



* Corresponding Author

Mohammed Waleed Asaad
College of Arts, University of
Mosul

Email:
mohammed.w.a@uomosul.edu.iq

Keywords: Adultery,
Shame, Exile , Silent struggle
,Puritans , Pearl, Patriarchal
authority, Redemption.

Article history:

Received: 2025-05-12
Accepted: 2025-06-16
Availablonline: 2025-08-01



Male Domination VS Early Feminism in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which was first published in (1850) and is considered one of his most famous and influential works. The novel tells the story of a married woman who is tried for the crime of adultery after becoming pregnant by an unknown man during her husband's absence, in a strictly religious Christian society in 17th-century Boston. The narrative delves into this woman's (Hester's) suffering following her scandal, and how she copes with her circumstances, after being forced to wear a scarlet letter (A) as a mark of shame and to be exiled. This study aims to shed light on the struggle and resistance of the character Hester—as well as her daughter Pearl—as a representation of feminism in the face of the dominance and control of the male characters in the novel, who serve as symbols of patriarchal authority. The novel is seen as one of the earliest seeds of successful feminism and rebellion against male or paternal oppression. The research will explore various aspects of the conflict between feminism and patriarchy on psychological, metaphorical, and physical levels.

الهيمنة الذكورية مقابل النسوية المبكرة في رواية "الحرف القرمزي" للروائي ناثانيل هوثورن.

م.م. محمد وليد اسعد
كلية الاداب، جامعة الموصل

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية الحرف القرمزي للكاتب ناثانيل هوثورن، التي نُشرت لأول مرة عام 1850 وتُعد من أكثر أعماله تأثيرًا وشهرة. تدور الرواية حول هيوستن براين، وهي امرأة متزوجة تعيش في مجتمع ديني صارم في مدينة بوسطن في القرن السابع عشر، وتُوصم بالعار وتُنبذ اجتماعيًا بعد إنجابها طفلاً خارج إطار الزواج أثناء غياب زوجها. وتُدان بتهمة الزنا وتُجبر على ارتداء الحرف القرمزي "A" كرمز لخطيئتها. تستعرض الرواية معاناة هيوستن النفسية والاجتماعية، إلى جانب الصلابة التي تُظهرها في مواجهة مصيرها. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على مقاومة هيوستن، وابنتها بيرل، بوصفهما تمثيلاً للفكر النسوي المبكر، في مواجهة البنى الأبوية التي يجسدها الرجال المهيمنون في الرواية. ومن خلال تحليل الأبعاد النفسية والمجازية والجسدية في الرواية، تُقدّم الحرف القرمزي كتعبير أدبي مبكر عن التمرد النسوي ضد السلطة الذكورية والاضطهاد الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الزنا، العار، النفي، الصراع الصامت، البيوريتانيون، بيرل، السلطة الأبوية، الخلاص

Introduction:

Many academics have addressed various themes derived from *The Scarlet Letter*. In this research, we will focus specifically on the feminist struggle, represented by Hester and her daughter Pearl, against patriarchy or male domination, as embodied by characters like Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and the Governor of Boston, in addition to the oppressive and rigid legal system of that period, which serves as an example of patriarchal authority used to silence and marginalize the female voice and role as a fundamental and active component of society.

The study will also compare Hester and Pearl as an old and new version of resistance and persistence in claiming their right to exist and be heard in the face of injustice and exclusion. It emphasizes that rights—whether feminist or human in general—are not granted but must be taken through ongoing struggle, passed down from generation to generation, until the goal is achieved.

The research will be divided into several implicit sub-sections that will analyze characters and ideas presented by the author, as well as offer an implicit academic and philosophical humanistic interpretation in order to reach the best possible outcomes from this study, leading ultimately to the conclusion.

Review:

The origins of feminist thought can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries, during which time women began to question their limited roles within society, particularly within marriage, religion, and legal structures. Though not always explicitly labeled as feminism, early expressions of gender resistance were rooted in moral defiance, religious dissent, and personal autonomy.

During the Puritan and Enlightenment periods, women's intellectual and social roles were narrowly defined by patriarchal authority—primarily through marriage, motherhood, and religious obedience. Female voices were often silenced in both public and private life. However, early feminist figures such as **Mary Wollstonecraft** emerged to challenge the prevailing ideology, arguing in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that women were not naturally inferior but had been denied education and opportunity.

