THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (1969) AND POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT--_The aim of this paper is to present a picture of literature under the influence of an age which culled literature as well as other aspects of society in a way which was undesirable as well as unpredictable. Literature is the mirror of society. Holding the finger of this well-known quote it can be remarked that literature reflects what has been going on in a particular society. Our prime concern here is to trace the influences of the postmodern era on the literature of that age, more specifically on John Fowles' novel The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969)._
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I.   INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism

The year 1939 is a remarkable year in the world history. The smooth pace of history was ruined by the First World War, and then this small spark was inflamed by the Second World War in 1939, which is a demarcation line to the beliefs, traditions, and norms, prevalent in the society. Literature got the greatest impact of this, and thus it took the form of a movement with the name 'Postmodernism'.As the Encyclopedia Britannica puts it, postmodernism is"a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power".Postmodernism logically means a state after modernity. It refers to the actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity. The archaeologist Mathew Johnson has characterized postmodernity, or the postmodern condition, as disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals. Jean-Francois Lyotard gives the best definition of postmodernism in his seminal work _The Postmodern Condition_ (1984) as"incredulity toward metanarratives", which best describes our prime matter of concern,   _The French Lieutenant's Woman_ as a postmodern novel.

The author

Before going deeper in our study, we must have to take an account of the life and works of the author of the novel. John Fowles was born on 31st March 1926, in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. His father, Robert Fowles was a tobacco importer and his mother, Gladys was a housewife. Until the beginning of World War II, his childhood was ordinary. In the 1940s and 50s, he attended Bedford and also served as a lieutenant as a Royal Marines. During this period he traveled extensively through France, Greece and elsewhere, and then finally returned to England to teach and write. As a child, he was fascinated by _Bevis_ by Richard Jeffries, a Victorian account of an adventurous rural boyhood and it is the first book that, he remarks, he had "ever loved passionately and almost totally lived … a

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unique master-influence". His first novel, *The Collector* (1963), was characterized by a parable of the confrontation between reactionary ignorance and progressive self-awareness. His next novel, *The Magus* (1965), was an existentialist tale of a man's personal growth. *Daniel Martin, The Ebony Tower, A Maggot, Mantissa, The Aristos* - are some other works authored by Fowles. He also wrote several non-fiction pieces about nature and ecology. Fowles' art was born of two parents: "the formulaic, fantastical, medieval romance and structurally more flexible, emotionally subtler tradition of nineteenth-century realism" (2). Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* appeared in the year 1969, and after the publication of this critic called him "the paradigm of a new postmodernist generation, audacious enough to acknowledge his debt to past literature by playing irreverent formal games with its most cherished conventions" (2). For more than a year the novel remained on the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine bestseller lists. It won him the W.H. Smith & Son prize in 1970 and the Silver PEN Award in 1969.

The novel: in a nutshell

The basic structure of the novel is very conventional that includes the archetypal romance plot of the meeting, separation, and reunion of two lovers. Very briefly the story involves the protagonist Charles Smithson, a nobleman and amateur scientist, who is engaged to Ernestina Freeman, heiress to the large fortune of her successful businessman father. Sarah Woodruff is a servant to the odious Mrs. Poulteney. On a holiday in Lyme Regis Charles with Ernestina sees Sarah staring at the sea on the Cobb. Charles comes to know from Tina that she is known locally as a fallen woman because of a past affair with Varguennes, a shipwrecked sailor, with whom she loses her virginity and thus reputation. The locals nicknamed her as the French lieutenant's 'whore'. Despite the danger of being seen, Charles starts meeting Sarah in a secluded wooded area, the Undercliff, to the west of Lyme. Charles wants to pick her up from the gutter of social negligence and help her, but she disappears from the scene as a comet and leaves for Exeter. Charles follows her there and finding her in a hotel, he has sex with her and finds that she is still a virgin. He breaks off his engagement to Ernestina. Sam, his servant, tells Ernestina's father about the affair. Charles returns to Exeter intending to marry Sarah, but by the time he reaches Sarah vanishes. He leaves England for America, but after two years Sarah is discovered in London itself who has been staying there as a model and amanuensis to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The meeting of Sarah and Charles provides two endings: one being the reunion of the family with Charles, Sarah and their daughter from their single sexual encounter; and the other being Sarah's rejection of the proposal of marriage by Charles and his departure for America.

