

Review

Between passion and sin: a postmodern Feminist approach to Nathaniel Hawthorne's the Scarlet Letter

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Nathaniel Hawthorne as a romantic writer achieved a special position among the American writers who never borrowed new themes and motifs outside their social milieu. This paper explores the Postmodern Feminist critical approach to emotional behavior of major characters towards the woman character. The central woman character that has been portrayed as a sinner for her original sin of adultery, want of freedom from social restrictions and a desire to grow as an individual with a hope of strong support from a sinful puritan 'man'. This paper invites readers' commonsense to understand the relation between human passions and morality where the American woman has become a victim of puritan morality rather than social morality.

Keeping aside all the established theories of genre traditions the postmodern feminist approach to woman's morality and freedom in the middle of social restrictions that emerged from religious moral policing in the novel have been dealt and analyzed. Woman's moral individuality was strictly scrutinized by men in the name of religious outcast of a sin, much attributed only to woman, called 'Adultery'. The Postmodern feminists do not necessarily magnify the design of religious morality but the way men politicize and utilize such situations in order to curb woman's individuality and independence. The American woman who had been waiting for her turn to grab the fruits of modernity equally with men, was deceived by the men's domination.

This paper informs the reader about how 'Hester', the central woman character suffered at the hands of hopeless men who drew her life's boundaries. It also analyzes the postmodern elements that contribute to the real identity of nineteenth century American woman being emphatically shown as suppression of women by Hawthorne in "The Scarlet Letter". The moral restrictions conditioned in the novel have affected woman's passions; derived her real happiness and freedom beyond the man made moral and religious systems of marriage and post-marital life. Man's systems of morality and hypocrisy tampered womanhood and her privacy to choose a life beyond her tolerance and patience.

Keywords: Postmodernism, feminism, moral wilderness, Puritanism, sin, sinner, alienated woman

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is inseparable from postmodernism. Most of the research in the social sciences and humanities was, in fact, carried out by feminists in the latter half of the

twentieth century, helped to a larger extent to humanity. Many feminists discarded the eighteenth century liberal feminism and responded to the fundamental

philosophical discourses in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. In the postmodern period, feminist observations and discourses have become prominent.

The feminist approach to woman strongly opposes the socio-religious and the Andocentric hegemony over woman's natural choice of life. The postmodern feminist perspective of dividing woman from man has created a new woman and stereotyped her position in the postmodern society. A new gap has been widened between men and women as women were victimized through centuries and such victimization gave her a legal and moral individuality, thrashing even all religious conditioning of human morality, in the twenty first century society. It can also be analyzed in Hawthorne's perspective of seeing a victimized modern woman from the postmodern feminist argument (Baym, 1986), (Hawthorne, 1959).

The postmodern feminists refused all the male centered theories related to truth, reality and traditions, etc. They do not accept the universality of ideals of philosophy, reason and theory that have been politically promoted against woman's ideology. They consider them as theories popularized by men and woman's experience, ideology and paradigms have never been part of all major established theories. They also deny modernism, which has been projected by male centered in order to avoid woman from a naturally available process of modernity and she couldn't have her influence on Art, literature and socio-philosophical roots of modernity. It is evidently man's suppression of a woman's identity and her individuality (Bercovitch, 1991).

The main objective of this paper is to assess woman's centrality between her passions and socially constructed system of morality. This paper mainly focuses on Nathaniel Hawthorne's portrayal of American women in a conservative puritan society where she lost her self respect and became a victim of manmade moral and religious systems of marriage and post-marital life beside his political design upon woman's social dignity (Leone, 1996). It also extracts the factors that dragged down American woman who had been waiting for her turn to grab the fruits of modernity equally with men, was deceived by men's domination. The Puritan restrictions were levied on the central woman character 'Hester' who

could not escape or avoid them as they were designed against women by men of flaw who were never identified as real sinners. This paper takes cues between passion and sin where 'Hester' as a woman becomes a victim of manmade morality and closely studies her loss of freedom and individuality that have strongly been argued by the Postmodern Feminists (Bloom, 1991).

Modern woman in a Puritan Society:

In "The Scarlet Letter", Hawthorne doesn't expose his characters by adopting any truth and reason. He has the objective of presenting the situations as they come along the complexity in which they do not favor any character. Similarly Hester Prynne's character in the novel doesn't get either sympathy or abhorrence due to the constant movement of things against each other (Browning, 1972). Hawthorne employed a depth of tenderness and unlimited sympathy with all forms of being and an omnipresent love. He doesn't attack the Puritan imposition of moral commitment and individual freedom. There are two significant paradoxes one can identify in analyzing the dilemma of love reached out towards the end of the novel. Hawthorne's strong consideration of Hester Prynne's purity of love towards Dimmesdale and Hester as a socialized woman who valued her passions before being named as a sinner for her original sin of adultery. The characters in this novel are not seen through in a social set up, but the weaknesses of an emerging free society which could not help Hester to come out of her dissatisfaction over man's failure to break the boundaries and restrictions made against his weakness, i.e. woman (Brackett, 1999).

