

***The Scarlet Letter* Presents a Sad Tale of Love and Betrayal within the Context of Seventeenth-Century Puritan New England: A Study between the Struggle and the Individuality of Hester Prynne**

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Abstract

This paper has been concerned about the struggles of Hester Prynne after staying in a Puritan society. The novel *The Scarlet Letter* was based on a sad tale of love and betrayal within the context of New England. This story actually did express the individuality of Hester Prynne, who has fought against the set rules of the 17th century puritan society. After going through the injustice from the society she showed how a girl can remove the extreme debacle from her life and again stood like a winner. As a heroin Hester Prynne, has conducted in a binary position as a woman in Puritan society. Basically she has exhibited her rebellious nature and tenacity to combat against the exploitation of colonial rulers combined by church and state. The rebellious actions of Hester Prynne proved by her utmost endeavour with the Puritan community. In this way she proved herself as totally different from the traditional women who are always known as a loyal, docile and obedient to the unfair rules offered by society. Hester has won not only the self-reliance in economy, but also in thought. It can be sensed that through the strong character of Hester the maintenance of her individuality among the others in the puritan society was concrete. This paper will try to analyse the sad story of Hester Prynne who has gone through the phase of love and betrayal and also she did struggle to present her strict morals at the respect of her rebellious spirit, self-reliance and strong mind. The values and morals of the Puritan settlement influenced by the society. Within the novel, the individual minor characters and the community as a whole articulated the strict code by which individuals were expected to live and by which they were judged when they engaged in wrong deeds. Hawthorne recreated and emphasised about the struggle between righteousness and sin for the seventeenth century world. Hawthorne explored how the struggle and the public humiliation of a woman has contributed to individual failings that rooted in self-righteousness and self-justification.

Key words: *Love, Betrayal, Individuality, Puritan Society, Adultery Sin, Church, Punishment, Scarlet Letter, Ostracize, Strength of Mind, Ability,*

1.Introduction

The novel has started with the humiliation scene of Hester Prynne, who was publicly humiliated and was considered as a great sinner. The puritan society proved her adultery, hence gave her punishment to wear the Scarlet letter A on her bosom. She was compelled to stand in front of the town's people for hours, therefore the

crowd was doing criticism about her adultery. They enjoyed after seeing her as a punished woman. Also they thought that by giving her punishment they have cleansed the town, and therefore has made a pure society. After this traumatic event Hester has been living a life of humiliation and shame for long seven years. She used to wear the scarlet "A" and survived by doing needlework and helped the poor and deprived. In the past life of Hester, she did marry with Chillingworth, an old man, although she did not love him. Their marriage was unsuccessful and uncomfortable because Chillingworth was such an old, decaying man who didn't deserve such a young and lovely woman like Hester. Between Hester and Chillingworth there was no love and eventually the loveless match ended through separation. Chillingworth abandoned his wife. It was an assumption that he was dead while he went at sea. After he became vanished from Hester's life, she felt herself absolutely alone and at last she has found out her true love for Dimmesdale. In secret Hester did adultery with Dimmesdale who was a minister, and for this reason he was unable to confess his love in front of the world. As it was the rule that a minister cannot confess his guilt. After being pilloried, Hester was convinced by Chillingworth not to identify him. Soon after the return of Chillingworth, he has made himself ready for taking revenge on Dimmesdale out of jealous..

As there was no social or moral restriction to him regarding the revenge process. Without any deep thoughts Chillingworth was adamant to destroy Dimmesdale as he won the heart of Hester Prynne. Roger Chillingworth disguised himself as a physician to keep an eye upon Dimmesdale and therefore poisoned and tortured him. This all revengeful act has been happened because Chillingworth suspected Dimmesdale as Hester's lover. As a whole Hester's entire existence gradually build up between her sin and the authority of Puritan society. But Hester has proved herself as a strong single mother who was able to lead her life alone without anyone's help, that is how she showed her prevalent individuality.

