



Psychological Conflict, Desire, and Female Selfhood in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction

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Abstract This paper studies the psychological conflicts experienced by major female characters in the fiction of D. H. Lawrence. While Lawrence's women have often been discussed in relation to patriarchy and sexuality, they also require attention as figures of inward division, repression, desire, emotional dependency, fear, and resistance. Focusing on *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the paper argues that female selfhood in Lawrence is created through psychological struggle. Gertrude Morel, Miriam Leivers, Clara Dawes, Ursula Brangwen, Gudrun Brangwen, and Constance Chatterley are not fixed types of mother, beloved, rebel, or sexual woman. Each is shaped by a conflict between inner desire and outer expectation. Psychoanalytic criticism is useful for understanding these conflicts because Lawrence repeatedly represents identity through attachment, rivalry, unconscious need, bodily awakening, and the fear of losing the self in relation. Yet these psychological conflicts are also historically produced by a world moving from Victorian restraint toward modern forms of sexuality and individualism. Lawrence's achievement is to show that female identity is not simply chosen; it is formed through struggle with family, love, body, memory, class, and the unconscious.

1. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence's fiction is intensely psychological. His novels are not content to describe social behaviour from the outside; they enter the disturbed inner life of characters who are divided against themselves. Love, sexuality, family, and marriage are never merely social arrangements in Lawrence. They are psychic fields in which hidden fears, attachments, desires, and hostilities become visible. This is especially true of his female characters. Women in Lawrence's major novels do not simply perform social roles. They suffer inward conflict, experience dissatisfaction, resist possession, and search for forms of emotional and bodily truth that ordinary social language cannot easily express.

The present paper argues that female selfhood in Lawrence is shaped through psychological conflict. This does not mean that Lawrence's women are only private individuals removed from history. Their inner conflicts are deeply connected with the social world: with patriarchy, class, religion, sexual morality, and the changing position of women in early twentieth-century England. However, Lawrence's distinctive contribution lies in his ability to show how social pressures become internal conflicts. A woman may be outwardly obedient but inwardly rebellious; sexually awakened but emotionally afraid; intellectually independent but still caught in unconscious attachment; resistant to male control but uncertain of what freedom would mean. Such contradictions give Lawrence's women their psychological density.

The four novels selected for analysis trace different forms of conflict. In *Sons and Lovers*, Gertrude Morel's disappointed marriage produces a possessive maternal bond, while Miriam and Clara represent contrasting forms of repressed spirituality and bodily independence. In *The Rainbow*, Ursula Brangwen struggles to form a self beyond family inheritance, religious expectation, and conventional marriage. In *Women in Love*, Ursula and Gudrun confront the danger that love may become domination, and Gudrun's relation with Gerald Crich reveals the psychological violence of possession. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Connie Chatterley's emotional numbness and bodily awakening dramatize the movement from psychic deadness toward renewed selfhood.

A psychoanalytic approach is especially appropriate because Lawrence's fiction repeatedly turns on unconscious attachment, desire, repression, and ambivalence. However, the paper does not

reduce the novels to clinical case studies. Rather, it uses psychoanalytic insight as a way of reading literary patterns: mother fixation, spiritualized desire, fear of intimacy, erotic power, repetition, and the struggle between self-preservation and surrender. Lawrence's women are psychologically important because they reveal the cost of living in relationships that demand too much, deny too much, or misrecognize the self.

2. Psychoanalytic Framework: Desire, Repression, and the Divided Self

Psychoanalytic criticism begins from the idea that human identity is not fully transparent to itself. People do not always know why they desire, fear, love, or resist. Their conscious explanations often conceal deeper attachments and anxieties. Lawrence's novels are powerful because they dramatize this lack of self-knowledge. Characters speak of love, duty, freedom, and marriage, but beneath these words lie conflicts they cannot fully control. Female characters in particular are often caught between socially approved identities and impulses that exceed those identities.

