

## STAMPS OF GENDER OPPRESSION: SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*



### CİNSİYET BASKISININ MÜHÜRLERİ: *KIZIL LEKE* ROMANINDA SEMBOL VE MOTİFLER

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**ABSTRACT:** In almost all areas of social life, people seem to be constrained by something, due to their class, gender, group, ethnicity, education etc. Although it is not easy as an individual to fight against the restrictive mechanisms regulated by some official or social bodies, the very existence of human is a force that tends to resist any kind of oppression. In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the female protagonist, Hester Prynne, is depicted both as the object of oppression and subject of resistance in the Puritan society. In the novel, the reader is exposed to themes related to power relations among the members of the society through the extensive use of symbols. The excessive use of symbols seems to create a bridge between the fanaticism exerted in the Puritan society and the reader led to question the gender roles violently and strictly stipulated by the same members of the society, both females and males. In this study, the signs, symbols and motifs that can be associated with the oppressive authority in *The Scarlet Letter*, shedding light upon the psychology and intellect of Hester Prynne are examined.

**Keywords:** *The Scarlet Letter*, symbols, Puritanism, gender roles, religion, moral codes

**ÖZ:** Sosyal hayatın neredeyse tüm alanlarında insanlar, sınıf, cinsiyet, bağlı oldukları gruplar, etnik köken, eğitim durumları vb. nedenlerden dolayı insanlar ya da insan dışı güçler tarafından kısıtlanmış gibi görünmektedir. Her ne kadar kimi zaman kanunlar, resmi kurumların uygulamaları ve somut biçimde gözlemlenemeyen sosyal kurumların dayattığı kısıtlayıcı mekanizmalarla mücadele etmek bir birey açısından kolay olmasa da insanın varlığı ve doğası her türlü baskıya karşı direnme eğiliminde olan bir güçtür. Nathaniel Hawthorne'un *Kızıl Leke* romanında kadın kahraman Hester Prynne, Püriten toplumunda hem baskının nesnesi hem de direnişin öznesi olarak kurgulanır. Romanda okuyucu, sembollerin yoğun kullanımı aracılığıyla toplumun bireyleri arasındaki güç ilişkilerine odaklanan izleklere maruz bırakılır. Sembollerin bolca kullanımı, Püriten toplumunda uygulanan fanatizm ile toplumun hem kadın hem de erkek üyeleri tarafından uygulanan şiddet ve katı bir şekilde şart koşulan cinsiyet rolleri arasında bir köprü oluştururken, okuyucunun ataerkil toplumun değerler sistemini, güç ve iktidar söylemini ve bunun ortaya koyduğu toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini sorgulamasını sağlıyor. Bu çalışmada Hester Prynne'in psikolojisine ve düşünsel yapısına ışık tutan *Kızıl Leke* romanında baskıcı otoriteyle ilişkilendirilebilecek sembol ve motifler incelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Kızıl Leke*, semboller, Püritenlik, cinsiyet rolleri, din, ahlak kodları

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## Introduction

Depending upon different mechanisms of power relations among humans, from very early social forms of existence to the present postmodern world, in addition to various groups, women have been oppressed and restricted in various areas of life, ranging from families to workplaces and even the streets. In a patriarchal society where laws, social values and codes, and even religious institutions and practices are designed to dominate women, women begin, in time, to lose not only their rights on their own bodies but also their mental rights, which can be termed as “freedom of thought” or “freedom of speech”. In this context, basing his fictional characters and the depictions of society upon the highly religion dominated Puritan community, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents the background of power relations to the reader as a guide to women.

There are many different reasons why *The Scarlet Letter* is still read and interpreted today. The topics, namely society and woman, moral beliefs and reality, honesty, order and chaos, and struggle for survival, most of which still continue even today provide a strong attraction for the reader. The novel deals with the difficulties of being a woman, the female body, freedom, and the oppression that comes with Puritan faith. It would be correct to refer to Puritanism in order to understand the novel better. The purpose of Puritanism, which derives from the original word “purity”, is to purify and simplify the sources that exist later in religion. New England, which is also mentioned in *The Scarlet Letter*, is the main place for the spread of Puritanism in America. According to them, belief in the Holy book, worshipping and dedication to a pure life with no hedonistic aspect are key concepts. According to Puritans, it is a necessity to apply the principles that the Bible depicts to individuals in the most correct way. Those who do not practice them are judged and considered to be sinners. According to this belief, the connection between women, society and religion makes women insignificantly thrown into the back spaces of the community. The morality, faith and righteousness that a woman is expected to teach to her child at home is one of the most important duties attributed to a Puritan woman. And if the child is not raised in accordance with religious principles, it is considered the fault of the woman.