This era of feminism was marked by a form of **silent rebellion**. Women's resistance often took the form of personal virtue, emotional resilience, and symbolic acts of independence. They opposed societal expectations not through overt activism but by enduring with strength, intelligence, and a refusal to conform to unjust roles. These early feminists laid the groundwork for later movements by framing gender inequality as a systemic injustice rather than a personal failing.

Qualitative Approach: This study will employ a qualitative research design to analyze literary texts, focusing on themes, character analysis, and humanistic psychoanalysis.

Hester's marital life:

The novel opens with Hester Prynne on trial for the crime of adultery after showing clear signs of pregnancy. It is well known that she is married, but her husband has been absent, having traveled abroad. This immediately establishes that Hester is not an unmarried woman caught in scandal, but rather a married woman abandoned by her husband. When accused of her crime, Hester chooses to remain silent and refuses to reveal the identity of the man with whom she committed the transgression. (Bercovitch, 1988: p.22).

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Hester is a young and beautiful woman, while her husband, Chillingworth, is significantly older. He had left her to travel to Europe for business and was absent for a long period, during which she received no news of him—eventually hearing rumors of his death. From these early details, we begin to see the imbalance in Hester's marriage, marked by a stark age difference and emotional distance. Such an unequal match is a contributing factor to the breakdown of many marriages and highlights a broader injustice: the denial of a woman's right to choose a compatible partner, at least in terms of age and presence. (Hawthorne, 1850). Moreover, Chillingworth's absence left Hester isolated in a rigid,

moralistic society that demanded perfection—even if only on the surface—and showed little tolerance for human error. This context further emphasizes the social and emotional pressures placed on women and the lack of support or understanding extended to them.

Hester against the Puritans:

From the moment Hester's forbidden affair was uncovered, she was relentlessly attacked by the city's rigid and deeply conservative townspeople. At first, they demanded she be executed publicly on the scaffold. Eventually (Hawthorne, 1850), the sentence was reduced to exile outside the community, with the condition that she must wear a symbol of shame — the scarlet letter "A" — on her chest at all times, never to be removed or hidden.

Despite being completely alone, with no one to support her — both because she was a woman and because she was branded an adulteress — Hester displayed remarkable strength and resilience. She chose to face her accusers in silence, refusing to reveal the identity of the man involved. She was willing to endure death or even worse, all for the sake of love, or simply for her right to live life on her own terms, rather than submitting to a society governed by harsh, discriminatory rules — especially those that unjustly targeted women. (Bercovitch, 1988: p.43).

What's strikingly ironic is that the same society that so harshly judged and condemned her was itself far from moral or pure. Throughout the novel, we see that many people — including men of high status — were involved in immoral behavior. In reality, this society was deeply flawed and corrupt beneath the surface. Their treatment of Hester was an attempt to cast her as the sole embodiment of sin — a scapegoat for their own hidden transgressions. Because she was a woman who had been publicly exposed, she was vilified, while those guilty of even worse offenses continued to hide behind a mask of virtue.

Hester and Dimmesdale love affair:

While waiting for her husband's return, Hester entered into an illicit relationship with a Puritan minister named Dimmesdale. That relationship led to her pregnancy and the birth of their daughter, Pearl. In stark contrast to Hester's strength and resilience, Dimmesdale was marked by cowardice and weakness. He witnessed her standing alone before the entire community, choosing not to reveal his identity in order to protect him, yet he remained in hiding, unwilling to face the consequences alongside her. His fear of punishment or of losing his esteemed position as a minister led him to abandon her in her most vulnerable moment. (Baym, 1986 : p.25).

What made his actions even more disgraceful was that, while concealing his guilt, he continued to preach to the public about morality, righteousness, obedience to the law, and the importance of avoiding sinful, unlawful relationships. This made him not only a coward but a hypocrite of the highest order. It was tragic and shameful to see him publicly advocate for virtue while privately living in fear of confessing his sin — letting Hester bear the full weight of the scandal alone.

Perhaps the only thing he truly excelled at was love. Unlike her cold, loveless marriage, Hester's relationship with Dimmesdale was filled with genuine emotion. Even though she was married, she never knew what real love was until she met the timid minister. And despite all that happened, Hester remained loyal to him, never betraying his secret — even after her husband returned and the truth came to light. Dimmesdale, however, remained too fearful to do the same. (Bercovitch, 1988).

Hester and Chillingworth marriage dynamic:

Hester's relationship with her husband, Chillingworth, serves as a clear example of what was expected from an ideal Puritan girl — complete obedience and no control over her own life choices. She had no say in whom she would marry; her fate was determined entirely by her family and husband. This was the common reality for most women in the 17th century. Hester neither chose nor loved Chillingworth, and she didn't truly understand what it meant to be a wife. Her act of infidelity was driven more by a longing to experience real love than by physical desire.

