

Questioning the Puritan notion of sin in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

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Abstract:

Nathaniel Hawthorne has quite aptly used the New England society and situations in his works. His novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is set in the middle part of the seventeenth century America which evidently exposes the Puritan way of life. It is here that we find the Puritan notion of sin and punishment. The ambiguity in the decisions and events throughout the course of the novel makes us realize that the society at that time was not free from religious and legal prejudices. In this paper, an attempt is made to throw light on the rigid religiousness of the Puritan society, and how its stringent norms and customs affected the lives of the people.

Keywords: *Puritan, punishment, rigidness, sin, victim, adultery.*

The characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in the novel *The Scarlet Letter* dig up questions on the then existing Puritan views on sin. As the story is set in a Puritan town of New England, the society is in keeping with the values and systems of Puritanism. In the novel Hawthorne places the case of adultery of Hester in this society and speaks about her life in it. The act of adultery committed by Hester is seen as sinful, and she as an object of shame. In the very beginning of the novel we find that she is an adulterous woman. She has given birth to a girl child by another man. However, the man who was her legal husband was unknown, and not even Hester knew of his existence initially. Even then she is being charged of adultery and is punished, the punishment results in her expulsion from the society and she is made to wear the letter 'A' in scarlet color which would make her a living sermon for adultery. As an outcast she

retreats to her mind and begins to contemplate life. She began to look at her sin in a different way, and becomes free from religious bounds.

What is important to note that the man who has given birth to the baby, on the other hand, is leading a pious life, full of respect and dignity. He is “a true priest, a true religionist” (*The Scarlet Letter*, 125). What is more, Dimmesdale was himself involved in the jury which was responsible for Hester’s verdict. We see that this unrecognized sinner, i.e. Arthur Dimmesdale, is not affected in the eyes of the public. He enjoys a pious life, preaching sermons and explaining the ways of God to men. By placing these two characters, those two equally involved in the sin, in stark contrast in respect of their positions of life in the society, we can note the ambiguity in Puritan notion of sin and punishment. In the scaffold Hester refuses to name the person involved. She might have thought that she has been already brought to the scaffold without her testimony of the act, so now there was no point in dragging another person in that. This may be because of her reluctance to obey the codes of the society anymore, be them social, moral or legal. In the real sense there was nothing like legal or social; there was the one and only thing- religion. And because the society excludes her, she considers the values and codes of that society as being not designed to bring her happiness. The same codes and norms by which she had been leading her life till now had changed their meanings for her. This is primarily due to the strict and so called rigid Puritan notions against her sin, which had denied any possibility of social justice for her. The society was so designed that Puritan views and norms were the supreme things, however inhuman they might be. Nothing could be held upon those beliefs, let alone a mere woman like Hester. It is important to note that it is only when she is cast off from the society for her sin that she gains the true knowledge of life. The character of Hester in the novel gains prominence because of the sin committed by her. It has turned her life from passion and feeling to thought and knowledge. Instead of begging for mercy or going against the verdict, she chose to live by her own as an outcast (which was her punishment). Here, her infamy as an adulteress can be placed in contrast with her fame as a good and successful embroiderer. Though being a socially outcast, her handiworks found places even in the houses and bodies of persons of the highest social order. They do not cast their eyes upon her, but at the same time they have no objection in

using what she had created by her sinful hands. The question here arises as to what has become of that shame imposed upon her by calling her a sinful woman. The very persons of the clergy who had judged her had no issues to use the things made by her. Here, the so called religious devotions and norms pale into insignificance. Apparently the whole notion of sin becomes vague when it comes down to materialistic utility, and as artificial as the letter 'A' that she is made to wear.

As the plot reveals we get to know that Hester donated a large part of her earnings to charity, which in the real sense is more humanistic and moral than preaching sermons and values. It is Hester's life which has become useful for the poor and needy. The badge of shame which Hester wore on her bosom publicly seems to be more effective than Dimmesdale's self-loathing and self-torture. This badge of shame actually gave her the freedom and independence which, even the most learned man like Dimmesdale was not able to attain. Her infamy led her to live by the law of her own mind, and not the existing constructed system of the Puritans. The letter 'A' functioned as "her passport into regions where other women dare not tread" (*The Scarlet Letter*, 203), enabling her to speculate about her society and herself better than others. But the social structure was such that her charity works did not find prominence in the eyes of the public. They viewed her as the sinner who can never be redeemed. Had the society given her a chance to redeem herself, she would have attested to it. The notion of unpardonable sin came in her way and the tag of adultery remained with her throughout her life. On the other hand, Dimmesdale is seen to be struggling from inside. He did not confess in front of the society, rather he chose to suffer from his sin in the closed chambers of his heart and mind. This may be partly because of his social position and the laws embedding it. His self-torture is fuelled partly by the Puritan custom of viewing sin as the condemnation of life, of which one can never escape. The notion of sin and purity was so constructed that people failed to notice what he is implying when he talked honestly about himself. Rather they found him more sacred than ever and saw him as the embodiment of God, and this he knew, he knew that it is because of his intelligence and skill of delivering his sermons. Here his intelligence and skills appear manipulative. He was convincing himself that he can be saved. It appears that he was trying to reason his way out of the torture by

manipulatively speaking about himself. For instance, “The minister knew about this, the minister well knew-subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!-the light in which his confession would be viewed” (*The Scarlet Letter*, 247). His inward adherence to the Puritan notions made him “to speak the very truth and transform into the veriest falsehood” (*The Scarlet Letter*, 147). Here we tend to condemn his hypocrisy rather than sympathizing with his sufferings. On the other hand, his followers and people of Puritan faith (the listeners to his preaching and sermons) appear to be blind followers of the religion at that time. For them everything that a clergy man do or say is the will of the God, no matter how whimsical that may be. This whole system was manipulated by the people of higher rank like the clergy so much so that they stood in the pedestal where common people like Hester dare not tread. Perhaps, this is why Hester readily accepted to live as an outcast. By doing so, she could come out of such irrational and manipulative societal structure and live life according to what she believes as right and fair.

