

**Impact
Factor
3.025**

ISSN 2349-638x

Refereed And Indexed Journal

**AAYUSHI
INTERNATIONAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY
RESEARCH JOURNAL
(AIIRJ)**

UGC Approved Monthly Journal

VOL-IV

ISSUE-X

Oct.

2017

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Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: A Tragedy of a Common Man

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Abstract

Arthur Miller claims a significant place in the history of modern American drama. His plays stand testimony to his views on drama, specifically tragedy. The twentieth century claimed the death of tragedy as the critics felt that rise of democracy had obliterated the possibility of 'heroic' in a common man. The lack of heroism jeopardized the concept of tragedy. Miller, however, defended tragedy in the modern times and categorically emphasized that a common man is an apt subject for tragedy. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller defines tragedy as the outcome of man's unwillingness to remain passive in the face of challenges and threats put to his dignity as an individual. A tragedy occurs when a common man is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to safeguard his personal dignity. When put to challenges of life that cause demeaning of the self-esteem and dignity, a man is left with two choices- either to surrender to the unruly forces and seek escape; or take the arms against the sea. In his choice lies the essence of tragedy. His choice accords him the size and a tragic stature. In the play *The Crucible*, Miller has exemplified his theory of tragedy and the common man. The characters in the play, especially John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth Proctor gain a 'size' and grandeur of the tragic figure through their choice of not remaining passive in the troubled waters that have washed away many a lives. John Proctor prefers to give up his life to his 'good name.'

Key Words: Tragedy in the modern times, a common man and tragedy, heroism, Unwillingness to remain passive, personal dignity and self-esteem, Tragic flaw, McCarthyism, Witch hunt and the Salem tragedy.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005), a New York-born dramatist shot into fame with his masterpiece work *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. His other plays *All My Sons* (1947) and *The Crucible* (1953), both are political — one contemporary and the other set in colonial times. *All My Sons* deals with a manufacturer who knowingly allows defective parts to be shipped to air-plane firms during World War II. This results in the death of several American airmen. *The Crucible* depicts the Salem (Massachusetts) witchcraft trials of the 17th century in which Puritan settlers were wrongfully executed as supposed witches. The play echoes the era in which it was staged. During the early 1950s, an anti-Communist crusade was led by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy and others. This ruined the lives of innocent people. Partly in response to *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller was called before the House (of Representatives) Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 and asked to provide the names of persons who might have Communist sympathies. Because of his refusal to do so, Miller was charged with contempt of Congress, a charge that was overturned on appeal. *The Crucible* may be described as one of the profoundest plays of the post-war world- a classic of the modern stage. The play's retelling of the story of the Salem witches had, at the time of its first production, a frightening relevance to the contemporary McCarthy hearings. Now that the immediate political message has faded, a more permanent dramatic force can be seen in Arthur Miller's drama (Miller, *The Crucible*, Postscript).

Miller claims a significant place in the history of modern American drama. His plays stand testimony to his views on drama, specifically tragedy. The twentieth century claimed the death of tragedy as the critics felt that rise of democracy had obliterated the possibility of 'heroic' in a common man. The lack of heroism jeopardized the concept of tragedy. Miller, however, defended tragedy in the modern times and categorically emphasized that a common man is an apt subject for tragedy. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller defines tragedy as the outcome of man's unwillingness to remain passive in the face of challenges and threats put to his dignity as an individual. A tragedy occurs

when a common man is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to safeguard his personal dignity. When put to challenges of life that cause demeaning of the self-esteem and dignity, a man is left with two choices- either to surrender to the unruly forces and escape; or take the arms against the sea. In his choice lies the essence of tragedy. His choice accords him the size and a tragic stature. In the play *The Crucible*, Miller has exemplified his theory of tragedy and the common man. The characters in the play, especially John Proctor and his wife Elizabeth Proctor gain a 'size' and grandeur of the tragic figure through their choice of not remaining passive in the troubled waters that have washed away many a lives. John Proctor prefers to give up his life to his "good name." His plays dramatized the emotional pain that average people suffer in their daily lives. Miller is described as an activist for the common man. But Miller's interest in the average man did not stop him from exploring major problems of society. In *The Crucible*, for example, he shows what happens when unreasonable dislike and fear cause people to accuse innocent people of horrible crimes. Arthur Miller's criticisms of modern American life influenced this arresting play.

The Crucible was first produced in 1952. The 1950s were a time of extreme fear of Communism in the United States. Sometimes this fear was unreasonable. Miller examined this difficult period in American history by setting his play at another difficult time. *The Crucible* takes place in the year 1692. It is based on the trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts. Young women in the play accuse people they dislike of being evil witches. The innocent victims are put on trial and executed. The story shows the tragic results of uncontrolled suspicion and fear. Like the victims in *The Crucible*, the playwright himself became the object of suspicion. In 1956, a committee of the United States Congress ordered him to give evidence. In 1940s, he had attended several meetings for writers organized by the Communist Party. The Congressional committee wanted the names of other people who attended Communist meetings. Arthur Miller said he was not a Communist. But he would not give the committee any names. He was found guilty of disobeying Congress. Later, however, a court canceled that judgment. Miller was lucky. Some people who would not answer questions before Congress served time in prison.

