

# Analysing Lawrence and the theme of gender and sexuality in *Women in Love*

Neha Minesh Kalangutkar alias Wader

PhD Scholar, Goa University

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.9.07.2019.p91107

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.07.2019.p91107>

**Abstract-** The paper aims at analysing the Lawrence and the role of gender and sexuality in his select novel *Women in Love* (1920). The novel is a piece of twentieth century work and is written at the backdrop of modernist movement and is categorised as a modernist text.

The study demonstrates the portrayal of man and woman characters against the backdrop of modernism and explores the theme of homosexuality evident in the novel. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) is all about triumphal masculinise over the female submissiveness. Lawrence here, embrace personification of a New Women but in the different light as portrayed his contemporary Mrs. Woolf. Also understanding Lawrence's struggle with his own sexual desires and analysing how his thoughts are evidently reflected in the characters.

My aim is to critique the roles given to men and women in his novel *Women in Love* (1920) and understanding the theme of homosexuality portrayed in the novel.

**Index Terms-** Gender, Feminism, Homosexuality, Modernism, Masculinity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modernism at the backdrop of Lawrence's writing: Modernism is a major cultural and artistic movement dominating the western world from approximately 1890 to 1940, depending upon the country modernism is now recognized as one of the most creative periods in human history.

No art was left untouched and most were transformed by this international movement. It is generally agreed that the movement was cross- disciplinary, dominated by its own myth of discontinuity fully urban and technological in nature, extremely self-conscious in its avant- grade and experimental facets and characterized by both an egotistical valuing of the self.

As the below definition states:

Modernism per say cannot be described as a 'movement' or reliably characterized by a uniform style. Indeed it may be said to have embraced a wide range of artistic movements (including symbolism, impressionism, post-impressionism, futurism, constructivism, imagism, vorticism, expressionism, dada & surrealism) and to have originated in cosmopolitan circles in Berlin, Vienna, Munich, Prague, Moscow, London & Paris. At slightly later period it spread to New York & Chicago & became synonymous with World Wide reaction against positivism & representational arts.

(Ian1988)

It helps us understand how modernism was affecting the generation not only in their cultural spheres but also it became an essential part of their living. Changing everything, from architecture to norms and cultures followed by the people of generation. Which in turn, affected, their writings; giving it a way into modernist literature.

Modernism in other words experimented with literary form and expression. Defining Modernism author Peter Childs states: Modernism as a literary movement was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of the time.

Whereas, writer Catherine Morley suggested that the horrors of the First World War saw the prevailing assumptions about society reassessed, and modernist writers were influenced by such thinkers as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, amongst others, who raised questions about the rationality of human mind.

The reason for highlighting 'modernism' is the mere fact that it played a very important role in the literary creations of the time when Lawrence wrote. He is considered to be an icon of modernism and his novels are important pieces for studying modernist literature. The character development in *Women in Love* (1920) gives the novel an exceptional quality of creativity. Rupert Birkin, the protagonist of the novel, his search for bisexual ethic and his moral seriousness, placing much of Lawrence's fiction within the canonical of "great tradition" of English Novel. He is now valued as a visionary thinker and a significant representative of modernism in English Literature.

## II. D.H. LAWRENCE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

D.H. Lawrence is one of the most versatile of all English writers, using almost every literary form in which the English language can express itself. He is namely a novelist, story-writer, critic, poet and painter. Indeed one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century English Literature. Lawrence's works containing sexual freedom led to obscenity trials. He brought about an understanding of the importance of love and harmony in the industrial world where everything was getting materialised. In 1912 he wrote: "What the blood feels, and believes, and says, is always true." The authors daring of describing sexual relationships had angered a number of people during the time.

E.M.Foster, in an obituary notice challenged this view, describing him as "the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation." Lawrence's treatment of the theme of homosexuality

can be found in the novel *Women in Love* (1920). It is noted in the novel that Lawrence and his wife Frieda are depicted as Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwen in a tale based partly on Lawrence's scandalous relationship with the writer Katherine Mansfield, her husband, the literary critic John Middleton-Murray as Gudrun and Gerald of the novel.

It is said that it was during the composition of *Women in Love* that Lawrence, frustrated by his failure to forge a deeper bond with Murray, evidently had a sexual relationship with a Cornish farmer named William Henry Hocking in the town of Tregerthen. The short lived affair was said to be a culmination of his prolonged struggle with homosexual feelings.

"I would like to know why nearly every man that approaches greatness tends to homosexuality, whether he admits it or not," Lawrence wrote to a friend in 1913. Where in he, highlights, his own struggle with sexuality. He is also quoted as saying, "I believe the nearest I have come to perfect love was with the young coal miner when I was about sixteen."

Lawrence was the only major modernist writer who was very much involved with the theme of homosexuality in his writings. He certainly has explored the homosexual love in both his male and female characters. He was more interested in the characters with working class background and their sexual orientation perhaps due to his own upbringing of a working class background. He insisted on the primitive rustic love as opposed to the industrialization and mechanization of the man and nation.

