A STUDY OF LIBIDO IN THE NOVELS OF D.H. LAWRENCE

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

D.H. Lawrence, “a mystical materialist,” was born at a time when the synthesis of the values which marks the Victorian era was disintegrating. The circumstances which were shattering faith in the social, economic, religious and moral creed of the age were building up to the breaking point of World War I. An explosive release from the Victorian repression of sexuality began to occur in the 1890’s; the taboo on the subject and the activity was openly assaulted and sex became a topic of acknowledged significance culminating in the discoveries of Freud and the new freedom of 1920’s. Belief in the Christian religion and with it moral and social convention had been seriously undermined by evidence derived from the physical sciences and Biblical textual criticism. Lawrence wrote in the midst of this shake-up of human values, attempting to provide the insight into the necessity and problem of getting free of the old values and contributing towards deeper understanding of the significance of sex and its place in human life:

After this brief historical perspective let’s come to the main issue of our discussion. Libido refers to a person's sex drive or desire for sexual activity.² The desire for sex is an aspect of a person's sexuality, The concept of libido was first introduced by Sigmund Freud as the instinct energy or force, contained in what Freud called the ‘Id’, the largely unconscious structure of the psyche.³

I would like, at the very outset, to make it clear that my inquiry has nothing to do with psychoanalysis. Lawrence himself was a pungent critic of Freudian idea of sex and sexuality. Thus, I propose the study of ‘libido’ that is, to great extent, based on Lawrence’s own idea of sexuality. But, at the same time it is enormously difficult task to have any clear and stable vision of Lawrence’s philosophy on the matter of sex partly because of ambiguity and inconsistency of his writings and partly because of his unstable and ambivalent personality. Yet, these drawbacks would not mar his genius and after all ‘truth’ is multidimensional and cannot be comprehended with finite mind so there are always possibilities of such defects.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libido
³ Ibid.
Both Lawrence and Freud attempted to liberate sex from the shackles of pseudo morality. In fact, sexual desire (libido) and the unconscious play a dominant role in the thinking of both Freud and Lawrence, but they mean very different things by the unconscious, and these differences in turn shape their very different notions of the nature and function of sexual instinct. Here lies the justification for the use of ‘libido’ that is ‘primarily’ Freudian term.

Lawrence had felt that Freud's notions of sex were too limited and mechanistic and that ‘the root was deeper’. The root, according to Lawrence, was pre-mental unconscious life. Psychoanalysis as he saw it was a means of imposing mental consciousness on this active, unique life-principle, of attempting to bind it in the shackles of cause and effect. Thus Lawrence's objections to Freudian psychology and analysis were in the wide sense religious, as he himself realised. He denied the validity of mechanistic procedures in psychoanalytic explanation on the basis of an intuitive conviction, tested in his own experience, of the uniqueness and individuality of living organisms, human or otherwise.

We must note that one of the most vital beliefs of Lawrence is that we should live with our whole beings—that body,
mind, soul, spirit all form one being. In fact living with only a part of one’s being leads to frustration and not to fulfillment. Thus, according to Lawrence, by accepting the body as part of the whole being we must live sensually—but not ‘sensually’ in a manner of Will and Anna Brangwen of *The Rainbow*. Lawrence believes in sensuality with tenderness. He believes that we become aware through touch, through the ‘blood’.

It should be noted that Lawrence’s views on this issue are more akin to ‘Tantrism’. For the practitioners of Tantra as well as for Lawrence, the transcendent bliss that proceeds from ritual sexuality is believed to be the height of religious experience. Lawrence’s attempt to reconcile the spiritual with the physical realities by affirming the "divinity of the flesh" through a harmonious sexual union was probably his most successful path to "unity of being" and the realization of the ‘true self’.

In this dissertation, for the purpose of inquiry into the matter of sexuality in general and libido in particular, only four major novels have been selected—*Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

*Sons and Lovers* has a structure rigorously controlled by an idea; an idea of an organic disturbance in relationship of men
and women, a disturbance of sexual polarities that is first seen in
the dissatisfaction of mother and father, then in the mother’s
attempt to substitute her sons for her husband, finally in the sons’
unsuccessful yet relentless struggle to establish natural manhood.

Let us proceed with Gertrude and Walter and the role
played by libido in this relationship. In the beginning, the
relationship between Gertrude and Walter is based on and sustained
by the life of instinct. This relationship begins on the strength of
Walter being passionate, impulsive, virile and instinctive. In this
phase libido and its fulfillment (not gratification) plays a very
significant role in the direction of establishing a ‘balanced polarity’.
Unfortunately, later on Gertrude, being puritan, takes recourse to
‘life of mind’. In other words, she begins asserting the life of
intellect; starts feeling miserable and makes other miserable. In fact,
she loses her faith on ‘religion of blood’. So she becomes incapable
of possessing the ‘bliss’ she earlier had.

