man's idealised image of himself and his deeds. Miller in his "Introduction" to the *Collected Plays* writes that he wished to write a play that would "show that the sin of public terror is that it divests man of conscience, of himself."(Miller, 1996, 155) He exposes the human nature and makes people believe that a righteous person like John Proctor can be a victim of certain flaws like lust. He opines that every human being has two selves – one is authentic and another is feigned one. In the first, man is a victim of passions and desires, and always give way to them whenever he finds an opportunity, while in his latter self he pretends to be an upright, honest person, quite contradictory to the first one. Here Proctor's flaw is that he had cared little for the people around him – his wife as he betrayed his wife's trust by committing an act of adultery and this guilt weighs so heavily on him that he comes to see that he is not very much different from those persons who betray the trust society places in them. Allan Lewis says that in about *The Crucible*, "Social comment is portrayed through personal frustrations."(Lewis, 48)

Miller makes the pint that a flawed individual has no place in this world; his existence always remains tenterhooks of uncertainty. Rather, the individual has to face the reality, and the sooner he does better it is for him. No doubt, *The Crucible* is a response to the atrocities perpetrated by Senator McCarthy, yet Miller had his goal set somewhere else: "It is examining the questions I was absorbed with before – the conflict between a man's raw deeds and his conception of himself, the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being and what happens when it is handed over not merely to the state ... but to one's friends or wife." ... (Miller, 1996, 173) In fact,

Miller is not concerned with the conflict between classes, but with a public challenge to the private conscience; to one's identity and moral being. When the daughter of Salem's unpopular minister Reverend Parris falls mysteriously ill, rumours of witchcraft spread throughout the town. It is rumoured that with a group of her young friends Abigail Williams the niece of Reverend Parris, has secretly engaged herself in a forbidden dancing in the woods. When the minister accuses Abigail, she replies that her soul has been bewitched. In fact, Abigail sees in this way an opportunity to implicate others and to save herself. So the name of Elizabeth Proctor who is saintly, but emotionally cold, is included by Abigail who wants to get rid off Elizabeth, for she had an affair with Elizabeth's husband John Proctor who, in order to expose Abigail's conspiracy, reveals his past adulterous relationship with her. But his attempt to discredit Abigail flounders when she accuses him of being an agent of the devil. Elizabeth, unaware of his confession, falsely says that John Proctor was never intimate with Abigail. Ultimately, when Elizabeth is caught in a lie, Proctor is condemned to death. Though he is offered a chance to save his life by making a public confession, he refuses to do so as he does not want to buy his name from the oppressive authority and accepts his doom rather than compromising his dignity. Bigsby says about the defiance of Proctor: "That he is able to resist this is the evidence and source of his dignity. It is also presented as a social act, an acknowledgement of obligation which he has to others." (Bigsby, 194) Proctor's death changes nothing, it implies instead that man's frantic efforts to make the world a home can defeat the viability of his private home i.e. family and even cost him his life. According to Allan Lewis: "A man's name becomes, for Miller, the symbol of ultimate dignity... Man's ultimate self resides in his uniqueness." (Lewis, 48)

Proctor is an individual as well as a part of the society in which he struggles hard to preserve his identity and authentic self which the familial and social relations tend to crush. In Miller's plays, the personality, the 'name' is what an individual strives to achieve and protect. With the threat to his 'name' the individual tries to make his conscience clear of his guilt. The playwright tries to find the reason for the people to comply to something unjust, and this could happen only because "of the sense of guilt which individuals strive to conceal by complying".⁴⁴ (Miller, 1967, 40) In *The Crucible*, Miller, by bringing the court on the stage, brilliantly shows together the court outside the society and the court inside of the individual where his only judge is he himself. Proctor, is not only tried by the judges in the court but also by a judge whose verdict he cannot escape—Proctor himself, and in this trial Miller meticulously expresses what is happening in Proctor's mind. Elizabeth remarks in Act II : "I do not judge you. The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you. I never thought you but a good man, John – (*with a smile*) – only somewhat bewildered." (Miller, 1996, 265) No doubt, Proctor is mainly responsible for leading his family, his home towards disintegration. What is required for a healthy social and familial relationship is the trust in one another, and whenever this is lost, the ultimate result will be the coldness at home and its collapse. The suffering the Proctors go through, no doubt, is painful yet it brings them together when later on Elizabeth comes to her husband's rescue and Proctor also realizes now that the peace and love one can get from one's family, cannot be got outside and that's why, he feels a sense of oneness with Elizabeth despite the fact that the sense of guilt creates a wall between husband and wife. It is only in crisis that Proctor shows solidarity with his wife before the judges. When questioned by Danforth about Elizabeth's honesty, Proctor remarks "In her life, sir, she have never lied. There are them that can not sing, and them can not weep – my wife can not lie. I have paid much to learn it, sir." (Miller, 1967, 305) The Proctor family is destroyed, no doubt, but not defeated and all this is due to the courageous fight of the protagonist in order to sustain his 'name' i.e. self and identity, and his dignified position in the society, a unique characteristic of Millerian hero. C.W.E. Bigsby says about the characters of Miller: "The range of choice facing his characters is minimal but the reality of that choice and the consequences that stem from it are vital to Miller, for what else is identity to consist of what else can define the public world which we claim

as our home?" (Bigsby, 137) Proctor's tragedy is due to his failure to reconcile himself with the system he finds himself in. The play conveys the idea that the individual can and must make his protest against an unjust order even at the cost of his family, as it is in this protest that the progress of the society depends.

