



A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GENDER SUBJECTIVITY IN HENRY JAMES' *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

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Abstract:

Reexamining and interpreting gender dynamics within contemporary society remains a prominent topic in gender studies. A central concern in these discussions revolves around the subordination experienced by women, whether as readers, writers, or fictional characters, within a patriarchal framework. This research employs a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing textual analysis to explore gender-related issues.

Specifically, this study investigates representations of gender subjectivity and patterns of subordination as reflected in the ideological context of Henry James's novel, "The Portrait of a Lady." Using feminist critical discourse analysis as an analytical lens, the paper seeks to uncover and critique the underlying Victorian-era ideologies embedded within the text, while also examining narratives of female subjectivity. The findings highlight that, despite societal progress, patriarchal structures continue to prevail, perpetuating women's subjugation within contemporary gender power hierarchies.

Keywords: gender subjectivity; feminine discourse, Victorian fiction, critical discourse.

1. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA): Evaluative Framework

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) examines the interplay between ideology, gender, and power within political discourses (Lazar, 2005). Fairclough (2003) argues that discourse is deeply integrated into societal actions as it encompasses both written and spoken communication, fundamental to social interaction. FCDA reveals and critiques ideologies that perpetuate negative representations of women as subordinate, secondary, and unequal to men. Lazar (2005) further asserts that FCDA holds emancipatory potential, aiming to liberate women from restrictive societal norms.

Henry James's novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), revolves around Isabel Archer, a young woman of modest means who inherits significant wealth from her uncle, Mr. Touchett, in England. The narrative explores Isabel's journey from innocence to maturity, highlighting her seemingly intentional submission to patriarchal authority following her marriage to Gilbert Osmond. Even after his intentions are exposed to her, contrary to her initial aspirations, Isabel eventually decides to endure her collapsing marriage. When contemplating the female characters of the novel, they are presented as subjects to ideological restraints that prevent them from exercising free will. The following study seeks to provide critical insight into *The Portrait of the Lady* by exploring it through a Feminist Discourse Analysis of gender subjectivity.



Consonantly, Lazar (2005) high spots how ideological considerations of women are chiefly constructed and prolonged by men. The men establish and perpetuate these ideologies by turning them into hegemonic forms that are challenging to acknowledge. Through the lens of FCDA, the study attempts to elucidate how *The Portrait of the Lady* by Henry James, illustrates the underlying patriarchal ideologies that confine women by limiting them to subordinate roles in comparison to men. It investigates how women despite their abilities and knowledge remain fragile, easily exposed to exploitation by deceitful men that demonstrates the societal conviction that women need men companionship to be complete. The study chiefly stresses Isabel's submission to patriarchal convictions, it sheds light to discourses that unjustly subjugate women, painstaking for their empowerment within the margins of social contexts.

Methodology

The following study seeks to explore uneven gender structures by explicating how sexist ideologies are constructed and perpetuated, largely through exposition of gender subjectivity in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James via Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) by Lazar. The paper uses a qualitative research approach, chiefly conducted via textual discourse analysis. A qualitative research method is essential for revealing deeper meanings, nuances, concepts, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions (Berg, 2007).

The primary analytical method employed is content analysis, specifically textual analysis, which allows for detailed examination of dialogues, interactions, and narratives among the characters. This method ensures a precise understanding of embedded ideologies and gender-related concepts within the text. The study employs purposive sampling, focusing exclusively on female characters to highlight gender-specific ideological constructs and patterns of subordination.

Critical Discourse Analysis as the Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as an analytical tool to reveal systemic power structures that perpetuate socio-economic inequalities, gender biases, and hierarchical manipulation within discourse. Being chiefly influenced by the foundations of CDA, Michelle M. Lazar, came forth with a novel feminist approach as Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). Considering FCDA, it emphasizes rooted gender biases, specifically the language and practices that preserve patriarchal dominance and perpetuate gender subjectivity. By blending feminist scholarly perspectives with the foundations of CDA, it emphasizes the complex correlation amongst power, ideology and discourse to high spot and challenge gender imbalances.

