

Female characters in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract: Confined basically to the domestic sphere, woman's role was practically attached to her reproductive capacities .Exploitation on notions of sexuality, motherhood etc. have severely clipped the possibilities of a woman reaching out for other occupations. Her reproductive role proved to be a constraint upon her life-limiting her involvement and participation in socio-cultural, economic and political affairs. However, it is not just biological factors alone that act as deterrent to women's lives, but certain socio-cultural factors also go a long way in actually marginalising their very existence. The female characters in D. H .Lawrence's novels make an interesting study and this paper makes an attempt on discussion of his art of portrayal of women with special illustrations from his *Sons and Lovers* .It also examines an important feature in his portrayal of women which is the recognition of female sexuality.

Keywords: Portrayal, Domestic Sphere, Reproductive Capacities, Exploitation, Sexuality, Motherhood, Socio-cultural, Economic and Political Affairs.

The condition and status of women very often crops up as the topics of debate and discussion among academicians and the issues concerning them (women) are not something new. It has been observed since ages that writers have applied different representational modes to express their thoughts, ideas, opinions and observations about women within the social system. It takes into its ambit the representation of women in various forms of literature, and these representations are the authentications of the dominant prevalent sexual ethics and cultural ideologies of the times. And the ideologies particularly the patriarchal ideologies of different times had the privilege and had most of the times granted rules and norms that makes women dependent and comes up with the view that such dependence or subordination is for the well being of the society and such ideologies are propagated through various texts. Women are marginalised and their marginalisation is the result of the so called dominant patriarchal structure which pushes women to a subordinate position in relation to men. Simone de Beauvoir is of the opinion that women have been compelled to take their place secondary to men in this world. She also feels that this secondary position imposed on them is not by biological or natural characteristics but is the resultant of the dominant social and cultural ethos which is the manifestation of men:

One is not born, but becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figures that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this

creature; intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 295)

Since ages women have been victims of dominant patriarchal ideologies which subjected her to a cramped existence. Cultural ideologies have been passed among men and women through various texts. And Pam Morris rightly maintains:

It has traditionally been believed that creative forms of writing can offer special insight into human experience and sharpen our perception of social reality...Representation is perhaps the most fundamental of human activities, structuring our consciousness of ourselves and of external reality. (7)

Representations are affected by culture and in the same way are capable of shaping and moulding culture and also directing society's attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviours. There were many writers who adopted the accepted image of women and created such stereotypical women characters in their works. At the same time, there were some writers who tried to challenge and subvert such images of women but some such works were banned and writers and publishers were punished. A very good example of such writers was Thomas Hardy who at least attempted to break the social practices in literature. He should be praised for making the efforts in trying to recreate women in the novel describing inner conflicts and sexual desires which was at one time hardly found in English fiction. In his novels like *The Return Of the Native*, *Tess of d'Urberville*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* etc., he had created some wonderful and memorable women characters. It is a fact that Hardy had created women characters in his novels with their strengths and weakness but at the same time we cannot afford to undermine the indebtedness of future writers (including Lawrence) to writers like Hardy, Moore etc. With the passage of time; values, perceptions and mindsets change, and by the twentieth century, there was a rapid and drastic change in the lives of the people, and to certain extent, the lives of women were also changing. It was during this time of social change that Lawrence was writing. The lives of women were changing in such a manner that it was difficult to undermine that. In Lawrence's novels, women play an important role and also impact and influence the lives of other characters and in the process; they turn out to be interesting, complex and dynamic characters. The three women-Mrs Morel, Miriam and Clara Dawes, dominate the novel, *Sons and Lovers*. Basically, they are all different and are depicted as unique individuals. They are the people with their own strengths and weaknesses, as any real person would have and they play important roles at every stage of the novel. In most of Lawrence's works, he discussed the issues of dehumanization and mechanization, human wills and instincts, sexuality etc. In this context we can very appropriately quote Patricia Stubbs who feels:

