

M.Z. Malaba: Witchcraft, Superstition, Religion and Hysteria in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

Abstract

A thematic approach is taken, analysing the play in its historical context, the various attitudes adopted by leading figures in the text; the issue of the patriarchal nature of the society and various definitions of “puritanism”; the fluidity of the notions of witchcraft, superstition, religion and the outbreak of hysteria among some of the young girls in Salem. The universal nature of the outbreaks of hysteria is discussed, with reference to Southern African schools.

Key words: Witchcraft, superstition, religion, integrity, Salem,

This article analyses aspects of Arthur Miller's tragedy, *The Crucible*, which is based on the infamous witch-hunt in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. The play, which is a set book in the South African High Schools matric examinations, resonates broadly speaking, with periodic outbursts of hysteria in African schools. The environmental conditions and cultural assumptions underpinning these incidents are explored.

The Puritan town, Salem, was shattered by the allegations that a group of girls led by Abigail Williams behaved in unbecoming ways and participated in evil rituals. Abigail's uncle, the belligerent minister in the town, Reverend Samuel Parris, is distraught by the weird behaviour of his daughter, Betty and deeply concerned by the damage to his reputation arising from the allegations that his Barbadian slave, Tituba played a leading role in a gathering in a forest at night, which included the drinking of blood. Abigail is described as “*a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling.*”¹ Parris is also worried by the rumours that his niece's reputation is not “entirely white.”² The fact that he became the minister in controversial circumstances, compounds his predicament. Parris condemns witchcraft as evil and the disgrace: “And what shall I say to

¹ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (London: Penguin Classics, Penguin Classics, 2015) 18.

² Miller *The Crucible*, 20.

them [members of the community]? That my daughter and my niece I discovered dancing like heathens in the forest?”³

The community is fraught with simmering tensions and the allegations bring the conflicts to a head. Abigail is obsessed with John Proctor and orchestrates the outbreak of mass hysteria among the young girls. She had enlisted Tituba to conjure a charm to kill John's wife and enable Abigail to replace Elizabeth. Abigail terrorises or persuades other girls to participate. The ritual included drinking blood.

The play hinges on whether witchcraft exists or not. Miller foregrounds the superstitious nature of some members of the community during the period when the play is set. I argue that the four terms, “Witchcraft, Superstition, Religion and Hysteria” are virtually synonymous as the residents are descendants of the Puritans who left England and went to America to worship as they wished, among other factors. Christopher Gillie in his *Longman Companion to English Literature* provides useful definitions of Puritanism:

The term is used in a narrow sense of religious practice and attitudes, and in a broad sense of an ethical outlook which is much less easy to define. In a strict sense it refers to those who rejected Queen Elizabeth I's religious settlement of 1560. This settlement sought a middle way between Roman Catholicism and the extreme spirit of reform of Geneva. The Puritans, influenced by Geneva, Zurich and other continental centres objected to the retention of bishops and to any appearance of what they regarded as superstition. Apart from their united opposition to Roman Catholicism and their insistence on simplicity in religious forms, Puritans disagreed among themselves on questions of doctrine and church organization. in church worship—the wearing of vestments by priests, and any kind of religious image ... In the broader sense of a whole way of life, puritanism has always represented strict obedience to the

³ Miller, *The Crucible*, 18 – 19.

dictates of conscience and strong emphasis on the virtue of self-denial. In this sense individuals can be described as ‘puritan’ whether or not they belong to one of the recognized Puritan sects, or even if they are atheists.⁴

The term is so broad based that we can see why there is so much dissent in Parris’ church. A former businessman, he was accustomed to a good life in Barbados, so he complains about his salary, wants gold candlesticks, and the title deed for his house, among other things. John Proctor, the other protagonist, objects to the fact that Parris is a hellfire and damnation preacher who hardly ever mentions God. Parris keeps a register of how many times members of the congregation attend church services. Proctor is charged by Reverend John Hale with ploughing on Sundays and not having his youngest son baptized. Hale is described as an intellectual who was delighted to display his wisdom: “This was a beloved errand for him; on being called here to ascertain witchcraft he felt the pride of the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for.”⁵

Miller’s commentary states that:

Like Reverend Hale and others on this stage, we conceive the Devil as a necessary part of a respectable view of cosmology. Ours is a divided empire in which certain ideas and emotions and actions are of God and their opposites are of Lucifer. It is impossible for most men [and women] to conceive of a morality without sin as of earth without a ‘sky’. Since 1692 a great but superficial change has wiped out God’s beard and the Devil’s horns, but the world is still gripped between two diametrically opposed absolutes. The concept of unity, in which positive and negative are attributes of the same force, in which good and evil are relative, ever-changing and ever joined to the same phenomenon—such a concept is still reserved to the physical sciences and to the few who have grasped the history of ideas. When it is recalled that until the Christian era the underworld

⁴ Christopher Gillie, *Longman Companion to English Literature*, (London: Longman, 1972) 731.

