

A SARTREAN INTERPRETATION OF *THE SCARLET LETTER*: THE CHARACTERS' METAMORPHOSIS FROM *BEING-IN-ITSELF* TO *BEING-FOR-ITSELF*

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850) can be interpreted from the Sartrean existential viewpoint that human being exists first, and then creates the essence or meaning of the life, through a significant conversion, for what he/she is responsible. Hester Prynne's individual development from socially constructed adulterer to biblical Abel or able, from Dimmesdale's unconscious ignorance of the adultery, at the marketplace, to being self-conscious by the end, or Chillingworth's transfiguration from stone like calm and solitary personality to the atrocious murderer is surprisingly the transforming points as beings, from being-in-itself (an entity with no self-consciousness) to being-for-itself (a self-conscious believing that existence precedes essence). The paper, taking Sartre's existentialism as a fundamental phenomenon, scrutinizes the text meticulously from a qualitative and theoretical approach, especially on the prominent characters to prove them as existential beings from Sartrean existential viewpoint who are free and at the same time responsible agents. The study also brings the consequences by providing enough textual and intertextual references that the characters' existence precedes their essence, and how they metamorphose themselves from paper-knife or stone-like beings (being-in-itself) to conscious or sensually active beings (being-for-itself).

Keywords: Existentialism, Sartrean, Metamorphosis, Conscious, Being

INTRODUCTION

Ambitions for retaliation, affection of penitence, seeking for identity are the prominent themes in Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, which asserts a tale of the typical puritan iniquity, self-annihilative emotions of hidden culpability, and virtuous dichotomy between righteous and morally wrong. The story also exposes the everlasting conflict between individual and society where the most vital part is that individuals must survive in the conflict, and transform themselves in the society from one existential state to another. According to the Sartrean interpretation of the *Human Conscious*, it is considered as the transformation from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself*. However, Hester's rejection of divulging the perpetrator's name at the marketplace represents the theory of (being-in-itself) because she performs here as like a stone or puppet woman while, immediately, she reverses her condition in the society from where she has been exiled a few days back through consciously performing and playing as an active being (being-for-itself). Roger and Dimmesdale's transformation also is the impeccable example of the Sartrean interpretation of *Human Consciousness*. Even, the babe child's mutation from a devil's daughter to a rich wife is the significant point to be discussed from the existential viewpoint. Besides, Sartre also speculates in the *Nausea* that "existence precedes essence", means human beings first exist and then produce meanings of life, where almost all the mentioned characters' existence precedes their essence or meaning of life because, at the beginning of the novel, they all exist

as puppets, or Sartrean *paper-knife* and later, creates the meaning of life through performing moral, and sometimes infernal (in case of Chillingworth) activities. Finally, characters are undoubtedly existential beings that are free and responsible for their every action as conscious agents.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The researcher has been scrutinizing the existentialism in writings, especially, in *The Scarlet Letter*, and as well as, the behaviors of each character in the scene. He finds some ideas and textual references regarding Sartrean existentialism, and started finding some relevant articles to be clearer, but has not found more scholarly articles on the issue. The majority of the articles are based on puritan hypocrisies and stereotype ideologies of the society, where individuals are being judged from a socio-religious perspective rather than humanism. The existing studies also are not related to the most important issue which is, every individual as a being has freedom and responsibility, and being's existence precedes his/her essence (they at first exist, then produce the meaning of the life). The research, definitely, would assist people to conceive and judge human beings from existential viewpoints rather than from surface denotative meanings. However, the research would try to infuse the problematic gap between usual socio-religious perspectives and existential interpretations of the selected text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the criticism of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, varieties of books and critical essays have been collected for the study. Different books and critical writings are compiled by many resounding scholars from all over the world who are adroit in existential theories and criticism. To progress with the study, Barrett (1962) has been referred in the beginning portion of the paper, in terms of discussing the features of existentialism where he explains existentialism from two perspectives, one is from social, and another one is from historical. In the time of explaining existentialism, Sartre (1976) is brought widely because the research is totally based on his theory "existence precedes essence" and *Human Consciousness*, where he speculates that individuals can transform them from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself*. However, Unamuno (1913), discusses about humanism where he insists that philosophy is for humans because philosophy is being produced by the philosophers who are made of flesh and blood. In addition, Macquarrie (1972) also asserts about human existence that human beings can precede their essence. Interestingly, Roubiczek (1996), supports both Sartre and Macquarrie, in terms of human existence can precede their essence which actually, means that human beings first exist in the world, then stand against, emerge and produce their essence or meanings of the life. To add that, majority of the study also has been conducted based on Stumpf & Pieser (2008), where they have encapsulated almost all the philosophers and philosophical theories, especially, from Socrates to Sartre. In short, they are brought as a fundamental based on this research to find out effective and prolific consequences. However, some literary online websites have been also supportive to support the paper.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The paper critically observes the reasons behind the decision of Hester Prynne's rejection to divulge the name of the co-adulterer by standing like a stone at the marketplace, and transformation of her own-self into an acceptable being in the same society, from where she has been deported. It also scrutinizes the other characters' conversion from one state to another, especially, Pearl's advancement from demon offspring to socially accepted rich and respected woman. One of the major functions of dealing with this study and research is to prove the characters as existential beings in Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*,