### III. WOMEN IN LOVE(1920) AND THE THEME OF HOMOSEXUALITY

*Women in Love* is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of modern fiction, and it is the novelist's most daring exploration with the theme of homosexuality. The major character in the novel Rupert Birkin is searching for bisexual partner underlying Lawrence's own search. The novel deals with the brilliant quality of character development. Birkin's search for "two kinds of love" is being stressed upon. In the novel's preface Lawrence claimed that the catastrophe of the Great War required that men form a bond lest "new life" be strangled unborn within them". This statement is what is implicitly described in the novel. Whereas the prologue says heterosexual marriage must acknowledge man's need to have the love of another man or else all will suffer a spiritual death. It speaks about Birkin's struggle against the homosexual longings. The Prologue was not published until 1965 and was not included in an edition of *Women in Love* (1920) until 1987.

As mentioned earlier Hocking the farmer with whom Lawrence has sexual relationship is alluded to twice in the Prologue in the description of the "strange Cornish type of man, with dark eyes like holes in his head" who powerfully attracts Birkin as well as minor character of William Hosken. It is noted that Birkin in the Prologue is torn between not only males and females, but between "two classes of men."

The chapter "Gladiatorial" and "Man to Man" speaks about the passion, love and tenderness between men. But nonetheless the sexual relationship between man is deemed failure hence the tragedy of Gerald's death. The quote at the end of the novel "You can't have two kinds of love..." speaks about the failure and futility of such relationships in the society.

### IV. D.H. LAWRENCE ON MAN-WOMEN RELATIONSHIP

Lawrence's preoccupation with the process of regeneration outlines the central importance of man- woman relationship:

In life, then, no new things have ever arisen, or can arise, save out female, the male upon the female, the female upon the male...as in my flower, the pistil, female is the centre and swivel, the stamens male, are close- claspings the hub, and the blossom is the great motion into the unknown, so in a man's life, the female is a swivel and centre on which he turns closely, producing his movement. (Niven, Pg.45)

Thus, giving us the account of man-woman relationship, he says it's the delicate balance between the sexes' that defines the physical relation between the two. Both male and female are equally important in the process and the relation has to be neither, overpowering, or controlling but the equal love and passion from both the sides that defines the physical love.

Lawrence believed that the desire to dominate often results in ending a marital relationship. For him it was the respect of the other sex that made a relationship worth living. He also thought ego resulted in a terrible clash of wills that further deteriorated any relationship. He sternly believed that the "otherness" of each individual should be respected.

'Why should we consider ourselves as the broken fragments of the whole?' Lawrence asks in *Women in Love*. 'It is not true.' (W. p125)

There is now to come a new day, when we are beings each of us, fulfilled in difference. The man is pure man, the woman pure woman, they are perfectly polarized. But there is no longer any of the horrible merging, mingling self abnegation of love. There is only the pure duality of polarisation, each one free from any contamination from the other. In each, individual is primal, sex is subordinate, but perfectly polarised. Each has a single separate being, with its own laws. The man has his pure freedom, the woman hers. Each acknowledges the perfection of the polarized sex circuit. Each admits the different nature in the other. (W.p.225) In other words Lawrence writes of conscious people. In almost all he wrote there lies a crucial truth that we are separate, different being from each other; he certainly considered it a escapist or a absurdist attempt to merge beings, to become identical with your sexual partner or to live in an existence wherein individual identities are suspended. He cannot imagine human beings to be the isolated creatures in their own world with no harmony in the universe what so ever. People might believe Lawrence to be an existentialist writer, but because of the premise that all people are distinct from each other might make one believe he is.

The core of Lawrence's belief on man-woman relationship:

- He insists on a total difference of man and woman.
- He denounces love in mental and possessive form.
- He also denies impulse: blending of two personalities into one, further losing identity.
- He break's the platonic myth: two lovers recognise in each other a lost half, and their union brings back complete single.

#### V. ANALYSING MAN- WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN LAWRENCE'S WOMEN IN LOVE(1920)

There is much talk in the novel of possession- the man's desire to possess woman's body, the woman's to possess man's spirit, parents to possess their children, managers to possess workers, society to possess its material goods. According to Lawrence, possession disrupts equilibrium.

In a significant chapter of *Women in Love*, 'A Chair', Ursula rejects ownership as a value worth pursuing, and at the end of the novel she and Birkin possess nothing they treasure. Certainly in their case as Lawrence sees we should not believe that they possess each other, for that is precisely something what they are fighting to resist. Ursula retains a healthy possessiveness in her affection for Birkin, but it is hardly dominating.

Lawrence appeals for a total separateness between people, true individuality not equality but what he calls 'inequality'. Examples are Ursula and Birkin from the novel, who come nearest to this ideal, remain as separate beings, still arguing but arguing creatively, at the end of *Women in Love*. They recognise that the equilibrium, compatibility and balance of their relationship sprung from their separateness as human beings, not an impossible mystical bending of coming together and being 'one'. Characters sense that balance and wholeness need not be extinct just because humanity has evolved as sexually divided. Their agonies have much bound up with their certainty that balance and wholeness are waiting to be achieved.

