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Examining the Condition Of Puritan Women in Colonial America Through Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter'

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Abstract: Women have never received the same status in society as men. History has plenty of examples of injustices committed against women. Men have always suppressed and denied them their rights. Almost all communities of the world have similar stories of women's subjugation. With the rise of feminism, we now realize the need to understand women and address their problems. So, we must look back into the past, learn from our mistakes, and fill the gaps. Hence, it becomes necessary to study the state of women across all times and spaces. Our literary texts have many such real stories highlighting their struggles. "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of them. The Puritan society in colonial America was one of the many patriarchal societies in which women did not enjoy the same privileges as men did. Religion has also played an essential role in framing American culture and thereby deciding the status of women in them. It is a common belief that Puritanism resulted in the formation of nineteenth-century feminism in America. This study aims to go deeper into the lives of the Puritan Women through the eyes of an American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne,

using his famous work The Scarlet Letter as a ground of research.

Keywords: Puritan, Society, Adultery, Evil, Sin

Introduction

"Men make the moral code and they expect women to accept it. They have decided that it is entirely right and proper for men to fight for their liberties and their rights, but that it is not right and proper for women to fight for theirs."

- Emmeline Pankhurst, "My Own Story"

The Puritans were radical Protestants who wanted to purify the Church of England. In the early seventeenth century, the first Puritans came and settled in America, naming it 'New England.' They were highly religious, had stringent rules and severe punishments for breaking those rules. However, these rules produced both good and bad results. Often the narrow definition of righteousness led to little or no room for individualism, as was the case with women in the society. The dominant male members of the community

RESEARCH ARTICLE

constructed rules and boundaries for the females and assigned them definite roles to play.

A Puritan woman was married early. She was forbidden to cast a vote or take education or hold any property in her name. The law of coverture placed a woman's legal and financial identities under her husband's name and authority. Even a widow was not allowed to inherit property, nor was she allowed to work for a living. Women were restricted to carry out domestic duties only. Abortion was strictly prohibited. Women were considered a weaker constitution and hence thought to be more susceptible to collaborating with Satan in evil. Such beliefs result in incidents like witch-hunting. The *Scarlet Letter* is one work that presents the condition of women in the Puritan Society during seventeenth-century New England. The novel is set in Massachusetts Bay Colony, the very first Puritan colony established in America.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, born and brought into this Puritan society of Massachusetts, must have been carrying the baggage of these societal rules, which might have played a significant role in framing his identity. His great-great-great-grandfather, William Hathorne, was the first Puritan from the Hathorne family to move from England to settle in America. He had occupied many powerful positions

and was infamous for his cruel judgments. His son and Nathaniel's great-great-grandfather John Hathorne was one among the judges who commanded the witch trials in Salem. However, Nathaniel despises the atrocities committed by his Puritan ancestors. "I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties [...]. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them [...] may be now henceforth removed" (13).

For this reason, he added the "w" to his surname, perhaps to isolate himself from them.

Being from a Puritan background, Nathaniel has successfully presented an accurate picture of Puritan society in his works. There are several historical events and figures which Hawthorne includes in the novel. Hathorne had mentioned in his diary, six years before the novel's publication, an old colonial law that punished a young woman for adultery. Hawthorne as a child had witnessed his mother after his father's death going through a similar kind of suffering in raising his siblings as she too had a child outside the institution of marriage. These events might have inspired him to write this novel. Nathaniel's father was a sea captain. Nathaniel enjoyed prosperity until the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

sudden death of his father, which then pushed his family into poverty.

Hawthorne's works are a good source of information to understand the Puritan society and the condition of the women in them. He is also famous for his strong female characters in many romances, novels, and short stories. These women characters project and reflect the societal gender expectations for being women. There are also some of his female characters who are cheated or exploited by the men. Through such female characters, we as readers from the 21st century can visualize the condition of females in Puritan America.

Nathaniel chose to write in somewhat a feminist narrative style, which creates sympathy for the woman protagonists suffering under patriarchal oppression. In addition to this, Hawthorne used an omniscient narrative technique that permits the story to disclose the different perspectives of different characters. The sympathy Hester earns in the heart of the townspeople, and the heart of the readers is the result of Hawthorne's writing techniques. The female characters in the novel (Hester Prynne, her daughter Pearl and Mistress Hibbins) and their sufferings reflect the actual life of the women in the seventeenth-century Puritan world. Studying these female characters and the situation they are put in by society will help us achieve our desired objective.

Discussion

When the novel starts, Hester is already declared adulterous by the law. Readers are not provided with any detail of her past. Such a beginning suggests that the people of the Puritan colony must have also done the same. Both the authorities and the ordinary people of the town must not have given a moment of thought to Hester's condition and her past before concluding her adultery. It is only a while later in the novel that the readers discover that Rogger Chillingworth was her husband who had mistreated her and never gave her any love or respect but instead left her alone. In her loneliness and search for genuine affection, Hester came close to Arthur Dimmesdale, which resulted in the child's birth, which society calls illegitimate. This side of Hester's life remains unknown to the town's people for the rest of the novel. It reveals that it was a common practice in Puritan society to pass on judgments without allowing the convicted person to put forward their arguments in defense.

