

Comparative Analysis Of Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and James's "The Portrait Of A Lady"

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Abstract

This article has been prepared with the intention of making both a comparative and contrastive study of the two novels – *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. How much chance do the two ladies in the novels – Hester and Isabel – have for their own freedom from the clutches of the orthodox society and the orthodox system of marrying? Both of them have no chance for freedom. As women, they have to suffer. Isabel tries for this freedom but her efforts make her commit more mistakes; she errs and suffers. Hester tries to remove her gown with the scarlet letter 'A' and her scarf – a cover over her hair – as a protest against the slavery to orthodox society. But her daughter dislikes it and she is forced to wear them again. Choice or no choice, they cannot free themselves from the exploitation of men. But that does not mean that the two novelists support the situations of their heroines. They are in support of a change in their lives. The change is brought about by the death of their loved ones. Hester returns to New England and Isabel to Rome. Both of them live their different lives in their own styles. But their end is the same – to get to freedom. The change of places because of certain deaths takes them to the desired freedom. They commit errors and do the penance – a panacea for both of them.

The comparative analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Portrait of a Lady* made me aware of the pioneering elements that are of acute importance in understanding the movement of "Thought " in American literature. Both the novels indulge in the making of the choice. The very theme for both the novels is " dilemma of human situation". " Man" in relation to " choice " and how much man is free to choose, is the key note. Both Isabel Archer and Hester Prynne are orphans. Former, though by chance situation is freed from allegiance to social hierarchies, and latter keeps fighting these very hierarchies to the end. The place of action in ' The Scarlet Letter ' is American soil and in ' The Portrait of a Lady ' it is Europe.

Before we go on with our analysis, it is imperative that we deal a little in the concept of " paradise " and " Adam & Eve ", which is, time and again, implied in both the works of fiction. The idea of America as a paradise, a lush, green land unspoiled by man, persists in American literature, where there has always been a charged movement between the old world and new world. America as a Paradise lies in the west of England in space, and in the backward movement in time. On reading the mentioned two novels we feel as if we have returned to the plight of Adam and Eve, as Milton has described in ' Paradise Lost'.

"The world lay all before them, where to choose their place of rest."

To Henry James, such an Eve as Isabel Archer might well be forlorn; and he wrote that the American girl should rightfully complain that in the name of freedom she had been " abandoned " and " betrayed ". These girls have been left in the middle of nowhere and they try to discover what sort of world is this, and why they have been sent hither. This existential dilemma is

clear in *The Scarlet Letter* in chapter 'The Market Place' in which Hester Prynne stood on the scaffold and felt as, "Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely, to her breast that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes!- these were her realities- all else had vanished!" (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.50).

And the concepts of "original sin" and "Adamic figure" have well been incorporated in American fiction. Isabel Archer has been expelled from the Paradise but due to unlimited opportunities she suffers in making a wrong choice. Was the American Adam liberated or lost? Is he an outcast? America is a country\ paradise of wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild man. Americans found themselves surrounded by chaos and disorder. In this regard Henry Bamford Parker says,

"For the Americans there is no underlying order, and each individual must find his own way of dealing with chaos". "Adamic significations" can be attached to the red letter "A" that the heroine in *The Scarlet Letter* is obliged to wear on her bosom; it represents her adultery, but as the first letter of the alphabet, it may also stand for the original sin of Adam, in which Puritans believed all men participated. Children in the seventeenth century Boston had learned their alphabet from a book that printed a little verse for each letter. The first letter was illustrated by this verse:

"In Adam's fall

We sinned all"

Hawthorne's novel begins with a scene with a scaffold, in the market place of Boston, where the heroine stands in disgrace with her infant child

held close as if to conceal the letter "A" on her gown. In *The Portrait of a Lady* Madam Merle is adulterous and should be put to the same scarlet letter "A". Pansy, once in the novel, has been called by the name of Pearl. Obviously Henry James had *The Scarlet Letter* in his mind. Hester Prynne undergoes penance by putting on Scarlet Letter "A" on her gown; the same way Madam Merle undergoes penance by going back to America. She holds herself guilty for having made convenience out of Isabel Archer. Madam Merle announced her intention of going to America- a radical act, which signifies some enormous change in her thinking. She is turning her back on a place and a relationship which has steeped her in vileness, perhaps. She is purifying herself by returning to the clean, if dull, air of Protestant America.

