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THE QUEST FOR EXISTENCE IN JOHN FOWLES' *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyse Twentieth-century English novelist John Fowles' 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in terms of French philosopher, playwright, and novelist Jean Paul Sartre's Existentialist philosophy. Like Sartre, Fowles mainly shows concern about the question of human freedom and human beings' struggle to exist despite the restrictions of the society they live in. In his *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles basically discusses the issue of personal freedom and existence through the characters Sarah and Charles, and through Charles' relationship with Ernestina. The main questions Fowles raises in his novel are "is there free will?", "can choose freely?", "can we act freely?", and "how can we do it?" (Neary, 1992: 20). This article proposes that in the conventional circumstances of the Victorian society, Sarah manages to create her freedom both socially and existentially in terms of Sartrean existentialist ideology. Charles, on the other hand, fails to act freely and create an independent life of his own.

Keywords: John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Sartre, Existentialism

JOHN FOWLES'UN *FRANSIZ TEĞMENİN KADINI* ROMANINDA VAROLUŞ ARAYIŞI

Özet

Bu makale Yirminci yüzyıl İngiliz romancısı John Fowles'un 1969 yılında yayımladığı *Fransız Teğmenin Kadını* romanını Fransız filozof, oyun yazarı ve romancısı Jean Paul Sartre'in Varoluşçu felsefesi doğrultusunda incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tıpkı Sartre gibi Fowles da insanın özgürlüğü ve bireyin içinde yaşadığı toplumun kısıtlamalarına rağmen varoluş mücadelesi konularına ilgi duymuştur. Fowles *Fransız Teğmenin Kadını* romanında temel

olarak bireyin özgürlüğü ve varoluşu sorununu romandaki Sarah ve Charles karakterleri ve Charles'ın Ernestina ile olan ilişkisi düzleminde ele almıştır. Fowles'un romanında ortaya attığı temel sorunlar "özgür irade var mıdır?", "özgürce hareket etmek mümkün müdür?", "eğer mümkünse bu nasıl başarılabilir?" (Neary, 1992:20) şeklindedir. Bu makaleye göre Viktorya Dönemi'nin gelenekselci koşullarında Sarah'nın Sartre'a göre olan Varoluşçu düşünce bağlamında hem toplumsal hem de varoluşsal biçimlerde kendi özgürlüğüne ulaşabildiği, Charles'ın ise özgürce hareket etmeyi başaramadığı ve kendine ait bağımsız bir yaşama erişemediğine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: John Fowles, Fransız Teğmenin Kadını, Sartre, Varoluşçuluk

Introduction

Getting its roots from the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, Existentialism received a lot of attention during the 1940s. The philosophies and the approaches of various existentialist philosophers differ widely from each other. As Robert Solomon (1987: 56) remarks, "Kierkegaard was a devout Christian, Nietzsche was an atheist, Jean-Paul Sartre was a Marxist and Heidegger, at least briefly, a Nazi". On the diversity of various Existentialist schools, Ross Murfin (1997: 146) similarly asserts that existentialists can be broadly divided into two camps. According to him, critics such as Paul Tillich and Gabriel Marcel followed Søren Kierkegaard in a Christian interpretation of Existentialism and maintained that freedom may be found in God; while Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre upheld the belief that individuals could exert their free will through engagement in the social sphere and resist the oppression of social institutions, laws and conventions. John Killinger writes in his 1961 article "Existentialism and Human Freedom" that:

Which is freer, a prisoner awaiting execution or a waiter serving tables in a restaurant? Nine persons out of ten would say, "Why, the waiter, of course!" The tenth person, however, particularly if he were an existentialist, might reply that the answer depends on several things, but that the prisoner is quite possibly the freer of the two. The reason is that Existentialism speaks of a kind of personal freedom that is inviolable regardless of circumstances and that can exist in prison as fully as it can anywhere else in the world. (1961: 310)