which might help the readers to conceive the world differently, as well as also might assist them to be conscious about their own self as existential beings. The core objective of conducting this research is to make the readers understand about the distinctions between usual denotative meanings and concealed connotative meanings of any text, which undoubtedly, help them to understand the differences between the socio-religious interpretations and existential viewpoints of the masterpiece.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has used a qualitative and theoretical method to comment on data from different sources. Primary and secondary sources have been also used to support it. The researcher consulted some online sources like (Academia.edu, scholar.google.com) and the library of Eastern University, Jahangirnagar University as well as a personal library. The researcher also took help from teachers, friends at different universities who have assisted him to compile data on the particular topic that he has chosen to find out new consequences. However, the researcher has used some conceptual frameworks to reach the main idea of the paper as well as further studies.

THE RATIONALE OF THE RESEARCH

It is commonly believed by many critics that the Hester and Dimmesdale's physical intercourse and being silent (stone-like appearance) during Hester's judgments at the marketplace is nothing but happens from guiltiness for committing iniquity, while another group of people strongly believe that it happens because they are like in unconscious level (being-in-itself), according to existential philosophy, at what level, the individuals are none but like the *paper-knife*. It is, therefore, my main concern to find out the real issues of their transformation towards *being-for-itself* (conscious being for what they are responsible for their own actions) from *being-in-itself* (an entity without self-identity) by applying Sartrean existential theories and criticism.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

The paper is dependent on printed books and journals available in my country. Few books are compiled from Amazon and few are downloaded from the internet. The paper cannot deeply consult Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl's transformation into *being-for-itself*, from *being-in-itself*, because of the time restrictions and word limitations. Finally, the budget cannot fully cover the paper to move forward to collect data.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Defining Existentialism with Some Recurring Themes

Existentialism, in general, is a philosophical inquiry that emphasizes the existence of the individual who performs as a free and responsible agent, regulating their own amelioration through the acts of the will. However, it is not as easy as to be defined, because it can be speculated from both contextual and historical perspectives while Barrett explains from socio-historical perspectives that "Existential philosophy ... is ... a product of the bourgeois society in a state of dissolution" as well as, "Existentialism is the philosophy of the atomic age." (14) Some individuals also claim that it is the style of philosophizing begins from the individual instead of nature which means it is the philosophy of the subject rather than the object. Interestingly, Miguel de Unamuno (1913) strongly states that "philosophy is the product of the humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who address himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself" (p.6), here, he also

