

Research Article

## Struggles between the Iconoclasm and the Convention in The Inner Circle– A Study

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### Abstract:

T. C. Boyle is one of the major contemporary American writers. His tenth novel, *The Inner Circle* is the fictionalised history of Dr. Alfred Kinsey. The study aims to analyze the tensions between the conventions and the modernity at the same time the importance of money in the life, how money flexes modernity or conventions. John Milk, a fictional character, who is a middle class conventional young man, happens to join in the sex research group of Kinsey, and the life after his entrance in the group. The mental swing between the convention and the modernity with his poverty leads the story. Textual reality that is the research and its purpose and the ground reality that is the Milk's personal life play a major role in the text. The aim of the "marriage course" is about the understanding of sex, which has to be treated only as an act of hormone than an emotion. Sex is not the matter which should set in the social constraints, this is the essence Prof. Kinsey and his research group try to prove through the research. But, when it comes to the personal life, it becomes hard to accept sex as only the action of hormone. Boyle's Milk gets affected, one side he is teaching sex as a common hormonal issue, but when it turns to affected, he has an option to come out of the group, but his economic condition made him to stay back. The study brings the aspect, how economy making human to adjust. These two things, "preaching and practising," and "economic survivability," and its predominance in human life.

**Key Words:** Iconoclasm, Convention, Economy, Materialism, Sex, Illicit.

### Introduction

*The Inner Circle* is Boyle's fictionalised history of Prof. Alfred Kinsey's research life, which is his tenth novel. Boyle is one of the famous American contemporary writers, who have won PEN/Faulkner award for his fiction *World's End*. His writings are quite social concerned and revolutionary; *A Friend of Earth* is one such novel which received much attention in eco studies as well as in literature. Being a former history student Boyle prefers more on history, either it's an event or a figure, some of his famous historical characters are Frank Lloyd Wright in *The Women*, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg in *The Road to Wellville*, Stanley McCormick and Cyrus McCormick in *Riven Rock*, hippie commune in *Drop City*.

*The Inner Circle* is also a historic fiction which is about Dr. Alfred Kinsey, a zoology professor, a horticulturalist, a famous sexologist who did a research on wall gasp, specially a

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taxonomist of living organisms. The research and the results on “human animal” made great impact in American society in the mid and the later part of the twentieth century. On the one side America was busy with the World War and on the other side the results of Kinsey’s report gave shock to the entire American society.

Every magazine and newspaper in the country exploded with sensational headlines – “50% OF MARRIED MEN UNFAITHFUL!” “PREMARITAL INTERCOURSE RAMPANT” “KINSEY SAYS MEN REACH PEAK TEN YEARS AHEAD OF WOMEN!”(*The Inner Circle* 242)

John Milk is the narrator and a fictional character in the novel *The Inner Circle*. Prof. Alfred Kinsey is a sexologist who is working as a zoology Professor in Indiana University who has done a research on sexual behaviour of human male and female in two volumes. Both the books gave a great impact in American society in the late twentieth century. T. C. Boyle took this historical character and the event. Like many other historical novels, this novel also has some fictional events as well as characters. All the characters are fictional except few. Having Kinsey and his research as centre, Boyle narrated what would have been happened in the research, how it would be recorded and the research group. More than the research the main focus was on the research group. Kinsey’s report was published in two volumes: *Sexual Behaviour of Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour of Human Female* (1953). His aim was to record 100000 but he couldn’t.

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the economic necessity to lead a better life. The inevitable role of money in human life, how man breaks the conventions in the name of modernity or iconoclasm in order to get an economically better life. The base of the study is to bring out the American Materialism, which is the desire to get a better financial state, the comfort zone with a small group of family. Materialism is a social progress, in “Materialism and the Value Judgements: Four Perspectives” Larsen, Val; Sirgy, M Joseph; and Wright, Newell Dwere discussing the different perspectives of the materialism, they have analyzed different perspectives of materialism in various stages, “Acquired and Good” is one stage, which is talking about the condition of materialism in the society. The very life of the common, middleclass people, how a simple man turns to be a materialistic one in the society.

Though people are not born with a desire for and a capacity to create wealth, they should be taught to desire comfort for themselves and accompanying prosperity for the larger society. Social progress results when people want a nice home, several cars, and a good education for their children, an ample investment portfolio, and are taught how to attain these things. (75-107)

The above lines show the situation of the materialism, which as a social progress. The study also discusses about the need of money and the fluidity of characters.

