



## ANTIFEMINIST ELEMENTS IN *THE PLUMED SERPENT*

**AVDHESH YADAV**

(Research Scholar)

Department of English & MEL

University of Allahabad

(UP) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

Lawrence wrote *The Plumed Serpent* during his stay in America and his several trips to Old Mexico. He began working on this novel early in 1923, when he was living on the shores of Lake Chapala and finished it in February 1923. This paper aims to discover antifeminist elements in this novel. This association with Mexico redefined his vision of life. As we know, he always had a remarkable reverence for the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent—the Indians, the Aztecs and the Mayas. What he adored these days was the instinctive life of these primitive civilizations, which he found to be lacking in the life of modern Europe and America. The political quest for power, which emerged forcefully for the first time in Aron's *Rod* and which took a religious form in *Kangaroo* with its call for the 'god-passion', now witnesses the quasi resurrection of 'the great dark god' in *The Plumed Serpent*. The plot of the novel revolves round an Irish widow, Kate Leslie, who comes to Mexico with her two American friends for no reason except that "Over in England, In Ireland, in Europe, she had heard the consummated of her own spirit. It was finished, in a kind of death agony". (41)

**Keywords:** Antifeminism, Manhood, Woman and Phallic Pride

### INTRODUCTION

Lawrence wrote *The Plumed Serpent* during his stay in America and his several trips to Old Mexico. He began working on this novel early in 1923, when he was living on the shores of Lake Chapala and finished it in February 1923. This association with Mexico redefined his vision of life. As we know, he always had a remarkable reverence for the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent—the Indians, the Aztecs and the Mayas. What he adored these



days was the instinctive life of these primitive civilizations, which he found to be lacking in the life of modern Europe and America.

The political quest for power, which emerged forcefully for the first time in *Aron's Rod* and which took a religious form in *Kangaroo* with its call for the 'god-passion', now witnesses the quasi resurrection of 'the great dark god' in *The Plumed Serpent*. The plot of the novel revolves round an Irish widow, Kate Leslie, who comes to Mexico with her two American friends for no reason except that "Over in England, In Ireland, in Europe, she had heard the consummated of her own spirit. It was finished, in a kind of death agony". (41) But the corrupt degradation of modern Mexico City horrifies her very spirit. The spilling of blood and bowels in the bull-fighting ring which gives thrilling pleasure to the degenerate mob and her American friends strongly suggest that Mexico ardently needs to be regenerated. Such brutish callousness prevailing all over Mexican atmosphere makes Kate feel imprisoned in a "beetle trap". She sees cold, insect-like principal of evil on the faces of the 'beetle-men' of Mexico City. This beetle imagery used so frequently in relation to the disintegration of modern Mexicans inevitably reminds us of Minnette's fear of 'black beetles' in *Women in Love* which originates from her inherent tendency to lapse into the world of dissolution.

The next chapter throws more light on the degeneracy of modern Mexico, which is the result of the imposition of American consciousness on primitive blood consciousness. And, according to the novelist; the much needed social reconstruction is not to be reached through democracy. This conflict between paganism and Christianity is more intensely reflected in the opposition between Don Ramon and his catholic wife Dona Carlota who, besides being the emblem of Christianity, stands for the rights of woman.:

*The old gods! Why, what are they? Nothing but dead illusions. And ugly, repulsive illusions! Ah! I always thought my husband such a clever man, so superior to me! Ah, it is terrible to have changed one's idea! This is such nonsense. How dare him! How dare he take such nonsense seriously! How does he dare! (145).*

Carlote embodies the unhittable Lawrentian constant- the devouring, predatory woman. It seems that the novelist is strongly tempted to give a tortuous image to her. She is presented as a wife who has the power to 'lacerate' her husband "in his old emotional, passionate self: right in the middle of his belly, to tear him and make him feel predation of Carlota is linked with her devout Christianity to strengthen the anti-Christ views of the novelist.

