

## **Tenets of Sociology of Literature: A Sociological Perspective of Miller's The Crucible**

### ***Abstract***

*There is a dialectical relationship between literature and society. Though research has been conducted on the sociological perspective of literature but exploring the tenets of sociology of literature from Miller's plays has not yet been conducted. This qualitative study is rooted in the sociology of literature especially in its three tenets i.e. reflection, social control and the influence theory and will attempt to explore these three tenets in Miller's play The Crucible. This play reflects the social, religious, political, and legal institutions of the Puritan community of seventeenth century Salem, Massachusetts. It discerns the patriarchal and hypocritical social context of the Puritans of Salem and their character traits i.e. religious harshness, hypocritical licensing, and their opposing pleasure, arts, and necromancy. In the theocratic society of Salem, the people were controlled by law and religion (social control). The 'influence theory' has also been explored in this play since it impacts people through developing critical thinking among them. Miller produces the sense of 'within'—arousing emotions of pity and fear and 'without'—producing critical thinking among the audience. The objective of this research is to highlight the dialectical relationship between the circumstances and literature especially The Crucible.*

**Keywords:** Literature, Sociology, Reflection, Social Control, Influence

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a relationship between society and literature because the circumstances in a given society exerts influence on its literature. Literature is the reflector of the

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temper, mood, and environment of a society at any given time (Hallen, 1966). Earlier, the literary critics analyzed the works of literature through intrinsic approach i.e. analyzing their inner structures, imagery, metaphors, rhythm, delineation of character, dynamics of plot and so on but a modern literary critic adopts the extrinsic approach because they analyze literary works in the perspective of the context or circumstances in which it is produced (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972). The present study, using the research method of textual analysis, will attempt to explore the tenets of sociology of literature in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, originally published in 1953.

Sociology is the developed, systematic, and scientific study of the society and has been defined by critics in various ways: the science of social phenomena (Comte, 1896); general science of society (Davis, 1949); "science that deals with social groups" (Johnson, 1960, p.2); "science of social institutions" (Durkeim, 1901, p.22); science of collective behaviors (Park, 1921); and as the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences (Ginsberg, 1950). Shah (2017) quotes Jones, Ogburn and Mimkoff, and Young and Williams' definitions of sociology: the study of man-in-relation-to-men; scientific study of social life and the scientific study of social aspects of human life respectively.

### **Objectives**

The aim of this study is to:

- Ascertain to what extent Miller's *The Crucible* is related with sociology;
- Discern the dialectical relationship between circumstances and literature in which it is produced in order to explore to which extend social institutions put their influence on the individuals of a certain society.

### **Research Question**

This research attempts to answer the following question:

- How are 'reflection', 'social control' and 'influence' reflected in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature is one of the institutions of society and sociology is the study of this institution (Albrecht & Wellek) that has been defined by different critics in the sociological perspective: literature is a record of men's experiences, thoughts and feelings; what they have seen in social life (Hadson, 1998); literature is the reproduction of life because it represents life (Wellek & Warren, 1949); literature should play an interventionist role in serving society (Ushie, 2008); literature should not be created in vacuum but in a particular time and space, and it should be written for a particular community (Oshin quotes Ngugi, 1990). Sociology of literature is one

of the branches of sociology. Both sociology and literature deal with the social world of man, his assimilation with it, and his desire to change it. Seeds of sociology of literature are reflected in Plato and Aristotle because both were interested in the relationship in art/ literature and society (Al-Salam & Morsy, 2017). Plato rejects poetry because it was not attributing to social reality. In *The Republic*, he vocalizes that both painter and poet are thrice removed from reality. Aristotle presents social and ethical function of art. He believes in social reality and the reality of the world of senses. According to Aristotle, a work of art does not imitate nature but reflects reality (Baktir, 2003).

Literature is the mirror of society in which it is written. It became more powerful in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the novel. Mathew Arnold declares that literature can be appropriately understood in its social and cultural contexts. Herder (1791) believed that the social, geographical environment, race, customs and political conditions of a certain area play a significant role in the emergence and development of literature. Madame de Staël also believed that there is the influence of race, climate, women and religion on literature (Swingewood, 1972). The sociological approach to literature is made scientific and systemized by H.A. Taine through his three categories of literature i.e. race, milieu and environment (Katscher, 1886). Marx and Engels gave economic turn to sociology of literature. For Plekhanov (1976), literature is the reflection of class struggle. Goldman's theories of genetic structuralism and 'totality' played a significant role in sociology of literature. His theories claim that all reflection on the human sciences is made within society (Goldman, 1967).

