CHAPTER 5

OLD MYTH VERSUS NEW MYTH

"The Plumed Serpent"
In *The Plumed Serpent*, the religious aspect of phallic consciousness is taken into consideration. Mexico provides a background to this story. Kate Leslie, the Irish widow sees Mexico's horror, transformation and realizes how they supplant the new myth of Christianity by the old pre-Christian Snakebird God of Mexico, Quetzalcoatl. It propounds Lawrence's universal phallic religion. But the protagonist fails to subject herself to Mexico's revival and continues to be an individualist. However, she is forced to abandon many of her ideas about love, leadership and religion. The novel seems to suggest that Kate's salvation could be possible only by accepting the old myth of Ireland.
We find that Lawrentian darkness is foreshadowed throughout in this novel. The already identified pattern of an English character who is evidently "conscious" drawn to a dark character is adopted in this novel too. If in other novels, the darkness is confined only to a certain individual, here we find the darkness is attributed to the Old Mexican religion. F.B. Pinion observes:

The novel is religious; extrinsically, in the revival of the old Mexican religion; essentially, in the enunciation of beliefs which Lawrence merged with that religion and which were cardinal for him in the regeneration of man.¹

The novel is in fact, a discourse on Lawrence's phallic religion and certain aspects of phallic consciousness. Characters seem to be insignificant and the focus is on race consciousness and the conflict between the ancient religion, which is found outdated and the modern one which is widely accepted, but in effect meaningless. F.R. Leavis says that *The Plumed Serpent* "is an attempt to prove, in imaginative

enactment, that the revival of a necessary religion is possible."\(^2\)

Kate Leslie, the protagonist who has a western upbringing finds herself hostile to much that she encounters in Mexico, but gradually she undergoes a change. The novel evokes the subterranean world of instincts and the dramatic surface life of Mexico with a series of "incidents of sacrifices, assaults, skirmishes, insurrections, betrayals, physical violations, and atrocious murders."\(^3\)

In the opening chapter we find Kate Leslie who has a "will-to-happiness" goes to see the last bull-fight of the season in Mexico city on the Sunday after Easter. But her "alter ego" repulses seeing the jeering pleasure from the mass. The bull-fight shocks her and she could see it only as human cowardice and beastliness. She feels a real pang of hatred against this Americanism which is coldly and unscrupulously sensational. We find in this Mexican degeneracy associated with a sense of sexual perversion:


There is something so obscene in the way the crowd feed on this spectacle of violence that we are not surprised to find that Mexican degeneracy is associated with a sense of sexual perversion. The contest between the bull and the toreadors is described in terms which suggest a grotesque sexual encounter ... Kate flees from the stadium before the bull is killed ... feeling that Mexico lies 'in her destiny almost as a doom. Something so heavy, so oppressive, like the folds of some huge serpent that seemed as if it could hardly raise itself.'

The opening bull-fight episode serves the protagonist to develop contempt on everything that is western: western habits, interests, mode of enjoyment, beliefs etc. The immediate consequence is the rejection of American friends and acceptance of the Mexicans. David Cavitch points out the significance of the bull-fight episode thus: "From such horror of brutal degeneracy, the novel eventually turns to describe a new religion of human redemption and transcendence."

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Kate, in her first meeting with Cipriano is struck by the darkness of his eyes. She contemplates on it later also: "Those black eyes, like black jewels, that you couldn't look into, and which were so watchful; yet which, perhaps, were waiting for some sign of recognition and of warmth. Perhaps!" She meets Don Ramon at the tea-party in Tlacolula. She, in a mysterious manner experiences that he is casting a powerful influence on her. It is "as if a sort of appeal came to her from him, from his physical heart in his breast. As if the very heart gave out dark rays of seeking and yearning".

