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Exploring and Critiquing Notions of Gender, Language, and Power through Works of Melville and Hawthorne

Raveena Kohli
Research Scholar
University of Delhi
Bharati and Kirori Mal College
Email:ravskohli12@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper focuses on critiquing and highlighting notions of gender, language, literature, and power, as presented in the works of American writers Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The works titled Moby Dick and Scarlet Letter are being taken into consideration along with scholarly articles. The primary focus of the paper is to showcase how power, when used in an uncontrolled manner, becomes hegemony and exhibits tyrannical form. Melville highlights the same through dictatorial character of Ahab in Moby Dick. The dichotomy between masculine and feminine, as presented by Melville, is explored in detail. There is also a reference to language and its manipulation by Hawthorne in his famous novel titled Scarlet Letter. The sexually repressed soul, Arthur Dimmesdale, is shown in a negative light by Hawthorne as the minister tries to justify his sinful act of adultery committed with Hester Prynne. The conception of God being less powerful than man, but at the same time, creator of predestined happenings, especially with reference to Moby Dick, is discussed in detail. The distorted and smudged image of gender is represented by both the authors in their works in question. Ahab is the epitome of totalitarianism and self-destruction because he becomes adamant about pursuing the white whale to satisfy his male ego and avenge the loss of limb. The construction of the notion of gender is challenged as well as accepted by both the writers at the one point in time. The symbol of 'A', which stands for adultery, is etched on the mind as well as body of the heroine Hester Prynne residing in the Puritan society of America. She tactfully defies, dissents, and even transcends the periphery of societal restrictions imposed on the fair sex. The paper aims to delineate how women have been subjugated by men in a patriarchy-dominated society since times immemorial and how the second sex has emerged victorious by dissenting against the subjugation. Power changes its forms through different pathways that it follows through the masculine and the feminine dichotomy.

Keywords

Power, Gender, Language, Dichotomy, and Patriarchy

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Raveena Kohli

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Introduction

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was an American novelist, short-story writer, and poet. He is known for his novels of the sea, including his masterpiece, *Moby Dick* (1851). The author's novel was published in London in October 1851 as *The Whale* and a month later in America as *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. In the initial stage, it did not bring any acclaim or reward. Later on, it became very famous and widely read by people across the globe.

In an essay titled "Ismael's (m) Other: Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's *Moby Dick*" by Mark Lloyd Taylor, he focuses on how "Ishmael, the narrator, draws between the masculine power of God, the Father and the feminine negativity of God, the Son in a chapter titled 'The Tail.' It provides an interpretive key to problems of gender and theology in the book."

Taylor suggests that in the chapter titled "The Tail", Ishmael celebrates the mighty tail of the sperm whale. He showcases its external shape and internal structure by or through allusions to Hebrew scriptures, classical and modern arts and letters, and then Christian theology. In the tail, the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Ishmael grants the tail an attribute traditionally reserved for God: Titanism of power coexists with graceful flexion and infantileness of ease, for real strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but often bestows it. Ishmael defends this conception as he appeals to the tied tendons that seem bursting from carved Hercules; second, to the overwhelming impression made on devout Eckerman when he lifted the linen sheet from the naked corpse of Goethe and saw his massive chest that seemed like a Roman triumphal arch.

The theological and sexual-political aspects are highlighted in the given passage.

According to Taylor, "When Angelo points even God the Father in human form, mark the robustness present there. This picture, instead of hinting at power, highlights the mere negative, feminine one of submission and endurance."

Further, as Taylor points out, there is also a theme of masculine-feminine dichotomy that needs to be taken into account. There are allusions to God the Father in Moby Dick and also to Jesus Christ. The book is full of masculine characters and has relatively less feminine ones. Melville's propensity towards the portrayal of weak and submissive side of the fair sex needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.

"Aunt Charity, sister of the *Pequod* ship's part owner Captain Bildad, and Mrs Hosea Hussey, wife of the proprietor of the try-pots, an inn on Nantucket," are the two females shown to be living ashore and depicted as efficient domestic workers.

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Taylor further suggests, "The feminine domesticity of the green land and masculine adventurousness of the blue sea are juxtaposed and contrasted." Ahab is a symbol of defiance as he wants to kill the giant creature to avenge for loss of limb. Femininity and maternity are related "with the capacity for love and relatedness", in opposition to, "masculinity and paternity," which becomes a metaphor for loneliness and distance.

Starbuck remarks, "Oh God! To sail with such a heathen crew that has small touch of human mothers, in them! Whelped someone by the sharkish sea, the white whale is their Demogorgon."