As stated by Lazar (2007), FCDA examines slight, commonplace, nuanced and definite processes in which power relations are structured in a way that gendered stereotypes are reinforced, and deeply rooted in numerous societal contexts. Having transformation and social justice as their ambitions, FCDA aspires to unveil and challenge discourses that perpetuate convictions and exercises that withheld the potentiality of women by representing them as feeble and limiting their exercising of equal rights as human beings. The crucial consideration of the FCDA is its capability to unveil the hidden interplay between power, ideology and language within FCDA, the revelation process is addressed by Lazar as demystification or denaturalization that includes critical exploration of discourse to elucidate the conventional suppositions concerning gender. This approach reveals these assumptions as ideological constructs rather than natural truths, often obscuring significant power imbalances.



CDA, employing a multidisciplinary approach, studies language use within broader social contexts. According to Van Dijk (1993), CDA concentrates on issues of inequality, dominance, and power relations, examining how textual and spoken discourses perpetuate, resist, or enact social abuses of power. Through a systematic analysis of language—both spoken and written—CDA seeks to uncover how discourse structures reflect and reinforce ideological frameworks and power dynamics (Van Dijk, 1993). According to Van Dijk, the very concept of ideology is shown to emerge from sociology, discourse analysis and cognitive and social psychology (2005). Basically, ideology is a set of beliefs comprising of anticipations, goals and values. Further he adds that ideology is a cognitive process which influences the dimensions of discourse by showing the impact ideologies have on text and talk (Van Dijk, 2005).

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) represents a contemporary evolution of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Jorgenson and Philips (2004) suggest that FCDA seeks to understand the interplay between language usage and broader social practices. According to Lazar (2005), FCDA emerges from post-structuralist and third-wave feminist theories, viewing gender as a fluid construct shaped by discourse. Consonantly, Sunderland and Litosseliti (2002) state that gender identities are not fixed rather constructed through different social contexts and interactions.

However, FCDA consolidates Judith Butler's (1900) concept of performativity, arguing that gender identities as well as norms are thoroughly constructed through modes of discourse. This conception addresses discourse as the core, often to the detriment of acknowledging the material and experiential aspects of power dynamics, specifically identity. Correspondingly, it seeks to explicate the ways in which gender is constructed and demonstrated within practical and real-world interactions and writings.

Moreover, Nartey (2020) states that male dominated assumptions often operates gender to generate harmful and contorted exposition of women. These misleading representations of women, reinforces societal "othering" of women, their subjugation and marginalization. By analyzing the African context, specifically Ghana, Nartey (2020) utilities FCDA to bring forth ways of resistance against patriarchal prejudices, inequality and suppression. These strategies are produced to revolt against sexist discourses, restructuring disparaging narratives, challenging gender assumptions and critically evaluating patriarchal designs. Similarly, Shapiro (2017) employs FCDA to dig deep into the portrayal of female characters in films that have been created by women, exposing how writers operate prominent independence, empowering the female artists and revolting against the convictions. However, Khan (2019) merges the concepts of FCDA with subaltern studies and asserts his criticism on the the subjugation and objectification of women demonstrated in the novel. The Holy Women, high spotting the validation of women's marginalization in South Asian male dominated Frameworks as conceptualized by Spivak. Moreover, Mendrofa (2020) employs FCDA to examine how economic enterprises exercise hegemonic control over women by advocating materials that promise to refine their appearances and skin tone. Consonantly, Ohtio and Nyachae (2018) analyze the intersection of power, language, ideology and identity, by shedding light on the



painstaking endured by black women writers. Dalton (2015) utilizes FCDA to critically explicate how discourses on sexual harassment in Japanese politics and media, specifically in context to the Me-too movement, demonstrating how each women's experiences often stimulate and initiate wider social movements despite primarily being excluded.

