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"Female Sexuality Portrayed in the *Scarlet Letter* and its Influence in Contemporary Works such as the *Handmaid's Tale*"

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Abstract: The characters, situations and dilemmas presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* are a rich re-elaboration and upgrading of a topic that had been discussed a long time before Margaret Atwood published it in 1985. Back in 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne encapsulated the vicissitudes and strong emotional connotations of a topic as delicate as female sexuality.

While *The Scarlet Letter* punishes sexual intercourse and exposes the female sex as a living proof of the devil's mission to tempt us and lure us into sinning, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes this idea and deforms it to the point where some women are only fitted to be "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices".

This essay will show how female sexuality is treated in both works and how women are depicted as the sinful figures that, in these two cases, embody maternity.

Keywords: Female sexuality, sin/sinful, maternity, adultery, red, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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0. Introduction

Female sexuality has been a taboo in most of the cultures of the world, mainly used as a weapon against women themselves, in order to relegate them to a secondary position with regards to men, as mentioned by different authors, separately:

The modern history of female sexuality has been plagued with misinformation, embarrassment and sexual frustration... Women's desire, arousal and satisfaction, let alone their (or men's) emotional needs, are very rarely part of this picture... With pleasure so elusive and mockery of the very discussion so normative ... it seems clear that women have a long way to go before we are living in a society respectful of our bodies, our minds and the connections between the two. (Woolf)

Society that has a problem in its definition of sex and the subordinate role that definition gives women. (Hite 52) In both of the novels to be discussed: *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the discussion of female sexuality constitutes the core of both, alongside the different connotations that motherhood and female sexuality have and how the presence of an oppressive society can influence in these aspects. For that purpose, some scenes from both novels will be analysed in order to portrait how female sexuality and motherhood are treated and how women who are involved in sexual intercourse are depicted.

1. Female Sexuality and Motherhood in The Scarlet Letter

In the *Scarlet Letter*, the reader is introduced to a woman, Hester Prynne, who has been adulterous and has given birth to a girl, Pearl, and who also refuses to say the name of the child's father. The first scene to be analysed is the first encounter the reader has with Hester, at the beginning of the novel, when Hester is leaving the local prison in order to stand in trial.

Hester is presented as a tall, elegant and well-proportioned young woman, with beautiful raven black locks, a haughty smile and, a look in her eyes that would stop anyone who passed by (Hawthorne 54). Hester is holding in her arms the object of her sin, her daughter Pearl, sinful fruit of a sinful relationship, the one Hester had with reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester is then taken to a platform for everyone to see her and her baby, alongside the scarlet 'A' embroidered in Hester's chest. Once she stands in the platform, receiving her punishment, the people around her start whispering about Hester's sin and who the father could be. This criminalization of Hester's sexuality is linked to the 'passive' criminalization of motherhood. It is

not only her who is being judged and accused, but also her daughter, an innocent child who has to pay for the sins of her parents. The 'A' in Hester's chest imprisons her both as a woman and as a mother. In the words of Battan: "a vivid reminder to women of the consequences of sexual transgression" (601). The letter suppresses Hester's sexuality and punishes it. Hester, by going against the canonical expectations that society had about women, has become a very dangerous person for the people in town. Her sin: adultery, which could become contagious and a plague for the town. She is treated as if she was some kind of leper, abandoned by everyone and isolated outside the social spheres of the town. The social pressure upon her for her 'sin' relegates her to a position where she has to fend for herself and her daughter without help from anybody. The complete alienation from society constitutes one of the cruellest punishments that somebody could ever experience as we see when Hester struggles to continue with her life, being an outcast and rejected by those who had no problem with her before her "sin" was discovered. According to Wang's study, "Hester suffers enormously from the shame of her public disgrace and from the isolation of her punishment" (894).

The second scene chosen to be analysed is the description of Hester that the reader is given seven years after Pearl's birth:

The effect of the symbol—or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it—on the mind of Hester Prynne, herself was powerful and peculiar. All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive, had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it. Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar change. It might be partly owing to the studied austerity of her dress, and partly to the lack of demonstration in her manners. It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. It was due in part to all these causes, but still more to something else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon (Hawthorne 161).

Hester is deprived of all her beauty and physical attraction, transforming her into a symbol of what punishment is. Even though the people in town do not treat her excessively bad, considering her a sort of benefactress who helped those in need. However, when they are relating all her good actions, they never miss the opportunity to expose Hester's past, reopening the wound once again. That is, Hester, a woman who had an incredible beauty is forced to become an emblem of the atonement that those who break the laws are forced to endure. Her femininity is abridged to a letter embroidered on her chest that reduces her whole life to a simple action, a simple action that will define her life until the day she dies, and even after that. She is no longer beautiful, she is no longer attractive, she is no longer powerful. The scarlet letter imposed on her takes away all her value, condemning her to a continuous state of servitude in order to be able, one day, to regain her right to go to heaven, as stated by

Eeckman "As is to be expected, the assumptions that are made about the nature of her person leave an imprint on her self-image ... She accommodates to the public's expectations by acting the part. Because she is thought to be a sinful outcast, she has to appear to be one" (17).

