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**The Ironic War between Victorian and Modern Values in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman***

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**ABSTRACT**

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be labeled as a metafictional novel since the writer makes readers aware of the fictional nature of his work through his comments in the novel. As a matter of fact, he detaches himself from the realistic novels by using metafiction—a type of fiction to demonstrate the controversial relationship of fictionality versus reality. Fowles produced his work under the guise of a Victorian novel which provides him to criticize cruel hypocrisy and sexual repression of the age. Also, the characters are given an opportunity to choose their ways, and thus they are not forced to be under the control of the author. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how Fowles as a writer brings an ironical approach to the norms of the Victorian society and novel through deconstructing the so-called Victorian values by focusing on the representation of metafiction, which is one of the key elements of postmodernism.

**Key Words:** Postmodernism, Victorian values, John Fowles, metafiction, hypocrisy.

**1. Introduction**

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be labeled as a metafictional novel since the writer makes readers aware of the fictional nature of his work through his comments in the novel. As a matter of fact, he detaches himself from the realistic novels by using metafiction—a type of fiction to demonstrate the controversial relationship of fictionality versus reality. Fowles produced his work under the guise of a Victorian novel which provides him to criticize cruel hypocrisy and sexual repression of the age. Also, the characters are given an opportunity to choose their ways, and thus they are not forced to be under the control of the author. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how Fowles as a writer brings an ironical approach to the norms of the Victorian society and novel through deconstructing the so-called Victorian values by focusing on the representation of metafiction, which is one of the key elements of postmodernism.

Since the initial publication of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a lot of studies have focused on the novel from various perspectives such as new historicism (Gündüz, 2017), feminism (Golestani, 2015), Foucauldian discourse (Diamond, 2012), or psychological points of view (Mandal, 2017). In terms of

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New Historicism, Ela İpek Gündüz posits that the novel “represents a retrospective view made possible by history by providing a current view about Victorian times” (59). She suggests that the work reflects the past as it is. From the feminist point of view, Narjes Tashakor Golestani studies “the construction of identity in the female characters of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” (321). She focuses on both Sarah and Ernestina to analyze how they gain their own different identities. She states that Sarah is rebellious against the norms of the society while Ernestina is obedient to her century. Ariella Diamond, from Foucauldian perspective, discusses the sexuality. She indicates that the physical contact between Sarah and Charles is “fraught with sexual tension” (2). As a matter of fact, she interprets the repressed sexual desires in the novel. Similarly, Mahitqsh Mandal posits the novel from psychoanalytical point of view and describes “Fowles’ interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and his use of psychoanalytic ideas in constructing fictional characters” (274). She asserts that his characters are subjected to psychological tests by the doctors. In this way, her article elaborates on the possible mental disorder of the characters. Therefore, a study on Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, from ironical and metafictional approach, becomes imperative owing to its vivid parody of the Victorian society through metafiction.

The loss of order at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led modernists to search for it at a deeper level of the mind, and the writers re-established order in their fictional world by creating self-conscious novels through metafiction which is used to discuss a kind of fiction that emerged in the 1960s. This term is commonly regarded as the interpretation and a commentary on the process of producing fiction, in that, it creates distinction between the fictional world and reality. The authors may prefer to disrupt the narrative in different ways to take attention to its fictive status, and they self-consciously play games with the conception of the readers in the process. Furthermore, metafictional writers focus not only on the basis of narrative techniques, but also on striking points which can be associated with human life in general. This indicates that the meaning of metafiction is quite related to the novelist’s vision of experience.

