

# Feminist and Traditional Patriarchal Perspectives in D. H. Lawrence's Women in Love

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**Abstract:** *"The two sisters worked on in silence. Ursula having always that strange brightness of an essential flame that is caught, meshed, contravened. She lived a good deal by herself, to herself, working, passing on from day to day, and always thinking, trying to lay hold on life, to grasp it in her own understanding. She seemed to try and put her hands out, like an infant in the womb, and she could not, not yet. Still she had a strange prescience, an intimation of something yet to come."*

**Keywords:** Silence, Brightness, Contravened, Prescience, Understanding

**Introduction:** Gendered Domesticity Lawrence has subtly used the art of stitching as a literary device to depict the age-old patriarchal view that a "woman's place is in the home." Many feminists today are questioning this traditional notion. According to them, it is the result of sex-role stereotyping from early childhood that women come to accept their passive roles as housewives and mothers, often without considering the development of their intellect or individuality.

Contemporary feminist writer Elizabeth Janeway, in *Man's World, Woman's Place*, traces the historical development of the idea that women belonged to the domestic sphere. She points out that the concept of the "home" is a relatively modern invention, emerging with the advent of the nuclear family, in which women were assigned the majority of household duties. This led to the creation of a new concept of womanhood that had no direct parallel in men's roles. The role of mother, homemaker, and wife came to define what it meant to be a woman—closely tied to her biological sex. Women internalized this role and fulfilled it as a social obligation, rarely questioning its legitimacy.

## Patriarchal Awakening:

Lawrence has subtly used the art of stitching as a device to depict the age-old patriarchal view that a "Women's Place is in the home." Many feminists today are questioning this idea. According to them it is as a consequence of a sex-role stereotyping from childhood that women accept their passive roles as house-wives and mothers without giving a second thought to developing their intellect or personality. contemporary feminist *Man's World* and women's witer Elizabeth 4 Place traces Janeway the in her historical development of the idea that women belonged to the domestic sphere, pointing out that the "home" was a relatively modern invention which emerged with the advent of the nuclear family in which women were assigned major duties. Thus there emerged a new concept of women's role that had no direct counterpart to any man's role. The role of mother, home-maker and wife was said to define what a women was in ways that were directly related to her being female. She accepted the role without question and fulfilled it as a social obligation.

After the discussion of marriage between the sisters ends, the scene shifts to Crich's marriage. The sisters are unseen witnesses to the whole scene. Here Lawrence introduces Birkin in the novel. He comes as the groom's man, Ursula is drawn to him at once. "Ursula was left thinking of Birkin. 5 He piqued her, attracted her, annoyed her". Birkin is described as an attractive and desirable man. At the same time there. was a "certain hostility, a hidden ultimate reserve in 6 him, cold and inaccessible," This kept Ursula from getting close to him. Lawrence has introduced him as someone who is hard to get and inaccessible like the "Son of God". He is sent as the saviour and master of Ursula. According to Kate Millet:

Women In Love presents us with a new man arrived in time to give Ursula her comeuppance and demote her back to wifely subjection. It is important to understand how pressing a mission Lawrence conceived this to be, for he came himself upon the errand. 7

So far Ursula is presented as an incomplete creature. She goes about with her routine activity as though she were in a trance. "This day had gone by like so many more in an activity 8 that was like a trance"8. She is bored with her life as a spinster school mi stress. The very presence of Birkin next to tier during their first meeting in her class-room, makes her fully awake:

She looked like one who is suddenly wakened. There was a living, tender beauty, like a tender light of dawn shining from her face. He looked at her with new pleasure, feeling gay in the heart, irresponsible. 9

This awakening made her very beautiful. She is indebted to Birkin for this enhancement of her looks. So, naturally it seems he has the right to feel pleased.

Usually the word "Awakening" gives one the idea of a sort of spiritual or intellectual enlightenment. The awakened person rises above ordinary humanity. Ursula's awakening is of a differnt kind. She drops all her knowledge, her ego and intellect and allows Birkin to instruct her about the methods of teaching botany (her own subject!) to her class. Lawrence tells us that Ursula was not herself. She becomes a kind of nonentity, utterly submissive to Birkin. This is the patriarchal idea of female awakening! Feminist theorists argue that although the effects of patriarchy are evident everywhere, they are not visible to most woman because they are still in a slumber. Kate Millet says that this invisibility, this ability to pass off as a set social norm, is one of the

features of patriarchy. To become aware of male domination, women have to wake up. They have to educate themselves to feel the previously invisible effects of patriarchy. This awakening is called 'Consciousness Raising.' In this process, woman is not awakened by a man but by other women. Consciousness Raising' is '..... a means of sharing reliable information about female experience.' In exchanging views about their lives and experiences, women learn to have more positive view about themselves. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

#### **Submissive Love:**

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure 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<sup>11</sup>.

