



ART OF CHARACTERIZATION AND LOVE OF INDEPENDENCE AS PICTURIZED IN HENRY JAMES' PORTRAIT OF A LADY AND VAASANTHI'S PARAVAIKAL PARAKINDRANA: A COMPARATIVE NOTE

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Comparative Literature is considered nowadays a useful discipline in the realm of literary studies. Most theoreticians of Comparative Literature agree that such a study involves the comparison of two or more national literatures. By placing a literary work beside similar works written elsewhere in the world, one may get fresh insights into it and this ultimately leads to a great understanding and better evaluation of that work. Generally speaking, when a comparison of two or more similar or even dissimilar forms or trends within the same country is attempted, such a study could also cut across national boundaries and compare themes and literary forms of authors in other languages to discuss the underlying elements of unity in diversity. No doubt, "it kindles the mind of the scholar to do good justice to the work concerned" (George 10).

As a study of literature, of literatures in comparison, Comparative Literature is essentially "a critical activity which may take place at various levels, namely the generic level, the level of cross cultural interactions and manifestations, the level of the mythical, archetypal or folklorish or again the level of interlingual movements" (P 11). It does evidently aim at liberating literature from narrow linguistic boundaries trying to unify the literatures of the world into one organic whole thereby establishing the unity of humanity. The ultimate objective of the comparative study is to reconcile all basic concepts of single literatures evolving a uniform concept of literatures so as to understand the cultural-cum-literary writer and the former President of India Dr.S.Radhakrishnan are worth quoting here:

"there is a unity of outlook as the writers in different languages derive their inspiration from a common source and face more or less the same kind of experience, emotional and intellectual" (Sachithanandan 2).

Here, the writers Henry James and Vaasanthi are 'taken up for an analysis. A study of characters, especially women characters of different cultures, countries and languages enables one to widen one's literary and cultural perspectives. Though James and Vaasanthi are separated by the frontier of culture and time, they have many similarities in their treatment of women characters.

Henry James was born on April 15, 1843 in the city of New York, as the second son to Henry James and Mary Walsh. He studied art in New Port. The year 1871 witnessed the publication of his novel in the monthly serialised form. Five years later he made a visit to Paris and then settled down in London and published *The American*, *Daisy Miller* in 1878 which brought him immense popularity. James became a British citizen in 1915. The first work of James' second period 1879-88. *The Portrait of a Lady* carried the earlier theme of fulfillment conveying the tragic implication of an American's experience abroad, of the loss of innocence, when the classless American comes in contact with European aristocracy. In the book, through a wide variety of characters and through characterization, Henry James also revealed his mastery of realistic fictional technique. In the words of Dr.Fisher Williams, "This decade of outstanding writing was marked by greater experimentation both in form and theme" (P 45). Henry James wrote twenty two novels (two unfinished) and one hundred and twelve tales. Some of the novels were twice



the length of ordinary novels, some of the tales more as long as a short novel” (Putt 14). He has to his credit publication of such notable novels as Roderick Hudson, The Europeans, The American, Daisy Miller, and The Washington Square, The Tragic Mure, The Spoils of Polynton, The Wings of Dove, The Ambassadors and The Golden Bowl, Of all novels of his, The Portrait of a Lady is concerned with the international theme.

Vaasanthi (Pankajam) was born on July 26, 1941 at Thumukoor, Karnataka, as the daughter to Viswanathan and Jayalakshmi. Even while she was a student of English literature at Bangalore Mount Garmet college, she started writing short stories. The first two short stories were remarkable and published in Ananda Vikatan. Her first short story was Parayachitham in 1961. So far she has written 22 novels and 20 novelettes and 250 short stories. Aakasa Veedukal was placed in World Literature. this is the first Tamil book published by UNESCO. It is also translated in English. Moongil Pookkal (Bamboo Flowers) has been translated in Malayalam. Through her works, Vaasanthi wants to influence the society by bringing about a change in the society. She vividly portrays the present day society picturizing especially today’s women and youth. In her novels, she pictures mainly women character. One of the famous writers and renowned politician Dr.C.N.Annadurai in his Parvathi B.A., has depicted how the educated woman is capable enough to protect herself in the society. Likewise, Vaasanthi also depicts the same theme in her Paravaikal Parakindrana.

