



ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ALIENATION IN HESTER PRYNNE: A FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the character of female protagonist Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's novel the Scarlet Letter (1850) through the lens of Freudian Psychoanalysis. The discussion in this paper consists of information as presented by Freudian Psychoanalysis which notes that an individual most of the times is influenced by unconscious factors in context of behaviour, emotions and decisions. And these unconscious factors by influencing the affected person get expressed through multiple symptoms of disturbing personality traits, disturbances in self-esteem and difficulty in relating to others. The study through Freudian theoretical framework and method of textual analysis highlights the theme of war within as represented by Hester Prynne through her actions in her miserable life of romantic entanglements.

Keywords: unconscious- Conflict, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Anxiety, Alienation, irrational behaviour

Introduction

This paper attempts to explore the theme of unconscious conflict in the character of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter (1850)* through the lens of Freudian Psychoanalysis. Freudian Psychoanalysis as depicted by Sigmund Freud (1949) in his book *Outline of Psychoanalysis* that it contains the knowledge about the complexities of human mind and how does it function. He maintains in his same book that the mind of an individual or human being is a place where both conscious and unconscious forces reside; in this residing place the role of unconscious forces is greater than conscious forces (P.12). Sigmund Freud (1949) labels this residing place as a repository for all sorts of repressed memories, instinctive drives, conflicting urges and disturbing thoughts. Rennison (2001) in research article *the pocket essential Freud and Psychoanalysis* notes that Freud concentrated on the idea of the "Unconscious mind" as the main cause of human behaviour. And this is what Freud (1949) himself upholds in his book *Outline of Psychoanalysis* where he believes that people are motivated by unconscious desires and repressed thoughts, and these things when removed from conscious awareness and kept in the unconscious always retain the dynamic power for re-enactment, or reoccurrence in a disguised form. It is this dynamic power of this repository that the present analysis intends to highlight through the literary representation of Hester Prynne as to shed light on the deeper meanings, implications and understanding of psychological underpinnings.

Hawthorne's novel The scarlet letter (1850)

Nathaniel Hawthorn (1804-1864) is a well known American novelist and a short story writer. He gained popularity mostly due to his views on history, morality and religion. He touched upon the themes of dark romanticism, guilt, sin, hypocrisy and evil. His decision of using themes like sin, fatherlessness, death and veiled soul in his literary contributions in fact is an



effort on his part to come to terms with his family past life. His best known novels are like *A Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). His *The Scarlet Letter* enjoys a unique position in the field of literary art from construction and thematic point of view. This novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850) narrates a story about a young woman known as Hester Prynne who conceives a daughter through a romantic affair with a man from elite class and then struggles to create a new life of repentance and self-esteem.

Introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud (1949) in his book *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* maintains that mind is a permanent abode for conscious and unconscious drives and decisions. He further points out that most of the time human actions are influenced by unknown psychological forces which he calls as unconscious and believes that people are motivated most of the time by these unconscious desires. Further, Freud points out that the unconscious part of mind is a repository for repressed memories, instinctive drives, conflicting urges and disturbing thoughts. In addition to this, Freud says that these things which are thrown away from conscious awareness owing to its painful nature to the unconscious always possess the power to show themselves back at any time in human life. This means that the release of such repressed deep buried material may cause intrapsychic conflict or irrational actions at any time in human life. Freudian psychoanalysis through literature focuses on what is latent through what is manifest as to respond to what makes the character do this or that, and it helps the readers of literature as Guerin in 2005 writes “to enhance their understanding and appreciation of literature” (152). In the current discussion with the help of Freudian Psychoanalysis, the researcher focuses on the character of Hester Prynne in terms of the unconscious which constitutes the main place in human psyche. This unconscious is a Phenomenon where according to Freud (1949) “people are simply actors in the drama of their minds, pushed by desires, pulled by coincidence. Underneath the surface, our personalities represent the power struggle going on deep within usthe instincts are the ultimate cause of all behaviour”(19).

Literature Review

Lalan (2011) in his research notes the challenges of inner torments faced by Hester Prynne in the context of puritanical code of law where sinner is more focused than the sin itself. Walcutt (1965) labels this work under the impression of didacticism where the leading characters of the novel get transformed through achieving wisdom, self-knowledge and spiritual power through suffering caused by sin. Nabila Akbar(2020) in her research article *A postmodern approach to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"* views this novel through lens of postmodern elements like pastiche, silence, fragmented identities, chaos, exhaustion, absence of centre, indeterminacy, and anarchy in society towards religion. Swathy P and Dr. M. John (2023) in their research article titled as *A Psychological Exploration of Guilt and Social Condemnation in the Scarlet Letter*, highlights the issues of adultery, guilt, condemnation and ostracism of women in this masterpiece of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Li, Y (2006) is of the opinion that *The Scarlet Letter* is story about never ending conflict of individuals against stringent regulations of Puritan community where appearance versus reality. Along with these critical views many other critics view her character as a symbol of resilience, proto- feminism and an example of moral independence within a rigid puritan society. Though these above critical views render enough light on the resilient side of Hester Prynne's character yet there remains a feeling that in spite of being resilient, subversive and morally independent why does she live still a life of a recluse? To answer this present analysis analyzes the Hester Prynne's war within, or



unconscious conflict in her romantic entanglement and psychological experiences of such conflicts through the theoretical framework of Freudian Psychoanalysis.

