

PURITANICAL INFLUENCE ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY IN COLONIAL AMERICA: FROM A SANCTIFIED BEING TO AN OSTRACIZED ONE

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Abstract

The research focuses on the discussion related to the arrival of white women from Europe and specifically the British Isles to Colonial America. The manner in which settlement for women was incentivised is discussed, along with the peculiar momentum of Puritan communities and the feminine roles thus developed in them. Settler women developed the democratic agrarian mythos while simultaneously being rebuffed for visibility beyond men. The essay engages with the repressive ideology of traditional inferiority, stating examples of Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer, and finally the Salem Witch Trials, along with few other mentions of women prosecuted for heresy and witchcraft. The impact of variant settlements in terms of agency is then discussed in the context of slavery, with a critical assessment on how subsumed identities and submission might have led to morally compromised agency development in the colonial white women. The essay concludes with a tentative assertion that the Puritanical impact on how women perceived morality, both in dissension and in tacit agreement shaped the character of Colonial American women.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Historical Background and Literature Review

Colonial America (1607-1776) was largely patriarchal where women have to submit before the will of the family head and her activities were confined with in the household, church, and community. Laws concerning property, voting, and education favored men. Such a female consciousness is described by the historians as 'Proto-feminism' However, women were not entirely powerless. Through domestic labor, religious participation, trade, and political protest, many colonial women developed identities that challenged patriarchal limitations.

Major scholarship on 17th-century colonial American women has been produced mainly by modern historians who reconstructed women's lives through feminist and social history approaches. One of the most important works is Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996), which analyzes gender, race, and patriarchy in colonial Virginia society. Carol Berkin wrote *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (1996), focusing on the everyday experiences of women in early colonial settlements. Earlier foundational studies include Julia Cherry Spruill's *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938), which explored women's domestic and economic labor, and Edmund S. Morgan's *The Puritan Family* (1944), which examined family structure and

gender roles in Puritan New England. Later influential works include John Demos's *A Little Commonwealth* (1970), which studied family life in Plymouth Colony, and Nancy F. Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), which analyzed the development of domestic ideology in early America. Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* (1980) highlighted women's growing political awareness, while Patricia U. Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven* (1986) examined religion and women's social life in colonial society. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Good Wives* (1982) and Elaine Forman Crane's *Ebb Tide in New England* (1998) further expanded understanding of ordinary women's daily lives, especially in New England communities. Together, these works form the core historiography of colonial American women, especially in the 17th century. Robert Cook (1994) explicate the life of colonial women was confined within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, and caretakers under a patriarchal social system. It was the American Revolution increased women's political awareness and helped develop early ideas of female rights and identity.

The current study is going to the look into the impact of religious polity that directed expected women behavior that may earn her the legitimacy; women interaction with religious while undergoing a transformation of the identity has actually carved out the path that led women emancipation movement and the demand for equal rights that relegated religion into a domain of choice. Existing research on Puritan women in colonial America focuses mainly on external religious and social controls shaping feminine identity, but it gives limited attention to women's internal experiences of identity conflict. Identity Gap Theory (Hecht, 1987; & Jung, 2004) has been widely used to study modern identity tensions, yet it has not been applied to historical contexts such as Puritan New England. Therefore, there is a need to use this framework to better understand how Puritan women may have negotiated tensions between personal identity, religious expectations, and socially imposed gender roles

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Applying Identity Gap Theory to Puritan influence on feminine identity in colonial America shows how women in the Massachusetts Bay Colony experienced tension between their personal identity, their socially expected roles, and how they were perceived by others. Puritan society demanded that women embody obedience, modesty, and strong religious devotion, which shaped their enacted identity, while their relational identity was defined by strict expectations from husbands, church leaders, and the wider community. However, these external expectations often conflicted with women's private thoughts, emotions, and sense of self, creating identity gaps between personal and enacted identities. This framework helps explain how Puritan feminine identity was not only socially controlled but also internally negotiated through continuous pressure to align individual selfhood with rigid religious and gender norms.

