ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

Bakhtinian Polyphony in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Min Lu

Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, 010021, China

Abstract: *John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman is a postmodern metafiction. Set in Victorian England, the novel centers on Charles Smithson, torn between his fiancée Ernestina and Sarah Woodruff stigmatized as "the French Lieutenant's Woman". This paper uses Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic theory, including four core tenets: independent consciousness, incomplete dialogue, simultaneous chronotope and carnivalization, to analyze the metafiction. The novel embodies Bakhtinian polyphony through autonomous character voices which reflects Victorian complexities, three open endings that leave ideological tensions unresolved, concentrated scenes amplifying clashes of consciousness, and carnivalization which subverts norms via hierarchy disruption and an intrusive, carnival-like narrator. Therefore, Fowles integrates Bakhtin's tenets into a dialogic, non-monologic narrative, solidifying his status as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism.*

Keywords: *John Fowles; The French Lieutenant's Woman; Bakhtin's Polyphonic Theory*

1. Introduction

John Fowles (1926–2005) was a prominent English novelist and thinker in the 20th century, celebrated for blending philosophical depth with innovative narrative techniques. His works bridge modernism and postmodernism, making him a key figure in shaping contemporary English fiction. His most famous work, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), solidified his literary status. Set in 19th-century Victorian England, the novel breaks traditional storytelling rules: the narrator often interrupts the plot to comment on the story, and it ends with three different outcomes—encouraging readers to reflect on choice and the nature of fiction itself. This experimental style generates such "a novel of avant-garde ideas" and "an artistic revolt against the orthodox and mainstream of British modern fiction".[1]

The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles is a classic work of metafiction. Happening in the Victorian era of 1867, the story centers on Charles Smithson, a gentleman who is originally engaged to the wealthy Ernestina Freeman. However, he is drawn to Sarah Woodruff, a woman stigmatized as "the French Lieutenant's Woman", and thus becomes trapped in a struggle between emotion and morality. In the novel, Charles and Sarah have numerous encounters, including those at The Cobb and in the Undercliff woods. Through some key plots, the novel intricately presents the social hierarchy, gender oppression and moral hypocrisy of the Victorian era. Meanwhile, with metafictional devices like the multi-ending structure and the narrator's intrusions, it breaks the authority of traditional narration. This echoes Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, allowing the consciousness of the characters—Charles' hesitation, Sarah's resistance and Ernestina's compliance—to engage in dialogue. In this way, it compels readers to reflect on the nature of freedom, choice and authenticity.

2. Bakhtin's Theory of Polyphony

Mikhail Bakhtin, a remarkable 20th-century Russian literary theorist and philosopher, developed the theory of polyphony (from the Greek words *poly*, meaning "many," and *phone*, meaning "voice") primarily in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Initially formulated to analyze Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, the theory later expanded to become a foundational framework for understanding narrative, dialogue and the nature of human consciousness in literature and beyond.

At its heart, polyphony rejects the "monologic" model of narration, where a single, authoritative voice (often the author's) dictates meaning, and characters serve as mere vessels for the author's ideas. Instead, it describes a narrative structure where multiple independent, equal and conflicting voices or

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

consciousnesses coexist and interact. As Bakhtin says in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "the essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony".[2] Therefore, these voices are not subordinated to one another or to an overarching authorial intent; each retains its autonomy, expressing unique beliefs, desires and worldviews that engage in dynamic dialogue, what Bakhtin called dialogism.

Bakhtin's work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* offers an in-depth analysis of Dostoevsky's novelistic creation, with the core focus on interpreting how Dostoevsky invented the entirely new literary genre of "polyphonic novels." Thus, polyphonic novels are distinguished by four defining features rooted in Bakhtin's theoretical framework. First, they demonstrate the independence of consciousness. Each character functions as an autonomous "thinking subject" whose ideological stances are not subsumed by the author's perspective. For example, in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky refrains from fully endorsing or rejecting Raskolnikov's "superman theory"; instead he makes the character articulate and defend his own worldview. Second, they embody the incompleteness of dialogue, which rejects closed endings and allows endless ideological clashes, like the inconclusive debate about God's existence between Ivan and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Third, they exhibit the simultaneity of chronotope, compressing time into crisis moments and space into concentrated settings, such as parlors or streets, to facilitate intense collisions of divergent consciousnesses. A case in point is *Demons*, where the confrontation of multiple characters in a small room generates a volatile field of ideological exchange. Finally, they incorporate the penetration of carnivalization. Specifically, Dostoevsky broke the hegemony of discourse by using carnival elements such as parody and degradation. For instance, he brought together people from different classes—nobles and beggars, believers and atheists—into direct dialogue, breaking the fixed social class boundaries in traditional novels.