Analysis and Discussion

Sohier (2015) examines Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* to explore the concept of ladyhood as originally depicted by the author, concluding that according to James, ladyhood is attained through enduring significant trials and hardships. These difficulties, though severe, are portrayed as essential for achieving the ideal state of lady hood. Neculeac (2020), utilizing Derridean deconstructive approach, highlights how vague and adverse expositions within a narrative, he asserts that the character of Isabel Archer takes its influence from gendered constructions. Furthermore, he argues that the protagonist, Isabel's portrayal, chiefly as a female willingly choosing her repressive marriage, showcases a systematic male fantasy embedded rigidly in Victorian attitudes and patriarchal expectations. Moreover, Brown (1996) debates different means of women submission and social roles illustrated in the novel. These means reflect women as marginalized, dependent and subjected to sacrifice persuaded by patriarchal power dynamics that aim to validate unequal distribution of rights and roles. Consonantly, Shapiro (2017) states that the representation of women are influenced by constant gender inequalities that are enhanced and perpetuated by hierarchical power relations. They construct and construct certain societal ideologies that later control power dynamics.

Lazar (2005) addressing this system as an ideological separation of genders into distinctive classes where one is dominant over the other. These classes are structured to establish persistent gender divisions and biases, that are rooted subconsciously by women themselves which reinforce greater societal discourses. In the following novel, the female characters are portrayed in relation to the Victorian convictions and standards, efficiently constraining them to marginalized and stereotypical statuses. The story high spots various societal layers for men and women, illustrating women's positions are limited to domestic duties, chores, parenting and family care that enhances their status as subordinate to men.

The female characters of the novel constantly mirror the convictional ideologies of patriarchal dominance and women subjugation dominant in Victorian times. To reveal the rooted gender ideologies in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, the following study emphasizes on major female characters and their underlying ambitions. These characters include Isabel Archer, Pansy Osmond, Madame Merle, Mrs. Touchett, and Amy Gemini.

Isabel Archer, the central figure and the titular "lady," is a young American woman without parents, brought to England by her aunt, Mrs. Touchett. Isabel is portrayed as intelligent, inquisitive, and possessing a kind disposition, making her a compelling presence for various characters in the novel. Despite her intellect and admirable qualities, she remains entangled in the restrictive gender ideologies of the 19th century. Her individuality is dismissed by her husband, Gilbert Osmond, who objectifies her, referring to her as a decorative possession within his



collection: "had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects" (p. 253). Isabel even comes to believe that Osmond valued her solely for her beauty, not her character or mind (p. 359).

Though she appears to be an independent thinker, Isabel becomes ensnared in the manipulative schemes of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. She ultimately accepts Gilbert's marriage proposal not out of love, but due to a misguided sense of purpose tied to her inherited wealth: "on a factitious theory, in order to do something finely appreciable with the money" (p. 358). This decision contradicts her earlier resolve to remain unmarried. Isabel is presented as lacking agency, manipulated into fulfilling the roles others define for her—particularly as a symbolic mother to Pansy and as a social ornament in Osmond's life. Her marriage, orchestrated by Madame Merle and Osmond, further strips her of autonomy.

The novel underscores how women in the Victorian era were denied authority over their own lives. They had little power to make or undo decisions about their personal and social relationships. Isabel, along with other female characters in the narrative, is portrayed as marginalized and confined within rigid gender roles, reflecting the broader systemic suppression of women's independence during that time.

The novel consistently explores themes of gender subjectivity and deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies, which shape and restrict the roles of female characters. Throughout the narrative, women are expected to conform to predefined societal expectations. When Isabel learns of the past relationship between Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, she is compelled to accept the revelation despite the emotional detachment of her husband. This reflects the societal belief that once a decision is made for a woman, it becomes irreversible, even if it leads to lifelong suffering. Lazar (2005) emphasizes that gender intersects with other societal structures such as class, geography, sexuality, and ethnicity, compounding women's marginalization.

Isabel is subjected to neglect simply because she is a woman. She is expected to find contentment even in misery, sacrificing her voice and identity to fulfill her role as a wife. Although she experiences emotional tyranny in her marriage, societal norms prevent her from ending the relationship due to the sanctity associated with marriage. In Henry James's narrative, the idea of becoming a "lady" involves enduring hardship and losing personal freedom, reflecting the notion that women must undergo personal trials to attain wisdom. This expectation, however, is not equally applied to male characters. Men in the novel are often portrayed as deceitful or manipulative, yet their actions are never critically examined—implying such behavior is natural and exempt from social scrutiny. Conversely, women must adhere to rigid standards or risk being labeled as outsiders. These societal expectations are instilled from an early age, making them difficult to challenge or remove (Lazar, 2005).

