



THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN WOMEN: A STUDY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S THE SCARLET LETTER AND KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

P Lakshmi Nair, Dr H K Jha

Research Scholar, Professor

Amity School of Liberal Arts

Amity University Haryana

ABSTRACT: The role of women in society has been a relevant and debatable issue throughout the ages. The concept of a Victorian womanhood began to change radically with the wave of Feminism in the 19th century. This paper explores the emergence of modern women in the context of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. This paper investigates the impact of gender stereotypes society imposes on the female psyche. The paper argues that Hester and Edna's fight for survival against societal norms and gender constraints examines the voice of women by analysing their stands for their individuality.

Keywords: Feminism, modern women, gender stereotypes, female psyche, individuality

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, women were not supposed to deal with economy, politics and social matters which were usually considered to be a man's domain. Man was considered superior to a woman and a woman was supposed to do only household chores and to take care of her family and obey the dictates of the man. The religious communities and social obligations oppressed woman with the idea of the sanctity of marriage and motherhood. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1852) is considered to be a literary masterpiece in the annals of American literature, has featured a powerful female character, Hester Prynne, who has the courage to stand against social authority and the Puritan's patriarchal approach. At the same time, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1890) lays bare the restlessness of a married woman who leaves no stone unturned to live an independent life, breaking the shackles of marital authority. Both these path breaking American novels were written during the second half of the 19th century when the whole world was busy in glorifying the Victorian values and ethics.

HESTER PRYNNE

The question of individuality has been explored in the Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the Puritan society of Boston. Hawthorne explores the hypocritical Puritan society that did not follow what they preached. The battle with gender stereotypes imposed by puritan society can be considered as a confrontation of an identity constructed by society with an individual identity. Hester Prynne, a woman living in a seventeenth-century puritan society, was entirely different from the women of her time. Hester Prynne, a strong woman took the risk to take when women were not allowed to have their opinions. The Puritans believed knowledge, intelligence, and freedom of expression were only meant for men, and on the other hand, women were only meant to obey the dictates of the patriarchs. Hester was considered a "living allegory of sin" after being charged with adultery. Hester's punishment of wearing the scarlet letter "A" was given to her on her bosom throughout her life (Jahan 1). She is self-reliant, counts on her most in-depth instincts, and values her inner truth in making her decisions. Committing adultery at that time was taboo. If a woman had committed adultery, she would have been afraid to face a question and answer it in front of the crowd. But Hester dared to remain silent, while other women did not have the same courage as Hester had. This incident at the beginning of the novel symbolises Hester as one of the strong female characters who had an opinion and took a stand for herself.

Hester's punishment does not end on the scaffold. In all her interactions with society, she feels detached. The clergyman paused in the street to preach words of advice that brought a crowd around her. She constantly encounters herself as the subject matter of the discourse when she enters a church. When a newcomer comes to the region and looks with curious eyes at the letter "A", she feels

the pain of the letter upon her bosom afresh. She never gets used to the letter. On the other hand, it grows more sensitive with everyday suffering (Gupta 58).

Hester suffers greatly as a result of her public humiliation and the punishment of seclusion. She will never agree with the puritan interpretation of her actions because she regards her love and freedom as noble and elegant. Feminism promotes these characteristics. Therefore, the prominent contrast between traditional female images and the new ones lies in the feminist consciousness (Wang 894). Dimmesdale responded to his feelings for Hester. She believes she is a widow, never thinks her relationship with Dimmesdale is adultery, but has responded to a natural urge and does not consider herself guilty. It was the Puritan society that punished them and sinned against them. In this novel, society itself deviates from the values it is supposed to uphold. For instance, they have excommunicated Hester for her adulterous act and branded her as a sinner, but they do not hesitate to accept the service of Hester (Gupta 56).

Vanity, it may be, chose to mortify itself, by putting on, for ceremonials of pomp and state, the garments that had been wrought by her sinful hands. Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the governor military men wore it on their scarf, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. But it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. (Hawthorne 77)

Hawthorne portrayed Hester as a strong individualistic woman who stood up to the Puritans for herself and her daughter. People's treatment of her was never enough to deter her from doing good. This shows how Hawthorne portrayed Hester as a woman who is fair to everyone and, in her own way, exemplifies how to be a good human being, as opposed to those who preach but do not follow.

EDNA PONTELLIER

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* captures the social and historical atmosphere of the 1890s. Through the institution of marriage, the female protagonist perceives the rigid customs of Creole society as oppressive and constrictive. In the patriarchal society in which we live, a woman views motherhood as the ultimate means of expressing her wants and is not required to carry out her motherly duties. Edna is a contentious figure who struggles with the "societal and natural frameworks" of parenting that force her to be labelled as a wife or a mother rather than a self-defined person. She is a defiant woman who defies all the rules that patriarchal authority expects women to follow since they limit their ability to communicate their repressed and secret desires in public. She is the epitome of expressive individualism because she expresses her inner feelings and desires by participating in extramarital affairs, exhibiting her artistic talents via painting, vacates her husband's home, and ultimately commits herself by throwing herself into the ocean. The right to communicate one's opinions, feelings, and preferences is seen as a key component of an individual's independence and freedom in American culture. People now have a profound grasp of their own objectives and choices, which has improved their capacity to act of their own free will to achieve those higher goals (Jahan 1). When it comes to sexuality, Edna violates patriarchal norms and violates what Creole women are legally forbidden from doing. Edna feels that sexuality is essential to her lonely creative lifestyle. Edna opposes and rejects all the ideas linked with motherhood because she is driven by her desires.

