
Reclaiming ‘Name’: A Study of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*

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Abstract:

In the first half of the Twentieth century the humanity witnessed huge events like the First World war, the Depression of 1929, and the second world war, and this culminated into division of the entire world in two groups-the East and the West that led to the ensuing cold war between these two groups for next fifty years. All these upheavals rattled the psyche of man beyond repair and man found himself sandwiched in a precarious situation, facing the existential dilemma of survival with dignity, name and fame in a life full of moral, social, cultural violations and transgressions. Arthur Miller, a bio-product of these times and one of the greatest social tragedy writers, constantly revisits these all-pervasive incidents affecting human life in his writing career. He remains preoccupied with questions related to man’s self and dignity despite the latter’s imperfections in the form of social, ethical aberrations and transgressions. In the contemporary situation of mistrust and self doubt, man violates the social code of conduct and this trespassing into unethical zone puts him into direct conflict with power-structures of the day, eventually eroding his name and identity in society. But Miller’s man cannot be divested of his name; despite private perversions and transgressions, he remains obsessed with his name and dignity, and makes every effort to regain and retain his dignified position as a social entity. Miller’s *The Crucible* is a noteworthy play that addresses the mute question as how man searches for meaning in life when his image is at stake because of his private tinkered self.

Key words: Self, Society, Transgressions, Dignity, Identity, Resistance**Introduction:**

Arthur Miller is one of the greatest modern American playwrights who along with his contemporaries like Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee, address the issues pertaining to man’s position vis-à-vis society. The ‘quest for name’ or ‘identity’ remains the central issue in the dramatic world of Miller, and this characteristic permeates throughout his journey as a playwright. The obsession of man with his ‘name’ becomes more relevant in the most challenging times that humanity post faced post World War 1 and Miller continuously keeps questioning the position of man in his contemporary powerful socio-

cultural set-up which appears very hostile to man's dignified survival because of the latter's transgressive nature. As a dramatist of human conditions, Miller engages himself in the ceaseless task of delving deep into the nature of human existence and asks questions like: "How may man make for himself a home in that vastness of strangers and how may he transform that vastness into a home? (Miller, 1996, 85) His plays- *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge*, *Incident at Vichy*- prod not only the exterior but also the deep into man's interiors- his likings, working of his mind and body with continuous interventions of conscious and subconscious and the corresponding intersectionality deciding his course of life and finally his position in his surroundings. Arthur Miller's major work *The Crucible* examines the conflict between man's idealised image of himself and his deeds. The play centers on a witch-hunt which took place in Salem in 1692. When Miller came to know about this scandal, he decided to consult the court records of the witch-trials. The play dragged the playwright into political controversy and thus Miller had to face the House Un-American Activities Committee and was first convicted, and later, when Miller appealed against his conviction, was acquitted. Here, he closely sees the working of human relationships: how people like Elia Kazan toes the line of the authorities by naming even their friends about attending the meetings of the Communists, but Miller who had the nerves of steel, refuses to compromise his dignity and the voice of his conscience, and also portrays John Proctor, the protagonist in a similar situation while facing the trial in witchcraft, and like Miller, the protagonist also swears to safeguard his sense of 'identity' and dignity. And when the state authority and the corrupt judges fail to bargain for his 'name', they seal the Proctor's fate and hung him. Even before his journey to Salem for this purpose, Miller already had in his mind, the image of a guilt ridden man who, having illicit sexual relations with his teenage servant girl, watches with horror as she becomes the leader of the witch-hunting pack and points here accusing finger at the wife he himself has betrayed. While searching for the motives in actual records, Miller noted: The sexual theme, either open or barely concealed ... Here was guilt, the guilt of illicit sexuality... Had there been not tinder of guilt to set aflame, had the cult and culture of repression not ruled so tightly, no outbreak would have been possible. John Proctor, then, in being driven to confess not a metaphoric guilt but to actual sex with an identified teenage partner might save the community in the only way possible – by rising to consciousness... (Miller, 1987, 340-41)

Miller believes 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 gives 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. In *The Crucible* 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. 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) No doubt, the play is a response to the atrocities perpetrated by Senator McCarthy, yet Miller has 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.

