

## *The Scarlet Letter* and Postmodernism

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### ABSTRACT

*Postmodernism is a convoluted and nebulous term to define as it involves a plethora of major and minor details that appear in a wide variety of areas of study like art, literature, culture architecture, technology, education. Equally problematical is to locate it historically as well as temporally. One of the principal areas of post modernism that continues to inspire critical debate is its strong scepticism of the grand narratives of modernism. Contrary to the modernist focus on hierarchical grand positions, post modernism as Lyotard envisioned it “preaches an appreciation and respect for diversity, for local differences, for the plurality of ways in which human choose to live”. This study aims to analyse Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as a postmodern text for it demonstrates a strong disinclination to uphold logocentric, monologic, absolute, universalist and structured metanarratives. It will be argued that a strong and hierarchical power structure supports and uphold these metanarratives for specific objectives of perpetuation of the governance and authority over the people. Thus, it links Lyotard’s scepticism of metanarratives with Foucault’s discourse of knowledge and power. It will be argued that resistance and opposition to this phenomenon is pre-eminently demonstrated not only by the most marginalized Hester Prynne, but also by Arthur Dimmesdale who has been one of the beneficiaries of these metanarratives. In countering and opposing the metanarratives, both establish a space for the legitimization of pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity as well as post modern liberation from the totalitarian persecution of the marginalized and the dissident voices.*

*Key words: Postmodernism; death of metanarrative: pluralism; heterogeneity; The Scarlet Letter*

### INTRODUCTION

Is postmodernism gone? Toth (2010) begins his debate on the condition of postmodernism in contemporary society with Hutchinson’s avowed declaration that “the spectre of postmodernism is dead, adding that the “death watch began, one could argue, as early as the mid-1980s” (declaring I am not interested in the exact moments of epistemological change (Toth 2010, p. 2). This phenomenon has been, as Toth (2010) argues, supported by a return to the pre postmodern condition of “meaning, truth, representational accuracy”, p. 4). But Toth (2010) maintains that this return to what he calls “renewalism” is neither simply a backlash in response to postmodern narrative production; a reactionary return to the ethical imperatives of modernism nor a revival of the traditional forms of realism that proliferated in the nineteenth century” (Toth 2010, p. 4). However, he has little doubt in saying that “Postmodernism, to a certain degree, persists” (Toth 2010, p. 4). Connor (2004) makes a similar kind of assertion in his introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Starting with Clov’s statement in Thomas Becket’s *Endgame*, “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished,” Connor writes, “surely, the first thing to be said about postmodernism, at this hour, after three decades of furious business and ringing tills, is that it must be nearly at an end” (2004, p. 1). But like the game of chess forming the title of

Becket's play, Connor writes, "the endgame is not the end of the game, but the game of ending that forms part of it and may be looked towards from the beginning" (2004, p. 1). Therefore, the "the sweet sorrow of taking leave of postmodernism may be prolonged for some time yet" (2004, p. 1).

## FUNDAMENTALS OF POSTMODERNISM

Born in 1972, the postmodern phenomenon continues to inspire conceptual debates across the disciplines. Certainly, it is a complex term to define as it encompasses several dimensions of the contemporary society. It also involves a plethora of major and minor details that appear in a wide variety of areas of study like art, literature, culture architecture, technology, and education. "A great deal of complexity", writes Cilliers (1998) also rises because "a number of theoretical approaches loosely (and even incorrectly)" have been "bundled together under the term postmodernism" (p. xiv). But, whatever the exact definition of the term, the consensus is that it denotes the end of single and universal worldview. "The postmodern ethos resists unified, all encompassing, and universally valid explanations (Granz 1996, p. 12). It focuses on "relativism of truth, pluralism, and centerlessness" (Granz 1996, p. 13) that signifies the simultaneous existence of plurality of truths. There is no clear shared focus, common standard or central legitimating myth that unites divergent elements of society into a single whole (Granz 1996).

