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ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Feminist Approach to D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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Inspired by an essay that elucidates the interconnectivity between Lawrence's characters and his philosophy of "holy balance", the paper, on similar lines, attempts to read the text as a feminist text to exonerate him from misogynistic blames. It shows how D.H Lawrence is redefining the male and female categories keeping in mind his philosophic succession of the idea of the male and the female. Taking liberty of extrapolating and qualifying his structure of "harmony of opposites" and his doctrine of balance in his essay "The Crown" with my own personal theorization through Venn diagrams, I attempt to conform to and confirm with the "Lawrentian balance" inherent in his corpus beginning with "Sons and Lovers", which makes him a true feminist. In attempting to convince the underlying feminism of Lawrence, psychoanalytic evidence is indispensable.

David Herbert Lawrence's maiden novel, "Sons and Lovers" cannot be read in isolation with his underlying and continually evolving philosophy, the unavoidable psychological realism in his works and the unintentional autobiographical streaks in the novel. Without keeping these in consideration or disregarding such factors as potent evaluative notions, critics run the risk of oversimplifying and generalizing the text.

To begin with a nursery rhyme, central to the major thrust of my argument:

"The lion and the unicorn  
Were fighting for the crown;  
The lion beat the unicorn  
And drove him out of town"<sup>1</sup>

While the crown is the unattainable and therefore the driving force behind the ever-continuing struggle between the two, the lion and the unicorn themselves are archetypes of something very fundamental or universal within us and hence to a certain extent with the novel's characters as well but more so with their roles and actions. The crown is the seat of the dynamic balance that exists between the polarities and binaries which the two heraldic animals represent. The relationship of opposites in the conjugal man and the woman, and the correlated conjugates like the female and the male, the sexual and the intellectual, logic and religion, light and dark, civilization and wilderness, passivity and activity, virginity and sexuality which are constantly at loggerheads with each other-struggling to fight for the oblivious crown for an apparent victorious end. By implication, these polar oppositions are equipotent and necessary to maintain the cyclical balance. This opposition is not a for a permanent static balance as it is a struggle without a teleos, which is as mutually exhausting as, to quote from Shakespeare, "two spent swimmers

that do cling together and choke their art.”<sup>2</sup> The fight is the cornerstone to Lawrence’s philosophy of living and the holy fight of opposites is allegorized by the lion and the unicorn who must continue fighting just like the aforementioned pair of opposites to maintain the holy balance so that neither side is triumphant. It can be logically extrapolated that Lawrence is not an anti-feminist because in the novel as much as the novelist’s ideology, neither the lion beats the unicorn and drive him out of town nor vice versa. Lawrence felt that in the modern world, the body is slowly being enslaved by the rational command of the mind which according to him will lead us to a nullity, a vacuum and a void. He mentions in his essay, “It is modest common sense for us to acknowledge that we are built round a void and hollow want, which, if satisfied, would imply our collapse, our utter ceasing to be.”

Therefore male and female are the two swimmers who are equipotent beings and in the novel, the powers attributed to them differ according to situations. It is not a simple math of one to one correlation for an algebraic cancellation of the opposites but symptomatic of gender polarity of a magnetic nature for the Lawrentian balance, imitative of the geographical antipodes. However, Lawrence redefines equilibrium by making it dynamic. So, when, in his essay, “The Crown”, he rhetorically questions: “Would not the lion at once expire, as if he had created a vacuum around himself? Is not the unicorn necessary to the very existence of the lion, is not each opposite kept in stable equilibrium by the opposition of each other?” he perhaps meant a stable equilibrium which comes with a qualification wherein the stability is not a stasis.

Considering the fact that the novel is an example of a roman a clef<sup>3</sup> and is a faction<sup>4</sup> and is suffused with autobiographical details, the reader/critic might as well reconsider blames of anti-feminism. The novel is a realist, biographical fiction where the characters and their portrayal, setting, plot, theme and tone have been changed from their factual model to the fictional model. Since creativity in fictions takes place in the dark side of the unconscious mind, it is dangerous to label his realistic portrayal of fictive characters as misogynistic. Lawrence is amongst the great realists like Eliot, Dostoevsky and Conrad whose “talent is devoted first and foremost to getting life on to the page, to conveying across to their readers the sense of what life as their characters live it really feels like.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, Gertrude is based upon his mother, the elegant Lydia Lawrence who later got disappointed by her husband who deserted her for a widow with wealth. Paul Morel is the character model for Herbert Lawrence to whom “it was a source of grief that he wasn’t able to enter boys’ games and he used to gather girls together to go blackberrying”<sup>6</sup> which often attracted the taunts of bullying boys like “Dicky Dicky Denches, Plays with the wenches”<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Lawrence drew upon Alice Dax to create Clara Dawes and Jessie Chambers is the real life Miriam.

