Authority and Terror in Arthur Miller’s the Crucible

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to prove that the political system in America during the beginning of the Cold War used false claims, established repressive censorship and unjust trials in order to create hegemonic atmosphere and unjustifiable horror in order to control its citizens, like the repressive and unjust trials which happened in the seventeenth century in Salem, Massachusetts. This paper exposes the parallel comparison between these trials of Salem to those of House un American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1950’s, which in turn fallaciously accused some Americans of being communist and of supporting the radicals who tried to destroy America. Miller throughout the Crucible castigates the American system and calls to safeguard the individual liberty.
Arthur Miller is considered one of the notable American playwrights of the 20th century. He was born in Harlem, New York, on October 17th, 1915, to an immigrant family of Polish and Jewish descent. Miller was formed by the Great Depression, which brought monetary damage onto his father, a small producer, and verified to the young Miller the uncertainty of modern existence. After graduation from high school, he worked in a warehouse. With the money he earned he attended the University of Michigan where he began to write plays. His first public success was with *Focus*. Miller’s next play, *Death of a Salesman*, became one of the most famous American plays of its period. It is the tragedy of Willy Loman, a man ruined by fake values that are in large part the values of his society. His best-known plays include: *All My Sons*, *a View from the Bridge*, and the *Crucible*. Miller in his literary works intermixed social consciousness with a searching concern for his characters’ inner lives. For him, it was momentous to put the ordinary man at the centre of a tragedy. He died on February 10, 2005. Miller depended in writing the *Crucible* on the historical report of the Salem witch trials.

He focused on the unearthing of young girls and a slave playing in the woods, conjuring spirits from the dead. Rather than punishing them for their devilish actions, the girls charged other innocent citizens of Salem with exercising witchcraft. Paradoxically, the girls shunned penalty by accusing others of the very things of which they were guilty. This girls’ outrageous and childish finger-indictment produced mass hysteria and created a climate of terror in which everybody was a probable witch. Thus, the number of innocent detainees increased and incertitude within the Salem community was escalated. By the end of 1692, the Salem court had convicted and executed nineteen men and women.

The present paper argues that the political system in America after the Second World War, during the beginning of the Cold War used false claims and established repressive censorship and unjust trials in order to create hegemonic atmosphere and unjustifiable horror in order to control its citizens, like the repressive and unjust trials which happened in Salem and Massachusetts in the seventeenth century which accused some people of dealing with witchcraft and being servants of the Devil. This paper exposes a parallel between these trials of Salem and those of House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1950’s, which in turn fallaciously accused some Americans of being communist and supporting the radicals who tried to destroy America.

The present paper adopts the concept of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, which states that ideology does not mean a collection of thoughts, or “false consciousness”. He defines ideology as a procedure of “representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 109). Added to that he clarifies that an impressive literary work does not necessarily mean a product or reverberation of ideology, but it also generates for the reader a
space from which to discover and divulge the origin of ideology, from which it is made and from which it detaches itself as an art, and to which it alludes. The social structure is fragmented and combines an array of social formations or as Althusser calls it “ideological state apparatuses”, or “ideological, structures” (ISAs). In fact, ISAs denote varied institutions in ideological practice, including religious, political, educational, media, legal and literary institutions and factors by which our values, desires and preferences are inculcated in us. Althusser confirms that ISAs enhance an ideology that will be in accordance with the hegemonic wishes and schematic conspiracies of the state. Therefore, these ISAs turn to be advantageous to the political hegemony because they strengthen its domination cunningly and with the help of the intestine approval of the individuals (Bressler 173).

The seventeenth century witnessed the Puritans’ ascending to the authority in England and America. The Puritans established their religious sect in the sixteenth century. They were oppressed and tortured by the royal authority. They were strict and firm in their religious learning. They called for reformation during the reign of King Henry VIII. The Puritans abolished Episcopal hierarchy, like the prayer book, the ritual vestment, and the celebration of Christmas. They opposed the Church of England; they became opponents of the state. They were divided into two groups: Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The Presbyterians who conformed to the majority of English Puritans believed that the church should include the population entirely and comprise geographical parish units (Miller, The American Puritans 2).

