

Postmodern Feminism in John Fowles's *the French Lieutenant's Woman*: From Madness to Liberation



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ABSTRACT: Historically, women are associated with inferiority, weakness, passivity, and emotionality, while men are linked with superiority, power, activeness and rationality. These binary oppositions between the two genders are reflected in the social hierarchy. Whenever women have tried to reclaim authorship, feminine freedom, and control over their own lives, they have been labelled as hysteric or mad. Nonetheless, from the second part of the twentieth century, postmodern feminists set out to deconstruct these false man-made conceptualizations and definitions imposed on women by embracing hysteria and madness. Ironically, they celebrate madness and turn it against itself as a way to agency and liberation. This article will argue that John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* heroine, Sarah, represents the postmodern female author who deconstructs the patriarchal ideal of femininity or "the eternal feminine" and constructs a new feminine self in the Victorian era. Ultimately, it will demonstrate that Sarah deconstructs the myth of the eternal feminine by embracing madness and storytelling. Moreover, she creates and contracts her feminine identity and shows authorial control over her own life story which influences others, such as Charles.

KEYWORDS: postmodern feminism, hysteria, female authorship, agency, the French Lieutenant's Woman, John Fowles

INTRODUCTION

Women are still oppressed and controlled by patriarchal society in the 1960s. They are still exposed to gender, social and racial discrimination. Coinciding with postmodernism, second-wave feminism has a mutual interest that claims individuals' right to freedom. Therefore, out of the two, a new feminist approach emerges: postmodern feminism. Postmodern feminism aims to subvert the patriarchal image of the self, drawing on post-structuralism's deconstruction which helps women create a new self for themselves. This paper argues that while poststructuralist theories dismantled and questioned some of the patriarchal foundations such as the notion of the author, identity, self and gender, for women the 1960s is a time to regain and (re)construct their female self, authority and agency. This entails a paradox which is resolved in the selected novel: on the one hand, these women celebrate poststructuralism as it helps them challenge patriarchy and its imposed concepts, on the other hand, they are after the discovery or construction of their genuine female self. The article will analyse John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1970) since it presents a heroine, Sarah Woodruff, who, as a representative of the postmodern feminist, deliberately chooses to be hysteric and mad to deconstruct the patriarchal conception and construction of femininity. The novel's heroine uses madness against itself to challenge the patriarchal representation of the female identity. Through storytelling, she chooses to become the author of her own life story and fight against the oppressive and despot society.

Postmodern Feminism and Second-Wave Feminism: A Paradox

To understand postmodern feminism, it is necessary to look at second-wave feminism in detail as it appears in the second half of the 20th century. Since women are misinterpreted and misrepresented as the inferior gender with emotions overriding their mental power, making them the weaker sex associated with negative connotations, second-wave feminism questions, rejects and subverts these false representations of femininity and claims that women are oppressed because of their biological differences. Beginning in the early 1960s, second-wave feminism aims to fight mostly racial and social discrimination. It is about women's demand for their natural, inherent rights and gender equality in different social spheres. It argues that society has viewed women as inferior by relying on biological differences. The movement is invigorated by feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet. de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) discusses how patriarchal society constructs and positions women as the Other, that is the second and inferior sex. As she argues, "[s]he is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 27). She contends that men describe women as passive objects, whereas they are the dominant sex as the subject. Women become the shadow of men. However, for de Beauvoir, the concept of femininity is not essentialist but constructivist, that is, femininity is not

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a biological given phenomenon but is constructed. As she puts it “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes woman” (2001, p. 14). In other words, a woman is not born as a female individual who is inferior, vulnerable and weak but a being that has different phases determined by inner and outer factors that shape herself. Unfortunately, this right of shaping a self is taken away from her by patriarchal society and she is thus shrunk to passivity and dependency as an object. As de Beauvoir explicates, throughout history, women’s duties and roles have been determined by sexist discrimination described as the “great historical defeat of the female sex” (2011, p. 88).

