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Strength, Thy Name is Woman: Subversion of Gender Identities in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract

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Key Words: Deconstruction, Gender Identities, Social Construction

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**Strength, Thy Name is Woman:
Subversion of Gender Identities in
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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter depicts a strong woman; Hester Prynne, who challenges traditional concept of gender by showing those traits that are mostly associated with men. She is strong, brave and independent. On the other hand, men are weak, coward and dependent. This is symbolic from a Deconstructionist feminist point of view that gender is a social construct rather than natural. Society assigns roles to man and woman, however, these roles are not inherent in nature rather socially constructed and culturally practiced. Therefore, gender roles can be subverted. Hester Prynne is a woman of wondrous strength who challenges and subverts conventional view and Shakespearean idea of woman as frail and weak and shows herself a strong woman. In contrast, characters like Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are embodiment of frailty. This paper focuses on the subversion of gender identities and challenging Shakespearean idea of woman as frail and weak.

Keywords: [Deconstruction](#), [Gender Identities](#), [Social Construction](#)

Introduction

Shakespeare famously asserted "Frailty, thy name is woman". It reflects a deeply entrenched culture "where masculine values prevail" (Woolf, 2012, p. 80) that considers women weak, frail, submissive, dependent, emotional, and accommodating. They are housebound and considered angels in the house.

They are either clipped hens or caged birds. They are expected to be loving mothers, amazing cooks, nurses, and comforters, obedient and faithful wives, and nimble domestic runners. Contrarily, Judith Butler (1999) states that gendered identities are not fixed but rather fluid. Heterosexual binary and gendered identities are not natural but rather socially constructed. However, these identities have



oppressed women since the dawn of civilization. Progressing human civilization fostered inequality among humankind which also created inequality among the sexes. Gendered identities were created by men who were ideologically driven, socially constructed, and culturally practiced. These gendered identities delineated women as frail, weak, irrational, dependent, housebound, and inferior, while men were defined as strong, free, rational, and superior. Historically, these gendered identities have been stressed, reinforced, legitimized, and normalized by men to dominate, oppress, exploit, and subjugate women. However, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne goes against these gendered identities. She is the embodiment of strength, willpower, and rationality. On the other hand, characters like Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are weak, frail, cowardly, and nervous. It is symbolic and laden with meaning from a deconstructionist feminist point of view. This research focuses on the deconstruction of gender through the character of Hester Prynne who subverts the traditional concept of a woman

Hester Prynne commits adultery with the town's minister, Dimmesdale. She is ordered to wear a scarlet letter A on her bosom. She gives birth to a child named Pearl. She is brought to the scaffold and asked to reveal the name of her fellow sinner. But she does not reveal it. On the other hand, Dimmesdale has no courage to confess his sin because he thinks that it will mar his fame and respect. As a minister in the church of New England Puritan society, he is deemed to be a sacred and a virtuous man but in reality, he is a sinner like Hester however, he does not confess his sin. The reason is that he lacks the courage, strength, and valor that is generally associated with man. On the other hand, Hester shows courage and strength and confesses her sin boldly in public. If looked at from the perspective of the traditional concept of gender men would have shown bravery and strength but in *The Scarlet Letter*, it is a woman who exhibits these traits. Therefore, it can be said that "strength, thy name is woman". Moreover, her husband; Roger Chillingworth, disguises himself as a physician and deceptively poisons Dimmesdale. In literature, women are depicted as tricksters, seductresses, deceivers, and evil. Homer in *Iliad* calls a woman a fiend and evil. In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures Rebekah, Rachel, Tamar other women are depicted as deceivers and tricksters. However, in

The Scarlet Letter, a man deceives both his patient and his wife. He is smooth in the face but fraudulent in mind. Outwardly, he is a savior and a benefactor but in reality, he is a fiend, deceiver, trickster, and monster.

Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are dependent upon Hester in order to save their name and fame in society. They urge Hester not to reveal their identity and she accedes. Furthermore, she is spurned, mocked, and humiliated both physically and mentally but she never loses her heart. Consequently, she emerges as a sister of mercy and an angel while Dimmesdale and Chillingworth die an ignominious death. Therefore, it can be said that strength, thy name is woman, frailty, thy name is man.

