



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Gloriously Politically Incorrect

*What are the reasons behind George Macdonald Fraser's
creation of the original Flashman novel?*

B.A. Essay

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January 2014

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Abstract

This essay is a literary analysis of George Macdonald Fraser's popular novel, *Flashman* (1969), addressing the novel's relevance as historical fiction along with questions on what is considered to be historical "reality". By close examination of the main character, Harry Flashman, an important question arises – why does Fraser create this character and what is the purpose? The essay thus examines Fraser's development of the Flashman character and his reasons behind this creation. It then discusses the importance of this character in relation to the novel by looking closely at the issues of misogyny and racism through commenting on the offensive opinions Flashman has towards women and minorities. These opinions, which Fraser attributes to Flashman, prove to have been common in Victorian Britain, and through this portrayal of his character Fraser manages to criticize the society of the time. The main character's racism and misogyny is shocking to the modern reader which leads to the final analysis of Harry Flashman as an anti-hero and also as an unreliable narrator. Taking the characteristics of Harry Flashman, his opinions on different aspects of Victorian culture and his status as an anti-hero into account, all of this is examined to a greater extent. That means that Fraser's criticism is expanded on and that examination along with what Fraser himself has said about his creation shows that the moral and the social message everything in the novel, along with Fraser's historical vision are connected through Fraser's own opinions on a politically correct view of history.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Fraser's Creation of Harry Flashman.....	2
3. Misogyny in Flashman	5
4. Racism and Political Correctness.....	10
5. Harry Flashman: An Anti-hero?	14
6. Flashman as Historical Fiction or a Criticism of History?	17
7. Conclusion	22

1. Introduction

From the moment we are born we begin learning history. First we record our own and our family's history, then as we get older we start to learn about the history of the world. We learn about ancient cultures and extinct species, about both war and peace. All this knowledge of the past is acquired by reading old texts, or other documents that were written about these events. Sometimes they were written by people who were there, or in some cases, people who had heard stories relating to the historical event. At some point in our study of history we start to question these old texts and ask ourselves how reliable they are, and if we can know that what they claim is what happened in reality. The answer is that we can never truly know everything that happened in major historical events unless we were there to witness them ourselves. History is a mystery that can never quite be solved, and this may be a reason many people seem to be fascinated with it. Moreover, this is one of the reasons why historical fiction has become increasingly popular as the years go by. This genre of novels aims to personalize history, and in many cases historical novelists try to make history more accessible to the general public. George Macdonald Fraser's novel *Flashman* is an excellent example of historical fiction done right; all of its historical facts are correct and it manages to be entertaining, instead of being a dry text relating facts from the historical record. The reason behind Fraser's successful *Flashman* novels is the titular character, Harry Flashman, who has a unique outlook on life, war and history. Some critics such as Alan Ramsay, consider the novel *Flashman* to be a satire on Victorian Britain, on its society, foreign policy, and the moral values that were held at that time.¹ To help the satire come across in the novel, Fraser creates Harry Flashman, using many uncharacteristic attributes of a main protagonist, which allows him to cross the line of political correctness and proper moral values. Flashman is a truly despicable man who somehow manages to captivate the reader despite all of his terrible characteristics. Due to these unique qualities and also because he is an unreliable narrator in the retelling of historical events, Harry Flashman is the perfect narrator for Fraser's novel. He enables Fraser to criticize the society of Victorian Britain in a way he could not have been successful at if his main character were a humble soldier with "proper" Victorian moral values. Fraser uses Flashman's outrageous character and views as a vehicle to distance

¹ Ramsay 363.

himself as an author from the text's inherent criticism of Victorian society; at the same time, this serves to distance Fraser from his non-politically correct view of history and his veiled criticism on the truthfulness of "real" history.

2. Fraser's creation of Harry Flashman

George Macdonald Fraser was born in England to Scottish parents in 1925. He joined the British army in 1943, just after turning 18, and was sent overseas to fight in India with the Fourteenth Army in Burma during the Second World War. Having survived the war, he went on to serve with the Gordon Highlanders regiment in the Middle East and Africa.² Through his wartime experience Fraser was able to witness the birth and evolution of modern western political correctness, which became an important target in his novels about Harry Flashman. Fraser had very strong opinions on politically correct vocabulary, which also comes across in his novels through his main character, the gloriously politically incorrect Harry Flashman.³ The reason for Fraser's choice of main character is that Flashman allows him to be as politically incorrect as he pleases. He is also able to showcase and satirize Victorian England through the eyes of an elitist, who has no illusions about the society and realities of his time.

Fraser's experiences as a foot soldier in the British Army and the perspective and ideals that were brought about by them became very valuable for him as a writer, in particular in the first of his most famous series of novels, *Flashman* (1969). The title character in these novels, Harry Flashman, is based on a character from Thomas Hughes's 1857 semi-autobiographical account *Tom Brown's School Days*. In Hughes's book, Flashman is the protagonist's nemesis as well as being the school bully who makes everybody in school miserable until he gets expelled for drunkenness. Fraser became inspired and decided to resurrect the bully from Hughes's account and build his own novel around him.⁴ Fraser's hero might even be considered worse than the drunkard from Hughes's novel as Flashman is misogynistic, racist, and a cowardly elitist with only one redeeming quality, his brutal honesty. Despite this protagonist's lack of "proper" values and his less than agreeable character, the *Flashman* novels are a

² "George Macdonald Fraser".