It is well known that sin was a serious issue for the Puritans. The Puritans did not believe that one can be saved by how one lived; rather they tend to believe that how one lived might indicate whether one were saved or not. It can be said that unpardonable sin was quite agreed upon in Puritan beliefs. But Hester believed that a person’s earthly sins did not necessarily condemn them. They can be purged of if one lives a life of penance and repentance. The manner in which Hester and Dimmesdale are placed in the system of beliefs clearly shows the vagueness of Puritan society of that time. The irony of the concept of sin is seen through the difference between public knowledge and private actions. Dimmesdale is a revered member of the community, while Hester is an outcast, which is because of her publicly acknowledged sin. While the community calls for Hester’s blood, those who are equally sinful remain silent and respected. Here, the question arises Who is the real sinner? And if there be strict law against sin, which the Puritans believe to have, then how come Dimmesdale and Chillingworth (Hester’s husband) escape from it! It appears that there is only a thin line that differentiates a sinner and a pious man in the society of the Puritans, the line being public acknowledgement. A question arises here- the sexual act cannot be done alone, nor can a child be conceived by the mother alone. Adultery involves two persons as we all know it. Then, Is not the point of punishing only

one of the two totally irrational? If such was the societal actions against adultery, why was there no attempt of finding the other person involved in the act? These questions lead us to a simple answer- the person involved was a man of power and great influence. Even if Hester had pointed out to him at the scaffold, no one would have believed her. Rather she would have been charged guilty of tainting the reputation of such religious man like Dimmesdale. This is why Hester might have chosen to use the power of silence here for her own benefit.

Now let us move onto another important character in the novel. Pearl was seen to be the product of the sin, the very sin for which her mother Hester was given a life of shame and humiliation. However, she becomes the motivation for Hester to live on, and it is also because of her that Dimmesdale finally recognizes what he should have done much earlier and confesses his deed publicly. Pearl, the otherwise embodiment of shame, grows up to be a lovely woman as we find in the last part of the novel. The social condemnation of her mother could have impact neither towards her relationship with her mother, nor even her own life that is to come. Though as a child she behaved like an elf and was seen as a demonic child, nowhere do we find her being indulged in anti-social or asocial activities except for some childish acts which are common. We never find in the novel that she was affected by her mother's sin. It was because Pearl did not grow up with the existing norms of the society, rather she was reared in respect to Hester's own thoughts and beliefs, the thoughts and beliefs based on humanity, justice, fairness and rationality. Pearl's constant assertion to Dimmesdale to hold her and her mother's hand in the public made him come out of the system of beliefs which he had been in the grasp of and confess his deed in the public. The product of sin (Pearl) becomes the redeemer of the sinner (Dimmesdale). His public confession gave him the freedom from inner torture which had been tormenting him for long. Here we may note that, Dimmesdale was not totally a bad man. It was just the situation and position that he was in that made him cold hearted towards injustice done to Hester. In the closed chambers of his heart he was suffering, it was just that he could not muster up the courage to acknowledge his wrongdoings. This cowardice was partly fuelled by his own membership in the Puritan system of beliefs, and partly because of his fear of losing his position and respect. As said earlier, public acknowledgement was integral to condemnation and punishment,

Dimmesdale actually committed sin when he did not acknowledge his deed when it was most necessary.

On the other hand, by rejecting the Puritan norms Hester was able to transform the symbolic meaning from shame to strength. She was a headstrong woman who did not give up on her own thoughts and beliefs. She single-handedly carried out the responsibility of rearing her child. She kept her hopes alive and fought the whole system of ridicule and public humiliation. The situation that she was in, she was very prone to think of ending her life or resort to such steps. If she had done that, it would be the sin of ending the life given by God. She resisted that and instead struggled on with her life. Her struggle bore fruit, and her very life of shame transformed into a life of meaning and purpose. As an outcast, she did not have to pass her time following norms and beliefs. Rather she devoted herself to embroidery and succeeded at it. This gave her financial security, which in turn helped her to bear the responsibility of a mother. It is however noteworthy that the novel does not altogether violate all the codes of living of the then Puritan society. Dimmesdale dies because of his fault, and the novel does not end with a happy union of Hester and Dimmesdale. Hester still continues to wear the letter 'A' until her death. But the manner in which both the lives end suggests that the concept of sin was not rigid. Both their lives achieved meaning only when they came out of the Puritan notions of sin. The values held by the Puritan society regarding sin cannot be seen as the ultimate way for one's salvation or damnation. Here, a narrow societal view of the sin is portrayed. If seen from a plane outside the system, "Hester's mistake could have been corrected in a healthier social arrangement, where she could obtain a divorce from Chillingworth and proceed to begin anew." (Brook, 166). She was denied this because of the strict Puritan values regarding sin. The novel clearly shows how people's lives are affected when religion and law become identical in a society, that such beliefs were not good for humanity. In order to lead a just, pure and truthful life without any prejudices, "the whole system of society is to be taken down, and built up anew" (The Scarlet Letter, 169).

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