The play exposes the forces which compel people like Proctor to sacrifice their lives. The protagonist in the play sacrifices his life for the sake of his identity, his name but fails to win peace and security for his wife and family. The structure of the play is woven around investigation of two transgressions – the charge of witchcraft and marital infidelity – both against Proctor. In this connection, Thomas E. Porter remarks:

Proctor's guilty relationship with Abigail Williams provides him with the evidence to prove the official testimony of Abby and the girls fraudulent. Thus the investigation of the witchcraft involves his confessing to adultery. These two issues, both of which involve Proctor's guilt, interrelate to determine the meaning of the play. (Porter, 81)

Miller through these two issues has tried to translate man's quest for identity into social anxieties and to trace the connection between human transgressions and public betrayals. The play is not only a search for the guilt in the individual but also a recognition of the knowledge in the individual about the consequences of the guilt or the transgressions. After grueling investigations, the real truth comes out because of Proctor's efforts, but the burden of establishing it rests with one person whose truthfulness can be guaranteed – Elizabeth Proctor. All attention is focused on her as she is asked the critical question, and, for once, in a moment of high excitement and suspense, this model of truthfulness, too, transgresses the bounds of truth and lies because she values something more than the truth – her husband's good name and identity. So, she tells a lie and paves the way for the tragedy of her husband and thereby the tragedy of her own, and of course, of her own children and consequently of her family. Elizabeth family has to choose one out of two alternatives – name for family or her husband's life, and apparently she decides to go for the first one. Finally Proctor makes an effort to save his wife, when the accusation is at last directed against him. He is imprisoned for months, but in the final moment before his execution, he signs a confession of witchcraft. His reason is that he is really different from them. He cries: "I can't mount the gibbet like a saint; it is a fraud, I am not that man, my honesty is broken, Elizabeth, I am no good man nothing, spoiled by giving them this lie that were not rotten long before." (Miller, 1996, 322) The real, the ultimate victim in the play is John Proctor, the rebel or we may call him, a victim of his own misdeeds.

How human beings pretend to be the representative of honesty, integrity and fidelity – men of character-when they are hollowed deep down their hearts? This is clearly indicated by the character of Proctor who commits sin against his wife, his family, the society in which he lives and violates the very social code of conduct and still aspires for his identity and name. He is well aware of the outcome of his confession and is ready to confess, but not publicly because he does not want to let it become a public document. Previously preferred over truth, his good name is now preferred to life itself. Thus, Proctor bargains with the judges and preserves his identity by sacrificing his soul. Miller here presents all forms of transgressions –guilt, betrayals, infidelity etc. that begin at home. It is when Proctor is unable to find a fulfillment of his physical as well as emotional desires at home that he falls prey to the temptations outside the home, and thus

denigrates the social code and degrades himself in his own eyes. The rigid code which governs his private life, makes it imperative for him to go against it and find satisfaction in his life. Despite being well aware of the hard fact that by satisfying his fleshy desires, he cannot find peace outside home, still he finds Abigail irresistible. Proctor recognizes the anguish he has caused to his wife, and he firmly believes that some restraint in relationship is desirable. In the same way, Elizabeth also realizes that John Proctor is not to blame for everything and says, "I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery." (Miller, 1967, 323) Elizabeth realises that, as she failed to give warmth and love to John Proctor at home, he searched for them outside 'home' and finds in the arms of Abigail. But Proctor does not make any excuse for his infidelity, rather he admits his guilt without pointing out flaws in others. It is this unshakable integrity and honesty in his character that he shares with his wife.

Miller is able to make point that man, despite wearing the gown of honesty and integrity, cares more for himself, his dignified existence, his own raw needs rather than anything else. His personal desires or needs are always prior to his family which requires an obligatory action on the part of its members. That's why Proctor, while sleeping with Abigail, is quite conscious that he is transgressing the faith of his wife, and in this way, is giving a jolt to the strong edifice of family solidarity and understanding, yet he goes ahead in his lustful relationship with Abigail. Elizabeth is able to read between the lines regarding the passionate relationship between John and Abigail, and her hair splitting questioning and repartee leaves John dumbfounded:

ELIZABETH: John – grant me this. You have a faulty understanding of young girls. There is a promise made in any bed–

PROCTOR: What promise!

