

# Brave Eves: an Evaluation of American Women's Marital Life in the Colonial Period

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**Abstract**—This paper argues against a popular opinion that American women in the colonial period enjoyed a wonderful marital life by revealing the reason behind it—the scarcity of women in the new continent at that time. Then this paper proceeds to explain three main types of hardships and difficulties for the American colonial women to conquer: child delivery, absence of legal rights and witch persecution danger. After these, the paper elaborates American colonial women's unique and irreplaceable role in family and their remarkable success outside of the family. Based on these analyses, this paper concludes that American colonial women's marital life is not easy and the colonial women can be described as brave Eves, who, via conquering the harsh natural and social environment, have made their indispensable contribution to creating a new country in the new continent.

**Keywords**—America; colonial women; marital life; brave Eves

## I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the USA has been regarded as the only superpower in the world. The American people are always proud of their country's miracle development from a wild land to a modern society cherishing freedom, equality and individualism. Stories about the frontier wildness and their forefathers' encouragement to create the new country have never failed to fascinate readers' imagination. In a general opinion, American values and ideas advocated today have been formed by their forefathers during the colonial period (1607-1776)<sup>1</sup>, and the spiritual legacies of their forefathers, alongside their material possessions, have also been passed down from generation to generation. Historians and scholars have depicted and reconstructed the past history of America, and one of their favorite topics is the American women in the colonial period, from the first permanent settlement by European Pilgrims in 1607 to the declaration of independence in 1776. A popular opinion is that the American women in the colonial period enjoyed a wonderful marital life, as one of the American scholars, Carl N. Degler, claims in his book *Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America* that colonial America was “a paradise for women”, where women enjoyed a superior position (1970: 54). Based on some documents and books on the life of the

<sup>1</sup> As for the definition for the American colonial period, see <https://www.landofthebrave.info/>.

American colonial women, this paper, however, disagrees with such an opinion and argues that the phenomenon that the American colonial women, compared with their European sisters, had wonderful chances to marry is mainly caused by the scarcity of women in the colony at that time. Furthermore, this paper points out that American colonial women's marital life actually was abundant with enormous hardships and difficulties; nevertheless, they strived to conquer the cruel living environment and they proved their unique value by making a great and indispensable contribution to the foundation of the new country. In a literary sense, the American colonial women can be named as brave Eves, together with their husbands Adams, trying to build up a paradise on the new land.

## II. THE REASON FOR AMERICAN COLONIAL WOMEN'S GOLDEN MARRIAGE CHANCES

Historians and scholars agree that American colonial women “had a far better opportunity for matrimony than their sisters abroad” (Schlesinger, 1981: 21). The reason is that there were not so many women immigrating to such a new continent for its unpredictable harshness. The following is an example:

“(…) in a group of 10,000 indentured servants who left Bristol, England, between 1654 and 1686, there were 338 males for every 100 women. A Maryland census as late as 1755 showed that the sex ratio for whites was 113 to every 100 females. The ratio in South Carolina in 1708 was 148 males to 100 females.” (Degler, 1970: 54)

Those statistics suggest that the golden chance for the colonial women to marry was only the result of the circumstances of the new world: the unbalanced ratio between men and women and consequently the scarcity of women. Moreover, the fact is that colonial women must be brave enough to conquer enormous hardships, both physical and social, in their marital life.

## III. HARDSHIPS FOR AMERICAN COLONIAL WOMEN TO CONQUER

### A. Childbirth Death Risk

One of the hardships that the colonial women must go through is the danger of child delivery. Many young wives

lost their lives in childbirth, for at that time the medical level was rather low: in one aspect, the medical care for delivery was poor, and in another aspect, the birth control method was still in its primitive stage. The fact was that the hard living in this new continent required lots of labor, the more the better; thus it was not surprised to find a big family of more than ten children, though in some cases children in a large family were not necessarily born by the same mother. It is well known that Benjamin Franklin, one of the founders of America, is one of the seventeen children of his family. Obviously, the frequency of giving birth to children, regularly two years intervals for a full year breast-feeding, not only had put the women's lives in danger, but also had affected their physical condition, and many women became very weak as they grew older (Reich, 1989: 200). The statistics suggest that child delivery had caused "a heavy toll on colonial women" (Ibid.), as the following describes:

"Thirteen years earlier [1711], Cotton Mather's sister, Jerusha, decided when she was five months pregnant that it was time to get herself ready for death. She acknowledged that she was a fearful creature, and especially so because of her pregnancy, and wished to give herself up completely to God. She vowed that if God gave her an easy and short labor that she would dedicate herself to bring up her child in fear of Him. She petitioned for a 'resigned will' and to be made for whatever God demanded for her. When her labor approached, she prayed to be delivered from the sin of fear. As it happened, her labor was easy, but she and her baby died a short time later." (Saxton, 2003: 32)