She reads in the news-paper a column with the heading: "The Gods of Antiquity Return to Mexico" which rouses her interest. The very name of the God Quetzalcoatl brings to her mind its meaning in association: Quetzal is the name of a bird that lives high up in the mists of tropical mountains and Coatl is a serpent. She is reminded of the relic in the National Museum: "Quetzalcoatl is the Plumed Serpent, so hideous in the fangled, feathered, writhing stone of the National Museum." It is here to be noted that this religion recognizes duality and attempts to reconcile opposites:

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7 Ibid., P.34.
8 Ibid., P.53.
Quetzalcoatl, being a bird which flies in the air and comes to us from above as well as a snake which emerges from the earth and comes to us from below, embodies a religion which recognizes duality/polarity and attempts to reconcile opposites.  

The rich suggestiveness of Quetzalcoatl make her conclude that god may be returning from heaven. She hates definite meanings and a god of one fixed purport. Gods should be iridescent and gods as well as man has to be born again. The protagonist's attitude is quite suited for the reversal of new myth by the old one. She meets Mirabel at Don Ramon's house. Mirabel believes in the fertility of sound and the old Mexican gods, whose names are like "seeds, so full of magic, of the unexplored magic?"

In Cipriano, Kate observes intense unconscious maleness in his eyes and the savage quality in him. In this context, we may note that all Lawrence's phallic characters are more or less attributed with this quality. They are the embodiments of potency. It's manifestation is not in their verbal exercises, but in their countenance. Here we find a good example:

There was something undeveloped and intense in him, the intensity and the crudity of the semi-savage. She could well-understand the potency of the snake upon the Aztec and Maya imagination. Something smooth, undeveloped, yet vital in this man; suggested the heavy ebbing blood of powerful reptiles, the dragon of Mexico ... So that unconsciously she shrank when his black, big, glittering eyes turned on her for a moment ... They were black, as black as jewels into which one could not look without a sensation of fear. And her fascination was tanged with fear. She felt somewhat as the bird feels when the snake is watching it.10

Kate finds herself in a situation similar to that of a bird whose body a snake has coiled and realizes that Mexico is that snake. Mexico gives her a strange feeling of hopelessness and dauntlessness. The natives are a powerful influence on her as she feels they touch her bowels with a strange fire of compassion. In women, she finds images of wild submissiveness, the primitive womanliness of the world, that is so touching and alien. They fill her mind with "tenderness and revulsion".

10 The Plumed Serpent, P.62.
Don Ramon, though attributed with darkness, resorts to find a rational explanation to his phallic consciousness. Here we find that consciously he strives to become unconscious. He is not willing to serve an idea, but he prefers to serve "the God of his manhood." He is nauseated with human will and realizes that his own will is another nuisance once he starts exerting it. He wants to free himself from his own will. Occasionally we come across Lawrence's phallic conscious characters achieving a state of 'Will-less-ness'.

Having a will is an obsession in the consciousness; it serves in fact as mental consciousness. What he prefers at this juncture is one's own manhood: "And the God gives me my manhood, and leaves me to it. I have nothing, but my manhood. The God gives it to me, and leaves me to do further."\(^{11}\)

Kate's journey to the lake Sayula drives her closer to the rituals of the pre-Christian religion. She finds it difficult to comprehend the significance of a native's reference to the Morning Star and the Evening Star. But she senses a certain delicate, tender mystery in the river, in the naked man in the river and in the boatman. The stories she hears about Mexican brutality horrifies her. She thinks about her plan to go back to

\(^{11}\) Ibid., P.70.
Europe. It is like going back to "politics or jazzing or slushy mysticism or sordid spiritualism." She decides to take a plunge from the trodden world of western culture to the unknown Mexican world:

"Anything, anything rather than this sterility of nothingness which was the world, and into which her life was drifting." By deciding to stay in Sayula she has a consoling thought about Mexicans: "Horrors might burst out of them. But something must burst out, sometimes, if men are not machines". Here we find that Kate rejects American friends and all those that are related to it. This process of rejection has a much wider significance to propound Lawrence's theory of phallic consciousness:

Kate Leslie rejects her American friends; the book rejects White America in general as mechanical, tolerant, decadent, unable to perceive the 'reptile-like evil', the horror and squalor of a Mexico in the throes of a dreary revolution that is nothing, but the imposition of white consciousness on blood consciousness. Mexico, for all its horrors, does not reverse Kate's life-flow as White Americans do.

