

Space and Gender Politics: A Re-Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: The role of space and gender has been an important theme in recent academic debates. Both concepts are based on relation and demarcation. Who is kept in and who kept out of certain spaces reflects the norms in a particular society. Spaces are now seen as ordered systems in cultures that are based on the politics of power and control. Status and gender are played out through spatial and physical space and are constantly contested and restructured in day-to-day life. Space does not imply only territorial demarcations but also includes spaces in relationships and plays a crucial role in the construction of hierarchies and exclusions. Space is not merely a passive backdrop but space itself creates meaning and can be seen as contributing to the dynamics of a narrative.

With the help of Michel Foucault and Edward Soja's tenets on space, power and social justice, this paper closely examines *The Scarlet Letter* to trace the genderisation of spaces in the narrative, problematizing the limits and contradictions of the ideology of space constructed in the text in light of the above.

Keywords: Space politics, Gender, Relationships, Power play, Thirdspace, Heterotopia

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is set in the seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England where society was patriarchal and harshly Puritan. Though the women were strong and tough, unlike the genteel English women of the times, they lived within the constraints of prescribed gender roles. Intelligent and dissenting women like Anne Hutchinson and the "witches" of Salem were seen as a threat to the established social order and were either banished from the Colony or executed. In such a society, we see Hester Prynne, at the centre of attention, as she has recently given birth to a baby girl out of wedlock, and whose father's name she refuses to disclose. Her husband had not been heard of for many months and was considered lost at sea. As punishment for her "sin," Hester is first awarded a prison sentence and then banished from the city limits. It is in this context that the paper examines the space, literal and otherwise, from which she is banished and the space she then inhabits and how these space demarcations impact her life.

The role of space and gender has been an important topic in recent academic debates. Both concepts are based on relation and demarcation. Who is kept in and who kept out of certain spaces reflects the norms in a particular society. Spaces are now seen as ordered systems in cultures that are based on the politics of power and control. Status and gender are played out through spatial and physical space and are constantly contested and restructured in day-to-day life. Space does not imply only territorial demarcations but also includes spaces in relationships and plays a crucial role in the construction of hierarchies and exclusions. Space is not merely a passive backdrop but space itself creates meaning and can be seen as contributing to the dynamics of a narrative.

With the help of Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace, and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which reflect on the politics of space, power and social justice, the paper closely examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to trace the othering and genderisation of spaces in the narrative, problematizing the limits and contradictions of the ideology of space constructed in the text. In doing this, my aim is to indulge in a nuanced re-evaluation of the ways in which the early American settlers affected the use of physical space to ostracise Hester Prynne and Hawthorne's attempts to subvert it.

What is the Thirdspace? From the spatial trialectics established by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Soja developed a theory of Thirdspace: "I define Thirdspace as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality" (Soja 57). Thirdspace is a transcendent concept that is constantly expanding to include "an-Other," thus enabling the contestation and re-negotiation of boundaries and cultural identity. Foucault uses the term "heterotopia" to describe spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meet the eye. In general, a heterotopia is a physical representation or approximation of a utopia, or a parallel space (such as a prison) that contains undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible.

The Scarlet Letter is a text that readily lends itself to a spatial reading as the story revolves majorly around the prison, the marketplace and the forest, the place of banishment of Hester Prynne from the city in addition to other punishments. The Puritan elders send Hester to the prison while she awaits her sentence. Foucault states that prisons, mental institutions and

even schools are such types of heterotopias that break the subject through his reconstitution, his “amendment” and “proper” disciplining. They are measures of disciplining, controlling and punishing of the different and deviant. Hester’s crime for which she is being punished is her expression of her sexuality, the worst possible crime for a woman to commit in a patriarchal society. Feminist writers from as early on as Mary Wollstonecraft have lamented women’s lack of control over their own bodies and sexuality. Feminists have debated on the regulation, manipulation, control and agency that women are subjected to, from external as well as internal sources with regards to their embodiment. The female body thus becomes the site for gender politics. Feminist campaigns against the double standard of sexual morality have, since, challenged the patriarchal definitions of the natural. They have represented a redefinition of male sexuality as political rather than natural. In the late 60s Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* argued that sexual politics determines the power relations between men and women, a relationship of domination and subordination. According to Seemanthini Niranjana, “Whether it be the sexualisation of female bodies through bodily and cultural practices, or the gender asymmetries in accessing resources and power, the matrix of spatialization opens up a major route for gender analysis” (116).