³ Fraser, "The Last Testament of Flashman's Creator: How Britain Destroyed Itself".

⁴ *Ibid.*

major success. According to an article by Fraser in the *Daily Mail*, it is evident that Flashman's characteristics have become his main attractions, and as Fraser states, "he was politically incorrect with a vengeance."⁵ Through the villain of Hughes's novel, Fraser puts forth his outrageous critique on aspects of British culture, like British society and sensibilities, colonialism and the first Afghan war in 1839 to 1842.

Most authors get their own opinions and experiences across through their characters, to a lesser or greater extent, and they know that they are held accountable for the things they write, even in fiction. Because of this it is interesting that Fraser chose to add an explanatory note in the beginning of *Flashman*⁶. In the note he distances himself from his creation by describing himself as the discoverer of the late Sir Harry Paget Flashman's newly discovered memoirs. This comes across as very unusual, and because of this explanatory note many of the "less informed" readers, and even some critics at the time of the first novel's publication, thought that *Flashman* was a real life account of Harry Flashman's wartime experience. The novels were even referred to in one review as "the most important discovery since the Boswell Papers"⁷ (which were private papers and journals written by James Boswell, biographer of Samuel Johnson, that were discovered over 120 years after Boswell's death).⁸ By placing all of the responsibility with the fictional Flashman, Fraser is able to distance himself from the themes and topics in his novel, which are considered quite controversial and sensitive. Therefore, Fraser has, by using humor and sarcasm, along with the fictional writer Flashman, done everything he could in order not to be taken too seriously. Fraser's decision to distance himself from his creation in this way is often misunderstood in modern criticism. Modern readers of the novel might think that he did this so he would not be held accountable for the number of sexist and racist remarks in the novel. However, what has to be kept in mind is that the novel was published in 1969, at a time when much was changing in western cultures. For example, a few years before, segregation was deemed illegal in the United States, and that same year Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Fraser, *Flashman* 7.

⁷ "George Macdonald Fraser".

⁸ Turnbull.

Things were changing and the public was not going to raise havoc over a fictional novel that was – to their sensibilities – slightly offensive towards women and minorities.

That being said, Fraser's decision to distance himself can be interpreted in many ways. One of his reasons could be that he did not want to be accused of having the same opinions as Flashman on controversial topics in the novel as has happened between characters and other writers of historical fiction.⁹ Through looking at articles and short essays that Fraser wrote about his novels it could be interpreted that he did so in order to show that there is no politically correct way of looking at history.¹⁰ Fraser himself never attested to what he thought were the politically correct ways of looking at history, and he had stated that he would never have had made excuses or apologized to anyone who might have felt offended by his novels.¹¹ Fraser notes that throughout the Seventies and Eighties he was able to lead Flashman

on his disgraceful way, toadying, lying, cheating, running away, treating women as chattels, abusing inferiors of all colours, with only one redeeming virtue - the unsparing honesty with which he admitted to his faults, and even gloried in them.

And no one minded, or if they did, they didn't tell me. In all the many thousands of readers' letters I received, not one objected.¹²

However, in the 1990s things started to change. Many reviewers and interviewers started to describe the *Flashman* novels and Fraser himself as politically incorrect. Even though the novels were non-politically correct this did not seem to have anything to do with how critics and the general reader liked them. It was because every critic felt compelled to mention it in order to warn readers that some might find Flashman offensive, and that the views presented in the novels were not those of the interviewer or reviewer.¹³ Fraser was alarmed by this new problem of being politically incorrect. He thought that most of the critics talking about it were really nervous about the public's

⁹ Dray.

¹⁰ Fraser, "The Last Testament of Flashman's Creator: How Britain Destroyed Itself".

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

opinion and were too busy making sure that everybody knew that the work they were criticizing did not reflect their own opinions on the matter.¹⁴

Fraser's use of historical events, names, dates and in many instances, characters lends the *Flashman* novels a more historical and authentic feel despite the fact that they are fiction. This is an important part of the central question that Fraser seems to have tried to convey through his novels on Flashman – can a term such as “facts” ever be used in the context of history and its literature, especially if that part of history is being viewed through politically correct opinions of the modern world? Fraser created Flashman as the embodiment of a way of thinking that modern society believes only belongs to a long forgotten past and if one looks at the cultural differences between the 19th century and today they would be considered correct.¹⁵ Despite this, Fraser's critique of British society is as relevant today as it was 44 years ago in regards to racism, war and the subjugation of women.

3. Misogyny in Flashman

In Fraser's *Flashman*, the issue of sexism and the role of women in the 19th century is one that stands out. Harry Flashman is a misogynistic elitist that thinks that women are only good for one thing – sex. Flashman thinks that women are simple minded and some even “truly stupid,”¹⁶ as in his description of his wife Elspeth the first time he meets her. His views of women seem to be similar to those his father has of them.¹⁷ This is the result of Flashman not having his mother around during his childhood¹⁸ and because of this he probably never had a normal platonic, yet loving relationship with a woman in his life. However, there are other factors that contribute to his misogynistic attitude towards women.

