

## Kantian Notions of Feminine Beauty and Masculine Sublimity in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark'

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**Abstract:** Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' is one of his short stories whose theme falls among the domain of experimenting human nature in the fields of art, religion, and science. Regardless of the birthmark itself which represents the Original Sin, a conflict between masculine attitude and feminine perspective toward perfection and beauty is artfully manifested in this story. The paper study employs the notions of the beautiful and the sublime according to Immanuel Kant's Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime in which he puts forward the idea that different sexes possess different perceptions of events and environment. From his viewpoint, women are mostly capable to feel the beautiful and sympathy, while men, with their tendency to perfection, possess and convey the feeling of the sublime. Several events, disputes and descriptions in 'The Birthmark', clearly exemplify women's zeal for beauty and men's seeking the perfection. Hawthorne proves that oversensitivity to perfection and sublimity can be a destructive force for the beautiful. One should not defy nature to reconcile his or her internal desires. Within the quest to win perfection by means of limited power of science, the only winner is true love.

**Key Terms:** the beautiful, the sublime, masculine, feminine, perfection

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### 1. Introduction

The idea about the differences between sexes goes far back to Plato who, like modern feminists, felt that women must be in action in society just like men. Plato, in his *Republic*, sees no fundamental difference between men and women. According to the Platonic perspective, "sex is relevant to the architecture of the ideal society on two counts: it is the means of producing new guardians, and it is emotionally charged and potentially divisive." (Craik, 1990, p. 224) Several other opinions manifest female charm and male inclinations to it.

In many literary texts as well as the real life or even in children's literature we witness men dealing with women's attractiveness; perhaps, the first and the most familiar example is Milton's expression, when Adam eats the apple "against his better knowledge, not deceived but fondly overcome with female charm." (Milton, 1850, p. 407) There are several accounts as well throughout the world that illustrate feminine charm. Followers of various traditions, religions, and sects emphasize covering woman's body or the face; observing the effect of feminine beauty over many thoughts and hearts, as well as masculine inclination to this feminine feature motivated rulers and lawmakers to define a specific type of clothing appropriate for women of those regions. Japanese layered kimonos, laced neckline and puffed sleeves of the

17th and 18th century European fashion, head covering of traditional sari in India, and various types of hijab<sup>1</sup> used chiefly by Muslim women, all confirm such a belief.

God the Almighty says in the Quran (24/31) "they [women] should wear something to cover their hair, shoulders, neck and bosom"<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, numerous theorists and philosophers have talked and written of men's zeal for ultimate perfection and sublimity. At least, the various types of cosmetic surgeries, makeup artists, and the manufacturers of cosmetic products prove such ideas. A similar notion is elaborated in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story 'The Birthmark'. In this story, Hawthorne portrays the quest between the anxiety about the beauty and the zeal for sublimity. The beautiful and the sublime are a pair of aesthetic concepts about which some philosophers and critics pointed out their opinions. Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804) is one of those philosophers who, in detail, expressed his perspective about the beautiful and the sublime.

In 1764 Kant wrote a treatise on aesthetics and titled *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (*OBS*). This book contains four 'sections', each of which defines the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime from a diverse point of view. During the first section, Kant presents a general attitude toward finer feelings and divides them into two categories of the beautiful and the sublime. The former charms, while the latter moves. Kant, in the second section, indicates that only those people are capable to feel the beautiful or the sublime who are truly virtuous; that is, in their feeling, thought, and action, they attend specific principles. In this regard, the idea of four human temperaments including melancholy, sanguine, choleric and phlegmatic emerge; however, the core focus of the present study lies upon section three which talks about the diversity of perception of the finer feelings between different sexes. In the Kantian perspective, with their tendency to sympathy and adornment, women symbolize the feeling of the beautiful; on the other hand, since men's deeds accord more with the principles, and the nobility of their behavior rises higher than that of women, they are capable of the feeling of the sublime. Eventually, through section four, Kant expresses national characteristics which influence the perception of the finer feelings.

## 2. Background

Although the third section of *OBS* must contain the characteristics of both woman and man in perceiving the finer feelings, in *OBS*, Kant mostly pays attention to the attributes of women and enumerates their features to feel beautiful. Generally, Kant explains that woman is capable of the feeling of the beautiful, and man for that of sublime; however, Kant does not mean that:

"Woman lacks noble qualities, or that the male sex must do without beauty completely. On the contrary, one expects that a person of either sex brings both together, in such a way that all the merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is proper reference point; on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind. All judgments of the two sexes must refer to these criteria, those that praise as well as those that blame;" (Kant, 2004, pp. 76- 77).