Chillingworth, for his part, knew she didn't love him, but still insisted on marrying her. As he admitted himself, he was seeking a young, beautiful woman to settle down with — someone who could bring stability to his life after years of aimlessness and indulgence.(Hawthorne, 1850 : p. 75).

What set Chillingworth apart was the darkness within him. He became a source of emotional torment for Hester, threatening her repeatedly with revenge. Once he discovered the identity of the man she loved, his cruelty deepened — he told her he would destroy Dimmesdale slowly and savor the process before finally killing him.

What's particularly unsettling is Chillingworth's reaction upon his return to Boston. Instead of stepping forward when he saw his wife publicly shamed and humiliated with her child on the scaffold, he remained silent and watched. A husband with love or honor might have revealed himself as the betrayed man, possibly confronting her or even punishing her himself to restore his pride. But Chillingworth, much like Dimmesdale, chose secrecy — concealing his true identity from the public and sharing it only with Hester. This behavior can only be described as both cowardly and malicious.

A. Hester opposes social injustice:

Living in the strict Puritan society, Hester suffered great suffering both before and following the disclosure of her infidelity. She was shunned and excluded in a world where women had no voice or agency after being isolated in a community opposed to anything unique and totally under patriarchal rule. She stayed firm in her denial to tell the name of her secret lover, having been publicly branded as an adulteress and producing a child out of marriage. Hester carried herself with grace, compassion, and respect despite the terrible circumstances—exile on the outskirts of town with her daughter, the weight of wearing the scarlet letter with all its overtones of humiliation, and the need of working as a seamstress to survive. With time, this calm dignity won her the respect of the very society that had denounced her. (Hawthorne, 1850: p. 189).

B. The Fight Against Dimmesdale and Chillingworth by Hester:

Hester had very complex and emotionally intense relationships with both men, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. Though she loved Dimmesdale honestly and sincerely, her relationship with him caused great emotional and physical suffering. She started a long and difficult path mostly influenced by Dimmesdale's timidity and high social standing as a minister, from the moment she got entangled with him in a forbidden affair, followed by the pregnancy, public embarrassment, and punishment. (Baym, 1986 : p.41).

C. Notwithstanding all this, Hester proved herself comparable in moral strength and intelligence, if not better. Her bravery in sharp contrast to Dimmesdale's frailty was shown by her unwavering commitment to preserve his identity and refusal to disclose him even under great pressure. Hester carried the weight of the scandal, the loneliness, the emotional suffering, and the load of single parenting while he covered his guilt and denied their relationship or his daughter Pearl. He stayed in the shadows, not ready to risk his reputation or own shortcomings, therefore leaving her to suffer alone. Her struggle with him represented a woman's confrontation with a male's narcissism—a man who would not sacrifice anything for love or respect his promises, and instead let the woman bear all responsibility for their shared sin.

D. Her battle with Chillingworth, on the other hand, was one of intense psychological agony. From the time he arrived in Boston and saw her standing on the gallows of humiliation with her infant in her arms, he quietly vowed revenge—against both Hester and her unidentified boyfriend, whom he would subsequently discover. Still, his approach to exact that retribution was not exactly equal. For Hester, his vengeance manifested as psychological torture. Insisting she must suffer for her transgressions; he told her often that he would never pardon her betrayal. Often threatening to hurt Dimmesdale, he subjected him to a slow, covert suffering using his herbal medicine knowledge. Emotionally manipulating Hester, he

warned her that he would hunt her down and carry out his threats no matter what even if she and Dimmesdale tried to flee. His complete contempt for Pearl added to the terrifying nature of the violence. Denying the child even the slightest indication of empathy, he showed no compassion or respect for her, therefore severely hurting Hester and adding to her emotional load. Fundamentally, Hester's struggle with her estranged husband was a fight of a woman against a man whose personality was dangerously molded by both narcissism and psychopathy. His merciless intention to gradually and systematically ruin Dimmesdale and his cold, deliberate exploitation of both him and Hester clearly revealed his criminal attitude. His narcissism was similarly clear: he could not understand that his wife may love another guy or bear the humiliation of being betrayed. Driven not by heartbreak but by ego, his damaged macho pride set off a dark, spiteful aspect of him. Instead of responding as a guy gently rejected or forgotten during his protracted absence, he developed an obsession with retribution.

