CHAPTER III

THE CRUCIBLE: CONSCIENCE AND THE COMMUNITY
Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, in its initial days of production was dismissed as "a cold, anti-McCarthy tract."¹ The analogy of Senator McCarthy's investigations of the suspected communists seems clear in the play. Miller's personal experience of the madness that swept through America brought the story of Salem alive for him in a new way. The initial success of the play was largely due to the topical importance of its theme. But Miller insisted that he was concerned with a problem larger than the McCarthy investigations:

It was not only the rise of "McCarthyism" that moved me, but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance.²


From the above statement of Miller's it is evident that the play is not essentially propagandist. The play was exonerated from all the charges levelled against it by its continued success even after the fall of McCarthy. Even though the setting of the play is a Massachusetts colony, the government run by a "theocracy," Miller is talking about a theme of central significance in The Crucible relevant not only for the audiences of the McCarthy period but for those of today. The play echoes Miller's belief that drama is "the art of the present tense."^3

The mass hysteria that swept through America in the fifties was similar to that of Salem witch-hunts in many respects. Senator McCarthy's investigations into un-American activities symbolized a dehumanizing influence that might occur at any period of time. They are a kind of personification of moral disintegration. The Salem witch-hunts are seen to be a conscious reflection of this McCarthyism. The play, with its historical base and relevance to our times and in a way to all time, can certainly be called a "social play."

^3Ibid., p. 11.
The Crucible may well be called a "social play," since it analyzes a public phenomenon with historical precedent and current actuality. But it focuses on the "subjective reality" of that phenomenon; it cannot be judged merely on the literal accuracy or political aptness of its topical allusions.4

History is directly presented in the play but mere summary can do no justice to the richness and complexity of the play. Historical accuracy is not the same as realism.

I had found a kind of self-awareness in the bloody book of Salem and had thought that since the natural, realistic surface of that society was one already immersed in the questions of meaning and the relations of men to God, to write a realistic play of that world was already to write in a style beyond contemporary realism.5

But to achieve realism, Miller uses a heightened naturalism. Within that closed world, action follows action, crisis follows crisis with a natural logic. The simplest language is used. The language is rooted in human speech patterns and some of the most powerful statements are made


5Arthur Miller's Collected Plays (Bombay, 1973), p. 47
in the simplest language. "But, woman," cries Hale to Elizabeth, "you do believe there are witches ..." and she replies "If you think that I am one, then I say there are none" (p.276).

John Proctor, the protagonist of *The Crucible*, is seen as real not because his story is historically accurate, but as Albert Hunt says:

Proctor is real because he stands at the heart of all the complex tensions of the Salem community. He is totally involved as a human being; socially, as a farmer in a farming community who, against his will, is caught up in the town’s factions; intellectually, because his mind rejects the insanity of the witch hunt; emotionally, because he is linked with that insanity through his adultery with Abigail; morally, because this adultery is not just a sin against the community, but a sin against his own conscience....

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John Proctor is a farmer in his middle thirties. Abigail, the ex-servant, is attracted by him and is willing to commit murder in order to possess him. He is no cold man and no saint. As he is a man of strong passions, he committed adultery, tempted by Abigail Williams, against the law of God and Salem. Now his conscience prompts him not to touch her again. He has confessed his affair to his wife and is honestly trying to make it up to her. This change in him occurs not because the church condemns adultery as a sin but because it goes against his own conscience and vision of decent conduct. This shows to us that Proctor is no puritan, no hypocrite, but he possesses all the democratic virtues that make him recognizable to the audience. He represents the view of society held by the Enlightenment thinkers - that society should be founded on the common good, as agreed upon by all reasonable men.

Proctor is unlike Miller's usual "little man" heroes, and he is a much more full-scale hero than the crass mouth-piece of After the Fall. He is an independent chooser of right and wrong. He speaks his mind when he feels he must. The genuine reason behind the rejection of theocracy, which reveals his courage, is his displeasure about the
misuse of power and minister Parris's hypocritical and repressive nature.

