

**Female Identity between Personal
Independence and Patriarchal
Authority: A Reading of Henry
James's
*Washington Square***

The Birth of Feminism

The last two centuries saw the emergence of certain concepts like freedom, emancipation, and independence, which acquired considerable significance when the subject of deciding Woman's position in society

- This radical alteration was mainly caused by political, social, and intellectual factors that came to not only reshape the position of woman in society but also to modify her image to be in keeping with the newly discovered identity.

- In the family, the traditional image of the father as the domineering figure was no longer socially considered appropriate for the newly-rising concept of personal independence. The Feminist Movement called for treating women on equal terms with men on the familial and

- Many nineteenth-Century writers saw it their duty to expose how women had been immeasurably suffering under such an invalid code as that of patriarchy .

- The necessity of abolishing the gender-based inequality can be seen through the writings of not only women novelists like Emily and Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen, but also of Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Henry James.

The Independence of Henry James's Heroines

- With Henry James (1843-1916), the famous English novelist and short-story writer, the Feminist question remained connected with the issue of the individual's freedom of all kinds of authorities that would limit one's capacities and

- Despite the fact that most of James's Major novels have women for their protagonists or main characters, James's own perspective concerning Women's rights of total independence and liberation from all old-fashioned codes remain

- In his *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the heroine, Isabel Archer, has a harsh experience to achieve a kind of self-independence and find out her identity which she feels lost in a cruel, utilitarian male-dominated society. Isabel, however, emerges in the end, defeated and all her hopes destroyed.

- That is the case with most of his women protagonists who try hard to manage on their own without falling under the control of a male authority, yet the results always come out disappointing. The tone seems to be that time is not yet ripe for women to be of certain independent identities, unless helped or instructed by male figures. This is perhaps shown clearly in his *Washington Square*

(Washington Square (1880

- James's fairy tale-like novella is concerned with plain daughter whose name is Catherine, living in a large house with her wealthy, but dictator-like father, Dr. Sloper. The chances of Catherine's finding her way out in life by choosing the man whom she loves for a husband are narrowed by her patriarchal father.

- Once She meets the man (Morris Townsend) whom she thinks is faithfully in love with her she, with the help of her aunt, tries to break the social codes and rules and achieve her independence by making the decision of accepting his proposal for marriage even though against her father's will.

- With her decision, the main questions that Catherine Sloper is after resolving are concerned with marriage, financial support, and freedom in thinking

A-Marriage

- Normally, the father is the one who decides who is the best suitor for his daughter. Since Catherine is rich and lacking female beauty, the father thinks she can not protect herself against the outside dangers, represented by such probable fortune-hunters like Morris.

- Tired of such abominable limitation on her and the dominance of her father as part of a patriarchal system, Catherine resolves to violate such codes, even though she may run the risks of failure and defeat

B-Finacial Support

- The financial support Catherine has proves immaterial as compared with finding or discovering her true identity away from any male dominance and authority. Yet, the struggle remain as it is once the husband can still be another male figure who can limit her movement and chances in life. Catherine has to choose sacrifice her wealth (disinheritance if she marries Morris) or the husband who may not come back again.

- In James's novel, Catherine seems to need enough maturity to make important decisions concerning her future. Ironically, Catherine, after the death of her father and her getting some independence in decision-making, goes back to the same formula and decides to say "no" to Morris. This rejection is important as it is the final and approved one.

C-Freedom in Thinking

- Catherine and her aunt Lavinia display that dissatisfaction with the way how they, as female identities, have been treated and enslaved by the prevalent patriarchal code which is oppressive and inhuman. They start to consider the possibilities in finding who they are and how creative their minds can be once they are let to think freely and creatively.

- However, James's ending of the story of his novella shows that women have to have their equal rights with men, yet time is not yet ripe to do so.

Thank You