Postmodern Features

The above description is the merest outline of the story, but the text provides sub-plots, digressions by the narrator, miniature essays on sexuality, evolution, and religion, descriptive passages, dialogues, footnotes, formal experiments, extended quotations, and allusions. Although it is a novel where one gets the essence of the past, it has a setting and structure which provide a postmodern feel to the text. Though he has set the novel on the Victorian society, the attribution of postmodern techniques gives it incredibility. Fowles sets the story in 1867-69, essentially a century before the composition of the book, and therefore in Victorian England, in which the social conventions governing love, class, sexuality, and religion were different from those of his own time. But, noticeably, the underlying issues were still very similar. "His fiction posed philosophical problems about individuality, sexuality,

creativity, ecology and many other issues, but artfully concealed them beneath the suspense and eroticism of popular forms like the thriller and the romance, from which he borrowed unstintingly"(William Stephenson) (2).

Fowles' work is an inseparable blending of both postmodernism and existentialism. Stephenson says, "Postmodernism is more difficult to define than existentialism (and in fact, *resists* definition as imposing an outdated form of conceptual closure)…" Still, we can find out certain aspects, which are characteristically postmodern. Postmodernism expresses a critique toward anything that could be labeled as 'unity in diversity' and celebrates everything showing openness, diversity, and pluralism. It emphasizes in juxtaposing what was traditionally considered to be strictly separate. This happens in the case of intertextuality, which is a significant feature of postmodernism as reflected in our novel. The text is never perceived as an original, unified, autonomous and isolated unit. It is, as Foucault puts, "caught up in a system of reference to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network". Most commonly intertextuality appears throughout the novel in the form of an epigraph at the beginning of each chapter. In these small passages, Fowles quotes famous literary works and authors, thus setting like a preface the theme and tone of each chapter. In the novel science and scientists like Darwin and his evolution theory become intertextual devices (chapters 3, 19 and 50). The extensive use of allusions serves in the authentication of the characters and it raises the credibility of the story. As Dana Valentova puts it,

When Charles sees Sarah, the expression of her face reminds him of Emma Bovary; and the gradualchanges in his servant's behavior makes him wonder "if there wasn't something of a Uriah Heep beginning to erupt on the surface of Sam's personality"; Sarah, not trying to hide her "shame", calls herself a "scarlet woman of Lyme";and Ernestina, on a romantic walk with Charles, shows him "the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in Persuasion". Charles and Dr. Grogan also spend a considerable amount of time discussing Darwin's revolutionary work, and Ernestina reads parts of Mrs. Norton's The Lady of La Garaye in the evenings. (3)

Thus we see instances of intertextuality in this novel, which also lead to other postmodern features inherent in it. The loss of center in postmodernism has brought about major changes in artistic expression. Instead of singularity, it chooses diversity and heterogeneity, mixing styles and techniques. It mixes past with the present and real with the fictional. In this work of historiographic metafiction, both the Victorian and the Modern worlds, and the fictional and the real worlds overlap. The novel operates between two metafictional tendencies: on one hand, it establishes the allusion of reality and on the other hand, exposes the fictionality. Some of the names and actualities appear only in the discourse of the narrator, for example, George Sand, J. S. Mill, Adolf Hitler; and some others enter also the discourse of the characters, for example, the Pre-Raphaelites, Charles Darwin and Jane Austen. Both ways, the deployment of those who are referred from the real world gives the text an impression of accuracy. But, Fowles' interpretation or representation of history will not prove a very authentic version, because as a witness to the Modern or Postmodern era, the novelist will present a realistic picture of the age. But, for the version of the Victorian era he will be a second hand narrator, who will provide some other's version. Since the setting of the novel is the Victorian society, a reliable and realistic picture is hence undesirable.

