



Disconsolation: A Pavement for the psychological study of the characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to portray the psychological study of the characters- Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl and Roger Chillingworth of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It is attempted in a way to portray the depression or the mental agony that each character is made to undergo. The characters are portrayed in such a way that they are diversified from the ordinary structure of the social community. It can be acknowledged that the community is presented in a hierarchical structure by itself, and by which the characters are also renounced themselves into the way of psychological hierarchy of depression which acts as a pavement to ponder into their mindscape.

A writer ought to become the character when he introduces each character in his work. As a great writer, Hawthorne also delves deep into the psychic of each characters – Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl and Roger Chillingworth in his novel the *Scarlet Letter*. By going deep into the mindscape of these characters, he has achieved the desired effect of art in this great work. Obviously *The Scarlet Letter* envisages a kind of moral and political paradox in terms of individual characters among the first generation colonists: men and women who participate in hierarchical authoritarian community that originates in a challenge to the authority and hierarchy of the English church and a challenge based on private interpretation of the sacred scriptures. If one contemplates the novel profoundly one can understand Hawthorne, by presenting this defiance of the community and keenly observed the psychic of the individuals in the society in which an individual is isolated and thereby webbed in disconsolation to a greater extent. This paper intends to reveal the truth of

the curse of the modern civilization which is the confinement of disconsolation thereby tries to portray the reasons for disconsolation of the significant characters.

Each individual in the novel are desolated as everyone undergoes mental agony throughout the novel. They live in themselves, indulging in self-appraisal, self-brooding and self-castigation. Hester Prynne, in her daily rounds to the village and back, the minister with his hand over heart and his secret tortures and suffering, the physician stooping and collecting herbs, are all sunk in the abyss loneliness and desolation. It is very explicit in nature, if one is isolated from the “social group” or “social hierarchy” then it is only the pain that one is compelled to undergo. For, if they are desolated from the societal structure, a kind of gloomy atmosphere that broods over the mind of the characters.

Hester Prynne has the kind of courage from which she has moved away from the Calvinistic preoccupation with sin, separating one from God. Actually the sin is committed by Arthur Dimmesdale – an agent in the patriarchal setup. On the contrary, Hester Prynne is considered to be the sinned person. She is isolated from the community – the community which scandalously attacks her with their pungent words, “this woman has brought shame upon us all, ought to die”(51). She thinks that her principal sin consists of not telling Dimmesdale who Chillingworth is. She sees that keeping that secret might isolate her from him. Rather , with Pearl and Dimmesdale at her side, she could be happy leaving Boston and going to England without their reconciliation with the Puritan community. However, she comes to understand that such a move would have disastrous spiritual effects on Dimmesdale because of the commitment to the visible church and also he is her spiritual guide.

The interaction of human beings with one another seems to be more just a pleasurable or useful activity. Whatever wealth a person deserves, a person cannot sustain in this world only with the help of the prosperity. If so, he would have to go insane. They need to become a part of a particular group in the society. Though the societal factors labour an individual psychologically, one needs to cope up with the societal structure, willingly or unwillingly for the reason that desolation will be painful. There is a deprivation of all sensory exchange of the person’s whole being, body and mind because of desolation.

Hawthorne’s characters are also affected by unpleasant circumstances which sap them of being one among the society. He explores the dark recesses of the human mind of the

individual. Hawthorne shows himself to be an insightful psychologist and explores the workings of the minds of the characters. The mental anguish of the characters make them to feel aliens in their own country. Hester Prynne, when she is in the scaffold is criticized as “irregular procession of stern-browed men and unkindly visage women” (54). She does not achieve a real voice in her community. This laudable woman giving birth to an illegitimate child causes a stir in the societal structure.

Pearl, one of the significant characters in the novel who “was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden”(85) becomes an isolated victim of the Puritans. Pearl remains an island among the people. She has got unique qualities that she is also not ready to one with the other children. Destiny has brought this innocent girl, an inviolable circle around her from which she could not escape. The child has been en-snarled by ostracism. This endangers an aversion, defiance and hostility to the other children in the society. Hawthorne shows a masterly understanding of a child’s mind. Hester’s own gusty feelings towards her society are projected on the child. She feels lonely because of the difficulty to establish the kind and the satisfying relationship she desires. Here she does not get the satisfying relationship – the relationship of father. This hampers her to build a social network and she remains “a child comprehended her loneliness”(89). Though Pearl is a victim of desolation among the puritans, she is the only agent who makes the minister to confess his sin, due to the innocent lovable girl, Dimmesdale is very much appealed and admits Pearl to be his child on the last election sermon. Only through this desolated angel, Dimmesdale frees himself as Daniels says, “Pearl is the efficient cause of the denouement and thus provides the motivation of Dimmesdale’s final act” (228).

