

Alienation an Inevitable Fate of the Protagonists in the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne A Critical Lens

Dr. T. S. Rajeswari

Assistant Professor Department of English KL University Vaddeswaram near Vijayawada,
522502, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Alienation as a social phenomenon exists right from the dawn of the history of man. Literary works often borrow the themes from the plight of man that puts him out of place and time making him a victim to bear the consequences. As per Hegel, it is a developmental phase in man's history. "In Hegel, alienation is not purely negative phenomenon; it is a stage in the process of human development" (Sayers, 2011, p. XII). According to the **New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought**, alienation indicates "a sense of estrangement from society, a feeling of powerlessness to effect social change and of the depersonalization of the individual" (Trombley 55). Nathaniel Hawthorne considered it as one of the reasons for the wretched condition of man. He observes sin and evil as precursors of Alienation.

The concept of alienation is also revealed in the works of many writers. The character like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's **The Sun Also Rises**, feels alienated from his own community. A few others like Caddy Compson in William Faulkner's **The Sound and the Fury**, feel alienated from his closer connections. The proliferation of literary characters who struggle with alienation is a result of the real-life struggle many human beings have with feeling disconnected from, shunned by, and unrelated to other human beings and the societal institutions that shape and guide them. The present paper is a humble attempt to discuss the theme of alienation as portrayed in short stories of Hawthorne. The short stories **The Minister's Black Veil**, **The Young Good Man Brown**, **The Birth Mark**, , **The Hallow of Three Hills**, **Wakefield**, are critically analyzed to bring home the idea of alienation suffered by the protagonists.

Key words: Alienation, psychological, religion, perfection

The clash between individual's contention for proprietorship and alienation, the indispensable fate, is very much in reality from the beginning of human civilization. The biblical citation of Adam's disobedience and his alienation from the God's empire provide sufficient scope for the ideology. The state of belonging cannot be enjoyed absolutely; either the individual should get detached from his conscience and buy his share of ownership in society or ignore the latter and enjoy the freedom of self. Hawthorne pursues the idea from discrete angles directing towards religious, Social, psychological alienations which are the prime concerns in any society.

The protagonists in the short stories taken for the study move away from reality physically and psychologically. Their staunch belief in their religion is one of the rationales for their alienation. Hawthorne intends to create such characters to generate understanding in society of the threats of estrangement. As religion is the principal factor in the lives of people during nineteenth century America, it plays a challenging role in deciding the fate of the characters in his short stories. "In Hawthorne's novels and short stories, characters are consistently alienated and experience isolation from society. These characters are separated from their loved ones both physically and psychologically. The harsh judgmental conditions of Puritan society are the cause of isolation for these characters and eventually lead to their damnation". (Litchfield 19)

In the short story **The Minister's Black Veil** Hawthorne tests on the theme of alienation with a parson, a member of the clergy. Hooper, the central character, is a parson. He appears during Sabbath, in a bizarre costume hanging a black veil on his face. The veil throws a darker appearance damaging the reality behind this accursed fate of Hooper. The people attending the Sabbath ceremony feel themselves removed from the Parson as his face is covered with the crape. The alienation imposed by Hooper is a self-announced, indicative of some negative implication, the author is apprehensive of the darker instinct that is revealed by the veil- "but probably did not intercept his sight further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things" (MBV 373).

The crape that conceals Hooper's face keeps him in darkness. The world almost loses value in his estimate. It removes him from the world giving him a chance to scan his own self completely and exclusively. The alienation makes him remain in his world of self defined standards. The secrecy behind the minister's veil is kept unidentified till the end of the story.

Simple crape becomes more powerful than Hooper. The isolation becomes the ultimate truth Hooper remains hidden as a person and as parson. The exile sponsored by the veil makes Hooper relinquish his actual personality, making him imitate the traits that mutilate his reputation and abandon his right to enjoy the company of his beloved ones. The veil is not conventional and is not viewed with the right spirit by society. They view it as a Satanic insurrection that sanctions his stance in the row of demons, acquiring the status of a philistine, a notary for evil. "The black veil, though it covers only our pastor's face, throws its influence over his whole person and makes him ghost-like from head to foot. Do you not feel it so?"(MBV 374).

In the story the veil claims its right and escorts Hooper into his coffin. Death is a state of eternal desertion; a symbol of exact truth, Hooper tracks it with the weapon of alienation, a mere two-fold crape. If the apprehension of expulsion kills the legitimate right of the individual to follow the commands of his conscience, then there is no meaning in craving for individuality in such a society. This is the positive aspect of alienation that is vouchsafed by the veil. Hawthorne appears to identify himself with the sentiments of the parson and feels that one such penance is a must for a person like Hooper to make him dare enough to reveal the truth which has long been shrouded under the mighty cloak of mere pretense. "When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!" (MBV 382).

