



“Whiteness” and the Gendered Space: The Case of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* one of the iconic romances in American fiction which has been heralded as a pioneering text foregrounding early American fears, inhibitions, conventions, social practices and religious order. Thematically, the novel lends itself to universalist dimensions as well where, apparently, immediate social problems like that of slavery and Red-Indian intrusions do not come to the fore. The character of Hester Prynne is also one of the baffling intrusions into the so-called status of a stigmatised woman who transforms herself from the state of being “adulterous” to one of becoming “able”.

The aim of the present article is, however, not to present another picture of her fallen and hapless status in society which earlier criticisms have abundantly ventured into. The aim of the present article is rather to talk about her essential “blackness” as an “other-mother” and the textual politics that treats her in an apologetic light. The article takes into account the key generalizations of Toni Morrison forwarded in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, particularly in the chapter “Romancing the Shadow”. This article tries to show how Hawthorne very conveniently romances on the “black” shadow in the text and crafts his characterization of Hester accordingly. Therefore, the article would try to reveal the gendered space lying submerged in the text by using the principles of racial dynamics offered by Morrison’s take on whiteness and the play of “literary imagination” to fictionally represent it.

Keywords

romance, shadow, whiteness, blackness, apologetic

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is usually classified as one of the iconic historical romances of nineteenth century America and one of the key texts ushering the American Renaissance. Ever since its publication, the text has been a fertile ground for various critical consternations and debates. While some criticisms focused on the study of the background and the Puritanical sources of the novel, others focused on its historical reference points, biographical nuances and corroborations and even the theological resonances of the ideas of Christian charity, kindness and mercy. The text's explorations from the critical lens of feminism, particularly the anti-slavery feminist standpoints have also made considerable impact on the academic and critical discourses. The text has also served as a "hypotext", for several blacks and whites in the subsequent years to spark off many of its suppressed, unwritten and silenced discourses. However, what has perturbed critics regarding the text is the author's deliberate evasion of contemporaneity in sketching the "romance" out of a fictive Puritanical tale. F. O. Matthiessen, for instance, contends

The pre-eminent reputation of *The Scarlet Letter* has obscured the fact that Hawthorne's three other novels all deal with contemporary material. It is important to correct the prevailing conception of him as a recreator of a dim past, primarily because such a view usually carries with it the belief that he has thus failed to fulfil the major obligation of the artist, the obligation to confront actual life. (Matthiessen 192)

Matthiessen's objection regarding Hawthorne's inability to fulfil the obligation of relating the work of art with "actual life" however can be contested on various grounds. One of the central issues, which critics find absent in the novel, is the deliberate evasion of the problematic of "race" as there is no Negro character in the novel. This article, therefore, seeks to read the traces of racial inflections in the novel, particularly the ways in which Hester Prynne has been projected, and associate them with some of the critical perspectives of "Whiteness Studies" as propounded by Toni Morrison. In other words, the article will try to unravel the "shadow" on which this text set in the seventeenth century, "romances", showing its engagements with the cross-currents of slavery and its intersection with the issue of Hawthorne's dealings with "gender". However, it is first pertinent to deal with the major theorizations of Toni Morrison regarding "whiteness".

Toni Morrison in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" as discussed in the previous chapter, among other concerns, addressed the "Culture Wars" and canon-debates that preoccupied American academia, particularly in 1980's about what should constitute the American canon. The Afro-American protest sentiments ventilated through various socio-cultural movements like Harlem Renaissance, Afro-American realism or the more radicalist tendencies in Black Arts movement were trying to make room for literatures by the minorities in the American canon, while cultural purists like Arthur M Schlesinger Jr resisted strongly, by trying to hold on to the distinctive American "national" character, which Afrocentrism or any form of pluralism might essentially dilute. However, attempts by Henry Louis Gates who in *The Signifying Monkey* captured the distinctive black aesthetics in a theoretical framework, contributed much towards canonizing even the "minority" literatures. The aim of the present chapter, however, is not another apology for the creative potentials of

