

Societal Perception on Female Subject of Adultery in *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is famously known for its story about adultery. As the act of adultery is against the religious laws, and it involves two parties, the punishment must apply pretty to both males and females. In the case of *The Scarlett Letter*, however, the penalty falls on Hester Prynne much harder than her partner, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Is it simply because he is not known as Hester's partner or because of some hidden message necessarily delivered by Hester? This is the issue we want to investigate in our analysis. This issue happens because each type of gender is constructed to have some particular behaviors to obey in order to be accepted in society. This paper discusses how a female who is considered a deviant becomes an outcast from society as a consequence of her actions. Aside from gender roles, this paper also discusses how the Puritan society reacts to adultery as a violation of their rules. Close reading and interpretation are applied to understand the issues in the novel.

Keywords: *Gender, Society, Literature, Hester Prynne, The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter is a famous literary work with a number of analyses and interpretations have been conducted on the novel. In 2014, [1] argues that Hester Prynne is a character who is ahead of her time because Hester's action in the book promotes feminism while the term feminism itself most likely did not actually exist at that time. [2], in 1995, has also conducted an analysis on the novel that discuss about the gender differences showed in the book. Even a discussion about Hester's child, Pearl, has been brought up by [3] in 2010. [3] discusses about the importance of the role that is performed by Pearl in the novel. However, we found that there is not much discussion about how the main female character, Hester Prynne, has changed the Puritan society.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* focuses on the theme of adultery in Puritan society. Adultery is a grave violation of the religious laws of the Puritans in colonial America. This sinful act usually involves two people, the man, and the woman, and as such, the punishment is usually equally applied to both the male and female parties. One of the novel's significant conflicts that *The Scarlett Letter* brings is that of inequality: only Hester Prynne is punished, while her 'accomplice' in the adultery, Reverend Arthur

Dimmesdale, receives no punishment. This becomes an important topic to explore: does this happens merely because Dimmesdale is not recognized as 'Hester's accomplice,' or is it because Hester is a disempowered woman who is put at great odds in a patriarchal Puritan society with a more profound message to communicate in the story? This is the problem we wish to look at in our research. This problem arises because the construction of the female gender is built to have certain behaviors that must be followed in order to be acceptable in the Puritan society. This paper discusses how gender, predominantly female, is perceived in *The Scarlet Letter*. The present study examines how Hester Prynne, the main female character, can make a difference in the oppressive patriarchal world of the Puritans. The significance of the paper is to understand the gap between each gender role, the factors that may cause the hole, and their relevancies to the modern era.

2. METHODS

This research is conducted in order to understand each gender stereotype and its relevancies to the modern era. The primary data in this study is Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, a famous novel that was highly acclaimed by critics and adapted into various media, including film and drama. This novel is a historical romance set in a very puritanical 17th century

Massachusetts. The central character of this novel is Hester Prynne, a young woman who is forced by her environment to wear the dark red letter “A” which stands for the word Adulteress.

This study uses literary criticism as the design. In particular, analysis of the novel is done by a close reading of the book and analyzing any relevant issues, literary devices, or elements of the story that help to answer the research statement. While putting the literary devices into perspective, we also take a closer look at the cultural background in which the story is set in the novel. Using the Feminist approach, we examine how the social norms and beliefs in the book are depicted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* tells a story of a central female character named Hester Prynne. The story begins with Hester Prynne receiving public shame on a scaffold with a three-months-old baby in her arms. Sadly, even some of the women in the crowd perceive her as a criminal and show no empathy to her. In the first chapter of the novel, Hawthorne shows how society failed in terms of showing compassion towards their fellow human. It is emphasized by the narrator's regretful tone while describing the scene in the novel.

“The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering at it” – (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.91)

Moreover, the failure to empathize is shown later in the novel through other characters, such as Governor Bellingham. Bellingham dominantly expresses judgment more than empathy. In the seventh chapter of the book, he even suggests taking the child away from Hester as he is covered by the thought that she is not a reliable mother.

“There hath been much question concerning thee of late. The point hath been weightily discussed, whether we, that are of authority and influence, do well discharge our consciences by trusting an immortal soul, such as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen amid the pitfalls of this world. Speak thou, the child's own mother! Were it not, thinkest thou, for thy little one's temporal and eternal welfare that she be taken out of thy charge, and clad soberly, and disciplined strictly, and instructed in the truths of heaven and earth? What canst thou do for the child in

this kind?” (Bellingham, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.169-167)

Hester is made to wear the scarlet letter “A” on her chest for giving birth to a daughter out of wedlock. Although she is physically released from prison, the badge that she has to wear on her chest creates another kind of prison for her. However, she comes to a decision to accept the letter as a life experience. As society tries to determine her identity with the badge, Hester manages to escape it by choosing to wear the badge by choice, not obligation. This way, she works to maintain her dignity and grace during the public humiliation.