Derridean "deconstruction" provides substantial support to this worldview of postmodernity. The central arguments of this theory depends on scepticism of what Derrida termed "classic realist text" (Butler 2002, p. 18) and on relativism, which implies the view "that truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject" (Butler 2002, p. 16). But the direct and strong expression of distrust of the universal myths /structures came from Jean- Francois Lyotard's denunciation of grand narratives of modernity. He conceptualises postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Bertens 1994, p. 119), to provide another variant of the postmodern resistance to absolute and Universalist approach of modern Enlightenment. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), he critiques the so called legitimating myths ('the grand narratives') of the modern age., the progressive liberation of humanity through science, and the idea that philosophy can restore unity to learning and develop universally valid knowledge for humanity" (Madan 1998, p. 132). These metanarratives, he maintains "have traditionally served to give cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority" (Butler 2002, p. 13) and "do not allow for dispute about the value, and often lead to totalitarian persecution" (Butler 2002, p. 14). This scepticism supported by Lyotard and many other postmodernists like Derrida had strong effects on the contemporary generations in American and Western democracies. For a large number of American readers for instance, writes Bertens (1994), Lyotard's scepticism of metanarratives "served a welcome additional evidence that such large scale ideological constructs say patriarchy, capitalism . . . or the supposed superiority of white race fatally lacked legitimation" (p. 125).

Contrary to the modernist stress on totalitarian and persecutory metanarratives, postmodernity stresses legitimation of the plural, "certain amount of non-conformism and non-identity vis-a-vis the powers that be" (Zima 2010, p. x). Thus it emphasizes "break with old modes of living and thinking (Zima 2010, p. 65), diverse forms of individual and social identity, dispersing the autonomous subject into a range of "plural, polymorphous subject positions inscribed within language" (Madan 1998, p.131). Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, as Madan (1998) writes, postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open

democracy and instead of the certainty of progress, associated with 'the Enlightenment project' (of which Marxism is a part), there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence" (Madan 1998, p. 131). In other words, the fragmentation of language games, of time, of the human subject, of society itself has become the key element of postmodernism (Madan 1998, p. 147). The death of the grand narrative thus heralds the birth of the local narrative, with its emphasis on diversity and heterogeneity" (Butler 2002, p. 13). This scepticism of grand narratives heralded a pluralist debate mainly supporting the marginalized and the subordinated (Butler 2002, p. 15). Lyotard's concept, Leitch (2010) states "preach and respect for diversity, for local differences for the plurality of ways in which choose to live" (p.1463). Connor also refers to the similar features of postmodernism:

Postmodernist theory responded to the sense that important changes had taken place in politics, economics, and social life, changes that could broadly be characterized by two words *delegitimation* and *dedifferentiation*. Authority and legitimacy were no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centres they had previously occupied; and the differentiations – for example, those between what had been called "centers" and "margins," but also between classes, regions, and cultural levels (high culture and low culture) – were being eroded or complicated. Centrist or absolutist notions of the state, nourished by the idea of the uniform movement of history towards a single outcome, were beginning to weaken (2004, p. 3).

An analogous approach to pluralism, diversity and fragmentation can be observed in postmodernist stance on art and literature. It stands for "the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes" (Madan 1998, p.132). It promotes and supports "parody, pastiche, irony and playfulness" (Madan 1998, p. 132) and "playful ambiguity" (Hardy 2006, p.7).

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most distinguished literary voices in American Literary heritage. His major literary work, *The Scarlet Letter*, demonstrates "extraordinary power, great feeling and discrimination, a subtle knowledge of character in its secret springs and outer manifestations. He blends, too, a delicate fancy with this metaphysical insight (Duyckinck 1850, Duyckinck 1985). Born in a prominent Puritan family in Salem Massachusetts in 1804, he seems to struggle here in the text to rise above this family history and establish Puritanism as a repressive and dark force in conflict with the instincts and individual urge for freedom and expression (Denis 2003). Set in 17<sup>th</sup> century Boston, the novel focuses on Hawthorne's remarkable sense of the Puritan past (Duyckinck 1850, Duyckinck 1985, Lou 2005, Baym 1970, Buell 1983, Last 1997), his understanding of the colonial history in New England, his preoccupation with the moral issues of sin and guilt (Donoghue 2003), his keen psychological analysis of people (Person 2005 & Lanlan 2011) highlighting such areas as feminism (Doubleday 1939 & Last 1997), eroticism (Derrick 1995), clash between the moral and the immoral (Last 1997), culture (Gilmore 1993 & Baym 1970), discipline and punishment issues in the puritan community of 17th century Boston (Korobkin 2004, Pimple 1993).