3. Independence of Consciousness: Autonomous Voice of Multiple Subjects in the Victorian Era

Bakhtin defines the independence of consciousness as the foundational trait of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, where "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" form a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.[2] That is to say, a character's consciousness is presented as someone else's consciousness—autonomous, unclosed, and never reduced to a simple "object of the author's consciousness".[2] This perspective is similar to Roland Barthes' view of "the death of the Author": the birth of the character "is ransomed by the death of the Author".[3]

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the independence of consciousness of multiple subjects (Sarah, Charles, Mrs. Poulteney, Dr. Grogan, etc.) fully embodies Bakhtin's polyphonic theory. No character is the author's "mouthpiece". Each character holds an autonomous voice that reflects a different facet of Victorian society—gender oppression, class rigidity and rational awakening. Their unmerged dialogue does not point to a single correct path, but allows readers to perceive the complexity and contradictions of the Victorian era. This is exactly the value of autonomous voices of multiple subjects: they turn the novel into a field of social dialogue, making the Victorian era no longer a single, objective background, but a living space where diverse consciousnesses collide and coexist.

3.1 Sarah Woodruff's Rebellious Autonomy

Sarah, labeled the "French Lieutenant's Woman" and ostracized as a "disgraced woman", refuses to conform to the era's demand for "decent, obedient ladies". She often stands alone on the Cobb (a sea rampart) staring at the sea, rejecting both the salvation of gentlemen like Charles and the moral condemnation of figures like Mrs. Poulteney. She chooses to stay in Lyme even when offered a chance to leave, and she insists on being herself by saying that "I have learned much of myself".[4] These are not symbolic of the author's rebellion theme, but her own autonomous pursuit of freedom. Even when she confesses her past to Charles, she does not seek pity. Instead, she clarifies her choice to "marry shame" to break free from her suffocating fate. Her consciousness is unclosed: she is neither a "tragic victim" nor a "rebellious symbol", but a complex individual who actively defines her identity.

3.2 Charles Smithson's Intellectual Awakening

Charles is initially a "model gentleman" who abides by Victorian class rules as he is engaged to Ernestina, a wealthy merchant's daughter, to maintain social status. But he gradually questions the era's

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

values through his interactions with Sarah. When Charles exclaims that "Is our age not full enough as it is of a mealy-mouthed hypocrisy, an adulation of all that is false in our natures",[4] he is beginning to awake from Victorian constraints. Unexpectedly, he encounters Sarah Woodruff, who is an outcast shunned for transgressing moral norms and exposes the falseness of these values. So He realizes that Victorian society celebrates falsehoods in human nature, such as prioritizing class status over genuine emotion, equating obedience with virtue, and condemning those who dare to deviate from social norms.

His final wavering between Ernestina (tradition) and Sarah (freedom) is not the author's arranged awakening, but the result of his inner conflict. He is tired of the emptiness of upper-class life and is constantly bored with discussing furniture with Ernestina. It is no wonder that he is drawn to Sarah's unconventionality. Even his interest in paleontology is not a stylistic setting, which reflects his desire to escape the rigid social order and pursue independent thinking.

3.3 Independent Voices of Minor Characters

Bakhtin points out that polyphonic novels include not only core characters but also minor ones with equal rights consciousness. Their voices do not serve the core plot, but form a dialogue with the main subjects, revealing the diversity of Victorian society.

