

The Social and Political Situations in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Хүлээн авсан - Received:
2023-11-17

Засварласан - Revised:
2023-11-30

Хэвлэгдсэн - Published:
2023-12-26

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Хураангуй: This paper intends to give a clear picture of how I, as a reader, react to the social and political situations described in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. The title of this paper obviously refers to the historical facts behind the play. To reach my target, I must permit myself to imagine the two different periods and their contexts, therefore, the exposition of facts may not be linear. The paper is organized into 2 main parts. In the first part, on the basis of the historical background of the two different periods in American History, I'd like to argue that the people's superstitious beliefs in witchcraft are considered as the use and didactic principle of changing the whole society. The second part, on the basis of the social and political background of the Witch-hunts in 1692 and the Cold War, which led to McCarthyism, intends to draw that McCarthyism is considered as an influential event which can be seen as a response to the occurrence of witch trials to cure them. The consequences of these historical parallel events on the society will be discussed. It also compares the similar fates of both witches and Communists throughout time.

Түлхүүр үг: Social and political situation, McCarthyism, dehumanization

Introduction

With respect to the history of America, there were two historical contexts which introduced to me about the political and social witch hunts of the two different periods: seventeenth-century colonial America and United States of 1950s.

Clearly, there is a great distance in time. First of all, the spring of 1692, a year in the minds of the people of Salem when they used to believe that their community was controlled by God and Devil, added a new page to American history. At that time people were found guilty of witchcraft and used to be hanged and executed. In this sense, witchcraft scare was violent, alarming, like an epidemic. Surprisingly, superstitious belief in witchcraft was considered as the use and didactic principle of changing society at that time.

Secondly, what needs to be born in my mind is that dehumanizing influence of Communist subversion in America. While reading the play, curiously, I tried to develop my own tastes about what the social and psychological consequences of Communism might be; and how it must be averted. (I grew up in a Communist country, Mongolia which experienced the Marxist leanings. Therefore, I had the same feelings as the author had.)

In 1950s, McCarthyism against anticommunism began to sweep the country. One of the unhappy occurrences of McCarthyism was naming others. Naming was taken as a guarantee of sincerity and one's desire to tell all. In following parts, the above-mentioned issues will be discussed in detailed.

Discussion

The Seventeenth-century colonial America

Fundamentally, the dramatization of the seventeenth-century witch trials is true to the historical record. The Seventeenth-century society believed in a dualistic universe, a world of matter and the flesh and an invisible world of the spirit. (Martine, 1993)

The central question of that period is that people had strong spiritual perspective about the world, especially, about how the community served to them. On the other hand, they believed superstitious beliefs of witchcraft which did not exist in reality. People were not able to see the difference between the standard norm of 'Religion' and 'Superstition' which existed in that society. More pointedly, the term "superstition" in this paper, is taken to refer to the main 'tool' of changing people's mind. Here, I mean that the people's superstitious beliefs in witchcraft help to change the whole society. To make it more precisely, first of all, I would like to introduce the central background facts about the periods.

Puritanism in Salem, in 1692

Salem had undergone major political, economic and social change until 1692. Therefore, poverty and land shortage became widespread in the city. This destabilized and demoralised situation caused morality decline. At that time the Puritans who contributed a lot to evolution of this nation dominantly settled in New York.

According to what I have understood about the Puritanism in seventeenth-century America, I would emphasize the two important influences of Puritans contributed to that society. Firstly, the Puritan theocracy of New England imposed numerous restraints on Salem's citizens which lead to an anxious atmosphere and to 'repression'. These psychological pressures caused them the real danger to lose certain religious privileges. People of Salem exclusively relied on religion considering it as the foundation of science, law and as well as ethics. According to the Puritan interpretation, people were extremely dependent on 'God'. As I realised, Government and God seemed the same thing to them. The Puritans had no ideas about the justice and righteousness of their cause so they felt free

to act precisely. On this regard, it seems to me so easy to change people's mind by inventing a belief in witchcraft.

The second thing I would like to emphasize is that the most significant aspects of the Puritan legacy should have given the citizens strong feelings for democracy, enthusiasm for education, and fervour for social reform (Martine, 1993: 4). I believe that the feelings are to let people know that despite an emphasis on material success, the pursuit of financial gain is not sufficient as a major goal of life in that society.

Witch trials in 1692, Salem, Massachusetts

Just as the author described in the play, the Salem witch trials represent one of the blackest pages in American history, a horrible aberration of that Puritan spirit of independence which swept the town Salem in 1692.

To a certain extent, the Salem witch trials were the causes and motives that created the background of the terrors which marked one of the darkest spots in American history. For instance, 19 adults and two dogs were hanged for witchcraft. Since those accused of witchcraft could save their lives by confessing and identifying other witches. Not surprisingly, the suspicion spread rapidly.

The execution of many thousands of people as witches in Salem was the most terrifying event which violated the human-rights of their time. Finally, the witch-hunt ended when a group of church leaders in Boston declared that the unsupported evidence of witnesses was insufficient to justify the death penalty.

To sum up the first part, the unsettled political situation caused to produce the witch trials. Undoubtedly, the horrors of this system were connected with the Congressional hearings in 1950s America.

The United States of 1950s

The peace that had ended World War II brought a conclusion to the clash between the great Allied nations and the powers of fascism. However, there was still an open conflict between the two major economic systems of the world. To America, as the capitalist world, rushing to enjoy the successes of the postwar era, the word 'Communist' was anathema.