In the line of possessive Lawrentian females Carlota, too, employs her children as her most powerful weapon by turning them against their father. The two boys also, bear a gesture of

AVDHESH YADAV

2 Page



disapproval towards Ramon's Quetzalcoatl business. The hostility between father and sons reaches to such an extent that the sons feel ashamed in being called 'Carrasco'. And this antagonism is provoked by their mother as Ramon tells us:

*...the babes and suckling don't get much chance. Their mothers and their teachers turn into little gramophones from the first, so what can they do, but sy and feel according to the record the mother and teacher puts into them? Perhaps in the time of Christ babes and suckling's were not so perfectly exploited by their elders.(188)*

Thus, the novelist has employs every possible opportunity to highlight the evil side of woman. In fact, his old pursuit, which demands a total submission from woman, flares up again in the present novel. What attracts Kate's attention most in Mexico is the assertion held by men and the subservience displayed sensuality of Don Ramon and general Cipriano, and feels a yearning to give over these men:

*"Ah!" She said to herself "Let me close my eyes to him, and open only my soul. Let me close my prying, seeing eyes, and sit in dark stillness along with these two men. They have got more than I; they have a richness that I haven't got. They have got rid of that itching of the eye, and the desire that works through the eye. The itching, prurient, knowing; imagining eye, I am cursed with it; I am hampered up in it. It is my curse of curses, the curse of eve. The curse of eve is upon me, my eyes are like hooks, my knowledge is like a fish-hook through my gills, pulling me in spasmodic desire. Oh, who will free me from the grappling of my eyes, from the impurity of sharp sight! Daughter of Eve, of greedy vision, why don't these men save me from the sharpness of my eyes!"(164)*

However, she goes on oscillating between twin poles of attraction and repulsion. But, gradually her western or Christian habits give way to the beliefs more elemental but more demanding. Cipriano wants to marry her, for he needs a goddess for Quetzalcoatl pantheon. And though Kate realizes that she is being made an object of a blind ambition she cannot gather the courage to oppose this female exploitation:

*His desire seemed curiously impersonal, physical, and yet not personal at all. She felt as if, for him, she had some other name, she moved within another species. As if her name were, for example, Itzpalotl, and she had been born in unknown place, and was a woman unknown to herself. Yet surely, surely he was only putting his will over her? (210-211)*

AVDHESH YADAV

3P a g e



The subservience of Kate to the men of Questzalocatl is justified as a great coalescence of the few who have decided to turn beyond humanity. To Kate all people are 'monkeys', performing in different ways. And when Ramon learns of her terrible revulsion he shows her the direction he has chosen for himself:

*One must be able to disentangle oneself from persons, from people. If I go to a rose-bush, to be intimate with it, it is a nasty thing that hurts me. One must disentangle oneself from persons and personalities, and see people as one sees the trees in the landscape. People in some way dominate you. In some way, humanity dominates your consciousness. So you must people and humanity and you want to escape. But there is only one way of escape: to turn beyond them, to the greater life. (223)*

Thus, the misanthropy of Lawrence ultimately reveals itself in the form of Ramon's disgust of every human contact. And that is the reason why he decides to meet people on another plane where the contact is different. In fact, this another plane is euphemistic reference to the world of isolation which provides shelter to every escapist, and where Ramon attempts to find his way to the morning star-the name which hides in itself all the frustrated longings of the novelist.

The major male characters in the fictional work of Lawrence-George(The white peacock);Siegmund (The Trespasser);Walter Morel and Paul Morel (Sons and Lovers);Will Brangwen and Skrebensky (The Rainbow);Gerald Crich (Women in Love);Aaron Sisson and Rawdon Lilly (Aaron's Rod); and so on and so forth-have been victimized by possessive women in their lives. But The Plumed Serpent shows a remarkable development in this regard. It teaches the way to escape such victimization by destroying female identity, as has been exemplified by the character of Kate who allows herself to be plighted in a mystic marriage with Don Cipriano's feet and heels and Cipriano kissing her brow and breast. This turn in Kate's character, though ill defined, and thus, contradictory to normal character development, is introduced to justify his antifeminism. And It does not take long before Kate learns to succumb before the 'living male power' of Cipriano:

*As he sat in silence, casting the old, and twilight power over her, she felt herself submitting, succumbing. He was once more the old dominant male, shadowy, intangible, looming suddenly tall, and covering the sky, making a darkness that was himself and nothing but himself, the pan male. And she was swooned prone beneath, perfect in her proneness. It was the ancient phallic mystery, the ancient god-devil of the male Pan. Cipriano unyielding forever, in*

AVDHESH YADAV

4Page



*the ancient twilight, keeping the ancient twilight around him. She understood now his power with his soldiers. He ha the old gift of demon-power.(278)*

However, her marriage to Cipriano, who is to become the First man of Huitzilopochtli, is also a part of the Aztec revivalism, for she is to take the place of the goddess in Mexican pantheon. Like a cowed victim she is made to undergo this strange ordeal which is euphemistically called a 'manifestation' as 'there must be manifestations' in the process of making changes. And those who do not grasp the significance of these changes are bound to be punished, as in the case of Carlota who receives a painful death after a direct confrontation with Don Ramon. Infarct, what the novelist intends to reveal by Carlota's end is the sup plantation of independent womanhood. Not only this, Carlota's torture is intensified by Cipriano's venomous rants which are intended to justify her so called punishment. To her exclamation that Ramon has attempted to murder her, Cipriano gives an angry explanation.

