

Discussion on Intercultural Communication

Analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady*

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Abstract—After the publication of American novelist Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, it had focused the attention of literary critics and readers. Many critics and scholars had studied its text from different perspectives. This thesis tries to from a new point of view—the intercultural communication, analyze Isabel's journey of liberty, her choice on marriage, the paper implies that Isabel is a failure in intercultural communication in this novel, and probes into the reasons which result in her failure. Hope people could get some enlightenment from the experience of Isabel with the development of intercultural communication at present.

Keywords—intercultural communication; conflict; liberty; failure; accommodate

I. INTRODUCTION

Among those novels of the nineteenth century which continue to be read and discussed as model of fictive craft and as major conditions to human comprehension of itself, *The Portrait of a Lady* stands out for the complexity of its character, the compelling nature of its story, the density of its range of cultural reference, and the artfulness of its conception and execution. (Joel Porte, 1990, p1) Like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madam Bovary* and *Middlemarch*, it focuses on the problem of a woman's destiny and the situations and the consequences of modern marriage. Although like *The Scarlet Letter*, it places those depressed issues in a specific American context, in the international context that innocent, ignorant American return to the Old World which was largely to define almost all works of Henry James. Indeed, in critical literature, the critiques about *The Portrait of a Lady* have been fruitful. No matter from the perspective of heroine Isabel or from James's central 'international theme', but in this paper, we try to combine the two aspects what I have referred to analyze the heroine Isabel Archer under the circumstance of intercultural communication.

Refer to the intercultural communication, it is necessary to introduce some brief information about Henry James. Henry James was born in New York in 1843. He is an outstanding artist. His family background is special. James's father was very famous in literary circle. He paid much attention to the education of his children. Since James was a infant, he had been brought to Europe. From that time on, he

always came and went between European countries and America. The intercontinental life gave James abundant writing material. The heroes or heroines in his work like him, shuttled back and forth between America and Europe, it was necessary for them to confront the question of intercultural communication. Unfortunately, like heroine Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, most of them were not the winners in intercultural communication. Because of the different cultural background, after arriving in Europe, a lot of Americans could not accommodate the life of the Old World—Europe, some might appeared as butt in social contact, such as Daisy Miller (heroine in Henry James's famous short novel *Daisy Miller*), or they reserved themselves carefully when communicated with other people, or they made a mistake in their of matrimony, all of these resulted in tragedy.

The literary critics had analyzed the characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*, such as heroine Isabel Archer, Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood, Gilbert Osmond and the subtle relationship between them, especially the end of the story Isabel decided to return to her husband Osmond, and her determination had been discussed repeatedly. Some believed that Isabel ever promised to look after her step-daughter Pansy, it was her responsibility to go back. Some held that Isabel pursued liberty and independence, so it was her only choice to return. Anyway, it depends on your viewpoint to understand this novel. Now, from the respective of intercultural communication, how we readers appreciate Isabel's choice of matrimony and pursuit of liberty and independence?

II. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

The main characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* were all from America. Compared with the Old World Europe, America was in a context of new culture, it had almost no history. So people who grew up in this kind of context needed detailed cultural background information about the opposite side who were communicating with them, they needed them to show what they could not understand clearly. On the contrary, the people who were born in the cultural context with long history and ancient civilization, oral communication were not the only resource they got the information. Because of the historical and traditional reasons,

systems of countries and ancient civilization changed slowly. The response people to one phenomenon were almost similar no matter from perspectives of synchronic or diachronic. Spoken language was not the major medium they got information. The space, silence, gesture, dressing, style of conversation and so on all of these could give message they required in the process of intercourse.

Though lots of problems of intercultural communication appeared among the process of intercourse, in fact most of the difficulties and misunderstanding should return back to the distinction of culture. The heart of cultural system deterred the way people who lived in the cultural context got along with others. The Americans in *The Portrait of a Lady* confronted the question of intercultural communication since they got to Europe. Isabel's uncle Mr. Touchett had arrived in England from America for thirty years. He was a banker and his profession was successful, he had rooted in England. Although no matter how long he had come to England, how he wholly absorbed by the estate of Gardencourt, Mr. Touchett was still the same as he came to the England, the features of American were still reserved in him. His American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he kept it in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with perfect confidence. (p3) He was a passionate, clear, clever and shrewd person like his son Ralph. As Isabel arrived, he soon was aware of the peculiar attraction of her. Once a time, he showed her favor to his niece Isabel, Lord Warburton misunderstood it as the signal he encouraged him to propose to her. On this case, Ralph gave proper comment: "My dear father, you have lived with the English for thirty years, and you've picked up a good many of things they say. But you've never learned the things they don't say." (p8)

Isabel's aunt Mrs. Touchett was also an American; she didn't like the life style of England, but it was her interest to live in European countries. She bought a house and established herself at Florence in Italy, leaving her husband to take care of the English branch of his bank, she returned to see him in a regular time. There were still typical features of American in her: independence, straightforwardness, and simple, she was a person who supported individualism. She had her own way of doing all that she did, and this was the simplest description of a character which, although by no means without liberal motions, rarely succeeded in giving an impression of suavity.(p17) Compared to other characters in this novel, Mrs. Touchett might be considered as a winner in the process of intercultural communication. The definition of intercultural communication: the successful intercultural communication is appreciation of common and accommodation of divergence.

