

## A Study of the Construction of Female Identity: John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Narjes Tashakor Golestani

MA. In English Language and Literature, Dalarna University, Sweden

### Abstract

*The issue of identity and female consciousness as one of the major concerns of feminists has always been polemical, for there are different attitudes in formulating gender identity and consequently defining what a woman is. As its theoretical framework, this study relies on Judith Butler's theory of gender and sexuality and studies the construction of identity in the female characters of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Judith Butler, a feminist constructivist, stresses the effect of socially constructed gender roles on creating gender identity and proposes her performative theory of gender and sexuality. In her theory Butler argues that gender is not what one is but what one does. In this sense, gender is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity constituted through a stylized repetition of normative gender roles and performances. Regarding gender as performative reveals that, what is taken as an internal essence of gender is actually fabricated through the regulatory frame of interacting discourses. It has an imitative structure which can be deconstructed. The study, thus, focuses on the effect of prescribed gender roles and norms in the process of identity formation, and examines Ernestina Freeman as a conformist character who constitutes her identity by taking on the ideal gender norms of the era and Sarah Woodruff who tries to renegotiate and reenact those roles and constructs a sense of self which transcends constraints of the social and cultural hegemonic frame.*

**Keywords:** *gender identity, identity construction, performativity, gender role*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Challenging the formal, existential and intellectual problems of its era, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* aroused controversy in the reading public and especially among literary critics after its publication in 1969. Like Fowles' former novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reflects its author's constant concern with themes such as the role of the artist in creating a literary work, individual freedom, the issue of identity etc. Although the novel explicitly touches on other issues such as the hypocrisy of religious belief, which is represented in the figure of Mrs. Poulteney, or class conflict-illustrated in upper class attitudes toward their servants- *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has also greatly appealed to feminist critics.

John Fowles once said that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* grew out of the image of a cloaked Victorian woman standing at the end of a quay and staring out to sea. "With her back turned, [the woman] represented a reproach on the Victorian age. An outcast" (as cited in Foster 1994). This picture of a socially outcast woman, which remains central to the novel, has generated diverse interpretations by feminist and pro-feminist readers. These perceptions range over those who consider *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as "an almost ideal feminist fictional work" (Byrd, 1984, p. 306) and those like Magali Cornier Michael(1987), for instance, who assume that the novel is a traditional representation of women's role and thus, "falls short of being a feminist novel" (p.235).

Michael argues that while Fowles asserts that the issue of feminism is one of the major themes of his novel and tries to push to the forefront of the text the issue of the emancipation of women by referring to historical figures and facts related to the liberation of women, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* fails as a feminist novel. She believes that the way in which the novel portrays Sarah runs counter to Fowles' intention of illustrating the development of a feminist consciousness.

For, Sarah is always represented as an image and never becomes a proper female character. The dominant male perspective of the novel never allows her to have a voice; she is "represented through a triple layering of voices, which includes Charles', the male narrator's and Fowles' voices" (Michael, p. 225). With no voice to express her thoughts and feelings Sarah never becomes a subject, rather she remains objectified and largely disempowered.

Bruce Woodcock (1984) explains this internal contradiction of the novel in his argument that Fowles "promotes a realigned version of the very myth of masculinity he lays bare" (p.8) because he "is caught within the limits of masculine ideology" (p.23). Therefore, though Fowles registers a deep awareness of patriarchal power as an obstacle for the emancipation of women, the lever for his analysis is an idealization of the feminine, which itself remains questionable. Actually this group of critics believes that Fowles' insistence on challenging the "reliable authority" of the author is "a strategy to mask [male] power" (Zare, 1997, p.178). The novel, thus, ultimately "fails either to allow a place for women's voice, which could open up the potential for women's self-portrayal outside of male ideology as well as initiate a critique of male ideology"(Michael, p. 235).

Conversely, there are critics who discuss that Fowles "does more than document the oppression of Victorian women- he creates a positive role model in the character of Sarah Woodruff, [who] gradually develops a feminist consciousness" (Byrd, p. 306). She is a character, who "transcends her role in the Victorian metaphor by being conscious of her historical position" (Eddins, 1986, p.51). From this new perspective, Sarah is no more a catalyst in the process of Charles' liberation; rather it is Charles who is "Sarah's character and his liberation is a by-product of her own more self-conscious liberation" (Eddins, p.52). Linda Hutcheon (1986) contends that "Sarah is the greatest fiction- maker of the novel, creating her own

identity" (p.126). She is the "narrating novelist's surrogate" who not only frees herself from the stultifying social codes but also frees Charles from illusion by fiction-making (Hutcheon, p.128).