2. Origin of Puritans and their build up community

In 16th century there has emerged a extreme group of protestants within the church of England and they were actually called as Puritans. Their main goal was to purify the church by doing the reformation of the doctrines and the structure of the church. From the beginning of 17th century many Puritans started to come to the New World, in order to find a holy Commonwealth in New England. The Puritans were so strict of following the religious matters and hence they did not allow to hold different religious belief. Their indoctrination was to occupy the high position and achievements which were the signs of 'eternal grace', and as well as the favour of God. Hawthorne's *The scarlet Letter* has been taken place in this puritan era. This novel actually encompassed the activities of the puritan society where a person's action was destined according to the rules of the puritans and if anyone did ignore their rules then he/she has been considered as a person of immoral behaviours.

The puritan community was entirely based on male's activities and their highest authority. Besides the male's group they didn't allow any female to contribute or participate in town's meetings in church. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was ruled by men. The Puritan ministers did include more authoritative powers towards the male group and gave them freedom in their writings and sermons. Their preaching was also proved that they have modified the religious doctrine according to their own wish. In their preaching they remarked that soul has two parts. One is the immortal masculine half, and the mortal feminine half. The strictness of puritan laws has seen through the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. They punished men and women in a very heartless way when they commit

even a small sin. For women's right, the puritan society only has created the humiliation compared to men. According to them a woman who is pregnant with a male child that means she is having a rosy complexion and on the other hands a woman who is carrying a female child that means she will be considered as pale.

By settling their own belief and religious activities, the Puritans believed that they were dedicated towards God more than any other society. As they feel themselves as the superior and took themselves as the direct messengers of God, their way of dealing with the punishments systems were certainly rude. The novel *The Scarlet Letter* was a real example of punishment in Puritan society. Those who has been traced by doing adultery he/she got no way to escape, especially woman. They were forced to wear a scarlet letter A on their bosom. It is the most positive process for punishing any woman of adultery. Adulterers might have been forced to wear a scarlet "A" if they were lucky. In a extreme case they used to order for execution. For example, at least two known adulterers were executed in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Public humiliation was the simple thing in the puritan society. When the stockade ordered the guilty person to sit in the public square, while the spectators were trained to spat or laugh at them. Puritans had no mercy or compassion about conducting that kind of cruel punishments which were full of injustice. They did like that because they believed in Old Testament methods. Their belief was that, God's punishment would be more strict than any earthly punishment. And that's why they used to keep their vicious way in order to maintain their religion.

3. Church represents the base of Puritan society

The puritan society followed the strictness even in Church. They made a compulsory attendance in Church, those who were irregular in coming to Church they had to pay fine for that irregular activities which was compulsory. The meaning of sermons became changed through addressing town problems or concerns. The church authority ordered to patrol the church to keep their rules more strong for the general people. They were even strict for any old man or children. For example, for a old sleepy man, the Church attendance tickled the chins of that old man. For children they have made a hard wooden knob to alert any children from giggling. In *The Scarlet Letter*, we have found out the base of puritan society was the church. Within the Boston town the church and beliefs of Protestantism became important. The puritans believed that, the church would be directly involved in the activities of judgment among the community. They have set the laws according to the Bible, as the Puritans treated the Bible as the "true law" of God. *The Scarlet Letter* was written in the era of puritan society. They considered any crimes as a great sin. Those who committed crimes against the government were not only criminals but also sinners, and they were punished severely. These were the harsh activities of the Puritan society upon the mass people in 17th century New England which was portrayed in this novel.

4. Hester Prynne's life represents the exploitation of the Puritan society

Hester Prynne was the extreme victim of the Puritan society. She was aware of their vicious rules in the name of religion and as a result she had to pay as she did adultery. The norms of Puritan society was strict with the guidelines from the Bible. They thought that this kind of strictness will help us to go near God. In every works they did find perfection. *The Scarlet Letter* was the best example of the exploitation of Puritan society upon the general people. The main thing of the Puritans were, the members of the government were also engaged in the religious activities and they also have taken part about the issues of giving punishment. Therefore the Church and the state has exhibited the resemblance and that's why they used to work together. In order to sanction

any punishment upon any person the Governor was not the only person but the reverends who were closely involved in the judgment of crimes as we have seen in *The Scarlet Letter*,

