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Soul-Consciousness versus Body-consciousness with special reference to Isabel Archer and Madame Merle in *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James

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Abstract: This paper deals with the manner in which two characters of Henry James--Isabel Archer and Madame Merle from his novel *Portrait of a Lady* embody soul-consciousness and body-consciousness respectively. The two terms body-consciousness and soul-consciousness have been taken from the teachings of Brahmakumaris in which it has been explained explicitly that body-consciousness gives rise to ego, lust, arrogance, anger and greed whereas soul-consciousness gives birth to acceptance of people, love, happiness, purity, peace and humility. Isabel Archer's state of soul-consciousness enables her to go through ups and downs of her life with stability and tranquility whereas Madame Merle's body-consciousness leaves her emotionally charred, physically infirm and mentally upset. Both women are fated to have Osmond Gilbert in their lives and both have diverse paths in their manner of interacting with him and materializing their relationship with him. The strength of Isabel Archer in confronting the egoism of Osmond with inner silence and stability testifies that the soul is in a state of happiness only when it is in its original state with seven inherent qualities of love, purity, happiness, bliss, knowledge, peace and power.

Keywords: *Brahmakumaris*, body-consciousness, karma, soul-consciousness.

The reputation of a writer goes through many changes depending upon variations in phases of life. But their works are testimony of their calibre and capacity to pin down the interest of readers through long periods of time period 10 years 100 years or even a thousand years what makes the readers read or re-read their works is their talent of conceiving the plot, the art of characterization and other such features. When it comes to understanding the work of a writer we can look at it from various perspectives and Henry James is one such 20th century American writer who needs no introduction because of the popularity that his works have gathered through all these years. He has written a number of novels portraying wonderful and unique women characters who have got a lot of depth in their portrayal. A very famous work of his that has stood



the test of time is *Portrait of a Lady*. It has often been regarded as one of his masterpieces because of the wonderful character of Isabel Archer. Many interpretations have been made regarding her decision by the end of the novel to return to her malicious and wicked husband Osmond Gilbert. Some critics have opined that it's the weakness of Isabel that made her choose this path; some feel that she didn't want to return to the New World (America) but wanted to experience further the life of Old World (Europe); some propound that her strength to face evil and learn the realities of life made her go back to Osmond in the end. There can be diverse interpretations regarding her decision but she is undoubtedly the embodiment of soul-consciousness as opposed to body-consciousness --- the terms used in the teachings of *Brahmakumaris*.

First of all, it's important to understand the concept of these two terms. Soul-consciousness is a state, according to *Brahmakumaris*, in which we see ourselves and others as purely souls wearing the costume of human bodies which we keep on changing with each new birth. The inherent qualities of a soul are --- love, happiness, peace, purity, knowledge, power and bliss. Each soul has in it these qualities. It's only with the process of taking birth again and again, we tend to forget these qualities and in a state of becoming body conscious, resort to vicious ways based on our adverse experiences in various lifetimes. These inherent virtues are there in each soul. So that's why when our outlook is coloured with the colour of soul consciousness then we see the others as equal to us. All souls are equal in Sweet silent home of God. With the soul going through the process of births and rebirths, ego, anger, lust, greed and attachment with their offsprings like jealousy, hatred, revenge, criticising others replace love, happiness, bliss, peace, purity and strength. Only when we start becoming aware of the basic qualities of each soul, then we tend to show unconditional love and acceptance for all irrespective of their behavior towards us (*Brahmakumaris*). Dadi Janaki, former chief of the *Brahmakumaris* said in one of her lectures that soul-consciousness means the awareness that we all are souls---children of Supreme Soul (God) (class on Soul-consciousness and Seed Stage).

The character of Isabel does show the unique quality of acceptance and unconditional love. The novel has always engaged the interest of various readers because it comes very close to the concept of family life chosen by Indian women in older times though it is still the norm among some modern women also. Isabel Archer is a character who has always left an indelible mark on the minds of the readers in one way or the other. Often been regarded as James's special character because he has given this character a lot of depth



and mystery. Both the admirers and detractors of Henry James have been engaged in a kind of ongoing debate regarding Isabel Archer's decision of going back to her callous and manipulative husband Gilbert Osmond despite having the option to leave him forever. The question that always crops up is that why would a strong woman like Isabel choose to live the rest of her life with Osmond a sterile American-Italian dilettante.