Some critics, by pointing to Fowles' resistance in granting Sarah a voice and his refusal to reveal her interior, highlight the dominant male perspective of the novel. Undoubtedly, Fowles is a product of his time and his writing may reflect the ideological limitations of his gender and his period. However, this does not mean that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not a feminist fictional work. For, as Bonnie Zare notices the novel "contain[s] moments of liberatory potential, moments that strongly appeal to feminists in their fight for equality" (p.176). Arguably, while the patriarchal perspective of the novel is frustrating, the resistance of its heroine to conform to the determining rules of the society is encouraging. Zare insists that by resorting to the liberating moments of the text feminist readers can gain control from the patriarchal text and simultaneously condemn the narrative's male authority (p.176).

What all of these critics who accept the novel as a feminist work, hold in common is their concern for the emancipatory development of Sarah, the novel's central character. Almost all of them concede that Sarah's quest to find her true place in society and her attempt to release herself from the constraints of her age and the identity imposed on her, is the central theme around which the plot of the novel has evolved. In fact, the issue of identity and female consciousness has always been one of the major concerns of feminists. This female self is in itself controversial for there are different attitudes in formulating gender identity and consequently defining what a woman is. The most prominent among these divergent attitudes are essentialist notions of the female subject and performative views of the subject.

As opposed to extremist radical feminists, who rejected the differences between sexes in order to gain equality, cultural feminists fostered the ideology of a female essence in an attempt to revalidate what they believed were overlooked female attributes. This essentialist notion of female nature is ahistorical and strongly linked to female biology. As Mary Daly argues; "our essence is defined here, in our sex, from which flow all the facts about us: who are our potential allies, who is our enemy, what are our objective interests, what is our nature" (as cited in Alcoff, 1988, p.409). The crucial fact is that, although cultural feminists validated the superior virtues and values of women's world, it is arguable whether they provided a solution for women's oppression within a patriarchal context. By regarding the female anatomy as the primary constituent of female identity it could be claimed that they actually reinvented the mechanism of oppressive power (Alcoff, p. 415).

Converse to this idea is the belief that the human subject does not have an authentic core which contains natural attributes and authorial intentions; rather it is the construction of the coercive structure of social and cultural discourse. Derived from the notion of a constructed subject, Judith Butler proposed her theory of gender and sexuality. According to this theory, gender identity is constructed through "the reiterative and citational practice, the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject" (Culler, 2000, p. 103). In fact, in Butler's view gender is a way of situating oneself in and through social norms and conventions. It is a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that produces the appearance of substance and essence of what is actually a social and cultural fabrication. As a construction, thus, gender identity is susceptible to deconstruction. This implies that the social and political nature of what has been represented as natural can be revealed by the very means of the discursive power that is used.

Regarding the performative theory of gender identity, the aim of this essay is to study the construction of identity in the female characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This will be attempted by studying Ernestina Freeman as a conformist character, who constitutes her identity by performing her gender role in accordance with the norms and values of society and Sarah Woodruff who resists conforming to such norms and constructs her identity through her subversive gender practices.

## 2 Identity as a Fictitious Construction

Identity and cognate terms have a long history as polemical terms in philosophical and social contexts from ancient times through to contemporary analytical studies. Ambiguous as the word identity is, it contains a wide range of connotations and arouses controversial debates. Jonathan Culler notes that the word 'Subject' implies this theoretical problem, and writes: "The subject is an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things...but a subject is also subjected, determined" (p. 109). The aim of this study, however, is to focus on the latter aspect of the individual subject and intends to examine the prevailing constructivist stance on identity, which attempts to acquit it of the charge of essentialism. The constructivist approach challenges identity as an innate and stable core which preexists the individual's words and deeds and propounds, instead, an unstable, fluid and fragmented self which is the product of interacting social, cultural and political discourses.

Influenced by post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories, a feminist constructivist stance stresses the effect of socially constructed gender roles on creating gender identity. In this perspective the notion of female essence, which is directly linked to the biological anatomy and sexual traits, is contested. Simone de Beauvoir's (1997) claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 295) endorses this distinction between sex as the biological aspect

of the female body, and gender as the cultural meaning gradually acquired by that sexed body. In her view, being a woman cannot be considered as a static status, rather it is an open ended process, for the verb 'to be' really "has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'" (Beauvoir, p. 24). Furthermore from this vantage point the causal relationship between sex and gender is undermined because being a woman is in no way determined by being female.

Although Beauvoir's theories on gender identity creation are crucial to the constructionists, her most prominent contribution has been her explanatory theories in respect to individual agency and autonomy in the process of identity formation. Beauvoir's theories on sex and gender are deeply influenced by the ambivalent attitude of Sartre toward duality of consciousness and body. In his theories, Sartre, does not try to refute the Cartesian duality of mind/body; rather he attempts to explain the paradoxical and yet essential relationship between the embodied body and the disembodied feature of self- the consciousness. In fact, Simone de Beauvoir's notion of 'becoming' a gender seems to be an appropriation of Sartre's claim that "consciousness exists its body" (as cited in Butler, *Variation on Sex and Gender*, p. 25). As opposed to Sartre, the tension in Beauvoir's theory is not between being 'in' or 'beyond' body, but between considering the body as a natural, static phenomenon or as a 'lived experience.' Actually, her view of gender as a project, an active style of living one's body with respect to the cultural norms and rules is proceeded from her view of gender as unnatural.

