



Research Paper

## ***Otherness of Hester in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter****

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**ABSTRACT:** *The inter-personal relations and the bond between individual and society are of pivotal value. Though the society means regulations, customs, traditions, but it also serves and ensures freedom to individuals to a moderate extent: not the unlimited one. Thus society is a cooperative body of individuals that nurtures, guides, maintains and affects human behavior. Man, biologically and psychologically, needs group to commune with, and this creates a habit or feeling aligning with or of alienation; the binary approach, in the individuals. This binary classification engenders the concepts of 'ownness' and 'otherness' among the individuals.. The societal force is so prominent, though undercurrent, in one's life that an individual has, intentionally or unintentionally, to be part of these groups formed on the basis of certain beliefs, ideologies, creeds or canons. The dominant group takes to its heart, and tries its best to eradicate or reduce the one to nothing, by logical or illogical means, whosoever acts or dares to act contrary to its dogmas. This paper aims to explore the timeline, incidents, mass mentality and hostile approach of the competent group towards Hester in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the light of this binary classification i.e the concept of 'ownness' and 'otherness'.*

**.KEYWORDS:** *Society, individual, binary, otherness and suffer.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION: CONCEPT OF *OTHERNESS***

Human history is replete with analyses of relationships: interpersonal and social, and these relationships form the very basis of a society. A person, termed as social animal, is affected by the actions and thoughts of the people. "The scientific study of the effects of social and cognitive processes on the way individuals perceive, influence and relate to others" (Smith 8) comes under the preview of Social Psychology. The 'other', a cardinal concept of Social Psychology, as one's behavior, in a particular and under specific circumstances, depends how he appreciates and comprehend the outer world in the light of his motives, thoughts, emotions, perceptions and past experiences i.e. memories. This otherness or the concept of 'other' is derived from the binary classification of 'the own' and 'the other' which creates group notions; 'we' versus 'other'. Gomez Muller, a famous experimental German Psychologist defines this concept as 'the one who does not do as I do, the one whose body-colour, size, facial-features- is not like mine'. (Civila 21)

The term 'otherness' refers to the "set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any full range of human differences based on group identities". It is limited by a number of factors viz. race, class, gender, religion and disabilities. It engenders the inferiority, lowliness, subservience and ultimate exclusion from the mainstream. For Hegel, 'otherness' refers to the "set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any full range of human differences based on group identities". (Powell 15) The marginalized people may face educational, professional, housing, economic, criminal justice and other co-related disparities.

## II. DISCUSSION

Apart from Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology, the tentacles of term 'otherness' manifest themselves in every sphere of life, including Literature. The Holocaust- the systematic oppression, persecution and liquidation of Jews under Nazi Germany is an endmost example of othering and its consequences. While 'otherness' is occasionally apparent in Literature, it is imperceptible; as an undercurrent, but all-pervasive. Though subjugation creates inferiority in the 'other', but sometimes, on the contrary it ameliorates the 'other' to excellence and superiority. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, displays the notion of alterity: particularly the rejection of single mother as emblem of otherness.

A crowd 'of bearded men, in sad-colored garments, and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women' (41) mainly 'inhabitants of Boston', that had assembled 'in front of a wooden edifice' (41) outside the prison, to witness the retribution awarded to a 'tall, with a figure of perfect elegance' (46) young 'beautiful, from regularity of feature and richness of complexion' (46) woman, Hester Prynne, for her ignominious act of a single mother. There on the Scaffold stands Hester with 'natural dignity', infant; her three months child, at her bosom, 'fully revealed before the crowd'(46), looking proud and radiant, wearing scarlet letter 'A' 'wrought into her dress' (48), that was 'artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy' (49). The puritan people for 'whom religion and law were almost identical' (43), especially the women, chaste 'merciful overmuch' magistrates for the leniency in punishment: just marking her 'other' by a scarlet letter on her dress and standing only on 'a portion of penal machine' (48) for 'time till an hour past meridian' (47), shown towards Hester.

However, it is the 'otherness' of Hester that invited chiding. She didn't budge before the authority, put a dauntless face, never parted her lips to speak the name of child's father. Reverend Mr. Wilson's caution "transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy" (58) could not shake her determination and yield no results. The authorities reprimand her for over- stepping the threshold of domesticity; however this punishment stands in stark contrast to liberties enjoyed by a town witch and Governor Bellingham's sister; Mistress Hibbins, who is 'bitter-tempered' and possesses 'ill-omened physiognomy' (98) and practices sorcery. She revels the life because of the 'ownness'; sharing and belonging the group of her brother; the Governor. This 'we' or 'ownness' permits her to share the same roof with her brother, though she frequently speaks of the 'Black Man'.

Again, the society which follows Puritanism; based on Bible's value system; enumerated by the Christ; the son of Mother Mary, degrades and negates, compelled by coterie's interests, the identity of a single mother. Hester seems to undermine the authority against her freedom, and that brands her the 'other'.

Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast."

"Never!" replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman. "It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!"

