
| BOOK REVIEW

Sacvan Bercovitch 's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975): Book Review

Baker Mohammad Jamil Banikhair¹ ✉, Imad Mohmmad Khawldeh² and Omar Abudullah Alanbar³

¹²Associate Professor of English, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, The Hashemite University, Jordan

³Associate Professor, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Isra University, Jordan

Corresponding Author: Baker Mohammad Jamil Banikhair, **E-mail:** Baker1983@hu.edu.jo

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Baker Mohammad Jamil Banikhair, Imad Mohmmad Khawldeh and Omar Abudullah Alanbar

University of Tasmania, Australia

The Puritan Origins of the American Self (1975)

By Sacvan Bercovitch

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Reviewed by Baker Mohammad Jamil Banikhair, Imad Mohmmad Khawldeh and Omar Abudullah Alanbar

Hashemite University and Isra University

The Puritan Origins of the American Self (1975) is a book on historical and puritan matters by Sacvan Bercovitch who is a well-known author for his great interest in studying and exploring the matters of Puritanism and classical American literature. He has published many articles related to Puritanism and ideology, particularly the importance of ideology in shaping and constituting the United States of America. Sacvan Bercovitch was a general editor of the new *Cambridge Literary History of the United States*, and a professor of American literature at Harvard university. He is known for his influential and important critical works, mainly the title of the book reviewed in this paper; *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), *The American Jeremiad* (2012), *The American Puritan Imagination: Essays in Revaluation* (1974). He also taught American literature and cultural studies at Harvard University where he published influential works, including the *Office of "the Scarlet Letter"* (1991) and *The Rites of Assent: Transformation in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993), "New England Epic: Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*", And many other essays and books on puritans.

In fact, this significant and valuable book consists of five chapters, and each deals with a broad topic that tackles a different view or perspective pertaining to puritans and Puritanism. In terms of the style used by the author, it is critical to note that Bercovitch uses plenty of puritan terms, and thus he attempts hardly to limit his discussion topics by concentrating on Cotton Mather's phrase "the American Nehemiah" signaling out the significance of the American puritan vision represented by some prominent puritan advocates like John Winthrop and Cotton Mather, who were influential intellectual puritan writers and thinkers during the 17th and 18th centuries in the States. Generally, the whole book deals with the doctrines and the principles of Cotton Mather as a puritan writer. He highlights the life of Cotton Mather and the history of his education at Harvard and Glasgow, in addition to his profound puritan mindset. Through focusing on this puritan figure and his writings, particularly Mather's *Magnalia Christie Americana* (1702), Bercovitch, in a unique and exquisite writing style, successfully and profoundly depicts Mather's biographical historical narrative and distinctly describes the significance of New England for later generations from a puritan American perspective.

In a critical and biographical lens, Bercovitch clearly scrutinizes the concept of "Puritanism and the self", and stresses the importance of Cotton Mather as an influential figure. He shows us the intertwined connection between Puritanism and the roots of the American culture represented by the religious and philosophical thoughts of this thinker. He amply clarifies that Cotton Mather collected and amassed all the documents of puritans, particularly the life of Winthrop surveys, the early problems between Plymouth and Massachusetts, and the mutiny of Town Hingham. He abundantly and profusely refers to these conflicts and historical events trying to link them with some contemporary matters. Thus, he stresses that Mather's texts were one of the most important documents in the American history because they reflect a particular significance of imagining and understanding America as a whole. He also appropriately and convincingly asserts that Mather's essays, especially the biblical ancient stories of the old testament, have special and indispensable literary, historical, and intellectual value.

For his analytical approach, Bercovitch uses Cotton Mather as a model for this concept. He point outs some critical aspects pertaining to Puritanism, major puritan figures, and the principles of puritans, showing puritan literature as a major manifestation of a growing self- consciousness and contemplative life which can be framed in terms of puritan principles, such as activism, experience, illumination, union, faithfulness, reflection, contemplation, and self-denial. He specifically explains the puritan psychology which is based on self-knowledge, self-abhorring, self-abasing, and self determination, asserting the fact that the puritans abase and diminish the energies of the self which lead to self-loathing.

In addition to what Bercovitch finds out in terms of the puritan self, he specifically highlights the idea of identity and individualism which is viewed differently by humanists and reformers. The humanists consider the true church to be a macrocosm of the self-fulfilled individual, whereas the reformers assert the idea that everyman is a world in himself/herself as an individual. He supports his argument with Luther's formulation which is considered to be one of the tenets and principles of reformation trying to lessen or remove the center of authority from an ecclesiastical institution and relocate it in the elect soul. The reformers condemned the humanist doctrines and they valued individualism as a higher authority.

Bercovitch successfully brings out the concept of "the vision of history" from an ideological perspective as to show how Puritanism as part of ideology in American literary history. He emphasizes the vision of John Winthrop who is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in Puritanism, who was a leader for a group of puritans to the new world. Winthrop was extremely puritan who defended the puritan beliefs, and thus similarly had a great influence and impact on the origins of Puritanism in America, which contributed to constituting the vision of America, for he was the first one who signed the Cambridge agreement with his puritan friends, promising that they would search for a new puritan colony in America (New England).

Bercovitch extensively and explicitly implies a subjective sense in his book. For example, in a separate chapter, he discusses the "elect nation" in New England" in which he stresses the idea of the new world (America) as part of the history of puritan salvation from his own perspective referring to the new world as a dream or a puritan vision which plays an important role in shaping America. This prophecy is deeply rooted in the imaginative conception of the puritans. He discusses that the idea of America implies the foundation of a new Christian world, which also means an extension of the movement of Puritanism asserting that America appears to be a representative of universal rebirth and spiritual identity

The value of Bercovitch's book lies in its profound analysis and understanding of Puritanism from a cultural and historical perspective. Bercovitch clearly shows us an interesting and thorough history of Puritanism engulfed with an image of the American self in modern culture. The book significantly brings out interesting echoes from naturalist thinkers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson whose vision serves to reaffirm the puritans' concepts. He emphasizes the role of nature as a spiritual vision of the new world, asserting that Emerson's principles comply with the puritan views which contribute to the construction of the American Self.

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