

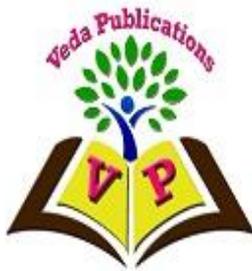


EXISTENTIALISM IN VICTORIAN ERA: REVIEWING JOHN FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Victorian novels presented carefully constructed conventional characters that does not deviate from the social standards. It was hard to find whether any deviant people survived then. The Victorians survived on a turbulent ground with Darwin's theory of evolution and various political reforms. Darwin shook their religious adherence. There were people who struggled hard to maintain the status quo with their blind belief and aversion to change. Some of them believed in Darwin and exhibited themselves as free thinking men. In reality they possessed a chaotic soul and were trying hard to balance their Victorian essence and Modernity. Rarely lived some legendary men who transcended their age. These men often failed to find their space in any manuscripts of the time. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, traces the roots of a 20th century philosophy named Existentialism in the predecessors. History has the feature of characteristically representing everything in groups or forms. Undermining the inconspicuous exclusivities provides an indubitable awareness about the period.

Keywords: *Conventions, Existentialism, Solitariness, Redemption, Victorianism.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Written in 1969, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is set about a hundred years ago in Lyme Regis, Dorset, England. The England of the 1850s has been flooded with ideas which were terrifyingly unfamiliar to the traditional Victorian inmates. Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution lead to the dreadful corrosion of the immaculate faith cultivated in religious entities. The Victorian society which was heavily rooted in its Christian identity, experienced chaos and conflicts which left them discombobulated.

HISTORICAL REFERENCE

A sense of disorientation, confusion and anxiety in an apparently meaningless or absurd world is the characteristic starting point of an individual, according to existentialism. It emphasizes the experience of human subject as an acting, feeling and living individual as opposed to a mere thinking individual.

The major political reforms include the expansion of the right to vote to the working class men in 1867. Contradictory to the majority of the domesticated Victorian women, some of them raised their voices for amendments in marriage laws and the liberty of women. "The Subjection of Woman" written by John Stuart Mill is the result of the vision of Mill himself and his wife Harriet Taylor Mill, an example of a gradual change which occurred in the conventional image of a nurturing women to an intellectual one. Years of deification of a nurturing, naive and poised women portrait, most of the Victorian women happily draped themselves in these conventional roles. With the declining of the power of the aristocrats, rise of middle class and women the Victorian Era was unknowingly treading into their tumultuous future.

"...it has always seemed to me that the Victorian age, especially from the 1850s on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas... Just such a man, an existentialist before his time, walks down

the quay and sees that mysterious back, feminine, silent, also existentialist, facing

the sea and turned on him." (Fowles, *Wormholes* 17)

An existentialist awareness as a developed philosophical theory was not available to the people of the era. The earlier works of John Fowles, *The Magus* and *The Collector*, were both based on more or less existentialist premises. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is no less different. Even though it is chronologically impossible for a novel set in 1867 to have existential elements, John Fowles have brilliantly crafted the soul of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with existentialism and its associates. Fowles through his novel, brings to the forefront, what many Victorian novelists deliberately avoided. They constructed the novel in peculiar ways which showed the disparity between the real and the imaginary. Sarah Woodruff, Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman along with all the characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* emulates the three distinct Victorians of the age, whereas the general Victorian novels had carefully machinated characters.

EXISTENTIALIST ELEMENTS IN THE FRENCH LIETENANT'S WOMAN

The French Lieutenant's Woman, Sarah Woodruff, appears as an image staring out to the sea. In a conversation, towards the end of the novel, which ensues when Charles finds Sarah, he asks her to marry him. Sarah refuses, because she does not want Charles to understand her. Sarah is alacritously immersing herself in the beauty of absurdity that life offers. She does not want to get confined to any societal institutions. Sarah Woodruff disdains the organizational institutions like marriage and family as she realizes their capability to entrap and make a person numb for an entire lifetime consequently maintaining the societal quo. She is an ardent existentialist who wants to preserve her freedom. She does not want anyone to rescue her from her plight, she has rescued herself already. Sarah Woodruff is uncompromisingly one of the most enigmatic characters ever written.