Even though Henry James’ The Portrait of a Lady is a voluminous novel, it has certain comparable aspects of Vaasanthi’s short novel Paravaikal Parakindrana. Both the novels are rich in terms of character portrayal especially portrayal of women characters. James’ art of characterization is rich, subtle and complex. He has adopted various methods of characterization so as to give his women characters a fullness of conception and living dynamism. He describes not only the interior reflection of women characters but also their external appearance. To him, both the interior and the exterior assume importance. For example, the women characters like Isabel in The Portrait of a Lady is depicted as pretty, vivacious, tactful, intelligent, imaginative and well-educated whereas in Washington Square, Catherine is depicted as a dull, plain girl and she is also painted beautifully by Henry James. In these two novels, the author has described women characters rather skillfully. Feminist writing has largely been attempted by women novelists like Anuradha Ramanan, Sivasankari, Lakshmi and Vaasanthi. They are said to have paid a great deal of attention to various problems faced by women in the modern society. Though women are playing a dominant role in the family, they are subjugated by men both at home and in the society. Vaasanthi has treated her women characters rather realistically in her fictional world. Her treatment of women characters gets admirably illustrated in Paravaikal Parakindrana especially in the character – portrayal of Radha.

Radha represents the south Indian way of life. In its several facts, she is an innocent educated passive, soft spoken and timid girl. She is the only daughter of her loving parents. Ragu is a science scholar in an Institute. Ragu has lost his parents. Only with the aid of his two brothers and scholarship, he is able to acquire degrees in science. Now he is waiting for a scholarship from abroad, so as to resume his higher studies in a science Institute. Ragu and Radha love each other. Radha’s parents don’t agree to their marriage in the beginning but after knowing their daughter’s extra-ordinary interest in the affair they give their consent. Radha and Ragu are married. Radha is able to enjoy the nuptial happiness only for a short period because Ragu gets position in a science institute at the United States of America. She is glad about it and later this leads her life into darkness. Raghu goes abroad to pursue his research. After a short interval, Radha receives a letter from Ragu which states about his arrival to India. It is a short trip



for one month, Radha is happy about it. In this brief visit of Ragu, Radha is able to observe that he often talks about his fellow scientist Lara. Later this affair brings a great loss to Radha's nuptial life. In chapter XII, Radha hears this new through one of her father's acquaintances that Ragu had introduced Lara as his wife in America. After getting this news, Radha is no longer happy. Radha realises that her marriage is a great misjudgement. A similar situation occurs in *The Portrait of a Lady* where Isabel feels unhappy after knowing her husband, Osmond's association with Madame Merle, his mistress. Like Radha, Isabel also marries according to her own wish. This proves false in the case of both the heroines. Like Ralph, the cousin of Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Radha's mother Mangalam has not wholeheartedly consented to her marriage.

Radha is completely disillusioned and suggested by her father, she accepts a job as a source of relief from the mental unrest caused by her marriage. The two important proposals from the rich Lord Warburton and Caspar Good Wood, Isabel rejects and marries Osmond who is after her pounds. Ralph is the one who gives his cousin a financial liberation to put a little wind in her sail. Finally this has become a great difficulty in her life, this makes her face her husband's mistress. Similarly in Vaasanthi's novel, the same matter is adopted but there is a little change. In *Paravaikal Parakindrana*, Radha is the only heirness of her father's property. In spite of her riches, she marries an ordinary man. Vaasanthi has made here the reader sympathise with Radha.

The very title of the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* suggests that the novel is going to be strong in characterization to give the portrait of a Lady of Isabel Archer, the central figure. In this novel, James employs two kinds of character-plot characters and thematic characters. Mrs. Touchett and Countess Gemini are used to further the plot of the novel. Osmond and Madam Merle help in the development of the theme. Isabel is a central figure that is important both for theme and plot. E. Albert writes:

"James is primarily interested in character-developing as part of a social group. He has no interest in the poor or in the unintelligent. His figures are usually intellectual like himself, sensitive, refined, sophisticated, controlling impulse by reason and endowed with a faculty of acute self-analysis. They view their own motives and reactions with a remarkable detachment and equal degree of subtlety" (Edel 259).

Henry James has employed various methods of art of characterization to give his female characters a fullness of conception and living dynamism. He describes not only the interior of a character but also her external appearance. To him, both the exterior and the interior are important. For instance, about Isabel we are told that she is pretty, vivacious, tactful, intelligent, imaginative and widely educated. James has paid close attention to the development of his characters with the change that takes place in them from the beginning to the end of the novel. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the development of Isabel Archer's character is the most important in the novel. The reader observes her actions throughout the story and consistently asks himself question. Why does she refuse Lord Warburton and Caspar Wood? Why does she accept Osmond and later grow to dislike him?

