11.

Anticipating the Problems of Absent Father and Single Mother: Reassessing Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Pradipta Sengupta[1]

Abstract

If R.B. Lewis's "New Adam" hero is "bereft of ancestry", the concept of the American hero – including Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Melville's Captain Ahab, Hemingway's Jake Barnes, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, Salinger's Holden Caulfield, among others—is imbued with a sense of distinctness which tends to ignore and subvert paternal authority. Thus, fatherhood is either missing, consciously avoided, or even critiqued in many major American literary texts. As an offshoot of absent fatherhood, though not necessarily a corollary to it, one also encounters the trend of single mothers in American fiction. Starting with the classic Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, American fiction bristles with a host of single mothers chiselled mostly by circumstances, and seldom by choice: Augie's mother in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*; Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Eva Peace in *Sula*; Verna Ekelof in Updike's *Roger's Version*, and Sarah in Updike's *S.*, to cite only a few. By exploring Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, this article will illustrate that, through the creation of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne anticipates some of the problems and causes of absent fathers and single mothers in American society and fiction.

Keywords: Absent, American, authority, father, independent, mother, single.

Although America as a nation has its cradle in Europe, American history and American culture largely developed from its conscious separation from Europe. In her efforts to shed her European roots, America forged a distinct identity as an independent nation, with its typical "American Dream" of liberty, democracy, equality, and human

1 Pradipta Sengupta, PhD, is an Associate Professor of English at M.U.C. Women's College Burdwan, West Bengal, India. Email: pradiptasg.eng@gmail.com

rights. D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* takes strong exception to reading old American classics as "children's literature". He insists that his readers discover new voices embedded in them. Lawrence asks a basic question about an "American artist" at the very outset: "Why isn't he a European still, like his father before him?" (2) This question betrays the basic fact about both an American and an American artist: that despite being born out of European parents, an American is singularly free from his fatherly identity. Moreover, it is this conscious sloughing off her European parental mantle to assume an original new identity that forms the premise of the first part of my thesis: that broadly speaking, both American writers and novels in general tended to shake off the shackles and erase the hallmark of fatherly authority and influence. Thus, the absence of father figures in American literature, both literal and metaphorical, seems to chime with American consciousness. However, this is, of course, not to claim that father figures are absent in American literature; what I mean to pinpoint, on the contrary, is that the absence of father figures and the deliberate attempts to undermine the authority of father figures in American literature have been missed or overlooked by critics, scholars, and readers alike. R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam* categorically insisted on the newness of American experience:

> The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: *an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling,* ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (5) (Emphasis added)

This emphasis on self-reliance and independence also indirectly suggests a tendency to shed one's parental/ancestral authority and identity. If Lewis suggested, "America, since the age of Emerson, has been persistently a one-generation culture" (9), this generation is certainly that of the present (i.e., the son/hero), and neither of the past (. e., father/ancestors), nor of the future (i.e., next generation). Carl Degler, in his wonderful study *Out of the Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America,* takes a more realistic and rational stance and suggests:

> In the New World, the future was still fluid. Europe's ways, both the new and the old, could be planted in America free of the choking weeds of outmoded habits. America would be a testing ground, but it would be difficult to predict what would happen. Some of the European ways would wither; some would strike root; still others would change and adapt to the new environment. (1)

Despite the open-endedness of Degler's observation, most critics agreed that America as a nation was ready to embrace new ideas and entertain new principles. However, I also wish to make it clear that although this insistence on newness does not necessarily suggest an absence of fatherly or ancestral values, it certainly contains the seed of undermining ancestral authority.

In Melville's *Moby Dick,* fatherhood is both suppressed and absent, inasmuch as Melville's focus is on elevating Captain Ahab to the lofty level of a tragic hero, while in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* fatherhood is critiqued and interrogated. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* the largely absent fatherhood is subordinated to the predominant role of friendship. In Henry James's *Watch and Ward,* Nora Lambert is brought up not by her biological father but by her future husband, Roger Lawrence, while the orphan siblings Miles and Flora in James's *The Turn of the Screw* are looked after by a governess. Fitzgerald's Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* consciously sheds his parental identity and ancestral name "Gatz", and assumes the name "Gatsby" and its concomitant self-reliant individual identity to pursue his American Dream. Similarly, the role of the father becomes a passive presence in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. While the examples could be suitably enhanced, the trait of absent fathers in American fiction remains indisputably conspicuous and yet overlooked. This article explores the problems induced by absent fathers and single mothers in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and substantiates that this novel anticipates, in many ways, the problems of single mothers in our contemporary age. However, I also wish to make it abundantly clear that, rather than present an exhaustive illustration of social research conducted in the relatively less explored arena of single mothers and absent fathers, this essay would make only a passing reference to some of them, leaving room for future researchers to explore this untapped area.