The contemporary society and the familial realities mirror the writer and vice versa where the mirror of realism is this somewhat mimetic novel. For instance, it is true that Gertrude Morel is the representative of the typical Victorian mother – the victim of patriarchal society and the

obstruction in the life of Paul. However, she is not merely a stereotype or an unconscious image of Lydia but also can be read as a departure from the traditional roles, not dissimilar to Connie Chatterley who was both bound and free. Henceforth while we see an oppressed mother in Gertrude Morel, we conveniently choose to ignore that she is also a woman character who remains receptive and is lured by the idea of others. She is an intellectual and her propensity to argue on philosophy, religion and politics with educated people is rather marked. She joins the Women's Guild, a club of women attached to the Cooperative Wholesale Society, who meet and discuss social questions and it is informed to us that as Gertrude Coppard she had claimed to her friend John Field that if she were a man she would do as she liked. When William turns thirteen, she gets him a job at the Co-op office and is a woman who enjoyed making other people tell their different stories.

Even the children are feminized in a way. Critics often note the Oedipus complex that manifests itself in the "male" children in how they turn against their father. They see their father through their mother's eyes and nurture a collective hatred towards him.

In striking opposition to the intellectual curiosity and sobriety of Gertrude is the coal miner husband, Walter Morel who is portrayed as irresponsible, frustrated, poor, much hated father of four, whose coat pockets have unpaid bills for the furniture. The near henpecking by the wife and the near physical abuse by the husband makes them our lion and unicorn who will continue their conjugal struggle to uphold the holy balance. Most importantly, such portrayals run the risk of being slandered when the realism is misread as misogyny.

One of the major arguments given by critics who claim Lawrence an anti-feminist is that the male protagonists are domineering individualists while the females are the ones who have to desist as selves. This however can be easily countered with "Lawrence's philosophy where individualism and egoism do not coexist and therefore it is unthinkable to conceive of his conscious portrayal of domineering male individualists."<sup>8</sup>

Most of the feminist critics like Kate Millett base their arguments on characterization and superficial action to prove Lawrence an anti-feminist. However, Lawrence's work has a strong interconnectivity with his philosophical discourse of balance. She writes that the women exist in Paul's orbits and cater to his needs, not realizing that he is the protagonist. Besides, she accuses him of killing or discarding women who have been of no use to him. However, the fact that he rejects Miriam and Clara and gives an overdose of morphine to his mother is because he is possessed by the latter to such an extent that he cannot establish any fulfilling and strong relationship with another woman while his sympathetic mercy killing is also superficially misread. Millett states that Paul "wishes to be rid of the whole pack of his female supporters so that he can venture forth and inherit the great masculine world which awaits him."<sup>9</sup> This seems hardly convincing for if Gertrude as a female character lives vicariously through her sons, Paul

as the male protagonist also lives vicariously through other male and female protagonists and can't do away with either. As instances, his comradeship with tomboyish sister Annie, being saved by Mr. Winterbottom during his embarrassing and flustering experience when he goes out to collect money for his father's pay on Fridays, his delight at domestic activities like baking cakes, his earning money and fame by conventionally feminine activity like painting and not being able to be the conventional man like his friends who could box Baxter Dawes even when the novel nears its end. The internal growth of the protagonist seems to have evolved in terms of action and changing behavioral patterns but his sexual interiority and virginal sensitivity remain ever unaltered and this novel could be read as his sojourn for achieving the Lawrentian balance.

