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**A Thesis Submitted in a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Degree of  
M.A in English Literature**

**Subject:**

**A NEW HISTORISIST STUDY OF JOHN FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH  
LIEUTENAT'S WOMAN***

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**Winter 2011**

## **Abstract**

The present research paper studies John Fowles' prominent novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the light of New Historicism focusing on two major themes in postmodernism, History and Power. In the first step, it demonstrates the unreliability of history as a metanarrative in the novel through concentrating on the textuality of history, the employment of paratexts, the non-linear presentation of time, and the narrator's anachronistic comments. In addition to indicating the fading borderline between fact and fiction in this novel, the researcher demonstrates that Fowles has intended to create a fictional history in order to reconstruct the history of Victorian era with the focus on the marginalized subjects. In the second step, this paper focuses on the notion of power in the novel in the light of Michel Foucault's ideas, and analyzes two main characters of the novel in terms of their resistance to the dominant power relations in a late Victorian countryside society. It also discusses their possibilities of resistance, clarifies their attitudes towards different modes of being and questioning of their identities, and finally follows their process of self-formation.

## **Acknowledgement**

I offer my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor Mr. Sarmady who devoted a great deal of time to read the early drafts of my thesis many different times. This thesis would not have been possible without his insights, comments, and patient guidance.

I am also immensely grateful to my lovely master Ms. Arian, the thesis reader, whose illuminating comments and spiritual guidelines helped me enormously to finish this thesis. I appreciate her concern and kindness to accomplish the process.

Last but not least, I am indebted to my dear parents and my kind friends, without whose support and encouragement I could have never been out of impasse in the process of writing this thesis.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### ***General Background***

John Fowles was a distinguished writer and a brilliant observer of nature who produced valuable works in the realm of fiction and philosophy. His novels have been among the best-sellers due to his remarkable narrative derive and his ability to challenge the reader. He was a highly self conscious postmodern writer who clearly declared artificiality in the act of writing and asserted fictiveness of fiction. His novels have at the same time rich strong narratives and old-fashioned characters of great susceptibility and allure. His most powerful characters are

women who like the princesses of medieval romances remain mysterious and unapproachable.

John Robert Fowles (1926-2005) was born in Leigh-on-sea in Essex, England in an oppressively conformist and conventional middle-class family. He attended Bedford, a large school, from ages 13 to 18. After leaving school, he completed his training in a Naval Short Course at Edinburgh University in 1945, the year in which World War II ended. In the same year, he began his military service. By 1947 Fowles had decided that the military life was not for him, therefore, he spent four years at Oxford, where he read the works of the French existentialists, especially Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. However, he never identified as an existentialist. It was at Oxford and through reading these works that Fowles first considered life as a writer. He began his full-time writing career in 1963 and published his first novel *The Collector* in the same year. The novel became a film in 1965. His second book *The Aristos*, a non-fiction collection of philosophy, was published a year later. Afterward, he collated the drafts of *The Magus*, a novel he had worked on before, and published it in 1965. *The Magus* is based in part of the experience he had in Greece. It is a traditional quest story with parallels to Homer's *The Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Fowles's most commercially successful novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, appeared in 1969. The British playwright, Harold Pinter, wrote a screenplay based on this

novel and it was made into a film during 1981. Fowles spent the rest of his life in Lyme Regis and wrote *The Ebony Tower* (1974) inspired by his translation of Marie de France's 12<sup>th</sup> century story *Eliduce*, *Daniel Martin* (1977) an autobiographical novel spanning over forty years of the life of a screenwriter, *Mantissa* (1981) a fable about a novelist's struggle with his muse, and *A Maggot* (1985) an 18<sup>th</sup> century mystery which contains science fiction and history. *The Wormholes*, a book of essays, appeared in 1998 and *John Fowles-A Life in Two Worlds*, his biography was published in 2004. John Fowles died in Axminster Hospital, five miles from Lyme Regis on 5 November 2005.

