

A Warrior or Not? A Comparative Study of *The Scarlet Letter* and “No Name Woman”

Quan Wang
Beihang University, Beijing

Abstract

The anonymous protagonist in “No Name Woman” is often regarded as a warrior. This paper argues against the mainstream criticism of her assertion of individuality, as is expressed by Kingston that her story mirrors the pioneering spirit of Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. Each of the following five different aspects compared in these two stories, namely, the historical backgrounds, the husbands, the male adulterers, the punishments and even the denouement, challenges her “courageous” announcement of female subjectivity.

[Keywords: warrior, feminist, Hester, woman]

In the interview with Paula Rabinowitz, Maxine Hong Kingston expects her readers to read “No Name Woman” in *Woman Warrior* in comparison with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, implying sufficient similarities. “When I was writing ‘No Name Woman,’ I was thinking about Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* as a discussion of the Puritan part of America, and of China, and a woman’s place” (“Eccentric” 182). Although two novels are both centered on adultery, is there a Hesterian warrior spirit in the no-name woman, “my aunt”, albeit in different degrees? According to Sidonie Smith, the nameless aunt is a “truly transgressive and subversive” figure (154), who strives to mark “female identity and desire” (153).¹ However, this paper, based on the comparative study between *The Scarlet Letter* and “No Name Woman,” argues against the fighting spirit of the titular heroine in latter story.

First of all, an exploration of the respective backgrounds will shed light on our comprehension of the two stories. “The grass-pot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston” (*The Scarlet Letter* 41).² Hester moves from the Old World of Europe to the New World of America, and settles down near Boston. Severing herself completely from a sophisticatedly interconnected hierarchical system, Hester arrives at a new world of potential possibilities. Annette Rubinstein has beautifully recaptured this nirvana-like transformation after the trans-Atlantic spatial movement: Unlike the Europeans

who “lived in communities where their families had known each other for many generations and their sense of social gradations, relationships and organization was a very strong one,” it was a totally different story for new settlers in America in Hawthorne’s times. “Thus many areas were settled by individuals of different backgrounds, customs, religions and even languages. Nor were these new communities very stable when settled” (Rubinstein 7). Separating themselves from the convoluted hierarchy, these immigrants were roughly on an equal footing with each other, and different cultural backgrounds and geographical isolation produced individualism and democracy among them. “Individualism is a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of fellow-creatures;” what is more, Alex de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in the United States*: “Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (qtd. in Rubinstein 3).

Hawthorne also deliberately describes this land as a Utopian place in *The Scarlet Letter*, suggestive of the potential individual experiments on the new soil. “The founders of a *new colony*, whatever *Utopia of human virtue and happiness* they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the *virgin soil* as cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison”(39 Emphasis mine). We can recapitulate the essential points mentioned in the very beginning of the story: on the one hand, this promising land is full of various un-lived possibilities of life; on the other hand, no matter how ideal the paradise is, two negative things are indispensable: death and crime, which are concretized in Dimmesdale’s decease and Hester’s adultery. However, unavoidable as the crime is, there is great room for people’s potential new attitudes towards life, because of the overemphasis of the *New World*.

But it is a completely different story in “No Name Woman.” In the Chinese villages in the 1920s, the whole villagers, in the possession of the same surname, are structured like a big family. “All the villagers were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten” (“No Name Woman” 11-12). In some cases, there are three or four surnames in a village. However, after intermarriages, they are soon linked together as the members of the same family. “Marriage promises to turn strangers into friendly relatives—a nation of siblings”(12). One’s identity is measured and defined by this collectivism. In addition, its time-honored cultural inheritance is so comprehensive that it is ready to assimilate any odd and aberrant exceptions. People have long been accustomed to their established cultural and moral standards, and any transgression and aberration will stir up their uneasy psychological percussions. Anyone determined to struggle against its overwhelming power is doomed to fail. Any aberration, let

alone the temptation to alter its deep-seated order, will be tantamount to, if not insurmountability, extreme difficulty.