⁵ Miller, *The Crucible*, 37.

was never regarded as a hostile area, that all gods were useful and essentially friendly to man despite occasional lapses; when we see the steady and methodical inculcation into humanity of the idea of man's worthlessness – until redeemed – the necessity of the Devil may become evident as a weapon, a weapon designed and used time and time again in every age to whip men into a surrender to a particular church or-church state.⁶

The challenge that Miller raises here is the need to engage in a critical enquiry into the dualism that is embedded in the binary opposition that the 'modern world' thrusts us into: that of us versus them, good versus evil, positive versus negative attitudes / attributes. We cannot and should not opt out of engaging with the challenges that our world presents us with. It seems to me that we should not accept, unchallenged the easy options which binary opposition presents us with. Perhaps we should probe deeper, as Miller challenges us to do:

Normally the actions and deeds of a man were all that society felt comfortable in judging. The secret intent of an action was left to the ministers, priests, and rabbis to deal with. When diabolism rises, however, actions are the least important manifests of the true nature of a man. The Devil, as Reverend Hale said, is a wily one, and until an hour before he fell, even God thought him beautiful in Heaven.⁷

Reverends Parris and Hale are initially presented as intellectuals who are proud of their educational accomplishments but, ironically towards the end of the play, they are both filled with doubt and disillusioned. The conclusion challenges the audience or reader to ponder the role of religion in causing or exacerbating the disintegration of the Salem community. This is ironic as another of Gillie's definitions of Puritans states: "In the broader sense of a whole way of life, puritanism has always represented strict obedience to the

⁶ Miller, *The Crucible*, 37-38.

⁷ Miller, *The Crucible*, 39.

dictates of conscience and strong emphasis on the virtue of self-denial.”⁸

In Act 2 Hale defends Parris when Proctor criticises him, saying: “The man’s ordained therefore the light of God is in him.”⁹ In Act 3 Judge Hathorne states: “I think, sometimes, the man has a mad look about him.” Proctor berates Hale when he is told that Rebecca Nurse was charged with murdering seven children: “Pontius Pilate! God will not let you wash your hands of this.”¹⁰ If God’s ministers are presented as pathetic men, what does that say about the God they serve?

Proctor staunchly challenges the antics of the hysterical behaviour of the girls, dismissing them as fraudsters. When Proctor eventually confesses that he committed adultery with Abigail, he is relieved from the guilt that has plagued him for months. Although his equivocal behaviour in Act 4 diminishes his stature, even Parris concedes that Rebecca Nurse and Proctor are held in high esteem by most people in Salem. The judicial officials’ high status does not exonerate them from the chaos that Abigail, the ringleader of the anarchic destruction of a fragile community, causes. Parris eventually reveals that his niece and Mercy Lewis have fled, and to add insult to injury, Abigail stole her uncle’s savings.

The fact that, after denouncing the court’s proceedings and quitting it, Hale returns and works tirelessly to persuade as many prisoners in death row as possible to save themselves by confessing, reveals that he does have a conscience: “Excellency, I have signed seventy-two death warrants. I am a minister of the Lord, and I dare not take a life without there be a proof so immaculate no slightest qualm of conscience may doubt it.”¹¹

In Giles Corey’s case he died not by hanging, but through weights being placed on his body. When pressed to confess, he bravely

⁸ Gillie, *Longman’s Companion to English Literature*, 731.

⁹ Miller, *The Crucible*, 63.

¹⁰ Miller, *The Crucible*, 72.

¹¹ Miller, *The Crucible*, 89.

responded saying “‘More weight.’”¹² By refusing to say aye or nay, his land could not be seized or auctioned, so his sons inherited it. Ironically, his suffering was initially triggered by him denouncing his wife for reading!

The other heroic figures in *The Crucible* are Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor, who refuse to lie and ‘confess’ that they are witches, despite the dreadful conditions in which they are kept. Though physically frail, they are morally strong, as Rebecca says when urged by Danforth to confess: “Why, it is a lie, it is a lie, how may I damn myself? I cannot, I cannot.”¹³ Miller’s masterstroke emerges in his deft exposure of the toxic masculinity that pervades the environment of Salem. Proctor’s domineering attitude towards Elizabeth is evident in most of their domestic interactions the audience witnesses in the play. Proctor repeatedly threatens to “whip”¹⁴ their servant Mary Warren. Parris, despite being a clergyman, treats his slave, Tituba churlishly.