1.3 Research Methodology

To research how Puritans ostracized colonial American women and shaped feminine identity, a qualitative historical research method is most appropriate. The study will use primary sources such as diaries, letters, sermons, and court records, along with secondary historical and feminist literature on Puritan society. Thematic, literary and textual analysis will identify patterns of social control, punishment, and moral expectations imposed on women. Identity Gap Theory will be applied to interpret tensions between women's personal beliefs, enacted behaviors, and how they were perceived by the community. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how Puritan women navigated social exclusion and internalized or resisted rigid gender roles.

2. Women and Settlement in Colonial America

The introduction of women to the American colonies as well as their integration was a multifaceted phenomena. Whether it was done through advertisement of mail-order brides or as immigrants from all over Europe or as religious denominations, the core argument rests upon the role of women and the gradual shift in their agency

from the traditional inferior role developed and controlled through a patriarchal setup in which a woman lived and behaved, to a role in which they had the ability to assert agency, economic validation and security. This shall further lead into a discussion on how the puritanical element led to a specific kind of identity development of a woman encircled around religious norms and the persecution faced by women and how they coped with it, which is a testament to their changing roles in colonial America. White women's ability to keep slaves which epitomizes their economic engagement and sense of ownership and its effects on the role of women, the portrayal and involvement of women in literature through the works of Anne Bradstreet and the depictions placed in novels such as the *Scarlett Letter*. Furthermore, lessons from the persecution of female spiritualists in the religious domain as exemplified through the case studies of Anne Hutchison and Mary Dyer leading up to the Salem Witch Trials.

English settlement in America began in 1607 when three ships entered Virginia, bringing in the largest number of settlers to the new found land under the leadership of one Christopher Newport. The North American land was perfect for settlers to establish new communities with rich well-watered soil and a healthy climate for crops, filled with precious materials such as iron, copper and coal were all very promising vistas for prosperity and community.

The land was inhabited fairly quickly under the British, French, Spanish and Dutch colonial masters who came to the Americas to increase their wealth and broaden their influence over world affairs. The Spanish were among the first Europeans to explore the New World and the first to settle in what is now the United States. By 1650, however, England had established a dominant presence on the Atlantic coast. The first colony was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Many of the people who settled in the New World came to escape religious persecution. The Pilgrims, founders of Plymouth, Massachusetts, arrived in 1620. In both Virginia and Massachusetts, the colonists flourished with some assistance from Native Americans. New World

grains such as corn kept the colonists from starving while, in Virginia, tobacco provided a valuable cash crop. By the early 1700s enslaved Africans made up a growing percentage of the colonial population. By 1770, more than 2 million people lived and worked in Great Britain's 13 North American colonies (Colonial America (1492-1763)", 2022).

The first European women who came to the Southern colonies were indentured servants, arriving in the Jamestown colony in the early 1600s. Though the "ideal" European family was headed by a man who presided over his family and business while his wife only worked inside the home, this model did not work well in the early Southern colonies. Merely surviving was difficult, so all hands were needed to ensure that the colony could continue. As a result, the social structure flattened a bit, with land-owning men and women doing the same work of farming and building settlements (alongside their servants and those they had enslaved, who were working on the same projects). Regardless of the colony in which they lived, white women in colonial America had many responsibilities. They oversaw managing the household, including baking, sewing, educating the children, producing soap and candles, and more (National Geographic Society, 2019). The freedoms and responsibilities afforded to white American women and children in the colonial era varied depending on their socio-economic background.

Early settlers that came aboard the Christopher Newport fleet were men and boys looking for new land in which to start their lives. However, in order to increase the population of Jamestown, Virginia there was a desperate need for women. The men of Jamestown desperately wanted wives, but women were refusing to immigrate. The reports of dissension, famine, and disease was daunting and it was clear that women would not be convinced to move to an unknown land in order to marry unknown men, therefore the population of Jamestown was almost entirely male. These men who wished to populate the island were unable to find wives thus began deserting the colony in droves. An immediate influx of women was needed to save the floundering colony; its

leaders suggested putting out an advertisement targeting wives.

