



Challenging Androcentric Narratives: A Gynocentric Analysis of Widowhood and Single Motherhood in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: This study examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, focusing on Hester Prynne's role in both challenging and reinforcing androcentric narratives of widowhood and single motherhood. By transforming Hester's isolation as a widow into public shame as an adulteress, the novel's androcentric narrative exposes gender biases and double standards that distort societal perceptions of female transgression. This reflects the broader social stigmatization experienced by women in conservative societies. Employing a "Gynocentric" lens, this research explores how Hester's economic independence and resilience transform the "scarlet letter" from a mark of shame into a symbol of defiance and autonomy. The roles of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth further illuminate the "masculine mask" that exacerbate Hester's marginalization. It revealing an androcentric structure that subjects women to moral scrutiny while safeguarding male privilege. Through a close reading of the text, this study critiques these biases and exposes persistent inequalities in the treatment of women, particularly in the absence of male figures. This research contributes to literary scholarship by offering a nuanced interpretation of gender roles in *The Scarlet Letter*, advocating for a re-evaluation of androcentric narratives, and emphasizing the need for more inclusive representations of societal attitudes towards single women. Finally, the study underscores the importance of addressing both historical and contemporary gender biases to advance equity and deepen understanding of the societal, cultural, and psychological challenges faced by single women and single mothers.

Keywords: Gynocentric Reading, Androcentric Narratives, Widowhood, Single Mother, Masculine Mask, Double Standard.

تحدي السرديات الذكورية: تحليل نسوي للأرملة والأم العزباء في رواية "الحرف القرمزي"

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الملخص: تتناول هذه الدراسة رواية "الحرف القرمزي" لناتانيال هاثورن، مع التركيز على دور هيستر برين في تحدي وتعزيز السرديات الذكورية حول الترملة والأمومة العزباء. من خلال تحويل عزلة هيستر كأرملة إلى عار علني كمذنبة بالزنا، يكشف السرد الذكوري للرواية عن التحيزات الجنسانية والمعايير المزدوجة التي تشوه تصورات المجتمع حول تجاوزات المرأة. يعكس هذا الوصف الاجتماعي الأوسع الذي تعاني منه النساء في المجتمعات المحافظة. باستخدام منظور "نسوي"، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف تحول استقلال هيستر الاقتصادي ومرونتها "الحرف القرمزي" من علامة عار إلى رمز للتحدي والاستقلالية. كما أن أدوار آرثر ديمسديل وروجر تشيلنجورث تسلط مزيداً من الضوء على "القناع الذكوري" الذي يفاقم تهمة هيستر. ويكشف ذلك عن هياكل ذكورية تخضع النساء للتدقيق الأخلاقي بينما تحمي امتيازات الذكور. من خلال قراءة مثالية للنص، تنتقد هذه الدراسة هذه التحيزات وتكشف عن أوجه عدم المساواة المستمرة في معاملة النساء، خاصة في غياب الشخصيات الذكورية. يساهم هذا البحث في الأدب النقدي من خلال تقديم تفسير دقيق لأدوار الجنسين في "الحرف القرمزي"، والدعوة إلى إعادة تقييم السرديات الذكورية، والتأكيد على الحاجة إلى تمثيلات أكثر شمولية للمواقف المجتمعية تجاه النساء العازبات. أخيراً، تؤكد الدراسة على أهمية معالجة التحيزات الجنسانية التاريخية والمعاصرة لتعزيز المساواة وتعميق فهم التحديات المجتمعية والثقافية والنفسية التي تواجهها النساء العازبات والأمهات العازبات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قراءة نسوية، السرديات الذكورية، الترملة، الأم العزباء، القناع الذكوري، المعايير المزدوجة.

Introduction

Widowhood, a stage of traumatic loss and grief, has historically carried the weight of gender-biased cultural practices such as sati, levirate marriage, and ghost marriage (Alam & Sengupta, 2024; Lo, 2022; Umoh, 2018; Wang, 2023). While society often reveres widowed women for their resilience and

fortitude, they frequently face suspicion, vulnerability, and social discrimination. This paradoxical position is deeply rooted in the etymology of the term "widow," which connotes "emptiness" (Cresswell, 2021). Research indicates that even today, widowed women continue to experience marginalization globally, confronting

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significant social barriers that restrict their access to education, employment, and healthcare (OBE & Lees, 2020). This persistent marginalization is further exacerbated by literary representations that reinforce patriarchal attitudes, often portraying widows as mere symbols of loss or shame. Such androcentric depictions distort and trivialize their complex and resilient experiences, undermining the narrative of empowerment and agency that widows seek to reclaim in their lives.

A classic example of these androcentric narratives in literary representation is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Even the title *The Scarlet Letter* reflects and perpetuates the androcentric biases that this study critiques. While the novel centers on Hester Prynne's public shaming for adultery, it also problematically reduces her widowhood and single motherhood to symbols of sin and shame. The "scarlet letter" she is forced to wear functions not only as a marker of moral transgression but also as a tool of patriarchal control, reinforcing society's tendency to stigmatize women who deviate from prescribed gender roles. In doing so, the title marginalizes Hester's resilience and independence, framing her autonomy as deviant rather than empowering. This reduction of her identity to the letter "A" reflects the broader societal practice of equating widowhood with emptiness, as seen in the cultural practices discussed earlier. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* serves as an example of how literature can both reflect and reinforce the patriarchal structures that this study seeks to deconstruct, perpetuating a narrative that constrains female agency rather than celebrating the complexities of widowhood and single motherhood.

