

# The Representation of Female Characters in the Romances of Hawthorne: A Comparison with the Popular Romance Fiction of America in the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract-** The study attempts to make a close analysis of the central female characters in the romances of the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne. This paper studies the central female characters in his romances and argues that they have gracefully adorned the feminist concerns of their times. Their radical nature and modern outlook augment the contemporary feminist's fight for equality; perhaps to such an extent that they were more able, courageous, and confident in facing the vicissitudes of life than the male heroes in his romances. These characters reveal significant traces of proto-feminism in their actions and ideologies whereas Feminism, in theory, was non-existent during those times. The paper further compares Hawthorne's female characters with the heroines of modern romances published in America in the twentieth century and posits that Hawthorne's women characters were far more modern even though conceived a century ago.

**Index Terms** - Hawthorne, romance, proto-feminism

## INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of female characters in the romances of the illustrious American author Nathaniel Hawthorne is an engaging area of research. It is more so because of the genre to which his works belong to. Hawthorne called his works of lengthy fiction romances as opposed to the common norm of categorizing them as novels during his time. He believed that his fiction namely, *The Scarlet Letter*(1850), *The Blithedale Romance*(1851), *The House of the Seven Gables*(1852), and *The Marble Faun*(1860) doesn't belong to the category of novels. It is to be added that these works neither fall under 'romance' in the stereotypical sense of the term. The characteristics of Hawthorne's romances are remarkably different from the usual romances. This paper explores the uniqueness of Hawthorne's romances in the

way it develops and represents its central female characters. Upon keen analysis, one finds that he was an author way ahead of his times, and his romances helped to spread the ideology of feminism in America long before the theory came into existence in the twentieth century.

A typical character in the feminist vein found in Hawthorne's romances is Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, who is a quintessential example of fortitude, resilience, and strength of character implicit in his women characters, perhaps more than in his male characters. At the beginning of the romance, one finds Hester standing on the scaffold with a baby in her arms incriminated with the sin of adultery. She is repeatedly asked to disclose her partner in adultery but she refuses to do that even though Dimmesdale, her lover, didn't forbid her from revealing it. She decides to face the wrath of law and society all alone and never gives up Dimmesdale. There are other examples in the text which showcase her stellar determination; her decision to stay back in Boston being one of them. Instead of finding shelter somewhere else where her identity is concealed, she decides to stay in Boston even though she was forced to wear the symbol 'A' on her chest. The townsfolk looked down upon her as an object of utmost scorn. However, she stays back, and her innate goodness succeeds in changing the public's perception that she is a sinned lady. Towards the end of the romance, she is looked upon as an angel by the same people who once scorned her. Another noteworthy facet of her character is that all the while she unconditionally served society, she believed in the sanctity of her relationship with Dimmesdale. She never accepted how society defined her relationship with Dimmesdale. As she says, " 'What we did had a consecration of its own' "( Hawthorne, 1850;2007, p.152). Her unrelenting attitude against succumbing to moral standards dictated by society makes Hester Prynne an unconventional character.

This paper aims at comparing modern romances with Hawthorne's romances to see how the latter sets its standards by being much ahead of its times in its portrayal of women characters. Hawthorne's inventiveness in chiseling out a different genre of romance can be attributed to various factors such as his choice of subjects and how he intersperses it into his narrative with the help of versatile narrative techniques. However, this paper focuses on the female characters in his four romances and how they become markedly progressive than most of the modern romances of the twentieth century. It aims at unearthing the elements of proto-feminism inherent in Hawthorne's fiction and thereby underscores the invaluable contribution it delivers to the American canon.

### OBJECTIFICATION VERSUS EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Thurston(1987) notes that romances met with exponential growth in sales during the twentieth century; particularly in the second half, in the 1960s and 1970s where almost forty percent of overall paperback sales were contributed by romances. This shows the growing popularity of the genre during this time. However, the burgeoning sales numbers don't reflect a progressive sensibility as there were serious feminist concerns regarding the content of these modern romances. It shall be noted that the improving status of women in society was not recorded faithfully in a majority of these works.

According to Jean Dubino(1993), modern romances were highly formulaic, the foundation of which was laid by *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Pamela*. She says that,

contemporary romances are generally told from the heroine's point of view. Desire for the hero propels most of the narrative along. The plot centers around courtship. The hero is always older, taller and richer than the heroine, and usually moody, dark and inscrutable. After traveling along a path marked by misunderstandings, for the course of true love never did run smooth, the two characters arrive at a correct reading of their love for one another. Once the goal of marriage has been reached, the novel usually ends. (pp.103-104)

It is interesting to note that such trends were visible also in the nineteenth century. Major authors, including Hawthorne, Wordsworth, and Wollstonecraft are some of the few authors who criticised this trend. Wollstonecraft compares romances to conduct books and argues that such literature would eventually lead to "the domestication, emotionalization and sexualisation of women"(Dubino,1993,p.105). Pamela Marks (1999) observes that a major theme of modern romances is women's search for a good provider. Such men are expected to support women materially and mentally which urges them to always depend on men for life. These aspects of modern romances could be compared with Hawthorne's romances that appeared a century before but which are more progressive than the former.