Mrs. Poulteney is the voice of moral hypocrisy. As a representative of Victorian upper-class moral tyranny, Mrs. Poulteney is obsessed with "cleanliness" and "morality": she dismisses servants for trivial improprieties, such as a gardener with dirt on his hands. She also forces everyone to attend church twice a week and even sets "man-traps" in her garden to prevent immoral encounters. Her consciousness is autonomous: she believes in hell and uses charity to atone for her fear of damnation—not to assist the weak. Her rigid worldview is not the author's criticism tool, but a real reflection of the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Victorian elite.

Dr. Grogan is the voice of rational humanism. Unlike Mrs. Poulteney, Dr. Grogan criticizes the era's moral hypocrisy when he "had lived now for a quarter of a century in Lyme and had seen the world".[4] He argues that using morality to replace human care is the greatest hypocrisy, which is implied in his defense of Sarah and his criticism of Mrs. Poulteney's cruelty. He refuses to reduce Sarah to a madwoman and instead attributes her suffering to social oppression so his rational perspective forms a dialogue with Mrs. Poulteney's tyranny and Charles's hesitation. His voice is not auxiliary to the main plot, but an independent critical consciousness that questions Victorian social norms.

4. Incompleteness of Dialogue: Open Narrative of Ideological Conflicts

"Dialogue and its various processes are central to Bahktin's thoeries".[5] In literary and narrative contexts, a dialogue refers to verbal or implicit exchanges of ideas, values or emotions between subjects, including not only direct spoken conversations but also ideological clashes, contrasting actions and conflicting worldviews that communicate without explicit words.

Bakhtin argues that "the polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through".[2] Thus, he discusses "the fundamental open-endedness" of the dialogue in the polyphonic novel.[2] The incompleteness of dialogue in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is reflected in its three distinct endings. Each ending is full of conflicts—desire and duty, autonomy and connection, rebellion and loneliness—while the open narrative refuses to impose closure. This incompleteness is not a flaw but a deliberate strategy: it reflects the contradictions of Victorian ideological clashes, in line with Bakhtin's vision of polyphonic dialogue, and invites readers to engage with the novel's themes as active participants.

4.1 Victorian Conformity Ending: Incomplete Dialogue of Desire and Duty

In the first ending, Charles leaves Sarah and returns to his fiancée Ernestina. He abandons his interest in paleontology, embraces a career in business and marries Ernestina. Sarah fades into a distant memory and no longer a real person, but a symbol of the freedom and passion he sacrificed. The narrator explicitly frames this as Charles' imagined outcome, designed to fit the era's rigid standards of decency. This highlights the unresolved dialogue between personal desire and societal duty, and also a core ideological conflict of the Victorian era.

Charles' internal dialogue is never resolved. He chooses duty but lives with perpetual regret. His dialogue with Sarah is abruptly cut off: he never confronts her about her motives, nor does he reconcile his own betrayal of his authentic self. Sarah, reduced to a distant memory has no chance to respond to

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

his choice. Her voice is silenced, making their dialogue one-sided and incomplete. The ending's ideological dialogue (conformity vs. rebellion) is equally unclosed. Victorian norms win superficially. Charles retains his class status, Ernestina gains a proper marriage but the narrative undermines this victory by emphasizing Charles' emotional emptiness. The conflict between societal expectations and individual fulfillment is not resolved; it is merely suppressed, reflecting how Victorian society forced individuals to bury their desires rather than address the clash between duty and authenticity.

4.2 Romantic Reunion Ending: Incomplete Dialogue of Autonomy and Connection

In the second ending, Charles defies his class by breaking his engagement to Ernestina despite legal backlash that ruins his social reputation. And then he searches for Sarah across England and even America. Years later, he learns Sarah's whereabouts from his former servant Sam. When they reunite in London, Sarah is working as a secretary and model for the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Initially distant, Sarah reveals they have a daughter together; moved by Charles' persistence and their shared bond, she relents, and the three form a family.