Although the novel primarily focuses on the public condemnation of Hester Prynne as an adulteress, it simultaneously depicts her as a widow and single mother constructing an independent life within a rigid patriarchal conservative society. This portrayal reflects not only the specific historical context of the novel but also resonates with contemporary debates on gender roles in religiously conservative societies, including those in Arab and Islamic nations (Meler, 2019; Taha, 2019; Yasien-Esmael et al., 2017). Through a detailed analysis of Hester Prynne's ostracized existence and her resourcefulness, this study seeks to unveil the

underlying patriarchal structures and oppressive male gazes that shape such narratives. It moves beyond the portrayal of resilience, challenging the notion of the widow as a passive mourner. Instead, it repositions her as a dynamic agent, revealing the hypocrisy of a society that demands sacrifice while denying women agency. By deconstructing these androcentric representations, this study calls for a re-evaluation of the historical and literary perspectives through which widows have been framed for ages. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex experiences of widowhood and the need to challenge patriarchal attitudes that perpetuate marginalization.

Literature Review

The classic American historical novel, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (2010), has garnered extensive attention from scholars who have interpreted it through various lenses, including Christian, psychological, Cultural, race, and feminist perspectives

Theological and Psychological Perspectives:

Gaimai Zhao (2019) posits Prynne as a metaphorical representation of the "Christian Spirit," embodying qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, and redemption. In contrast, Ragini (2016) approaches Hester Prynne's actions from a psychological standpoint, revealing the repressive nature of Puritan society and its impact on mental anguish.

Feminist Perspectives: Challenging Patriarchal Order

Feminist readings of *The Scarlet Letter* have significantly contributed to the discourse on gender roles. Li Guanghua (2019) presents Hester Prynne as a strong, independent woman who refuses to compromise her dignity, making her a symbol of feminist resistance. Alghofaili (2022) furthers this argument by interpreting the novel as a critique of patriarchal oppression, portraying Hester Prynne's defiance against societal expectations as a condemnation of historical injustices faced by women. Jayasimha P. (2014) views Hester Prynne as a complex figure who both falls victim to and overcomes patriarchal values, symbolizing the potential for female resilience against male-dominated ideologies.

Significance and Research Gap

These diverse interpretations enrich the understanding of the novel's themes and Hester Prynne's character, offering valuable insights into how external forces shape inner experiences of human nature. However, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is not solely about Hester Prynne under Puritan society in seventeenth-century Boston. It is crucial to note that the marginalization and stigmatization associated with her status as a widow in a male-constructed society are still relevant today (Anzaa et al., 2018; Dube, 2022; Pemunta & Alubafi, 2016; Manor, 2023; Sharma, 2023). Thus, this study will explore Hester Prynne's widowhood as a parallel to modern experiences of widows, offering a more comprehensive analysis of the novel's enduring relevance.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes thematic analysis to examine Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* through a Gynocentric lens, focusing on the marginalization of widowhood and single motherhood in a patriarchal society. The study integrates close reading and feminist literary criticism, exploring how androcentric narratives shape both the personal and social dimensions of Hester Prynne's character. The methodology is structured as follows:

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Elaine Showalter's "Gynocentric" approach (1985), a feminist criticism framework that emphasizes the representation of women's experiences, voices, and perspectives in literature. By applying this framework, the study critically examines Hester Prynne's portrayal as a widow and single mother, deconstructing androcentric structures that reinforce patriarchal dominance. The Gynocentric lens allows for a nuanced analysis of how patriarchal forces influence Hester's identity, agency, and resistance, revealing broader societal patterns that perpetuate the marginalization of widowed women.

Research Questions and Objectives

Research Questions: The study is guided by the following primary research question: In what ways does Nathaniel Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester

Prynne both challenge and reinforce androcentric narratives surrounding widowhood and single motherhood?

To address this, the following secondary research questions are proposed to further explore the double standard of widowhood and single motherhood within conservative societal norms, and the roles of male characters in *The Scarlet Letter*:

- How do widowhood and single motherhood function as marginalizing forces within the androcentric narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*?
- In what ways do the actions of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth contribute to Hester Prynne's marginalization, thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms and suppressing female autonomy?
- How does *The Scarlet Letter* reflect societal attitudes toward gender, particularly concerning widowhood and the marginalization of women in conservative societies?

Research Objectives: To explore these research questions, this study aims to:

- Analyze Hester Prynne's character through a Gynocentric lens, focusing on her resilience and agency within a patriarchal society.
- Explore widowhood and single motherhood as marginalizing forces in the androcentric narrative of the novel.
- Investigate the roles of male characters in reinforcing patriarchal norms and suppressing female autonomy.
- Contribute to the understanding of literature's role in reflecting societal attitudes toward gender, especially in relation to widowhood.

