



BECOMING ISABEL ARCHER: A FOUCAULDIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF HENRY JAMES' *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

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ABSTRACT

*Henry James' *The Portrait of Lady* charts the journey of its protagonist Isabel Archer from a self-assured individual ready to take on the world on her own terms to gradually becoming a willing participant in the patriarchal mission by staying in a marriage that has lost all meaning and despite opportunities to alter her fate chooses to abide by a system of values at odds with her values. This paper explores the discourses that govern Isabel's choices through the explication of Victorian gender ideology. It uses Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and examines how those systems of values alter, affect and influence Isabel's life trajectories and what makes her give in her freedom for the social appearances. The study posits that gender ideology is affected by the discourse episteme as undercut by the analysis of the constitutive elements of discursive practices. The findings identify the influence of gender discourses in forming the subjectivity of the protagonist as revealed through an engagement with the novel, its historical context.*

Keywords: *James; Foucault; discourse; ideology; Victorian novel; 19th Century; discursive practice; subjectivity*

INTRODUCTION

Henry James grew up in America but settled down as a British citizen after the second world war. He was raised in an intellectual family. His father was a reputed scholar. James spent a substantial amount of time travelling in Europe and spent 20 years in England and France. Travelling furnished him the fodder for his works. Theme of Americans and their experiences in Europe rears in his books.

He produced psychological novels that focused on the consciousness and human nature. He wrote 20 novels and other works of nonfiction. He along with Virginia Wolfe perfected the technique of stream of consciousness, exploring the innermost workings of his characters. He wrote and compared old world of Europe to the new world of America. He dwells upon a comparative analysis of social institutions of America and Europe.

The *Portrait of a Lady* is James' masterful depiction of American living in Europe putting the socio-cultural values in contrast. The novel (1881) was completed in three parts and generally considered to be his uncontroverted magnum opus. Isabel declares 'I'm very fond of my liberty' (James, 2018, p. 51). Isabel is self-educated having read extensively



thanks to her grandmother's library in Albany, New York. James describes her imagination as 'ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window' (James, 2018, p. 66). She is averse to being ordinary as she declared to Casper Goodwood 'I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me' (James, 2018, p. 232).

Novel opens at Gardencourt. Ralph, his father Mr. Danial Tracy Touchett and a local landlord, lord Warburton are having tea when Isabel makes her appearance in England for the first time. Isabel apparently treasures her independence. To help her, Ralph makes Mr. Touchett to leave her 70,000/- pounds by declaring that he wants to 'put a little wind in her sails (James, 2018, p. 259). The sudden riches confound Isabel. It is then when Ralph advises her not to 'ask yourself so much whether this or that is good for you. Don't question your conscience so much - it will get out of tune like a strummed piano' (James, 2018, p. 311).

She gets caught up with Osmond through the deception of the latter's ex-lover Madam Merle. She has a soft corner for their child Pansy and Isabel thinks the convent where Isabel has been kept by Osmond as 'a well-appointed prison; for it was not possible to pretend Pansy was free to leave it' (James, 2018, p. 374). Despite a renewed marriage offer from Warburton, she goes back to Osmond. The question remains what Isabel's motivations for her actions are. Why she goes back to 'obscure American dilettante, a middle-aged widower with an uncanny child and an ambiguous income' (James, 2018, p. 377).

By chapter 42 she is forced to objectively view her situation as she 'found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end' (James, 2018, p. 572). If put into perspective, Parker had argued that worldly representations as formed by discourses 'have a reality almost as coercive as gravity, and, like gravity, we know of the objects through their effects' (*Discourse Dynamics* 8). These discourses affect individual volition and a subject's self-perception is mediated by the gender ideology of the period and they monitor any deviations.

Foucauldian Discourse analysis aids in exploring gender ideology and subjectivity and they explain how Isabel battles conventions and if she resists them. It is an examination of 'process of logical accretion' that affect the growth of her personality. she finds herself 'endowed with the high attributes of a subject' (James, 2018, p. 18).

Notwithstanding, eventually Isabel falls in the trap of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. It is baffling why she goes back to a marriage she hates with a husband who denies her any space. What forms her subjectivity or what makes her a woman is of utmost importance for this study. Why go for an unhappy union.

FDA aids our understanding of how discourses direct the course of individual destiny of Isabel in her choices. It can inform how gender ideology was consolidated, and discourses were contracted. Foucault has identified discourse as a network of elements that operate within a wide hierarchy of power structures that seek to enforce their own versions of truths (Bernauer, 2005, p. 34). For him discourses are better analyzed within the



specificity of their historical occurrence which gives a more lucid understanding of the mechanics of power structures.