Given all this, it is abundantly evident how much agony Hester had through at the hands of Chillingworth—a tormented emotional and unrelenting force.

E. Along with social rejection, Shame's penalty for adultery was to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her clothes for life without any means to hide or remove it. She thus suffered protracted humiliation and contempt from the townspeople. But the internal sorrow and regret that followed public disclosure of her sin brought her the most shame—not the letter itself.(Berlant, 2008). Not the external mark of her crime, but rather her own sense of personal shame, haunted Hester. She carried her conscience weight whether or not she carried the letter. The knowledge that one moment of weakness had permanently changed not only her life but also the lives of her daughter and Reverend Dimmesdale, so aggravating her pain. Dimmesdale lacked outward signs of shame, unlike Hester, but he was gradually driven by inner guilt and anxiety. His secret guilt finally showed itself physically when a strange mark showed up on his chest at the end of the book—a symbolic act of divine justice exposing the truth even in cases when people try to hide it. (Bercovitch, 1988 :p . 36).

She turned down later suggestions from the authorities that Hester no longer had to wear the scarlet letter, claiming only God could clear her sin. Her remark reveals her development and increased awareness of her moral obligation. For Hester, the letter represented her path and responsibility rather than only a penalty. By the end of the book, what originally meant as a sign of guilt had evolved into a mark of difference representing her power, uniqueness, and perseverance.

Pearl: Pure Innocence or a Rebellion in Childhood?

Born from her unlawful affair with Dimmesdale, Pearl is the name Hester assigned her baby. Pearl really embodied purity, beauty, and innocence—qualities suggested by her name. She stood out from other children her age in that she was absolutely beautiful, pure-hearted, and possessed a peculiar sort of purity. Pearl became Hester's greatest delight and a continual reminder of her sin from the moment of her birth; she was the live form of her transgression. Still, Hester loved her with an almost incomprehensible depth.

Pearl had a powerful and wild attitude outside her beauty and purity. She was called wild, ferocious, and rebellious. She was not slow to defend herself, even hurling stones at young people who teased her or sought to discredit her for her mother's background. Pearl objected to Church rulings, Puritan regulations, or the strict social mores of the day. She was a free spirit, not ready to let expectations she disagreed with define or limit her. Though with even more bravery and intensity, Pearl followed in the footsteps of Hester, who had once been a forerunner of early feminism battling patriarchal power and a culture that subjugated women. Hester finally won morally by silently, patiently, and quietly strengthening herself against injustice. Pearl, on the other hand, was open and brave. She spoke loudly and with unvarnished honesty as she immediately challenged injustice. She never restrained her ideas or changed her position for anyone. (Bercovitch, 1988). Pearl might thus be considered as a new face of feminism, one free from reliance on quiet opposition. Despite her early age, her interpretation of the fight for women's rights shows a more strong, vibrant, and assertive attitude. She is the sharp, unreserved continuation of the road her mother started to follow.(Berlant, 2008 : p. 74).

Pearl and Her Relationship with Dimmesdale:

Initially, Pearl felt no particular attachment to Dimmesdale. However, when the authorities threatened to take her away from her mother, Hester turned to Dimmesdale for help. He responded by passionately defending Hester's right to raise her child, delivering a powerful speech that ultimately convinced the officials to let Pearl stay with her mother. After this, Pearl began to allow Dimmesdale to hold her hand during his meetings with Hester, signaling a shift in her attitude toward him.

Still, Pearl would often see Dimmesdale covering something by putting his palm over his heart. She seemed to sense, too, that he carried a scarlet letter—one invisible but equally important as her mother's. Pearl grew really close to the scarlet letter over time. Growing up, she had seen it on Hester's chest and it became a familiar and necessary component of her life.

Should she see her mother without it or if it was hidden, she would scream and grow agitated. To Pearl, the letter represented love rather than a mark of guilt; it was a physical manifestation of the link that

brought her to be. For her, it was evidence that she was born out of love, not a sign of dishonesty. She felt that when her parents wore the scarlet letter, they were honoring her since she considered it as proof of her existence in the planet. They were, in her view, negating her existence and the facts of her origin when they tried to hide it.

From this vantage point, Pearl pulled away and later rinsed the kiss off when Dimmesdale tried to kiss her forehead during a covert encounter in the woodland. Any affectionate gesture from a father who refused to publicly acknowledge her meant nothing to her. She rejected being embraced in the shadow and denied in the light. She yearned for complete, honest respect—proof she belonged and had the right to live.