In Beauvoir's view one chooses one's gender but this does not mean that she believes in a choosing agent prior to the chosen gender, because there is no position outside of gender and we are always already gendered. Arguably, Beauvoir's notion of agency in taking on a gender implies an agency, which itself is

embodied. Gender, in her view, is “a corporeal locus of cultural possibilities both received and innovated” (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Beauvoir*, p. 37). This means that in becoming a gender one is obliged to reinterpret and reenact received gender norms, which themselves are restricted within the framework of social constraints. Indeed, the limits to gender, the range of possibilities for an active interpretation of an anatomical differentiated body, seem less restricted by anatomy than by cultural institutions that have conventionally interpreted sex (Butler, *Variation on Sex and Gender*, p. 29). In fact, from Beauvoir’s vantage point, the ways women can ‘exist’ their bodies is pre-defined by the cultural institutions of patriarchal society (Tidd, 2004). In *The Second Sex*, she describes how girls and boys are punished explicitly or implicitly because of their failure to conform to the desired models of heterosexuality, which perpetuates patriarchy. This challenges the possibility to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. The necessity to be the gender one has become reveals the burden of choice intrinsic to living as a man or woman, a freedom made burdensome through social constraints (Butler, *Variation on Sex and Gender*, p. 27).

The dominance of an existential framework in Beauvoir’s gender theories have been criticized by critics such as Michele Le Doeuff for resurrecting “a classical form of voluntarism” (as cited in Butler, *Sex and Gender in Beauvoir*, p. 40). These critics believe that the use of a doctrine of existential choice in this context leads the oppressed of the oppressive system to be blamed for choosing their situation. But in Judith Butler’s view, this is a misreading of Beauvoir’s perspective, for by scrutinizing the mechanism of appropriation and agency she tries to reveal the contingent nature of oppression despite its inevitable appearance. By considering oppression as a dialectical system which is maintained by individual participation through their taking up the oppressive gender norms and not as a fixed, self-contained system, Beauvoir attempts to infuse the emancipatory

potential in the construction of gender identity (Butler, *Sex and Gender in Beauvoir*, p. 41).

Heavily influenced by Simone de Beauvoir, Butler proposed her performative theory of gender and sexuality. In her theory Butler argues that gender is not what one is but what one does. In this sense gender is a condition one enacts. In fact, this perspective is derived from a phenomenological theory of acts that considers the agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts (Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*). Therefore, gender is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity constituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). These constitutive acts and performances that are the compulsory repetition of gender norms, not only construct the identity of the actor, but also create the illusion of an abiding gender essence. Like Beauvoir, Butler believes that gender norms are constructed and stabilized within a cultural hegemony which confines gender to sex according to an imperative of heterosexuality.

Based on a genealogical critique her *Gender Trouble* “investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of the institutions, practices, discourses which multiple and diffuse points of origin” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. viii). Phallogocentrism is one of these defining institutions, for the symbolic structure of language organizes the meaning of one’s lived experience and produces normative gendered identities. Consequently any representation or expression of the category of woman inevitably involves employing the very means of women’s oppression, for language itself is structured by rules of binary oppositions that determines its truths and falsities. Therefore, prior to any effort to gain political representation feminist theorists should address the operation of representation itself. Butler then goes further by offering the formulation that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; identity is discursively

constituted..." (Butler, *Bodily Inscriptions*, p. 91). Or to put it in Monique Wittig's words; gender is constructed and naturalized through grammatical rules and norms (as cited in Butler, *Bodily Inscriptions*). In another word gender attributes are not expressive but performative. This means that, these attributes constitute the identity they are said to express. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial, because if gender attributes and acts are performative, then there is no preexisting identity prior to those acts and attributes. Gender, thus, cannot be neither original nor derived, neither true nor false. This reveals the postulation of a true gender identity as a regulatory fiction and strategy of the masculinist discourse and compulsory heterosexuality for concealing the performative nature of gender identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). This construction of gender through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences in a way that represent gender as a given, natural and immutable state of one's sex is the challenge that Butler sets out to explicate in *Gender Trouble*.

