



The Feminine Mystique in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

Ms. Swati Joshi

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Soban Singh Jeena University, Uttarakhand.

joshiswati2223@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This paper examines Betty Friedan's concept of the Feminine Mystique in Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Although the novel was published nearly fifty years before Friedan's landmark work, it serves as an intimate case study of women suffocating within the rigid domestic boundaries of early 20th-century industrial England. By analysing the three female characters- Gertrude Morel, Miriam Leivers, and Clara Dawes- the paper will explore how society distorts their lives by systematically starving them of intellect and independence. It does not equate their historical eras. Instead, it uses Friedan's framework to highlight an earlier form of domestic confinement in Lawrence's writing. In doing so, the paper bridges the gap between Friedan's affluent American homemakers and Lawrence's women in industrial England. Although they belong to vastly different socio-economic backgrounds, they experience the same psychological confinement and the stifling of their intellectual agency. Because these women are trapped with no emotional escape, Gertrude smothers her sons, Miriam seeks refuge with her domestic prison in art and religion, and Clara's apparent freedom leaves her empty. The paper moves beyond the binary categorisation of Lawrence as a misogynist or a feminist and looks at both sides. It engages with Kate Millett's criticism of his male-centred ideology and later feminist praise for his deep understanding of women.

Keywords: Feminine Mystique, misogynist, male-centred ideology, psychological confinement.

Introduction

The seminal work that triggered the second wave of feminism, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, started a discussion around “a problem that has no name” and probably a problem that was never really identified as a problem in the first place. Friedan coined the phrase ‘feminine mystique’ to expose the deep unhappiness of many educated middle-class women who supposedly had everything (husband, children, home) and yet felt empty and dissatisfied. She questions the post-World War II ideology that equated womanhood with being a wife, mother and caregiver. The glorification of womanhood with no parallel identity in the public sphere trapped women psychologically and left them dissatisfied and seeking more. Although Friedan’s text is rooted in post-war suburban America, many of the psychological structures she identifies find an earlier expression in Lawrence’s fiction. While she diagnosed the systemic domestic claustrophobia of the mid-twentieth-century suburban elite, Lawrence was already exploring similar forms of psychological confinement within the domestic world of early twentieth-century industrial England. Often considered a transitional modernist figure, Lawrence remains a highly controversial and dynamic modern writer. The highly polarised views of his work from feminist critics have left him in a precarious and ambivalent position. Early critics like Kate Millett see misogyny and male dominance in his writing. Later scholars, on the other hand, argue that he gave women psychological and sexual depth by creating powerful female characters and representing women’s desire more openly than many modern writers. Lawrence’s celebrated and controversial work, *Sons and Lovers*, is not just a milestone in modernism but also a reflection of his complex ideological tensions about family, sexuality, and what it means to be a man or a woman. Through his profound psychological insights into complex relationships, the text shows how his radical psychological explorations were an attack on the rigid rules of the 20th century. The narrative

revolves around the domestic sphere, and Lawrence subtly exposes the foundational architecture of what Betty Friedan would later identify as the "feminine mystique".

Nearly fifty years before the dissatisfaction among American homemakers that Friedan wrote about, Lawrence's female characters were already suffocating under social rules that confined their identity to roles of self-sacrificing wives and mothers. While Friedan's homemakers suffered from the emptiness of comfortable, modern lives, Lawrence's characters confront the harsh realities of poverty. However, what is common is that in both worlds, women are forced to bury their true selves and end up suffocating. Through the evolving nature of Lawrence's fiction, one can understand the trajectory of this domestic entrapment as Lawrence, in writing the work, sought to make sense of his early-life experience. The conflict is observed through a deeply personal lens and reflects upon his upbringing in a fractured Nottinghamshire mining household. The novel becomes an intimate case study of how women's intellectual and social desires can affect an entire family dynamic.

Gertrude Morel and the Domestic Prison in *Sons and Lovers*

At the heart of the novel stands Gertrude Morel, who is undoubtedly one of Lawrence's most complicated and deeply human characters. When the story introduces her, she has been married to Walter for eight years. She is utterly exhausted and depressed, feeling entirely trapped by the demands of motherhood and housework. As a woman of refined intellectual sensibility, she is trapped in the grim reality of an industrial mining village. The first time the two meet, Gertrude is magnetically drawn to Walter for his roughness and physical vitality, which contrasts with her rigid puritanism. Lawrence highlights this attraction through the contrasts between Walter's raw vitality and Gertrude's restrained intellect, describing "the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous

flame of life... not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was" (Lawrence 11).