Pearl hated Dimmesdale's frailty and timidity. A father who supported her just behind closed doors and in silence was unacceptable to her. Passive encouragement was insufficient for her. Pearl, a potent fresh emblem of early feminist ideas, insisted on explicit, public affirmation and refused silence. She stood for a new generation ready to reject subdued sympathy in favor of forceful public campaigning.

Pearl's Relationship with Chillingworth:

There was no emotional connection between Pearl and Chillingworth. From the moment of her birth, he showed no affection, compassion, or any semblance of paternal instinct toward her. In his eyes, Pearl was a living reminder of his wife's betrayal—a symbol of her preference for another man over him. To Chillingworth, she wasn't a child to be loved, but the product of infidelity, and for that reason, he chose not to acknowledge her.

However, it's important to note that his resentment wasn't directed personally at Pearl. He didn't hate her as an individual; instead, his hatred was reserved for her father, and his vengeful schemes were aimed at him—not at Pearl. (Berlant, 2008 :p . 23).

The fact that Pearl inherited Chillingworth's large wealth following his death makes the circumstances extra ironic. She finally got to benefit from his riches even though he refused to acknowledge her during his lifetime. This scene is a potent emblem of female success. Representing patriarchal power and control, Chillingworth neglected to stifle Pearl's value or future.

Pearl finally acquired everything: his inheritance, personal achievement, and a contented life including a lovely marriage following Europe. These successes act as symbolic affirmations of the growing feminine power she embodies, a continuation of the road her mother, Hester, traveled—hardship endured with dignity and strength. Pearl's accomplishment embodies a larger, growing feminist legacy rather than only a particular triumph.

Conclusion:

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne offers more than a story of sin and punishment; he presents a profound critique of patriarchal society. Through Hester Prynne, Hawthorne crafts a proto-feminist figure who resists male dominance with quiet strength, moral resilience, and defiance of societal norms. Her daughter Pearl symbolizes the next generation of feminist resistance—more outspoken and unrestrained. In contrast, the male characters, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, represent different faces of patriarchal authority: one marked by weakness and guilt, the other by control and vengeance. This analysis reveals the novel as an early feminist text that underscores the emotional and social cost of a male-dominated culture. Hester's transformation from shame to empowerment, and Pearl's symbolic victory, mirror the gradual emergence of female agency. Thus, Hawthorne's work stands as both a literary classic and a powerful precursor to modern feminist thought, making a lasting statement on gender, justice, and resistance.

References:

1. Bercovitch, S. (1988). *The office of The Scarlet Letter*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Baym, N. (1986). *The Scarlet Letter: A reading*. Twayne Publishers.
3. Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Duke University Press.
4. Davidson, C. N. (1998). No more separate spheres! *American Literature*, 70(3), 443–463. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902719>
5. Fetterley, J. (1978). *The resisting reader: A feminist approach to American fiction*. Indiana University Press.
6. Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
7. Hawthorne, N. (1850). *The Scarlet Letter*. Ticknor, Reed & Fields.
8. Kahf, M. (1995). The silences of the harem. *College Literature*, 22(1), 74–90.
9. Kolodny, A. (1980). Dancing through the minefield: Some observations on the theory, practice and politics of a feminist literary criticism. *Feminist Studies*, 6(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177766>
10. Leverenz, D. (1983). The woman in the mirror: Hawthorne and the female. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 38(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2933060>
11. Lutz, D. W. (1992). Suffering and redemption in *The Scarlet Letter*. *The New England Quarterly*, 65(1), 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/366526>
12. Person, L. S. (1990). Hester's revenge: The power of silence in *The Scarlet Letter*. *Studies in American Fiction*, 18(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1990.0001>
13. Reis, E. (1997). *Damned women: Sinners and witches in Puritan New England*. Cornell University Press.
14. Tompkins, J. (1985). *Sensational designs: The cultural work of American fiction, 1790–1860*. Oxford University Press.

15. Walker, N. A. (1990). *A very short introduction to feminist literary theory*. Routledge.
16. Warren, R. P. (1990). Hawthorne. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Modern critical views: Nathaniel Hawthorne* (pp. 35–47). Chelsea House.
17. Zagarell, S. (1988). Narrative of community: The identification of a genre. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13(3), 498–527. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494429>
18. محمود، ز. ض. (2025). اعتذار نسوي لأدب الرومانسية المعاصرة - استكشاف المازوشية والغزو الذكوري الداخلي في رواية "أثر". *مجلة واسط للعلوم الإنسانية*، 21. لتود 820(1/Pt1)، -796. <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss1/Pt1.829>