The beauty of Hawthorne's defining work is that, critics look at it with a fresh perspective and find the story ripe with new meaning that is relevant to contemporary society (Lou 2005). Last (1997) interprets the text as a narrative discourse on feminism "that emerge in profusion from the novel" (p. 351). Employing Derridean deconstruction, she suggests that the narrative technique is essentially anti masculine as it "speaks with a feminine sensibility" (p. 351). In her concluding remarks Last (1997) writes, "A singular, authoritative, narrative voice cannot be pinned down, enabling the text to be read according to one's own desires.

Indeed the multitude of voices creates a polyphony that allows the feminine voices to emerge and, depending on how one listens, perhaps even overpower the masculine” (p. 373). This study aims to analyse Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as a postmodern text for it demonstrates a strong disinclination to uphold logocentric, monologic, absolute, Universalist and structured metanarratives. It will be argued that a strong and hierarchical power structure supports and uphold these metanarratives for specific objectives of perpetuation of the governance and authority over the people. Thus, it links Lyotard’s scepticism of metanarratives with Foucault’s discourse of knowledge and power (Hoy 1981, Granz 1996 and O’Farrell 2005). It will be argued that resistance and opposition to this phenomenon is pre-eminently demonstrated not only by the most marginalized Prynne, but also by Dimmesdale who has been one of the beneficiaries of these metanarratives. In countering and opposing the metanarratives, both establish a space for the legitimization of pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity as well as post modern liberation from the totalitarian persecution of the marginalized and the dissident voices.

### METANARRATIVES IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

*The Scarlet Letter* is an American classic (Baym 1996), embodying certain features of allegory and romance (Branch 1982) to highlight intricacies in the life of the principal protagonists, Hester and Dimmesdale. The narrative is fundamentally concerned with Hester’s post adulterous torturous existence, her moral dilemma, and punishment (social, legal, religious, and psychological) and her final redemption at the end of novel. Defying the state apparatuses, Hester voluntarily decides to settle in Boston, undertaking acts of charity and thus conquering sin. Voluntarily again, she decides to continue wearing “A” on her bosom as the letter has assumed a phenomenal shift in meaning from association with sin to association with able-ness. Dimmesdale has his own share of the punishment after his involvement with Hester in adulterous relationship. He has to pass through terrible sense of guilt, leading to self-torture and death.

Metanarratives in the text emanate from a centre, resembling totalitarian and monologic hierarchical power structure of non democratic societies. Therefore, they contend for their absolute domination in all conditions as well as marginalization of the populace. Furthermore the particular point of origin of the metanarratives establishes strong ties between knowledge and power. As a generic term, power structure implies delegation of power “to specific men to achieve some goals in any society” and involves “the function of executing determined policies\_ or seeing to it that things get done which have been deemed necessary to be done” (Hunter 1953, p. 129). Historically and politically, the term power structure is generally used to describe the establishment of cooperative federation by the powerful oligarchy comprising military, elite civil servant class, politicians, industrialist, media personals and most importantly the senior clergy. The political purpose of the powerful oligarchy is to administer control over the masses and perpetuate a typical agenda of exploiting the resources to their exclusive advantage. Although ignored in critical debate on the power structure, clergy is the most significant part of the oligarchy as it allows use of religion for some specific goals. .

Boston polity in the novel reflects a similar power structure which functions as the origin of political, social, cultural, patriarchal and religious metanarratives with the same ideological points that characterize a totalitarian power structure. A very purposeful, effective and close concordance among different groups like civil administration, military, magistracy and the clergy has been established and effectively demonstrated in the whole text.

