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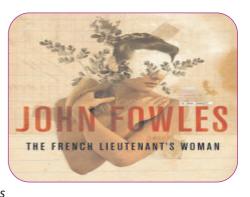
FALLEN WOMAN: A COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE ON HARDY'S TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES AND FOWLES'S THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

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ABSTRACT:

Stranded in the same milieu (the mid-Victorian age), Hardy's Tess in the novel after the same name, and John Fowles's Sarah Woodruff in The French Lieutenant's Woman are branded as 'fallen woman', in the eyes of social myopia. Pitted against patriarchal violence represented by Alec and Victorian double standards by Angel, the former though initially gives way to passive acceptance of her fate, eventually puts up a kind of feminist resistance. In contrast the latter, in her tryst with Charles Smithison, her pseudo-progressive 'new man', though at one stage of their relationship, is successful in eliciting his marriage proposal, ultimately steps out of the Victorian moral standards



of coming to terms with patriarchy through such an institutional practice. A 'new woman' that she essentially is, she opts for a single woman status in her existential crisis, and passes from the 'feminist' to the 'female' with a view to subverting 'sexual politics'.

The present paper seeks to explore the nature of this difference between the two heroines in their social and existential struggles in terms of textual illustrations as well as to account for the said difference given the fact that Fowles experiments as many as hundred years after his predecessors with the latter's Victorian heroine.

KEYWORDS :New Woman, Female, Feminine, Feminist, Victorian double standards, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 35 of his *The French Lieutenant Woman*, John Fowels states that "I have now come under the shadow, the very relevant shadow, of the great novelist who towers over this part of England (Lyme Regis, Dorest) of which I write. When we remember that Hardy was the first to try to break the Victorian middle class seal over supposed Pandora's Box of sex..." (*TFLW* 262)

Locale apart, time, though not particularly mentioned in Hardy's novel as in Fowels's, is just a couple of years after the latter's. Whereas *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is set in the late March of 1867, *Tess of Durbervilles* is during the long depression of England of 1870's.

It is primarily the spatio temporal correspondence between the two novels that impels me to make a comparative study of their treatment of the common central motif i.e. 'the fallen woman.'

The present comparative discourse would involve the terms in which the heroines concerned of the two novels are defined as 'fallen' as well as a critical analysis of the role of the male agents behind their fall, and of the ways the protagonists view themselves vis-à-vis their creator's view of them, and finally a conclusion to account for Fowels's departure from Hardy's in the presentation of such a conventional (typically Victorian) motif.

Tess is deemed "fallen" following her seduction by the seasoned philanderer Alec (Tess Chap ii) resulting

in her baby (sorrow) born out of wedlock. Here her affair falls short of the social assumption that a woman should remain virgin before marriage, or, in other words, a girl who has been raped before marriage is thereby unfit for marriage with another man. It is striking to note that Hardy who puts the seal of "pure woman" upon her in the subtitle, also calls her "maiden no more" in the very next chapter.

In contrast, the social convention holds Sarah Woodruff, Fowles's heroine as 'poor Tragedy' (14), 'the French Lieutenant's woman'/ 'whore' (14), 'scarlet woman of Lyme' (*TFLW* 121) etc reminding one of the " adulterous woman" in Hawthorne's romance The Scarlet Letter), following the factor that she unknowingly loving a womanizer (Varguennes), followed him to Waymouth on a promise of marriage from his end (after resigning her job in John Talbot's family as a governess in the capacity of which she looked after Varguennes, a, French Lieutenant, wounded in an accident, and fell for him) and lodged there with a female cousin although found " a virgin" by Charles Smithison long after (*TFLW* Ch 47) her love and sex with the latter (who sympathetically shared her disgraceful past as a confidant at the beginning) leading to her motherhood without marriage.

