

# Comparison between Greek Tragedy and Arthur Miller's modern tragedy in : The Crucible



**Dr. Shaifali Saxena**  
Assistant Prof. (English)  
Upadhi P.G. College, Pilibhit,

## ABSTRACT

Miller is regarded as a luminary figure in reflecting the tragedies of common individual of twentieth century in America. According to him tragedy is no longer straitened to the royal man placed indifferent from others. Miller rebuff hard definitions of traditional Greek tragedy and improve them to be acquainted with modern society. Miller highlight the internal conflict between the individual and society for the most part in his , he observe tragedies inherent in situation as the consequence of the failure of the individual's struggle against the society he lives in .The purpose of this paper is to examine the issue of tragic fatal downfall of a common man due to adultery.

**Keywords :** Tragedy, Crucible, Modern, Struggle.

At the outset of 20<sup>th</sup> century, man is seen as a victim of his surroundings and society is thought to have become a shaping force in man's lives. Modernism had arrived in America towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century itself when the nation had adopted secularism and scientific approach of life. The industrialization and the formation of big cities had transformed the nation from agrarian to the industrial one. Scientific inventions and discoveries made America a new nation capable of facing new challenges of modernism.

The crucible 1953 is one of the most important play of miller that has over the years, come to attain global critical acclaim as well as commercial success, very much like the earlier Death of a sales man. The study begins with the introduction and gradually displays the problems of identity. Common individual has always been the victim of commercial society. The classical tragic mode is archaic and it no longer suits for ordinary life in modern society. Increasingly, scores of dramatists become preoccupied with social and political issues. Under such circumstances, Arthur Miller attempts to

remold the classical concept of tragedy and formulates an acceptable modern definition of tragedy. Even if he denies some major principles found in standardized Greek tragedy, one cannot ignore that Greek tragedy has an indelible impact on Miller's works. *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge* display characteristics of both Greek Tragedy and Miller's idea of modern tragedy. This paper attempts to draw on certain theories of Greek Tragedy and Miller's conception of modern tragedy which are the foundations for the subsequent analysis. Then it respectively analyzes how distinctive characteristics of Greek Tragedy feature these two plays including the functions of the role of chorus which consists of an implicit narrator in *The Crucible*, the tragic hero, the tragic flaw and catharsis, attempting to perceive Miller's underlying ideas of modern tragedy.

### **Greek Tragedy and Arthur Miller's Modern Tragedy**

Choral performances play a considerable role in Greek tragedy, in which a group of men sing hymns and dance in praise of god Dionysus throughout the play. The function of the tragic chorus, both as a real and ideal entity, is to comment on the dramatic actions and draw universal ethical conclusions from the play. The tragic chorus is called time and time again to participate affectively in the actions by voicing the feelings which the play evokes, to summarize information that facilitates the audience's understanding of the play, to comment on the actions by revealing moral implications and social significance (Bushnell, 2005, p. 215-233). At the same time, the chorus members provide time for scene changes and give the protagonists a break; they offer important background information and allow for the tragic plot to unfold. As the importance of the characters increases, the tragic chorus become fewer in number and tends to have less importance in the plot. Modern realist tragedies no longer feature a choric role as Greek Tragedy does in *Oedipus Rex*.

The tragic hero performs a supreme big part in Greek tragedy in which the prioritize tragic hero is a noble and honourable man with a tragic flaw which eventually leads to his destruction. He must be greatly superior; he must possess a great reputation and good fortune. The tragic hero should be defined by a hierarchical order and his demise is the result of his fatal flaw, his own fault which others cannot be blamed for. Aristotle stresses that the hero's downfall from such height should have a public significance. His tragic downfall brings about strong emotions of fear and pity among the audience. The catharsis is an emotional relief through which the audience can achieve a state of moral and spiritual renewal and obtain a sense of liberation from stress and anxiety after they undergo emotions of fear and pity. Aristotle believes that the function of tragedy is to arouse this catharsis—a purging of emotions and a release of tension. Golden also points out that what is accompanied by tragedy is not merely pity and fear, but the representation of pitiful and fearful situations, a clarification of such incidents (Golden, 1962, p. 51-60). These particular fearful and pitiful events so skillfully arranged and presented by the

playwright lead the audience to the cathartic effect and perceive a universal condition of human existence.

As an empirical playwright, the social, political, moral and personal questions are reflected directly and indirectly by Miller. In most of his works, he reveals social injustice and its effect on the lives of his characters in modern society. His concept of tragedy is deeply grounded in his concerns with social problems. In his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, he presents his conception of tragedy. Tragedy, he writes, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly. Tragedy derives from the underlying fear of being displaced and being torn away from our chosen image of who we are (Roudane, 2015, p. 8). Miller focuses on the internal conflict between the individual and society. For the most part in his essay, he sees the tragedy inherent in the situation as a consequence of the failure of the individual's struggle against the society he lives in. Man should not be conceived of as a private entity and his social relations as something attached to him, but rather he must be seen as constantly in the process of becoming part of the society which also simultaneously shapes him.