Research Methodology

The research methodology, the present study adopts to examine the character of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), is qualitative method of research. Lawrence Frey in 1999 calls this method as the method of communication by which researchers are able to examine, describe and interpret the characteristics of any recorded, visual or written message. In this method the important steps are: selection of the texts to be studied; acquiring appropriate texts; and determining which particular approach is suitable for analysis. As this method of research deals with materials which are in the written form therefore the materials needed in order to support the current material are also in written shape, either creative or critical. The technique of close reading is used to carefully examine the text and identify distinct dynamics, symbols and narrative complexities so as to reveal the psychological motifs which are in line with Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. The current study through Freudian psychoanalysis sheds light on how elements like anxiety causes internal conflict of psychological alienation.

Anxiety

Tyson (2006) is of the view that a momentary break down of defense mechanism is known as anxiety. Freud (1926) notes in his book *inhibition, anxiety and symptoms* that a major drive for people is the reduction of tension and the major cause of tension is anxiety. He identifies three types of anxiety; reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Reality anxiety is the most basic form of anxiety and is based on the ego. It is typically based on the fear of real and possible events, for example being bit by a dog or falling off of a roof. Neurotic anxiety comes from an unconscious fear that the basic impulses of the id will take control of the person, leading to eventual punishment from expressing the desires of id. Moral anxiety comes from the superego. It appears in the form of a fear of violating values or moral codes, and appears as feelings like guilt or shame. When anxiety occurs, the mind's first response is to seek rational ways of escaping the situation by increasing problem solving efforts and a range of defense mechanisms may be triggered.

Research Question:

Q: 1 How does anxiety manifest the unconscious conflicts of Hester Prynne in her romantic entanglements?

Discussion and Findings

Traces of Anxiety in Hester Prynne

Nathaniel Hawthorn (1804-1864) is a well known American novelist and a short story writer. He gained popularity mostly due to his views on history, morality and religion. He touched upon the themes of dark romanticism, guilt, sin, hypocrisy and evil. His decision of using themes like sin, fatherlessness, death and veiled soul in his literary contribution in fact is an effort on his part to come to terms with his family past life. His best known novels are like *A Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). His extraordinary use of allegory and symbolism rate him amongst the most read novelists and writers of his times. His *The scarlet Letter* is a historical fiction which the current research selected for the analysis under the frame of Freudian Psychoanalysis.

The study has selected following lines from novels as to prove that Hester Prynne is in the grip of heightening stress or tension and is suffering from disintegration.

“Thus, the young and pure would be taught to look at her,



*With the scarlet letter flaming on her breast-at her, the
Child of honorable parents,-at her, the mother of a babe, that
Would hereafter be a woman,-at her, who had once been innocent,-
As the Figure, the body, the reality of sin.” (Hawthorn 33)*

The female Protagonist of this novel known as Hester Prynne born in England grew into a beautiful and attractive young woman. As she belonged to an improvised family therefore, she quickly married with an old rich businessman known as Roger Prynne. After marriage Roger Prynne leaves England and settles in Boston, Massachusetts which at that time was known as New World emerging Order. After settling his family in Boston, Roger again leaves for England on some important business trip and disappears from scene for at least two years. During the absence of her husband Hester Prynne, because of some misinformation of her husband's shipwreck and resultant death, develops a love affair with Dimmesdale and conceives a daughter Pearl through an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale with whom she has love affair in spite of being married to Roger Chilling worth. The above lines from the text of novel show that now on wards the character image of Hester Prynne would be seen as a good woman gone bad. And this awarded entitlement by society for Hester is not below any degree of anxiety because this child of honourable parents would be seen with askance due her imposed flaming Scarlet Letter symbolizing her act of adultery. She knows very well that what future holds for her and for her illicit child named Pearl. Hester Prynne's act of romantic rendezvous with Arthur Dimmesdale, who was a puritan minister, is the main point of her stress. She has come to know about the hypocrisy of puritan society and their true nature where outward appearances are valued over genuine morality. She finds Dimmesdale a weak and fragile man who hides his sin and does not own her publically which gives her feeling of being betrayed. This feeling of left alone in the time of crisis and being punished publically renders her helpless, torn and emotionally drenched. As Freud (1926) in his book *Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety* tells about this key feature that anxiety is a feeling of fear, tension or worry that occurs as a response to real or perceived threats and mostly the reactions are fight, flight or freeze. These as Freud further notes are mostly caused by traumatic events, perceived threats, and pressures of social expectations, financial struggles, or any sort of discrimination. From these views of Sigmund Freud presented in 1926, the study very clearly finds out that the romance of Hester Prynne has turned into seduction and as such has acquired the gravity of traumatic experience causing or developing pressure on her of facing the possible public shame and condemnation. Though, the technique of flight in case of troubles or difficulties as given by Freud (1926) in his book *Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety* does not work here in the case of Hester Prynne. Therefore, Hester Prynne comes with fight against attack of anxiety as is crystal clear from following lines of text