In addition to this, all metafictional novels question the truth situation of what is thought to be reality, in that, they search for alternative worlds by taking the paradox between creation and description into consideration. In addition to this, characters unexpectedly realize that they do not exist or cannot act. Fictional characters created in the minds of the authors exist in a particular world despite the fact that they are unreal, and thus, metafictional novels enable readers to observe the reality of literary fiction, and they deal with the duality of literary fictional texts. In other words, the author admits the fictionality of his work. The prefix “meta” means “beyond”, that is, metafiction can be labeled as a type of fiction which shows its own fictiveness. According to Patricia Waugh, “[m]etafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”(2). In fact, it breaks down the distinction between reality and virtuality, and allows both novelists and readers to comprehend the main elements of fiction. This special way of narration encourages readers to find out their identity by presenting some traditional conventions of the novel which they are familiar. In short, metafiction acknowledges the artificiality of the texts, and it centers on the readers’ position through multiple realities, that is, it suggests a narrative technique distinguished by a fictional work that self-consciously takes attention to status as a piece of imagination instead of reality by raising some questions about the association between fiction and reality.

## 2. Victorian Women and Marriage Market

Victorian society favored a proper and stable family structure based on heterogeneous relationship because the patriarchy considered such a family as the milestone of stable society, progress, and regeneration. For this reason, a proper marriage had importance in the patriarchal society. However, the irony is that the roles and professions of both men and women were radically categorized in terms of the space which they occupied. Men were responsible for earning money and bringing bread to his home while women were liable for domestic duties such as childbearing, cooking, or sewing. This was a general idea that women should not have any other social activities rather than the ones performed at home as homemaking was accepted to be the only necessary function of women in Victorian period. According to Jenni Calder, “[h]ome was a refuge, and women made it such” (10). They used to be kept at home to keep them away from the ugly sides of the world, therefore, the women’s position would be labeled as the caged bird. The majority of the women would accept this imprisonment in order not to go beyond the norms of the male-dominated society.

Moreover, domesticity was a crucial concept for the Victorian women. For this reason, the marriage institution was the sine-qua-nons of the society especially for the female gender despite the fact that it did not present equal opportunities to them. Finding a suitable husband was the ultimate goal for the women as they were grown up and educated to be successful on the marriage market. However, their situation was rather inferior in their marriage. They were expected to be a mother and a good wife for their unfaithful husbands due to the dominant position of the men.

Education was compulsory for men; but unnecessary for women. Unlike men, women were economically dependent since they could not have worked in any public place due to lack of professional education and social rules. The only purpose of these rules is to lead women to marriage and provide to continue the generation cycle by discouraging women from professional life. The reason lying behind this aim is that women would easily have gained their economic freedom if they had taken more education. Thus, they would not want to marry and obey the rules of the society which may have risked the Victorian social stability. In this respect, education was seen vain and prejudicial for women in the 19th century.

Women were economically disadvantaged from two aspects in their marriages. Initially, women could not marry when they did not have enough dowries, and this situation would put the families of the single women in an awkward position in the eyes of the society. Moreover, women were also disadvantaged in terms of the inheritance as their property passed on to control of their husbands since the married women lacked the legal competence to possess their own goods. All these restrictions on women put them into a victimized position and aims to lead women to make good marriages with notable men.

The oppressed sexual attitudes and regulations were specific to upper class in Victorian era. The purpose of sexuality in marriage was reduced to regeneration. Adultery, prostitution, and any illegal affairs used to be regarded as sexual immorality. According to common belief, this indulgence led to the degradation of the society by posing threat to the social order. Therefore, women had been living their lives under restricted conditions; that is, they had to obey the conventions in order not to be an outcast in the society. In this respect, virginity was an ultimate value which women required to have in marriages for the continuity of generation properly, that is, the Victorian men wished their brides to

be virgin for showing admiration and respect for chastity. On the contrary, the single women above twenty-five had been the target of these greedy men since they were thought to work as a prostitute; for this very reason, the unmarried women found it hard to incorporate into the society.

It is an undeniable fact that Victorian women were suppressed under the control of the patriarchal society. Furthermore, women were submissively reduced to the position of inferiority under the strict regulations of the society and with the walls of marriage. In other words, “[e]quality has always been rejected” (Edman 249) by male-dominated society in this era. Creating a well-educated character like Sarah, John Fowles defies and challenges the norms of the 19th since Sarah deliberately gives the image of a whore to refrain from marriage imposed by the society. In other words, Fowles breaks the chains of the period in order to enjoy freedom by violating the established rules of society and novel as a genre in an ironical way.

