Analysis on Hawthorne’s Eco-Feminist Consciousness from the Movie The Scarlet Letter

Jing WANG*
Xi’an University of Technology, Xi’an, Shaanxi, China
ypwjzr@aliyun.com
*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s masterpiece The Scarlet Letter receives extensive attention from the public. It has also been adapted as a movie. There are many different comments made by literary critics on the author’s background, writing styles and social significance. This essay applies eco-feminist theory to the interpretation of the movie by analyzing the relationships between women and men, women and nature, and community and nature, thus exploring Hawthorne’s eco-feminist consciousness and revealing his desire of building a harmonious world among men, women and nature.

Introduction

The classic movie The Scarlet Letter is adapted from the novel of the same title by Nathaniel Hawthorne, starring Demi Moore, and it is a huge hit in public. As a romance, over a century, it has enjoyed popularity and become one of the classics in American Literature. Literary critics analyze the story in many different aspects such as the emblematic qualities, the thematic concerns, and religious archetype. Eco-feminism is a new kind of literary criticism theory combined environmentalism with feminism. It says that in the patriarchal society, everything from social attitude to social system should follow the dominance of men. Men view the nature and women as an alien power, and want to conquer and rule them. Eco-feminism focuses on the close relationship between nature and women, tries to find out if there exists the special links between debasing nature and debasing women. It strongly protests against the oppression for nature and women in the patriarchy community, and proposes to build a harmonious social relationship between people to people, and human to nature.

The movie, with powerful religious overtones, reflects Hawthorne’s eco-feminist consciousness. He is deeply influenced by Calvinism when he was young. He himself is not a Puritan in fact, but an heir to the Puritan convention. On one hand, he inherits characteristic Puritan preoccupations with original sin, with guilt and with redemption; and on the other hand, he distrusts the Puritan brutal attitude toward the sin. The Scarlet Letter takes place in this context where human nature has been destroyed and strangled by Puritanism. Influenced by Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne shows great sympathy for the marginalized women in the society and thinks deeply about their social position and status because they do not have any right in the male-dominated society.

The story gives an extraordinary insight into the norms of American Puritan society in the 17th century Boston where women are persecuted emotionally and physically by Puritanism. Hester, the leading character in the film, is denounced and punished by the Puritan community because she commits “adultery”, and thus is doomed to wear a scarlet “A”, the mark of adultery and the symbol of shame, on her bosom all the time. She is brave and determined enough to encounter all kinds of cruel censure, bring up her daughter alone, and get on the way to the redemption. After quietly enduring the humiliation for seven years, she finally gains people’s respect with her diligence and goodness. In the film, in a background of the desolate wilderness, the reckless rule of nature by men is a complete contrast to the harmonious mixture of women and nature. The subordinate position of women and nature is re-interpreted, which contains many ideas of eco-feminism.
This paper tries to apply eco-feminist ideas to the reexamination of the movie, and analyze the relationship among women, men and nature, thus revealing Hawthorne’s eco-feminist consciousness, whose aim is at creating a harmonious, ecological society for human and nature.

**Patriarchy and Nature - Men Destroy Nature**

In the patriarchal society, both the exploited nature and the oppressed women are marginalized for they are regarded as subordinate and inferior to men. Hence, no right of having a voice would be given to them in the patriarchy community. Men are superior to nature and women so that they should be the only dominators and rulers beyond any question in the community. In the film, this cruel reality can be seen from the display of nature scenery at the beginning.

When Hester is paraded through the streets for shame, the dark and desolate wilderness is the nature scenery which represents the gloomy and chilling environment conquered by the patriarchy community. The colonists in New England invade and destroy once the beautiful environment. Exposed to the wind and rain, the prison looks fierce and horrible. Along the suffocative and terrible road, there stands great burdock, puncture vine, some toxic and deadly plants, here and there on the grass. They flourish mainly because they match well with the poisonous fruit of the civilized society -- the prison. The movie displays a crude and brutal invasion for nature by men in an ironic way. The desolate wilderness is a symbol of evil while the prison is a tool to maintain the patriarchal dominance. It is impossible for any prisoner to get away with the severe punishment. The conquest of desolate wilderness by men is to guarantee patriarchy; therefore the desolate wilderness is the first thing to get trampled underfoot and marginalized in such a male-dominated society.

In the film, the next nature scenery is displayed sarcastically in the garden of Bellingham, who is the top governor of the community, and the representative of patriarchy. The usual flowers and trees in garden are replaced by cabbages and vines with a big, round and gold pumpkin, because the natural decoration of flowers and trees is thought to be absolutely unnecessary, and it is in vain to plant them in such a hard ground and harsh environment. The big gold pumpkin seems to be the only colorful ornament in this new colony. All the nature scenery makes it clear that men intrudes nature roughly.