Analytical Framework:

The analytical framework of this study conducts a close reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, focusing on representation of character behavior in androcentric narratives. The study examines:

- Hester Prynne's transformation from a socially condemned adulteress to a figure of autonomy, highlighting her psychological and emotional struggles, such as guilt and grief, alongside her defiance of patriarchal constraints.
- The roles of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth in reinforcing patriarchal

ideologies and contributing to Hester's marginalization.

- Pearl's character, illustrating how patriarchal narratives affect future generations and reflect ongoing marginalization.

This combined analysis of representation of character behavior in androcentric narratives offers a comprehensive understanding of how *The Scarlet Letter* portrays the multifaceted oppression of women in patriarchal societies.

Literary Representation of Widows and Single Mothers

Through detailed thematic analysis, this study explores the literary representation of widows and single mothers, using Hester Prynne's journey as a case study. By analyzing character behaviors and literary themes, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how patriarchal structures in literature distort and suppress female autonomy, particularly for widowed and single mothers. This analysis highlights the broader societal relevance of such literary portrayals and their impact on contemporary discussions of gender and marginalization.

Double Standards and Androcentric Misinterpretation of Widows

Double Standard Label of Widow as Adulteress:

Adultery is one of the gravest sins deeply ingrained in the moral fabric of diverse cultures across the globe (Leckie, 1999), and it has garnered substantial attention among scholars seeking to understand the factors contributing to this phenomenon. Recent data on patterns of adultery, collected from the Social Survey of the Institute for Family Studies (IFS), among married or divorced men and women between 2010 and 2016, provide insights into the prevalence of extramarital affairs. The findings of the study disclosed that twenty percent of men and thirteen percent of women admitted to engaging in extramarital relationships, emphasizing the higher propensity for infidelity among men compared to women (Wang, 2018). This imbalance in reported cases of adultery has sparked debates concerning gender roles and the societal consequences that women, particularly widows, face within a constructed patriarchal framework.

Paulo Coelho (2014) captures this gender-based double standard when he observes, "For men it is just a "stupid mistake." For women, it feels like a spiritual crime against all those who surround her with affection and support her as a mother and wife" (p. 187). His observation emphasizes the societal expectation that women adhere to stricter moral standards, reinforcing the patriarchal gaze that governs female behavior. This echoes Simone de Beauvoir's argument that male-dominated narratives reflect men's subjective perspectives as absolute truth, reinforcing gender biases (1956, p. 162). Both Paulo Coelho and Simone de Beauvoir highlight the intense societal pressure on women to be conditioned by stringent moral codes. This double standard can even intensify into a triple oppression in situations where women, particularly widows, are left without male protection or support. Such observations demand critical analysis of the socio-cultural norms and patriarchal structures that dictate women's treatment, especially widows, exposing how these frameworks perpetuate gender disparities and marginalization.

This androcentric disparity is vividly illustrated in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel exemplifies the enduring impact of patriarchal bias in society and literature, particularly through its portrayal of the protagonist, Hester Prynne, as an adulteress. This preconceived label obscures Hester's experience as a widow within her male-dominated society. Taylor Swift's lyrics, "Cause you were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter" (2021, 00:01:41), poignantly echo Hester's quest for love amid her suffering as a widow, highlighting the emotional depth of her character. Despite Hester's attempts to find solace in love, she faces relentless shame and humiliation, symbolized by her solitary stand on the scaffold with her baby. However, her fellow citizens remain oblivious to her personal struggles. Nathaniel Hawthorne powerfully captures this struggle in his description of how "Shame, Despair, Solitude" become her stern teachers, shaping her resilience. He writes, "*The Scarlet Letter* was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Hawthorne, 2010, pp. 242–243). This passage underscores how societal judgments force widows like Hester to bear their sins alone, highlighting the gendered double

standards that still persist in both literature and reality.

Double Standard Label of Widow as Witches:

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is not merely a victim of her circumstances as a widowed woman. The novel reveals that the plight of widows, as victims of patriarchal and androcentric narratives, extends beyond Hester's character. Hawthorne introduces another facet of this injustice through Mistress Hibbins, a minor character who embodies the societal prejudice faced by widows. Mistress Hibbins, described as a "bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate" who was "executed as a witch" (Hawthorne, 2010, pp. 58–59, 140), reflects the historical persecution of widows, drawing inspiration from Ann Hibbins, a real-life victim of the Salem witch trials (Schiff, 2015). Both Hester and Hibbins serve as poignant reminders of the systemic oppression faced by single women, representing two different archetypes. Despite facing harsh societal misconceptions, prejudice, and condemnation as an adulteress, Hester Prynne's journey as a resilient widow serves as a testament to individual strength and growth. Alternatively, Mistress Hibbins serves as an allegory for societal paranoia and a cautionary tale, illustrating the consequences of challenging patriarchal norms and the dangers of unchecked power and prejudice.