The second group i.e. the Congregationalists believed that each church was independent; the churches had to be self-governed entirely. According to their creed, each congregation would choose its pastor, officers and the masses had to remain outside the congregation. The Congregationalists emphasized the unanimity of the saints and the responsibility of the civil authority for keeping the unchurched people in subjection and preventing the rise of heresy or any competing ecclesiastical proposals among them (Miller, The American Puritans 2). “As for the American Puritans, they were peculiar, due to the homogeneous people, the sparse soil, the climate and the economic struggle” (Miller ix). They played a dominant role in New England. They carried the traits of English Puritans across the continent, even though the original creed in England was lost. Their societies were strictly organized and they established Puritanism as one of the survival factors in American life and thought. Curiously enough, Miller visited Salem and got all the documents and papers related to that tragic event. In this respect, Enoch Brater points out that “Miller drove to the Atlantic coast of eastern Massachusetts to research letters, diaries, and court records relating to the Salem witch trials of 1692 a murky period in New England history” (56). The play is not historical, as it is written by a historian, but Miller makes some changes
from the original story for dramatic purposes, and he plans to make it more interesting, realistic and acceptable to the audience and readers of 1950’s. This literary technique enables him to shock them concerning the dangers around them, when a mere rumor is going to destroy them and turns their life upside down, a matter which makes him unable to say or clarify which event and informant is real and which is invented. In this sense William J and McGrill Jr clarify that “A playwright has no debt of literalness. Right now, I couldn’t tell you which details were taken from the records verbatim and which were invented. I think you can say that this play is as historically authentic as Richard II” (263).

_The Crucible_ opened in Salem in 1692. Salem was a new small village. At the beginning of the play, Miller gave us details about the nature of its inhabitants who lived in an extremely closed society. They had strong belief in religion. They worked very hard, and they helped each other as much as possible. They formed a communal society. By their nature, they were suspicious of individuality, which gave the opportunity to the church to have strong political control over them. They devoted their live to survive. They worked seriously and rigidly and lived according to the Puritans’ principles. In this sense Jean Marie Bonnet states that, “Such an adamantly rigid society of course implies that any form of individuality will be considered subversive and dangerous, such society is likely to generate suspicion among its members to develop” (33). A “Somber and ‘Strict’ society was not acceptable and dangerous because under certain circumstances, such shaky society would lose its connection as Susan Abboston clarifies, “And the witch trials will offer them a release of pent-up frustration and emotion. Under the guise of morality, they will be given the opportunity to express envy and hostility toward their neighbors and take vengeance” (118).

The witch trials at Salem charged people with dealing with witchcraft and turning to be the Devil’s disciples, in a pious village, which considers such a thing is not only blasphemy, but it is also an anti-authoritarian deed in a very serious time of their life. Dealing with witchcraft is suspected when two young girls were laid unconscious in their beds. One of them is Betty, Mr. Parris’s daughter who is the minister of Salem. He suspects the matter of witchcraft, because he saw his daughter and some other girls participating in some ritualistic magic acts in the forest at night which is, “Virgin forest was the Devil’s last preserve” (Miller, Act I, 5). Mr. Hale, the clergy man who is professional in diagnosing witchcraft is brought, and obtains a confession from the black servant, Tituba, that she has been “conjuring up” the devil. The court is formed and the girls appointed officials in it, “The girls are now credited with the power to identify witches; all whom they denounce, on whatever grounds, are arrested and brought to trial” (Miller,108-109).

