

Redefining Womanhood: The Rise of Feminism in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract: Along with the ideology of feminism came societal fears to the patriarchal hierarchy and along with it came the misconception that *feminism* relates to the ideology that consider females are superior to men. Many aristocrats at that time beloved feminism to be the lobbying against men in power. The concept of the new modern women challenged the ideal and ornamental image of a Victorian lady. People feared the loss of traditional values of womanhood with the rise of feminism. The image of a modern woman, equal in rights to men; who is strong in her opinion and is not scared to affirm her beliefs and who can express herself, came into being. The concept of a new type of woman who is fearless was challenging the orthodox authorities.

It was an era that redefined womanhood and lady-like. But the question that the new type of woman will be accepted in our male dominated society that longs for a traditional lady still prevails. Shall a woman leave the traditional norms completely to adapt to modernism? Or is it justified to be curbed by the traditional norms? What do we define as ideal? And is there a possible combination of modernity and traditional values? I've tried to answer some of these questions with reference to Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* in the present paper.

Keywords: Ornamental womanhood, Ideal-lady, societal-norms, Feminism, Liberty

In the late nineteenth century, the colours of a female political movement became evident. Feminism emerged as an officially recognized and pursued movement characterised by what we now call as the first wave of feminism that lasted from around 1850s to 1940s. The wave initially was carried forward by the pursuit of equal legal rights for women. Women who were till then considered subordinate to men in political and financial prospects, were now standing up for themselves and against the social norms that defined the ideal Victorian women. Ideal women then was characterized by – piety, docility, purity, submission and domesticity also called as the cult of true womanhood. Women were standing against the patriarchal system that barred them from getting equal opportunities regarding education and employment. Their demands regarding women's enfranchisement was quite radical at that time. During the late nineteenth century the women were not only expressing themselves through conventions, protests and conversations centred around women's suffrage but they were leaving behind the old norms of ornamental womanhood.

This wave of feminism is deeply reflected in the literature of that period. Henry James was indeed an advocate for women's rights and this is reflected in his novels and short stories like *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Golden Bowl* as they all have visible traits of feminism and development of a female character as its pivotal theme.

The novel *The Portrait of a Lady* revolves around the life of a female protagonist Isabel Archer. Isabel is a free-spirited and beautiful young lady who is not in the least scared to challenge social norms by means of her actions. She believes in asserting her independence and her identity as an individual rather than marrying someone like her elder sisters. One may say that Isabel is Henry's representation of a modern 'American' and 'original' woman. Isabel is undeniably a true American by her attitude towards life. After the demise of her mother at a very young age, and an unconventional childhood, her father groomed her into a strong woman having her own thoughts and opinions of life. The novel narrates the adventures of Isabel Archer through the critical stages of a women's life. Isabel doesn't believe in the ideology of marriage and she refuse to surrender herself into any social institution that may injure her freedom. Her desire for independence and her captivating imagination are striking qualities of her character. She is described as an-

‘...independent young lady’ and ‘seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others’
(The Portrait of a Lady, 29-30)

Isabel is characterized as a fresh young face who is simultaneously naïve and interesting, the one who values education and adventure. This shows the contrast between the character of Isabel and the ideal image of woman cherished at that time. By means of Isabel, Henry James has tried to affirm his belief in feminism and womanhood. As Robert Weisbuch described the character of Isabel in his book ‘Henry James and the Idea of Evil’-

“She is an Emerson on the road, who reads German idealist philosophy in the locked office at Albany, that occludes a view of the street; an overly theoretic, though wonderfully fresh earnest self- realizer ..” (Pg. 112)

Isabel Archer thus defines the new type of woman, James in his efforts has portrayed Isabel as a strong girl and narrated her journey towards becoming a strong lady.