The play, *The Crucible*, opens in year 1692, in the small upper bedroom of Salem priest Reverend Parris. His only daughter, Betty, lies unconscious on the bed. The symptoms are indicative of something unnatural as the local physician couldn't find remedies in his book to the illness of this child. He advises for the probe into the witchcraft. This aggravates the problem for Reverend Parris. On the previous night, Parris has witnessed some young girls dancing in the forest. And the worst, some of them were naked. This was abomination of the sacred commands of the Salem society. The midland forests were considered to be the only places on the earth bereft of the touch of God and hence the Devil's place. Especially children and women were strictly prohibited from going into forests for they were considered susceptible to the temptations and so the easy prey to the Devil. The priest was assigned the duty of keeping moral eye on strict observance of the Salem prohibitions. But in this case, the young girls and women of family of Reverend Parris got involved in the heinous crime of dancing and singing in the forest. Abigail Williams, the niece of Parris and Tituba, his African slave maid along with his daughter Betty and other girls of the village had danced in the forest. As a result, his daughter Betty and Putnam's daughter Ruth are suffering from illness. The villagers are crying witchcraft as the sole cause of the illness. Reverend Parris knows that there is a fraction in the church and many people are waiting for a chance to overthrow Parris from his seat. Parris is scared that the rumor of witchcraft would spread like a wild fire among the Salem dwellers that would consume his prospects as a clergy. He decides to call upon Reverend Hale, an authority in the matters of witchcraft with a credit of driving out witches from the afflicted places. The entry of Hale to Salem pushes monstrous machinery that claims many a lives. The judges from the town set in the court in Salem. The children are considered the victims and witness of the witchcraft. Whichever names they speak out during the trials are summoned to the court. The

accused are left with only two choices to make. Either they have to plead themselves to be guilty of having contracted with Devil or they will be hanged to death for not confessing practicing witchcraft.

One of the accused of witchcraft is Elizabeth Proctor, the wife of John Proctor. The trials of the Proctor family stand as prototype of Miller's acidic observations on the contemporary political and social affairs of 1950s in the USA. Through these trials Miller presents an arresting sketch of the pitfalls in the legal procedures. These trials showcase the murderous effects on the accused of erroneous judgments of the authorities. Abigail Williams charges witchcraft on Elizabeth Proctor. In the court she comes with a sharp needle stuck in her belly and accuses Elizabeth's spirit for doing so. The court issues a summons for the arrest of Elizabeth. She is put behind the bars. John Proctor decides to save his wife from the gallows because he knows that he is a party to the sufferings of his loving and innocent wife. Abigail Williams served the Proctor family during the illness of Elizabeth Proctor. It resulted into the physical intimacy between Abigail and John Proctor. Elizabeth sensed the adulterous behavior of the couple and threw Abigail out of the services of a maid. Abigail Williams embarks on seeking revenge over Elizabeth Proctor. She longed to possess John Proctor. The trials of witchcraft provide her a chance to fulfill her motives. She sees Mary Warren, a maid servant of the Proctors, making a doll in the courtroom during trials. She spots Mary putting needle in the belly of the doll. As Mary leaves for the home, Abigail pierces a needle in her belly and accuses Elizabeth for doing so. The court marshal finds a doll with a needle in the house of Proctor which confirms the charges of Abigail. John Proctor tries to bring it to the notice of the court authorities that the doll was given by Mary to Elizabeth. Mary Warren makes it clear that she had put the needle in the belly of the doll and that Abigail knew it as she sat beside her in the court room.

The matter gets worse for the court authorities when Parris tells them that Abigail Williams has eloped along with the money of Parris. She was the prime accuser and witness in the court. The court authorities sense that they have been duped by this young girl. But now they could not retreat from the trials. Elizabeth Proctor claims to be pregnant and so her sentence is prolonged till the safe delivery of the child. But John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse had to be executed. Parris feels that there could be revolt against the church and court as John and Rebecca carry good names among the Salem dwellers. In this situation the court authorities are left with only two choices. Either they should make John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse confess witchcraft or they will have to face the gallows. Reverend Hale is assigned the task of convincing John Proctor for the confession. Hale calls upon Elizabeth to ask John to confess. He tells her that life is God's precious gift and no principle, however worthy, has right to take it back. He arranges for the meeting between Elizabeth and John. When John tells Elizabeth of his decision to give a lie to the court authorities and confess witchcraft, Elizabeth simply asks him to do what his conscience allows him to do. John Proctor is asked by the court to put his confessions in writing and sign it. John confesses but refuses to sign. When pressurized to sign, he does so but instead of giving it to the authorities he tears it into pieces. He argues that he has given his soul to them but would like to retain his good name with him. He would not like his confession signed by him to be nailed on the church wall. He decides to prefer gallows to his good name.

John Proctor gains a size and a tragic stature for his choice of not remaining passive in the troubled times. He offers his life for safeguarding the individual dignity. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," Arthur Miller argues that the real weakness or the tragic flaw of a character is not some weakness or error of judgment in the Aristotelian sense. Rather, the weakness is Man's unwillingness to remain passive in the face of challenge. A Tragedy occurs when an individual is ready to lay down his life if need be to safeguard his self-esteem and dignity. The character sketch of John Proctor establishes the arguments of Arthur Miller that a common man is a fit subject for tragedy even in the modern times.

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