Repression is one of the central psychological processes in Lawrence's representation of women. A repressed desire does not disappear; it returns in disguised forms, such as resentment, spiritual intensity, physical illness, emotional coldness, or sudden rebellion. Miriam Leivers in *Sons and Lovers*, for example, cannot easily accept sexuality because her emotional life has been shaped by religious idealism and the fear of bodily surrender. Her desire for Paul is intense, but it is spiritualized and strained. Connie Chatterley, by contrast, begins *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in a condition of emotional and bodily numbness. Her desire has been buried beneath aristocratic routine, intellectual conversation, and a marriage without physical fulfilment. In both cases, Lawrence presents repression as a wound to the self.

Another important concept is ambivalence. Lawrence's women often desire and resist the same relationship. They seek connection but fear possession. They want recognition but fear being absorbed by another person's will. Ursula Brangwen's relation to Anton Skrebensky and later to Birkin shows this pattern clearly. Gudrun's relation to Gerald is even more ambivalent: she is fascinated by his physical power and social authority, yet she also despises and resists his need for mastery. This ambivalence is not a flaw in characterization. It is Lawrence's way of representing the difficulty of female selfhood in a world where intimacy often threatens autonomy.

Silence is another major psychological sign in Lawrence's fiction. His women often reach the limits of available language. Miriam cannot speak desire without translating it into spiritual devotion. Ursula argues fiercely, but her deepest longing remains larger than the words offered by religion, school, or marriage. Gudrun's irony is a form of speech that protects silence; it says something while refusing complete exposure. Connie's early numbness is accompanied by a failure of meaningful speech in her marriage, where conversation continues but living communication has disappeared. These patterns show that female conflict is not only a conflict of ideas but also a crisis of expression. The self struggles to find a language equal to its bodily and emotional knowledge.

Lawrence's narrative method reinforces this psychological depth. He frequently moves between external description and inward sensation, allowing gestures, pauses, touch, and atmosphere to carry meanings that characters cannot consciously formulate. This method is especially important for female selfhood because the women are often surrounded by social discourses that misname them. The narrative gives access to experiences that social language would repress or simplify. As a result, the reader encounters female identity not as a completed statement but as an unfinished process of feeling, reaction, and self-discovery.

The unconscious also appears in Lawrence through the body. The body knows what social language denies. Characters experience attraction, revulsion, fatigue, illness, trembling, and silence before they can explain themselves. Lawrence's focus on bodily response can be problematic when it becomes essentialist, but it also allows him to represent forms of female knowledge that are not accepted by conventional morality. The body becomes a site of truth, conflict, and rebellion.

3. Gertrude Morel and the Psychology of Maternal Possession

In *Sons and Lovers*, Gertrude Morel is one of Lawrence's most psychologically complex characters. Her marriage to Walter Morel begins with attraction but becomes a source of humiliation and loneliness. Walter's drinking, roughness, and emotional inadequacy disappoint her expectations of married life. Unable to find fulfilment as a wife, she transfers her emotional energy to her children, especially William and Paul. This transfer is psychologically understandable, but it has destructive consequences. The maternal bond becomes a substitute for

the failed marital bond, and the sons are drawn into emotional responsibilities that should not belong to them.

Mrs. Morel's love is not simply selfish. She wants her sons to rise above the limitations of mining life. She gives them ambition, refinement, and emotional seriousness. Yet her love also binds them to her. Paul's development is shaped by the fact that his deepest emotional loyalty belongs to his mother. He cannot give himself fully to Miriam or Clara because part of him remains attached to Mrs. Morel. The female psychology of the novel is therefore inseparable from the male protagonist's divided emotional life. Mrs. Morel's wounded identity as a wife produces Paul's wounded capacity as a lover.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mrs. Morel represents the power of displaced desire. Her emotional disappointment does not vanish; it is redirected into motherhood. Motherhood becomes the site where she regains value and control. Yet because this control is based on loss, it cannot be purely healthy. She needs Paul not only as a child but as emotional compensation. Lawrence is sensitive to the tragedy of this situation. He does not present Mrs. Morel as a villain. Rather, he shows how a patriarchal marriage can produce psychological distortions within the family.