The Puritan community looks down at Hester Prynne like a demon from hell. The Puritans believed that all humankind was damnable and sinful because of the original crime committed by Adam and Eve, which led to their fall. Hence, Hester is compared to Eve, who was also damned for her sins. The Puritans were highly resilient with their views about right and wrong. Their path of goodness, nobility,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and ethicality was very narrow and learned by strict sermons on evil and sin.

The Puritan mindset was such that even women of the society were insensitive and unsympathetic towards Hester Prynne, a lady left with a three-month-old infant in her arms. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead," said an old woman standing near the scaffold.

The author has excellently described the mental condition of Hester while she was standing on the scaffold amid the hateful comments and scornful gaze of the public. "But, under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure, she felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once." However, instead of losing her composure Hester recalls her happy memories of childhood. The way she handles the situation and herself shows how strong she was.

Nevertheless, several questions must have come to every reader's mind why she did not disclose the name of the father of her child and why she did not think of aborting her when she was very well aware of these situations to arise in the future? The answer to all these questions lies in the Puritan society itself. A Puritan woman is taught to believe that abortion is a sin as per the Bible. Furthermore, if a person has

sinned, then the only way left is salvation through suffering. These teachings incorporated in the mind of Hester from very early in her life might have compelled her to make such painful decisions for herself.

"Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee. On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. In this little, lonesome dwelling, with some slender means that she possessed, and by the license of the magistrates, who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her, Hester established herself, with her infant child."

It was forbidden for a woman to work outside the household. Hence, Hester had to depend on embroidery and nursing sick people as her only source of income. "It was the art—then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp—of needlework." These limitations made women dependent on their husbands and also curtailed their freedom of choice. A society in which men are free to follow any career of their preference, surgeon, or a pastor, get necessary education for it, while women are not.

Another hypocrisy of the society is that an adulterous is allowed to sew all fine things for townspeople but not a wedding dress. However, Hester's dedication to the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

selfless nursing of the sick did change the people's opinion about her to an extent. They began to look at the scarlet letter not as "adultery" but as Hester's "ability." Nonetheless, Hester is still despised and rejected by society and made to live in the suburbs. Nobody in the town was interested in having any relationship, not even friendship with Hester." Lonely as was Hester's situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want."

Where Hester is despised as an adulterous, Mistress Hibbins is despised as a witch. Hibbins was allegedly involved in the black arts in the forest. Her character was framed on a historical figure, Ann Hibbins, who was executed in 1656 in Boston after being found guilty of witchcraft. Hawthorne uses phrases like "bitter tempered" and "ill-omened physiognomy" to describe her. Where Hester is forcefully ejected from the community, Mistress Hibbins consciously chooses to be an outcast.

The next female character in the novel is that of little Pearl. She is introduced as an illegitimate child of Hester Prynne. "So Pearl—the elf-child,—the demon offspring" but grows up to be intelligent and sensible. She is aware of everything happening around her. Her experiences in life are unique. She is unknown of her father's identity. However,

she is constantly aware of her mother's sufferings. Although for most of her childhood, she cannot understand the reason behind her mother's sorrows and the person responsible for them. Thus, she attains a sense of maturity early in her life, constantly witnessing her mother's everyday struggles. She observes her mother going through all these pains silently. She suffers along with her mother in the Puritan colony. Her suffering is no punishment but an outcome of the Puritan sense of morality. Their mindset always relates knowledge with sin, sin which results in suffering. Thus, Pearl being the product of sin, also had to suffer.

Pearl is not like her mother. She did not accept Dimmesdale's show of affection in private when she knew he would not show the same in public. Hence, after the incident in the forest, she demands her father to acknowledge her mother in front of all. "Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town? (Pearl). Pearl, unlike her mother, did not approve of love being kept a secret, not even under any societal pressure.

No matter how different Pearl was, the opinion of the townspeople about her did not change. After Pearl and her mother left the town, they thought, "had the mother and child remained here, little Pearl, at a marriageable period of life, might have

RESEARCH ARTICLE

mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all."

However, this was not the end of Pearl's story. After experiencing a lonely childhood, Pearl did experience her share of happiness, too, after she left the Puritan colony. She was married and was living a joyous life outside the boundaries of Puritan law and order. Unlike her mother, who returned to the town to go through the leftover share of her suffering, Pearl chooses to move out of it and live a better life. Perhaps Pearl had understood that the source of all her sorrows was the Puritan society itself.

Conclusion

Thus, Hawthorne's novel creates a fictional world where the women go through many suffering, deprived of certain freedom they deserve. Though the novel is fictional, the pain and suffering which the women have been going through were real. Not ignoring the fact that the Puritans were strict followers of their religious ideologies, and Hester's child from another man considered as a sin in their eyes, her punishment and suffering could have been reduced if the additional restrictions on her being a woman were not imposed. Hester double suffered being a sinner and a (Puritan) woman. Although 'Puritan' in its political form disappeared, Puritan mindsets and values continued to impose their

influence on the society and especially on the weaker sections like women.

These female characters mentioned in the novel have potent messages and marked heritage to pass on to us. Their voices speak of the real Puritan women from the past who are still waiting to be heard.

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