Despite such differences, Existentialist philosophers essentially claim that individuals are responsible for their lives and their actions and that they have certain freedom to choose and create the meaning of their lives. Jean-Paul Sartre is the most significant and the best-known existentialist philosopher and, is the one to name the movement. His philosophy can be seen most clearly in his 1943 book *Being and Nothingness* and can most briefly be summarized by the idea that man makes himself. Meaning of life and morality depend solely on the shoulders of the individuals and that they construct our own values, our sense of being, and as a result, create the meaning of life (Murfin, 146). Sartre rejects the idea that "the true nature of the object is the secret reality of the thing- its essence" (2003: 3). In this sense, he proposes that human beings do not have pre-determined purposes in life, on the contrary they define themselves in terms of who they want to be. Therefore, a human is "what it is, it is absolutely, for it reveals itself as it is." (2003: 4)

Sartre develops his ideas through the concepts 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself' in his *Being and Nothingness*. The term being-in-itself is used for inanimate objects that are not able to change their essence:

Being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It is. This is what consciousness expresses in anthropomorphic terms by saying that being is de trop-that is, that consciousness absolutely cannot derive

being from anything, either from another being, or from a possibility, or from a necessary law. Uncreated, without reason for being, without any connection with another being, being-in-itself is de trop for eternity. (2003: 29)

On the other hand, being-for-itself refers to human beings who have consciousness, are free of their choices and can turn themselves into what they are not essentially through their free will.

Theoretical Framework

In this essay, I aim to analyse Fowles' 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in terms of Sartre's philosophy. It is considered by critics that his works are reflections of Sartre's existentialist philosophy. Like Sartre, Fowles mainly shows concern about the question of human freedom and human beings' struggle to exist despite the restrictions of the society they live in. As well as his other works, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is also representative of Sartre's philosophy of existential freedom. However, the concept of freedom does not only refer to a specific kind, there are different kinds of freedoms that Fowles deals with; "social, existential, and narrative." (Lynch, 2002: 50) Furthermore, in his *Freedoms in French Lieutenant's Woman* Lynch remarks:

In Fowles' thinking, Existentialism is primarily a response to social and political pressures on the individual to conform. His novel can be more clearly understood, however, if two kinds of freedom are distinguished. Social freedom, a concept that will be elaborated on below, is the opportunity to choose between alternative social "realities" or support groups, which confirm and strengthen one's identity. There is some overlap between social and existential freedom in the sense that both give the individual the opportunity to choose, but Existentialism necessitates a choice independent of any sustaining community. (2002: 51)

Fowles basically discusses the issue of personal freedom and existence through the characters Sarah and Charles, and through Charles' relationship with Ernestina. The main questions Fowles raises in his novel are "is there free will?", "can choose freely?", "can we act freely?" and "how can we do it?" (Neary, 1992: 20). I propose that in the conventional circumstances of the Victorian society, Sarah manages to create her freedom both socially and existentially in terms of Sartrean existentialist ideology. Charles, on the other hand, fails to act freely and create an independent life of his own.

At the beginning of the novel, it is revealed that Sarah is not a stereotypical Victorian woman and she is living in a world where she does not belong to. She can be considered a rebel against the "facticities" of her community. As Sartre explains in *Being and Nothingness*, these facticities are "one's place, past, environment, other human beings and death" (2003: 476). Though these concepts might seem to limit the human freedom at first glance, it is explained that "the factual limits of our actions are not limits to existential freedom, they actually make freedom possible, since freedom is the way we go beyond all that is to a not-yet-existing end." (Wang, 2006: 344), and being 'being-for-itself' can only be achieved through "negating of these real existents and engaging in a resisting world" (Sartre, 2003: 483).

Existentialism and Fowles' Novel

Sarah is one who can resist in a restrictive world. The facticities we learn about her life at the beginning of the novel are her class and place in the society, her situation, her interactions with the others, and her past. She belongs to lower-class, but her father wants her to get an education. She is not respected and accepted by her schoolmates as an individual at school but Sarah, without caring

about being discriminated against, creates her own meaning and forms her own values and treats others as if they are “fictional characters” (Fowles, 2004: 58) and not real. The education she receives leads her to move out one step further from the class she belongs to but does not “raise her to the next” (2004: 58). Therefore, her place in the Victorian society is ambiguous and she becomes “the perfect victim of a caste society” (2004: 58).