Apart from the settings, the roles of men in the stories also deserve our further consideration. As the husband, Chillingworth, despite his efforts in searching for his wife, has not provided any iota of assistance to Hester during the past years. This is clearly shown in the text: “I [Chillingworth] have met with grievous mishaps by sea and land, and *have been long held* in bounds among the heathen-folk, to the southward, and am now brought hither by this Indian, to be redeemed out of my captivity”(Scarlet Letter 50). Hester, all by herself, a lonely woman struggling independently for survival in a totally alien land, wins certain excusable sympathy toward her transgressive behavior from the readers.

In contrast, the husband of “my aunt” seems to be a very responsible man. In order to support the family, he had to leave home to earn money “in starvation time” (“No Name Woman” 6). “[...] your aunt’s new husband sailed for America, the gold Mountain.” “All of them sent money home”(3). Also implicitly suggested in the text is the fact that it is the hard-earned money by her husband as a coolie in gold mining field that has spared the aunt the horrible labor work commonly suffered by other fellow village women: “More attention to her [the aunt’s] looks than these pullings of hairs and pickings at spots would have caused gossip among the villagers” because her care-free sensual dressing is sharply contrasted with their humdrum drudgery: “Women looked like great sea snails—the corded wood, babies, and laundry they carried were the whorls on their backs,” which will inevitably lead to the “bent back[s]” (10). Economically secured, “my aunt” is also emotionally nurtured by the family members. The daughters-in-law in Chinese families usually have very intimate relationships. And this is especially true during the absence of men who are out to make a living for the family. The sisterly solidarity unifies with the members left in the family, sharing their weal and woe, unbosoming their secrets to each other. However, the economical and emotional support does not seem to satisfy her needs, “my aunt” decides to season her life with a lover: “such commonplace loveliness, however, was not enough for her,” and “she dreamed of a lover for the fifteen days of New Year’s , the time for family to exchange visits, money, and food. She plied her secret comb”(10). On the one hand, her husband is risking his life earning every possible penny to send it back home to support the wife. Apart from the long-hour menial labor and ingrained cultural prejudice, Chinese miners often died during their work because of the unsafe security measures. Even worse than that, the anti-Chinese activities generated innumerable persecutions on these poor foreign workers. For example, *Alta California* reported a typical case, “An American yesterday attacked a Chinaman, beating him shamefully. [...]The assailant held the unfortunate Celestial by the queue and kicked and beat him until he was tired, and when the poor fellow got loose and was going off a

policeman came up, saw by his bloody face that he had been in a fight and arrested him” (McCunn 27). Ironically, the wife at home, living on the toil money of the husband, is pursuing her sexual pleasure. Nora from *A Doll's House* provides a striking example for her: to pursue one's own new life, above everything else, one must not crutch upon others and must try to be independent by oneself in the first place.

Besides the husbands, another interesting contrast is the two lovers. As the adulterer, Dimmesdale, as is suggested by his symbolic name (a dim dale, something could not be exposed to the public), has not revealed his inner shadowy secret to the villagers until the denouement of the story. However, by employing an omnipotent third person narrator, Hawthorne enables the readers to have access to his inner sufferings and thus share with his gnawing consciousness. Tortured by Chillingworth's secret revenge, this formerly energetic figure is reduced into ghostly pale inactivity. “His [Dimmesdale's] nerve seemed absolutely destroyed. His moral force was abased into more than *childish weakness*. It groveled *helpless* on the ground” (Emphases mine 125). Thus Dimmesdale becomes the desirable object of the war-of-tug between Chillingworth and Hester, and the feminist warrior image of Hester is unambiguously revealed in reversing the classic literary tradition: the weak and passive princess, captured in some remote castle, is waiting for the rescue of some brave and vigorous knight. “Strengthened by years of hard and solemn trial, she felt herself no longer so inadequate to cope with Roger Chillingworth as on that night.” With the newly gained warrior courage and power from the past hardship, “She [Hester] resolved to meet her former husband, and do what might be in her power for the rescue of the victim on whom he had so evidently set this gripe” (131). Apart from this physical battle of rescuing Dimmesdale, Hester also serves as his spiritual guide to see the truth: with her care, love and encouragement, Hester plays an indispensable role in enabling him to be honest with himself and the public: to declare his secret A Letter to the mass. As is acknowledged in his confession to Hester, “Oh, if this be the path to be a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it! Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain, —so tender to soothe!” (157). Her love and guidance also enable him to experience a transformed new life; “ ‘Do I feel joy again?’ Cried he, wondering at himself, ‘Methought the germ of it was dead in me! O Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself—sick, sin-stained, and to have risen up all made anew [...]’” (158).