To be better able to understand Flashman's sexist and demeaning attitude towards women, the culture in which he lives has to be taken into consideration. Educated in an all-boy's school where physical strength and martial vigor is encouraged, Flashman lives in a culture that is filled with the worst of male

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Fraser, *Flashman* 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 21.

characteristics. It is astounding that even though a woman ruled the British Empire, the male dominated hierarchy did not diminish, but instead flourished.¹⁹ Women were pressured to fit into a single version of ideal femininity that Victorian society tried to impose upon them. “In Victorian culture, women were idolized, protected and obsessed [over]”²⁰ and not in a good way. Female qualities such as innocence, purity and passivity were celebrated in Victorian culture and reinforced through religion, teaching and the law. This also justified the exclusion of women from institutions of power, even though these institutions shaped their future. There are many fixed social expectations regarding women from this era and there are many theories about women’s bodies, innocence, emotional temperament and maternal instincts. All of these theories are used to underpin the concept of the Victorian woman as spiritually inspiring.²¹ This becomes evident when understanding that a favorite metaphor of the period for womanhood was the “Angel in the House.”²² This “Angel in the House” metaphor and the characterization of the tender feminine nature shackled women intellectually and confined bright and intelligent women to attending to and taking care of their husbands, as well as to taking care of their own looks.

All of these characteristics that were applied to women in the Victorian age restricted women intellectually, and they were enclosed in their homes with a man as their master (father, brother or husband).²³ In this male dominant world women lacked rights. It was incredibly hard for them to get a divorce, and even after the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, that was supposed to make it easier for women to get divorced, they still needed more extensive proof to be granted a divorce than men did. Not only was it hard to get a divorce, since if they succeeded it was really hard for them to get custody of their children. This is not the only form of women’s lack of freedom; the mindset in the Victorian era is also evident in the clothing fashion of the time period. Women’s bodies were policed through restrictive social instruments, such as clothing, which they were forced to wear; not even through fashion were they allowed to express themselves as individuals. Women had very few opportunities to enter public

¹⁹ Longford 195.

²⁰ Moran 35.

²¹ *Ibid* 36.

²² *Ibid* 36.

²³ *Ibid* 36.

life; they were excluded from higher education for the first three quarters of the century and had no right to vote.²⁴ The reality for women living in Victorian society was a role of a mother and a wife. They were all expected to have the ideal characteristics of femininity that were celebrated in Victorian culture, to the extent that they seem to have been enslaved by society to portray the “perfect” woman.

The most important female character living in the same culture as Flashman, in the *Flashman* novels, is his wife Elspeth. As mentioned earlier, Flashman does not seem to think much of his wife’s intelligence and considers her to be stupid and simple. He does, however, think that she is very beautiful,²⁵ and therefore his interest in her seems to be only for her looks and her physical attributes. Flashman’s opinions on Elspeth and women in general reveal to the reader that he is naive when it comes to understanding women. After “seducing” Elspeth, he feels like his success demonstrates that he is truly irresistible to women and that he is the one in control. Even when Elspeth “accidentally” reveals their little dalliance to her family, he still believes he is in control, although the reader can identify that Elspeth is the one with the control.²⁶ In the end, Elspeth is the one that gains most from their affair, as she gains a husband of noble heritage and a house in London. Flashman, on the other hand, is stuck with a Scottish wife from middle class society and because of his marriage he loses his position in the 11th Light Dragoons and is forced to go to India.²⁷ When Flashman finally comes home from war he becomes financially dependent on his wife and suspects that his wife has been adulterous like himself while he was gone. This acts like a blow to his ego so he quickly suppresses his suspicion and tells himself that it just could not be true.²⁸ Flashman’s reaction to his wife’s supposed affairs seems to be in line with 19th century social morality, since there are clearly double standards when it comes to sexual matters. This double standard means that women were punished for sexual experiences outside marriage while men were forgiven for the same act.²⁹ This indicates how chauvinistic Victorian society was despite the fact that the ruler of the country was a woman. Flashman does not dwell on the matter, though, because he is too arrogant to

²⁴ *Ibid* 36.

²⁵ Fraser, *Flashman* 58.

²⁶ *Ibid* 62.

²⁷ *Ibid* 70.

²⁸ *Ibid* 271.

²⁹ Moran 37.

comprehend that his wife would even consider being unfaithful to him. However, his reluctance to admit to his wife's infidelity seems to be purely selfish, as he needs her money. The fact that Elspeth is able to be unfaithful to Flashman and that he cannot do anything about it is because she has control over the money, gives Elspeth the upper hand and demonstrates that she is the one in charge in the marriage.