Similar to de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan discusses women’s place in family and society. Her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is a groundbreaking work for second-wave feminism. She indicates that women are generally unhappy since their femininity requires independence, free will and sexuality. Friedan notices that women suffer from what she calls “the problem that had no name” although they are not able to describe it (2001, p. 16). Friedan addresses women’s unhappiness and the way they are told to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. She argues that “[f]or over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers” (Friedan, 2001, p. 44). Women are taught to seek fulfilment through the roles given by the patriarchy. Therefore, women’s place in society is limited to bearing children, being wives and doing housework. Friedan adds that “we can no longer ignore that voice within women that says, ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (2001, p. 60).

Another feminist, Kate Millet, contributed significantly to shaping second-wave feminism with *Sexual Politics* (1970) which calls attention to female sexuality as well as other gender problems such as job discrimination. Her book is about power imbalance in relationships and the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. Millet argues that gender relationships are a sort of politics: one dominates the other one, the female one. By “politics,” she means “powerstructured relationships” in which a group of people is controlled by another (Millet, 2000, p. 23). Moreover, she criticizes Freud’s idea of “penis envy” and the passivity of women. As she put it, “the Freudian understanding of female personality is based upon the idea of penis envy” (p. 179). She implies that Freud misinterprets female personality as being jealous of men due to the “lack” of a penis. In other words, Freud views women in relation to men, rather than as autonomous agents. Overall, mirroring the background of second-wave feminism, writers such as de Beauvoir, Friedan and Millet brought about advancement for women’s rights.

Postmodern Feminism and Deconstruction

Emerging in the 1970s, postmodern feminism is an advancement of second-wave feminism. Theoretically, drawing on poststructuralist ideas, it problematizes the way society defines genders according to biological differences. It emphasizes the sociopolitical factors regarding gender discrimination rather than shrinking genders into biological phenomena. In *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), Patricia Waugh argues that “[a]n adequate psychoanalytic account of subjectivity will view gender as largely a social product rather than a biological fact, and the product of a society in which the division of labour is neither mutually beneficial nor equal, and which denies full humanity to both sexes” (p. 44). Therefore, gender differences are shaped by social, cultural and political factors. Due to these factors, women are not treated equally in family and society. Postmodern feminism aims to highlight that social and political factors have led to the construction of false selves and identities for women. In *The Post-war Novel and the Death of the Author* (2020), Arya Aryan argues that: “Laing describes a further problem in Hegelian terms: these false selves are acknowledged by the outside world and other people, so a paradox that arises here is that the existence of the true self is still profoundly under threat since it is not recognised or confirmed by the outside world that instead affirms the false or performing selves” (p. 98).

Women are forced to adapt to false and artificial selves so that they can be shaped according to social norms. Postmodern feminism believes that female individuals can deny these false selves and construct identities out of their social status.

The relationship between feminism and poststructuralism’s deconstruction method is crucial for postmodern feminists. Postmodern feminist critics draw upon Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralism to deconstruct the conventional perception of femininity. Waugh contends that “women were on the hand seeking equality for recognition of their existing gendered identities while at the same time arguing this femininity had been socially constructed and must be dismantled along with the patriarchal institutions shaping it” (1995, p. 187). It follows that female identity is socially constructed by the patriarchal conventional way of thinking; therefore, women ought to dismantle the discriminative approach to femininity. As a leading theorist in shaping theories of poststructuralism, Derrida focuses on the contradictory nature of language. In his words “language bears within itself the necessity of its critique” (1970, p. 254). Derrida shows how language is inherently unreliable. Moreover, as Aryan stipulates, “Derrida holds that the whole Western philosophy has been founded and functioned upon binary oppositions implying a hierarchy; that is, in each binary opposition one takes the centre and is superior or privileged (e.g. man/woman, good/evil, day/night, white/black and so on)” (2022, p. 13).

Post-structuralism is based on the criticism of structuralism which focuses only on the structures of the language as a linguistic system ignoring its historical, cultural and political factors while analyzing a text. It claims that language is phallogocentric which means that language’s history and structure date back to the construction of the patriarchy. It also argues that language is based on binary oppositions such as reason/emotion and woman/man.