The research aims to highlight that gender is a social construct rather than firmly grounded in nature and eternal. Social construction divides human beings into man and woman. It associates certain fixed characteristics with man and woman that lead to hierarchies, relations of domination and subordination, power and powerlessness, superior and inferior, and so on. Social construction pictures a woman doing domestic duties and is housebound and it seems that a woman's natural place is home. While men are rulers of the outside world. Women's roles and place in society are secondary.

Contrarily, deconstructionist feminists like Judith Butler and others vehemently reject the social construction of gender. Butler (1999), in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* asserts that gender is socially constructed and performative. Performance brings gender into action and then it is imposed upon us. Butler (1999) states that "gender reality" (p.180) is the product of "social performance (p.180).

When one is born, the first question asked is 'Is it a boy or a girl?' The answer decides the characteristics that will be given to the child on the basis of its sex. The performance and repetition of those gendered roles will result in gendered identities. However, this research aims to highlight that gendered identities are not necessarily inherent in nature. Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*, defiantly abrogates the normative concept of gendered identities and gives rise to a new social reality that a woman is strong, rational, brave, and independent.

Research questions

- What gender roles did the characters play in *The Scarlet Letter*?
- How gendered identities are subverted in *The Scarlet Letter*?
- How men are frail and a woman is strong in the novel?

Literature Review

The Scarlet Letter has been discussed by critics from various perspectives. Terence Martin (1983), a romantic critic, in his book, Nathaniel Hawthorne says that Dimmesdale is afflicted with a devious pride. Dimmesdale thinks that he is a miracle of holiness and God's shadow on earth. If he accepts his sin, what people will think of him? Therefore, he does not accept his sin in public. Michael Davitt Bell (1985) sees *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance. He highlights Hawthorne's style of writing and the sensitivity of hidden quality in his fiction. He asserts that his writing is more subversive and anarchic rather than simply gentle and pleasant. Nina Baym (2005) argues that Nathaniel Hawthorne is a feminist writer. She shows a contrast between "dark" and "fair" ladies (p. 108). She calls the dark lady a "real" woman and the fair lady a "social myth" (p. 108). Hawthorne depicts strong-minded real women having the creative force and natural expression of womanhood. She interprets *The Scarlet Letter* as a feminist novel because it is the story of an iron-willed, self-sufficient, and bright woman who has found her fair and proper place in a puritanical and patriarchal society.

Sherry E. Adams (1972) examines man's relationship to nature and society in *The Scarlet Letter*. Nature and society can affect an individual in a beneficial manner as well as can be equally harmful to a person. Humans are dependent on both and they must establish a relationship with nature and society in order to gain their benefits and to avoid the dangers. Margarita Georgieva (2009) examines the notion of sin in *The Scarlet Letter*, explores the relationship between knowledge and sin, and focuses more particularly on secret sin. She observes that sin is not wholly black but has room for something more positive and hopeful.

Discussion

Human history bears witness to the universal devaluation of women. It reflects how man created

gendered identities to achieve their vested interests. Resultantly, women became invisible in all the spheres of life while men seized politics, history, geography, science, and so on. It led to the creation of societies where man became a god and master while woman became a subject and a slave. Berger and Luckmann (1966) call it the social construction of reality. They say, imagine a spaceship, full of young boys, lands on an island. They start living on the island and develop their own society. After a few years, a boat comes to the island with only one survivor. The boys discuss who the survivor is. Is it a god, a human a slave, or an animal? After a long discussion, they decide that it is a slave. Then the boys decide how the slave may be used. They create rules for the trade and use of slaves. Moreover, they assign certain traits and qualities to a slave by publishing a pamphlet. The boys discover that they can sleep with the slave and have children and grandchildren both boys and slaves. The little slaves are called girls who are supposed to clean, cook, comfort, nurse, and obey. The little boys are masters who learn the use and trade of slaves. They are supposed to command the slaves. This is the social construction of reality. As time passes, this constructed reality is practiced repeatedly and continuously by society and seems an objective reality. In the same way, men created a social reality that women are weak and frail. Centuries-long practice and performance have led people to believe that gendered identities are natural and inherent.