One of the primary reasons that made Isabel choose this difficult route of returning to Osmond rather than tread the easy part of leaving him forever and go to America with her long time admirer and suitor Casper Goodwood is her determination to face evil and become maturer and more realistic than she had been. Dorothy Van Ghent writes about Isabella,

The heroine's voluntary search for fuller consciousness leads her, in an allusion of perfect freedom to choose only "the best" in experience, to choose an evil; but it is this that, by providing insight through suffering and guilt, provides also access to life--- to the fructification of consciousness that is Knowledge of human bondedness (*The English Novel*, 215).

It's true that what Dorothy calls "fuller consciousness" is very much related to soul-consciousness. It is the state wherein the soul is powerful enough to face any adverse situation and get the best out of the worst situation, for Isabella, a will and determination to maybe improve her marriage by staying with Osmond instead of selecting the easiest path of going to America with Casper Goodwood. Life with its promise of comfort and luxury does not appeal to Isabel and it's not obvious that what seems like beautiful and comfortable will turn out to be the same in reality of life. She has a keen desire to taste all the aspects of life. Though there is an inclination in her to seek the pleasantries of life, she's not oblivious to the dark side of life. That is the reason why she rejected the proposal of exceptionally rich and royal Lord Warburton. To become the wife of a wealthy Lord and remain encompassed in the luxurious and stagnant life is not her mission and purpose of life. She wants to experience life in its various manifestations -- be it viciousity or virtue. She tells her cousin Ralph Touchette that "it's not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that" (53). Her happiness doesn't lie in everything happening according to her wishes, but in experiencing all types of pleasant and diverse situations to become a maturer and stronger person. After her marriage with Osmond, when Ned Rosier, the suitor of Pansy sees her, he feels, "The tears had touched her only to enrich her; the flowers of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem. She had lost something of



that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception--- she had more the air of being able to wait...[she had become] the picture of a gracious lady" (315-16). Despite going through the rough patch of her marriage, she doesn't lose her charm and becomes an enriched person. Her final choice of going back to Osmond is the outcome of her maturity and also it's her free will. Walter. F. Wright points out,

Even though she has suffered humiliation and disillusionment she is still determined to seek no escape from responsibility; and though she cannot believe it will be her fate to experience only suffering, she is resigned. That the price she pays heavy is revealed in the last scenes.... Her final choice ---to return to Osmond and Pansy, who need her--is a free one (The Madness of Art, 147-148).

Sister Lucy Schneider also talks about the inner growth of Isabella Archer in her choice to go back to Osmond. She writes:

the seeming environment and the suffering to which she returns constitutes in reality the freedom to be the complete, loving woman--- the strong woman of integrity she has, by degrees become. "(Schneider, CLA Journal, 161).

Though Isabel does show an inclination to be independent and ready to face realities of life, there is in her a strange type of fear not to look beyond what is visible, like the little room in her house in Albamy where Mrs. Touchette visits her.

The place owed much of its mysterious melancholy to the fact that it was properly entered from the second door of the house, the door that had been condemned, and that was secured by bolts which a particularly little girl found it impossible to slide. She knew this silent motionless portal opened onto the street; if the sidelights had not been filled with green paper she might have looked out on the little brown stoop and the well-worn brick pavement. But she had no wish to look out for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange unseen place on the other side--- a place which became to the child's imagination, according to it's different moods, a region of delight or of terror. (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 34)

John Rodenbeck has aptly traced the importance of the image of the bolted door. He gives due credit to Isabella Archer in following her heart, in her extreme capability for idealisation which brings to her suffering after her marriage to Osmond, but also a new zealous perspective towards life. He writes: Incapable of moving back the bolt that separates her from life, the early Isabel Archer prefers to live in her imagination which is 'by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window.