If we closely examine the play, we can find a set of people who are associated with Proctor and whose nature is closely akin to his, in contrast with another set of people in the same society who are in league with "evil." "The line between good and evil, between the good society and the oppressors, is always clearly drawn in Miller's plays."\(^8\)

The Crucible has its kernel of good people who oppose the witch trials: Giles Corey, the homespun old curmudgeon who fights for his rights in court, and Rebecca Nurse, a reputable woman, who could not save Goody Putnam's children. These manifest the same kind of virtues as Proctor. Even the visiting investigator of witches, Mr. Hale, is transformed during the course of the play. He remarks "if Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing's left to stop the whole green world from burning" (p.277).

In the opposite camp, dedicated to evil are the greedy and spiteful like Parris and Putnam. Parris wants

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gold candlesticks and better living arrangements; his fellow conspirator, Putnam, is a land-grabber. In the play the opposition is concentrated in Abigail Williams and the "evil" in the play focuses on her as the fountainhead. She is "seventeen, ... a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling" (p.230). Her passionate involvement in the adultery committed by Proctor works as the main key in the play and brings about personal struggle in him. Thus she bridges both the official investigations and Proctor's personal struggle. Abigail's wish to destroy Elizabeth Proctor, the wife of John Proctor, springs from her desire to possess John. In order to attain her ends she sacrifices the community and subverts the function of the law.

When the witchcraft issue exists, the concealed hatreds and grudges come to surface. Perris sees an opportunity to suppress his rival faction. He and his faction misuse the law, the witchcraft ordinance. And under the shadow of conventional belief and in the name of tradition they do mischief.

The witch-hunt was not, however, a mere repression. It was also, and as importantly,
a long overdue opportunity for everyone so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims (p. 229).

These unscrupulous individuals like Parris, Putnam and Abigail Williams deliberately and cynically commit crimes by giving false evidence or incite others to do so for their own personal gain or gratification.

The institution that stands between these two factions of the Salem community is the court. The body of the court consists of judges. It is the embodiment of Law and Justice. The notion that everyman however lowly is entitled to a fair trial and an impartial hearing is regarded as the corner stone of civilized government. The court protects the rights of an individual but not at the cost of the rights of the society and hence they treat both equally through defence and prosecution. Thus the jury and the judge or court represent both the individual and the society. The Crucible examines and surveys the genuineness and the validity of the sacred trial as a channel of impartial justice. If the law is 'bad' and the court corrupt, the worst disaster happens. The law is not bad here, nor are the judges bad. They are straightforward, rational and good
tempered. The judge follows the prescriptions faithfully. He would not hesitate to send ten thousand to gallows if they dared to rise against the Law. Not everyone who contributed to that madness, was villainous. Some officials, like Danforth, Reverend Hale and Judge Hathorne, committed the gravest wrongs in the name of the public welfare, as they conceived it.

The trial resembles Joan’s trial in Shaw’s Saint Joan. Danforth and Hathorne may seem hard and cruel, if we see them with our more enlightened standards. They are trying to arrive at a judgment on the basis of evidence quite outside their previous experience. The testimony of honest men is not accepted and it is condemned as a lie by these bigoted fanatics, not from ingrained evil but from overzealousness and a purblind confidence in their own judgment.

Danforth: I judge nothing I tell you straight, Mister — I have seen marvels in this court. I have seen people choked before my eyes by spirits; I have seen them stuck by pins and slashed by daggers. I have until this moment not the slightest reason to suspect that the children may be deceiving me. Do you understand my meaning? (p.290).
The Crucible comes to a very Shavian moral conclusion that in the life of a society evil is occasioned less by deliberate villainy than by the abnegation of personal responsibility. That is why Elizabeth rejects as "the Devil's argument" Hale's impassioned plea to her to help Proctor save himself: "Life, woman, life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it" (p.320). Elizabeth, like Shaw's Joan, learns through suffering that "God's most precious gift" is the life of spiritual freedom and moral integrity. She cannot prove her reply to Hale "I think that be the Devil's argument," (p.320), though she believes this. She says "I cannot dispute with you, sir; I lack learning for it" (p.320). Again, as in Saint Joan, the learning of the scholars and the theologians and the rulers is discredited by the simple faith of a country woman.