squeezes on the individuality and subjectivity. The most focusing point of the theory is related to Sartre's idea of "existence precedes essence" which means "we mean that man first of exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre, 1975, p.7). The statement means that man is born of nothing or as an indefinable agent in the universe then he/she will produce his or her existence what he/she wants to be on the earth. In addition, existentialism has some basic traits to be conceived it very conspicuously, for instance, freedom, decision, and responsibility which are pervasive to all existential philosophers. In these features, men are free agents to take actions, and they have to take responsibility for it, only then the existentialists believe that men become authentically themselves. In the same way, there is another group of recurring existentialists' features comprising such topics as guilt, alienation, despair, and death. Though these are not vital in the traditional existentialist's philosophies, but till now, they are being practiced in the contemporary philosophies especially, by the hand of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre which mainly focuses on the tragic incidents of human existence as an individual, and as well as the whole. Still, to recapitulate the whole phenomena about existentialism and its nature, it can be said that Kierkegaard and Heidegger epitomize consternation as a basic and ontological effect which divulges the world in its entirety, while Shestov, Camus but also Cioran, Ionesco, and Kafka deal with the issues of the absurdity, and easily conceive as a limit of the human rationality, finally, Nietzsche goes beyond the Hegelian rationality through scrutinizing hopelessness, strangle, the feasibility of the adjournment of moral code, on one hand, the will or wish to power, the death of God, the annihilation of the morals, on the another. To be more clear, existentialism denies "sociological concerns" (Levin, 1989, p.326) because it believes in "total responsibility" (p.60) of human beings.

Hester and Dimmesdale: As the Free and Responsible Agents

Sartre's amoral subjectivism has not now come to be a formation to account for individual responsibility because responsibility and individuals are no longer segregated from each other. According to Sartre's "existence precedes essence", human beings first exist, then confront, emerge in the world, and creates meaning, which means after the existence, they are free to create their self-being in the world, whatever they want to be. Sartre is not interested to bring any universal law to guide moral choice which seems to be contradictory to Kant's *categorical imperative*, but Sartre is stubborn to be stagnated in his ideologies. However, he later, accepts Nietzsche's proclamation "God is dead", and also seriously accepts Dostoyevsky's ideology that "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted" (Dostoyevsky 1880, as cited in Stumpf&Pieser, 2008, p. 435). These appreciations are clear that "men are born free" by Rousseau or "condemned to be free" means (we are doomed because we are fallen from heaven, but still we are free) by classical phrase. In addition, they are free with choices and responsible for those actions where prominent characters in *The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne are almost free agents to take actions because there is no heavenly determinism in the psychology of the characters as well as are bound to break divine and communal regulations by their wish. For instance, Hester Prynne and Mr. Dimmesdale commit adultery just to fulfill their sexual desire, even without caring for anybody, or the divine laws, for what both of them have to account for values. This is because, Hester has been exiled in the deep forest, while Dimmesdale dies of *PTSD* (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), due to committing diabolic acts where Pearl is the consequences of such iniquity, " in giving her existence, a great law had been broken...but all in disorder" (Hawthorne,2008, p. 95). Therefore, human beings like Prynne and Dimmesdale are free agents to take any action of life but undoubtedly, responsible for it, that Sartre insists to make us understand through existential philosophical perspectives.

Hester and Pearl' Existence Precede their Essence

According to Latin etymology *ex-sistere*, it can be clearly understood about the meaning of existence which means 'stand out' or 'emerge' (exist or exsist). Thus, the word basically squeezes on something really present there. However, existence is the fact what we see by our eyes or it is featured by concreteness. For instance, a one taka coin is lying on the floor which exists as a particular material on earth and its appearance is existed to us as a fact to be recognized. Though it exists in a particular place, we still can change it's 'form' which is the inceptive point from existence to essence while Macquarrie (1972) claims "if the existence of anything has to do with the fact 'that it is', its essence consists in 'what it is' in a sense" (p.61). In addition, the physical appearance of the coin is an object, while its size, color, weight, and description are the essences that form it as a coin. Therefore, the essence of an object is identified by abstractness, while the existence is formed by its concreteness. After all, according to human beings, the physics is the existence while the characteristics (good, bad, beautiful, ugly, social identity or smartness) are the essences which they advance in later life through experiences which means they create their own essence. To conceive the most important part of the chapter, we have to be conspicuous about the idea "existence precedes essence" which means at first people exist and then stand against, appear in the world, and finally define them afterward. As one defines himself/herself, he/she possesses all the controls of the actions as a subject, for what he/she has to take the responsibility while Stumpf and Fieser add "what gives me dignity is passion of a subjective life" (p.434), also assert in further that "the most important consequence of placing existence before essence in human nature is not only that we create ourselves but that responsibility for existence rests squarely on each individual" (p.434).

