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Hester's resistance against the patriarchal society: A postcolonial reading of *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter can be read within the framework of postcolonial theory, with colonialism equating patriarchy. The anti-colonial reading of the novel is permitted through Hester's struggle with what seem to be prevalent regulations regarding gender, culture and religion. The only way for females to be liberated from this patriarchy is by rejecting it. Hawthorne, in this novel, suggests that being a woman is in itself fighting back. Thus, it is only through womanhood that the female character is able to arrive at a reconciliation with themselves and with their consciences.

Recently postcolonial studies have moved beyond the limitations of studying the colonial experience as an encounter between European forces and colonized people to seek to problematize this seemingly homogeneous body of colonizers. Exceeding the limits of the immediate binary oppositions between East/West or colonizer/colonized results in providing different conflicting forces. The body of the colonizer, also, can be broken into struggling forces based on gender relations. Thus, oppressed female characters in any given text can be read to be socially colonized by the dominant imperial patriarchy. In other words, postcolonial theory does not restrict itself to one aspect of studying the colonial experience as the encounter between European forces and colonized people. According to Tyson (2006), postcolonial theory can be used not only upon postcolonial texts, but it exceeds those limits, and can be applied to any literary text that has

colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies. Therefore, a text does not have to be categorized as a postcolonial work in order to be analysed through the framework of postcolonial theory.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in this sense, can be read as a blow against the imperial male-made community. This paper aims to analyse Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* by providing a postcolonial reading of the text. An anti-colonial reading of the novel is permitted through Hester's struggle with what seem to be prevalent regulations regarding gender, culture and religion. The only way for females to be liberated from this patriarchy is by rejecting it. Hawthorne, in this novel, suggests that being a woman is in itself fighting back. Thus, it is only through womanhood that the female character is able to arrive at a reconciliation with themselves and with their consciences. In my treatment of the subject, I will use the terms imperialism and patriarchy interchangeably because my reading of Hawthorne's novel attempts to draw a connection between the two terms together because of their similar ideologies in the oppression and exploitation of their subjects.

Even though *The Scarlet Letter* is a fictional literary work, the novel's prestige rests in part on its realistic scenes of actions and events. Moreover, a great deal of Puritan culture and history is found throughout the novel. Thus, the locale of the novel and the social context unmistakably have a historical setting. In his essay entitled "The New England Sources of *The Scarlet Letter*", Charles Ryskamp asserts that "Hawthorne used the most creditable history of Boston available to him at that time, and one which is still an important source for the identification of houses of the early settlers and for landmarks in the city" (Ryskamp, 1959, p. 257). However, the author does not build his theme, characters, dialogues, conflicts and plot strictly around particular historical events. Ryskamp remarks that Hawthorne uses historical personages for his secondary characters and created his major ones. Yet, the depiction of Hester Prynne's miserable life according to Yamin Wang manifests women's inferiority to men during 17th-century Puritan society. Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* sheds light on women's low status within the Puritan community in the early part of the novel. "'Goodwives,' said a hard-featured dame of fifty, 'I'll tell ye a piece of my mind . . . if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne . . .'" (Hawthorne, 2007, p. 478). Hawthorne not only criticizes inequality in relation to gender but also shows the constructed ideology towards women in Puritan society. In this unique environment and age, women were not expected to go beyond the demotic assigned roles given to them by male-made society. In his

article “Hawthorne’s Hester”, Darrel Abel affirms that “Hawthorne’s attitude towards women is that of Victorian liberalism; he looked upon them as equal to men, but differently endowed” (Abel,1952, p.307).

The Scarlet Letter recounts the story of Hester Prynne, a young beautiful wife who is publicly punished by male-made society for bearing an illegitimate child and her challenge of the patriarchal/colonial oppressive conditions of Puritan society. In fact, Hawthorne’s subject, adultery, was highly problematic to deal with during 19th-century America. Hawthorne avoids possible criticism from his reading public according to Painter Alice Lorraine by starting his novel after the adultery has occurred. Hester is the central character of the novel and almost all the events directly or indirectly relate, affect and shape the way she behaves. Lorraine argues that the novel touches upon two major themes which develop throughout the course of the text: the role of women in society and the role of authority. The two themes are introduced to readers through Hester’s interaction with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, as well as with the Puritans of New England. Eric Savoy in his article “Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Anxieties of the Archive” believes that “*The Scarlet Letter* intertwines the trials of Hester Prynne with futile attempts of the Puritan community to stabilize the import of the letter A” (Savoy, 2015, p. 41).

