Journal of Namibian Studies, 35 (2023): 1050-1058 ISSN: 2197-5523 (online)

Embracing Sin: Hester Prynne And The Panopticon

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Abstract

It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform the prisoner…to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another…of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power. (Foucault on Panopticism, Discipline and Punish, 1995)

Keywords: panopticon, Foucault, punishment, the Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne

Introduction:

The idea of the panopticon, a word which is a combination of the Greek prefix “pan-” and the Greek word “optic” (OED), was first put forth by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham as a name for a prison structure presented in a project in 1787. The purpose behind the panopticon was to build up a system for institutional surveillance that is as effective and efficient as possible. The structure of the panopticon is made, therefore, circular in shape, with an inspection tower at the center that equips the prison warden with a maximum level of visual modality over the inmates lodging at the prison cells, which are built alongside the perimeter. The surveillance tower is designed in such a way that it hides the prison custodians while at the same time giving them a full view of all prisoners at all times. With that system in place, inmates will be under the impression that they are constantly being watched. Part of Bentham’s proposition was “the gradual adoption and diversified application of this single principle” of the panopticon to schools, asylums, hospitals, as well as other

institutions (139). In spite of the limited cases where Bentham's model has been implemented by correctional institutions, half of his dream still came true, and the principle of the panopticon has gradually seeped through the social sciences and political theory, initially at the hands of the French philosopher Michael Foucault.

In his widely acknowledged work on the history of prisons and punishment in the West, Discipline and Punish, Foucault expands the principle of the panopticon into a model for explaining the social dynamics of discipline, sovereignty, free will, sin and crime, state power, and legal accountability. Those social dynamics belong to a phenomenon which he calls "Panopticism"–also the title of one of the chapters of his book. Ever since, Panopticism has become a social and political paradigm employed as an abstract structure, expandable and reusable beyond its tentative architectural use, for describing the power relationship between the governor and the subjects. For Foucault, Panopticism can eliminate, being preemptive, the need for persistent and exhaustive policing and therefore reduces the chances of future punishment. Therefore, whereas the purpose of punishment has been to "correct, reclaim, 'cure'" (10), the preemptive effectiveness of Panopticism, Foucault argues, can be attributed to two major factors: invisibility and unverifiability of how, when, and who is conducting the actual role of surveillance (201). As for their placement within the social system, punishment inflicts the individual, whereas panopticism is the immediate influence of that punishment on the community. This means that the panopticon is most effective when people internalize the oppressive power structure by watching over themselves. This internalization, Foucault further explains, reduces the need for "the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come." (209).

When treating the issues of sin and punishment, most critics approach Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, The Scarlet Letter, with a focus on Hester Prynne as a victim oppressed by a strict and punitive moral system that ostracizes and turns the sinful individual into a black sheep within the community. This paper will argue, by employing Foucault's social theory on punishment, that the novel reveals two incongruous relationships to panoptical authority. The first, unconventional, is Hester's. The second, conventional, is that of the community of Boston. The paper will argue that Hester

neutralizes the panopticon's effect, defeats one of its purposes, and therefore rises from the victim status into a heroine/martyr status with an oppressive, although apparently unplanned, effect on her own community. Unlike Hester, the members of the community of Boston, lacking the reader's knowledge and not realizing the degree of Hester's containment of the effect of the punishment she receives, internalize the fear of the panopticon and succumb to its authority by means of their constant sub/conscious fear of the corrective effect of the scarlet letter upon them. As a result, the redemptive function of the punishment in the novel is not limited to Hester's banishment. The panoptical function is, rather, bidirectional in its influence. Therefore, reading the function reversely by investigating its coercive effect on Hester's community contributes to more comprehensive understanding of the important social–not just individual–role penal codes played in seventeenth century.

Review of Related Literature:

It is not surprising that Hawthorne's (1850) novel, The Scarlet Letter, has aroused many critical controversies since its publication. The most contrastive of these controversies are between critics who characterize the portrayal of Hester's character as a sense of "victimhood" within an oppressive society and those who go beyond such a portrayal by highlighting the representation of Hester as a nonconforming individual who challenges and refuses to accept the social and moral codes of her time. Although these two views are clearly discordant, they implicitly agree on the fact that there is a "sin" committed in an absolute conservative community, in which "punishment" is a matter of an extreme procedure.