Hawthorne's puritan angle is also clearly visible in his characterization of invisible 'Eve' as Hester and Adam as Dimmesdale, who do not love each other for a common reason. Hester's love has passion and she looks for such a relation and freedom from god made morality. She has been projected as a sinner who gains readers' sympathy for her immune purity of love, seen only as a passion by the society where Hawthorne places the reader as one among the strict puritan society.

The American woman's attitude towards the modern

freedom being enjoyed by men first and given later to women with limitations can be observed as Hester initially devalued and forgot the consequences of an impending solitary life ahead.

Between 'self' and 'self-consciousness'

Hawthorne can be seen as a person much detached observer of life. The mystery of the sin is nearly created throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. Many a times Hawthorne saw the mystic power of sin and attributed it to the psychological conditions of man who was once under the influence of belief in sin and purity as he preached dominantly in every church in the Christian America. Though sin is basically a moral issue of human conscience and doesn't come under the realm of natural choice of relationships developed in course of time (Crews, 1996), (James, 1879), (Stewart, 1948).

Hester Prynne's passion for a life beyond the moral construction of the society helped her to develop a relation with Dimmesdale. She never expected that Dimmesdale would come out of his socio-religious constraints in which he struggled his psyche in a series of incidents took place around him. His fear of Chillingworth knowing of the secret sin between him and Hester Prynne stopped him to think of freedom and escape into a new world. He saw Hester as an alien in a free world. The truth always prevailed in his heart followed by the fact, i.e. sin filled heart. He could not compromise with his amoral past as it was painful to his pure love for Hester and Pearl. He saw his love's incarnation and happiness in Pearl who looked like a flower blossomed out of mud. Hester's ideals, though not projected much, have had their roots in her chosen freedom, but a mystic wilderness of sin was always seen in her past and future.

Believing Feminine Values

American feminism tries to retain some of the traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, characterization, etc while interpreting literary texts. The question of 'male ego' has always been addressed in most of the woman

writing. But in Hawthorne's, 'male ego' was not exposed either with Dimmesdale or with Chillingworth. Hawthorne equally exposed the moral dilemma of overcoming the moral intimidation confronted by Hester and Dimmesdale. If Chillingworth is attributed to 'male ego', it doesn't mean he would be advocating male domination but he became one of the victims of the moral wilderness, for which he wanted to attain peace through revenge against Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne (Kaul, 1968), (Savory, 1957).

Hester's want of a relation to man is not a general female expectation of a male stereotype, but a male who can succeed the obstacles being created by the puritan society and the general human tendency of belief in purity. She saw purity as a kind of mental construct and that can be achieved easily in a society which has been transforming into a modern society and where the religious inequality can't sustain for a long time. Hester's position as a woman is different from a sinner. As sin is not equally attributed or expected for both men and women, Hester faced the struggle to survive as a woman sinner who must suffer more than a man. Man was fundamentally considered as pure as Adam's heart (Male, 1957).

Sin, Sinner and Woman

What a woman, according to postmodern approach conceal always regulates the Phallogocentric society. What a woman keeps secret doesn't help her to live happily, but tries to protest from male's attraction towards her organs, territory and interest. "One token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another" (Chapter – II, 'The Market-Place'). The gender question arises first with female and it is woman's fate to identify herself as a woman. In the "Laugh of Medusa", (Helene Cixous, 1976), a celebrated manifesto of women's writing, she states, "She must recover her goods, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.

In a postmodern feminist discourse Hester's character can initially be studied by asking a fundamental question: "What constitutes a woman?" and later "What is

feminity?" in "the scarlet Letter", Hester represented true feminity but not what a woman is supposed to be as defined in a male dominated, male defined society. "But this has been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose." (Chapter XVIII, 'A Flood of Sunshine'). Every passion that she exposed at the beginning of the novel was her 'self' that was much devoid of looking at herself as a woman of puritan social creed, never expected or wanted in such a social milieu. Hawthorne's attitude to Hester draws sympathy from the reader. His portrayal of 'Hester' as eve is not completely acceptable because she also represents a mother like "Virgin Madonna", mother of Jesus Christ. But Hawthorne's manifestation of 'Hester' as a true representative of feminity rather than womanliness is clearly evident. "It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." (Chapter-I, 'The Prison-Door'). Because she gave birth to 'Pearl' unlike Madonna gave birth to male child, Jesus. The puritan justification of woman's dependency on man is seen obviously as Madonna gave birth to a male child, Jesus but not a female child.