On the contrary, the information of the adulterer in the “No Name Woman” only discredits the aunt as “a warrior.” The narrative structure of the short story only provides the readers with the bits-and-pits speculations of the unknown man. As a cautionary tale to educate the daughter, the mother narrator is “powered by Necessity”: the indispensable background information, the detailed description of

the raid on the house, and only very brief and indirect mentioning of the aunt's pregnancy. The bulk of the whole story is the daughter's (who is living in a different American context) speculative reconstruction of the narration told by the mother, full of uncertainties.³ The most natural reason to explain her pregnancy in such a seemingly lawless and barbaric land is rape. “Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil”(6). “If you tell your family, I'll beat you. I'll kill you. Be here again next time”(7). If we follow this version of interpretation of her pregnancy, we can only sense a sympathetic victim, who does not dare expose the name of the brutal violator, even at the moment of her death, too timid to deserve the title of being a warrior: “my aunt, my forerunner”(8).⁴ After the suspension of rape, the daughter narrator provides another more plausible and also more feminist-like explanation: love, and thus the story becomes her courageous pursuit of her beloved man despite the traditional shackles. Thus “she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him, [...]” “Then she pulled the thread away from her skin, ripping the hairs out neatly, [...]”(9). However, a question of principle should be asked at this moment: is it a pursuit of happiness through the faith of love or just a flirtation for sensual pleasure? As a girl from an economically better-off family, she has enjoyed some inaccessible privileges denied to other women. “[...] her four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles ‘out on the road’ and for some years became Western men”(11). In the 1920s, if some Chinese had relatives in USA, it was greatly admired and they were actually much more affluent than other villagers. Also “his [grandfather] Western-style great coat” implicitly indicates his unusual economic status. Besides, “she may have been unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection the family lavished on her” (10). The pampering and indulgence on her fantasy is further reinforced by the unbridled fondness of girls of the grandfather, the most influential patriarchal figure in the family, as is narrated in the text, “he [grandfather] had traded one of his sons, probably my father, the youngest, for her [a baby girl]. They must have all loved her [the aunt]”(8).

The economic superiority and lavishing affection have fostered her vanity and her increasing attention to her sexual appeal, also tantalizing her pleasure-seeking desire. “[...] her desire delicate, wire and bone”(8). Instead of letting “dreams grow and fade,” she “went towards what persisted.” “She offered us for a charm that vanished with tiredness” (8). The seeking for sensual pleasure is further revealed in the text, “It could very *well have* been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but a *wild woman, kept rollicking company. Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit*, though”(8 Emphasis mine). The situation is even worse than that: her excessive sensual dressing has already stimulated the sexual disturbance within the family, shaking the very fundamental patriarchal order of incest taboo: “Uncles, cousins, nephews, brothers would have looked, too,

had they been home between journeys. Perhaps they had already been restraining their curiosity, and they left, fearful that their glances, like a field of nesting birds, might be startled and caught.” To avoid this incestuous love, the men had to leave the home, as is suggested, “But another, final reason for leaving the crowded house was the never-said”(10). In short, neither of the possible reasons of her pregnancy—the passive victim of a rape or the audacious pleasure adventurer—could crown her the title of a woman warrior.