The diabolical methods used by Abigail and others to gain control over the frightened, the gullible and the malleable are best illustrated in the play. Abigail gained control over the girls, Betty, Tituba and Mary Warren and others. The panic-stricken child Betty, on being disco-
vered in the woods, is under her total command. Abigail lies very easily. All the false accusations were believed by the court. Elizabeth Proctor was accused that she kept puppets in order to play witchcraft upon others. Abigail hatched a wicked plot in employing Mary Warren, the servant girl in Proctor's house, to keep the puppets in Proctor's house which are to be discovered by the authorities as a proof to her accusations.

These diabolical people devise a very subtle plan to gain their ends. They first convince the court that their victim is in the company of the devil and cleverly implant in him the provision of a confession that will release him from suspicion and at the same time achieve their selfish ends. A reasonable man like Proctor appears a fool at a time of unreasonable action by his fellowmen. The climax of every act builds upon the idea of a confession, true or false, forced or withheld. The first act ends with the lying confessions of the hysterical girls mingled with Hale's naive "glory to God." At the climax of Act Two, Proctor is seen forcing Mary Warren to agree to confess her lies in court. At the end of Act Three, Proctor is condemned by Mary as the Devil's Man and he will not confess. At the end of the play, Proctor's tearing up the confession creates the climax.
Fraud and falsehood are an anathema to Proctor. He courageously points out the fraud in Abby, in Putnam, in the girls, in Hale, and in the court. When Proctor confesses his lechery, which might have set him free, the falsehood of Elizabeth by means of which she intended to save his name, ironically condemns him and makes him a liar.

Proctor is a man who is not a saint, not even an ordained minister, but a decent man trying to understand and translate into action the dictates of his conscience. Proctor suffers from inner accusation throughout the play and he doesn't want it to be disclosed in public. In Act Two we notice Proctor filled with guilty feelings. When Elizabeth urges him to go to court to expose Abigail, he is afraid that his relation with Abby will be brought to light. The cardinal point is that John must struggle against his own fear. The "personal" and the "social" are integrated in The Crucible in a number of ways. "I cannot speak but I am doubted," says John, "... as though I come into a court when I come into this house!" (p.265).

John's struggle against his inner contradictions and his outer antagonists is seen throughout the third act. His persistence is seen in extracting a confession from Mary.
He concentrates his attack on the court for the sake of others when the charge against Elizabeth is suspended. And when Abigail calls up hysteria and seems winning the struggle, John makes a public confession of his "lechery." Thus the process of the investigation of the witchcraft is linked with Proctor's confessing to adultery.

According to Miller, these hysteric incidents are like an introduction or an "overture" to the "trial." The trial scene brings to a climax several personal and ideological conflicts. While the personal conflicts include the puritan vision of the eternal triangle involving Abigail, John and Elizabeth, and the open bitterness between Parris and Proctor over the former's fitness to be the minister of Salem, the ideological conflict involves the confrontation between fanaticism and common sense. The private and public conflicts are linked by the vicious attack of Abigail on Elizabeth through the witchhunts. She is motivated by her passion for Proctor. Proctor is arraigned by the court for witchcraft. He is accused, within himself, of his infidelity to his wife. These two issues are carefully blended by the

playwright, for Proctor's past illegal relationship with Abigail Williams provides the evidence to prove the testimony of Abigail. *The Crucible*, even though it inds the community, includes a complicating variant because the protagonist, besides answering a formal charge, must satisfy his own conscience about his innocence. Thus we see two investigations, two indictments, and two verdicts in the structure of the events.