Miller unsettles the definition of Aristotelian tragedy in that Aristotelian tragedy derives from a fatal tragic flaw which leads to a hero's crisis and downfall while Miller's tragedy comes from the external forces operated on the man, his failure of confrontation towards the society he lives in. The importance of the tragic flaw is diminished in Miller's viewpoint. Insofar as he regards external factors as the source of tragedy, he argues common man is apt for tragedy as kings are. Miller argues for the impossibility of tragedy if tragedy must be about the socially elevated nobles in the social hierarchy, because the modern age is an age without rigid hierarchy which is eliminated by democracy. He argues for the possibility of a common tragic hero by observing the fact that modern psychiatry deals with such conceptions as the Oedipus complex which can be applied to anyone no matter whether he is a king or a common man (Roudane, 2015, p. 9). He makes it clear that the common man experiences the same mental processes as the high-born heroes of the past, facilitating the secularization of tragedy. Tragedy, furthermore, is not exclusively about individuals, but more precisely about humanity and it reveals the truth about human societies. Miller explores themes of a personal search for forgiveness and salvation. The individual's tragedy lies deep down not only in his psychology as well as the tragic flaw, but in his milieu which is influenced by the socio-economic system. Man's own personality, psychology and social and moral forces act upon each other and bring about the individual's end.

Tragedy, however, brings the audience fear besides sadness, sympathy and identification; it also brings knowledge and enlightenment (Roudane, 2015, p. 12). For Miller, knowledge is ethical knowledge, the right way of living in the world. His idea of tragedy related to ethical knowledge here can be viewed as an equivalent to the catharsis in Greek Tragedy which stresses the audience's moral enlightenment after

the undergoing of fear and pity. Miller further points out that tragedy is inseparable from a certain hope regarding to humans. The glimpse of hope inherent in tragedy can function to raise sadness out of the pathetic towards the tragic, which adds a hint of optimism in modern tragedy.

Miller starts to adjust the device of chorus from the classical Greek Tragedy when creating *The Crucible*. He also uses the choric role to unfold the tragedy. He employs an implicit omniscient narrator, a parallel of Greek chorus, to address the audience to tell the story. Not being part of the action, the implicit narrator provides detailed information on the characters and comments on the social background of the play. He traces the history of the characters to show that the long-held hatred of neighbours who turn on each other has its historical origins. The constant bickering over land boundaries can cause the citizen's grievance and resentfulness which eventually leads one to take revenge on the other. The neighbors' pent-up dissatisfaction towards one another provides excuses for their later invented accusation of witchcraft in the dramatic text. Some people are accused of witchcraft by others who merely feel envy and hostility towards them, revealing the guise of morality in Salem. Except for the disclosing of the steeped-in tradition of vengeance in his detailed monologue, he also introduces the history of Salem in which people's way of life is extremely strict and sombre. In Salem, the inhabitants oppose individuality for they see it as a threat to their existing social order. The community is intolerant of individual thinkers who question or refuse to accept what they are told to believe (Ackerman, 2013, p. 115). The dominant ideology is held by the religious authority that runs the government and manipulates the citizens. Judge Hawthorne and Reverend Parris, therefore, have chance to abuse their power, and characters like Abigail could manipulate it to her selfish advantage. These background issues of land ownership, personal vengeance and power struggles give ample evidence to the tumult of Salem where it is overtaken by accusations of witchcraft. The concern with social problems, social injustice and its effect on the lives of the characters is evident in Miller's plays. The choric narrator uses the lengthy background information to foreshadow Proctor and others' tragedies, and accounts for the inevitability of their tragedies in morally degenerate Salem. Miller applies a choric role to weave in and out of the characters' dialogue and at the same time comments on the milieu of the play, which illustrates the historical parallel between the witch hunt in Salem in 1692 and McCarthyism in the current United States and reflects that tragedies are socially determined.

*The Crucible* has the outline structure of Greek Tragedy with Proctor as a standardized tragic hero. Proctor is an upright, reasonable and honest man, but he has an affair with Abigail, which is a fatal flaw that leads him to death. Their affair plays a significant role—an incident that touches off the widespread fear of witchcraft throughout the play. Elizabeth, Proctor's wife, dismisses Abigail after she spots their affair, resulting in Abigail's vengeance—the indictment of witchcraft—on her. Abigail's revenge on Elizabeth never seems more than a way of removing Elizabeth and marrying Proctor. Not only does