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12 Ibid., P.100.
13 Ibid., P.100.
The men whom Kate meets on her way to Sayula rouses in her mind fear at first. But later she could see something very beautiful and truly male in them which the civilized white man do not have. The difference lies in the race consciousness: "It was not of the spirit. It was of the dark, strong, unbroken blood, the flowering of the soul." The men want to be able to breathe the Great Breath, at the same time they are like demons. The bluish dark power in the earth has become more real to her than the so called reality. She seems to be inspired of Earth's potency:

Concrete, jarring, exasperating reality had melted away, and a soft world of potency stood in its place, the velvety dark flux from the earth, the delicate yet supreme life-breath in the inner air. Behind the fierce sun the dark eyes of a deeper sun were watching, and between the bluish ribs of the mountains a powerful heart was secretly beating, the heart of the earth.\(^{15}\)

At the Plaza, Kate listens to the pulse-like thudding of the drum. Instantly she feels the timeless primeval passion of the pre-historic races, with their

\(^{15}\) *The Plumed Serpent*, P.105.
intense and complicated religious significance, spreading on the air. The drum all the time has the blood-rhythm. The incomprehensible hollow barking of the drum is like a spell on the mind, making the heart burst at each stroke, and darkening the will. Kate is attracted to and repulsed at the same time. In the dance that follows, Kate joins with one of the bare-breasted men. She feels like a virgin again. Men cease in the dance to be dark collective men, non-individual and women the great wheel of womanhood. She realizes the greater mystery of sex:

Men and women alike danced with forces lowered and expressionless, abstract, gone in the deep absorption of men into the greater manhood, women into the greater womanhood. It was sex, but the greater, not the lesser sex.  

The realization the protagonist arrives at is not a rational one. It resembles the understanding of an Indian who darkly and barbarically repudiates the spirit and accepts soul that is of the blood. The realization of greater sex can be explained thus:

16 Ibid., P.127.
Homogeneity of blood alone ensures continuous consciousness; the pure blooded ensure it at the time of coition. But now 'the Indian consciousness is swamped under the stagnant water of the Whiteman's Dead Sea Consciousness.' If there is any hope it lies in the fostering of the ancient Indian consciousness, defeated and corrupt as it is.\(^{17}\)

Don Ramon's adherence to a new belief invites disapproval from his wife Don Carlota. She thinks that an attempt to bring back the old gods is nonsensical. She takes his enthusiasm for advocating this new religion as an attempt to acquire power. We find that the ground is set for an open conflict between the advocates of the Old Myth and the advocates of the new myth.

Ramon, is a character who is conscious about mental and phallic consciousness. He consciously makes an attempt not to think and not to remember so that the "poisonous snakes of mental consciousness" will not be disturbed. Ramon and Cipriano make Kate think about her own state of affairs. They have a richness which she hasn't got. She is cursed with the "itching, prurient, 

\(^{17}\) Frank Kermode., \textit{Lawrence}, P.107.
knowing, imagining eye." Her mental consciousness forces her to observe everything and that leads her to a realization. She laments: "Daughter of Eve, of greedy vision, why don't these men save me from the sharpness of my own eyes!"

Ramon's discourse from time to time emphasize on the religion of the blood; man-woman relationship and the relationship with Nature. He believes that the earth that we live in is alive: "The snake of the world is a huge, and the rocks are his scales, trees grow between them. I tell you the earth you dig is alive as a snake that sleeps."\textsuperscript{18} Regarding man-woman relationship he points out that one has to find the star of one's manhood rise within him and star of womanhood rise within her. Cipriano finds fault with Kate for her inability to comprehend Ramon's ideas. He gives the reason for it also: "You are compelled all the time to be thinking U.S.A. thoughts - compelled, I must say."\textsuperscript{19}