Upon examining the themes of Hawthorne's romances one finds that the "desire for hero" that Dubino (1993) states as a characteristic theme of modern romances, is not the mainstay of Hawthorne. Courtship is not the crux of his fiction. For instance, *The Scarlet Letter* cannot be reduced merely to the love story of Hester and Dimmesdale. It foregrounds other serious concerns such as the politics of Puritan society, the impact of society's morals upon personal life, the effect of guilt upon one's life, and how different persons react to it differently. In matters regarding courtship, the romance doesn't describe their love affair at all but its outcome. Multiple interpretative possibilities emanating from these themes gather the name of "Hermeneutical romances"(Fluck,1996) for Hawthorne's romances. In *The House of Seven Gables* too, the theme is neither courtship nor desire for a hero. As Hawthorne himself states, it discusses how "the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief;"(Hawthorne, 1851, p.iv). His third romance named *The Blithedale Romance* deals with a socially relevant theme, of how bogus social reformers would do more harm than good to society. Hence it could be deduced that unlike the theme of courtship, marriageability or 'desire for hero' that becomes the center of the narrative of modern romances, Hawthorne's themes are versatile.

Another formulaic character of modern romances according to Dubino (1993) is that it is mostly told from the heroine's point of view. However, Hawthorne's romances are strikingly different in this aspect. One of the most unique features of his romances is that the story is not narrated only from a single character's point of view. For instance, if the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* had been Hester Prynne alone, it would have limited the narrative range of the text. By not doing so, the romance gives ample space to accommodate the views of multiple characters as the story unfolds through them all. The narrative incorporates how Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth view the act of adultery and it must be noted how differently each character perceives the same event. Rather than limiting the perspective of narration, it helps in widening the interpretative possibilities for the reader as Hawthorne doesn't narrow down the characterisation to a single hero and heroine. The same holds in Hawthorne's other romances too. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the story develops through the eyes of Hepzibah, her decrepit brother Clifford, Phoebe, and Holgrave. In *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne uses narrative devices in such a way that a single event is interpreted through the eyes of different characters. For instance, the murder of the monk which is the most important event in the romance is narrated through the eyes of Miriam, Donatello, and Hilda. This widens the interpretative possibilities of the text. Miriam takes the death of the monk as a relief whereas Donatello feels that by committing the act he has lost his innocence and purity forever. Hilda who witnesses the act is overwhelmed by the animosity of the sight that, it alters her worldview forever. If the romance had been narrated from the point of view of either of the female characters Miriam or Hilda alone, the scope for interpretation would have reduced largely.

Marks (1999) says that the heroines of modern romances are pictured as women in search of good providers. They believe that such men will support them materially and mentally. These works make the impression that the life of a woman is complete only when they are successful in their pursuit of finding the perfect man. However, Hawthorne's women are independent personalities with a strong identity. Hester Prynne, Hepzibah, Miriam, and Hilda are all examples of the same. Hester is an independent woman both materially and psychologically. In comparison to Dimmesdale, she is stronger and gives mental support to him. Even their final decision to leave Boston and escape to Europe comes from her. In their relationship, one finds a reversal of conventional gender roles. The same applies to Hepzibah. She is a strong woman who opens a cent-shop to support her mentally handicapped brother Clifford. Miriam, who appears in *The Marble Faun* is another example of a female character in Hawthorne's romances who is not afraid of pursuing her instincts. When her family fixed her marriage with her cousin solely based on financial motives, she doesn't approve of it and flees to Rome in pursuit of her freedom. Hawthorne's women characters are not timid and never wait for a "good provider" to be their saviour for a better life.

### THE IMPACT OF ROMANCES UPON SOCIETY

The influence that literature exerts on society is a fact that is proven beyond doubt. Hence, the impact of such a popular genre in literature as romance is a matter of serious scrutiny. However, modern romances despite having a large readership base enjoy little critical favour. It is thus because of the wrong messages it carries to society. Hence there is ample scope for comparison between the impact of modern romances and Hawthorne's romances in society to find which one contributes in a more healthy way.