However, this romantic illusion shatters within a few months of marriage when Walter retreats into alcoholism and rough company to cope with the brutalities of mining labour, leaving Gertrude utterly alone at home. She attempts to keep herself sane, and the visit of a Congregational clergyman, Mr Heaton, offers her solace. As the children grow old enough to be left at home, she joins the Women's Guild, a small club of women affiliated with the Co-operative Wholesale Society. These women met on Monday night and would discuss about the benefits to be derived from co-operation and other social questions. Gertrude would sometimes read a paper, and the children would feel utmost respect for her when they saw her writing, thinking and referring to books. In Edwardian England, middle-class women had limited options for intellectual and economic independence and on top of this, working-class domestic life offered even fewer possibilities. In Gertrude's case, she was not only intellectually starved but also emotionally deprived of the love she once thought she had. Her small attempts to channel her creativity and intellect only resulted in short-term escapes that helped her remain sane for a time. What added to this domestic claustrophobia was Walter's growing temper, which sometimes exploded into violence. He would return home drunk repeatedly, leading to frequent episodes of violence that terrorised Gertrude and the children. Over the years, however, the shouting and fighting quietly died down and were replaced by something quieter and even more painful. There was a cold silence that settled between them now. The passionate anger of their early marriage slowly turned to deep emptiness, leaving two people who had once loved each other sitting in the same house but living in completely separate worlds, utterly alone together. Lawrence emphasises this domestic breakdown by noting that "the economy of the house was closed against him". At the same time,

Gertrude remained "silent, cold, correct to him," leaving Walter to distract himself in the bar-parlour (Lawrence 48). This severe emotional detachment turns their home into an arena of psychological isolation.

Through this observation of Lawrence, we see that Walter turns to alcohol and Gertrude, with no personal outlet, and a suffocating domestic sphere prompts what Betty Friedan would later diagnose in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan famously observed that when a woman is denied an autonomous creative or intellectual outlet, her domestic sphere turns into a psychological pressure cooker, forcing her unfulfilled drives to manifest as destructive interpersonal control. Consequently, Gertrude diverts all her energy to the children in an attempt to achieve fulfilment through the lives of her two sons, first William, then Paul. This emotional redirection is one of the clearest manifestations of what Friedan terms "vicarious living", a coping strategy in which mothers, denied their own achievements, use their children as surrogate selves to realise their hampered ambitions (Friedan 181–185). Gertrude does not merely raise her sons; she emotionally absorbs them, demanding intellectual companionship, artistic validation, and emotional intimacy that belong in a partnership. By transferring her starved intellectual ambition onto Paul, she imposes a suffocating psychological burden on him. As Friedan warns, this dynamic does not liberate the mother. Instead, it transforms maternal love into an engulfing mechanism that prevents the child from establishing a separate identity. After William's untimely death, Gertrude's life revolved entirely around Paul. As he grew older, he carried his mother everywhere as a standard, a judge, which complicated his romantic relationship with women. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), reads the character of Gertrude as a victim of patriarchy and as someone who not just absorbs but also passes on the oppressive system that trapped her. Millett argues that Lawrence does not frame Gertrude's desperate love for Paul as a tragedy of a trapped woman, but as a

suffocating force that Paul must be liberated from. According to Millett, Lawrence cannot view maternal love as anything but tyrannical, and "the mother becomes the enemy" that the son must defeat to claim his masculine identity (Millett 71).

Modern feminist or Marxist literary critics, however, read Gertrude's character differently. They argue that Lawrence clearly maps the socio-economic conditions that initially broke her. Beginning from the class divide in her marriage, the absence of female education and work, the isolation of mining communities, and then proceeding to the patriarchal structure that confines women to the domestic sphere. Lawrence does not excuse Gertrude's behaviour, but he explains it. He shows that she lived in a society shaped by strict class and gender rules that gave her no outlet for her intelligence or ambition. Because of this, her intense creative energy was forced entirely onto her sons. Thus, the novel becomes more than just a study of a mother-son complex. It is a sharp critique of how industrialism and male-dominated structures warp women's lives and destroy entire families.

