

## النظام الأبوي والمجتمع البيوريتاني في رواية

### (الحرف القرمزي) لـ ناثانيل هوثورن

طالبة الماجستير: فاديه الربيع اشراف الدكتور: ابراهيم السماعيل

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#### ملخص

لطالما اتسمت المجتمعات الأبوية حول العالم بنهجها المضطهد للنساء، حيث يقوم النظام الأبوي لتلك المجتمعات على عدم تكافؤ علاقات القوى بين الرجال والنساء، والتي يهيمن من خلالها الرجال الذين تصنفهم بالمجموعة العليا على النساء اللواتي تعتبرهن المجموعة الدنيا. لذلك تركز هذه الدراسة على النظام الأبوي للمجتمع البيوريتاني السائد في رواية (الحرف القرمزي) لـ ناثانيل هوثورن، وتهدف إلى استكشاف هذا النظام وتحليله من منظور نسوي. تقوم هذه الدراسة بتتبع انتقاد هوثورن للمجتمع البيوريتاني الأبوي من خلال جوانب متعددة، حيث تبحث أولاً في المصير الذي تواجهه النساء البيوريتانيات إذا تجرأن على الخروج من نطاقهن المنزلي ودخول الميدان العام المحظور عليهن؛ ونظراً لأن المجتمع البيوريتاني معروف على نطاق واسع بسلطته الدينية، يعد البحث في السلطة الدينية البيوريتانية بتركيبها الأبوي والهرمي نهجاً أساسياً في هذه الدراسة. علاوةً على ذلك، تستكشف هذه الدراسة الأيديولوجيات التي تبناها هوثورن لتدمير العناصر الأساسية للنظام الأبوي الذي يرتكز عليه المجتمع البيوريتاني.

السلطة الدينية البيوريتانية، الحركة النسوية، هستر

## Patriarchy and the Puritan Society in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

### Abstract

Patriarchal societies around the world have been always characterized by their oppressive approach towards women. Patriarchy as a system is based on unequal power relations in which men, classified the 'superior' group, dominate women, the 'inferior' one. This study focuses on the patriarchy of the Puritan society as prevailed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and it aims to explore this system and analyze it from a Feminist perspective.

Hawthorne's criticism of the patriarchal Puritan society is traced through various aspects in this study. First, this study inquires into the fate the Puritan women face if they dare to step out of their domestic sphere and enter the public domain prohibited for them. Since the Puritan society is widely recognized by its theocracy, investigating the Puritan theocracy and its patriarchal and hierarchical structure is essential in this study. Moreover, this study explores the ideologies adopted by Hawthorne to destruct the basic components of the patriarchal system upon which the Puritan society is based.

The Feminist reading of *The Scarlet Letter* is centered on the heroine Hester Prynne; therefore, this study investigates the ways in which Hester challenges the Puritan patriarchy, which end up with Hester's success in her struggle to achieve her individuality in the Puritan society.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan society, Hawthorne, the Puritan theocracy, Feminism, Hester

Boston, the founded colony of the civilized society, is the place where the Puritans settled themselves. The Puritans established their 'civilized' world on the basis of a completely patriarchal system. It is the society which invests power and authority only in men, excluding women from the public life and confining them to one limited sphere, i.e. the domestic one. The Puritans' purpose was to create a godly state, so they intended to establish their own theocracy where religion and law are seen as identical, both based on patriarchal foundation. Leland S. Person in *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne* indicates that "Puritanism was also a utopian philosophy" whose aim was to establish "a religious society, to be sure, a theocracy in which church and civil governments were virtually identical" (18).

In the Puritan society, the patriarchal family is essential since the household is considered as a mirror to the gendered political and religious hierarchies of the society. Amanda Porterfield highlights this idea in her book *female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism*, arguing that "the Christian household" is seen "as a microcosm of church and state," the thing which marks it as "the building block of society and social reform" (24). However, men (fathers and husbands) dominate this domestic world making women submissive to them in all matters. Moreover, women cease to be individuals and are defined by their fathers, husbands or sons; they do not have any legal identity. Within their

domestic world, they perform their 'natural' roles i.e. a wife and a mother. Those women, who dare to transgress their 'natural' roles, are severely crushed and suppressed by the Puritan authority.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is definitely a criticism of the Puritan society with its patriarchal values and conventions. The novel creates an imaginary world, analyzing the different aspects of the Puritan society and showing its patriarchal system. Hawthorne sets his influential novel in Puritan Boston between 1642 and 1649. He pays careful attention to the historical setting of the novel alluding to various historical incidents and figures. The novel clearly reflects the patriarchal structure of the state and the church, and how they are closely intertwined supporting the 'superiority' of men over women. However, Hawthorne's purpose is not only to show the patriarchal Puritanism of Boston society, but rather to advance ideologies that may contribute to destruct this patriarchal system of the society. He creates the story of Hester Prynne, the female individual, who struggles against the patriarchal laws and regulations. She is confronted by a male-dominated Puritan society which strives to confine her within the very limited sphere it allotted for women. Nina Baym, in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, offers her opinion about the novel saying that "the story of *The Scarlet Letter* may be about things going wrong in a projected utopia" (3). Hester Prynne is viewed as a threat to the patriarchal

Puritan society, and the plot of the novel is centered on Hester's conflicts with the society in her quest to achieve her individuality.