Harry Flashman does not have much respect for any women and this is evident in the way he treats them and the language he uses to describe them in the novel. Early in the story he manages to sleep with Judy, his father's mistress, and a few nights later he tries to get her into bed again but this time she is unwilling. This causes Flashman to assault her, trying to force her to have sex with him and threatening her in many ways.³⁰ When this approach does not work he tries to tell her that he is sorry and that he feels guilty and regrets his actions. However, although he is still unsuccessful in getting her to have sex with him, his actions demonstrate to what length he will go to get a woman into bed.³¹ Later on, Flashman's lack of respect for women becomes even more evident when he buys an Indian girl called Fetnab to be his sex toy.³² He buys her because "she knew the ninety-seven ways of making love that the Hindus are supposed to set much store by,"³³ and he seems happy with her most of the time. However, he does not have any problems with beating her if he finds it necessary or just because he is feeling frustrated.³⁴ Flashman proves just how elitist, racist, and sexist he is through his behavior towards Fetnab, whom he considers to be beneath him and to be completely disposable.

Even though the reader thinks Flashman's behavior and attitudes towards Judy and Fetnab are inexcusable, most would be outraged when knowing that he is a self-confessed rapist. When he is in Afghanistan he admits to raping a dancing girl called Narreeman because she resisted him when he tried to have sex with her.³⁵ The rape scene in the novel is repulsive, not merely because of the act itself, but more due to the cold and detached way in which Flashman describes the act: "I managed to rape her –

³⁰ Fraser, *Flashman* 29.

³¹ *Ibid* 30.

³² *Ibid* 76.

³³ *Ibid* 76.

³⁴ *Ibid* 83.

³⁵ *Ibid* 105.

the only time in my life I have found it necessary, by the way.”³⁶ He then goes on to say that while raping has its points, he does prefer willing women;³⁷ meaning that he feels no remorse for his actions and that he considers the rape as something he had to do. Later in the novel he is confronted by Narreeman when he is captured by the Afghans, only at this point the tables are turned.³⁸ Now she is the one in control and Flashman is begging for mercy, not realizing that it is only fair for her to want revenge for what he did to her. He does not learn anything from this experience and as soon as he has the upper hand again he probably would have raped her again and killed her if his companion Sergeant Hudson had not been there.³⁹

However, despite Sergeant Hudson’s disgust of rape, Flashman’s attitude appears to be the more popular view of the time. When Flashman meets Sir Willoughby Cotton he asks him about why he was expelled from Rugby and Flashman replies that he was expelled because of drunkenness. After hearing this Cotton is outraged and comments that “They’ll be expellin’ for rape next.”⁴⁰ This comment showcases the mindset of the male dominant culture in regards to rape and women’s rights. Records from the Victorian period show that men of high status were often not charged with rape or were acquitted of the crime. “Sexual assaults by respectable men were called “drunken impulses” or “sudden outbreaks of wickedness” or “harmless fun”.”⁴¹ The fault was often placed on the woman and that she must have in some way provoked the rape or allowed herself to be seduced, meaning that “there was no victim and no crime”.⁴²

The Victorian age does not seem to have been the ideal time to be a woman. Flashman seems to learn nothing from his encounters with women and how he treats them, even though when faced with a similar fate he begs for his life. He is only interested in them when there is a chance he can sleep with them and all his thoughts of them seem to be confined to the sexual sphere. It becomes evident, though, that it is not

³⁶ *Ibid* 105.

³⁷ *Ibid* 105.

³⁸ *Ibid* 225.

³⁹ *Ibid* 237.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 84.

⁴¹ Conlay 535.

⁴² *Ibid* 535.

just Victorian culture that is unjust and misogynistic towards women, but also the Indians and the Afghans. They are the ones that sell women as sex toys⁴³ and it was Akbar (an “Afghan prince”) that gave Narreeman to Flashman, knowing he would most likely rape her.⁴⁴ Women in the early 19th century were often considered second class citizens in the many parts of the world it seems, not just in Victorian England. Therefore, it can be said that being a woman at this time in history is by modern standards a very undesirable thing indeed.

4. Racism and Political Correctness

When it comes to the subject of racism in *Flashman*, social status and gender complicate an already difficult subject, especially when looking at how Harry Flashman acts towards all the people that he thinks are beneath him. Flashman’s loathing seems to apply to everyone he thinks deserves it and his feelings of superiority are not confined to one group in particular. Nevertheless, his views can be linked to the disposition adopted by each group towards the British.

To begin with, Flashman, being raised in a society where class inequality is accepted, is very aware of his status within the Victorian society. He is born into luxury only known by the privileged and is taught from an early age to look down on others, especially those that rank lower in society. Flashman does not have any sympathy for those less noble than him, even though he is well aware that his grandfather was a pirate. This fact even seems to encourage him to act in a more superior manner, which could be his way of distancing himself from his grandfather’s past. However, it does not seem to matter how he treats others because he is at the top of the social ladder. Because he is a white male of noble birth he has the role of the oppressor, not the role of the oppressed. Therefore, it seems that the nature and purpose of the class system is to reinforce this order that has to be upheld.

One example of how Flashman’s opinions of those less fortunate than he is are acted out is through his treatment of his servant Basset. When the two of them meet for the first time Flashman beats him and describes their relationship as that of a master to

⁴³ Fraser, *Flashman* 76.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 104.

his dog.⁴⁵ (It may not be a coincidence that Fraser chooses to name the servant Basset, as this is a type of dog; i.e. Basset hound). He even goes as far as claiming that Basset liked him better for beating him. After this event and seeing how Flashman treats Basset, the reader cannot help but to feel sympathetic towards Basset for having to endure Flashman's treatment. However, when arriving in India along with Flashman, Basset becomes the head of the household and treats the Indian workers in the same fashion as Flashman treats him,⁴⁶ a reason through which the reader loses sympathy for Basset. There seems to be a lack of empathy among the people in Victorian society for those who are "lower" in the social ladder. This lack of empathy seems to be the core of the issue of racism in the novel as it extends from the inequality in the English social system and fuels Flashman's treatment of those of different ethnic backgrounds.

