

ANTIFEMINISM IN THE WHITE PEACOCK

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ABSTRACT

For the presentation of negative images of women in literature two terms have been used — misogyny and antifeminism. Therefore, it shall be in the fitness of things to deliberate on them first.

A Feminist Dictionary describes misogyny as “[w]oman-hating [that] ‘[i]ncludes the belief that women are stupid, pretty, manipulative, Dishonest, silly, gossipy, irrational, incompetent, undependable, Narcissistic, castrating, dirty, over-emotional, unable to make altruistic Or moral judgments, over-sexed, under-sexed. . . . Such beliefs Culminate in attitudes that demean [their] bodies, [their] abilities, [their] characters, and [their] efforts, and imply that [they] must be Controlled, dominated, subdued, abused and used not only for male benefit but for [their] own” (275).

Katherine M. Rogers uses the term more widely:

“I include among the manifestations of misogyny in literature not only direct expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womanhood, but such indirect expressions as misogynistic speeches by dramatic characters who are definitely speaking for the author and condemnations of one woman or type of woman which spread, implicitly or explicitly, to the whole sex” (Preface xii-xiii).

The prefix ‘anti’ in the term antifeminism makes it evident that the word ‘antifeminism’ came into parlance only after the term ‘feminism’ gained currency. Since the feminists were initially concerned with the issues of rights, the word ‘antifeminism’ too has been defined in the same vein:

it is “[t]he conviction that women are not entitled to the same moral and legal rights as men, or to the same social status and opportunities. ‘All anti-feminist thinkers hold in common the thesis that there are innate and unalterable psychological differences between women and

men, differences which make it in the interests of both sexes for women to play a subordinate, private role, destined for wife and motherhood. [It] . . . ‘[i]nvolves the idea that women ought to sacrifice the development of their own personalities for the sake of men and children’ (*A Feminist Dictionary* 54).

The different types of antifeminist practices described in the definition have been ubiquitous throughout literature in the form of misogyny because “. . . [a]nti-feminism is its ideological defense; in the sex-based insult passion and ideology are united in an act of denigration and intimidation” (*A Feminist Dictionary* 275) . According to The Oxford English Dictionary an antifeminist is a person who “[is] opposed to women or to feminism; a person (usu. a man) who is hostile to sexual equality or to the advocacy of women’s rights” (524). Thus, antifeminism may be regarded as the ideological representation of the different tenets of misogyny

The White Peacock, started in the autumn of 1906 and first published in 1911 is the first novel by D. H. Lawrence, and it reflects the multi-dimensional picture of his vision of life, which was to acquire a more clearly defined shape in his later works. Most of the themes and ideas of the later works are found in the novel in a form more than embryonic- his idea of the conflict between mind and instinct; his craving for paganism and primitivism; his antifeminism; his advocacy of homo-sexuality and male-male relationship; and his hatred of the civilization. An exploratory study establishes a casual connection between the chronic ill-health and the sexual impotence of the novelist and all the above-mentioned preoccupations of his mind.

The White Peacock, through a series of repetitive episodes, gives vent to Lawrence’s s venomous feelings regarding the nature of woman-possessive and predatory, as he finds it. The destruction of the major male characters of the novel is attributed to their inability to resist the devouring temptation provided by women. Annable’s experience with lady Crystabel, George’s with Lettie and Meg, and also that of leslie with lettie, all throw light on the ways in which women make men victim of their destructive curse. Julian Moynahan aptly asserts that in *The White Peacock*, “All of the defeated males are woefully passive and are pathologically oversensitive to feminine rebuke and resistance.”(6)

The White Peacock, the basic symbol of the novel, designates the womanhood- sadistic and destructive. The representatives of *The White*

Peacock symbols are Lady Crystabel, Mrs Beardsall, Lettie, Meg, Emily, Gertie [George's daughter] and the girls who make minor appearance in the novel, like Alice, Marie, Miss Denys, Miss D'Arcy and Hilda Seconde.