Fowles's successful novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* which won the Silver Pen Award and the W. H. Smith literary award in 1969, was inspired by a woman once he had dreamed. The woman was standing at the edge of a quay staring at the sea. She engaged Fowles's mind and became his muse in writing. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a complex novel, a work of genius, set in the village of Lyme Regis on Dorset's Lyme Bay. The story is centered on a classic love triangle, among Charles Smithson, a gentleman of wealth and unfulfilled scientific ambitions, Ernestina Freeman, a beautiful heiress of a new rich; and Sarah Woodruff, a melancholic woman, seduced and later deserted by a French officer, who is infamously called The French Lieutenant's Woman. During his visit to Hardy-Land, the summer retreat of his fiancée, Charles Smithson, the amateur



paleontologist and Darwinist, becomes involved in a web of a governess-companion, Sarah Woodruff. He notices Sarah on a windy morning in the late March of 1867, while walking down the quay at Lyme Regis with Ernestina. They see a woman standing on a rock looking at the sea. Ernestina introduces her as the French lieutenant's woman, who has been deserted by a French naval officer. After getting to know Sarah, Charles is drawn to her and breaks his engagement with Ernestina. He intends to marry Sarah but unbelievably she leaves him and disappears. Charles begins a quest to see Sarah and finally finds her living in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house, serving as his assistant and model. Although Charles achieves self-knowledge in this quest, he can never understand Sarah's endless complexity. The novel defamiliarizes conventions of a Victorian novel and provides the reader with three endings and allows him to choose.

The novel challenges the reader's expectations of realistic Victorian and evolves to a self-reflexive poststructuralist novel. The dominated line of thought in the Victorian era provides the writer with authority to make characters and impose order to construct them. In spite of intruding in his fiction and providing his characters with restricted freedom, Fowles regards himself a Victorian omniscient narrator. He also employs parody when writing in the convention of Victorian novelists. Fowles attempts to achieve a view of his own contemporary world through concentration on a particular time in the past. Indeed *The French*

*Lieutenant's Woman* is a parody of the Victorian novel. Until chapter twelve the narrator takes the role of a god-like narrator, the one in conventional Victorian novel, but this chapter ends with a question about Sarah. The narrator answers that he does not know, and destroys the illusion of the omniscient author of Victorian novels. The characters rebel against the narrator's authority obtaining a freedom, the most important concept any writer should practice in Fowles's opinion. Through illusion-breaking and self-reflexivity in the novel, he reminds the reader that the represented, textual history which had always been believed to be true and authentic is not but a type of creative writing. However, in chapter thirteen, he clearly employs postmodernist techniques in order to question the relationship between fiction and reality.

The novel remembers Foucault and his argument in his "What is an author?" Fowles demonstrates himself like a god-writer in Victorian time, but ends up with granting freedom to his characters. Possessing social, political and ideological functions give the author ontological status. The author functions as a means of organization. He functions to confirm specific discourses through a society. Author-function indicates that the voids, resulted by the death of the author, are filled with social, institutional and ideological functions. The author-function of this novel simultaneously demonstrates his presence and causes his own death that result in the birth of the reader. As an active agent, the narrator reveals (and

invents) the author`s identity. In this book the author exists as a figure, conscious of the act of writing. The narrator is another constructed character, who turns into a physically explained character in the novel, thinking, walking, and expressing his opinions.

### ***The Argument***

This study discusses *The French Lieutenant`s Woman* by John Fowles in the light of New Historicism. As a self conscious postmodern writer and in a playful way, John Fowles intends to demonstrate fictiveness of both fiction and history. Fading the borderline between fact and fiction, postmodernism makes it difficult to make any distinction between historiography and works of fiction. In the process of producing both, historical fictional narrative language plays the central role. Regarding history as fiction shattered the considered authority of facts and raised several oppositions from the side of historians.

As a postmodern approach, New Historicism adopted a different approach in expressing the relationship between history and literature, insisting on the textuality of history. It focused on the study of discourse in any historical period and also the historicity of the text itself. For New Historicists, both history and

literature were necessary for the study of each of them. Regarding the points mentioned above, a number of questions may be raised:

1. As a postmodern novel how does *The French Lieutenant's Woman* represent history as a metanarrative?
2. To what extent is the novel voice of the marginalized and hushed subjects?
3. To what extent has Fowles adopted the role of a historian to narrate this story?
4. What is the significance of historical parallelism used in the novel?
5. Why does the novel employ numerous paratexts?
6. What do the multiple three endings stand for?
7. What are the dominant discourses and prevailing power relations represented in the novel?
8. How do the main characters of the novel Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff resist the dominant power relations of their society?
9. Has either Charles or Sarah achieve ethical self-formation according to Michel Foucault's ideas?