In the referent text, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, we find the protagonist as physically impeccable with bright complexion, Edenic affection with dark eyes and abundant hair. The narrator explains "the young woman was tall and figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale" (Hawthorne, 2008, p.55). These explanations are the essences of Hester Prynne who first exists in the world as a physical being, and later creates the meaning of life which describes her to identify as being. Although Prynne's existence is one kind of accident in the stereotype and double standard puritan society as being, because she is exiled in the forest due to committing adultery with the puritan priest Dimmesdale, but she does not cease there because she creates her own meaning of life by her physical handiwork, "by degrees, nor very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion" (p.87). She exists and later, produces the meaning of life. However, not only mother Prynne but also her baby daughter's 'existence precedes her essence' because she also tries to produce the meaning of her own life, "She pressed her infant to her bosom, with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain. But, the mother did not seem to hear it" (p.63). In the very tender ages, she tries to create meaning of her own kingdom differently, even just after coming to the Post-lapsarian world from Prelapsarian. Pearl's description of beauty and brilliantness undoubtedly, the instances of her produced essences which ameliorated after her existence in the world, "in giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant" (p.95). 'The result as a physical being epitomizes her existence and the words 'beautiful and brilliant' depicts her essence which she precedes before in life. Roubiczek (1960) emphasizes on the Sartre's philosophy that existence comes first then, it creates the meaning of life in a different way, "Man first is – only afterward is he this or that. Man must create for himself his own essence" (p.121). Therefore, Hester Prynne and her babe daughter first exist in the puritan society and then later, produce their meaning of life through different kinds of activities, means they exist, confront, emerge and finally define the meaning of life.

Hester Prynne: A Being-In-Itself

The idea of *Human Consciousness* is considered as one of the most resounding parts of Sartre's existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre has delivered a lecture in Paris in 1994, in the protection of his philosophy in front of the scholars which, later, was published as *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946) and, in English, translated by Philip Mairet, as *Existentialism and Humanism* (1975). In the lecture, he disputes that there are two kinds of existences, one is *being-in-itself* (l'en-soi), and another one is *being-for-itself* (le pour-soi). However, *being-in-itself* is the human existence where human beings are like one kind of stone. Like a stone, human beings just exist without any feelings and movements; they just exist simply being there. Along with stone, another interpretation can be brought to make the idea more conspicuous which is nothing but a *paper-knife*, a material without any consciousness that can be explained in advance, because of being a *being-in-itself*. According to Sartre, a *paper-knife* is a product of what its creators have thought which means the purposes of the use of the knife are determined and fixed even before it has been materialized or shaped. This is because, the essence of a *paper-knife*, as *being-in-itself*, "precedes its existence" (Sartre, 1966, p.22). Thereafter, when we observe the world as a *being-in-itself*, Sartre asserts "the essential point is a contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not necessary. To exist is simply to be there". (Cited in Stumpf & Fieser, 2008, p. 436). Basically, it depends on the choices that human beings make. For instance, a mountain is just simply a mountain to a peasant, while it might be changed by a holidaymaker which means the peasant's conscious level is not active, (being-in-itself), while the opposite term applies to the tourists. Finally, *being-in-itself* in general means just being in the beings without conscious actions.

Following the statement, Hester Prynne is an existential being who performs in the beginning as a *being-in-itself* because she is stigmatized for her adultery with saint-like puritan priest Mr. Dimmesdale but she refuses to divulge his identity as an adulterer and does not speculate even a single word in front of the public at Marketplace, during her judgment. She stays as like a stone or *paper-knife* (being-in-itself) without a single word, "Madame Hester absolutely refuseth to speak, and the magistrates have laid their heads together in vain" (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 65). In the prison door scene, she once tries to expose everything before the public but finally, procrastinates and cannot attempt this only because of her dead consciousness (being-in-itself), and even she cannot commit suicide due to the dearth of it and says "But, under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure, she felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (p.60). Her marriage to Roger Chillingworth who is a man of almost doubles to her age even, without taking any consent from her. Her voiceless acceptance divulges her inactive senses as a *being-in-itself* or a stone. In addition, her physical intercourse with Arthur Dimmesdale also comes from her conscious less (being-in-itself) state of the psyche where she is not aware of the up-coming consequences or another state of the mine (being-for-itself), an active and conscious part for what she is aware. Finally, Prynne's refuge to expose Mr. Dimmesdale's identity, marriage to an older man, and committing adultery as an inactive agent are the parts of *being-in-itself* state of her existence.