In the fourth place, the different ways of punishment in the two novels are also very instructive. In the opening chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, standing on the scaffold, is suffering the “Public Execution” to be humiliated for her individual crime, but also as a cautionary example to teach young girls a lesson. Then, in order to make her repent upon her rebellious misdeeds, she is separated from the civilized world and expelled into the wilderness of forest, a symbolic place suggestive of her moral degeneracy. However, after her personal confrontation with the public resentment for seven years, Hester is able to throw a magical spell upon the mass, that is, her pioneering spirit has gradually transformed the public opinion: the shift of the meaning of A letter from the shameful Adultery to the virtuous Angel image, as the story narrates, “many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (127). In fact, even the most severe moral and political guardians of original meanings of A letter have gradually changed their views: “Day by day, nevertheless, their sour and rigid wrinkles were relaxing into something which, in the due course of years, might grow to be an expression of almost benevolence”(127).⁵

In contrast to the legal punishment on Hester, the devastating ransack on the aunt’s house seems to suggest barbarism and violence. To understand the meaning of “the mischievous, inhuman, and irrational” raid of Chinese peasants, Yuan Shu argues that the rationale behind the surface is very much in demand. She situates the story into its broad political background, domestically and internationally, rather than limits it to the narrow village setting. Invaded by Western countries and Japan, Chinese government was on the edge of collapse, and people were burdened with unbearable taxes. Under this circumstance of “the restless feudal and colonial society,” the villagers’ attack is symbolic of directing “its own energy of confusion and frustration towards anything accessible, rather than as a premeditated moment of Chinese patriarchal practice or a ritualistic pattern practice at the village level in China” (Shu 29). But, I would interpret the episode from the perspective of cultural differences. Fundamentally different from Western individualism, the Chinese culture essentially believes in collectivism. The village, instead of consisting of individuals, is structured like a big family in which every one is just a member whose fate is tightly linked with and inseparable from each

other. Personal misdeed is not just an individual behavior, rather, according to the Chinese superstition, as an ominous breach of normal cycle of cryptic nature, which would invite endless troubles to all the members in this community. “But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky” (“No Name Woman”¹²). Since the villagers “depend on one another” (3), the aunt’s infidelity of breaking up the “roundness” “had already harmed the village.” Like the Western concept of the scapegoat archetype, the villagers must sacrifice something to pacify the angry gods who are in charge of the “roundness’ order, therefore they destroyed her house to teach her a lesson, and massacred the pigs and sheep to offer them to the furious gods so that they could cleanse the evil and avoid the misfortune that is supposed to befall. Thus instead of taking her life away (“her husband’s parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her”), they just killed the domestic animals—a gesture already merciful enough. The attack on the family house also conveys another explicit message: a warning to the family who fails to carry out its due and proper accountability of educating their children, as is succinctly expressed in Chinese proverb: “子不教，父之过” (it is the parents who are responsible for the misbehaviors of their children).

The family punishment further dissipates the heroic flavor of the nameless aunt. Disgraced by her shameful behaviors, the family also inflicts its own punishment upon the nameless aunt. “Don’t tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born” (15). In other words, the nameless aunt is relegated into the obscure corner of the family: disappearance, silence and non-existence. Michel Foucault has a wonderful explanation of this repression: there is nothing to say, nothing to see, and finally epistemologically, nothing to know (4). In short, publicly she is regarded as a great violator of mysterious order of “roundness” and, privately she comes into oblivion of the memory of the family members. Therefore, we cannot help asking what kind of influence she had exerted upon the villagers? Unlike the gradual but miraculous transformative power of Hester, “my aunt” has only reinforced and sharpened the traditional awareness of patriarchal system whose gruesome authority makes it more dreadful to be transgressed.