the racial minorities, but a reinvestigation of one of the defining canonical works of the young nation, applying Toni Morrison's "reading strategies" addressed sporadically in her essay and elaborated later in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993). J Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, taking cue from Morrison, elaborated her perspective at length, in their book *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, taking cue from Morrison's comment that "No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32). However, it is interesting to note, that despite significant researches on Poe's racism and Melville's covert preoccupations with "whiteness" from the Afro-Africanist perspective of Morrison, her theoretical claims were hardly put to test in the literary corpus of Nathaniel Hawthorne's romances. Even Dana Nelson's *The Word in Black and White: Reading Race in American Literature 1638-1867* includes Poe and Melville, but does not incorporate any of Hawthorne's texts. A few stray articles by critics like Jonathan Arac, Jennifer Fleischner, Richard Klaymen and Jay Grossman and Jean Fagan Yellin have tried to relate Hawthorne in the contexts of slavery and racism, but their articles fail to incorporate the subtle nuances in Hawthorne's "romances", because they contributed mostly to the contextual socio-political factors which impacted Hawthorne's ideology, rather than close textual details. This chapter would attempt to test Morrison's observations with reference to the iconic romance of Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* and thereby attempt a search for the "ghost in the machine" exploring ways in which the narrative "romances" on the shadow.

Despite the promises and hopes the New World generated (Truslow theorized it as the "American Dream"), the founding literature of young America was replete with transactions with different, fears, anxieties, tensions, repressions and inhibitions and such experiences were variously labelled as "gothic", "sermonic", "romantic", "Puritan" etc. Paradoxically enough, the European disorder and anarchy which the young country wished to leave behind began to be projected in the literature of the new nation. In the nineteenth century, the literary form which could accommodate the "uniquely American prophylaxis" (*PITD* 36) was "romance". This new genre began to embrace the fears of the new nation- "Americans' fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness: their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization: their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal" (*PITD* 37). Morrison critiques the usual critical conjecture that romances are ahistorical and atemporal, with her unequivocal contention – "There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called "the power of blackness", especially not in a country especially not in a country in which there was a resident population already black, upon which the imagination could play" (*PITD* 37). The creative possibilities of the country began to get enriched by the presence of the black population, the fabrication of an American Africanism, which Morrison intended to probe deep into. Such a fabrication was essential to craft the fresh American identity as the "new white man" and writers did not craft this distinctive American identity merely by establishing difference with the European cultural and aesthetic standards, but by maintaining a racial difference in the newly arrived location. Citing the example of William Dunbar about whom Bernard Bailyn had written in his *Voyagers to the West*, Morrison pointed out that the new white

man was conditioned by a “sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others” and functioned as a “bordered gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world” (*PITD* 42). Like Dunbar’s experience, concerns over authority, autonomy, newness, difference and power turned out to be the governing themes of American literature and all white men tried to posit their privileged subject-positions against the “bound and unfree, rebellious but serviceable black population” (*PITD* 45). Therefore, Morrison argued, statements regarding the supposed racelessness of the very American identity and the founding texts that projected such identity, made by strong assertions, are false. She contends

Statements...insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints but not the hand. Besides, what happens to that violent self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers or the finger-prints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid free? The literature itself suggests otherwise. (*PITD* 46)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, too, considered how the real and historical trope of “slavery” can be explored as a literary subject. Jean Fagan Yellin in “Hawthorne and the American National Sin” points out this preoccupation of Hawthorne towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Yellin writes, “In his Notebooks written between 1842 and 1845, Hawthorne reveals that he considered using the problem of slavery as a literary subject” (Yellin 88). The following entries of Hawthorne from his “Notebooks” attest to this observation

- (1) To point out the moral slavery of one who deems himself a free man. (Hawthorne “American Notebooks” 236)
- (2) A moral philosopher to buy a slave, or otherwise get possession of a human being, and use him for the sake of experiment, by trying the operation of a certain vice on him. (Hawthorne “American Notebooks” 237)
- (3) Sketch of a person who, by strength of character, or assistant circumstances, has reduced another to absolute slavery and dependence on him. Then show, that the person who appears to be the master, must inevitably be at least as much a slave, if not more, than the other. All slavery is reciprocal, on the supposition most favourably to the rulers. (Hawthorne “American Notebooks” 238)