Flashman's opinion of the Scottish is a further example of racism. The novel shows that Harry Flashman does not care for the Scottish people and thinks they are boring, hostile and rude.⁴⁷ He does not go into great detail about them despite mentioning that their women are too masculine for his taste.⁴⁸ This statement may be contradictory since Flashman thinks his wife is very beautiful, though Scottish, although he may be referring to their spirit and not their body in his comment. However, it is clear that Flashman does not think the Scottish are meek enough and he interprets their pride as insolence. The Scottish view of Flashman is that he is "insolent, arrogant, and smart,"⁴⁹ which proves that they do not think any more highly of Flashman than he does of them, and may prove to be a more accurate description of Flashman than Flashman's description of the Scots. Between Flashman and the Scottish, there exists a barrier of culture and language which allows Flashman a certain amount of insolence and authority. He does, however, not get away with doing as much as he would like to, for instance when he fornicates with Elspeth and, instead of getting away with it, is forced to marry her.⁵⁰

When Flashman is stationed in India he mentions the Scottish again in reference to how much better he likes the Indians. Unlike the Scottish people the Indians are meek

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 66.

and humble and have a language that Flashman finds easy to learn.⁵¹ However, this is not the only reason he prefers the Indians over the Scottish. Because the Indians have darker colored skin, Flashman revels in a new found superiority that has always eluded him: the white man's absolute dominance over the colored man. Because of this added difference between Flashman and the Indians, he enjoys doing whatever he wants to them. He gives no reason for his abuse of the Indians, and he does not beat them because they are colored but because he seems to enjoy it and can get away with doing it and other things.

Flashman's attitude towards the Indians and the Afghans appears to agree with the attitude of anyone from Britain in the 19th century. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said claims that views and attitudes towards the oriental, which includes India and Afghanistan, are anti-human and persistent.⁵² What he means by this is that the British Empire was the stronger culture and that it penetrated and gave shape to the countries that it conquered,⁵³ and that the British did not concern themselves with the existing culture. Therefore, Flashman does not have to adapt to a different culture when he is stationed in India but instead forces his own culture on the Indians, which is why he gets away with anything he does to them.

What Flashman thinks of the Indians and his whole outlook on them is contrary to what he thinks of the Afghans. When he arrives in Afghanistan he quickly realizes how different it is from Calcutta and he comments about the people, and calls them "lean, ugly, Jewish-looking creatures, armed and ready for mischief."⁵⁴ However, despite this initial description of the Afghan people, Flashman is forced to admit that he has some respect for them, no matter how reluctant that respect may be. Flashman is not the only one in the British army to respect the Afghans. General Nott seems to be one of the few leaders in the Army that recognize the military threat posed by the Afghans, and he even refers to the Afghans as "one of the fiercest warrior nations in the world."⁵⁵ Unlike the Indians, the Afghans do not try to please or impress the British with their cultural or intellectual achievements, instead trying to impress them through brutality and fearlessness, which seems to work for them. The Afghans manage to strike fear into

⁵¹ *Ibid* 73.

⁵² Said 44.

⁵³ *Ibid* 44 – 45.

⁵⁴ Fraser, *Flashman* 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 92.

the hearts of the British army and this is the only reason they receive some respect, while the Indians are all treated like slaves. Flashman realizes as soon as he enters Afghanistan that the Afghans are more brutal than and not as meek as the Indians and he is therefore very careful as to what he says and does around them.

When in Afghanistan, Flashman realizes that even though he considers himself to be superior to the Afghans, they also have racism within their culture. This becomes evident in their use of black slaves, and that Gul Shah shoots one just to test a gun.⁵⁶ This shows that just as the Indians and the Afghans are disposable to Flashman, the black slaves are disposable to the Afghans. Even though Flashman finds it understandable that Gul Shah would kill a black slave, he is still shaken by the cold-blooded manner in which he killed him.⁵⁷ This seems to suggest that even though Flashman shares the racism of the Afghans against the black slaves, he still feels he is more evolved than the Afghans because of the casual way they kill them and their total disregard for human life. That is to say, he looks down on their racism and therefore has his own prejudice towards their racism, which is quite interesting. On the other hand, Flashman is also shaken by the killing because he is afraid of what they might do to him if he did something that the Afghans would not like.⁵⁸

It cannot be said that racism and discrimination arrived with the Europeans to their colonies, but instead may have existed in the colonies for a long time just like in other parts of the world. What the reader sees in Flashman's view and attitude towards those that he considers to be beneath him, be it of social status, country of origin, or the color of their skin, seems to be in line with how British society worked in the 19th century. Flashman's unapologetic and, more importantly, politically incorrect retelling of his experience in the Orient opens the politically correct reader's eyes to the harsh reality of the inhabitants of colonies at the time. This is important in Fraser's critique on racism and history in the novel because, as he states, by being "politically correct" about everything we are denying our history⁵⁹.