The puritans who came to make permanent settlements atop the Mayflower already had families who were looking for better lives, after breaking off with the Church of England, whereas the Jamestown immigrants were severely unattached. Their desertion of Jamestown caused by their sexual need as well as the lack of a family structure led them towards the Indian settlements where there were already women and the situation was much more favourable. The very nature of settlement in the American colonies for men stands at the standard prospect hunt and pioneering nature that significantly defined how the 'terra nullius' was perceived. The land that belonged to no one was there for the taking by the white man, and additionally did not belong to anyone whose rights might be respected by him (Lynch, 2014). This resulted in a peculiar assertion of agency and prophethood by the white man in his position in the new lands. This is important, as this, by reference, engages how the women in the colonies were then perceived. The first settlers were unattached men and any manner of settlement and permanent roots warranted the need for perpetuation of white individuals who would populate these newly settled lands. This effectively opened the avenue for female-white settlers to the colonies, thus marking a shift in the dynamics of predominantly masculine lands into social communities. Women from the native peoples did not categorise in the same manner and this leads to the cumulative understanding of how the notion of race is also important in defining the settlements of women. White women from Europe and British Isles would not have seen the prospect of leaving their homeland and going so far into the unsettled (almost) wilderness. The first English women to arrive on American shores were Mistress Forrest and her maid Anne Burras (Smith, 2006) in 1608, a year after the creation of the Jamestown Colony. However, two women were definitely not going to settle an entire fledgling colony, which prompted the Virginia Company to come up with a solution. This led to the landmark event in the development of American settlement; ergo, the incentivizing of

women with little to no prospects to come to the colonies in search of a husband and a life with better prospects. This blatant advertisement resulted in the 90 women coming to Jamestown in 1620 and another 56 who arrived in late 1621 and early 1622 (Little, 2019). These women came to be known as the 'Tobacco Wives' as their passage expenses on the Atlantic was paid off by their eventual husbands for around 120-150 pounds of 'good leaf' tobacco. An antidote to the deserting men, they brought a sense of permanence to the colony, bringing with them the reproductive powers that were essential in creating permanent settlements, by bringing about a family structure. This nature of dis-balance in male to female ratio persisted all over the American colonies, and this particular solution of incentivizing women to come to the Americas to find husbands continued well into 18th century, with New Orleans and the French territory of Louisiana following a similar pattern of seeking girls with little prospect (orphans and women living in convents) to be sent to these territories as marriageable women starting from the Pelican girls in 1704 to land in Mobile, and another ship in 1727 in Biloxi New Orleans (Benson; & De Ville, 1988).

3. Puritanism and the Construction of Feminine Identity

By contrast, the Puritan settlements that happened in New England (Massachusetts) struck out in a different vein that was more attuned to the development of familial values and the precisionist nature of religion that they believed was lacking even in the Protestant Church of England. This effectively meant that a new society was on the agenda, which would essentially indicate a critical notion of community and thus families. The New England Puritan settlers, beginning from the Mayflower in 1619, therefore came to the New World with families in tow. The nature of migration was focused on a society that would be free of persecution and hence the church that would come to be established in the New World would be voluntary organizations in which "the congregational self-government would be the predominant form of church government" (Mamdani, 2015). This indicates that the religious

adaptation would be entirely free of the aristocratic tradition and would have the element of voluntary religion. This, compounded with the removal of the tribal structure of Europe, led to a significant shift in the migratory and settler nature of the culture in the American colonies which would then develop the nature of voluntary self-government in context of the community that would finally settle in an area. It needs to be noted that these communities were predominantly of European ergo Caucasian stock and therefore had a degree of homogeneity within them. Where they differed was in the manner of religion they followed, and more critically to the issue at hand, how the women would behave in these communities.

A critical homogeneity when it came to female roles in these settlements was the cult of domesticity that developed around the pioneer women. The traditional roles of women basically exacerbated into full blown requirements in these new lands, as the core communities had to be built from scratch; and in order to find the prosperity and the sense of New Eden (God's City), roles needed division. Women effectively fell into the traditional roles of femininity, ergo, wives, mothers, daughters and homesteaders. This role division was however, layered. Puritan women specifically had multifaceted lives wherein in addition to the standard feminine roles, they were considered the backbone of the Puritan church and were expert witnesses in court (to be explained further). They were also economic partners in domestic economies, household managers, and could, if the need arose act in their husbands' stead. This is critical in a number of ways; while the women did have the added implement of coverture (the legal doctrine of placing the wives legal and economic identities under the control of their husbands) (Morris, 2020), they also retained a very visible presence in these communities as staunch motivators of the specific communal sense within the Puritan communities and later in the Quaker, Antinomian, and Baptist offshoots. Puritan women, unlike the ones that came as mail-order brides and the German and Dutch immigrants, were not obligated to work in the fields or hold down any work that was out of the

bounds of 'domestic work'. This however came with the added layer that Dutch and German immigrants did actually give women more property rights than the Puritans.