Collectively this association constitutes oligarchy that aims at totalitarian persecution of the majority, denying them polyphonus, heterogeneous, plural truth, identity and culture. This factor makes *Scarlet Letter* representative of several undeveloped and developing postcolonized polities, where certain religious groups have effectively sided with the political and military oligarchy for defined political interests and served as an influential determinant of power relation in the society. Nasr (2004) and Engineer (1996) have highlighted this role of the religious factions in Pakistan's politics. The "Balcony" in the novel in particular demonstrates a structure of deep concordance between the political and religious authorities in the existing social set up. Here Governor Bellingham who represents the political and bureaucratic set up and revered John Wilson (the eldest clergyman in the city) have assembled to mark a unified show of authority. Chapter XXII (Procession) also demonstrates the effective coalition between the administrative and religious forces in the polity. Led by the military band, the civil and the religious classes walk in ostentatious style on national holiday to mark their material, administrative and even spiritual infallibility/superiority. The novelist brings to light this factor in his explanation of the civil class posture.

In this context, the "balcony" and the "market place" represent two contrasting positions. "Balcony" is only for the oligarchy, the center of emanating monologic, logocentric and absolute truth, whereas the market place where the crowd has assembled to demonstrate their repulsion of Hester's sin, reflects their subordinated position to metanarratives of the Balcony. Hester on the other hand has her place on the scaffold, thus she stands a doubly marginalized figure. On the one hand, she, as subject of the powerful oligarchy must express subordination to arbiter of absolute truth and on the other hand, she is the sole object of public sarcasm. Wearing the accursed scarlet letter "A", she is the sole object of the condemnatory scrutiny of all those standing high in the gallery and the disdainful gaze of the people who have gathered there to show their repulsion of her act of adultery. One old matron asserts that "at the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead" (p. 56). One of these women adds sarcasm to the earlier expression saying "this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (p. 56). Elbert (1990) categorize these old women as "micking the patriarchs of their community. They are no longer maternal, and therefore have no value in a patriarchal system, except what they can appropriate for themselves as faux men. They have denied their gender, their maternal power, and have no recourse in a patriarchal society but to adopt masculine power" (p. 175).

Quite clearly, Hester here is the most marginalized figure in this situation and the authorities have managed to win the support of the whole town in initiating/maintaining a punitive procedure against the sinful Hester. Apparently, she is the only figure who has transgressed the law and religion in the town. Her condition therefore constitutes the binaries of the pure and the ugly as well as that of "othering" where Hester stands apart equally from the elite and the crowd on account of supposedly being the sole perpetrator of sin and transgressor of law. She has no other option, but to endure the painful proceedings of public admonition and humiliation alone. Reverend Mr. Wilson, the eldest clergyman, enjoins Dimmesdale to "exhort [Hester] to repentance, and to confession" (p. 66). Reflecting his double talk, Dimmesdale addresses Hester in the following words:

If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he . . . . (p. 6).

On the face of it, the situation demands total and unquestionable subordination to the laws and the will of the authority. A weaker spirit would easily have succumbed to the persistent pressure and crumbled down. However, as discussed below, despite serious and repeated exhortations from the authorities she stands firm in opposition to their commands, opposes, challenges them and in fact tries to subvert their whole effort through impressive expression of individuality, creating space for pluralism and heterogeneity in opposition to centrally structured metanarratives of the power structure. Quite amazingly, the scaffold and the public sarcasm seem to liberate her from the peripheral and marginalized existence and imparts strength to her to transcend the constraints for realization of subjective position, signifying resistance to absolute truth. Throughout the episode, she stands unconcerned about the crowd sarcasm and exhortations from the balcony. She seems to live at that moment in a very different world of personal association with the lover. Only the appearance of her husband, Chilingworth temporarily distracts her attention from total absorption in her own world and brings her back to earthly reality of pain and torture.