“There was a murmur among the dignified and reverend occupants of the balcony; and Governor Bellingham gave expression to its purport, speaking in an authoritative voice, although tempered with respect towards the youthful clergyman whom he addressed. ‘Good Master Dimmesdale,’ said he, ‘the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you. It behoves you, therefore to surround by the teachings of their religion and Puritanism itself. ... exhort her to repentance, and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof.’” (Hawthorne, chapter 3)

The life of Hester was somehow imprisoned by the governor of the city where Dimmesdale was one of the unjust rulers. In this novel Hester was the flag bearer of sinner, strong personality, concrete individuality and the oppressed woman in the Puritan society of 17th century Boston. Men and women got no freedom to lead their life after staying in the Puritan society because they have restricted the activities of them. For example adultery was considered as a great sin.

5. The society people’s attitudes towards Hester Prynne

After the government made Hester to wear the scarlet letter A, Hester was known as severely punished according to the law of adultery. Hence she was banished by the government and destined to live far from the town. In this way she became alienated from the community. The community people gave some negative comments on Hester’s scarlet Letter A.

"Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin" (Hawthorne, chapter 5).

In that society, all the mothers told their children to stay away from Hester and never be like her as she has gone against the society’s rules.

"Children to young to comprehend wherefore this women so be shut out from the sphere of human charities...coming forth along the pathway that lead town ward; and, discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off with a strange, contagious fear" (Hawthorne, chapter 5).

Hester’s act of adultery was not forgotten among the community people’s mind. They never let her to forget what she did and Hester also accepted the condemnation from the society. Hester was excluded mentally and physically from everything because the community imposed this unkind situation for her. As Hester was proved as a sinner so for that reason she had to live in another place along with her daughter Pearl. That was the most sorrowful event for Hester to be away from her home town. After going far from everyone she did realize her sin. When Hester returned to her own place, She again resumed her work as an independent soul, But the scarlet letter fixed in her life as a mark of disgrace which was essentially attached with world’s bitterness. Hester therefore felt that the community women were not comfortable with her and easily didn’t want to accept her. When Hester has been released from the prison cell, most of the people recommend to give her a punishment more cruellest than death. She was no longer accepted as a good human being rather than a evil figure to the town which can only bring shame to them.

6. Hester's social work towards the poor people

To imbibe the bitterness of punishment, Hester has decided to work for the poor people in the society. After getting banished from her own town place she was determined to show her good intention by helping the poor people and also she showed her talent by doing needlework. She thought if she can help the poor then it could reduce her sin towards God. The Puritan society gave her this punishment of ostracize based on their strict religious rules and regulations. When they came to know about the penitence of her, then they have realized that how much honest and dedicated she is. They also understood that Hester was very much serious to demolish her sin and determined to grab her sense of repentance. Finally they forced to think that Hester was a good person with good heart, and for this reason people again started to accept her in their lives. When Hester was considered as a worst person, from that time she did resolute to care the poor. She earned money by her sewing skills. As she was so dedicated to those poor people, yet they insulted her. Because she was morally poor but they were financially poor. At last the community people did recognize Hester's endeavours to remove her sins by helping and feeding the poor inhabitants. They thought that they should not discourage her great spirit to do something better for the society, they also felt that they will have need her in the community and in this way Hester's better life came back again. The community people remarked,

“She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness. . . . The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss (Hawthorne, chapter 18)”.

7. Hester's time for introspection after the Puritan society banishes her

Hester's introspection has started soon after her release from the prison cell and sentenced to wear a scarlet letter A on her bosom. She has pondered over the thoughts of pearl, her daughter's custody. When she has gone to a secluded cottage on the edge of town. This isolation allowed Hester to examine her mental process and also she has been found out the way to eliminate the stink of her sin and punishment. The scaffold scene made her remember about the cruel public punishment. In the time of Hester's punishment there was the presence of huge crowd though it was not an execution, yet they were there because that was the punishment of adultery. Whenever she started to think on the scene to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom, she became more determined to show her potentiality by doing some good works for the society.