Critics who, probably out of post-modern sympathies, portray Hester as the absolute victim of an oppressive (or, at times, villainous) society have concrete, and obvious textual reasons for doing so. For example, no one in Hester Prynne's local community seems to sympathize with her, approve of what she did, or at least just ignore her and let her live in peace. Even Dimmesdale, her lover and partner in "crime," seems to aggravate Hester's victimhood–from the perspective of a traditional reading–by being so cowardly and emasculate in his handling of the affair and the publicity it receives. The community does not even spare Hester's innocent child, Pearl, who is "born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened

infants" (42). The traditional understanding of Hester as the absolute victim date back as early as 1850, soon after Hawthorne published his novel. Henry F. Chorley, for example, emphasizes how skillfully Hawthorne portrays "the misery of the woman...in every page" in a way that gives us insight to the terrors she feels (55). The trend also persists in recent studies. Sandra Tomc, for example, argues that Hester has properties typical of a victim of seduction (475). Another critic, Walter Herbert, reads the novel as a rebellion against masculine authority and as Hawthorne's way for expressing sympathy with the "feminist protest against the restricted role assigned to women" (285). Following a similar direction, Jamie Barlow approaches Hawthorne's novel from a feminist perspective, contending that Hester is objectified, or to use Barlow's wording, "captured…by the male gaze" which serves to reiterate social, political, and religious judgments about women (44). The problem that immediately arises from such readings emphasizing the victimhood of Hester is the possible devaluation of Hester's transcendental characteristics and decisions she continues to make in the novel. While such mournful readings of Hester as a victim can be textually valid, they do not sufficiently account for Hester's continuous development as a defiant individual who, not only adapts to her punishment, but also adjusts it to her own advantage.

Another prevalent critical trend to the novel goes beyond the victimhood of Hester to shed light on the transcendental aspects of her character. Critics following this trend focus on the representation of Hester as a nonconforming individual who challenges and refuses to accept the social and moral codes of her time. This critical trend is not merely a result of the perception of the nineteenth century as the age of American Transcendentalism, but can also be linked to various examples in the text. Early in the novel, for example, the narrator's use of imagery to describe the prison as "the black flower of civilized society" is strongly indicative of banishment and ostracization (20). Similarly, the mother and daughter, after Hester refuses to confess, "[stand] together in the same circle of seclusion from human society" (42). Many critics therefore justifiably approach Hester's situation as a manifestation of the conflict between social cohesion and transcendental agency. The literary critic Denis Donoghue, for instance, argues that Hester's "Evil was incorrigible because no social institution could accommodate it" (1). One underlying meaning of Donoghue's argument can

be the dominant bipolar view of selfhood that saturates the communal consciousness of the puritans of Boston in the seventeenth century. That is, the community perceives itself as "good" and harmonious. Therefore, any individualistic aberration that threatens that harmony can be uncritically cast away as "evil." Hawthorn's in fact refers to the society's self-image as a projection of "Utopia of human virtue and happiness" (19). Another critic, Olivia Taylor places a similar emphasis on transcendentalism by celebrating Hester's defiant choice of silence as a form of passive resistance (135). Taylor, nevertheless, draws attention to the backlash Hester receives from the community as a result of her nonconformity. For Taylor, Hester's defiance, besides causing an irreparable rupture between her and the society, also deprives her of the chance of "holding communion" with her co-sinner, Dimmesdale (65). A similar focus runs through Leland Person's criticism. For her, Hester's only practices freedom in private, and therefore she has a very limited influence on the community (471). Taylor's and Person's mode of interpretation clearly suggests that Hester represents a case of absolute and, at the same time, destructive individualism.

Centrality as Two Repercussions

In fact, while mourning the plight of Hester as an enduring victim and celebrating her transcending individuality aptly centralize her figure in the novel, this centrality has two important repercussions which such modes of reading overlook. First, the triumphant and metaphorically oppressive panoptical power she lays claim to as she rises from a victim into a martyr. Second, the community is now intimidated, rather than intimidating, gaze towards Hester, her child, and the scarlet letter. Before discussing examples of these two repercussions, it is worthwhile emphasizing that they are not only interdependent in their severity, but their mutual inclusiveness is also sustained by the symbolic power of branding, as is the case with the letter "A" in the novel. In his book, Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law, Alan Hunt, a theorist of the sociology of law, traces the historical roots of the legal enforcement of certain forms of clothing on certain classes of people, including convicts and religious minorities. Most important to the interpretation of The Scarlet Letter is Hunt's contention that branding ensured that "once the character was revealed, despite Christian notions of redemption, it was regarded as immutable. Branding," he proceeds, "provided a ready means

of conveying this information to others confronted by the intractable problem that the rootless vagabonds seemed to pose" (131). Once branded, one could infer from Hunt's view, Hester's relationship to her community is characterized by a permanent and mutual exercise of power as the following examples will reveal.