### ***Literature Review***

New historicism is a postmodern approach represented by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982. He and other critics identified with New Historicism denied the notion that it was a specific doctrine or a theory. Rejecting the formalist concept of aesthetic autonomy, they stressed that contextualization of literature involved a new examination of author's status within a linguistic system. Like other new theories, New Historicism questioned the traditional definition of history as an objective record of the past events and facts. In order to explore this approach in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, due to the variety of concepts, the researcher benefits from various sources. Both division of this research paper employ different concepts and terminologies taken from various critics.

Beginning with the sources employed in the first division, *The Condition of Postmodern* by Jean Francois Lyotard, provides the researcher with beneficial information on postmodernist movement and the concept of metanarratives. In this book, Lyotard asserts profound changes of the status of knowledge in his own time, and is mainly concerned with how knowledge has become legitimated in cybernetic society. He is also interested in the legitimation itself. Rejecting any kind of philosophy that believes in uniformity of opinion, Lyotard advocates pluralism. He is against both metanarratives and totalization of opinion. As a pluralist thinker, he believes in a just system of legitimation that accentuates multiplicity and searches for answers to old questions. In his opinion, abstract

principles are not the basis of knowledge, but its affectivity in achieving favorable outcomes counts most.

Metanarratives (grand narratives) are grand theories and philosophies of the world such as the possibility of absolute freedom, progress of history and the ability to know everything through science. Lyotard argues that narratives of this kind are no longer adequate to express and represent. Man has become aware of distinctions and multiplicity of beliefs and desires, and consequently postmodernity is characterized by several micro narratives. In spite of the concept of earlier history that was regarded monological and intended to discover a unitary vision, postmodernism consider history as a metanarrative, neither authentic nor reliable.

In the first step, the researcher benefits from several theoretical books in order to fulfill the thesis. In addition to *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* by John Brannigan that presents both approaches, their affinities and differences, *Critical Theory and Practice: A Course book* by Keith Green and Jill Lebian, *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History* by M. A. R. Habib, and *Literary Theory* by Terry Eagleton provide the researcher with helpful theoretical knowledge on the process of writing this paper. Stephen Greenblatt's major focus is on Renaissance and intends to reassess the works of Shakespeare. Therefore, his ideas are employed in order to study another period of history, the Victorian era.

The essays employed in this division are “The Interplay Between Historicism and Textuality: Postmodern Histories” by Serpil Opperman, and “Stories about History: Hyden White, Historiography, and History Education” by Jon A. Levisohn that presented valuable information in the process of constructing this paper. The last works, utilized in this division, are *The Poetics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism* by Linda Hutcheon that represent ‘historiographic metafiction’ a kind of novel resulted of postmodern ideas on textuality of history and fading the border between history and fiction.

The second division of this research paper mainly focuses on the ideas of Michel Foucault and largely benefits from his works. Along with some of Foucault`s works, two supportive guide books, *Michel Foucault* by Sara Mills and *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* by Mark G. E. Kelly, provide the researcher with plenty information about Foucault and his ideas and pave the way for reading and better understanding of his works. In *The History of Sexuality; Volume I*, (1976) Foucault describes that power is always exercised in the polemical force relation. But in his later works, through different non-dominating techniques, he shows that power can also function through the process of organization of subjectivity in a structured form. Therefore, the research paper follows the thought line of Foucault and his reconceptualization of notion of power in his career. Later in *power/ knowledge*, he says that the conventional view of

power seemed to him inadequate during the course of an experience that he had with prison, starting in 1971-72, and the notion of power needed to be formulated not so much in terms of justice as in those of technology, he also mentions that the problem with “The Order of Discourse” was that he was still involved in the conventional concept of power as he had been since *The History of Madness*. Being concerned with exclusion, madness represented negative moment of power. However, studying about prison made it clear to him that there was a problem with the traditional conception of power. It was the time he became preoccupied with power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how institutions encourage discipline as a form of self-regulation, and how regimes through the use of different techniques exercise power in a society. In this book, Foucault speaks of disciplinary power that affects bodies, rather than power in general and talks about specific disciplinary mechanism bring about an internalization of power.

