



## RESEARCH PAPER

## First World War and a Vision of Global Chaos and Decay: An Analysis of D. H. Lawrence's Post-War Novels

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## ABSTRACT

The present research aims to explore a vision of global chaos and decay in Lawrence's post-war novels. A careful comparison of Lawrence's early and later novels shows that his pre-war novels reflect his zest for life and blissful blindness to bitter social realities. However, the outbreak of the Great War (1914-18) made him realize inherent death wish and suicidal instincts in European culture and this bitter realization of modern anti-life filled him with disgust for the European culture which is reflected in his post-war novels. The present research has adopted a qualitative method for the collection and analysis of the relevant data. The analysis proves that there is a marked difference between Lawrence's pre-war and post-war novels. Later novels are full of imagery associated with decay, death, impotency and rottenness representing modern anti life. Future researchers can carry out other such research projects to explore the impact of war on various literary texts.

**Keywords:** The Great War, Pre-War Novels, Post-War Novels, Flux of corruption, Anti-life

## Introduction

D.H. Lawrence was a sensitive modernist writer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His vision and temperament kept on growing with the passage of time owing to his personal experiences and contemporary socio-political events and changes. First World War (1914-1919) was an important event he witnessed as a young man. The war made him suffer a lot because of his wife's German origin. The bitter experience during the war left a far-reaching impact on his psyche and vision which is reflected in his writings composed during and after the war. The Great War made Lawrence become conscious of the miserable condition of society and recognize its power to affect individuals' life. It gave him the pungent realization of society's pressures and its crucial role in characters' life.

The First World War had a significant influence on Lawrence. It changed his outlook on life and society. There is a marked difference between the writer's pre-war and post-war novels. Before the war his works express his optimism and zest for life. But the outbreak of war filled him with cynicism and disgust which is reflected in his works of the time. Thus, his post-war novels present a vision of global chaos and decay.

## Literature Review

Various critics have referred to Lawrence's response to the first world war. They have traced its effect on Lawrence's vision and his works. Keith Sagar (1979) refers to Lawrence's instant reaction to the great war- frail hope that the war would bring new life- and also his subsequent disillusionment. He frequently quotes from Lawrence's letters to elucidate his shifting attitude after the War. He traces symbols of rottenness in *Women in Love* and hints at the flux of corruption depicted in the novel. Similarly, Gamini Salgado (1982), in his book, *A Preface to Lawrence*, gives an account of Lawrence's life and believes that the War was a vital episode of his life, which changed his vision and approach. He, like

Sagar, primarily relies on Lawrence's letters to illustrate the change in his attitudes to different things such as society, man and human relationships. Marianna Torgovnik (2001), in her article, "Narrating sexuality: *The Rainbow*" compares *The Rainbow* with *Women in Love* and maintains that the emerging hardness and bitterness in the later novel is due to the war. She believes that in the period between the composition of these two novels great change had occurred in Lawrence.

Hugh Stevens (2001), in his article, maintains that the war left "lasting effects" on Lawrence. The wounds of war "were taken into himself" (p. 50). He also refers to Lawrence's pre-occupation with violence and perversity, and his preference for other cultures in his later novels. Stevens also links the elements of violence and cruelty in *Women in Love* with the writer's torturing experiences during the War. He identifies that Lawrence's wartime works portray "human relationships hyperbolically marked by plays of power and subordination, cruelty and violence" (p. 52). Alastair Niven (1979) holds that Lawrence's faith in the greatness and supremacy of man dwindled due to the War. According to him, "The War had led to a catastrophic loss of faith in humanity.... The War years crystallized his hatred of mob" (p. 151).

According to Fiona Becket (2002), the period from 1914 till the end of the Great war was a disheartening time and Lawrence considered the inhuman war as "the last throes of a degenerate 'mechanistic western culture'" (p. 17). Thus, Becket thinks that War was the outcome of the greater crisis of death wish in degenerate European culture. David Ellis (1993), in his introduction to *Women in Love*, holds that the War changed Lawrence's attitude to society. It made him express violent repudiation of the industrial society.

Thus, a number of critics have talked about the influence of the first world war on Lawrence's sensibility and his works. But none of these critics takes the issue in detail. They have made casual references to the War and its impact on Lawrence. These writers did not attempt to compare Lawrence's early novels with his post-war novels to show the characteristic change that is quite visible in his later novels. They have not taken into account Lawrence's own experiences during the War and their repercussions in his works. They have ignored the psychoanalytical aspects of suppressed desires of fear and disgust in Lawrence, which resulted in his bitterness, repulsion and cynicism. This research has adopted psycho-biographical approach by examining how Lawrence's personal experiences of the War generated repulsion and bitterness in him and how this bitterness is internalised in characters. His later novels give an outlet to his pent-up emotions of horror, disgust and anger implanted by the War in his psyche.

