



## POSTMODERN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN JOHN FOWLES' *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

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### ABSTRACT

*Postmodernism in abstraction, is a recent intellectual movement which has a powerful influence on contemporary literary writings, apart from other forms of representations. World War II divided the world as before and after it. The ideas of individuality, identity, gender-relations got challenged and a new discourse was created to represent the disjunction of modern perspective. The postmodern influence also challenged the modern approach to literary texts. Postmodern writers seem to have new discursive practices to represent the present condition. John Robert Fowles is an English novelist. He is critically positioned between modernism and postmodernism. The French Lieutenant's Woman is a 1969 postmodern historical fiction. Fowles explores new ideas that informed the British society during the Victorian Era. He re-works on the traditional boundaries of narrative in modern manners. The novel features alternate endings. It compares the ethics of the Victorian characters living in the second half of the nineteenth century. Fowles also attempts to convey to the reader his actual conviction of how a novel should be written from the modern author's stance, while criticizing both the 'form-obsessed' school of writers and the shortcomings of Victorian writing-techniques. This short paper will examine some of the novel's aspects, and the accurate depiction of the morals of Victorian age while maintaining a certain critical distance. Also, the narrative perspective and the alternative endings will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Victorian era, historical fiction, narrative techniques.

### INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is known for its rebellious approach and willingness to test boundaries. Several themes and techniques are indicative of writing in the postmodern era such as irony,



black humour, intertextuality, pastiche, metafiction, fabulation, historiographic metafiction, temporal distortion, magic realism, paranoia, fragmentation.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel written by John Robert Fowles during the postmodern period. It is about the distressed love story between the two main characters Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson. It was published in the second half of the 20th century. The novel takes place during the Victorian era. It shows the contradictions of that time and trying to overthrow them.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a postmodern novel. Postmodernism is a cultural, artistic and intellectual phenomenon that spread in the Western countries after the WWII. The development of this movement was the sense of dissatisfaction, loss of faith, misery and ideological exhaustion. In this novel, John Fowles exposes the themes by using a number of epigraphs, particularly of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, which become a reminder of the political situations and theories of the time.

The narrative techniques of this novel are a combination of Victorian and modern narrative elements applied by John Fowles which transforms it into a contemporary novel. The relationship between Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson resembles as the clash of the twentieth century consciousness and the Victorian mentality. Both the characters are searching for their freedom and they follow the meta-fictional concept of the fiction relationship. The narrative techniques revolving around Sarah's character offer a new interpretation of her.

Fowles cleverly uses a number of different voices throughout the novel. There are several narrative presences and the identity of the story-teller is always ambiguous. He appears as a narrator, an observer, and a god figure. Sometimes he is the author, dropping into a familiar style and inviting the readers to share his creative illusory process, using the "I" pronoun.

John Fowles is the bearded man who enters the novel several times as an observer and sometime as a sort of theatrical director. He comments on the actions of his characters and discusses the relationship between the art of the novel and life.

Some of the major postmodern narrative techniques used in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are: pastiche, fragmentation, multiple points of view, intertextuality, metafiction, and historiographic metafiction.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is partly a pastiche of the great Victorian novelists. Fowles uses the conventions of the nineteenth century romantic fiction to write a study of Victorian



manners, morals which includes two major themes: directing erotic desire into the institution of marriage, and working out the financing of marriage and the family, and also to portray the emergence of modern consciousness.

Fowles rearranges with three distinct narrative voices in the novel: a seemingly omniscient narrator and an intrusive twentieth century storyteller conversing with the readers using both first person and second person narrative voices. Majority of the story is narrated from a third person point of view.

The foremost technique John Fowles has used in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the technique of recreating the Victorian novel with a critical and a sense of parody. He has recreated a Victorian novel with an ironic sense and mockery. To recreate the Victorian novel Fowles does not namely use Victorian conventions. He used Victorian convention, but with a decent portion of parodic skepticism. He sets his novel in Victorian time. He portrays all characters except Sarah in the light of Victorianism.

The second technique Fowles used in this novel is putting epigraph on the head of each chapter. Intertextuality appears in the form of an epigraph in the beginning of each chapter. Fowles uses this technique of epigraph to give every impression of being devoted to recreating Victorian novel. The purpose of an epigraph is to set the tone for the chapter which follows. Many of them are from the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson. There are also examples from Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold, Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, E. Royston Pike and the poet, Clough. Fowles also refers to Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray and Jane Austen.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a meta-fiction. The author certainly intrudes into the narrative structure. In chapter thirteen and elsewhere John Fowles has entered into the narrative structure. This intrusion into the narrative structure gave him quite opportunity to comment upon the Victorian convention.

The narrator intervenes in the story continuously. Fowles uses the technique to make the reader aware of the fictionality and the presence of the author. Fowles is engaged with the problem on whether telling a story is telling lies, and this engagement draws him to examine the relation of the fictional world to the real world. Metafiction is not an imitation of reality, and instead of hiding the difference between fiction and reality.

Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. It is the process of re-writing history through a work of fiction. In Fowles' novel, the readers shuffle between realistic narrative set in the mid-nineteenth century and contemporary narrative



voice. It is able to pull into that Victorian world a host of intertextual references which interrupt the novel's historical realism.

The next technique is giving multiple endings to the novel. The happy ending is the nature of Victorian text. This structural nature of Victorian novel is questioned here. The hero of the novel Charles Smithson is shown condemned to live alone throughout his life. The novel is having three endings. For the Victorian readers, first end is that Charles married to Ernestina. For the traditional reader is given a happy ending that is a successful reestablishment of a relationship with Sarah. For the modern readers the tragic separation between Sarah and Charles and then Charles came back into the world without a partner. These multiple endings enable Fowles to hint at his rejection of literary perception.

The last unusual technique is the novelist becoming a character. The novelist enters into the structure of the narrative and talks to other characters, discusses their problem and fixes a course of action for them. The intrusive novelist seems like a character. He talks about the power of authorship to change the inevitable destiny of his characters. Fowles stimulates his readers' self-consciousness and invites them to compose the narrative with him. In this sense, readers are no longer passive consumers but co-authors with freedom.

Postmodernism in fiction subverts the master-narrative. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* had Sarah accepted Charles the novel might have been a master-narrative. But Sarah rejected Charles. Consequently, it became an existential narrative of the protagonist's evolution of personality and progression of self. To achieve the purpose of overthrowing the following devices are used: Parody, Irony, Distortions of narrative time, Discontinuity, Anachronism, Blurring of genres and Ambivalence.

John Fowles examines the complex relationship between men and women and the social framework which determines their behaviour as well as their roles in society. In this novel, John Fowles portrays the Victorian Age in terms of his own history and society as he comments of his faults and ills which continue to exist.

In this novel, the concern of the feminine voice is one of the main issues for Fowles. The protagonist of the novel, Sarah Woodruff, becomes a 'surrogate author' who acquires the power of the narrative within the text frames. She continues to question and challenge the conventions of the Victorian era.



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