

Tragic fate of women in *Sons and Lovers*

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In this paper I will be focusing on the predicament of three female characters in *Sons and Lovers*(1913) by David Herbert Lawrence in an androcentric society. This bildungsroman novel circulates around the evolution of Paul's character who seems to be the protagonist in the novel and the three women, Mrs. Morel, Mirriam and Clara, have been delineated to serve the different dimensions of his polymorphic development. These three women have been imprisoned by Victorian morality and perpetually struggling for equality. My goal in this paper is to hit upon the so called gender conflicts in *Sons and Lovers*. I will be elucidating Lawrence's attitude towards women and his feministic point of view..

D.H. Lawrence was a great modern novelist who wrote first psychological novel of English Literature, *Sons and Lovers*, which published in 1913 and established him among front rank novelists of England. This quasi-autobiographical novel and in his own words "a restrained, somewhat impersonal novel"(Tedlock 13) was selected among the top ten novels of the twentieth century by the editorial board of Modern Library. In a letter to Edward Garnett dated November 14, 1992 Lawrence opines that "It is a great tragedy, and I tell you I have written a great book. It's a tragedy of thousands of young men in England." (Lawrence 20)

Lawrence has been criticized by some critics for being anti-feministic and misogynist and eulogized by others for his naturalistic and ingenious portrayal of women's characters. Middleton Murry was the first one to charge him of misanthropy in *Son of Woman* (1931). It is from Murry's criticism that the reputation of Lawrence as "the squeaky-voiced, hysterical, impotent prophet of virility"(Simpson 13) reduced. Lawrence's attitude towards feminism has been construed by Murry as an employment of his perilous, "hyper-sensitive masculinity" (Murry 72). But some other critics like Anais Nin in her work *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* has propounded that Lawrence had "a complete realization of the feelings of women. In fact, very often he wrote as a woman would write . . . It is the first time that a man has so wholly and completely expressed woman accurately" (Nin 66-7,70). But in *Studies in Classic American Literature, Volume 2*, in his own words he himself reveals his anti feministic approach when he says "unless a man believes in himself and in his gods, genuinely; unless he

fiercely obeys his own Holy Ghost; his woman will destroy him . . . Woman is strange rather terrible phenomenon, to men" (Lawrence 89).

The most significant woman character, Gertrude Morel, mother of Paul Morel, was a lady of cultivated and refined taste. She shared a melancholic bond with her husband, Mr. Morel, a peevish and ill-tempered drunkard miner. In spite of possessing exquisite eloquence and an intellectual mind she had no respect in the eyes of her husband. "She loved ideas, and was considered very intellectual. What she liked most of all was an argument on religion or philosophy or politics with some educated man. (Lawrence 19)

But these intellectual subtleties were beyond Walter Morel. Nina Haritatu in her article *Emotion and the Unconscious: The Mythicization of Women in Sons and Lovers* says about her that

"she is the angel in the house, the innocent victim of her husband's uncomprehending coarseness" (Nina Haritatu). She had been frequently beaten up by him and thrown out of the house and still she had to do a lot for him when he grows diseased. She even had no idea about the amount of her husband's salary. She was told many lies by him about himself and his belongings before the marriage and their marital antagonism begins with the discovery of Walter's lies about owning the house and about the unpaid furniture bills. While talking about his father, Lawrence in a letter to Rachel Annand Taylor himself proclaimed, "he lacked principle, as my mother would have said. He deceived her and lied to her." (Tedlock 14) It shows how a woman was ensnared by telling lies in the trap of marriage where she was tied by moralistic norms of Victorian society "but this trapped woman will never break free, will not even try to, except indirectly through her children, and so will remain deeply unhappy" (Haritatu). Such frauds not only violates the prospects of their mutual compatibility but also vitiates even the life of children.