II

The novel that exemplifies both the absence of a father and the struggle of a single mother is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.* Hester Prynne's estrangement from her cold, old husband, Roger Chillingworth, and her decision to leave her ancestral England for the Massachusetts Bay Colony give us the first inkling of an independent woman ready to wrestle with her life. Later, her adulterous union with her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, precipitates the birth of her illicit daughter Pearl, who remains both literally and virtually fatherless throughout the novel. However, what strikes us with awe is how Hawthorne, a descendant of a Puritan family, dared to glorify and mythicize Hester, the single mother, and Pearl, the single child of a single mother, in adulatory terms in an age conditioned by Puritan strictures. This adulation of Hester accentuates into a strategic and artistic deification, as Hawthorne, through his wonderful ambivalent narrative, elevates Hester to the dignified pedestal of the Virgin Mary in what happens to be one of the most fascinating lines in the novel:

> Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, *an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent*; (52) (Emphasis added)

Similarly, in another passage where Hawthorne describes the inner struggles of the single mother embodied in Hester, induced by social ostracization, Hester is elevated to the status of the supreme martyr, Jesus Christ:

> Dames of elevated rank...were accustomed to distill drops of bitterness into her heart, sometimes through that alchemy of quiet malice, by which women can concoct a subtle poison from ordinary trifles, and sometimes, also, by a coarser expression, that fell upon the sufferer's defenceless breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated wound....*She was patient— a martyr, indeed— but she forebore to pray her enemies,*....(79)(Emphasis added)

What is singularly significant about Pearl is that she delightfully acquiesces in her fatherlessness. When in Chapter 8("The Elf-Child and the Minister") Governor Bellingham wants to take custody of Pearl from her adulterous mother to educate her in a better way than her mother, and when Mr. Wilson asks Pearl about her identity, she offers a brilliant reply: "I am Mother's child", answered the scarlet

vision, "and my name is Pearl!" (103) This reply is at once her attempts to forge her identity in her mother's image and a deliberate dismantling and rejection of a father in her life. Still earlier in Chapter 6("Pearl"), Hester's prayer to God— "O Father in Heaven—if Thou art still my Father— what is this being which I have brought into this world!" (89)— undermines and rejects the existence of an earthly father on the one hand, and interrogates the role of the heavenly Father, on the other. In the same chapter, Hester, in a rather mischievous and frivolous mood, asks Pearl, "Tell me, then, what thou art, and who sent thee hither?" Unable to answer, the intelligent Pearl shifts the question back to Hester, who replies, "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee!" (91). Hester's reply both rejects the role of an earthly father and that of a social father. It offers, as it were, a better alternative to such a father, thereby flagrantly flouting the patriarchal structure of her contemporary society. Still later, in one of the forest scenes (Chapter 19), Arthur Dimmesdale, in a frantic effort to reclaim his fatherhood, kisses little Pearl on the forehead, and she goes to the brook and washes her forehead repeatedly to wash off the stain of that unwelcome kiss (205). Thus, if in Pearl's life the absence of an earthly father is conditioned by a series of circumstances, it is approved of, as it were, by the choice of both the mother and her daughter. In other words, both Hester and Pearl, as it were, accept and rejoice in Pearl's fatherlessness and Hester's status as a single mother. The epitome of the lonely free single mother in American literary history, Hester Prynne was also the embodiment of self-reliance, a quality that chiselled the American character during the formative period of its birth and development into a new nation, and a value that Emerson so compellingly promoted for all Americans in his essay "Self-Reliance". As Hawthorne puts it:

> Standing alone in the world— *alone, as to any dependence on society*, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected— alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable— she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her.... *She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic,* (157) (Emphasis added)