The Portrait of a Lady is introduced as immersed in personal space, conscious of her individuality and independence. Her sister Lillian tells Lydia Touchett that Isabel is extremely 'fond of her liberty (p. 793). As it eventually transpires Isabel finds herself 'imprisoned' (p. 798) in a matrimonial union that exudes no love. At first, Isabel comes off as a feminist who treasures her rights as an individual and rejects marriage offers that be restrict her freedom. James' *The Portrait of a Lady* provides a thoughtful explanation of the deeply held beliefs on gender roles. Understanding how that process occurs and how it attempted to defend itself are both made easier by Foucauldian discourse.

By dissecting the components of discourses and using Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how gender roles, it aids the researcher in understanding their function. As a literary work from the end of the 20th century, James' book charts the gender ideology of the time and how it limited personal choice. Foucault's perspective on discourse is unique in that it aims to assess the ways in which discourses impact the creation of gender within a certain episteme. In assessing the frequently separate modes of functioning for discourses, it also aids in our comprehension of the formation of subjectivity.

James draws readers in with his captivating psychological examination of Isabel Archer's internal conflict, which also establishes a framework for the formation of her distinct subjectivity. It takes place through a daring contrast with the profoundly embedded patriarchal value structures that those discourses uphold. The details of gender ideology are shown in *The Portrait of a Lady*. It makes the audience reevaluate how gender dynamics work. It is a thorough analysis of the discursive practices surrounding the components of gender. It begs the question of how gender may be liberated from the patriarchal, value-laden system that always tries to defend itself. The study enables scholars in the discipline to look beyond the superficial appearance of canonical texts.

HENRY JAMES' *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY* AND GENDER: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

If we examine *The Portrait of a Lady* in its historical context, it drew a lot from gender discourses of the 18th century. It was a dismal affair for women before the Divorce Act of 1857. The doctrine of coverture rendered women without legal rights as their essence was subsumed by husband making the latter the master of the wife's body and any inherited property (Marcus, 2007, p. 206).

This was generally favored by Victorians as they considered family sacrosanct and the 'peaceful and loved refuge' for men (Shanley, 1993. p. 3). Victorians looked down upon single and independent women and considered them a threat to the family system. This Victorian ideology is showcased in their vociferous protestations in proposed changed in the Matrimonial Clauses Act of 1857 that had suggested marriage as contract that can be annulled. They regarded marriage as the 'greatest, oldest, and most universal of all social institutions, the great institution of marriage' which was 'a lifelong compact which never can be rightfully dissolved' and that 'the principle of divorce' was a relic from the dark ages in the past and therefore obsolete (212-213).



Discourses as agents for gender subjectivity figured prominently in the later decades of the 19th century. It was fueled by the New Women movement that was steadily gaining steam in its insistence for gender equality. Victorian women had realized that submission to male patriarchy meant a bleak 'social death' for them, and they had to depend on men on their economic sustenance (Marcus, 2007, p. 208). The debate had ample supporters but a fair share of detractor across the gender spectrum (Shanley, 1993, p. 13). Anna Jameson had noted in a magazine in 1846 that the way forward for women was the immediate recognition on the part of men that they had to part ways with the dark ages and woman must inculcate enough native strength work her 'faculties and duties' (Jameson, 1846, p. 216).

The plight of women as promulgated by the deeply engrained discursive practices is underscored by JS Mill (1869) declaration that this openly patriarchy subjection of women functioned as a yoke which was 'rivetted on the necks of those who are kept down by it' (*The Subjection of Women* 21-22). Additionally, Mill goes on to stress the fact these discourses of ideological mission do not have to be left uncontested; rather, they must be routinely and 'fearlessly discussed', only then these discourses will lose their velocity and will eventually eb 'held as dead dogma, not a living truth' (Mill, 1859, p. 40). Mill had made it substantially clear in his seminal work *The Subjection of Women* that this state as it presently stood was systematically ensured the 'subjection of individual women to individual men' and was a curse 'too terrible to be overlooked' (140-141).

In *The Morality of Women* (1890) feminist Mona Caird (1897) if women persisted in demands for gender equality and secured liberty like men, all relations of life would be transformed, and the very launching pad of patriarchal ideology would be undermined (p. 167). Caird (1897) disputed the legitimacy of terms like feminine nature and argued in her essay in the *Westminster Review* that loaded terms like 'women's nature' packed a 'host of begged questions' within these 'hackneyed words' (p. 188).