In both the cases irony inherent in the patriarchal society does not at all escape the notice of a sensitive reader. Whereas the female offenders (if they be called so), are taken into serious consideration, the male counterparts of their offence (?) move freely without impunity. Irony is piled on irony in the first case in the sense that it is the very Alec who doomed Tess's life at the beginning, also comes to pounce upon her at the end (finding her dire strait due to her husband Angel's abandonment of her once being informed of her black past and financial crisis) in disguise of a pious man to stand beside her in distress. Again the society does not at all sit in judgment upon Varguenness, the "heartless deceiver", while loving him truly and following him on a marriage vow Sarah is branded as a social 'outcaste' (*TFLW*175), a 'public scandal' (*TFLW*237). Here also irony gets a subtle edge in as much as misogyny is compounded with xenophobia (Vargueness being French, Englishman's arch rival to victimize the female only. However, if Tess and Sarah is the subject to the overt male violence represented by Alec and Varguenness respectively, they suffer no less from the covert one embodied in the figures of Angel and Charles Smithison. Of course, here, the male aggressors stand in sharp contrast with each other in the ways as follows.

Angel Clare iconises the Victorian 'double moral standard' in the true sense of the term. He professes to be a modern thinker- free from familial conventions and public moral standards, but cannot live up to his ideal in the question of Tess' past story with Alec, when disclosed to him (by her) as her husband. When he himself reveals his romantic 'disposition' with a woman in London, Tess immediately forgives him, but ironically when the latter seeks forgiveness, he refuses her in a harsh manner: "O Tess forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person: now you are another" (*Tess* 298). And the cruel Mac Greygor's observation is very here: "A wife might are not any loss of castle...condone an act of adultery on the part of the husband could not condone a similar act on the part of a wife..." (Greygor 20). And the cruel desertion of Tess by this "callous and vacillating Angel Clare" (Auerbach 42) plays no less a crucial role than Alec's villainous lechery to bring about the heroine's ruin. How ironically poignant is his hypocrisy is confirmed by the fact that it is he who when infatuated by Tess, idealized her as "a visionary essence of woman- a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (*Tess* 187), and called her "Artemis , Demeter" (*Tess* 187). It is as if to deify and demonise one at the same time is a special privilege of a middle class patriarch like him who is generally guided by whims and caprices under a camouflaged idealism.

Charles, modeled on Angel Clare, in some ways takes after the latter, but ultimately stands the test of "one of the New Men of his age" (Spear 8). Though fed on the modern scientific ideas of Darwin (he is engaged in an amateurish research in pale ontology), cannot initially get rid of the Victorian norms and conventions as regards his response to Sarah, the "fallen woman" in the eyes of the society. In fact, it is the fatal dichotomy in the hypocritical Victorians – " the endless tug-of-war between Liberty and Restrain, Excess and Moderation, Propriety and Conviction..."(*TFLW* 354) that prevents him from deciding on Sarah, more so because he has already been betrothed to Ernestina Freeman, an icon of the one then repressed sexuality. While on the one hand being overwhelmed by Sarah's passionate charm, he seems to have "lost the whole Victorian age" (*TFLW* 75), on the other, when the sin-ridden Sarah helplessly asks for an assignation with him for confession of her past

experiences with the French lover, Charles shrinks at her proposal, although idealized her before like Angel – Virgin Mary standing on a de^ boulis beside ... road (*TFLW* 136). He agrees subsequently but with "the greatest reluctance" (*TFLW* 143).

That Charles remains a prey at this stage to prudery can also be attested by the fact that he seeks suggestion from Dr Grogan, another Darwinian and yet another upholder of contemporary moral standards. In fact, initially Charles is guided by his mentor's prejudiced ideas that Sarah is "a very strange case", "the obscure category of melancholia" and that she should be put to a mental asylum.