She was not indeed accustomed to keep it behind bolts and at important moments when she would have been thankful to make use of a judgement alone, she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judgement.' It is her imagination, of course, her intellectuality, her extreme capacity for idealization, her 'faculty of seeing without judgement' which in the second half of the novel brings isabella a great deal of suffering and in the end, a revivifying sense of life. (Modern Fiction Series, 331)

All the above critics have caught the essence of Isabel's inner growth (a move towards soul-consciousness) and touched upon the fact that Isabel has indeed shown strength in choosing to return to Osmond despite having the option of going back to America with Casper Goodwood.

When she comes to know that her cousin Ralph is on his death bed in England, she is refused permission by Osmond for going to England to see him. But Isabel is adamant to go. He tells her that, " That's why you must go then? Not to see your cousin but to take revenge on me." She answers, " I know nothing about revenge" (454). it's her move towards recognizing Osmond and Pansy as souls which give her the new lease of life. From catatonic state, devoid of purpose and intention, she transforms suddenly into a lady with a purpose and newly gained wisdom. Casper Goodwood's kiss does not promise her an attractive life with him but the idea of going back to Osmond does encapture her, not only for the sake of Pansy, but with a hidden motive of amending the arrogant and crafty Osmond with her stability and serenity. Her tour of Europe (the Old World) would have remained redundant and meaningless had she returned to America (the New World) without fulfilment of her belief in her duty to rectify the Old World with her inner beauty and charisma.

Unlike Isabel, Madame Merle is a character who is shown as completely body-conscious. Her love for clothes, expensive jewellery and a penchant for luxurious life makes her use manipulative and crafty techniques to meet her ends. Tony Tanner has rightly observed that her most chilling remark is " I don't pretend to know what people are for.... I only know what I can do with them (Henry James: The Writer and his work, 44). This perspective of hers is sufficient enough to point out that for her, the only function of human- beings around her is to serve her purpose. This is the highest form of body-consciousness when a person lives in the awareness of his outer appearance as his only identity. The outer achievements and personality are important but more important that that is our awareness of ourselves as souls. When we're conscious of ourselves as souls using the costume of our body to do work, then we use the seven qualities



of the soul (expounded earlier in the paper). Otherwise, we tend to become egoistic and disrespectful towards other beings and start looking at them as things which can be used for our selfish gains. The whole world appear to be like a huge family of ours and our interest for betterment does not remain focused on ourselves but on the whole human race.

From the very beginning, when Madame Merle enters the novel, she is shown as someone who is strongly seeped in enjoying the life of rich and high society. She is the friend of Isabel Archer's aunt Lydia Touchette. Her very delicacy in playing Schubert on piano creates an air of mystery about her and Isabella does get mesmerised by the music of her piano. It's because Madame Merle does get engaged in certain skills like writing, painting, piano and embroidery that Isabel admires her. According to Ralph Touchette, Isabella's cousin, Madame Merle "does everything beautifully. She's complete"(159). This is an ironical comment wherein Ralph is trying to say that Madame Merle is a highly cunning woman with a great capacity of manoeuvring and using others.

In one of their important exchange of words, When Madame Merle tells Isabella that "there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances"(179), Isabel answers her, "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on contrary a limit, a barrier and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes, which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!...My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with, it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society" (179-180). Madam Merle replied in a tone " Should you prefer go go without them?"(180) which terminated the discussion.

She tells Isabel about Gilbert Osmond, a friend of hers who lived in Italy. About Osmond, she says, that he has "No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" (176). Unfortunately, Isabel falls into the trap of Madame Merle in marrying Osmond because she knows that Isabella is the heir to seventy thousand pounds bequeathed by her Uncle Mr. Touchette. In a classic gesture, Madame Merle's over-attraction towards wealth is discernible when she develops the idea in her mind that Isabel would be a good catch for her and Osmond if the latter marries her. When she comes to know that Mr. Touchette had left her a fortune of seventy thousand pounds,



Madame Merle's hands were clasped in her lap; at this she raised them, still, and held them a moment against her bosom, while her eyes, a little dilated, fixed themselves on those of her friend. 'Ah,' she cried, 'the clever creature....It certainly is clever to achieve such results--- without an effort! (185)

This information about Isabel's inheritance developed the idea in the mind of Merle to get her married to Osmond so that they both could befool her and enjoy her wealth. As such she knew that Osmond was not earning and Isabel's fortune would be a good source of income for him. Madame Merle was cocksure that an innocent woman like Isabel would never come to know anything about her relationship with Osmond or the fact that Pansy was their daughter.