Paul can be read as the ideological nexus between the male and the female. He is not the perfect male who can establish fulfilling ionic<sup>10</sup> matrimony, implying a strong relationship that maintains the Lawrentian balance. Similarly, Miriam Leivers is the female equivalent of the imperfect male that androgynous Paul is. Their relationship thrives on a sexual covalence<sup>11</sup> owing to similarity, implicative of a weak attraction in order to maintain the Lawrentian balance. Miriam's interest in the stereotypical male realm, intellectual and the mental, like being enamored by Paul's creativity and poetry and her wish to study mathematics is her willful entry into the masculine orbit of Paul and sharing his masculinity. In akin to this, Paul also shares her femininity and once heart-broken considers going to Miriam since she is "bigger and better than he. He would depend on her." This mutual sharing represented by the common region of intersecting circles doesn't suffice to uphold a relationship of holy balance and there needs to be a mutual exclusivity in their circular individuality in order to co-exist in a static equilibrium of superimposed circles. The usage of circles in this elucidation is meaningful because they represent the hollow and the void that Lawrence philosophized we are rounded upon. In this respect, the corresponding circumferences are the individuals from the conjugal conjugates which are hollow everywhere inside except at the intersectional area wherein partial union of the opposites takes place. H.M Daleski writer of "Forked Flame: A study of D.H. Lawrence" explains balance as a "recurring polar movement of forces within the individual" and it can be argued that this movement happens between individuals. Although Lawrence's pairs have no stability amongst themselves as characters yet this is essential to uphold the stability of the macrocosmic Lawrentian balance to show the continual struggle between the man and the woman. Besides, in doing this, Lawrence not only renders us with characters with androgynous and conventionally imperfect gender roles, but also evokes an unavoidable male female equivalence. Perhaps, Lawrence was treating male and female characters as changing forms due to alternating content with respect to the ongoing struggle.

Clara Dawes who is estranged from her husband, a married woman and five years senior to him provides a co-ordination to Paul's despair<sup>12</sup> since she is more female than Miriam and she can willfully provide body in lieu of mind. Their circles also intersect where the common region is bodily transfusion as opposed to the mental in the previous case. Miriam disallows her sexual

involvement in the first case just as Paul disallows his mental involvement in the second case involuntarily. Paul and Miriam as opposites do not completely meet just as Paul and Clara don't. The inability to achieve sexual unity is however not the central concern for it is rather the fact that philosophical rudiments of Lawrence's conscious mind and the inevitable psychological dimensions due to his unconscious which corroborate the stand taken supporting his feminism.

Inferentially, in an ideal relationship, the physical and the mental, both will be shared and in the event of this there will not be a covalent sharing of the purely mental or the purely physical but an ionic superimposition of two non-intersecting circles that renders two minds and two bodies of two individuals complete within themselves yet in a perfect sexual unity, against the Lawrentian balance. However the explanation for the lack of an ionic conjugality is the androgynous dimension of Paul. Annie also shows departure from what a Victorian female child ought to be. It is significant to mention that even if the aforementioned abstractions be tested under conventionally opposite values of inferiority and superiority exchanged between the mind and the body and the male and the female and the dominant and the recessive, the unachievable static balance still tantalizes us.

In a nutshell, it can be said that Lawrence is redefining the balance and gender polarity and in doing so, could be defended as a feminist and absolved of anti-feminism. Polarity is the function of the struggle and not of a misconstrued potential difference due to a given, preconceived and an essential male- superior or a female-inferior dichotomy. The dynamic equilibrium exists in the fights and struggles which is the holy fight of the opposites where neither side is triumphant and hence in Lawrence's philosophy both man and women are saved from slanders of essential inequality stemming from their supposed inferiority and superiority. It is a philosophy which is allegoric of the psycho-sexual and socio-sexual real and is far removed from the ideal where the underlying reality means the male female equivalence and the word ideal is a referent to the ideals of the society that the man is superior to the woman.

## Notes and References

1. Roud Folk Song Index Number 20170.
2. Macbeth (1.2.8-9).
3. Roman a clef is a novel about real life, overlaid with a façade of fiction.
4. A portmanteau for fact and fiction.
5. Quoted from "Psychoanalysis in fiction and a study of D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers"- S.M. Ogene.
6. & 7. George Lawrence's take on his brother's childhood. Quoted from the online thesis by Erin Holman.
8. Idea borrowed from the Erin Holman thesis.
9. Quoted from the Erin Holman thesis.

10. & 11. By the usage of the chemical metaphors-the “ionic” and the “covalent”, I mean strong and weak interaction due to complete and partial unions in conjugality.

12. Pun on the word.

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