

Foucault's Discourse and Theory of Power That Explores the Root Cause of Female Aphasia

Interpretation of "The Portrait of a Lady"

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Abstract—"The Portrait of a Lady" is one of the best works of Henry James and one of the most famous works of world literature. Isabel, the heroine of "The Portrait of a Lady", has certain new ideas and the desire to pursue independence and freedom. However, she still cannot get rid of the shackles and conventional opinion of the society on women and thus can only silently bear the failed marriage. This paper will analyze the aphasia of Isabel, the heroine of the work, and Madame Merle, and find the root cause of their aphasia, so that more people can have a more comprehensive understanding of the work.

Keywords—Henry James; "The Portrait of a Lady"; Female aphasia; Foucault's discourse and theory of power

I. INTRODUCTION

Henry James is a famous American writer. His main masterpiece is "The Portrait of a Lady", which is a novel with female as the protagonist. It reflects his attention to women in that period from two aspects of female cognition and female ethics. Much of Henry James's novel is about communication between Europeans and Americans. Isabel, the heroine of "The Portrait of a Lady", is an American living in Britain. She yearned for and pursued freedom, but as a woman, many of her choices were limited by her gender. She wants to be the depicter of the blueprint of her life, but it is difficult in reality. From the secular point of view, her pursuit of freedom seems to be a failure. However, from the spiritual perspective, her yearning for freedom, insistence on self and observation on independence all reflect her height on the moral level, which is worthy of respect. The author, Henry James, also reverses the traditional happy ending in his book. In the process of dissecting social relations and displaying the environment, he starts from realism, grasps life, examines the soul of human beings, reflects on history, and shows his concern for people beside social life, especially for women's spiritual world. Isabel is a woman who yearns to live life to the fullest and has dreams, but is deprived of many rights. She is also a typical representative of literature. In the process of depicting her life, people have a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of life, morality and people's destiny. This paper will analyze the female aphasia phenomenon in "The Portrait of a Lady" from the perspective of feminism, and use Foucault's discourse

and power theory to uncover the mysterious veil behind this phenomenon.

II. FOUCAULT'S DISCOURSE THEORY AND FEMALE APHASIA

A. Foucault's Discourse Theory

1) *The definition of discourse*: The core of Foucault's theory is discourse in the earlier stage. In Foucault's philosophical theory "discourse" is an extremely ambiguous and complex concept. It has one meaning in the broad sense and another meaning in the narrow sense. In a broad sense, discourse includes all existing forms and categories of human cultural life. But in a narrow sense, discourse is a language that makes valid claims and, more often, a form.

The so-called discourse is not an intermediary that is usually understood, but a practical way of the speaker, so it is called "discourse".

2) *Power of discourse*: According to Habermas' analysis, it can be seen that discourse is intertwined with power and the two are inseparable. However, Foucault believes that power is the most fundamental and crucial factor that functions and influences discourse. Discourse and power are closely linked and cannot be separated. So, it can be said that, Discourse is expressed through power, and power is achieved through discourse.

They use the same method, so they are built in the same way. When one masters the means of power, he or she masters the discourse; and vice versa. Generally speaking, what people call discourse is first accomplished through the mastery of discourse. Discourse has a great function. It is not only the key factor to hold power, but also the effective factor to exert power. Therefore, the control of discourse is extremely important.

B. Symptoms of Female Aphasia

In medicine, aphasia mainly refers to the impairment of language function caused by brain damage. A major premise of feminist theoretical system is female aphasia, which refers to the fact that great psychological harm on women can lead

to their failure of normal language communication or the gradual loss of language communication function. What is now in power is male language. Similarly, male language is the carrier of male consciousness. As women are not very conscious of their own values, they lack their own ways of expression, so the rules of the game can be said to be customized for patriarchal society. Therefore, in the culture, the natural image of most women is also slightly patriarchal.

III. HENRY JAMES AND "THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY"

Leon Edel had been studying James all his life, who he thought was a fine gentleman with feminine characteristics. James's father, however, was a symbolic figure in the patriarchal system. He believed that men could do whatever they wanted and fully enjoy their freedom. Yet women in that period must regulate themselves according to the rules and regulations of the society at that time, both tangible and intangible. Before marriage, they should be pure and innocent like an angel. After marriage, they should be diligent and thrifty, caring for husband and children, and be a good wife and loving mother. In that period, James's mother was such a woman bound by rules, who was the model of that period. James, on the other hand, was naturally shy, introverted and didn't like to talk to strangers. But he felt very sorry for his mother. He depicted this with an intense color, which has a profound impact.

James writes mostly from a woman's point of view. There are many reasons for this. The most important one is his writing tradition, which is mostly based on women; and the second is her focus on women. At that time, James paid close attention to the general trend of the society, the situation faced by women and the problems they encountered, which made him more determined to create on the theme of women and was also his determination. At the time, he thought it impossible to think of anything more important than the status of women and the revolution in how people should look at women.

The heroine in James's novel "The Portrait of a Lady" is based on his favorite cousin. He wanted to create the image of a woman in a new era in his novel. Such a woman was supposed to have positive and optimistic qualities and live according to their own will, independent, strong and unyielding. But at that time, it was only imagination, or just fiction. In reality, women could only be forced to do the prescribed things in front of the authoritarian men, and some of them had lost their voice. Isabel is the positive heroine in the novel, while Madame Merle is the negative one. They may represent two kinds of people in reality, because either the positive image of Isabel or the negative image of Madame Merle, under the social system of "patriarchy", are in a neglected position and are suppressed to varying degrees.