Since the background of the story in *The Scarlet Letter* is shaped by various aspects of Puritanism, and as the novel is specifically about the Puritan punishment directed at those who break the laws, this research first seeks to show the fate of the women who dare to claim their rights and face the Puritan authority. There are three instances in the novel: Two historical figures who are Anne Hutchinson and Anne Hibbins, and surely the heroine of the novel Hester Prynne. This research then reveals the patriarchal system of the Puritan society with its theocracy, and how it is reflected in the family, the state and the church since the whole structure of the society revolves around these three institutions, showing how women are made and nurtured to be submissive to men. This study also analyzes the ideologies advanced by Hawthorne to destruct the patriarchy of the Puritan society. The rest of the research is centered on Hester Prynne, and the rebellious ways she adopted in her quest to achieve her individuality.

### **I. Public Women in the Puritan Society**

As a historical fact, the Puritan society is widely recognized as a patriarchal one. Elizabeth Reis, in the preface of her book *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, makes use of influential words said by Benjamin Wadsworth to accurately describe the Puritan patriarchy and the status of women

under it; Wadsworth says that "the husband is call'd the Head of the Woman. . . . It belongs to the Head to rule and govern. . . . Wives are part of the House and Family, and ought to be under the Husband's Government" (xiii). However, the patriarchy of the Puritan society is not left unprotected; it is severely defended against those few women who transgress their domestic sphere, dare to cross the established patriarchal boundaries and enter the 'inherent' male public sphere. Here comes Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to show the fate of such public women. The novel presents three public women who committed three 'big crimes' in the Puritan society: Anne Hutchinson (the heretic), Anne Hibbins (the witch) and, of course, the heroine of the novel Hester Prynne (the adulteress). These three women become public 'thanks to' the prison. In this section, the three cases are going to be discussed from the society's perspective.

*The Scarlet Letter* cannot be accurately understood without having a clear insight to its historical background. It alludes much to many historical figures and incidents in its approach for understanding the Puritan past. Evoking Anne Hutchinson, the historical female rebellious, provides better understanding of the novel's approach in presenting the Puritan society. From the very beginning of the novel, Hawthorne evokes the historical 'heretic' Anne Hutchinson whose "sainted" footsteps are followed by his heroine Hester Prynne. Hawthorne directly connects the wild rose bush which grew at the threshold of the dark Puritan prison with

Anne Hutchinson. He says that "there is fair authority for believing, it [the wild rose bush] had sprung up under the footsteps of sainted Ann Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door" (44). Hawthorne explains that this rose bush "has been kept alive in history," and that is "by a strange chance," (44) just like the way Anne Hutchinson is immortalized in history in spite of the Puritans' attempts to silence her and erase her traces.

Anne Hutchinson is known to be a woman of good knowledge which is something the Puritan patriarchs dismiss and do not like to find in a woman because, as Kate Millett explains in her influential and much quoted book *Sexual Politics*, "if knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their [women's] subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women" (42). In her study of *The Bible*, Hutchinson follows a religious radical approach, which is referred to by the Puritans as Antinomianism. Her preachings are considered as a crime because, using Ben Barker Benfield's explanations, they "denied the authority of priest, bishop, and king to mediate between the individual and God" (66). Also, her meetings are viewed as illegal since Hutchinson is a woman, and women in the Puritan society have no official status or privilege to hold such discussions. This misogynistic systematic approach of the Puritans concerning the place of women is clearly reflected in the words of John Winthrop, Hutchinson's judge, who refers to her meetings as being "not fitting for your [Hutchinson's] sex" (qtd. in Person 19).

Thus, Hutchinson is questioned by Winthrop in the court and described by him as "being a woman not fit for our society" (qtd. in Person 19). She refuses to submit to the ministers and magistrates, faces them and defends herself strongly and bravely. As a result, Hutchison is found guilty, convicted of heresy and banished from the colony. The historical event of Hutchinson shows, one may assume, the Puritan magistrates' failure to silence the educated spiritual woman, and their severe reaction to defend their patriarchy against the individual Hutchinson proves their deepest fear of the powerful woman. *The Scarlet Letter* may not be about Anne Hutchinson, but evoking her has a deep meaning in the novel's treatment of the Puritan society.