Thomas C. Foster claims in his “The French Lieutenant's Woman: Postmodern Victorian”, that it is seen in Fowles’s description of Sarah in the novel that her life does not include an essential meaning and instead she takes charge of her life and she gives meaning to it, and she struggles to create her own being despite all hostile conditions (1994: 72). She is condemned to a certain life, trying to create her own being singly in a society that values its members merely in terms of money and social positions. However, as Foster further indicates: “Sarah is genuinely trapped in an existentialist situation without the knowledge or skills that would provide a guide out of that trap” (1994: 72). She endeavours to act freely and chooses to lead her life according to her own free will by rejecting being ‘being-for-others’; no matter what Charles’, society’s, Mrs. Poulteney’s or others’ attitudes are.

Further in the novel, other facticities of her life are revealed and one sees that the most important facticity that determines her life is her past relationship with the French lieutenant. She is alienated and expelled from the society due to her experience with this man. However, Sarah does not complain about being expelled from the Victorian society. On the contrary, she seems content and glad for not being a complacent member of it, since she has an opportunity to explain the facts about her relationship and she can prove her innocence and, yet she chooses to stay outside the society. Fowles affirms: “Her exhibition of her shame had a kind of purpose; and people with purposes know when they have been sufficiently attained and can be allowed to rest in abeyance for a while” (2004: 68). I assume that her purpose is to lead her life on her own without being dependent on the norms of others and the society. It seems to me that she thinks the way to emancipation and freedom lies in resisting the norms of the society in which she does not value. Therefore, she becomes an independent and a free human being. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre indicates:

Human being is free, since the human being is not an abstract freedom but free reconstitution of a concrete bodily life. To be free is not to choose the historic world in which one arises- which would have no meaning- but to choose oneself in the world whatever this may be. (2003: 483)

Stephen Wang explains what “historic world” in the quotation above implies: “historic world here stands here for that immensely complex set of facts and circumstances which constitute one’s present reality” (2006: 345). In this sense, it can be claimed that Sarah prefers living in another meaningful world she created than accepting the meaningless historic world. Fowles mentions in the novel: “A planned world is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live.” (2004: 98) In my opinion, Fowles’ words here refer to the choices and decisions of Sarah in some ways. If we come to think the Victorian society as the planned world, we can easily come to the decision that Sarah refuses to lead the purposeless and dead life of the Victorians. She redeems herself from the restrictions of the dead world and embraces freedom.

Apart from Sarah’s situation, Charles’ incompatibility with existentialist realities deserves an emphasis throughout the novel. Charles is portrayed as a stereotypical Victorian gentleman who,

unlike Sarah, seems to be in good terms with Victorian society and its conventional attitudes. Foster comments on Charles:

While he believes himself to be a Byronic loner and sceptic in the beginning of the novel--and his tweaking of the middle class by following Darwin is his chief supporting evidence--Charles is very much a product of his time and class. He lives on a private income, with expectations of further inheritance of money and title when his uncle dies. He is a non-productive member of society, and even his fashionable scientific interests are dilettantish, pursued without system or rigor. (1994: 73)

Apart from these peculiarities of him, his engagement to Ernestina also reveals that he is a typical man of his time who leads his life according to society's expectations. Yet, from time to time, he seems to perceive the simplicity of his life and engagement, and he goes on to live in the planned dead world until he has a relationship with Sarah. Sarah causes an awareness in Charles which leads him to abandon his conformist role in life and struggle for finding his true self and another world. Foster remarks: "when Charles loses his way as he gazes into Sarah's eyes, he begins to lose his conformity, begins to see the possibilities of the radical Self" (1994: 75). Before their relationship starts, even thinking of Sarah reminds him of "some hidden self he hardly knew existed" (Fowles, 2004: 128). Sarah's existential attitude gets him to become aware of the fact that in his current situation, his future is "a fixed voyage to a known place" (2004: 129). In my opinion, to explain Charles' condition, some of Sartre's claims about future should be mentioned: "our orientation to a future allows us to unify the self that is seeking this future." (Sartre, 2003: 465). However, Charles will not be able to unify the self since it is not the future he is seeking anymore.