In *The Scarlet Letter* Pearl is the emblem of Hester Prynne's sin but also a means of salvation. Love and concern for Pearl save Hester from wandering too far in the intellectual and moral wilderness. But, of course, the past cannot be undone, and little Pearl is the living result of the past- the emblem of responsibility to the community for one's past actions. Hester becomes truly, voluntarily penitent only after her lover has died; only then she returns to new England without a selfish motive. We can say that the very source of sin also served as the source of salvation. The same situation occurs in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Pansy becomes the source of salvation and direction not only to Madam Merle but also to Isabel Osmond. Isabel's life is dedicated to its errors. And there is nothing in her act which holds the promise, as does Adam and Eve's, of eventual happiness through suffering, even though Ralph assures her that there is. She goes back to Rome purely for Pansy's sake. Isabel matures through her sufferings. Now she cannot accept an easy alternative to her vows. She is wise enough not to be fooled again. Though she returns to Rome to her loveless, lifeless, cheerless marriage, it is not without an ironic source of nourishment for her. Pansy has become vital

for her and begun to draw sustenance for her, lest her blooming should be crushed. Pancy is her source now. Isabel returns to Rome. She has learnt through Ralph, to love the forlorn creature that Pancy is. Such a denunciatory love which Isabel finds at last is⁷ her only salvation, and this flight back to Rome can be understood in terms of the great scriptural pronouncement about life and the knowledge of good and evil which she so eloquently cites as proof. Further, the open ending also suited to James's ironic vision of inscrutability of life, appearance and reality etc. It is the concept of the 'Serpent and the Rope' which Raja Rao employs in his novel.

In both novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, the theme of "institution of marriage" is very important for understanding. We must remember, first of all, that Hawthorne was not himself a Puritan and that he was probably not a believing Christian. For Nathaniel Hawthorne, if it is the instinct that is of grave importance then for Henry James it is the sacredness of institution of marriage. The tone of difference in both the writers can be felt as far marriage and relationship are concerned.

In the concluding chapter in *The Scarlet Letter* when Hester Prynne had come to New England, women came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what was the remedy. Hester comforted and counseled them, as best as she might. She assured them, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the relation between man and woman on surer ground of mutual happiness. It is not safe to conclude whether this "mutual happiness" is to exist within the fold of marriage or outside of it. But Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady* gives clear indications in favour of sacredness of the institution of marriage. After Ralph (Isabel's cousin) had died she remembered having a husband in a foreign city. He was not one of the best husbands but that did not alter the

case. Certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage, and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it. Henry James seems to be implying that the institution of marriage should not be made light of.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, it seems, like D.H. Lawrence, believes in the marriage of passion and instinct. For him it is instinct that is the guiding force and active principle of life. Conventions might deceive- Hester Prynne is deceived in getting married to Roger Chillingworth. Isabel's instinct got killed by intellectual pursuits and so is deceived in having made a choice in Osmond. There is some basic similarity that lurks at the bottom of Chillingworth and Osmond. None of them married out of love. If the former married for the purpose of kindling of a household fire, then the latter married for monetary purposes. Both of them had forgotten that marriages are made in heaven. Marriage should be the outcome of love and not of need. Maria of *Mansfield Park* married Mr. Rushworth because he was rich and could provide security in life. As the saying goes " in the matters of heart, mind shouldn't interfere ". Maria is deceived in her choice and ends up eloping with Henry Crawford. Regarding Hester Prynne John Erskine observes:

" She has sinned, but the sin leads her straight to a larger life...Hawthorne... lets the sin elaborate itself, so far as Hester's nature is concerned, into nothing but beauty... Since her love for Dimmesdale was the one sincere passion of her life, she obeyed it utterly, though a conventional judgement would have said that she was stepping out of the moral order. There is nothing in the story to suggest condemnation of her, or of the minister in their sin...The passion itself, as the two lovers still agree at the close of their hard experience was sacred and never caused them repentance. "

The fact in Hester's case is that her sin of adultery is a sin of passion, rather than a sin of intellect. As the story progresses she engages our moral compassion. The personal attraction deepens our sympathy and we realize that she is more sinned against than sinning. If instinct and passion led her to fall then it also led her to rise. Till the end she kept her faith intact in passion and embraced salvation. It is clearly shown in the following lines at the end of the novel,

" In Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. "