When Isabel’s aunt Mrs. Touchett invites her on a trip to Europe, she viewed it as an opportunity to ‘leave the past behind’ and to ‘begin afresh’. James in this novel has tried to highlight the limitations women face because of their anatomy, our social hierarchy and its patriarchal psychology. Isabel as a child is blessed with an inbuilt sense of security. She has faith in the world and cannot perceive the world beyond her safe sphere. Though one may lament Isabel as a strong character but we cannot deny some freckles of childishness evident as a part of her otherwise mature character. Isabel tries to enforce her will and stand by her decisions and their subsequent outcomes, yet she has a pleasing tendency and to appease everyone is one of her deepest desires.

‘Isabel had in the depths of her nature an even more unquenchable desire to please more than Edith; but depths of this young lady’s nature were a very out-of-the-way place, between which and the surface communication was interrupted by a dozen capricious forces’ (The Portrait of a Lady, 48)

This shows the significance of an ideal image prevalent in the society at that time and how much the women strived to achieve it. Yet Isabel embraces the qualities of a new woman, she not only wants the freedom to choose but to rather express herself. She denies the portrait of a domesticated and ornamental lady and appreciates transparency. She is open for new discussions and strives to be the best version of herself.

Isabel denies the marriage proposal from Casper Goodwood as ‘Isabel believes that to marry him would be to submit her inner fluid to a prison of mechanical American convention’ (57, Phillip Sicker) whereas in case of Lord Warburton, Isabel ‘fears that marriage to such a man would fix narrow limits upon her self-expanding consciousness’ (57, Phillip Sicker)

Thus, Henry James tried to portray a new type of American lady deeply concerned with her freedom and highly on her independence through Isabel Archer. She not only ardently denied the two proposals but elaborates her concept of marriage. She believes in a marriage that provides her with the kind of liberty she seeks. She ardently wishes to satisfy her in her romantic beliefs of marriage and her desire to please her future husband is a substantial one. She has a desire to be needed and to prove herself useful rather than embracing the values of ornamental domesticity. James show her desire to be productive as-

‘...yielded to the satisfaction of having refused two ardent suitors in a fortnight. That love of liberty.... was yet most exclusively theoretic; she has not been able to indulge it on a large scale.’ (The Portrait of a Lady, 178)

Thus, denying these two men, Isabel is filled up with a sense of victory. She is delighted with a newfound sense of power and authority, that she was able to resist the two men. She wants to believe in herself and wishes to stay true to her plans. She wants to believe she is strong and don’t want to be an ‘easy-victim’.

Isabel already strong and firmly rooted in her beliefs was then made financially secure by her cousin Ralph's decision to make her rich. Though intentioned towards securing her freedom, it makes Isabel an easy target. Every character in the novel is focused on what Isabel evokes, while ignoring their responsibility to protect and guide her semi-formed teenage fantasies into adult convictions. No one in the novel is rooted in reality and is thus, unable to see the danger approaching towards her, because of her incomplete knowledge. Isabel's portrait as a lady does not represent a girl with a desire to appear an ideal lady but rather revealing that she wants more from her life – her ardent desire to display her mantle and find her true worth. Isabel is attracted towards art and literature, along with freedom and liberty.

Henrietta Stackpole, a side character in the portrait of a lady, represents another and a more aggressive side of feminism. Henrietta, an American reporter, is Isabel's friend. She represents a patriotic soul, always sticking up for her country over any European ideology. Henrietta is not in the least scared to express her opinions. When Isabel approaches her for suggestions on the marriage proposal of Lord Warburton, she says, '*...if you marry one of these people, I'll never speak to you again.*' (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 168).

Henrietta thus expresses herself very bluntly and refuses to indulge herself in any forms of flattery. She speaks her mind and is also an avid women's right activist. She doesn't believe in any societal conventions and openly suggests Isabel to stay away from them as well. She was also the first person in the novel to tell Isabel that "*she liked [Osmond] no better than [Isabel's] other admirers*" (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 303).