In this article, based on the symbols and motifs in *The Scarlet letter*, we will try to explain how the expulsion of women from society is expressed through symbols by examining the Puritan society, life, individuals and women in that period. Hawthorne, who handles the reflection of this reality by using symbols, metaphors and motifs, has provided the reader with a better understanding of the novel that facilitates to grasp the inner world of symbols more clearly.

### 1. Independence of Women in Patriarchal Religious Rule

Religion is a phenomenon accepted as “reality” for its believers, and a social case to be investigated thoroughly by sociologists, theologians and

literary critics (as long as it is handled in literature). Each religion has its own belief system, worshipping practices and explanations of its mainline purposes. It is considered a sacred system and believers act in accordance with the laws it directly or indirectly imposes. However, although it tends to bring people together in a community, it has both positive and negative aspects. Those who are inclined to make use of religion for their own interests, and those who can do whatever they want by saying that religion dictates so, adopt religion for a different belief and purpose. No matter what religious texts or practices show, it is almost impossible to separate religious practices and beliefs from the social and cultural practices of the community. Therefore, religion is not a completely separate domain where supernatural beings lay and dictate the principles. On the contrary, the very fact that humans are the only practitioners of religion makes it prone to changes according to power relations, one of which is gender roles.

Depending upon the patriarchal power relations, some people who hold the power might exercise practices that are incompatible with the principles defined in the holy scripts. For example, although there is not a clearly defined or openly explained rule about the oppression and harsh treatment of women, slaves, or black people in holy scripts, the human history mostly consist of the tragic narratives of those “others”. In another example, men belonging to another pagan faith used women as prostitutes in temples. However, did God really command people to do so? *“The Lord God gave Adam a deep sleep. While Adam was sleeping, the Lord God took one of his ribs and replaced it with meat. He created a woman from the rib he received from Adam and brought him to Adam. Adam said, “This is the bone from my bones, made from my flesh.” She will be called ‘Woman’ because she was taken from the man. Therefore, the man will leave his mother and father and be attached to his wife. Two of them will be one size.”* (Genesis, 2:18, 21-24). What is the reason for the situations imposed on women when God has commanded men and women to be whole, united, “one size”? In the cycle of oppressed and oppressor, why has the oppressed always been women? According to Karakoç (2016), throughout humanity’s history, the value of women, the roles that have been considered for them, the inequitable masculine dominance and women’s loss of identity have always been discussed and scrutinized.

Women had different statuses in various societies; they were sanctified in some primitive societies where the matriarchal family structure was valid, in some they had equal status and rights with men, whereas in patriarchal societies they had a secondary status compared to men, and even in some cultures they had almost no rights. Women are oppressed by both cultural and religious practices (monotheistic as well as polytheistic) directed by the powerful upon the weak, namely by men upon women.

Hester Prynne represents the independence of women in the book *The Scarlet Letter*. She inspires women by making her own decision and plotting her own path. Regardless of the outcome, she does not submit to the

patriarchal order and acts according to her own perception of truth, revealing the strong woman theme. Hester Prynne's determination and the resultant punishments in the struggle for independence creates a guilt in Arthur Dimmesdale. The desire to have such independence in the intensity of religious rule has created a dilemma between human nature and society.

Keeping in mind the main themes of the book, it is possible for one to say that these feelings and concepts are not only telling a story, but also harbouring many emotions to the reader despite all the contradictory thoughts. The committed sin, love, independence, guilt, and the society-individual conflict are the themes of the novel. The desires of an individual, represented by Hester, in her own life and the expectations of the society contribute to the formation of these themes. *The Scarlet Letter* is the independence story of a woman who, despite the pressures and the strict practices of religion, could exist in life with her own self. In this context, the novel contains not only freedom but also many emotions. These emotions contribute to the reader to find her/his own identity, to empathize and to establish a connection between human nature and society.