In the light of the above insights provided by Morrison, one can unravel a pertinent issue that has been a significant area of exploration in recent criticisms - the “black shadow” that hovers around the “white” character Hester Prynne. Attempts have been made to read her role in terms of the subjugated doubly-marginalised “black woman” and also in terms of Afro-American motherhood. Hester’s “racial” function in a novel that outwardly does not address issues of slavery and racism and historicizes only the seventeenth century rigidity of Hawthorne’s Puritan ancestors becomes problematic when seen through Toni

Morrison's critical perspective of "whiteness studies". In fact, locating the absent "black agency" in an ostracized, apparently subjugated adulterous young woman is to challenge many of the critical contentions which endow Hawthorne's Hester with a passive, submissive temperament. Analysing Toni Morrison's own fiction, Otten, for instance looks at the character of Sethe in *The Bluest Eye* as someone who "appears[s] to be something of a black Hester Prynne" (Otten 91). Caroline M Woidat harps almost the same tune in asserting that "Morrison's Sethe is indeed something of Hester Prynne, but one that subverts Hawthorne's text by creating marked differences between the characters" (Woidat 528). Both Otten and Woidat tried to study the roles of Hester Prynne and Sethe in comparative terms to underscore how Morrison was "writing back" to the conventions of both the Afro-American tradition of slave-narratives and the nineteenth century white perspectives by the American Renaissance writers. However, this section of the present thesis would not read Hester's roles in Hawthorne's text in terms of Morrison's revision of the same in her novel. Instead, it would try to locate, in what ways Hawthorne's Hester can be studied in terms of the discourses of slavery, womanhood, abolition, miscegenation and motherhood. Such a study would necessarily address the following contention of Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially when American texts are not "about" Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. (Morrison 46-47)

There are a few critical readings that attempted to align Hester with racial motherhood. Leland S. Person, for instance, argued that both "nineteenth century and seventeenth century materials comprise Hester's character" (660). What Person meant were the enormous instances of adultery, fornication and infanticidal impulses in mothers that might have shaped the character of Hester in the text. Among the seventeenth century sources, Person cites Dorothy Talbie's hanging in 1638 for murdering her three-year old infant, the execution of Alice Bishop in 1648 for murdering her four-year old daughter, Mary Martin's condemnation by the Massachusetts court for killing her new-born girl child, the case of Esther Rodgers, who, defiled by a Negro lad murdered her child and gave it a private burial in a garden. Person also contended that the nineteenth century too provided several instances of slave mothers killing their new born infants to save them from the lacerating physical and mental tortures perpetrated by their masters. Hester's role in the novel therefore might have been closely influenced by such instances Hawthorne was already acquainted with.

The question that naturally surfaces regarding Hawthorne's representation of Hester in the light of the "othermothers" in the Afro-American tradition is about the reasons behind his "direct" evasion of the subject of slavery or racism in the text. It must be remembered that Hawthorne sets his novel in the seventeenth century context to probe deep into a universal subject regarding the functioning of human conscience. Despite several critical contentions that censured Hawthorne's evasion of the American "national"

sin of slavery in this romance, Woidat refuses to consider that Hawthorne really “evaded” the subject of slavery. Woidat contends

Hawthorne returns to the time of his Puritan forefathers in order to probe the workings of the human conscience. *This is not to say that Hawthorne evades the subject of slavery; rather it is displaced onto his depiction of the “dark” side of Puritanism-literally configured by Hawthorne with images of blackness. The harshness of Puritanical rule is represented by images and symbols frequently- and in Hawthorne’s day, perhaps more immediately- associated with slavery, imprisonment, whippings, brands, the scaffold and “darkness” itself, both racial and moral. (Woidat 535 italics mine)*

Woidat therefore considers the subject of “slavery” to be “displaced” rather than deliberately erased in the novel and what follows is the synecdochic representation of the of the “black woman” in the text .The Afro-American “other” is only apparently absent in the text because Hester’s plight as an objectified woman in the scaffold, marked by the ignominious scarlet letter and separated from the community at large align her sufficiently with black womanhood.