The historical setting of *The Scarlet Letter* further contextualizes these struggles. The societal expectations during this period demanded women remain as caretakers within their homes, reinforcing traditional gender roles. This pattern extended into the Victorian era, during which the Hawthorne penned the novel. In this time, a societal structure perpetuated women's financial dependence on men, deepening gender disparities. These intertwined narratives of Hester Prynne and Mistress Hibbins illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by single women, offering insightful commentary on the historical and social dynamics that shaped their lives. Across epochs, the identity of women had tamed and been confined to roles marked by servile caregiving, characterized by their economic reliance on men and societal mandates encompassing qualities of dedication, altruism,

chastity, and submissiveness in the guise of "angels in the house" (Kühl, 2016).

In many cases, androcentric narratives in patriarchal societies objectified these nonconformist and independent women as adulteresses, prostitutes, or witches to satisfy their male desires, subjecting them to shame and perpetuating their internalized misogyny (Sabala and Gopal, 2010). Consequently, women were rendered powerless against the unrelenting subjugation of their feminine sexuality over generations, or they became victims of "hetaerism" (Engels, 1972) within a macho culture. Through these two vividly contrasting female characters, Nathaniel Hawthorne addresses broader themes such as gender dynamics, societal prejudice, the consequences of defiance, and the potential for personal growth and redemption. Hence, *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a powerful critique of the androcentric society and its treatment of women, providing valuable insights into the complexities of human nature and the historical context in which these characters exist.

Impact of Masculine Mask in Hester Prynne's Fragmentation and Marginalization The Mystique of Masculinity

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, delves into the complexities of sin, society, and gender. At the heart of the novel is the portrayal of protagonist Hester Prynne as a woman condemned for adultery in Puritan Boston. Beyond the societally crafted depictions of Hester, she is the victim of her extant beloved Dimmesdale's "masculine mystique" (Kimbrell, 1995) and her past husband Chillingworth's sadistic "masculine malice" (Elshout et al., 2019) due to the loss of his belonging.

Hester's reputation as a devoted wife is compromised to preserve her beloved Dimmesdale's reputation within his society. Ironically, it is Dimmesdale himself who condemns Hester publicly, hiding his own involvement in their forbidden love to protect his position of power. As Baym (2004) emphasizes, "Dimmesdale is like the captive maiden and Hester the knight who will sally out to do battle for him. She wants to rescue Dimmesdale from his own despair and from

Chillingworth” (p. 23). Dimmesdale’s actions throughout the novel embody the “masculine mystique” (Kimbrell, 1995), characterized by a facade of moral superiority and emotional detachment.

In the scene depicting Hester’s public shaming on the scaffold, the novel introduces the character of Roger Chillingworth, her estranged and lost husband who was presumed dead in a shipwreck. It is also essential to acknowledge that Hester had no idea of her husband’s existence until that very moment. However, it is significant to note that even the scholarly Chillingworth refrained from coming forward due to his fear of tarnishing his masculine reputation, revealing the presence of an unconsciously concealed “masculine mystique” (Kimbrell, 1995). As Hawthorne (2010) aptly reflects, “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true” (p. 263). This statement underscores the inner turmoil and confusion experienced by Dimmesdale and Chillingworth as they grapple with their public personas and private realities. The social mask worn by both men to maintain their masculine privileges clearly illustrates the theme of masculine mystique in the novel. In Betty Friedan’s words, “men weren’t really the enemy—they were fellow victims suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique.” (1977, p. 372)

The Malice of Masculinity

Similarly, masculine Malice (Elshout et al., 2019) is represented through actions of Roger Chillingworth. After discovering that minister Dimmesdale was his former wife Hester’s treasured love, Chillingworth waited with fiendish patience as a leech to devour the guilt-filled soul of the esteemed minister with the intention of exacting vengeance. The reason behind Chillingworth’s vengeful deeds lies in the core notion of masculinity, which pertains not just to power but also to control. Moreover, the spirit of vengeance in men is an inherent “deterrence mechanism” (Elshout et al., 2019) against losing control over their belongings. Chillingworth’s deterrence mechanism is starkly evident in his declaration to Hester: “No matter whether of love or hate: no

matter whether of right or wrong! Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me” (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 90). This statement reflects Chillingworth’s belief that Hester and Dimmesdale are extensions of his property, reinforcing his controlling and vengeful nature.

As Engels (1972) notes, women have historically been seen as the property of males due to capitalistic patriarchal constraints. Moreover, it is clear that the old scholar Chillingworth married young Hester as property, not as a woman with flesh and heart. From this capitalistic patriarchal perspective, it is evident that Chillingworth’s trigger point for revenge is because he loses control over his property. Therefore, Chillingworth did not quench his sadistic vengeance even after he achieved it because his vengeance did not retrieve his property. On the contrary, “he fell into depression without the aim and motive of life” (Zhang & Li, 2018, p. 599). In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne vividly demonstrates “masculine mystique” (Kimbrell, 1995) and “masculine malice” (Elshout et al., 2019) through the characters of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. Their roles play crucial in transforming Hester’s image from a widow to an adulteress. Likewise, the interplay of these masculine constructs underscores Hester’s shame and suffering are products of the patriarchal power struggle between the men she loved and the man she married, illustrating the broader societal mechanisms that perpetuate her marginalization.