However, the modern western women inside Kate finds hard to stomach the brutality of her god-husband and ponders over these crude men who hold women responsible for the loss of their virility:

*No, if women are thieves, It is only because men want to be thieved from.If women thieve the world's virility it is only because men want to have it thieved, since for men to be the last thing men want.(312).*

But to our surprise, and to the convenience of the novelist, she passively assumes the formal place of goddess Malintzi in the pantheon.Thus, the modern woman who loathed 'the very sound' of Quitzalcoatl and Huitzilopochli and preferred to die rather than be mixed up in this affair becomes part of it. The bloodshed, which takes place on the resurgence ceremony of Huitzilopochtli, god of death and destruction, gives her merely a short bout of depression whereas previously even the bull-fight used to shock her out of the senses. Though she despises the imposition of male significance she does not possess the will to protest and feels herself under the spell of Ramon and Cipriano. She realizes her instrumentality:

*But, where was woman, in this terrible interchange of will? Truly only a subservient, instrument thing: the soft stone on which the man sharpened the knife of his relentless volition: the soft lodestone to magnetize his blade of steel and keep all its molecules alive in the electric flow. (347-348)*

But, with a strange passivity, submits her very being:



*She was in love with him, when he was with her; in his arms, she was quite gone in his spell. She was the deep, slumberous lodestone, which set all his bones glittering with the energy of relentless pride. And she herself derived a great gratification in the embrace, a sense of passive, downward-sinking power, profound. (348)*

It seems as if the power of 'the Pan male' remains unfarmed unless it is aided with the capacity for violence as is indicated by Cipriano's conduct of the 'execution' of the bandits who had made an attack on Ramon's life. Two of them are strangled and three are stabbed by Cipriano publicly. However, the captives are called 'traitors' by the novelist so that their open murder, which is euphemized as 'execution', may get a justification.

And in the novel sexually insecure male finds contentment in humbling the opposite sex, and Teresa's docile submissiveness heals his hurt pride. His wife's adoration of him is apparent the way she rejects Kate's idea of living her the real secret of womanhood which lies in giving one's soul to the man:

*When a man is warm and brave-then he wants the woman to give him her soul, and he keeps it in his womb, so he is more than a mere man, a single man. I know it. I know where my soul is. It is in Ramon's womb, the womb of a man, just as his seed is in my womb, the womb of a woman. He is man, and a column of blood. I am woman, and a valley of blood. I shall not contradict him. How can I? My soul is inside him, and I am far from contradicting him when he is trying with all his might to do something that he knows about...That other way of women, where a woman keeps her own soul-ah, what is it but weariness!(370-371)*

Kate, Who used to accuse Teresa of sacrificing her individuality to her husband, herself becomes an obedient slave to Cipriano and loses her identity,. And nothing else but Lawrence's wish-fulfillment fantasy, which arose from his worsened physical conditions and hindered sexual activity, leads to such description of sexual experience in the novel. Also, the same factor explains the sacred relationship established between two male characters of the novel-Ramon and Cipriano. In the line of Cyril-George, Birkin-Gerald and, Lilly-Aaron conjunction the present relationship grows even more stronger. Enough indications are given in the novel that Women's company disgusts Ramon whereas Cipriano's contact pleases him most, "With Cipriano he was most sure. Cipriano and he , even they embraced each other with passion, when they met after an absence, embraced in the recognition of each other's eternal and abiding loneliness; like the morning stay."(225)



As it has been discussed throughout, his 'manhood' finally takes the shape of dictatorship. Moreover, on the other hand he seeks obedience from the masses and on the other hand we find him escaping from humanity. In fact, Lawrence's hero can best be understood as a man who, unable to fulfill his responsibilities, poses as a representative of divine masculinity. And in this novel too Lawrence wants to maintain the male primacy.

## WORK CITED

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley, 1953. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Daleski, H.M., *The Forked Flame: A Study of D.H. Lawrence*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.
- Farr, Judith, *Twentieth century interpretations of Sons and lovers: a collection of critical essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, .1970.
- Lawrence, David Herbert. *The Plumed Serpent*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth editions Ltd, 1995.
- Sanders, Scott. *D. H. Lawrence: The world of Five Major Novels*. London: Vision Press Ltd., 1973.
- Stoll, John E. *The Novels of D. H. Lawrence: A Search for Integration*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1971.