Briefly, the hierarchical power structure supporting metanarratives in this society is characterized by certain very distinctive factors. Firstly as referred above, it is based on close coalition between the religious class and administrative authorities like Governor, magistrates, and prison officials, which provides them a position of immeasurable strength to govern and execute law as they deem fit. Secondly, it demonstrates ruling oligarchy's aura of superiority, control, immunity from flaw and even human error (Ingham 1964). It imparts to the rulers a definite position of strength where their words are synonymous with words of God. One of the citizens refers to this prevalent conception in these words, "the magistrates are God Fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch --- that is the truth . . ." (p. 39) and reverend Wilson is considered, "a great scholar, like most of his contemporaries in the profession, and withal a man of kind and genial spirit" (p. 47). Thirdly, superior standpoint of the oligarchy is supported by their economic strength. Quite contrary to the majority, the elite class lives in extreme luxury and comfort. The Governor Hall constructed "after the residences of gentlemen of fair estates in their native land" (p. 70) realistically demonstrates the luxurious and ostentatious living of this class. Fourthly, the power structure establishes the oligarchy's exclusive right to exploit the criminal law system to their advantage (Korobkin 2005). The prison in this context is a practical necessity; "the founders of the new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of the prison" (p. 36).

The stern severity, "grim and grisly presence of the town-beadle, with sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand" (p. 39) amply reflects the "the whole dismal severity of the Puritan code of law" (p. 39-40). The narrative account of the scaffold "as a portion of penal machine" (p. 42) furthers the power structure agenda as it embodies criminology, punishment, with full public show of the power. The narrative refers to the use of the scaffold for producing "good citizenship" (p. 42). But in the prevalent culture as discussed below represents their unreflective, depressed and subjugated attitude. Importantly the scaffold is entirely linked with the humiliation part of the punishment for the offender. Hawthorn describes the whole structure in these words:

It was in short, the platform of the pillory, and above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron. There was no outrage. . . . against our common nature . . . no outrage more flagrant

than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of the punishment to do (p. 40).

The power structure also stands for a stronger and predominant and religiously inspired phalocentric social order. Hester does not, thus fall prey to a typical patriarchal set up. She has to confront a religiously cultured and supported patriarchal mind set. Dimmesdale's speech on the balcony, "woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy" (p. 49) fully demonstrates this prevalent patriarchal attitude. Hester's defiance with "never" draws out a sterner response from another unnamed clergyman, "speak woman . . . speak and give your child a father (p. 50). Stress on "woman" and not on her individual name Hester in both examples links Hester's individual identity with the women and an effort to specify sexuality, sinfulness, adultery, transgression with the women in that society. Similarly, Hester has to pattern her life in accordance with the patriarchal order. She has to wear "A" around her neck with strict injunction to have it in her private life too. Therefore, she cannot dissociate herself from the emblem of sin even in the privacy of her home, or in the outskirts of the town. The letter becomes an essential part of her identity. Hester's meeting with the officials at the Governor's residence further highlights how patriarchy governs the gender in the text. Here the all powerful oligarchy plans to separate Pearl forcibly from Hester and send her to some asylum for what they think is better care. Very obviously, the Governor as an administrative head of the polity demonstrates his own infallibility and Hester's subordination, sinfulness and incapability to take care of her daughter's well being and moral growth.

Hester Prynne, "said, he fixing his naturally stern regard on the wearer of the scarlet letter, "there hath been much question concerning thee, of late. The point hath been weightily discussed whether we, that are of authority and influence, do well discharge our conscience by trusting an immortal soul, such as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world. . . Were it not, thinkest thou, for the little one's temporal and eternal welfare, that she be taken out of thy charge, and clad soberly, and earth? What canst do for the child in this kind? (p. 75)

