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Deconstructing Postmodern Narrative Techniques in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract:

Postmodernism began after the end of the Second World War and was both an intellectual movement and a continuation and an experiment on modernism. The end of the Second World War challenged the ideas of identity, individuality, and gender relations. The old discourse could not represent the newly formed ideas and thus a new narrative technique was created. Postmodernism challenged the modernist approach to literature. Postmodernists believe the world to be meaningless and chaotic, without any single truth. Instead of controlling the readers' minds, postmodern literary texts tend to give the readers room for interpretation. John Robert Fowles' novel "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*", published in 1969, is a seminal work of postmodern historical fiction that subverts the traditional style of writing novels. This work is an amalgamation of both postmodern and modern fiction. Fowles through this work questions the traditional narrative styles of the Victorian era. The novel has multiple endings, and the role of the narrator is also questioned. This research article will examine and analyze some of the postmodern techniques employed by John Fowles.

Keywords*:* Postmodernism, John Fowles, Narration, Metafiction.

INTRODUCTION

John Fowles' "The French Lieutenant's Woman" is one of his most famous and commercially successful works of postmodern fiction. Fowles spent four years at Oxford studying French. He was influenced by existential thinkers such as Albert Camus and John Paul Sartre and that is why we see the themes of existentialism in this novel. The novel was written when the author was living in Lyme Regis with his wife. The novel is essentially a love story with the Victorian era as its setting. The central characters are Charles Smithson, Sarah Woodruff, and Ernestina

Freeman. Even though the novel has the Victorian era as its setting, Fowles employs many postmodern literary techniques to construct the novel such as fragmentation, pastiche, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, and multiple points of view. The authority of the author or narrator is also questioned. The use of such postmodern techniques makes this novel a defining work of the postmodern era. The novel is also a pastiche or blending of many eminent Victorian novelists. The novel examines Victorian manners and morals from a postmodern perspective. It challenges the rules and conventions of nineteenth-century fiction and questions whether there is any single reality. The narrative techniques employed in the novel are an amalgamation of both modern and Victorian genres which eventually turns it into a startling work of the postmodern era. Several Avant Garde techniques of postmodernism such as fabulation, metafiction, fragmentation, intertextuality, and others are carefully employed by John Fowles. The novel is narrated from a third-person point of view but Fowles manages to include two other distinct narrative voices: an omniscient narrator and a twentieth-century storyteller who converses with the readers from both first-person and second-person narration. Fowles manages to recreate a Victorian novel but with a sense of scepticism and parody. The characters also embody the mentalities of different ages. It is evident from the relationship between Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff that the former presents the Victorian mentality and the latter is a symbol of twentieth-century consciousness. While commenting on the construction of the novel John Fowles says:

"There are many reasons why novelists write, but they all have one thing in common – a need to create an alternative world."

Thus, **John Fowles** creates an alternate world where the conventions of the Victorian era are subverted and modified to show the contradictions of an earlier age. The novel examines the complex relationship that existed between men and women and how their behaviour was determined by the social framework existing at that time. Fowles tries to comment on the faults and vices of the Victorian era which continued to exist. He also allows readers to interpret the work in any way they like; thus, by doing so, the author turns the readers into co-authors. The inclusion of multiple endings testifies to the above line since the author uses three different endings for the readers and it is up to the readers to decide which one they will choose. Therefore, this novel is a unique example of postmodern fiction where the author employs many different genres to create an organic whole. This paper will thus, discuss the various postmodern literary techniques employed by the author with special reference to "The French Lieutenant's Woman".