A key element in the development of a specific female identity for the Puritan women and their later offshoots was the dismissal of the Cult of Mary by the Protestants (Dunn, 1978). This effectively led to the removal of the option of nunnery or entering into a convent for women. This meant that in a social set-up, where the options were marriage or nun-hood, the women had one critical agency removed. Puritan constructs focused heavily on the covenant of marriage, whereas the Quakers did not see the harm in having unmarried women in the community. It is critical to note that while the Puritan women were considered the backbone of the Congregational Church and most of the preaching was done at them, there began a significant shift towards the erasure of their individual identity within the congregation and as individuals in their own right. This began as the erasure of names and the identity definition as wife-of or daughter-of within church rosters; culminating in the removal of society, not in the physical sense, but rather in the constructive discourse, through the assignation of certain 'inferior' roles to them that were deemed unimportant for discourse. This was a sneaky way of creating the gender boundary in a religious doctrine that indicated that despite the feminine inferiority, she still held equal status in the eyes of the Lord. More so, selective omission on religious constructs regarding women's rights was also subsumed in these rigid bounds of role assignation. The lack of reconciliation of these dual assertions in biblical texts led to the creation of the Quakers and their Society of Friends which effectively allowed women greater liberties in terms of equality of status in the eyes of God and hence their activism in society. It needs to be noted though that despite recognition and no divisive bias for women in spiritual equality, women retained their identity primarily in women's meetings and hence feminine circles. The religious divide for women and men in terms

of roles and status did not see any significant progression throughout colonial times in America. It is imperative that the nature of homesteading and the value of women in core communities be understood. The simple label of home-makers and wives and mothers simply does not bear on the pioneering nature of how women approached settlement in communities. One example of this is the fact that the status of women was often defined by what they chose to cultivate or garden, thereby engaging the community with her status as a provider of some significant staple. This led to the democratic agrarian mythos (Lynch, 2014) that effectively engaged the people to act as a community. The mythos of women as community builders therefore led to the creation of female voices in an era when it was highly uncommon for women to hold positions of public prominence (whether official or unofficial). This led to certain Avant Garde views and equally nifty ways to quell them.

4. Religious Dissent and the Persecution of Women

In the case of how dissidence was silenced in Puritan New England, the first case of note was the issue of Anne Hutchinson, who migrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634 with her husband William Hutchinson. Anne Hutchinson, was a follower of the Anglican minister John Cotton, and was a prominent figure as she soon began organising meetings akin to the practice of private conventicles of Boston women and preaching her own theological views which included the stress on individual intuition as a means of reaching God and salvation. Her core beliefs were those that would later be held by the Quakers and other Protestant sects that considered individual intuition better than institutional interpretations. These meetings eventually started attracting men as well. She also criticised the Massachusetts Puritans of being too narrow in terms of the legalistic concept of morality they had developed and resultantly her protest against the clergy that held most of the power in this context (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). This led to charges of antinomianism by her opponents and chief opposition by John

Winthrop, who, consequently became governor; Anne Hutchinson lost most of her support after that and she was charged by the General Court for “traducing the ministers,” was convicted in 1637, and was sentenced to banishment. Refusing to recant before the Boston Church, she was later excommunicated. She left with her followers and established a settlement in what is now Portsmouth. On an afternoon in 1643, Anne and her family were attacked by Indians and hacked to death. This was considered divine retribution by the Puritans and Winthrop stated that the instrument of the devil had been dealt with justly, calling her an American Jezebel in an antagonistic essay. Anne Hutchinson was tolerated in the Boston society by the clergy and male dominated magistrates and ministers as long as she retained the position of clarification and explanation of the sermons. Her questioning of them led to extreme opposition against her. The covenant of grace in opposition of the rigid legislative morality led to the Puritan ministers fearing insurrections and hence the persecution of Anne Hutchinson. What is critical to note is the fact that due to her sex, the Puritan elders faced difficulty in levying charges against Anne Hutchinson. This was due to the fact that her being a woman precluded her from any manner of direct participation in public matters (Buchanan, 2006). This led to the prosecutors in her trial focusing less on her beliefs and more on the issues of discourse and her audacity of having both men and women as part of her instructions in her parlour talks. This also engaged with the idea that held its onus on her being a woman, and therefore the charge was levied against her that she was, in scripture, prohibited from teaching in public spaces. The manner in which her accusers charged her, indicates a critical sense of patriarchal grandeur that the Massachusetts oligarchy of churches held dear. The ministers, teachers, elders, and deacons were all male and were all selected by men, which led to a significant engagement of how the covenant was between ‘man’ and God. This particular bias was deeply entrenched within the social fabric of the era, and resultantly carried with it the notion of how women were only to be engaged within the familial fabric and were thus only acceptable in that