So the feminists of today, will certainly disagree with Lawrence's idea of 'Awakening'. They feel that patriarchal society has made woman into a meek and dependent weakling. She should have no aim or desire in life and she should be in a ? The constant state of stupor, till the arrival of a 'Prince charming', to awaken the woman in her. Lawrence's portrayal of Ursula as a sleepy, unassuming female waiting for Birkin to break her sleeping-spell clearly shows his typical patriarchal attitude towards woman. Modern woman has come a long way from woman like Ursula. She has realized that she is not born as a weakling, but the society has made her that way.. If she knows her own worth, she does not have to depend on anyone for her existence.

The entrance of Hermione in the class-room makes Ursula's position all the more pitiable. Hermione is overbearing and sophisticated. highly educated. She belongs to a high social class and is She seemed to be a fit match for Birkin always. Birkin belongs to the elite class, owns property and holds the position of 'school-Inspector'. Ursula secretly admires and hero-worships Birkin. Lawrence makes her helplessness very apparent by portraying the superiority of male over female, higher class over lower class. Women are always placed as rivals. Hermione's politeness to Ursula is mixed with "an odd self-bullying effrontery When she leaves the class-room with Birkin, Ursula feels so brokenhearted and left-out, that she bursts into tears. Tears depict weakness, softness, childishness, vulnerability etc., Crying is always associated with women. Women are allowed to display emotions for it confines them to expressive roles expected of them.

Right from the first encounter between Ursula and Birkin, in the class-room, Lawrence favours this formula of presenting 'Ursula' as a passive and submissive woman with a slave like devotion towards Birkin. In the chapter 'Water - Party', they have an open talk with each other. Ursula is disappointed at Birkin's idea of love. She is confused by all his talks about love. They are beyond her comprehension. There is a feeling of uncertainty in his philosophy which Ursula finds hard to understand. Her idea of love is not only a devotion but a total submission of soul and body to the lover, without reservation, without regard for anything. Birkin voices out Lawrence's philosophy of spirituality and blood-consciousness. He did not believe in the union of two bodies and souls. Love, according to him, is something like death, after which one is reborn. The two lovers in their physical union stay apart from each other. He has his own doctrines of love which Ursula finds very vexing. "I don't wan't love .... I don't want to know you. I want to be gone out of myself and you to be lost. co yourself, so we are found different"<sup>13</sup>

#### **Dominant Love:**

Simone de Beauvoir has aptly depicted the difference of meaning of love between man and women in *The Second Sex*:

The word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of serious misunderstanding that divides them ... 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence'<sup>14</sup>

After such a disappointing conversation, one would expect a woman to put an end to her dreams of loving such a person. Ursula forgets all her ill-feelings towards Birkin, throws herself into his arms and totally surrenders to him. In the chapter 'Mino' Ursula is invited for tea at Birkin's place. He proposes an alliance with her on the Steller plan. He wants to go beyond love to "Something much more impersonal and harder" He does not want her good looks or feelings or ideas. (Is he denying a personality in woman?). He wanted a "pure balance of two single beings:- as stars balance each other". These are his false terms of contract which Ursula fails to understand. The actual conditions of the alliance are explained by the actions of a male cat. Kate Millet in her *Sexual politics* says that " ... the real 'terms of contract' a far harsher matter, are supplied by Mino the cat in his exercise of. authority over his inferior mate." The Male cat is portrayed as stately and proud. He does not notice his female companion. He often gives her light cuffs to put her in her place. It is a sort of relationship in which Birkin expects Ursula to accept bullying and domination passively. He further talks about the relationship and describes it to be like the way, "Adam kept Eve in the indestructible paradise, when he kept her single with himself like a star in its orbit." Kate Millet explains this statement as: " ... Of course the star in Birkin's orbit is exactly what Ursula's position is to be. Birkin will Play at the Son of God, Ursula revolving quietly at his side. Ursula is such a simpleton that she keeps on insisting that he should declare his love for her, even if it were only superficial. The very utterance of love from Birkin's mouth is enough for her. There cannot be a more humiliating and degrading position for woman than this!