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Poststructuralism subverts and dismantles such binary oppositions. However, it is not adequate for women's liberation to only deconstruct the patriarchal construction of femininity although feminists celebrate and use it.

Postmodern feminism aims to deconstruct the imposed patriarchal image of femininity that represents women as a matter and flesh and men as mind, intellect and creativity. As Aryan explicates:

In de Beauvoir's terms, historically, women are immanent, looked upon as inferior, passive, static and as bodies, objects to which things happen, whereas men are transcendent, identified with mind, being active, creative, productive; throughout history, women have been deprived of transcendence by men treating them as objects: "it is consciousness, will, transcendence, it is the spirit; and it is matter, passivity, immanence, it is the flesh." (2020, pp. 74-75)

To challenge what Simon de Beauvoir calls the "myth of the eternal feminine," postmodern women writers attempt to subvert the angelic/mad construction of femininity. Waugh argues that "Woolf killed the Angel in the House not with the weapons of war or anger, but through writing, aesthetic play, and performance" (2008, p.191). Similarly, women are encouraged to deconstruct and kill the angelic image of femininity constructed by patriarchy to achieve their feminine identity.

A postmodern feminist thinker, Helene Cixous, addresses the literary world in which women are not included. In her famous article "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Cixous reveals this problem and proposes women to write. She urges women to write so that they can have a voice in history as well as in the future (1976, p. 2). She mentions the fact that women do have not a voice over their bodies since it is identified and defined according to the norms of a masculine-based society. She believes that women need a language to subvert any social or political discrimination against them. Women need to be authors who can create something that can spread worldwide to give a voice to feminine freedom. Aryan argues that writers find a way to assert their voice turning madness against the false image of women in their writings. As he puts it:

These writers [Sylvia Plath, Muriel Spark, and Doris Lessing] resort to hysteria and madness in their fiction to liberate it from its traditional, patriarchal association—biologically a "female disease." They turn madness against itself and make it a gateway (thanks to its creative power) to agency and authorship and take the position of the Creator. (2020, p. 12)

Aryan's argument reveals that these feminist writers liberate, redefine and utilize "madness" as a weapon against itself in the battle of gender discrimination.

Likewise, Waugh points to the problem of the absence of female authorship, the fact that women writers are excluded from the literary canon. In *The Myth of the Artist and the Woman Writer* (2006), she argues that women are disassociated with the literary world unlike men since "male writers are able to occupy a secure, well-established authorial position" (2006, p. 176). Waugh addresses the patriarchal tactic of displacing women from the literary world since women's attempt at writing is not welcomed by the patriarchy.

In *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), Elaine Showalter argues that "[i]t's a term that particularly enrages some feminists because for centuries it has been used to ridicule and trivialize women's medical and political complaints" (p. 7). She adds that "in a surprising reversal, hysteria has been adopted since 1970 by several feminist intellectuals, psychoanalysts, writers, and literary critics as a rallying cry for feminism itself. Some of these women have claimed hysteria as the first step on the road to feminism, the sign of women's protest patriarchy" (p. 10). As Showalter points out, women, including writers, critics and intellectuals, started to turn hysteria's definition and function upside down. They begin to reclaim hysteria and madness rather than escape from it. Cecily Devereux contends that this reclamation is called "hysterical engagement" (2014, pp. 28-29). Women reclaim hysteria as a weapon against patriarchy. As she puts it, "[h]ysterical engagement' as feminist critical practice works to 'reclaim' hysteria, but it does so in order to draw attention to the ways in which a 'discourse of mastery' operates by undertaking to control the term itself" (p. 30).

Yet, for women writers, hysteria becomes a way of communication. Feminists associate it with "gender revolution" since it represents the mindset, culture and society of the time. These feminists deal with hysteria in line with gender issues. Through hysteria and madness, feminists can overcome the false definition of femininity.