Challenges of Single Motherhood and Children Born Out of Wedlock

Single Mother and Societal Challenges

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne’s role as a single mother is depicted with nuanced complexity, illustrating both societal and personal challenges. Rather than succumbing to societal pressure to reveal the father’s name, Hester bravely accepts the consequences, embracing her role as a single mother. As Hawthorne (2010) describes, “Hester Prynne, nevertheless, the loving mother of this one child, ran little risk of erring on the side of undue severity” (p. 109), highlighting her inherent warmth and compassion. She raises her daughter, Pearl, on her own with great passion, love, and care. However, her attempts to impose

“tender but strict control” while navigating her own “errors and misfortunes” reveal the limitations of conventional parenting methods. Hester’s efforts to influence Pearl’s behavior through “smiles and frowns” prove ineffective, underscoring the difficulties of balancing affection with discipline. This depiction critically underscores Hester’s internal struggle, as her personal transgressions and societal judgments complicate her parenting approach.

The challenges Hester’s faces in balancing societal expectations with personal responsibility resonate with contemporary issues faced by single mothers, who similarly navigate the intersection of societal judgment and personal responsibility. Drawing parallels to the contemporary context, it is stimulating to note that Joseph Chamie (2017) points out a global increase in the occurrence of motherhood outside of wedlock in modern society. This phenomenon can be attributed to the diminishing necessity of marriage for women’s financial stability, social interactions, and personal well-being. However, government policies have been slow to adapt to these changing dynamics. Joseph Chamie (2017) emphasizes that whether society approves of it or not, the prevalence of out-of-wedlock births is undergoing a significant transition worldwide, which poses challenges for many societies.

In this specific context, it is crucial to note that Pearl, despite being born outside the boundaries of marriage institution, is not an illegitimate child but rather the daughter of a single mother. This distinction holds substantial significance as it sheds light on the prevailing biases and discriminatory practices rooted in patriarchal societal and cultural norms during the relevant historical period. Moreover, the observations of Joseph Chamie (2017) on the slow adaptation of government policies also find relevance in Hester’s situation. Just as contemporary societies are grappling with the implications of changing family structures, the historical context of Hester’s life reflects the rigid norms and discriminatory practices prevailing at that time. The significance of recognizing Pearl as the daughter of a single mother, rather than labeling her as an illegitimate child, further underscores the

need for societies to break free from patriarchal biases and embrace diverse family arrangements.

Hester’s determination to provide a loving and supportive environment for Pearl challenges the societal norms of her time, demonstrating that motherhood and parenting are not solely dependent on marital status. The parallel drawn between Hester’s situation in the historical setting and the contemporary global trends of motherhood outside of wedlock provides a thought-provoking perspective. It underscores the enduring struggle faced by single mothers, past and present, in navigating societal expectations and norms. Hester’s resilience as a single mother and her dedication to Pearl’s well-being serve as an inspiration to women who find themselves in similar circumstances today, amidst the ongoing evolution of family structures and social attitudes towards motherhood outside of marriage. As societies continue to grapple with these changes, Hester’s story serves as a reminder of the importance of empathy, understanding, and support for all mothers, regardless of their marital status.

Daughter of Single Mother and Societal Challenges

The significance of public shaming extends not only to its impact on Hester but also to its profound psychological effects on her daughter, Pearl. Hester’s actions, driven by fear and a desperate quest for love, have imposed a heavy toll on Pearl, relegating her to the status of “an outcast who remains at war with her world until the end of the final confession scene” (Turner, 1961, p. 59). The novel’s narrative further portrays Pearl as an untamed and nonconformist child, whose vivid imagination and conduct often parallel her mother’s status as a societal outcast. The intricate interplay between parental behaviors and their subsequent outcomes assumes a pivotal role within the overarching discourse concerning the ramifications of marital relationships on child rearing. Acknowledging the deficiencies or shortcomings within a matrimonial bond becomes of paramount importance, as these factors frequently align with disruptions in the proper upbringing of offspring. Such failures impose hindrances upon the children, precipitating the forfeiture of individuality and

consigning them to a state of dehumanization reminiscent of fallen angels.

Furthermore, this discourse extends to children born outside the confines of marital institutions, akin to Pearl, who frequently encounter neglect within this societal framework. Empirical support for this phenomenon is found in research studies from various countries, consistently underscoring the critical role of parental discipline in the prevalence of juvenile delinquency. For instance, a recent study (Aizpurua et al., 2020) established a relationship between parenting practices and juvenile offenders in the United States. Similar conclusions were drawn from earlier examinations conducted by White et al. (2007), revealing analogous results that highlight the association between a lack of parental discipline and increased rates of delinquency in Australia. In addition to that, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex*,

Enforced maternity brings into the world wretched infants, whom their parents will be unable to support and who will become the victims of public care or 'child martyrs'. It must be pointed out that our society, so concerned to defend the rights of the embryo, shows no interest in the children once they are born; it prosecutes the abortionist instead of under-taking to reform that scandalous institution known as 'public assistance' (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 162).