## **2. The Stamp of Society**

In order for women to exist and live freely, it is very important for them to be accepted in societies first, beginning from the very basic unit of family extending to the major institutions like the Constitution. Society, which has progressed in many issues, still has not been able to accept the independence and uniqueness of women's existence. Women are forced to work in the family as child-raisers, house cleaners, ironers, husband's sexual satisfiers, food makers, laundry doers etc., on a daily basis, in mostly bad conditions and in unpaid ways. It seems that main reason for the widespread exploitation and dependence of women on men is the financial conditions they have.

Women are expected to avoid occupations based on competition with men, as when they work in "womanly" jobs, they will be able to devote more time to their homes and will not disrupt their "basic duties". Men who are against female emancipation are mostly afraid of women's consciousness formed and enhanced through education, so they are against women doing something new, or having proper education in universities in particular. This fear is the direct result of the fact that if a woman becomes aware of her abilities and potential, male dominance will weaken and get shattered in the end. Every realized rebellion by a female against the oppressive male system is likely to create hope in another woman's heart.

Even though many transformations have taken place in gender roles benefitting women to a certain extent, many differences have still not been observed in the position and value of women. One of the reasons for the slow progress in women's liberation is the practices rooted in patriarchal societies stemming from various interpretations of religions. Not only in divine religions, but also in polytheistic religions, women have been abused

and used for wrong purposes. For instance, the place of women in Judaism is very different according to the roles and duties of men; as Meyers (1983) puts it, the first duty and reason for existence of a woman is to give birth to a child and to take care of the home. In the Puritan belief, which is completely based on an extremely strict interpretation of Christianity, the value of women is similarly created and women's rights are limited.

Many of the symbols and values in the Puritan cultural system are known as social or religious covenants. The basic symbol or belief in the covenant as the path of God, man, and believing brothers, is carried into puritan life in all respects. In the church, the relationship between God and humans, the individual and brothers is established through covenants. In addition, the 'consent' practiced in the community has an important place in the Puritan belief. The story of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* relates the position of women in the American world with the Puritan belief through the use of some symbols.

One of the symbols is the red colour, generally denoting revolt, love, revolution and danger in many places. But in *The Scarlet Letter*, red is used for very different meanings. It does not signify victory, revolution or love; instead, it symbolizes the stigmatization of women. It is presented to the whole public, where red symbolizes attention, passion and danger. Thus, those who see the colour red are aware of the danger and are invited to see a woman's 'contradiction to society'. Erdem (2019) puts forward that with the Virgin Mary in Christianity; the red colour dress worn by the stud girls is associated with Mary Magdalene, who is known as the 'bad woman' in Christianity and who was sainted by the blessing of Jesus. In that situation, it's clarified that women do not have freedom, and they indicate a 'stop' warning like traffic lights in this colour presented to them: "*When she woke up, it was red. It wasn't fried or sunburned, it had that bold dense red color of the stop sign.*" (Jordan, 2021: 9). This colour symbolizes that every right in a woman's life is taken over by others, and the red with blood colour can be ruled by the priests. So, it becomes the symbol of a presented life style of oppression, nothingness, love, danger and peace (contradictorily). For example; the red bird is a motif and displayed as a symbol of peace, love and freedom. Birds are regarded in many areas as a symbol of human spirit and connection with the divine. In addition to this spiritual representation, it is actually a symbol of love, peace, passion and danger. It is the sign of how the combination of two souls will bring danger, but at the same time it presents freedom too. The coexistence of these contrasts has further revealed the ruin of love, the stigma, and the greatness of men because Hester is compelled to bear the sin of the union of the souls with a letter in the depths of her heart.

The second important symbol is the letter "A" embroidered on the cloth. In modern or ancient times, the clothes were embroidered and these embroideries made the individual look stylish, elegant and attractive as a lady. These embroideries on individuals' collars or on their chests were sometimes made up of a figure, sometimes a flower, and sometimes the

