

Metafictional Possibilities of French Lieutenant's woman by John Fowles: Analysis of Multi Climaxes

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*The one remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly;
Life like a dome of many coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity,
Until death tramples it to fragments*
:Stanza 31, Adonais, P B Shelly

The universal quest for ultimate truth and reality is the core of all the philosophies and a question every individual asks at least once in their life to their own conscience or to others. One is often disillusioned to choose the right path that leads them to this truth. All the existing ideologies and belief system further increases the existing ambiguities regarding this to a more complex and complicated level. None of these belief systems are proved to be perfect and flawless. A suggestive way is to have a clear idea about all these ideologies and formulate a set of unique individual belief system through subjective introspection along with using their conscience as a mode of filtration band thus by assimilating the goodness that each of these offers. But then there will be chances that one may find the contradictions between them which makes the process further complicated and incomprehensible. There is another aspect that while comparing the philosophers and thinkers around the world, one may find similarities in their concepts irrespective of their lifetime and geographical zones. A comparison between Aristotle's idea of catharsis and Sadharanikaran process of Indian philosophy can substantiate this aspect. The Greek master tells about the "purgation of emotions" when the spectator identifies or relates himself or herself with the text or art and this identification or relation is what is referred as sadharanikaran in Indian philosophy through which one can attain the state of "calm of mind, all passions spend" or in Bharata's terms, the Rasa or aesthetic pleasure. These two ideas originated in different geographical ages but they both have similarity. These

similarities can be occur even in the ideas of scholars who belongs to different time periods also. John Keats, one of the early romantic writer in his letter commenting on Shakespear's dramatic craftsmanship talked about the idea of Negative capability, or the ability to negate one's personal beliefs along with maintaining the aesthetic distance can be paralleled with the impersonality theory of T.S Eliot where he redefines Wordsworth's definition of poetry and states poetry should not be an "expression of personality but an escape from personality". The modernist writer presents in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent". Both of these scholars lived in different centuries but one can see the influence of one over the other or rather "pastness of past and pastness of present" by analysing these two ideas and that is another concept Eliot explains in the same essay. This idea of the influence of his predecessors over a writer is further explained in Harold Blooms, *Anxiety of Influence*.

There are different ways with which a text can be studied or explained with the help of literary techniques as well as literary theories. Literary theories serves as a "dome of coloured glasses" each offers a different colour or a different perception when sunlight (in here, the text) passes through it. Humanity beings has the instinct knowledge to distinguish reality and fantasy but in order to fully understand the text, the reader may have to accept the fantasy as Coleridge said there should be "the willing suspension of disbelief". What is reality? Is there anything called an alternate reality in the world? These are unresolved philosophical questions that still haunts the people even now. The oxford dictionary defines reality as; "reality is the state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be". 'Real' by definition is something that has existence. Reality is often contradicted with imagination. Peter Berger and

Thomas Luckman explains the concept of ‘social construction of reality’ which implies that the reality that we perceive is shaped by our experience and the way we interact with people around us”. To exemplify it further, Berger writes, “What is real to a Tibetan Monk may not be real to an American businessman” This can be paralleled to the lines from William Blake’s poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “A fool sees not the same tress that a wise man sees”. So in short, it is the individual perception that colours the reality.

The possibilities of multiple reality is the core of *Syadvada* or *Saptabhangi Naya* which is the most important part of Jaina logic system. According to this, what one perceives is only some aspect of reality and so all our judgements are relative which reflects the theory of relativity of knowledge. The followers of this logic system suggests the possibility of another reality which is beyond our sensual apprehension. That super sensory perception or the sixth independent source of knowledge is regarded as *Anupalabdi* or non-apprehension by Indian scholars who belongs to the *Mimamsa* school of Indian philosophy. So according to this, human beings have the faculty of non-apprehension or *Anupalabdi* which is presentive knowledge of negative facts. Sensory perception and inference can only apprehend the positive facts. But in order to accept or apprehend the negative facts such as the possibility of not finding a Dinosaur

In the dining room, the special instrument called *Karana* or non-apprehension is required. This whole process or this faculty of mind is *Anupalabdi*. The concept of the absence of Elephant immediately presupposes nonexistence. But most of the scholars refuses the *Nyaya* view that non apprehension is the same as perception or inference since negation is never perceived, because there is no senses involved.

