



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.1, March, 2018

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**The 'New' World?: Space, Religion And The Identity Of Hester Prynne
In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter***

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Abstract: In her review of Sian Silyn Roberts's book *Gothic Subjects: Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861*, Bridget. M Marshall, notes that literary depictions of the gothic and gothic spaces help create and foster a sense of community within a new World inhabited by different individual entities. Thus with respect to such depictions, one can assume that individualism in early American fiction was inextricably associated with communitarian fashioning which accounts for the sense of lost identity in a character like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. However, as I attempt to suggest, such a view fails to take into account the individual agency of the character concerned and the focalization that the third-person narrator attempts to undertake. Thus the contradictory impulses of Hester in the text forecast a sense of authorial attempt to play within existing discourse of identity in New England (which is historically rooted in a religious ethic different from that prevailing in 'old England'). Thus while Hester chooses to wear the red badge and subscribe to the Puritan ideal of redemption through suffering, she also does not hesitate to advise the old minister to live a life of the redeemed preacher in the very land they have left behind them, thereby questioning the very definitive impact of religion upon the identity of the individual in a certain geopolitical space. Interestingly, such an idea of conflating the existing, predominant oppositions (or, binaries to use a 'structuralist' term) in the discourse of religious identity was very much present in the writings of Puritans themselves. In this respect, Margerie Kempe who wished to live a saintly life in a celibate marital relationship (thereby conflating the prevalent discourse in England whereby marriage *qua* sexuality stood in opposition to sainthood *qua* celibacy) presents us with a good example. In other words, as I suggest, Hawthorne directs us time and again to the fact that the idea of subversion is an effective tool deployed in many cases for the purpose of establishing what Raymond Williams has effectively



called 'emergent discourse', and is cast off upon its establishment, creating a new set of predominant binaries (in the case of New England, this 'creates' a geopolitical entity altogether) and therefore a 'closed text', whose concealment Hester and even her daughter Pearl seek to expose. This will in turn help contest the fact that the idea of an united 'national' consciousness or identity was the mainstay of authorial intention in the period we are looking at.

Keywords: New world, space, religion, emergent discourse, *The Scarlet Letter*.

In her review of Sian Silyn Roberts's book *Gothic Subjects: Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861*, Bridget. M Marshall, notes that literary depictions of the gothic and gothic spaces help create and foster a sense of community within a new World inhabited by different individual entities. Thus with respect to such depictions, one can assume that individualism in early American fiction was inextricably associated with communitarian fashioning which accounts for the sense of lost identity in a character like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. However, as I attempt to suggest, such a view fails to take into account the individual agency of the character concerned and the focalization that the third-person narrator attempts to undertake. Thus the contradictory impulses of Hester in the text forecast a sense of authorial attempt to play within existing discourse of identity in New England (which is historically rooted in a religious ethic different from that prevailing in 'old England'). Thus while Hester chooses to wear the red badge and subscribe to the Puritan ideal of redemption through suffering, she also does not hesitate to advise the old minister to live a life of the redeemed preacher in the very land they have left behind them, thereby questioning the very definitive impact of religion upon the identity of the individual in a certain geopolitical space. Interestingly, such an idea of conflating the existing, predominant oppositions (or, binaries to use a 'structuralist' term) in the discourse of religious identity was very much present in the writings of Puritans themselves. In this respect, Margerie Kempe who wished to live a saintly life in a celibate marital relationship (thereby conflating the prevalent discourse in England whereby marriage *qua* sexuality stood in opposition to sainthood *qua* celibacy) presents us with a good example.



In other words, as I attempt to show in this paper, Hawthorne directs us time and again to the fact that the idea of subversion is an effective tool deployed in many cases for the purpose of establishing what Raymond Williams has effectively called 'emergent discourse', and is cast off upon its establishment, creating a new set of predominant binaries (in the case of New England, this 'creates' a geopolitical entity altogether) and therefore a 'closed text', whose concealment Hester and even her daughter Pearl seek to expose. This will in turn help contest the fact that the idea of a united 'national' consciousness or identity was the mainstay of authorial intention in the period we are looking at.