initials indicating the name and surname of the wearer. Sometimes a letter as a symbol or an embroidery is adopted in very different meanings. In the novel, the 'scarlet letter' that the main character Hester Prynne bears on her chest symbolizes neither elegance nor ladylikeness. This coat of arms is a symbol of shyness, immorality, and crime. It is a stamp on which Hester's freedom, body and decisions are inscribed. 'A', which is the abbreviation of adultery, is the manifest symbol of the neglect of women's rights, the struggle for survival, and oppression by the society. It represents shame, adultery, and sin, and when a person's eye focuses on that letter, Hester's soul gets stabbed once more again. "*It seemed to argue so wide a diffusion of her shame, that all nature knew of it; it could have caused her no deeper pang had the leaves of the trees whispered the dark story among themselves—had the summer breeze murmured about it—had the wintry blast shrieked it aloud!*" (Hawthorne, 1878: 43). Although Hester may think that the red letter bestows something new on her life, in fact, people can see that how her chest hurts with every single look of people. Her shame is not because of what she's doing but because of the way people look. This letter puts great pressure on her soul not because of what she does, but because of people's gaze. "*She felt or thought that the red letter was telling her a new feeling. She could not help shivering believing that it gave her the ability to understand the sins hidden in other hearts.*" (Hawthorne, 1878: 99).

This symbol, described as adultery, later becomes a guide for Hester's survival. The symbol A for Hester, who is judged by the society and regarded like the devil, starts to be described with the word 'able'. This change actually represents how a woman gradually regains her freedom and breaks down the pressure with her own hands. This symbol can actually be associated with the red colour and clothes bestowed on the woman created in '*The Handmaid's Tale*' by Margaret Atwood. In that novel, too, women are dressed in red to serve their commanders and are forced to live in a society founded on the state of male domination. The stigma of women is just giving birth; "*We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.*" (Atwood, 2017: 182-183). The area expressed by this symbol is very wide and unfortunately it is still an example of the oppression of women today. The letter 'A' reveals that women have no say in society, cannot live alone, and must be loyal to a man (her husband, father, brother). The letter 'A' should not be defined only as adultery. Because the pressure, freedom, body, decisions and belief that underlie adultery are effective factors in the formation of this letter. For instance, when she meets Dimmesdale in the forest, she removes the scarlet letter from her chest. There, the glowing of the sun and the sudden vitality of life is a representation of women's liberation. The letter is a symbol that is ingrained in the soul and heart of all women, not just Hester.

The letter 'A' represents 17th century society, the Puritan faith, and the imperative of commitment to this faith. The harsh conditions of the Puritan faith are exhibited by the 19th century eyes through the letter 'A'. In

this context, the letter becomes a motif not only for Hester, but for all individuals who are somehow affected by patriarchal pressure.

Another significant symbol in *The Scarlet Letter* is Pearl. Pearl, which can be interpreted as the union of souls, the union of love and the destruction of the rules, drags the reader into many different thoughts with the meaning of its name and the character she exhibits. A pearl represents purity and truth as can be seen from its brightness, value and whiteness. Pearl, the child of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, is interpreted by different critics as a symbol; "Pearl's artistic effect of ambiguity is achieved by her symbolism of truth, symbolism of grace, symbolism of the New World, and individuality" (Wang, 2017: 376). Actually, this kid is the creator of the love and reality of Dimmesdale and Hester. Instead of a love trapped in an oyster, they have chosen to turn their love into a pearl. That's why Pearl, the symbol of their love and the sins of society, offers many possibilities for interpretation to the reader.

Pearl's changeable mood symbolizes both evil and good. What we call evil is the sin and adultery created by society. Goodness, on the other hand, is the source of the love, peace and cheer created by Hester and Dimmesdale's rebellion against society. "*Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants*" (Hawthorne, 1878: 107). This little girl was born with different rights than others because her mother committed adultery and she was born in that way. Hester and Pearl are framed within the morality of society. There is no place for their lives in this circle, and the moral norms are ingrained in the body and soul of this girl, who was born without any guilt, crime, or sin of her own. This is why Pearl symbolizes both purity and immorality. When Pearl is forced to behave according to the rooted moral codes, it means that she becomes deprived of life. She turns into what Sylvia Plath (1992) criticizes in her poem 'I am Vertical'; "*I am not a tree with my root in the soil*". Similarly, Pearl is not rooted in the morality of this society, either. Pearl constantly reminds her mother of the forbidden love, which will never be accepted in society. The pearl that the oyster holds is itself, and the shells are representative of Dimmesdale and Hester, who take their Pearl under their protective wings.

