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## Female Quest for a Self through Acts of Transgression: A Study of *Jane Eyre* and *The Scarlet Letter*

**Cheena Chawla**

Assistant Professor,  
Patel Memorial National College  
Rajpura, Distt. Patiala, Punjab

The search of the female self for its own identity has been a part of many narratives ever since feminist consciousness permeated in the minds of writers – whether male or female. Such quest received major impetus when feminist ideology started taking a tangible shape through works such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In coherence with such emerging voices about the 'othered' sex, many novelists through their works tried to put forth experiences of female rebellion and expression in face of patriarchal authority. Among such works *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) occupy a prominent position. The analysis seeks to highlight the acts of transgression through which the female voice in these texts seeks to liberate itself.

It is transgression that transcends the boundaries which differentiate and distinguish between that which "ought" to be done and that which "ought not" to be done for the sake of social "morality". For such taboos are often associated with transgression. Foucault asserts, "[t]ransgressions violate unspoken or explicit rules that maintain a particular social order...[a]s transgressions exceed normalcy, they threaten the community's imperative toward conformity" (Foucault 3). Foucault further elucidates that transgressive actions have the capacity to fracture figures or structures of authority as it questions their "legitimacy" (Foucault 4). The study seeks to highlight the various ways in which the subjugated female expression finds an outlet and seeks to counter the confines of patriarchy. For liberating itself out of the bondage that binds the female sense of self, transgression is resorted to, for to be limited by the dictates of the society that upholds the male law, one needs to go beyond it. In the process, the individual seeking liberty openly flouts boundaries of the society indulging in transgressive acts.

*Jane Eyre* (1847) is a text that challenged the male bastion of authorship and literary writing, in the very act of it being written during the Victorian age in England. Written by Charlotte Brontë under the pseudonym Currer Bell, the female author, exercised the right to pen down a smothered female voice. In doing so, she transgressed the dictates of patriarchy to have no professional female writers in the society. *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist in the novel begins her life in transgression and concludes in propriety. However, it is in the various subtle ways that the author reveals Jane's dissatisfaction with various societal values and norms. Wooed by the rich landlord and morally ambivalent hero, Rochester, Jane though submits to his love in the end, but not before the author has revealed some serious counterculture episodes. The proper female figure that Jane is expected to be, is countered primarily by the presence of the racially and socially marginalized character of Bertha Mason, the "mad" first wife of Rochester, who, for a long time is hidden in his attic due to her "abnormal" behavior. If transgression deals with flouting of boundaries laid by authorities in the realm of gender, religion and race, then Bertha Mason typifies such transgressive behavior in the book. Noticeably, the presence of the "abnormal" Bertha Mason becomes quite

pronounced, as Jane feels increasingly uneasy about her impending marriage to Rochester. This suggests that when Jane is not able to pronounce her fears and anxieties about her nuptials, it comes to fore through the transgressive figure of Bertha Mason who is twice subjugated for being a woman of colour. However, through the delineation of this character, Bronte is effectively able to communicate the female rage that seethes beneath the veneer of societal values. As Elaine Showalter opines

The madwoman in the attic of the respectable Victorian home represents the rage of repressed sexuality and the frustration voice hiding behind the “angel in the house” that every woman was supposed to be. (Showalter 428)