The white Peacock is seen together by Annable and Cyril; the bird is seen perching upon the bowed head of a stone angel in the wild thicket of the churchyard. Annable, the honest mouthpiece of the novelist, seeing this act of the bird, a damned thing, speaks up, "the proud fool!- look at it! Perched on an angel, too, as if it were a pedestal for vanity. That's the soul of a woman- or it's the devil." (144)

And seeing the bird defecating upon the angel he is certain about the veracity of the previous statement, now the bird surely seems to him,

"A woman to the end...all vanity and screech and defilement." (145)

Thus Lawrence's woman signifies defilement and he' uses Annable in *The White Peacock* to voice the most overtly misogynistic statement to be found in his early work. Such thoughts irresistibly reflect the diseased psyche of the novelist which was the result of his equally diseased body and sick sensibility. For one can be that cruel if it is oneself who is attacked. It can be easily conjectured that owing to his physical and sexual debility, he could not establish normal emotional sexual relations with any woman, and this factor lies at the root of the antifeminism of the novelist. In the present novel he has made no secret of the fact that the instrument of the degradation of the male characters is their respective women. John E. Stoll describes,

"Thus, the peacock may simply designate woman, or more comprehensively, may signify and analyze the man-woman relationship."(20)

As discussed earlier, Frank Annable, the gamekeeper, voices the cynical hatred of the novelist against women. When we first meet the gamekeeper in the wood he seems to be the only male character, who has been victorious in the sex-war, for he is the dominant husband of a submissive, docile and enslaved woman, Prosperine; and he himself, like Pluto, is the king of his own infernal region. He makes their visitors, including Lettie and Emily, feels that, "it is always the woman bears the burden", (132) and, that "Men are brutes- and marriage just gives scope to them."(132). But soon one realizes that he also bears the same burden as is borne by the other males. To him, the white Peacock seems a symbol of Lady Crystabel,' of vanity and screech and

defilement', to whom he had been married once, and who violated his basic nature as she tried to mould him into an object of her passive idealism.

Mrs. Beardsall, mother of Lettie and Cyril, is one of the major white peacocks of the novel; she occupies a prominent position in the ruin of Frank Beardsall who flees from woman's domination to his escape in death. Though not many pages have been devoted to the details of his character, yet Lawrence gives the essential information about him in a few broad strokes. He appears and dies in chapter 4, "The Father", but the novelist adequately suggests that Mrs. Beardsall is no less responsible for his isolation and gradual degradation. Moreover, she has deeply sown in the minds of her children the seeds of contempt for their father, as is evident from the following dialogue between mother and son:

There was silence for some minutes, then she said, "You might have had a father- "We are thankful we hadn't mother. You spared us that." "But how can you tell?" said my mother. "I can", I replied, "And I am thankful to you." (142).

And Lettie finds it a good thing that such nuisance (her father) is out of the way. The sense of decadence associated with Beardsall's life links him with George Saxton, dark, heavy, plain, farmer, who is also victimized by the white peacocks at different stages in his life. He dominates the whole story but is himself dominated by the women in his life. Lettie, a cultivated, sophisticated and high-spirited girl, wants to transform his raw animal vigour and virility into a heightened idealism, because she is afraid of his domineering brute power.

George is shown to be a mere toy in the hands of Lettie, and he himself realizes it at many stages: "But you know", he said, "You began it. You played with me, and showed me heaps of things. (115). He finds himself at a loose and when Cyril tells him of Lettie's engagement with Leslie, and he bursts out, "She- she's like a woman, like a cat- running to comforts- she strikes a bargain. Women are all tradesmen."(88).

Yet he is unable to break the aura of her charm. From time to time, he falls victim to her enchantment, as is evident from the following expressions, "You know", he said at last, "I do want her". (154) and "You don't know, Lettie, now the old life's gone, everything – how I want you-to set out with- it's like beginning life, and I want you."(161)

Lettie's marriage with Leslie creates a vacuum in George's mind and soul, thus, making him more vulnerable to further shocks in his life. He is certain about the healing power of the love which is to enter his life through his marriage with Meg. We hear him telling Cyril, I can have her without trembling. She's full of soothing and comfort. (223). On the morning of his ill-fated marriage to Meg, he shows Cyril a white smear on his shoulder, Look here, a bird has given me luck(224).