Lois Tyson (2006) says that conventional gender roles regard men as rational, tough, superior, protective, and decisive while women are considered the embodiment of weakness, irrationality, and nurturing (p. 85). She states that "these gender categories are constructed by society" (p. 86). However, when looked at from a Deconstructionist feminist point of view, the concept of binary opposites seems faulty. It stresses these gender roles in such a way that they stand in extreme positions. It is difficult to divide human life and human language which are complex and incomplete, into the two opposite extremes. That is, one term in the pair is always privileged, or considered superior to the other" (p. 254). Judith Butler (1999) in *Gender Trouble* emphasizes that gendered identities are a result of social construction and performance. These identities yield separateness and superiority. Males are separate and superior to females. In *The Scarlet*

Letter, Hawthorne depicts weak male characters, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, and strong female characters, Hester Prynne and Pearl. These characters possess some characteristics attached to the opposite side. Hester Prynne is a strong woman facing the cruel Puritans alone and fighting against traditional norms. Hawthorne (1967) portrays her as an icon of "Wondrous strength" (p. 78). She embodies those characteristics that are associated with men. From Judith Butler's point of view, Hester seems to deconstruct the passive and morbid roles attached to a woman.

It is the traditional notion that women are weak and men are strong. Shakespeare (2002) has also depicted women as frail, Hamlet says, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146). However, *The Scarlet Letter* seems to deconstruct this traditional concept as Hawthorne portrays Hester as a strong woman figure who is standing against the whole Puritan society. Joshua Kates (2008) quotes Derrida "To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy" (p. 20). He quotes Derrida that the "binary oppositions arise as his discourse's presupposition...their reign...subject...and evidence...are far from clear" (p. 21). During the 17th century, it was difficult for a woman to go against the inflexible rules and restrictions of Puritans who had been "the most intolerant brood that ever lived" (p. 98). She has committed adultery, one of the major "Seven Deadly Sins", and rejected the Puritans' restrictions by following her natural instincts. Wang (2010) states that Hester "becomes totally different from the traditional women who are always obedient to the unfair rules enacted by men" and "a new female image is born" (p. 893). Hester makes her punishment symbol, scarlet letter A, beautiful as if it is a symbol of reward. Her beautiful "rich gown" and "fantastically embroidered" letter A in "scarlet" symbolize her non-conformity to the traditional gender roles and Puritans' code of law. It is Dimmesdale who accompanies Hester on the bed of lust but he is not strong enough to stand with her and support her on the pedestal of humiliation and shame. Rather, he is a weak character who is unable to accept his sin and let Hester alone face the consequences of their mutual sin. She is led to the scaffold. She stands at the scaffold in a dignified manner against the whole community. She acts upon her individual will. When the town-beadle places his hand on Hester's

shoulder to push her forward from the prison door, Hester repels him with dignity. All the efforts of magistrates go in "vain" as "Madam Hester absolutely refuseth to speak" (p. 73) about the fellow sinner. "Hester shook her head" when she is asked to reveal the secret. She has an opportunity to get away from the badge of sin by the offer that "Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast" (p. 77). She prefers to keep her secret and replies "Never!", "it is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. (p. 78). Traditionally, it is associated with women that they cannot keep their secrets. Shakespeare (2006) has also depicted this notion in the character of Portia in *Julius Caesar*. When Brutus refuses to tell his plan about the murder of Caesar, she proves herself as a strong woman by giving a "voluntary wound" in her "thigh" but later on she becomes unable to keep that secret in her heart and starts uttering it in indirect ways by asking questions about Caesar's health to the different people. Then she says, "Set a huge mountain 'tween my heart and tongue!" (2.4.7). Hester Prynne has a powerful heart that has the capacity to keep secrets. She refuses to reveal the secret and says, "I will not speak!" Chillingworth left Hester alone in Boston just after their marriage and never supported her before. He betrayed her "budding youth into a false and unnatural relation" with his "decay" (p. 83). He also becomes ignorant of her on the pedestal and is only concerned with saving his reputation by hiding his identity from the people. He is unable to convince Hester to tell him the secret. When he asks about the fellow sinner, Hester replies, "Ask me not!" replied Hester Prynne, looking firmly into his face. "That thou shalt never know!" (p. 83). She chooses to live in New England because it is "the scene of her earthly punishment" and the "daily shame" would "purge her soul..., more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom" (p. 87). She faces all the hardships and hatred and changes her position to a saint by living at the crime scene.