According to Lowenthal (1961), the writer's task is to invent a plot, to describe action, to describe the relationships of the characters, and to emphasize certain values and the task of the sociologist of literature is to relate the experience of the writer's imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive. According to Escarpit (1968), literature is a socio-cultural fact not an aesthetic one. The presence of the tenets of sociology of literature especially theory of reflection, social order and influence in Miller's *The Crucible* have not been taken into consideration because very little research has been done from the perspective of the sociology of literature but this drama has not been studied in the frame of reference of these three tenets. Literature reflects the ills of society in order to make it realize its mistakes and make amends (Duhan, 2015). During the last few decades, several researches have been conducted in the realm of sociology of literature i.e. Costanzo Cahir (1999) explored the solitude of American society in the works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton; Amy E. Singer (2011) investigated social inequality in children's literature, and Hase (2014) explored literature as a social institution. Different researchers i.e. Williams (1959) analyzed Miller's plays in the

perspective of social questions and developing social thinking; Schissel (1994) rediscovered the witches in the male-dominated Salem society; Reed (2007) scrutinized Salem's witch-hunting in the perspective of feminism and cultural sociology; Hooti (2011) has attempted to search identity in emotional, moral and social predicaments. These researchers have attempted to study Miller's *The Crucible* in the perspective of sociology but the present research will explore the three tenets of sociology of literature i.e. 'theory of reflection', 'social control' and 'influence' in Miller's *The Crucible* since it has not yet been investigated.

### **Tenets of Sociology of Literature:**

1. There is a dialectical relationship between literature and society.
2. Literature is a reflection of society that created it: literary works reflect social, economic, religious, political, environmental, moral and domestic values of the society that produced the texts (Albrecht, 1954). According to Mark Twain (1898), literature is the product of race, epoch and era.
3. Literary creation reveals the determined social situations.
4. Literature is an agency of social control.
5. Literature impacts the people's attitudes and behaviors (The Influence Theory).

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is qualitative in nature; the paradigm of research is sociology of literature; the type of research method is textual analysis and a text-critical method is used in order to collect primary data because only one text of Miller i.e. *The Crucible* has been taken in order to explore the tenets of sociology of literature from it. The secondary data were collected from the published articles and books.

### **RESULTS & ANALYSIS**

The findings of the present study are to:

- i. Explore the presence of one of the tenets of sociology of literature i.e. 'reflection theory' in Miller's *The Crucible* through the reflection of social, religious, political and legal institutions of the Puritan community of the seventeenth century.
- ii. Discern 'social control' through controlling the inhabitants of the theocratic society of Salem by law and religion.
- iii. Investigate another tenet of sociology of literature i.e. 'influence theory' through this play's impact on the people by developing critical thinking among them.

Reflection theory is one of the tenets of sociology of literature and according to this theory a literary work reflects the social realities through the socio-political, religious,

economic, and moral values of the society that creates it. Miller's *The Crucible* reflects the Salem of 1692: it speaks to the history; it is not the history (Dabbs, 2017). It reflects social institutions like family, political, legal, religious and, economic institutions of seventeenth century Puritan Salem. In 1608, five years after the death of Queen Elizabeth, the Puritans or Separatists separated themselves from the Church of England, left England and settled in Holland. Later, fearing that they would lose their identity as a religious community in a foreign land, they applied for a charter to settle in the Virginia Plantation - a vast tract of land which included what is now New England in The New World. Far more representative in attitude toward the Church of England were the Puritans who joined the Massachusetts Bay Colony under the leadership of John Winthrop. Whatever their difference, with respect to the Church of England, the basic beliefs of both groups were identical since both held with Martin Luther that no people or bishop had a right to impose any law upon a Christian soul with consent (Baym et al., 1994).

The Puritans' lives were very hard in that vast tract of land. Baym, et al., (1994) quoted Bradstreet's father who told the people in England to come over and join them if their lives were endued with grace because there was no house where one had not died due to the terrible winter and the devastating infections that were the result of the summer heat (p.3). God's law and the teachings of Christ were observed in all institutions of the Puritan societies and they believed that God's hand was present in every event as also that He rewarded virtue and punished vice. The Puritans had confidence in God's design and that everything could emblemize something. According to Bremer (2009), the core of Puritanism was an understanding of God and the individual's relationship to Him. In writing about Bradstreet's writings, Adrienne Rich observes that seventeenth-century Puritan life "faith underwent its hourly testing, the domestic mundanities were episodes in the drama; the piecemeal thoughts of a woman stirring a pot, clues to her "justification in Christ" (Baym et al., 1994).

