

Postmodernism in John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman

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Introduction

The French Lieutenant's Woman(1969) is John Robert Fowles(31 March 1926 – 5 Nov 2005) novel published in 1969. This novel is Fowles' one of the famous and commercially most successful novel. Fowles spent 4 years in Oxford and studied French where he read the French existentialist and was greatly influenced by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. He stands between modern and postmodern so in his writings like The French Lieutenant's Woman we find the amalgamation of both modern and postmodern features of writing a novel.

The French Lieutenant's Woman was written when he and his wife lived in Lyme Regis. It is basically about a Victorian love story which takes place in 1867 the central characters being Sarah Woodruff, Charles Smithson, Ernestina Freeman. Though the setting of the novel is Victorian literary genre, Fowles uses certain postmodern techniques to write this novel.

The aim of this paper is to find out the postmodern characteristics in The French Lieutenant's Woman.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is both a continuation of modernism and experiment on modernism. It shares certain common characteristics with modernism. They do not stick to rigidity of genre distinctions, do not follow the tradition ways of writing. Both are of the opinion that there is no single truth or reality. There can be many truths many realities. However, postmodernism is also a break away from modernism which was thought to have become conventional. Unlike modernism postmodernism believes that the world is chaotic, meaningless. Modernist writers in their writings guide the reader, they try to control the reader's mind but postmodern writers' leaves the text to be interpreted by the readers. The readers are given space to analyze interpret on their own.

Postmodern characteristics in French Lieutenant's Woman

In The French Lieutenant's Woman, Fowles employs a number of postmodern elements which are explained below:

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is one of the key features of postmodern writings. It means referring to other texts to explain the meaning of a particular text. This process is deliberately done by the author as it is explicit, the writer himself shows the reader to what text or which writer he is bringing in to explain his text. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we find Fowles at the beginning of every chapter adding epigraphs where he quotes from other texts. He quotes from Thomas Hardy's *The Riddle*, Darwin's *The Origin of Species*(1859), G.M Young's *Portrait of an Age*, Mrs Norton's *The Lady of La Garaye*(1863), Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Lord Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam*(1850), *Maud*(1855), Marx's *Capital*(1867) etc. Again the setting of the novel is Lyme Regis which is also the setting of the novel *Persuasion*.

Parody

It is one of the characteristics of postmodernism. In Linda Hutcheon's view "parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference." Parody "is usually considered central to postmodernism" In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the Victorian narrative style is being parodied by the use of modern narrative style. He points out the differences between an omniscient narrator and a non-omniscient narrator reflecting that readers no longer believe that the author knows everything. In Chapter 13, Fowles regards the novelist as God - "a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God." In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we find the author as God but in a different manner in the sense that he is no longer a God who knows everything but God who can do anything. Fowles uses epigraphs in each chapter to make a parody of Victorian period. The character of Sam Farrow, servant of Charles is parodied who says cockney English and is modelled on Sam Weller, a character of Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*.

Parody is not just mockery it is also revision of past, repetition with difference. We find Victorian characters but they are not like the conventional Victorian characters. Lines which depict this are-

"Good Heavens, I took that to be a fisherman. But isn't it a woman?" (Here the woman is Sarah.)

"The girl lay (Sarah) lay in the complete abandonment of deep sleep, on her back." In Victorian

society woman were always escorted by a male member but Sarah is portrayed to be alone.

In Chapter 5 we find “to catch her (Ernestina) eye in the mirror- was a sexual thought”. Ernestina is a prude and at the same time she is a product the Victorian era. Again by giving the story multiple endings and the characters to take decisions according to their will Fowles parodies the style of Victorian ending. He also reflects that there were more brothels than churches in England during the Victorian period- “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” (chapter- 38).

Parody can be both mockery and affectionate. Reading Fowles we know that he had deep affection for the Victorian writings. Fowles uses Victorian features, he brings in Victorian writers like Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky who knew about human experiences. There is the use of narrational voice to express opinions. Fowles in his novel retains some of the Victorian features but parodies.

Metafiction

A playful element of postmodern writing is metafiction. While reading fiction readers are carried away to a different world, metafiction reminds that the readers of being in a fictional world. It makes the reader aware of the author. It's a kind of disruption that interrupts the reader. In Professor Chang Yaixin's view writing about fiction in the form of fiction is metafiction. When Fowles writes about Charles in Chapter 3 the twentieth century inventions are mentioned “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...” which reminds us that we are reading a fiction. We find that fact and fiction are combined from lines like “...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.” Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is crucial in this regard where Fowles says “I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination.” (answering to the question “Who is Sarah?” “Out of what shadows does she come?” at the end of Chapter 12). He interferes in the novel and destroys the illusion of reality to explain the Victorian era or the characters and gives his comments.