The notion of the Puritanical family in the novel functions in order to depict Hester's own situation with respect to it. As Amanda Porterfield points out in her book *Female Piety in Puritan New England*, the idea of a pious marriage rested on the notion of submission of the wife and children to the husband who in turn was required or expected to be the upright moral shepherd of his flock (read family), thus symbolizing a Divine Earthly responsibility. Puritan pastors therefore led family lives, unlike their Catholic counterparts whom they distanced themselves from (both spatially and intellectually) vis-à-vis a number of issues including this. Hester's unwillingness to expose the misconduct of her husband displays a certain sense of fidelity which in Puritanical discourse would only be rendered an 'excess', for it denotes fidelity to someone who has not been able to keep upright the virtue of God bestowed on him. At the same time, she raises her daughter in the absence of the father, thereby posing a veritable challenge to the Puritanical construction of family life itself. Although she does so, it must be recalled that no stone is left unturned by Hester to 'educate' Pearl in accordance with the predominant ideas on piety, religiosity and civility- a proof of this is very well encountered in her visit to the Governor, where any passing remark on the futility of Pearl's education strikes a deep chord of anxiety in Hester. In fact, all that is deemed unacceptable and unseemly in Pearl's nonchalant disposition become matters of grave concern for Hester. Thus she situates herself in a rather quaint and ambivalent position with respect to the normative codes of behaviour. This ambiguity is related to a sense of individuality (which in the case of Hester Prynne stems not from a sense of adventure but from a deep-seated sense of



necessity when she is left with no one but her fatherless child in the wide world), which might threaten to disrupt the impervious and rigid code of Puritan religious manuals. This sense of individualism again seems to be most articulate in cases and instances where her sympathy and affection are best highlighted. In her conversation with Dimmesdale, the New England Minister, she asserts that if the latter finds it hard to reconcile his private urgency of confession with the public role he has to display, he might as well leave for the old Europe they have left behind to preach the word of God. What might seem, in the course of narration, to be merely an impulsive response from Hester entails serious consequences and implications for the space of 'New England' which is in the process of construction, at least in the historical moment of the setting of the text. In his private diary entitled, *The Diary of an Old New England Minister*, Francis A. Christie, records his observation of one Arthur Bentley, a minister in New England, who supposedly "...entertained [emphasis mine] two Catholic Indian chiefs of the Penobscot tribe, and at parting gave them from his cabinet a crucifix, two mass books, and plaster images". This mode of 'entertaining' the Other is conspicuously followed by the gifting of certain items that constitute the quintessential elements of religious identity. Thus, this symbolizes the indoctrination of the Other as the precondition for the subsequent acceptance of him/her in the ambit of the Self's own fold. Thus the annihilation of an identity which is a potential threat to the shared elements of a homogeneous identity comprising thereby a geopolitical space comprises the backbone of religious proselytization and constitutes one of the major roles played by religious identity in the New World. Measured in these terms, Hester's seemingly innocuous proposal threatens not simply a specified religious code but also the fundamental essence of a collective spatial (and by relation, 'national') identity that embodies an emblematic compromise of the Self for the whole. The inextricable association between nation-building and religious identity is perhaps best evidenced in the fact that Roger Chillingworth's despicable association with the Native American medicinal procedures and techniques his being leads to his being designated as 'evil' and 'infernal'. The introduction to the character of Hester Prynne is coloured in the hues of authorial sympathy. One needs only to notice the meticulous choice of words in the following paragraph to affirm the same:



To say the truth, there was much need of professional assistance, not merely for Hester herself but still more urgently for the child...It now writhed in convulsions of pain,...of the moral agony which Hester Prynne had borne throughout the day. (Chapter IV, 'The Interview')