Little wonder then, Hawthorne projects Hester as embodying the quintessential seed of the women's freedom germinating "on the other side of the Atlantic", i.e., Europe. Gradually, these ideas crystallized into the women's rights movement, which was not

limited to Europe but percolated through America and eventually assumed global significance. Broadly speaking, these activities can be divided into three phases: (a.) the early woman's movement (1848-1875) spearheaded by such leaders as Maria W. Stewart, Sarah Grimke and Angelina GGrimke (or the Grimke sisters), Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among others; (b.) the suffrage movement (1890-1925) and the woman's right movement (1966 till date). Although Hester Prynne, with her social stigma and badge of shame, was never associated with conspicuous woman's movement in her society, any perceptive reader will not fail to recognise the gradual transformation of the significance of her stigmatized scarlet letter, and more importantly, her acceptance as an embodiment of compassion and kindness to the people. For example, in Chapter-13("Another View of Hester") Hawthorne comments:

> Elsewhere, the token of sin was the taper of the sick-chamber. It had even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer's hard extremity, across the verge of time.... In such emergencies, Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a wellspring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. *Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a sister of Mercy*; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. *The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her— so much power to do and power to sympathize— that many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter "A" by its original signification. They said that it meant "Able"; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.* (154) (Emphasis added)

This entire passage testifies to the fact that Hester Prynne possessed the latent quality of a true leader whose patent manifestations were to spearhead women's movement in the future and to help develop a host of women's organizations and unions geared towards their cause. To revert to Chapter 8, when Governor Bellingham strongly argues in favour of taking Pearl into their custody because Pearl is her "badge of shame" (104), Hester strongly defends her case:

> "God gave me the child!" cried she. "He gave her in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness! — she is my torture, nonetheless! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me, too! See ye not, she is my scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and

> so endowed with a millionfold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!" (106)

Hester's invulnerable defence also buttresses her claim for a role as a single mother. Long before women were granted greater freedom and privileges under American law, Hester Prynne paved the way for single mothers.

Conclusion

Modern social research has thrown significant light on the conflict faced by women due to the multiplicity of roles played by them in different spatio-temporal situations. "It is impossible to be a traditional mother", argues Helena Znaniecka Lapota in her wonderful research, *Circles and Settings: Role Changes of American Women*, "in traditional or modern times if the child is exposed to other types of interaction with other members of the mother's circle who do not cooperate with traditional rights and duties" (246). Stephanie Coontz's research, *The Ways We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trip* (1992), argues that the nostalgia factor idealizes the past and sees it as unproblematic because of institutional integration and clear priorities; conflict did not occur in the past. Scholars such as Stephen R. Marks (1977)[2], Judy Long and Karen L. Porter (1984)[3], and Rose Coser (1991)[4], among others, accept the complexity and heterogeneity of the social system as having a positive impact on women's personality development. Professional women across various fields also find it difficult to reconcile their professional demands with the demands of domesticity. For example, in a study by Cynthia Epstein, *Women in Law* (1983), she argues that women lawyers who try to implement feminist principles in their practice face resistance, surprisingly from their female clients, who are conditioned to accept the male stereotypes imposed by society. Another cause of conflict may be triggered by the unevenness and inequality between the husband and wife, as found in the research carried out by Rosanna Herz in *More Equal than Others: Women and Men in Dual Career Marriages* (1986). In fact, there can be no end to such research because human life is too complex, too huge, too variegated an affair to be put into the straitjacket of any theory or research. Furthermore, although literature recreates and mirrors life, it also creates both something more than life and something less than life. Little wonder, then, that Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The*

Scarlet Letter embodies and anticipates the varied problems of modern women who must bear the crippling consequences of absent fathers and single mothers.

Notes & References

1. Some of the notable ones are the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), both of which later merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the General Federation of Women's Club (GFWC), the National Organization for Women (NOW), to name only a few.
2. See Stephen R. Marks, "Multiple Roles and Role Strain: Some Notes on Human Energy, Time, and Commitment", in *American Sociological Review* (Dec. 1977), 42: 921-936.
3. Interested readers may consult Judy Long and Karen L. Porter, "Multiple Roles of Midlife Women: A Case for New Directions in Theory, Research, and Policy", in *Women in Midlife*, eds. Grace Baruch and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (Plenum Publishing Corp., 1984), 15-31.
4. Rose Laub Coser, In *Defense of Modernity: Role Complexity and Individual Autonomy* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

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