In order to help women come through the "recurring and dangerous" crisis (Nash et al., 1986: 102), the women in the colony who had attended childbirth started to form some networks of mutual assistance. According to the research, a lot of women engaged in the profession of "obstetric art", which then had saved many young mothers. An example is Mrs. Phillips, an immigrant to Boston in 1719, who delivered more than 3,000 infants in her 42-year career. Mrs. Phillips became a familiar figure in her town because she always "hurried through the streets to attend the lying-in of about 70 women each year" (Ibid.). Many stories demonstrate that the colonial women not only tried to conquer hardships individually, but also offered help to others as much as possible. This can be regarded as one of the sources for the American people's independence as well as team-working spirit.

### *B. Absence of Legal Status*

Another obstacle that the colonial women must be confronted with was the absence of their legal status in their marriage lives. As far as the marital relationship was concerned, American Puritanism had a strong influence in this aspect. At the very beginning, a married woman hadn't have any legal rights, for American Puritans had "subordinated female to male, wife to husband, and mother to father", insisting women's "obedience, modest, and taciturnity" (Saxton, 2003: 31). This is vividly illustrated in a piece of writing by John Winthrop, who was the Governor of Massachusetts in the mid-17th century. After telling us that

he "happily married to three submissive women" (quoted from Saxton, 2003: 31), he wrote:

"A true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom and would not think her condition safe and free but in her subjection to her husband's authority. Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ, her king and husband; his yoke is so easy and sweet to her as a bride's ornaments; and if through forwardness or wantonness, etc., she shakes it off at any time, she is at no rest in her spirit until she takes it up again; and whether her lord smiles upon her and embraces her in his arms, or whether he frowns and rebukes her, or smites her, she comprehends the sweetness of his love in all, and is refreshed, and instructed by every such dispensation of his authority over her". (Ibid.)

As a result, the colonial women's legal rights were entirely ignored and thus void. For instance, a woman could not sue or be sued in court without her husband's name; the right to dispose the money she earned outside of the family belonged to her husband; she even could not be the children's guardian, for her husband was the only lawful guardian to their children (Schlesinger, 1981: 26). Fortunately, the legal status of married women had gradually been improved, and in the 18th century, some colonies began to offer women a chance to sue or to be sued in court as they engaged in a business. In 1714, a statute in New Hampshire provided that "where a husband's will proved to work an injury upon the wife, the widow should receive such proportion of her husband's estate 'as if he had dyed intestate'" (Degler, 1970: 57-58). On the whole, however, in every aspect of a woman's life, she was restricted by and subordinated to the social authority as well as her husband, as Jerome R. Reich once commented that "the reluctance to grant women any political rights was a characteristic of the entire colonial period" (1989: 202). It is well known that American women didn't have the equal voting rights as American men until 1920.

### *C. Witch Persecution Danger*

In addition to being grim and somber on women's subordination to men, American Puritanism was notorious for its persecution of witches in the colonial period, which, ironically, had become a unique characteristic in American history. It is recorded that English witchcraft executions began in the 16th century and peaked in the mid-17th century. Salem Village in Massachusetts had witnessed a large number of witch executions. Salem's witch persecutions broke out in 1692. Some women were condemned as witches for playing devil power on people, especially on young girls, who got hysteria — a disease that could not be cured and explained by doctors at that time. People believed that the vicious power came from the devil Satan and the witch women were Satan's representatives. Actions were taken immediately, as the descriptions in American Experiences go that: in the June of 1692, in Salem, "six women had been hanged from the gallows (...) in early August five persons went to the gallows (...). A month later fifteen more were tried and condemned, of which eight were hung promptly and the other spared because they were presumably to ready to confess their sins and turn state's

(...)" (Roberts et al., 1990: 30). Some American literary works have depicted and reflected this notorious witch persecution history, among which Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a famous one. In *The Scarlet Letter*, a physical birth mark of a newly-born baby would be considered as the evil mark of Satan by Puritans and the midwife would be condemned as a witch who "witched" the baby; consequently, this midwife would be put on trial and even be executed to death. Ironically, some historians once claimed that those episodes should be seen as "perfectly natural superstition" (Ibid.).

