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The Silent Voice of Rebellion and Resolution in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract:

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a postmodern historical novel by John Fowles. It is a novel based on the conflict between man and woman. It explores the relationship between a gentleman and amateur naturalist, Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff, the independent former governess and their relationship crisis. This novel has been described by Linda Hutcheon, the famous post-modernist critic as a woman's binary of popular and academic interests. In fact, the novel creates a number of binaries between men and women. The female characters of John Fowles act as an elite set of creators or educated visionaries who provide the facilitation for evolution in existential terms to the male characters. The French Lieutenant's Woman offers a sufficiently transformative perspective on female sex. The novel's narrator demonstrates and proclaims a feminist approach to women. The heroine, Sarah is presented as a more liberated and independently willed woman as compared to other modern female characters. Fowles' presentation of Sarah is one of the most enigmatic female characters in literary history. She is also psychologically presented as a representative of complex psychic of women. Through Sarah's relationship with Charles, Fowles brilliantly brings about the various aspects of feminity that have the potential to expose the vanity of the male subjects.

Keywords: Rebellion, Tradition, Patriarchy, Chastity, Freedom, Feminine.

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a complex and thought-provoking love story. The writer John Fowles has made it one of the world's most successful literary classics in the 1960s. The novel narrates a story that took place in England in the nineteenth century. Sarah, the central character, is a pensive and mysterious woman surrounded by many rumors created by her own self. She's a virgin, but she claims to have committed to a French Lieutenant. She's degraded for

being regarded as a sinful and lustful woman by society, but her mystery, boldness, beauty and unique appearance attract a lot of men. Charles is also attracted towards her mysterious personality and gets involved with her but she leaves him quietly when Charles has dissolved his engagement with another woman. The novel also throws light on the mentality of people in the Victorian society which had a social patriarchal environment. In the Victorian era in England, the female was affected by the patriarchy and was put in a humiliating position for a long time. Sarah is the voice of rebellion but a silent voice. She demonstrates bravery and determination of striving against traditional customs and the so-called chastity regarding female sex. Her pursuit of individual liberty and financial freedom lead to her working as freelancer to teach children painting. Sarah has been portrayed in a ruling position in her relationship with Charles. She intentionally broke her leg to seduce Charles and destructed her social reputation and hurt herself. She always wore a black dress in order to capture the attention of Charles. She appears before us a mysterious character and in the beginning, we can not call her a woman image of freedom and independence in the traditional feminine perspective. In the nineteenth-century Britain, women were not in the position to have their existence without their male counterparts. It was quite difficult to imagine their own value and importance in a patriarchal society and Sarah gives a challenge to this concept. Not only is she a self respecting woman, but she also challenges the so called traditional norms of morality and chastity. Women like her were expected to marry a farmer having several children or live in a big city as a prostitute. But Sarah resists her expected doomed fate and she moved to the town of Lyme. Although Sarah was born poor, but she was educated and loved painting besides freedom. She was reluctant to depend on others. Meanwhile her previous employer was dead and the house would be leased so Sarah could not be allowed to live there. Therefore, the parson introduced her to Mrs. Bo Tanni as an entourage. Even at the end of the novel, Sarah was left alone or chooses to be left alone and was found as a governess working in an artist's house. The novelist wants to show her ability of thinking for herself and the right of achieving self worth.

A very important question arises from Sarah's self destructive reputational behavior. She herself told Charles that she was in love with a French Lieutenant but she also tells him that the lieutenant was not worthy of her love and she left him. After the encounter of Charles with Sarah, we realize that Sarah has been in a dominant position. She intentionally kept a distance from Charles in the beginning so that she could be a mystery for him. When Sarah arranged to meet

Charles secretly, she shared her experiences of past years and asked for help. The two of the fell in love and Charles felt an avoidable attraction towards Sarah. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Sarah went to London. When Charles successfully found her and saw her injured leg, he became emotional. In fact, Sarah intentionally broke her leg for seducing Charles and she became successful in her plan. When after their encounter in the hotel room, Charles realized that Sarah was a virgin, his psyche becomes a bundles of mixed emotions of anger, love, frustration, confusion, etc. This act of Sarah challenges history, culture, traditions and social norms of chastity in the Victorian times. Why did she spoil her own reputation? The novelist throws a question to Victorian traditions through the character of Sarah. The main reason for it is that Sarah has a unique way of her pursuit for freedom from the narrow mentality of the people of the Victorian era. The character and life of Sarah has been wrapped up in lies and she became an object of despise for people. Her life is a series of alienation, sadness, resentment, temptation, love and hatred. Destroying her own reputation is one of her actions which is required for freedom. Her black dress also confronts the Victorian tradition of mourning. Sarah is a very candid girl who refused Charles' love for she was eager to pursue freedom. She left him because for her freedom is more important than the love of a man. In order to realize, the real sense of independence and find her own self, she disappeared from Charles' life. Charles had been looking for Sarah for three years when he finally found her in the house of the artist D.G. Rossetti. When he inquired why she left him silently three years ago, Sarah could not explain the reason.