The conflict of female selfhood in Mrs. Morel lies between care and possession. She is genuinely nurturing, but her nurturing contains a need to hold. She wants her sons to succeed, but their independence threatens the emotional structure on which her own life depends. This contradiction gives her character its tragic force. She is both victim and agent, both loving mother and possessive presence. Through her, Lawrence shows that domestic femininity can become psychologically powerful precisely because it is socially confined.

4. Miriam and Clara: Spiritualized Desire and Bodily Rebellion

Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes represent two contrasting forms of female desire in *Sons and Lovers*. Miriam's desire is inward, reverent, and spiritualized. She loves Paul intensely, but her love is burdened by the fear of the body. She wants emotional and spiritual union, yet sexuality appears to her as something dangerous or degrading. Paul experiences this as pressure and accuses her of wanting his soul. However, Paul's view is not neutral. He is himself incapable of mature love, and his judgment of Miriam reveals his own fear of being claimed.

Miriam's psychological conflict arises from the division between spiritual aspiration and bodily desire. She has been shaped by a moral world that values purity and self-denial, especially in women. As a result, her erotic life cannot develop freely. Desire becomes mixed with guilt, reverence, and self-sacrifice. Lawrence's portrayal of Miriam can seem harsh, but it also reveals the damage caused by sexual repression. Miriam is not simply frigid or possessive; she is a woman whose desire has been forced into an unnatural form by religious and social pressures.

Clara Dawes, by contrast, appears as a woman of bodily presence and sexual independence. She is separated from her husband and involved in suffrage politics, which places her outside conventional domestic femininity. Paul is attracted to her because she seems to offer what Miriam cannot: a relation grounded in physical passion rather than spiritual demand. Yet Clara's freedom is incomplete. Her sexuality gives Paul temporary release, but it does not create a stable selfhood for either of them. Clara remains connected to Baxter Dawes, and her independence is still defined through the broken structure of marriage.

The contrast between Miriam and Clara shows Lawrence's interest in divided models of womanhood. Miriam embodies repressed spiritual intensity; Clara embodies rebellious bodily life. Neither is allowed full integration. This is partly because Paul cannot perceive either woman wholly. He divides women according to his own needs: mother, soul, body. The psychological failure of the novel therefore lies not only in women's conflicts but in the male inability to receive female complexity. Lawrence's achievement is that the pattern becomes visible even when the narration is close to Paul's perceptions.

5. Ursula Brangwen: The Psychology of Becoming

The *Rainbow* marks a major development in Lawrence's treatment of female selfhood because Ursula Brangwen is represented not primarily in relation to a male protagonist but as a searching consciousness in her own right. Ursula's conflict is the psychology of becoming. She refuses the identities that society offers her, yet she does not immediately possess a clear alternative. Her life is marked by movement, dissatisfaction, experiment, and rejection.

Ursula's psychological development is shaped by her struggle against enclosure. Family, religion, school, and romantic love all offer forms of meaning, but each also threatens to close around her. The Brangwen family gives her a deep inheritance, but she cannot remain within its older rhythms.

Religion offers transcendence, but it also imposes moral discipline. Teaching gives her public identity, but the school system reduces both teachers and pupils to mechanical obedience. Love offers intimacy, but marriage to Anton Skrebensky would turn her into an accessory to his imperial and masculine world.

Ursula's refusal of Anton is psychologically significant. She is attracted to him, but she recognizes that he cannot meet her deeper self. His idea of life is organized around service, duty, and social form. Ursula seeks something more fluid and inwardly true. Her rejection of him is therefore not merely a rejection of one man; it is a rejection of a whole pattern of female completion through marriage. She chooses uncertainty rather than false security. This is one of Lawrence's most important representations of female agency.

Yet Ursula's freedom is not simple happiness. She experiences fear, loneliness, and disorientation. Lawrence understands that the loss of old structures can produce psychic crisis. A woman who refuses inherited roles must endure a period in which her identity is not yet secure. Ursula's struggle is therefore modern in a profound sense. She is not liberated into a ready-made world of equality; she must create meaning in a world where traditional meanings have become inadequate.