The dramatic way in which they check the suspects is to bring the accused in front of the girls, and if the girls shout and cry and fall on the
ground, the accused will be detained directly and indicted of bewitching them, “And folks brought before them, and if they scream and howl and fall to the floor –the person’s clapped in the jail for bewitchin’ them” (Miller, Act II, 41). It is ridiculous and funny to accuse people of such an “invisible crime”. And what makes the matter so tragic and horrible is that the court has the power and authority to hang the accused since they live under the protection of such a terrible theocracy. Also, they add to it a sacred trait, “It’s God work we do” (Miller, Act II, 46). Such a kind of trials is not the application of law, but is a matter of liquidation and vengeance; if anyone wants to end or liquidate a rival, he would accuse him of witchcraft.

So, Mongrel Walcott’s charge against Martha Corey of killing his pigs and his inability to keep them alive, and Mrs. Putnam’s charge against Nurse Rebecca of killing her seven babies, and Abigail’s charge against Elizabeth, John Proctor’s wife of her trying to kill her, all those people are searching for revenge, and they find their great chance in this false witch-court. In this respect Retta Blaney states that “The mass hysteria shows what happened in a community when people don’t trust each other and use people and events for their own political purposes. Proctor knows why the town’s leaders are quick to believe the children. “I’ll tell what’s walking Salem. We are what we always were, but now the little children are jangling in the keys of kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law” (15). The mercilessness of the prosecutors and the excitement of neighbor to attest against neighbor evidently reveal the vicious power of the communally authoritative aggression.

In fact, the real cause of Mongrel’s charge of Martha is that he had bought a pig from her and the pig died a week later, when he asked her to give his money back, she refused, and the real reason behind Mrs. Putnam’s charge against Rebecca is to gain her land, and the reason behind Abigail’s charge of Elizabeth is to remove her away and this gives her the opportunity to marry John Proctor, her former boss who had an adulterous sheet with her seven months ago. When Elizabeth knew this, she dismissed Abigail. So, malice and avarice were playing the biggest and the main role in this court.

So, under such a kind of terrible transformational changes in a closed restricted society, it is necessary for this society which is guided by totalitarian, theocratic leaderships to find scapegoats in order to keep controlling the citizens according to their prejudice and to impose and preserve their power and domination. Enoch Brater confirms that “Any threat to entrench authority at the moment when society is in transition, as Salem surely is in Miller’s play, will find its scapegoats” (66).

Confessing publically in a ritualistic way and mentioning names of innocent people is the only choice left to the accused in order to save his soul. The court was not neutral and just. So, people of Salem should be careful in the way they should react to this court, since there was no chance
for protesting, arguing or confronting the oppressive legal procedures followed and applied by the court. The aim of any court in general is to spread justice, equality, democracy and freedom, but the court of Salem was inequitable and unjust. There is no way in between to oppose this holy court, “But, you must understand sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between” (Miller, Act III, 71). The unreasonable procedures of the court continue to disrepute even the well-known citizens of Salem. Nurse Rebecca is an old woman. She has a good reputation in Salem; she is used to helping all the citizens and even gives money to some when needed of them. But the court did not understand the status of a decent inhabitant like Rebecca. On the contrary, the court detained and charged her with witchcraft, and this also confirms the brutality of such court. Henry Popkin states that “The Crucible, too, has its kernel of good people who oppose the witch trials but become the victims of the court. They are paragons of virtue. Even the visiting investigator of witches remarks, of the most improbable defendant: “If Rebecca Nurse be tainted, then nothing’s left to stop the whole green world from burning” (47).

As a consequent result of this course that the court decides to follow, fourteen people are hanged and hundreds are detained in prison. The legal procedures of the court give us a clear image of the nature of theocratic authority of Salem at that time. The use of false claims gives the opportunity to the authority to practise excessive power framed by legal procedures upon its people in order to control them. In this respect, Terry Otten mentions that “Desperate to maintain tight control, the theocratic system asserted its absolutism, generating a historical conflict between what Heliman calls the “imperative” for order and an “impulsive” will to power” (67-68).