When it comes to matrimonial issues, the true virtue of nature and its principles demand a man to "become more perfect as a man, and a woman as a wife" (Kant, 2004, P. 95). The drives of the sexual preference act in accordance with the handbook of nature, hence more to ennoble the man and to beautify the woman. The unified couple must build a single moral character, which is full of life and "governed by the understanding of the man and the taste of the woman" (Kant, 2004, p. 95).

Repeatedly, Kant refers to woman as the fair sex whose "figure in general is finer than male sex" (Kant, 2004, p. 76). She has more delicacy and gentleness in her traits. Woman has a powerful instinctive feeling for all that is beautiful, stylish, and ornamented. Even little girls like to dress up and use adornment. "They [women] love pleasantries and can be entertained by trivialities if only these are merry and laughing." (Kant, 2004, p. 77); this sentence of Kant reminds us of the characteristics of comedy which is pleasant and causes laughing. Woman tries to keep modesty, and knows how to give herself a fine deportment and be self- possessed in very early ages. Woman has the chief reason in human nature for the distinction of the beautiful features with the noble, and she does "refine even the masculine sex" (Kant, 2004, p.

<sup>1</sup> As a general term, hijab is covering body (and hair for women) by a type of cloth to prevent the drives of opposite sex in public and to protect dignity. In many regions such as North & West Africa, Middle East and East Asia, women cover their hair, and sometimes their faces in public. Covering the face is mostly popular in Arab nations. Despite various prohibitions, hijab, in recent decades, has been getting more popular among Muslims in European countries such as France, Spain, and Denmark. Hijab is not only personalized to women, but men also should wear in a reasonable way.

<sup>2</sup> Quran, Surah Noor, Verse 32 "والبصيرين بخمرهن على جيوبهن"

77). This notion reminds us of Imam Khomeini's famous statement saying that man ascends to the heavens from woman's lap. Kant admits that a woman has just the same understanding that man holds, yet in a beautiful form. Then he follows to assert that since woman's nature is so delicate and her "unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature" (Kant, 2004, p. 78), deep rumination and arduous learning ruin her merits of beauty and delicacy. A woman observes virtue beautifully; she hardly acts on the basis of principles, and her reason for preventing evil deeds is not for they are wrong, but more because they seem ugly to her.

Age is "the great destroyer of beauty" and "threatens all these charms" (Kant, 2004, p. 92). Gradually, beauty fades, and sublimity and nobleness take its place. As age shrinks beauty and charms, it is proper to women to start studying and educating themselves. But Kant observes justice and shifts his statements to man as well.

Speaking about men, Kant calls them the noble sex. Man is capable to feel noble and sublime. In fact, these are the merits of his sex. At an early age that women become aware of observing dignity, "well-bred male youth is still unruly, clumsy, and confused" (Kant, 2004, p. 77). The understanding of men is 'deep' and it indicates identity with the noble and sublime. Ruthless difficulties arouse approval and belong to the attributes of the sublimity of men. The virtue "of the male sex should be a noble virtue" (Kant, 2004, p. 81). Here, Kant deliberately and delicately advises men; Kant does not agree with a man who makes his wife aware of his intention to risk his destiny on behalf of his friend; because, he must not "fetter her merry talkativeness by burdening her mind with a weighty secret whose keeping lies solely upon him" (Kant, 2004, pp. 81- 82). Kant does not permit men to "weep other than magnanimous tears" (Kant, 2004, p. 82). Compared to the sublime, nothing is much more inferior than the ridiculous; nothing can be more insulting to a man than considering him as a 'fool' as it opposes sublimity.

### 3. The Analysis

The primary concept that draws our attention in terms of sexuality in 'The birthmark' is the unconscious awareness of every masculine creature of feminine tendency to adornments and decoration. Aylmer, the scientist-husband of 'The Birthmark', similar to a male peacock that extends its tail to win its purposed female, clears "his fine countenance from the furnace smoke", washes "the stain of acids from his fingers" and persuades "a beautiful woman to become his wife." (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 836) Aylmer is a scientist and this matter intensifies his ardent interest in perfection and sublimity. Yet, in such a context, besides beautiful qualities, he expects sublime and flawless features of his wife; that is, the exact mistake which gradually leads their love and life to failure.