The second public woman Hawthorne presents in the novel is the historical figure Anne Hibbins, or as he calls her "Mistress Hibbins". She is the witch of *The Scarlet Letter* where she embodies "everything a witch should be" (Baym, *A Reading* 56). Hawthorne designs her in such a way that matches the Puritan characteristics of the witch, and introduces her to the reader as being "Governor Bellingham's bitter tempered sister, and the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch" (109). However, what seems to serve this argument best is not the representation of Hibbins as a witch in the novel, but why she was historically convicted of witchcraft since the reason behind her accusation shows the society's misogynistic approach against powerful women, those who dare to claim their rights.



Anne Hibbins is viewed by the Puritan authority as being a hard-hearted woman damned with her pride, and gossips spread about her as being a woman who controls her husband. The society's view of Hibbins is formulated mainly because she complains against the state and the church after the injustice she receives in a dispute she has with a carpenter. She insists on claiming her rights and strives to make her voice heard, but women's voice is hardly heard in the Puritan society! In her first trial, John Wilson, her judge, stresses on "the importance of male dominance, most intimately husband over wife, but also minister, elder, governor, and male congregant over woman" (Westerkamp 576) since Hibbins is considered as a woman out of the male authority.

Hibbins' accusation of witchcraft happens a year after her husband's death, and upon inheriting a large estate from him. This hints at something very important regarding many cases of women's accusation of witchcraft. Reis' argument in her book *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* can be useful here. She highlights that many critics who studied the Puritan history found that "many of the accused were potentially powerful women on the verge of inheriting substantial amounts of property," (6) and one can take Hibbins as an example of such accused women who are targeted because of their wealth. Her accusation is outwardly based on her first trial but implicitly aims to defeat the powerful woman. The fate Anne Hibbins suffered in the Puritan

society shows the price women pay if they rebel against the society's injustice and claim their rights.

The third public woman in *The Scarlet Letter* is Hester Prynne, the heroine of the novel, whom Hawthorne introduces to the reader as the adulteress who brought shame to all her female sex, as one of the women observing her punishment notes: "this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (47). However, no one of the spectators of Hester's punishment raises a question concerning the identity of Hester's partner in adultery since in patriarchal societies, the female is considered as primarily responsible for the sexual guilt. Millett discusses this idea in her analysis of the patriarchal societies arguing that "the large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable or more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison" (54).

In the patriarchal Puritan society, women are primarily seen as sexual beings and viewed as creatures of sexual passion, who are easily tempted to evil. They need the guidance of a male patriarch i.e. a father, a husband or a magistrate, in order to be saved and not to be lost. Marilyn J. Westerkamp asserts this way of thinking about women in the Puritan society arguing:

Placed under the protection of men at the direction of a rational God, women, by nature, desperately needed male enlightenment and guidance if they were to achieve salvation. . . . Certain deceptions were practiced, and women, being female, were neither strong, knowledgeable, nor subtle

enough to discover treachery or resist temptation. Women lacked men's ability to reason; they were easily deluded. (589)

This idea is reflected in the way the spectators of Hester's punishment interpret the main cause of her sin. Hester has been left alone in Boston, a woman without any external regulation by a patriarchal figure. Two years she has been living in Boston alone without any news from her husband. Being 'naturally weak' as a female, and living without her husband's guidance, Hester is thought to be sexually tempted, the thing which leads to her fall. The man who converses with Chillingworth, Hester's unknown husband, expresses this idea saying that Hester was "being left to her own misguidance" (57). Also, the importance of imposing external regulations of law on women's nature and their need to be guided is delivered in the speech of the ugliest and most pitiless woman who attended Hester's punishment. The woman demands Hester's death and expresses her anger saying "let the magistrates, who have made it [Hester's punishment] of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray" (47).

Hester's punishment is designed to shame her and to set her as an example before other women, restraining and warning them from committing a similar sin. It is to make her "a living sermon against sin," (58) an 'object' at which the people look with disgust, contempt and scorn. However, the thing which surprises the readers and unconsciously places them in a contradictory position against

the long-described stern opinion of Hester is Hawthorne's description of her first appearance. Hawthorne writes:

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale . . . She had dark and abundant hair . . . and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of features and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness, belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like, too, . . . characterized by a certain state and dignity . . . And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. (48-9)

Surprisingly, the holiness of Hester's appearance, with the scarlet letter A on her breast and the sin-born baby on her arms, leads the Puritans to picture, as Hawthorne imagines, "the image of Divine Maternity" (51). Thus, Hawthorne, by comparing Hester to the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ on her arms, dignifies Hester elevating her and putting her in a high saint-like position completely opposed to that which the Puritan magistrates aimed to achieve. The appearance of Hester seems to fail the Puritan authority and their punishment in the eyes of the reader and even the spectators in the first scaffold scene.