Linda Hutcheon uses the term “historiographic metafiction” (the term was coined by Hutcheon in

the late 1980's) . It means combination of historical fiction and metafiction; fictionalizing actual characters and events. We find real world figures and fictional characters at the same time like Jane Austen, Karl Marx, Charles, Ernestina, Sarah etc. Fowles chooses an age of the past to write his fiction and tells about the Victorian era in his own way. Fowles novel is a historical metafiction in the sense that he uses history, historical setting and historical figures.

Openending

The endings of the postmodern novels are different from the traditional novels. Postmodern novels do not have closed endings. The endings are left for the readers to interpret analyze as they like. In Fowles there are three endings of the novel. The endings of the novel are in Chapter 44, 60 and 61. The ending of chapter 44 is conventional while in chapter 60 and 61 are unconventional. In the first ending Charles left Sarah and married Ernestina, but he rejects this ending saying to be traditional in Chapter 45. In the second ending, Charles breaks his engagement with Ernestina and re unites with Sarah. Charles is a rejected lover in the last ending which is very much postmodern as it shows the existential quest. Fowles leaves for the readers to choose one of the endings or add another if the readers want to.

Plurality of meaning

Postmodernism believes in plurality of meanings. There is no one truth or one reality, there can be many. Truth depends upon conditions and situations. Meaning cannot be fixed. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Readers are confused when in Chapter-4 the narrator says "I need hardly add that at the time the dear, kind lay knew only the other, more Grecian, nickname." The readers might feel that he means "tragedy" and not her nickname "whore". Moreover, uses of phrases like "I guess", "I think" gives the readers freedom to add think in many different ways.

The three endings of the novel are right, which shows that plurality of meanings. It shows the reality of life. In life, there is no straight away path to anything there is no such thing called a single end or a fixed meaning of life. The readers are given freedom to interpret in their own way which displays plurality of meaning.

Existentialism

Another most important characteristic of postmodern writing is existentialism. Existentialism

questions the very existence of human beings, it tries to answer to questions like, "Is there any meaning of life?" It emphasizes freedom of choice and suggest that change is possible. During 1947 to 1950 when Fowles was in Oxford University the French existentialism was in vogue. He was influenced by existentialist philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In John Fowles view existentialism "is not a philosophy, but a way of looking at, and utilizing other philosophies." In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we find this theory being used by Fowles. Using the theme of existentialism Fowles writes, "She (Sarah) made him aware of a deprivation. His future had always seemed to him of vast potential; and now suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place. She had reminded him of that." Sarah reminds him that if he marries Ernestina there will be no other possibilities in his life which reflects existentialism. Charles and Sarah are existential characters. At the beginning of the novel we find them living a life which the society wanted them to live one as a gentleman and the other as a prostitute. But at the end they reject each other, Charles decides to live alone and Sarah as a fashionable lady lives in the community of Pre-Raphael. They live a life of their choice.

Narration

Postmodern narrative techniques differ from that of traditional novels. There is no master narration in postmodern novels. In traditional novels there are omniscient narrators who has full control over the plots and characters. They are the all knowing. In Victorian novels it is seen that the narrators knows everything about their character but Fowles novel we find him rejecting such kind of authorship. About Millie's age he says "nineteen or so" from which we come to know that the narrator is not of sure of her age. He differs from the Victorian narrators as in Chapter 13 we find him saying, "I do not know. This story I am telling is all my imagination." "Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them." which shows that he does not use his power over the characters. The characters enjoys some kind of freedom.

About the Victorian narrators he writes, "the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does." "Along with the narrator he also intervenes in the story. Again in Chapter 5 the narrator deliberately giving the readers a lie, "Ernestina was to outlive all her generation. She was born in 1846. And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland." which he later makes the readers remember. In Chapter 13 he says "Perhaps it is only a game." Though there are unreliable narrators we do not find the narrators deliberately telling lie. Fowles

plays such tricks with the readers which fulfills one of the postmodern characteristics on the part of the narrative style.

Conclusion

Reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman* we find that John Fowles employs postmodern tactics in his novel. The narrator plays tricks with his readers. The author interrupts in the novel along with the narrator. Again, the author does not have full authority over the characters. The novel is a fine example of "historiographic metafiction", it combines history and fiction. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* displays multiple meanings, Fowles rejects the idea of fixed meaning. The multiple endings give full freedom to the readers to interpret the novel as they like. Moreover, the novel refers to many other texts fulfilling the postmodern characteristic of intertextuality; the theme of existentialism is well portrayed through the characters of Charles and Sarah etc. Hence we can say that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has postmodern characteristics and it can be read as a postmodern novel.

References

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