Dubino(1993) is highly critical of the cultural impacts of modern romances upon society and fears that it would regress the advancement of feminist movements of the twentieth century. According to her,

Romances bolster patriarchal ideology, continuing to reaffirm the centrality of men in women's lives and to harness the desire of both men and women for a gendered other. And, romances help to reconcile women to their domestic role as house workers.(p.109)

Musell (1984) argues that most women readers depend on modern romances to experience vicarious enjoyment. Women who lead stressful lives, and who suffer from a lack of self-respect and powerlessness read these works to seek at least a temporary respite from their problems. The flip side of such an attitude is that it doesn't help the emancipation of such women anyway but only aims at monetizing their dependency. Crane (1994) posits an argument in a similar vein, that is even more dangerous, regarding another sub-genre of modern romances named "Bodice-rippers". Bodice-rippers are works that contain themes that are usually found in romances but differ from them in their explicit erotic content. This sub-genre is indicative of a positive social change, as a part of which women could discuss their

sexuality and sexual likes and dislikes openly. However, this has an antithetical side to it. A common characteristic of this fiction is the presence of an arrogant hero who considers the objectification of women as normalcy. As a result, they are blatantly offensive to the women characters. Though the women characters initially resist and reproach this behaviour, many romances portray them as liking these aggressive advances eventually. Burt(1980) names this phenomenon that is rampant in modern romances as the "rape-myth" and condemns it on the ground that such story and characters would encourage social sanction for such outrageous behaviour of men towards women.

Upon a closer look into Hawthorne's romances, one finds that none of the aberrations of modern romances are found in it. No women's character in them could be found as approving patriarchy or behaving in such a way as to give silent consent to it. *The Scarlet Letter* is a romance set in the Puritanic era where patriarchy was normal. However, Hester doesn't accept it as her fate to subdue herself to a man only because he is the lawfully wedded husband. She is sensitive to individual liberty and doesn't consider it a sin to defy her husband as there is no bond of love between them. On the other hand, she respects her relationship with Dimmesdale and cherishes it though it is not legal in the public eye. She believes in the veracity of her ideals than society's and doesn't try to emulate them and gain the approval of society. Hester thus encourages women to follow their dreams and not succumb to conventional rules, be it patriarchy or puritanism. The character Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* is another example of a typical feminist character who believes that "when my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women where there is now one eloquent man"(Hawthorne,1852;1862, pp.143-144). She is mindful of the role of women in the upliftment of society and believes in her ability to do it. Miriam in *The Marble Faun* also shares similar sentiments regarding the liberation of women. She escapes from the grip of her affluent family and comes to Rome because she respects her freedom beyond material comforts. If her ambition was to lead a conventional life, she would have married the man whom her family fixed for her but she didn't do that because she was conscious of her likes and dislikes. Hence Hawthorne's women characters are far more modern than the women portrayed in modern romance fiction.

Bodice-rippers earned a place in the feminist narrative by expressing openly about women's sexuality through erotic encounters and descriptions. However, Hawthorne's romances serve feminist causes too, but subtly, through characters such as Hester, Hepzibah, Zenobia, and Miriam by asserting their independence through their actions. Hepzibah asserts her economic independence by opening a cent-shop in a part of her home. She does that after battling with her deep-rooted conceptions of aristocracy and social class. She belongs to the Pyncheon family, a family of great wealth and social standing. After facing an economic crisis, she comes to terms with her false notion of an imagined family legacy. In her conversation with Holgrave, she says that she was a lady before opening the shop but now she has become a woman. Holgrave's reply to her reflects the spirit of the changing times as he says that she must be proud of her transformation. He says, " ' Let it go! You are the better

without it...I look upon this as one of the fortunate days of your life. It ends an epoch, and begins one”(Hawthorne, 1851,p.51). Characters in *The Blithedale Romance* show their allegiance to feminist causes through their ideological conversations with each other. Coverdale, the narrator of the romance, tells Zenobia in one of their exchanges about the need for women assuming more powerful positions in society. He says that he would be happy to live in a country that is ruled by women than men and that he would submit himself more freely if it were a woman ruler. He also takes a similar stand on priesthood arguing that women would perform better in that role than men. He says,

The task belongs to woman. God meant it for her. He has endowed her with the religious sentiment in its utmost depth and purity, refined from that gross intellectual alloy with which every masculine theologian save only One, who merely veiled himself in mortal and masculine shape, but was, in truth, divine- has been prone to mingle it.( Hawthorne, 1852;1862 p.145)

### CONCLUSION

An analysis of Hawthorne’s romances leads to the conclusion that the female characters portrayed in it are more modern and life-affirming than the ones commonly found in modern American romances of the twentieth century. They are equally or more capable than the male characters in his romances and are adept at contributing greatly to personal as well as political life. For example, Hester breathes a new life of hope in Dimmesdale when she proposes that they start a new life in Europe. At the same time, she makes a strong political statement to the puritan society in her decision to embellish the scarlet letter ‘A’ on her clothing, as it communicates the message that she determines her morality, and not the society. Strong women characters like Hester, Hepzibah, Phoebe, Zenobia, Miriam, and Hilda fill the pages of Hawthorne’s fiction as opposed to enervating women in modern romances who are depicted as if their only goal is to find a man and settle for a married life with him even if she is treated badly or objectified. This

prompts Rabine(1985) to state that, modern romances glorify “women’s powerlessness and lack of freedom” (p.viii). The value of Hawthorne’s romances increases when one considers the fact he created such characters at a time when feminism hadn’t been established strongly in America, either theoretically or practically. This reflects the noble vision Hawthorne instilled in the society through his romances and makes him one of the most important writers in the country artistically, culturally, and politically.

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