### 3. The Fictionality of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

The novel's self-consciousness is emphasized throughout the novel thanks to the comments of the narrator and the epigraphs from Victorian literary works given at the beginning of each chapter. The first epigraph at the beginning of the initial chapter enlightens the key aspects of the whole novel. It is one of Thomas Hardy's poem called as 'The Riddle', and Hardy describes a mysterious woman looking at sea directly. This woman can be associated with Sarah Woodruff, who also stands to wait for the French Lieutenant. The title of the poem is also related to Sarah's personality since she remains enigmatic for the readers. Sarah stands motionless, still and staring out to sea like the woman in Hardy's poem. The writer inserts a Victorian poem to let the readers think about its reality. Furthermore, the heroine of the novel, Sarah, is introduced via different interpretations by Ernestina who is highly Victorian. She says that “[t]hey call her the French Lieutenant's Woman. She is a little mad” (Fowles 9). These words are the typical consequence of gossip which is the characteristics of Victorian period. People were inclined to believe in what they heard, and they used to act in accordance with such kind of gossips. Sarah does not belong to any norms of the period. In other words, she is a liberated figure in contrast to the age that she inhabits. For this reason, the male protagonist of the novel, Charles and Sarah fail to communicate with each other on their first meeting due to a hundred year gap between them despite the fact that Sarah partly shows the characteristics of a Victorian female character. While Sarah reminds “the forbidden woman of a number of Victorian novels, Charles is an archetypal Victorian hero” (Alexander 128). That is the reason why, Fowles deliberately confuses his readers with the representation of Sarah as a fictional and independent figure who goes beyond the social codes of her age.

It is no doubt that Charles is impressed by her face although Fowles does not explicitly describe her physically, and thus, he creates ambiguities to let the readers project about her appearance. Sarah breaks off the chains of being a conventional woman which makes her a good example of deconstruction of the Victorian stereotype. She encounters with various difficulties; however, she never gives up unlike other Victorian women. Therefore, the author describes her as a self-reliant and assertive person although she represents the lower class: “Sarah was intelligent, but her real intelligence belonged to rare kind” (Fowles 53). This proves the violation of typical Victorian novel in relation to the description of working class member. Despite her isolated lifestyle from the rest of the society, Fowles' presentation of her with an attractive story makes her a unique character. Unlike

traditional way of victimizing woman, he presents a strong and confident woman whose survival violates the traditional Victorian novels.

Sarah is also thought to suffer from hysteria; however, she does not follow the prescription of Dr. Grogan. Her refusal to medical therapy leads Grogan to view her as a mystery. Sarah has been examined as an unknown object which needs to be examined, and she is regarded as patriarchal mystification of women. Therefore, she does not want to be treated and rejects all kinds of treatments. Women like Sarah have exposed to be named as insane women to ensure social mobility according to Victorian patriarchal view. However, Sarah reacts against this idea by refusing to be examined by Dr. Grogan. She remains as a mysterious person who cannot be understood by anyone including herself, and she confesses her situation at the end of the novel: "I meant that I am not to be understood even by myself" (455). Fowles intentionally creates Sarah as a mysterious character to make the readers involve into the novel to highlight its fictionality.

John Fowles frequently interrupts his novel so as to tell the reader that their concept of reality is partly fictitious. To begin with, Fowles gives information about the setting of the novel at the very beginning of the novel, and he adds his own personal comment about the place. After describing Lyme Regis, the narrator interrupts his description and begins to address the readers directly as if a character in the novel, in that, Fowles constantly includes himself to the narrative to enlighten the readers about possible events. For example, the writer implies that the modern world is changing when compared to Victorian age; "[h]e could not have imagined a world without servants" (44). It means people do not need to employ servants in the modern world unlike Victorian period. In addition to this, Fowles criticizes the masters of the servants since they regard them as nothing more than a mere object. However, Fowles ironically lets the servants comment on their masters' private lives which were impossible in Victorian period. Furthermore, Sam's ambition to open a store to gain his independence and set his own business proves that Fowles goes beyond the Victorian age by subverting some general traditions. This supports that social hierarchy begins to change with the development of commerce.