Evil comes into power only when the community gives it institutional status. Danforth's words "the entire contention of the state in these trials is that the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children" (p.289) shows how the community surrendered the sacred power over life and death to the hands of a corrupt judge and a group of malicious and gullible girls. The people who do the final damage are not the lunatic fringe but the gullible pillars of society. The courts bog down into travesty in order to comply with the popular mood. Freedom is achieved by naming one's associates in crime. Even an upright person like Proctor is eventually tormented into going along with the mob to secure his own way of life, his own family.

The emotional outburst of the girls overpowers logic and common sense. The power that sweeps through Abigail
and others is overpowering. Mary Warren, whose powers
are not at her own disposal and who cannot faint at her
will, cannot disprove Abigail's fraudulence. It can be
disproved only by a more forceful testimony, by a more
persuasive force of personal conviction. The conflict
can be won only by the side which adapts itself to this
kind of excitement, of rhetorical excess. In a crucial
moment when Mary tries to expose the fraud, Abigail calls
up hysteria, the girls shiver. Soon Mary's spirit transforms
into a bird and possesses them. The spectators too
look up expecting to see the yellow bird in the rafters not
because they are momentarily convinced by her lies but be-
cause they feel the presence of a malevolent power so great
that it might easily reveal itself as a terrible yellow bird.
They repeat in chorus whatever is said by Mary and ultimately
she, contaminated by hysteria, cries out against Proctor
"You're the Devil's man!" (p.310). The court's due process
provides no method for coping with the kind of hysteria that
the children's shrieking generates. Reason and intelligence
prove powerless before this outburst of human darkness.
Proctor's words "I hear the boot of Lucifer, I see his filthy
face! And it is my face, and yours, Danforth! . . . . we will burn, we will burn together!" (p. 311), touches our hearts as this is not just an abstract argument but a real and personal truth, forced out of concrete, human experience. Albert Hunt, commenting upon Miller's concentration on the past says:

Proctor comments on our own situation, not by aping our ideas, but by being: the comment is all the more immediate because of Miller's intense and lucid concentration on the past. And it is this objective concentration which makes The Crucible a work in the realist tradition.

In Act Four John "is another man, bearded, filthy, his eyes misty as though webs had overgrown them" (p. 320). Proctor tells Elizabeth that he would confess. His experience in jail contemplating his death brings this change in him. Though John defends himself; "Spite only keeps me silent" (p. 323), "I want my life" (p. 324), he has not overcome his inner contradictions. He hesitates to implicate others and balks at signing the confession. He refuses to

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relinquish the document after he signs it. He says "God has seen my name on this! It is enough" (p.327). He is not willing to have his neighbours know his guilt. He pleads "I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (p.328). But slowly he comes to realize that his soul and name are virtually synonymous. Indignation compels him to salvage his self-respect and honour which he lost by publicly admitting lechery and by the more humiliating incident of confessing to witchcraft. A re-discovery of what he thought had been lost is sounded in Proctor's exalted victory-in-defeat rhetoric. The Crucible, thus, explores two contrary processes, the generation of hysteria and the achievement of moral honesty.

Both, The Crucible and Shaw's Saint Joan, are religious-historical plays culminating in a trial scene followed by the martyrdom of the main character. Towards the end of both the plays the tension is heightened by a dramatic peripeteia in which the prisoner suddenly understands the implications of the confession which he has already made in order to escape death and recants by tearing the document to pieces:
Like Shaw's St. Joan he is so eager to stay alive that he makes the "confession" that is required of him, only to tear it up afterward, knowing that if he puts his name to it he will never "find himself" again. Identity is more precious than survival.  

Elisabeth Proctor, who is "cold," suspicious, self-righteous and slow to forgive, acknowledges her contribution to John's fall: "I have read my heart this three months, John. I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery" (p. 323).

Out of the ordeal of his personal crucible, each of the main characters acknowledges the truth about himself. When it is discovered, a man must be true to it. John Proctor refuses to sell his friends by naming them and tears up his confession and goes to execution but preserves his soul from corruption. It is something like a warning against surrendering one's identity and name. As Miller says in his 'Introduction,'

the sight of the real and inner theme, which, again, was 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." 12

Miller, who has shown the courage of his convictions
beyond most men, has some right and authority to give such
a warning.