As soon as Edna starts to awaken, she renews her artistic abilities in order to put her understanding of awakening into practise. She feels as though she has a "voice" that she wants to express through the painting. She uses art as a genuine instrument to express her individuality and learn more about her true self. The essence of self-expression, art manifests as an original thought from the artist's spirit. For one, an artist is free to use their talent however they see fit. As her creative talent becomes a sign of her freedom and she starts reading things in artistic phrases, Edna's rediscovery of her creative strength ushers in the process of her self-discovery. She recognises the flaws in her earlier creative works and yearns to fix them so that they better suit her newly awakened self, demonstrating that her perception of the world has also been altered in line with her personality and spirit. She asserts her dominance over other characters in the novel because she is a painter, and she even makes her controlling father stay still and rigid for hours so that she may sketch him how she wants. She may reinterpret people in accordance with her views through painting. Her artistic ability has evolved into a ground-breaking tool for engraving her recently awakened desires. It frees her from the responsibilities of being a wife or mother. She is able to achieve her freedom through her paintings, which also give her the independence and self-assurance she so desperately wants.

In her writing, Kate Chopin has explored how the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century affected women, how it confined them, and how it robbed them of their freedom. In contrast, marriage was not viewed as an act of love in the nineteenth century; rather, it was viewed as an act of arrangement. They were only required to respect the limits of domesticity and refrain from becoming overly preoccupied with the outside world while their husbands were away. Edna was raised with religious and civic obligations. Likely the most patriarchal and religious character in the novel is her father, whose authoritarian and oppressive beliefs led to the death of her mother. Despite the lack of significant information regarding Edna's mother, Chopin suggests that she is another woman who experiences the restrictive nature of her marriage. Chopin draws attention to Edna's situation and that of the other women who make an effort to comply with the Victorian norm of womanhood. She claims that women in her era were confined to their homes.

The narrator contrasts Edna with the typical mothers and spouses of her generation—women who care deeply for their children and husbands, attend to their needs, and figuratively devote their entire lives to fostering their children's development and their husbands' pleasure. Edna disagreed with it. She lacks the maternal instinct that other mothers possess. As an illustration, Madame Rotignolle is shown as a model wife and mother who had a kid every two years of her marriage (Gokcen 30). Since she is a traditional mother from the 19th century and represents herself by how many children she has and how wonderful of a mother she is—since these are the parameters that establish the worth of a woman—her children are an intrinsic part of her nature and her marriage. The idea that

femininity and motherhood go hand in hand was identified by Adele as an authoritarian concept. She embodies the idealised notion of a woman; the fine lady of men's dreams; she is sweet, caring, and committed to her womanly responsibilities. She frequently serves as a reminder to Edna of the value of motherhood and the proper behaviour expected of a mother toward her children. She resembles the representative of those who make repeated efforts to remind Edna of her obligations. When Edna pays her a visit following the birth of her child, after she awakens, she gives her advice on how to recognise her offspring, in which Adele reflects the moral code of the time.

CONCLUSION

Women still confront significant issues today, despite the fact that their roles in society have altered over time. Different writers have characterised it in different ways. The goal of this study was to find out how select female characters in American novels came to reflect contemporary women. Nathaniel Hawthorne crafted a strong, opinionated woman like Hester. She was described as a woman not guilty of adultery who had illegitimate daughter named Pearl. The neighbourhood rejects her, as illustrated by how they will accept her selfless deeds when they are required but not in other circumstances. Hawthorne illustrates the conflict between the individual and Puritan society. Chopin created a character like Edna, a respectable woman. She desired to live her life as per her desires after her awakening. She was going against Creole society by distancing herself from her responsibilities as a wife and mother. She was adamant about pursuing her desires and living her life on her terms. Chopin depicts a female character who chooses herself and her longing. She does not have an internal conflict after awakening because she is firm in her decision, but she faces challenges from the Creole society and its principles, which leads to Robert leaving her. Both Hester and Edna grew up in societies that imposed gender constraints, but they adopted an individualistic attitude by fiercely defending their beliefs about how they should live their lives. This demonstrates how, Hester and Edna portray the emergence of strong individuality of modern women in American novels.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- 1) Chopin, Kate. "The Awakening." *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, New York, Bantam Dell, 2003, pp. 1–157.
- 2) Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New Delhi, Fingerprint Classics, 2017.

Secondary Sources

- 1) Gökçen, Nilsen. "EDNA PONTELLIER'S DIGRESSIVE QUEST FOR THE MATERNAL IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING." *Folia Linguistica et Litteraria*, no. 24, 2018, pp. 23–43. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.31902/fl.24.2018.3>.
- 2) Gupta, Leema Sen. "Conflict Between the Individual and Society in the Scarlet Letter." *Crossings a Journal of English Studies*, vol. 7, ISSN 20711107, Dec. 2016, pp. 55–62. www.academia.edu/44366830/Crossings_Volume_7_2016.
- 3) Jahan, Mursalin. "Expressive Individualism in the Nineteenth Century Patriarchal Creole Society: A Study of the Portrayal of Edna Pontellier in The Awakening." *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, <http://www.tjprc.org/publishpapers/2-40-1490359169-8.IJELAPR20178.pdf>
- 4) Jahan, Mursalin. "Individualism of Hester Prynne in the Seventeenth Century Puritan Society: The Scarlet Letter." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0402011>.
- 5) Nur, Dedi Rahman. "An Analysis of The Feminist Characters in Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening.'" *Journal of English Educators Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–20. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.21070/jees.v2i1.687>.
- 6) Wang, Yamin. "A Representative of the New Female Image—Analyzing Hester Prynne's Feminist Consciousness in The Scarlet Letter." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 1, no. 6, 2010, pp. 293–297. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.1.6.893-897>.