Like Beauvoir, Judith Butler is concerned with the notion of agency in the process of identity formation. In her *Bodies That Matter*, she argues that "whenever construction is considered not as an activity, but as an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed; the constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of human agency" (p.9). In providing an explanation for the polemical opposition of the passive/ active subject in the construction of gender identity, Butler notes that; "surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions is clearly not an individual matter" (Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, p. 525). This implies that the embodied subject is both simultaneously active and passive in the production of meaning, for it constitutes meaning by taking up and rendering specific cultural possibilities. Understanding this

as a series of acts which are both voluntary and non- voluntary, Butler notices moments of indeterminacy in reiteration and locates the possibility of agency as resistance in this indeterminacy. Resistance can occur by the subverting, reinterpreting and reenacting of the norms in a way that creates novel and diverse forms of living. Through subverting and reinterpreting gender norms, one comes to understand that what is considered to be real, what is invoked as the natural gender is in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. In this sense the concepts of 'natural sex' and 'real woman' are also considered as regulatory fictions.

### 3 Ernestina Freeman; a Perfect Lady

While all canonical readings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* from different perspectives (feminism, postmodernism and existentialism) have focused on the character of Sarah Woodruff and her evolution, little attention has been paid to Ernestina and her role in the novel. The majority of critics argue that Tina is a minor character whose role in the novel is the complement of other characters' roles and a minor forum for the author to proclaim his point of view. But to study the novel from the perspective of a performative theory of gender construction, examining her function in the novel seems to be crucial, for as a 'conforming' character who constitutes her identity by imitating the established gender norms of the era, this essay will be incomplete if it overlooks Ernestina's character.

Ernestina is the spoilt and cosseted daughter of a wealthy trade man. "She is really pretty" (Fowles, 1969, p.34), "has exactly the right face for her age" (p.31) and dresses in the height of fashion. Like many other only children, she has been the center of parental attention throughout her life. "Since birth her slightest cough would bring doctors; since puberty her slightest whim summoned decorators and dressmakers; and always her slightest frown caused her mama and papa secret hours of self- recrimination" (p.33). She is

clearly a product of her time and social class; the “selfish and conforming” bourgeoisie which “sincerely and habitually despises itself” (p.245). Ernestina is no exception, she is “a victim of her class’s perennial lack of faith in itself” (p.245). She is very aware of the difference between her social caste and Charles’s, and this is one reason that makes her unsure of Charles.

In her relation with Charles, Tina displays a certain low cunning that makes him to regard her as a shallow-minded child. In his view “there was something shallow in her – that her acuteness was largely constituted, intellectually as alphabetically, by a mere cuteness. Was there not, beneath the demure knowingness, something of the automaton about her, of one of those ingenious girl-machines from Hoffman’s tales” (p.147) ? In spite of her childish and somewhat snobbish manner, there is a streak in her nature which is endearing; a sense of “self-irony” and a sense of humor (p.34) without which she would have been an intolerable spoilt child.

Though it is conveyed in the novel that Ernestina is a moody child who “had been given no talent except that of knowing how to spend a great deal of money in dressmakers’, milliners’ and furniture shops (p.186), and her life is an indolent one consisting of headaches and journal writing, she is a ‘perfect Victorian lady.’ The perfect lady as a desired model of femininity was all- pervasive throughout the Victorian period. Although it was a too narrow and inflexible definition of womanhood, any deviation from the model was regarded as an unforgivable sin. Women were punished implicitly or explicitly by Victorian society according to how successfully they (socially or individually) conformed to this ideal model. In this respect, an examination of Ernestina as a conformist character who constitutes her identity by taking on the ideal gender norms of the era is essential if we are to fully comprehend the element of performativity in her aspiration to become a ‘perfect lady.’

Before studying Ernestina as a character who perfectly assimilates to the perfect lady model, the depiction of some of the attributes of this desired image seems to be appropriate. As defined by the highly conformist and male dominated Victorian society “the perfect lady’s sole function was marriage and procreation (the two needless to say were considered as one)” (Vicinus, 1972, p. x). In such a society, women’s sexuality and desire were subordinated to social ceremony and reproductive functioning. Rejecting the individual dimension of sexuality, it was supposed that God or society would justify the assumptions of desire and pleasure. In fact in Victorian society, according to Martha Vicinus, “women were educated to believe that they were morally superior to men in their lack of sexual drive” (p.xiv). The young girls, thus, were trained to be “loving and emotional, without sexuality” (Vicinus, p. xi). It was ideal for the Victorian lady to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant before marriage.

Ernestina has the usual sexual hang-ups of the time. Though completely ignorant and frightened of sex, she experiences occasional natural moments of passion and desires as described in chapter five, for example; the rare moments of awakening sexuality, “a thing she knows to be vaguely sinful, yet necessary” (p.34). Trained to be ‘asexual’, she represses autocratically any moments of “the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, paturitional, ... to force an entry into her consciousness” (p.34). Her mind does not allow itself to imagine the sinful sexual moments. She even does not let herself to think whether her fiancé has slept with other women; “of course Ernestina utter [s] the autocratic ‘I must not’ just as soon as any such sinful speculation cross[es] her mind” (p.77).