Isabel Archer is the central character, the heroine of the novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* which is a study of her portrait. The novel is, therefore, a study in a young woman's understanding of herself through contemplation and a process of self-knowledge. Romantic, full of glamour and freshness of a flower, innocent like Jesus, fresh like an evening air, she is intelligent and charming. Mr. Lydia Touchett is responsible to bring Isabel to England in order to save her from her yawning isolation in Albeny, America. She is the aunt of Isabel. Isabel Archer's two elder sisters Lilian Ludlow and Edith Keyes are



married in a respectable way. James continues his portraiture of Isabel who has stayed at Garden Court in England with her aunt. The most distinguishing trait of Isabel's character is her love for Independence; "I'm fond of my liberty, says Isabel easily in the book and she also says, "I wish to choose my fate" (P 259). James portrays his heroine as one filled with hopes and dreams.

Like Isabel, Radha represents the love of independence in Paravaikal Parakindrana but in a comparatively limited sense, Vaasanthi pictures in the very first chapter of Paravaikal Parakindrana, the heroine Radha ponders about her independent way of choosing her life partner. This causes a great uproar between her parents. Isabel gently rejects a proposal of marriage from the super eligible Lord Warburton, for he has enough imagination to divide Isabel's view that the splendid security so offered to her was not the greatest she could conceive. She makes it clear to the battled nobleman that to marry him would be somehow to escape her fate, even though the art of renouncing so magnificent a capture made Isabel really frightened at herself. Similarly Radha also rejects her mother's advice and family decides to marry Raghu her lover. It shows her independent way of choosing her partner. Radha's mother considers her as their only daughter by saying their worry is that Radha must be happy for ever.

James portrays Isabel from the old world to the new. Isabel comes to the old world hoping to experience some of the freedom denied to her in the New and it is one of the many complications of James' treatment of the relation of Europe to America which recurs throughout the novel and which furthers the irony of such a quest's taking place in Europe with Cast nearly wholly American. She wants to be 'free' when her charming and ailing cousin, Ralph Touchett, persuades his father to make Isabel rich, he does so by saying that "she wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free". Like Radha's mother Ralph is hoping to prevent her marrying Osmond. Later, she discovers in Europe, as Osmond's wife, that described her even of the illusion, freedom. Vaasanthi also makes Radha discover that her husband's love is deprived to her. She believed that Raghu will be hers for ever. The love of independence makes Isabel suffer a lot. The great blunder she committed is her selection of her life partner. Her love of independence makes her commit the mistake of marrying Osmond which was engineered by Madame Merle for some selfish end. In Chapter XLII, she realises her mistake;

"Poor Isabel, who had never been able to understand Unitarianism. This as the certitude, she had been living with now for a time that she had ceased to measure" (The Portrait of a Lady 202).

Choosing her husband in her own choice makes Isabel undergo many mental and physical tortures. Like James, Vaasanthi also pities her character Radha, "she is so soft", how does she have to bear the betrayal of her husband? This is a terrible shock to her. In chapter XII, Radha hears the news through one of her father's acquaintances i.e., Ragu had introduced Lara as his wife of him while in America. After this, Radha is not at all happy. This unwelcome news fell like a bolt upon the heart of Radha and she broke down. Radha realises that her marriage is a deed of misjudgement. A similar situation occurs in The Portrait of a Lady where Isabel feels unhappy after knowing her husband, Osmond's association with Madame Merle as his mistress. Like Radha, Isabel also marries according to her own wish. Their independent decision in the case of both the heroines, like Ralph, the cousin of Isabel is something detestable. Ralph, the cousin of Isabel in The Portrait of a Lady and Radha's mother Mangalam do not wholeheartedly approve independent way of selecting their partners. Isabel too, like Radha, realizes that her marriage is a wrong decision on her part. Vaasanthi's Radha enjoys freedom in one way; i.e., her choosing Raghu as her husband. In Jame's Isabel it can be noticed that Isabel walks with independence, talks with independence and acts with independence. Knowing the betrayal of her husband, Radha thinks that she could not bear Raghu's child makes abortion. Since he tied thali, she says that she can not



tolerate such an insult. Likewise after knowing the affairs between Madame Merle and Osmond, through Countess Gemini, Isabel develops a quarrel with Osmond. The relations between Osmond and Isabel have now reached the breaking point and Isabel decides to go to the Garden court in spite of the opposition of her husband. Radha blames herself for the mistake and seeks a job as a lecturer but Isabel fights with her husband for the sake of her step-daughter and she goes back Rome after the death of Ralph.

