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**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S NOVEL *THE
SCARLET LETTER***

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This paper tends to study the feminist perspectives in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel entitled **The Scarlet Letter**. Before delving deep into the textual analysis, it is essential to have fair understanding of the concept of feminism for a fruitful and objective discussion of the novel. The Feminist criticism, one of the invigorating modern approaches to literature, was inaugurated in 1960. It is primarily concerned with the projection and presentation of women in literature. The study of feminist critical theory can broadly be classified into two dimensions. First, woman presented in literature by male writers from male point of view, and second, woman presented by female writers from their viewpoints. The former gives rise to a feminist theory known as phallogentrism; the latter promotes a kind of criticism called gynocentricism.

An exponent theorist and writer of the feminist theory was Virginia Woolf who expressed her view that it was the "patriarchal society that has hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibility."¹ However Simon de Beauvoir laid the foundation of theoretical mode of feminist criticism in her **The Second Sex** (1949). In America, modern feminist criticism began with Mary Ellman's witty discussion in **Thinking About Women** (1968) about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men, and also alternative and subversive points of views in some writings by women. Elaine Showalter cites similar view:

In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing images of women in literature as angels and monsters, the literary abuse or harassment of women in classic and popular male literature and exclusion of women from literary history.²

Elaine Showalter lays emphasis on gynocriticism which looks at women in their right perspectives and tries to bring in grace and beauty to the existing situations of women. According to her,

Feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritic is more self contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research. in a dialogue between these two positions Carolyn Heilbrun. The, the writer, and Catherine Simpson, editor of the American journal Signs: Women in Culture and Society, compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, 'looking for the sins and errors of past' and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking 'the grace and imagination.'³

Gynocritics seek to formulate a female framework for the analysis of women's literature to develop a new model based on the study of female experiences rather than to adopt models put forth by male theorists. They have even tried to access male created texts about women producing a literary category as the women centred criticism.

In the light of above feminist critical perspectives, it is reasonable to proceed with the discussion of **The Scarlet Letter** as a feminist text written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a male writer. Published in 1850, it portrays the historical background of the seventeenth century Boston, of New England. It was at a time when Puritanism was a drastically powerful driving force in deciding the public and private matters. Any attempt to exercise personal freedom and liberty was construed as a betrayal of the existing social norms and taboos set up by the religious fathers. Any violation of such norms entails rigorous term of punishment. For the women, it was all the more violent and strict. The Puritanism, the male oriented corpus of religion, was quite uncompromising, and death punishment was the only reasonable option for women committing the sin of adultery. The writer, though a descendent of the puritan stock, never appreciated the inhuman and illogical code of conduct preached gloriously by the puritan forefathers. He shows his disagreement, to some extent, to his forefathers who valourised Puritanism as a way to

elevate life. In The Custom House, the introductory chapter to The Scarlet Letter, he feels guilty for the sins committed by his forefathers.

*At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sake, and pray that any curse incurred by them-as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year back, would agree to exist-may be now and henceforth removed.*⁴

The Scarlet Letter begins with the significant presence of Hester Prynne, the heroine of the novel, and her three months old daughter, Pearl. She is accused of committing the sin of adultery and is asked invariably to wear the scarlet letter 'A' on her garment throughout her life as a symbol of shame. Though she deserves the death punishment for violating the seventh Commandment of the Testament, the magistrates exercise their prerogatives conscientiously and decide to put her in prison rather than giving her death punishment. As per the convention of the Puritan ethics, Hester Prynne along with her daughter is made to stand on scaffold, centrally located in the market place, to face public disgrace for her ignominious behaviour .While being taken to the market place through the thick density of crowd, people make humiliating comments. Specially women are not happy with the kind of liberal punishment and wish her to be hanged to death for bringing disgrace to entire woman race:

*This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray.*⁵

The above extract of the novel brings out the fact that women still strongly uphold the ideals of Puritanism and are made to look at themselves from male points of view. However, the magistrates, policy makers of society, have soft corner for Hester Prynne and rule out any possibility of her death punishment. It shows gradual but constructive change in men's attitude towards women. These magistrates who perpetuated the puritan ideals so far are now realizing their futility and tend to mitigate stringent punishment which invariably targeted the women only.