#### **Maternal Submission:**

Ursula is always waiting for Birkin. She wants to submit to him, she wants to be his shadow. She cannot bear the pain of waiting for him:

As the day wore on, the lifeblood seemed to ebb away from Ursula, and within the emptiness a heavy despair gathered. Her passion seemed to bleed to death, and there was nothing. She sat suspended in a state of complete nullity, harder to bear than death. 20

Death is more lovely for her than life in which the constant presence of Birkin is denied. It reveals a certain insecurity in her nature. She regains her cheerful mood, the moment he enters her house. Birkin is highly impressed by her feelings of “maternal love” towards her siblings. All the qualities of ideal women, ideal wife, ideal mother, according to the patriarchal norms are embedded in her nature. Her maternal instinct extends towards men too. “Ursula saw her men as sons, Pitied their yearning and admired their courage and wondered over them as a mother wonders over her child, with a certain delight in their novelty.” Placing women on the pedestal as mothers or goddesses is the usual trend followed by 19th century chauvinistic writers. Feminists, views these as attempts to suppress woman’s sexuality, by imbuing her with an aura of purity and divinity.

In the chapter “Moony” Ursula finds Birkin hurling stones at the image of the moon in a pond. Kate Millet opines, that in doing so he is destroying the evil side of the moon which represents the destructive female force. He loathes the independence and assertive will of the modern women. The moon reminded him of the ‘New Woman’. Ursula is the antithesis of the destructive female force. Her interruption not only startles him but also relieves him. He sees her as a contrast to the evil side of the moon. “His mind saw again: the lovely golden light of spring transfused through her eyes, as through some wonderful window. And he wanted her to be with him there, in this world of proud indifference. He gets carried away by her sensitive and delicate nature and declares his love for her. Ursula is pleased beyond words. As he declares his love for her, he remembers the statuette of an African Women suffering from labour pain. The sadistic bent of his mind is exposed by this thought. Ursula is the symbol of purity, an angel. The Angelic purity is always associated with some sort of suffering. According to patriarchal ideas suffering is a part of womanhood. Only a true woman can bear pains and sufferings without complaint. Feminists contend that inflicting suffering on women has been condoned through the ages as one of the ways of asserting male superiority. Soft natured women like Ursula are the most vulnerable victims of cruelty. The very sight of them gives rise to sadistic thoughts in male minds.

#### **Possessive Submission:**

Finally, Birkin lands up at Ursula’s house with a proposal of marriage. He is shocked beyond words when Ursula refuses to give an answer immediately. She is bullied by her father on one side, and Birkin on the other side. Moreover she is uncertain about Birkin’s idea of marriage. To her, marriage means total surrender to the man. In return she wants to possess him “she wanted to have him utterly, finally, to have him as her own .... To drink him down - ah, like a life draught.” Birkin with his idea of star equilibrium and importance of the individual in love, really confuses her. For her, love is everything, “let him be ‘her man’ utterly, and she in return would be his humble slave.” A humble slave is what every chauvinistic males looks forward to obtaining in a wife. Here Ursula is willing to accept the role of a slave, if he just agrees to be her man. But her wish to possess him annoys Lawrence.

Lawrence has voiced his contempt for the possessive side of woman’s nature in many of his novels. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel as Lawrence’s mouthpiece often rebukes Miriam for wanting to possess his soul. Lawrence agrees with the male myth of the devouring woman who ‘swallows’ a man by her sentimentality. In the chapter ‘Man to Man’ Birkin’s thoughts regarding the clinging role of woman is clearly expressed:

But it seemed to him, woman was always so horrible and clutching, she had such a lust for possession, a greed of self-importance in love. She wanted to have, to own, to control, to be dominant ... It filled him with almost insane fury, this calm assumption. of. the Magna Mater, that all was hers, because she had borne it. Man was hers because she had borne him. 25

This double standard in his opinion about woman is strange indeed! Women, it seems, cannot win. Chauvinistic males like a woman if she is clinging and possessive, at the same time they hate her for this aspect of her nature. Many feminists are of the opinion that men are very conscious of the capacity of women to procreate; They are aware of the fact that they themselves were born out of her. As a defence mechanism against this power of woman, they have been trying to prove by myths like ‘birth of Eve through Adam’s rib’ etc., that women came out of man. Hence man is superior and woman is inferior. Lawrence is no exception. He always believes in the supremacy of the male and characters like Ursula compliment this idea of his supremacy. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* gives a rational explanation for this possessive nature in women. She says that women are glorifying the patriarchal ideology of femininity by accepting the role of house-wives and mothers even at the cost of their intellectual and spiritual developments. As a result their husbands and children become the centre of their lives. They have no other goals in life and hence they cling pathetically to their husbands and sons:-

#### **Feminine Rivalry:**

This male outrage is the result, surely, of an implacable hatred for the parasitic women who keep their husband’s and son’s from growing up, who keep them immersed at that sickly level of fantasy. 26

