

Ursula's Feministic Perspective in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love***Mamta Mahendru**Assistant Professor
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Punjab**Abstract**

Feminism is both an intellectual and political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of gender-based politics in all forms. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and life experiences. D. H. Lawrence breaks the stereotyped notions of the society by taking the unconventional and feminine themes in his novels against the patriarchal backdrop. He is always obsessed with the role and position of woman in a male-dominated society. He never portrays his women characters as weak or suppressed rather he projects them as strong and at a challenging position who refuse to follow male divine order. *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* are the psychological novels which present the study of female mind and its desires. This paper is an endeavour to analyse the feministic perspective of the character of Ursula Brangwen through her epic journey to find her identity. She refuses to inherit the self-sacrificing role of a traditional woman and challenges the royal authority of her male-counterparts. She struggles to overcome all the obstructions come in her way and finally, emerges as an iconic heroine of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Feminism, Stereotyped, Conventional, Patriarchy, Identity, Independence.

The term 'Feminism' is applied to a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economical, cultural and social rights for women. This includes providing equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist supports the rights and equality for women. Feminism is both an intellectual and political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of gender-based politics in all forms. Toril Moi in her essay "Feminist Literary Criticism" writes "Feminist theory must in some way be relevant to the study of the social, institutional and power relations between the sexes" (Moi, 1986: 204). Important topics for feminist theory includes: the body, class and work, disability, family, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism, reproduction, science, the self, sex work and sexuality. Feminist theory aims to understand the

nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and life experiences. It has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender. Some of the earlier forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle class, educated perspectives. This led to the creation of ethnically specific or multiculturalists forms of feminism.

Lawrence has always been considered a writer who tries to break the stereotype notions and set conventions of the society. Through his novels, he created many new unconventional relationships beyond the constraints and conventions of society. Due to its biased parameters and narrow-mindedness, the contemporary society failed to recognise the feministic approach he applied in his novels and labelled him as an anti-feminist. But I argue if we probe deeper into his works we can find that Lawrence writes with a strong feministic point of view. His novels are chiefly the studies of the feminine minds. He deals with the struggles faced by the women from the different sections of society. He portrays his female characters fighting to free themselves from the shackles and demands their male partners impose on them. Women characters often predominate in the subject matter of his novels. His female characters are not the traditional, suppressed women who just weep and cry over the atrocities inflicted upon them by patriarchy. Rather they carve their own niche by fighting against all odds and depressions pour down upon them by society time and again and every time they emerge stronger than before. It appears that Toril Moi writes about the authors like Lawrence in her essay, "We must aim for a society in which we have ceased to categorise logic, conceptualisation and rationality as masculine not for one from which these writers have been expelled altogether as unfeminine" (Moi,1986:220). If we read the novels of Lawrence we will find that Lawrence is the writer who dares to create such societies in his novels where the above-mentioned qualities are associated with women. Who can forget the unforgettable characters of Anna, Gudrun, Lydia, Gertrude and Ursula who refuse to act as the inheritors of the traditional self-sacrificing women rather challenged the authority of their male-counterparts? I, in this paper, endeavour to analyse the character of Ursula Brangwen from *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* as feministic who successfully overcomes all the obstructions come in her way and finally emerges as an iconic figure in the history of English Literature.

With the publication of *The Rainbow* in 1915, Lawrence's name began to be associated with sexual license and literary scandal because of the sexual nature of its content. But the novel opens the new vistas of human psychology and the human being's quest to find the perfect balance in life. Through this novel he tries to say that the beauty of man-woman relationship lies in attaining the stage of perfect balance through the practice of being egoless. According to Lawrence, "The whole crux of life now lies in the relation between man and woman, between Adam and Eve. In this relation we live and die" (Scherr 13). In *The Rainbow*, Lawrence takes the readers through three generations of Brangwen family and finally sets his focus on Ursula Brangwen, a universal character who poses great questions to male dominated society. Keith Sagar remarks about her, "Ursula is the first 'free soul' in the English novel" (Sagar 57). From the very

childhood she shows herself to be very intelligent and independent. She fights against society's connections and restrictions almost from the beginning and "Gradually she became conscious that she could not go on living at home as she was doing, without place or meaning or worth." (301) We witness her development and her widening circle from a child to adolescence and then to young womanhood.