The author opens the door of fiction by breaking illusion of reality. He speaks directly to the reader in chapter 13 at which point he admits that everything he has written so far has been fiction. Also, he acknowledges that the characters do not exist out of his mind. This means that metafictionality finds its expression in this chapter. He states that: "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (95). Readers learn that they are not reading a real piece of work thanks to this explanation, and they come to the realization that the teller of the story is its inventor rather than a mere recorder. As a matter of fact, Fowles created an imaginary world that is similar to real life. His intrusion into the course of the events and intimate confession about the characters distort the narration. Brian McHale puts forward that the metafictional writer "occupies an ontological level superior to his world; by breaking the frame world around his world and he foregrounds his own superior reality" (197). The narrator leaves the reader with his own choice, and thus they become aware of their freedom thanks to the novel's self-reflective characteristics.

#### 4. A Critical Gaze on Victorian Society and Writers in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* reveals the Victorian inability to act with their free will. They cannot lead a life of their own under the influence of pre-determined rules and norms. They have lots of duties such as going to the churches, balls or marriage. Among these duties, marriage is one of the most important one as it is indicated through Clough's poem "Duty" at the beginning of the chapter 11: "And marry – papa and mama desire you" (73). Therefore, Charles feels instinctively to find a suitable wife for himself. Actually, his respectable marriage to Ernestina Freeman who is the daughter of earnest businessman is pre-determined by the society. After his interaction with Sarah, Charles is described as "a man struggling to overcome history" (298) since he attempts to solve the mystery of Sarah's identity by abandoning not only his fiancée and comfortable financial future but also the nature of his entire existence. Although Charles belongs to English Victorian society, he is critical about it, and he seeks his freedom from his inherited identity as an English gentleman. He could only reach his freedom by choosing Sarah over Ernestina. This highlights that even a horizontal Victorian character like Charles is disturbed by the strict regulations of the period. Charles finds the truth thanks to Sarah, and he would have never thought of searching for truth if he had not known her since "the structure of the society is invisible to those who live unquestioningly immersed in it, just the foundations of selfhood are invisible to someone who can take his identity for granted" (Hilles 94). Charles stands against the conventions of the era, that is, Sarah changes the vision of Charles to his hypocritical society.

Victorians believe that prostitution is an important problem which needs to be prevented; however, this institution becomes increasingly common among men. Prostitute women used to be called as evil, and they are regarded as subversive system which gives harm to the order of the society. Fowles criticizes this social injustice and paradox in chapter 39 through an epigraph from *The Times*; "[n]ow, what if I am a prostitute, what business has society to abuse me?" (300). It is evident that this epigraph focuses on the Victorian social problem of prostitution. Fowles claims that the society pushes these women to become a prostitute. Prostitutes are the victims of the society, and they are exploited economically. For this reason, the writer hates the hypocrisy of the society as they lead women to be whores while cursing them harshly. He deliberately gave Sarah the image of a prostitute in the novel in order to deconstruct the common sense of the period. However, it is revealed that Sarah has refused some marriage proposals. In spite of the fact that Sarah is not an actual prostitute, she acts in this way to remain outside of the patriarchal structure, and marriage does not become an obligation which imprisons women, that is, she gains her independence by acting like a whore. Sarah differs from Victorian female characters as she seeks her freedom in every fields of life thanks to her imaginary relationship with the French Lieutenant. In this way, Sarah stands for "Fowles's philosophy of freedom and fiction. She is mythical: she stands outside history and outside fiction" (Waugh 125). When she is regarded within the values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear that she is not a Victorian due to her rebellion to sexual regulations. This shows that Sarah has deliberately chosen her own story to be an independent female figure even though it gives her harm in terms of reputation. For this reason, it is inevitable for women like Sarah to be labeled as social outcast since they act against traditions. However, Sarah manipulates the way she is perceived by others to her own advantage. She does not behave like other fallen women in Victorian literary conventions. She turns into a New Woman after rejecting the conventions of Victorian society, and Charles even cannot recognize her at first sight