This is indeed conspicuous that in the opening chapters Mrs. Morel has been depicted as a devourer of her husband's life and in later part of the novel as stopping stone in the life of her children, which Judith Arcana argues in her *D.H. Lawrence Review 20* (1989), "ignores one basic conflict the novel presents: the intensity and power of Gertrude Morel thwarted by the utter impotence of her situation" (Qtd. in Schapiro 22). She also quoted the views of Lydia Blanchard's about Mrs. Morel that she lives in a world that "allows her no positive outlets for her talents and energies, who must live a vicarious existence through her sons" (Qtd. in Schapiro 22)

In the very first chapter the realization in her that she has no self, no individuality and mother's lack of "I-ness" has been emphatically established:

She seemed so far away from her girlhood, . . . 'What have I to do with it?' she said to herself.

'What have I to do with all this? Even the child I am going to have! It doesn't seem as if I were taken into account.' (Lawrence 13)

She is fully conscious of the fact how difficult it is to be a woman when she says to Paul, "If I were a man, nothing would stop me" (Lawrence 17) and it is patently obvious that it is her femininity that has been made to stop her from doing her fullest potential in her life.

Eventually she grows depressed that she casts her husband off from her life which is evident in her words when she says to Paul, "You know, Paul . . . I've never had a husband . . . not really" and went on demanding emotional fulfillment from her children.

Her embittered and toxic relation with her husband, a person who is incapable of refinement and sophistication and his bamboozling makes her feel quite insecure. Eventually for emotional support and sustenance of her desires, emotions and ambitions this sensitive and suffering went through a downward spiral and started leaning heavily on her sons, first to William and then to Paul. "From her the feeling was transmitted to the other children. She never suffered alone any more: the children suffered with her." (Lawrence 118) Gradually, there developed an unhealthy interdependence and Oedipal relation between the mother and the sons that the presence of any other woman becomes intolerable to her.

Miriam Leivers, modeled after Jessie Chambers who was once a close friend of Lawrence, is romantic, possessive, religious and sexually inhibited. By nature, she is so sensitive who has been made to feel miserable by the coarseness and vulgarity of the surroundings of her living place, Willey Farm. Her brothers are redefined who often humiliate her with their bullying attitude. They had no respect for her and considered her nothing more than a mere servant which is clearly evident from the following conversation at the dinner table in Miriam's house:

Edgar tasted the potatoes, moved his mouth quickly like a rabbit, looked indignantly at his mother, and said: 'These potatoes are burnt, mother.' 'Yes, Edgar. I forgot them for a minute.

Perhaps you'll have bread if you can't eat them.' Edgar looked in anger across at Miriam. 'What

was Miriam doing that she couldn't attend to them?' he said. Miriam looked up. Her mouth opened, her dark eyes blazed and winced, but she said nothing. She swallowed her anger and her shame, bowing her dark head. 'I'm sure she was trying hard,' said the mother. 'She hasn't got sense even to boil the potatoes,' said Edgar. 'What is she kept at home for?' (Lawrence 282).

In spite of being the witness of her son's brutality, Miriam's mother did not reprimand him, instead she asked her only to stay quiet and let them say what they liked to say.

"But how often have I asked you not to answer Edgar back? Can't you let him say what he likes?" (Lawrence 283) says her mother to her. This small incident reveals in itself the pathetic lot and mental subjugation of women in the Victorian society. They were supposed to stay quiet even if they are being insulted and belittled for trivial mistakes. Here Nancy Chodorow's theory about mothering seems to be at work, according to which a mother identifies herself more with the daughter and transmits all the morals and social norms, set for women, in her daughter and reinforces the patriarchy in the society.

The uncouthness of her father is equally repelling to her, "she held not her father in too high esteem because he did not carry any mystical ideals cherished in his heart, but only wanted to have as easy a time as he could, and his meals when he was ready for them" (Lawrence 275).