Lawrence is always obsessed with the role and position of woman in a patriarchal society. In the first chapter of *The Rainbow*, Lawrence states, "The woman was the symbol for that further life which comprised religion and love and morality" (Lawrence, 2010: 13). He delineates his female characters very minutely. He always assigns the major roles to women. It seems that he writes his female characters in the disguise of a woman. Lawrence frames Ursula's character originally in *The Rainbow* where each detail of her family background is given including her sexual history. She is portrayed as a middle class girl with a devastating sexual affair with Anton Skrebensky, a materialistic and shallow officer in British army, and a lesbian love-affair with her school-teacher, Winifred Inger. Later, she also has the experience as a school-mistress in a local school. She experiences all kinds of sexual experiences and full range of human sexuality to attain the highest point of perfect unity with Birkin in *Women in Love*. "Ursula doggedly persists, veering away from that from which her soul recoils, moving into unknown territory with no better guide than the principle of trial and error, deep sense of responsibility for her own life, and an destructible faith, at the very centre of her, surviving all disillusion, in a world of 'absolute truth and living mystery' within the everyday world, within the everyday world, within herself and all living things" (Sagar 57)

The character of Ursula is so much powerful and fascinating that it appears to negate the argument posed by Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* "Woman is polarized downwards towards the centre of the earth...and man is polarized upwards towards the sun and the day's activity." (Beauvoir, 1953:229). Unlike the other heroines of her era, Ursula owns a strong will of her own and rejects domesticity of her mother's life. She lives in a separate world of her own violent will. She is a free, unbeatable animal. "An all containing will in her for complete independence, complete social independence, complete independence from any personal authority" (281). She yearns for the world beyond and when she finds Skrebensky, she feels that she would be able to realize herself through this passion. But she rejects him after realising his fakeness and hypocrisy. In his absence, her search for identity takes her through some erotic experiences and she encounters some characters like Miss Inger, uncle Tom, the school Principal and Miss Harby, which prove helpful for her to know her real worth. It leads her to the path of her self-discovery as well as self-development; very unconventional terms for the women of Victorian era. Ursula's decisions create many problems for her. She even suffers the agony of miscarriage but she gets up with a new courage and hope for better future.

By exploring the character of Ursula in *The Rainbow* Lawrence discusses the changing status of the modern woman from a housewife to a

career-focussed woman. Ursula decides to struggle in the search for her independence and identity. On her personal Odyssey she faces all of life's big questions: marriage, love, maternity, economic independence and the place of woman in society. Lawrence writes "the liberty of woman meant something real and deep. She felt that somewhere, in something, she was not free. And she wanted to be. She was in revolt. For once she were free she could get somewhere. Ah, the wonderful, real somewhere that was beyond her, the somewhere that she felt deep, deep inside her" (343). In the process of becoming a modern independent women, Ursula explores, progresses, advances, thinks and feels. The character of Ursula can be considered as one of the best example of feminism in the history of English literature. Lawrence treats her with so much courage that he discusses a taboo subject of homosexuality through her. "Suddenly Ursula found a queer awareness between herself and her class-mistress, Miss Inger" (282). The gravity of her passion for her teacher Miss Inger and the description of their physical union is not only on the surface level but also on the psychological level. Ursula's frustration against the traditional ways of her parents finds expression in the form of this affair and she starts to cross the patriarchal limits set by society. Ursula adores Miss Inger as an epitome of independence for which she craves. "She was proud and free as a man, yet exquisite as a woman." (283).

Ursula's achievement in the whole novel is to attain freedom by unconventional ways. When Ursula decides to teach, the first obstacle comes in her way is her father Will Brangwen, a peculiar product of patriarchy. He tries to impose his will on her. He rejects her request to teach in the school where her application has been approved. He says, "You're not going all that distance," (308). He instead sends her to teach in a nearby Brinsley Street School where she experiences a horrible and suffocating atmosphere. But she never loses her confidence. In spite of all the difficulties and problems, she completes her session of teaching and emerges as a determined woman with strong universal appeal. "She has a standing ground now apart from her parents. She was something else besides the mere daughter of William and Anna Brangwen. She was independent. She earned her own living. She was an important member of working community." (329).

In the works of D. H. Lawrence, male characters never have such big part to play, nor are they seen so wholly and roundly. The men turn up and perform as secondary characters, related to them or needed by them as props. The women characters are often so powerful that they devour all their male counterparts like Ursula completely demolishes her lover Anton Skrebensky, who is an officer in army. Due to her determination to attain self-independence, she rejects him. He wants to marry her at any cost. By marrying him she can have a bright future in India because Anton's senior officers have a high opinion for him but Ursula thinks another way. After sharing a very passionate relationship with him, she leaves him for leading life on her own terms and declines his marriage proposal. She never likes his too materialistic and opportunistic attitude. "If she were his social wife, if she were part of this complication of dead reality, then what had his under-life to do with her? One's

social wife was almost a material symbol.” (382). Her feministic attitude comes very often on the surface whenever she talks to Anton, “Her eyes blazed at him, he felt as if she wanted to destroy him. She had gripped him and was trying to break him.” (389). Soon after Ursula’s refusal, Anton marries Colonel Hepburns’s daughter and goes to India. Ursula gets aware about her pregnancy and feels very disheartened. In a traumatic and depressed state of mind, she meets a nightmare involving a crowd of the horses attack on her and she has a miscarriage.