Madness, in the act of transgressing the boundaries of normality and sanity was actually the anger that a woman was dictated to suppress, her anxieties and her revolt against the caging societal norms. Such madness is also seen in Charlotte Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* where, just as in *Jane Eyre*, “a woman’s loss of psychic ability...is shown as the result of oppression”(Knellwolf 134). Bertha is a symbol of female anxiety as she never harms Jane, but only objects to her marriage with a duplicitous Rochester, who has been hiding Bertha’s existence all along. Bertha’s voice is heard as subhuman noises suggesting that if a woman chooses to speak against the society, the language she has learnt so far cannot help her in giving a vent to her emotions. She can only give an outlet to her feelings in a tongue incomprehensible to human beings or rather, the patriarchal society. Madness, an opposite of sanity, gives Bertha a chance to express her aggression towards Rochester, which neither she nor Jane gets the chance to do. It is this female rage that Rochester imprisons and smothers in his attic. Bertha needs to be a transgressive figure because being normal, being feminine, would again stifle her identity. Hence, she and Jane collectively find a voice through Bertha’s transgressive madness.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* reflects Hawthorne’s ambivalence about the newly established American civilization. To hold the society in an alien land together, the authorities bound the people in rigid doctrines through religion, which promoted austerity and self-denial in face of temptations. This religious ideology called Puritanism serves as the most potent force in the text forming the confining boundaries that the protagonist Hester Prynne transgresses, to flout the boundaries of an affectionless marriage unequal in its very foundation. In the text, transgression chooses to take the form of complete rejection of social and orthodox religious values, in which Hester mothers a child by Dimmesdale, the pastor who gives way to his passion in spite of his commitment to the Puritan church. The passion which is sacred to them, is a sin in eyes of the Puritan society and hence, as a symbol of this transgression, Hester is compelled or rather punished to wear the badge ‘A’. This badge isolates her existence. As a female in quest of her identity as a woman, she chooses to associate herself with the man she loves, transgresses the margins of society and is ever so proud of it. Her commitment to her act and her lack of regret or remorse is seen in the embroidered and dainty ‘A’ having “rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic, -a taste for the gorgeously beautiful,”(TSL 66) which she puts on her bosom and the bright colours in which she dresses up her daughter Pearl. Through such courage she denies the societal meanings of both the letter and the child. Supporting Hester’s expression of her self through these things, as Nina Baym puts it

Pearl's most important function in the book is to express all the resentment, outraged pride, anger and even blasphemy that Hester feels in her punishment, but cannot voice. (Baym 221)

The rules of this society, as Baym puts it, are man-made by a group of privileged members of society in the name of Puritanism with individualism given no power at all, and God being largely absent from such laws. Such conservatism and religious despotism is quite worldly in nature with not only Hester but quite a lot of members participating in outlaw behaviour. It is Hester's destiny that she is the one who is discovered in such act and not others. In the novel it is not the act of adultery but the act of adultery done in a Puritan society that determines Hester's fate for a "sin of passion". Charles Feidelson Jr. holds that the throng which is collected at the scaffold "intimates a latent failure within the Puritan social system...the ferocity of the women in the marketplace is as lawless as the lust they denounce, and it complements the rigid natural law that dominates their men" (Feidelson 396). Through this act of defiance, Hester starts regaining her natural self. This can be seen in the bold assertion with which she tries to give direction to a dejected Dimmesdale, saying that he should "Preach! Write! Act! Do anything save to lie down and die!" (TSL 201). She is not ready to flee her site of torture to a new location with Dimmesdale, as this would declare that she is ashamed of her act of defiance. Especially when she casts off her Puritan cap and the scarlet letter for few moments, she regains her passionate self. She acknowledges her act as one of transgression but not as an act of sin. This act of transgression inspires positivity in her and after Dimmesdale's death following an impassioned confession, she lives her isolated life to help others. The hypocrisy of the society is revealed in the same tendencies shown by other members of the Puritan community. Sandeen opines that hence it would be wrong to say that Hester on the scaffold is actually "that the human family takes in times of affliction. Openly branded with the offense which many others share with her in secret, she purges the public conscience" (Sandeen 375). Hester sought to express her inner truth of passionate love in a patriarchal society that advocated the rule of the father, the church and the magistrate and "represents a dangerous subversion of the hegemony of familial, ethnic and religious male authorities and of the male god of Israel" (Streete 13). In her own secluded life in her later years, Hester realizes her self by being a sympathetic hearer to women who are troubled by "the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring passion"(TSL 263). The truth of the female self paves way for individual freedom in an orthodox community.

What Jane realizes but suppresses in order to attain heterosexual love, Hester transcends to accomplish in her solitary existence. This is seen in the fulfilling life that the child of passion, Pearl is said to live in the end of the book. The consequence of this quest of self, thus, is partial for Jane and almost total for Hester.

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