

Chronotope of Forest and Public Sphere in the *Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract : This article explores the vivid operation of Foucaultian paradigm throughout Hawthorne's narrative, *The Scarlet Letter* of the individual versus the state; elucidating how these institutional mechanisms of the state (which include the police, judiciary and the notion of surveillance) tend to regulate and curb an individual's life. The narrative takes us into a society where the menace of Puritan law and order is evident along with their ostentatious ethics for deliverance of 'justice' and their unreasonable means for punishment. So, the scaffold placed majestically, in the public sphere of the Puritan town is in itself a symbol of threat to the individual, who is not only made well aware that sin follows a punishment, but at the same time, to them sin refers to transgressive behaviour. So the 'deviant' individual like Hester in the novel, would be subject to both a compulsive punishment and public shame. The novel on the contrary, also provides us another symbol in opposition to the public sphere which is the forest, the forest however, in its natural plenty is symbolic of freedom and purity. Now if we look at the narrative from the point of view of Bakhtin's chronotope, it would be easy to infer that both time and space are aspects of the novel which are inevitably fused into one another, therefore, inseparable. So in the case of *Scarlett Letter*, time denotes the Puritan time and the space of the public sphere is designed according to the needs of its times.

Keywords : Scaffold, Conservatism, Puritan Regime, Chronotope, Public Sphere, Sin, Transgression

The concept of chronotope has been introduced to literary analysis by the twentieth century philosopher and writer Mikhail Bakhtin [1895-1975]. In his work 'Forms of time and Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin (1994) asserted that he took this term 'chronotope', from Einstein's theory of Relativity. It has been utilized by him as an integral category of literature as well as a determinant of genre and image of man in literature. Bakhtin endorsed the phenomenon of chronotope to explain the inherent connectivity between temporal and spatial relationships as expressed in novel forms.

The 'chronotope' plays the role of an 'organizational Centre' in a narrative. It is to the physical space as mentioned in the Novel, the whole nexus of its narrative is tied and untied. Time, however as Bakhtin points out in the essay, gives the narrative its flesh and blood, becomes artistically visible through the course of its social and historical events. The space in turn responds to the flow of time and plot. Time experience is therefore, interwoven with space experience and vice versa. The events in a narrative correlate space and its surrounding vicinity with social historical time i.e. with temporal sequences.

This Bakhtin's concept of chronotope therefore, can be applied to all novel forms, the *Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is one such example. The 'chronotope' of forest and the public sphere contribute significantly in shaping the Novel's content, plot, form and most importantly its context.

In terms of its temporal-spatial arrangements Hawthorne's time is historical

particularly with regards to the public sphere, as he is intent on contextualizing and historicizing his narrative, *The Scarlet Letter*, according to critic AN. Kaul in *The American Vision* (2002), it is not a moral fable about Christianity but it is critical of a particular society based in a certain climate of "early severity of the Puritan Regime". In his ironic glance at the puritan past, he is questioning not only his own heritage and lineage, but is also criticizing its inherent orthodox conservatism.

The public sphere, then is a space carved by Hawthorne out of his acute historical consciousness, with the motif of understanding the present followed by an ideal construction of a perfect future.

"A throng of bearded men in sad coloured garments and gray,

... assembled in front of a wooden edifice ... tempered with oak and

studded with iron spikes."

The opening of the narrative with the above description of the scaffold at the public sphere in the novel, is a deliberate attempt by Hawthorne to convey the hegemonic existence of constraint and stranglehold in the Puritan society. The descriptive attributes of the public sphere for instance, the use of the phrase 'iron spikes', 'wooden edifice', 'oaken door', 'beetle browd and gloomy front', 'rust on the ponderous iron work' embodies not only strict curtailment of free human spirit, but also signifies metaphorical ugliness as characterized by the Puritan society. The reiteration of the term 'iron' signals inflexibility of public

decision. According to the Bible, iron belongs to the category of base-metals, which thereby enables us to infer that the Puritan new world was based on base-values.

“, the platform
of the pillory
... so fashioned
to confine the
human head
into its tight
grasp.”

The above description of scaffold erected at the public sphere signifies itself as an instrument of puritan discipline taking into its possession human life itself, which otherwise is ordained only by divinity. Scaffold, however worn and dingy in appearance, was a space for ignominy. For Hester her journey from the prison to the scaffold is a journey towards her salvation. Viola Sachs in the essay ‘The Myth of America’ (1973) observed that Hester’s journey is symbolic of her “Spiritual elevation” towards the most supreme knowledge signifying her permanent divorce from values of the old puritan order embodied by the market places.

“It was a policy
of our
ancestors to
search out even
the secret sins
and expose
them to shame
without fear ...
in light of the
moon day sun.”