The postmodernists argue that dependency is justified between man and woman as they equally take part in the creation of modern man and woman for a generation that sustains through ages, but who will answer the question of equal distribution of freedom and power to women? One is always subdued or dominated is only a theoretical proposition or a belief but not practically acceptable pity. Hester's pity is at the edge of hesitation, but not a point of consideration to see her life a life of free woman. She was always seen as an original sinner for her adultery (Van, 1957).

Postmodern alienated woman:

Hawthorne indirectly and seriously protested the adopted western paradigms and social systems of gender bias. He seems to pity Dimmesdale, at the helm of his religious puritan affairs and his commitment to purity and service to god on behalf of the people he preaches. Though he was seen as a tragic hero who conquered his 'self' to

overcome both internal and external responsibilities: carrying the message of eternal salvation and concealing the secret of his sin and share the whole weight of sin of adultery with Hester (Rahv, 1941).

Dimmesdale at times confused with his 'self' for the sin of having affairs with Hester and also rejected the belief of eternal salvation for which man has to wait. "People say," said another, 'that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to his heart that such a scandal has come upon his congregation.' (Chapter II, 'The Market-Place') Similarly Hester's prime concern towards the end of the novel is to get rid-off from social abandonment of her act of adultery. She felt alienated due to her dislike for a society where she too was an alienated woman with a strong aspiration for freedom, but the American society was still a borrowed western ideal society where puritan foundations strongly laid the principles of sinfulness. The human faith played a vital role in the multicultural American society and regulated individual American society and regulated individual freedom. It started defining sin and sinner.

Hester, in fact, rejected to wear the scarlet letter 'A' because it represents 'Adultery', an identity for her sin but not what she believes ability. "Ah, but let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart." (Chapter II, 'The Market-Place') It was Hawthorne's view to show how individuals cannot attain purity as they wish through spiritual freedom. Unlike in the East, like in India, where sin is not a serious issue, but anyhow can have a remedy and it, in fact, makes the individual to know himself better after self-realization. There are innumerable stories and myths in Indian scriptures that depict, teach and exemplify the true nature of sin. For example the sage who wrote Ramayana was a sinner at first. He became a pure man and composed a huge epic, *Ramayana* that describes the story of god's of avatar on the earth as lord Rama. If we compare the puritan essentialism and fundamentalism, laid and rooted deep into the individual freedom in an alienated land called America, with a culturally rich and spiritually assimilative Eastern society, it can be seen evidently in their social milieu.

Hester convinced Dimmesdale to fight against the circumstances in order to escape into a free world, but

Dimmesdale's failure to overcome the circumstances disappointed her. "A pure hand needs no glove to cover it". (Chapter XII, 'The Minister's Vigil'. She felt alienated into an unwanted world herself and though prepared to escape with the help of Dimmesdale. She could not do it. "She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom". (Chapter XVIII, 'a Flood of Sunshine'. From the postmodern point of view it was man's inability and conservative ideals that made him disallow woman to fulfill her ambition to achieve freedom. Towards the end of the novel, Hester realized man's inability and she mentally prepared to spend her rest of the life helping the people in that locality. The New England to Hester was an alienated land of concealment and doubleness in order to achieve acceptable femininity (Thorslev, 1962), (Cohen and Paula, 1976).

CONCLUSION

Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" s needs to be studied from both the Postmodernist and Postmodern Feminist point of view. This paper has analyzed the significant socio-psychological issues that surrounded 'Hester Prynne', the central woman character of the novel. Hawthorne's concern for the woman who was influenced by the puritan Phallocentricism and western moral systems construed and dominated by men. The postmodern feminism, to its great contribution, has revealed and analyzed many theories that have been highly influential so far in the male world. As postmodern paradigms were never of naturally made but socio-psychologically constructed with the help of western moral system, promoted by the puritan borrowed principles that are mostly characterized by man's domination over woman in terms of morality, purity, spirituality and salvation. This paper has brought out the way woman was treated by the men of purity and the society that did not consider and value her femininity (Swisher, 2003).

Finally to summarize, the postmodern argument against men who were the sole reason behind the loss of woman's freedom and individuality was highlighted. The readers can understand men's design of morality and politicizing of the religious sins by attributing them

exclusively against women in order to restrict their freedom and individuality. This paper finally proves and emphasizes that the real woman was replaced by womanhood and her gender identity in a male politicized world of freedom was blemished at large. It has been dealt with subtle instances taken from Hawthorne's depiction of Hester's character throughout the novel.

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