Throughout the Crucible Miller wants to shed light on the current situation of freedom and democracy in America in 1950’s as Henry Popkin clarifies: “Although the Crucible set in seventeen century America, Arthur Miller intends it as a comment on American life on his time”. (139). Arthur Miller’s The Crucible gives us an allegory that stretches for centuries. It is an exposition on the claustraphobic Puritanical rule of behavior, fear of witches and trivialities of Massachusetts in the 17th century. Paradoxically, Miller employs the play as a mirror to reveal the anti-Communist hysteria hearing blazed by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1940's and 1950's.

McCarthyism, as the Britannica Encyclopedia defines it is “A name given to the period of time in American history that saw Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy produced a series of investigations and hearings during the 1950s in an effort to expose supposed communist infiltration of various areas of the U.S. government. The term has since become a byname for defamation of character or reputation by means of widely publicized indiscriminate allegations, especially on the basis of
unsubstantiated charges” (Achter). It is the process of producing false charges of treachery, unfaithfulness and conspiracy without evidence. Actually, during the 1950’s, there was a fever about censorship that was set by the government upon the writers, actors, and journalists. This censorship observes the relationship between those journalists, writers, actors’ activities and communism. So, the atmosphere urges Miller to write this outstanding play, and to make this metaphor between Salem’s court and the HUAC hearing. In this sense Susan Abboston writes, “House Un-American Activities Committee, popularly known as HUAC, existed as an investigated committee of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1938-1975. In May 1938, it was replaced by the Dies committee, which swung to the other political extreme by investigating Communism” (409). This committee searches for and investigates many people who were members of the communist party or even who had sympathized with them. Again, in America innocent people are accused of an “invisible” crime. In this concern, Susan Abboston adds that, “HUAC would become a permanent committee in 1946 to investigate suspected threats of subversion that attacked “the form of government guaranteed by our constitution,” but their ostensible target was anyone who exhibited communist sympathies or had at any time been affiliated with any potential communist organization” (409). So, history repeats itself again and again, like folk of Salem, trials, court and accusation, in order to protect and preserve the Puritans’ principles which form the core of the American society.

How one can imagine and bear such a state in America, which is the country of such ideal as freedom and democracy. Undoubtedly, for such “illegal” procedures there will be victims who are pushed to be put in such difficult and terrible dilemma, and certainly many people lose their jobs, others lose their social status among people as Susan Abboston clarifies that “People were called before the committee often based on inconclusive or questionable evidence, and even if the committee’s investigation came up empty, many of these people’s lives ostracized because of mere suspicion” (409). So, in the name of keeping and protecting the American’s principles, ideals and achievements, America punishes its citizens and restricts the freedom of speech and freedom of thought.

It is generally agreed that it is necessary for any country to have different and opposite currents of thought and opinion, because they represent the most beautiful image of that country; although people are different in their thoughts, opinions, color, culture, religion and politics. All these differences serve the country’s reputation, in addition they compete and strive to give and produce the better things to the country and natives. But it is the policy of the one pole and the restriction of freedom that were followed and applied by the political system in America in order to control people in a “critical” era; the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War.
There is a clear comparison between Salem’s court and the HUAC’s. In Salem, as it was mentioned earlier, there is no road between; the native is either with the court or against it. The same procedure was followed by the committee. They invent a “Black list”, which contains the names of people who refused to testify for this “just” committee, they forbid them from doing any activity. In this respect Henry Popkin states that “Actors who refused to testimony disappeared from both large film screen and the small television screen, but “friendly witnesses” continued to work” (140). In addition, the committee’s basic question to the suspect was, “Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the communist party?” (139) in their searching for, “radicals, formal radicals possible former radicals” (139). In fact, Popkin states that the American Communist Party existed and many people joined its activities for many reasons: good, bad and idealistic ones (14). So, joining and participating in these activities do not necessarily mean that the participant is a member of the communist party. Miller joined such activities, but he wasn’t a communist, “it was possible for many, like Miller himself, to have some association with communism and communist without joining the party”. (141). Therefore, the purpose behind these activities as Popkin added was “Out of instinctive interest in conspiracy, out of a general dissatisfaction with society, or even as many said, in order to offer effective opposition to Fascism” (141). They were cultural activities called and supported for resisting Fascism, but the government in turn punished people who participated in these activities severely. Now, the comparison is clearly stated as Popkin mentions, between victims of Salem and those of the committee, “for the purpose of our comparison, they are exactly like the innocent victims of the Salem trials”. (141).