Feminism not only lies in the movements organised and revolutions passed in favour of women rather it is the ability to take right decision by a woman at the most crucial time of her life. After the departure of Anton, Ursula has transformed into a weak and submissive woman, who just like any traditional woman, wants the support of her man but at this point her feministic tendency interrupts with all its might and forbids this iconic heroine to bow before a weak male. This new birth of Ursula is presented in the form of the rainbow which she sees at the end of the novel. She finds in the rainbow the new meaning and the recreation of life. She overcomes the traditional self-sacrificing role of woman and visualizes the life with a completely new rainbow of colours. Lawrence’s fascination for Ursula does not end with the completion of *The Rainbow* rather her journey for self-emancipation carries on in his next novel, *Women in Love*, in which she is again presented with her same passion for being independent but with additional spark, wisdom and maturity. Here, a new companion joins her in her odyssey, i.e. her younger sister Gudrun. She is the advanced version of Ursula, more independent and also more wild. Their Feministic approach give a new turn to the English novel by presenting the women characters in much modern and unconventional way.

In *Women in Love*, Lawrence describes a record of deep and passionate desires of modern individual. It records the life experiences of Ursula, Gudrun and their lovers Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich respectively. The couples’ passions are set against the chaos of World War I. Lawrence captures the hidden subtleties and describes women’s growing awareness of sensuality with delicate intimacy. The questioning nature of both the sisters comes before the readers in the very first chapter of the novel ‘Sisters’ when Gudrun openly argues about the conventional nature of marriage and condemns the patriarchal society, “Ursula, don’t you really want to get married?” (1) The chapter analyses the essential question of feminism that is necessity of marriage and radical isolation of the modern women. Beauvoir writes for such women in her book, “when woman has become sexually conscious of herself, there she is functioning away from her own head and her own consciousness of herself and her own self-will.” (Beauvoir 230). Both sisters are portrayed as the modern women with grasping qualities of independence.

The modernist writers such as Lawrence sought to question any fixed relation between women and her social environment and to break away from conventions through experimentation with new forms, devices and styles by introducing the different critical theories. “Finally, due to his rebellious

thoughts, Lawrence became a distinctive iconoclasm in his fiction and a representative figure of modernist era, where modernism sought to accurately portray the world not as it is but as humans actually experience it.”(Robbins398)

In *Women in Love* we see a more mature and grown up side of Ursula. Though she is a little bit confused in the starting of her relations with Birkin yet she is succeeded in attaining a fine balance with him in the form of their marriage. But time and again she never forgets to show her feministic side to Birkin. She is the perfect representative of feminism and not ready to sacrifice her independence for anybody. When Birkin goes to propose Ursula to her house, he was not at all serious about Ursula’s response and tries to bully her. But Ursula does not want to be bullied by either Birkin or her father. She instantly rejects his proposal. “She stood suspended in the middle of the room, her face glimmering and dangerous.” (295). Many a times, in the novel, we find the traces of anti-feminism in Birkin’s attitude and behaviour. But every time Ursula, with the strong strength of her character and her influence makes him realise his mistake. Once Ursula sees him hitting the image of the moon in a pond. Again and again, he throws stones at the pond to destroy the image of the moon. Here the moon symbolises the image of a woman. The incident implies his deep desire to destroy woman as a whole because of his obsessive fear of being dominated by women. But the more he tries the more dissatisfies he is because the broken image of the moon rearranges itself in the water. “he saw the moon regathering itself” (279). This is the symbolic re-gathering of the Ursula’s self and courage which never let her down in any circumstances.

Feminist critics believe that gender differences are culturally determined, not inborn. They interpret literature as a record of male-dominance. Womanhood is a role defined by society rather than a natural condition. Although, Lawrence applies feminism in his works and presents very strong and powerful image of woman, yet he explores his female characters from different perspective. He tries to set up a form of equality between the sexes. Males try to convince female through imposing their will upon them is seen throughout the writing of Lawrence but through introducing the characters like Ursula, he rejects the idea of patriarchy. Though Ursula faces many challenges and suffers many losses but at the end she wins majestically. She realizes that she can have much more than what she desired. She is no more a sufferer when she gets aware about her real worth as a woman and as a human being. She has become a landmark in the history of English literature. Ursula is no more a character drawn by Lawrence rather she has become an icon to be followed. She is a trend-setter for all the women of coming generations and lighted their way to be walked on.

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