The story of Brown, in **The Young Good Man Brown**, is probably an extension of the journey started by Hooper, steering him in to the forest in search of an abstraction which chases the conscience. The mistrust which Hooper experiences in the story **The Minister's Black Veil** infects Brown. Skepticism that torments the soul of Hooper haunts Brown, making him fall into the clutches of a stranger.

Young Good Man Brown is wedded to Faith. His love for Faith cannot prevent him from getting tempted by a stranger who persuades Brown into a forest. Lack of precision itself is the scope open for misperception. The stranger who understands the pulse of Brown throws him into a valley of anguish without much trouble. The stranger is convinced of his triumph. He leads Brown into the forest relating the family history of the latter. The old tramp brings

to light many dark secrets of so-called good and righteous people, to parade in front of Brown's visage. Brown is infected with blasphemy long before, the stranger's entrance is just a coincidence giving him a motive for isolation. "It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude. (YGB 277).

The traveller's invitation is only a pretext for Good Man Brown to walk into the forest of confusion incidentally leading into the path of exile. Brown is mentally separated from his family and other priorities that keep him attached to society. The traveler who is already in the path of seclusion tempts Brown to follow him. The fate of Brown is connected to the traveler is understood from the fact that the former's visage tallies with that of the latter. This resemblance hints that the traveler got isolated from his family, which makes him to wander in the forest, in the like good man Brown. It is sure that the latter would also get inflicted with punishment of alienation. Formidable institutions like family, religion, support the survival of the individual in a society. If the man goes out of the circle of the influence of these institutions, he becomes prey to alienation. In the story family the ultimate resort for a simple man like Brown, where his interest vests, keeps him pulling out of the whirlpool of the accursed state of isolation. "Friend," said he, stubbornly, "my mind is made up. Not another step will I budge on this errand. What if a wretched old woman does choose to go to the devil, when I thought, she was going to Heaven! Is that any reason why I should quit my dear Faith, and go after her?" (Hawthorne, 283).

As Brown cannot not bring himself under the canopy of family he goes to an extent of discarding the world and locks inside his own self, as he scares at the threat of insecurity open for him outside himself. Solitude resulting from refinement purifies the soul and shows the way to redemption. If the individual steps into the territory of alienation making excuses, becomes targeted to self-pity which spoils his body and the soul. The ill-fated alienation makes him fail to get his right to life. "This is the formidable influence of alienation, which normally dictates the fate of the victims in Hawthorne's fiction. Accordingly, many of Hawthorne's secret sinners appear as socially ostracized individuals or as solitary wanderers". (Georgieva 5)

In the short story **The Birth Mark** idiosyncratic nature of man, fuming with unrighteous intensions leading to. Man's boldness to investigate nature is a clear case of guilt. The cynicism of man inspires him towards this inappropriate deed in the garb of expository research. Adams disobedience brought death on to this earth the concept of alienation in every sense. The story of birth mark is one that of a prohibited apple alluring the protagonist is written on the lines of Milton's **Paradise Lost**, which stands as a testimony for man's disobedience. Another general truth is that man needs to understand that none in this universe can enjoy the right of eternity, implying that separation is the rule of nature.

Aylmer considers that the red mark, in the shape of a tiny hand, on the left cheek of Georgiana, his wife, is the mark of limitation. He endeavors to attain completeness by trying to remove the birth mark. Hawthorne construes that the act of defiance is a valid reason for alienation. Aylmer in the story, with an idea to prove himself above the truth tries to fight with it which makes him give up all valuable gifts in life. This directs him outside the sphere of perception, making all other assets insignificant. "Perhaps every man of genius in whatever sphere might recognize the image of his own experience in Aylmer's journal" (Hawthorne 284).

The story **The Hallow of Three Hills** is the experience of a young lady who abandons her home and all her other natural possession like security, chastity etc and suffers from the feeling of sin and guilt which keep her alienated from her home. The guilt haunts her and chases her to a forest in search of a crone who narrates the catastrophe that has struck the family after the lady's departure. The lady agrees to meet a crone at an appointed hour of the day, at the hollow of three hills though it is not a worthy place for a fair appointment. The lady though leaves the house, she cannot enjoy the luxury of alienation; she is bound to be accountable to her family. "There is a weight in my bosom that I cannot away with, and I have come hither to inquire of their welfare." (HTH1).

Young Good Man Brown is guided by a stranger in the forest with a magic staff in his hand which reveals the past, present and future. The crone in the story also leads the young lady revealing to her the condition of the latter's family. Like the parson Hooper, in **The Ministers Black Veil** she prefers remaining in oblivion, she avoids the countenance with her family members as she does not dare to face their countenance. Her separation curses the family with disgrace, which snatches her due rights and the confidence of gaining her seat in

the family. She loses hope of reuniting with the family as the severance creates a gulf that is too long to cross.