when he sees her new image in her modern clothes. Throughout the novel, Sarah is deliberately portrayed as a whore since she does not follow typical Victorian women career of marriage and motherhood. By this way, Fowles again criticizes Victorian problem of sexuality by combining Victorian parody with metafiction.

Experiencing the destiny in terms of values and norms was the main handicap of the Victorian Age. People used to live their lives designed by others; therefore, it was abnormal for even married women to show passion or pleasure. They would keep the pose and would not show any zeal from having sex. In the novel, there is a clear-cut distinction between this era and the modernist thinking. This distinction can be observed in the difference between Sarah who represents modernity and Ernestina who stands for unblinking disobedience. For instance, Fowles gives importance to the eyes of both women. While Ernestina's eyes were short-lighted, Sarah's eyes are far-seeing which can be interpreted as looking at the distant horizons. Based upon the descriptions of the eyes, it can be inferred that Ernestina is strictly attached to the past unlike Sarah. In addition to this, Sarah is the sexual counterpart of Ernestina who is sexually restrained, and Fowles uses her to reflect the understanding of sex in the Victorian period. To clarify, Ernestina was a beautiful and nice woman. She was aware of her beauty, and she sometimes examined her body although she thinks that it is sinful. For this reason, Ernestina evidently refrains from sexuality. This characteristic of Victorian age can be observed in the relationship between Ernestina and Charles. Despite the fact that they are engaged, they have a frosty relationship since intimate relationships are not suitable for couples, and the aim of sexuality in marriage is reduced to regeneration at that time. In other words, sex becomes a crucial duty for Victorian women. Furthermore, women were restricted in terms of sex while men were free. Fowles criticizes Victorian sexual inequality and the writers of the period who did not describe sexuality, and he is critical about the works which do not reflect instinctive feelings. Thus, Fowles deliberately describes the sexual scene between Charles and Sarah in detail unlike Victorian writers;

Then he raised his left knee onto the narrow bed and fell on her, raining burning kisses on her mouth, her eyes, her throat. But the passive yet acquiescent body pressed beneath him, the naked feet that touched his own ... he could not wait. Raising himself a little, he drew up her nightgown. Her legs parted. With a frantic brutality, as he felt his ejaculation about to burst, he found the place and thrust. (352)

This scene violates Victorian's literary tradition of explaining sex because of the fact that Fowles explicitly narrates the sexual scene in detail. In addition to this, Fowles tricks his readers into imagining a lesbian relationship of Sarah with another woman, and he corrects their mistaken relationship between two women by interrupting the narration after a few lines later. As a matter of fact, Fowles informs the readers about their wrong assumptions through his intrusive comments. This is similar to Sarah's virginity which reveals the contradictions of fictionality and reality. In other words, it suggests that the mixture of fictionality and reality exist both in the fiction and outside the fictional text.

Fowles disrupts Victorian historical reality and criticizes God-like figure of Victorian writers, that is, the role of the narrative is not omniscient any more. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he explains the drastic change in authorship as; "we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and

decreeing; but in the new technological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (97). Fowles enters into the minds of the characters and plays with the Victorian convention of the omniscient author. He breaks the illusion of reality by commenting as a 20<sup>th</sup> century individual in a novel which actually presents the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Foster explains Fowles's narration on the reader: "[h]e repeatedly violates the illusion of reality by intrusive comments and stratagems. From the outset he insists on the differences between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, and he compares characters and situations to literary examples from the major Victorian novels" (83). Fowles constantly interacts with the readers by adding his comments into the novel, and he stresses the author's access to ultimate power in relation to fictional world, that is, the readers are drawn into Victorian society by the narrator's critical comments. Thus, they become aware of the fact that what they read is not reality.