The plot is centred on John Milk, a fatherless, middleclass young man, a student of literature who was attracted by the lecture of Prof. Kinsey or Prok, to his close people. Prok started doing a research on human sexuality in the university with the married people and the people who about to get marry and named it as “Marriage Course” which is to investigate and enquire about the sexual histories. In future Milk happened to be his assistance, primarily as a librarian in his house and for the farm he maintains. Later, Prok added Milk in his Marriage Course which they called as the inner circle which also been the title of the novel. Milk was introduced as conventional young man and as “sex shy”. The way he introduced and the job he undertakes are contradicted. In the beginning, it was

uneasy for him and he hesitated, he is easily discomfiting because the way he brought up, the beliefs and the convention he has followed are just opposite to what he was doing. This shows he came to the job for his economic need. He himself convinced, by seeing Prok's dedication towards the research which he actually adores. Kinsey is very charismatic and anyone could easily attract by the way he presents. From the first lecture Milk attended in the biology hall by Prok on "Sex and Sexuality," that was the first day with him and Milk was too much attracted. Slowly, Milk adapted the inner circle and he started doing his job professionally. In the inner circle, his job is to record the personal sex history of others and keep them safe. Personal questions like, at what age they seen their opposite gender's sex organ and of the same sex, for women, at what age they attain the puberty, first masturbation, premarital affair, extra-marital affair, homosexual relations, oral-sex, pan sexuality, and etc., all these questions become common to Milk, which are consider as the taboos in the society. "Human sexual behaviour as a way of uncovering who had been so long hidden behind a veil of taboo, superstition and religious prohibition." The main purpose of the research is to change the mind society in sexual matters, to the development of sexology,

In sketching out Kinsey's character traits, his behaviour, his worldview and the historical development of his Institute for Sex Research, Boyle tries to draw us into the environment of sexual experimentation and documentation as it first occurred in a scientific framework, under the guidance of this driven, iconoclastic professor of zoology at Indiana University. At the end of the 1930s, Kinsey was the world's leading expert on gall wasps but began to earn notoriety for a course on marriage that he taught, in which he went far beyond the bees and the birds. (Winslow, A, 45)

Prok tries to bring sex is not something which to be hidden or something which is unspoken in public; it's simply a hormonal change which happens to everyone and every living organism. In the prologue, he clearly mentioned, "There is no abnormalities when it comes to sex, save for abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage (7)." Sex is something which is natural and we cannot resist it. If we take the early or ancient cultures sex was celebrated and it considered only as a part of nature not as a taboo. For example, in the Hinduism sex is celebrated as a divine, it has a separate book named *Kamasutra* which is about the pleasure of sex and it has its some divisions also like, sattvic, rajasic and tamasic. Every ancient culture had this ideology, but in the middle, there were many social and cultural changes were made to control the human population, and for many other social frames sex turned to be the part of cultural taboo. There are many misconceptions in the understanding of sex, as a result now every society is facing some sensible issues regarding sex and affairs. George P. Murdock, an American anthropologist in his *Culture and Society* says:

All societies have faced the problem of reconciling the need of controlling sex with that of giving it adequate expression, and all have solved it by some combination of cultural taboos, permissions, and injunctions. Prohibitory regulations curb the socially more disruptive forms of sexual competition. Permissive regulations allow at least the minimum impulse gratification required for individual well-being. Very commonly, moreover, sex behaviour is specifically enjoined by obligatory regulations where it appears directly to sub serve the interests of society. (348)

When the natural thing which is sex pulls into the frame of culture that will be collapsed that the cultural norms of sex will not be the same and it will lead to break the norm. It is hard to fix sex in a

cultural frame. And the anthropologists feel this is the reason why sex turns to the cultural taboo and is the reason for the illegal, illicit relationships.