Pearl is neither forced into displaying guilt, nor into hiding it, because she does not own the guilt brought into her life by her mother. Instead Pearl is left to interpret her mother’s shame, since the scarlet letter is adorned in gold, and her own dresses are beyond compare and fit for princess, even while she takes in the community’s frowning disapproved. To quote, “Pearl is the only character in the novel actually drawn from life; many of her descriptions come directly from Hawthorne’s notebook of his own daughter una” (Parini, 175). Hester Prynne allows Pearl’s clothing and Pearl’s physical beauty to speak of her unspeakable belief; namely that Pearl, regardless of her flawed conception, is the perfect child. Hawthorne himself points out when Pearl is viewed honestly as a beautiful female

child, whether her outer coverings remain perfect or not, she becomes representative of all children regardless of class position within the community.

In contrast to Hester Prynne, who has divorced herself physically from the outside world, Arthur Dimmesdale works against nature and his inner vitality has been consumed by which his scarlet letter burns inside his heart. Dimmesdale senses out the fact that he has been a victim of duplicity and dishonesty. His anguish has many times impelled him to confess his sin. For seven years he has faced the mental agony before his final admission of the guilt. It is well depicted when he speaks to Hester Prynne in the forest,

What can a ruined soul like mine effect towards the redemption of the other souls or a polluted soul towards purification...I have laughed in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am (179).

Such is the wrecked condition and the misery of the minister who has a bleeding heart. Isolated and cut off from the life and society, “he is falling into a moral limbo farther and farther from reality and existence of men” (184). In fact it is the sense of delusion and deceitfulness, the divergence between what he appears to be and what he is, between his professed ideas and performed action which are causing grief.

Due to the guilty consciousness of his self, a ground has been prepared for the delineation of agonizing conflicting mind between what he is and what he ought to be. He suffers from his mental agony which torments him whenever he presents the election sermon. There is a conflict within him. To use Freudian term, the conflict is between his id and superego, between his dark unconsciousness and consciousness. Because of his id, that demands immediate gratification he does not show awareness to the external reality. He does not try to rationalize and so he is tempted by the worldly pleasure. Though he is a clergyman the passion urges him to indulge him in such an illicit act with Hester Prynne. But the super ego of the mind is concerned with moral ideas, tries to stand superior and so the minister remains peak at his dilemma whether to conceal it within himself or to confess his guilt. The super ego part of the mind strives to attain perfection. It usually deals in absolute rules. This part of the mind is usually persistent and unyielding as id. It is only because of this rationalizing part of his self, he goes and confesses everything to the public and get rids of the horror.

The very word disconsolation seems to be horrible and sick. It reduces an individual's opportunities to make social contact, and, over time, this hampers a person's efforts to build a social network. It is a condition experienced by a person's effort to build a social network. Hester Prynne is the nucleus of this presentation because she embodies the paradoxical relationship between the individual and the community. Hester Prynne, as an adulteress bears an illegitimate child. She is by the fact threat to social cohesion and subject to the full weight of public opprobrium. Steeped in misery herself, she wonders whether life is bearable for even the happiest women and despairs of any real improvement in their lot without a total revolution.

There is another major character in this novel. It is the Puritan community itself. It appears throughout the novel in various forms representing the capacity for their that is manifested in human nature at different moments. The community's judgment demonstrate their insights of self-deception but usually assume ironic overtones. Hester Prynne emphasizes her conflict with the larger community that judges and condemns her. Her brave silence stands in sharp contrast to the cowardly words of Dimmesdale, whose moral reputation in Puritan society ironically seems to rise with each new act of hypocrisy. Chillingworth is the representative of Dimmesdale's own diseased conscience. It appears to torment the minister every time he attempts to escape into his own hypocrisy. Beneath the surface, both the minister and the physician have much in common: a secret relationship with Hester Prynne, a capacity for deceit, and a love of intellectual inquiry. In fact, the two men seem to embody Hawthorne's critique of intellectual life. This great work depicts a woman's confrontations with a repressive and judgmental community thereby paving way for the psychological study of human beings.

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