Hester's rising from her victim status occurs as a result of her containment of the authority of moral and legal panopticism. While she is customarily expected to be the scapegoat suffering mentally and physically for the greater good of her community, Hester survives the punishment and is never reformed. She is capable of carrying out this containment of the panoptical oppression by means of her agency and acceptance of–rather than confrontational attitudes to–the sanctions ordained against her. Hester is the animator of most of the narrative, and her actions are mostly narrated using the action verbs. Although she is marginalized, she is never a bystander to the events of the novel. Critical views which construct Hester's agency merely as a form of passive resistance, such as those by Taylor and Person, cast an air of defeatism over her identity by ignoring many of her elaborate tactics of adaptation as well as the advantages she gains through her maneuverings. The community, one could argue, also has agency. It endeavors to force Hester to live in a constant state shame by decreeing that she should wear the scarlet letter all the time. However, by inhibiting the symbol of shame and embracing it as part of her identity, with the "natural dignity and force of character" (22), not only does Hester achieve absolute individual authority, but also conquers the Foucauldian panopticon. Therefore, Hester stands out as the uncorrected individual, who actively "came to have a part to perform in the world". If the society deprives her of the smile of "household joy," her reaction is not to panic or fall apart, but to refuse to "mourn with the kindred sorrow" (37). Needlework is another concrete mode of social agency Hester involves. The same community which rejects Hester's sin embraces her art. The novel shows many examples where Hester marries symbols of sin to artistic talent, most direct of which is the way she furnishes the scarlet letter. Reading artistic talent as a psychological projection, extension, and stealthy expression of sin, one could argue that Hester infiltrates the social sanctions against her by creating a need for her art.

Drawing on the classic case of the public torture and execution of Robert-François Damiens for attempted regicide, Foucault refers to punishment as "the art of inflicting pain" (8). Hester, on the other hand, proves that conquering pain and exclusion can be a form of art too. She deliberately celebrates and anesthetizes her sin: "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A" (22). If Pearl, Hester's daughter, embodies disgrace and social decadence in the public eye of her society, Hester does not spare any effort in "arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered in fantasies and flourishes of gold thread," so much so that the child becomes "the scarlet letter endowed with life" (46). Hester's celebration of sin makes her freer in her seclusion than Dimmesdale in his revered position in the community. Unlike the life-embracing Hester, "the conscience-stricken priest," knuckles under the torments of his sin, failing to have "the strength or courage…to venture into the wide, strange, difficult world alone" (94). Hester's conquering of punishment, therefore, allows her to wield fiercer power than has been exercised against her. The communal effect of this power, consequently, moves beyond people's literal fear of the prison as an "effectual agent, in the promotion of good citizenship" (23). Similarly, the communal dismay with punishment, "a giant of stern features" (35), does not stop at the immediate awe which results from it public display. Even when Hester lingers in the background of communal existence, marginalized and invisible, people in her community are constantly watchful of her ghostly presence "apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them" (37).

The power which Hester incessantly enjoys even while invisible can be accounted for by referring to the Foucauldian distinction between the visible and the invisible forms of punishment. For Foucault, although punishment, historically, has over time moved from the public to the private sphere (i.e., the disappearance of public tortures and executions), people's imagination fills the gap and perpetuates the effect by allowing them to envision the invisible (201). Hester's community, intimidated by the threat Hester's poses to their imaginative Utopian cohesion, desperately wants to believe that the "the pang of [the scarlet letter] will be always in her heart" (22). The intimidation of the community, although self-imposed, is impossible without Hester as a centralized panoptical figure. Foucault definition of panopticism as a "type of location of

bodies in space" is, as such, reminiscent of Hawthorne's portrayal of the positionality of Hester within the space she occupies, where "all mankind was summoned to point its finger" at the sinful individual (74). The anxiety of moral degradation, combined with the desire to eliminate any individual aberration, exhausts the conscience of the residents of Boston, especially old women. The "public behoof" emerges as their biggest obsession and they become "self-constituted judges" (21). The women who gathered around the scaffold want the magistrate to exact a harsher punishment on Hester so that other wives and daughters are sufficiently deterred from going astray (22). Although most spectators do not consider Hester's punishment harsh enough, its influence upon the community is not reduced, and no one else in the novel dares to stray. This is because they are unable to conquer the fear of discipline like Hester. The panoptical authority reigns over their minds, controls their actions, and constrains every social aspect of their daily life as they have to watch over and correct one another. The effeminate subservience of the Boston community is therefore in complete contrast with Hester's masculine assertiveness of character. Being everything they are not, the attitudes of the people of Boston, especially women, towards Hester might be attributed to a latent Freudian case of penis envy.

Conclusion

Hester could have followed many other comfortable and less challenging routes. Had she revealed the name of her child's father, for example, she would have spared herself a lot of trouble. People would probably have placed most the blame on Demmisdale for failing to uphold the values his authority mandates him to follow. She could have done everything the community wants her to do, like becoming a redeemed exemplary citizen. Had she followed other than the thorny path of celebratory agency, however, she would not have achieved her selfhood as a morally independent individual. If the function of panopticism is to swallow individuals and have them perform certain roles sanctioned by the society, Hester's counter-panoptical self-assertion, unrestrained by her suffering, helps establish her as a martyr of individualism.

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