Bravery is often associated with man. Women are deemed cowardly. However, it is the inner quality of human beings rather than a manly or a womanly quality. Hester is a brave woman, she is led to the scaffold where "man, woman, and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel" (p. 67). At the moments of "insult", "shame" and "scornful merriment" she feels sometimes that she must cry and shriek, but she courageously stands there with

silence, dignity, and a "bitter and disdainful smile" (p. 69). Hester is excommunicated by society and is sent to live on the "outskirts of the town" (p.87). It is difficult for humans to live in complete isolation as Hester has no "friend on earth" but only an "imp of evil (Pearl)" who also frightens her with her evil features. She also raises Pearl as a strong and brave child. She never uses the traditional Puritans' tools: "the frown", "the harsh rebuke", "the rod" etc. to teach Pearl but permits "the child to be swayed by her own impulses" (p. 96). When the other children gather about her, Pearl grows "positively terrible in her puny wrath, snatching up stones to fling at them..." (p. 97). When the children want to "fling mud" at Hester and Pearl, then Pearl as a "dauntless child" screams at them and terrifies them. Bravery is to accept the sin and face its consequences. Hester faces the consequences of her sin bravely which has reduced her to a mere phantom and has become the "living sermon against sin (p. 73)". The male characters, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, are cowardly to accept their fault and sin; rather they hide their reality under the pseudo covering to avoid negative criticism. No one knows about Hester's husband and they say that Hester is the "wife of certain learned man". Chillingworth comes with the false identity of a "physician" and pretends to be a stranger and a wanderer and asks, about Hester, from the town's people as if he does not know her. When Hester recognizes him, he raises his finger and puts on his lips asking Hester to remain silent. So that, his relationship with Hester must not be revealed before the public and he will not be the victim of humiliation. Dimmesdale wears the mask of false fame and respect, he is considered by the Puritans "a miracle of holiness" and the "mouthpiece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love" (p. 137). But, in reality, he is the "fellow sinner and fellow sufferer" who is unable to face the consequences of his sin. Instead of confessing his sin and standing with Hester on the scaffold, he engages himself in the false inquiry to find out the name of his fellow sinner, which he was himself. He goes to the scaffold in the darkness of night because there is no chance of discovery in the dark. From the aforementioned lines, it can be deduced that Dimmesdale prefers night over day for confessing his sin as night symbolizes secret and weakness and day symbolizes reality and bravery. Hester stands on the scaffold in the daylight and Dimmesdale in the night so that "no eye could see him" (p. 140). He refuses to stand on the scaffold in the daylight with

Hester and Pearl due to the "dread of public exposure" and promises that on the day of judgment, he will stand with Pearl and his mother. Men are supposed to be brave heroes for their women to save them in any difficult situation. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* presents weak male characters—Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. This is meaningful from a deconstructionist feminist point of view as the depiction of these two characters deconstructs the traditional concept of being a hero by not supporting Hester in her hour of need. Helmer himself does not prove to be a hero and further, he says, "But no man would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves" (Act III. p.71). Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have also not sacrificed their honor for Hester.

Dependency is considered a trait of women. In the patriarchal society, they have no identity of their own and are dependent on men for mere things. Tennessee Williams (2008) portrays the traditional woman figure, Laura, in *The Glass Menagerie* as "crippled" and "shy" and totally dependent on a "gentleman caller" as Tom says that the "image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment" (Scene iii. p.19). Laura is also dependent on her brother as Amanda says to Tom that he is supposed to look after his sister as she is weak and dependent. When she gets married, Tom will be free to go anywhere. In Laura's life, a man—gentleman caller, is the only symbol of happiness who can change her life in a better way. In contrast, Hester Prynne is totally the opposite of this traditional woman figure as she does not have the support of any man but she is independent of her own life. Wang (2010) represents "Hester's noble character" as the embodiment of a "rebellious spirit, self-reliance, and strong mind" (p. 897). Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester can be seen doing all the things alone and making decisions for her life by her own "free will". Adultery is Hester's own choice. She stands on the "scaffold" alone against the whole community. She chooses her punishment to live alone on the "outskirts of Boston". She "refuseth to speak the name of her partner and does not share her punishment with him. She even does not accept her punishment symbol—A—in the form given by the society but has "fantastically embroidered" it with "gold thread" according to her own choice. She lives in Boston without the support of her husband and on the "outskirts of Boston" without the support of any man—Dimmesdale or Chillingworth. Hester plays both the roles—mother and father—in Pearl's