There are many occasions in the novel when Tina is described as demure, chaste, sexually ignorant and as embodying other desired characteristics, which a girl should exhibit before marriage according to the Victorian standards. For example, in chapter

eleven, where Charles' offer of marriage to her is forthcoming, Fowles writes "He could not go on, for she had turned, her eyes full of tears. Their hands met, and he drew her to him. They did not kiss. They could not. How can you mercilessly imprison all natural sexual instinct for twenty years and then not expect the prisoner to be racked by sobs when the doors are thrown open" (p.85)? As discussed earlier, Victorian women were trained to exclude passion and desire from their personalities; actually, "women themselves were the greatest enforcers of standards of moral behavior (defined in purely sexual terms)" (Vicinus, p. xiv). Therefore, being sexually ignorant and innocent is a rule that Ernestina obey in the process of creating her identity. The significant fact in this respect is that, such proscriptions which have been represented as the natural order of things are, in fact, fabricated by the patriarchal context of the era in order to create a regulatory frame to constrain women's sexual practices.

In such a society which regards marriage and reproduction as the sole function of women, thus, "a normal existence is to be a wife and a mother" (Beauvoir, p. 453). While it was believed that women have little sexual feelings at all, family affections and desire for motherhood were considered innate by the predominant ideology of the age (Vicinus, p. ix). When in the novel Charles says to Sarah that "you cannot reject the purpose for which woman was brought into creation" (p.431), he is in fact, advocating this ideology. In sum, marriage and motherhood involved a true woman's entire destiny. In a perfect imitation of the ideal model of femininity, marriage was regarded to be so important that the unmarried woman was socially viewed as "wastage" (Beauvoir, p. 447) and was called the "redundant woman-women not fortunate enough to marry, who in place of completing, sweetening and embellishing the existence of others are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own" (Roberts, 1972, p. 57). In such a society a woman who was

unsuccessful in capturing a husband or would lose him after marriage was dismissed and humiliated, for there was no greater failure than this for a woman. This reflects the difficulties of living in a socially meaningful sense outside of the established frame of gender practices.

Trained to be a perfect lady, Ernestina is aware of the importance of marriage and maintaining her husband. For, though she is not in need of Charles's financial support, she knows that her marriage is the only means of integration in the community. Like other young ladies, she is educated to be a sweet and passive wife who is submissive to authority and has no opinion; an obedient wife who prioritizes duty over passion. In chapter thirty two, after her passionate reaction to the news of Charles being disinherited, she writes in her diary:

I cannot sleep. Dearest C. is displeased with me- I was so very upset at the dreadful news from Winsyatt. I wished to cry, I was so very vexed, but I foolishly said many angry spiteful things-which I ask God to forgive me, remembering I said them out of love for dearest C. and not wickedness. I did weep most terribly when he went away. Let this be a lesson to me to take the beautiful words of the Marriage service to my conscience, to honor and obey my dearest Charles even when my feelings would drive me to contradict him. Let me earnestly and humbly learn to bend my horrid, spiteful willfulness to his much greater wisdom, let me cherish his judgment and chain myself to his heart, for 'The sweet of true Repentance is the gate to Holly Bliss.' (pp. 245-246)

In fact, the record of her diary is a pathetic self-indictment, for she knows that such a reaction has been a transgression of her role.

In chapter fifty, where Charles informs Ernestina that he is going to break off his engagement, she manifests the passivity of a



woman engaged in marriage, when she says to Charles:

I know to you I have never been anything more than a pretty little... article of drawing-room furniture. I know I am innocent. I know I am spoilt. Perhaps I am just a child. But under your love and protection... and your education... I believed I should become better. I should learn to please you, I should learn to make you love me for what I had become. (pp. 363-364)

In her attempts to make Charles reconsider his decision, Ernestina then continues; "It is true, I am ignorant, I do not know what you want of me... if you would tell me where I have failed... how you would wish me to be... I will do anything, anything, because I would abandon anything to make you happy" (pp. 364-365). What Ernestina says in these quotations is important, for it is the summation of the Victorian assumptions of women, which she has internalized as being her role in the process of constituting her identity. In other words she has been socialized to prioritize those patriarchal concerns that foster the dominance of male will and superiority. The coercive structure of the cultural discourse that fosters such a role, in fact, conceals the performative nature of any gender role and invokes the imposed role as natural and essential.

The Victorian view of Marriage as being not a choice but a destiny, seems to be a structural and material perversion of the meaning of Marriage (Bergoffen, 2006, p. 93), for it is in no way a reciprocal relationship. As it is depicted in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, marriage is usually arranged as a contract between two men (father-in-law and son-in-law) and this "contractual side to matrimony" (p.254) again affirms the status of woman as an object in the relationship. Marriage, thus, can be regarded as one of the defining institutions, which confine women's lived experience to their sexed body. In this sense, it cannot be viewed as

the divine and natural order of things as Victorians believed it to be, for "laws of God and nature are generally read as justifying the subordination of women and as apologies for patriarchy" (Bergoffen, p. 92). As a proof of the instrumental and patriarchal attitudes toward marriage and women, the novel itself can be cited. At one point, Fowles describes the Victorian era as "an age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds- a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two." A period "where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never- or hardly ever- have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives"(p.258).

