

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VICTORIAN BACKGROUND IN THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN OF JOHN FOWLES: A CASE STUDY

P. MUTHUSIVAM

Department of English, Selvam College of Technology, Tiruchirappalli, India

ABSTRACT

Historical elements in novels take the readers into a realm of complete conventionality and a writer may choose it for many reasons as a background for his story. Especially, a writer who has conceived characters that are free from the contemporary inhibitions and with social and moral consciousness will certainly want to move away from the known world to unknown. Some create a world of their own to let their characters play attractively with the values and the dignity of their own, with the creation of a strong sense of possibility and probability in the minds of the readers. On the other hand few in its place, find a suitable moment in the past, with which they need not try and toil in the work of creating it and their job becomes very easy as they only call for the memory of their readers. Thus the novelists generally succeed in creating a distinctive ground for their story. The present study discloses the reasons and the advantages of the novelists for luring back the audience with the elements of the past in general and Victorian world in particular with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* of John Fowles as an epitome.

KEYWORDS: Parody, Utilitarianism, Fallen Woman, Serialization, Totalization

INTRODUCTION

John Fowles' *The French lieutenant's woman*, published in 1969, brought to public attention a different interpretation of Victorian, sexual and literary conventions. But in the 1980s and 1990s that many British novelists, for various and complex reasons, have unearthed and have given the kiss of life to the great Victorian tradition. Some of the popular novels by popular novelists of that category include *the siege of Krishnapur* by J.G. Farrell in 1973, *The Great fire of London* by Peter Ackroyd in 1982 and *Nice Work* by David Lodge in 1988. Later novels like *The Quincunx* by Charles Palliser in 1989, *Affinity* by Sarah waters in 1999, *Laura Blundy* by Julie Myerson in 2000 and *the final journey of Jane Eyre* by D.M. Thomas in 2000 also possess Victorian elements.

Novels such as *The Quincunx*, *Laura Blundy*, *Sweet Thames* and English passengers Matthew Kneale, *the underground man*, bring around the integrity of the Victorian voices (in the form of first-person narrative letters, diaries or dialogues). The interesting thing about this trend of fiction is that many of the novels have not simply been interested in resurrecting or retreating into the Victorian past, but have instead displayed an informed postmodern self-consciousness in their interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history. (Shuttleworth 1998:253)

Reading *the French Lieutenant's Woman* does make the readers to have a glimpse of the Victorian world and characteristics of the Victorian novels. However some facts about Victorian world will make us to dig up the reasons behind the using of that world and life in the cotemporary fictions.

Victorian period marked by the rule of Queen Victoria is the longest reign beginning from the year 1837 to 1901. According to Katherine Newey, many Victorians themselves had great confidence in the almost immeasurable capacity of the stage as an effective means of representation and communication, and its capacity to absorb and incorporate

all other art forms. (2009: 5)

The Evangelical and Utilitarian ideas of purity, morality, wholesomeness and utility strengthen Victorian cultural system of sexuality. Like Evangelicals, Utilitarianism is a powerful ethical force during Victorian period. Its doctrines are based on sexual repression: Sexual expression was impractical because it diverted men to work, it appealed to emotion rather than to reason, and it did nothing to further the progress of society. Procreation was meaningful; all other forms of sexuality were, practically speaking, merely a waste of precious time. (Goldfarb 1970: 29)

TREATMENT OF VICTORIAN AGE AND SPIRIT BY FOWLES

Fowles indicates that Victorian Age is a time of contradictions: an age that regards woman as sacred and spiritual, but a girl can be purchased at low price. He also says that the sensual description of the literary productions never goes beyond a kiss and the output of pornography has never been exceeded. Against such a period of contradiction and transition, Fowles' concern with human emancipation and the Victorian sexual hypocrisy are accentuated. He does not appreciate Victorian Age a better one as compared to the contemporary world.

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds--a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. 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 (the modern ratio would be nearer one in six thousand).