This 'luck' given by a 'bird' marks the entry of another white peacock in his life in the shape of Meg, who, after marriage, starts dominating everything, 'particularity her husband', in her household, and assumes a 'careless freedom', which is 'so subtly derogatory' to the man. Significantly, the vulnerable look in George's eyes is contrasted with the unhesitating look in Meg's eyes, Her eyes were so different from the Saxtons': darker, but never still and full, never hesitating, dreading a wound, never dilating with hurt or with timid ecstasy.(225). And reduced to a helpless state by the suffocating influences of the women in his life, George becomes a chronic alcoholic. His intense mental agony creates a rotten feeling of nothingness in his soul:

"I dunno," he answerd. "I am like this sometimes, when there's nothing I want to do, and nowhere I want to go, and nobody I want to be near. Then you feel so rottenly lonely. Cyril, You feel awful like a vacuum, with a pressure on you, a sort of pressure of darkness, and you yourself-just nothing, a vacuum-that's what it's like- a little vacuum that's not dark, all loose in the middle of a space of darkness, that's pressing on you."(264)

Finally, We see him reaching on the verge of extreme ruin, standing 'apart and obscure', like a condemned man.' Thus, Lawrence leaves no doubt that it is the woman who is the primal agent in affecting the destruction of man. And there is no doubt that no other writer than Lawrence could show such perverted antifeminism in his thoughts and consequently, in his words which are scattered all through the pages of his novel.

Leslie Tempest is yet another central male figure in the novel, who belongs to the aristocratic, mine owning world of Nethermere. But one thing that unites him with other male characters in the novel is his supplication in the sex-war. He, too, like George and Annable, realizes the cruelty of women, "Why, Women are cruel enough," said Leslie, with a glance at Lettie. "Yes", he continued, "they're cruel enough in their way."(51) Moreover, even after

getting the signal from Lettie that she does not want to be held by him, You know you hold me—and I want you to let me go. (189)

He is unable to come out of the spell of her feminine charm, and eventually gets married to her, thus, becoming the subject to her feminine tyranny. His personality undergoes a sea-change after his marriage, “I found a good deal of difference in Leslie since his marriage. He had lost his assertive self-confidence. He no longer pronounced emphatically and ultimately on every subject. Nor did he seek to dominate, as he had always done, the company in which he found himself.”(239).

We find him kneeling at the feet of his wife to tie her shoe-lace with a ‘subdued’ masculine power. Thus, through the marital relation of Lettie and Leslie, the novelist has once again given, with no less malignity, a reflection of his own inner conflict and confusion.

The inability of the novelist of establishing any fruitful bond with a woman is presented in a different colour in the relationship of Emily and Cyril. Cyril Beardsall, the narrator of the novel, is enamored of Emily Saxton, sister of George, but can’t take any decisive step in this regard. Moreover, even in their cool relationship one observes the fumes of a seething confusion. Cyril, though attracted towards Emily, feels an inexplicable repulsion for her, “When I left her at the corner of the lane I felt a sting of her deep reproach in my mind. I always felt the reproach when she had gone. (8).He miserably fails to live up to a real emotional necessity. When Emily gets engaged to Tom Renshaw, he is hardly affected to the core of his heart.

The contended, happy marriage of Emily with Mr. Renshaw superficially seems as not forming a part of the chaotic, conflicting ties between the opposite sex, but the seeds of feminine dominance and masculine are sown deep in their marital bond, “She was the mistress, quiet and self-assured, he being her rejoiced husband and servant.”(295)

Lawrence’s sense of insecurity due to his own weakness leads him to such an extent that he sees the child in a family situation being used as a weapon against the man. According to him, the motherhood of a woman makes her impregnate, destructive against the man. At the end of the novel, Lettie and Meg stand triumphant and indifferent with their children. Mrs. Beardsall’s policy of keeping her children on her side in the marital war is more sternly adopted by the younger generation of women. Meg uses this weapon most pertinently against George. Her position as a mother makes her impregnable

and scornful towards her husband, “She was secure in her high maternity; she was mistress and sole authority. George, as father, was first servant; as an indifferent father. She humiliated him and was hostile to his wishes. (254) Gertie, George’s dear daughter, is no less contemptuous towards him. Supported by her mother, the small child gathers the courage of taunting and humiliating her father in the presence of others. Lettie, too, in her maternal pride, imagines herself above rest of the world. With a ‘touch of ironic brutality’ she proudly declares that, “when I have to sign my name and occupation in a visitor’s book, it will be- Mother’. I hope my businesses will flourish.” (260). No less proud is Emily with ‘the stateliness of strong woman’ six month gone with child. But it is Lawrence’s diseased mentality that makes him fear the lovely togetherness of mother and child, “A woman who has her child in her arms is a tower of strength, a beautiful, unassailable tower of strength that may in its turn stand quietly dealing death.”(260).