The final vision of the rainbow expresses this psychological condition. It suggests renewal, but it does not solve the problems of desire, work, marriage, and society. Ursula remains open to the future. Her selfhood is not fixed but emergent. Lawrence's representation of her is valuable because it shows female identity as a process of becoming rather than as the fulfilment of a predetermined role.

6. Gudrun and Gerald: Desire, Domination, and Emotional Violence

In *Women in Love*, psychological conflict becomes darker and more dangerous. Gudrun Brangwen is one of Lawrence's most complex modern women. She is artistic, intelligent, ironic, and emotionally guarded. Her relation with Gerald Crich is charged with attraction, competition, and violence. Gerald's psychology is built around mastery. He controls mines, animals, machines, and social situations. Gudrun fascinates him because she resists the world he knows how to command. Her resistance becomes both the source of his desire and the cause of his rage.

Gudrun's psychological conflict lies in her simultaneous attraction to and rejection of power. She is drawn to Gerald's physical force and social confidence, yet she also sees the emptiness beneath

them. Her irony protects her from surrender. She refuses to become the passive object of Gerald's will. However, this refusal also leaves her emotionally isolated. Gudrun's freedom is colder than Ursula's. She resists possession, but she does not clearly discover a sustaining alternative to it.

The relationship between Gudrun and Gerald reveals Lawrence's understanding of domination as a psychological structure. Gerald does not simply want Gudrun's affection. He wants confirmation of his own power. When Gudrun refuses to provide this confirmation, his identity begins to break down. His violence is the reaction of a self that cannot bear limits. In this sense, Gerald's tragedy exposes the weakness hidden within patriarchal mastery. The man who controls the outer world cannot survive the inner challenge posed by a woman who will not be possessed.

Gudrun is not presented as morally innocent. She can be cruel and destructive. Yet this moral ambiguity is important because it prevents her from becoming a simple victim. Lawrence gives her the disturbing freedom to wound, judge, and withdraw. Her character suggests that female resistance under conditions of domination may itself become harsh. If a woman is repeatedly treated as an object to be mastered, her self-defense may take forms that appear cold or violent. Gudrun's psychology is therefore inseparable from the oppressive relation in which she is placed.

Women in Love also contrasts Gudrun with Ursula. Ursula's relationship with Birkin remains conflictual but contains the possibility of mutual recognition. Gudrun's relationship with Gerald moves toward annihilation. Through the sisters, Lawrence presents two paths of modern female selfhood: one toward difficult relation, the other toward refusal and isolation. Neither path is simple, but both reveal the psychological dangers of love in a world shaped by possession.

7. Connie Chatterley: Emotional Numbness and Bodily Awakening

Lady Chatterley's Lover presents psychological conflict through the movement from numbness to bodily awakening. Connie Chatterley begins the novel in a state of inner deadness. Her marriage to Clifford is socially secure but emotionally barren. Clifford's paralysis matters not only as a physical condition but as part of the novel's larger image of sterile consciousness. Wragby is a world of talk, class pride, intellectual abstraction, and mechanical power. Connie's body and emotions slowly wither within this world.

Connie's conflict is not simply sexual frustration. It is the loss of felt existence. She becomes alienated from her own body, from nature, and from spontaneous feeling. Lawrence represents this

condition as a psychological illness produced by a lifeless social environment. Connie's affair with Mellors is therefore not merely an act of adultery; it is a process of psychic recovery. Through bodily intimacy, she begins to experience herself again as living, desiring, and responsive.

From a feminist perspective, the novel remains problematic because Connie's recovery is mediated through a male lover and through Lawrence's own philosophy of sexual relation. Yet psychologically, her awakening is significant because it challenges the split between mind and body that has damaged her. Clifford's world values intellect, property, and social name while denying bodily truth. Connie's movement toward Mellors rejects this division. She discovers that selfhood cannot be sustained by social identity alone. It requires bodily presence, emotional warmth, and the courage to choose life against convention.

Connie's choice also involves fear. To leave Clifford is to risk social judgment, class instability, and an uncertain future. Her awakening does not lead to immediate security. Like Ursula, she chooses uncertainty over false order. The difference is that Connie's choice is more explicitly bodily and sexual. Lawrence presents the body as a way back to psychological wholeness. Whether one accepts this philosophy completely or not, the novel powerfully represents the damage caused when a woman's desire is denied by marriage and class respectability.

