

Hester Prynne: Identifying the Feminine Self?

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Abstract: *The idea of feminist criticism is to evaluate all the works of literature and scrutinize the prejudiced treatment between genders existing in the society. Feminist critics also try to estimate the various manner women are regressed and the technique they utilize to rise above or fight back the tyranny. The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorn delivers an excellent premise for a feminist critical review. Hester Prynne the central character of the novel, her hardships and her resilience in confronting forms the core content of analysis in this paper. Hester is viewed as a beacon of light for all the women as she manages to manifest her powerful individuality and uniqueness by her supreme sense of perseverance.*

Key words: *Feminism, Scarlet, Letter, Hester, Prynne, Nathaniel, Hawthorne, oppression, patriarchy, criticism, identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ever since Literature has marked its roots, many of the writings have portrayed women as a second fiddle to men and men on their part have considered themselves to be at an elevated position far more supreme to their women counterpart. For precisely this reason, men take pleasure in hegemonizing every sphere concerning women's existence and gave rise to a patriarchal society. Here on women are subjugated and coerced into performing actions or restricted from acting on their own, thus ensuring that they are aware of their own inferior status. Hawthorn has set up this exact premise in *The Scarlet Letter*. The central protagonist Hester Prynne is thoroughly intimidated in her puritan society and compelled to wear a scarlet 'A' letter on her bosom for indulging in an adulterous relationship. She is, "the central woman character [who] suffered at the hands of hopeless men who drew her life's boundaries" [Jayasinha]. However, the readers are presented to her iron will mindset that rejects all the ordinances that the puritans have imposed upon the society. Hester even challenges the patriarchal rule makers who try to subjugate her and the entire womenfolk of the community. Hester "paves the way for the women who are trodden and considered worthless to rehabilitate their state and play their positive role in that particular patriarchal society..." (Ahmad). Despite being shunned by her community, she emerges as the female persona who withstands all the hardships imposed upon her and confronts the misogynistic notions put forth by the puritan society.

Puritans were an ecclesiastical section who were in service to the God and were under the belief that they were chosen to execute his plans on Earth. As a result of which, all crimes were considered as straying away from the path of God and were punished severely. There were hardly any compromises in this matter. Women naturally bore the brunt of all these strict rules. Firstly they were not encouraged to participate in the town councils, and secondly they were shunned from any activities related to the church. In short, power in any form was never manifested in the hands of a woman. Hence, Hester Prynne had to strictly comply by the rules of this puritan society. She had to undergo a lot of torture and was cruelly stripped of all the bearings that expounded her identity as a woman. In spite of this, Hester remained unwavering. Her calm reaction to all the punishments and the unperturbed routine she adopts to raise her daughter proves to portray how she challenges the male-oriented community and restores her feminine personality intact.

History has recorded the Puritans as a group that firmly stood against grandeur and beauty. Females were severely subdued and looked down by the Puritan society and it has been abundantly written. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has picturised this scenario. For example, Hester is warned against wearing any clothes that she prefers and is also forced to hide her hair and face by wearing a cap. Hester's natural beauty is described when she on an impulse takes off her cap before Reverend Dimmesdale:

By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, [...] and imparting the charm of softness to her features. [...] All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest... (Baym, 321)

In this scene, the "formal cap" represents the rule imposed upon the females by the puritans. It's compulsory that all womenfolk wear a cap. "Symbolically, when Hester does these actions, she is in fact removing the harsh, stark, unbending puritan social and moral structure" (Wang). And when Hester removes the cap, she is unconsciously yet

stubbornly rejecting all the rules and regulations inscribed by the puritan community and claiming her inner self, even for a tiny fleeting moment.

Letter 'A' symbolizes adulteress, a powerful connotation of a man-ruled community that takes pleasure in implementing law and order. Men ensured that Hester felt, experienced her inferiority each passing day by wearing it. But as irony seems to have it, by banishing Hester from town and forcing her to be on her own, the male-oriented society has in reality molded her into a confident woman: "she cast away the fragment of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before" (Baym, 340). This ends up in a completely opposite route, as Hester does not need to go to the church or adhere to any limitations prescribed by the phallic society.