Aylmer's terrible feeling to the birthmark begins just "soon after their marriage" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 764). In general, men's prejudice or some similar feeling keep them introvert about the most important issues that may engage their mind, otherwise, the necessity of the matter rises so high that it appears physically or even in remarks as Aylmer says to Georgiana "Has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 764) This is the first expression of Aylmer in which, for the first time, his search of perfection manifests itself clearly. Georgiana, on the other hand, is unable to believe his point of view, because all her memory tells her about the affection of the lovers and bachelors who called it "magic endowment" and:

"Masculine observers, if the birthmark did not heighten their admiration, contented themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw". (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 765)

Accordingly, Georgiana's mind comes across a paradox. Who is right? People or Aylmer? Also, Aylmer has "discovered that this [the birthmark] was the case with him" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 766) after marriage. Does this mean that his idea about Georgiana's beauty, before their union, has been as well as other men? What should she do? Does she have to accept the idea of her husband who is the only love of her life, or remain on her present status? For her feminine sympathy and good-heartedness, she decides to agree her husband and remove the fatal hand at any cost "I know not what may be the cost to both of us to rid me of this fatal birthmark. Perhaps its removal may cause cureless deformity; or it may be the stain goes as deep as life itself..." (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 768).

This remark and the following one clearly illustrate that Georgiana has deeply hurt of Aylmer's attitude toward the defect that the birthmark has put on her beauty. Her aesthetic and long-lived beautified esteem are shrunk, thus she is strongly determined to remove the mark. "If there be the remotest possibility of it," continued Georgiana, "let the attempt be made at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; ...either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life!" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 768).

What is a woman for, but to be beautiful? If there is no beauty, there is no life. With such an expression Georgiana is getting prepared for a kind of suicide; Hawthorne artistically proves Kantian belief that nothing could be more harmful for a woman than being said that she is not beautiful enough. On the other hand, with such words, Georgiana

demonstrates her absolute decision and confidence about removing the birthmark; however, she also doubts about the success of such experiment. In this regard, Aylmer faces an uneasy feeling of being not reliable and professional enough to perform it. Therefore, he has to ensure both Georgiana and himself:

“...doubt not my power. I have already given this matter the deepest thought--...Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow;” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 768)

Since Aylmer is aware of the sensitivity of women and their sympathetic heart, he behaves gently with Georgiana. Hawthorne proves that sometimes sublimity can destroy beauty. There are some expressions in the story that demonstrate such notion. Georgiana is a masterpiece of Nature; Nature “permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 769). One other phrase that foreshadows destructive power of perfection is that Hawthorne calls it “abortive experiment”.

As any other man who is normally informed of the anxieties of the fair sex, Aylmer all the time attempts at creating an environment that influences Georgiana’s comfort; for instance, he does his best to create visual adornments in the apartment and make a beautiful context in which she can regain her ease and to get ready for the experiment. Meanwhile, Hawthorne portrays a beautiful relationship of the united couple. Many times, Aylmer and his wife try to be one soul that, as Kant says, bring both delicacy and dignity to their life, “So she poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of his spirit. He then took his leave with a boyish exuberance of gayety, assuring her that her seclusion would endure but a little longer...” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 775)

Georgiana belongs to those women who have an exaggerated sense of sympathy and their trust and loyalty to their husband influences their reason. Although Aylmer is in a number of ways informed of the possible risks of the experiment, Georgiana’s patience is over, and all she wants is to look as most beautiful as possible [or even impossible] in Aylmer’s eyes “And, Aylmer, I shall quaff whatever draught you bring me; but it will be on the same principle that would induce me to take a dose of poison if offered by your hand.” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 777) and then goes on to say ““Danger? There is but one danger--that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!” cried Georgiana. “Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost, or we shall both go mad!”” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 777)

So the story progresses with similar anxieties, tenderness, sympathies, and perfectionist attitudes; the fearsome moments that intensifies Aylmer’s fervor for removing the birthmark and reaching the sublime perfection, for purifying his soul of the fatal hand that reminds him of a probable sin or flaw in the past. Georgiana bears a fine comprehension of her husband’s feelings. Her part in matrimonial life is to carry peace and serenity to Aylmer, and the only way to perform it is removing the fatal birthmark. In this regard, however, she finds herself not strong enough to bear the birthmark a lifetime or to neglect it and endure carelessly; her life is destroyed ‘with’ the birthmark “...Were I weaker and blinder it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully. But, being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die.” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 778). Aylmer, in response, raises a utopian idea which illustrates his ultimate zeal for sublimity; that is, “You are fit for heaven without tasting death!” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 778)

Possibly, one reason for which Aylmer seeks perfection and purification of his soul in Georgiana’s perfection is because he finds no more flawless spirit than that of hers. If, in any other case, he was to purify his soul, he could repent of former flaws or search purification by means of his excellent science and creating a chemical substance for himself. Why, for instance, he does not try on perfectionizing his assistant, Aminadab, who is in no way man- like?! Hawthorne clears the answer through Aylmer’s words addressing Georgiana: “There is no taint of imperfection on thy spirit. Thy sensible frame, too, shall be all perfect.” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 778)