While taking the punishment of her adultery sin, Hester refuses to mention the father of the child, which makes the other party of the adultery, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, free from any social or legal punishment. However, Dimmesdale is dominantly tortured with the guilt of his sinful act and his cowardice of not being able to take responsibility for the crime. This guilt highlights the hypocrisy of the situation that he is in. The Puritan' perceives him as a good person, and, therefore, he has a hard time with himself because no one knows that he actually bears the same sin as Hester does. His guilt is reflected in several lines in the novel.

“I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am!” (Dimmesdale, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.293)

“Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!” (Dimmesdale, *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 294)

As Dimmesdale is vulnerable and drowning in his guilt, Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, takes advantage of it. Chillingworth strives for revenge, and because of that, he spends most of his time observing Dimmesdale, looking for proof of Dimmesdale's guilt. By the end of the story, both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are their very own worst enemies. Their need for control, which is perhaps comparable to what is often called toxic masculinity these days, leads them to suffer even more than Hester ever does. The term poisonous masculinity itself comes up because of certain traditional male cultural norms, which can be considered as harmful either for society or even men themselves. For example, men are culturally linked to strength and power that men tend to avoid actions that can be considered weak, such as crying and suppressing their emotions in order to meet the stereotypes. In *The Scarlet Letter*, both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth fail the stereotype, for they are not able to show such power because of their secret. Therefore, they try to gain control by manipulating themselves and Hester in order to feel powerful. On the other hand, Hester does not

seem to have the need to control the situation that she is able to focus more on her own growth.

Because of the secret they share with each other, the relationship between Hester and both men is not on an equal footing. Hester seems to be the only one who knows the whole story. While Dimmesdale has no idea about who Chillingworth really is, Chillingworth is second guessing about Dimmesdale. Hence, it seems impossible for the three of them to have a normal human relationship with each other.

In the seventeenth century, the novel itself is set in Boston, New England. It depicts how living among a Puritan society is like for a female deviant. This Puritan society in which Hester lives was predominantly constructed by religion. It was a belief that women's general weakness of body and mind, because of the excess fluids in the woman's body that makes them prone to emotional instability, is considered as a weakness in dealing with God and the devil [4]. This socio-religious Puritan construction put women in an inauspicious situation, for it suggests that it is more natural for women to be sinful than men.

According to [1], Hester Prynne is a character who is ahead of her time. While the term feminism probably did not really exist at that time, Hester shows many feminist acts in the novel [5][6]. She expresses herself and her desire for freedom, which is often considered as one of feminist philosophy. The way that she reacts to the punishment of her sinful act describes how much of a strong woman she is. She becomes a self-reliant woman by deciding to keep and raise her child on her own. Her feminist act is well shown in the seventh chapter, in which she convinces Bellingham to let her keep her child. Hester argues that she is able to teach her little child what she has learned from her situation. As well as expressing independence, her acts also represent a kind of rebellion, if seen from a Puritan's point of view, by her way of rejecting the ways that women are subjected in a patriarchal society. Hester refuses Bellingham's offer to take care of her child and chooses to raise her by her own, and even refuses to rely on any other human being, especially men, by living separated from the main settlement of the Puritan. This shows that Hester desires and expresses the need for freedom according to the Feminist belief.

Such patriarchal belief that oppresses Hester's freedom in her society is a social system that is described by [7] in his study. [7] believes that patriarchy is a social system in which men are a more dominant party than women, which results in a perception in which women have to obey and serve men. This social construction is most likely caused by evolutionary challenges that had to be faced by both sexes in order to survive environmental threats back then [8]. The natural build of men has given them the privilege in terms of body strength which allows them to roam and provide

for the family. This initial survival instinct later develops into a more complex social construct. In the Puritan's case, it turns into some norms that need to be obeyed by all society members.

“The multitude of domestic manuals produced by Puritans during the seventeenth century provided not concrete instructions about the running of a household so much as prescriptions for a godly family ethos. While it may not be surprising that men were instructed to govern firmly, wisely, and gently while women were told to submit to their husband's rule, it remains noteworthy that these were almost the only guidelines provided.” [4]

[4]'s statement supports the idea of the need for power depicted in both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, for they, as men, are “instructed” to govern the family. The Puritan society, the society in which Hester lives, is known as part of a religious movement in the Church of England in the sixteenth century. This particular society believes that women are more submissive compared to men. The patriarchal system is also shown through the character Roger Chillingworth as he treats Hester more like property rather than a human being. The way he holds a grudge towards Dimmesdale for ‘stealing’ his wife and shows no empathy on Hester's unfortunate situation depicts his need for control of his ‘property.’

The way Chillingworth treats Hester can be considered to be too much, even for the Puritan's patriarchal system; it is misogynistic. Other acts of misogyny are also pictured in the novel. For example, the way Mistress Hibbins is first introduced in the book.