Analysis: Deconstruction of Madness in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) touches on various topics in postmodernism, existentialism, individualism and feminism. His novel exemplifies the postmodern feminist preoccupations and concerns. More specifically, it addresses female identity, agency and female authorship in a patriarchal society. This part will demonstrate how patriarchal society imposes its sexist norms on female characters like Sarah and Ernestine and how they react to the imposed norms. It will argue that Sarah represents the disobedient woman who breaks the masculine order of society by refusing to get married, raising her child by herself and behaving improperly to social codes in the Victorian Era while Ernestina represents the ideal obedient Victorian woman who tries to be a decent candidate for marriage.

According to the Victorian mindset, women are assigned different roles and duties which are domestic and inferior. As Anne Digby puts it, "[t]he family wage, women's work and women's rage were conditioned by values that placed women's responsibilities primarily in the home, in the private sphere" (2005, p. 207). In contrast, men are given more significant tasks such as working and earning money. Yet, Sarah subverts such male-constructed impositions by embracing madness, accepting her nickname "lieutenant's whore" and telling the story of her life as a female author.

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The novel is set in Lyme Regis, southwestern England in the Victorian period in the 19th Century. The novel mainly revolves around the rebellious and anti-Victorian Sarah Woodruff. Sarah is an impoverished governess with a bad reputation in the society. She is known as the French lieutenant's woman due to her ambiguous relationship with a French sailor who leaves and makes her wait with the hope of his return. She is then hired by Mrs. Poulteney, an old faithful woman who wants to save her virtue for the sake of the town's morality and safety. Sarah is a mysterious woman who has self-interest and belief. She is different from the typical Victorian women who act and react according to social norms. She experiences her first sexual intercourse with Charles, the fiancée of Ernestina Freeman. Despite his confusion about her personality and purposes, Charles falls in love with her and ends his engagement with Ernestina so that he can be with Sarah. The novel proposes various endings. According to one ending, Charles cannot find Sarah in the hotel as he expects and he loses her; therefore, he marries Ernestina after returning to Lyme. They have children and are an unhappy Victorian family. This represents the traditional closure of the time. The other ending shows that Charles ends his engagement with Ernestina and proposes to Sarah; consequently, they reunite and learn that they have a child from their first sexual intercourse.

The third ending shows that they meet yet Sarah is not interested in being with Charles again. She chooses to be a single woman instead of fulfilling societal expectations. Being rejected, Charles goes to the USA with a confused mind about her. Through multiple endings, Fowles enables the readers and characters to choose. As Fowles puts it, "[i]n other words, to be free myself, I must give him [Charles], and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedom as well" (1970, p. 83). The ending of the novel is left to the imagination of the reader since Fowles gives freedom to his readers as well as his characters to avoid enslavement. He adds that "[i]t is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. When Charles left Sarah on her cliff edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy" (p. 88). For Fowles, rejecting the freedom of the characters and the reader enslaves them. Therefore, he appreciates their freedom, especially Sarah's freedom since she represents the female author.

The novel specifically points out creativity and female authorship from a postmodern feminist perspective by exemplifying Sarah who recounts her life story as a female author in a conservative atmosphere. She represents the female author figure by storytelling her life and opinions to Charles. Linda Hutcheon calls her a "free woman and fiction-maker" (2019, p. 6). Her freedom allows her to demonstrate her identity, creativity and authorship.

Sarah is a proto-feminist who resists the masculine order wherein women are mainly restricted to domesticity. She represents the anti-Victorian female individual since she does not follow the social norms and instead creates her narrative to influence male characters such as Charles. For instance, as opposed to society's trite definition, she insists on waiting on the seashore and does not pay attention to the harsh criticism of others. Therefore, she is considered as a burden of morality for society. She is seen as a sinful fallen woman who needs to be pulled out. This duty is dealt with by Mrs. Poulteney. Mrs. Poulteney is a representation of the Victorian mindset. As the narrator puts it, "[b]ut there was her only too visible sorrow, which showed she was a sinner, and Mrs Poulteney wanted nothing to do with anyone who did not look very clearly to be in that category" (1970, pp. 32-33). Sarah is hired by this old lady as a governess so that society does not need to worry about their morality as the "dangerous" single woman is kept by a faithful woman. Mrs. Poulteney, as a conservative Victorian guard, forbids Sarah to go to the Cobb, the coast way, as it is a reminder of Sarah's relationship with the French lieutenant. Moreover, Mrs. Poulteney does not want her to go to the woods, the wild Ware Commons: a place out of Victorian society: "But what is the sin in walking on Ware Commons?' Mrs. Poulteney puts it, 'The sin! You, a young woman, alone, in such a place!'. She adds, 'I know very well what it is. And what goes on there. And the sort of person who frequents it'" (p. 84). Ware Commons is a place with a bad reputation since it stands for the young couples' meeting which is not welcomed by the society. It represents Sarah's disobedience and freedom. Therefore, she is not approved to go there. Instead, she is expected to change her attitudes which do not fit society's norms and have virtue like a typical Victorian woman. When she does not perform and fulfil conventional feminine duties, she is viewed as mad.