## Material and Methods

This study for the most part uses comparative method. Its aim is to compare Lawrence's pre-war novels with those written in the post-war period to indicate how the direction of Lawrence's thought developed as a result of the Great War. Qualitative research method is employed. Attempt is made to analyse Lawrence's post-war novels in detail to show how Lawrence in his post-war fiction presents a picture of global chaos and decay. Content analysis is used as a technique for data collection and analysis. The study aims to explore the changes in Lawrence's approach and explains the role played by the Great War in bringing about these changes. Psychoanalytical theory is applied at some places to show how the war made Lawrence go through torturing and humiliating experiences, which filled him with bitterness and cynicism and thus affecting all his works written after the war.

## Results and Discussion

The Great War, according to Lawrence, was a side effect of a greater crisis-death wish in European culture, which Lawrence foresaw in *The Prussian Officer*, written before the War. But the War intensified this awareness. It made him realize that European culture

was exhausted and was incapable of rebirth. Lawrence, in post-War period, perceives this death wish in European people. The war was a manifestation of a crisis of more serious kind i.e. suicidal wish in European culture. The War removed veil from the face of Europe and now he could see its real horrible visage. It gave him the harsh consciousness that modern society was a quagmire of corruption and disintegration. He also realized that this disintegration was centrifugal with no chances of synthesis. This astringent perception resulted, as the post-War novels prove, in his pessimism, cynicism, and detestation of society, man and Europe. The post-War novels offer a picture of global chaos; he finds ugliness everywhere and is greatly "depressed by the sense of evil in the world" (1981, p. 310). There is greater cognizance of the social world in post-War novels. Now Lawrence felt that the individual's encounter with society is unavoidable. This bitter recognition of the deadly influence of society on human life shadows all the post-War novels. It is distinguishable in *The Rainbow*, but it is more dominant element in post-War novels. According to Worthen (1979) it was the war that led to such a change in Lawrence's vision, and it can be clearly traced in *The Rainbow* where the individuals of the third generation face the "problem of being an individual in a society" (p. 74).

*The Rainbow* exhibits social concerns, but it does not display severe social criticism. Here Winifred Inger and Uncle Tom are the archetypes of the modern decayed world. But Lawrence's consistent and unwavering examination of society started with the War after 1915, when Lawrence started writing, as Worthen (1979) comments, "much more directly about his characters' involvement with society" (p. 80).

Whereas the earlier novels depict the conflict between the industrial and pre-industrial values and bewail the erosion of the natural by the industrial, the later novels deal only with the havocs of the industrial ideals. Hugh Stevens (2001) explains that although Lawrence's pre-war works portray a contrast between pastoral and industrial England but after the war this concern became more prominent in the works of that period.

In early novels Lawrence is a poet of feelings while in the later ones he turns into a critic of the society. Early novels are lyrical in nature displaying no concern with social issues; but after the commencement of the War, he realized the importance of society in human life and now he could not ignore it. The early interest in autobiography and personal dilemmas is replaced by concern for common social life in post-War novels which have penetratingly observed social settings. Psychological determinism of pre-War novels gives place to social determinism in post-War novels. Later novels are social tragedies where the characters are presented as victims suffering under the pressure of social forces. Psychological forces, as dominant in the early novels, do not frustrate them. These novels represent Lawrence's social vision where his attention is directed more to the social factors than the personal ones. Family is no longer central. Society is rejected along with its norms and institutions, and even the social notion of family and marriage has no magnetism.

Post-War novels depict a marshland of corruption in society. Images associated with decay recur throughout. Michael Bentley (1987) holds, in his article that after the war Lawrence's choice of images suddenly changed. "Bugs, beehives and beasts of the field began to inhabit his letters and the post-war fiction" (p. 75). Images of rats and beetles are recurrent in his post-War letters. These letters give a miserable portrait of London. He wrote in 1915: "London seems to me like some hoary massive under world, a hoary, ponderous inferno" (1981, p. 339). Post-War novels give the image of a paralysed and crippled world. Sir Clifford in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, rendered impotent sexually due to a war injury, symbolizes post-War degenerate world. Here Lawrence regrets inadequacies of people after the disaster of the war. These novels are full of the pictures of the sterile males such as Clifford whose "centres of feelings were drying up" (p. 209). This image of the impotent male encapsulates the deadness and impotency inherent in European civilization.