Political correctness is used today in order to justify racism throughout history. This is true when it comes to the depiction of the superiority of one race, or culture over

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 102.

⁵⁷ *Ibid* 102.

⁵⁸ *Ibid* 102.

⁵⁹ Fraser, "The Last Testament of Flashman's Creator: How Britain Destroyed Itself".

another. When the subjugation of one race by another is discussed today it is often explained in terms of cultural or intellectual superiority of one group over another, because it is too harsh a reality that people in the past kept slaves simply because they were greedy. They could have had paid workers but instead used slaves, because they reveled in their superior power. Therefore, by using the politically incorrect Flashman and his brutally honest perspective on 19th century society and historical occurrences, Fraser highlights the terrible reality of the treatment of those considered “inferior” in history.

5. Harry Flashman: An anti-hero or just an obnoxious soldier?

Fraser’s title character Harry Flashman is a notorious scoundrel, a ladies’ man and racist elitist, even though he is seen as a hero by Victorian society. These characteristics suggest that Flashman is not the traditional “hero” of the story despite the fact that he is the protagonist of the novel. In literature this type of protagonist is often referred to as an anti-hero. According to M.H. Abrams, an anti-hero is someone who is:

The chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that of the traditional protagonist, or hero, of a serious literary work. Instead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power, or heroism, the antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, clownish, or dishonest [...] the term “antihero,” however, is usually applied to writings in the period of disillusion after the Second World War.⁶⁰

As this definition confirms, an anti-hero is a protagonist who has the opposite of a hero’s traditional qualities. Even though anti-heroes are typically unconventional heroes, they should not be confused with a villain, who is the opponent of the hero, or of the anti-hero for that matter. An anti-hero is usually plagued by self-doubt and is often frightened and a coward when it comes to life threatening situations. The anti-hero suffers from character flaws and hindrances which can be easily found in Harry Flashman, making it possible to view him as the epitome of the anti-hero.

⁶⁰ Abrams 14.

However, today it is rare to find a hero who does not have at least a little of a traditional anti-hero in him and, because of this, Harry Flashman perhaps fits better into the role of a “modern hero” instead of an “anti-hero”. The heroes in modern literature all seem to have become more complex than the stereotypical classical hero. The classic heroes were godlike; they were “men of great achievement who could serve as examples”.⁶¹ Although the modern hero is more of a mix of the classical hero and the anti-hero, he lacks godlike characteristics and therefore usually does not have superpowers. Instead, he is a flawed individual that still manages to accomplish what he sets his mind to, whether good or bad. As Edith Kern laments in her paper “The Modern Hero: Phoenix or Ashes?”, “[t]he hero of a book no longer has to be heroic. He may be, indeed, the very opposite. He owes his designation as hero solely to the fact that he is the book’s leading character”.⁶²

When taking both the analysis of the anti-hero and the modern hero into consideration, it seems that the character of Harry Flashman is better suited as an anti-hero than a modern hero. The modern hero lacks godlike characteristics and is a flawed individual that still accomplishes what he sets his mind to, no matter what their intentions might be. Flashman, on the other hand, proves to be a typical anti-hero with his character flaws, unconventional perception of what is important and the fact that he has no desire to hide his flaws but admits to them and even takes pride in them.⁶³

In the beginning of *Flashman*, Harry Flashman is reminiscing about his past while looking at a picture of himself from when he was young. When looking at this photograph he says that “it is a portrait of a scoundrel, a liar, a cheat, a thief, a coward – and, oh yes, a toady.”⁶⁴ This shows that Flashman is fully aware of his character flaws and may even be proud of them. Flashman even talks about how handsome he looks in the photo,⁶⁵ which makes it possible to add the word vain into his description of himself. He goes on and writes that he is going to tell the truth for once in his life and that he was “breaking the

⁶¹ Kern 331.

⁶² *Ibid* 333.

⁶³ Fraser, *Flashman* 13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* 13.

⁶⁵ *Ibid* 13.

habit of eighty years.”⁶⁶ Flashman is definitely not ashamed of all of the lies that he told and of all the bad things he did in his life, not even when they took place.⁶⁷ This beginning of the novel gives the reader an immediate insight into what kind of character Flashman is and prepares him or her for what is to come, which is an honest and a little disturbing account of his entire wartime experience, starting with the Afghan War in 1839.

In this account the reader learns that Harry Flashman runs away from danger, betrays or abandons acquaintances at the slightest incentive, bullies and beats his servants, sleeps with all available women, and gambles and boozes enthusiastically. In his article “Flashman and the Victorian social conscience” Allan Ramsay provides us with his perception of Flashman:

Flashman's itch to survive and to save his skin at all costs makes him a resolute and desperate character. Ignatieff, Bismark, von Stamberg and others credit him with guile, resourcefulness and cunning. If there is a way out of a hole he will find it, having first burrowed into it. In other words he is a dangerous enemy and consequently a good man to have on one's side provided one can keep an eye on him.⁶⁸

Throughout the battle scenes in the novel, the reader becomes fully aware that Flashman will do anything to save his own life and that he cares for others only if his survival is secured. When McNaghten and his troops are attacked by Akbar and the Ghazis,⁶⁹ Flashman is the only one there who does not rush towards his leader but instead looks for a way out. When he is writing this he says “I take some pride when I think back to that moment; while the others started forward instinctively to aid McNaghten, I alone kept my head. This was no place for Flashman, and I saw only one way out.”⁷⁰ Flashman’s first instinct is to secure his own survival; he does not rush to help the rest of the soldiers and even though he is standing next to McNaghten, he does nothing to help him. In this situation Flashman seems to think that being a coward also counts as

⁶⁶ *Ibid* 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid* 14.