Similar to Mrs. Poulteney, another representative of the myth of eternal femininity is Ernestina Freeman, Charles's fiancée. As opposed to Sarah, Ernestina represents the ideal Victorian marriage candidate since she fulfils the social necessities of the Victorian Lyme Regis. Ernestina, the daughter of a rich family, has no other concerns except completing her social tasks such as marriage. As the novel reads, "Ernestina wanted a husband, wanted Charles to be that husband, wanted children; but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive" (Fowles, 2011, p. 27). In her understanding, to be a woman is to be someone's possession. A Victorian woman is not expected to go free but only to depart from her father's domesticity and become a man's possession. As Waugh puts it, "clearly to assign all rationality, intellectual capacity, and urge towards autonomy to the male, and emotionality, intuition, and urge towards connection to the female, is to validate both traditional stereotypes and the dominant social order" (1989, p. 42). Ernestina is a character who surrenders unlike Sarah. She is a young lady who is not aware of her feminine rights, identity and sexuality. As the narrator has it, "she had evolved a kind of private commandment - those inaudible words were simply 'I must not' - whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force an entry into her consciousness" (Fowles, 1970, p. 27). She tries to be the perfect angelic image of femininity. Her duties are to be the innocent wife of her husband, bear children, dress well and become the woman of her house avoiding her feminine rights.

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As the narrator states: “[a]fter all, she was only a woman. There were so many things she must never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children” (p. 119).

The Victorian patriarchal society keeps female individuals in a cage-like atmosphere to control them. Those women who do not conform are likely to be labelled as mad, hysteric, whore, etc. For de Beauvoir “[s]ociety codified by men decrees, that woman is inferior: she can only abolish this inferiority by destroying male superiority” (2011, p. 849). By dismantling the masculine-constructed mindset, women can achieve their autonomy. This is what Sarah does. She deconstructs the false image of femininity by embracing all the bad reputations and labels, destroying society’s expectations by waiting by the seashore for the French lieutenant, wandering around the forbidden wood and rejecting marriage.

Deconstruction of the Myth of the Eternal Femininity and Construction of a Female Identity

Sarah Woodruff is an independent single woman in a society that defines women according to the myth of the eternal feminine and harshly labels them negatively when they do not conform. Charles attempts to possess her, but as Linda Hutcheon puts it, “she is no one’s woman” (2019, p. 8). As a female character whom postmodern feminists would appreciate, Sarah is decisive about destroying the eternal feminine image constructed by society. As Aryan argues, “Fowles’ heroine, Sarah, refuses the doll’s house and resists the discourses of heredity and environment that circumscribe her behaviour as a woman and an artist” (2020, p. 137). She rejects being an object in the domestic atmosphere of a house. As a man of Victorian society, Charles says to Sarah, “you cannot reject the purpose for which woman was brought into creation” (1970, p. 419). What he implies is that women are created for marriage. When women avoid and disobey, they are excluded from society. Yet, this cannot discourage Sarah from being herself. Throughout the novel, she appears as a resistant woman who deconstructs the social codes by escaping from marriage, being a man’s inferior and breaking society’s restrictions and duties by losing her virginity without marriage. Instead, she embraces her bad reputation as “the French Lieutenant's Whore” (p. 161) which is also an act of deconstruction. She does not want to be included in marital enslavement; she does not want to give away her “self” as much as her surname no matter what kind of life is proposed to her. As Sarah puts it, “I do not want to share my life I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage” (Fowles, 1970, p. 418). She celebrates her loneliness and rebels against the conservative mindset that enslaves female identity.