Miriam and the Mystique of Spiritual Renunciation

Along with Gertrude, Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes create a tragic trio, and their relationship with Paul Morel is the ultimate manifestation of the feminine mystique. Jessie Chambers, the original Miriam of the novel, expressed her dissatisfaction with Lawrence's portrayal of Paul's sweetheart in a personal record, noting that Lawrence diminished the mutual, tragic weight of their intellectual and spiritual search into a one-sided failing on her part (Chambers 201-202). Within the text, Miriam is trapped in the agrarian, male-dominated hierarchy of Willey Farm and internalises the early stages of the feminine mystique. She feels an intense, passionate desire for a life beyond Willey Farm as her intellectual ambitions are stifled by both people and the

surroundings. In Miriam, we see an explicit hatred towards the position she had as a woman because, in her household, womanhood is synonymous with being a servant to her father and brothers. Lawrence captures Miriam's deep resentment toward domestic servitude, recording that "she hated her position as swine-girl" and longed to learn so that "the world would have a different face for her and a deepened respect" (Lawrence 157).

With no access to higher education, Miriam looked to Paul Morel as the only person who could cater to her intellectual needs. She desperately pleads with him to teach her French, algebra, and art. Willey Farm, which was a physical and mental prison for Miriam, gave no legitimate outlet for her creative intensity. Consequently, she channels her frustrated energies into an oppressive, hyper-spiritualized aestheticism. Friedan observes that women, when denied real agency and meaningful work, often seek refuge in self-glorifying, passive idealisations to cope with their restriction (Friedan 121). She cannot simply look at a flower; she must commune with its spirit.

This hyper-spiritualized aestheticism functions as a defence mechanism, a condition that Simone de Beauvoir diagnoses in *The Second Sex* when discussing "The Mystic"—a woman who, denied real action in the world, transforms her enforced passivity into a holy internal theatre (Beauvoir 678-682). This strategy reflects Friedan's account of how domestic confinement forces female ambition inward into exaggerated emotionalism (Friedan 257). This hyper-spirituality, however, takes a devastating toll on her physical autonomy. Hilary Simpson in *D.H. Lawrence and Feminism* observes that Miriam's eventual sexual hesitation, which Paul cruelly labels as 'unnatural frigidity', is a cultural symptom rather than a personal defect, as Edwardian society systematically conditioned respectable women toward sexual passivity and ignorance (Simpson 84-86). Miriam has thoroughly internalised what Freud explores in his analysis of the Madonna–Whore complex,

wherein cultural pressures split female identity into either idealised, asexual purity or debased physical desire (Freud 183-185).

When she physically surrenders to Paul, she frames it as a "sacrifice" to his masculine needs, feeling "as if she were giving up her life... a sort of crucifixion of her physical self to satisfy his desire" (Lawrence 283). By reducing the sexual act to a "crucifixion", Miriam tries to maintain her internal spiritual superiority by looking down on the act and on Paul's physical needs as base and animalistic. At the same time, she remains the holy, suffering saint who has given up her purity to satisfy him. Miriam represents a human extreme in the novel, and through her, Lawrence illustrates just how deeply the societal and religious pressure to remain 'pure' can distort a woman's mindset. Because she submits to it like a religious martyr rather than a willing partner, the act feels cold and heavy to Paul. He immediately senses her underlying resentment and withdrawal, feeling that he has committed a cosmic violation against her soul rather than participating in a liberating physical union.

Clara Dawes: The New Woman and the Illusion of Liberation

Miriam seeks Paul's soul while Clara seeks his body and, in doing so, she is seen as anti-Miriam, a "new woman". Clara lives independently in Nottingham and is separated from her unfaithful and abusive husband. She earns her own wage by working in a lace factory and is a politically active woman who participates in the militant movement through the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). In her appearance and thinking, Clara presents a striking contrast to both Gertrude and Miriam. The difference between the two women is evident in the way they appear. Miriam, the angel in the house, has been presented by Lawrence through a spiritual and mystical lens. She is described as a woman with a beautiful, dark face and a warm, clear complexion. With a less

mature body, her features are often associated with a romantic, almost sorrowful intensity. Clara, on the other hand, is described as tall, blonde, and "rather heavy in build." She possesses a voluptuous beauty, with broad, handsome shoulders. Her confidence and assertiveness both mesmerise and scare Paul.