Sarah's dialogue with her own principles is incomplete. She has spent years asserting her autonomy rejecting marriage and pursuing economic independence, yet she relents to Charles' persistence. Her choice to form a family is not a resolution but a negotiation. She retains her work as an artist's assistant to avoid marital subjugation, showing that her dialogue with autonomy is ongoing. Charles, too, fails to fully resolve his dialogue with patriarchal logic: he rejects his class but still seeks to possess Sarah through marriage, never fully embracing her vision of radical freedom. Therefore, the ending's ideological dialogue between connection and autonomy remains open. It offers a middle ground: love and connection without total surrender to Victorian norms, but Sarah's compromise reduces her radicalism, while Charles commitment to family does not erase his past conformity. The conflict between connection and autonomy is not resolved; it is merely balanced, reflecting the complexity of ideological clashes in real life.

4.3 Radical Freedom Ending: Incomplete Dialogue of Rebellion and Loneliness

The third ending mirrors the second ending. Charles finds Sarah in London after years of searching. However, when he proposes, Sarah firmly rejects him. She declares she is satisfied with her current life: she has gained economic independence through her work with Rossetti and emotional autonomy, unbound by marriage, class or societal judgment. She refuses to be owned by anyone, even Charles, whom she cares for. Charles, shocked and angered, leaves alone, resuming his wandering life but now without the hope of reunion. The narrator underscores this as the "truest" ending by rewinding time (a metafictional device) to erase the daughter from the second ending, reinforcing Sarah's choice to prioritize self over partnership.

Charles and Sarah's final dialogue is a break, not a resolution. Charles pleads for marriage, framing love as partnership, while Sarah insists, "I cannot love you as a wife must".[4] Their worldviews are irreconcilable. Charles' anger and despair reveal his inability to accept Sarah's choice, while Sarah's quiet resolve does not reduce the pain of separation. Their dialogue ends with no mutual understanding, highlighting the unbridgeable gap between a man still tied to patriarchal ideals and a woman who has transcended them. So the ending's ideological dialogue is perpetually open. Sarah's choice validates the primacy of individual freedom, but the narrative does not shy away from its cost—loneliness for both her and Charles.

5. Simultaneity of Chronotope: Collision of Consciousness in Concentrated Scenes

In Bakhtin's theory, the chronotope, literally means time-space, is a dynamic site where time and space converge to shape meaning and where conflicting consciousnesses collide. In his published work *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* the essay *"Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel"* concerns *"the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."*[6] In literature's artistic chronotope, space and time merge into "a tangible, perceived whole".[7] Time condenses into something artistically visible; space grows intense, swept into the flow of time, plot and history. Temporal cues unfold in space, while space is understood and measured through time. This intersection defines the artistic chronotope.

The French Lieutenant's Woman masterfully utilizes simultaneity of chronotope—concentrating multiple time-space layers and ideological perspectives into scenes—to strengthen the collision of

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

Victorian conformity and individual rebellion, patriarchal logic and female autonomy.

5.1 The Cobb: Past Trauma

The novel's opening scene on the Cobb (a stone seawall in Lyme Regis) is a condensed chronotope, forcing Charles and Sarah's consciousnesses into an unavoidable collision. Here Sarah was abandoned by the French lieutenant, marking her social ostracism. It is a space frozen in her shame and rebellion. She returns here deliberately to embrace her reputation as the "fallen woman", and rejects Victorian norms of female modesty.

5.2 The Ware Commons: Wild Nature

The scene in the Ware Commons (a dense, isolated forest outside Lyme Regis) is a concentrated chronotope that merges wild nature and forbidden desire, escalating the collision between Charles and Sarah's consciousnesses. The forest is a space outside Victorian civilization: untamed, dark and free from social rules. It mirrors the uncivilized desires suppressed by the era's morality, and becomes a physical manifestation of the characters' repressed instincts. For Charles and Sarah, the forest is a space where their attraction transcends social roles. Time slows here: their conversation lingers on emotions, and the dense foliage shields them from societal scrutiny.

5.3 The London Studio: Artistic Rebellion

The final concentrated scene in Rossetti's London studio, shared by Sarah as an artist's secretary, converges three chronotopes—artistic rebellion, emergent modernity and unresolved past—to connect the ultimate collision of Charles and Sarah's consciousnesses across all three endings. Rossetti's studio is a hub of Pre-Raphaelite radicalism. Artists reject Victorian academic art and moral hypocrisy, embracing individual expression. It is a space where Sarah has found economic independence and intellectual community, and it also embodies emergent modern values of female agency. For Charles, the studio is a space of awakening. He arrives carrying his past choices: his broken engagement, his search for Sarah, and his desire to fix his mistakes. The space forces him to confront the gap between his own growth and Sarah's transformation.

