



Individuality and Society: A Study of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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Abstract: This present research affirms to investigate transcendence between individuality and society in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Among many great American writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott and Richard Wright are famous for their renowned works. They have written some of the prominent characters of American Literature like Hester Prynne, Jo March and Richard. This paper puts forward a view point of the plight of the main protagonist Hester, Jo and Richard to lead one's life as per one's will against the society. This paper focuses on how class, gender, race and religious issues are interlinked. This paper examines the delineation of these characters on how they voice their individual point of view, gender stereotypes and liberty. This paper intends to scrutinize how Hester, Jo and Richard attain individualism along with self-reliance.

Key Words: Individuality, society, gender, stereotypes, and self-reliance.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The freedom of expression of oneself is seen as a powerful tool of an individual's liberty and freedom. The assertion of one's individual traits like self-expression gives rise to a newer form of individualism. According to Emerson, in *Self-Reliance*, it is simpler to live in a world as per their opinion, but it is simpler to live in solitude as your own opinion, but the great man is one who lives with the world by incorporating his independence of solitude (Emerson 150). Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates puritan patriarchal society by highlighting how those representing the society have oppressed, tortured, condemned, and governed women in every area of their life. Hester Prynne, the central female character, is a metaphor of the peaceful coexistence with nature. In contrast to what patriarchal Puritan society is unable to show, this text illustrates nature's pity for an adulterous woman. She is a young woman who emanates perfect femininity and grace along with a passionate and fiery personality. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* delineates Jo's revolt against womanhood caused by her apprehensions towards the domestication of the woman. Being an aspiring writer, she faces challenges to pursue her writing due to her commitment towards her family. Although, she never understood the societal expectations of what a girl needs to adhere to, as she was always uncomfortable in such situations. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* illustrates the journey of a young boy from his childhood to adulthood, how the authoritarian people from his family to the society has tried to oppress, torture and condemn him. Despite this, he tries to persist to his will and lead a dignified life in accordance with his principles and beliefs. Richard Wright is one of the most significant Afro-American writers who works with the crucial threads like racism and oppression of the black people.

2. HESTER PRYNNE:

Hester Prynne is the female protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* published in 1850, a masterpiece in American literature. Hawthorne has written Hester Prynne's character as a strong individualistic woman, who was ahead of her time as compared with the women from her time in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne denotes Puritanism as excessive moral, superstitious, intolerant and patriarchal operation (Pearson 17). Puritans always believed that men are the decision maker and head of the family. Whereas, the women are the nurturer, who will obey her husband and take care of her family and does household chores. Therefore, when Hester committed adultery and she had to go through public humiliation and alienation with the townfolk. Still, she was not guilty, although, the puritans considered her act of love as sin. Due to her determined approach not to reveal the name of her fellow sinner, Puritans get agitated and as a result decide to outcast her and put the scarlet letter 'A' on her bosoms as a symbol of shame for her adultery. The purpose of the letter 'A' was to humiliate her for her adultery, but she took it as a token of love she has for herself,



Pearl, Dimmesdale and her individuality. Although the Puritans thought that it would break her spirit. Suzan Last writes how the authoritarian figures are baffled by her reticence to acknowledge the father of her child (Last 360). Hawthorne depicted Hester as a woman persisted with her individuality by not conforming to the ideologies and rules of Puritans. Hester chose silence as a weapon to depict her individuality by not revealing Dimmesdale's name, although revealing the name could have saved her from wearing the scarlet letter. This depicts that how Hester opposed Puritan's control over her by staying silent. Hester could have shifted to a new city by hiding her identity but she wanted to face the puritans after the public humiliation she faced on the scaffold for three hours. As leaving Boston meant she is agreeing with puritan authority over her. Rather she wanted to emerge as a new individual by not hiding or removing her scarlet letter and living a respectable life with her actions in front of the puritans to remove the meaning associated with the scarlet letter. Over the years, Hester and Pearl lived in Boston but in isolation. They were excluded and humiliated from the beginning. Although Hester continued with her work by helping the needy ones by residing at the outskirts. After this shunning and exclusion, puritans did not have a problem when she does charitable work but otherwise, they do not welcome her. Hawthorne tries to depict their double standard like how they exclude her for committing a sin like adultery but do not hesitate to take her help. As Puritans try to suppress her individuality but they are not able to make her follow their principles. She separates herself from puritan rules and regulations. Therefore, it denotes her first step towards Emerson's concept of individuality in self-reliance (Jahan 101). She is not ready to go against her belief to free herself from this puritanical judgment. She does not submit to the demands of the puritan authority, but rather emerges as a strong woman who asserts her individualism by stepping forward on the path chosen by her against the puritan codes. She does not stay away from the puritan society, but she is excluded due to their perception of right and wrong. Whereas her perception of right and wrong is based on her principles. Several instances in the novel depict Hester as being proud rather than ashamed of her sin. As sin is a sinner in the eyes of the puritan authority, she thinks the sin she committed was "a sin of passion, not principles, nor even purpose" (Hawthorne 43).