In 1950s America, anticommunism became a movement everywhere. The growth of anticommunist hysteria began to sweep the country. Also, the growing tension between the two great political systems of the world disillusioned many Americans from the relations between the communist and non-communist nations.

Here, I'd like to mention that the key point of McCarthyism, the peak of the power against communist hysteria, was naming names of people who were suspected as members of the Communist Party. On the other hand, the meaning behind 'naming', a repressive

system served as a ‘mythical and political mechanism’ in that society. To make it more clearly, for instance, all the judges and juries were willing to participate in serious violations of civil liberties. Generally, I agree that the horrors of this political system can, definitely, be considered as the main fact of ‘dehumanization’ in the society. The next sub-parts are to give clear evidence to this issue.

The modern witch hunts in 1950s America

With the recourse to Arthur Miller’s feelings about the historical records of the seventeenth century, the play carefully sustains the aura of the 1950s historical period but also projecting onto the political realities of dark era of modern American history.

The central point of this period drawn in the play is that the growth of anti-communist sentiment in the United States which soon reached unpredicted heights and generated a climate of hysteria and constant fear in that society. Consequently, the shaping events such as anti-communist laws were passed; employees were scrutinised for their loyalty; paid informers were hired, and blacklists in the House of Un-American Activities Committee ruined hundreds of careers, spread across the country.

The reality of this historical determinism of the 1950s America reminded me of the dehumanising influence of a ‘repressive system’ which could remain a black spot in American history. Thousands of people were economically and personally ruined by having been suspected, accused and even had no legal rights.

The only way to save their lives was a “confession” of ones past political activities and the naming others who were Communists. Thus, the underlying logic produced exactly the same vicious circle as in a witch hunt, for instance, “... Nonsense! Mister, I have myself examined Tituba, Sarah Good, Osburn, and Goody Good and numerous others that have confessed to dealing with the Devil. They have confessed it.”(cf. 2061) In fact, the way they save their lives could tell me the secret mechanism of defamation in that society. However, this mechanism brought me to the question whether the society really needs any kind of treatment to cure the perennial conflict between individual conscience and civil society. This question may be the main reason for talking about the influence of McCarthyism in the play.

The influence of McCarthyism in 1950s America

What was born in my mind about McCarthyism is that it is one of the most influential events that should occur in the history of America. It may seem strange why it is considered as an influential event in American history. I think the main reason for this occurrence is that the society really needs any kind of treatment to cure the witch-trials mentioned in the previous parts of the paper. I mean that McCarthyism could become the best kind of alarming to the social and political lives of the country.

To start with talking about it, I would like to explain the hidden meaning of the word “McCarthyism”. The actual history behind this word is that it is a name of American Senator who built his international fame on his presumed knowledge of subversion in the government and he added a new vocabulary which means ‘ruinous accusation without any basis of evidence’ (cf. The Greenhaven Press: 1997).

However, a serious consideration of McCarthyism was the threat of Communism in national politics and in the attitude of Americans. A rallying point of it was for conservatives over the country. More pointedly, McCarthyism referred to the anti-communism, but from a positive point of view, it could undermine both political and intellectual work.

As I mentioned before, McCarthyism served as a mythical political mechanism in that society by naming thousands of people who were not guilty. In fact, there was nothing behind McCarthyism and its influence – naming. It just simply wanted to tell the society some fantasy which reminds that any kind of treatment was really necessary to cure the witch-trials – ‘superstition and naming’ which really existed in that society. In this sense, McCarthyism can help to cure the witch-hunt by having been realized the conflict between individual and society.

Conclusion

What I have discussed in this paper is an attempt to explain my feelings about the parallel events happened in American history: witch trials and anti-communism which are related to the liberty and rights of the people.

It is worth bearing in my mind here that there is one important point by which these events are distinguished – there was Communism but there was no such thing as witchcraft. This distinction indicates that psychological state of the victims of the Salem trials is different from that of the victims of the investigations of the 1950s.

Finally, people’s superstitions were deeply connected with the political inquisitions of McCarthyism in which the same strain of American Puritanism runs across.

Артур Миллерийн “Хэцүү сорилт” жүжигт нийгэм, улс төрийн байдлыг дүрсэлсэн нь

Abstract: Энэхүү өгүүлэл нь Артур Миллерийн “Хэцүү сорилт” жүжигт дүрсэлсэн нийгэм, улс төрийн нөхцөл байдлыг тодорхойлон бичихийг зорилоо. Зохиолд Америкийн түүхийн хоёр өөр үеийг баримтат үйл явдлуудаар дүрсэлсэн харуулахыг оролдсон. Судалгаа нь хоёр хэсгээс бүрдсэн: эхний хэсэгт хүмүүсийн мухар сүсэгт итгэж буй итгэл үнэмшлээр дамжуулан нийгмийг хэрхэн өөрчилж буйг, хоёр дахь хэсэг нь 1692 оны нийгэмд өрнөж

буй антикоммунист үзэлтэн буюу нийгэмд аюултай тэрсүүд үзэлтнүүдийг засан хүмүүжүүлэх, Маккартизмыг эсэргүүцэх үйл ажиллагаа, түүний нийгэмд учруулж буй үр дагаварт анализ хийж, тодорхойлон бичихийг оролдсон болно.

Keywords: улс төр, нийгмийн нөхцөл байдал, мухар сүсэг, итгэл үнэмшил, антикоммунист үзэл, Маккартизм

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