There is also a reference to God's pathetic decree as Ahab exclaims, What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper natural heart, I durst not so much as I dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, lifts this arm? But if the great sun that moves not of himself; but as an errand-boy in Heaven, nor one single star can resolve, by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living.

We can deduce from the above extract that Ahab is torn between his lust for power to tame the giant and his heartfelt desire and longing for his family and love. Masculinity represents power, independence, loneliness, and violence. Femininity is related to weakness, life ashore or away from the sea, relatedness, domesticity, and life that is devoid of any risk. Through Jesus, Melville represents submission and endurance. On the other hand, God

Becomes an epitome of uncontrolled power and destruction. The author critiques and celebrates different mystiques of gender.

Considering Nathaniel Hawthorne's marvelous and most remarkable work titled *Scarlet Letter*, there is a reference to a scholarly essay by Michel Small "Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter: Arthur Dimmesdale's Manipulation of Language", which focuses upon language being used as a double-edged weapon to release impulses from his "strong animal nature" incompatible with his ideal self.

Small emphasizes and highlights that Dimmesdale can't confess about his repressed sexual desires and adulterous affair because it would mean abandoning the image of his ideal self forever, which is impossible for him to achieve. Further, his verbal skills as a minister in Puritan society of America, help others to achieve a better spiritual life but are useless for him to escape public exposure of his adultery.

"In his sermons, Dimmesdale still controls language skilfully enough to maintain the balance between the demands of body and spirit, but the struggle weakens him and eventually words begin to master him." Even though he tries to suppress his libidinal self, but language betrays him and becomes an instrument to maintain a decent balance between the opposing and self-destructive demands.

Small brings our attention to his last speech—"In his dying speech, Dimmesdale claims to know God's purpose in torturing him." He argues that God has sent Chillingworth to keep the torture always prominent and palpable.

Since Chillingworth symbolizes "Dimmesdale's cruel and sadistic conscience after Hester Prynne's revelation of the physician's identity, and since Chillingworth does not long survive the minister's death, Dimmesdale's suicide accomplishes the murder of the angry God, ending his punishment and reuniting him with the Almighty."

In his last melodramatic speech, he imagines to recover all of his self-esteem. His death presents a recognition that his last speech was also a denial of his animal nature.

Body

Marina A. Kinney, a prominent scholar and critic, discusses about Ahab's devolution in her work titled "Ahab's Devolution in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*." Ahab, as emphasized earlier, exhibits supreme and uncontrolled form of power as he becomes an animal or an avatar of a non-human monstrous being in pursuit of the whale. There is complete loss of humanity in him as an individual. He challenges his interdependence on others for survival as well as tries to distance himself from becoming part of the collective universe. His prosthetic limb is made up of material prepared or extracted via the whale's body parts. He lives in denial of the fact that the whale was a non-human form that had become part of him.

Kinney states critic Henry Alonzo who focuses on the idea that, Ahab's madness is beyond common experience only in its intensity. This suggests that Ahab's obsession is unique only in its intensity, however this would be overlooking everything that occurs because of the intensity of the obsession, one of the obvious being loss of empathy and humanity. Ahab learns in the ninth game (social meeting of two or more ships, generally on a cruising ground, when after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by boats' crews) that the miserably misnamed" ship 'The Delight', has lost men in an encounter with Moby Dick, I bury but one of five stout men, who were alive only yesterday; but were dead ere night. Here, Ahab introduces to 'The Delight's' Captain, the harpoon that he fully believes will bring an end to Moby Dick. Look ye, Nantucketer; here in this hand I hold his death! Tempered in

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blood, and tempered by lightning are these barbs; and I swear to temper them triply in that hot place; behind the fin, where the White Whale most feels his accursed life.

Ahab places a large amount of trust in himself and his harpoon which leads to his tragic fall. He lacks any humanity as he loses ties to the world. There is dearth of social as well as mental ties. As he severed these ties, he made sure that he fated himself to death.

The tragic end that he meets is quite palpable along with the loss of humanity as he encounters Moby Dick. The harpoon that he trusted more than himself works as an instrument of destruction against him.

Kinney draws our attention to the concept that The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line. It ran through the grove;—ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone.

Melville's employment of irony is indicative of an end for Ahab. He meets death through the same harpoon that he trusted upon to save his life. He had gone far away to interact with human civilization. There is an absolute loss of humanity and disintegration of the bonds presented via the nine games of the Pequod.

In a work titled "Symbol and Interpretation in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*" by Dr. Stephanie Carrez, she highlights about reference to Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne via an illicit love affair with Arthur Dimmesdale.