An interesting aspect about Charles' situation is that he is a scientist, namely a palaeontologist, and he fancies collecting fossils. Oya Başak writes in her *John Fowles: Novelist as Thinker* that "Charles is only a facile poser to himself as well as to others; he is not a true scientist at all. [...] Although Charles poses as a liberated and modern young man, he is quite a slave to conventions of the Victorian world around him (1976: 110)". It is ironic that although he calls himself a Darwinist, he does not understand Darwin and his principle of change and adaptation. At least before meeting Sarah, at the beginning of the novel, with his Victorian moral values, his 'proper' engagement to Ernestina, and his gentlemanly appearance, he is a typical and stiff Victorian man, unable and reluctant to resist adaptation. Only after meeting Sarah and falling in love with her can he begin to show signs of discomfort at the rigid Victorian values.

As I mentioned, Sarah elicits the consciousness in Charles through imposing her mentality on him by her words and reactions, and especially through her love. If Sarah's words are carefully analysed, it is seen that she mostly talks about personal freedom and freedom of choice which are basically the reflections of Sartre's philosophy. When she tells Charles that she gave herself to the lieutenant, she underlines her being a dishonoured woman was her choice. Furthermore, she criticizes other women and affirms that "she has a freedom they don't understand" (Fowles, 2004: 171). She creates her own freedom by alienating herself from the society, therefore "no insult, no blame, can touch her." (2004: 171) She pulls off her connection with the society and the others, so she does not have any responsibilities towards anyone or anything except herself. Her indifference to the general beliefs, ethics, moralities, and social conditions and the self-confidence in her force Charles to gradually think over and analyse his life and the circumstances, and he concludes that the concepts regarded as realities like "history, religion, duty, social position" are all "illusions and mere opium

fantasies” (2004: 200). Although such restrictive anxieties have always been among the main concerns of any society, they were extremely dominant issues that created pressure on the Victorian society. As Fowles describes, England was “a place where there was enormous progress and liberation in every other human field of activity; and nothing but tyranny in the most personal and fundamental” (2004: 259).

The unusual relationship that Charles experiences with Sarah and his recognition of his empty and aimless life contribute to his breaking off his engagement to Ernestina and abandoning his aristocrat identity since the alterations in his life and his epiphanies make him interrogate his existence and life. Sarah makes him realise “all his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms, his never-to-be-taken journeys” (2004: 321). Like Sarah, he decides to live on his free will and find her. Nevertheless, we may assume he cannot wholly internalize such freedom like Sarah does and his struggle to really exist proves useless. Fowles explains his psychology through Sartrean concepts and states:

He had not the benefit of existentialist terminology, but what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom- that is the realization that one is free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror. (2004: 328)

Instead of being a man of his own time, he decides jumping into the future; yet he is not ready for this kind of freedom since his whole life so far has been spent within restrictions. With the disappearance of the boundaries around him, he feels an emptiness and does not seem to know how he should act. He releases himself from his class, country and ancestry but he considers his new position and situation as another prison that also restricts his life. In *Critical Essay on French Lieutenant's Woman*, Wendy Perkins comments on his situation of terror and the time he searches for Sarah and affirms:

Even though during those twenty months he has not been free of his obsession with finding Sarah, he has experienced a certain terrible freedom from the social ties that had previously bound him. As a result, he begins to realize his selfhood. He decides that “there is something in his isolation that he could cling to” – his label as an outcast— “the result of a decision few could have taken, no matter whether it was ultimately foolish or wise. (2003: 3)

Although Charles struggles to create a new life and give it a meaning, I believe that he cannot escape being an object, that is to say, being being-for-others. He may be considered as a being-for-itself, however his obsession for finding Sarah and his desire to be with her, without minding and knowing her opinions, proves that he has not attained the existential freedom yet.