Wakefield is another character who walks out of the house without a serious reason. He feels it is his right. He comes home after twenty long years his wife does not prevent him from taking his place in the family but the lady in the story **The Hallow of Three Hills** is not sure of regaining her position in the family. The lady's isolation from the family makes her continue outside the threshold for ever. She is cursed with enduring alienation. The experience of the lady in the story is different from that of other protagonists like Good Man Brown, Hooper, and Wakefield. In Hawthorne's stories the male protagonists who abandon society, and never think to reunite.

The alienation experienced by the central characters in the short stories of Hawthorne contrasts from each other. It is decreed by their social status. Hooper's seclusion is of exceptional concern to people as he is supposed to face people with a face that could make them get rid of fears. His disguise influences them in such a way that they cannot not just ignore it as a mere piece of crape. The physician in the story, a man of strong intellect reveals his fear when he says: "But the strangest part of the affair is the effect of this vagary even on a sober-minded man like myself" (MBV 375).

Alienation is specific to each of the characters. The Young Good Man Brown experiences, a different type of alienation. He is a normal folk. He is not a man of any importance hence his oblivion in no way effects the society. He is finally cursed to remain aloof from his clan, he cannot obtain any place in society as he blocks the ways by uncertainty. Could Brown learn to laugh that is, could he learn to take an ironic view towards his experience in the Salem Woods, then he might well begin to exorcise his tormenting devils. He will never be able to dismiss their words but might learn to live with them (Williamson 159).

Aylmer in **The Birth Mark** is distinct from Brown and Hooper. He is being a man of science misapplies his knowledge for penalizing himself with banishment. This is to consciously spit out the medicine that saves life, instead drinking the poison just because it tastes good. Instead of experiencing the bliss of innocence, Aylmer tries to alienate himself from the impregnability of time and truth with an aim for unruly perfection. "The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present. (BM 775) .

According to Hawthorne, it is the individual who grieves for the loss of his place. He must hold his stance cautiously. If he is not smart enough to cope with society, he might have to lose his place and convert into an outcast. Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever.” Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (WF 306)

Hawthorne, while working at the idea of alienation tries to warrant the readers from falling prey to the temptation of seclusion. The real worth of the individual lies in proving true to his birth and gaining true essence of knowledge that illuminates his life. “ All through Hawthorne's work, there is the admonition: "Do not be alone in concealed glory. Do not separate yourself from the rest of things, so that, darkly, you can establish yourself in another world.” (Siegel 449.)

A systematic understanding of the nature of alienation practiced by the protagonists in the short stories of Hawthorne helps us to group them under different banners like sin, guilt, pride and Ego. The title character Ethan Brand in the story **Ethan Brand**, becomes the victim of isolation due to sin. The characters like Brown, **Young Good Man Brown**, Hooper, **The Minister's Black Veil** the anonymous lady in **The Hallow of Three Hills** suffer alienation due to their guilty conscience. The Aylmer, **The Birth Mark** and Wakefield, the title character in **Wakefield** try to enjoy their right of alienation and deliberately abandon the company of the society.

Conclusion:

Obscurity is salvage for those who dare not face the world; hence it is secured at the cost of identity. Loss of identity is sometimes imposed by society and in other cases it is accepted by the individual intentionally. The natives in a society do not suffer from identity crisis as they claim the right over the territory of their habitat. Hawthorne does not assert the idea of alienation as a solution. He feels it to be a risk that is sure to lead to damnation. “Hawthorne uses these characters to teach two different lessons. The first is of the damnation that is the result of alienation and isolation from society and humanity. The second is that reuniting with

society can prevent damnation and put an end to alienation and isolation from humanity. (Litchfield 30).

Hawthorne's longing to remain identified, citing the lines from the biography of Hawthorne by Stewart: "Here I sat a long, long time waiting patiently for the world to know me It seemed as if were already in the grave, with only life enough to be chilled and benumbed" (Stewart 57).

References:

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Selected Tales and Sketches, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
2. Steele, Jeffrey. "Margaret Fuller's Rhetoric of Transformation." *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Larry Reynolds. Norton, 1998.
3. Swann, Charles. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution* : Cambridge University Press, 1991.
4. Fetterley, Judith. "The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction." *Journal of American Studies* (978): pp. 22-43.
5. Tritt, Michael. "Young Goodman Brown' and the Psychology of Projection." *Studies in Short Fiction* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 113–117.
5. Manning, Susan. "Nathaniel Hawthorne". *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2 pp. 109-125 published by: Oxford University Press, 1988.