life. She raises Pearl alone, provides her love and affection, and also the facilities that are expected from a father to fulfill, like a breadwinner, according to the traditional patriarchal system. Hester is not dependent on any man for shelter and food but is a financially independent woman who "possessed an art that sufficed...to supply food for her thriving infant and herself" (p. 88). She earns from her art of "needlework". "Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the Governor" (p.89), on the scarfs of soldiers, on the band of priests, and cap of a little child, and "in the coffins of the dead" (p.89). From a deconstructionist feminist lens, Hester seems to deconstruct the conventional concept of women's dependency on men. Henrik Johan Ibsen's (1966) *A Doll's House* represents the same example. Like Hester, Nora is also an independent woman who negates the patriarchal preaching of her husband who wants her to depend on him and he will direct her. She opposes male supremacy and women's dependency by saying to her husband that she wants to educate herself and does not want to be a pet of her husband. Then she leaves the house by shutting the door. It shows that she cuts off her relationship with the patriarchal system and steps into the outer world like an independent individual. On the other hand, the male characters—Dimmesdale and Chillingworth—are dependent on a woman—Hester Prynne. Their identity and reputation lie at the mercy of Hester; if she speaks the truth, they will lose all. Dimmesdale does not want her to reveal his name. Dimmesdale is unable to find out the reality of Chillingworth and needs the help of Hester when he says, "Canst thou do nothing for me? I have a nameless horror of the man" (p. 148). Chillingworth is also dependent on Hester for his secret of being her husband as he says to her, "Breathe not, to any human soul, that thou didst ever call me husband" because he is unable to "encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman" (p. 84). He wants not to be recognized before the public and says to Hester that do not reveal my identity to the public. Traditionally, a woman's identity depends on the name of her father or husband. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Chillingworth does not claim Hester as his wife and Dimmesdale does not claim Pearl as his daughter. They bear no name of a man with them. Hester and Pearl are the identity of each other.

Deconstructionist feminism does not place human beings—women and men—in extreme positions but it provides the margin of being human. It gives them a free hand to choose and explore their roles and choices rather than to fit into the traditional roles by removing the divisionary line—slash between them. *The Scarlet Letter* presents that men and women can wear the masks of each other. Hester Prynne is a strong, independent, and intellectual lady while Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are weak cowards who lie at the mercy of Hester. Wang (2010) states that "in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne creates a brand-new female image—Hester, who is different from traditional types" and who shows that women can do things "that they have never done before" (p. 894). Deconstructionist feminism grabs women and men out of their cages of traditional gender roles to the wider world of possibilities.

Conclusion

In the contemporary era, gender identities have been questioned, challenged, and shaken by deconstructionist feminists. They have looked at the social construction of gender from historical, political, sociological, anthropological, and psychological perspectives. They have found that women's universal subordination and subjugation were due to the social construction of gender. It had far-reaching impacts on the lives of women. They were called frail, docile, irrational, and emotional. The creation of gendered identities that had reduced women to the level of a slave and an animal. This research will help in understanding how these identities are socially constructed rather than inherent and natural. Furthermore, it will be beneficial for the readers in reevaluating and deconstructing their views of women's inferiority and men's superiority. It will highlight that gendered identities are an inexact formula to divide human beings into warring factions and women must be accepted in the mainstream. It will lead to the making of balanced individuals and balanced societies across the globe. Moreover, providing equal opportunities to women in social, political, legal, financial, and other arenas will pave the way for the holistic development of the world in general and third-world countries, like Pakistan, in special.

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