However, ultimately, in his dire dilemma, it is Charles' free passion for Sarah guided by "a scientific as well as a humanitarian reason" 9161) which prevails over "the impropriety" (*TFLW* 161), and he commits to the latter – "Miss Woodruff, I detest immorality. But morality without mercy I detest rather more. I promise not to be too severe a judge" (*TFLW* 164). After all mercy is coupled with the "pleasure element" (*TFLW* 161), and it once ignites his "intolerable thirst" (*TFLW* 334), "a violent sexual desire" through an encounter with a prostitute coincidentally named Sarah, and impelled by this dormant volcano in him, he is once led to the arms of Sarah, the whore.

After his ecstatic sex with Sarah, Charles fully realizes his commitment of love for her. In this respect, he remains far ahead of his age as represented by Angel, his prototype. Noticeably, while in Hardy's Tess, it is the heroine who in her dire strait after Angel's desertion of her, seeks the latter's help through writing a letter, in Fowles's novel it is Charles who writes a letter to "my sweet and mysterious Sarah." The usual pursuer- pursued relationship in a patriarchal structure is inverted here in a subtle way and with obvious implication.

By the way, while Charles's eventual course of action qualifies him to be a "New Man", it is not unlikely that Fowles takes an opportunity of his transformation to crituically draw the attention of the Victorian double standards. While male sexuality before and after marriage with another woman (in the cases of Alec/Varguenness and Charles respectively) is not objectionable, it is a case of serious transgression of the socio-economical law. As Sir John Bigham (President of the Divorce Laws, 1912) said, "he did not think the act of misconduct on the part of the man had anything like the significance as such an act on the part of woman...It was not inconsistent with his continued esteem and love for his wife ... Whereas an act of misconduct on the part of a woman, was, ...quite inconsistent with her continual love and esteem for her husband." (Quoted in Duffin, 244)

From the author's point of view vis-a vis the point of view of the victims themselves, we find a dual perspective in the presentation of Tess. While Hardy's explicit narrative abases the woman, his iconographic pattern exalts her. Despite the narrator's radical air and idiom ("pure woman" in the subtitle being the instant example), Tess appears from another perspective a very pitiably abased fallen woman. For, with all her suppressed purity, perspective and language insinuate images of a somewhat unsavory and guilty thing. Not only does a famous passage present her as "a fly on a billiard table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly" (*Tess* 159), but like Kafka's Joseph K., Tess seems a consciousness born to guilt. After the seduction by Alec, Tess is always haunted by her guilt ridden past. Taking it for granted that she is tainted, she accuses her mother for throwing her off to this miserable plight (*Tess* Ch. 12) because it is she who has insisted her on taking the job at the poultry farm of Alec and his family. In fact, Tess has imbibed the moral standards from her birth, and internalizing that shreds of convention, she is always in the grip of moral horror for her shared sin with Alec. As goes Hardy's authorial comment, "a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason", and she looks down upon herself as a "figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence." (*Tess* 135)

This unremitting sense of sin does not leave Tess till the end. When Angel turns his back upon her following her confession of the disgraceful past with Alec, instead of protesting against the former's unjust moral judgement, she accepts his decision to leave her in an attitude of passive suffering: "I shan't do anything, unless you order me to do; and if you go away from me I shall not follow 'ee; and if you never speak to me any more I shall not ask why, unless you tell me I may." (*Tess* 300). This way of reconciling herself to her fate may legitimately be interpreted in terms of her 'feminine' idealization of Angel which involves self deprivation. As De Beauvoir explains:

The woman in love who before her lover is in the position of the child before his parents is also liable to

the sense of guilt she felt with them; she chooses not to revolt against him as long as she loves him, but she revolts against herself. If he loves her less than she wants him to do; if she fails to engross him to make him happy to satisfy him, all their narcissism is transformed into self- disgust into humiliation, into hatred of herself which drive her to self punishment. (*The Second Sex* 661-662).

Again when she is in the clutch of her wrong doer (Alec) for the last time, says, turning up her eyes to him with threw hopeless defiance of the sorrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck, "Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim- that's the law." (*Tess* 411) What a pathetic cry of the hunted being pitted against the hunter!