Miller introduces this comparison in order to express the brutality, irresponsibility and irrationality of the legal procedures followed and applied by the political system in order to impose power on people. The Crucible shows us how innocent people are used as scapegoats to serve the system. Miller throughout the Crucible proposes to express his protest, castigation and disgust against such illogical steps, which make the situations in America bad and unendurable. He strongly believes that his duty as a writer is to confront this repressive censorship by writing literary works which reflect the miserable and dangerous consequences of restriction of freedom and democracy.

The same trivial and silly idea is repeated again in the trials of 1950’s: Public confession”. Miller says that he attended some of the communist activities, but he is not a member in the party, and he also refused to mention any name of those people who were with him, “Salem’s seventeenth century victims refused to recant their confederacy with the forces of darkness; that was their crime and undoing. What their judges required as in HUAC interrogations were a public confession,” after which they could “let those to rejoin the society of extremely decent people”
John Proctor is similar to Miller in his refusal to “name names”: put his friends and people around him in plight and dilemma. But Miller stays firm and loyal to his principles and ideals and he does not mention any name.

Miller refers to people in his time, to all cultural movements, freedom, democracy and how people and such movements keep silent and do not intervene or move to change or even to show or criticize the miserable situation of democracy and freedom in his country as Terry Otten clarifies that “Miller relates Proctor’s reluctance to speak to the silence of the left during the McCarthy era, which “bespoke a guilt that the right found a way to exploit” (Otten 68). Their panic and terror of the situation keep them silent and tame.

This is the political atmosphere that was in America during the 1950’s; the most serious time in American literature. Miller exploits Salem’s trials and compares them to the situation in his country. In this respect, Leo j O’ Donovan explains that “The crucible”, Miller’s most often produced play, opened in 1953, and stunned people preoccupied with McCarthyism and the House Un American Activities Committee (HUAC), by recalling parallels with the Salem witchcraft trials of the 17th century” (15). He creates this comparison in order to be able to shock his readers and audience and draw their attention to his noble and sublime intent which pushes him to write this impressive play. Freedom and democracy are under threat, and the reason behind writing this play is to resist and fight against the so called “Liberal System” which uses horrible procedures in America. This political system uses such hostile, repressive and oppressive methods in order to impose its power, domination and control upon its citizens. In this sense Susan Abboston confirms that “What worried him most about these tears that was American democracy seemed under threat of dissolution. Although many stayed cautiously silent about what was happening, Miller felt he had to publically respond in some way to the committee’s behavior, “For if the current degeneration of discourse continued, as I had every reason to believe it would, we no longer be a democracy, a system that requires a certain basic trust in order to survive”. Miller’s response was to write The Crucible” (132).

In a serious, sensitive era as in 1950’s: terrified and fearful atmosphere affects the social relations between people seriously and even the way they look at and perceive each other, because in the name of freedom and democracy, some people try to utilize the situation for their own benefits. And in this case, the social relation would turn upside down. Thus, such miserable state creates injustice, desperation and irrationality as William J and Jr Mc Gill mention, “But the face of John Proctor, Giles Corey, and Rebecca Nurse do tell us about the dangers of public terror in any age when it overthrows social conventions. Whatever view one takes of the guilt or innocence of those celebrated figures of the Cold War, one must acknowledge that all hysterias produced injustice because hysteria
denies the individual conscience and destroys the standard of rational proof” (263).

Miller uses the power of the word to defeat the heinous terror which was created by authority. The *Crucible* dramatizes one of the critical moments in American history where the American administration uses panic and false claims in order to sustain intensive surveillance over its citizens. The play comes as a critique to confront repression, awe and injustice. Miller throughout the *Crucible* calls to preserve and protect the sanctity of individual freedom.
Works Cited