The practice of puritans alluding disgrace upon the sinner was performed, open in public and the public sphere was its pedestal. This ceremony of public humiliation, as depicted in the Chapter Market Place engages itself in mutilating the human body to carry a sign of its transgressive sin. The puritan consensus approved of imprinting upon the victim, the letter of law.

Human Existence in the community was driven by an imposed sadistic semiology forever seeking to ‘typify’, ‘appropriate’ signs and symptoms not so much for an individual’s grace but for their sins, Hester is coerced to not only dawn upon her the sign of ‘Adulteress’ but has to live with it throughout. Such typifications endorsed by the puritan public not only determined the fate of Hester’s life but also commodified it. So the chronotope of public sphere operates significantly in the novel, depicting the collective consciousness of the public in the puritan town, who tend to instruct upon the individual codes of moral behaviour alongwith the repercussions of acting against them.

These puritan ceremonies are one of the central events that take place at the public sphere.

This in turn, enables us to infer that time here has to be read in relation to the new puritan regime established in America after their immigration from the old world. So the public sphere as a space where civil events of the puritan town are held indicates the time in which it operates. As Bakhtin explains in the essay that our acquaintance with space occurs through time. The chronotope of public sphere in the novel, puts to display the socio-historical context of the puritan society and its conventions.

Hawthorne’s motto of writing the text also cannot be ignored, as he is bringing forth the gap between what society ought to be and what it actually is. The public sphere in the novel, as constructed by the new world puritans is part of a history which Hawthorne narrates in order to place it in contrast with the new puritan world’s unfulfilled promise of a utopic land and human happiness.

Through the course of his novel, Hawthorne questions as to what can moral values of a society be which, on one hand sails westwards to recreate its world and on the contrary in doing so erects a scaffold, “at the western extremity of the market place”.

The Prison symbolizes forced complicity to an established order, lack of freedom, an enclosed space with gloomy darkness, whereas the Door to the prison is a threshold extending dark space of prison towards light and freedom. Here we see a symbolic structure of romance vacillating around this opposition between enclosed space and open air, bondage and freedom. By constructing the characteristics of the public sphere with all negative connotations, Hawthorne however is not only pointing out to the flaws in puritan past but is also critiquing gloomy space of the public sphere.

Apart from a gothic description of the public sphere. Hawthorne also uses a fantastic interplay of colour imageries. Here on one hand, we see weeds growing near the prison described as the ‘black flower of civilized society’ whereas on the other hand, there is a ‘wild rose bush’ in full bloom with its ‘fragrance and fragile beauty’. This opposition of black weed versus delicate rose is Hawthorne’s method of symbolism expressed through colours. Its used in the text to provide a contrast between the image of rose as an emblem of hope pitted against the rigid and dark puritan times.

Thereby the public sphere consists of three significant physical objects; the prison, the door, the rose each of them in turn is reflecting there particular time stages. The Prison is symbolic of old world darkness, door as threshold, and rose signifying new world light.

The *Scarlet Letter* is based on a central anguish of the individual in state of conflict with the governing system. The scaffold erected by the

Puritan State and the prison belong to the category of State Apparatus, built in order to reform the 'deviant' individual. So, the public sphere of the puritan town consists of spaces belonging to the governing bodies, represent the 'dark times' into which an individual is helpless, vis-à-vis power of the state. Michael Foucault has been considerably interested in the shifting ways in which a civilian body and the civil institutions are related and also have entered into politically governed connections with each other.

For instance, in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault cites how the body was objectified during the nineteenth century. This commodification was practiced by the institutional machinery in a clinic's or prison's spatial-temporal compartmentalizations. Foucault, pointed out that the prison is also a place of surveillance over the punished individual.

Its spatial setting is designed by using barracks and iron edifice to signify restraint. Similarly, the public sphere in the *Scarlet Letter* and its physical caricatures; the prison and the scaffold, mass civil gaze onto Hester's body all signify order impinged upon the innocent individual.

One of the other important chronotope in the text is that of the forest. In a forest, time is read in correspondence to its natural spatial characteristics including hour of the day, season, rise of the sun above its horizon, direction of moon and stars. A Natural space has to be read in correspondence to its natural time. Space thereby, here is a reflection of its time and time a trace of its space. The concept of chronotope through its specific temporal spatial arrangement becomes a "unitary of the epoch" as Bakhtin points out, which becomes not only graphically visible but also narratively visible. Its out of this given context we begin to infer sense out of a narrative.

In one of his works *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among men*, Rousseau observed the forest, as a mode of spontaneity, as here "man is scattered in the woods among the animals, wandering ... without industry, liaisons, speech, domicile". In the civil society man is held up under socio-cultural, moral-ethical stigma, whereas man in a close proximity to the woods is neither good nor bad neither virtuous nor vicious. The individual is then beyond all kinds of man-made parameters of conduct. Rousseau in through his above ideology is placing the pristine state of nature in contrast to the civilized world, full of prejudices.