8. Discrimination between Hester and Dimmesdale's sin and punishment

The Puritan community considered Hester as a great sinner and as a result they punished her with banishment, humiliation and alienation. But there was one ironic thing which was ignored by the society's people. That irony based on the notion of discrimination between Hester and Dimmesdale's sin. Because if Hester was banished for adultery then it was Dimmesdale who also did the same adultery, but he didn't get the punishment. Dimmesdale said,

“before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I must stand together! But daylight of this world shall not see our meeting”! (Hawthorne, chapter 12)

It was a superstition among the 17th century Puritans that if they want to go more closer towards God then they must have to go closer to a religious leader. The Puritans thought it will help them to go to heaven. In this way Dimmesdale was the spurious leader who was not pure fully but became a religious leader. He was also a sinner as he did adultery being a reverend in Church. The town's people considered that Hester's punishment was less and she should have experienced more severe punishment than death. This kind of injustice has been happened upon Hester where Dimmesdale was saved.

9. The significance of the Scarlet Letter 'A'

Hester was humiliated by the order of wearing the scarlet letter "A". This A means adultery. The church and the government sentenced Hester to a life of shame and alienation. The letter "A" was fixed upon her breast therefore on her gown which was made in fine red cloth, surrounded with elaborate embroidery and marvellous needlework of gold-thread, and made the letter A. It was so artistically done, with the sense of fancy and gorgeous ostentation.

The cloth which was made with the letter A, later presented the continuous struggle, humiliation of Hester. With presented on Hester's chest opened a door for continuous public humiliation and involvement. Hester herself became surprised of the letter's significance and the sense of appropriateness. As the "A" symbolized Hester's position of adultery, for such embroidery was

"greatly beyond what was allowed (Hawthorne, chapter 2)" When she was about to remove the letter after seven years, Pearl didn't accept her without it and forced her to wear it again. After wearing 'A', she said, "Now thou art my mother indeed! And I am thy little Pearl!" (Hawthorne, chapter 19)

10. Hester's strong sense of individuality

After get banished from the society, Hester has exhibited her strong sense of individuality. In The Scarlet Letter, the author attempted to show that the ideologies of the Puritan society and the individuality of Hester was different than each other. Hester was a woman who has faced and fight against the law of the community. Though she has been banished from her own town place. She saw that the people of the town still felt for her and thought that she has done good by repenting herself through some good deeds. Being a person of philanthropist, Hester showed that she could do good for the general people, and as well as the community people accepted her and remarked that she can effect the society in a positive way. At first when the town's people came to know about her sin, they considered her as evil and wanted to get rid from her. Hester was excluded by the Puritans as they were afraid that their community would fall apart. They only saw Hester as a sinner but didn't see her as a woman of good behaviours and talents by which she was known at past. They did banish Hester Prynne but did lost a woman of individuality. The first step of her individuality was that to support herself and her daughter by her needlework and as well as she used to help the poor people of the community. Her work was the medium to prove her artistic mind which she exercised through sewing cloths, she did that for others and also for her daughter pearl. Usually Hester wore very plain and simple dress except the gown embroidered with the letter A. Hester didn't wear it by her won wish but she was compelled to wear it as a emblem of her sin. But that letter A didn't able to upset her mind from being an individual person.

11. Changing attitudes of community

The community started to believe Hester again after knowing her spirit of individuality. As she has suffered many hurdles and trails on her paths of life but didn't try to defend herself against the unjust society's rule. Instead of confronting the society, she did present her skills and helping mind which eventually spoke in favour of her. The community People even started to think they will allow Hester to keep that letter A on her cloth or not.

"It was debated whether or not the scarlet letter was to be taken off her bosom" (Hawthorne, chapter 16)

Hester has won the heart of the community people again by showing her sewing skills and her good intention by giving charity to the poor. The people of the community thought that she has fulfilled her punishment and therefore they were ready to accept her again as a good citizen of the town.