However, it is not surprising that as Hester becomes a public woman in the Puritan society, she ceases to be an individual human but a mere symbol of sin. As a result, Hester becomes the outcast of the society, isolated and abused psychologically. Porterfield, in her study of the seventeenth-century New England, mentions that historically "the ministers who assumed leading roles in New

England used images of adultery to portray faithlessness to God, and images of marital affection and wifely submission to portray Christian faith" (36). Thus, Hester serves them just fine to communicate their 'godly' message. Hawthorne describes that upon seeing Hester:

clergymen paused in the street, to address words of exhortation, that brought a crowd, with its mingled grin and frown, around the poor, sinful woman. If she entered the church, trusting to share the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse. (79)

Even the Puritan children grow to abuse Hester with words they are too young to comprehend their meanings. Similarly, the poor whom Hester used to help receive her charity with a curse instead of being grateful to her. It seems to be obvious that Hester's punishment is a life-long ideological one aims to destroy her sense of self.

In short, to be a public woman in the patriarchal Puritan society means to become cursed, damned, outcast and severely treated. All the three public women of *The Scarlet Letter's* Puritan world prove this ideological approach of the Puritan authority in defending its patriarchy.

## **II. The Puritan Theocracy: Inherently Patriarchal**

In the seventeenth-century Puritan society, law and religion were closely intertwined and considered as identical. The Puritans have come to New England to establish a society organized according to the instructions of the church. By creating their own

theocracy, "the leadership of the colony is epitomized by two figures, one political and one ecclesiastical," (16) as Baym notes in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. In this section, the Puritan theocracy and its patriarchal structure is going to be discussed.

Placed in the seventeenth-century Puritan Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* reflects the theocracy of its society. From the very start of the novel, Hawthorne makes the close relationship of the state and the church clear to the reader. They have identical roles in leading the founded colony. He successfully achieves his aim by immediately connecting the prison with the cemetery as being essentials to the founding of the colony. Hawthorne writes: "The founders of a new colony, . . . have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of prison" (43).

Moreover, both the state and the church are based on a patriarchal structure. No representation of women in the state or the church has ever taken place in the Puritan society, since they are public institutions, and the public is the domain prohibited for the Puritan women. Here, patriarchy obviously manifests itself, marking the Puritan society as inherently patriarchal. The patriarchal representatives of the Puritan society appear in Hester's trial, embodying the Puritan theocracy. They are all patriarchs, dignified men who are witnessing Hester's punishment while sitting in a balcony, which overlooks the scaffold where Hester stands. The patriarchs are looking down from a high level, symbolizing the

superiority fitting for their rank. Hester's punishment is given an "earnest" meaning by "the solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town" (51-2). So where are women in this scene? One may raise the question. However, the answer is not far to find. Obviously, they are the adulteress Hester Prynne whose partner is standing above among the dignified leaders, and those naïve and simple women from the common public, in whom patriarchy is well internalized, and who are discussing the 'leniency' of Hester's punishment and calling for a severer one put on their fellow in the female sex.

Furthermore, the patriarchy which marks the Puritan society is also hierarchical in that it contrasts women with men, and the youth with age. It is valuable in this context to use Millett's words stated in her analysis of the patriarchal societies: "If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be two fold: male shall dominate female, elder shall dominate younger" (25). Hawthorne composes the patriarchy of the Puritan society in the novel depending on the hierarchy described by Millett, and personifies it in the character of Governor Bellingham. Hawthorne writes:

[He is] a gentleman advanced in years, and with a hard experience written in his wrinkles. He was not ill fitted to be the head and representative of a community, which owned its origin and progress, and its present state of development, not

to the impulses of youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood, and the somber sagacity of age. (59)

Dimmesdale, "The young divine, whose scholar-like renown still in Oxford," (113) and the only young male whose intellects helped him to enter the 'heaven' of elders, is depicted to have secretly committed adultery, proving the 'sagacity' of patriarchy in putting its almost power in the hands of elders.

The Puritan patriarchs of the novel are characterized by their severity. They are described as the generation who "wore the blackest shade of Puritanism" (224). The harsh legalism and the severity which dominate the society are early introduced in the novel in the first scaffold scene by Hawthorne's use of irony. This scene, Michael J. Colacurcio highlights, "is fraught with ironies as comic as they are painful" (109). Through using irony, Hawthorne successfully communicates the gloomy mood of the age and indicates the severity of the Puritanic law, foreshadowing the great change that will happen in the future of the Puritan society and their failure to keep their law. This is also an indication that everything that is social is open to change, or rather is likely to change; what is considered as a great crime and sin in the Puritan past, is now, in the Western American society, viewed as something normal and even gone unnoticed. The scene is described as the following:

The scene was not without a mixture of *awe*, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown *corrupt* enough to smile, instead of shuddering at it. The witnesses of Hester



Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the *heartlessness* of another social state, which would find only a theme for *jest* in an exhibition like the present. (*italics added*, 51)

The link between the church and the state, and their patriarchal approach in ruling the society is manifested in the fact that only male church members have the right to vote in the selection of the new governor. The chapter entitled "The New England Holiday" starts by stating that on the Election Day "the new Governor was to receive his office at the hands of the people" (219). But here, in this statement, women are excluded from being people as they are prevented from their right to vote. Women are never depicted as having any political role; they are seen as being not benefit for political affairs since they lack the wisdom and rationality necessary for politics. Thus, the magistrates, statesmen, ministers, judges and jury were all men. The law of the society is put by men and applied by men. The society is definitely controlled by men.