The character of Pansy Osmond exemplifies these restrictive gender norms. A fifteen-year-old girl and the daughter of Gilbert Osmond, she was educated in a Swiss convent that suppressed her individuality. Her upbringing leaves her devoid of personal will or enthusiasm. Her father



refers to her as “a little convent flower” (p. 220), implying that she has no personal desires or autonomy. Although Pansy wishes to marry Ned Rosier, a modest and financially unstable artist, she is denied the opportunity. When she expresses affection for him, her father sends her back to the convent for additional “refinement” (p. 442), reinforcing the notion that her role is to be a compliant and unassertive woman.

Pansy is raised to embody submission and obedience, stripped of independent thought. Her father believes this is the appropriate way to raise a girl, viewing complete compliance as a virtue. She is described as “impregnated with the idea of submission” (p. 202), with her agency entirely subdued. The ideology she internalizes leaves no room for questioning or resistance. Women in the novel are likened to “blank pages” (p. 268), with their identities written by others, particularly by the men chosen to control them. Pansy’s decision to wait for Ned instead of defying her father illustrates the internalization of gendered expectations, where patience and silence are perceived as feminine virtues.

Another notable female character in *The Portrait of a Lady* is Countess Amy Gemini. She is married to Count Gemini, a man who treats her with contempt and appears to have entered the marriage with the intent of causing her distress. Described as a flirt and a morally questionable figure, he openly disrespects Amy. Despite knowing she is unloved and mistreated, she remains in the marriage—reflecting the societal belief that a woman's identity and respectability are tied to her marital status. Considering the portrayal of marriage in the novel, it is illustrated as a sacred and obligatory institution that is supposed to be respected and preserved even if it comes at the cost of an individual’s happiness. Correspondingly, Amy decides to cling on her marriage since she as a Victorian is cognizant that without the identity of her husband, the society would not accept her. On the other hand, Madame Merle distinguishes as one of the most complex women characters in the novel. Unlike other women, she appears to be deceitful and intelligent, being admired for her experiences as a socialite and awareness of cultural notions. Though on the surface she has it all that even makes Mrs. Touchett to admire her, but the underlying true face of Merle is more calculating. Madame Merle persuades Isabel Archer to marry Gilbert Osmond by gas lighting her. The marriage is a business contract for Madame Merle to establish for her own daughter Pansy social stability and wealth. By doing so, Madame Merle becomes more complex since her actions stem from the same convictional attitudes that she herself has been captivated with. Unable to publicly claim her child due to societal expectations, she becomes entangled in a web of deceit, revealing how societal double standards allow men greater freedom while punishing women for similar actions.

Mrs. Touchett, Isabel’s aunt, plays a pivotal role in introducing her to European society. She is portrayed as emotionally distant and highly pragmatic. Unlike other women in the novel, she defies patriarchal conventions—living independently, separate from her ailing husband. Her autonomy, however, is not celebrated; instead, she is often dismissed or ridiculed, referred to as “crazy aunt Lydia” (p. 127). The narrative reinforces the patriarchal notion that a respectable woman is one who is devoted to her husband and children, especially during times of illness. Mrs.



Touchett's rejection of this ideal subjects her to criticism, with the portrayal shaped by a male perspective.

Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel's close friend, represents another variation of womanhood. She is an assertive, career-oriented American journalist who lives independently and earns her own income. Despite her independence and bold personality, the novel ultimately shows her entering marriage with Mr. Bantling. This outcome reflects the recurring theme that no matter how ambitious or self-reliant a woman may be, societal pressures often steer her toward marriage as the ultimate destination, reinforcing the idea that women's autonomy is incomplete without a male partner.

As Arnfred (2002) references Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, this idea perfectly captures the journey of the female characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In context to the novel, the women are not identified and known for who they are rather they are shaped in accordance with societal convictions. They are structured into inactive receivers of men; they are subjected to emotional suppression and submission. By analyzing the female characters via lens of marginalization, it high spots how women are socially excluded. In this context, marginalization can be understood as the systematic exclusion of women from the societal mainstream. This societal exclusion limits women to socially drawn margins where they are unable to access broader opportunities.