And he is bound to conclude that in the marital duel, the woman generally wins, because she has the children on her side. If it is evident that Lawrence was unable to deal with normal heterosexual relations in his novels, it is also clear that he had warm regard for the homosexual or man-man relationship. The preference of the novelist for such kind of ties can be easily explained by connecting it with such personal causes as his effeminate nature and cowardly temperament. Thus, the homosexual associations for man and man in the novels of Lawrence can be adequately attributed to his womanish qualities. Cyril Beardsall, who is Lawrence himself as a youth and whose natural attribute is a girlish sensibility, is deeply fascinated with George, as is seen in his close physical proximity with the man, when they are drying themselves after taking bath and George is rubbing his naked body, “He saw I had forgotten..... (212).With same enthusiasm, Cyril is attracted towards Annable: “But he had a great attraction for me, his magnificent physique, his great vigour and vitality, and his swarthy, gloomy face drew me.”(143).

This attraction of Cyril for the two men, George and Annable, accounts for his inhibited and indecisive response towards Emily’s love. Thus, Lawrence’s physical debility not only gave rise to his antifeminism but also to homoeroticism which he euphemistically referred to as the ‘blood-brotherhood’.

In almost all the novels of Lawrence we see the conflict between instinct and intellect, between knowledge and intuition. It was Lawrence’s infirmity that drove him to such queer psychic precipice as propounding his theory of ‘blood consciousnesses. The White Peacock presents this doctrine of the novelist by

posing a conflict between culture and primitivism, between sense-awareness and intellectual consciousness. This conflict has been related to the clash between male principle and the female principle, between feminine world of Christian idealism and masculine world of pagan vitalism. When a Lawrence-woman has to actuate her essential destructive course of action against a man she attempts to replace the vitality in him with idealism, thus affecting a lethal split within his sensibility. George and Annable have been brought to the verge of physical and spiritual ruin by their fatal association with such women. Lettie, the first of Lawrence's possessive women, "is capable of living from an emotional center, but only from a mental one in which intellect reigns and from which the passions are divorced" (23) Comments John E. Stoll. She represents the formalized modern life of abstractions, which consists of 'garden parties' not 'rabbit-catching, whereas George stands for the primal impulsive and instinctive life. We see Lettie gradually replacing the vital animal vigour of this 'primitive man' with the experience of sophistication and idealism. She creates around him an aura of splendid visions by giving him the regular dose of pictures and music. Her alluring feminine charm is the basic instrument in this process. When after a song she asks, "Did you really see nothing in the music?" (18).

Thus when Lettie enquires about what he thinks he replies in terms of his, 'feelings'. But it does not take long before he starts 'thinking', "Good lord", he drawled, "I've lain there thinking all afternoon. I didn't know I could do such a thing." (156)

As soon as George marries and moves away from his secure and contended existence in bourgeoisie world, his destruction begins. Thus, the destructive influence of woman and decaying effect of industrial set up are assimilated. His movement from the secure happiness of a pre-industrial environment to a rootless existence in the post-industrial environment shows Lawrence's belief as the solo-state of contended living. Significantly, Cyril asks him to back to the land and revive his drooping spiritual contentment, "You will come back to farming again, won't you?" (293).

The malignity of Annable's misanthropic thoughts is naturally made explicable by the man-woman relationship as portrayed in the novel. He has been exploited by lady Crystabel, who tried to view him 'in an aesthetic light',She'd got the idea from a sloppy French novel-the 'Romance of A poor young Man'She had her own way too much- I let her do as she like with me" (146)

After escaping from such a state he finds pleasure in his present living, where he is the 'ruler' and his women is the 'ruled'. Thus, we see that Annable's emotional insecurity, caused by his failure with lady crystabel, develops in him a tendency of negative escapism, and he derives a satisfaction by making his own world where he himself is the master, "One's more a man here in the wood...I'd rather watch the rabbits and the birds."(128) and where he refers to his children as 'lovely little litter; 'a pretty bag o'ferrete;' 'natural as weasels'.

After making a careful study of *The White Peacock*, the most probable question that arises before us is that why is life so blighted in *The white Peacock*? The answer can be given in the words of Julian Moynahan who considers the basic reason behind this blighted vision to be the actually diseases temperament of the narrator; because the narrator is 'actually diseased himself. Unfulfilled by woman, man gives way to the anti-social destructiveness of an Annable or the self-destructive shapeless emotional vagaries of drunkenness.

But the close scrutiny of the novel certifies what Lawrence told Jessie chambers that he was putting everything in the book that was part of him. As already discussed, the essential traits of Lawrence's personality are reflected to the full in his first work-his emotional fray's i.e., antifeminism.

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