... whatever we may think of Lawrence, there can be little doubt that his apparently startlingly new emphasis on sexuality was an extension of the earlier efforts of Hardy, Moore, Carpenter, Wells, Forster and

others, to break down sexual taboos in literature and escape from the grossly over simplified images of women and mid-nineteenth century culture. (58)

Lawrence was a modern writer who shared the literary space with writers like Arnold Bennett, E.M.Forster, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley etc. These writers had introduced radical changes in literary techniques particularly writers like Joyce and Woolf who came to be known as pioneers in advocating the 'stream of consciousness' technique. Lawrence was different in spite of the fact that he was their contemporary. He also described the inner lives of the characters just like the other writers but without actually making use of the stream of consciousness technique. Here we can easily quote Allen's remarks:

Indeed Lawrence never used any techniques like that of stream of consciousness, but he takes us right inside his characters, we apprehend them instantaneously through the force of his intuition. He captures, it seems, the moment of life itself, both in men and women and in the physical world of nature. (359)

Exploring human relationships was a predominant theme in Lawrence's works. He felt that 'the novel is a perfect medium' for depicting living relationships and according to him as he states in his essay 'Morality and the Novel':

If a novel reveals true and vivid relationships, it is a moral work, no matter what the relationships may consist in. If the novelist honours the relationship in itself, it will be a great novel. (59)

Relationships play an important role in *Sons and Lovers*. In Lawrence's work, it is important to note the women's role in the context of individual relationships and also under changing circumstances. We see important people like Rousseau, Dr Fordyce, Dr Gregory and others propagating that the only objective of women is to 'please' men and be their obsequious companions of life. In the Victorian period, a woman was no longer considered as an 'individual'. More so in the middle class, she was pushed and crushed to being a meek and passive creature fit for only producing children and doing household jobs or works. A woman's voices, wishes or desires had no place in the patriarchal society. Some specific symbols and images were used for representing women and this resulted into stereotypes. Some such images were that of the shy and virtuous woman, the Magna Mater, the temptress, the spinster etc. These images about women from the existent literary tradition influenced Lawrence as a writer to some extent. In one way, his female characters also have some resemblance to such stereotypical images. But, however, he moves beyond these stereotypes and creates or constructs them as 'wholesome' figures and not simply caricatures. He creates his women characters not only to 'please' men. For his candid expression of female sexuality and other factors that were considered as 'obscene', he had to undergo official prosecution and his novel *The Rainbow* was banned. Lawrence introduces Mrs Morel as a woman who seems to be unhappy with her condition:

Mrs Morel was not anxious to move into the Bottoms, which was already twelve Years old and on the downward path, when she

descended to it from Bestwood. But it was the best she could do. Moreover, she had an end house in one of the top blocks, and thus had only one neighbour; on the other side an extra strip of garden. And, having an end house, she enjoyed a kind of aristocracy among the other women of the 'between' houses, because her rent was five shillings and sixpence instead of five shillings a week. But this superiority in station was not much consolation to Mrs Morel. (8-9)

He (Lawrence) has already set the ball in motion by giving us an impression about Mrs Morel who has a kind of 'aristocracy' which was missing among other women who reside in the Bottoms and yet this 'superiority' is not much of a consolation to her:

A rather small woman, of delicate mould but resolute bearing, she shrank a little from the first contact with the Bottoms women. (9)

The very fact that she shrinks from connecting and relating with the working class women may be traced to her family origins:

Mrs Morel came of a good old burgher family, famous independents who has fought with Colonel Hutchinson, and who remained stout Congregationalists... Her father, George Coppard, was an engineer-a large, handsome, haughty man, proud of his fair skin and blue eyes, but more proud still of his integrity. Gertrude resembled her mother in her small build. But her temper, proud and unyielding, she had from the Coppards. (14-15)

