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## EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (1969)



**Ashok .D. Mashale**

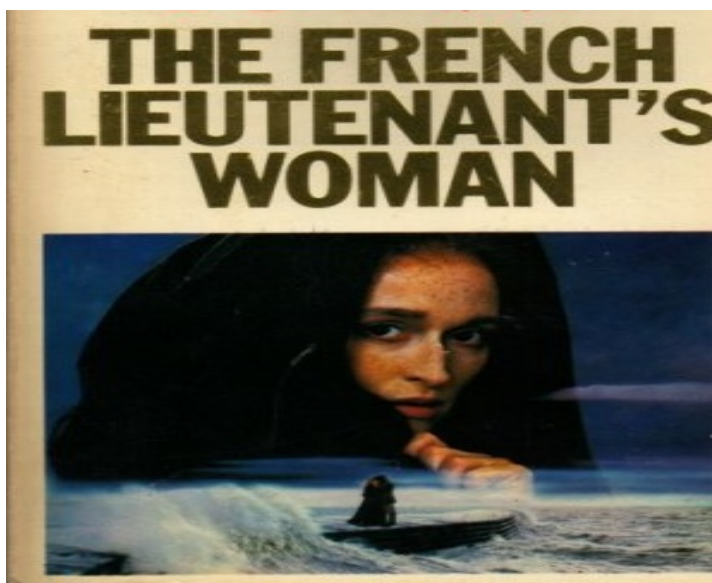
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### ABSTRACT

John Fowles published another contemplating novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in 1969. The publication of the novel strengthened his reputation as a writer. He was awarded the Silver Pen Award in 1969 and the W. H. Smith Literary Award in the following year.

**KEYWORDS** : *French Lieutenant's Woman* , novel strengthened , medieval courtly romance , translations.



### INTRODUCTION :

Published in 1969, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was inspired by the 1823's French novel *Ourita* by Claire-de-Duras. John Fowles translated it into English in 1977 and revised in 1994. In 1981, the novel was adapted as a feature film.

John Fowles' novels draw attention to the importance of medieval courtly romance. Fowles, through his essays, translations, interviews and occasional remarks indicates his close familiarity with and on-going interest in medieval stories and quest and love. He finds that many of his own

preoccupations –love and sex, problems of freedom, search and quest are already present in the earliest Celtic romances. The fact is that, although Fowles has an amateur's interest in medieval literature, he does not structure his novels as mere imitation of medieval romances. Fowles adjusts himself to the aspects like the subject matter, manipulations of plot and character, fantasy and adventure. They are written in similar style of the writers of courtly poems and stories. His novels also show similarity with the medieval formal devices of confession; allegorical storytelling and tales interlaced with tales are evident in most of his fiction.

In this novel, the novelist is interested in the literary genre of the 19th Century romantic or gothic novel. The novel succeeds in reproducing a typical victorian characters, situations and dialogues. But the perception of the novelist of the genre is touched with typical 20th Century irony. The thematic concerns of the novel range from the relationship between life and art and the artist and his creation that result from an individual struggling for self hood.

The aim of the novel is to bring to light those aspects of Victorian society that would appear most foreign to contemporary readers. Victorian attitudes towards women, economics, science and philosophy are tackled as minor themes making the main plot. Both women and the working class are the two groups that are revealed as being oppressed both economically and socially in a society that inhibits mobility for any one who is not middle or upper class and male. These are the social issues that Fowles explores within the guise of traditional romance.

The general mood throughout the novel is somber and turbulent. From the initial chapter, the mood is set. A strong easterly wind is blowing and a storm is coming in. It is in such a setting that Charles and Sarah meet. The atmosphere suits Sarah's enigmatic personality. Throughout the novel she is presented as a dark, mysterious and intriguing figure. The readers are unconsciously aware that the lovers, Charles and Sarah are doomed from the beginning. In the several sections, the mood changes one of irony and realistic recording of details. Fowles tends to comment on several unknown aspects of the Victorian era e.g. prostitution in an realistic manner.

As far as the structure of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is concerned, Fowles shows his talent to craft the overall structure of the novel. He very aptly makes use of number of different voices throughout the narrative. He uses several narrative presences in the novel. He cleverly keeps identity of the story teller ambiguous. He indirectly defines role of an author as an anecdotist and an observer and emerges as a God figure. With the use of Pronoun "I" in the narrative, he calls readers to share his creative illusory process. He, sometimes, drops into familiar style. He begins the narrative in the middle of the events and things. Critics call it as "in media res". As readers proceed further, he unfolds events in retrospect. At one stage, his style appears to be leading to confusion; however, he increases suspense and tension in the story. He compels readers to guess as he himself does so. He plays with the time. Events are shown as though in sequence, when, in fact, they are happening at the same time, in parallel. He does not reveal events, sometimes, until later on.

Fowles' attempt to present story in three different endings is most striking. He according to critics, attempts to cheat readers with this attempt. He even appears in an enigmatic disguise as an anonymous bearded character to turn back his watch and give readers the last which is existential ending.