Regarding Hawthorne’s inhibitions to directly incorporate the issue of slavery in the novel, the contextual traces of the text from the nineteenth century socio-political purview is imperative. In fact, there are numerous references regarding Hawthorne’s ambivalence in respect of slavery and abolitionism, some of which have been explored by Jean Fagan Yellin in “Hawthorne and the American National Sin”. Yellin argued against the general critical consensus that Hawthorne was “largely unaware of the great moral struggle going on all around him” regarding the emancipation of the slaves. Hawthorne’s “Notebooks”, for instance attests to this awareness of the issue of black slavery. His journal in its earliest version (1836-37) incorporated an advertisement regarding the selling of a fifteen years old Black girl in an auction block and in 1838 in a journal entry Hawthorne recorded that he traced out the reference to some Julia Africa -a servant of a Reverend- on a mossy stone. Even Captain Daniel, Hawthorne’s father was a direct participant in the “triangular” West Indian trade exchanging the rum of New England for African slaves and, in turn, African slaves for West Indian sugar. William Bentley, the local historian, characterized the nineteenth century Salem where the Hawthornes lived since 1638 as their own “black town”. In “Old News” (1835), Hawthorne records how the slaves contributed to the picture of society a rather dark shade. Considering the slaves as the merriest of population in “Old News”, Hawthorne also recorded there the separation of the slave mothers from their infants which sometimes took place due to the forced disposal of the slave-children when their population in a family outpoured like multiplying kittens. “In 1830”, Yellin notes, “local race relations were strained by the sensational murder of Captain White[who] had made his fortune in the slave trade” (Yellin 80). Hawthorne’s distant cousins, the Crowninshields were ultimately convicted in the crime. The same year further strained race-relations in Salem as white Salemites resisted the enrolment of the black daughters to the New girls’ high school there. These references show how Hawthorne’s formative years at Salem, and the years that preceded his writing of his romance made him well acquainted with the problems of slavery and

racism, some of which he personally recorded in his notebooks. Most of his records, as critics like Yellin and Jonathan Arac wrote, however, show the rather dismissive attitude of Hawthorne regarding the social injustices perpetrated by racism that he tried to tactfully avoid. The absence of any Negro character in a novel which is supposed to have universal ramifications can be a direct consequence of Hawthorne's ambivalence. As Jonathan Arac has noted in "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*". Hawthorne was struck by many indeterminacies in his personal life that propelled him to avoid direct "political" action in *The Scarlet Letter*. Arac notes, how, in the novel Hawthorne could artistically transform the social and the personal into the universal. He writes

Hawthorne's novel transforms his life situation by adding accountable guilt. A complex social fact- involving American trade relations in the Caribbean, the inadequacy of mosquito control, the conditions of medical knowledge - is turned into crime. Something that might require political action- as it did to empower public health undertaking in the nineteenth century - becomes a matter for ethical judgement and psychological reflection. (Arac 253)

Richard Klayman goes to the extent of contending – "With rare exception, Hawthorne's racism was supportive of those factors that preserved and maintained the slave system. Throughout his life Hawthorne's struggles attaining and retaining political patronage necessitated public visibility and a rather unremitting association with matters concerning race and slavery" (Klayman 5). Jennifer Fleischner, however, points at Hawthorne's "compromise", rather than direct evasion of the subject of slavery in *The Scarlet Letter*. Fleischner writes

But what he [Hawthorne] does evade, time and again, through these interlocking displacements, is the connection between this particular evasion and the policy toward slavery that he does endorse when he overtly enters the slavery debates. Finally, what we do find in *The Scarlet Letter* is the production of an ideology that is related to the belief in compromise toward slavery adopted by Hawthorne and other Northerners at mid-century who, although anti-slavery, were above all pro-Union. (Fleischner 97)

This "compromise" of Hawthorne of being at once a critic of slavery and a pro-Unionist is in many ways related to the way he projects Hester Prynne in the *The Scarlet Letter*. Leland Person categorically points out that Hester indeed has "ambiguous racial markings" which he terms "the whiteness of her blackness".