Beauvoir emphasizes the interconnectedness between familial upbringing and the broader social context, shedding light on the potential repercussions of inadequate parental guidance on the overall development of individuals within society. The issue of neglect towards these "wretched infants" (Beauvoir, 1956, 162) has persisted unresolved even in contemporary society (Chamie, 2017), leaving them to grapple with their sense of anomie and uncertain identity within this cultural context. The research of clinical psychologist Ana Nogales has found that seventy five percent of children experience lingering feelings of betrayal towards their cheating parents. In addition to that, research findings have consistently indicated a higher prevalence of

behavioral problems, diminished self-esteem, and emotional disturbances such as depression and anxiety among children whose parents engage in extra-marital relationships.

Pearl's interactions with other characters reveal the complex dynamics of her existence. Her interactions with Hester reflect a deep emotional bond but also highlight the strained relationship between mother and daughter due to the circumstances of her birth. Though Hester's ego concealed her love through silent torment, her daughter Pearl became the alter ego of Hester. She even dared to refuse Dimmesdale's kiss in the forest because she wanted her father to confess his love for her in front of everyone. Moreover, she does not recognize even her own mother, Hester, without the letter "A" on her breast. As inscribed in the novel, Pearl is the epitome of the letter A in the incarnation; she "had not been made at all, but plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door" (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 133).

Beyond serving as a mere plot device or secondary character, Pearl holds a significant standard in *The Scarlet Letter*. As the daughter of a single mother, she stands as a powerful symbol of independence and redemption within a society burdened by oppressive norms. Moreover, her existence plays a crucial role in Hester Prynne's survival against prejudice and social disdain. Notably, Pearl serves as a catalytic source of hope for Hester, offering tangible evidence of their pure love within an illicit and patriarchal milieu. Through her existence, Pearl becomes a testament to the transformative potential of love, acting as a beacon of hope and a living embodiment of their shared humanity in a world riddled with judgment and discrimination.

Economic Independence as a Catalyst for Empowerment and Rebellion Needlework as a Means of Survival and Empowerment

The emergence of single professional women as a global phenomenon is increasingly prominent within the global economy (Berg-Cross et al., 2004). This shift challenges traditional gender roles and work-life dynamics, reshaping the narrative from depicting single women as confined within

domestic responsibilities to representing them as independent professionals. This transformation is gaining momentum across cultural and geographical boundaries, illustrating a significant socio-economic change. Recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by single professional women is crucial for creating supportive environments that empower them to fully realize their potential.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's career as a seamstress provides a poignant illustration of this phenomenon. Despite her isolation and social ostracism, Hester's proficiency in needlework, almost the only profession available to women at that time, becomes a crucial means of survival and self-expression. As described in the novel,

Lonely as was Hester's situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want. She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art, then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp—of needlework... there was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labour as Hester Prynne could supply. Baby-linen—for babies then wore robes of state—afforded still another possibility of toil and emolument. By degrees, not very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion. (Hawthorne, 2010, pp. 95–98)

Hester's needlework evolves into a respected and fashionable skill, demonstrating her ability to thrive despite societal constraints. Through her craft, she finds beauty and establishes a deep connection with her inner strength, illustrating how her professional journey becomes a symbol of rebellion against a restrictive society. Her work not only supports her and her child but also challenges established gender norms, offering a glimmer of hope for their future.

Rebellious Identity through Professional Journey

Hester Prynne's narrative on her career closely aligns with contemporary studies that highlight the

significance of supporting single professional women. As Berg-Cross et al. (2004) note, fostering an inclusive and supportive environment allows these women to make substantial contributions to economic growth and social progress. Hester's story exemplifies the potential and resilience of women, illustrating the importance of gender equality in achieving a more equitable society. Empowering single professional women, as demonstrated by Hester's success, is crucial for advancing toward a progressive and inclusive world where their capabilities are fully recognized and utilized.

Hester's creativity and skill as a seamstress enable her to find beauty in the world, even amidst her sufferings. Her professional journey constitutes a radical act as it directly challenges the established gender norms within a male-constructed society. As Herzog (1983) claimed, "There is something aboriginal about Hester's femininity that separates her from the Puritan Women around her. She is an alien with a touch of the exotic" (p. 7). The necessity to survive impelled Hester to pursue a career as a seamstress. However, her choice of occupation goes beyond mere livelihood; it also endows her with financial independence, signaling her refusal to abide by societal expectations and constructs. Furthermore, Hester's chosen profession not only enables her to connect with other women but also fosters the establishment of a supportive community. In essence, Hester's journey as a working woman has been instrumental in surmounting the various hurdles she has encountered as a widow, ultimately leading to an improved life for both herself and her daughter.