Radha receives the news from her father's acquaintance. Likewise, Isabel gets the news from her husband's sister. Only through others, both the heroines come to know the news but in one stage, Isabel is able to notice the intimacy of Madame Merle with Osmond. Both the heroines have well wishers to share their sorrows with, for Isabel, Ralph and for Radha, her father. Vaasanthi beautifully creates a fine character and understanding father, similarly, James creates a loving and benevolent cousin, Ralph. Radha and Isabel get solace from them. In his relation to Isabel as artist, James is much like Ralph in his relation to her as spectator. She is a refreshment to the imagination of both.

Isabel is a refreshment to James's imagination because she is a new, if not wholly original, kind of fictional heroine whose ambition can only be defined by abstractions like freedom or knowledge. Henrietta asks Isabel why she does not leave Osmond if he is so wretched. Isabel tells her that she has no intentions of publishing her mistake. Similarly Radha also has no idea of publishing her mistake but in her case, Vaasanthi has not created one Henrietta. Radha too has a friend but it is not shown so intimate as Henrietta is to Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*. As we first see Isabel as portrayed by James, her independence is a natural disposition which even the sophisticated Mrs. Touchett appreciates. But under the pressure of others' appreciation and manipulation of it – Ralph's Mr. Touchett's, Warburton's Madame Merle's – Isabel becomes aware of independence as virtue and begins to cast a romantic light around it. Vaasanthi's heroine has only the dissimilarity in the pride of Isabel. Radha never speaks proudly, even though she is the only daughter to the rich parents. James and Vaasanthi, both of them bring out the root cause of the sufferings of their heroines only due to their independent decision of their marriage. Tsugio Aoki comments rather evidently:

“James' fiction, however, is the question of freedom as presented in Isabel's exploration of life and its failure. Freedom means for him not only the deliverance from economic restrictions but also the positive responsibility for herself and the world, and at the very core of her sense of duty there is a feeling for the idealistic plasticity of the self and the future of the world” (Narasimaiah 57).

Henry James' Ralph is similar to Vaasanthi's mother Mangalam. Ralph unfortunately, the English air has left him with a lung ailment. Likewise, Mangalam also suffers from physical ailment, paralytic stroke. She thinks about her daughter's sufferings and this makes her more feeble. Radha feels that “more than her, Mangalam only suffered a lot.” Ralph in his death had pities about Isabel's marriage with Osmond. Radha too marries Raghu ignoring his mother's unwillingness and difference. Both the characters die in the novels; Former in the chapter XL while the later in the middle of the novel.

To conclude, both Henry James and Vaasanthi have made their heroines nourish life with a deep of independence, no making compromises with their dignity. With the same sense of independence, they make their choices regarding their life-partners. But ironically, they become the source of their irreparable sorrows. So their love of independence has failed to make them happy. But in their reactions to their disappointment also, they exercise the same love of independence and remain dignified. Henry



James has used symbolism in characterization for identifying his women characters. Countless Gemini is constantly compared to birds, Pansy to flowers and Madame Merle and Henrietta to birds. Some characters have some mythical significance. For instance, Isabel Archer stands for Jesus, for her innocence. Symbolism is also used by Vaasanthi. In their honeymoon trip to Kodaikanal, Radha inquires about boarding of boat with Raghu. Raghu replies that there is no fear to get into the boat, when she has already started her life with him. In that juncture, the group of birds flying in the sky symbolically warns the heroine by twittering, it does imply 'beware of the hero.' Radha can be compared with flowers and Mangalam to twittering bird. In a word, the male characters are pictured as responsible for the sufferings and frustrations of the female characters depicted in both the novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Paravaikal Parakindrana*.

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Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* touched me deeply. Since I finished this novel a few days ago, I could not seem to stop thinking about it as I tried to organize my feelings. That I was mesmerized by it, there is no doubt. *Portrait of a Lady* is the story of a young American woman, Isabel Archer, and her voyage of self-discovery. I loved getting into Isabel's conflicted mind, her doubts and her confidence, her wishes and her choices. I went even further and identified thoroughly with Isabel Archer. The opening scenes of Henry James's classic novel. Besides this, as I have said, he could have counted off most of the successive owners and occupants, several of whom were known to general fame; doing so, however, with an undemonstrative conviction that the latest phase of its destiny was not the least honorable. The front of the house, overlooking that portion of the lawn with which we are concerned, was not the entrance-front; this was in quite another quarter. Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a novel by Henry James, first published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1880-81 and then as a book in 1881. It is one of James's most popular novels and is regarded by critics as one of his finest. *The Portrait of a Lady* is the story of a spirited young American woman, Isabel Archer, who, "affronting her destiny," finds it overwhelming. She inherits a large amount of money and subsequently becomes the victim of Machiavellian scheming by two

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