Hester’s body, thus, becomes the space, literally and figuratively for the propagation of the Puritan morality with all its double standards. We see her for the first time when she emerges from the prison and it is interesting to note that Hester, far from being disciplined and broken, to the consternation of the gathered crowd, comes out of the prison, “a figure of perfect elegance” (45). At the beginning of the narrative, we see “A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, ... assembled in front of a wooden edifice,” (40) which we get to know is the prison. “Meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for, from such bystanders . . .” (43). And as Hester emerges from the prison, she is described as:

And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of this term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. (45-46)

Though it is also stated that to a discerning observer, “there was something exquisitely painful in it” (46). The Puritans were deeply religious and their sense of sin, morality and guilt, the major themes of the novel, were determined by the church. The townspeople are

worried that Hester's sin has brought disrepute to their church. It is through religious tenets that women are hegemonised. Women are constrained in a marginal position through the sanction of religion. Religion, along with culture, has always been the instrument through which patriarchal practices are given credibility and reinforced. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (de Beauvoir 31). Codes of religious morality and sin too are biased against women.

Hester and her child are seen as embodiments of sin and on her body she must bear the burden of her punishment, the letter "A." In the manner of her embroidering the letter "A" on her bosom too, we see Hester subverting the meaning of punishment. Meant to be a token of her shame, and instead of concealing it as expected, she:

with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbors. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter "A." It was so artistically done, and with so much felicity and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore. (45)

Appreciating her skill with the needle, but denouncing her spirit, one of the women in the crowd remarks, "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?" So we see how her dress too becomes a space for her quiet defiance: "Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity" (46). The harsh words of the women are indicative of the internalisation of the biased gender norms by the Puritan women, who are reinforcing the biased space allocated to women in the Colony.

We may interpret the prison-space as a place of play of two types of heterotopias, the heterotopia of deviation and the heterotopia of purification. According to Foucault, heterotopias exhibit dual meanings or layers of meaning. We may therefore see the prison as a thirdspace where the hegemonic authority of the city fathers is inverted by Hester into a space for gaining inner strength, resolve, and quiet defiance. So we see how a woman who

has transgressed societal norms of morality, has invited harsh punishment to teach her and others a lesson, but manages to use the punishment itself as a site of resistance, the thirdspace. The thirdspace is always open to interpretation, always flexible, vibrant, controversial and moreover radically open. It is grounded in the post modern thought of seeing a conclusion as never being final but instead as a starting point for further exploration. In the light of this argument we may understand the prison space as a complex space open to multiple interpretations where Hester undoubtedly suffers, is isolated from society but also finds refuge from the “agony from every footstep of those that thronged to see her, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample upon” (47). On the scaffold in the market place, the place appointed for her punishment, she is up for scrutiny whereas the prison offers her the sanctuary from the harsh public gaze. In a time when a woman should be seen “only in the quiet gleam of the fireside, in the happy shadow of a home, or beneath a matronly veil, at church,” (54) it was perhaps much easier for Hester to bear the prison-space than the market-space.

Interestingly, it is the marketplace, a typically male space in accordance with the male/female, outside/inside binary, where a large part of the action in the story plays out. Paradoxically, this masculine space does not serve as an empowering space for Hester; rather it serves as the space for her public shaming. The Massachusetts Bay Colony is itself a space where race and gender politics play out. Not only are the women in a disadvantaged space, the natives too are repeatedly referred to as the savages and are otherised and marginalised.