However, one cannot miss the way Tess has been elevated in the iconographic pattern of Hardy. To begin with, the subtitle saves her character from having fallen at all. As Ruth in Gaskell's novel entitled the same, she is allowed a plausible degree of innocence an passivity in her affair with Alec, suggesting that according to Victorian sexual ethics, the true sin lies less in the act than in willing one's fall. Moreover, though an absurd society condemns Tess, natural growth is her friend: her affinities with burgeoning nature, her incorrigible will to renewal and joy, seem to exempt her from the fallen woman's guilt of sorrow. Like Hethy Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Ruth, Tess is given a certain psychic integrity, a fidelity to her own nature, " Was once lost always lost really true of chastity?... The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone." (Tess 150). Nina Auerbach rightly comments in this connection, "This integrity raises all three women above their moral flexibility of their seducers. Their singleness of being seems to resist the myth that world transforms them from characters into types of sin." (Nina 40)

However, Tess's protective defense turns into assertive defiance against social norms and male aggression twice. First, when following the death of her child, she is led to plead for her salvation to the parson of a parish (Tess ch 4), and secondly when she is led to murder Alec, her social killer.

Guided by the professional code of Christanity, when the vicar refuses to give a Christian burial to "Sorrow, The Undesired", Tess asserts herself to bury her in a secular manner "where all anabaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid. (*Tess* 148) Here Tess strikingly stands as a foil to Angel. The latter, a student of Darwin, still stick to age-old Christian morals in his final judgment of her, whereas she, with her inherent Christianity, comes out of the false moral code, in being compelled by her heart's desire which knows no ;social law' (*Tess* 146)

The murder of Alec, for all practical purposes, remains a symbolic protest of her "feminist" self as it were, against male violence which has made her life a hell, Alec being an incarnate of the same. But then three are critics- Auerbach is one of them – who think that Tess's death following Alec's murder confirms to the end of a conventional structure of fictionalizing a fallen woman. Accordingly, Tess compounds sexual experience with murder, and there is nobody to rescue her from the ceremonial butchery of death by hanging. To quote Auerbach:

No doubt, this addition of murder to sexuality eased Eliot and Hardy's final conformity to Victorian conventions: the exclusion of a killer was not yet revolting to society's liberal guilts and fears. (Auerbach 41)

Now to Sarah Woodruff herself and her creator as regards the former's 'fallen' state.

The first phase of her life leading to her stigmatization (as particularly marked by the novel) is more fraught with irony than that of Tess who has to bear the scar of the sexual violence of Alec, courtesy, patriarchal mores and manners. Confirming to the Victorian ideal of pure womanhood so to say: "a happy marriage, home adorable children" (*Tess* 166), as she tells Charles, she saw everyday at the Talbots and was denied- She pursued Varguenness (who she fell for while nursing him at the Talbots) and when betrayed by that womanizer, she was labeled as the "impure" woman!

But unlike Tess, she does not give way to feminine self-pity and self-humiliation following this trauma; she rather defiantly accepts the social defilement of her: "I could not marry that man. So I married shame" (*TFLW* 17).

This willful adaptation of a socially disgraceful identity by herself can easily be interpreted in terms of her subversion to the then "sexual politics" of the society.

The patriarchy preserves pure/ impure , virgin/ whore binary with a shrewd motive the strategy being

that while virgin could be enjoyed and dominated as wives maintaining the 'respectable' status, whores could be held at a lower price for the first encounter with sex: "You could buy a thirteen- year-old girl for a few pounds" (*TFLW* 258). In both ways, the weaker- vessel is deprived of their free love and sexuality, in as much as it is passed by the patriarchy not as a naturally sanctioned phenomenon. Sarah, therefore, capitalizes on this amoral/immoral "blasphemy" (*TFLW* 171)- stand imposed on her by the society as a vantage point of enjoying her free sex and love with Charles. By setting herself "beyond the pale... as the French Lieutenant's whore" (*TFLW* 171), she adopts all her feminine wiles and contrivances, starting from soliciting Charles's sympathy as a gallant in her distress to the siren-like charm and appearance, till the latter is trapped into seducing her and offering love to her at length.