*My child should seek a heavenly father;
She shall never know an earthly one. (Hawthorn 35)*

Once again the above lines justify the presence of stress in her life because she is worried about the legal position of her daughter pearl in the eyes of society and ethical demands. She is so embarrassed and confused that she even goes to the extent of selecting heavenly father which refers indirectly to the status of being exempted by religion for her act of adultery. Hester in above lines takes the support of the concept of intentional and unintentional sin as to somehow save herself from possible denigration, guilt and condemnation.



*“Thou must gather thine own sunshine.
I have none to give thee!” (Hawthorn 23)*

Again in lines selected the study points out that Hester is very depressed and in tension that is why she asks her illegitimate child Pearl to find herself some sunshine or hope of living respectfully in society, because she cannot help her because of her own status of being an adulterer in society. She stands deprived now of any hope or sunshine in the long run and advises her child to learn a lesson and try to live a life which carries a beacon of hope and respect. Her horrific downfall starts when her husband Roger Prynne comes back after two years of disappearance, and on his return comes to know about Hester’s infidelity to him. Roger Prynne vows to take revenge on both Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Roger Prynne assumes the name of Roger Chilling worth and becomes an active part of Hester’s impeachment by Native Americans. Hester is imprisoned, convicted and forced to wear a prominent Scarlet Letter ‘A’ for the rest of her life. Hester after her Punishment leads an uneventful life along with her illicit child Pearl and attains the title of a good woman gone bad.

*...he gave her in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness-
She is my torture, none the less! The future is yet full of trial and success (Hawthorn 25)*

Furthermore, as in selected lines, Hester Prynne tells Roger Prynne that you have taken everything which Dimmesdale had given me and her daughter pearl. And now the only thing that I have with me is the illicit child who stands as both torture as well as the only source of happiness that his love has given to her. This shows that Hester’s involvement was based on true feeling towards Dimmesdale but the sudden come back of her husband has turned her life into torture and trials which may lead to any result from further trials or to uncertain success. Hester Prynne’s state of anxiety or fear of a major threat to her future happiness is more justified by following lines from the text of *A Scarlet Letter*

Hester was deeply affected by the perplexing and mysterious enchantment that frequently created a barrier between her and the only thing she truly valued-her loving partner, who meant everything to her. As a result, Hester would occasionally burst into tears filled with intense emotion (Hawthorn 68)

The researcher notices that this female protagonist is in the grip of suffering; and this misery or suffering is due to her act of adultery. She clearly expresses, as the researcher observes while studying above lines and the data which researcher extracts from it that her life has become more difficult and her sin continually hits her inner soul and heart. Hester Prynne according to the analysis of above lines is confused in her life; she has terrible pains, and cries often at her life sunken in darkness and is completely taken by psychological alienation.

Thus, the study finds clear traces of building up anxiety and resultant suffering in the form of psychological alienation in the character of Hester Prynne. The study notes that this existence of anxiety is due to her repressed motive that is through her act of love affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, she should alleviate her socio-economic deprivation and her this extramarital act may be treated as unintentional sin by the natives as well as she should be pardoned off by her husband. But, this repressed motive remains unfulfilled and as such she stands flabbergasted



regarding her future position in the society. This view of study regarding the anxious state of Hester Prynne, her psychological descent into darkness and isolation is fortified by the critical opinion of Francoise Grellet (1987) in his book *An Introduction to American Literature* writes that “Hawthorne’s use of outer form of life that is nature, objects, tangible forms are symbols of a deeper , more inward reality and the Hawthorne’s language is an attempt to extract the secret meaning from reality, and render the sense of life in visible term”(P.231).

Conclusion

The study through rigorous process of analysis and interpretation finds that in the life of Hester Prynne there is the presence of repressed fear which causes heightening stress or anxiety to her. This repressed fear according to current study is related to her act of adultery which she committed with a hope of gaining materialistic gains in life or achieving a life of grand lady in Victorian society. The anxiety or threatening dread in her is more related to her unconscious or hidden motive of gaining a life style of high class standards than to the manipulative men who came, manipulated and left. She married an old business man Roger Prynne with a subtle hope of settling down in the life of a grand lady but this hope didn’t materialize because her husband was taken hostage by pirates while back to home and disappeared for two years. This sudden disappearance of her husband shattered her dreams and developed a sense of betrayal in her. And she gets connected emotionally in despair with Young Minister Dimmesdale, and immediately surrenders to seductive moves of Young Minister Dimmesdale. As she already deep in her unconscious mind was threatened and was not sure of her instruments which she as a beautiful heroine desired to use in her worldly success. Thus, the study concludes that as she was already anxious deep in her unconscious mind about her external efforts to which the manipulative man in her life served as an external trigger.

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