After completing her prison sentence, Hester decides to settle down in the forest, having been ostracised from the “limits of the Puritan settlement.” She begins to live in a small thatched cottage built and abandoned by an earlier settler. The forest too serves as an important metaphor of space in juxtaposition to the settlement. We may view it as a thirdspace, literally as a physical space but also as a space for contestation, an alternate space where the rules of city are not in force. Thirdspace, according to Soja is a way of “thinking about and interpreting socially produced space,” where the spatiality of our lives, our human geography, has the same scope and significance as the social and historical dimensions. The forest is a space that does not lie within the socio-cultural domain of the city fathers. Like the prison, it serves as Hester’s site of resistance and a space for her redemption. If the city is the patriarchal space, Hester makes the forest-space her own, where she and her daughter live by their own rules. In the novel, the forest is often referred to as dark, mysterious and wild and now with Hester living there, it is even more so: “In this lonesome dwelling, with some

slender means that she possessed, and by the license of the magistrates, who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her, Hester established herself, with her infant child. A mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot.”

Thus, far away from the eyes of the people, Hester creates a parallel utopia for herself and her child. The forest is seen as a dark, mysterious place by the people, where few venture, other than Hester and her daughter, Pearl. Hester exercises her own judgement in disciplining her daughter. She “early sought to impose a tender but strict control over the infant immortality that was committed to her charge” but Pearl seems to have a mind of her own: “After testing both smiles and frowns, and proving that neither mode of treatment possessed any calculable influence, Hester was ultimately compelled to stand aside, and permit the child to be swayed by her own impulses. Physical compulsion or restraint was effectual, of course, while it lasted” (77). Thus partly guided by Hester and partly by her own wilful nature, Pearl grows up a defiant and wilful child, not subdued by the patriarchal norms of the city. But seeing Pearl’s intelligent and assertive nature, Hester worries and doubts if she is human: “It was a look so intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse, sometimes so malicious, but generally accompanied by a wild flow of spirits, that Hester could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl was a human child” (77). This goes to show that a young girl, growing up to be independent, intelligent and assertive is seen as an aberration, as society, especially in those times, moulded young girls into being much less independent, assertive and intelligent. And much like Hester hoping Pearl’s nature and behaviour is not born out of sin, society too has viewed thinking, intelligent females as embodiments of sin, immoral or insane. There are repeated references to Pearl’s intelligence (82, 89) and to her being like an elf or devilish, reinforcing this idea. Pearl’s unfettered upbringing and her aggressiveness in the face of the hostility from society she grew up with, makes Hester exclaim, “O Father in Heaven . . . what is this being which I have brought into the world!” (81).

The attire too can serve as a space for political positioning. In dressing Pearl too, Hester in a departure from the city norm, makes beautiful, elaborately embroidered dresses in red colour for her daughter: “Her mother, in contriving the child’s garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play; arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread (85). In addition to the style of her upbringing, the Governor and other ministers do not approve of the way Hester dresses her child. They wish to take Pearl away from Hester so that she has a more “conventional” upbringing. Addressing Hester, the Governor says, “Speak thou, the

child's own mother! Were it not, thinkest thou, for thy little one's temporal and eternal welfare, that she be taken out of thy charge, and clad soberly, and disciplined strictly, and instructed in the truths of heaven and earth?" (93). In Pearl's vivaciousness, too, Mr. Wilson, the pastor, sees something amiss, "The little baggage hath witchcraft in her, I profess. She needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal! (98).

