Preface

Nathaniel Hawthorne called his works Romance and insisted that as a romancer, he had no obligation to follow minute and factual details. A novel is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. To study his work as romance only as Hawthorne defines his kind of fiction, is to preclude the cultural and historical dimension in the study of his work. The definition of his work as Romance is an attempt on the part of the author to repress its historicity. Hawthorne claims a lot of poetic license for himself. Though, he professes that he writes romances and his works do not correspond to the factual world, his works serve an important cultural purpose. His narrative voice is a self-conscious rhetoric construction to suppress the real Hawthorne and his ideological beliefs. Every literary work is attended by a host of outside circumstances. If a reader succeeds in exposing and exploring them, it will suffuse the work with additional meaning.

I started work on Hawthorne soon after my post graduation in 1997. The enticing presence of Hester in The Scarlet Letter amid subversive ideology of the Puritan society of the 17th century was initially my inspiration. This text was prescribed in my Post graduate course in American literature in AMU, Aligarh. I collected Hawthorne’s tales and novels from American Centre library, New Delhi and most of my critical material on Hawthorne from Maulana Azad library, Aligarh and American Centre library, Hyderabad. As a naïve enthusiast, exploring thematic angle was foremost in my mind at the initial stage. I had even started to work on it in the beginning but gradually in the course of my reading Hawthorne’s works, I was intrigued by their repressed historicity.
There was no problem like dearth of material on Hawthorne, instead of it, I encountered another kind of difficulty: what to read and what not from the enormous body of critical and biographical works available on him amid undying enthusiasm in new scholars to further explore Hawthorne’s fictional horizon. I went through critical works on him only to find out what was left to speak and tried to relook at his work to say something new.

In the wake of latest development in the field of literary theory, I found it fascinating to attempt a contextualized reading of his works. The more travelled back into American past and explored social, religious, economical, and political territory, the more I was caught up with an irresistible urge to go for a parallel reading of American history and Hawthorne’s fictional world. My task became difficult in the light of the author’s constant effort throughout his career to endorse his works as product of fancy that they were conceived in a neutral territory between the real world and fairyland. It made me increasingly conscious of what Hawthorne was trying to disown by constantly asserting on the fanciful aspect of his writings and adopting techniques like allegory, images, symbolism, and emblems for the said purpose.

The bulk of critical material available on Hawthorne asserted that the most prominent themes in his Romances are sin, guilt, conscience, isolation, burden of past, original sin of our Original father Adam, ethical inclination, symbolism, allegory, and the stigma of a concealed guilt. The earlier critics over emphasized these themes and asserted that the passion for ethics prompted Hawthorne to stop his characters in the midst of action in order to probe their inner lives. He frequently reported it by means of symbol and allegory.
Traditional critical approaches to Hawthorne described him as a writer who expressed himself through allegory and who found isolation a root of all evil. They found nothing in his tales that enlarged our understanding of human nature and the society in which he lived. They accused him of paralyzing the creative mind of New England.

The present work finds it impossible to relate with the traditional approaches to Hawthorne’s works. The purpose of this thesis is to present a fresh perspective to him. This proposed work aims to shift the focus from the conventional and hackneyed approaches to his work to show that his work is embedded in the leading social and political ideologies of his time. This thesis is a meagre attempt to bring to surface a sense of milieu in which Hawthorne wrote. Through use of seemingly insignificant details present in his cultural context, this thesis tries to unravel the inherent contradictory forces at work within that cultural milieu.

Hawthorne’s four novels and a few tales have been selected for the purpose of present reading. The selection of his tales was based on their historical relevance. It was interesting to work on Hawthorne from New Historicist perspective but at the same time it was also very challenging and demanding task. Knowing from the onset, the nature of work done on Hawthorne in the past, it was difficult to justify the historical importance of his work serving an important cultural purpose.

The present proposed reading tries to resituate his work not only in relation to other genre and modes of discourse but also in context of non-discursive practices, ranging from the essays of Emerson to a few lines from a poem of Alfred Tennyson, references to the novel of Charlotte Bronte to lines from books of social, political, and religious history to find resonance between them and the fictional world of Hawthorne.
The author’s representation of the society of his ancestors as well as his own was not objective rather it was guided by his personal sympathies. Hawthorne’s reading provided with a model for the integration of intellect, religious, and social commitments. The reading of his tales in the present thesis at once demystifies the claim that literature and scholarship can stand beyond the self and group interests, biases, and struggles of material existence. For the purpose of formatting this thesis seventh edition of the MLA style sheet has been used with a slight deviation. The body of the text is justified contrary to MLA 7th edition guideline.