Discussion:

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) *The Crucible* exposes the chinks in human nature and makes people believe that a righteous person like John Proctor can be a victim of certain flaws like lust. 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. When the daughter of Salem's unpopular minister Reverend Parris falls mysteriously ill, rumours of witchcraft spread throughout the town. In fact, Abigail wants to get rid off Elizabeth by denouncing her as a witch, for she had an affair with Elizabeth's husband John Proctor, because here she sees 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, 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. Allan Lewis makes insightful observations about *The Crucible*, "Social comment is portrayed through personal frustrations." (Lewis, 39) 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 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, 1967, 304-05) 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, 1967, 304-05) The real, the ultimate victim in the play is John Proctor, the rebel and also a victim of his own misdeeds. The hero prefers to die with dignity rather than to live in ignominy. Thus, Proctor, like the protagonist of Miller's earlier plays, Joe Keller and Willy Loman, has to leave this world with his belief that only with this his 'name' and 'identity' will be preserved rather than compromised. Alice Griffin sums up the life of Proctor: "In his struggle against his society's mass hysteria and their authoritarian court, he loses his life, but he preserves his integrity, his 'name'." (Griffin, 59)

The Crucible is not only about guilt in the individual but also recognition of the knowledge in the individual about the consequences of the guilt or the transgressions. John Proctor is a family loving man, but he also has his own share of betrayals and imperfections. He betrays his wife by his adulterous relationship with Abigail Williams. He commits a 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. Thus, Proctor bargains with the judges and preserves his identity by sacrificing his soul. While facing trial by the state authorities, Proctor is also simultaneously facing another trial, that of his wife as the two argues with each other:

PROCTOR: ... Is the accuser always holy now?...I'll tell you what's walking Salem – vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law! This warrant's vengeance! I'll not give my wife to vengeance.

ELIZABETH: I'll go John –

PROCTOR: You will not go. (Miller, CP, 281)

Miller presents different layers of transgressions –guilt, betrayals, guilt, 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. 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, ...'(Ranchan, 22) 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. He also fails to understand what Hale describes as: "Life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however, glorious, may justify the taking of it." (Miller, 1967, 320)

The effect of the crash capitalism finds lesser intensity in *The Crucible* but not in human dignity where the protagonist sacrifices everything for his 'name' and dignity. John Proctor is not a puritan or a hypocrite, rather a bold, courageous personality who never sells out his voice of conscience, though his awareness of his guilt pricks him very much. His wife, Elizabeth, who, in words of Thomas E. Porter "is a mirror of the magistrate," (Porter, 85) admits that the guilt of Proctor is also of hers. It is not only for his name that he accuses Abigail of lechery, but also to reconcile himself with his wife, his family. Proctor is different from the rest of the Salem people by virtue of his strong individuality and his all-too-conscious mind, as he asserts: "Because it is my name ! Because I can not have another in my life... How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (Miller, 1967, 328) The spirit of success myth is present in him in the form of his strong passions that refuse to conform to the popular beliefs of society. Similarly, when minister Parris daughter falls ill, he is worried about his place rather than his daughter's well being regarding the rumour of witchcraft. The professional life is more important to him than his concern for the conduct of the members of his family. After the 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. Porter comments about Proctor: 'The girl has gauged his temper, he is no "cold man", she tempted him and, being a man of strong passions, he fell.' (Porter, 82) But he refuses to sell his consciousness by refusing to name his friends and tears up his confession and goes to execution but preserves his soul from corruption.

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. The opposition which brings havoc upon the Proctor family comprise minister Parris and the landowner Putnam, the State authority represented by the Deputy Governor Danforth and Mr. John Hale. These two persons represent two different viewpoints – while Danforth sounds rough and partial during the trial scene, Hale on the other hand, becomes an advocate of Proctor. Danforth refuses to give credence to any testimony counter to his firmly held opinion whereas Hale's willingness to consider the evidence indicates that he is both rational and more conscientious. While interrogating John, Hale says to Danforth about Abigail's testimony: "I beg you, stop now before another is condemned! I may shut my conscience no more – private vengeance is working through this testimony. From the beginning this man has struck me as true... (*Pointing at Abigail*) This girl has always struck me as false." (Miller, 1967, 327) Proctor's refusal to name others in the charge of witchcraft saying "You cannot use my name", takes him to a position of dignity where no one can touch him. No doubt, he cannot save his life, but at least he gets success in not implicating others and thus becomes chastened and dignified in the eyes of audience.

Proctor's act of adultery and guilt prevent him from feeling at one with his community and thus becomes an alienated soul. No doubt, Proctor is an iron willed person who raises himself against the powerful forces, but what pains him most is the realisation of his corrupted-self, and his sin against his wife Elizabeth. Though feeling utterly lonely during the trial, he bravely admits his relationship with Abigail so that his wife is saved, and finally chooses to save his 'name' though the way to it lies in his death. Before his confession, John pleads for oneness with his wife Elizabeth and wants to get her support while Elizabeth appears very practical and worried about the well-being of her husband:

PROCTOR: I have been thinking I would confess to them, Elizabeth. What say you? If I give them that?