Why then she does not accept the offer of marriage from Charles in the final first ending by doing which she could realize her unfulfilled dream of becoming a wife of Varguenness in a happy family? The answer is not far to seek.

In fact, by the time that Charles has searched for her after her mysterious exit after the blissful moments of seduction, Sarah has undergone a spiritual transformation by coming into contact with the Pre- Raphaelites in particular. For one thing, as a model for the brotherhood, she poses a challenge for the Victorian masculine ideology that domesticity id women's sacrosanct space. Secondly, her work as a model for these artists, enables her to be economically independent, and thereby, saves her from being a prostitute, the ultimate destiny of a fallen woman. Thirdly and more importantly, to be one of the artist's would offer her the opportunity of taking into consideration the involvement of a male along with a female in every act of adultery, (if it is so called), the denying of which would led to her disaster like Tess in the Victorian phallocentric society. After all, the paintings or poems of the Pre- Raphaelites signify ruined woman's story.

To be precise, Sarah is transformed at the end of the novel into a new woman from Sarah, the fallen woman, at the beginning. And for such an emancipated woman, to accept Charles's proposal of marriage would be as good as accepting the patriarchal ideology she seeks to resist. As Hilda Spear notes: "Fulfillment in marriage and motherhood was a nineteenth century woman's dream that Sarah might have expected to achieve through Varguennes. Fulfillment in motherhood without marriage is a twentieth century practical possibility which she seems to have chosen Charles to fulfill her" (Hilda 58).

In consonance with the social and existential freedom, Sarah also enjoys narrative freedom. In the true spirit of a surrogate – novelist of a hitoriographic metafiction, Fowles states that "it is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live" (98) and that "There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allow other freedoms to exist" (99). And he really " conform" (99)s to that definition in that he allows Sarah to fictionalize her story in a way which deconstructively dismantles the pure/ impure, virgin/ whore dichotomy, the traditional stereotyping of women particularly peculiar to the Victorian Age.

It is in this mysterious manifestation that Sarah differs considerably from her prototype Tess, though, otherwise, without her existentialist characteristic, "can be seen as a Hardyesque figure, educated to rise above the class she was born into and thus unable to find her place in life" (Hilda Spear 63).

Both of the figures under discussion are fallen women of the same time- 1867 which is said to be "the beginning of feminist emancipation in England" (Fowles 115). But if Tess "immediately preceded the New Woman Fiction" (Cunningham 103), Sarah really appears as a New Woman. If Tess passes from "feminine" to "feminist" there lies a guilty man, and as such, the fallen woman must not bear the blame alone.

We find Sarah rejects Charles as her husband for the same reason that she has rejected a Victorian society that has classified her as a governess, a fallen woman, a whore, since either role, be if a wife or governess is a betrayal of self. She has opted, instead for her authentic, autonomous self or subjectivity completely free from patriarchy.

It follows from the above discussion that Sarah eventually realizes Fowles's faith in existentialism. As an existentialist for emancipation, her sexual transgression and her resistance to social duty are "the revolt of the individual against all the systems of thoughts" and "social and political pressures" which attempt to deprive her of individuality (Foster 76) phase, Sarah can legitimately be said to have achieved the "phase of the movement concerned. Whereas Tess's approach turns from one of suservieness to subversion, Sarah's from subversion to

self-discovery.

Why difference in portrayal of same kind of women of the same time? One ostensible reason is that while Hardy was writing just at the crossroads of the (traditional) Victorian and Modern Age, Fowles revisits the Victorian through the interpretations and perspectives of a hundred years later (the novel was written in 1969), obviously a vantage point for him to be much more rebellious than the former under whose "shadow" he was writing.

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