Altogether Henry James has woven a plot with a lot of strong women like Isabel, Henrietta, and Mrs. Touchett who overshadowed the males in the novel. Isabel herself is an expansive personality as a protagonist. She possesses a natural charm and sincerity that attracts readers towards her. It is ironic that Isabel's ardent desire to remain independent fools her into marrying Osmond. Her determination to follow her own evaluation about Osmond, that forces her to refute against many friends who cautioned her against such a marriage. Therefore her highest and most valued quality also becomes the cause of her downfall. Isabel is charmed with a self-fulfilling sense of pride and respect. Even after she realizes the flaw in her decision, she refuses to recognize it publically. Thus, she represents the image of a lady with brimming pride and self-respect to confess her mistake to Ralph.

Ultimately one can apprehend a trace of womanhood in the character of Isabel when she refuses to sacrifice, change or to even amend her individual essence to please a man, let alone the man be her husband, Osmond. She does not publically humiliate Osmond by leaving him, which would have been much of an easier choice for her. This makes her a new type of lady. Isabel's romantic fantasies and ideologies clashed bitterly with the horrific realities of life, but yet Isabel archer refused to crumble and chose to carry the weight of her decisions with the grace and modesty of a real lady. She does not embrace Osmond's view of an ideal lady altogether as they are so abhorrent to her own. Even if her life becomes a mess, she refuse to shrink.

"...the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation.. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her.." (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 448)

Isabel is thus a precise image of the representative of the true spirit of a new type of lady, the one that represents that amalgamation of the endorsements of the traditional ideal lady with the elements of a modernistic woman.

Isabel's later suffocated emotions find a vent through Pansy, Osmond's daughter. When it appears to Isabel that Osmond is not her worthy receptor, she diverts her attention towards pansy. Her utmost desire was to prove herself useful to Pansy and that might make her happy in return. Isabel recognized Pansy's sufferings.

'...Isabel... saw the poor girl had been vanquished... Isabel looked into her eyes and saw there mainly a prayer to be treated easy... she bowed her pretty head to authority and only asked of the authority to be merciful' (The Portrait of a Lady, 577)

The commitment and responsibility towards Pansy born out of her love becomes her solemn vow. This commitment as a mother highlights the values of a traditional ideal Victorian Lady and lays emphasis on the sanctity of motherhood. Though Isabel pitied Pansy's situation as her father, Osmond has utterly crushed every hope in her world, her love for her is appreciable. Isabel tries her best to secure comfort for Pansy, by means of her friendship and love.

Pansy says of Isabel, *'she is not afraid of anyone.'*, thus manning Isabel successfully a role-model in the eyes of Pansy. She tries to conform to Osmond's image of a lady, but eventually ends up confronting and rejecting it. She refused to sacrifice her ideals in order to protect Osmond's little ego. And even though life for her was now confined in a gilded cage, it accepts it with pride. As Maria de Sousa says-

' Her marriage had then been for her the symbol of her total freedom. When Isabel becomes gradually aware of her error of perception concerning Osmond's character-that though she married in freedom, she had not married freedom-all her strength and sense of dignity come to her through her still...cherished ideal of freedom as opposed to her husband's strict conformity... (Santos 307)

Conclusion: James tried to make a portrait of a noble lady, through Isabel Archer, a character that represents an ideal amalgamation of strength and grace. Isabel represents a woman's inner zest who has to confront the ugly facets of human nature – including a man's manipulative selfishness, cruelty and indifference. James has made attempts to illuminate the implications of women's determination to seek liberty and how instant impulses can drive us more than our chosen consciousness. Isabel's development as a very strong lady rather than being an ornamental woman who is useless and domesticated captures the true spirit of feminism. Isabel represents a brilliant fusion of traditional aspects of a lady along with the characteristics of a modern woman. Towards the end of the novel, she has finally turned to a woman who knows who she is, what her morals are, what holds dear to her and what she is willing to sacrifice. James, thus portrays Isabel as a character who supplies us with hope. She personifies the youth of that era, and their pain when their illusions and their fantasies about the world are shattered, the resilience of experience, and their ability to find the strength to hope.

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