2. Female Sexuality and Motherhood in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In the *Handmaid's Tale*, the character of Offred, alongside others, is presented to the reader as a Handmaid, a woman whose 'job' and obligation is to get pregnant instead of the Wife of the Commander since the wives themselves are sterile. Here, motherhood takes the extreme opposite position as in *The Scarlet Letter*, since some women are only thought to be carriers, and nothing else. All their sexuality is reduced to 'The Ceremony', a kind of consensual rape event once every month, in which they are presented to the Commanders while lying between the legs of the Wives so that this action of getting pregnant is also taking away from them. They are considered to be only "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 148).

The first scene elected to be analysed is the one where Offred reflects upon what being a handmaid is like. In her own words: "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category" (Atwood 148). Even

though they are seen as the only chance for repopulation, they are mistreated and enslaved. Women who are the 'solution' for the problem of the decrease of population are treated as devils instead of saviours. According to Gulick: "Just as these women are often put on pedestals as the saviours of humanity, they are also scorned, mostly, it seems, by other women around them" (51). Hatred among women is encouraged by society, creating a separation based on the subject of sexuality and motherhood. Handmaids are only well-considered when they get pregnant and deliver healthy babies, who are then given to the wives to raise them. The whole existence of the Handmaids is abridged to their breeding purposes, leaving everything else, their dreams and aspirations, their past and their feelings, aside. Their sexuality is erased in all regards to pleasure or anything else that is not breeding and conceiving. Just as happened with Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, their sexualities and the act of conceiving a child becomes a pivotal point in their lives. While one is punished for such action, the other is considered fitted only to do that, making her life spin around it.

The second scene to be analysed is that when Offred thinks of the power she is gaining over the Commander and his Wife: "It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it's of an equivocal kind" (Atwood 223). By agreeing to going to the encounters with the Commander, Offred is regaining power over herself, even if it is just a desire of the Commander. By going to the Commander, Offred is also taking something away from Serena Joy. This kind of relationships are prohibited by the society of Gilead, but as Gulick says: "trade-offs can and do occur" (53). In the society of Gilead, women are encouraged to hate each other based of their ability to procreate and give birth to healthy children. Maternity is used as a weapon to divide women, as they fight and hate each other on the basis of that.

The ability to create life becomes a weapon to undermine female sorority and reinforce the patriarchal structures of a country such as Gilead. By breaking this important relationship between women, men are able to establish their own ideas and repress those that they do not appreciate.

The third scene to be analysed is the one with the Jezebels, the women who have chosen to be prostitutes in order not to become Handmaids or be sent to the Colonies to die. The systematic categorization of women depending on their ability to produce children "deny the individuality of women, their intelligence, creativity, humour, and strength by pigeonholing, imprisoning her" (Gulick 59). Jezebels are only toys for powerful men to play with, a forbidden fruit that they are eating to 'keep balance'. When the Commander asks Offred to go to him to the 'club', she is forced, once more, to construct her whole identity around her sexuality, this time showing it off. Female sexuality is a trait whose only goal is to amuse and entertain men, depriving women from the pleasure of consensual sexual intercourse and reducing them, just like with the Handmaids, to an organ they can get profit from. Moreover, men like the Commander get satisfaction from exposing handmaids like Offred to the world of the Jezebels. As Moira says: "Some of them do that, they get a kick out of it. It's like screwing in the altar or something: your gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels. They like to see you all painted up. Just another crummy power trip" (Atwood 257). In this 'game', the Commander gets pleasure by breaking the same rules his new-born country has created, showing the reader that even the most rigid government has weak points. The humiliation of women forced to become prostitutes is a kind of sadistic kink that the Commanders enjoy as an extension of their own power and influence.

The fourth scene chosen to be explored is the one where the readers hear Offred's own last words in the novel: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so, I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (309). Here, the reader can see the hopelessness that lives in Offred now. She cannot fight anymore and decides to just let go and follow the current that is driving her, it does not matter if it drives her to her salvation or to her death. This feeling has been implanted on her by the totalitarian society of Gilead which has, apparently, destroyed every personality trait she had in order to create a loyal servant to use and abuse. Women like Offred are forced to endure calamities and humiliations such as continuous rape, forced servitude and megalomaniac 'masters' in order to survive, but paying the price of their freedom and free will. These women are obliged to give themselves up and enter a state of apparent hibernation if they want to survive (or save others, in the case of Offred). Even if they become mothers, Handmaids are treated as mere objects from which they can get benefit.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, while both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Handmaid's Tale* spin around the topic of female sexuality and motherhood, the implications are very different in each case. While in *The*

Scarlet Letter Hester is isolated and punished for giving birth, this embodied in the character of Pearl; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the sole purpose of women like Offred is to produce healthy children for the nation. The sin of one becomes the obligation of the other. The reader might be tempted to think that both of these topics are very different regarding meaning, but they are not. Both novels portray women and their sexuality as something hidden and undesirable, something that should not be practiced with freedom and pleasure. The latent truth in these novels is the role that male dominated societies have on women like Hester and Offred, whose entire lives are reduced to a single action: giving birth. The different meanings of this action depend on the novel; however, the reader can see clearly how women are treated as puppets when something regarding their sexuality has to be decided by someone other than themselves. In the words of Johnson: "The society is obviously founded upon principles that negate the rights of women" (1).

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