The novelist has presented Hester Prynne as a lady of unflinching faith, firm determination and astounding courage who has potential to endure the resounding whips of society stoically. She has deep insight into the issue and does realize that she has made blunders by dishonouring the social norms which she was supposed to follow invariably. As such, she is earnestly ready to accept any kind of punishment given to her for her mistake. However, she does not believe in the notion of sin as she was accused of by the priest and the existing society that she has committed the sin of adultery by having extra-marital relation with someone and by mothering the child. . In this regard, she is a rebel who single-handedly deconstructs the old notion of sin perpetuated and propagated by the religious fathers. *She never accepts that they-Dimmesdale, her lover and Hester Prynne herself- have desecrated “the sanctity of human heart”⁶ rather they have “consecration of its own”⁷* Thus she casts aside the well formulated ,stereotyped and superstitious practices shrouded in mystery, and follows the dictates of her conscience unhesitatingly in crucial phrase of her life.

Hester Prynne has tremendous knowledge of human psychology .She knows that people may pressurize her diplomatically to tell the name of her lover and the father of daughter Pearl. She also knows that people might also persuade her to know the reality. Consequently, she is prepared to deal with any unfavourable situation bravely. Wilson’s persuasion that her repentance may avail her to take the scarlet letter off her breast delivers no goods to meet his purpose. She is firm in her decision and would save her lover at any cost from being publicly disgraced. So she decides to hold back his name. She quickly reacts to keep people away from any further venture of interrogating about her lover: “It is too deeply branded .Ye cannot take it off. And would that might endure his agony as well as mine.”⁸

Despite the pressures from the magistrates to disclose the identity of Pearl’s father, she does not budge from her stand; on the contrary, her sudden outburst sends shock waves through the audience: “And my child must seek a heavenly father; She shall never know an earthly one”⁹ This firm statement shows her heroic courage, presence of mind and deep insight into human psychology to get the better off situations. During her social boycott, she does not tend to leave Boston, being the place of her action and earthly punishment. The novelist appreciates her tremendous bouts of courage to bear the brunt of people and to purge herself of the guilt by constant mental suffering:

*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: more saint-like because the result martyrdom.*¹⁰

The onslaught of social crusade strengthens her to sharpen her artistic skill of embroidery to earn sufficient to make her both ends happily meet. Even religious governor and women of high status are fond of her unique artistic manifestation and place order for various items of needle work. The scarlet letter 'A' was initially looked down upon as a symbol of disgrace, but in due course time it becomes a symbol of attraction and ability:

*She bore on her breast in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornments of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold.*¹¹

Besides, she cannot stoop too low as to grudge against those who have spoiled her life. Whatever strong initiative she takes up is meant to safeguard her own principles of life, and under no circumstances will she compromise with another thing coming in the way of her spiritual pilgrimage. She takes pity even on her lover, Dimmesdale, who never comes to her risqué accepting his close intimacy with Hesper Prynne. Seeing his mental and physical torture, she takes quick stand and neutralizes the her husband, Roger Chilling worth's evil design of against her lover, Dimmesdale. She still loves him though he never supports when she undergoes the crucial phase of ordeal of life. Dimmesdale is now fully dependent upon her for his life, and requests her to relieve him from the conspiring Roger Chillingworth. He says: "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me."¹² She promises him to save his life against all odds and advises him to leave the place to lead a better and fruitful life:

*Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened. Meddle no more with it! Begin all a new! Hast thou exhausted possibility in the future of this one trial? Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success.*¹³