It seems obvious that the authority controlling the Puritan society of *The Scarlet Letter* is patriarchal, in which both the state and the church play identical roles: each reflects the other and supports it. Women have no role in the authority and are excluded from the political life.

### III. Hawthorne's Destruction of the Puritan Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a well-constructed system. Living under the patriarchal system, the roles and characteristics expected from both men and women to fulfill follow a strict guideline. Any deviation from the constructed lines for both sexes is a threat to the patriarchal society. After clearly defining the separate realms for both males and females, patriarchy carefully organizes the place where the two sexes meet; it is within the institution of family which is considered as the powerful base for the patriarchal system, according to which all the other main institutions are modeled. In her influential book, *Sexual Politics*, Millett makes it emphatic that "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole" (33).

However, what Hawthorne does in *The Scarlet Letter* is the destruction of the very basis on which the patriarchal system is set up. Also, shaping the character of Dimmesdale, as a minister and an adulterous at the same time, has an essential aim in the novel. Baym highlights, in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, Hawthorne's aim saying that "the distinction that the Puritan did not recognize — between church and state — is a distinction on which *The Scarlet Letter* is morally based" (59). This section is going to explore the ideologies followed by Hawthorne in his destruction of the Puritan patriarchy.

Often, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' get mixed and seem to bound together; the first is used to reflect the other, and vice versa. One of Millett's approaches in analyzing patriarchy is to show the difference between the two. In fact, they are two separate realms, maybe connected to one another, but never merged together. While the first is biological, the latter is cultural. Millett uses a very important quote by Robert J. Stoller to show the distinction between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. The quote says: "Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex" (30). In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne carefully creates his two main characters in a way that he attributes feminine characteristics to Dimmesdale, and masculine ones to Hester. Nina Tassi takes notice of this idea arguing that what Hawthorne does in the novel is "reversing traditional ideas of feminine and masculine traits" (26). This is the first ideology Hawthorne uses to destruct the Puritan patriarchy.

First comes Arthur Dimmesdale who is lengthily described in a way that leads the reader to get the impression of softness as the most obvious characteristic in his character. He is handsome, but at the same time, appears as weak, slight, tremulous and pale. He is sensitive too. Moreover, Dimmesdale is highly characterized and distinguished by his voice. Many times Hawthorne stresses on the

description of his voice which always takes its way towards having feminine attributes using feminine adjectives. In the first scaffold scene, when Dimmesdale is asked to urge Hester to reveal the name of her partner in sin, his voice, Hawthorne describes, "was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken" (62).

Emphasizing this idea again, Hawthorne's description of Dimmesdale's voice in his last sermon on the Election Day leads the researcher to the heart of the point under discussion. Dimmesdale's voice is like "music, it breathed *passion* and *pathos*, and *emotions* high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart" (italics added, 235). In her celebrated essay entitled "Sorties" and under the heading "Where is she?" Hélène Cixous offers a number of oppositions to determine the place of "she". Some of which are "Activity / passivity," "Day / Night," "Head / Heart," "Intelligible / sensitive" and "Logos / Pathos" (263). She argues that all these oppositions are based on the essential opposition which is "man / woman" (263). In answering her evoked question, Cixous determines that "woman is always on the side of passivity" (264). Coming back to the context of the novel, one may ask the question 'Where is he?' Where is it more suitable to classify Dimmesdale? On which side? Throughout the novel, except the very last scene of his confession, Dimmesdale's attitude is passive towards his situation. He seems lost, powerless, incapable to do anything to free himself from his crisis to the extent that Hester strives to make him

move in the forest scene urging him "Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die!" (191) He lives in a perpetual night darkened by his unknown sin, unlike Hester whose sin is known and seen to everyone in the light. He is a deeply sensitive man, a mere presence of an enemy like Chillingworth is "enough to disturb the magnetic sphere of a being so sensitive as Arthur Dimmesdale" (186). Lastly, back to the first-mentioned quotation in this paragraph, Dimmesdale's voice is burdened with emotions; it is full of "passion and pathos"! What can be deduced here is that Dimmesdale seems to be more feminine than masculine.

As Dimmesdale increasingly turns to be more feminine, Hester gradually becomes more masculine. Through seven years of isolation, Hester has developed an intellectual thinking. She becomes more critical to the Puritan society. As she dives deeper in her thoughts, her appearance, as the narrator notices, becomes less feminine. The progress of her thoughts is associated with the loss of her beauty. Hawthorne notes that "Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstances that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thoughts" (155).