The novel has always been viewed as a feminist representation of the Puritan community. Leslie Fiedler, in his book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, says “Hawthorne is the only American novelist of classic stature who deals centrally in his most important works with the seduction theme” (Fiedler,1960, p. 224). Walter Herbert views *The Scarlet Letter* as a way to illustrate a leading feature of the cultural construction of gender. In his study of *The Scarlet Letter*, Yamin Wang argues that Hawthorne portrays a brand-new female image through Hester’s resistance against the patriarchal society. Charles Campbell reads little Pearl as the semiotic disposition within the psychoanalytic discourse of the novel. Through psychoanalysis, Campbell reveals that Pearl’s character “subverts and reverses the mirror stage to evoke a feminine identity not subject to the Law of the Father” (Campbell, 2014, p. 54). This study illustrates the colonial ideology of the founders of New England towards women. Colonization, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “implies a relation of structural domination, and a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject in question” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 333).

Indeed, feminism and postcolonialism share many theoretical grounds, yet both schools, traditionally, in their attempts at studying marginalized voices have been separated into what Bill

Ashcroft calls “a path of convergent evolution” (Ashcroft, 1995, p. 249). In her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Leela Gandhi asserts that “both bodies of thought have concerned themselves with the study and defense of marginalized ‘Others’ within repressive structures of domination” (Gandhi, 2019, p. 83). Only recently have the two theories been brought together in order to demonstrate that females are subjected to oppression by colonial/patriarchal ideology. Gayatri Spivak sheds light on the importance of the theoretical connection between the two schools of thought. Likewise, Gemma del Hoyo de la Mata, in her essay, articulates more clearly the similarities between feminism and postcolonialism:

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of “Other”, marginalized and “colonized”. Women, like post-colonial people, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available tools are those of the colonizer. Both groups are powerless, exploited and have a subordinate position in society. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist postcolonialism sought to invert the structures of domination. (de la Mata, 1999)

Therefore, patriarchy and imperialism share major aspects such as domination, repression, exploitation and marginalization. To oppose the patriarchal/colonial system the victim needs to show resistance against the hegemonic colonizer. In fact, the use of the female to represent land is an aspect of postcolonial theory. “From the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond) female bodies symbolize the conquered land” (Loomba, 2007, p. 129). There is a connection between women and land in postcolonial discourse. Furthermore, the notion of resistance is imagined as a woman. In other words, resistance against colonizers can be portrayed via women. “Resistance itself is imagined as a woman” (ibid., p. 180). This study seeks to posit these theoretical parallels between feminism and postcolonialism through the reading of Hester’s resistance against the dominant male society.

The Scarlet Letter reveals many events and incidents which affirm that the novel can be read through a postcolonial lens. Within patriarchal/imperial society, minority groups are marked or categorized according to their race, culture, gender and religion. In the early stage of the story,

Hawthorne employs the letter A significantly on Hester's bosom to manifest how women are easily marked as "Other" according to the laws and regulations of the dominant patriarchal community. In her book *Understanding The Scarlet Letter*, Claudia Durst Johnson affirms the notion of female otherness as she states "Leaders who deal with Hester's misbehavior very self-righteously, as if they are exempt from the feelings to which she and her lover gave in" (Johnson, 1995, p. 54). The use of the letter A is significant at two levels; first it suggests total difference from the mainstream, secondly the letter A is concrete evidence which is visible to every member of the community. The narrator says, "But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were transfigured the wearer, — so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first times, was that SCARLET LETTER [...] illuminated upon her bosom" (Hawthorne, 2007, p.480). Hester is not only metaphorically marked as other through the letter A, but she is physically isolated from the community as she lives in a small cottage outside the village.

Hester's crisis in the novel is her struggle to achieve self-recognition, whereas the rest of the Puritan women, especially the older ones, try to cope with the existing system. Lorraine believes that Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* establishes a contrast between Hester Prynne and the Puritan women. The difference between Hester on one side and the other Puritan women on the other side reveal that the latter have their ideology, regarding their unequal status in the community, constructed, whereas Hester does not submit to the patriarchal society. The Puritan women believe deeply in the wrongness of Hester's deed; their negative attitudes towards Hester emerge from their established perception. In the second chapter of the novel, the narrator sheds light on how the Puritan women perceive Hester's case. One of the women says "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it?" (ibid., p. 479). Consequently, the constructed ideology is attributed to the patriarchal/colonial discourses used by the new founder to create a patriarchal community. The narrator demonstrates the established perception of the members of the Puritan community as he says "The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, [...] without a murmur at its severity" (ibid., p. 482). In his essay "Engendering the Puritan Religious", Marilyn Westerkamp states:

