(E-ISSN 2347-2073) (U.G.C. Journal. No. 44829) Vol. VII Issue II, April. 2018

PURITANISM AND PARANOIA: RACE AND SEXUALITY IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S "YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN"

Sudipta Mandal
Former Guest Lecturer
Dwijendralal College, Krishnanagar, Nadia.
sudiptomandal694@gmail.com

Abstract

The fictional world of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" is a deeply puritanical world, a morally closed system that generates a fear and distrust of the "other" that lies outside its margin. But the "other" is not some undifferentiated entity. Rather it is a structure of values and sentiments that shape the very nature of "self". On the other hand, the "self" is developed by projecting certain elements of itself on the "other". In "Young Goodman Brown" the self is a highly contested zone. The invasion of the forces of the other shows the stability of the self to be precarious only. Its stability is maintained largely through projection and selective sublimation of subversive elements on and into something else and fabrication of a "false" affiliation that establish the identity of the "self" in the first place. But it should be clear that identity is formed along different convergent lines of ideologies and interests. There is always a tension involved in the process. Therefore, paranoia, an exaggerated form of fear that results in psychosis, can be considered as a natural result of this process. In "Young Goodman Brown" this paranoia has two dimensions-one of race and the other of sexuality.

Keywords: Puritanism, race, paranoia, sexuality.

Introduction:

Although, for most of the contemporary critics and, for many twentieth century critics as well, the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) appeared as allegories per excellence, or as works that create, in his own words, a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy land", thereby promoting the image of Hawthorne as a romancer who "seemed intent upon liberating his tales and novels from the everyday world", recent critics have gone against this critical tradition in order to scan his works for ideological and cultural traces (Person 16). Indeed, as Leland S. Person points out, many of Hawthorne's works pay "careful attention to historical settings" (16). This is true in case of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and very significant, as my reading shows, in case of his short story "Young Goodman Brown", which is set in his ancestral village Salem and in his Puritan past. The personal connections do not stop here. The protagonist's father and grandfather are modeled on

(E-ISSN 2347-2073) (U.G.C. Journal. No. 44829) Vol. VII Issue II, April. 2018

Hawthorne's own ancestors whose actions formed a large basis for the writer's sense of guilt and uneasiness regarding Puritanism. It is true that the naming device in the short story follows the rules of allegory: Faith is the name of the wife and, the protagonist's name clearly directs our attention to his moral nature. But it is really more complex than that. The name of the wife itself becomes the locus of a crucial irony. The name of the protagonist, on the other hand, foregrounds and, at the same time, problematizes his psychological set up. To some extent, the story presents an allegorical pattern that is itself a critique of allegorical representation. This is clear in Hawthorne's treatment of Puritanism as a cultural and political structure.

Discussion:

It is not enough to "associate Puritanism with superstition, excessive moralism, intolerance, and patriarchal oppression", important as that association is for our understanding of the setting and the characterization in the story; Puritanism must be understood as a "utopian social philosophy" that "recognized the opportunity to build a new society literally from the ground up" (Person 18). Indeed, the early colonial enterprise in America was, to a great extent, a Puritan project that located a New Eden in the "virgin" land and envisaged the coming of a New Jerusalem, an ideal political society governed solely by the rules of religion and morality. The use of the term "virgin land" in this context is problematic since a colonial encounter with the aboriginals was inevitable and bore disastrous consequences to both sides. The Puritan self was developed along two apparently conflicting strategic lines: on the one hand the new world presented itself to the Puritan imagination as a "pure" space with myriad possibilities; on the other hand, it was "the wilderness", a mysterious and perilous entity that had to be dealt with. The wilderness haunts the moralistic imagination of the Puritan as both "natural" and "evil", something to grapple with, something that defines the very self which evolves in opposition to it. Therefore, the Puritan colony, like the Puritan self, evolved as a political and cultural centre, and placed at the margin/periphery the other-the racial other/ the demonic other-that nonetheless served as the basis for "self"-definition. This results in tension, or to be more accurate, paranoia that involves a fear of losing the "self"-formation. Subversive elements are to be contained or exorcised. These subversive elements may be of "external" origin, or of "internal" type. To form the discourse of the "self", the "self" must first either project its own problematic aspects (like moral qualities) on the "other", or sublimate its more dangerous aspects into relatively harmless ones. Therefore, Joel Pfister's comment on the Puritan's zeal as "a cocksure cultural and economic energy that uses religion as an imperialist alibi to persecute Natives and dissenters" is too straightforward, if not too simplistic (37).

Just as Puritanism is a highly fluid combination of ideologies, so Hawthorne's attitude towards his Puritan past is highly ambivalent. As Pfister so optimistically posits, Hawthorne "had an admirable self-critical inclination to explore beyond his own ostensible ideological

preferences" (36). It implies that the author will problematize history and contemporary culture even when such problematization goes against his ideological stance. In "Young Goodman Brown", as in Hawthorne's many other works, historical setting does not defamiliarize, rather drags history into a lively conversation with the contemporary problems. It is obvious that in "Young Goodman Brown" Hawthorne severely criticizes the actions of his Puritan ancestors. Brown's companion, who is actually the Devil himself, tells him:

> I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war (Hawthorne 26).