Hester, Pearl & Roger: A Transformation to Being-For-Itself

In the *Human Consciousness* theory of existentialism, *being-for-itself* (le pour-soi) is related to the conscious subject, and actions of human beings what a stone cannot perform. As an active agent, people can relate themselves to the things of the world in many ways. However, according to Sartre, a *being-for-itself* is a complete opposite entity of a *being-in-itself*,

because unlike a *being-in-itself*, the essence does not precede the existence of a *being-for-itself*. For a *being-for-itself*, 'existence precedes its essence' signifying that a *being-for-itself*, first of all, exists consciously then one after another creates its essence—the meaning of life where the individuals experience the world, “as a solid, massive, undifferentiated, single something that is not yet separated into individual things”(Stumpf&Pieser, 2008, p. 437). Subsequently, Sartre sets a character in his resounding text *Nausea* who is none but Roquentin to make the idea *being-for-itself* more conspicuous to the readers. Once he is taking rest on a bench under some trees in a park. All of a sudden, he sees everything differently because all the appearances have abolished. The existence has unveiled itself and the words and meanings have wiped up. The surfaces look like nothing but naked and single phenomena. Whatever we see on the surface of the world, or the existence is really not the real existence rather Roquentin asserts that “the world is the unity of all objects of consciousness” (Sartre, 1938, as cited in Stumpf&Pieser, 2008, p. 437). Last but not the least, *being-for-itself* is the metamorphosis from the inactive stage of human existence to an active and conscious level, where being is aware of the world and its surroundings.

In connection with the theory, it is visible to us that the character's transformation from stone like behaviors to active beings through creating meanings of the existence is nothing but a metamorphosis from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself*. When Hester Prynne is deported in the forest for committing physical intercourse, at that time, she has been a *being-in-itself*, but when her handicrafts have been widely used by all sorts of people in the vicinity, then her entity is being recognized as an active and conscious who is aware of the world right now. At the same time, the whole world seems like free to her, where she can do whatever she likes which makes her another state of being,

it may seem marvelous, that, with the world before her, - kept by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of the puritan settlement, so remote and so obscure, - free to return to her birthplace, or any other European land, and there hide her character and identity under a new exterior, as completely as if emerging into another state of being (Hawthorne, 2008, p. 83).

At the same time, in the last part of the chapter “Pearl”, asserts her conscious identity where she is aware whatever she does and says “Yes, I am little Pearl”(p. 103). She exists in the world first, then creates the meaning of life, and even in the last portion of the text *The Scarlet Letter*, speculates Pearl's ultimate destination with her reach husband which identifies her transformation from illegitimate child to a rich wife and her belongings with husband is the depiction of *being-for-itself*, who creates and finds the meanings of life. Interestingly, Roger Chillingworth's transformation from a “calm temperament, pure and upright man” (p.137), to the thirsty seeker to kill someone, “he now dug the poor clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold...but nothing save mortality and corruption. Alas for his own soul, if these were what he sought!” (p.137) is nothing but his metamorphosis from usual existence (being-in-itself) to (being-for-itself).

CONCLUSION

Hester's revolutionary transformation from Adulterer to Abel or socially accepted being, Roger's revengeful conversion from the secluded mind, Dimmesdale's final confession by being conscious, and finally, Pearl's metamorphosis from the elf- child or demon's offspring to socially respected being is the symbol of Sartrean free agents, as well as the transformed beings from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself*, who also have been responsible for their all committed actions. The final consequence of the study can be connected with Pearl's ultimate reverse in the final part of the text where “ Pearl- the elf-child,- the demon offspring, as some

people, up to that epoch, persisted in considering her-became the richest heiress of her day, in the New World”(Hawthorne, 2008, p. 280). The child at first exists in the world, then is exposed with obnoxious identity, and finally, produces herself with richness in the new world, which means her existence precedes her essence. This is not only applicable to her, but also Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth, and Mr. Dimmesdale who disclose their characteristics as existential beings in the society.

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