The above-mentioned concept is challenged by certain literary technics such as surrealism and magical realism which perceives this presentive knowledge of negative facts as something usual. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is work which uses magical realism and there one can find a lot of examples where the people perceives these strange occurrences as something usual and mundane. For example there is a line in the novel “An empty flask that had forgotten in a cupboard for a long time became so heavy that it could not be moved... A pan of water on the worktable boiled without any fire

under it for half an hour until it completely evaporated” [Marquez 27]. This is how magical realism works in which the magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality. When the magical elements are explained like normal occurrences, it constitutes an authenticity to perceive the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’ in the same stream of thought. So there is always a chance of finding the ‘impossible’ or ‘unexpected’. Surrealism differs from magical realism since it is based on dream like hallucination and a distorted version of the real mostly used in paintings such as “The Persistence of Memory” by Salvador Dali portrays the melting cloak and watches represents the unconscious symbol of the relativity of space and time. Dreams are the symbolic inner world which is a reflection of the real external world. So literature is an arena which offers the abundance of possibilities, imagination and creativity that science cannot offer and the different theoretical interpretations elevates the possibilities of a text to beyond expectations.

While constructing literary work, the writer uses different narrative techniques or literary devices such as the above-mentioned Magical realism and surrealism, Textualities such as Inter textuality, Meta textuality and Hyper textuality, narrative viewpoints such as omniscient point of view, first person, second person and third person narrative voices, anachronisms and flash backs. etc. Reader response criticism gives a reader the authority to generate meaning as they like. So it gives options to the reader to explore or focus more on the different aspects or characters of a text and that is the central concept of Hyper textuality. For example Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* to Charelotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys demystifies or focuses on Bertha Mason and how she became the ‘mad woman in the attic’ from Antoinette as a victim of patriarchal oppression. Here, the hero of *Jane Eyre*, Mister Edward Rochester is portrayed in negative light as a greedy Victorian man who marries Antoinette Cosway only for the wealth since he was denied the right for inheritance as per the traditional Victorian manners. Another experimentation in the art of fiction writing, or the writer’s explorations of the possibilities of ways in constructing a work of art is switching plots and time. In modern and postmodern fictions, writers have deviated from the classical rules laid down by the eminent masters such as Plato and Aristotle. The

modern writers have not adhered or observed the three unities of time, place and action. The modern writers have taken the art of fiction writing to the next level where even the reader or writer also becomes a character of the text. An apt example is Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Here the reader is the main character and it deals with the technic of writing or constructing a novel while emphasising the importance of structure. Calvino has blended different literary styles with an unfixed climax such as multiple narrative voices, styles and a whole new version of the story in another edition of the same title. So using multiple climaxes and intervention of reader or writer as a character helps the readers to associate more with the novel as against Brechtian concept of alienation effect or distancing effect by making the story more authentic. Many writers used these techniques and John Robert Fowles (1926-2005) was one of them.

The *French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles is significant novel which later adopted into a film of the same title, starring Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons. Directed by Karel Reisz with Harold Pinter's screen play. It is significant as a literary specimen because Fowles was experimenting or rather playing with almost all the above-mentioned literary devices. The novel entirely deviates from the traditional features of fiction writing such as time, plot, settings...etc. Even though the novel is a typical example of a modern text, the setting of the novel is Victorian. The writer cleverly mixes both these scenarios thus by creating a 'chinese box' effect in which the consciousness of the reader shifts between both the traditional Victorian world and the modern world in which they exist. The authorial intervention and his interactions with the characters further substantiate the metafictional dimensions of the novel. The writer's evolution from the role of an omniscient narrator like traditional narrative style to an active engager who presents the different possibilities in front of the readers makes a writerly text in which the reader has the freedom and active role in the meaning making process. This plurality of meanings makes the narrative structure disrupted instead of linear. This plurality of meanings or the multiple meaning underlines what Derrida said about the centerless world of 'free play' with 'incredulity towards metanarratives' by questioning about the 'structurality of structure'. So the novel can be perceived in terms of a meta fiction in which the boundaries between illusion and reality are dissolved