ELIZABETH: Spoke or silent, a promise is surely made. And she may dote on it now – I am sure she does – and thinks to kill me, then to take my place. There be a certain danger in calling such a name – I am no Goody God that sleeps in ditches... She'd dare not call out such a farmer's wife but there be monstrous profit in it. She thinks to take my place, John. (Miller, 1996, 269-70)

If Proctor had taken care of the prevailing social code and had given a thought to his family or children, he would not have permitted himself to be engulfed by perversions. He is in search of warmth and pleasure and ultimately finds them in the lap of Abigail. In the same way, when minister Parris' daughter falls ill, he is worried about his place rather than his daughter's well being. The professional life is more important to him than his concern for the conduct of the members of his family. The Times writes about Miller's works: "... many of his plays are furnaces of or, as he put it, crucibles in which an exemplary individual's principles are tested and judged according to their integrity and their altruism." (Times, 2005)

Human weaknesses are not limited up to fleshy desires; they can be in any form or type for materialistic gains, for satisfaction of ego which are also hinted at in the play. The Proctor family becomes a victim of conspiracy planned out deliberately by Abigail, and well supported by other evil minded people who contribute their own share for their apparent specific purposes. While John's conscience suffers for his adultery and for spoiling the life of his wife as well as of his

family, his guilt is further intensified by Abby's outburst as she vows to become Proctor's wife when the world is white again. Like Abigail, minister Parris and the landowner Putnam work out of personal vengeance in the trial scene. Parris' insecurity causes him to ally himself with the authorities and to see Proctor as an enemy. Miller himself remarks about Putnam family: "It seems beyond doubt that members of the Putnam family consciously, coldly, and with malice aforethought conferred in private with some of the girls, and told them whom it was desirably to cry out upon next."(Miller, 1967, 157) The play brings to the fore the problem of the guilty consciousness of an individual in a social context, and this sole guilt becomes responsible for the chaos, disorder and disintegration of the family. Som P. Ranchan writes:

John Proctor... is committed to his family; his wife Elizabeth ... He awakens to the reality and the challenge of Polis, Salem, takes on the priest craft in Parris and Hale; he awakens to the divine and the demoniac and throw his lot in with the divine represented by Rebecca and Francis, fights the demoniac and perishes in the fight. (Rachnan, 22)

From the very beginning Proctor is a conscious human being, never succumbing to the evils, always asserting his rightful existence in his contemporary maneuvering world. Though Abigail and Proctor are revolutionary by nature and unorthodox in their approach, yet they are at loggerheads. Proctor's problem is that he wants more just conditions in his society to conform to but fails to understand them: "Life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however, glorious, may justify the taking of it." (Miller, 1967, 320)

Miller is of the opinion that the middle-path can lead to survival in this world. And contrary to this John Proctor being rational and an active personality, cannot adopt this path, and is wiped away from life. That's why he accepts death and proves that however painful his struggle maybe, he has succeeded in preserving his 'self' even though the price he pays for it is very high – a happy family life which he can enjoy with his wife and three children at home. Pramila Singh describing the tragedy of Proctor says that "... the common farmer attains the tragic height by his questioning of values to secure the dignity of a private, innerly satisfying conscience."(Singh, 1990, 89) *The Crucible* is an effort to answer "the questions of integrity – not moral integrity alone, but the integrity of the personality. The difficulty is to locate the forces of disintegration..."(Miller, 1996, 229) The play asserts that man can create conditions that may turn the society into his home. It gives man his due in the society by pointing out that he has the possibility of making a forceful comment upon the conditions of his milieu. To Miller, the greatest hope for human race lies in the individual's capacity to strive for a better tomorrow, that's why Proctor's tragedy results in untold miseries upon the Proctor family, yet Miller glorifies Proctor's denial of selling out his conscience to unjust authority as Miller himself did in his life while facing HUAC in America. Miller's knowledge of human nature and working of human mind was very comprehensive as he says about it in "Again They Drink from the Cup of Suspicion":

We know how much depends on mere trust and good faith and a certain respect for the human person, and how easily breached these are. And we know as well how close to the edge we live and how weak we really are and how quickly swept by fear the mass of us can become when our panic button is pushed. It is also, I suppose, that the play reaffirms the ultimate

power of courage and clarity of mind whose ultimate fruit is liberty. (Miller, 1996, 465)

The world of Miller always remains same – insensitive and hostile to the every individual's existence, for every individual harbours in himself some flaws. But those who are unable to adopt the middle path are crushed and while those doing so, are spared. Miller strongly advocated that one should learn to compromise in life, should know "how to settle for half", as suggested by Alfieri the wisest of Miller's characters - and if they do so, the world will accept their existence. The play sums up that individual and society as belonging to two opposite camps and that every individual as influenced by his milieu and up bringing is involved in some sort of transgressions and these transgressions directly threaten the healthy structure of society and hence unacceptable to it. So, the corrupted conscience of the individual sows seeds of discordance between the individual and the world around and in the ensuing fight, the individual who relents are assimilated and approved and those who resent are destroyed and crushed. Miller here suggests that the way out of the crisis existing between man and his milieu lies in the realization by man of his imperfections and necessity for change in his attitude, that instead of remaining adamant, he should learn to relent a bit, try to reconcile with the world beyond with certain sacrifices, and even should try to remain above board regarding evils and perversions, though it is very difficult.

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