Hester's subconscious attitude towards the retribution meted out to her can be viewed through different spheres. She deliberately decorates the scarlet letter. A child is born to Hester after her adulterous act whereby she is found guilty and sentenced, thus coerced into wearing the scarlet letter on her bosom to allow the world to know of her shameless act. But here, it has to be duly noted that Hester beautifully fashions her dress, tailoring the letter 'A': "But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer [...] was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom" (Baym, 280). It is not pleasing to the eyes of many people in her community and therefore she is scolded:

She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain," remarked one of the female spectators; "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?" (Baym, 280)

Hester's act of refashioning the scarlet letter, her bold attempt in opposing the verdict is almost a tight slap on the face of the patriarchal lords of Puritanism. She calmly decides matters related to her life on her own, although she never shies away from her retribution. She ensures that her individuality remains intact even while accepting the ordeal and it is proven by her idea of decorating the letter on her chest.

Hester's second act that confronts the Puritan enslavement is her response to the ordeal she is forced to endeavor. She carries herself with dignity. In the presence of stares and questions by onlookers, she does not duck her face nor looks tensed, "journey of some length [...] measured by the prisoner's experience" (Baym, pg 281). In reality, as she waits by the scaffold, she controls herself from "shriek[ing] out with the full power of her lungs" as her emotions are cascading in her mind. She never wavers from the puritan culture and restrains herself from breakdown "under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom" during this scene (Baym, 282).

Furthermore, Hester downright refuses to identify her paramour with whom she bore her child. She is strictly compelled by the Reverend who administered her tribulation to make her confession and divulge the name of the father to the entire world: "I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer" even if "he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame" (Baym, 288). Hester refuses which forces another priest to raise her voice at her. To which she thunders "Never!" her denial to reveal the name with whom she had established sexual relations, seriously sabotages the Puritan society. They wanted the man too to be tried and shamed and never establish any relation within the society as per the Puritan law. Hester clearly cripples the Puritan values and beliefs through this action.

Hester's child is named Pearl. The name is commonly referred in the Bible, "as being of great price" (Baym, 299). This reference is most commonly associated with the Bible verse, Matthew 13:45-46. Although the child is precious to her, the pain she had to endure was too profound. Hester and her child are banished from the village. In spite of all this repudiation from the community, Hester loves her baby dearly and lavishes all the attention on her. Pearl grows up to be an intelligent and precocious child. There is a part in the novel where the governor discusses matters about her daughter. They desire to punish Hester further by depriving her of her child. Towards which Hester outrageously defends her baby:

Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with almost a fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast off by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the death. (Baym, 322)

The readers of the novel can distinctly view the candid request to the puritan law. The priests termed Hester's child as a demon and a barrier to Hester's inclination towards faith and forgiveness. According to the clergymen, they were better developed in teaching Pearl about the spiritual life that she was supposed to abide by; hence they decide to take her away from her mother. "Ye will not take her! I shall die first," Hester's blunt rejection and furious outburst at the priests speaks volumes about her courage and determination. She establishes her individuality, motherhood and her strength as a woman.

Hester is content with her freedom and obviously does not crave for a man's presence in her life. She has proven time and again that she loves Dimmesdale and wishes to commence a new life with him but at the same time she does not make it her life mission. Hester works as a tailor and is able to fend for herself and her child, "Her needle-work was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarves, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap..." (Baym, 254) It has to be noted that women were not allowed to work in the puritan society. Men were the bread winners and any alteration from the usual system was heavily frowned upon. Hester defies this norm and never begs for a living from either Dimmesdale or Chillingworth.

The scarlet letter 'A' stands out as the powerful symbol of rebellion against Puritans amongst all others that Hester stood against. The letter 'A' is reflected as "her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers [...] and they had made her strong..." (Baym, 366) the symbol reigns as a teacher to her, as she propounds when the clergymen try to snatch her daughter:

'Nevertheless,' said the mother, calmly, though growing more pale, 'this badge hath taught me—it daily teaches me—it is teaching me at this moment—lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and better, albeit they can profit nothing to myself. (Baym, 259)

2. CONCLUSION:

Throughout the novel, one notices that Hester is undergoing a learning process. It is as though the letter A has been personified into a moral preacher. In spite of being banished and mocked at, Hester turns bold and sagacious.

Hester is a feminist in true sense of the word. She is heavily persecuted by the society she resides in. Her enchanting face is deliberately hidden by a formal cap and she is further forced to wear the phallic symbol 'A'. Despite all this tyranny, Hester never falls apart. On the contrary, she emerges to fight back and challenge the male oriented society. She beautifully decorates the letter on her chest, walks with grace and poise and never divulges the name of her lover. All these are clear and powerful acts of rejecting the laws ascribed by the puritans. She also takes in her hands the responsibility of rearing her daughter despite being a single mother. She earns her own money; which again stands against the law. By all these noble and courageous initiations, Hester can rightly be termed as a feminist.

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