III. THE JOURNEY OF LIBERTY

The beautiful and charming American young woman Isabel Archer came to the Old World with her aunt Mrs. Touchett after the death of her father, she lived in Gardencourt as guest, and she admired the ancient civilization of Europe and hoped to see the world outside her own country, so she came to England. Mrs. Touchett also

wanted to give her niece an opportunity to develop herself under the circumstance of the Continent. All Isabel needed was liberty. The word liberty appeared in the novel again and again. A crowd of Americans went to Old World to pursue liberty with the implication of irony. Isabel's kindhearted cousin Ralph begged money from his father for Isabel, he wished father to leave her a legacy. The reason was "I should like to put it (money) to her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse."(p172) "...she wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free."(p173) In fact, Ralph didn't want his niece to marry somebody. He himself also admitted his father that he loved Isabel very much. "...Don't you like Isabel?" "Yes, very much." "I like Isabel very much." he repeated.(p17) At the end of the story, it was indeed the bondage of marriage and the realistic life Isabel with Osmond in Europe after marriage made herself lose the dream of liberty.

A. *Romantic Proposal from an English Peer*

Lord Warburton was a typical English gentleman.

He was a well-made man of five-and-thirty, with a face as English as that of the old gentleman I have just sketched was something else; a noticeably handsome face, fresh-colored, fair and—frank, with the firm, straight features, a lively grey eye and the rich adornment of a chestnut beard. This person had a certain fortunate brilliant exceptional look—which would have made almost any observer envy him at a venture.(p3)

Out of question, he was noble, handsome, and rich; he was the Mr. Right in the hearts of a lot of young English women. When Lord Warburton proposed to Isabel, she was satisfied and very happy. She liked the manner of Lord Warburton, but unfortunately at the same time she felt that he was the representative of English politician. She could not accept the political system of England. Lord Warburton was the member of it. Lord Warburton's social status, his family background defeated Isabel, she was afraid of being stranded in the cage of wealth and power.

What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious but persuasive, told her to resist—murmured to her that virtually she had a system and orbit of her own.(p96)

American believed liberty, independence and equality obviously their value of life was contrary. The cultural conflict blocked her way to pursue the happy marriage, true and successful intercultural communication. Though Lord Warburton never had the idea of superior, Isabel always related him with politic and his class. The cultural context in Lord Warburton made him lose the chance. It was a satire for Isabel, when she confronted the most romantic people in the world she always admired, she escaped and withdrew. She could become consistently wise only at the cost of an almost of folly would constitute almost direct appeal to charity.(p97)

B. *Strong-Minded American Proposal*

Caspar Goodwood, a strong-minded American businessman whose name was

synonymous with the latest method of spinning cotton was spun in emotional circles by the willful girl Isabel. He was a typical. Image of American, he refused to accept anything which belonged to the Old World. When Isabel told him she was offered a great position and a great fortune—by a Englishman whom she liked extremely, Caspar Goodwood said: “That doesn’t make him by companion, Besides, he is an Englishman.” “Oh, those people? They ‘re not my humanity, and I don’t care what becomes of them.” (p149) Isabel realized that the liberty and independence what she pursued could not be satisfied by Caspar Goodwood who had crossed the sea to wring from her some scrap of vow. In her mind, liberty was “I an do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I’ve neither father no mother; I’m poor and of a serious disposition; I’m not pretty… I try to judge things for myself.” “The world—with all these places so arranged and so touching each other—comes to strike one as rather small.” (pp151-152) Isabel’s conception of liberty and independence, Isabel’s eagerness to embrace the outside, which were sight too big for caspar Goodwood, it was necessary for her to refuse his proposal.

C. *The Dream of Liberty Disillusioned*

Gilbert Osmond was a Europeanized American. When Isabel met him, she was attracted by him. In other words, when he appeared, she seemed to find intimate under unfamiliar cultural circumstance. She was unable to hold herself back to accept him. Isabel believed that Osmond had no position; he was free from traditional European custom; he was only concerned with his daughter Pansy and himself; he had put himself in solitary confinement from the society; he was a critic, a student of exquisite; he was a gentleman who studied style. All of Gilbert Osmond’s urbanity admired Isabel Archer. She saw the image of American like herself and the proper urbane manner in the circumstance of ancient civilization which she appreciated. It was reasonable from the perspective of intercultural communication, because people studied foreign culture from the angle of their own country, the observation and evaluation of them always had the elements of individual and their own culture.

