



Alterity of Female Identity Represented in the Portrait of a Lady from the Perspective of Postcolonialism

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Abstract

The United States has not gotten rid of the shadow of the British colonial culture until the 19th century. The trend of realism in European literature is later prevalent in the United States. Henry James is one of the representative realist writers. The Portrait of a Lady, which plays an important role in shaking the influence of British culture from American literature, reflects truly the state of American society influenced by European culture.

Gayatri C. Spivak, a postcolonial feminist scholar, opposes the mindset of sameness in the logocentrism protocol and acknowledges the existence of alterity in the construction of the female subjects, and endows alterity with multiple meanings. In The Portrait of a Lady, James reveals the influence of European culture on American culture and the American way of life. He tries to acknowledge difference and to find an ideal way to respect it, which is in parallel with Spivak's view of alterity.

In my paper, I will mainly illustrate the character of Mrs. Touchett, who at first, like James, was very fond of the European culture and civilization, but gradually found that she was not quite fit in it despite trying hard to integrate. Under the disciplines of her husband and the England customs, she began to understand the real life of a women, and lived abnormal from the outsiders but deep in her heart, she went through several ups and downs. Finally, she lived out of London life, with free and easy. The life of Mrs. Touchett was like the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, alterity but transcendence in the end. At first, she tried hard to integrate into this seemingly egalitarian social system just like Frankenstein eagerly explored human society after he was created. However, no matter how hard she tried to integrate into British culture, Mrs. Touchett came to find that there were still many judgments and criticisms about her, so she decided to change herself. Frankenstein was also suffered from repugnance and persecution of human beings. Finally, after rebuilding her mind construction, Mrs. Touchett created a system of her own and finally moved beyond herself. Frankenstein also lived beyond people on a snow mountain and established a living zone of his own. After comparing these two characters, I want to show that Shelley's Frankenstein and



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James's Mrs. Touchett resist male constructed system and challenge male dominance at some degree. Spivak points out that the machine civilization represented by men produces monsters completely contrary to its original intention, and fails to discipline and educate the monsters properly. This plot is a satire of western civilization and the patriarchal society. Likewise, the transformation of Mrs. Touchett's character from obedience, to alterity, and finally transcendence, may also symbolize a satire to the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Henry James; Gayatri C. Spivak; Postcolonialism; Feminism; Alterity