#### POSTMODERNISM IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Dimmesdale and Hester differently and in varying proportions demonstrate an alternative to the submission to the metanarratives. In Dimmesdale's case, the situation is a bit complex and eludes explicit analysis. In the beginning, some health problem seems to affect his appearance. His mind like the body also reflects apparent signs of decay, "Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments, there was an air about this young minister, an apprehensive, a startled, a half frightened looks of being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could not be at ease in some seclusion of his own"(p. 48). He looks noticeably "pale, and holding his hand over heart" (p. 77) reflecting low vigour and the depress functioning of the vital body system, "He looked now more careworn and emaciated than as we described him at the scene of Hester's public ignominy; and whether it were his failing health, or whatever the cause might be, his large dark eyes had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth" (p. 77). A persistent decline in his health continues unabated, "His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a blush and then a planes, indicative of pain" (p. 81). Those familiar with his conscientious routines of meditation and rigorous virtuous work considered the decline in health as a sign of his

nobleness, intense devotion to learning and longing to “keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring the spiritual lamp” (p. 81). Like his acquaintances and admirers, the readers are not sure of what exactly troubles him. However, gradually and imperceptibly, the most peculiar cause of this factor is revealed and the readers are able to perceive an association between his sufferings and Hester. It is made clear that his adulterous affair with Hester in the past governs his present predicament. It becomes apparent that a deep-seated guilt and spiritual crises undermines his thought processes, modes of meditation and health. It results in severe degrees of self-condemnation and life is termed as a “pollution and lie” (p. 95). It compels him to act sacrilegiously in punishing the body and soul after the fashion of “the old, corrupted faith of Rome, than with the better light of the church in which he had been born and bred” (p. 96). He even resorts to the profane practice of “bloody scourge” (p. 96), followed by intensely painful vigils and unremitting fasting.

But his renewed relationship with Hester in the forest not only brings to light the complexity of the whole affair, but also draws our attention to the fact that Dimmesdale is determined to follow the path of pluralism, diversity and individuality against any totalitarian persecution/ideology. It is apparent that despite the vigils, fasting, and other terrible psycho-spiritual afflictions, Dimmesdale prefers to carve a relative, non conformist and independent place for expression of his individuality. Guilt or whatever the psych-spiritual unrest he might have faced are not instrumental in initiating a constructive/corrective moral recovery in the priest. “Pastor and His Parishioners” very clearly demonstrates his obvious disentanglement from the persistent depressive mood and demonstrates his will to renew his relationship with Hester as the only choice to come out of his predicament. In response to Hester’s repeated calls of forgiveness, as Dimmesdale replies, “We are not Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! The old man’s sin has been blacker than my sin. He has violated in cold blood the sanctity of human heart. Thou and I, Hester never did so” (pp. 125-126).

In fact, a kind of rebellious attitude against religious commandments regarding sin and punishment could be identified in this change. A serious sin like adultery and adulterous relationship are regarded as the most desirable options in prevalent conditions. Far from regarding adultery as one of the worst punishable sins, he acknowledges human propensity to error and inclination for physical pleasures over and above religious commands and proscriptions. Therefore his pervasive sense of recrimination, disgust and torturous existence give way to emotional ecstasy, compassion and love; “they sat down again, side by side, and hands clasped in hands” (p. 126). Full expression of this change in his thought processes is evident in the next chapter “A flood of sunshine”. Past seven years of misery reflected so forcefully in morbid spells of wretchedness, flogging, sleepless night and pitiable self recrimination give way to passions, love, sensuousness and instinctual desire for love for Hester. Those seven years in pain are in fact termed a “preparation for meeting Hester in the wildness of the forest (p. 129). A definite transformation from self-reproaching ascetic to a desperate, non conformist and even defiant hedonist is apparent in the following expressions:

But now—since I am irrevocably doomed, wherefore should I not snatch the solace allowed to the culprit before his execution? Or if this be the path to a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it! Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; she is so powerful is she to sustain, —so tender to sooth! O thou to whom dare not lift mine eyes, wilt thou yet pardon me! (p. 129).

The prospect of joyful days with Hester ahead has instantaneous stimulating and ecstatic effect on his meek appearance. He feels like that of a prisoner who has just escaped

from the dungeon of his own heart and “breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region” (p. 129). The feelings carry a kind of religious and elated rapture: “His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout all the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth. Of deeply religious temperament, there was inevitably a tinge of the devotional in his mood” (p. 129). It even transforms his attitudes to the people and places, “the edifice [church] had so very strange and yet so familiar, an aspect, that Mr. Dimmesdale’s mind vibrated between two ideas; either that he had seen it only in a dream hitherto, or that he was merely dreaming about it” (p. 129) and “nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral code, in the interior kingdom, was adequate to account for the impulses now communicated to the unfortunate and startled minister” (p. 129).