In the novel the novelist shows the fact that power resides in the hands of those who tell the best – that is, most intelligible, most satisfying-stories, and prevailing narratives work to produce and maintain an obedience culture. The critics also believes that narrative is a singularly potent discursive form through which control can be dramatize, because it compels belief while at the same time it shields truth claims from testing and debate.... Symbolic resources that serve the ends of control are realized through practices of storytelling and listening.

The novel uses science despotically, bringing powerful scientific reasoning procedures to bear on unstable narratives like Sarah's, to realign them and bring them into congruence with narratives that serve his interests. The remains, if she does not conform, she will be sent to an asylum; obviously, society offers incentives for adherence to canonical narratives. Her emotions are as unacceptable as her actions. Emotions are largely taught not by experience, but by stories, wherein narrative situations set up standard expectations for certain appropriate emotional responses.

Sarah's profound and unnamable emotion cannot be retrofited to a narrative that would sufficiently account for it and sanction it. She insists to Charles that her pain is sensual, generative, and enabling, even if it is not to be explained. The critics consigns Sarah to the melancholia narrative, with its putative causes, effects, crises and denouements. In a symbolic gesture he takes the La Ronciere text down from his shelves and gives it to Charles, ion effect prescribing and dispensing narrative for the

confused man. Charles is able to replace the unprocessable Sarah with a scientifically created replicate. Charles's reading becomes a paradigm for the reading process itself, where the reader comes to see the story as a generic template that can be extended to other situations. Dr. Matthaei, the author of this text, relates how he used Marie de Morrel's story to diagnose six other women who exhibited random one-to-one correspondences to her story. The tale also seduces Charles to patch himself into the story:

*He identified himself at once with the miserable Emile de La Ronciere.*

(Fowles, 235)

At the end of the novel Grogan acts as a voice of power, the voice of Victorian morality. In trying to free himself from given narratives, Charles has attempted a profound subversion. Fearing that Charles will spin off into antisocial and renegade plotlessness with Sarah, Grogan appeals to him to return to community by reinscribing himself into the Christian atonement plot. He says,

*If you become a better and more generous human being, you may be forgiven.*

(Fowles, 398)

Charles, who seems always destined to fall back into scripted existence, temporarily takes the bait: all of a sudden

*his guilt seemed almost beneficial: its expiation gave his life its hitherto lacking purpose.....[A] new life lay ahead of him, great challenges, but he would rise to them.*

(Fowles, 399)

This shows how swiftly and urgently the confused mind seeks narrative form, as Charles's dream of a brave new life with Sarah collapses into a trite quest narrative, with its hero facing a rising action pulsing with complications and obstacles. Personal identity itself does not precede or exist outside of narrative operations. One learns to construct narratives by others' examples. Reciprocally, we restrict our actual lives by emplotting them to maintain a coherent identity. Charles feels caught in these narrative dynamics, feels himself a brilliant man trapped, a Byron tamed. (Fowles, 130) and fights all through the novel to free himself; he feels that Sarah might bring him a new vision' if only he could 'cleanse himself.

*With her he sees*

*a glimpse of another world, a new reality, a new causality, a new creation.*

(Fowles, 365)

However, his revolution against received narrative life and identity is destined to become a revolution. It is a sense of not only story itself, but familiar story repeating over and over.

The narrative mode of cognition accounts for the phenomenon of re-revolution at the social level as well. It brings in one of its most deleterious effects. The great 'social revolution' Sam seems to represent to Charles is a red herring, a great irony. He and Mary move from one story of servitude to another, not carving out a new history, not breaking out into a new life, but into an old story Mr. Freeman previously inhabited. Sam loves Mary for the 'part she played in his dreams'. She is 'prettily

caged behind the counter of a gentleman's shop,' putting collars 'round her small white neck before each admiring duke and lord'. Freeman's Store becomes Sam's 'Oxford Street grindstone', where he spells out, ironically, 'Freeman's for Choice' in collars. In Jameson's terms, history is 'the experience of Necessity', and Necessity is what Charles might call Duty, a commitment to narrative thinking and canonical narrative forms; and, Jameson adds, Necessity is a *narrative category that determines the inexorable form of events*. (Fowles, 102)

A chronically re-voluting history, on the personal and social levels, is 'what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis'. The readers must see Charles 'for what he is: a man struggling to overcome history'.

What remains is that the novel dreams not in the postmodern hallucination of the new or of the fetishized happy apocalypse. On the contrary, it dreams of disrupting the insidious pattern of historical revolution, on the personal and collective levels by pushing the limits that linguistic consciousness places on our perception. The novel further dreams of a 'horizontal evolution' of consciousness that produces an extra-narrative mode of understanding, making not new but more consciousness available to us, more love, more freedom, more desire, more tolerance. Horizontal evolution is the action of metamorphosis, and one of the great subjects of this novel is its own ongoing metamorphosis and its challenge to readers to evolve commensurate cognitive skills.

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