Ramon's relationship with Carlotta turns to be in a symbolic manner, the conflict between mental and phallic consciousness. Here again we notice that Ramon realizes the superiority of phallic consciousness over

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Plumed Serpent}, P.193.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., P.202.
mental consciousness. Carlotta loves him emotionally; loves mankind spiritually and feels mentally that she is quite right. The spontaneous mystery dies in her and her will gets hardened and she is nothing, but a lost will. The whole trend of her life has killed in her "the god in the woman, or the goddess, and left only charity, with a will." Ramon's objective is to help the Mexican's to find the beginning of their way to their own manhood and their own womanhood. The hymns and rituals do serve this objective:

The hymns and rituals were designed to appeal not to the mental-spiritual consciousness of English and American critics, but to the old "blood-and-vertebrate consciousness" of the novel's Mexicans ... Their purpose in the book, as Lawrence has taken pains to indicate, is to enable Ramon "to speak to the Mexicans in their own language." 20

Ramon and Cipriano move ahead with their plan of this "new legend" as others call it though there is widespread protest from the priests. Ramon wants Mexicans to learn the name of Quetzalcoatl because that would enable them to speak with the tongues of their own blood.

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Cipriano's proposal to marry Kate has to be taken in this prospective. She finds "his desire ... curiously impersonal, physical, and yet personal at all.". Kate complains that all others bring to her detest and despise. Ramon retorts that there is only one way to escape; "to turn beyond them, to the greater life." He feels that the one thing that a man really wants to do is to find his way to his God, his Morning Star, and he alone there. Second to this is saluting his fellowmen, and enjoy the woman who has come the long way with him.

Ramon points out the Bishop of the west how Christianity has failed miserably in the case of Mexicans. The church do not possess "the key-word to the Mexican Soul". He speaks his strongest conviction:

... that the time has come for a Catholic Church of the Earth, the Catholic church, of All the Sons of Men. The Saviours are more than one, and let us pray they will still be increased. But God is one God, and the Saviours are the Sons of the One God. 21

So they think that they have to reintroduce the old myth which lies deep in the consciousness of Mexican's. It is

21 The Plumed Serpent, P.263.
necessary to introduce a new Saviour to quench the need of their consciousness. In the words of Frank Kermode: "The gods are not indestructible, but the god-stuff is, taking new forms according to human need. And modern Mexico needs not a Saviour, but an authoritarian father..."\(^{22}\)

Ramon's purpose is solely to revive the Aztec cult for the redemption of the Indian soul in Mexico. For achieving this a drastic change in man-woman relationship is needed. Man and woman should ravish each other. Unless there is ravishment on both sides there is no meaning in the meeting. So one revishing another can't be regarded as sex: "It is not sex. It lies in the will. Victims and victimisers." David Cavitch comments on Ramon's objective:

The one activity in life that he wants to change is sexual relations. He believes that the present practice of "letting oneself go" in sex involves a man ravishing a woman, or a woman ravishing a man... From this center, sin spreads into all human relations, for they consist chiefly of people ravishing others and offering themselves for ravishment. His view

\(^{22}\) Frank Kermode., *Lawrence*, P.107.
of civilization is not far from the novel's emblematic opening picture of the horse and the bull.  

Kate slowly realizes the secret of Cipriano's influence on her. She could observe "the black fume of power which he emitted, the dark, heavy vibration of his blood, which cast a spell over her." She feels that he casts the old twilight Pan-power over her. She looks at him wordless: "Language had abandoned her, and she leaned silent and helpless in the vast, unspoken twilight of the Pan World. Herself had abandoned her, and all her day was gone. Only she said to herself: "My demon lover."  