Paul, the central figure of *Sons and Lovers*, strives
relentlessly, throughout the novel, to strike a ‘balanced polarity’ –
to actualize his true self in compliance with ‘calling of the soul’.
Naturally, libido plays a very decisive role in the evolution of
Paul’s personality. The personality of Paul, as a matter of fact is a
fragmented one. He and his mother are so largely dependent on each other so as to hamper the natural growth of Paul as ‘man.’ Paul swings like a ping-pong ball amidst the three female characters—Gertrude, Miriam and Clara—all having a peculiarly different sort of personalities.

Ultimately, the ‘male’ inside Paul propels him to make efforts to get rid of his obsession with his mother, to unfasten her hold over him and seek fulfillment with other women—Miriam and Clara. He first turns to Miriam for fulfillment of this desire (libido) but is finally disgruntled. Obviously because Miriam is predominantly spiritual and she has nothing but her spirituality to offer him. She does not want to yield her ‘complete self’. It should be noted here, though Paul and Miriam have sex; that is simply gratification and not fulfillment of libido. Failure on the part of Miriam to baptize herself and Paul by fire of passion drives Paul towards Clara, ‘an embodiment of passion’. In fact, in Paul –Clara relationship, there is a sort of ‘baptism by fire of passion’ but not a complete one so as to make Paul actualise ‘his being’.

Finally, after his mother’s death Paul has a sense of ‘nothingness’. This sense of nothingness clearly suggests, apart from other things, the dissolution of the ‘old stable ego’ of Paul.
Resultantly, it shatters illusions—a big leap to actualize his ‘true being’.

D. H. Lawrence calls *The Rainbow* "a voyage of discovery towards the real, eternal and unknown land." The title of this novel recalls the Biblical covenant symbolic of relationship, communication and faith between God and man. Insistence of Lawrence is that, within the cycle of time man is repeatedly reborn, thrust forward by the wave of regenerative history and abandoned, ostensibly defenseless but, actually, possessing the mystic clue to life--vitality.

Sexual desire (libido) and sexual act (coition) are very important in the regenerative process. If it is achieved, it becomes the via media of a delicate balance between sexes and in turn creates the ‘new being’. In *The Rainbow*, Tom Brangwen’s great adventure is his adventure into the woman Lydia Lenskey. This creates a new awareness within him—the birth of new self within the known and acknowledged self. Lawrence feels that the source of deep human desire is ‘the unknown,’ the primal unknown from which all creation issues. Further in order to become fulfilled we

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must yield our ultimate will to the unknown. Tom Brangwan realizes this and in order to find himself, he gives himself over to the ‘unknown’ in the woman. Once this is done the promise of rainbow is partially fulfilled. Towards the end of his life he realises that his life had been one long marital embrace, but both he and his wife had stopped just short of the “Great Unknown”; they do not go on to explore the new world which they have glimpsed. The rainbow in the novel symbolises the transfigured life. Tom and Lydia receive the call and respond and are saved.

Contrary to Tom and Lydia, there is relationship of Will and Anna, replete with evils of domination and the egoistical clash of wills. In their context sexual desire (libido) works almost negatively. Being ego dominated, Anna and Will do not recognize their respective ‘otherness’. In fact, a recognition of this otherness goes with a recognition that man and woman come together rhythmically. The coming together must be spontaneous, must arise from a need below the level of mere mental consciousness. It must not be willed, it must not solely arise from the ego. But Anna and Will’s coming together is willed from the very beginning. Much more, at a certain phase of their relationship, gratification of the libido becomes the sole aim of Will’s life—that is nothing but lust.
So they reject the call of the rainbow and turn towards disintegration—Will to church and Anaa to her role of Magna Mater.

The third love affair in the Rainbow, between Ursula and Skrebensky, fails because it too is willed from the very beginning. The immense energy of the libidinal force could not be harnessed and sex could not become a means of transfiguration and ‘leaping off into the unknown’. In fact Ursula wants something of Skrebensky that he cannot give her. This is because he lacks individuality. His life lies in the established order of the society. So the passion he offers Ursula excludes ‘the unknown’.

*Women in Love* records a soul’s liberation from the fetters of materialism. Ursula Brangwen who, in *The Rainbow*, achieves the primary "living relationship" of self-unification, in *Women in Love* proceeds with Rupert Birkin to the secondary "living relationship with another individual, which Lawrence calls the relationship of balanced opposites. Together, they achieve the ultimate cosmic relationship with "The Unknown" or God and a further step towards Lawrence's new social order. This creative experience, comprising successive exfoliations of the self, is portrayed artistically as a series
of transcendences and transformations contributing to new
dimensions of awareness and perception of a reality more psychic
than material. Parallel to this evolution is the destructive "devolution"
of Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich. Their lives spiral towards a
disintegrative nadir of death and degradation, just as Ursula and
Birkin ascend to an apex of creative reality.