We can compare Sarah with Hester Prynne, who is the heroine of The Scarlet Letter, a puritanic novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The social stigmatizing can be seen in both the novels, The Scarlet Letter as well as The French Lieutenant's Woman. But whereas Hester Prynne was ordered by the puritanic government to wear a scarlet letter A to indicate her adultery, in the case of Sarah, it is her own way of defence mechanism that she scatters the rumor about her being the whore of the French Lieutenant. However, one thing is common among both the women, both are rebellious and silent, defiant of the social traditions about the purity of women. Sarah moves a step further and she is not ready even to accept the patronage of Charles. She keeps the secret of her virginity from him and disappears from his life. She becomes a mystery to Charles and remains the same throughout the novel. In the case of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale suffers with the pangs of guilty conscience as he was the father of Pearl, Hester Prynne’s daughter, but could not accept it publicly. Hester Prynne, even after completing her sentence, refuses to put off the scarlet

letter A from her bosom which can be seen as her bold and silent reply to the society that always questions a woman's character. Sarah also does not want to hide behind a male existence to find her identity in the society.

Post modern fiction follows a different style in matters of realistic techniques than the modern literature. John Fowles has presented a different type of realism while providing the reproduction of situations and even dialogues. The author comments on the psychology of the people in the Victorian England and the effect of society on the life of an individual. He presents the social consciousness of the Victorian people and how it destroys one's life. However, Sarah remains a voice of protest even up to the very end of the novel which has been provided with three different endings by the writer. When Charles goes in search of Sarah and finds her working in the household of the artist, he tries to ask for the reason as to why she had lest him. But, Sarah's silence does not provide him any opportunity to show his traditional sympathy for a lonely woman. Sarah remains an enigma on him. The title in itself is ironical. It provides a negative shade to the women's existence in the Victorian society. In reality, Sarah is not the woman of the French Lieutenant. She is the not even the woman of Charles Smithson. She is Sarah Woodruff, she has her own identity, an identity that is not determined by her relationship with a man, she has her own independent existence, one which is not controlled by her male counterparts. She is not any man's woman. She is herself. It is not a romantic story where a man falls in love with a woman with a mysterious personality and tries to get her.

"There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist."

The narrator in the French Lieutenant's Woman describes the attitude of the Victorian people,

"They sensed that their current accounts of the world were inadequate; that he allowed their windows on reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation; they knew, in short, that they had things to discover, and that the discovery was of the utmost importance to the future of man."

And,

"Given the veneer of the lady, she was made the perfect victim of a caste society."

The Victorian society ostracized Sarah Woodruff for her self righteousness, for being 'French Lieutenant's Woman' because they can not accept the fact that it is the fundamental right of a woman according to her own will, just like a man usually does. It is rather surprising that Charles who sympathizes with her because of her out caste status, also finds himself in a similar position when he comes to know about the virginity of Sarah. But Sarah is a modern woman and Charles realizes that she can not be compelled to act according to the social norms.

However, we must not forget that The French Lieutenant's Woman is also a historical novel that shows the England of the 1960s. Sarah is not an ordinary woman, she is educated and not ready to follow the laws which were imposed on the other ordinary women of her class. In those days, in England, the women who stayed in the house were idealized and called, 'Angels in the house'. Whereas the women who would step out of the house and were self built, were referred to as fallen women. They were often regarded as a slut or a whore, a woman who would provide an outlet for men's sexual needs and desires. The novel of John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman presents a criticism of the society in the nineteenth century as he describes it as

"An age where a woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen year old girl for a few pounds- a few shillings, if you only wanted her for an hour or two."

The novel presents to us the double standards and hypocrisy of the Victorian society and explains that Charles has dallied with a huge number of women abroad whereas Ernestina is supposed to stay faithful and even deny sexual thoughts into her mind. The narrator presents to us a picture of the Victorian people and their mentality, where it was not possible for a woman to acquire a crucial and powerful position in the society unless she was the wife or daughter of one such man. When Sarah talks about her sufferings, she tells how woman who are labeled as a slut or a whore by the society are completely boycotted from the mainstream society. A female like Sarah was beyond imagination in the Victorian society, a woman who was so blunt, intelligent and independent. She bluntly says about the French Lieutenant, *"I gave myself to him."*

The attraction that Charles has for Sarah is also because of the fact that she is different. He can not help himself from falling in love with her. However, in the novel, the facts of the history have been manipulated as many of the incidents from 1860s and 1960s appear the same. The narrator reminds us, *"This was a time when a suntan was not at all a desirable social sexual status symbol, but the reverse: an indication of low rank."* And further, *"Such a sudden shift of sexual*

key is impossible today. A man and a woman are sooner in any but the most casual contact that they consider the possibility of a physical relationship. We construct such frankness about the real drives of human behavior healthy, but in Charles' time private minds did not admit the desires banned by the public mind."

Conclusion:

In the end, we can say that the French Lieutenant's Woman, Sarah, represents a courageous and determined modern woman who shows her rebellion against traditional customs. Her life is a story of bold pursuit for true love and true freedom. John Fowles has used anachronism and this use connects the novel from the 1860s to the modern world. His realistic representation of women is rather shocking and surprising. The liberal feminism of the 1860s and its tendencies are clearly visible throughout the novel. Sarah is the representative of a modern woman who is pendent, personally as well as sexually. Even after decades of writing, this novel remains to be a challenging milestone in the history of female rebellion. It challenges the traditional concept of women that was idealized and actually, was used to belittle the women in the name of idealizing a particular role for them.

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