The novel, also, embrace the personification of 'New Woman'. Ursula, 'new and frail like a flower just unfolded' (W, p.416), embodies Lawrence's vision of the new woman. Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, two sisters who are both educated, who both work and who both are somewhat sexually liberated. They both are not interested in marriage but Ursula decides to marry later in the novel. There is also a character called Pussum, who has repeated physical relation with Gerald.

Lawrence indeed manifests 'New Women' in some of his female characters however his motives may not have the same interest as his contemporary Virginia Woolf. Although women are being categorised as 'New Women' their treatment in the novel will raise questions. Especially some feminists will object to his attitude dealing with women characters.

#### VI. GERALD AND PUSSUM'S SEXUAL ENCOUNTER

After the act, the Pussum lays in her bed motionless, her round dark eyes like black, unhappy pools(...) perhaps she suffered. (Lawrence.1999. Pg.66)

Her subsequent sadness is portrayed to us, and it suggests sexually liberated woman are actually harming themselves. This is portrayed in the Pussum's thoughts, 'She knew he (Gerald) wanted to give her money' (Lawrence.1999.Pg.68); suggesting sexual act was closer to prostitution than of desire or lust.

Further conversation between Gerald and Birkin convey to us how they perceive these 'New Women.' Birkin states, 'She is the harlot, the actual harlot of adultery to him. (Lawrence.1999.Pg.80)

Gerald describes her as 'rather foul.'(Lawrence.1999.Pg.80)

These derogatory remarks are the consequence of the Pussum's promiscuous activity, thus bestowing negative

connotations upon sexually liberated woman and in this instance, it seems Lawrence is portraying the 'New Woman's' sexual liberation as belittling.

#### VII. BIRKIN AND URSULA'S RELATION

Birkin and Ursula is another example of man taking control over female. Ursula being working and independent; Lawrence's 'New Woman' decides to leave her job and go wandering with Birkin. It is Birkin who tells Ursula, 'We must drop our jobs, like a shot'. (Lawrence.1999.p274)

Further adding, 'Let us wander a bit' (Lawrence.1999.p274) Birkin is the one who decides and makes Ursula do what he wants her to do. It is he who has the power and control in their relationship and it is he who makes Ursula being independent as she was rather passive.

The transition of Ursula who 'does exactly as she pleases' (Lawrence.1999.p224) is a great contrast to her later subjugation in the novel.

In claiming the free status which the heroine of every nineteenth century novel aspires, Ursula willingly gives one portion of it for greater consolation of shared partnership. Lawrence understood the need of the feminist's struggle of his time; though in his essay on modern womanhood collected in *Phoenix II* he can be gently ironic: 'Women, women everywhere, and all of them on a warpath!'

Lawrence believed that woman may not aim only wanting right to vote or being a mother without being a wife or get an equal pay or easier divorce- he wasn't passionately interested in any of these- but the attainment of 'the new superfine bliss, a peace superseding knowledge.' (Niven, Pg.98)

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Lawrence's genius consists on his emphasis on the barely discussed and articulated dynamics of gender and sexuality. As the characters in the novel move in the state of crises, flux and have cathartic confrontation. Alone among the writers of the period he brought a working class perspective to the theme of homosexuality. A self-proclaimed enemy of the upper class forward thinkers, caring least for getting respect in the society; he believed it is the struggle put forth by upper class gentry, he believed in the prominence of the true creative and artistic work. Hence he exceptionally worked on the themes otherwise "unspeakable" in the society with the brilliant creativity and imagination.

The relationship between man and women is the main dominant theme in the novel *Women in Love* along with the theme of homosexuality. The relationships are expressed in various shades, hues and aspects. Such relationship may be between husband and wife or man and man or woman and woman. Sex plays an important part in the development of such relationships in form or the other. Lawrence expresses his inner feelings through these characters. For him both man and woman play a vital role in a relationship. For him one soul, two bodies' kind of love does not exist. He believes in maintaining the independence and "otherness" of each other in a relationship. We can say, he could try by his creation of Ursula Brangwen, to demonstrate his concern

that mankind should have a future and that love and harmony are the feasible goals for man to work towards.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Lawrence, D. *Women in Love*. London, Penguin Books, 1999.Print.
- [2] Niven, Alastair. *D.H. Lawrence: The novels*. London, Cambridge Press, 1978.Print.
- [3] Nandvani, Aditya. *The Rainbow*.New Delhi, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd.,2009.Print.
- [4] Gurudev, Sujata. *The Fiction of Lawrence*. New Delhi, Atlantic Pub.(P)Ltd. 2006.Print.
- [5] Ousby, Ian. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988.Print.

#### AUTHORS

**First Author** – Neha Minesh Kalangutkar alias Wader  
PhD Scholar, Goa University