and this aspect can be substantiated with the character's direct interaction with the author. 'Nouveau Roman' is a term first used in 1957 by Emile Henriot to describe the attempts of novelists to create a new style which de-emphasised the traditional aspects of the novel in terms of plot, narrative, character and idea as well as the traditional Victorian novel with its God-like author. One cannot say that the novel is attempting to recreate the England of 1867 or the Victorian England. Rather than that it is a Victorian narrative written from a twentieth century perspective with a strong story line and an experimentation that explores Victorian characters and attitudes from the perspective of 1967 with all that intervening years have revealed in the fields of science, religion, politics, social conditions and literature. There is an abundance of allusions in both overt and covert manner. The overt allusions include references to novelists, poets, essayists, scientists, naturalists and political, economic and social theorists. Fowles brought these personalities not only confined to the Victorian age, but also of his own generation thus by reminding readers the fact that he is writing from the 1960s. This technique that Fowles adopts, looking back one hundred years from the present time of writing to the past time of action of the main narrative involves a series of literary devices such as parody, deliberate anachronistic juxtapositions, comments and intrusion. The novel begins and ends with an image of sea may be as to give the entire narrative, a cyclical effect symbolic of the cyclical nature of life. Other incidental image of the ships and the allusion to Matthew Arnold's poem "To Marguerite" to reinforce the existential theme. Besides the image of sea is effectively utilised in the novel to show even the relationship between Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff as "beset by a maze of cross currents, swept hopelessly away from his safe anchorage" (p172). In his final rejection with "his masts crushing, the cries of the drowning in his ears" (p438). Commenting on the motifs, mirrors are a recurrent one in the life of Ernestina (p34), Charles (p456) and Sarah (p269) which can be perceived as the idea of self-examination and illusion in the Victorian age, as well as to portray the idea of mirroring of the past century in the present. The allusion that Fowles brings in are all subliminal and every chapters begin with a quote from any famous Victorians. Such as Matthew Arnold, Tennyson,

Hardy, Leslie Stephen and William Macpeace Thackeray. etc.

The novel chiefly centers around three characters and their triangle relationships. The voice of the narrator is an omnipresence who finally give up his authority over his characters Charles and Sarah to work out their own conclusions to their story. Narrator intervenes twice in the story. First he meets Charles in the railway carriage and reappears in Cheyne walk. He adjusts his watch and after granting freedom to his characters to choose their own conclusions he gets into his landau and disappears in Thames with other things in his mind perhaps another story. In his book called *Understanding John Fowles*, Thomas C. Foster speaks “he undertakes it in a spirit of great fun. His comments are arch and knowing, his asides are sly, his allusions are diverting and he brings himself into the novel in two quite different, but equally amusing guises”(p86). Sara Woodruff is the enigmatic prime mover of the action in the narrative. She has an aura of mystery around her with a wounded part. Her background and her life upto her appointment as a governess to the Talboth household is clear enough but the incident that associates her to the French Lieutenant is that of mystery, judgemental opinion, speculation or even deceit. Sarah is a Victorian outcast like Tess in Hardy’s novel *Tess of D’Urbervilles*. Jane Eyre, an orphan who later becomes a governess. Jown Fowles in the last pages of the novel says that; “Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of sphinx, is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it...And out again upon the unplumb’d salt estranging sea”(p470). She refused to confine her identity to the expected role of Victorian woman it is Sarah who gives the novel its title, though she insists to Charles on the cruder appellation ‘whore’ (p171). She also represents the image of fallen woman like Eve.

Charles Smithson represents the aristocratic young Victorian man with a keen interest in natural science especially Palaeontology. The author says of his nature as, “Laziness is Charles’s distinguishing trait” (p21). He feels disillusioned whether to accept Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of a rich merchant from rising middle class who sees Charles as a suitable match for her in terms of financial position and social status. But his meetings with Sarah fluctuates his mind and the unexpected marriage of his uncle with a widow, young enough to bear children has extinguished the hope for his uncle’s inheritance.

Charles has a comfortably superior attitude in his false perception of his evolutionary role in “the survival of the fittest” (p54) and the “naturally selected” (p 159). This dilemma of Charles can be paralleled with the collective Victorian dilemma after the publication of Darwin’s origin of species. About the character of Charles, David H Walker says that “he finds himself enmeshed in a web of falsehood that increasingly threatens to place him outside the bounds of propriety; not consciously perceiving this danger, he is only too relieved at finding means of avoiding confrontation with Ernestina” (p64).