Early novels eroticise working class life and criticize the upper-class society. In these novels the working-class people exhibit vitality and life. For example, in an early short story, *Daughters of the Vicar*, Alfred Durant symbolizes working class qualities of warmth and sincerity, which bring some sort of fulfilment to Lausia. In *The Rainbow* Ursula's chance meeting with the bargeman gives her an idea of a better way of life than Skrebensky can offer her. In *Sons and Lovers*, the virtues which Lawrence had then seen in the working-class life, are constantly emphasized. In post-War novels on the other hand there is no hope for any class of society. These novels make wholesale condemnation of all the sections of society; the working class is not excluded. For example, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* depicts a society caught up in the process of futility. Connie and Mellors feel utter hopelessness about all strata of the society. According to them England of the time "was producing a new race... over-conscious in the money and social and political side, on the spontaneous, intuitive side dead, but dead" (p. 164).

*Women in Love* gives a ruthless criticism of society. It makes an analysis of the ills and flaws of the industrialized society and evaluates how the people are affected by this life-denying society. Neil Roberts (1987) calls it a diagnostic novel, which presents social ideals as "anti-pathetic to life" (p. 40). The characters are pitiable victims of society. The novel conveys something of Lawrence's fear for his country and his repugnance of the social system, which among its other evils, had brought about the War. The novel makes a piercing examination of modern culture. It criticizes the whole of modern civilization, not only the industrial English society. According to F. R. Leavis (1964), in Lawrence's works "the diagnosis of the malady of the industrial psyche can become that of the malady of a civilization" (p. 158). The novel gives a picture of degenerate European life, which is symbolized by Gerald. According to Sagar (1979), Gerald represents European industrialized civilization and its allied values. His demise in the cold ice towards the end of the novel symbolizes the ultimate failure of modern civilization to "preserve any contact with life source" (p. 96).

Before the War Lawrence did not express harsh denunciation of industrialized society. For example, in *Sons and Lovers* it is a part of nature. But in post-war works he presents a severe criticism of society. The war was the main reason for this transformation in Lawrence's attitude. *Women in Love* denounces the world of *The Rainbow*. It is a violent repudiation of society and social world. The characters, like Ursula, renounce their past. Birkin and Ursula reject worthless life of the Brangwen parents. This reaction against the past is one aspect of the novel's wholesale denunciation of the ordinary social life: work, marriage, family, children and so on. All his major characters are disgusted by the conventional social world. This revulsion on the part of the representative characters and the author was the result of the War; the bitterness of the War led to the repudiation of everything. David Ellis (1993) observe that the war though never explicitly mentioned in his works, but Lawrence wanted "its bitterness to be 'taken for granted in the characters'" (p. ix).

All social nets—of family, of job, of marriage etc, as considered important in *The Rainbow*, are neglected in its sequel namely *Women in Love*. In the later novel, the characters rebuff society and all its bindings. Ursula and Birkin reject marriage as a social commitment. To them it is a mutual pledge. The same is true of love and other social norms. Ursula is sick of home, as it is a symbol of social life. She felt hatred for the "home, the milieu, the whole atmosphere and condition of this obsolete life" (p. 11). She despised social people. She loved "the animals, that were single and unsocial as she herself was" (p. 244). The novel bitterly criticizes industrialization of the society. Tony Slade (1969) holds that Lawrence looks like a prophet who:

Through an investigation of the relationship between Gerald and Gudrun... illustrates the potential dangers of mechanized society with its mechanically thinking individuals. (p. 73)

In the first chapter Gudrun expresses disgust at the mechanization of society, which has marred the beauty of countryside. She could not bear: "The insufferable torture of...this defaced countryside" (p. 11). Mechanization of the society resulted in chaos and disintegration. Machine came to prevail everywhere in the world, and it disrupted the harmony of organic life. It was introduced by Gerald and other industrialists, and it:

Subjected life to pure mathematical principles.... It was pure organic disintegration and pure mechanical organization. This is the first and finest stage of chaos. (p. 231)

The novel presents 'The Wasteland' picture of society, which breeds hollow and half people. These social people exhibit incompleteness; Hermione Roddice felt a void and "a deficiency of being within her" and she needed someone to "close up this deficiency" (p. 16). The modern social people have a lifeless existence. Theirs is an anti-life. In chapter two Birkin feels sick of these dull social people who "jingle and giggle.... Essentially, they do not exist, they aren't there" (p. 25). In chapter eight Hermione's guest indulge in trifling social activities. They are shallow and superficial people like the characters in Jane Austen's novels and Eliot's "The Wasteland." Like Eliot's poem the novel articulates spiritual sickness prevalent in modern society. To Gudrun Pompadour Café is a "whirlpool of disintegration and dissolution" (p. 380), and the people in the Café are like "apish degraded souls" (p. 380). The attitude of these social people indicates their worthlessness and shallowness, and they remind us of Eliot's poems, *The Wasteland* and *Hollow Men*.