The chapter ‘Woman to woman’ reveals Lawrence’s dread of female alliances of any kind. Females are always



rivals to each other. 'Divide and rule' is a common policy of any oppressor towards the oppressed. Here Ursula represents the ideal wife and the ideal woman and Hermione is the mistress and Vamp. There is a natural repugnance of these two categories of women towards each other. "... Ursula only suffered from Hermione's one-sidedness. She only felt Hermione's cool evidence, which seemed to put her down as nothing". Both vie for the common male i.e., Birkin. They exchange their opinions about him as a lover and husband. Their thoughts are parallel. Each one cannot understand the other. In the end Ursula bursts out at Hermione and points out to her that her fault lies in not realising herself as a total woman. "You don't believe in yourself, and your own womanhood, so what good is your conceited shallow cleverness. 28

Emotional outbursts are considered natural for an ideal woman. She is supposed to be more emotional than intellectual:

"Ursula could not understand, never would understand, could never be more than the usual jealous and unreasonable female, with a good deal of female emotion, female attraction, and a fair amount of female understanding, but no mind.<sup>29</sup>

This is Lawrence's idea of the feminine qualities which Ursula possesses in abundance. Her emotion is further swayed with the entry of Birkin into the room. She feels all the more jealous and in a fit of impotent rage, walks out abruptly. According to Kate Millet anger, quarrelsomeness, upset by defeat, jealousy, etc. are expressive roles expected of a woman. Any failure to confirm to this role reduces her to a feeling of guilt, unworthiness and confusion. She says that writers like Lawrence helped to build these stereotypical structures and actually shape these attitudes.

Lawrence's males are always encouraged to build alliances. They are above petty mean-mindedness and jealousy. The wrestling scene in the chapter 'Gladiatorial' shows Birkin and Gerald in such a close alliance that some critics suspect a homosexual relationship between them. In the opinion of Kate Millet, "Male homosexuality and friendship are one of the greatest interests of Lawrence's life" She exposes Lawrence's double standard for male friendships and female friendships. Females are stereotyped as the feminine, emotional and childish females, and, the intellectual and mature females. The two types can never get along well with each other or understand each other. Many of the radical feminists feel that women can have satisfactory emotional, intellectual and physical relationships with each other. Further, they feel that sexual relationship between man and woman is politicised. Kate Millet is one of the feminists who advocates this idea. The homosexual relationship between males is another form of showing male superiority and power.

### **Submissive Marriage:**

The marriage of Ursula and Birkin, takes place after a typical dramatic scene. Under the patriarchal system, women are considered as a property of some males in the form of father or husband. She is not allowed to make decisions or have a free choice of mate. Ursula's decision to marry Birkin comes as a rude shock to her father. He bullies her, abuses her and even slaps her. She bears all these humiliations silently, and then runs to Birkin to be comforted. She weeps her heart out and he in turn consoles her with a promise of marrying her without any delay. They get married soon and immediately leave for a honeymoon. Ursula is totally dependent on the assurance, security and support of a man. When one-man (father) rebukes her she runs to another man (lover), she cannot exist on her own. She must belong to someone. Lawrence has very nicely described the scene in which Birkin consoles her:

And he went across to her and gathered her like a belonging in his arms. She was so tenderly beautiful, he could not bear to see her... Now, washed all clean by her tears, she was new and frail like a flower just unfolded, a flower so new. So tender, so made perfect by inner light, that he could not bear to look at her.<sup>31</sup>

She is pure and delicate like a lily because she is passive, submissive, helpless and totally dependent on Birkin. He treats her like his possession.

According to contemporary feminists, this condition of being subordinated by men and to men had turned women into an inferior "species". Women fulfilled their roles successfully, as a result they have become doormats in the eyes of men. Phyllis Chesler in "Women and Madness" says that to confirm to the stereotype of "womanly" or "feminine" meant to display, those characteristics that distinguished women from men. It therefore meant, behaviour that was passive or weak, compliant and indecisive. It meant being easily moved to tears (hysterical) susceptible to suggestion from others, easily led or persuaded by others. In short, women were meant to be inadequate, self-doubting and essentially incapable of a strong independent and autonomous existence. Thus the sex-role stereotype was a sort of prescription for failure and victimization of women.