As writers constructed a rigid system of gender relations, they also mapped out a model of female virtue determined, in part, by their own construction of women's weaknesses as well as their desire and need to sustain male authority from the household outward. The leadership found itself required to control women for the good of the community as well as the women themselves. (Westerkamp, 1997, p. 107)

Within Puritan society, women were expected to follow conventional norms regarding gender relations, where the male was supposed to be superior to the female. Puritan society according to Westerkamp established and maintained a biblical patriarchy by the assistance of English common law and custom, founded upon the assumption of marital unity and male superiority. Furthermore, "Many Puritan writers found it necessary to emphasize the need for women's subordination" (ibid.). Therefore, there is a tight connection between the male Puritan mindset and the colonizer. Both of the two subjects believe deeply in their superiority to the others (female and colonized people respectively) and also their responsibility to civilize and maintain superiority over the others according to their set standards. As a postcolonial critic, Spivak writes, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 2015, pp. 82-83). Seen through this perspective, Hester is a subaltern who because of her adultery was exposed to the public as the other, and during her exposure she was given no right to have her voice heard. In the novel, the grim beadle says, "I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman, and child may have a fair sight of her [...] come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place"(Hawthorne, 2007, p. 481). The public punishment of Hester enhances the notion of colonial mentality in a sense of enforcing a particular pattern of life which was constituted by the patriarchal society.

Within the framework of postcolonial theory, Hester's adultery is read as a way of resisting the patriarchal community as she violates the general conventional norm assigned to her by the male-made community. On the contrary, she acts according to her will, which is not expected in accordance with the patriarchal ideology. To overcome the Puritan dominant order, Jeffrey Gross writes "Hester must resist its territorial control" (Gross, 2013, p. 215). Thus, Hester's rejection of

the hegemony of the patriarchal society resembles colonized people's resistance against their colonizers.

Hester's first confrontation with the hegemonic patriarchal society is manifested through her refusal to reveal her lover's identity. Hester takes a firm stance in her refusal to reveal the baby's father. Mr. Wilson said "Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast. Never replied Hester Prynne, [...] Speak said another voice [...] give your child a father! I will not speak! Answered Hester" (Hawthorne, 2007, p. 488). Through her confrontation with the elite members of the patriarchal society, Hester elevates her social status. The same refusal is revealed when Hester's husband asked her about the name of the baby's father. "Ask me not! Replied Hester Prynne, looking firmly into his face. "That thou shalt never know!" (Hawthorne, 2007, p. 492). Hester's position demonstrates her rejection of the cultural perception regarding the unequal gender relations within the Puritan community. She takes a courageous stand and maintains her right to keep her lover's identity secret.

Indeed, Hester's second conflict with patriarchal ideology takes place immediately after she leaves prison. The narrator says "Perhaps there was a more real torture in her first unattended footsteps from the threshold of the prison, [.....] . But now, with this unattended walk from her prison-door, began the daily custom, and she must either sustain and carry it forward by the ordinary resources of her nature, or sink beneath it" (ibid., p. 493). The cultural constraints of the patriarchal Puritan community use every single means to maintain the unequal status of the two genders. The permanent letter A on Hester's breast indicates the colonial ideology of keeping Hester as the other for as long as they can. The imperial/patriarchal mindset through the long-lasting punishment of Hester threatens the rest of the community with similar torture if the rule of imperial law is violated. Hester had an alternative as she could move to a remote location where her identity and shame could be hidden, but instead Hester not only confronts the imperial mentality but she also rejects the assigned identity given to her by the male-made community. "Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost" (ibid., p. 495). Through her fight with the imperial/patriarchal community, Hester gains some sort of recognition and changes aspects of the existing culture of the Puritan society. This notion is manifested through changing the implied meaning of letter A from adultery to signify angel and able.

Hester fights against the patriarchal culture by making herself economically and geographically independent. The conventional role of a woman during the Puritan time was limited to the domestic sphere. Women were expected to live financially and geographically in the shadow of men. In this regard, colonized people resemble Hester as their natural resources have been exploited by their colonizers and become economically dependent on them. In her rejection of the colonial ideology, Hester establishes her financial status by taking part in the public domain.

The Scarlet Letter depicts gender inequality; the text is a compelling narrative of the patriarchal domination faced by women's resistance against exploitation and inferiority and simultaneously encourages female characters to step out of the ideological cocoon of patriarchy. Additionally, it provides the reader with the benefit of understanding the changes that occur in Hester's character and her role in the patriarchal community. The triumph of Hester at the end of the novel underscores the failure of the imperial/patriarchal power to maintain a different social status between the two genders. The struggle of Hester versus male-made society is similar in nature to the struggle between colonized people and colonizers. The former strived for self-recognition, whereas the latter used every mean to maintain their imperial power.

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