The sympathy, I would like to argue, is generated precisely from the fact that while the individual will in Hester Prynne pines for a certain idea of acceptance and liberation, there is no agency to be exercised on her own part. Thus we do not see a picture of the eternal rebel in her. Bereft of such stereotypical attributes, she is instead presented to us as a woman who has to desperately satiate herself only with momentary fits of provocative impulse. In a way, the fact that one's social circumstances can weigh down one's self-assertive claims (even when such claims are meant to redress guilt) has a biographical pinch. Hawthorne's own troubled remembrance of his ancestral past is, in a sense, a cause of his sympathy for the protagonist. Both of them can lay claim to piety or morality but the past continues to haunt them. Although critics like Richard Harter Fogle argue that Hester's reception of authorial sympathy must be judged alongside the presentation of her as a character unable to fully absolve herself, they fail to notice that the aforementioned biographical connection coupled with Hester's own subversive gestures (as elucidated earlier) also suggests a certain degree of resistance to a socio-religious order which attempted to completely foreclose the possibility of individual agency through the creation of 'closed texts'. On Hawthorne's part this amounts to his taking responsibility for the past and announcing his resentment for its hideousness. The Customs House, old and dilapidated as it is, becomes the archetype for this link between the past and the present, and between the author of the Preface and the characters of the plot. Hester's attitude to everything she metonymically asserts as her own Self assumes the burden of guilt. The most explicit manifestation of this occurs in her observation of Pearl:

Day after day she looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being. (Chapter VI, 'Pearl')



This is a pertinent example of the interpellation of female subjects in Puritan New England. Amanda Porterfield, in her description of the testimonial witnesses and accounts of women in the Salem witch trials, speaks about the ideas of right and wrong that had been internalized by women in their attendance of mass sermons and so on. The fact that Hawthorne does not fail to depict Hester as being within the throes of such interpellative apparatuses, but also depicts the fallibility of such devices of control through Hester's sporadic and intermittent subversions, makes her quite a nuanced character.

The conversation between Hester and Pearl about the implications of the scarlet letter is a crucial instance of role-reversal in the novel. On Hester's insistence that there are things that a child should not know, Pearl remains utterly dissatisfied and cannot cease to be curious to know its true identity. The will to know its connotation is suggestive of an untameable curiosity- an instance of individualism pitted against social control. Interestingly, Hester herself cannot abide by this idea of self-compromise when she transgresses the conventional social and religious morals of family life or even exposes the lack of individual choice in the conception of 'national' consciousness in her discourse with Dimmesdale. In this respect, her identification with Pearl receives authorial sanction. In every respect, Pearl is a child of the forest- in the words of Richard Fogle she belongs to the category of "Nature" in which exists the level of the 'subhuman' who is rendered so on account of his/her being more in consort with the heart rather than with the head. According to him both Dimmesdale and Pearl belong to the same category for they avoid the danger of the head which lies in its attempt to be superhuman and therefore demonize. In other words, Fogle actually posits the will to power in the interstices of the intellectual cult of Puritanism.

In Hester's case however there is no possibility of placing her in any category as such, putatively because she has already made her journey through experience and the vigour of self-assertion is no longer a Romantic issue with her. Dimmesdale's easy association between Pearl's facial contortions and outcries expressive of disgust and Mistress Hibbin's 'preternatural' beauty shows how easily identifiable a subject she is. She is easily recognized as a child gone astray, and



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

on whom the disciplinary effect of power can be most expediently deployed. The importance of pedagogy in Puritanism can therefore be accounted for, and an instance of this is made evident in the diary entry of Arthur Bentley, as recorded by Francis Christie. The different landscapes presented in the novel share a very conspicuous presence within it. Each has a certain demarcation and assumes its significance only in terms of difference. This is brought out in Hester's warning to Pearl that one should not talk in the 'marketplace of what happens to us in the forest'. She is actually warning Pearl not to reveal her clandestine rendezvous with the Minister in the forest. In this arrangement of spaces lies an uneasy ambiguity. While it is necessary for the settlers of New England to demarcate a space of Christian civility from the pagan wilderness, there is no easy way to get rid of the latter. Thus the inclusion of the pagan Other is possible through the process of Selving of the Other. Thus on the one hand the wilderness must be 'cleared' and the religious/cultural traces effaced. The most incisive resistance to this effort happens to come from those characters in the text who willingly take up the customs of the other, subsequently inhabiting its space (the forest), and being characteristically excluded from the so-called collective space. Mrs. Hibbins is one of them. Her presence in the marketplace, or for that matter, in any locale that is one amongst the demarcated spaces of Christian civility is always supplemented by the mention of the remains of the forest that cling to her dress. This symbolically testifies the intermingling of spaces that are supposed to remain separate and distinct. Thus the character of Mrs. Hibbins is a full-proof indication of the threat posed to the project of Christianization- a project that finds its mention at various junctures in the journal entry of Arthur Bentley. What follows thereof is the subsequent exclusion of Mrs. Hibbins from the cultural, religious milieu of those who are on God's own side while she is said to be in consort with the Devil. It is therefore significant in this context to mention that the witch trials in Salem were actually sparked off through the trial of one of the first suspects- a Native American maid named Thitchaba.