Hester's loss of beauty is a very important point which should be carefully dealt with. The argument here is going to be of two sides: The first one goes with Hawthorne's ideology and the main idea presented in the previous paragraph i.e. true, as Hester pursues

in her critical thinking, she becomes less beautiful and less attractive to men. The second side of this argument and the most important one is taken in light of what Baym issued in her article "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism". Baym sheds light on the patriarchal thought that is: A woman is only a woman if she is sexually attractive to men. She is critical to this idea which Hawthorne offered ideologically. She states in her article that "Mind does not unsex a woman" (47). Obviously, as stated in the novel, Hester intellectual pursuit leads to her loss of beauty, but "insofar as female beauty means sexual attractiveness to heterosexual men" (Baym, Revisiting 47). What is clear in the novel is that the two men in Hester's life are depicted to be fascinated by her strength of character and thoughts. There are not scenes in which Dimmesdale or Chillingworth are depicted to express their attractiveness to Hester's outside beauty, even though Hester's physical and facial beauty is stunning. In short, using again Baym's words, "if Hester's thinking makes her less conventionally sexy, it does not make her less loving" (Revisiting 48). Hester's unique and charming character makes her more attractive to the two men in her life regardless of her outside appearance, and that is Hawthorne's utmost aim.

Role reversal is the second ideology adopted by Hawthorne in his destruction of the Puritan patriarchy. This happens most obviously in the forest scene where Hester, the female, appears to be the stronger and dominant character. At knowing the truth of

Chillingworth's identity, Dimmesdale "sank down on the ground, and buried his face in his hands" (187). The picture Hawthorne creates in this scene greatly emphasizes the gap between Hester's strength and Dimmesdale's weakness. The more Dimmesdale becomes lost, confused, horrified and tremulous after knowing the truth, the more Hester becomes calm, well-controlled, determined, steady and sober minded. Unable to think and look for a solution to rescue himself, Dimmesdale starts pleading and begging Hester to guide him: "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" (189) At this point, Ernest Sandeen explains, "Hester takes control of the situation, and Arthur, all at sea as to what should be done, readily submits" (426). Thus, role reversal is very clear in this scene; Hester is the strong character, Dimmesdale is the weak one; the woman is the one who leads, and the man is the one who follows.

"As co-operation between the family and the larger society is essential, else both would fall apart, the fate of the three patriarchal institutions, the family, society and the state are interrelated" (33) the idea presented by Millett leads to the rising of the question 'Where is the patriarchal family in *The Scarlet Letter*?' A novel set in a strongly patriarchal Puritan society, led by inherently patriarchal theocracy, but its basic patriarchal institution is absent! The answer to the above-issued question comes through Baym's words in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*: "there are no families in

*The Scarlet Letter*. The society is full of patriarchs, authorities, rulers, and father figures, but it is devoid of real fathers" (59).

Therefore, the third ideology adopted by Hawthorne is the destruction of the patriarchal family. The ideal image of the patriarchal family which the Puritans seek to achieve is absent in the novel. What *The Scarlet Letter* presents is the story of two broken families. The first one is the legitimate family of Hester and Chillingworth, the second one is the illegitimate 'family' of Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl. The marriage of Hester and Chillingworth is broken when Hester commits adultery. The focus here is on Hester's and Dimmesdale's 'family'. What we have in their bond: Hester, the single mother – Dimmesdale, the absent failed father – and Pearl, the illegitimate child. Their bond is literally the destruction of the ideal patriarchal Puritan family. In depicting them this way, Hawthorne seems to have a deep insight on the fate of the Puritan family in the future, since this is the case in the American society these days; the society is full of single mothers, absent fathers and illegitimate children.

In the novel, Hester provides for Pearl alone and "carries the responsibility of a single parent" (Jahan 102). However, this is literally the opposite of Dimmesdale's attitude towards Pearl. He neglects his duties towards his daughter for the sake of his social standing. He publically denies any connection with Hester and Pearl ignoring Pearl's constant demand for him to stand with them in the



daytime. Also, he does not contribute economically for the raising of his child. In the scene at the Governor's Hall, Hester deadly defends her right to keep Pearl, while, as Person notes, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, "Dimmesdale wants nothing to do with raising his child and obviously fails Pearl as a parent" (79). Moreover, he even fears the possibility that his features can be traced in Pearl's face, so that he will be discovered as her father! He says to Hester: "Methought—Oh, Hester, what a thought is that, and how terrible to dread it!--that my own features were partly repeated in her face, and so strikingly that the world might see them!" (199). Obviously, Dimmesdale cares for his social standing more than he does for Hester and Pearl, and he embodies what Person calls "[the] fathers who sacrifice their children for their own worldly success" (79).

A very important point which should not be gone unnoticed is concerned with the legitimacy of the Puritan family. It is something essential for the construction of the Puritan basic institution. Millett points out to this idea arguing that "To insure that its crucial functions of reproduction and socialization of the young take place within its confines, the patriarchal family insists upon legitimacy" (35). What happens in the novel is the opposite and the destruction of this patriarchal principle too: Pearl is produced and brought to life as the result of the illegitimate relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale; "In giving her existence," Hawthorne

writes, "a great law had been broken" (84). Answering the Reverend Wilson's question about her identity, Pearl declares "I am mother's child" (103). Thus, she is brought into the world without a man! She denies the possibility of having a father.