In the novel Fowles not only speaks about the religious wrong interpretations, he even goes to the extent of speaking about the fate of the wrong practitioners. He describes about Mrs. Poulteney's a lady who craved for after-life in heaven has to confront a situation that she never expected.

Fowles descriptions of the religious practices and the attitude of people towards it have its own role to play. It is not just to bring into focus certain understanding of the society but in fact they were constructed to create pity and love towards Sarah who suffers because of such institutions along with women of her kind.

The French Lieutenant's Woman has typical Victorian features like the suspension of plot or the shift in situation which would support the form of serialization. The story revolves around *the French Lieutenant's Woman*, and she is the prime of the novel and all other characters get influenced in one way or the other., There is a rise and fall and the treatment of fatalism to an extent.

The characters and the scenery form an organic whole and they are found inseparable. Hardy's characters may be grouped into the following categories: Staunch, selfless, tender-hearted heroes like Oak, Giles, Winterborne, Venn; The dashing, fickle, breaker of hearts like Sergeant Troy, Wildeve, Alec D'urberville; Patient, devoted, forgiving women like Tess, Marty, and Elizabeth Jane; Willful, capricious, but good-hearted girls like Bathsheba, Grace, and Fancy and Passion tormented romantic enchantresses like Eustacia, Lucetta.

The character "Sarah Woodruff" of Fowles is mysterious and at the same time unique. Sarah seems to bear out the public's view when she explains to Charles that she indeed became infatuated with the French Lieutenant when he was recovering from an injury in the house, where Sarah was governess, and that she followed him when he left to return to France. She tells Charles that she quickly realized that he had regarded her only as an amusement, but that she gave herself to him nonetheless, doubly dishonoring herself by choice as well as by circumstances. She seems to be proud of her status as outcast, for it differentiates her from a society which she considers unjust. She confesses that she deliberately allowed herself to be seen by him and through which she uncovers her attraction towards him. Later, in a hotel at Exeter, he is

ordered to see her in her room because she has supposedly injured her ankle, though she has purchased the bandage before the slip occurred. Charles is overcome by passion and takes her to bed, only to discover that she is a virgin, despite what she had told him about the French lieutenant. She confesses that she has deceived him, says that she cannot explain why and, furthermore, cannot marry him. After the incident, Sarah goes to London having left no forwarding address. Two years after she disappeared, Charles gets a cable from his solicitor saying that Sarah has been found. When Charles arrives at Sarah's house, he finds her surprised to see him and not apologetic about having left him. Charles is shocked, partly by the rather notoriously unconventional company she is keeping with and partly by her lack of repentance for having deceived him and left him in uncertainty. He accuses her of implanting a dagger in his breast and then twisting it. She decides not to let Charles leave without revealing that she has had a child by him, named Lalage. She is publicized to set for a new Journey with Charles but Charles goes away even before she could tell him about the baby. But on both occasions she is placid and contented with herself. The characterization of Sarah accentuates the theme of emancipation in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Sarah is sexually exploited and condemned for her sexual impurity by Victorian patriarchal society.. As Fowles argues, this mysterious woman “represented a reproach on the Victorian Age, an outcast. I don’t know her crime, but I wished to protect her”. (Afterwords 162)

The purpose to criticize Victorian sexual inequality is accompanied with the employment of parody of Victorian literary conventions. In this parodic writing form, Fowles expresses his belief in freedom through characterizing Sarah as a fallen woman, contrary to a virtuous heroine in Victorian traditional novel. The miserable endings of impure heroine, such as death or insanity, are modified. Far from being the victim of patriarchal sexual regulations and suffering of female hysteria, Sarah reappears as a New Woman. She asserts the finding of her true happiness and the achievement of her selfhood. Moreover, Fowles casts off the Victorian literary convention of a fixed consummate ending in a romance.