This is how Hester Prynne breathes fresh life into Dimmesdale and convinces him to abandon the place in order to avail better opportunities in future. Here again she deconstructs the old notion of Puritanism which emphasizes that a minister is supposed to preach and hence cannot dissociate himself from the divine duty of preaching people. Dimmesdale becomes fully convinced by Hester's argument and finally agrees to desert the place after carrying out his last duty as a minister. On the last day after executing his task of lecturing and reciting sermon, he fails to control the "spontaneous overflow of his love towards Hester Prynne and his daughter Pearl and resolves the riddle which was so far shrouded in the veil of mystery. Supported by Hester Prynne, he climbs the scaffold and stands by them exposing his deep love to Hester Prynne. *With the confession, he breathes his last uttering: "Praised be His name! His will be done! Farewell!"*¹⁴

This very act of confession is definitely victory of Hester Prynne, who is accepted as a partner by a man who is no other than a religious minister, Dimmesdale, a man of high profile and a distinguished scholar of the time.

The other ministers and common mob around are shocked to hear the startling and uncalled for admission of Dimmesdale. As story progresses, Hester Prynne emerges as heroine of the novel, and people treat her as a sister of mercy, as she shows magnanimous gesture by carrying out missionary drives to help those in utter need.

The Scarlet Letter is the magnum opus of Nathaniel Hawthorne comprising cluster of themes---- sin and crime, guilt and punishment and regeneration. It is a text written by a male writer from male point of view supported by historical perspectives where women were marginalized and had no privileges and freedom which usually was being enjoyed by male members in society. He, though belonged to a priest's family, was pained at heart to realize the perpetual sufferings of women down the ages. Therefore, he intends to present Hester Prynne as a human being with weaknesses and strengths which a common man is supposed to have. She undergoes a number of physical and mental tortures to her utter violation of social ethics but her unprecedented sense of commitment and her unflinching faith in her own philosophy of life support her to stand the test of the time.

If we dig deep into the works of other writers, we come across that some of them have presented the female characters from male point of view, again tainted with the male chauvinism. For example, Shakespeare's statement that "frailty, thy name is woman" appears to be presented from male point of view as woman is portrayed here in a quite unfavorable light. However on account of a sentence or fraction of it, true perception of writer about a male or female ideology cannot be brought out. Sometimes a writer uses such remarks in a particular context which should not be construed as his cult about some thing. A threadbare analysis of Milton's **Paradise Lost** brings out the fact that Eve is presented weaker physically and intellectually than Adam .According to Shirin Kudchedkar, "Milton's line, "He [Adam] for God only , she [Eve] for God in him" could well be cited as an example of the almost universally held assumption that man's purpose in life is to serve God, the state, the society, not least his self-advancement, while woman's purpose is to serve man"¹⁵ .If this is accepted as a factual truth, Paradise Lost " then can be said to be written by Milton from the male point of view. In Indian literatures, a woman is always presented as ABALA (weak) which seems to be making them still weaker rather than supporting them to be stronger. Nayanta Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and host of writers have comprehensively dealt with the issues related to female upliftment in existing society, but they have not been able to create strong space for women to be emulated in society by others. However, situations are changing and women themselves are carving the path for themselves as they fully aware of their rights and duties in society.

In the light of above discussion, **The Scarlet Letter** is an excellent text recording the trial and success of a woman who ultimately emerges victorious and regains her due place in society by fighting the battle of life herself alone. The novelist has quite meticulously shown how the heroine of the novel deconstructs the myths of the ages and looks for a fresh pasture meant to elevate the condemned soul of targeted women in society. The novel strikes a balance between points of view presented by male and female writers and offers proper platform where both can be respected and honored as human beings on this beautiful planet. According to Peter B. High, "The novel asks the question of whether the act of Hester and her lover was really sinful. The author gives no clear answer"¹⁶ To handle this debatable issue, Reader Response Theory can be suitably applied to this text. It is the reader's response which is meaningful, and a number of texts and interpretations can be generated to respond to issues raised in **The Scarlet Letter**.

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