According to conventional societies, a woman is responsible for her virginity since it is associated with purity, virtue, innocence and morality. As de Beauvoir puts it, “[t]he patriarchs are polygamous and can renounce their wives almost at whim; at the risk of harsh punishment, the young bride has to be delivered to her spouse as a virgin; in cases of adultery, she is stoned; she is confined to domestic labour, as the image of virtuous women demonstrates” (2011, pp. 119-120). Women are burdened with virginity until marriage. Not adhering to it will lead to condemnation or punishment. Sarah destroys this conservative approach to female sexuality to free herself by breaking her virginity, yet the Victorian mindset cannot understand it: “[W]hat can her purpose have been? To give herself to me—and then to dismiss me as if I were nothing to her?” questions Charles (1970, p. 387). As Aryan puts it: “Charles interprets Sarah’s behaviour as an attempt to gain love and security” (p. 138). Being freed from any restriction, she asserts her freedom and strength: “I am far stronger than any man may easily imagine,” says Sarah (p. 329).

In a conservative society, women are expected to stay home as married women and bear children; otherwise, they are subjected to madness since childlessness is historically associated with hysteria. Yet, Sarah does not care for these social impositions even if she is labelled as hysteric. Rather, she subverts such conceptualizations of women. For instance, she becomes pregnant without marrying, bears and raises her child without a husband and the child’s father (p. 425) and works as an independent woman with Mr. Rossetti (p. 412). Her challenge is interpreted as madness and hysteria.

Sarah resists sexist social understandings that determine women’s identity and freedom. She rejects playing the angel in the house in the Victorian era by rejecting a man’s marriage proposal. As she puts it, “I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage” (1970, p. 418). Marriage is a significant social institution in the Victorian era. As de Beauvoir argues, a woman “has almost no direct relations with public authorities or autonomous relations with anyone outside her family. She looks more like a servant in work and motherhood than an associate: objects, values” (2011, p. 142). Marriage aims to create the family core which has a hierarchy within itself. By rejecting the marriage proposal, Sarah destroys that hierarchy. She decides not to be the inferior in the family institution where she cannot claim any feminine rights; instead, she chooses to be in control of her own identity and life: “What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. I shall never have children, a husband, and those innocent happinesses they have. And they will never understand the reason for my crime,” says Sarah (1970, p. 161).

Sarah is a storyteller who creates an alternative storyworld and subverts masculine authority. She stands for a female author who guides her life story as well as a decision-maker of her self and her identity. She is the creator of her own self and the author of her own life story. First, she dismantles the myth of eternal femininity and then constructs an independent feminine self. As stated previously, hysteria is historically associated with femininity. Elaine Showalter argues that “[i]t’s a term that particularly enrages some feminists because for centuries it has been used to ridicule and trivialize women’s medical and political complaints” (1997, p. 8). Similarly, Sarah is viewed as hysteric and mad. Dr Grogan claims that, due to anti-societal behaviours, women like Sarah use madness as a strategy to gain a man’s sympathy, mercy and love. As He states:

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They fell into a clear monthly or menstrual pattern. After analyzing the evidence brought before the court, the Herr Doctor proceeds, in a somewhat moralistic tone, to explain the mental illness we today call hysteria--the assumption, that is, of symptoms of disease or disability in order to gain the attention and sympathy of others (Fowles, 1970, p. 215).