In the *Elementary Structures*, Claude Lévi Strauss expressed his experiment of human sex of the illicit, incest. In that text, Strauss tries to examine the natural and cultural value of sex in communities. In *The Inner Circle* also Prok took the study of sexology and the human behaviour of sex. As a scholar of zoology, he wishes to do a research on human organism also. Being animal researcher, he felt like other animals' human sexual matters also the common one and which should not be consider as a taboo. He wants to show this as his results with the proper records. Whenever he feels Milk is uncomfortable, he told Milk that:

John- Let me remind you that there is nothing, nothing whatever to be ashamed of. There is no sexual act between consenting parties that is in any way qualitatively different from any other matter what the prevailing effort of given society may be.  
(31)

Milk convinced by the words of the favourite Professor and keeps aside his conventions and tried to be an iconoclast; he does not against the religion but the conventions he came out. The relationship with Prok grows stronger; Milk involved more in the research and sincere, when it is needed for his research, he loses his virginity with Mac, Prok's wife. In the beginning he has some quilt but later it seems usual. Due to the responses from the public Prok's goes crazy and take the research to the next level. Prok decided to add some new methods and he need few more assistants too. On the other hand, Milk coming out of his economic crisis and the trust Prok is having on him helps to grow little strong. And also, Milk got an engagement with Iris, a girl from his native. Milk accepted everything which Prok has said for the research purpose without any questions. He follows the words of Prok, Milk does not have any problem in the inner circle even he it was more beneficiary for him

Prok's research was moving fast, so Milk joins Iris into the inner circle as an assistant. Iris understands the research and she also become studious. If we defend the research it is fully scientific, Prok starts next level, he added the new theories such as following the prostitutes without their knowledge and the brothel homes, which is illegal. This shows his madness on the research. And on the next level he decided to film live sex, masturbating in alone as well as altogether. He wants to know how it feels to be a gay, so he had a gay relation with Milk. None of these affects Milk, he enjoys but when it comes to his wife, he started affected when Prok ask Iris to have sex with Purvis, his other assistant. Because Prok want to know how it would be to have an extra marital affair, Milk was okay if it that he have to have sex with another woman, likely he had with Mac, but he couldn't take that easy, when it comes to affect his family matters, that his wife, his possession supposed to have sex with another man. He didn't expect that Iris will accept it. New things can easily attract women, they allow new things and new changes, Satan manipulated Eve, here Prok doesn't manipulated Iris to do an evil thing from his norms of sex, but he does. Nowhere in the text, Prok forced anyone to do something for him but everything was going how he wants. Milk started falling for Iris, Iris, who completely adapted herself for all the theories Prok. Preaching something and practising something, till then Milk was much respectful and thankful to Prok, he accepted the vision of Prok and enjoys, he does not have any problem to record others personal sex history or to have sex with Mac, or Prok, he accepts that as his part of the research and that interest made him that to teach others. When it comes to his personal life he affects. He never want his wife to have sex with any other man even he believes sex is only the act of hormones. There the struggle starts between his iconoclast mind and the conventional one. From the very beginning, he hesitates to do everything but

he accepts those for his new ideology of sex. Accepting these new things was beneficiary for him, but when it affects his personal life, he is not ready to accept. A. O. Scott, in his article stated;

Milk is torn between his quasi-religious devotion to Kinsey and his love for his wife, Iris, the novel's most elusive and engaging character and the only one whose desires and behavior transcend. (The Joy of Sex Research, 8)

The impression on Prok started changing, Milk started questioning him, and he warned Iris not to do anything regarding research. But she is not ready to listen; she already evolved in all kinds of sexual stuffs. She adapted to that, she had sex with her colleague, Purvis. Here is the problem starts between Milk and Iris. Milk doesn't like Purvis or his ingress in the inner circle. He feels Purvis will disturb Milk's personal life. But he didn't expect that Prok will open the opportunity. Iris was very constant in her decision and Prok and others explained the situation to the Milk, Prok explained the aim of the research and the theories which Milk already knows. Milk tries to convince himself, but this time it is very hard for him, at any point milk doesn't want to Iris to go with any other man even its for profession. This time he is ready, to quit his job. He decided to leave the inner circle with his wife. Financially Milk needs him. He sees Prok as a father figure and Milk was the favourite assistance to Prok. While maintaining Prok's library Milk also taken care of his little farm. And Prok gave the word the he is not going to take care for the farm and he said that he will give the farm to Milk after the research gets over. Milk, calculate his financial status, what it would be if he leaves Prok. Milk has to leave the job; his income will cut and the same for the Iris also cause for her only Milk is leaving. Both have to search the new jobs, and have to run a new family, a new start. It will be harder for Milk because he is already little fame in his research. So people may recognize him easily. And he also has to convince Iris.