In John Ruskin (1819-1900), essay titled *On Queen's Gardens* (1864) fueled much debate. Ruskin argued that women belonged in the domestic sphere which served as peaceful haven for men after their struggles in the outside world providing for the family. John Ruskin's 1864 essay *On Queen's Garden* sparked controversy for defining gender spheres and confining women to the domestic while demarcate the outside world for men. He regarded men as 'the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender' while women were meant for 'sweet ordering' and 'arrangement' of sphere at home (Ruskin, 1864, p. 44) Women had detractors to their cause as well. Eliza Linton (1822-1898) had essayed to redefine the feminine ideals and suggested in her *Girl of the Period* that woman had to be the archetype of submissions, without passion and individual ambition (Linton, 1883, p. 340). Greg's 1862 essay, *Why Are Women Redundant*, was averse to the independence of women and considered unmarried woman a liability underscoring his contempt for women

He wanted women attend to their 'natural duties and labours of wives and mothers', and if they protested their fate would be sealed in living out 'incomplete existence of their'



own (Greg, 1862, p. 282). It took sustained efforts on the part of women that laws i.e., Infant Custody Acts of 1873, and 1886 Matrimonial Clauses Act of 1878 and Summary Jurisdiction Act of 1895 were finally conceded by the government (Shanley 131). These laws brought certain rights to women and gave them greater control over their property and children. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 gave couples access to divorce but was heavily tilted in the favor husbands (Levine 166). The literature of the fin de siècle was full of newfound vitality from the feminists of the day, who attacked eminent discourses in their endeavors to carve out a new epistemic environment for themselves. In other words, new ideas were undermining the old patriarchal guard.

Theoretical Framework: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

The choice of a Foucauldian framework lies in its capacity to map discursive practices surrounding marriage and gender. Discursive practices are systems of rules that govern what can or cannot be said in a given historical moment, shaping truth and subjectivity (Foucault, 1972). Individuals are both products of and participants in these practices, regulating themselves within them. This approach, therefore, aids in decoding how these rules form and sustain power relations. The present study employs this lens to examine how characters' gender subjectivities are produced within the late Victorian discursive environment, particularly in relation to marriage.

Foucault (1981) reminds us that discourse is not merely a reflection of domination but the very medium through which struggles occur. Hence, examining marriage and gender through discourse highlights how institutions normalize certain roles while marginalizing others. Discourses shape ideological perspectives and influence characters' choices, limiting or enabling resistance. The study thus evaluates how novels reveal the conflicts between entrenched patriarchal norms and the subjectivities shaped by them.

Parker (1992) defines discourse broadly as networks of meaning that construct social and psychological realities. Foucauldian discourse analysis, then, identifies the conditions that render such meanings possible. Willig (2008) similarly emphasizes that constructions of reality are grounded in institutional practices, while Kavoura et al. (2015) underline how social values guide notions of masculinity and femininity. These views converge in the idea that discourses create fixed subjectivities, making critical awareness essential for resistance.

Foucault consistently interrogated the relationship between discourse, power, and truth. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), he argues that discourses are active agents sustained by institutions, not external forces. Likewise, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he contends that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive, shaping perceptions of the body and governing gender norms. The discursive nature of knowledge means that power operates everywhere, not as an external force of repression but as a productive and dynamic network. Importantly, this same dynamism allows points of resistance to emerge. Freedom, therefore, does not lie outside discourse but within its tensions. As Foucault (1982) argues in *The Subject and Power*, individuals cannot exist outside power relations, but awareness of these mechanisms allows for alternative possibilities.



Analysis and Discussion

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* offers a sustained critique of Victorian constructions of marriage and gender, dramatizing how social conventions discipline individual subjectivity. Throughout the novel, marriage emerges as a restrictive institution. James likens it to a "cage" (p. 464), a metaphor that captures the entrapment Isabel Archer experiences after her union with Gilbert Osmond. This image reflects a cultural reality where women, once married, lost autonomy and found themselves trapped in institutions designed to preserve patriarchal authority (White, 1970, p. 63).

The failed marriages that populate the novel, such as Mr. and Mrs. Touchett's estrangement, further underscore the hollowness of marital bonds. James suggests that marriage remains socially valid but often lacks emotional or intellectual substance. Isabel's eventual marriage to Osmond illustrates this reality most powerfully. Critics argue that Osmond functions as a symbol of social convention, with his marriage to Isabel exposing the way patriarchal institutions can restrict women's agency (Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p. 106).