The political context in which the play was written was the McCarthy era, where witch-hunts of a sort were conducted to smoke out communists in America. Miller’s play in a sense foregrounds the political environment in which spiritual or ideological differences undermine the moral fibre or fabric in societies. A terrible price was paid by innocent people through the vengeful manipulation of judicial and political power. The global repercussions of such conduct remain with us to this day.

Shabaz Afzal Bezar, Mahmood Ahmad Azhar and Muhammad Khalid’s article “Tenets of Sociology of Literature; A Sociological Perspective of Miller’s *The Crucible*”¹⁵ foreground different definitions of Puritans that highlight polar opposites, such as:

¹² Miller, *The Crucible*, 118.

¹³ Miller, *The Crucible*, 111.

¹⁴ Miller, *The Crucible*, 55.

¹⁵ Shabaz Afzal Bezar, Mahmood Ahmad Azhar and Muhammad Khalid, “Tenets of Sociology of Literature: A Sociological Perspective of Miller’s *The Crucible*” *Biannual Journal of Gender and Social Issues* 17, 1 (2018): 87-97.

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 [sic] under the rule of God, the Puritans believed 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 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 task to which they had been called. Religious, 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 and 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.¹⁶

The hypocrisy is verges on schizoid personality disorder. The authors' sociological viewpoint is beyond my ken, as is their critique of the American legal system. Their insights on the subordinate roles of women, particularly the maltreatment of servants is insightful.¹⁷

Academic studies have been conducted regarding the impact of outbreaks of mass hysteria in African schools. Dr Indiran Govender article "Mass hysteria among South African primary school learners in Kwa-Dukuza, Kwa-Zulu-Natal"¹⁸ points out that "Mass hysteria has been described in literature for more than 600 years in a variety of cultures and settings ..."¹⁹ She also points out that:

Some of the teachers and religious leaders proposed evil-spirit possession and offered to cleanse the school. Since the community of Stanger comprises predominately Hindu and Muslim beliefs, this was acceptable behaviour reflecting evil possession and the need for the children and the school to undergo prayers to be cleansed of the evil spirits.²⁰

Govender also refers to incidents in schools in Gauteng that occurred in 2009; body itching without apparent cause in Mangaung; Belgium and Mexico in 2000. Unfortunately, the footnotes seem to be jumbled up.²¹

Demobly Kokota's article "View Point: Episodes of mass hysteria in African schools: A study of literature"²² mentions mass hysteria incidents that occurred in schools South Africa, Tanzania, Malawi,

¹⁶ Bezar et al, "Tenets of Sociology," 91-92. Sources F.J. Bremer (2009), *Puritanism: A very short introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. K. Keller, "The Puritan Perverse". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 25, 1(1983): 139-164.

¹⁷ Bezar et al, "Tenets of Sociology," 92.

¹⁸ Indiran Govender, "Mass hysteria among South African primary school learners in Kwa-Dukuza, Kwa-Zulu-Natal" *Official Journal of the South African Academy of Family Practice / Primary Care* 52, 4 (2010): 318-321.

¹⁹ Govender, "Mass hysteria," 318.

²⁰ Govender, "Mass hysteria," 321.

²¹ Govender, "Mass hysteria," 318.

²² Demobly Kokota, "View Point: Episodes of mass hysteria in African schools: A study of literature", *Malawi Medical Journal* 23, 3 (2011): 74-77.

Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda. When the article was published he was a member of staff in the University of Malawi's Department of Mental Health, in the College of Medicine. No scientific causes were identified in the incidents he refers to. His conclusion is that:

Supernaturalism has fuelled most flamboyant cases of mass hysteria. More properly described 'mass hysteria' are cases in which groups of people act upon beliefs which gain exaggerated credence in times of social and economic distress. ... [The studies] show that People in Africa are more likely to attribute mass hysteria to the supernatural such as witchcraft, Satanism or any element which makes up their cultural beliefs.²³

In conclusion, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* taps into universal elements that highlight the vulnerability of human beings, these can result in tragic deaths or traumatic experiences. The importance of integrity is personified by Rebecca Nurse and Elizabeth Proctor in the crucible of mass hysteria.

²³ Kotoka, "View Point," 77.