Madame Merle is someone who has lived her life in relationship with others, someone who appears to be terribly insecure and lonely from inside. Mrs. Touchette says about her, "Madame Merle has been a dweller in many lands and had social ties in a dozen different countries....She's one of the most brilliant women in Europe" (173). The whereabouts of her husband are unknown and it's been told by her that he has died. He had been supposed to be a businessman but nobody seemed to have met him. Ralph jokingly tells Isabella that "the husband of Madame Merle would be likely to pass away" (159). She has no children and again Ralph puts it in a satirical way, "Not the least child---fortunately.... I mean fortunately for the child. She'd be sure to spoil it"(159).

These remarks of Ralph show a very clear image of Madame Merle as a dodgy and fraudulent woman who uses her charm to create a picture of a perfectionist to live with her so called friends all over Europe.

Madame Merle's planning with Osmond gets success when Isabe decides to marry Osmond despite a warning from her cousin Ralph Touchette. He makes it clear to Isabella that he doesn't like Osmond. But Isabella is beyond getting influenced in this sphere and does get married to Osmond, much to the disappointment of Ralph. Her married life with Osmond is not a very pleasant one:

She knew if no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel: she simply believed he hated her. That was all she accused him of, and the miserable part of it all was precisely it was not a crime, for against a crime she might have found redress. He had discovered that she was so different, that she was not what he had believed she would prove to be. He had thought at first he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he would like. But she was, after all, herself--- she couldn't help that..... (364)



It's Osmond's expectation that people should behave according to his desire and things should happen exactly according to his wishes. This proves to be the hindrance in his path towards achieving a harmonious relationship with Isabella because his only motive in life is to decorate his house with artistic collections and shockingly Isabel is nothing more to him than a prized possession which he can keep in his house the way he wants to in accordance with his moods and fancies.

Brahmakumari Sister Shivani in her spiritual talk show *Awakening with Brahmakumaris* says about relationships, "I (we) need to stop and ask myself (ourselves) what is the quality of my (our) relationships... It's now based on give and take. Two people only want everything from each other. But we would be very comfortable if we give... Probably we're to remember that we have to give". (*Awakening with Brahmakumaris* episode 1, Soul Reflections). Osmond is only concerned about what he wants from Isabella but he's not aware of the reality that relationships are meant for giving love and respect to others instead of always expecting the other to give. The drive to always want from others is a part of body consciousness and this very concept of Osmond doesn't let him develop a cordial and trusting relationship with his wife.

Osmond and Madame Merle are its appropriate exemplary figures in the novel. They are so much obsessed with gaining wealth and high stature in society that they want to use their daughter Pansy to procure more money and assets. Instead of letting her marry Ned Rosier, the boy of her choice, they want Isabella to influence her into marrying Lord Warburton, the old English aristocrat who had once shown a keen interest in marrying Isabella. Ned Rosier is not as wealthy and of high status as Lord Warburton and hence he is not welcomed by Osmond in his house. Though it's clear to both of them that Pansy and Ned are in love with each other, they insist that Lord Warburton who's much older than Pansy is a better match for her than Lord Warburton. The narrator tells us:

It would please him greatly to see Pansy married to an English nobleman, and just please him, since this nobleman was so sound a character. It seemed to Isabella if she could make it her duty to bring about such an event she should play the part of a good wife (354-355).

This is a very common feature of body consciousness in which we emphasise our worldly wealth and position contrary to our right and accurate karmas. Materials become no longer a means to achieve ends but an end for which anything can be done to achieve. It's in this consciousness that we become selfish and self-



centered in a bid to attain everything for ourselves irrespective of the type of our karmas or actions towards others.