Hester's associations with social ostracism, her aimless wanderings amidst the wilderness, her suicidal as well as infanticidal impulse, her victimization against the oppressive psychological tortures inflicted by the Puritan "masters", the deviant tendencies of her motherhood over the dismal seven year tenure are obviously predicated upon the "dark labyrinth of the mind", the absent Africanist mother-space in the novel. But what need discussion are current critical conjectures regarding how Hawthorne's "whitens" this black presence. For instance, Grossman's argues that Hester as a white woman is a victim of the "unbridled sexuality" of the "Black Man" in the text. Grossman writes-"the novel...does not merely reproduce the terms of the Southern confrontation

between a white master and a female slave. Rather, the novel shifts the genders of that equation, with the effect ultimately of revealing the white fears that linked North and South; a shared belief in the unbridled sexuality of African men and the vulnerability of white women..." (Grossman 15). In fact, the fears and anxieties, both Pearl's and Hester's, in respect of the "Black Man" abound with text. Person is right in his assessment about "Hawthorne's symbolic representation of race in *The Scarlet Letter* [where] Hester and Dimmesdale can be both black and white" (Person 661). Second, what needs to be considered are the ways in which Hawthorne prevents Hester from being a radical pro-abolitionist in the text, which is in keeping with Hawthorne's own "pro-Unionist" political stance that Fleischner pointed out. Person also points out the relevance of Hazel Carby's caution regarding "any feminist history that seeks to establish the sisterhood of white and black women as allies in the struggle against the oppression of all women" (qtd. in Person 661) in this context. Hawthorne's attitude towards his contemporary white abolitionists and the radical anti-slavery feminists are worth reflecting upon, therefore.

In 1857, Hawthorne's sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody who was a radical abolitionist sent an abolitionist pamphlet to her sister (Hawthorne's wife Sophia), which Hawthorne eventually returned without even producing it to Sophia. When Elizabeth resent the same pamphlet after three months, Hawthorne attached a cryptic rejoinder to the same informing her that "it is not very good...not worthy of being sent three times across the ocean" (Hawthorne "Letters" 115). Though the correspondence took place in 1857, seven years after Hawthorne's text was written, the Peabody- Hawthorne's debate regarding the issue of abolitionism dated long back. Person considers Hester to occupy such a position as an anti-slavery white feminist who retained only those traces of "white feminism" that her creator would sanction- a docile, submissive one who will have to wait for the time God would end her bondage. The text itself evinces this view- Hester refuses to name her child's father and is cast in an image of Divine Maternity in asserting that her child would seek a "heavenly father". Hester almost spiritually transforms herself from an adulterous woman to an "able" one and does not partake of any radical feminist rebellion in the text. She subscribes to Hawthorne view regarding slavery that he forwarded in "Life of Franklin Pearce" where he argued that slavery is "one of those evils which Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream" (Hawthorne "Life" 417). Woidat pointed out this approach of Hawthorne in his outright refusal to support abolition, a "gradualist" approach. Woidat writes, "In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne learns to respond to injustice with steady submission rather than outright rebellion, thus offering a preview of Hawthorne's advice to abolitionists" (Woidat 536). The question that remains to be answered is whether such an image of docile submission and "Divine Maternity" really "whitens" Hester in the text. Even if it does, she remains, in the words Woidat, "a white precursor to Stowe's Uncle Tom" (537). If bondage and "blackness" are perceived in their metaphorical implications Hester remains a shadow of a "black" slave-woman and an "other-mother"; if she fails to be as subversive and radical as Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is because her "white" creator's personal and political obligations denied her such subjectivity.

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