Hester, on the other hand, is not as easily located within this binarized version of domination and resistance. Her presence in the market place and elsewhere is in fact desired for a very specific reason which is integral to the reproduction of modes of consent to the dominant



ideology of Puritanism- it is meant to serve as an example for those who might show signs of transgression or infidelity. In fact, the trial at the beginning of the novel gives us this reason for her life being spared. However it is this presence itself that brings the prevailing discourse to its limits. The transformation of Arthur Dimmesdale is what underpins the limit of its logic. Amanda Porterfield makes a very specific mention of the strong will to power immanent in the gaps or silences of the Puritan logic when she writes:

The emphasis on the soul's inferiority to God disguised the subjective nature of Puritan desires for power while facilitating their exercise. God represented the power Puritans dreamed of wielding while the saint's humility represented the self-deprecation that effectively regulated Puritan desires for power and mediated its self-controlled exercise. (Porterfield 32)

Hester's presence in the marketplace and her role in the transformation of the preacher also expose the gaps in a discourse that rests on the foundation of mortal fallibility. While confessions made to pastors are integral to Puritan customs and are justified on grounds of man's bearing of the Original Sin, the confession of the preacher himself is quite an unprecedented act. The utter silence that prevails following Dimmesdale's public confession is the element that reveals the unsaid in the Puritan discourse on mortal fallibility. While it is taken for granted that the path to redemption is the ragged avenue of sufferings which must be endured owing to the post-lapsarian inevitability of Sin, it nonetheless remains valid only with certain conditions. These are, not to mention, conditions that arise on account of the socio-political conditions of the space in which they are implemented. The socio-political conditions of the text and the temporal context of the novel make it almost impossible for pastors-cum-legislators to behave like others, and their uprightness must lie unscathed if the collective mobilization of the masses is to be ensured. A threat to this is likely to arise from the exercise of individual agency, as is the case with Hester and Dimmesdale. Thus, Hester's actions point specifically to an impulse of individualism that is uncalled for in her milieu. As Slavoj Zizek argues, every social condition runs not only in accordance with explicit rules but



also through certain implicit procedures for following them. These are implicit rules that Hester exposes, but one would not go too far to say that she has been 'allowed' to do so (roaming freely

and having her life spared are two instances to prove the same). The unprecedented nature of her actions results from a mis-identification of her benign acquiescence to the explicit rules of Puritan conduct, as is revealed through her interaction with the wider social world in the novel and in the ways in which she manoeuvres her perceptions, giving others the impression that her punishment is justified.

Hester Prynne therefore is pitted against social forces and conditions whose relationship with her exists not simply in terms of resistance or difference. It is this vacillation that projects her subversive image. Again it is not to say that there is a conscious agency in her that propels her to act in ways that are unseemly, for she is fully aware of the guilt-ridden façade of herself and is in fact complicit with it. However the spontaneity of her most subversive utterances and actions points to the authorial tendency to conform to a degree of social realism, which is however not distanced from a personal memory of the past. What is thereby exposed is of course part of the Puritan discourse itself, but it is ultimately the darker underbelly of a code of conduct that was in itself a challenge to authoritarian religious discourses in Europe. Hawthorne, with his nineteenth-century hindsight of the past therefore expedites upon such a discourse to show how its once-diffident facet had to be subjugated to the avaricious will to dominate and control, and the individual in the novel exposes this through her travails on the thorny road of survival and existence.

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

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