Eco-feminist believes that the system of patriarchy is repressing “naturalized” women while repressing “feminized” nature. The usual beautiful nature now becomes a wasteland and wilderness. The dilapidated wharf in the town, and “the richest ornament” – a big gold pumpkin in the garden are a terrible scene after oppression, which can be seen as a silent defiance to the oppression.

**Patriarchy and Women - Men Oppress Women**

The story takes place in the 17th century, Boston, where the patriarchy plays a leading role. The patriarchal dominators of Puritan community set up tougher laws and religious rules there to fool, deceive, and imprison women. They are very strict in regulating behavior of women and imposing a heavy penalty. Hester is young and pretty, with an elegant figure, abundant glossy dark hair and deep-set black eyes. When she is young, and knows nothing about love, she married Chillingworth, a complete villain in the story, who is a small, thin, and lonely scholar, isolating himself from the world, in his quest for knowledge. Deficiency in human warmth, as his name suggested, Roger Chillingworth’s stooped and deformed figure reflects his distorted soul. However, he looks calm, intelligent and knowledgeable, and his bleared eyes, has a strange and penetrating power under the lamplight. Even after marrying Hester, he spends most of his time alone in his study, rather than caring about Hester, his wife. He views his wife as a mere appendage to him in his life. In fact, he himself admits that his marriage to young and pretty Hester is false, unhealthy and abnormal. However, he doesn’t feel guilty. Chillingworth never regards Hester as an independent woman who has her own needs and her own ideas. In contrast, he sees Hester as his own possessions. Whether it is love or hate, whether it is right or wrong, Hester should completely belong to him, never rebel against him because men are always the hard core of the whole male-dominant community. However, to poor
Hester, there is no mutual understanding and communication between her and her husband; she gains no love but loneliness in this undesirable marriage. In this community, men rule women, making women subordinate to them, and women must submit themselves to men unconditionally. In other words, matrimony is an important way for women to be devoured by the patriarchal community, which makes women lose themselves completely.

Her lover Dimmesdale, the most complex character in the story, is young, pale and physically delicate, with large melancholy eyes and a tremulous mouth suggesting great sensitivity. Hawthorne portrays Dimmesdale as a hypocritical minister who estranges from his congregation because in his name, “dim” means “not bright” and “dale” means “valley”, thus the name “Dimmesdale” hints that the minister’s inner mind is like a deep and hidden valley, inaccessible to the community. As an influential public minister, Dimmesdale is well-educated, philosophically minded, and eloquent in his sermons. But privately, he is cowardly, selfish, and weak-minded. He never sees Hester as equal as him, too. His frail and weak appearance could not conceal his sanctimonious and hypocritical innate character. He falls in love with Hester and becomes the adulterer, but dares not to acknowledge Hester and Pearl as his wife and daughter openly when Hester has been questioned on the scaffold. He is afraid that his bright future would be ruined if Hester reveals his name. He is a pious minister publicly, but cannot resist the profane temptation privately. Although he is Pearl’s father, Dimmesdale remains silent so that he can continue to do God’s work as a minister, which makes Hester bear severe punishment alone. He finds excuses for his weakness and indecisiveness, when he suggests that his divine God’s work may justify his villainy and may justify the concealment of a sin. He keeps his dreadful secret but suffers a lot both spiritually and physically. Living with the guilt, he seems to be a coward during these seven years, and is afflicted by the soul-punishment all the time. Obviously, the character of Dimmesdale is exactly lack of masculinity. However, in the patriarchy community, firmness and courage of men are valued. Only women could be feeble, hesitant and passive. Therefore, the portrait of Dimmesdale is set off by contrast to show how strong, how firm and how brave Hester is, which serves as the defiance of the prejudice and oppression for women in such a male-dominated community.

These two male figures, intensely selfish, are typical of most men in the community at that time actually. They lose themselves while achieving their goals, so they are no longer the men of value; instead, they are wretched and contemptible, compared with courageous Hester.

Hester has not only been hurt by the two male figures, but also been disparaged, oppressed and repelled by the patriarchy community which values androcentrism at the time. Because she commits adultery, the governors in Boston punish her severely by wearing the scarlet “A” all the time on her bosom. She is exposed publicly for shame, thus being banished and repelled by the whole society. The reason why she is deserted is not just because she commits a sin, but largely because she, a woman, commits adultery, which could never be accepted by the male-dominated community.