Lastly, Hawthorne's decision to create a lawmaker and a lawbreaker in one person is also ideological. It aims to break the Puritan principle in viewing the state and the church as being identical. First, there is Governor Bellingham who is introduced to the reader as being "not *ill fitted* to be the head and the representative [of the Puritan community]" (italics added, 59). Clearly, Hawthorne's use of irony here aims at something deeper. This historical Puritan magistrate is himself involved in sexual controversy. After the death of his first wife, he gets married to a woman who is previously engaged to one of his friends. Also, he refuses to offer a justification to the court when he is asked to do so. Choosing Bellingham to sit in judgement of Hester's sexual sin appears to be deeply ironic.

The second lawmaker and lawbreaker is surely Dimmesdale, the Puritan minister and Hester's partner in adultery. The first scaffold scene is full of irony revolves around Dimmesdale's position as the minister on whom "the responsibility of this woman's soul [Hester's] lies greatly" (60). Thus, Dimmesdale urges Hester to reveal the name of her partner in sin i.e. his own name! He will preach her in order to purify her soul and make her repent! An irony

which aims to show the hypocrisy of the 'heavenly' Puritan minister underlying the idea that the one who puts the law is himself the one who breaks it.

To sum up, Hawthorne's approach is critical in depicting the Puritan patriarchy. Many ideologies he adopts to destruct the patriarchal basics of the society, and he succeeds in doing so.

#### **IV. Hester Prynne: The Feminist Heroine**

The Feminist reading of *The Scarlet Letter* is centered on the character of Hester Prynne. Hester seems to be a perfect example whose thoughts and actions through which Feminism is manifested. Hester's struggle to achieve her individuality in the Puritan society takes different forms and ways. Thus, this is the idea around which the argument of this section is going to revolve. In this section, it is hoped to find out the answer to the two main questions: The first one is concerned with the personal level 'did Hester achieve her individuality in Puritan society?' and the second one is related to the larger social level 'was she able to change the Puritan society?'

To start from the beginning event of the novel, the Puritan authority punishes Hester for committing adultery by publically humiliating her and making her wear the scarlet letter A which means, as the authority sets, 'Adulteress'. Their punishment aims to destroy Hester's sense of self and make her a sermon for sin. However, Hester appears as rebellious from the very beginning of

the novel. Emerging from the prison, Hester's first reaction to the town-beadle, who is the representation of "the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law," (48) indicates her rebellion. As the beadle attempts to push Hester forward towards the prison door, Hester "repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her free-will" (48). Thus, the first impression the reader gets of Hester is her dignity and strength of character.

The second mark of Hester's rejection of the Puritan punishment of her is communicated by her embroidery of the scarlet letter. It has a deep meaning, the meaning which the Puritan magistrates fail to catch, but it does not escape the Puritan women in the crowd. One of the women gets Hester's aim questioning "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it [the scarlet letter]! Why gossip, what is it but to laugh in the faces of godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?" (49). Hester's beautifying of the letter implies that she considers her act beautiful, and by this, she seems to refuse the Puritan definition of her deed, underestimating the punishment set by the magistrates. Baym, in "Passion and Authority in *The Scarlet Letter*" argues concerning Hester's decoration of the letter saying that "by making the letter beautiful Hester is denying its social meaning. The embroidery is a

technique by which Hester subverts the letter's literal meaning" (219). What seems to be obvious is that Hester celebrates her act.

Moreover, Hester's refusal to speak and reveal the name of her partner in adultery is also considered as an ideology Hester adopts to express her refusal to accept the Puritan authority over her. She does not care about Reverend Wilson's speech that the scarlet letter will be taken off her breast in case if she confesses; the Puritan magistrates become powerless at this point since nothing they say or do is able to make Hester speak. Hester's silence becomes a powerful tool through which Hester's strength is revealed. Mursalin Jahan highlights this idea and points out to Hester's strength in silence saying "Silence, a submissive trait of a woman becomes a powerful weapon to assert her individualism against puritans" (101).

Furthermore, the very idea of Hester's stay in Boston can be taken as a mark of her rebellious soul. The Puritans experience power over Hester only because she grants it to them since her stay in Boston is by her own choice. Hawthorne writes: "it may seem marvellous, that this woman should still call that place her home, where . . . she must needs be the type of shame . . . Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilation than the first" (74). Thus, the pains and shame she suffers from lead to the birth of a conscious awakened Hester. She starts living in the Puritan

settlement but without admitting the authority of the Puritan magistrates over her. Had she left Boston, she would have assured the Puritan power and victory over her, but her stay comes to be understood as a challenge to the Puritan law.