Dr Grogan is a representative of the Victorian medical authority which misinterprets feminine reactions. He interprets Sarah's behaviours as malicious to deceive Charles for shelter and security. He represents the Victorian understanding of madness and femininity. However, Sarah's behaviours function as an escape from patriarchy to gain her freedom. Dr Grogan's diagnosis and opinions about Sarah make Charles and others understand that the gender normative of hysteria refers to limiting the freedom of women who rebel against pressure. To create her own identity, Sarah uses madness against itself. As she states, "[a] madness was in me at that time. I did not see it clearly till that day in Exeter. The worst you thought of me then was nothing but the truth" (Fowles, 1970, p. 415). She also explains why she lied about her virginity: to show that she is the master and author of her body and identity as well as her life. As she puts it: "I did it so that people should point at me, should say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore - oh yes, let the word be said" (p. 162). Therefore, madness is a kind of strategy for her to free it from the patriarchal definition of femininity. Feminists connect madness with authorship and power. This is what Sarah does: "No insult, no blame, can touch me" (Fowles, 1970, p. 161).

Female authorship is a significant issue for feminists since writing has a power that can support women in their struggle for the construction of the female self and identity. From a feminist perspective, one can notice that Roland Barthes's concept of the death of the author implies only a masculine concept of authorship. This shows that women are not included in the discussion of authorship. Barthes contends that "the Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (1977, p. 145). As seen, the author is gendered as a male, a father. Furthermore, as Barthes proposes, with the death of the author occurs the birth of the reader-critic. Consequently, there has been "an increase in the role of the critic in the creation of meaning" (Aryan, 2023, p. 338).

Fowles' heroine, Sarah's attempt to embrace hysteria is to practice her authorship. As opposed to the imposed femininity by society, Fowles's heroine attempts to rebel as a female author. Accordingly, Sarah is ready to risk everything for her authority as the creator of her life story. She distorts the social expectation of morality. She says, "I could not marry that man. So, I married shame" (1970, p. 161). By "marrying shame," in fact, she marries freedom. Sarah deconstructs even the comprehension and understanding of the concept of shame. She creates an alternative language and universe for her freedom through redefining concepts. Richard P. Lynch argues that "Sarah, then, has found an alternative symbolic universe, a social frame of reference within which she can choose an identity" (2002, p. 57). Sarah represents a creative author who can sacrifice everything for her agency.

Fowles's heroine represents not only the deconstruction of the myth of eternal femininity but also the construction and creation of an independent feminine self. What is introduced to the reader is the creative process of a female heroine as an authorial voice of her story. In the beginning, Sarah is portrayed as a mysterious and outcast woman at the seashore, an unknown woman with a gloomy, unusual outfit and sorrowful face, as a "dark shape" (1970, p. 8). She is questioned and criticized by Charles and Ernestina since she is different from the typical Victorian woman. As Ernestina puts it, "[s]he is ... a little mad. Let us turn" (p. 9). From Ernestina's viewpoint which represents Victorian society, Sarah is a fallen angel. She is given names like "tragedy": "A nickname. One of her nicknames" (p. 8). These labels imply stories imposed on her. Each holds a narrative that constructs Sarah as a certain Victorian woman: a tragic fallen woman or the lieutenant's whore. Each constructs and frames a metanarrative around her. These labels and nicknames represent the Victorian-dominant meta-narrative towards women. However, Sarah subverts these meta-narratives. In fact, she embraces the nicknames and labels as part of her identity and self since she redefines and uses them against themselves. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "it is Sarah who demands that 'Whore' be used, for she is free of the frivolity, the prudery, and even most of the feminine vanity of Ernestina, who is presented as a Victorian cliché" (2019, p. 9). By telling her own life story and framing her narrative, she facilitates a change in Charles's perspective towards her and women. Sarah, as the author of her story, fictionalizes her narration. She fictionalizes her story and identity to gain authorship. Sarah's storytelling indicates creativity and agency.

CONCLUSION

All in all, Fowles's novel represents a rebellious female character, Sarah Woodruff, who subverts the conservative expectations and normative understanding of femininity in the Victorian era. As women are defined in terms of the myth of eternal femininity, the postmodern feminist understanding of freedom becomes a matter of struggle for them in the 1960s and 70s. As seen in the novel, Sarah is exposed to negative labels such as whore, tragedy and hysteric since she does not conform to society's expectations of femininity. Rather she uses such labels against themselves. Ultimately, she deconstructs the myth of the eternal feminine and creates her feminine self and identity through storytelling, hence, exercising her authorial control over her own life story. Her narrative is liberating not only for other women but also for Charles.

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