Unlike Victorian novelists, Fowles also interacts with the readers by commenting on the possibilities that he could have used while writing this novel through his constant usage of the word "perhaps". The repetition of this word leads readers to establish alternative interpretations of fiction. Everything is based on possibilities, and thus Fowles attempts to manipulate the readers by directing them through his comments. In addition to his comments, Fowles interestingly gets on the same train with Charles in chapter 55 and says that: "I have already thought of ending Charles's career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given" (408). Fowles deliberately includes himself as a Victorian passenger on the train carrying Charles back from London in this chapter. During their journey, the narrator observes the sleeping Charles, and he starts to hate him. Although Fowles would like to get rid of Charles when he stares at him, he cannot end the novel since Victorian fiction requires a traditional ending.

## 5. Three Unconventional Endings

John Fowles presents three different endings which are very unconventional. He enjoys the idea of freedom by presenting various endings for the novel. He prepares these endings for Charles, Sarah, and the readers. In the first ending, Charles leads an unhappy life after he marries Ernestina. Sarah interestingly disappears in this ending, and Fowles is not interested in her any more; "[w]hat happened to Sarah, I do not know — whatever it was, she never troubled Charles again in person" (340). This first ending can be accepted as quite Victorian since the 19<sup>th</sup> century demands it.

The author himself goes back to the train scene and again appears as a minor character before the second and third endings. He flips a coin to decide the order in which he will present two other endings and states that; "I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the real version. I take my purse from the pocket of my frock coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my right thumbnail, I flick it, spinning, two feet into the air and catch it in my left hand. So be it" (409). Interestingly, the author decides on the order of the rest two endings in this way, and he constructs the novel in front of the readers.

Charles leaves Ernestina and looks for Sarah in the second ending. When he finally finds her after a long time, Sarah refuses to marry Charles. It should be noted that her refusal keeps her away from the imprisonment of marriage. Once Charles asks the reason, she simply declares that she does not want to marry, and he decides to leave the house thinking that he is deceived; however, Sarah begs him to



meet a lady. Later on, it is revealed that this lady is their baby, and they embrace each other. Despite this, it is not clear whether they will ever marry or not. This ending also meets the expectations of the society since it fulfills the romantic conventions.

The last alternative ending is quite challenging. Fowles enters the novel as a bearded man to make a little adjustment in time. This means that he returns fifteen minutes back in time and creates the last ending for the novel. The last ending is quite unconventional because of the fact that Charles feels disgusted to let himself fall for a woman like Sarah and leaves her without meeting his baby. While the first two endings show different kinds of Victorian endings, the last one is more modern. Fowles harshly criticizes the worst part of Victorian ethics through subverting Victorian conventional endings.

## 6. Conclusion

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an amazing novel which parodies Victorian society. Fowles' skillful rewriting of Victorian novel by combining past and present and his depiction of traditional Victorian way of life through postmodern sense makes his novel leave a prominent impression in the period soon after it is written. The author intends to depict the contrast between modern thinking and Victorian thought in the novel, that is, he makes up a world of fiction out of a historical Victorian Age through metafiction. In other words, it is the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Victorian novel. The writer positions himself as a character in the novel to play with the notion of mystery, and this is accepted as breakthrough in the traditional literary narrative. Fowles believes in the freedom of novel just as he believes in freedom of Sarah. Also, the readers realize their own liberation by reading possible endings, and they themselves decide their own choice whether they want a Victorian or a modern one. Fowles associates these multiple endings with "[t]he river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice, flows past a deserted embankment" (469-70) since there are no certain answers of mysteries in the real world.

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