Ernestina Freeman, indeed, imitates and performs femininity to perfection. She knows how to make herself a loving and pretty object. She is aware of conventions and has a very proper respect for them (p.34). She is well trained to adopt the ideal feminine model and performs her gender roles perfectly. The crucial fact here is that the norms and conventions she conforms to are not original. This means that the norms themselves are constructed (as discussed in the case of marriage, for example). The 'perfect lady' model, the rules and standards of which Ernestina enacts is a desired image of femininity fabricated by masculinist discourses. Therefore, the concept of the 'true woman', which is postulated as an immutable status is, in fact, a regulatory fiction; it is a copy of the copy. Arguably, the limits to gender, the range of possibilities for gender performances, seem less restricted by anatomy than by cultural institutions that have conventionally interpreted sex.

#### 4 Sarah Woodruff; an Outcast

The novel's main character, Sarah, has elicited many polemical and often controversial debates. Her enigmatic character makes her a figure of

fascination, appealing to the readers as much as to Charles. Sarah is a 'remarkable' woman and her "instinctual profundity of insight" (p.57) together with her education is said to make her distinct. She does not fit into the social class her fate destined her to inhabit, nor does she fit into the upper class life for which her superior intellectual capacities qualify her. Sarah is born out of her historical period, for her battle against the conventional sexual attitudes of the era sets her above the horizons of her particular time; she is the harbinger of the modern age.

Though Sarah is a mysterious and baffling character, what is central to her characterization in the novel is the fact that she is not pleased with the passive and dependent role imposed upon her by society and attempts to renegotiate her performative role by transforming the sexual rules and conventions of her time. In her quest to liberate herself from the presuppositions of the epoch and achieve autonomy and independence, she even invites "social crucifixion" (Eddins, 1986, p.52). She creates her own fiction, surpasses all sexual sanctions and proscriptions, manipulates others, and does not cease to use any instrument she can, until she gains self-respect and freedom at the end of the novel. In a word Sarah's transgression of the normative gendered roles not only makes her capable of reconstructing her identity other than the purported essential gender identity, but also challenges and subverts the norms which are the criterion for evaluating true or false, original or deviated with respect to the feminine role and performances.

Sarah's integration into the story is a symbolic illustration; she is described as a motionless figure dressed in black, staring out to sea, "more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day" (p.11). In the second chapter a bare outline of the story of "poor Tragedy... The French Lieutenant's... Woman" (p.14) is told through the dialogue between Tina and Charles. Fowles subsequently

offers a more detailed description of her outmoded clothes which were "bizarre" and "out of oblivion" (p.15), and her face which "was certainly not a beautiful... but an unforgettable face" (p.16). And her looks are said to have nothing to do with "the favored feminine look" of the age which was more in tune with "the demure, the obedient, the shy" (p.16); she has a look that was like a "lance". The way Fowles depicts Sarah in the introductory chapters is, in fact, a part of his strategy to set her beyond the pale, as she is deliberately described as the opposite to Ernestina.

In tracing the evolution and emancipation of Sarah, the critic Deborah Byrd (1984) divides her adult life into three phases. The first phase includes the years of her working as a governess after her father goes insane. It is in this phase that she journeys to Weymouth to join Varguennes- the French lieutenant- an act which is her first rejection of social norms. Her experience in Weymouth when she discovers Varguennes's true nature and realizes that she had been "no more than an amusement during his convalescence" (p.169), seems to be an epiphany, for afterwards she tries to change her life and to be the "mistress of [her] destiny" (p.170). Hence, she renders a set of innovative performances in order to disrupt the imposed gender practices. From now on Sarah becomes "the greatest fiction- maker of the novel, creating her own identity" (Hutcheon, 1986, p.126). Sarah, then, takes the most peculiar actions, by fabricating the fiction that she has lost her virginity to Varguennes in Weymouth and encourages the townspeople to view her as a "fallen woman".

In one of their meetings in the Under cliff Sarah explains to Charles the purpose of the exhibition of her shame;

I did it so that I should never be the same again. 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. So that they

should know I have suffered, and suffer, as others suffer in every town and village in this land. I could not marry that man. So I married shame. (p.171)

She then explains that she has sacrificed her honor, "a woman's most precious possession" (p.171) to gain freedom, for there had been no other way to liberate herself from her stagnant and oppressive life as a governess;

I know it was wicked...blasphemous, but I knew no other way to break out of what I was. If I had left that room, and returned to Mrs. Talbot's, and resumed my former existence, I know that by now I should be truly dead... and by my own hand. What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. (p.171)

Sarah even pities other women because she thinks she has "a freedom they cannot understand" and that because she has set herself beyond the pale, no insult and no blame can touch her (171). Therefore, as Richard Lynch (2002) argues, Sarah pretends to be what she is not in order to reject socialization in a social reality she cannot accept, as a verification of her identity. A fake identity that she maintains until she finds an alternative universe other than that of Victorian society- in Rosseti's house- where she feels she belongs, and construct a secure identity for herself .