context. This absorption of the individual into the collective allowed for the sense of traditional inferior roles to come into play, which then stood in direct opposition of Anne Hutchinson's ideology of the individual interpretation being superior. This created a direct threat to the structural hold that men had over the communities on the basis of religion and the notion that in a social construct, the highest status one could achieve was to become part of the congregation. This engages with the masculine notion of how in congregational churches, women were eventually subsumed into subsets of their male counterpart identities. Men represented the magistracy of their households and thus found legitimacy in the religious and political order of the time. What Anne Hutchinson did, excoriated this particular branding, and led to the warranting of a more equivalent society, which would have eventually perpetuated an earlier focus towards women's rights in Puritanical America. She was however declared weak of mind, due to being a woman, and her earthly ties being stronger, which effectively compounds her argument in act of equality moot to a social structure that considered her lacking. The argument of men being free of secular cares engages here. The secular cares of the world were the domain of the women so as to free the man to engage in his true purpose of study and sacred employments (Baker, Benfield, 1972). The charge of heresy on a woman who was perpetuating religious doctrine indicates a degree of hypocrisy within the male members of the society, whereby it indicates a particular intensity towards maintaining the rigid structures that would facilitate the will of God. This indicates that Puritans required validation for their existence on the Earth, and a challenge to the structures, specially from women would destroy the idea of covenant between man and God. The case of Anne Hutchinson concludes on the notion that women, even when they came to the New World as parts of families and therefore integral units to the communities, were subsets of men. This indicates that a particular ideological paradigm stood for the roles of women and thus gender definition. The women, similar to men in colonial America had fled persecution, or had come

looking for a better life. This also infers a significant shift in the outlook on their status in society. By enveloping oppression in the garb of religion, it perpetuated the notion of heresy on matters of fundamental rights. This in turn might have opened the door towards the perpetuation of negative perceptions of feminine characters and their abilities later on. In the year and half after the excommunication of Anne Hutchinson, the Massachusetts ministers and magistrates prosecuted a number of other women on various charges. In 1638, Judith Smith (the maid servant of Anne's brother-in-law, Edward Hutchinson) was cast out by the church in her "obstinate persisting in sundry Errors". In October 1638, Katherine Finch was ordered to be whipped by Assistants for "speaking against the magistrates, against the Churches, and against the Elders". Less than a year later, she again came before the judges on the charge of failing "to carry herself dutifully to her husband". In September of 1639, Phillipa Hammond was excommunicated on the basis of being "as a slanderer and revyler both of the Church and Common Weale." She had resumed her maiden's name after the passing of her husband and operated a business in Boston and was publicly defensive of Anne Hutchinson. Sarah Keene in 1646 and Joan Hogg in 1655 were found guilty of partially imitating Anne's example, with the charge on Sarah Keene being "irregular prophesying in mixed assemblies," and Joan Hogg guilty "for her disorderly singing and her idleness, and for saying she is commanded of Christ so to do" (Koehler, 1974).