"Speak, woman!" said another voice, coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold. "Speak; and give your child a father!"

"I will not speak!" answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice, which she too surely recognized. "And my child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (Hawthorne 59)

Hester Prynne got punishment because of her 'otherness' i.e. being a woman, in a typically patriarchal setup. The authority: Governor Bellingham, Reverend Mr. Wilson and Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale never utter a single word; just a mere rebuke, against her unknown partner; definitely a male. The magistrates, who were entrusted to maintain social order, didn't intend to pursue the matter to its conclusive end; and Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, her pastor, appreciates 'Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart' (59) for not revealing his identity. Hester suffers for years, branded an outcast, forced to lead a life of seclusion and moral degradation until her companion: Reverend Mr. Arthur Dimmesdale, ascends 'the platform of the pillory' (48) in broad-day light, only after realizing that all the escape routes are closed. During the years of her seclusion, she was 'without a friend on earth'.

In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere. (Hawthorne 71)

Hester's 'otherness' is that she 'felt no love, nor feigned any' (63) to 'a man of thought-the book-worm of great libraries- a man already in decay, having given best years to feed the hungry dream of

knowledge' (63) who lured her into marriage, only with the intention that 'that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy' (63). Roger Chillingworth betrayed Hester's 'budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with' (64) his decay, and suddenly mysteriously disappeared for seven years before return. Hester, though wronged in relation, never walked out of the wedlock, but her husband's sudden disappearance made her to take refuge in Arthur Dimmesdale. No punishment for betraying one's wife.

Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle, by transporting an eminent Doctor of Physic from a German university bodily through the air and setting him at the door of Mr. Dimmesdale's study! Individuals of wiser faith, indeed, who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition, were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth's so importunate arrival. (Hawthorne 102)

Despite her seclusion, isolation and punishment, the society feels Hester's 'otherness' demands more abomination. A plan, that reaches to Hester, was in circulation to take away her child: Pearl who was borne 'out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion' (89) and exhibits a mysterious 'faultless beauty' and a 'wild-flower prettiness' (90), from Hester. She is a true manifestation of Hester's sin. Though a streak of temptation in visible in major characters, Pearl 'as incapable of deceit or dishonesty as nature itself' (Waggoner, p. 145), is immune to impacts of Dark Powers. However, the leaders of the society, as per Puritan Law, intend to take the child away from Hester: her mother and sinner, because she lacks guidance, and Pearl will not be able to achieve salvation, if capable. And if she is an 'airy sprite' or a 'little elf', than she will dampen her mother's soul. This logic in itself is self-contradictory. Governor Bellingham addresses:

"Hester Prynne," said he, fixing his naturally stern regard on the wearer of the scarlet letter, "there hath been much question concerning thee, of late. The point hath been weightily discussed, whether we, that are of authority and influence, do well discharge our consciences by trusting an immortal soul, such as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world. Speak thou, the child's own mother!" (Hawthorne 93)

Only the 'otherness' of Hester perturbs them, and ignites their hatred. Hester fights back who got Pearl 'in requital of all things else', boldly urges Athur Dimmesdale 'Speak thou for me' convinces them: the group of men including Governor Bellingham, the Reverend John Wilson, the Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, that Pearl is for her a blessing & retribution, succeeds in retaining Pearl's company with Dimmesdale's help, who acknowledges:.

"Truth in what Hester says, and in the feeling which inspires her! God gave her the child, and gave her, too, an instinctive knowledge of its nature and requirements,—both seemingly so peculiar,—which no other mortal being can possess. And, moreover, is there not a quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother and this child?" (Hawthorne 95)

This 'otherness' of Hester had brought changes not in Hester's behavior but also in those who belong to 'the own'. 'The own' tries their best to humiliate, degrade, made Hester to feel lowly but lowered themselves to such an extent which is unimaginable for the humanity. On the other hand, the feeling rejuvenated good- qualities of Hester to such a level that now the citizens decipher the letter 'A' for 'Able'

The state, authority, magistrates and the populace who had decided Hester's fate, punishment and excommunication, have turned oblivion towards Mistress Hibbins' deeds of black magic, Satan's incarnate Roger Chillingworth and Athur Dimmesdale's hypocrisy, not because they are learned or rich but because they, all, belong to 'the own' of binary classification.

### III. CONCLUSION

This 'otherness', meld with social exclusion and psychological repression, elevated the personality of Hester. She symbolizes emergence of individualism, and faces the society, the oppressor, bravely; earns respect from the citizens for her compassion and empathy. She could settle for a new life in Europe with her daughter; after Pearl's marriage, but returns to New England; years after, and continues to adorn the letter on her breast. The society, ultimately, absolves her by permitting to bury her body next to Dimmesdale's. However, by concealing their sins, the negative impacts of being perpetrator of 'otherness' are clearly visible on both Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale suffers in privacy for his guilt, and in

the end upto a certain extent, seeks salvation by publically admitting his adultery before dying. But Roger Chillingworth, blinded by his monomaniacal pursuit of revenge, attains damnation only.

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