As the novel begins, from the starting of the narrative, the women, chiefly Isabel Archer, is limited to the societal convictions. Foremost, she is ambiguous of living an independent life where she can exercise freedom without being bound to a marriage, she aspires to embrace personal grooming. However, being compelled by the rigid Victorian notions of subjugation, she is forced into marrying Gilbert Osmond. The story highlights the Victorian assumptions of unmarried woman who is seen with doubt and considered as an other. To avoid alienation, the women are compelled to marry for security and acceptance. The novel illustrates the lines of separation drawn based on gender, being demonstrated in events where men group to debate over business and politics, in contrary, women talk about men. This form of division enhances the imprisonment of women being confined to superficial roles, while men exercise greater autonomy and authority.

Regarded as a representation of Victorian ideologies and assumptions toward marriage, *The Portrait of the Lady*, illustrates marriage as a relationship of equal companions rather an essential for women. to attain societal acceptance. Despite their prosperity and intelligence, female characters are showcased as feeble and incomplete without a partner. For instance, Pansy Osmond is raised to be entirely obedient and passive, shaped to fulfill the ideal of the submissive wife—an embodiment of patriarchal conditioning. In this framework, marriage becomes a binding constraint, one that offers no escape once entered.

The theme of gendered subjectivity runs throughout the novel. Madame Merle draws a parallel between the experiences of expatriates and those of women, stating that women have no natural place of belonging. She observes that while expatriates may at least claim a home country, women



remain rootless, constantly navigating social expectations without a space of their own. According to her, women are left to "remain on the surface and more or less crawl" (p. 248), illustrating their constant struggle for validation and security.

Ralph Touchett echoes patriarchal notions when he remarks that most women do nothing with themselves and simply wait for a man to determine their destiny: "Most women did with themselves nothing at all, they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come and furnish them with a destiny" (p. 146). This belief underscores the idea that women are defined not by their own aspirations, but by the roles assigned to them by men. Ralph also disapproves of his mother's decision to take on a more active, paternal role—suggesting a bias toward traditional, male-dominated authority.

Another striking example of the novel's gender dynamics is the absence of attention given to key moments in women's lives. Events such as Isabel's childbirth are barely acknowledged. Madame Merle mentions it in passing, reflecting how female experiences are often rendered invisible within patriarchal narratives. The all-encompassing patriarchy in the novel is completely implanted that it slightly directs the events that are silenced though worthy of focus.

Conclusion

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* offers a profound examination of women's struggles and their marginalized status in society. This condition arises from deeply ingrained gender ideologies that normalize women's subordination and position them as the "other," relegated to the edges of social structure. Through the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the novel reveals how discourse is manipulated to construct and reinforce gender roles that align with patriarchal interests, effectively preserving these power dynamics.

The narrative demonstrates how gendered identities are not inherent but constructed through cultural and discursive practices, particularly within the Victorian framework. The portrayal of female characters is shaped by flawed and restrictive gender ideologies that subtly reinforce male dominance. These ideological undercurrents sustain a representation of women as passive, controlled, and subject to rigid societal norms.

Isabel Archer, the protagonist, becomes a symbol of this entrenched ideology. Although she resents her circumstances, she ultimately cannot break free from the institution of marriage and returns to Gilbert Osmond, her emotionally abusive husband. Despite her financial independence and initial resolve, Isabel is constrained by the social stigmas attached to divorce during the Victorian era, which discourages her from asserting her autonomy.

Pansy Osmond, raised in an environment steeped in patriarchal values, is denied personal agency. Her father governs every aspect of her life, reducing her to a compliant figure shaped entirely by his expectations. Similarly, Mrs. Touchett, who lives an independent life separate from



her ailing husband, is viewed unfavorably for not adhering to traditional maternal roles. Her deviation from accepted gender norms results in social disapproval.

The findings of this analysis suggest that all female characters—whether financially secure like Isabel, spirited and assertive like Henrietta Stackpole, socially astute like Madame Merle, affluent like Countess Amy Gemini, or docile and well-educated like Pansy—are ultimately confined by the pervasive structures of a patriarchal society. Regardless of their individual traits or circumstances, each woman in the novel is bound by expectations that limit their freedom and reinforce gender-based subjugation.

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