In the play, The Crucible, the spirit of dissent
is strong. Self-understanding implies dissent. Proctor is
attacking the court and in a way the whole system it repre-
sents. His protest against the theocracy's repressive, irra-
tional use of authority and against the judges who abnegate
the most common sense rules of evidence while they intimi-
date the community into accepting the self-serving view of
justice ends in frustration. This conflict between the
right of dissent and corrupt authority is as old as organised
society. This universality makes the play, The Crucible
contemporaneous. In this aspect both Sophocles' Antigone
and Shaw's Saint Joan provide us with parallels to The
Crucible. This also brings back to our mind the names like
Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Winny

12 Arthur Miller's Collected Plays (Bombay: Allied
Mandela and the whole tradition of minority dissent in America and in other countries. Writing about the play, The Crucible, Miller said,

No man lives who has not got a panic button and when it is pressed by the clean white hand of moral duty, a certain murderous train is set in motion. Socially speaking, this is what the play is and was "about," and it is this which I believe makes it survive long after the political circumstances of its birth have evaporated in the public mind. (This) tragic process underlying the political manifestation (is) as much a part of humanity as walls and food and death, and no play will make it go away. When irrational terror takes to itself the fist of moral goodness, somebody has to die. 13

The Reverend Hale, one of the most substantial figures in The Crucible, can easily capture the interest of the audience by the parallel action of his "fall" with the "rise" to glory of John Proctor. While Proctor is concerned with the natural and visible world, Hale is concerned with the supernatural and spiritual world. In the beginning

Hale mistakes his own eager certainty for the voice of God. Hale's gradual change is seen step by step in the play and finally he acts upon discovery. After acknowledging the total fraud in the court, he argues for Proctor and his deposition, shows disdain for Abigail's games and in the end he denounces the proceedings and quits the court. Hale's decision is more climactic and dramatically placed than Proctor's cry that "God is dead!" (p. 311).

In Act Four Hale is seen engaged in persuading those who were condemned by him to lie and confess and save their lives. Thus he tries to ease the agony of his soul. A great guilt has brought this moral disintegration in this man of God. It is seen prominently in the final tableau of the play as he "weeps in frantic prayer" (p.329) which becomes a more compelling vision for the audience than the apotheosis symbolized by the sun shining upon Elizabeth's face.

A play's actions and theme are determined by the discoveries and decisions of individuals on whom they must
focus. Miller here presents the whole man who as an individual is seen in conflict with himself and society.

The social forces which influence him are depicted in the beginning of the play. During the course of the play's progress the forces of evil win over typically blind justice. The balance between order and freedom is destroyed. In the destruction of a man the personal and social conflicts are dramatized. When Proctor tears up the confession, his personal honour triumphs over the corrupt court. His sacrifice and death return order to the world:

In solemn meeting the congregation rescinded the excommunications—this in March 1712.

... The jury, however, wrote a statement praying forgiveness of all who had suffered.

To all intents and purposes, the power of theocracy in Massachusetts was broken (p.330).

A close reading of the play would reveal to us that the "personal" and the "social" are so fused that the social action of trials is largely connected with a flaw in Proctor's marriage, which is "personal". Any personal act is linked with the "social." For instance, John's words "Is the accuser always holy now? (p.281) has both personal and social references; personal because Elizabeth accuses John of evil
and she is not "holy." Later John himself acknowledges that he is not as holy as he had thought; social because Abigail and the other girls are not holy but they accuse others.

_The Crucible_ is a powerful dramatization of the notorious witch-trials of Salem. The importance of the witch-trials is that they exemplify, in their enactment and statement, the moral crisis of a whole society. The particular crisis referred to in _The Crucible_ enables Miller to hold the mirror up to the modern witch-hunt in his own society. As Gerald Weales points out, "Miller believed that the America of that moment, like the Salem of his play, was going in for a kind of group therapy that demanded each man's _mea culpa._" 14

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