Fowles writes multiple endings for the novel. First one is a stereotypical Victorian end. He finds Sarah and learns that Lalage is their daughter and they reunite again. But this end is not compatible with Sarah's and Fowles' existential philosophy. On the other hand, second end is ultimately different and Fowles completely uses existential elements to construct it. Sarah only wants to be herself and she is content with her new life. It can be said that “she needs no longer suffers the Victorian stereotypes because she has found that universe and the significant others she needed.” (Lynch, 2002: 55). Sacrificing her freedom is impossible because freedom is the essence and meaning of her life and she tells Charles: “I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage” (Fowles, 2004: 430). Wendy Perkins

also comments on the different ends of the novel and states: “The major argument critics have supported is that the first ending is anti-existentialist, because it denies to both Charles and Sarah the power of choice” (2003: 2). Moreover, she defends the second ending by claiming “when both choose their independence over the confines of marriage, they become models of existential freedom” (2003: 1).

Conclusion

I agree with the critics who claim that the second ending is an existential resolution, but I do not agree with Perkin’s idea that Charles also becomes a model for existential freedom. It is clear in the novel that Sarah signifies “the modern liberated woman”, and she has her own ideas, independent decisions (Foster, 1994: 77). In addition, she chooses the identity she wants and creates the meaning of herself on her own. Firstly, she chooses to be the French Lieutenant’s whore, then she decides to be herself in a world where she can be her true self without being a social outcast. In this sense, she becomes the perfect representative of both Fowles’ and Sartre’s. I believe that unlike Sarah, Charles cannot be considered as a good model for existential freedom. Because, according to Sartre, our choices always have a connection with our pasts, and it is not possible to find a connection between Charles’ choices and his past. Sartre claims: “If we do something completely unconnected with our past identity, without any reference at all what went before, this is not freedom—we call it madness or amnesia” (2003: 466). In this sense, the choice made by Charles can be regarded as madness. Although there are some references that explain why he did this; his past and future do not correspond to each other. Charles’ decision is irrelevant with his past identity, and his new identity is not constructed according to his own free will and his own values, but it is under the strong influence of Sarah. Sarah can be defined as “a catalyst in Charles development” (Lynch, 2002: 52). She evokes an awareness in him, but John Neary explains in his “Freedoms in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” that “rather than achieving or even attempting freedom, Charles has merely replaced Christianity with Duty, Culture and science which become substitute determiners of his character and actions” (1992: 163). On the contrary, Sarah is depicted as “a female Heathcliff, someone who ignores social convention” (1992: 52). At the end of the novel, Fowles also makes a comment which explains this situation and asserts:

Thus, only life as we have, within our hazard-given abilities, made it ourselves, life as Marx defined it – the actions of men (and women) in pursuit of their ends. The fundamental principle that should guide these actions, that I believe myself always guided Sarah’s, I have set as the second epigraph. A modern existentialist would no doubt substitute ‘humanity’, or ‘authenticity’ for ‘piety’. (2004: 445)

In my opinion, Sarah not only substitutes humanity or authenticity for piety, she also substitutes them for all the things that are determined by social concerns and dogmatic beliefs. Yet, Charles substitution is only for his aristocrat Victorian identity. As I mentioned before, his quest for Sarah and abandoning the things he owns are not exclusively his self-decisions, yet they are the reflections of Sarah’s identity. Moreover, despite her love for Charles, Sarah does not risk losing her freedom and being, but Charles cannot understand being rejected and her desire to be on her own. Therefore, it seems to me that, freedom of choice and independent living are not the things he has managed to internalize. I suppose that he fails in achieving an existentialist freedom despite the progress he made and the alterations he has achieved in his life.

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