

## CHAPTER-III

### THE CONFLICT IN THE CRUCIBLE

#### I. ABOUT THE PLAY :

The Crucible is one of the finest plays of Arthur Miller which can be studied as a test-case to show how social drama is transformed into high tragedy. The social element in this play is not only limited to the political parallel of Mc Carthyism with witch-hunting, but also it extends much beyond it to the question of the individual's integrity in the face of organized challenges by socio-political force. The central problem dramatized here is that of human integrity : whether an individual should surrender his conscience to social pressures or not. McCarthyism only provides Miller a contemporary event parallel with the historical events of the 17th century Salem witch-hunting. Miller actually went to Salem, Massachusetts and collected the material for his play. The play, however, is neither about McCarthyism nor about the Salem with-hunting.

Arthur Miller in his essay "On Social Plays" writes "... it is not enough any more to know that one is at the mercy of social pressures; it is necessary to understand

that such a sealed fate cannot be accepted."<sup>1</sup> But unfortunately what we see is that most people bow down before the social threats and pressures against their conscience. There are very few people like Proctor in The Crucible and Stockmann in An Enemy of the People who do not sacrifice their reasoning and sense of judgement. Miller's own statement in this context is pertinent :

Above all, above all horrors, I saw accepted the notion that conscience was no longer a private matter but one of State administration. I saw men handing conscience to other men and thanking other men for the opportunity of doing so.<sup>2</sup>

The witch-hunting personifies the social forces of disintegration of the individual which Miller has tried to unveil in the play. It represents the social evil which the protagonist is made to challenge and which ultimately leads to destruction.

About the protagonist in Miller's plays Robert W. Corrigan writes :

Each of the protagonists in these plays is suddenly confronted with a situation which he is incapable of meeting and which eventually puts his "name" in jeopardy. In the ensuing

struggle it becomes clear that he does not know what his name really is; finally, his inability to answer the question "Who am I?" produces calamity and his ultimate downfall.<sup>3</sup>

John Proctor fits in this generalization. Thus becomes clear that The Crucible is a play about the problem of identity. It is a drama of universal significance. It is a play which shows how far the Puritans were ready in taking their doctrines seriously. The witch-trials are perhaps the most disconcerting single episode in the history of America.

In The Crucible Miller uses chronological narration method and characters are fully drawn. John Proctor is a rounded character. He is committed to his family, his wife Elizabeth. He awakens to the reality and challenges the priestcraft in Salem. He fights the demoniac puritan authority and perishes in his fight. His sacrifice, however, bears fruit in the sense that years later the puritan commonwealth crumbled and the victimised families were compensated.

## II. SHORT SUMMARY :

The year is 1692, John Proctor and his wife had been living away from Salem on their farm. Abigail Williams is a <sup>v</sup>handsom and sensual servant in John's house. John had once



represented by the witch-hunt. Here an individual is struggling against the forces of society. It is presented that private conscience is struggling against public issues. In The Crucible Miller explores the nature of relationship between individual and society more closely than any other play.

The very opening scene introduces us to the nature of evil the hero is called upon to encounter. Enough evidence is there in the imagery of this scene, which is dominated by treachery, deception and lies, to suggest that the world of The Crucible is a world where "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". In such a world Proctor finds it difficult to maintain his own thoughts and principles. He is a farmer with "a sharp and biting way with hypocrites". He has the reputation of being the wisest and sanest of all the people in Salem, who fights in order to rescue others from injustice.

The character of John Proctor should be properly analysed in order to draw out the conflict in the play. As we have seen some good aspects of Proctor's character, there is also a flaw in his character. Proctor commits the sin of adultery with Abigail which virtually sparks off the whole tragedy. In the absence of Elizabeth, he has fallen a prey to the sexual temptations of Abigail. Here he made a wrong choice. Had he avoided Abigail and overcome the

temptation the tragedy would not have occurred. Proctor did not remain faithful to his wife. His wife did not allow him to continue the immoral relation with Abigail. Abigail being hurt avenged Elizabeth by accusing her of being a witch, and it led to the tragic fall of Proctor. Thus had John followed proper way of moral life he would have saved. Thus The Crucible the conflict works both on the level of character and 'Fate' represented by social forces. In Miller's tragedies social forces as well as the individual guilt precipitate the tragic crisis which is the result of the conflict.

Also there is a triangular romantic conflict between John Proctor, Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor in the play. But this conflict is not on the foreground. As Miller himself has said, this triangular conflict made the play first conceivable to him. But the play would not have been a social tragedy, if it were to be confined to this romantic conflict alone. But the play has been enlarged and elevated from domestic tragedy to this powerful and disturbing social tragedy.

Also there is an internal conflict in the mind of Proctor. Proctor has to face the dilemma whether to die for the truth and become a martyr like Rebecca Nurse or to lose his name. To Danforth's question "You are a lecher?" Proctor replies: "A man will not cast away his good name."

You surely know that." Proctor chooses to die for his name. Thus the problem of personal identity creeps in. The trial scene represents for Proctor, in the words of a critic, "a personal crucible of self-discovery through commitment."<sup>4</sup> Proctor prefers to live by telling a lie that is not a lie rather than die for a truth that is not a truth. He knows too well that he is a sinner and can not mount the gibbet as a saint along with innocent people like Rebecca. He also knows the futility of dying for a sin which he never committed. He thinks his sacrifice would go waste, so he finally decides to sign the document of recantation. But he tears off the confession on discovering the true intention to make it public. First, it would soil his social image, which he can not bear; secondly, his confession would be used to compel others to confess or damn those who do not. Therefore, he does not want his confession to be made public. He refuses to compromise in order to maintain his rightful image in society. He prefers to die on the top to living without his social image. This gives him the noble status of a tragic hero. He is not convicted for adultery but for the sin he never commits namely, witchcraft.

Thus a young man, dominated by reason and self-respect, is fighting with the irrational force of society.

IV. COSMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE CRUCIBLE :

The Crucible is writt<sup>er</sup> when McCarthyism was at its peak and pro-communists were persecuted. (Miller himself was examined by the Committee but he refused to disclose the names). But the contemporary parallel has no relevance to an appreciation of the play as tragedy. We must detect the eternal from the temporal. The play's emphasis shifts from the inner<sup>most</sup> circle of the family to the outer most circle of the society which suggests its universality. The metaphysical aspect of the play is in the fact that it deals with fundamental questions confronting mankind, questions relating to individual freedom, justice, integrity, conscience, responsibility to others i.e. commitment. The analysis of the conflict only helps us to find out its metaphysical dimensions.



REFERENCES

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2. "Introductory" Arthur Miller's Collected Plays (Allied Publishers, 1973), p.40.
3. Robert W. Corrigan, Arthur Miller : A Collection of Critical Essay (Prentice Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliff, N.J. 1969), p.2.
4. John F. Ferres, Twentieth Century Interpretation of The Crucible (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice Hall, Inc., 1972), p.17.