"Such helpfulness was found in her-so much power to do and power to sympathized -that many people refused to interpret the scarlet "A" by its original signification. They said that it meant "Able": so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength". (Hawthorne, chapter 13)

12. Hester finds her lost reputation from Adultery to 'Able'

Hester was humiliated and embarrassed after she has experienced the punishment from the government and the reverend of the church. Everyone started to hate her with full fledge. But Hester didn't lose hope, she again tried to fight with her humiliation and have full effort to remove her sin and punishment by doing good works for herself and for the poor people in the society. She actually proved that she is able to change her punishment and turned it as the term 'able'. After seeing the good deeds, the community people decided to accept her. Hester eventually proved that she can stand with respect again by her strong will and strong individuality. She has opened the eyes of the Puritans and showed that honesty and goodness never fail, one day good will definitely win. She also depicted her ability to turn her scarlet letter A to able. Hester was an example of strong woman who showed that goodness has got its way to survive even after observing lots of pains and hurdles in life.

13. Hester's relationship converts from Roger Chillingworth to Arthur Dimmesdale

Roger Chillingworth was a man of complex manner. Being an old man he married a lovely woman like Hester. He was a man who didn't deserve love from Hester though he expected her to attach with him. The actual identity of Chillingworth was much like a leech. This identity matched with his vicious nature. Being a physician he was so adamant to take revenge on Dimmesdale as he thought Dimmesdale was the man who snatched her wife from her and he was the man to whom Hester got attracted. In order to take revenge Chillingworth even tried to do witchcraft. After he became defeated from taking revenge, he did find no way but to die. At last he died which has proved that evil nature can't survive. Hester finally came out from the clutches of Chillingworth.

Being a shared sinner with Hester, Dimmesdale was relieved from the punishment. It was Hester who took all the blame on her which made Dimmesdale to shake his conscience. He was an Oxford scholar and later he was

appointed as a reverend in a Church. As a higher authority of the government he did hide his sin as Hester also concealed his mistakes. Later after seeing the struggles and pains of Hester, Dimmesdale became physically and mentally weak, therefore fell into sickness. As he was an articulate and utterly a powerful speaker, hence he was an empathetic leader, and his congregation was able to spread the meaningful spiritual guidance. But when he tried to confess his sin and guilt in front of the town's people they didn't believe. Dimmesdale generally used to deliver his sermons allegorically rather than to express any personal guilt. When he did share his guilt with the town's people that means he got peace in heart but this self-punishment leads him towards more deterioration of his physical and spiritual health. He then remarked to Hester,

“As concerns the good which I may appear to do, I have no faith in it. It must needs be a delusion. What can a ruined soul, like mine, effect towards the redemption of other souls? – or a polluted soul, towards their purification?” (Hawthorne, chapter 17) He also regrets,

“I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it!” (Hawthorne, chapter 17)

“Be thou strong for me,” answered he. ‘Advise me what to do’” (Hawthorne, chapter 17)

Those above lines has expressed the scream of Dimmesdale's inner self. Dimmesdale asked help from Hester as he didn't able to bear his mental trauma alone. Finally he did admit that Hester is equal or even above than him. Again Dimmesdale said, Hester's scarlet letter A which was visible to all but his one was torturing him silently.

“Mine burns in secret!” (Hawthorne, p. 206) He cannot tolerate people's adoration and faith on him any more because he is not a good person in his own eyes. “It is all falsehood! – all emptiness! – all death!” (Hawthorne, chapter 17)

14.. Hester and Dimmesdale's love in a deep forest

In the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the theme forest played a significant role to differentiate between the strictness of Puritan society and the freedom of general people. Deep and dark forest symbolized the hidden thoughts and emotions of human beings. The settlement of the forest usually far away than the main living areas thus its wilderness forced to vanish the signs of civilization. This forest proved as a escape route from strict rules and religion. where a man and woman express their emotions altogether. In this way Dimmesdale confessed his everlasting love towards Hester. After that they both engaged in a conversation without any fear or anxiety. This freedom lead them to live for sometime far from the unjust puritan society. Nobody has the power to find them as they were hiding behind the woods. Hester also discussed about their future which she never did in any place except this forest. Eventually this forest has presented itself as the incarnation of freedom for both Hester and Dimmesdale.