These changes in his attitude also demonstrate a strange, but definite likeness between him and Hester. Both prefer celebration of the self and disregard of the established metanarratives of administrative control, hegemony and orthodox faith. As Last (1990) writes, their mutuality and concordance is obvious in their attitude towards Pearl. Both regard her as “the living hieroglyph. . . the oneness of their being. . . the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met” (p. 162) and the evil impression surrounding Pearl “has less to do with damning her [Hester] than with condemning the narrow perspective of Puritan and patriarchal judgment, and its morbid effect on Hester. Pearl allows Hester to grow imaginatively and philosophically. Pearl is not only the evidence of the sin for which Hester has been cast out of her society; she is also a source from which Hester imbibes identity” (Last 1990, p. 366).

Initially, the writer/narrator reflects Hester’s deep recognition of her “sin” as she experiences mental unrest due to her daughter’s wild nature, but he gradually distances himself from taking any hardliner’s stance to present her as a stigmatized personality. On the contrary as Egan (1995) maintains Hawthorne by never openly announcing adultery and never clearly alluding to adultery and adulteration throughout creates “a kind of fetishistic fascination with the nameless crime” (p. 26). Hester’s own defiance against all forms of imposed penalties reveals her inclination to pluralistic ways of living as well as strong denunciation of cantered truth. She faces public sarcasm, undergoes punishment, but shows no inclination to follow the dictates coming from the centre of power, and in fact resists it in many ways. She refuses to name the partner of sin. Similarly her act of decorating the ignominious “A” further demonstrates her refusal to follow the metanarratives. She even compels Dimmesdale to think of liberating himself from the bonds of established order that has kept his “better part in bondage too long already” (p. 127). In reply to his miserable utterance that he has “no other thought than to drag on earthly existence in the sphere where Providence has placed him”, Hester tries to inspire her own resilience in him, “Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened. Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew . . . there is happiness to be enjoyed. There is good to be done. Exchange this false life of thine with a true one” (p. 127). This true life obviously means submitting to the sensual self, which becomes the source of a kind of higher spiritual experience. It also establishes her position of enacting her individuality through repudiation of the established and traditional moral codes in order to live and enact a “little pastoral life without law” (Lou 2005). Dimmesdale shows his alliance with this resilience in staying out there in the forest with her, and agreeing to flee with her to some distant lands that are free from the metanarratives of control and inhibition. Hester, in disregarding the codes of the powerful hierarchy in the society resist the imposed penalty and ex-communication, thereby substantiating her faith and belief in celebrating essential personal and sensual self. She courageously faces the unsympathetic gaze of the mob in the

market place and by embellishing the reprehensible letter “A” demonstrates her refutation of totalitarian modes of Puritanism.

## CONCLUSION

Postmodernism despite the complexity of its meanings and interpretation, has legitimately supported the marginalized voices; creating space for them to express their subjective positions to withstand and subvert totalitarian persecution and institutional exploitation. In contemporary multicultural polities, this phenomenon empowers the marginalized and the subordinated subjects in defining their existence in the face of overpowering grand structures. *The Scarlet Letter* as discussed might be termed as an essential postmodern text as through the principal characters’ struggle, it distances itself from modernist paradigms of acquiescence to Universalist myths. Additionally, and purposefully, it strongly supports the marginalized to provide scope as well as space for the polyphonus identities. It appears quite meaningfully that each of the principal characters’ response to the monolithic political and cultural, metanarrative demonstrates their resistance to it. A great deal of convergence in fact appears in their response to the strong and stifling metanarratives. This convergence enriches the literary representation and adds versatility to the literary debate. It also reveals a fascinating account of how individuality and plurality is created, maintained and nourished against overwhelming forces of authority, exploitation, subjugation and persecution. In its broader sense, this factor embodies a postmodernism spirit of defiance against possible means of hegemony, control and persecution in a social set up.

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