The forest and the brook running in it are depicted with symbolic value in the novel. The forest, which can be regarded as the metaphor of human society or life in general, is the description of the cycle of life. In this life cycle, trees are like human beings. A human grows, develops and dies just like a tree. The forest, which might be interpreted as a reflection of the subconscious, also represents the society in which the human being is a symbol of complexity, the brutality of and even loyalty to society. Devotion is symbolized with trees as the roots of the trees are tightly wrapped in the soil. Hester is rooted in that society, oppression, rules and beliefs, just like tree roots. But this devotion has deprived her of her own existence. As Sanger (1921) puts it, a woman who does not have her own body and cannot

control her body is not free. For Hester Prynne, trees in the forest are the public, and the roots of the tree are the norms of society. And Hester has taken root in those trees. Although she is a strong woman, the fact that she cannot leave her homeland means that she cannot remove these roots.

The scaffold is another symbol in the novel. In some cases, the connotative power or symbolic value of a sign might be much greater than its meaning. The scaffold and the memories cumulated around it, though left behind, are engraved in the heart, so they have an important value. *"It is not the feeling of guilt that blushes the face, it is the thought of others thinking or knowing that we are guilty"* (Darwin, 2016: 83). It is among these accusations that Hester Prynne was put on trial by all gazes and was serialized on the gallows as a picture of shame. The scaffold is displayed to denote the disregard of belief, morality for the Puritans. It is also a warning, and even threatening sign, indicating what the consequences would be in similar violations of social, cultural or religious rules.

The scaffold, where sin, adultery, crime, the destruction of rules and their consequences are displayed to society is a disgrace of Hester. The display of a child and her mother, who has chosen to be with the man she loves with her own will and desire, should create a feeling of shame, not fear, in the society. However, according to both the Puritan belief and the holy scripts, this is the place where adultery is displayed. Although for Hester it is recognized as the place where shame is displayed, for Dimmesdale, the scaffold is the symbol of purification and reality. The situation that gnawed Dimmesdale's soul and made him rise to the scaffold is a kind of purification there, a movement committed to end his regret because it has become unbearable for Dimmesdale to load the burden of adultery only onto Hester's chest. The symbol of the letter 'A' formed by a meteor fragment in the sky when Dimmesdale, Hester and Pearl are side by side on the scaffold is a powerful sign that Dimmesdale shares this shame. It cannot be said that Dimmesdale, the pastor, is psychologically well and does not suffer. The reason why he gets sick is this big 'secret' that he carries. Being a respected priest turns into being unable to reveal the truth, which inflicts enormous pain on Dimmesdale and drives him mad. Dimmesdale's emotions in a very strong and long-lasting captivity are revealed through hallucination. Therefore, the scaffold becomes the symbol of purification, revelation, discriminative line between mental wholesomeness and craziness, as well as a platform where the truths are confessed, or at least faced.

Daylight can mean the symbol of enlightenment, clarification and cleansing. While daylight gives peace to a person, it also reflects the brightness of one's heart. Hester tries to catch the light of day on her way to meet Dimmesdale, which means she is actually trying to catch the love of her child's father, and to feel the warmth of her love. In a way, it can also be said that Hester and Pearl try to make and turn the gloom and pessimism of the dark worlds besieging them into enlightenment. *"All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure*



forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now" (Hawthorne, 1878: 139). The description of daylight as a smile of heaven is because daylight fills her soul with beauty. Daylight, which has become the symbol of honesty and simplicity, turns into the light in the lives of Dimmesdale and Hester.

### Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* is set in Puritan society, where all the strict moral code and rules are dictated and observed by the members of this society. The novel is narrated with many denotative signs and symbols, most of which are designed by the author to reflect the mood, general psychology of the characters as well as the position of women in a fundamentalist Christian community.

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In conclusion, *The Scarlet Letter* depicts realistically the possible outcomes of a woman's forbidden sexual affair with a man. To make the fictional structure more complex, Nathaniel Hawthorne positions the main character, Hester Prynne, as a woman whose husband is believed to have been lost in the sea. Yet, it turns out that in fact he survived the accident, a fictional design that deteriorates her role as she has a love affair, and even a child out of it. Even worse, Hawthorne delves deep into human psychology

by choosing the most respected priest of the community as Hester's lover, and not an ordinary man. The novel becomes, in this regard, a great laboratory where godly rules are practiced by human design, moral values clash with the instincts of both men and women, the relationship between a priest and a married woman in his congregation is reflected as a trial both socially and psychologically, and a woman's roles are questioned, leading to a revolt against all the system established by patriarchy. What's more attractive in the novel is that it is full of signs and symbols, which greatly enhances the semantic value of the narration when combined with the plot and dialogues.

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