It is obvious that her dissatisfaction lies with her social and domestic condition. She is compelled to lead the frugal life of a miner's wife. It is important to remember that at a time when class divisions were very prominent, Lawrence was writing. He presents Mrs Morel as a woman who has tremendous mental and moral power to fight against all odds. He depicts the predicament of a woman-who is stuck in an unequal and oppressive marriage, one who can never be economically independent. Mrs Morel is someone who is bent upon raising the station of her life. It is a fact that she hates the conditions, yet no one can blame her of neglecting her duties. She tries her level best to manage the conditions-leads an economic life, balances household expenses etc. As Keith Sagar states:

Mrs Morel's religion is presented here not as chapel-going, but as a moral obligation to face reality, to be responsible for one's life, to have integrity. She does not merely make impossible demands of Morel. She goes more than half-way to meet him. She accepts the squalor and poverty. She is a model housewife and mother. (25)

Lawrence tries to show as to how domestic conflicts may also sometime can have social implications. He projects a woman who is a social being and has certain social and personal aspirations but is restricted due to gender and social (class) limitations. Anyway this does not prevent her from her aspirations as she starts posing hopes on her child. And slowly, conflicts develop between husband and wife with respect to the child. Mrs Morel begins to take decisions regarding her son's career. Besides Mrs Morel, Miriam and Clara are the two important female characters in the novel under consideration. We are introduced to Miriam when she is fourteen years old, and :

... had a rosy dark face, a bunch of short black curls, very fine and free, and dark eyes; shy, questioning, a little resentful of the strangers, ... (156)

Judged in the right context, she (Miriam) is a girl, staying in a farm, cut off from any outward contacts, is bullied by her brothers and taught to be subservient by her mother. Under such circumstances it is natural that she is 'shy' and has some inhibitions. To begin with she hesitates but slowly she musters up courage to shed off her inhibition and explore the possibilities of life and its experiences. Mrs Morel's possessive nature does not allow Paul and Miriam to come closer. There is a conflict going on between Miriam and Mrs Morel. We are then introduced to Clara Dawes - a rather striking woman, blonde, with a sullen expression, and a defiant carriage. (227) She is a woman who does not tolerate Baxter Dawes' unfaithfulness, is separated from her husband and had taken up women's Rights. (229)

In Mrs Morel, Lawrence has created such a woman who is so dominating and demanding and so stoic in her beliefs that other female characters simply fade into the background. The fact that Clara fights for women's rights cannot be taken as a factor responsible for her misfortunes in her domestic life. She fights for women's rights because she feels and believes that women deserve those rights. She thinks that there are many women like her who have to work hard and are exploited by the labour market. The fight that she is fighting for rights is not just a personal fight or issue, but Paul fails to understand this. He fails to sense the lot of women in general and takes pride in the fact that he can provide employment to a woman like Clara.

Lawrence clearly discusses about the sexual relationship of Paul with Miriam and Clara. Both women respond and react in a different manner. There is some kind of hesitation and restraint on Miriam's part owing to her mother's education and her conventional upbringing. Clara is different and much more experienced than Miriam. She feels that Paul does not really think that the 'woman' really matters - he does not really want to know about the woman as an individual or as a person. And finally, she refuses to enter into a relationship where she is to feel herself as the subordinate partner. She knows about herself and her feelings for Baxter Dawes, which brings about reconciliation between them (with help from Paul). Despite her intense and intimate relationship with Paul, she is convinced who she can really be happy with. Clara has a sense of self-respect and in her final withdrawal from Paul's life, she remarks: He did! At any rate, he (Baxter Dawes) did respect me, and that's what you don't do? (466). And she feels she has taken the right decision: On the whole, she would not be sorry when he was gone. (495) In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence presents three powerful and dynamic female characters without whose presence, the novel would not have been so meaningful and engaging. Be it Mrs Morel, Miriam or Clara Dawes, all three occupy important places or spaces in the novel and they are all highly influential in the lives of the other characters in the novel. Lawrence treats them as individuals. These women are not stereotypes.

They are not simple, one-dimensional characters; rather they are dynamic, complex individuals-they act as individuals and are not non-entities. They are individuals with their strengths, weaknesses, passivity, emotionality and intensity and they exert powerful influence on other characters in the novel. And it is here and in this way that we come across the essence of these women.

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