G.M. Hyde (1990) compares this novel with Eliot's "The Wasteland." According to him the novel is a record of break down like Eliot's poem. "The novel", according to Hyde, "proliferates images of maimed and arrested development.... loss of faith in the future" (p. 59). The imagery associated with the wasteland recurs throughout the novel. It is replete with the images of decadence, degeneration, corruption and rottenness. In chapter five Birkin goes to London and he feels disgust at the desolate look of this modern mechanized city. He felt utter "hopelessness. He always felt this, on approaching London" (p. 61). He is sick of meaningless social life "which belongs to death.... our kind of life.... I do want to die from this life" (p. 186).

At the time Lawrence was writing this novel he thought that modern society was a whirlpool of rottenness, and chaos. He wrote to Lady Cynthia Asquith in November 1915: "There is no future here, only decomposition...this decadence, this collapsing life...this slow flux of destruction and nihilism" (1981, p. 438). The novel depicts this flux of decay in society. According to Horace Gregory (1957) "the society revealed here is sick" (p. 48). Gudrun finds deterioration in her soul with "a pungent atmosphere of corrosion" (p. 451). Birkin thinks that human beings are like "gall apples.... Their insides are full of bitter corrupt ash" (p. 126). The people of this corroded society display collective decomposition. All these social people display "inexpressible destructiveness, and fatal half-heartedness, a sort of rottenness in the will" (p. 118). Imagery of corruption recurs throughout the novel; metaphors of animals are employed to convey rottenness of the social people. These people are compared to insects like beetles, rats etc which are associated with decay and decomposition. For example, Loerke's eyes are compared to those of a mouse. In chapter twenty-nine he is compared to a bat and later on Birkin compares him with a rat living "in the river of corruption" (p. 428). Here the images of bat and rat indicate corruption, decay and rottenness in the soul of Loerke and other social people.

In *The Rainbow* disintegration is part of the essential autumnal process. It is like the excremental functions of the body, and it is an obligatory prelude to a new beginning; it leads to rebirth. In *Women in Love* this decay and disintegration lead to extinction and annihilation. However, Lawrence rejects decay and regeneration not only of the kind depicted in *Women in Love* but also the one manifested in *The Rainbow*. He is well aware that there are chances of rebirth through disintegration as Ursula anticipates at the end of *The Rainbow*. But to him rebirth as the natural outcome of disintegration is not acceptable.

He does not want regeneration after the breakdown of the old. He rather rejects the old altogether and makes quest for new world and new life. Ursula also exhibits the same kind of attitude e.g. she praises the butterflies as starting new life out of nothingness. This is not rebirth after disintegration; rather it is a new creation out of non-existence. Lawrence does not want to reform the existing world but desires to find an alternative world away from the real corrupt world. His letters of the time bear witness to this fact, where he has consistently expressed his desire for an ideal land.

Most of the characters in *Women in Love*, such as Gerald, Gudrun and Loerke are marked for destruction and obliteration. The last scene of the novel depicts extreme kind of devastation. According to Horace Gregory (1957), "not even the last scene of *Hamlet* uncovers more annihilation than the final pages of *Women in Love*" (p. 48).

Lawrence's post-War philosophical essay "The Crown", written in 1915 is replete with apocalyptic terminology. It depicts decay and disintegration in the modern world. The third section is fittingly titled 'The flux of corruption'. Here Lawrence is pre-occupied with horror, destruction and rottenness. Images of worms and maggots are recurrent highlighting the decay of society and its people. Lawrence maintains in this essay that the War was the result of collective death wish inherent in European civilization. According to him this death wish, resulted in a joint activity of destruction i.e. the War. This bitter realization was not there in pre-War period. The essay is the expression of Lawrence's pent-up horror of the War, his social frustration, and his need to get away from English society. Here he depicts a world where things are falling apart. The essay expresses Lawrence's view that all modern activity is corruptive and dissolving: "We give ourselves up to the flux of death, to analysis, to introspection, to mechanical War.... It is the continued activity of disintegration, separating, setting apart, investigation, research, the resolution back to the original void" (cited in Michael Black, 1991, p. 376).