As an English magnate, Lord Warburton’s proposal was refused, but the legacy which Mr. Touchett had left for Isabel Archer brought a tragic marriage to her. The handsome fortune Mr. Touchett offered to Isabel became a burden for her, she was impatient to deal with the big money. Osmond appeared; he had no career, no name, no position, and no future, no anything. He was distinguished. (p186) The appearance of his nothing catered to Isabel, it was fit for her standard of independence and liberty. Osmond, on the contrary, acquainted himself with American culture well and had everywhere effectively imposed himself. He married Isabel for her money, never for love. We could see this from his conversation with Madam Merle.

“Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous? It’s the only on

those conditions that I care to make her acquaintance. You know I asked you some time ago never to speak to me of creature who shouldn’t correspond to that description.” (p225)

Isabel was eager to life, Ralph also thought his cousin was charming, clever, and wanted to see life, and fortune was serving her to her taste, he persuaded his father Mr. Touchett to leave half of his legacy to her. He hoped that she was able to meet requirements of her imagination. He wanted her to see the world and do what she wanted to do. Unfortunately, It resulted in opposition. The young lady Isabel Archer with sixty thousand pounds fell a victim to the fortune-hunter. Ralph also realized that what a fool he had been to put the girl on her guard. He had played the wrong card, and now he had lost the game. He should see nothing, he should learn nothing.

Madame Merle had married Isabel. On the marriage, Merle and Osmond played a very deep game, they managed it beautifully, but on the side of Isabel, she was voluntarily, she could not make a crime of Madame Merle’s having been the producing cause of the most important friendship she had ever formed. (p383) She ever considered and chose herself; she could only let herself bear her burdens and not shifted them upon others.

It was benefit for someone under unfamiliar circumstance to open her heart and accommodate the new culture, new condition, new custom and new people. Only in this condition, one could confront all the challenges on her and got the new ideas what she pursued. The successful intercourse was accommodating all the cultures one confronted. Isabel was far from it on this point. At the end of the story, she was aware of that she had thrown away her life.

She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond’s beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond’s beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course, it had not been physical suffering, for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He looked himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lag hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers. (p407)

Although Isabel knew Osmond was selfish, hypocritical, despicable, wicked, degenerated, she knew Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood still loved her, she preferred to return back Osmond. Of course she did not want him, she didn’t care two straws of him, and she didn’t want to make things hot for him. She gave herself a reason: Pansy was dear to her. On her own side the sense of the girl’s dependence was more than a pleasure; it operated as a definite reason when motives threatened to fail her. She said to herself that we must take our duty where we find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible. (p385) Isabel was conscious of the mistake she had made, but she refused to correct it and gave herself various excuses. She disillusioned her dream by herself. As

Ralph had said: "You were ground in the very mill of the conventional." (p546)

IV. ISABEL: A FAILURE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Isabel was the heroine in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the other characters were all around her and entered her circle. Isabel wanted to go outside her own country and appreciate the culture of other countries, especially the ancient civilization of Europe. She was a girl of imagination. Her destination crossed the sea was to judge things for herself and choose her own fate. There were a lot of American features in her, such as independence, liberty, innocence, straightforwardness. When arrived in England, she knew the difference of two cultures and reserved herself carefully. The 'cultural shock' made her refuse Lord Warburton. Isabel arranged barrier on her way to communicate, though she always reminded herself that her aim was to appreciate the ancient civilization and get the real liberty.

After experienced tragic matrimony, Isabel recognized her wrong choice. It was obvious she was still admired European culture, but she couldn't accommodate it completely. Otherwise, it was not the only solution to solve her tragic marriage. She had the right to leave Gilbert Osmond, she could still had the opportunity to care after her step-daughter Pansy, she could leave anywhere in Europe if she liked, but she chose the life style she hated best. The reason was that she had not the enough courage to confront the divergence of culture and go on her journey of liberty. On this point, she was not the winner of intercultural communication.

V. CONCLUSION

In preface of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James said: "for my word about my dim first move toward 'The Portrait' which was exactly my grasp of a single character—the image of the young feminine ...that this single small cornerstone, the concept of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had began with all my out fit for the large building of *The Portrait of a Lady*."

Henry James created a charming and clever girl for the readers; he depicted the destiny of this girl who had handsome fortune in modern marriage and her experience in intercultural communication. He used a lot of psychological analysis in the novel and expressed the feeling of heroine exactly. Linda J. Taylor observed that *The Portrait of a Lady* made him (Henry James) famous all across the American continent...It was James's most widely reviewed work and created a peak in his reputation.(Alfred Habegger, 2007)

Now, with the development of intercultural communication, the experience of Isabel Archer may give people some enlightenment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Specail gratitude should be conveyed to my supervisor Mrs Yu., from whom I learned a lot concerning academic research and receive great help for my paper. Without the useful comments and advices of her, it's impossible for me to forge ahead. It is also necessary to express my heartfelt gratitude to my husband for his technical support and encouragement.

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