These two figures can be identified: the first one refers to William Hathorne, the author's great-great-great grandfather; the name of the Quaker woman was Ann Coleman (Person 16-17). The second one may refer to this person's son. Interestingly, the devil's answer comes as a corrective to Brown's naïve conception of his family history, "My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs…."(Hawthorne 26)

Brown's version of his personal history and the history of Puritan settlement curiously evades the elements of racial tension and violence. He has created a false affiliation for himself and has subscribed to a false notion of security whereas the construct of the Puritan Self has always been unstable. As Hawthorne very cleverly shows, the Devil, having a similarity of appearance with Brown's father, symbolically replaces him. Thus, the story unveils the truth that history and reality can be manipulated. What is less clear, since the main story is part of the protagonist's imaginary/dream world, is Hawthorne's attitude to the racial other. His ambivalence to the questions of race and slavery is now well-known (Person 25-30). Pfister, however, concludes:

> Although Hawthorne wrote during the period of forced "Indian" removal from east to west, the imperialist war against Mexico, and mounting abolitionist protests against slavery, his fiction was not especially concerned with the production of racial difference and race relations.(54)

Nevertheless, "Young Goodman Brown" is deeply implicated in the process of Puritan "self"-making that entails a fear of the racial other. The text bears many traces of this fear: "There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree", said Goodman Brown to himself; and he glanced fearfully behind him as he added, "What if the Devil himself should be at my very elbow!"(Hawthorne 25). What is curious is the juxtaposition of "devilish" and "Indian" in the quotation. It not only indicates a moral and theological interpretation of the racial difference, but a clever naturalization of the political and the economic dimensions of racial conflict in moral terms. Morality subsumes the fear of the 'other'. This point will be addressed later.

(E-ISSN 2347-2073) (U.G.C. Journal. No. 44829) Vol. VII Issue II, April. 2018

The wilderness itself becomes a place where mystery and danger remain "concealed", where the "unseen multitude" threatens the solitary "self" (Hawthorne 25). It harbours both Indian powwows and European witchcraft that are in league with each other. Thus, the construction of the Puritan self as a coherent and unitary entity is shown in the story to be naïve and fallacious. The New England Puritans cannot be morally separated from their racial other, the Indians. It has often been pointed out that the main reason behind Goodman Brown's tragedy is his inability to accept a morally mixed world: "It was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints" (Hawthorne 31). But the real problem can be found in Brown's failure to maintain a racially uniform Puritan self. The racial 'other' invades even that very 'secure' space as the narrator depicts, "Scattered also among their pale-faced enemies were the Indian priests, or powwows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft." (Hawthorne 31-32)

This raises certain problems. First, the forest is accepted in the story as a contested zone. Secondly, it projects on the "other" the Christian paradigm of sin and guilt. Thirdly, the simple theological fear of the evil ultimately shows its complex face: the fear and distrust of the racial other. To locate this paranoia in the context of good and evil is extremely problematic. As I have already said, it naturalizes the whole history of racial conflict and violence into a relatively "innocent" model. Therefore, we cannot be sure of Hawthorne's motives. It is clear that he deflates the Puritan ego by erasing the theological and moral lines between the Puritan self and the racial other in the story where the Deacon says: "…several of the Indian powwows, who after their fashion, know almost as much deviltry as the best of us."(Hawthorne 29) But, on the other hand, he simplifies to a certain extent the image of the "other" by introducing certain stereotypical traits, devil-worship being one of them. However, the story "Young Goodman Brown" gives us hints that the fear and distrust of the racial other is a mutual one, thereby interrogating any claim to authority on the part of the Puritan self. At the brink of extreme paranoia, Brown exclaims, "Come witch, come wizard, come Indian Powwow, come Devil himself, and here comes Goodman Brown. You may as well fear him as he fears you." (Hawthorne 30)

These repeated attempts at connecting witchcraft with Indian powwow, bring to the centre the theme of sexuality, which, along with the theme of racial difference, has contributed greatly to the formation of the Puritan Self. Just as the fear of the racial "other" problematizes, and, finally, deconstructs the fiction of a stable "self", so the fear and uneasiness with sexuality creates a rift inside that very Puritan self that tries to exclude and sublimate it simultaneously. By aligning certain subversive forms of sexuality with the racial other, the Puritan Self (which is also a deeply patriarchal structure) defines its ideological position and develops a more or less same strategy to deal with both of these. The connection between sexually dissident women and witchcraft must be sought inside the Puritan male

psyche which tries to sublimate or naturalize certain aspects of female sexuality that cannot be controlled or contained. The process of sublimation can never be completely successful. Often, when sublimation fails, exclusion or "othering" is required. This creates tension. This is evident in "Young Goodman Brown". Brown's obsession with sexual purity must be understood within the context of American Puritan culture. T. Walter Herbert rightly comments: "An ideal of purity became a defining virtue of the domestic angel, and assigned women the task of allaying male sexual anxiety" (70). Interestingly, Brown's imagination runs along the angel/whore binary, or rather angel/witch binary. In order to tackle his own sexual anxiety he idealizes his wife's sexuality. He contemplates, "Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven. (Hawthorne 24)