Society attempts to confine women to the domestic sphere is an attempt not only to spatial control, but through that, a social control on identity (Foucault). Transgressions are viewed as sinful, dark and mysterious, as they are outside the realm of control. Viewed thus, the forest-space in *The Scarlet Letter* too assumes the aspects of the dark and mysterious. Interestingly, another frequent visitor to the forest, but in the dark of night, is the witch, the old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate. Single women, independent women and women who dare to overstep patriarchal norms, have often been labelled witches. Such women are believed to have supernatural powers and Mistress Hibbins is seen flying on her broom in the night, headed for the forest. A few years later, she is executed as a witch. The forest also harbours elves and gnomes in addition to the birds and animals. It is therefore a space which is mysterious, yet the benevolent pastoral. The contradictions are evident in little Pearl too, who growing up in the forest, exhibits traits of the devil and the pious. The play of light and shadow in the forest also indicates the dualities inherent therein.

In the city, the places and spaces of power are all occupied by men. When Hester is standing on the scaffold, we see "the solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town; all of whom sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting house, looking down upon the platform" on which she stood (48). No place/space of power is allocated to the women who are relegated to the margins. There is no woman of authority or eminence in the novel. It is these patriarchs that sit in judgement on the townspeople: "Thus it was with the men of rank, on whom their eminent position imposed the guardianship of the public morals" (138).

Another subversion of gender norms is seen in Dimmesdale's character in contrast to Hester. As an inversion of the masculinity that ought to be inherent in a man of the times, Dimmesdale is depicted as weak and cowardly, and Hester is depicted as strong and brave in the face of their joint crime. While she has no choice but to own her sin and confront it boldly, Dimmesdale cannot gather the courage to own his sin publicly. He gets up on the scaffold only in the dead of night when nobody can see him: "He had been driven hither by

the impulse of that Remorse which dogged him everywhere, and whose own sister and closely linked companion was that Cowardice which invariably drew him back with her tremulous gripe . . .” (126). Hester, seeing the clergyman suffer with his guilt and tormented by Chillingworth, resolves to help him: “She decided, moreover, that he had a right to her utmost aid. Little accustomed, in her long seclusion from society, to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself, Hester saw—or seemed to see—that there lay a responsibility upon her in reference to the clergyman which she owed to no other, nor to the whole world besides” (135).

After seven long years of “blameless purity of her life,” in which Hester sought no favours for herself; rather was ever ready “to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty,” and was so helpful and sympathetic to all who needed help, that “many people refused to interpret the scarlet ‘A’ by its original signification. They said that it meant ‘Able’; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (136-37). Thus from a position and place of a sinner, Hester has with her womanly strength of character, acquired the position and place of “sacredness which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril.” The “A” on her bosom now had the “the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (138).

Living alone in the forest, fending for her child and herself, Hester becomes self-sufficient, and carves an independent space for herself, rare for a woman of the times: “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 mind” (139). Thus the banishment to the forest becomes a liberation from the sexist laws of the city. No doubt Hester had to pay a heavy price for it, but she has acquired a heterotopic space, where she has cast away the chains that bind women. And “Providence, in the person of this little girl, had assigned to Hester’s charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties” (140). In fact we have the narrator give almost a radical feminist sermon, through Hester’s thoughts, on the space women occupied in society:

The child’s own nature had something wrong in it which continually betokened that she had been born amiss—the effluence of her mother’s lawless passion—and often impelled Hester to ask, in bitterness of heart, whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all.

Indeed the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. . . . She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (141)

Hawthorne's revisionary urge to accord women a more fair place in society is clearly seen an attempt at setting the record straight, as he carries the guilt of his forefathers, one of whom was the judge at the Salem witch trials and was the only one who did not repent his actions.

Through this paper, I have tried to re-read *The Scarlet Letter* with the help of spatial concepts that show us other ways of understanding how spatio-temporal gender politics plays out in society. In *The Scarlet Letter* the play of spacio-temporal patterns can be seen as biased, gendered and othering but the same spaces are heterotopic and spaces that have complex layers of meaning. These spaces can also be seen as thirdspaces, where subversions and negotiations take place, and are another way of delving into the layers of meaning of relationships and how they work to change the space dynamics of the characters.

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