Isabel Archer in her state of soul-consciousness doesn't complain about her situation to everyone because she honours her own decision of marrying Osmond even though it may have proved to be wrong to her. It's only in the end when she goes to meet Ralph Touchette that she tells Ralph about the reality of her life, "He married me for the money"(487). When Ralph asks her if everything was over between her and Osmond, she replies, " Oh no; I don't think anything's over"(488). Despite a dull and stifling marriage with Osmond, having lived in the house of darkness and the house of dumbness and moreover, it was also the house of suffocation. Isabel's soul-conscious state doesn't impel her to break her marriage but an inner power to face her challenges and adversities. Her desire to take care of Pansy and get her happily married is a testimony of her loving and generous nature. She would surely withstand with her promise given to Pansy of going back to her. A soul-conscious person would always be compassionate and forgiving.

Darshan Singh Maini in his book *Henry James: The Indirect Vision* opines that, "For the type of deception practised by Madame Merle and Osmond is so subtle and treacherous that the victim may not only guess the real nature of her disabilities, she may even, thanks to the generosity of her impulses, begin to develop a bad conscience, a distrust of her own self. Such a manipulation is all the more difficult to perceive in that social appearances and forms are scrupulously maintained" (93).

But as destiny would have it, Isabel does come to know about the reality about Osmond and Madame Merle's relationship from Osmond's sister Countess Gemini. She tells Isabel, "My first sister-in-law had no children"(459). Pansy is the daughter of someone else's wife. She continues:

The wife of a horrid little Swiss who died--how long--a dozen more than fifteen years ago. He never recognised Miss Pansy, nor, not knowing what he was about, would have anything to say to her; and there was no reason why he should. Osmond did, and that was better; though he had to fit on afterwards the whole rigmarole of his own wife's having died in childbirth, and of his own having, in grief and horror, banished the little girl from his sight for as long as possible before taking her home from nurse. His wife had really died, you know, of quite another matter and in quite another place: in the Piedmontese mountains, where they had gone, one August, because her health appeared to require the air, but where she was suddenly taken worse--- fatally ill. The story passed, sufficiently it was covered by the appearances so long as nobody



heeded, as nobody cared to look into it. But I knew--- without researches.... As for her veritable mother---!
(459-460).

Though Countess Gemini spoke no name, Isabel could understand that Pansy's mother was Madame Merle. Isabel's reaction is very much connected with her soul conscious state. She doesn't utter spiteful words for either Osmond or Merle but she weeps for the pitiable and pathetic condition of Madame Merle, about Merle's misfortune at not having been able to marry Osmond and call Pansy her own child. "Ah, poor, poor woman!" cried Isabel, who herewith burst into tears. She asks Countess Gemini, "Why then did she want him to marry me?" Countess Gemini answers, "Ah, my dear, that's her superiority! Because you had money; and because she believed you would be good to Pansy"(462).

In reality Madame Merle is the mistress of Gilbert Osmond and her shrewdness and manoeuvring nature instead of giving her a sense of fulfilment saps her soul power and makes her a sort of pawn at Osmond's hands. She is entrapped in her own world of appearances so much that she starts looking disturbed and distressed. There's a feeling of inner bitterness in her and she even tells Osmond that "It was my devilry that stupefied her(Isabel) . I couldn't help it; I was full of something bad. Perhaps it was something good; I don't know. You've not only dried up my tears; you've dried up my soul" (443).

Drying up of soul is the greatest damage that can happen to anyone because if the soul has dried up then there is no happiness in the life of that person. It gives rise to the worst form of life and no amount of outer appearances can bring the glow of happiness on the face of that person. Isabel is on her journey of taking care of Pansy or perhaps with passage of time transforming Osmond even though a little bit. She is on her path of going through the worst conditions with her power and stability. Whereas Madame Merle is destroyed by her own ambition and greed. She cannot call Pansy her daughter because of fear of being alienated from her web of so called social security. Moreover Pansy doesn't like her and wouldn't accept her as her mother had she been told the truth. For the rest of her life, Madame Merle has to live with this hatred of Pansy who loves only Isabel and considers her as her mother and well-wisher. Isabel with her soul-conscious state has stood victorious in each situation and Madame Merle has lost everything-- from self-respect to happiness and her peace of mind.

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