15. Hester's relationship with Pearl

Pear was a different kind of child than any other child in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. When Dimmesdale died that time her age was only seven years old. The significance of her character was, she used to ask questions to the adult persons to draw their attentions. The constant awareness of her mother's scarlet letter made the

readers surprised. Pearl's innocent or intuitive questions and comments about the letter raised some salient questions about its meaning:

“Will not it come of its own accord, when I am a woman grown” (Hawthorne, chapter 16)

This scarlet letter was the utmost proof of Hester's sin of adultery. The strict Puritan society punished her by wearing the scarlet A forever. and banished her from the community. This banishment not only destroyed the life of Hester but also compelled Pearl to live a confused childhood. After seeing the odd attributes of Pearl the Puritan society thought if she was a witch baby fathered by the devil as he had no father. Throughout the novel Pearl was considered as the constant sign of Hester's sin. Because of this, Hester's view of Pearl was blocked by her own guilty conscience. Along with the Puritan society Hester also started to believe that Pearl might be a “witch-baby”. When Reverend Wilson asked Pearl about her father,

“Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee”? (Hawthorne, chapter 8)

Pearl gave answer out of bold disobedience that, she was

“plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door“. (Hawthorne, chapter 8)

This kind of reply made Mr. Wilson in to deep thinking that Pearl did not believe in God, and Pearl could not associate herself with other children, as she seemed so different from other children regarding thoughts, behaviours and her creation of own imaginary world in nature.

16. Hester's inner desires to go against the strict Puritan law

In a married life with Chillingworth, Hester was not truly happy and this thing was also visible towards Chillingworth. Hester was trying to get freedom from her husband and fortunately she got that chance after Chillingworth left for sailing the ocean. She came out from her prison like married life and came to the new world. Here she has been attached with adultery. She formed a unauthentic love with Dimmesdale. In the novel Hester expressed her love with Dimmesdale which was undying. By escaping to the “new world” Hester proved that she was able to transcend the man made law and reach to her individuality which was the true nature of humanity towards Hester and her activities. Hester also experienced much struggle with the sin that she has committed through adultery. She was forced to wear a scarlet “A” that represented as the symbol of punishment. The scarlet letter further incarnate through this seclusion which has represented Hester's inner desires going against the strict law of Puritan society. Therefore her inner desires has gained its way to go against the Puritans law.

17. Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne has portrayed a different kind of sad love story which has tasted by betrayal as well. Hester Prynne was the main character who was going through the intense pains and sufferings in life after doing adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale. Besides Dimmesdale there was another man in Hester's life who was Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth was Hester's husband in her earlier life. Hester understood the nature of men as she interacted with both the man and made decisions about how to deal with them. Although Hester believed

that somehow it was possible to fight with Dimmesdale. At times Hester contemplated her own freedom and the possibilities for a woman's self-realization. Towards the end of the novel we can see that Hester was ahead of her time and demolished the stigma of her which was the scarlet letter A. Hester decided to wear the letter A continuously which was indeed the emblem of her wisdom and insight. Thus the struggle of Hester Prynne ended in a positive way. Hester's character was developed gradually from the humiliation and embarrassment in front of the town's people to a strong individual position. Hester did show her good virtues by helping the poor people and earned money by sewing cloths. She didn't depend on any other but did run her and Pearl's life by her own struggles. After seven years of struggle, Hester continued her life isolated on the outskirts of town. She was accepted from the society again as a woman of good virtue but she did choose to live in Boston. She decided to live in a place from where she did her sin and now she committed to stay in the same place in order to eliminate her sin fully. As a whole the novel *The Scarlet Letter* exhibited Hester as a strong minded woman to the people of Boston and unveiled the flaws of Puritan society.

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