IV. REASONS FOR THE APHASIA OF TWO FEMALE CHARACTERS IN "THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY"

A. *Analysis of Causes of Isabel's Aphasia*

1) *Background story*: Isabel in the novel is a beautiful American woman with a sharp mind. She likes thinking

very much and is good at thinking. She advocates freedom, and has a different idea of her life. Yet one day, she "lost her voice". The main reason is that when she got married, she was blinded by the so-called superficial phenomenon. After falling into the trap of marriage, the real tragedy began. Her husband, Osmond was a man of mediocre intelligence. He had many flaws of human nature in him and was very greedy, lecherous and extremely selfish. Soon after their marriage, he exposed all these shortcomings. He was entangled with Madame Merle. Isabel, faced with such a situation, was in deep sorrow and did not know what to do. Nor did she know how she should abreact.

After marriage, Osmond's "patriarchal" thought deepened day by day. After his marriage to Isabel, he showed it all without any pretence or scruple. He was not as sweet and tender to Isabel as he had been, and he got to neglected her day by day. Most of all, when he learned that Isabel had gone to visit his cousin who was seriously ill, he was very dissatisfied, and even forced Isabel not to continue her relationship with the female journalist. When Isabel learned everything, she asked Osmond to let her visit her cousin one last time, but her husband refused.

Isabel never told anyone about everything that had happened. She kept her pain to herself, and she was afraid of being told what to do about her life. She did not want to be pitied and she feared to be seen in her misery. When asked her whether she was happy with her life, she could only keep silent. When she visited her cousin, it was found that Isabel, who had once been bright and open, was long gone. At that time, the rules of society were binding on women. Isabel bore her misfortune in silence, and wanted to receive it with the greatest grace. In their marriage, her husband played a leading role; Isabel had no choice but to obey all this, which gradually drowned out the female discourse. Isabel's aphasia appears more than once in the novel. When her cousin told her all about the plot of marriage, she was very painful, but finally chose to go back to Osmond. In fact, she felt very helpless deep in her heart. In addition to "losing her voice", she couldn't find any way out.

2) *Foucault's discourse and power theory*: Foucault believes that discourse is an effective form of language. Power is the most fundamental factor that influences the control of discourse power. Discourse is determined by power. A person suffers from aphasia if he or she cannot say what he or she wants to say. Isabel suffered from it after marriage, because she was dissatisfied with her marriage but she didn't express it out effectively according her feelings, which was aphasia. She had lost her own mind, regarding all her husband's demands on her as a standard by which everything should be judged. Women of that period tended to suppress their will. As a result, she began to deceive herself and was unable to change her sad fate. She lost the ability to express their own thoughts and feelings, and also lost her own, which is really lamentable.

The fate of women is not inherently tragic, and it is the social expectations that bring them to this. Like Isabel, the real reason for her aphasia was that she had no voice in the

married family and could not express her feelings. She could only conceal her pain and despair in silence over what her married husband had done. Osmond's behavior was a symbol of complete power. She completely lost herself, lost her direction and even lost the power as a woman. Although in the beginning, Isabel had an independent nature, she was forced to become "voiceless" after marriage.

3) *The influence of her own personality:* Although Isabel had awakened her self-consciousness, she still had no way to get rid of the shackles brought by traditional social concepts. Her warm and cheerful personality has also been stamped with the brand of the times. In her married life, her weak and yielding character was very obvious. Osmond's imperious temper prevented Isabel from having her own ideas, and everything had to be done according to her husband's wishes. She was clear that what Osmond loved was only her money, but she still chose to stay in Rome. After learning that she had been the victim of a hoax perpetrated by her husband and Madame Merle he had every reason to leave Rome and put an end to the deception that her husband and Madame Merle had devised. Sadly, she did not. She did not end her marriage and did not break the social norms and customs of the time, which ultimately led to the exacerbation of her misfortune.

B. Causes of Madame Merle's Aphasia

In the novel, Madame Merle is a person who, in appearance, has all the aura of a person. But these are false, all the attention is paid to her bright appearance, but her life is not the case. She has an illegitimate daughter that she cannot recognize. Her outward appearance is in sharp contrast to the inner pain. People are often envious of other people's life but ignore the bitterness behind glory, which cannot be shared. So Madame Merle was also a typical person that suffers from aphasia.

Foucault believes that discourse and power complement each other, and discourse is determined by power. But apparently, Madame Merle also lost herself. She took the demands of men as her own standards. She even gave up her right to be a mother for her daughter's sake to meet the moral standards of society, which was her tragedy. But at that time, her practice reflected the shackles of social environment on women. She kept silent about all these things and came to the final state of "aphasia". She was also very helpless. It is easy to find that, the root cause of the discourse loss is the loss of power.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper adopts Foucault's theory of discourse and power to analyze the aphasia of a positive and a negative protagonist in "The Portrait of a Lady", and finally concludes that power determines the right of speech. Isabel, the heroine described in "The Portrait of a Lady", changes from a woman who yearns for freedom to a tragic character who is in an unhappy marriage but dare not break social customs and norms. Many of the things she experienced in this process were the factors that led to her eventual tragedy. In

fact, the cause of these misfortunes could not be separated from her own personality. Finally, she fell victim to "aphasia" under the influence of both internal and external factors.

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