6. Penetration of Carnivalization: Subversion and Deconstruction of Discursive Hegemony

Polyphonic novels, asserts Bakhtin, "have a carnival sense of the world".[5] Therefore, carnivalization, according to Bakhtin's doctoral dissertation *Rabelais and His World,* refers to the infusion of carnival's essential principles—freedom, inversion, dialogism, and grotesque realism—into literary, artistic or ideological forms. Rooted in "the Middle Ages and Renaissance" folk carnival traditions,[8] it functions as a subversive force that challenges official hierarchies, dogmas and fixed truths, reshaping how reality is represented and experienced.

In John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, carnivalization manifests as a powerful tool for subverting dominant discourses. By connecting Victorian-era narratives with carnivalistic elements, including the suspension of hierarchy and metafictional narrator as a carnival figure, Fowles deconstructs the discursive hegemony of 19th-century patriarchy, moral authority and fixed literary conventions.

6.1 Carnivalistic Suspension of Hierarchy: Undermining Patriarchal Dominance

Victorian society's rigid gender hierarchy, which positions men as rational, authoritative subjects and women as passive, subordinate objects, is deconstructed through carnival's blurring of power boundaries.

Sarah Woodruff, the French Lieutenant's Woman, rejects her assigned role as a marginalized "fallen woman", a label imposed by patriarchal discourse, and embraces a carnivalistic state of "outsiderness." This shows the novel's playful inversion of gendered power dynamics. Sarah's emotional and intellectual autonomy is over Charles, which subverts the patriarchal natural order. Charles, a wealthy gentleman engaged to the bourgeois Ernestina, abandons his privileged life to pursue Sarah. This reversal is a hallmark of carnivalization and exposes the arbitrariness of Victorian gender hierarchies, regarding them as changing identities rather than eternal truths.

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 17-22, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081104

6.2 Metafictional Narrator as a Carnival Figure

The novel's narrator is a carnival figure. The intrusive meta-fictional author reveals the fictionality of writing skills and narrative process by exposing his identity intentionally. John Fowles always uses "I" to break into the narration and tell readers his writing process. This strategy is employed from the beginning to the end in. In Chapter 45, "And now, having brought this fiction to a thoroughly traditional ending, I had better explain that although all I have described in the last two chapters happened, it did happen quite in the way you may have been led to believe".[4] The silent author used to be quite popular in the traditional novel, but Fowles insists that the author's voice cannot be killed. So the author is debating with the reader about the novel's endings, and commenting on the historical context of the Victorian era, which creates a carnivalistic dialogue between author, text and reader. This dialogue subverts the monologic relationship between author and reader in Victorian fiction, inviting readers to co-create meaning. This is a radical act that challenges the hegemony of authoritative literary discourse.

7. Conclusion

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exemplifies Bakhtin's polyphonic theory, integrating its four key elements; autonomous consciousness, open dialogue, concentrated time-space, and carnivalistic subversion, into a cohesive narrative. Beyond its Victorian setting, the novel becomes a dynamic arena of ideological clashes, challenging literary conventions and societal dominance through diverse voices, unresolved conflicts and subversive energy.

References

[1] Zhang, H. (2020). "Metafiction" Revisited: The New Avant-garde Ideas in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), (5), 92-99.
[2] Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
[3] Barthes, R. (1977). The Death of the Author (R. Howard, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1967)
[4] Fowles, J. (1969). The French Lieutenant's Woman. Little, Brown and Company.
[5] Bressler, C. E. (2011). Literary Criticism: An introduction to Theory and Practice (5th ed.). Pearson.
[6] Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
[7] Zhu, Y. (2024). An Interpretation of Nabokov's Novel Mary from the Perspective of Bakhtin's Chronotope Theory. Journal of Qiqihar University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition), (3), 115-118.
[8] Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). Rabelais and His World (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1965 as Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable, Moscow, Khudozhestvennia literatura)