⁶⁸ Ramsay 362.

⁶⁹ Fraser, *Flashman* 167.

⁷⁰ *Ibid* 167 – 168.

being the only sane man in the troop.⁷¹ This only seems to strengthen the concept of Flashman as an anti-hero since he proves over and over in this novel that he has no redeeming qualities, except maybe his honesty.

The character of Harry Flashman in Fraser's novels is in many ways a brilliant creation. By making him such a despicable character with no moral values Fraser is able to explore parts of nineteenth century Victorian England that he would not be able to if the narrator had been anyone else. Even though readers may despise the character of Flashman, most of them are also fascinated by him. Anti-heroes are very popular in modern literature, but unlike Flashman they usually do something to justify rooting for them. However, Harry Flashman is a scoundrel to the end and is brutally honest in his account of his life. This makes Harry Flashman the archetypical anti-hero and because of this he is the perfect narrator for Fraser's underlying critique in his novels.

The importance of making Flashman an anti-hero, whose only quality is his honesty, comes across in the subjects of misogyny and racism. This is because by making Flashman into this despicable captain in the army, Fraser is able to use his character to bluntly show the chauvinistic culture of the time. Because of Flashman's qualities as an anti-hero, Fraser does not have to worry about sugar-coating the truth and his critique on Victorian society is more powerful this way.

6. *Flashman* as Historical Fiction or a Criticism of History?

After examining the relevance of Flashman's anti-heroic character attributes, his views and attitudes towards women, and his blunt racism, a question begs to be asked – if Fraser is only concerned with using Flashman to criticize Victorian moral values, then why does he focus so much on historical correctness? Fraser's novel is thoroughly researched and there are even historically accurate end notes in his book.⁷² There are some plausible reasons for this, the first being to use *Flashman* to teach the reader history that is not very popular, another being to use the historical background to make the reader doubt the truthfulness of historical events, and a third being to show the

⁷¹ *Ibid* 168.

⁷² *Ibid* 295-298.

reader how an politically incorrect approach to history is possibly the more accurate one.

The main driving force behind the idea of using *Flashman* as an exciting way to teach history is the fact that it is a well researched novel that takes pride in having its historical facts accurate. This is combined with the way nearly every historical and as well as fictional aspect of the novel is described in great detail. All the battle scenes in the novel are derived from famous historical battles in which Britain fought in the nineteenth century and had a great impact on Victorian Britain. *Flashman* covers three major military conflicts of the Victorian age, i.e. the Retreat from Kabul, the Last Stand at Gandamak and the Siege of Jallalabad. Those battles are seen and experienced through Harry Flashman and by creating a character that takes part in and witnesses these events, Fraser is able to take more liberty in describing them. Allan Ramsay specifically mentions Fraser's descriptive style of writing, especially relating to war combat:

As well as being able to describe the broad sweep and cut and thrust of the fighting, the author has an eye for the telling detail e.g. the black hairs growing on the back of the hand of a swarthy Highlander waiting the charge of Russian cavalry. Anyone who has been in action will confirm that it is small and apparently irrelevant details such as this that remain in the mind. All the rest is obliterated by the noise and confusion (and stench) of battle.⁷³

There are many more examples of this descriptive narrative in the novel and it comes across very well in most of the battle scenes. By placing these small details within his narrative, Fraser is rewriting history, or at least how history was experienced. Taking a better look at the novel, there are many prime examples of Fraser's descriptive style. One of these examples is when Flashman and Sergeant Hudson are witnesses to the Last Stand at Gandamak:

As we watched I saw the glitter of the bayonets as they leveled their pieces, and a thin volley crashed out across the valley. The Afghans yelled louder than ever, and gave back, but then they surged in again, the Khyber knives rising and falling as they tried to hack their way into the square. Another volley, and

⁷³ Ramsay 361.

they gave back yet again, and I saw one of the figures on the summit flourishing a sword as though in defiance. He looked for all the world like a toy soldier, and then I noticed a strange thing; he seemed to be wearing a long red, white and blue weskit beneath his poshteen.⁷⁴

Thanks to Fraser's writing style, the reader is able to enjoy all these battle scenes, not least because there is action, but because in some instances, there is much humor in his writing. Fraser proves to be incredibly skilful at taking dry history text and bringing it to life in the minds of his readers, and this makes reading *Flashman* a great way to get to know the history of the First Afghan War.