In *Women in Love* we find two aspects of libido—
redemptive and destructive—in function. In the relationship
between Ursula and Birkin libido works in a redemptive manner
resulting ultimately in their regeneration. In the relationship
between Gerald and Gudrun it works destructively leading to their
disintegration.

Ursula and Birkin base their standard of values on pure
being. Rejecting the dynamics of property ownership they find in
love the ultimate harbinger of real happiness. Initially Birkin
corrupted by his experience, (especially with Hermoine Roddice),
though desirous of love is unwilling to forfeit his proud singleness.
However, after Ursula’s flouncing off, Birkin makes the final
commitment. His heart wins over his mind and he wants her to
return to him. He affirms his faith in ‘otherness’. Ursula and Birkin,
however, acknowledge only independent ‘otherness’, involving
neither mastery nor subservience. Such sort of ‘otherness’ naturally suggests absence of ego.

In this way, both Ursula and Birkin who choose love as the vehicle of their adventure into the unknown are affirmed by it. Their true union is marked both by transformation and transcendence to a better state of "tenderness" instead of sexual greed. It should be noted that this union of ideal and physical response achieves Ursula's childhood dream about ‘the sons of God seeing the daughters of men’.

On the other hand the trio of Gudrun, Gerald and Loerke suggests the process of disintegration. Love between Gudrun and Gerald is a matter of self assertion, another form of hatred. Characteristically enough they do not seek affirmation of the other. In other words there is no recognition of the ‘otherness.’ So their love becomes a struggle for supremacy where the assertion of the one implies the annihilation of the other. Naturally, sexual communion between such ego dominated male and female is not going to prove a ‘leap into the unknown.’ In fact this is nothing but satiation of their lust. Owing to inherent fallacies of their personalities they meet their destined end. Gerald is ultimately destroyed and meets his icy death while Gudrun remains wedded to
soulless abstraction of pure art. It should be noted that at first
Gerald, by virtue of the will, destroys Pussum and later he himself
is destroyed by Gudrun by the power of this diabolical will—an
agent of ego. Further, perversions of Gudrun and Loerke’s take
them back to the pre-adamic days because they do not venture forth
into the great adventure of the ‘the unknown’. This failure on their
part leads them towards disintegration.

*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* treats numerous aspects of life
including sexual purpose and various aspects of this urge. It's
probably this novel which is mainly responsible for the popular
image of Lawrence as a writer who deals with sexual themes and
celebrates the life of the instincts against the suppressive forces of
so-called civilized society.

We find, in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, hatred for libido,
gratification of libido and fulfillment of libido in the relationships
between Clifford-Connie, Michaelis-Connie and Mellor-Connie
respectively. After her marriage, Connie has been trapped in
Clifford’s dead and barren world of intellect. There is no space for
the life of instinct. In fact their marriage is a nullity because a
marriage is no marriage unless it is basically and permanently
phallic. So there is no blood correspondence in their relationship.
Clifford is not only physically disable but also emotionally paralyzed. Hence, in their relationship, there is complete denial of the ‘life of body’. Such a situation is really unbearable. Sexual desire (libido) of Connie finds no physical expression, so it causes loss of vitality and suffocation.

In such a state of fiasco, only sex coupled with love and tenderness can save her from being annihilated and it is Mellor who is responsible for her awakening and resurrection. Before Mellor-Connie there is one interlude of sexual relationship between Michaelis and Connie. It should be noted that sex devoid of love and tenderness is meaningless. The sexual relationship between them clearly reflects this aspect. There is simply gratification of libido and no real sex at all. Though Connie’s relationship with Michaelis make her aware again of her pent-up sexual desire yet it makes her strongly detached and discontented, because Michaelis wants from it only the swift success of consummation and has no obligation to the spirit. Obviously he has no regard for Connie herself and there is no tenderness which is prerequisite of sexual fulfillment.

Awakening to the phallic consciousness requires ‘oneness out of twoness’. This accomplishment of ‘oneness out of twoness’
does not occur immediately with the first sexual contact between Connie and Mellors. It is only in their third sexual encounter that they have mutual orgasm which brings Connie into a oneness she has never known. She is consumed by the pure element—fire and water—as she is at first conscious, then unconscious of the episode. The flame of orgasm unites both Connie and Mellors into an ‘oneness’ and a ‘blood consciousness’.

Thus, for Lawrence, the ‘act of coition’ triggered by libido is meaningful only when it is coupled with love and tenderness tending towards the “leaping off into the unknown.”