ELIZABETH: I cannot judge you, John.

PROCTOR: What would you have me do?

ELIZABETH: As you will, I would have it. I want you living, John. That's true.

(Miller, 1967, 322)

The sense of alienation grips Proctor when he comes to realise that his adultery with Abigail is known to his wife Elizabeth. Proctor's awareness of his complete detachment from his family makes him restless at his heart and in his own house. Even though he is conscious of the fact that he had been dishonest and licentious in the past, he cannot stand his wife's emotional separation from him as she does not believe in him and goes on doubting his present honesty and this further makes Proctor even more lonely and alienated. He is deeply

attached to his wife and children as Joe Keller and Willy Loman were. The quiet, understated dialogue conveys the idea how much Proctor and Elizabeth are alienated from each other; there is emotion but born of suffering, beyond mere words:

PROCTOR: The child?

ELIZABETH: It grows.

PROCTOR: There is no word for boys?

ELIZABETH: They're well Rebecca's Samuel keeps them.

PROCTOR: You have not seen them?

ELIZABETH: I have not. (Miller, 1967, 321)

Unlike Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Proctor is fully conscious of the implications of his actions but like Willy and Joe, Proctor too is very lonely. Miller's plays, as Eric Bentley points out "are as much sexual as social dramas." (Bentley, 22) It is true that Proctor comes closer to his wife during the last few days of his life, but his decision to die is his alone and dying for his 'name' and identity is the most meaningful action for him. And when he has to take the decision which is a crucial one, he takes it alone, trapped in his terrible state of seclusion, because despite his repeated requests to his wife to advise him, she cannot decide for him. Thomas P. Adler remarks:

Proctor must judge and answer only to himself: human conscience is the final authority, autonomous in all things. ...Miller himself identifies the 'real and inner theme' of *The Crucible* as 'the handing over of conscience to another, be it woman, the state, or a terror, and the realization that with conscience goes the person, the soul immortal, and the name. (Adler, 98-99)

John Proctor chooses the path of death when he realises that no other way can give him identity because of mudslinging of his 'name' in public. He, like Miller himself, remains non-conformist, never ready to strike a deal for his name, and thus invites miseries on his wife and children. Deep down in the his heart, he is a family man; commitment is broken temporarily when he is swayed by the charm of Abigail, and this was enough to isolate him from his family, and the world, thus the tragedy of John Proctor happens. Alan S. Downer says about the hero of *The Crucible*: "Its hero, the cynical observer drawn into the maelstrom through no sin of his own, goes to his death rather than compromise with error; the social order, even though shaken in its connections, must maintain its stand in the face of reason, or collapse." (Dawner, 36) His wife, in their final confrontation before the execution, confesses that his guilt is also hers and she admits: "It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery." (Miller, CP, 390) 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)

In the play, John Proctor loses his life because he refuses to admit that he is a witch, a confession that would save his own life, but make the others who would not confess, seem guilty. He refuses to sign the confession because he has a strong sense of his individuality and would never bargain for his conscience. He seems to be a rebel with a cause but he has certain blemishes in his character.

Conclusion:

In *The Crucible* Miller has emphasised on the necessity for man's fidelity to others as well as to himself by stressing the horror of anti-social act. *The Crucible*, a social tragedy, creates a belief among the people that men, inspite of imperfections, are capable of enduring everything for their sense of decency. Man tries to find short cut method to reach at the top, but even in doing so, he does not curb his longings for the things which are in contravention to a civilised, committed life. This dualism has no place in a world of commitment and integrity, so the individual's place or status is reduced and the surrounding refuses to give him 'name' or an 'identity'. But this the Millerian hero cannot accept; he wants the most precious thing for himself in life – identity – and wants it complete despite remaining non-committal to what society expects from him. And here the seeds of common man tragedy by Miller are sown. As every individual wishes to live in society for the fulfillment of his basic needs, he also wishes to see himself at the top of the ladder in social hierarchy. But the causes of his downfall, according to Miller, lie in the individual himself, and as the individual is a smaller unit of the society, so imperfections lying in the individual are also transferred to the society as well. The social set up may be different but the fate of his protagonists Joe Keller, Willy Loman and John Proctor– remain same. With these opposing forces – love for 'identity' on the one hand and breach of social moral values on the other – Miller tries to wedge the gulf as the situation requires, and tells about the force behind his works:: "It's to arrive at the point of illumination," (Miller, 1996, 498) and this 'illumination' will help in "achieving a coherence out of chaos", because, Miller affirms: "We are weak, the rules of life are powerful, and they exist. And that's a tragic view and therefore hopeful." (Miller, 1996, 489) Miller is able to make the 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.

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