Sarah's next action is to manipulate Charles. She needs his help and knows that the best way to make him to overcome the strict Victorian conventions governing the relationships between the opposite sex is "to simultaneously arouse his sympathy and his sexual desire" (Byrd, 1984, p.313). Hence, she plays the role of a sexually appealing and socially castrated woman in their forbidden meetings in the Undercliff and Ware Commons. In chapter eighteen, for example, it is noted how deliberately she has loosened her hair, "her one great jewel" (p.239) to attract Charles; "Her hair,

he noticed, was loose, as if she had been in wind; but there had been no wind. It gave her a kind of wildness, which the fixity of her stare at him aggravated" (p.136).

The other scene of her performance as a fragile and passionate woman is their confrontation at Endicott's Family Hotel, a visit she has elaborately prepared herself for. After purchasing some bandages she simulates a fall when descending the staircase in the hotel. Then, while pretending that her ankle is strained, she dresses herself in a beautiful nightgown and a shawl whose color is in harmony with her hair. Hence, when Charles arrives, she appears not only seductive, but also very helpless. "He could not take his eyes from her- to see her so pinioned, so invalid..., helpless. And after that eternal indigo dress-the green shawl, the never fully revealed richness of that hair" (p.333). The notable fact here is that Sarah's acting of a desired role is, in fact, a part of her 'project' to deconstruct such a role and to take up another possibility among divergent ways of doing one's gender.

Charles is so fascinated by his role as a strong supporter who redeems a weak woman in desperate need of protection (the role Sarah expertly plays to deceive him) that he cannot believe he has been manipulated until the end of the novel, when he regards himself again as a knight, a rescuer who "had come to raise [Sarah] from penury, from some crabbed post in a crabbed house, in full armor, ready to slay the dragon" (p.426). Unfortunately for Charles, Sarah has no need, no desire to be saved; "and now the damsel had broken all the rules. No chains, no sobs, no beseeching hands" (p.426). A visit that makes him finds out "the folly of his own assumption that fallen women must continue falling" (p.423). It is only then that both Charles and the reader realize that, Sarah's "maneuvers were simply a part of her armory, mere instrument to a greater end" (p.433) and that he has been an instrument used by Sarah to achieve what she struggles for; to set herself beyond the restrictive boundaries and to be true

to herself. An end which she achieves due to her ability to amend the stabilized gender performances.

Sarah, seems to prioritize her will to gain independence and self-respect over her sentiment, for she rejects Charles's offer of marriage though she confesses to him after they make love that "[she] has long imagined such a day as this" (p.339). She also states that the one thing, in which she has not deceived him, is her love, as she says to Charles: "I loved you... I think from the moment I saw you" (p.342). Sarah, actually, is well aware of the freedom-denying nature of love and sexual possession when she explains to Charles why she will never marry; "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" (p.430). She rightly fears and refuses the limitations his love would impose upon her freedom, for although she never received Charles' letter which reveals his inclination toward possession and control, she knows that he is a product of his time. In fact, she knows that it will be impossible for him to reject totally the dominant standards of proper female behavior fostered by the society that has raised him. These are norms and standards which are not only at odds with women's independence and autonomy but even refuse to regard her as a subject who has free will. In this regard, Charles' fascination with paleontology can be considered as a symbolic representation of his inclination toward classification and ownership, two vital characteristics which mark Victorian attitudes toward women.

Fowles' remarkable and completely distinctive heroine is, indeed, one of those individual women whose courageous efforts to free themselves from the hidebound sexual assumptions has been the foundation of the notion of the 'New Woman' (Vicinus, 1972, p. xiv). Sarah's performing of her gender is another proof of the idea that one becomes one's gender and being a woman is not a static and abiding reality but a changeable and revisable state.

When in chapter sixty Charles and Sarah are reunited, he is shocked when greeted by a Sarah totally different from what he had imagined those two years; "what was she now, what had she become... she was the remarkable creature of his happier memories- but blossomed, realized, winged from the black pupa" (p.424).