8. The Historical Production of Inner Conflict

Although this paper has used psychoanalytic concepts, Lawrence's female characters should not be read as isolated psychological cases. Their inner conflicts are historically produced. The transition from Victorian values to modern life created new possibilities for women but also new anxieties. Education, suffrage politics, changing sexual attitudes, and the weakening of older religious authority all altered the meaning of womanhood. Lawrence's women live within this transitional moment. They feel the pressure of inherited roles, but they also sense that those roles no longer satisfy the self.

This historical context explains why Lawrence's women are so often divided. Mrs. Morel belongs partly to an older domestic order, yet her intelligence and dissatisfaction exceed that order. Miriam is shaped by religious purity, but her desire cannot be contained by it. Clara gestures toward political and sexual modernity, but she remains caught in marital structures. Ursula seeks a future beyond family and marriage, but she cannot fully define it. Gudrun embodies modern artistic

independence, but her freedom becomes emotionally dangerous. Connie rejects aristocratic marriage, but her alternative remains socially precarious.

This pattern also explains the repeated presence of crisis scenes in Lawrence's novels. A quarrel, a sexual encounter, a withdrawal, an illness, or a moment of disgust often reveals more than ordinary conversation. In such scenes, the controlled social self breaks down and a deeper truth emerges. For women, these moments are often painful because they expose the distance between the role they are expected to perform and the life they actually feel within themselves. Lawrence's psychological realism depends on this pressure. He presents the self as something tested at moments when convention can no longer conceal conflict.

Therefore the female conflicts in these novels should not be treated as accidental subplots. They are central to Lawrence's vision of modern life. If modernity weakens inherited moral structures, then women must confront both new freedom and new uncertainty. Their inner divisions become the place where historical change is felt most intensely.

The psychological conflicts in Lawrence's fiction therefore reveal a larger cultural crisis. Female selfhood is no longer secure within traditional roles, but modern society has not yet created stable forms of recognition for women's autonomy. This is why Lawrence's endings are often unresolved. The women do not simply arrive at freedom. They move toward possibility through conflict, loss, and risk.

The emphasis on conflict also protects Lawrence's women from being read as simple symbols. They may stand for motherhood, desire, artistic modernity, or bodily renewal, but they also exceed these symbolic functions through inconsistency and emotional difficulty. Their contradictions are part of their realism. A psychologically convincing female character, for Lawrence, is not one who resolves every tension but one whose unresolved tensions reveal the pressures of her world.

9. Conclusion

D. H. Lawrence's major novels represent female selfhood as a psychological struggle shaped by desire, repression, attachment, bodily knowledge, and resistance to possession. His women are not fixed symbols of motherhood, sexuality, spirituality, or rebellion. They are divided figures who become meaningful through conflict. Gertrude Morel's maternal power emerges from marital disappointment; Miriam's spiritual love reveals the wounds of sexual repression; Clara's bodily

independence exposes the limits of sexual freedom without full recognition; Ursula's search shows the uncertainty of modern becoming; Gudrun's resistance reveals the violence of domination; and Connie's awakening dramatizes the recovery of bodily and emotional life.

Lawrence's treatment of women remains contradictory. His fiction sometimes limits female identity through essentialist ideas of sex and gender, yet it also gives women intense psychological reality. The value of his novels lies in their refusal to make selfhood easy. Female identity appears as something formed through struggle with family, lovers, social expectation, class, and the unconscious. Lawrence understands that the desire for relation and the desire for autonomy may conflict deeply, especially for women in a patriarchal world.

A psychoanalytic reading therefore enriches the study of Lawrence's women by showing how external restrictions become internal divisions. The struggle for female selfhood is not only a social battle against patriarchy; it is also an inward battle against fear, repression, dependency, and the longing to be recognized without being possessed. Lawrence's women remain significant because they make this battle visible. Their conflicts show the painful birth of modern female consciousness.

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