3. JO MARCH:

Jo March is the female protagonist of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* published in 1968, a coming-of-age novel. Alcott has written Jo March's character as an individualistic girl facing several challenges due to poor financial conditions and societal constraints. Mostly in the novels, the mother's love and memory leads the protagonist after the disappearance of mother from their lives. But in this novel, Jo's father left them to fulfil his manly duties during the war, leading to her being an orphan suddenly. Her father's memory and love guide them to lead her life ahead. The financial condition of Jo and her family is not good. Therefore, she has to work for her Aunt March. While working, she has constantly surrounded by all kinds of luxury. This reminds Jo of what they were in the past. Alcott questions the stereotypical gender roles prevalent in the society and how it was asserted on both men and women to fit in this society. Alcott was a determined feminist and her ideologies reflected in her literary works as well. This point of view was put forward by Alcott by delineating the characters of Laurie and Jo. They were delineated as individuals who were non-confirming to their gender stereotypical roles.

Alcott has shattered several stereotypes by offering main characters, Jo and Laurie with the names, which are usually conveying name of the opposite gender (Bender 141). With this instance, she is dismissing the gender expectations established on the character's names. Moreover, she gives more masculine attributes to Jo and more feminine attributes to Laurie. The first encounter of Jo and Laurie depicts how they are not surprised with one another's name. It denotes how they themselves do not pursue societal gender expectations. Their relationship is not only funny and real but a medium for Alcott to break many gender stereotypes. The conversation Jo and Laurie have at Gardiner's New Year Party highlights that women are not able to escape the gender stereotyping. For instance, Jo didn't like to be called as Josephine. But to adjust with her aunt's will, she familiarizes with being called Josephine. Therefore, resigning themselves to being treated in the ways they disliked. This represents how girls are expected by the society to behave in a specific way and be obedient, quiet and introspective by comprehending to suppress their expression of aggression or intense non-complaint feelings. Therefore, Laurie was in a position, where he is capable to compel people to treat him in the way that he wants. Whereas, Jo must suppress her emotions and surrender to other people's expectations. Still, with all these challenges Jo has made her own decisions to fulfill her aspiration to be a writer along with doing jobs to support her family. This showcases how strong and independent Jo is. Jo did not rely upon anyone, rather she worked hard for herself and her family.



4. RICHARD:

Richard is the male protagonist of Richard Wright's fictionalized autobiography, *Black Boy* published in 1945. It highlights the conflict between the self and society. Richard shares the pathetic portrait of the life of black people in America. The actions of whites in the South have always disorganized his family life. These actions have always deprived him of a good education and made him live in poverty (Chaitanya 620). Richard since a young age started to observe the characterization of two groups namely, the Black and the White by the people. Initially, he felt it was merely based on colour. As time passed, he realized what is happening around him and his experiences was a guiding light to introspect. The way Richard looked upon racism and oppression is not a result of his one-day experience but it is the result of how the black were treated by the white on the basis of colour and how the relations were among the blacks. Richard supported the concept to not to express oneself in merely racial terms, since the typical social situations spreads a shadow over their consciousness. Richard was forced to embrace spirituality at his grandmother's home and he was told that he would not graduate, if he doesn't read an official speech at school. He defies to conform to both of them, which leads to create difficulty in his life. Still, he affirms to his decision.

In *Black Boy*, it is evident, how Richard is aware of his place according to the stern racial taboos of the society. Richard's early steps to his individuality was to face his struggles with his highly religious family, the black and the white people. He was persistent to attain his individual decision-making capacity. Hence, he faced family clashes, revolt against the school teachers, fight with relatives and others boys in his childhood. With strong intellect and observational skills, Richard was an avid reader. He reflected on how these experiences made him feel wrath, anger, fear and disdain. This forms the foundation of Richard's tremendous creative power (Elakkiam 1). Similarly, Richard faced a situation in his adulthood, where he was forced to either act as per the Communist party or he will be expelled. Richard leaves them. As confirming to them was against his beliefs and individuality. This showcases how he always chooses not to conform to others call. As Richard desires to be an individual and have compassion to all who is like or alike him. Throughout his writings, Wright has addressed major social and political issues being faced by the blacks. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* deals with the concept of individuality and the notion of environment. The term "environment" is broad denoting the group, the community, the culture, and the authority (Mathpati 672). The black people faced several challenges to free themselves from the oppressive social structure that the White has imposed on them.

5. CONCLUSION:

Hester, Jo and Richard are the three individualistic characters in American novels, however, their approach towards individuality is distinct. For Hester Prynne, her individuality exists by being a selfless woman, like she is opinionated, brave, fair to herself, takes stand for herself and rebels against the authority for the right thing but still after facing all the humiliation from the puritans, she does charity and help the needy ones. For Hester Prynne, her individuality is interlinked with her love and care for her daughter and keeping Dimmesdale's secret by taking stand for herself by staying true to herself and not letting the Puritan authority take control over her life. Alcott's Jo is tomboyish, ambitious and reliable. She was delineated as a girl who takes on her family's financial responsibilities and begins to work from a young age. She affirms her stern opinion about how a girl is expected to be. Alcott indicates the internal and external conflict an individual goes through. Like Jo's aspiration, to be a writer was a challenge for her, due to her family's condition and societal expectations. Richard dealt with conflict of identity while growing up and how his inclination towards reading and writing differentiated him from others. Since his childhood, Richard observes racism, harassment, discrimination and subjugation of the black in the American society. He himself suffered as a black to go through a lot to have his identity and rights by facing several socio-political challenges. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* emphasizes how pitiful Afro-Americans were treated. It highlighted the prejudice, persecution and oppression they experienced in the contemporary America.

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