Pearl was born an outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants. Nothing was more remarkable than the instinct, as it seemed, with which the child comprehended her loneliness: the destiny that had drawn an inviolable circle round about her: the whole peculiarity, in short, of her position with respect to other children. Never, since her release from prison, had Hester met the public gaze without her. In all her walks about the town, Pearl too was there: first as the babe in arms, and afterward as the little girl, small companion of her mother, holding a forefinger with her whole grasp, and tripping along at the role of three or four footsteps to one of Hester's.

As clearly palpable in the above extract from the novel in question, we can easily fathom that Pearl was a misfit in a male-dominated and orthodox society of Puritan England. She was far from being acceptable in the conventional ideological framework and religious underpinnings of the Puritans. They disregarded her completely as a metaphor or a symbol of adultery and sin. Even though she was not accepted by the society, she stood strong as a support system to her mother. She

accompanied her everywhere without any hesitation or fear of being ostracised. Hence, the work needs to be read figuratively or symbolically.

In another fascinating work titled "Form and Content in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: A Stylistic Study of Dimmesdale's Narrative Sentences" by Shaimaa Mohamed Mahmoud Helal, there is mention of Arthur Dimmesdale's suffering and anguish that gave him the power to convince people around him and make his sermons emotionally powerful. His colleagues, other priests and ministers

Lack the tongue of flame, the power of effective speech, of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language. By curious ambiguity, Dimmesdale's torture and suffering make him a better priest than he was in the past. People gather to listen to him. They believe him to be a saint, and a miracle of holiness. An ambassador of God, bringing his messages of wisdom, rebuke, and love, they worship, love, and respect him. I, whom you behold in these black garments of the priesthood,—I, who ascend the sacred desk, and turn my pale face heavenward, taking upon myself to hold communion, in your behalf, with the highest Omniscience,—I, in whose daily life you discern the sanctity of Enoch—I, whose footsteps, as you suppose, leave a gleam along my earthly track, whereby the pilgrims that shall come after me may be guided to the regions of the blest,—I, who have laid the hand of baptism upon your children,-

—I, who have breathed the parting prayer over your dying friends, to whom the Amen sounded faint from a world which they had quitted,—I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!

The partial confessions just make him more of a hypocrite. He knows that the parishioners will interpret his messages and confession in a positive light and will not doubt or assassinate his character.

More than once—nay, more than a hundred times… He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity; and that the only wonder was, that they did not see his wretched body shriveled up before their eyes, by the burning wrath of the Almighty!...They heard it all, and did but he reverences him the more… He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of being self-deceived. He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood. And yet, by the constitution of his nature, he loved the truth, and loathed the lie, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all things else, he loathed his miserable self!

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Dimmesdale's congregation interprets his sermons and confessions allegorically rather "than as expressions of any personal guilt—because they depend in their interpretation on the priest's background and his desire or inclination towards rhetorical speech. The attitude of the congregation leads to further internalization of guilt and self-punishment" resulting in the physical and spiritual deterioration of Dimmesdale.

His inability to confess his guilt leads to a lack of inward peace, combined with emotional and mental turmoil. He is "the saint on Earth" and "godly youth." This sharpens his suffering making him a subtle hypocrite. Hawthorne conveys these messages through stylistic "use of parenthetical structure."

The subtlety of Dimmesdale results from his creation of the thwarted interpretation of his congregation who interprets his confessions in an allegorical form rather than real expressions of sin. The remorse results from his sin and the consequences of being a hypocrite.

Hawthorne's use of parenthetical structure emerges successful as it conveys his noticeable effect on the reader and also nourishes the reader's understanding of Dimmesdale's round and complex character.

Coming back to *Moby Dick*, another eminent critic Jeffrey Insko talks about Melville's skillful deployment of the Ahab trope in his work in question. The title of Jeffrey Insko's work is "All of Us Are Ahabs: *Moby Dick* in Contemporary Public Discourse", which focuses on Richard Brodhead's description of Melville's work.

As Jeffrey is quoted,

It has been absorbed into American fiction folklore—so much so that people who have never seen a copy of Moby Dick know who Captain Ahab is and use the chase of the great white whale as a metaphor for the obsessive pursuit of irrational goals. Unloosened from its moorings in the author as a generator and arbiter of meaning, the Ahab trope can be applied in endless contexts, to countless situations. Moreover, these applications are far less univocal than Brodhead's concise description—the obsessive pursuit of irrational goals.

Indeed, one of the most significant and interesting features of the "Ahab trope in contemporary culture is its multiple valences." The trope suggests that "Captain Ahab in an obsessive pursuit of the irrational, is actually a model of dogged persistence, a kind of modern-day goal-oriented careerist whose aims might even be praiseworthy, even if seemingly unattainable."