Isabel initially resists this fate. Her early refusals of marriage proposals, whether from Casper Goodwood or Lord Warburton, highlight her insistence on liberty. She proclaims her idea of happiness as unbounded movement: "a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses" (p. 237). Yet her eventual acceptance of Osmond's proposal demonstrates the paradox of choice shaped by discourse. What Isabel interprets as freedom is in fact a decision molded by cultural expectations. Hochenauer (2001) emphasizes that Isabel's struggle reflects late nineteenth-century tensions between changing sexual ideologies and women's attempts to claim autonomy (pp. 19–20).

This tension is most visible in Isabel's gradual shift from liberty to submission. Despite her ideals, she ultimately becomes "the custodian of domestic organization" (Niemtzow, 1975, pp. 380–381). Berkson (1979) observes that Isabel's trajectory demonstrates how cultural forces overpower personal aspirations, reducing marriage to a site of captivity rather than growth (pp. 68–69). The Foucauldian framework clarifies this process: Isabel's subjectivity is not merely personal but constituted by a network of discursive practices that limit what she can think, say, and do (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 25).

The broader Victorian context reinforces this reading. Women were expected to remain confined to the home, performing domestic duties rather than seeking intellectual or professional fulfillment (Altick, 1973, p. 54). Even innocence or ignorance was socially prized in women, as Petrie (1940) notes, since men preferred wives who appeared weak and unopinionated (p. 184). Gillespie (1999) highlights how these values formed the moral backbone of Victorian consciousness, built on duty, respectability, and middle-class morality (p. 5). Against this backdrop, Isabel's desire for independence could only falter.

James dramatizes this struggle most vividly in Isabel's interactions with Ralph Touchett. When Ralph confronts her decision to marry Osmond, he is shocked: "You were the last person I expected to see caught" (p. 463). Isabel's reply, that she may "like her cage" (p. 464), symbolizes her acceptance of discourse as destiny. Willig (2008) explains this paradox well: discourses not only confine subjects but also offer the very resources by



which they understand themselves (p. 113). Isabel's belief in her agency is thus a discursive illusion, a false autonomy shaped by structures of power.

In Foucauldian terms, Isabel becomes the product of biopower, internalizing cultural expectations to the point of submission. The novel's language—her oscillation between liberty and entrapment—maps precisely onto Foucault's description of “docile bodies,” shaped by invisible networks of authority (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 139). What begins as a desire for independence becomes an embodiment of social convention.

Conclusion

Isabel Archer's fate in *The Portrait of a Lady* reveals how Victorian marriage operates as a disciplinary institution, shaping subjectivity through cultural norms. Her journey begins with lofty ideals of liberty but culminates in resignation to convention. Stein (1981) harshly describes Isabel as a figure obsessed with abstractions of freedom while blind to their consequences (p. 177). This critique resonates with James's portrayal of a heroine who values independence yet ultimately conforms to patriarchal expectations.

The novel demonstrates how power and discourse construct subjectivity. Isabel's marriage to Osmond, and her decision to remain despite her misery, illustrate Foucault's argument that power both constrains and produces subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). By accepting her role as a wife even when it negates her happiness, Isabel enacts Willig's (2008) claim that social practices reproduce the very discourses that sustain them (p. 117).

Taylor (1995) observes that James strips away Isabel's self-confidence to reveal her “ontological insecurity,” exposing the fragile basis of her independence (p. 136). Similarly, Hadley (2003) argues that Isabel's submission to marriage underscores the dominance of entrenched social structures over individual volition (p. 24). These critical perspectives confirm that James's novel is less about triumphant liberty than about the limits of choice within a patriarchal framework.

The conclusion of the novel drives this point home. Although Isabel recognizes the emptiness of her marriage, she resolves to return to Rome, fulfilling Osmond's command that “we should accept the consequences of our actions” (p. 718). Her decision echoes the Victorian reverence for vows and tradition, revealing the depth of her internalized subjectivity. As Ralph foresaw, Isabel was “ground in the very mill of the conventional” (James, 2018, p. 770).

In the end, *The Portrait of a Lady* stands as both a literary exploration and a cultural critique. Through Isabel, James exposes the ways in which discourse, power, and custom collaborate to shape identity. The novel portrays not only the tragedy of a woman caught in a loveless marriage but also the broader historical truth that, within the Victorian episteme, freedom was often indistinguishable from submission.

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