

Concept of outsider: a psychoanalytical approach to The French Lieutenant's Woman

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Abstract

According to the Oxford English Mini Dictionary, the term 'outsider' refers to a person who does not belong to a particular group (Soanes 390). Due to several reasons like ideology, belief, practice someone may differ from others and such person can be found surrounding us. Those people are often placed outside from a particular group and ignored most of the time in a normal society. From psychoanalytical point of view, some people may undergo certain psychological issues which force them to lead a different life from the rest. In the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles in 1969 several instances can be found in relation to psychoanalytical criticism. The present paper aims to study the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, from psychoanalytical perspective.

Keywords: Outsider, Psychoanalytical, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Sarah, Victorian woman.

INTRODUCTION

A person may be referred as outsider due to several reasons in a society. Those people often feel estranged and uncomfortable with the rest of the society. They find it difficult to adjust in the society. From psychoanalytical point of view, people may suffer from several psychological issues like depression, anxiety, failure etc and due to such issues people may prefer to stay alone.

Being the mirror of the society, literature always covers almost all types of issues. There are several literary pieces which have already concentrated on this aspect of the human behaviour. Some of those literary works are:- Charlotte bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Albert camus's *The Outsider* (1946), Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) etc. In all these above mentioned novels, there can be found some characters undergoing through certain psychological issues which debarred them from leading a normal life in the society.

Similarly, in the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), John Fowles concentrates on several issues of Victorian

society like gender issue, freedom of women, presentation of women as per the expectations of the society. Because of its unique focus of study from its contemporary literary pieces, it has been able to attract the attention of various readers and academicians.

Aims and Objectives

The present paper aims to study the following points:-

- It aims to study the Victorian women issues through the instances of the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.
- It also attempts to study the novel from the psychoanalytical perspective.

Methodology

The present research paper is based on both primary and secondary data to carry out the study. The paper is narrative in structure. For secondary data the articles, journals and the research thesis are taken into consideration. The

textbooks of the novel, criticism and theory are studied as primary data for the present paper.

Analysis: Without mentioning about Sigmund Freud, discussion of psychoanalytic criticism will remain incomplete. It has gone through huge transformation. Psychoanalytic criticism is a field of study which seeks to explore “the language of the unconscious, of the repressed and the hidden as embodied in literary or cultural texts such as art or fiction, with particular attention to the repression of sexuality and its desires” (Nayar 64). Freud explains the relation between the language and unconscious mind. In this respect, unconscious mind refers to the unexpressed mind which is often repressed by the structured society and is commonly known as taboo. Freud explains that such unconscious mind though ignored most of the time but plays a very vital role in human behaviour. Freud also states about unconscious mind as follows:

Most of the human actions are motivated by psychological forces over which

humans have very limited control (Tyson 13).

Through the above quoted lines it is understood that human cannot control their psychological influence upon their activities which ultimately is revealed through their behaviour. Freud explains that literature or any creative writing basically acts as a medium for the fulfillment of wishes which may either be denied or repressed by the structured social morality. In this respect, Freud’s discussion on the two basic principles should be taken into consideration.

The pleasure principle is one where all our acts are governed by the need to attain

pleasure and avoid ‘un-pleasure’. The reality principle enables us to understand

that our pleasures cannot all be fulfilled the way we want them, and, therefore,

inspires us to seek other routes of attaining pleasure (Nayar 65).

Through the above quoted lines, Freud wants to express about two types of principles which usually influence our life regarding the explosion of certain human desires. Each person

of the society is expected to be obedient by the respective society because of which the person needs to balance accordingly between his or her desires and the social behaviour. Jacques Lacan has also discussed about the concept of identity while discussing about human psyche. He explains the concept with the example of a child which at its initial stage feels complete with its mother and later after understanding the language it gets to know the complications of the real life. Similarly, Erik Erikson also traces the concept identity and the identity crisis. Like Lacan he also attempts to explain the concept, identity by giving example of the development of human being since their birth.

Freud in one of his essays entitled “The Uncanny”, published in 1919 states about the sense of unfamiliar in the society which influences people undergoing certain psychological depression, anxiety or other issues stay away from the crowd. Erikson points out eight stages of psychological development of human being in his famous book *Identity: Youth & Crisis* (1968). In this book, Erikson gives more concentration on the psychological development of the youth age of human being in which people usually experiences several types of psychological issues.

English novelist, John Fowles has a great contribution towards the English literature. His literary works possess a unique position in English literature because of their dealing with several important issues of the contemporary society. His work, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has been translated into several global languages till now. Some of his prominent works are:- *The Magus* (1965), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), *The Ebony Tower* (1974), *Islands* (1978) and many more. He has also composed many poems but most of them got destroyed. *My Kingdom for a Corkscrew* (1955), *The Last Chapter* (1970) are some of his short fiction.