Hester's economic independence is also important in her quest for her individuality since, in the Puritan society, women are traditionally viewed as being dependent on men economically. Hester breaks this patriarchal tradition being acknowledged in the Puritan society as a self-dependent woman. Colacurcio highlights Hester's independence through her needle art saying that "Hester can earn her way only through the artistry of her needle, which she turns to political subversion as well as to economic advantages" (108). As highlighted by Colacurcio, Hester makes her needlework a weapon she uses in her struggle against the Puritan authority. First, she subverts the meaning of the letter by embroidering it using her skill in the needle. Then she achieves her independence by relying on the income she gains from her needlework. Through her creative skill, Hester establishes her individual position in the Puritan society, gradually stepping further beyond the limitations and isolation designed for her by the Puritan authority.

Hester's approach towards the Puritan people differs from that she follows against the Puritan authority. Hester "starts increasing her activity in the society," (103) Jahan says, and after seven years of a hard experience full of shame, isolation and

dismissal, but also good deeds, Hester succeeds in establishing her individual position in the society. She becomes a self-devoted woman, ready to offer help to whoever asks her. Her good services to people especially in times of pestilence and calamity, besides her kind warm spirit full of tenderness, contribute to creating the people's new view of Hester as being a "Sister of Mercy" (153) referring to Hester's great self-devotion to charitable acts. Even the scarlet letter ceases to indicate its original meaning put by the Puritan magistrates; the symbol, in people's eyes, comes to refer to Hester's strength of character. The letter starts to signify the word 'Able' since "so strong was Hester, with a woman's strength" (153). People become proud of Hester instead of being ashamed of her, and the scarlet letter becomes viewed with a kind of sacredness having "the effect of the cross on nun's bosom" (154).

Most importantly, what appears clear from the beginning of the novel until its end is that the last thing Hester cares for is the Puritan magistrates and their opinion of her. When she gets the chance in her second meeting with Chillingworth, she expresses her strict refusal to the change in the magistrates' opinion of her. Upon telling her about the magistrates' intention to take off the scarlet letter from her bosom, Hester reacts in a way that implies her rebellion against the Puritan authority saying "it lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off the badge . . . Where I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be

transformed into something that should speak a different purport" (60). Truly, the letter, as Hester refers to, comes to signify something other than the magistrates' definition of it (discussed in the previous paragraph).

Hester's radical feminist thoughts regarding the race of womanhood makes *The Scarlet Letter* more appropriate for a feminist reading. Feminist principles can be traced in Hester's inner speculations. Living in a society controlled by patriarchal Puritan principles, being punished by its severe laws and isolated as a result, Hester develops a critical thinking concerning the society's whole patriarchal system and the status of women in it. In chapter 13, Hester formulates her feminist ideas criticizing and attacking the patriarchal foundations of the society and questioning the whole existence of the female sex "Was existence worth living, even to the happiest among them?" (156) She starts speculating about the changes that should happen in order for women's position to become fairly acceptable for them, being "potent in her power to recognize as convention what others take to be nature, and refuse it as such" (Colacurcio 110). The following passage shows Hester's feminist and radical solution for the lot of women in the patriarchal society:

As a first, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take



advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change. (156-7)

It is clear from this passage that Hester considers patriarchy as a system socially and historically constructed, not naturally found. The radical solution she offers cannot be easily applied since centuries-built system like patriarchy cannot be overthrown at once, but rather gradually altered and modified. It is right, as Hester thinks and Hawthorne writes, that "A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought" (157). What can an individual woman like Hester do in the face of a whole patriarchal society?! To be rebellious in a society not ready for your rebellion is a dangerous attempt, and to face it alone is a "hopeless task" (156) as mentioned in the novel. This can interpret Hester's last image in the concluding chapter of the novel where she determines to gradually change the society by trying to raise the consciousness of those "wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful" (253) women who come to her cottage seeking her advice and counsel. The gathering of those women around Hester, discussing their misfortunes in the society is a change in itself, just applying what Millett issues in *Sexual Politics*: "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it is scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change" (58).

Maybe Hester, after achieving her individuality, is not able to overthrow the patriarchal Puritan society alone, but the end of the novel is promising where Hester encourages her circle of women to respect and appreciate their individual experiences and to get free from the patriarchal definition of them. She tries to cultivate in them the sense of self-acceptance and advises them to have patience since, as Hester believes and envisions "in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (254). Looking at the changes happened in the American society concerning the status of women centuries after the time of the novel, one may assume that Hester's prediction regarding the future of women is going in its right way.

In conclusion, *The Scarlet Letter's* approach in depicting the Puritan society is critical. Hawthorne analyzes the Puritan society, criticizing its patriarchal structure and advancing ideologies that contribute to the destruction of the very basis of the Puritan patriarchy. Taking into consideration the limitations of the historical setting, Hawthorne gives his heroine the most possible ways to achieve her individuality. What can an individual woman do more than that in a seventeenth-century Puritan society? The end suits its historical setting.

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