Moreover, in many instances Fraser uses real figures from history in *Flashman*, even to the extent that there are more characters that existed in real life than there are fictional characters. This is helpful in establishing it as a historical novel and supports the case of it being used as a teaching device. The way Fraser entwines the story of the real people with the fictional ones is impressive and it is hard for the reader to separate the two without further investigating which ones are real and which are fictional. An example of this would be Fraser's use of Lady Sale's account of the journey through Afghanistan or the so called Retreat from Kabul. Fraser uses her diary as a source of inspiration when writing about the journey and his description is in many ways quite similar to her description of how everything was prepared in confusion, and he includes her descriptive details like the freezing cold and how slow their journey was.⁷⁵ Fraser uses many other real figures from history like, for instance, many of the generals in the British army, such as Elphinstone, William Nott, and even Lord Cardigan. Thus Fraser creates a "highly coloured background [for] the men and women portrayed[...as] recognisab[le] individuals, not cardboard copies."⁷⁶ However, despite this background, it does not influence the idiosyncrasies of Flashman's strong likes and dislikes and his observations on the things that are going on around him.

The fact that Harry Flashman has strong opinions on the events taking place in the novel makes it a more interesting read. He risks his life in the war in Afghanistan,

⁷⁴ Fraser, *Flashman* 216.

⁷⁵ Sale 43-44.

⁷⁶ Ramsay 364.

even though it is against his wishes, which grants him a certain moral status that people can relate to. Flashman proves to be an honest narrator and never pretends to be something he is not even though he plays the role of the hero that society demands of him. Fraser uses his main character to narrate a different kind of view on real historical events and by doing so he makes the history more entertaining, interesting and accessible to the modern reader. Fraser takes great pains to provide extensive end notes in order to amplify the historical background of the novel, which makes it easy for the reader to further investigate the historical facts covered in the novel. From the battles themselves to the names of some of the characters, this novel is thoroughly researched and very accurate. It is therefore by combining historical events with an interesting character like Harry Flashman that Fraser manages to create the ideal historical novel. However, it can be argued that by using a narrator like Flashman, Fraser is also trying to make the point that history as we know it is not necessarily what really happened.

Fraser appears to try to get as much criticism on everything he could in his novel, *Flashman*. At the end of the novel as well as several times throughout the novel, Fraser appears to imply that perhaps history did not happen in the way we think it did. By placing the honest and unapologetic Flashman into real historical events and by making him prove many times that he is a coward but is nevertheless still acclaimed a hero by his society, Fraser suggests that we cannot believe everything we read about history. This is a reason for him placing the anti-hero, Harry Flashman into those real events – to show how easy it is to manipulate history.

The third reason for why the historical accuracy is important is that Fraser is trying to show that a non-politically correct narrator can better showcase all that is considered to be “bad” and “taboo” in our history.⁷⁷ Fraser was notoriously politically incorrect in his writings and in all articles and books he has written on his *Flashman* novels, he talks about the phenomenon of political correctness. In his article in *The Daily Mail* this is evident, as Fraser harshly criticizes those that have a political correct view of history and claims that they are in fact denying their own history.⁷⁸ He does not think much of those that are ready to deny their history just because it is inconveniently

⁷⁷ Fraser, “The Last Testament of Flashman's Creator: How Britain Destroyed Itself”.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

brutal and that they cannot accept their history for what it really is. The most important issue Fraser has regarding political correctness is that it has become pervasive in modern society. For instance he comments that “[t]he silly euphemisms, apparently harmless, but forever dripping to wear away common sense ... which suggests that the army is some kind of peace corps, when in fact its true function is killing”⁷⁹. No country is willing to admit that their army kills innocent civilians, calling this action “collateral damage” instead of what it really is – murder. Therefore by introducing Flashman with his anti-heroic qualities, brutal honesty and politically incorrect mind and attitude, Fraser is able to better make the statement that we cannot change our history and that we should embrace it and be aware of what really happened, which is normally the politically incorrect version.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

7. Conclusion

George Macdonald Fraser's *Flashman* is a work of fiction, but despite this it does not take much imagination to understand why, at the time of its publication, some readers thought that it was a real time account of the character Harry Flashman's war experience. *Flashman* is a very intriguing novel filled with sex, humor, violence and has an interesting story line, all of which makes for a good read. However, through further study and investigation of the novel it becomes evident that there is more to it than meets the eye. Through his research of history and his accuracy in retelling it, Fraser criticizes history and historical writing by showing us through Harry Flashman's perspective how easy it is to distort and manipulate historical fact. Furthermore, by showing the reader a world through the eyes of a non-politically correct narrator, Fraser gives the reader a fresh and unfamiliar view of history. Flashman, though his anti-hero characteristics, is brutally honest and the historical facts are not sugar-coated or romanticized. Fraser's criticism of Victorian society and the values of the time, along with his critique of historical accuracy become more believable because of his novel's historical correctness. Furthermore, Fraser does not care for a politically correct view of history or the people that hold this view, and as a result of that Fraser uses *Flashman* to make a point of ridiculing the way people today think of history. He wants his readers to know that just because the past is not always what we would like it to be, it does not mean that we can deny our own history just because it is not compatible with how we think it should have happened. The injustice towards women and minorities that is exposed in the novel is still relevant to modern society. As a result, Fraser's use of *Flashman* is not only a satire of the injustices of the Victorian period but also of the political correctness of modern society's view of history.

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