After the marriage, Birkin conveniently forgets all his speeches regarding love and marriage. He believed that the marital relationship was "not in the emotional loving plane but there beyond, where there is no speech and no terms of agreement. That was just a belief. In practice, he turns out to be a typical dominating and aggressive husband. He insists on Ursula resigning her job and even dictates her letter of resignation. His speeches about love and marriage gave an impression that his future wife would get a new life by marrying him. She would enjoy freedom and independence. But Ursula surrenders to him. She becomes his shadow, a non-entity. She is extremely happy with this passive role:

### **Patriarchal Marriage:**

She wanted to have no past. She wanted to come down from the slopes of heaven to this place, with Birkin not to have toiled out of the murk of her childhood and her upbringing, slowly, all soiled. ... She was with Birkin, she had just come into life. She was herself, pure and silvery, she belonged only to the oneness with Birkin, a oneness that struck deeper notes, sounding into the heart of the universe, the heart of reality, where she had never existed before<sup>34</sup>

She becomes her husband's creature, and forsakes her individuality, and identity in order to make the marriage a happy one. In marriage, it is always the woman who has to forgo her identity and interests. She is always at the receiving end. Marital happiness is in her hands. These are myths created by patriarchy. Betty Friedan has named these myths as the "Feminine Mystique". According to her, woman must demystify the feminine mystique by changing the old patriarchal norms about marriage and by finding a new identity of her own.

Birkin always poses himself as a sort of prophet who looks down upon sexuality. He contradicts this idea however, after his marriage. He is a typical demanding husband, with a good deal of passion and animal instincts. In conjugal relation, he always has the upper hand, he is the active one and Ursula is the passive and obedient one. The dancing scene during the honeymoon reveals this aspect of their relationship:

Birkin was dancing with Ursula. There were old little fires playing in his eyes, he seemed to have turned into something wicked and flickering, mocking, suggestive quite impossible. Ursula was frightened of him. Clear before her eyes, as in a vision, she could see the sardonic licentious mockery of his eyes, he moved towards her with subtle, animal, indifferent approach.<sup>35</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* has explained the idea of "Phallic Pride" in Lawrence. Lawrence has idealized the "Phallus". It is fit to be worshipped by women. In all his sexual descriptions he has portrayed man in the position of an incarnation who purifies the woman's soul by his sexual union with her. " .. Ursula is conquered and saved by sexual purity of Birkin, as Lady Chatterly was by that of the gamekeeper." Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* feels that it is due to Lawrence's fear of free female sexuality, that he portrays man as the master in bed and the female as a passive worshipper. The man can be licentious and totally indifferent to woman's feeling. The woman is left with a feeling of fear, an anticipation of any kind of behaviour from him.

Lawrence's marriages are always based on a relationship in which man is superior. dictating, demanding and ruling and woman is passive submissive, yielding and bending. The husband should control the wife and suppress her will. Birkin's famous sermon, in which he compares woman to a horse explains Lawrence's idea further. He says that woman is like a horse. She has two wills. She wants to subject one will and assert the other. A psychological tool should be employed to control her will and make her submit totally to man. Gerald uses brutal force to control his mare. According to Birkin subtle ways work wonders, compared to rough and brutal ways. Ursula - Birkin marriage, is portrayed as an ideal Lawrencian marriage. Even the marital relationship between Gerald's father Thomas Crich and his wife is portrayed according to Lawrence's patriarchal idea. Their natures never agree, but Thomas Crich manages to subdue his wife and imprison her like a bird in a cage. After Mrs. Crich loses her identity, her husband idealizes her as a pure, chaste white flower which belongs to him alone. Kate Millet has aptly commented about Lawrencian marriage that, "Hereafter marriage represents not only the taming of woman, but her extinction."<sup>38</sup>

### **Male Perspective:**

At the end of the novel, Birkin tells Ursula that she suited him as far as his need for a woman is concerned. He wanted something higher than that. She was not everything for him. Only an eternal union with another man can give him total fulfilment. Man is free to choose homosexuality, or polygamy, but woman once tied in wedlock is totally committed to her man and her home. This kind of double standards has invited wrath in contemporary Feminists. Kate Millet feels that masculine alliance is also political in character. In excluding women, a Lawrencian male takes revenge on them for the difficulty he has in subordinating them. It is also a craving for power, first over woman and then over man.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Lawrence has successfully portrayed Ursula as a chaste, innocent, obedient and affectionate woman. These are stereotypical qualities of the 'Angel' or 'Lily'. As long as she plays her feminine role well, she will be portrayed as a triumphant and happy female far, in doing so, she does not pose a threat to the patriarchal system. Contemporary Feminists feel that this kind of portrayal is due to the prejudicial and distorted views of the male mind. This is how the men want their ideal women to be. Do women agree with this male point of view? What about other types of women-the bold, aggressive and dominant ones? Lawrence's perspective on liberated women warrants closer examination through his portrayal of characters like Gudrun and Hermione.

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