

Discovering Lawrence

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My first introduction to D. H. Lawrence was through his poem “The Great Newspaper Editor to his Subordinate” when I was in high school, many many years ago...1987 to be exact.

I still remember enjoying the poem immensely, especially the part where he says: “Oh, so happy, you sappy.” I thought that the poet was really witty, though his name didn’t really register, and I forgot him after that. I did not read anything by Lawrence again till 1995, when I studied English literature for a civil service exam. The book included in the syllabus was *Sons and Lovers*. To this day I believe that one of the greatest benefits I got out of studying for that exam was getting to know Lawrence.

I want to dwell on this a little, because this was my first real introduction to Lawrence. I went on to write a literary review of the book entitled “Absolutely, Not” for *The News on Friday* (now *The News on Sunday*), a prominent English language newspaper in Pakistan. This was 25 years ago, in 1996. My article highlighted what it was that spoke to me in Lawrence’s writing. First, of course, there was the sheer power of his prose. Lawrence paints vivid word-pictures in what has been called incantatory prose. But there was more. I could really relate to the book. Not only did it provide new insights, but it also talked about phenomena that were only too familiar to my generation here in Pakistan. To begin with, we in Pakistan also subscribed, still subscribes, albeit in a hypocritical way, to the idea of the subservience of the body to the mind or spirit. Just like the Victorians or Edwardians, our society also “promotes a false spirituality and belittles the importance of the physical body.” Connected to this is the idea of shame, for which Pakistani women in particular have to be responsible. Here’s Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*:

There was a serpent in her Eden. She searched earnestly I herself to see if she wanted Paul Morel. She felt there would be some disgrace in it. Full of twisted feeling, she was afraid she did want him. She stood self-convicted. Then came an agony of new shame.

She admits to Paul that she has been taught to regard desire as shameful: “All my life, mother said to me, ‘there is one thing in marriage that is always dreadful but you have to bear it.’ And I believed it.” I don’t know if young girls in Pakistan feel this way now, but in my day, this was pretty much the default mode for conservative families like mine.

Moreover, the mother-dominance described by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* was something very relatable. I actually quoted Lawrence in my article, saying that what he had written was “the tragedy of thousands of young men in England,” and I said: “Not only in England, one might add.” But here’s an interesting thing: when I first read *Sons and Lovers* in my 20s, I read it from the perspective of a young woman. But when I re-read the book after some 20-odd years, I was amazed to see the insight and sensitivity with which Lawrence had shown how that mother-child bond was created, and how it could not but be as strong as it was. This was another thing that I related to personally, now that I was a mother myself.

So this was, like I said, my first real encounter with Lawrence and it left its mark, even though I got sidetracked for a few years after reading this book. I did not come back to Lawrence again till the year 2002, when I ventured out of Pakistan for the first time in my life as a graduate student at Montana State University, Bozeman. One day at the Renne library, my eye was caught by a book—it was Harry T. Moore’s *D. H. Lawrence: Sex, Literature, and Censorship*. This was my first introduction to Lawrence’s essays, aided by Moore’s introduction entitled: “D. H.

Lawrence and the Censor-morons.” Coming from a country and a culture that delighted in censorship of all kinds, and being of a rather contrary bent of mind, I naturally read it with great interest. I found the twin essays “Pornography and Obscenity,” and “A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover” very relatable and convincing. Lawrence seemed to be describing Pakistani society in the year 2002 when he was talking about his own almost a hundred ago.

I ended up writing a Master’s thesis on Lawrence and literary theory at MSU. Later, during my PhD studies at the University of Alberta and Idaho State University, I knew that I wanted to work on Lawrence again. This time it was his nonfiction, which I often find much more interesting than his fiction, especially his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, which is indeed, as he calls it, a compilation of “very keen essays in criticism.” I think that I find Lawrence’s nonfiction more accessible than his fiction because he takes up more universal themes in it. As someone who has never visited England, the English settings of much of his fiction, the speech and dialect he often reverts to, and many other references are not as clear to me as they would be to someone who is more familiar with the country. I can relate better to his nonfiction because it involves universal human themes more often. However, that is not to say that Lawrence’s fiction provides no common experiences or philosophies. Indeed, some of his fiction is largely symbolic and atemporal, like *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, and even *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Lawrence’s subject for most of his fiction was the relationship between men and women, with both of them balanced with each other like stars, as per Birkin in *Women in Love*, and each of them (especially the man) keeping their individuality intact. This attempt, if only in thought, to create balanced human relationships where no one dominates anyone else, is probably the most important problem in social relationships, not only amorous, but of all kinds.

What I really admire about Lawrence, apart from his virtuosity with words, is his fierce individuality, his rebelliousness, his powers of perception and his common sense, his comic rages, his contrariness and his anti-intellectual stance, and most of all, his focus on the body and bodily autonomy, and his rejection of automation and the machine in favor of the human, and not just the human, but everything in nature itself. Like Lawrence himself, I do not see him as “the British Isles on two legs,” but as a consciousness which is accessible to me, even if it is foreign, so to speak. As it often happens when we study a particular author, we find common interests, points of agreement, a similar *temperament*--irrespective of time or place, race or gender—that endear the author to us because we have somehow connected with their consciousness. It is this common humanity, not some internalization of a White European male’s ideas, which makes me admire, and often enough, love D. H. Lawrence like a close friend.

Acknowledgements

Woks consulted and referenced include Moore, Harry T., editor. *D. H. Lawrence: Sex, Literature and Censorship*. Viking, 1959; Lawrence, D. H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Letter to Amy Lowell 1917, *Sea and Sardinia, Sons and Lovers, Studies in Classic American Literature*, "The Great Newspaper Editor to his Subordinate," *The Virgin and the Gypsy, Women in Love*; Rehan, Naveed. "Absolutely, Not." *The News on Friday*, 22 March 1996.