Thus the flagrant ruthlessness of the men-folk in her family makes her withdraw into her own shell and she unintentionally shrinks from all contact with the outside world. Isolated from the external world her only pastime and consolation is to be lost in her day dreaming. She was struggling with the kind of treatment she was subjected to in her home and wanted to study to elevate above such status in her life. She had an ardent desire to live a different life than other girls of her society:

She wanted to be considered. She wanted to learn, thinking that if she could read . . . the world would have a different face for her and a deepened respect. She could not be princess by wealth or standing. So I was mad to have learning whereon to pride herself. For she was different from other folk, and must not be scooped up among the common fry. Learning was the only distinction to which she thought to aspire. (Lawrence 275)

Finally Paul comes to the life of this beleaguered woman to whom he seems to be the assuager of all the exasperation because of boorish behavior of the people around her and the resulting isolation from them. But her

tragic fate lies in the fact that even Paul does not value her love and scorned her and insulted her when he said to Clara, "love should give a sense of freedom, not of prison. Miriam made me feel tied up like a donkey to a stake. I must feed on her patch, and nowhere else. It's sickening!" (Lawrence 689). In Tedlock's *D. H. Lawrence And Sons and Lovers*, Harry T. Moore in his essay "The Genesis as Revealed in the Miriam Papers" talks about the passages where "Paul is described as storming at Miriam and becoming furious and abusive . . . Paul shouts at her such names as duffer, fathead, and donkey " (Moore 53-54) His extreme rudeness with her is clearly apparent in the following passage: "Once he threw the pencil in her face. There was a silence . . . But still again his anger burst like a bubble surcharged; and still, when he saw her eager, silent, as it were, blind face, he felt he wanted to throw the pencil in it" (Lawrence 302). He, a self-conscious neurotic, discarded her spiritual love just because she could not satisfy him physically because of her sexual inhibitions.

Paul, in search of sexual gratification, got attracted towards Clara, an autonomous, affectionate, beautiful and emancipated lady. She has bravely come out of the abusive marriage with Mr. Dawes who had beaten her and deceived her. She is the one who jettisons the traditional notion of woman's submissiveness to her husband. She also refuses to be subordinated by Paul as when she is inquired about her husband by him, "Do you feel as if you belonged to him?", she replies, "No I think he belongs to me" (Lawrence 687). She thinks that she will be happy "so long as I can be free and independent" (Lawrence 446). Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*(1971) has remarked about her that she is "the rebellious feminist and political activist . . . whom Paul nonchalantly disposes of when he has exhausted her sexual utility"(Millett 254). "Paul explicitly sets up this chivalric attitude in opposition to Clara's freedom"(Simpson 32).

Paul begin to feel interested towards Clara only when she acknowledges her emotion and weakness as he had "a desire to experience the thrill of seeing a strong and independent person betray her vulnerability . . .he also want her to acknowledge that her feminism is misguided and that what she really needs is sexual fulfillment" (Simpson 33). He just saw her as a woman that has to be used to satisfy his libidinous desire. She has just been used callously as an instrument by him who could never see through her individuality. She can be seen as an epitome of feminism the way she shuns the society's conventions and dared to have sexual relation with someone whom she loved notwithstanding the judgmental eyes others conferred on her behind her back. According to Victorian norms of morality if a woman is discarded by her husband she has lost everything which is insinuated

by the dialogue of Paul about Clara that, "she lives separate from her husband, and talks on platforms; so she's singled out from the sheep, and, as far as I can see, hasn't much to lose. . . her life's nothing to her, so what's the worth of nothing?" (Lawrence 601). And when the thrill of Paul with her is over he makes her restitution to her husband which also highlights his ideology that "Sex desire was a sort of detached thing, that did not belong to a woman" (Lawrence 528). This shows the insouciance of some patriarchal elements in the society that do not even scruple to crumble the elevated enthusiasm of some women who could set an inspiring example for others to set themselves free from the restraints of bogus, superfluous and biased norms set from the patriarchal point of view.

Conclusion

Lawrence has been unable to give feminism the platform it deserves in the *Sons and Lovers* as all the three have been portrayed as the victims of anti-feministic disciplinary practices. Mrs. Gertrude has been continuously dependent on her husband for financial security and on her sons for emotional fulfillment but at last meets her tragic end by dying at the hands of her most lovable son, Paul. Mirriam kept on pondering about learning and conferred on Paul the true love but left with nothing to be grateful for at the end. Clara even being independent and clever became an easy toy in the hands of Paul to meet his sexual passions and dumped by him at last after being used enough to satiate his hunger for pleasure. All these three women capitulate to their tragic circumstances and led a doleful life that is full of abortive efforts to make it better.

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