The main focus of this division is on the last works of Foucault between 1981-2, including “The Subject and Power” and “The Hermeneutics of the Subject” that represent a turn to the subject. Three valuable articles, “Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency Again Autonomous” by Mark Bevir and “Ethical Self-Formation: A Look at the Later Foucault” by Justen Infinito, and “Ethical Aspects of Nietzsche and Foucault’s Writing on Self-Formation” by Anna-Lena Carlson intend to clarify the later ideas of Foucault on the subject and ethical self-



formation, and help the researcher with applying Foucault`s ideas to the present novel.

The insights provided by Brian Mc Hale`s *Postmodernist Fiction*, and the articles including “Self, World And Art In The Fiction of John Fowles” By Susana Onega, “John Fowles: Existence As Authorship” by Dwight Eddins, and “Power and Hazard: John Fowles`s Theory of Play” by Roy Mack Hill, and Raman K. Singh`s interview with Fowles, “An Encounter with John Fowles”, will be employed throughout the research paper.

### ***Thesis Outline***

The present thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter or Introduction commences with General Background that represents John Fowles, his writing style, and his works concentrating on the novel being discussed *The French Lieutenant`s Woman*. The Argument represents raised questions to be answered. The Literature Review concentrates on the approaches and the works which are utilized more broadly in the thesis. Methodology and Approach focuses on the cause of selecting New Historicism as a proper approach for the present thesis, and a brief definition of key terms closes the part entitled Methodology and approach.

Chapter two contains two separate theoretical divisions. The first one concentrates on history, elaborating on its both traditional and postmodern notions, relation between history and fiction, exclusion of suppressed discourses belonging to the marginalized that result in doubting the validity of history, and the textuality of history. This division largely borrows from Jean Francois Lyotard and New Historicist thinkers, especially Stephen Greenblatt. It ends with the discussion of historiographic metafiction, a kind of postmodern novel named by Linda Hutcheon. The second division focuses on power in the light of Michel Foucault's ideas, specially his concept of constructive resistance that results in ethical self-formation.

Chapter three exclusively discusses the novel in the light of postmodern approaches focusing on New Historicist concept. This chapter intends to demonstrate that the novel being discussed asserts that history and fiction are identical, and represents the history of a marginalized outcast woman ignored in subjective history.

Chapter four analyzes two main characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in terms of their resistance to the dominant power relations in a late Victorian countryside society in the light of Michel Foucault's ideas and discusses the dominant discourses and the episteme of the age. It also discusses Charles Smithson's possibilities of resistance and clarifies his attitude towards different

modes of being and questioning his identity, and finally follows his process of self-formation. And it finally analyzes the character of Sarah Woodruff in terms of her resistance to the prevailing power of her society and will discuss her success, as an agent, in confronting the power relations.

### ***Methodology and Approach***

New Historicism emerged in America in the 1980s, introducing a new theory, concentrating power relations in the concept of all texts. In fact, all literary texts are the products of current power relations of their societies. In the light of New Historicism, history and fiction resemble and their affinities lie in their textuality. Consequently, the historian and the writer as the producers of textuality play the same. Rejecting the authenticity of history, Newhistoricism considers it as a narrative lacking the validity of recording the past events. John Brannigan in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* explains the relation between literature and history. In this book he introduces two similar literary approaches, one practiced in England and the other in America. These two approaches brought a new mixture of post-structuralism and Marxism to study the Renaissance literature. Cultural Materialism was mainly inspired by the British premier socialist critic Raymond Williams and focused on the role of ideology, possibility of subversion, and the

role of institutions. However, New Historicism concentrates on the Foucauldian approach leaning towards discourse, power and the construction of identity in a society.

Williams considered Cultural Materialism compatible with Marxism “but it took issue with the kind of Marxism which had relegated culture to secondary, 'superstructural' status, and resembled the New Historicism in its refusal to enforce such hierarchies” (Eagleton 199). Acknowledging that power functions through discourses, both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism focus on the power relations represented in a literary text. Many New Historicists and Cultural materialists are concerned with placing literary texts within power structure, and also considering them as fundamentally participating in conflicts of power between different forms of social and political authority. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism attempted to redefine history through the relationship between history and literature. For both approaches history is not the events of the past, but the story regarding the past events, and accessibility to a complete understanding of the past events is impossible.

In spite of their similarities, the issue of dissidence separated New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. While the former presents a system in which any subversion is impossible, the latter emphasizes subversive potential of history. The grand master of New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, moves from the influence of