With the personality of a new woman, Clara refuses to be confined to the domestic sphere. She is a well-educated woman in French and Literature and speaks articulately on public platforms about women's economic and political disenfranchisement. With these strong glimpses of her assertive personality, it appears on the surface that she has broken the shackles of the Feminine Mystique. However, a deeper look reveals that this characterisation of Clara is highly ambivalent and serves as a powerful critique of what Lawrence perceived as the superficial emancipation of women. Here, Friedan's insight is again illuminating: Friedan warned that political rights and superficial freedom without genuine, self-determined identity or deep human connection leave the underlying emptiness unresolved (Friedan 361). Clara's aggressive, strict feminism is actually a shield that protects her from her profound isolation and her starved, unfulfilled physical nature. Her experience illustrates Friedan's argument that political emancipation alone cannot dismantle the psychological entrapment of traditional womanhood if society still lacks the infrastructure for true equality (Friedan 372). For Lawrence, things like winning the right to vote or being financially independent are important, but they are not enough on their own. He believes a woman (or anyone) cannot be truly free until they also fully connect with their body, their desires, and their passion. Through her intense relationship with Paul, Clara experiences an awakening of her physical and sexual self. With this union, Lawrence explores his emerging idea of "phallic consciousness." However, this concept remains deeply controversial in Feminist scholarship as it is fundamentally phallocentric. Lawrence often suggests that a woman achieves true fulfilment not by establishing

independent agency, but by dissolving her ego into the primal masculine current. However, within the text, this muddy riverbank encounter in Chapter 12 allows Clara to reject conventional Edwardian imagery. She experiences powerful, intense sexual desires, emerging as a revolutionary woman who claims her right to unadulterated sexual pleasure, entirely detached from the institutional dictates of the Edwardian era (the early 1900s). During this period, Women in literature were usually portrayed as passive and delicate. Lawrence, however, breaks this conventional imagery and presents Clara as a woman with real, active passion. Upon their union, Lawrence writes, "she was hit by him, and they went down into the peace of the flood together... her soul was vast and powerful" (Lawrence 321).

Ultimately, this sexual freedom came with its own tragic limitations. For Paul, the union was a temporary escape, freeing him from his mother's control and boosting his own ego. But Clara wants to be seen as a real person. She realises that Paul does not actually care about her and is simply using her body as a tool to fight his own psychological battles. In the end, he wants total freedom without any of the emotional risk or responsibility that comes with a real relationship. With growing bitterness after their passionate encounters, Paul inevitably retreats into his intellectual and emotional attachment to his mother, leaving her isolated in her rented rooms. Because of this, Clara ends the affair and goes back to her estranged husband, Baxter. This turn in the plot has infuriated feminist critics like Kate Millett. She argues that the author (D.H. Lawrence) did this to punish Clara for being independent. In this view, the story forces a rebellious, politically active woman back into a traditional marriage to restore male dominance. However, modern feminist critics view Clara's return to Baxter differently. Rather than a flawless victory of agency or cowardly surrender to societal pressure, her return is a practical, clear-minded decision made completely on her own terms. When Clara looks at Paul, she sees a boy trapped in his own head,

someone who uses her body to fight his own psychological issues and completely erases her as a person. She refuses to spend her life catering to the sexual and psychological whims of a man who looks right through her. By walking away from such a man and choosing to return to Baxter, Clara makes a deeply human compromise. This return becomes significant as it asserts Friedan's critique of how women, when offered only flawed alternatives between empty isolation and traditional arrangements, are often driven back into domesticity by a culture that fails to offer a viable third path (Friedan 380). Baxter is flawed, and their past is messy, but he actually needs her to survive. In his world, she finds a space where she is a necessary partner rather than an invisible instrument for a young man's psychological escape. Returning to her marriage is a strategic choice by a woman who understands her reality and decides to live in it on her own terms, even if it means returning to the domestic sphere she once fled.

Conclusion

When we look at the overall trajectory of *Sons and Lovers*, it becomes clear that Lawrence's novel is a crucial precursor to *The Feminine Mystique*. The broken lives of Gertrude, Miriam, and Clara prove that "the problem that has no name" was not a modern invention, but a predictable negative repercussion of industrial capitalism and strict patriarchal rules. Each of these women tries to break out of the cage, but the attempts tragically fail. Gertrude turns her frustrated energy inward, consuming her sons with an intense, destructive love. Miriam escapes into a spiritual dreamworld, disconnecting completely from her own body. Meanwhile, Clara chases political and sexual independence, only to realise Paul is just using her body to escape his own mental struggles. Her eventual retreat back to domesticity underscores the absolute claustrophobia of her era, illustrating how few viable options existed for an independent woman. These detailed and distinct failures

make the novel far more than just a case study of the Oedipal complex. It showcases how an entire family can be fractured when women are warped. At the end of the novel, with his mother gone, the final image of Paul Morel turning away from the dark valley and walking toward the glowing lights of the town leaves us with the distinct feeling that the ghosts of these trapped women are walking right alongside him. Reading Lawrence through a feminist lens does not just expose his personal biases but also highlights his incredible power to capture the claustrophobic birth of the feminine mystique, showing that a world that denies freedom to its women ultimately sentences its sons to a lifetime of emotional isolation.

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