As Herbert shows us, the Puritan "home" is a complex construct: it is a neatly ordered moral world, a perfect Puritan Self in miniature. Sexuality is situated at the centre of this construct: "The sexual life of a married couple lay at the heart of the domestic paradise that provided a refuge from the heartless world of male competition…." (Herbert 69). No doubt Brown uses his wife's idealized sexuality as a shelter where he can return from his "immoral" adventures (that involve male camaraderie like the one between him and the Devil) to find his psycho-sexual self intact. Unfortunately, his experience in the wilderness deconstructs the binary between angel and witch. Faith is no longer playing by the allegorical/cultural rules. This leads to the breakdown of Brown's sexual identity.

Brown's obsession with a "soft" and "pure" version of female sexuality is indicative of his oedipal fixation. This quite explains his sublimation of his sexual desires. His fixation with maternal virtue is quite evident in the text:

> He could have well-nigh sworn that the shape of his own dead father beckoned him to advance, looking downward from a smoke-wreath, while a woman with dim features of despair, threw out her hand to warn him back. Was it his mother? (Hawthorne 32)

Goodman Brown's oedipal fixation incites him, to a great extent, to cast doubt on the morality of his ancestors' actions. It even implies uneasiness in his relationship with his father and his grandfather. But it also raises certain contradictions. First of all, the distribution of virtues and vices along the lines of gender reinforces certain gender stereotypes. Secondly, it reinstates the angel/witch binary, thereby effectively subverting the story's critique of patriarchy. Thirdly, it tries to establish a pure and stable maternal history against a dubious and unstable paternal one. But again, it deconstructs the concept of witchcraft as a form of feminine transgression and underscores the role of male brotherhood in propagating sin. Something can also be said about Goodman Brown's sexual orientation. His obsession with his wife's purity, his uneasiness with male consort, and his idealizing of domestic heterosexuality at the cost of all other forms of sexuality are typical of the Puritan male. And

yet, he can hardly resist the temptation of a male fraternity involved in some morally daring project, since his initiation in this world of sin somehow validates his masculinity. Therefore, Puritan masculinity is not just a code of conduct; rather it is a set of contradictory performances that involve negotiation with society and culture. This is central to our understanding of Brown's tragedy.

Conclusion:

In our reading of "Young Goodman Brown" psychoanalytic perspective meets a more historically and culturally motivated one. This can hardly be avoided. Hawthorne himself was of the opinion that subjectivity is as much a product of a psychological core as of society and culture (Pfister 39). This influences his characterization. Alison Easton is right in saying that Hawthorne's skepticism of radical reforms does not imply that he was unaware of the questions that troubled his contemporaries (81). Though his views on the questions of race and gender are overall conservative, and characteristic of his own time, he nonetheless problematizes these issues as much as possible in his fiction. In "Young Goodman Brown" Hawthorne accepts the moral ambiguity that was at the heart of Puritan colonial expansion. He is aware that a colonial project, no matter how much grounded in religion and morality, is sure to breed fear and distrust of the "other". Hawthorne even explores the ways in which this fear of the "other" shape and motivate the Puritan character. So far as the theme of sexuality is concerned, Hawthorne places the character of Goodman Brown in his fictional project of "exploration of the same doomed desire to find a refuge" (Easton 84). Brown's paranoia and anxiety in this case must be understood within the frame of cultural transition in America from "older forms of social, economic, and intimate relationships" to bourgeois family values that redefined man-woman relationship against a new cultural background (Easton 84). Perhaps at this point a class-oriented reading of the story may well begin.

Works Cited:

Easton, Alison. "Hawthorne and the question of women". *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, edited by Richard H. Millington, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 79-98.,dlx.b_ok.org/genesis/547000/3743bf6f9a56721414d42384ff63156d/_as/[Richard_H._Millington]_The_Cambridge_Companion_to(b-ok.org).pdf.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Young Goodman Brown and Other Short Stories*. Dover Publications, 2016.

Herbert, T. Walter. "Hawthorne and American masculinity". *The Cambridge Companion to*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, edited by Richard H. Millington. Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 60-78.dlx.b_ok.org/genesis/547000/3743bf6f9a56721414d42384ff63156d/_as/[Richard_H._Millington]_The_Cambridge_Companion_to(b-ok.org).pdf.

Person Leland S. *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

Pfister, Joel. "Hawthorne as cultural theorist". *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, edited by Richard H. Millington. Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 35-59.,dlx.b_ok.org/genesis/547000/3743bf6f9a56721414d42384ff63156d/_as/[Richard_H._Millington]_The_Cambridge_Companion_to(b-ok.org).pdf.