“Mistress Hibbins, Governor Bellingham's bitter-tempered sister, and the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch.”
(*The Scarlet Letter*, p.179)

“her ill-omened physiognomy seemed to cast a shadow over the cheerful newness of the house.” (*The Scarlet Letter*,179)

Even though Mistress Hibbins' lousy character traits are not proof, the narrator introduces the character by her dark side. She is called “the witch-lady” several times in the novel, although there is no concrete proof of her witchery in the book. The contrasting image between Mistress Hibbins and Dimmesdale emphasizes the former statement in this paper that it is considered more natural for a woman to be sinful than a man. While most male characters in the novel are perceived either as the powerful (such as Governor Bellingham) or noble (such as Arthur Dimmesdale), female characters such as Ms. Hibbins and Hester are mainly perceived as miserable or miserable even evil.

Although Mistress Hibbins is depicted as a witch in a less-delightful way, Hester's daughter, Pearl, is the opposite. It is shown in how the narrator describes the magical image of the child in a more pleasant way as if the narrator is amazed rather than judgmental about Pearl's 'witchery.'

"The unlikeliest materials—a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower—were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world." (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.147)

"There was witchcraft in little Pearl's eyes; and her face, as she glanced upward at the minister, wore that naughty smile which made its expression frequently so elvish." (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.236)

"The little baggage hath witchcraft in her, I profess said he to Mr. Dimmesdale. "She needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal!" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.178)

Hawthorne romanticizes what is considered as wrong and evil by society through the child. Nature which is often depicted as evil in the novel turns into something pure and beautiful when it comes to Pearl. For example, the forest is often described as something haunted and dismal, but it turns solemn whenever Pearl interacts with any forest objects. The forest is described as 'shadowy,' and it whispers into people's conscience (Hawthorne, 1956: 80, 285)

Qin (2010) argues that Hawthorne personifies the rose-bush, which is mentioned at the beginning of the novel, as both Hester and Pearl. Meanwhile, the prison where Hester walks from is being called a 'black flower' by the narrator. This scene is presented in the earlier conflict between society, nature, and the narrator's disappointment towards society. The wilderness of character, which is later depicted in Pearl, shows the contrasts of the civilized Puritans who hold onto law and order. Rather than promoting woman independence through Hester, Hawthorne seems to promote other human behavior before law and order. This statement is supported by Hawthorne himself, as shown in the narrator's description of Pearl in the fifth chapter of the novel.

"..inscrutable forest open to her, where the wildness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law.." (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.124)

Even when stuck in a society where they do not benefit, Hester and Pearl manage to accept and even grow in that unpleasant situation they are stumbling

upon. Instead of letting herself become a victim, Hester makes the best out of it, produces stronger, and even maintains her loyalty towards Dimmesdale. In the scene where Dimmesdale meets Hester in the wood. Being regretful for his sin and his inability to admit his sinful act openly, Hester affirms that Dimmesdale's past is not for him to cry about.

"Your sin is left behind you in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?" (Hester Prynne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 294)

Hester's compassion is one of the reasons why she eventually manages to silence society's scorn of her. The Puritan woman then comes to her for shelter as Hester becomes an influential figure of woman empowerment. It is ironic that Hester Prynne, who is a sinner, shows more virtues than the Puritans themselves. The letter 'A' is embroidered with gold thread, and it then goes beyond a symbol of shame to something more beautiful and admirable. [2] has also stated that Hester's virtues are bound to the ideas of freedom and self-expression.

"Hester inwardly becomes more alienated from her puritanical society while she outwardly performs deeds of mercy and kindness during her seven year period. She begins during this outcast to become aware of a revolutionary and socially radical mind in herself." [2]

However, the patriarchal social construction shown in *The Scarlet Letter* may be still be experienced by some women today; however, it must be noted that this particular phenomenon may not be as relevant as it was in Puritan America. [8] suggest that in a safe and stable environment, gender inequality is not as prevalent. In this modern era, with all the development of technology and medication and more minor environmental threats, although sex differences are nearly impossible to remove, women's dependency on men is not as prevalent as before. Although [9] says that society still suffered from male domination, no woman should experience the same shame as Hester does in the novel. Women are now, more than ever, able to make their own decisions and live their lives according to their very own beliefs and not to be controlled by others, especially men. Hester's personal choices and actions, just as our own personal decisions and actions, should stay private, not for the public - even for the likes of the overly religious people like the Puritans - to make a shameful public show off of.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* shows how ugly society perceives a woman. Not only is a woman depicted as a dependent figure, but a woman's life is also genuinely determined by how the community, and/or the authorities, tell her. However, Hawthorne gives a sense of hope for women through the main character, Hester Prynne. [10] says that Hester manages to successfully grow into a strong character against the oppressiveness of the Puritan society, and she also emerges as a female image whose qualities are promoted by the feminists today. According to [11], Hester's victory means that society has been changed by her. Hester's victory ultimately is her victory over her suffering. She eventually becomes a figure known for her strength and good deeds rather than her shameful sin. In the end, we believe that she wins the fight against the ugly perception that society has of her.

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