The Puritans were committed to leading an exemplary social life: following the path of righteousness, to be the children of light walking in darkness. Having first brought their personal life under the rule of God, the Puritans believed that their family would become a godly realm, their parish a godly realm, and society as a whole a godly kingdom. The foundation of the first institution of society i.e. the family was the relationship between husband and wife. Husbands and wives shared responsibilities in the supervision of their children. The Puritans' view of a proper society was that of a living organism in which each person had his or her distinct complementary role. They regularly gathered with friends and neighbors for social occasions i.e. feasting, telling stories, and sharing news. The Puritan families were insistent upon the proper observance of Sabbath because the commandment mandated that the Lord's Day be kept holy by fasting, worshiping, and avoiding labor. Bremer (2009) states that for

the Puritans, the institution of law was also subject to the requirements of God's law. They sacralized the economic institution, believing that it was an individual's duty to use God's bestowed economic gifts effectively in the tasks to which they had been called. Religious, social, economic, and political realities of the Puritans reflected in Miller's *The Crucible* are totally different: the word "Puritan" is associated with "prudish", "sexually repressed", "prohibitionists", and "busybody snoops". They are also known as theocrats, regicides, witch-burners, Indian killers, and bigoted heresy hunters (Bremer, 2009). According to Keller (1983), some of the typical traits of Puritans were hypocrisy and hypocritical licensing - saying one thing, doing another, sanctioning without sanctifying self-destructive ends, honoring the past while ensuring the future without sacrifice of self, condemning something and attracting one to it at the same time, and benevolence and destructiveness existing in one person.

Employing the reflection theory, one of the tenets of sociology of literature, the evil traits of Puritans are investigated from Miller's *The Crucible*. This play reflects the patriarchal social context of the Puritan community. The Puritans believed in Eve's role in the original sin, therefore women were subordinated to men in religious, social, legal and political spheres of life. In this play, female children i.e. Mary Warren and Mercy Lucas work as servants in the homes of Salem villagers while Abigail worked in the Proctor's home. She says to her uncle about Elizabeth: "She hates me, uncle, she must, for I would not be her slave. It's a bitter woman, a lying, cold, sniveling woman, and I will not work for such a woman!" (Miller, 2008, p. 12). Abigail was replaced with Mary Warren in the Proctor's home and the Proctor asks her: "Be you foolish, Mary Warren? Be you deaf? I forbid you to leave the house, did I not? Why shall I pay you? I am looking for you more often than my cows!" (p. 21). Mercy Lucas was the Putnam's servant and is also treated harshly like other female servants. Mr. Putnam bullies her seeing her in Mr. Parris' home: "Why aren't you home?" (p. 16). Religious and political institutions are reflected in this play because the action takes place in Salem - a Puritan community in 1692. The Puritans were a religious and political party during the Salem witchcraft trials and the play depicts many Puritan traits.

The Puritans opposed pleasure and the arts because they considered joy and laughter to be symptoms of sin. In the play, Parris asks Abigail: "And what shall I say to them? That my daughter and my niece I discovered dancing like heathen in the forest? (Miller, p.10)" Religious refugees settled in New England in 1608 with the purpose to establish a Bible-based society. This gave birth to Puritanism which states categorically that there is no place for those who indulge in witchcraft in the Puritan society of seventeenth century because the Bible abjures necromancy. The Bible says about witchcraft: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or

daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord” (Deuteronomy 18:9–12). This play takes place in Puritan society and deals with the historical witchcraft trials of Salem town. Throughout the play, the word ‘witch’ or ‘witchcraft’ has been used sixty seven times in this play. Parris sees his own ministry in danger due to his own niece- Abigail, daughter - Betty, and servant – Tattuba’s indulging in witchcraft: “We cannot leap to witchcraft. They will howl me out of Salem for such corruption in my house” (p. 14). The religious harshness of the Puritans is reflected in *The Crucible*. Puritanism in its secular and religious principles exercised self-restraining and self-corrective agencies (Ellis, 1888). The Proctor irritatingly mentions Parris’ frequently frightening from hell: “Can you speak one minute without we land in Hell again? I am sick of Hell!” (p.30). “He may turn his head, but not to Hell!” (p. 28) and later says: “I have trouble enough without I come five mile to hear him preach only hellfire and bloody damnation” (ibid.).