Further, Jeffrey brings to our attention that in 1996, Janice Maloney's Fortune magazine profile of the CEO of the software company Oracle Corporation announced

in its headline that "Larry Ellison is Captain Ahab, emphasizing and not disapproving Ellison's competitive drive. Also, Bill Gates's Microsoft Corporation has often been described as the Great White Whale.

Insko has also laid focus on the fact that

Captains of the industry as the captain of *Pequod* is an analogy used to draw on Ahab to express, on the one hand, a particular view of the novel—Ahab's persistence as a figure to be admired—and, on the other, to reinforce the values of corporate culture— ambition, aggression and fierce competitive spirit.

Now, as we are nearing towards the end of the paper, it is imperative and absolutely essential to highlight that an eminent critic Jennifer Fleischner, in her critical work titled "In Female Eroticism, Confession, and Interpretation in Nathaniel Hawthorne", emphasizes upon "Hawthorne's use of the confession as a central trope in his novels that helps focus attention on the narrative of sexual complicity in the link between writer and reader, narrator and listener."

In the "History of Sexuality" by Michel Foucault, he highlights the absolute necessity of the requirement of listener and reader in order for a confession to take place successfully.

Fleischner suggests that,

Hawthorne's ambivalence and anxiety about gender and sexuality derive from a number of interacting forces. One is the conception of gender roles in 19th-century America that informed his consciousness. He designated women as a self-sacrificing counterpart in the private sphere to the combative, self-sufficient men in the public sphere.

While writing letters while working as a customs officer in "Custom House", with reference to *the Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne puts light on his idea of considering Dove as his "blessed angel on Earth; she is a bird of paradise and has a perfect and angelic nature—so that love is her inalienable and unquestionable right." But the dove could turn out to be a "faithless dove" which showcases the author's ambivalence towards female eroticism.

Hawthorne mentions in his *Letters* that if Dove would follow its "dove instincts", she would become personification of female eroticism that would be "radical, threatening and ultimately destructive to the male's connection to institutional authority. Her force and power are antisocial." The image of Dove "does inspire the individualistic authority of the private

Imagination whose origin is passion. She is the source and center of most of the author's figures and fantasies."

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Hawthorne turns his wife Sophie Hawthorne into an allegorical figure, even before their marriage, which seems to be an effort to control her uncontrolled erotic desires and put a traditional lid on fantasy. Like "Sophie Hawthorne" and "Dove", Sophia Peabody is made to represent her own limits and the transgression of these limits.

Hester Prynne emerges as a figure of defiance as her eroticism too becomes source of creative individualistic authority as the threat to social, institutionalized authority. The 'A' pinned to her breast is the symbol of her eroticism as a social crime while Pearl is its embodiment as something wild and grotesque—an imp not even a human being seen from her mother's eyes. She is double—within her rests the secret of authority, the licit and illicit meanings of the ribbons the names of her husband and lover. Yet although it is Hester's confession that the Puritans demand, the novel is framed by the parallel confessions of Hawthorne and Dimmesdale, whose autobiographical confessions are generated by their contact with the force of female eroticism in the symbol of 'A' Hester wears.

In the above paragraph, it is clearly highlighted that Melville, quite like Dimmesdale, too is afraid of Hester's indomitable spirit and her courage to defy and transgress patriarchy-dominated Puritan society. Hester Prynne wears the letter "A" signifying adultery with undaunted courage, iron-like willpower, and panache. She is unabashed and not guilty even after facing the ire of the Puritan society and disregards its orthodox ideological framework. She emerges like a Phoenix from the ashes of her past laden with adultery and sinful indulgence in sex.

Conclusion

Nearing the conclusion, we can easily decipher from the above discussion that both Ahab as well as Hester Prynne were the protagonists who tried to transgress the ordinary in order to break through it and move towards the extraordinary in the context of their respective societies which they were part of and the milieu too. Ahab emerged to be a figure of dissent as he dissented against the conception of being part of humanity that has limitations as far as achieving of unreasonable objectives is concerned. Hester Prynne transgressed the societal norms to triumph in her life by defying all odds and becoming the best version of herself. We can conclude that the ideas of gender, power, language, and metaphorical symbolism have been critiqued and explored with reference to the given works in question. Hence, it is worth mentioning that both the writers portrayed the notion of gender and power not in its original form but in a form that is exceptional and not acceptable to the small minds. The writers distorted and reversed the well-defined gender roles in their respective novels. The unconventional and remarkable representation of

conceptions of power, gender, and symbolism via manipulation of language in the given works gives them a status that is class apart and they are meant to be read by the masses. Both the novels became bestsellers and are read across the globe even today notwithstanding the fact that they were written in an era full of prejudices against women and devoid of acknowledging the role played by them in nation-building and emancipation of the humanity in all aspects.

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