AN OVERVIEW OF POSTMODERN ELEMENTS IN THE NOVEL

John Fowles in "The French Lieutenant's Woman" employs several postmodern literary techniques which will be explained in this section. Intertextuality is one of the key techniques used in the novel. The term was popularized by Julia Kristeva. It is meant to denote the different ways through which one text can refer to other texts either by open or covert citations or by allusions. It essentially refers to the idea of shaping one text by making use of different texts from the earlier or contemporary era. It is a procedure where the 'always-already' conventions are combined in the discourses into which we are born. This idea of including citations from other texts is deliberately done by the writer to show the readers what literary text the writer is referring to. In "The French Lieutenant's Woman", Fowles adds an epigraph at the beginning of each chapter where he quotes from other texts from different periods. Fowles uses quotations from many different sources such as Darwin's "Origin of Species", Hardy's "The Riddle", G.M. Young's "Portrait of an Age", Jane Austen's "Persuasion", Mrs Norton's "The Lady of La Garaye" and Tennyson's "In Memoriam", "Maud" among others. The intertextual allusions are essential to the development of the characters. William Stephenson says "*The French Lieutenant's Woman's citations of its Victorian sources are re-enactments rather than references: they form part of an extended, and often self-contradictory, pattern of performances by the narrator*". The use of intertextuality affects metafiction in a way that allows a parodied dialogue with history and literature, which eventually gives rise to historiographic metafiction. Therefore, Fowles' work is a representation of postmodern sensibilities which further encompasses "*cultural forms that display certain characteristics such as reflexivity, irony, parody, and often a mixing of the conventions of popular and high art*". The use of epigraphs is an intertextual strategy that represents the significance of previous texts and how they relate to the work being written. Thus, Fowles employs Intertextuality to emphasize the progression and development of the characters and also to explain the essence of each chapter, as evidenced by the use of epigraphs at the beginning.

METAFICTION AS A WAY OF NARRATION

Metafiction is another important postmodern literary device used by John Fowles in the novel. Robert Scholes popularized it as an alternative to "surfiction". The use of metafiction allows the author to depart from realism and focus on the role of the author in creating fiction and the way the readers will receive it. Closely related to Metafiction is the term Fabulation which

violates standard conventions of constructing a novel by experimenting with the form, style, and subject matter which eventually blurs traditional distinctions between trivial or serious, tragic or comic as well as ludicrous or horrible. While reading a work of fiction, the readers are taken away to an alternate world, and the role of metafiction is to make the readers aware of the artificiality of the fiction. It also makes the readers aware of the existence of the author. In simple terms, metafiction is writing about fiction in the form of fiction and it interrupts the readers in a kind of disruption. In chapter three of this novel, Fowles while discussing Charles and the inventions which took place in the twentieth century writes:

"*Though Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him in future of the aeroplane, the jet plane, television, radar…*"

The above lines about Charles remind the readers that they are reading a work of fiction. While discussing Sarah, Fowles says that he doesn't know her and that the story might all be an imagination. Such discussions about the plot and the characters by the author prove that this is a work of metafiction where the readers are constantly reminded about the fictionality of the novel. As a narrator, Fowles also interrupts the flow of the novel and eventually shatters the illusion of reality to explain the plot and characters and also provides his comments. Also, we find the combination of fiction and fact from the lines given below:

"*…Charles would almost certainly not have believed you – and even though, in only six months from this March of 1867, the first volume of Kapital was to appear in Hamburg.*"

The term 'historiographic metafiction' was coined by Linda Hutcheon in the late 80s which meant to amalgamate metafiction and history. In simple terms, it means to fictionalize actual figures and events and combine them with fiction. As evident in the novel, we find many actual figures who are fictionalized in the novel, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter of the Victorian era. Fowles chooses a historical setting and talks about a bygone era in his manner. This novel is a historical metafiction as it uses actual figures, history, and a historical setting.