It is obvious that the ideology and structure of Victorian bourgeois sexual morality and regulations constitute the social background of the novel. The word “Victorian” is not only referred to Queen Victoria or to her reign but defined as an adjective, “pertaining to or characteristics of ideals and standards of morality and taste prevalent during the reign of Queen Victoria; prudish; conventional; narrow.” (Goldfarb 20)

In Victorian era, the restrained sexual attitudes and the system of sexual regulations exclusively belong to the bourgeois and upper class. The Victorian bourgeoisie is demanded and regulated to espouse a set of sexual moral values: sexual repression, non-premarital intercourse, and the strong social decorum between two sexes. The purpose of sexuality in marriage is reduced to getting offspring. Any sexual transgression, such as prostitution, adultery, or extramarital intercourse, over the procreative delimitation means the sexual impurity and immorality. Sexual indulgence, for the bourgeois class, is considered to degrade personal morality and threaten the social order.

Sara willingly makes the folly of having an affair with Charles and which makes one to think that she has been ill treated by the society for what she is not and at the end she resolves to live deserving their treatment.

THE SYNTHESIS OF FOWLES

The Victorian novelists may miss the heights and depths of human passions, there may be no probing of the human heart and no psycho-analysis as in the modern novel. But Fowles has certainly probed beneath the characters and has given insight of most of the characters. It should be noticed that almost all the characters are different from one another and Fowles has given importance to all the characters. Sarah as a social rebel, Ernestina as an orthodox lady of the Victorian age, who is contented with her life is an interesting contrast. Charles is of course, a man who could fit in both the

category and it is understood from the three endings that Fowles gives in the novel. Fowles describes Mrs. Poulteney right in the beginning and does not let the readers to know through the novel.

Mrs. Poulteney had two obsessions: or two aspects of the same obsession. One was Dirt though she made some sort of exception of the kitchen, since only the servants lived there and the other was immorality. In neither field did anything untoward escape her eagle eye. (25)

Unlike Victorian novels important aspects of life are not left out. There is proper treatment of human nature. The view of life expressed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is just, everyone in the novel play their part, unlike Victorian novels which tends to be one-sided and partial. He certainly speaks about our nature and the nature of the Victorian world. Sarah Woodruff is mysterious in nature and she essentially comes around as a fallen woman. Characterizing Sarah as a fallen woman, contrary to a virtuous heroine in Victorian traditional novel may sound odd in the beginning but he comes to the normal track of the Victorians after the "accident" in the hotel, when Charles discovers that she is a virgin, despite what she has told him about the French lieutenant. Here the author changes the attitude of the readers towards her and he creates an entirely new one. However the reason for her to describe herself as a fallen woman is not very clear. It can be understood that Fowles tries to play as free as he can and he impresses every one with the twist in the story than the logic behind the course or cause for the action.

Fowles has created a female protagonist who at the beginning looks as tough different at the end matches with the qualities of Victorian novelists. Fowles gives greater importance to the landscape of the Victorian world. There is the suspension of plot or the shift in situation consistently throughout the novel. The sentiments of the characters are typical to that of their own age. The attitude of characters towards their life is typical to that of their own age except Sarah's. There are many literary allusions and quotations, and references to poets and writers of the Victorian age. The use of co incidents and accidents are very apparent.

IMPLICATION

Achievement of John Fowles is that he has used the epigraphs and poems of the Victorian world and has created an ideological and philosophical world with the Victorian background. He has analysed the Victorian world and has manipulated it to create a platform, re-arranging it, to tell his own story. In the end he has created a real Victorian world than the ideal Victorian world, in order to support his story. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is one of the first novels on the British fictional scene to strive for novelty not by looking for a new way of rendering contemporary experience but by reverting to the past and revising its most potent myths. Fowles proves that he is a Post-Modern novelist, though the background is Victorian in *the French Lieutenant's Woman*, through the narration of the story and the three possible endings that he gives for the novel. Above all it also gives the hint, with the increase in the number of novels with the Victorian background, that the contemporary world is not endowed with all the credentials for staging classical design.

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