Through such flattering expressions or whatever one may call them, the couple pace the last step to the birthmark removal; that is, preparing liquid by Aylmer and drinking it by Georgiana. She faints, and Aylmer begins to play his role to the end of the story as a man of science rather than a man of love and life. Hawthorne launches this idea through one moving and heart- breaking statement:

Aylmer sat by her side, watching her aspects with the emotions proper to a man the whole values of whose existence was involved in the process now to be tested. Mingled with this mood, however, was the philosophic investigation characteristic of the man of science. (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 779)

Aylmer’s part in these last paragraphs of the story is recording and writing down the results of his experiment which is already in touchstone. He does not allow any slightest symptom to escape; breaths, heartbeats, movements, color of her countenance and eventually, the birthmark. Among all his efforts to remove the fatal hand, there is but one, the easiest, that implicitly leads to success “Yet once, by a strong and unaccountable impulse he pressed it [the birthmark] with his lips. His spirit recoiled...” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 779)

Hawthorne portrays the removal of the birthmark just after this expression. Perhaps he tends to say that true love with no malice or inclination to destruction is the only elixir of survival. Now, what happens as the result of the scientific experiment is devastation and death; Georgiana, with her deep feeling is inhaling the essence of death "... you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!" (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 780)

#### 4. Conclusion

The closing sentence of Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' seems to be a proper opening for our conclusion: "He failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find a perfect future in the present." (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 780).

Both Aylmer and Georgiana are in search of the perfect form of what the Providence has put within their nature; that is, the masculine sublimity and the feminine beauty. Although both characters' zeal for the beautiful and the sublime is natural for their sex, they are not aware of the destructive power of the ultimate perfection which is not tolerable by a limited creature such as human. Aylmer has learned to change, deform, and reform everything to what he desires. He is not able to understand the true nature of love that is to love whatever naturally is, not whatever should be or he wants to be; this is his exact fault in dealing with the birthmark.

He supposes his purification of soul solely in removing the birthmark; while his spirit recoils only after kissing it "by a strange and unaccountable impulse". As the story suggests, the birthmark vanishes after this incident. But, is the tiny hand removed in reality, or is it only Aylmer's vision who, unconsciously, found the eventual impulse of true love purifying his soul? One may consider the removal of the birthmark happening physically; as Aylmer's servant, Aminadab's "gross, hoarse chuckle" appears; however, he is a servant and even his happiness can be as a result of accomplishing his master's command:

"Ah, clod! Ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy, "You have served me well! Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of the sense! You have earned the right to laugh." (Hawthorne, 1982, pp. 779-80)

We know not how long Aminadab has lived and worked in Aylmer's laboratory; yet, it is clear that this passive creature's state of being and living depends directly on Aylmer's works and experiments. As a result, his exhibition of happiness can be one major that relates his progress of life to the laboratory as a place to live in. Aminadab's happiness and laugh is under the authority of Aylmer; therefore, one can conclude that the birthmark is not truly removed, and it is Aylmer's vision. One which Aminadab has no right but to obey whatever his master commands; even if Aylmer is sunk in daydreaming, Aminadab has to play a role in it and to make Aylmer believe it.

Georgiana's wrong decision in removing the birthmark at any cost is one major element that makes a tragedy out of Hawthorne's story. She is a woman, a really beautiful and charming one; at least, Hawthorne and the people of his story-town lead us to such perception. She has always encountered with the flattering and lovely expressions of men, and envy of women. Before Aylmer's decision, Georgiana plays neutrally; instead of making him aware of the true beauty and charm that the Providence has put in her, she just intensifies Aylmer's daydreaming. Perhaps the majority of women with their tender hearts would be influenced under such situations and cultivate dreams of their husbands. She was a wiser woman, Georgiana would prove her power of feminine beauty and could cure her husband's abnormal enthusiasm for perfection and sublimity. As a woman, the worst that could be said against her is that something defects her beauty. Receiving such an opinion, particularly from her husband, is so grave to her. Thus, she decides to regain her perfect beauty, even if it puts her life in danger.

Georgiana's lack of self esteem and Aylmer's over confidence, leads the story to experimenting the fatal hand. None of the characters is able to moderate his or her passion and affection for perfection either in the form of the beauty or in the form of the sublime.

The birthmark fades only when Aylmer, although unexpectedly, moderates his enthusiasm for sublimity and bestows a true love's kiss to the tiny hand. Hawthorne proves that Aylmer's medicine is a poison to his wife's life; and that, neither oversensitivity to beauty nor extra enthusiasm for sublime is the winner; the only champion is true love.

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