The literary representation of Hester's experiences finds resonance with the research conducted by Tandipayuk and Akhrani (2021) on the career experiences and trajectories of single mothers. Their study explores the personal challenges faced by widows and divorcees and investigates how their careers play a crucial role in overcoming these challenges. Despite encountering initial economic hardships, these women embarked on their career paths independently, without relying on external assistance, highlighting their strength as single mothers and their ability to meet their daily

requirements while pursuing their professional goals. The study showcases that their profession has played a vital role in their resilience and displays their unwavering determination to provide for their children and pursue their identity and purpose. Furthermore, Hester Prynne's profession made her emblematic of rebellion against a restrictive society, shedding light on the repercussions faced by women who dared to challenge established gender norms. Her quest for independence and agency serves as a poignant reminder of the historical struggles endured by women in their pursuit of autonomy and self-determination. Therefore, Hester's professional journey underscores the importance of creating supportive environments for single professional women, with significant implications for society.

Agency and Resilience of Hester Prynne

Economic independence and personal agency are crucial for understanding Hester Prynne's resilience in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester's role as a seamstress transcends mere economic survival, becoming a profound expression of her autonomy and resistance against societal constraints. In the novel, Hester emerges as a powerful symbol of female agency and resilience within a Puritan society. Although her status as a widow grants her a degree of autonomy outside the traditional patriarchal framework, her identity as an adulteress subjects her to male dominance, particularly within the male-dominated legal system. Despite these constraints, Hester defiantly refuses to adhere to societal expectations and chooses to live on the fringes of society. She supports herself through her embroidery skills, thus creating a space of independence and self-sufficiency. As Michael T. Gilmore (1994) observes, "Hester creates an alternative institution to patriarchal structure.... She endures as an independent being who separates herself from the prevailing social order. She finds fulfillment in the company of other females" (p. 60).

Hester's resistance to societal norms challenges traditional gender roles by embodying the roles of a working woman, a single mother, and a survivor. Her narrative underscores that women have the capacity to achieve remarkable feats and overcome significant obstacles when driven by determination

and conviction. Notably, Hester's decision to continue wearing *The Scarlet Letter* "A" after Dimmesdale's death in the novel's concluding chapters illustrates her reclamation of the symbol. Rather than an emblem of sin, she adopts it as a marker of her identity as a widow and as a statement to her community. The depiction of *The Scarlet Letter* on her tombstone, "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules" (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 320), reinforces the persistent prejudice against widowed women, highlighting how such biases endure even after their deaths.

The novel reveals that sin is not merely an individual moral failing but also a phenomenon influenced by sociological factors. The societal structures that perpetuate these circumstances are primarily designed to benefit men. Hester's actions, driven by the absence of her husband and her subsequent search for genuine companionship, are framed by the narrative as adultery. However, this characterization is a reflection of the androcentric society's biases rather than a true measure of her moral failings. The embroidered scarlet letter "A" symbolizes the societal prejudice rather than Hester's own transgressions.

As Hawthorne articulates, Hester "cast away the fragment of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind" (Hawthorne, 2010, p. 197). In this light, Hester becomes an emblem of optimism and strength for other widowed women navigating a patriarchal world. Despite the numerous challenges she faces, Hester's unwavering resilience and commitment to her own and her daughter's independence highlight her role as a pioneering figure in a stigmatized society. In the end, Hester Prynne's unwavering resilience and determination to define her own identity, despite the harsh societal judgments, exemplify the strength of a widowed woman who transcends societal constraints. Her story not only challenges patriarchal norms but also serves as a timeless symbol of the power of agency, self-sufficiency, and defiance in the face of oppression. Through Hester's journey, Hawthorne crafts a narrative that resonates with both historical and contemporary struggles, reminding readers of the enduring fight for autonomy and dignity against the rigid structures of society.

Hester Prynne as a Symbol of Androcentric Edifice in Contemporary Widowhood Literary Parallel of Widowhood in Contemporary Conservative Contexts

The experience of losing a spouse is a universal phase of marital life, but the treatment of widowhood remains deeply gender-biased across cultures. Evidently, the study by Harma (2015) shows that one in seven women face stigma and discrimination after losing their partner, leading to financial struggles, social isolation, and emotional pain. This issue is further complicated by regional factors that intersect with widowhood, particularly in conservative societies such as those in the Middle East and South Asia. In these regions, widowhood is not just a personal loss but a socially constructed identity that leads to exclusion and isolation. A notable example is the Israeli Arab Muslim community, where societal expectations confine widows to prolonged periods of mourning, thereby restricting their freedom and limiting their prospects for remarriage (Yasien-Esmael et al., 2017). In addition to this psychological and cultural isolation, widows are economically disadvantaged, facing reduced access to resources, property, and income, further exacerbating their vulnerability and marginalization (Tshaka et al., 2023).

Although Islamic teachings promote care and compassion for widows, cultural practices often subvert these religious ideals, enforcing strict codes of modesty and seclusion that further marginalize widows and limit their opportunities for social and economic participation. This tension between religious doctrine and cultural customs underscores the broader challenges faced by widows in these societies, revealing a critical disconnect between their rights under Islamic law and the harsh realities they confront within patriarchal structures. The poignant portrayal of Hester Prynne's experiences as an ostracized widow in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a powerful parallel, highlighting the enduring struggle for gender equality and justice across cultures and centuries.