USE OF PARODY

Parody is another distinct feature of postmodern works and one of the major characteristics of postmodernism. Fowles uses parody as a style to comment on the follies and hypocrisies of the

Victorian era. The use of epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter is employed as a parody of the Victorian era. The Victorian style of narration is also parodied by the author's use of a modern narrative style. Fowles tries to distinguish between the omniscient and non-omniscient narrator and claims that modern readers are no longer able to believe the author's all-knowing capacity. According to Fowles, the author is not the creator and controller of a work but it is the readers who are giving meaning to the work. In The French Lieutenant's Woman, the readers find that the role of the author has been subverted. The author is no longer considered a God. The author is a God who no longer knows everything but is someone who can do anything. Fowles while discussing the role of the author in chapter 13 says:

"*a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God.*"

Thus, Fowles uses parody to show the differences that occurred between the Victorian and the Modern period. The characters are also parodied in the novel. Sam Farrow, the servant of Charles Smithson is a parody of Sam Weller from Charles Dickens's Pickwick Papers. But Parody serves more than just being a form of mockery. Parody is also used as a revision of the past. In the novel, the characters belong to the Victorian period but they do not have the conventional Victorian traits. This is evident in the given lines: "*Good Heavens, I took that to be a fisherman. But isn't it a woman?*" It was common in the Victorian era for a male member to escort a female but here we see Sarah to be alone. This shows that the Victorian characters are parodied in a modern sense. In chapter 5, readers find "*to catch her (Ernestina) eye in the mirror- was a sexual thought*". Ernestina, being a product of the Victorian age, is a prude. The Victorian style of ending is also parodied as the author chooses to give multiple endings. The characters are also allowed to make decisions according to their own will which was again a mockery of the Victorian style of characterization. Fowles also mentions that there were fewer churches and more brothels in the Victorian period in chapter 38 "*Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel*". Thus, Fowles abundantly uses Parody to highlight the follies and vices that existed in the Victorian era. But at the same time, it is important to remember that Fowles had a deep affection for Victorian literature as he brings in seminal figures of the Victorian era like Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy who knew human experience. Thus, Parody is an essential part of this novel and an important literary technique of postmodernism.

OPEN-ENDED NATURE OF THE NOVEL

The open ending is also a crucial element of Postmodernism. Post-modernist writers leave the novels to be interpreted by the readers and they avoid giving a definite ending to their work. Fowles in this novel has used three different endings and it is up to the readers to choose the ending. We find the endings in different chapters of the novel such as chapters 44, 60, and 61. The first ending is considered to be conventional since it follows the tradition of Victorian happy endings. In the first ending, Charles leaves Sarah and finally marries Ernestina, and thus the readers are given a traditional happy ending. On the other hand, the second ending deals with Sarah reuniting with Charles which is considered to be an unconventional ending. While the third ending is different since it shows the existential quest of Charles. Sarah rejects Charles and therefore he becomes a rejected lover. The last ending is considered to be postmodern. Thus, Fowles' use of three different endings gives room to the readers to interpret the work in any way they like. The plurality of meaning also becomes important in this discussion since postmodern writers believe that there is no single reality and that truth is dependent upon situations and circumstances. The three endings provided in the novel also signify the lack of one single reality. The destinies of Charles and Sarah are decided by the readers and therefore we find multiple realities in the novel.

CONCLUSION

After a complete analysis of the novel, we find that John Fowles uses postmodernist literary techniques uniquely and innovatively. The novel's use of intertextuality gives the readers valuable information regarding human nature and it also provides the essence of each chapter. Thus, the use of metafiction to construct the plot becomes another distinct feature of the novel. The amalgamation of history and fiction makes the novel a unique piece of postmodern literature. The use of real-life figures and fictional characters is yet another trait of postmodern novels. Parody is another key feature of postmodern writings and Fowles tactfully uses parody not only to mock the hypocrisy of the Victorian era but also as a revision of the past. The Victorian way of plot construction, narration, and characterization has been parodied to highlight the differences between the Victorian era and the modern world. The open-ended nature of the novel allows the readers to interpret the novel in their own way. The readers are given equal importance and the author allows readers room for interpretation. Plurality of meaning and existential angst can also be seen in the novel and hence we can conclude that

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a perfect example of postmodern fiction where John Fowles uses postmodern literary techniques and creates a unique narrative for the readers.

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