The case is just the opposite in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Isabel makes her own choice not because of her passion and instinct. Isabel is all head and no heart- like, as Sartre said, ' a winged bust '. She is not, on the other hand a frigid woman. She is capable of deep sexual passion, though it is obvious that she has obtained no satisfaction from Osmond, child or no child; her love for him has always been, as D.H. Lawrence puts it, ' in the head '. Warburton merely excites her pity. Ralph comes closest to providing the right combination, but he is ill and a relation. Goodwood offers her all the sexual excitement she can take, but his mistake is that he wants to possess her. James is fully aware that if Isabel's motives become too expressly sexual in the final scenes, then all her previous acts of high principle might equally be explained as evasions of sexual confrontation. Sexual ethics of James also casts its shadow on her character and development of Isabel. Rather we can say that Isabel is an autobiographical character of James's own personality. There are evidences that, when James was young he had become sterile because of some accident. There is no denying the fact that he was a homosexual. So, the phallus fear in Isabel is an obvious manifestation of James's own ideas about sexuality. Isabel is often cited as a typical example of sexual fear and

frigidity- an extension of James's own repressed sexuality. Perhaps deep down in her puritan psyche, sex is still essentially ugly and bestial- an idea which is not wholly dissipated, for all her cultural refinement. Her rejection of Caspar appears to be a rejection of male sexuality roused to a desperate pitch. In the end of the novel, that she should escape from his arms and " the lightning kiss " even as she felt dissolved in the ecstasy of impassioned love, shows her distrust of phallic love and her fear of the danger of surrender. In fact, a deep irony seems to attend her choice of unoriginal Osmond. It is a choice not made by the whole of Isabel's self, but by a frozen part of her personality. After rejecting the sexual and social life held out to her by her two previous suitors, she marries Osmond thinking that she is embracing the cherished ideas of " beauty " and " liberty ". Instead of taking her at a higher level of communion, she is condemned. She falls in her own choice- a radical failure of her vision. In *The Scarlet Letter* if Hester Prynne suffered from lack of choice, in the middle of nowhere, then Isabel suffers because she can choose any thing, there are numerous possibilities. She becomes blind because of too much of light. Hester becomes blind because of acute darkness and there is no light that could come to her rescue. In the context of making a choice, relevance of Robert Frost's poem titled ' The Road Not Taken ' can be a source of inspiration. Proper choice can be made provided we know the difference between appearance and reality. Isabel's relationship with Osmond is based on "appearance". He seems to offer her a release from the troublesome life of turbulent passions and promise of a life dedicated to the appreciation of ideal beauty. But the interaction soon leads her to a truth below this ' appearance '. Both the novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Portrait of a Lady* are full of contrasting elements. Henry James surely got some influence from Hawthorne. Osmond is Isabel's antithesis because he belongs to the world of means and she to the world of ends. Then in *The Scarlet Letter* Roger Chillingworth is an antithesis to Hester Prynne. The former is a citizen

of the world of means and the latter is the citizen of the world of ends. Both the heroines have fallen prey to the making of convenience out of them. They've been used. Their souls have been left ravished. It also brings out the feminist issue that makes an analysis of the state of women in a society that is controlled by men. Thematic pattern of both the novels concerns with human exploitation, which is the worst type of crime to be committed by one human on another human. Both the heroines have been treated like commodities.

Another important contrastive element is the death of both, minister Dimmesdale and Ralph putting respective influence on Hester Prynne and Isabel Osmond. As long as Dimmesdale lives, Hester is not properly penitent. She compounds the sin of passion with the sin of pride. She embroiders the Scarlet Letter as an elaborate expression of ambiguous defiance and guilt, and she dresses her daughter in equally Flamboyant colours. Hester's passion, then, has only been damned up. And the confinement of her rich, dark hair under tight cap symbolizes the artificial restraint of her natural passion. But it is not voluntary penance. When she throws the Scarlet Letter aside and lets down her hair in the effort to undo her past sin, Pearl, her daughter, will not come near Hester until she puts on the familiar letter again and pins up her hair once more. Hester could become truly voluntarily penitent only after her lover has died; only then does she return to New England without selfish motive.

The similar situation occurs in *The Portrait of a Lady*, where Ralph's death leads to complete metamorphosis in Isabel Osmond with regard to her understanding of reality, which she realizes, is always fleeting. Her cousin's death brings her a sense of realization and salvation. Just like Hester Prynne, Isabel too is charged with a sense of voluntary penance at the point of death of someone who was dearest and nearest. Ralph, was called by James an 'apostle of freedom'. He puts in a lot of money in the life sail of Isabel just to

see how she would sail in life with all her freedom. But with Ralph's death, which is synonymous nearly with the end of the book, Isabel ceases to live in the imagination for the freedom. Her confidence and imaginative trait were his very active principles of life. He dies because the life no longer allows him to imagine the possibility that freedom and the life of the world are compatible. She goes back to Rome for Pancy's sake, who activates her spiritual pilgrimage. It is selfless attachment. Isabel's action at the end is fully consistent with everything she does earlier. Now, however, she asserts her idealism of self not in innocence but in full knowledge of the world. For that reason freedom becomes a form of indifference to the fact that returning to Rome will, as Caspar admonishes, cost her life.