Despite his concentration on several important issues of the society, John Fowles has always studied his literary figures very minutely and those represent the behaviour, mindset of common folk of the contemporary society. In the novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) Fowles basically concentrates on the issues of Victorian woman as well as the respective society. Like every societal norms, Victorian society is also well-known for its own

ideologies and expectations from its inhabitants. Through the protagonist of the novel, Sarah Woodruff, Fowles explores more about the Victorian society. Andrew Sanders in his *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* describes this period as

It was an age of conflicting explanations and theories, of scientific and economic

confidence and of social and spiritual pessimism, of a sharpened awareness of the

inevitability of progress and of deep disquiet as to the nature of the present.

(Sanders 405)

Through the above quoted lines the significance of Victorian era is revealed which marks the period an important one. This period marks development in social, scientific, religious, academic, economic and many more sectors. But it is to be noted that in comparison to the man of the society, woman are often bound by several social norms in Victorian age. They are referred as weak than man in the society. Again the class difference between upper class and lower class also impacts the life of woman belonging to both the categories. Women are expected by the society to maintain their decorum according to their class. Though there is a vast development in several aspects of the Victorian society but women are expected mainly within four walls of the house indulging themselves mainly in household activities rather than experiencing the outer world. Though it sounds quite bitter but it is proved through the writings of the female writers like Bronte sisters, Mary Shelly, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf that women are dominated by the men force in both their domestic and social life. The freedom of women is the most asked question in Victorian society. The typical portrait of women as a mother, obedient wife, daughter, sister is often found in maximum of Victorian literary pieces. Even in most cases female writers are often found struggling in their academic career in the male dominated society.

In contrast to what Victorian society expects a girl to be, Fowles presents his protagonist in this novel as an independent girl possessing a strong psyche who hardly cares

about the society. Sarah Woodruff, the protagonist of the novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* represents those women of the society who often possess a repressed desire of doing anything they wish for. Since the beginning of the novel, Sarah seems to be ruled by her own disciples. The curiosity that is arisen by the following beginning lines of the novel:

Stretching eyes west Over the sea,
Wind foul or fair, Always stood she
Prospect-

impressed; Solely out there Did
her gaze rest, Never elsewhere Seemed charm to

be. (Fowles 1)

The novel begins with the above quoted lines of Thomas Hardy's poem, 'The Riddle'. Through these above quoted lines Fowles introduces his protagonist, Sarah Woodruff who is seen near Lyme Bay of England. Fowles has also depicted the Victorian typical thought for the women in the society in the very beginning of the novel by using the word 'Spy' (Fowles 1). Through the lens of the spy Sarah is describes as follows:

The young lady was dressed in
the height of fashion, for another wind was

blowing in 1867: the beginning
of a revolt against the crinoline and the large

bonnet. The eye in the telescope
might have glimpsed a magenta skirt of an

almost daring narrowness- and
shortness, since two white ankles could be seen

beneath the rich green coat and
above the black boots that delicately trod the

revetment; and perched over the
netted chignon, one of the impertinent little flat

"pork- pie" hats with a delicate
tuft of egret plumes at the side- a millinery style

that the resident ladies of Lyme
would not dare to wear for at least another year

(Fowles 1)

The above quoted lines about Sarah make it clear about her different sense of fashion which basically is not followed by the common ladies of the locality. This also reveals her nature of being careless about her surrounding society. Sarah's wearing of a unique dress and standing

beside the river all alone staring at the water force seems as if she wants to reveal her psychological issues for example- loneliness, depression etc. In other words, this beginning scene of Sarah shows her courage of breaking the societal norms of dress for women. Throughout the whole novel, Sarah seems to be fascinated by the environment and its wildness. She is usually seen throughout the novel enjoying her life by roaming here and there breaking all the rules of the society. She is often suspected by the people of the locality of having an affair with a shipwrecked French sailor. She is also observed silently by the people and referred as mysterious character. But with the progress of the novel, Sarah is better understood by the readers. Charles, a geologist is seen to be attracted by her beauty and wildness. Most of the time Charles encounters Sarah in the jungle while doing his own research on stones. He follows Sarah and through his explanations Sarah's other side is revealed in front of the global readers. Sarah rejection of intimacy with Charles at their initial encounters makes not only Charles but also the readers surprised about her. The instance of Sarah's first intimacy with Charles towards the end of the novel makes Charles and the readers more surprised when Charles reveals that she is a virgin lady. This particular instance has left all silent by clearing all the misconceptions about her.

Conclusion

The socially treated 'outsider' in the novel, the protagonist, Sarah Woodruff represents those women who are victim of social judgments upon them. There cannot be found anyone who attempts to understand those people in the society. People complete their duty by showing pity for them and they do nothing beyond this. Sarah is the victim of the Victorian society who is ignored by the society at her front but observed on her back. Through this character, Fowles attempts to teach the global society a lesson of co-operation with people undergoing any psychological issues despite of referring them as misfit or outsider of the society.

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