Androcentric Oppression and Gendered Accountability in *The Scarlet Letter*

Another significant narrative in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* that remains

pertinent today is the persistent double standard in gender roles and expectations. Hester Prynne's public punishment for adultery contrasts sharply with the lack of consequences for Dimmesdale, the man involved in the affair. This gendered disparity reflects a broader social pattern, both historically and in contemporary times, where women often face harsher moral scrutiny than men. Hester's experience exemplifies the systemic bias that still prevails in modern society, where women are frequently subjected to greater judgment for actions that men commit without equivalent repercussions. More than a passive victim, however, Hester's character challenges traditional gender roles by embodying strength, resilience, and defiance of societal norms, both as a single mother and widow. Her refusal to abide by societal expectations and constructs highlights her role as a critique of the restrictive gender norms placed on women, aligning her struggles with contemporary debates on evolving gender roles. Hester's defiance of oppressive norms not only demonstrates her personal resistance but also highlights the systemic inequalities that underlie gender expectations, revealing how societal structures maintain gendered disparities in moral and social judgments.

This critique of gendered injustice finds support in modern studies. Dadhanian's research demonstrates the heightened vulnerability of widows, noting an increased risk of suicide due to social isolation and the stigma attached to widowhood (2015). The emotional and psychological toll of this marginalization is further emphasized by a survey from Bala Vikasa (Singareddy, 2021), which found that twenty-nine percent of young widows had contemplated or attempted suicide. These studies underscore the profound impact of gendered discrimination on women's mental health. Similarly, Hester's experience echoes this phenomenon, where societal expectations of women to live within rigid boundaries, especially after the loss of a male companion, compound their suffering.

The societal preoccupation with regulating women's behavior, particularly in the absence of male companionship, extends beyond the historical context of *The Scarlet Letter*. Widows, unmarried,

or divorced women, are often subjected to intense scrutiny, and their attempts to live vibrant and independent lives are frequently met with suspicion or condemnation. This societal fascination with their personal lives, reflected in the distorted perception of Hester's act of love as adultery, reveals the deep-rooted androcentric narrative that continues to shape the treatment of women. Hawthorne's depiction of Hester, therefore, serves as a powerful indictment of the ongoing gendered double standards, illustrating how societal expectations have historically constrained women's autonomy and continue to do so in modern contexts.

Conclusion

This study transcends a mere examination of loss by redefining the narratives surrounding widowhood and female autonomy. Through a gynocentric close reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it reveals how Hester Prynne's portrayal simultaneously challenges and reinforces patriarchal views on widowhood and single motherhood. Hester's defiance and resilience critique the androcentric structures and narratives that marginalize women without male support. Notably, her success as a seamstress transforms *The Scarlet Letter* from a symbol of shame into one of autonomy and defiance. This clearly demonstrates the critical role of transformative career power and economic independence for single women in counteracting systemic biases and gendered double standards. Furthermore, the analysis exposes gendered disparities in moral judgment and societal expectations through the portrayals of Arthur Dimmesdale's "masculine mystique" (Kimbrell, 1995) and Roger Chillingworth's "masculine malice" (Elshout et al., 2019). These elements exacerbate Hester's marginalization, reinforcing the androcentric biases that perpetuate her humiliation, suffering, and ostracization. This study underscores the urgent need to address and dismantle the persistent gendered double standards enforced by societal and patriarchal structures.

The Gynocentric reading also illuminates the specific challenges faced by single mothers and their children, particularly concerning societal judgments and institutional biases. Hester's struggle to balance societal expectations with

personal responsibility reflects broader issues encountered by single mothers today, who navigate societal pressures while providing for their children. Pearl's portrayal further illustrates how societal stigmas and parental hardships impact children born outside traditional marital structures. Hester's resilience underscores the strength required to confront persistent prejudices that undermine single mothers' autonomy and economic independence, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms to provide adequate support and recognition for single mothers and their children.

Therefore, Hester Prynne's narrative in *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a critical lens for understanding ongoing androcentric injustices faced by widows and single women. This study advocates for a re-evaluation of gendered narratives and greater inclusivity and equity within both literary and societal frameworks. By addressing historical and contemporary biases, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and emphasizes the necessity for continued efforts toward gender equality and justice. Hester's enduring relevance affirms the need for a more compassionate and equitable societal perception of single women and reinforces the importance of literature in reflecting and shaping our understanding of gender dynamics. The study calls for sustained attention to the narratives that influence societal perceptions of gender roles, advocating for a fairer and more inclusive society for all women.

Disclosure Statement

- **Ethical approval and consent to participate:** Not Applicable. Ethical approval and consent to participate are not required for this literary analysis, which focuses on the characters and themes in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The study does not involve human subjects or data collection that necessitates such approvals.
- **Availability of data and materials:** This research relies exclusively on a literary analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, utilizing close reading methods through a gynocentric lens. Relevant data and materials are drawn from the primary text and publicly available secondary sources. There are no proprietary datasets or supplementary materials beyond the literary works discussed. Readers can access the primary text and

pertinent academic literature through libraries and online databases. All referenced works are appropriately cited in the manuscript.

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