Lawrence's novel *The Lost Girl* depicts the collapse of modern civilization. The gradual decline of the Manchester house in the very first chapter points to social decline and degeneration. It gives a sense of a shattered society. The novel gives a picture of lifeless society. It illustrates hollowness of the social set. It also criticizes the mechanization of society, which has rendered modern people dead and sterile. The people of society are "worn down by the regular machine-friction of our average and mechanical days" (p. 84). Similarly, his novel, *Aaron's Rod* is the expression of disgust at decay and corruption in society. Society is satirized but this satire is not sympathetic; it is full of bitterness. The novel pictures worthless and pleasure-seeking people. This hollowness of people makes the society present a look of the wasteland. The novel gives account of social disintegration. It depicts things falling apart. The novel expresses contempt for the conventional society and its norms. Here social criticism is less developed than other post-War novels, but it is perceptible in several instances.

*Kangaroo*, one of Lawrence's post war novels, shows more explicit impact of the War. Its chapter titled 'Bits' illustrates fragmentation in modern culture. It offers portrait of the diseased modern life. In chapter six Kangaroo (Ben Cooley, leader of the 'Diggers') gives picture of the exhausted society. According to him the modern people live an anti-life. They conceal rottenness in their souls; they are like ants with their acid-stings. Richard Lovat Somers, a Lawrentian figure in the novel, wishes to fight against the modern social world. He tells Jaz that he would sacrifice everything "for a smash up in this social-industrial world" (p. 162). He wants to escape from social world to live an isolated life with his wife.

Sir Clifford, In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, is paralysed down his hips due to a war injury. Thus, the War had a crippling effect on the modern society and its people. People are crippled (with their vital parts down the hips being paralysed). They are barren and impotent. The War resulted in the loss of vital life and the emergence of sterile and rotten modern life. Therefore, post-War novels are full of the pictures of crippled people. The

society portrayed in post-War novels is in a state of chaos and disintegration. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* presents a vision of the modern mechanical world as full of chaos and disintegration. The novel is a sustained lament for broken English society. It gives tragic picture of things falling apart. Here the world consists of bits and fragments. The novel describes decay, rottenness and disintegration in the modern social world. The characters cannot escape this anti-life. Alastair Niven (1979) observes that:

The novel is about disintegration of modern life and the erosion of old England. Any way out of the 20<sup>th</sup> century trauma, which Connie and Mellors may discover, can only be tentative. Even the power of personal relations...may not be enough to resist the anti-life of the present world. (p. 8)

Dreariness prevails throughout *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Clifford's house looks as "dreary as a disused street" (p. 14). He, like Gerald, reveals decay and rottenness. Both of them represent what Lawrence hated in the European civilization. The novel criticizes the automation of society. It gives the picture of an industrialized society where everything is in mechanical order having no organic harmony. To Connie it is a "methodical anarchy" (p. 14). Lawrence gives a severe condemnation of the mechanized society, which has corrupted its people. According to him the fault lies not in the people but in the society, which victimizes the individuals. According to Mellors the fault lies in:

Evil electric lights and diabolical rattling of engines. There, in the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanized greed.... There lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform. (p. 126)

Imagery of decay recurs throughout the novel. The characters are compared to animals and insects to represent their rottenness. For example, Michaelis, a dramatist friend of Clifford, has rat-like life experience. Lawrence criticizes the materialism of modern society. According to him "civilized society is insane. Money and so-called love are its two great manias" (p. 101) Connie bewails the lifelessness of social people in whom "the living intuitive faculty was dead as nails, and only queer mechanical yells and uncanny will power remained" (p. 163).

She is completely hopeless about the modern industrialized society and its people. She remembers old England, which was corrupted, and "blotted out by this terrifying new and gruesome England" (p. 168). She thinks that modern social people are lifeless and rotten like iron and clay. To her men are not humans, "but animas of coal, and iron and clay" (p. 171).

The novel presents a picture of hollowness of social people who indulge in trivial social activities. In chapter nine Mrs. Bolton's account of the activities of the town people illustrates that these people are hollow creatures who pass their time in trifling routine activities. The end of the novel bewails the miserable state of modern world. In his final letter to Connie, Mellors describes the wretched condition of modern social and industrial people. He finds no hope in the world and gives in to resignation. He just ignores the world around and wants to enjoy his own life in seclusion.

## Conclusion

Post-War short stories such as, *St. Mawr*, *Woman Who Rode Away England*, *My England*, and some other stories also depict decay and rottenness in society. According to F.R. Leavis (1964), *St. Mawr* resembles Eliot's "The Wasteland." All these stories and several others depict and criticize sterility and deadness of the English society and its people and present a vision of global chaos and decay.

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