Abigail accuse Elizabeth of witchcraft, but she also sets the witchcraft hysteria in motion in Salem. She starts to accuse the community's outcasts and gradually moves up to the respected members of the community, which causes community-wide fear of being indicted of witchcraft. Proctor initially tries to hide their affair, but later he realizes that nothing can prevent Abigail's instigation but his confession to their affair. He eventually admits their affair and his guilt publicly, coming to save his threatened wife and defend something more than his wife. His tragic flaw results in his downfall, but his role of a tragic hero shows a larger view of Miller's conception of modern tragedy. Asked to concede a lie of participating in the witchcraft, he refuses to sign the document admitting the false confession. When Judge Danforth demands an explanation, Proctor cries out "because how may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (Miller, 2015, p. 328). He refuses to provide a false confession under the threat of his impending death. Miller stresses that tragedy is evoked when the tragic hero is ready to lay down his life to secure his personal dignity because he is embroiled in the social mire. Faced with the trumped-up charge, Proctor would rather go to the gallows than give false testimony. He saves his sense of himself, his dignity as a man; he seeks the meaning of his own life when threatened by the invented charge.

His tragedy is also intensified by the fault of the society according to Miller's idea of modern tragedy. Judge Hawthorne and Deputy Governor Danforth believe that they are emissaries of God and everything they do must be right. Having realized that they might be deceived by Abigail and other girls, they never reassess their actions because they think the citizens in the community would target at them if they knew the judges had made impaired judgement. Parris also knows this but he makes scapegoats of people including Proctor and Rebecca in order to strengthen his position as the Reverend of Salem. They connive at hateful revenge under the shield of righteousness. The church abuses their immense power, resulting in the innocents' tragedies. Thus the importance of the tragic flaw as a disadvantage in Proctor's character diminishes, and the tragedy stems from the corrupted stifling social environment. As Miller deeply believed, individual tragedies do have their social roots. Man's tragedy is viewed as constantly in the process of being shaped and inevitably influenced by the environment which he lives in. Miller's focus on social problems not only expresses the characters' tragedies, but reflects the moral truth concerning society. Miller's concept of modern tragedy does have ethic values; there exists no tragedy without messages of moral values. The death of the innocents as scapegoats in the historical corrupted society shows a larger impending tragedy in American society, McCarthyism.

The vanquishing of the tragic hero awakens the powerful emotions of pity and fear in classical Greek Tragedy. The audience sympathizes with his misfortune and feels pity for his inevitable fate. At the conclusion of *The Crucible* when Proctor sacrifices his life to retain his sense of integrity with the intoning of the final prayer, the audience feels something more than pity and fear. Miller writes, "There

lies within the dramatic form the ultimate possibility of raising the truth-consciousness of mankind to a level of such intensity as to transform those who observe it" (Miller, 1956, p. 36). He strongly believes that the tragedy can lead the audience to ponder something bigger such as ethic and moral problems closely interrelated with humans; he also believes in the capability of the audience to achieve spiritual enlightenment from tragedy. Proctor struggles to reconstruct a new self through which he is able to become worthy of respect from others and retrieve his name again. Not only does Proctor's death evoke great sympathy, but it impresses the audience with enlightenment and knowledge—the high consciousness of defending one's dignity when he is mired in dilemma. It provides the audience an insight into the importance of regaining one's integrity in the world. Miller also points out that there exists a glimpse of hope regarding humans in tragedies. This hint of hope inherent in tragedy is enough to raise sadness out of the pathetic towards the tragic. The audience can observe the optimism when Proctor stands up to defy the religious authority in order to preserve his integrity as a man. No matter how corrupted and unscrupulous the social environment has become, there are always upright people shining through in it.

The study reveals the different effects on the selves of the characters involved in the historical moment of a social crisis. The crucible ultimately ends as a tragedy, The audience is transported to the Salem jail cell. At the top of the act, Rebecca nurse and John Proctor are scheduled to be hanged. Both the characters have resisted a confession, which sentences them to death. It also displays a complex interface of personal, social, psychological, moral and political factors in the search for identity. The choice of a historical moment facilitates the exposition of Miller's hypothesis about self, because the Salem history simultaneously creates a distance and proximity of the audience to the subject matter of the play. The emphasis in 'The Crucible' is on the external aspect of human behaviour, on an individual's actions, though it is true that ultimately these actions can be traced to be originating from a particular inner being. The study displays Miller's basic attempt who wants to show man struggling against the society of which he himself is a part. This is the most valid and fertile soul-soil of his dramaturgy. At one point Hogan (1964: 9) remarked, "The one thing a man fears most next to death is the loss of his good name. Man is evil in his own eyes, my friends, worthless and the only way he finds respect for himself is by getting other people to say he is a nice fellow". Finally, the study has tried to show the inevitability of public intrusion into private 'self', and has attempted to highlight the quest for self-understanding in the play, which revolves round the protagonist's efforts and his subsequent failure in maintaining a boundary between his private 'self' and his public role. However, the life has to flow ahead with all its ups and downs, as Goethe says, "the whole art of life consists in giving up our existence in order to exist" (Bishop, 2009: 171). The study reaches its conclusion by showing that, an individual under different unsatisfactory circumstances starts having conflicts with his existing 'self' and tries to search for a new identity.

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