#### IV. AMERICAN COLONIAL WOMEN'S MULTIPLE ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

##### A. Pillars to Families

Despite the fact that there were enormous physical and social hardships, the American colonial women showed great strength and courage to conquer them, and they assumed incomparable responsibility for the daily life of their families. They played multiple irreplaceable roles: being the wife of the husband, being the mother of children, being the nurse of the ill, being the organizer of the family, being the consultant of the spirit needs, etc. Americans themselves are also amazed by the energy and industry of the colonial women, who can arrange their families' daily life as much as comfortable. The following descriptions provide a glimpse to the general labor of a colonial woman:

"Physical isolation and the chronic shortage of cash required that the typical household provided the essential livings for itself, and this largely rested on her shoulders as the wife and mother. The family raised its own poultry and vegetables, prepared its own butter and cheese, made its own soap out of grease left over from cooking and butchering, supplied its own birth brooms, dipped its own candles, made and dyed its own cloth, rugs, and apparel, doctored and nursed its sick and injured. (...) In addition, women sometimes helped with the sowing and reaping, and in the back country they had to know enough about firearms to repel wild beasts and Indians. (...) To preserve perishable foodstuffs the womenfolk, having no knowledge of refrigeration or canning, had to salt, pickle, smoke and dry vegetables and meat. (...) Even the plantation mistress (...) not only superintended the cooking and serving of meals for the family as well as for the constant stream of guests, but she also saw it that the table was largely provisioned from her own garden, chicken yard, dairy, and smokehouse." (Schlesinger, 1981: 28-29)

Apparently, American colonial women had assumed such indispensable responsibility that they were the pillars of their families.

##### B. Success Outside of the Family

In addition to do a lot of housework, some women started their own business outside of their families. Though it was rather difficult at the very beginning, more and more women took the job as being shopkeepers, innkeepers, ferry tenders, wharf proprietors, school mistresses and seamstresses, and,

sometimes, even as being wholesale merchants and ship-owners (Schlesinger, 1981: 29). One recorded shining example was Eliza Lucas Pinckney in South Carolina. In 1738, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, only seventeen year old, was left to charge her father's three plantations, as her father had gone to the West Indies to fulfill his military duty. Here goes her story: first, she successfully grew figs, gingers and cotton; then, after some experiments, she made indigo as a stable crop in South Carolina; later, in 1744 she engaged in other business such as cultivating silkworm; besides, she married a widower who owned vast and scattered estates in various part of the colony, and after her husband's death, she took over her husband's business; in the end, she made good profits and became such a prominent figure that even President Washington took part in her funeral in 1793 (Schlesinger, 1981: 30). Of course, it was admitted that Eliza Lucas Pinckney was an exceptional example, and one must not overemphasize the opportunities for the colonial women to work outside. Lots of professions were not open to them, and the jobs related to such as medicine, ministry and law were "totally closed to them" (Degler, 1970: 56). As years went by, nevertheless, more and more women moved out of home to start their career and gain their independence.

#### V. CONCLUSION

A popular opinion states that colonial America was a parasite for women where women enjoyed a superior position and golden chances of marriage. This paper refutes such an argument by revealing the reason behind it: the unpredictable harshness had made fewer women immigrate to the new land, which had caused the unbalanced ratio between men and women as well as the scarcity of women in the new continent. Then what is the true picture of the America colonial women's marital life? This paper probes into three main types of hardships and difficulties that the American colonial women must face and conquer: the risk of dying in childbirth, the absence of legal status and the witch persecution danger, based on which American colonial women's unique, multiple and irreplaceable roles are further explored: being an indispensable pillar to the family and also being able to achieve huge career success outside of family. All in all, this paper carries out a comparatively rounded examination of American women's marital life in the colonial period. The above analyses, on the one hand, display the hardships and difficulties encountered by the American colonial women; while on the other hand, they also suggest the braveness and efforts of the colonial women to conquer all kinds of the harshness, through which American colonial women made their unique and tremendous contributions to the creation of America out of a vast and wild land.

Benjamin Franklin once remarked that family is the sacred cement of all society; if so, then the American colonial women are a vital ingredient of that sacred cement, without which the American society could not be evolved into today's modernization. Their qualities such as industry, endurance, self-reliance and team-working spirit are generally regarded as their precious legacies to the further development of the new nation. In a literary sense, western writers would praise the colonial men as Adams, as the

immigrants are just like Adam in the Bible, ever cherishing the dream to build an Eden in the new continent; then the colonial women could be fairly described as brave Eves, who, sharing tears and harshness with their husbands, have made their share of unique contribution to the foundation of a new nation. The thrilling stories of those brave Eves are always there, continuing inspiring Americans to create a better world.

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