"You do not understand. It is not your fault. You are very kind. But I am not to be understood...I meant that I am not to be



understood even by myself. And I can't tell you why, but I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding. Charles smiled, in spite of himself. This is absurdity. You refuse to entertain my proposal because I might bring you to understand yourself. I refuse, as I refused the other gentleman, because you cannot understand that to me it is not an absurdity."(Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 462)

Charles Smithson, is that disoriented Victorian man, who believes, has travelled afar from the conformities of his age, but who in reality is bewildered and stuck with the norms. He cannot figure out where his real adherence lies. This bafflement of Charles is the result of a tight-knit Victorian society, which views man as a mere reasoning animal. Dr Grogan and Charles shares similar perspectives with regard to their acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution. Dr Grogan was tolerant enough to listen Charles affair with a supposed outcast. Charles eventually develops a receptive mind where he becomes able to grasp the mysteriousness of Sarah sufficiently, despite his potentially incomplete knowledge. Dr. Grogan could only reciprocate his Victorian consciousness. He acts as Charles's moral guide and tries to bring him over her possession. Grogan believes that "she is possessed, you see.... dark indeed. very dark" (Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 156). He wants to put Sarah in asylum and later rebukes Charles for choosing Sarah over Ernestina.

Charles' character as an upper class amateur paleontologist and his belief in Darwin's theory is not sufficient to make his way through Victorianism. In fact, his fossil collection is an escape from the real world. Existentialism is absurdity to a societal law abiding human being whereby, it is real freedom to a true existentialist. Charles pathetically oscillates between the two worlds. The similarity in the names of Smithson and Darwin foreshadows his evolution from an amateur to a fully developed man in his vistas.

"When he had had his great vision of himself freed from his age, his ancestry and class and country, he had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile. He no longer much believed in that freedom; he felt he had merely changed traps, or prisons. But yet there was something in his isolation that he could cling to; he was the outcast, the not like other men, the result of a decision few could have taken, no matter whether it was ultimately foolish or wise".(Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 427-428)

Charles trodding with his future wife Ernestina Freeman in Lyme Regis as an amateur paleontologists and a man who got ensnared by the sensuality of an outcast breaks himself free from everything that held him back. He realizes his real self and break off his marriage with Ernestina. The Fortune he anticipated from his uncle proves to be of no avail when he remarries. Sarah and her tremendous sense of freedom, the acceptance of life as an absurd entity moulded Charles to suspend his conventions.

"Charles did not know it, but in those brief poised seconds above the waiting sea, in that luminous evening silence broken only by the waves' quiet wash, the whole Victorian Age was lost. And I do not mean that he had taken the wrong path."(Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 72)

Ernestina Freeman a conventional and unenlightened representative of the majority Victorian community is the true Victorian embodiment in the novel, she is full of the laws governing the ideal nurturing moral Victorian women. The confinement is so profound in her that self love is dangerously absent. It has irretrievably inundated in the sea of laws. Sarah enfolds the absurd solidarity of her life whereas, Ernestina is devoted to maintaining the unwritten structure of society which will not aid the blooming of her as an individual

The repression of these laws upon the minds of a woman is vividly portrayed in a scene when



Ernestina look at her body in a mirror. "Thus she had evolved a kind of private commandment—those inaudible words were simply "I must not"—whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, tried to force and entry into her consciousness."(Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 28-29)

CONCLUSION

The brilliant writer in Fowles portrays three distinguished characters of the age in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* through the protagonists Sarah Woodruff, Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman. Ernestina is the torch bearer of the entire Victorian moralistic society. Charles stands at the bay of two world with a chaotic soul. He gradually embarks on a journey from existential unawareness to a more comprehensive state of mind in the course of the novel and succeeds. Sarah Woodruff has already transcended the age, a true existentialist beyond time. Any random search about the reign of Queen Victoria does not fail to provide some basic details which is repetitively transferred throughout the ages.

Fowles writing flows like a tranquil sea, simple and elegant in the forefront but exhaustively deep in content. 19th century novels have always been a typical representation of what is manipulatively Victorian. John Fowles ventured further to bring to the forefront what the Victorian writers deliberately avoided. The existential roots can be traced back to the 'othered' Victorians who failed to find their place in any classics or manuscripts of the age. Fowles breathes life into these hidden figures whose restless souls still lingers in the philosophies of contemporary times. The solitariness of the human life is essential and real. It is from that void does worthy creations rise. Existentialism is the embracing of the solitariness and wild absurdity. It is this absurdity arising from the solitariness that the Victorians tried to organize with their moral convention of reasoning.

The French Lieutenant's Woman gives you the quality of discernment by providing a quintessential example of Existentialism prevailing in

an age that had no academic knowledge regarding the subject.

It is through the sole choice of oneself that a man finds his genuine purpose. Conformity to the organized structure of any society hampers the ability to choose your heart-calling. The openly presented histories and fictional works are the custodians of tradition and order. They exceptionally guide you to stay in conformity to them, making it hard for you to recognize yourself from the masses. As soon as Sarah Woodruff finds her true purpose, she redeems herself from a group of self-same members. Acknowledging the expelled or inflicted past opens your way to salvation from a patterned and domesticated society. Accept the unpredictability and solitariness that life offers. It is through the voice of the silence will you achieve purgation.

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