Ernestina is at first sight a typically fashionable, emerging rich middle class, Victorian young lady. She finds Charles as the best offer in terms of his inheritance, reputation and aristocratic background not as a lovable partner. Marriage, money and social status being the three concerns of her life, she could not tolerate the love affair between Sam, Charles’s servant and Mary, the maid in aunt Tranter’s home. Charles meets Sarah on the cobb at Lyme Regis on a walk with his fiancée Ernestina. Ernestina was staying with her aunt Tranter. They both see Sarah and Ernestina tells Charles about the tragic past of Sarah, the dark rumours surrounding her how she became ‘the French Lieutenant’s whore’. Charles learns from Ernestina that Sarah is an outcast in Lyme Regis society and the gossips about her and the French Lieutenant’s promised marriage followed by his deception. Even though Charles approaches Sarah, he was struck by her piercing look. Sarah is a governess under Mrs Poulteny, a woman with selfish motives. Sam Farrer was Charles’s servant who fell in love with Mrs Tranter’s maid called Mary. Later Charles meets Sarah twice. First time on his expedition to Ware commons to find fossils. Secondly on the path back to town. She begs Charles not to disclose their meetings as she was forbidden to walk there. There is an explanation about Ernestina and her family background. Charles, Ernestina and aunt Tranter visits Mrs Paulteny. Charles and Ernestina have difference of opinion over the relationship between Sam and Mary. Ernestina was against it while Charles supported it. Later they both reconcile and Charles starts to develop a fascination for Sarah and he feels puzzled as to why she stays in Lyme even though they treat her as an outcast. He compares both these women and feels that the character of Ernestina is rather shallow as compared to Sarah.

Charles accepts Sarah's request for a further meeting at Ware Commons despite being aware about the risk of scandal. In this meeting, Sarah tells him more of her involvement with Vargueness, the French Lieutenant. Dr Grogan is the local Doctor who warns Charles about Sarah and he tells him that Sarah is suffering from 'Melancholia'. Sarah discloses to Charles that she herself chose to be an outcast in order to free herself from the social restraints. Here, one can perceive that Sarah, like a free, independent 'modern woman' is unwilling to conform to the false morality and manners that expected to be followed by a Victorian woman. She does not surrender and emerges as a bold woman like Nora in *Doll's House*. Sarah and Charles witness the embracing of Sam and Mary and Sarah smiles at the shocked face of Charles.

Charles goes to meet his uncle at Winsyatt after receiving a letter from him. Charles feels anxious of his uncle's plan to remarry a widow who is young enough to bear children. He realises that he will be disinherited from his uncle's properties and title. Charles finally accepts this while Ernestina worries about the loss of social standing. Meanwhile Charles realises that Sarah has been dismissed from job and her disappearance. Sam gets the letter from Sarah addressed to Charles and he decided to blackmail his master with it. Dr. Grogan advises Charles to move on with Ernestina. He believes that Sarah is trying to take advantage of Charles and he even shows a case report of a young lieutenant convicted by the false accusation of a girl. But Charles could not completely accept this. Charles finds Sarah and they both kissed but suddenly Charles turns away from her. He found Sam and Mary and he insists to Sam that his encounters with Sarah should be kept as a secret. Charles advises Sarah to go to Exeter and she parts him by saying that she will never forget him.

Charles goes to London to see Ernestina's father. The first climax of the novel begins from here. Ernestina's father Mister Freeman offers him a position in their family business. He then meets his friends in a club. From there, he goes to a brothel and his encounter with a young prostitute failed in utter awkwardness when Charles vomits over her pillow after hearing that her name is Sarah. Meanwhile, Sarah settles into a hotel in Exeter. Later Charles receives two letters. First letter was from Dr. Grogan in which he wrote Charles to reconcile with Ernestina. The other letter was from Sarah, in which her address was written. Sam

blackmails Charles and they both go to Exeter. Charles then later goes back to Lyme and makes a partial confession to Ernestina and they both marry. This is the traditional Victorian happy ending of the story. The narrator later insists that this ending was only in Charles's imagination.