The religious persecution that drove settlers from Europe to the British North American colonies sprang from the conviction, held by Protestants and Catholics alike, that uniformity of religion must exist in any given society. This conviction rested on the belief that there was one true religion and that it was the duty of the civil authorities to impose it, forcibly, if necessary, in the interest of saving the souls of all citizens. Non-conformists could expect no mercy and might be executed as heretics. One such case is of Mary Dyer (1611-1660) who was hanged on charges of Hersey; she supported the view of Anne Hutchinson and joined the Quakers. In 1637 Mary Dyer supported

Anne Hutchinson, with the belief in her conviction that God "spoke directly to individuals" rather than only through the clergy. Dyer joined with Hutchinson and became involved in what was called the "Antinomian heresy," where they worked to organize groups of women and men to study the Bible in contravention of the theocratic law of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

She gave birth to a deformed stillborn baby in 1637, which was exhumed by the governor stating that it was "of ordinary bigness; it had a face, but no head, and the ears stood upon the shoulders and were like an ape's; it had no forehead, but over the eyes four horns, hard and sharp; two of them were above one inch long, the other two shorter; the eyes standing out, and the mouth also; the nose hooked upward; all over the breast and back full of sharp pricks and scales, like a thornback [i.e., a skate or ray], the navel and all the belly, with the distinction of the sex, were where the back should be, and the back and hips before, where the belly should have been; behind, between the shoulders, it had two mouths, and in each of them a piece of red flesh sticking out; it had arms and legs as other children; but, instead of toes, it had on each foot three claws, like a young fowl, with sharp talons" (Quakers in the World, 2015).

The association of birthing a monster and being a monster was very explicit in her treatment by the clergy and considered as God's punishment upon her. A classic example of how spiritual error springs from and reproduces female monstrosity (Myles, 2001). Quite like Anne Hutchinson's demise was seen as her own fault, so was the stillborn baby for Mary Dyer. Her placement in puritan orthodox literature as an object of divine condemnation is a powerful example of how much control was exercised on women in colonial times and any deviation from it, especially within the realm of religion was punished with the worst treatment. The Dyer case is looked at from two trajectories, one from the angle of her actions, read as public display of a women's agency, affiliations and dissent (Myles). By stating, "I come at his command, I go at his command" we see that Dyer signifies a woman's agency. This is a complex issue in women's religious radicalism as the likes of Dyer

see themselves as female prophets exercising God's will.

Dyer's story also denotes affiliation and unity of women; she entered the public space by advocating and her statement of allegiance with another woman. This is a powerful testament to the growing agency of women in the colonial period. Her conviction comes from her religious beliefs as well as her loyalty to her friend and midwife.

5. Witchcraft, Moral Panic, and Feminine Otherness

The year 1692-93 was the year of paranoia and mass hysteria in colonial Massachusetts, at the tail of a 'witchcraft craze' that rippled through Europe from the 1300s to the end of the 1600s. England went into war with France in the American colonies in 1689, known as King William's War. This was a deadly war, ravaging regions of upstate New York, Nova Scotia and Quebec, sending refugees into the county of Essex and, specifically, Salem Village in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This influx of population surging into Salem and depleting resources and aggravating the ongoing rivalries in the region, specifically over Reverend Samuel Parris, who became Salem's first ordained minister in 1689. He was widely despised due to his rigid ways and gluttonous nature. The unrest was supposedly the work of the devil who had taken control of the society. These Trials provide lenses into the whole puritan period in New England and serves as an example of persecution and the superstitions that revolved around women in that era (Ray, 2003).

In January of 1692, Reverend Parris' daughter and niece had unusual physical and mental behaviour such as screaming, throwing things, unusual sounds and contorting the body into strange positions. Another girl, Ann Putnam, experienced similar episodes; all three girls blamed three women for afflicting them: Tituba, the Parris' Caribbean slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, an elderly impoverished woman. All three women were brought before the local magistrates and interrogated for several days, starting on March 1, 1692. Osborne claimed innocence, as did Good. But Tituba confessed,

"The Devil came to me and bid me serve him." She described elaborate images of black dogs, red cats, yellow birds and a "black man" who wanted her to sign his book. She admitted that she signed the book and said there were several other witches looking to destroy the Puritans. All three women were put in jail. This led to a spill-over of wanton accusations of witch craft throughout Salem leading to a massive escalation until over 150 people had been accused, 19 people executed and at least five put in jail.