She feels that she has fused into a sudden unconsciousness or we may say that she has achieved phallic consciousness. Sheila Macleod comments on the evolution of Cipriano to the state of a godhead and Kate's phallic consciousness thus:

... when he has proved himself in his leader's eyes, he too can achieve godhead and become a reincarnation of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war, fire and human sacrifice. In assuming such a role, he becomes 'once more the old, dominant male',


24 The Plumed Serpent, P.309.
capable of opening a new world to Kate. It is a world of 'twilight, with the dark, half-visible face of the demon-god Pan, who can never perish, but returns upon mankind from the shadows. The world of shadows and dark prostration, with the phallic wind rushing through the dark'. The prostration, however, is all Kate's. Sensing the 'phallic mystery' in Cipriano, she wants to give into him and his power completely.  

The executions conducted on behalf of the new religion shocks and depresses Kate. There comes deep in her soul revulsion against this manifestation of pure will. For her, disregarding her self and becoming Malintzi means a submission she has ever made. But when Cipriano claims that he cannot become a god unless she is a goddess, she gives in. After the executions, he comes to her, "flickering, flashing and strongly young, as young and boyish as a flame." She feels that both have regained their young spirit. The deeds of crudity make one feel whether Lawrence is advocating a reign of barbarity through Cipriano. But it has a definite purpose:

25 Sheila Macleod., Lawrence's Men and Women, P.87.
Cipriano cannot be blamed for murdering people, any more than fire or the sun can be blamed for burning people. Fire would not be fire if it were not capable of destruction. Fire and the gods are beyond human mortality. Is Lawrence really telling us that we can turn ourselves to gods and get away with murder?\textsuperscript{26}

Ramon's marriage with Teresa surprises Kate. Teresa loves Ramon with virgin loyalty as he has served her sex from the insult and restores it to her in its pride and beauty. Kate is convinced that the clue to all living and to all moving on into living lay in the blood relationship between a man and a woman. Teresa is offered to hear Kate's observation that her love to Ramon is a sacrifice and it exhausts her. She retorts that her soul is with Ramon. It is more than love and he is more than her husband. She says "He is my life". Kate believes in living one's own life individually. Teresa emphasizes on the need to give up one's whole self to another:\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., P.90.
But you can no more keep your soul inside you for yourself, without its dying, than you keep the seed of your tomb. Until a man gives you his seed, the seed of your womb is nothing. And the man's seed is nothing to him - And until you give your soul to a man, and he takes it, your soul is nothing to you ... And a women only betrays because only the part has been taken from her, and not the whole.  

Kate knows that Ramon is a greater man than Cipriano. It is painful for her to think that Teresa is greater than herself. Ramon has rejected her because of "a flame" in Teresa's eyes which she is lacking. Her marriage with Cipriano is curious and momentary. At his absence, she becomes her old individual self. Occasionally, the contact with him overwhelms her. Kate never fully submits to her phallic consciousness and she insists on keeping her self. Sheila Macleod comments on the protagonist's predicament:

Being both servants and embodiments of the phallic gods, neither Ramon nor Cipriano is sexless and if they are womanless, they can

27 The Plumed Serpent, P.408.
neither achieve nor retain their godhead. In becoming phallic gods-in-men they can admit their need for and dependence on woman. But not just any woman. Woman at her womanliest as they are men at the manliest. That is, woman recognizing and submitting to male superiority. The admission is conditional, and there it sticks. Kate Leslie never quite endorses Quetzalcoatl. Not even the blandishment of becoming a goddess - a step in the direction of an equal - but - separate policy - can altogether succeed in producing the woman who can willingly maintain the man in his frail state of maleness.²⁸

We find the protagonist in the last chapters is indecisive. She is neither lost to the world of mental consciousness nor gained to the world of phallic consciousness. She has experienced and seen the phallic mystery. But she fails to adopt it as her life-style. She sees in the Mexican eyes the proclamation "The blood is one blood. In the blood, you and I are undifferentiated". But her old self retorts: "My blood is my own". Kate's inability to adhere to the Mexican gods may be due to the fact that she belongs to another race.