Apparently the novel gives us a very simple story, but it is not as simple as it seems to be. The narrative technique of the novel is a very complex one that again goes according to postmodern literary characteristics. The novel does not have an omnipresent or omniscient, God-like narrator. Following postmodern tradition the novel rejects any imposition of a supreme authority upon the text; instead, it gives a mixture of narrative voices. Hutcheon in his *Poetics* gives us the phrase, 'Chinese boxes of narrators and fiction-makers'. The major narrator is confused

himself, behaves like a neurotic person. After describing a lot about Sarah, he gives answer to the query 'Who is Sarah?' as 'I don't Know'. Fowles himself appears in a chapter, which again disturbs his omniscient vice because he seems to be torn apart between fiction and reality. At times he appears as a modern narrator, again as a traveler sharing a train compartment with Charles and so on. He lets us know that some of the characters 'disobey' his intentions. Sarah, for instance, lives her life in her way and creates her own "fictional" world, and remains till the last a 'mystery' for the author/creator.

Creating layers of confusion are the forte of our author. His greatest effort proves successful with the threefold conclusion of the novel. Not only one, declaring his authorial authority over the structure of the novel, but he also gives three ultimately contradictory endings to the novel. The first one, which appears in chapter 44, is a typical Victorian ending accordingly. Here Charles conforms to his duty and after leaving Sarah, marries Ernestina and enters her father's business. This conventional "happy ending" cannot satisfy the expectations of a modern reader. This is like an interval or breaks to the smooth flow of the story. The great 'epic quest' begins in the next chapter following Sarah, the quest gets over by chapter 60 when he meets Sarah and with a family reunion of- Sarah, Charles and their child from the single intercourse. The very next chapter gives a very different and realistic ending i.e. Charles is left alone, more accurately, 'abandoned'. But this leads him to the understanding of freedom and his true-self. There was a time when a single happy ending served well enough, but now the expectations of a postmodern reader cannot be sufficed even by three endings. This, in a way, is indicative of the modern man's complex mentality, understanding, and insight. This characteristic feature of the novel is the most important trait that contributes towards its postmodernist understanding. Any ending one can operate for a short story/novel of modern/postmodern age. But, here the task is made easier by the author by applying the method "pick and choose". There is another mystery which acted behind the making of this threefold ending i.e. "Elizabeth (Fowles' wife) was his sternest editor". "Because of her interventions, Fowles removed several didactic or redundant passages. Elizabeth also disapproved of the single, closed ending her husband had offered." By this, our author has started market imperialism or opened up a 'conglomerate'. In modern times, we think we have so many choices, and we can choose things in the market accordingly. But, have we ever noticed that both *Colgate* and *Close-up* are produced by Hindustan Unilever? Consumers must have to buy one or the other. Ultimately the profit goes to the same company. Likewise, Fowles is also giving up options, but barring us from being creative.

At last, but not the least, the feature of the novel as a postmodern text is its parody over the style and tradition of the Victorian writers, with the help of modern narrative devices. His novel is a rebellion against any restrictions upon the techniques established by the nineteenth-century novelists. The illusion of reality, the treatment of a plot and characters, the chronological story-telling, the omniscient and God-like voice of the narrator and the sense of a neat, final ending- all these features are questioned and parodied by the author. It in a way disrupts the classic idea of 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Fowles parodies all the great Victorian artists- Dickens, Hardy, Arnold, Austen, and Eliot and so on. Thus, from this discussion, we can say that 'parody' is the umbrella term that engulfs all other major and minor postmodern features of the novel.

II.   CONCLUSION

Thus, from the above discussion, we can remark that postmodernism is a very important influence upon the novel, The French Lieutenant's Woman, though we couldn't talk about all the characteristics of that strand as seen in the novel. An age influences upon the people and compels them to behave in a certain way, and hence the remarkable becomes the mileposts of that age. People can get the essence of that age in the works of art, produced exactly at that time. What stands against the flow of time that becomes exceptionally great. And therefore *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a postmodern novel that expresses, questions, satirizes and symbolizes everything that was typically Victorian, through certain ways, which are typically modern/supermodern/postmodern.

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