By getting married either to Warburton or to Caspar Goodwood she didn't want to turn away from life and its experience. She wanted to know life by her own construct. She wanted to see the world from her own eyes and whatever she saw did not make her happy, but then her faring through her own idea has a beauty of its own. And that's James's idea of freedom, idea of salvation. There is, for example, James's characteristically expansive and kindly letter to the Deerfield school in 1889, replying to an invitation to discuss the art of the novel. His letter is an appeal for freedom of observation as a necessary pre-requisite for fiction of a high order. His phrasing might well remind us that Ralph's intention in giving Isabel a fortune is to allow her to take full advantage of her desires "to being by getting a general impression of life": "oh, do something from your point of view ", James begs the students, " an ounce of example is worth a ton of generalities; do something with the great art and the great form; do something with life. You each have an impression coloured by your individual conditions; make that into a picture. Every sort of mind will find what it looks for in life. That is what I mean by freedom."

Both Hester and Isabel had the same idea of freedom. Their individual condition of life was just like a black canvas, which both of them painted by the very colour of their own experience.

Along with *The Scarlet Letter*, the idea of sin can be traced in *The Portrait of a Lady*, as well. If Hester Prynne committed the sin of passion then Isabel Archer committed the " sin of self esteem ". She possessed a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast; and had therefore been accustomed to be held in some awe by them. Her mind moved more quickly than theirs' ' and this encouraged an impatience that might easily be confounded with superiority.' She often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; she suffered from Narcissism. The sin of self-esteem – a clear case of hubris, of pride coming before a fall: The Greek's tragic formula. James rubs it further; Isabel's thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority. False pride brings Isabel low, having too great an opinion of herself but since she is no king or queen but only ' a simple young woman ' from Albany: she suffers, instead, a fate worse than death. She has dug her own grave; she had made her bed and must lie on it.

Isabel and Hester, are full of uniqueness with regard to other characters in the novels. Isabel's uniqueness lies in her being more powerful than conventional character like Henrietta, Madam Gemini, Osmond's sister, or like Osmond himself and Madam Merle, that have been cast in her surroundings. The same way Hester Prynne is stronger than either Dimmesdale or Chillingworth, who are not as strong as her. She had the courage to confess her sin but either of the other two could not reveal their identity.

Both, Hester Prynne and Isabel Archer, remain dedicated to their error, and penance comes to their rescue. And this very dedication to their respective errors and their spiritual pilgrimage. The world falls short of their expectations and they do come to realize the futility of human action to achieve reality. The whole debate is whether we are free to make a choice. If yes, then we have to be accountable to our actions. Isabel says, " you think me the child of my circumstances: I make my own circumstances." But if we don't have a choice then is it still in our capacity to commit sin? In this regard Madam Merle's statement is very important:

" Self is determined in part by an envelope of circumstances that one does not always create."

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne had no choice and still was condemned by social convention. But in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer stands condemned in her own court for having made a wrong choice. In both the novels, it is a question of choice and happiness that is discussed. Isabel turns down the marriage proposal of Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood but makes her wrong choice in Osmond and so is unhappy.

While creating a character like Isabel Archer, Henry James must be having Hester Prynne's image in his mind. Hester, who was an orphan child, forlorn, without any choice, is metamorphosised into Isabel Archer by the way of putting in 70,000 pounds in her sail, which unfortunately sinks because of the subverting power of unearned money. In fact, it nearly ruins her.

What's really interesting about these two novels is that both deal with the issue of women and their situation in society. We should not hesitate to say that both these novels are pioneering efforts in the direction of feminism.

In the name of civilization it is women who are suppressed the most. As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, that both Hester and Isabel are forlorn and in the name of freedom the woman is abandoned and betrayed. Hawthorne agreed that we must try to discover what sort of world this is, and why we have been sent hither. This "existential dilemma" is clearly visible in *The Scarlet Letter*, in chapter 'Another view of Hester' where Hester is brooding over status of women in society:

"Indeed, the same dark question often rose in her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative and dismissed the point as settled. ... As a first step the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change". (*The Scarlet Letter*, p.140).

In the end let's hope that the day is not far when we wouldn't need to write about "suffering woman" for world would have changed for better and dialectics of relation between man and woman would have been created. Man would be seen in relation to woman and vice versa, and that will be the day when we all will be perfectly happy in our relationships. A dialogue would have been created between man and man, and man vs world.

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