Milk needs an economic support and he got that in the inner circle where he used to be a comfortable man. Iris felt Purvis, a modern and a practical man. Comparing to Milk, Purvis is a lively person and having much passion towards the research. This often happens, Milk used to say that he is going to leave his job, but Prok or Milk's economic calculation stops him to come out of the circle. At some point, Milk doesn't know what he sort job he will go if he leaves the inner circle. He may think of the same librarian job which he was doing before he met Prok. But now he cannot do that to. In one place, Purvis says Milk that he will not go out of the inner circle or he can't because he practised to this place and for him this job is luxurious. Milk himself tries to accept Iris as herself. As per his research norm, sex is nothing but the act of hormones. Nothing is to do with the others personal or sexual feelings. These things which human have to leave as it is. Sex is something, which no one can resist.

The mental swing whether have to leave the job for the conventions or accept the wife who is having the sexual relation for her professional needs plays an important role in the novel *The Inner Circle*, readers can victimize that, throughout the novel. Sometimes, Milk thought of leaving the job and some other times he tries to accept his wife and the life. Whenever this happens, we readers can easily get the role of money or the economy in human life through Milk. Economy plays a prominent role in the novel. We can see the American Materialism everywhere in the novel, from the beginning. Fleany Laura, the lover of Milk who leaves Milk and goes with another man only for the economic state of Milk. She openly says that she cannot marry him and says that he couldn't buy her a new jacket where Milk wants to be a rich man. When he gets the chance to wipe off his poverty, he doesn't want to give up that for anything. Once place he says that he is ready to break the norms which he was following till and broke that for money. It may seem to be a modern thinking or an iconoclastic thing,

coming out of tradition to follow modernity which is seems as natural. But in depth, he did it for money for the economic condition and the development. Till the end he does everything for money, totally he is disappointed by his wife's actions and in many places he stated that he doesn't like or he can't accept his wife is having a sexual relation with any other man, but he accepts it because he doesn't have any other option. He needs the money which Prok is giving as salary and the farm which Prok promised to give. Milk needs both of these for his life betterment.

Milk clearly knows that these conventions are anything else is not going to improve his economic status than the job he is doing. Before Iris entrance, Milk convinced by Prok's dedication, here is the man who is doing his business which is the same taboo, then why should he resist or embarrass. Milk realises the he couldn't stop Iris so he accepted the fact that he couldn't stop his wife or he can't. Whatever he is not ready to lose the job for the thing which he cannot stop so, he admitted it.

Prok, on the other side whenever Milk wants to leave the job, Prok tries to convince him than let him go. Several times Milk tries to quit but Prok never allows because Milk is the least payable assistance in the research group and Prok is much conscious about it. Milk is the one who introduces Iris and she is another least payable one and also helps Prok in his research practices. As Andrew Hughes mentioned in his article, stated, Prok is very egoistical, "He's very egotistical," Geisel says. "Even though he wants everyone to be sexually free, he's very domineering about that. He's sexually free in that he can have any sex he wants." Milk is a profit to Prok in all the ways whether it for maintaining the library or the farm and mostly importantly to the research. No boss will lose his labour who is sincerely working. Milk is Prok's student who was attracted by the dashing lecture of Prok, through the library contact Prok got close to Milk and used his condition. Not only Milk, Prok uses almost everyone in the novel. Mac is the first assistant who is his wife; she helped Prok both mentally and physically. She supports him and his research, Prok is not paying anything to Mac in the research, simply she is his wife and she didn't expect anything. She came as a typical woman who fulfils all her husband's wish.

From the beginning till the end, the series of the chapter presents the condition of the characters. There are not many characters in the famous novel. The novel is centred on a small group, and a few characters. Boyle presents the novel in the first-person point of view directly or indirectly money plays a major role. The novel directly talks about the sexual matters of the human, a sex revolution.

Everyone is running behind something to get something. Milk desire is to have a comfort life zone; he wants to be standard economically. Nobody does care about anyone. Everyone's necessity is important to everyone. Anyone can manipulate anyone to get anything. Everyone's self-settlement is prominent. Nobody does care about anything. If anyone can or if anyone wants anything, they can do anything to get that one. There is no norm or nothing like that existing. All made by someone to satisfy someone. If someone else wants to change something if he can, he can change. Power is everything that power comes through the economic settlement so everyone wants to settle down economically.

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