Law is another institution of society that is reflected in *The Crucible*. The historical witchcraft trials of Salem town reflect on the American justice system. This play deals with the trial rituals and the attitudes that surround it. The administrators of justice i.e. Danforth and Hawthorn are confused by the rift between civil and religious law in the Salem theocracy (Marino, 2015). The Holy Bible describes death as the penalty for witchcraft but both judges in Salem release those who confess their involvement in witchcraft. Instead of using their judicial experience, they simply rely on the evidences of the children i.e. Abigail and Mary Warren given the court. Danforth says: “The entire contention of the state in these trials is that the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children” (Miller, p. 88). They rely wrongly on the so-called victims of the witchcraft. As Danforth says:

One calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is ipso facto, on its face and by its nature, an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore, who may possibly be witness to it? The witch and the victim. None other. Now we cannot hope the witch will accuse herself; granted? Therefore, we must rely upon her victims - and they do testify, the children certainly do testify (p. 100).

The economic institution is also reflected in the witchcraft trials of Salem. Land was the source of earning for the villagers of Salem. Mr. Putnam wants to get the land of his neighbor, Giles Corey. Putnam’s conduct during the witch trial hysteria was due to the financial motivation (Boyer, 1974). Giles exposes Putnam’s lust for land: “And there is none but Putnam with the coin to buy so great a piece. This man is killing his neighbors for their land!” (p. 96).

Another tenet of sociology of literature “social control” has also been explored in *The Crucible*. In the theocratic society of Salem, the people were controlled by law and religion. According to Nye (1958), there are three different types of control i.e. direct control, punishment and reward, indirect control - affectionate identification with non-criminals, and internal control - conscience or sense of guilt. In the rigid Puritan society of this play, direct control is reflected in the form of law and religion. Both Judges and Parris fail to perform their role and their delinquent behavior becomes the cause of inadequate social control. According to Nye, “most delinquent behavior is the result of insufficient social control” (p. 4) which in Salem gives birth to the execution of twenty innocent people; by the institutions of law and religion at the same time that it results in Parris’ departure from Salem; Abigail’s turning into a prostitute in Boston; ruination of the farms of the victims “Certain farms which had belonged to the victims were left to ruin, and for more than a century no one would buy them or live on them” (ibid.); and breakdown of the power of theocracy in Massachusetts.

Another tenet of sociology of literature is the Influence theory. According to this tenet, literature casts its impact on the attitudes and behaviors of the people in various ways both desirable and undesirable (Albrecht, 1954). According to the influence theory or functionalist perspective, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in developing harmony and balance; each part influences and is influenced by other parts (Mooney, 2007). *The Crucible* being modern drama has impact on the people through developing critical thinking among them and exerts influence on the audience, arousing feelings of pity and fear. Miller produces the sense of “within” and “without” on the audience of this play: “within” in the form of producing emotions of pity (for Proctor and other characters of this play who were hanged by the law of Salem) and fear in the audience according to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and “without” in the form of producing critical thinking among them. “Without” enables the audience to think beyond the scene that takes place in this play but exerts influence on the modern man to think critically of the social realities around him. Miller annexes the audience with the characters through the realization of the desire- positive desire for pleasure and negative desire for lust, greed or envy. The realization that desire affects individuals and their behavior keeps the audience engrossed in the play. Miller’s critical thinking enables the audience not to think only in the historical context of the witchcraft trials of Salem of 1692 in which action of that play takes place but also to think in contemporary America of McCarthyism- the practice exercised in the United States of making accusations of subversion or treason accusing someone of being a Communist without proper regard for evidence in 1950s.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between literature and society is not new but American literature especially Miller's *The Crucible* has not been studied in the perspective of the tenets of sociology of literature i.e. Reflection theory, social control and influence theory. Employing the method of textual analysis and framework of sociology of literature, the present study is an attempt to explore these tenets in *The Crucible*. The findings of the study show that there is a dialectical relationship between circumstances and literature in which it is produced and social institutions that exert their influence on the individuals of a certain society that is reflected in this play.

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