On the second ending, Charles goes to Exeter to meet Sarah and they both make love. Charles discovers that Sarah is a virgin and all those stories of the French Lieutenant was lies. She refuses to marry him. Charles goes to a church and contemplates. He decides to follow the Christian ideals of truth and sincerity. After confessing to Ernestina, he writes a letter to Sarah about his decision to be with her and encloses the letter with a brooch inside of it. Sam opens it and takes the brooch. He later informs Charles that there was no answer from Sarah. Hearing that Charles goes to Lyme and breaks the Engagement with Ernestina, after bursting into a turmoil of anger and sadness, Ernestina collapsed. Sam resigns his job as Charles's servant and they both part ways. Mrs Tranter helps Sam and Mary. Dr Grogan strongly opposes Charles's decision to be with Sarah. Charles goes back to the hotel to meet Sarah but feels disappointed because she was already left the hotel with no clue. Charles realises Sam's treachery through Mrs Endicott and the maid. He hopes to find Sarah in London. He boards in a train and there he meets the narrator who is now disguised as a fellow passenger. Narrator observes Charles flipping of a coin to make a decision. They both part ways and Charles hires a detective to find Sarah. Mr Freeman filed a case against Charles on court and he provided employment to Sam.

Charles decided to explore and travels around America. He gets a telegram while he was in New Orleans that Sarah has been found. He goes back to London and found Sarah who is now living with Pre-Raphaelite artists. She shows him Lalage, their daughter whose existence was unknown to him. The second ending also offers a happy one with the union of Charles and Sarah. Again within this ending itself, the narrator intervenes and turns back the cloak to fifteen minutes were Charles and Sarah having their conversation. But this time, there was no reconciliation happens between them and Charles was not ready to have an unmarried relationship with Sarah and he feels that he was deceived. He decides to live alone and to find hope in it along with endurance from the world outside. Even though the author tries to

assert his authority over the characters and the narrative like the conventional, omniscient, God like narrator, he later admits that he cannot control his characters and that they have the freedom of their own to choose their climax as they like. Fowles claims in Chapter 13 of the novel that he is only reporting the outward facts but then for the surprise of the reader, suddenly enters into Sarah's consciousness in very next chapter to prepare or for the foregrounding of the metaphorical, biblical fall.

The questions that the narrator asks in page 97, are the possibilities that he offers to the readers to ponder over. These several possibilities that he rises are part of the game Fowles is playing in the narrative. Fowles is not willing to disclose whether there is any truth in all of these and he gives freedom even to the readers to interpret the novel in many ways as they like. These interpretations will lead to the exploration of different avenues which is surprisingly does not contradicting with the overall text. Thomas C. Foster states that, "Fowles is so good as a storyteller. In fact, that reader may caught be caught up to the extent that they believe the story be like its Victorian forebears, the entirety of the novel. One cannot, however in good conscience write an 1867 novel in 1967 too much has changed in world view, in our understanding of literature, in our society in our theology to continue with narratives in the manner."

In the Glossary of Literary Terms by M H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham says;

"Robert scholes popularised metafiction or surfiction as an overall term for the growing class of novels which departs from realism and foreground the role of the author in inventing the fiction and of the reader in receiving the fiction."

Considering the above definition, *The French Lieutenant's woman* definitely satisfies all the requirements or features of a typical metafictional narrative. The narrator breaks the illusion of conventional fiction writing by interpolating twentieth century references and languages into the Victorian context, the author definitely amuse the readers with the sudden unexpected breaking into the novel and starts directly addressing the reader. He poses his questions in Chapter 13 about the mystery that always envelops Sarah. "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?"(p96). The following chapter 13 further underlines the metafictionality of the novel in

which he raises some other questions in front of the reader such as,

"Perhaps I am writing a transposed biography? Perhaps I now live in one of the houses that I have brought into the fiction? Perhaps Charles is myself in disguise? Perhaps it is only a game? Perhaps I am trying to pass of a concealed book of essays on you?"(p 97).

Patricia Waugh suggests a way of looking at Fowles's frame breaks or the authorial intervention in chapter 12 as; "The alternation of frame and frame breaks or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction" (p31). Fowles explains that the idea of this beautiful metafictional novel strike in his mind in a half-sleeping, half-awaken state: "A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to the sea. She had no face, no particular degree of sexuality. But she was Victorian and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian age" (p13).

The authorial interventions can be viewed as an alienation technique and Charles's forbidden love for Sarah represents the quest undertaken by the hero for the archetypically unattainable female. Above all, this novel has an intriguing narrative style which helps to enhance the critical mind set of the reader and thus by making it a fascinating text to be taught in literature classes as part of their curriculum in different universities worldwide.

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