According to his study inequalities among human beings came into being with the advent of civilization, prior to it life was simple. Therefore, Hester's union with Dimmesdale in the woods is a world incomprehensible from the perspective of puritan reason. "Such was the sympathy of nature

..., never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth."

The Puritan world given its orthodox framework in the novel is 'exclusive' in all senses, especially towards those who like Hester are 'misfits', 'sinners', 'deviants' or towards those who by their eccentric actions transgress the dominant normative. Subsequently, after Hester's public humiliation, she is declared as the 'other' in the collective. Her humiliation is a kind of social banishment which enables her to seek refuge in the forest. She and her daughter Pearl, 'the fruit of sin' as the puritan society addresses her, dislocates themselves from this 'exclusive' society. Hester's residence is now not in the Puritan town, but on its outskirts, close to nature.

The forest, as a form of chronotope in the novel operates against the grain of formal time of Puritans. The forest as a space is not only idyllic but is also, liberal as against the enclosed world of the Prison at the puritan public sphere. Time in forest can be inferred in correspondence with Hawthorne's notion of Romance.

Leo Blevy in the essay 'Landscape Modes of the Scarlet Letter', observed that "Hawthorne turns the whole landscape into a metaphor which is capable of an infinite extension beyond the mere spatio-temporal limitations." So the forest in the Novel though is a mode of romance viewing time and space in terms of the ideal, but at the same time one can also infer, as the above critic has observed, that the landscape mode in the novel cannot be confined to merely spatial-temporal settings.

"So strangely did they meet in the dim woods ... two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life."

In Puritan times, the forest was considered as a symbol of gloom, a devil's playground where evil prevailed whereas for these lovers Dimmesdale and Hester, it was the only place available to them on land for their encounter with each other. It was a space away from the intruding gaze of civilization. Thereby, the forest can be read not only as a parody of puritan officialdom but also a space of subversion of its authoritative discourses. Love, however in humanitarian discourses is considered as the purest of all emotions to which the corrupt puritan world is blind folded. However this pure almost mystical emotion is given its utmost expression and free play in the natural landscape of the forest. As both Hester and Dimmesdale sit hand in hand, they relish their intimacy. This intimacy which the forest allows to prosper is to them otherwise forbidden and punishable. As they share

their sentiments under the 'tossing boughs' and the 'mossy trunk of the fallen tree'. Therefore, this moment of reunion in the novel is one instance of free flow of passion.

Critic Hossein and Omid Amani in the essay "the Carnavalesque in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*" read the forest in the novel as a space where a new model of interaction is developed among individuals in contrast with the dominant hierarchical monologic world of the Puritan public sphere. As a space of transgression the forest works as a trope in opposition with the Puritan town where rigid Laws and religion prevail.

The 'meditative walks' into the mystery of the 'primeval forest' allows the characters to enter into a special communication with natural objects, which is not possible in the human world.

"With a sudden
smile of heaven
the sunshine,
pouring a very
flood into the
obscure forest
gladdening
each green leaf
...."

The sun operates as a signifier of time in the forest, it not only signifies hour of the day but also contributes to those little moments of happiness available to Hester in the novel. Sunlight evading all darkness leading to subsequent erasure of shadows implies a crucial aspect of sunlight's purity purporting Natural Law as Superior over Puritan Law.

FO Matthiessen in the essay 'Allegory and Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*' (1941) observed that "the beam of light in the forest scene does not merely remain a dramatic property but becomes

itself a central character", as it fixes itself like a spotlight first on Hester's bosom then follows Pearl. It is due to the sun's beams that Pearl signifies the light which escorts Hester through dark wilderness. She almost consumes the sunshine which significantly contributed to the "untransmitted vigour in Pearl's nature."

So we clearly see these significant contrasts used in the text by Hawthorne between light and darkness. The outdoor scenes of the novel dramatized in the forest, contribute towards a new vision of time in opposition to the punctilious time of the puritan public sphere. All these significant forces of nature including the sun, shadowy ardour of the forest through their imperial presence express their own natural time.

Chronotopes apart from being the defining features of a particular space and its time also enable us to point out contrasts between two given spaces. The forest and the public sphere, both are in the novel important forms of chronotopes each of them with their own distinctive characteristics. While the public sphere as a space is 'exclusive' as it provides shelter even to social non-conformists, the public sphere haunts its citizens by its hegemonic political tactics with Sermons being read, regulations imposed, the forest on contrary 'primeval' as it is, allows free flow of human sentiments. The civilians at the public sphere wear "Sad coloured gray" garments closely resembling the spirit of their Spatial-temporal arrangement, on the other hand, the forest a symbol of divine magnificence it provides natural garments to Pearl. "Pearl gathers violets, anemones, columbines, and some trigs of the freshest green". With these natural objects she decorates her hair, her young waist and becomes 'a nymph child'.

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