The final death scene is also pregnant with symbolic meanings. “The black well of sky and stars went out and out and out forever; her body and complexity seemed to disappear. She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness”(14). The daughter narrator seems to crown her as a bright feminist star in the suffocating darkness of patriarchal culture—the feminist flavor is revealed to the fullest degree.⁶ Despite the overwhelming suggestive tone of feminist awakening, intended by the narrator, some contradictory details could not escape the careful

readers: “Sometimes a vision of normal comfort obliterated reality: she saw the family in the evening gambling at the dinner table, the young people massaging their elders’ back”(14). What she is much hungrier for is a name remembered in the family tree: “No one would give her a family hall name.” If we define her feminism as transgressing the patriarchal conventions concretized in traditional family life, her longing for “a family hall name” at the dying hour is symbolic of her acknowledgement of the mainstream value and her past “wrong deeds.” A scrutiny of the textual details will make the point more salient. “Don’t tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born” (15). Not to be mentioned in the discourse is a frequently employed patriarchal way to relegate the challenging behaviors to the obscure corner of the silence. Therefore, if the aunt desires her name to be carved in the “family hall,” she has to be a “virtuous woman”(meeting the patriarchal expectations), the very thing she is short of and regrets for. In this sense, her innermost craving for “giv[ing] her a family hall name” at the dying hour has totally erased the seemingly feminist awakening. The final denouement is always of supreme importance in interpreting the significance of the protagonist’s behaviors. Sula, until the very last moment of her death, still maintains her rebellious belief against the conventions; Hester Prynne, on her tenacious persistence to her own belief of faith, has transformed the villagers’ reading of a letter from shame to virtue. On the other hand, Moll Flanders, towards the end of the novel, repents her previous challenging behaviors. In this line of thinking, no-name woman’s longing for conventional family comfort and her desire for the recognition in the “family hall name” suggests an implicit acknowledgement and repentance of her improper behaviors, a further indicator of her non-warrior spirit.

[**Acknowledgement:** *The article is part of the project supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities and the number of the project is YWF-11-06-39.*]

Notes

¹ Lee Quinby also expresses the similar view , “In *The Woman Warrior*, she promotes ‘new forms of subjectivity’ by refusing the totalizing individuality of the modern era” (125). Likewise, Roger Bromley maintains, “[...] my ‘aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space,’ ‘she’ becomes, for a hypothetical moment, the active subject of her own verbs or actions—‘she looked’; ‘she liked’ ” (31).

² “For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night”(Scarlet Letter 124). Cindy Weinstein informs us that ,“It is significant because this gives us the dates of the novels, 1624-9, and calls attention to the strategic ruse of making Bellingham governor” (Introduction to *Scarlet Letter* xxix).

³ In Shu’s understanding, the narrator has assumed “the position of a privileged first-world woman” and speaks for the third world aunt because as the subaltern, she “cannot represent herself and has to be represented by the first-world feminist writer” (208).

⁴ E. D. Huntley has provided a different but very convincing interpretation of her silence: a courageous “act of will.” “No Name Aunt maintains total silence throughout the months of her ordeal: she does not cry out when the villagers ransack her home; she refuses to identify the father of her child; she gives birth without a sound; and she dies without a word. Her silence is an act of will, while by contrast, the wordless Chinese American girl displays the silence of inaction, of an overprotected and weak woman who depends on others to speak for her” (87).

⁵ Weinstein clearly points out the magic transformation of “the meaning of the ‘A’ from Adultery to ‘Able’ and even ‘Angel’” (Introduction xxvii).

⁶ For Smith, this symbolic description of vastness of the black sky suggests the potential possibilities of female identity undefined by patriarchal society: craving but also fearful. “While the endless night proposes limitless identities being the confining borders of repetitious patriarchal representations, it promotes the ‘agoraphobia’ attending any move beyond the carefully prescribed boundaries of ancestral, familial, and community paradigms of female self-representation” (154).

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Quan Wang, PhD, is an Associate Professor of English of Beihang University, Beijing. He has published many articles and books on English literature.