Even in the governor Bellingham’s hall where the ultimate authority resides, Hester is forced to waive her right to her daughter, Pearl. It means that her right as a mother, the most basic right for a woman, would be deprived. Anthropocentrism and patriarchy put women and nature on the edge of the community; women as well as nature are deprived of the right of discourse, because they are considered to be subordinate to men, in the patriarchy community where the domination ethic becomes the primary pattern in people’s relationship; and also they are considered to be the “resources” that can be exploited and oppressed by men. At that time, men discriminate against women, rule and dominate women, and even persecute women from every aspect. However, it is the rigid laws in the patriarchy community that morally justify all the discrimination, domination and oppression by men.
Women and Nature - Women Coexist Harmoniously with Nature

Eco-feminists believe that women have a much closer relationship with nature than men. Women and nature build a harmonious world in which they interrelate and interact. Besides, in many literary works, people often compare nature to mother. In China, the Yellow river is often likened to mother.

In the movie, nature plays a positive role in offering Hester comfort and hope. A wild rose bush can be seen as a symbol of nature. Hester has a good looking just like a rose. When she is sent for trial as a sinner, and when she bravely refuses to tell the lover’s name and faces the humiliation on the scaffold alone, Hester has appeared more lady-like. She is more beautiful, more graceful, and more charming than ever before. On the scaffold, there is a young and elegant woman, wearing the mark of shame upon her bosom— the scarlet letter A which is made in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread. Its exquisite craftsmanship makes it much more like an art work. It is her inborn pride, passion and firmness that sustain her to wear the scarlet “A”, from the opening scene until she dies. All her distinctive personalities are also shown in her relationship with Dimmesdale, in her love and affection for Pearl, in her defiance of Governor Bellingham to maintain a mother’s right, and even in her words to Chillingworth. She is much more like a rose with thorns, beautiful but inviolable.

In the movie, the forest can also be seen as another symbol of nature since it is original, natural, and environment-friendly. It means free, energetic, but uncertain and gloomy. In the forest, old trees reaching in to the sky and the tangled vines keep out the sunshine, which makes the forest dim and dark, hiding gloominess, mystery and danger. But it is full of vigor, rebellious and uncontrollable, far away from the stifling Puritan community. Hence, it is a place for women to against the old forces and to emancipate from the restrictions of patriarchy.

In the Puritan community, Hester experiences lots of discrimination and abuse. On one hand, she is a public nuisance due to her sin; on the other hand, she must keep secret for her lover and endure the coldness and condemns alone. All of this afflicts her very much, and despair prevails in her mind. Therefore, she has her beautiful hair cut and puts on plain clothes, like a withered flower. She was in a stage of numbness, without energy and vitality. However, only in nature, in the forest that is far away from the control of the cruel community, can Hester be released completely. She can breathe the fresh air, regain her energy, do whatever she wants, and enjoy the freedom. She discards the shackles of the Puritan society, throws away the red-hot mark of shame, searches her spiritual driving force, calms down, and gains her inner peace. She says “See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!” She restores self-confidence and holds out hope for life again in the forest. It is the nature that helps Hester extricate herself from the marginalized straits. Hester is vitalized.

People in Puritan community are required to strictly adhere to the religious laws and rules. Otherwise, they would be severely punished even if breaking the laws a little. In the forest, there is no restriction against humanity, so everyone can enjoy freedom and peace here. That’s why the forest is seen as the opposite to the Puritan community. It is the evil and mystery incarnate from the view of the patriarchal dominators. It is in the forest that Hester falls in love with Dimmesdale and gives birth to Pearl, a sweet fruit of their love; it is in the forest that Hester regains her courage and confidence in life; and it is in the forest that Hester completes her redemption. Through her diligence, sincerity and kindness, Hester receives respects from others. Eventually, the significance of scarlet “A” has been translated from “adultery” into “able”, and “angel”. Hester gets resurrection and rebirth. She is accepted by the community. Nature gives a new life to Hester, and makes her a real human being. It constitutes a harmonious whole between Hester and the real world.

Pearl, as her name suggested, is still the embodiment of nature. She was born in forest, and has a close tie with the nature. So she is the beloved daughter of both Hester and nature. She is smart, imaginative, inquisitive, determined, and sometimes obstinate. Like her mother, the little girl is seen as subordinated to the community. She is abandoned by the society because she is regarded as a little evil, which makes her solitary. But when she returns to the forest, she becomes active, lovely and energetic. The birds and squirrels are all her close friends. Trees and flowers bring her endless joy.
She integrates into the nature, and forgets the unfairness and maltreatment from the Puritan community. Pearl is the incarnation of nature; she stands for a hope of people pursuing a bright future, and also she conveys a truth that people would pay a price in the pursuit of happiness.

Conclusion

From the tragic love story, Hawthorne depicts a cruel and brutal Puritan community on one hand; on the other hand, he wants to seek a way out for the oppressed women. Therefore, through revealing the oppression of women and nature by men, and the links among them, Hawthorne makes the theme of the story clear: a harmonious community based on the equality between men and women, men and nature, as well as community and nature should be established. That is what his eco-feminist concept shows. Women can pursue their own happiness and have the sexual equality in building harmonious relationships with all creatures.

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