Before the Salem Witch Trails of 1692, came another incident of one Ann Hibbins, in 1656 was hanged for being a witch. Her true fault was being a woman who spoke her mind and the issue that led to her hanging was one which began with a dispute with her carpenters. Her case also indicates the nature of the gender bias that engaged within Puritanical states. Eventually found guilty of every perceivable feminine sin she was found guilty in 1640, excommunicated and later in 1656 hanged when her case was re-opened. The idea of "illustrious providences" of the Puritan deity ergo God, as provided by Increase Mather, a Boston minister, indicates the nature of narrative building that was conducted by Puritanical masculinity. In his 'Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences', Mather increasingly engages in the idea of special benevolence bestowed upon New Englanders despite all the hardships they faced. The important element in this essay was the blurred associations with the impact of the supernatural, and the numerous accounts of sorcery and witchcraft that were effectively purloined from English accounts. Puritan leaders held great power and significant complacency in that authority warranted to them by their peers and thus did not take kindly to the dissent that demanded a shift in the hierarchy, no matter how justified. It also engaged with female prophets in a manner that disregarded their induction and also came into conflict with the societal demands of order and control and the spiritual associations of conversion and revelation (Westerkamp, 1993). Combining the two aforementioned ideas in the context of the Salem Witch Trails introduces the elemental nature of convenient scapegoating in order for a hierarchal

system to continue. The examination of the events at Salem, indicate that the conscious engagement of the children in lies told with impunity would not have gotten very far had the overzealous ministers not been guilty of using the opportunity to fan the flames of superstition, resulting in children relishing in the celebrity of their being. This was indicative of the immense strait-jacketing that came from crushing independent thought over the course of the century the Puritans had found charters in America. This hyper-focused attention on the supernatural came with the convenient scapegoating of white women, being accused by other white women, but also an underlying race factor in the case of Tituba, the slave woman. The idea caused mass hysteria, not simply in the case of certain elements being perfect catalysts for the time, but also in the extended notions of how hostility engaged with the construct of witchcraft and the particular feminine notions of a 'woman out of place', thus re-calling the nature of Adam's fall at the hands of Eve, and the compounded understanding for the congregational church and the woman's place in the puritanical society (Reed 2015). The nature of the feminine double-bind in contest of the devil is that despite the puritans also believing that the souls of women was no more susceptible than that of men, the physical weakness, the weakness of the female flesh would lead her to be easily engaged with evil (Reis 1995). The Puritanical notion of the body protecting the soul also indicates a significant focus on the physicality of morality, and this easily transcends into the notion of physicality-morality duality of the sacred union of marriage. Anything beyond that was the conversion to the devil. This effectively engages with the traditional inferiority of women and magistracy of men in the domestic realm. Another facet in understanding how the events in Salem were enabled would be in the context of how witchcraft could be used as a tool of societal control and also as an outlet for frustrations, leading to having adjustive functions for a society under tensions of inevitable change (Detweiler, 1975).

The Salem incident might have been an event designed to restore equilibrium in a society that

was in upheaval as a result of the French and Indian Wars, and the dissident spirit engaged by Cotton Mather's support of the rebellion against Governor Andros. What is interesting to note in the nature of the Salem upheaval, is the fact that beyond that, the society and the intense hold of the Puritanical ideology did change. It can therefore be considered a herald of change. However, in the case of associative conundrums, the Salem Witch Trials were a culmination of the assumptions of inferiority and weakness in women's character and the role of the Puritanical oligarchy to stamp it out, and along with it any notion of a gender balanced society.

6. Representation of Women in Colonial Literature

The intensely evolutionary society of Colonial American gave birth to literature that emerged from the original U.S. colonies during the period from 1607 to the late 1700s. While being largely influenced by British writers, many of the characteristics of Colonial America can be found in the poems, journals, letters, narratives, histories and teaching materials written by settlers and religious and historic figures of the period. Colonial American literature includes the writings of Mary Rowlandson, William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet and John Winthrop. Religion was prominent in Colonial American literature and can be found mostly in Puritan writings. The Puritans wrote about the religious foundations of many of their settlements, especially the exodus from Britain, and employed the constant theme that God should be worshipped.

The first published woman was the puritan poet Anne Bradstreet who published in the North American colonies in 1650s. Many critics believe that Bradstreet was a woman who pushed the boundaries of her religion. Fortunately for her, she did not suffer negative consequences like Anne Hutchinson, who was also a Puritan writer of her time. Her works do not give depictions of the woman's experience in Colonial America, rather focuses more on her spiritual journey towards God.

However, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter* is set in Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony during

the years 1642 to 1649, the very symbol that is meant to bring her shame becomes a catalyst in her independence and defiance of a social structure that aims to oppress a woman. The meaning of the *Scarlett Letter* shifts as time passes and since this piece was set in colonial era, it gives us a representation of a woman's struggle. In retrospect, the novel empowers the woman caught in her struggle of passion and sin as the main character of the novel, wore the scarlet letter with pride and without shame through town as she didn't let society deny her of her human dignity. This is however a more romantic retake on the grim ending for the novel's inspiration, the aforementioned Ann Hibbins. It may however indicate the underlying understanding for the women of those times who dared to defy social conventions, or at least took measures beyond their perceived station.

7. Women, Slavery, and Economic Agency

White women coming to American shores effectively coincided with the first slaves coming to America. It should however be noted that despite the certain questionable methods by which mail-order brides came to America, they were never slaves to be bought or sold. Additionally, this also held significant meaning in the future when slavery engaged in society and social structures as a mark of status; this led to a peculiar instance in which, despite not having rights over property, white women could still hold and own slaves. Slaves could be gifted to infants, and as a result became part of feminine prestige in a society that was finding a specific class system. This effectively meant that white women were shoring up their own economic power through advancing the institution of slavery.

The connection between women's agency as a part of society and slave holdings became a very important factor that determined their self-worth. The buy, selling and ownership of slaves as property of their own gave women in colonial America a sense of economic independence.

White women were trained in slave ownership, discipline, and mastery, given enslaved people as gifts when they were as young as 9 months (Stevenson, 2007). This resulted in white women

investing in slavery, as they were not commonly land owners but the very idea of ownership of something brings a psychological change in how a human being perceives themselves. Women coming into the colonies as brides were often perceived to have been sold, but the privileges they gained after slaves were imported post 1620s garnered a sense of agency in the colonial women. This was particularly recurrent in the south, but it was an overall phenomenon throughout the states in early American colonies. Furthermore, the white woman felt that breastfeeding her own children restricted her movement and sense of agency in herself therefore she adopted 'wet nurses' that fed their infants and took care of them, thus white woman created a huge market of enslaved black women who had recently given birth. Sometimes forcing black women to give birth at the same time as them so that they can feed the white babies, at instances in which formerly enslaved people did in fact state that their mistresses either sanctioned acts of sexual violence against them that were perpetrated at the hands of white men; or that they orchestrated instances of sexual violence between two enslaved people that they owned, in hopes of producing children from those acts of sexual violence (Stevenson). This engagement with the predominant modes of status and wealth indicates how even white women engaged in perpetuation of a system of oppression. This particular claim holds absolute truth for women in the South, with the Northern (Puritan and Quaker) women relatively free of this charge. Women in places such as Colonial Arkansas, Louisiana again found a differing course in terms of their status. The Arkansas women belonged to the 'noblesse militaire' (Arnold, 2017), which indicated an aristocratic lineage with the material prospects the new world had to offer. This resulted in the development of powerful matriarchs and widows with varied interests in both domestic and public realms. They however were again handled in the privilege of being of European stock, while at the same time these colonial outposts were hotbeds for human trafficking, specially in native women and children. This also engages an important final query regarding the assimilation of women in the colonial setup. It is surmised that

despite having the traction of belonging to the core race demographic that was 'immune' to nature of atrocities that were being committed against people of colour, women in Colonial America also faced hurdles that were unique to their station. The overt suppression of the agency of women in the New World might have actually exacerbated the issues regarding slave ownership and general complacency in terms of the core racial divides enabling such issues. This indicates that suppression creates undercurrents of perverse suppression that engenders assumed agency that does not engage morality in the same causal formality.

8. Conclusion

When it comes to the Puritanical influence, the binary of masculine and feminine and their divine roles did bleed out in all the colonies due to the core requirement for marriageable women. When enough came to the continent, the engagement between communities increased thereby rendering a far expansive and combined influence on basic perceptions. Even with this furthering, the core Puritanical influence of women's status and their accepted dynamics remained a core element of American life in the colonies, going well into the 19th century. Women came to the continent in search of better prospects, found themselves enveloped in traditional gender roles that persisted. They could be women in place, to be accepted and revered, or women out of their place, to be persecuted and shunned.

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