In her study of the relationship between textuality and sexuality in John Fowles' fiction, Pamela Cooper (1991), contends that Fowles' major female characters, apparently so self-sufficient and compelling in their strength are, in fact, the opposite of what they seem. They are actually passive figures who are re-categorized and limited by the strategies of the narrative. In her view, "Sarah's quest for freedom and identity leads not to true independence, but to another kind of subservient confinement" (p.10) and her search for self-respect and independence, "is in effect a change of masters" (p.11). From a feminist vantage point, Cooper's argument is logical, for Sarah seems to be confined by stereotypical gender representation; she is depicted as seductive, femme fatal, and object of art. But as Butler's theory of performativity explains, though language and narrative are oppressive institutions in the service of patriarchy, gender representation as discussed earlier is performative, rather than being expressive. The performativity of representation is important, for if sexual attributes are going to be constructed through representation, then there is no pre-existing identity prior to those attributes. In this sense, Fowles' narrative strategies are not restrictive (as Cooper believes) but liberating, for the reader knows that this is the desirable female image that Fowles has portrayed and not the true Sarah.

Nevertheless, Sarah's resistance to being explained and understood can be regarded as a mode of resistance against the defining capacities of the narrative which colonize and control gender categories. In chapter forty seven, she pleads with Charles; "Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It

is not to be explained" (p.342). And in another chapter against Charles's insistence to understand she answers; "you do not understand. It is not your fault. You are very kind. But I am not to be understood... I can't tell you why, but I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding" (p.431).

Furthermore, Sarah's role as a model for Rossetti cannot be regarded as the imposition of the male power, for she is happy with her role and present situation. In chapter sixty, she confesses to Charles; "Mr. Smithson, I am happy, I am at last arrived, or so it seems to me, where I belong... I have been very fortunate. No one knows it better than myself. But I believe I owe a debt to my good fortune. I am not to seek it elsewhere" (p.430). And when she says that "I cannot wish my life other than it is at the moment" (p.431) she, in fact, concedes her free will to choose her present situation.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman's* prominent heroine not only rejects the reigning gender norms and conventions of her time but also creates her own. This means that the methods she deploys to reach the status of self-respect and self-sufficiency are genuine and unique. In her battle to obtain independence, Sarah Woodruff, obtrusively rejects any restrictive role the patriarchal society imposes upon her.

## 5 Conclusion

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a fascinating blend of the imagination and the intellect which articulates life into art. While deploying the distinctive postmodernist narrative structure, it explores the problematic issues of gender and sexuality. Although the novel has been frequently studied from different viewpoints by feminist critics, to examine it from the perspective of the performative theory of gender identity brings to light new aspects of the identity construction of its female characters.

As its theoretical framework, this study relies on Judith Butler's theory of gender and sexuality. According to Butler there is no internal essence of gender, rather gender identity is constructed through a forced reiteration of norms through time. This implies that gender is doing rather than being, it is an open-ended process of becoming. In this sense, gender identity is not the subject of individual performance but its object. Therefore, one constitutes his/ her gender identity through the constitutive acts and performances which are the compulsory repetition of gender norms, or to put it in Beauvoir's words the "embodying of certain cultural and historical possibilities" (as cited in Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, p. 521). These norms and conventions are constructed and stabilized within a cultural hegemony which confines gender to sex and constrains those historical possibilities. As mentioned, this essay has attempted to examine the performativity of gender identity construction with respect to the female characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. To do so it has been tried to study how these characters- Ernestina Freeman and Sarah Woodruff- construct their identity by conforming to the hegemonic rules of the Victorian society or by rejecting those norms.

Ernestina Freeman, though moody and snobbish, is a 'true woman'. This means that, in constituting her identity she has imitated gender norms of her time to perfection. Ernestina's performance of femininity assimilates rules and conventions of the desired model of the perfect lady. She has been trained to be loving and without sexuality before marriage, and after marriage, which involves her entire destiny, both obedient and subservient. She knows that to be a proper wife she should have no opinion and should subordinate her desires to her social duty and the will of her husband. In other words, her existence is confined to that of her husband and she never exceeds her imposed passivity. The crucial fact here is that, the normative gender model she adopts is, in fact, a regulated fiction. It is an ideal model fabricated

by patriarchal institutions to restrict women to their sexed body in order to perpetuate patriarchal culture. In other words the 'true woman' is one possibility among other historical and cultural possibilities, which is represented as the only normal way of 'doing' one's gender in a way that any deviation from its rules is regarded as perversion and must be punished.

Sarah Woodruff, on the other hand is a non-conforming character. She seeks to escape the conventional sexual presuppositions of her time. In her struggle to surpass norms and conventions of a society that relegates the function of women to the female instinctual realm, she is branded as a lunatic fallen woman, a categorization that leads to her alienation. Sarah even, in a peculiar way, encourages the townspeople to believe her fabricated tale because she prefers to be "The French Lieutenant's Whore" rather than being a dependent governess, even if the latter offers a respectable social status. She also rejects being the lovely wife of Charles Smithson, because she is aware of the freedom-denying nature of love. Sarah's refusal to perform her gender role in accordance with stabilized gender norms and her desire to construct her identity based on her non-conformity and resistance to oppression and restriction reveals the artificial nature of categorized gender practices. She actively subverts and disrupts the purported continuity and coherence of gender identity and challenges the notion of 'true woman'.

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