²⁸ Sheila Macleod., Lawrence's Men and Women, P.91.
Cipriano avoids her curious irritant quality of talk. He makes her aware of her own old desire for frictional, irritant sensation. She realizes that she has to accept Cipriano whose strangeness she has been living: "She lived, in his aura, and he, she lived in hers, with nothing said, and no personal or spiritual intimacy whatever." 29

The narrative of *The Plumed Serpent* differ from that of Lawrence's other novels by exempting the protagonist from the mystification of sex. But violence seems to have taken its place in this novel:

One successful effect of the deflation of exaggerated violence throughout the novel is that Kate is relieved of the dangerously attractive powers and betraying compulsions that accompany the sexual nature of Helena, Getrude Morel, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, Lou Carrington, the nameless Woman, and the Princess. But *The Plumed Serpent* shows that, given Lawrence's views of the savagery of phallicism and the rapaciousness of independent women, his only recourse was to devalue sexual activity entirely, in favour

of quiescence. The one myth in *The Plumed Serpent* that is fully supported by the author's feelings is the characters descent from sexual exaltation to an ageing, familiar order of life.

The novel concludes with the protagonist realizing the duality in herself. "There is a conflict in me," she admits to Ramon. She cannot definitely commit herself either to the old way of life or to the new. "She reacted from both." The old way, she knows, has been a prison, and she loathes it. And the new way seems to deny her very individuality and she also gets "a bit bored with living Quetzalcoatl and the rest." She turns to be an instrument which balances between strong attraction and strong repulsion:

It was as if she had two selves: one, a new one, which belonged to Cipriano and to Ramon, and which was her sensitive, desirous self; the other hard and finished, accomplished belonging to her mother, her children, England, her whole past. The old accomplished self was curiously invulnerable and insentient.

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curiously hard and "free". In it, she was an individual and her own mistress. The other self was vulnerable, and organically connected with Cipriano, even with Ramon and Teresa, and so was not "free" at all.  

She can't move according to her desire to leave the place. Ramon observes her conflict and advises her to "listen to your own best desire". Cipriano reacts to her pleading words "You don't want me to go, do you?" with "I like you very much! very much." His words sound so soft, so soft-tongued, of the soft, wet, hot blood. She could help only to repeat "You won't let me go!" The novel ends with Kate's decision to stay in Mexico, but she, nevertheless, continues to carry "conflicting feelings in her breast".

Some critics have observed that the theme Lawrence has dealt with in The Plumed Serpent is irrational as he makes an attempt to institute synthetic savagery. It is true that the background of this novel offers a horror element and the use of language is mystical. But it is meant for the enrichment of humanity and not for its impoverishment.

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31 The Plumed Serpent, P.427.
What "Ramon means" is not the institution of savagery or the abandonment of civilized consciousness, but the attainment of a balanced, integrated personality by bringing into union the blood and the spirit, the dark and the light, the mind and the body, the eagle and the snake, Quetzal and Coatl: the aim is enrichment, not the impoverishment of life.  

The novelist's attempt to reintroduce the old myth has to be taken as his advocacy of phallic consciousness. But that doesn't mean that he dismisses "mind knowledge" completely. It is his assumption that civilization has gone too far in the direction of cerebral activity and needs a counterforce to restore the balance. Harry T. Moore observes that "It was not the acquisition of knowledge or the activity of the intellect that he hated, but the perversion of those processes." Keith Sagar has rightly observed that the narrative in The Plumed Serpent explores the possibilities of experience: "Is Don Ramon's trail the right

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32 Yudhishtar. Conflict in the Novels of D.H. Lawrence, P.255.

one: for him? for Mexico? for Kate?" To conclude, we may say that The Plumed Serpent is a remarkable piece of artistic work. Stressing its uniqueness Middleton Murry writes:

It (The Plumed Serpent) is a very remarkable novel; but inevitably, not one that can be assimilated into 'the great tradition' ... It has its secure and significant place in the only tradition to which Lawrence belongs - namely the tradition of himself. That this will one day become a genuine tradition, I have little doubt. It will happen, as always, that his genius will gradually create the mode of perception by which it can be appreciated in its own revolutionary uniqueness. 35
