

# The Poetics of Exile in D H Lawrence's depiction of Personal Identity through Narration

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Biological essentialism is the belief that 'human nature', an individual's personality, or some specific quality is an innate and natural 'essence' (rather than a product of circumstances, upbringing, and culture). Lawrence, in his formulation of 'Blood Consciousness' outlines a philosophy of normative materialism based on 'the Flesh'. Lawrence's Blood Consciousness earned him many detractors that led him to undertake a self-imposed exile, which he called a 'a savage pilgrimage'. Lawrence's exile leads him to his own interpretation of personal identity, that he incorporates into his philosophy. This unique conception of Personal Identity is inseparably linked to Lawrence's biological essentialism. A Poetics of Exile is indeed articulated in his attempt to understand his own self-imposed deportation from Industrial England. Lawrence applies this Poetics of Exile in his narrative technique in depicting the real and imaginary landscapes of industrialised England. This paper attempts to trace Lawrence's Poetics of Exile in view of 'Blood Consciousness' and its manifestation through his essentialism depicted in his narration.

Joyce Wexler in his paper, D.H. Lawrence Through a Postmodernist Lens writes that the fiction that Lawrence wrote in the 1920s has been judged inferior wrote his canonical novels Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, Women in Love- though explanations of the decline vary (Wexler 1).

It was during this period that Lawrence undertook his journeys away from England. Lawrence's journeys away from England were in effect a self-imposed exile. This self-imposed exile had its own effects on Lawrence's philosophy and his theory of blood consciousness as is made evident in his writing. Lawrence's rhetoric during his exile is one informed with a unique ontological scepticism of Modernity. Lawrence's ontological scepticism caused the rhetoric in his expatriate novels to resemble that of later postmodernists. Lawrence resembled a proto-postmodernist in the making. This aspect of Lawrence is important because it helped shape a worldview that was much ahead of the time and space that he belongs to. The philosophy that emerged out of this worldview evolved a metaphysical framework which had implications that are still unexplored. One way of looking at Lawrence's fiction is as a result of a unique poetics of exile that resulted in producing works where characters were depicted characters through a narrative that adopted a rhetoric of exile.

Lawrence's expatriate novels can resemble postmodern fiction because he was in the rhetorical position of postmodernists- isolated and exhausted, both physically and artistically. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" John Barth locates the source of postmodernism in the writer's conviction that certain forms seemed used-up; one's options seemed limited to imitating earlier forms or writing about (Wexler 3). Lawrence was of the same opinion as other modernists that the traditional forms of representation were inadequate to represent the changing reality that the industrial revolution and modernity ushered in. In pursuit of new forms of representation, Lawrence experimented with style.

Convinced that readers had a "need" for his work (L ii. 171), he used what he called an "intimate" style in his modernist novels (L iii. 549). This style is manifested in the third person omniscient point of view of *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (He also used this narrative form in *The Plumed Serpent*). Like Flaubert's free indirect discourse, Lawrence's "intimate" style avoids an intrusive narrator and consistently focalizes the narrative from various characters' positions (Wexler 4).

This unique narrative style led to the conflation of two aspects. A poetics of exile, for Lawrence and a rhetoric of exile for his characters as mentioned earlier. The third person omniscient narrator is not interested in the discovery of characters by letting the reader explore the social reality of the day. On the contrary, his approach is one that is both prescriptive and didactic. Prescriptive, because he wanted his audience to analyse their own social reality in light of the alienation caused by the Industrial revolution and come to the same conclusions he did. His didactics arise from his need convey what he thought was the antidote for alienation. In his approach can be traced a unique poetics or theory that evolves not just from his exile from England but also an exile from his audience.

As Lawrence travelled farther from his audience, his ranting narrators became more strident. Rick Rylance argues, "The rightwards drift of Lawrence's thought is continuous with his increasing separation from his own social origins and experience (Wexler 9). This separation from his origin was in part what led Lawrence's scepticism of both his audience's worldview and English society as a whole. Lawrence later developed this ontological scepticism in his narration into a fully formed metaphysics. Lawrence's metaphysics also led to the unintentional creation of two distinct products. A poetics of exile from Lawrence and a rhetoric of exile from the narratives of his characters. His rhetoric depicts his characters as exiles not from their homeland but from their own nature. According to Lawrence this exile was the consequence of the alienation of men and women from their normative materialistic instinctual selves due to the restructuring of the human experience by the Industrial revolution and modernity itself.

A suitable example is Kate from *The Plumed Serpent* who travels to North America in search of community and liberation from the alienating effects of modernity. Kate's dilemma is that when she seeks autonomy, she finds alienation; when she identifies with a group, she overcomes alienation but sacrifices autonomy. She is drawn to Cipriano, a general in Ramón's army, erotically and politically, because he allows her to feel a vicarious community with a group of Mexican peasants (Wexler 10). In the novel Kate fails to find fulfilment. All personal spaces, that fulfilled her and gave her a personal identity, have transformed into spaces of contention.

“The couple, the family, and the state are parallel sites of contention. While showing the failure of the individual to find fulfilment alone (the European model), Lawrence also shows the difficulty of yielding individual identity to a group (Ramón's model). Lawrence presents the cult of Quetzalcoatl as a way to rescue the modern subject from the isolation of individualism, but he also expresses a bedrock of resistance against any emotion that obliterates self-consciousness.” (Wexler 10).

When man is alienated, he is not just being alienated from himself. He also being alienated from both his group identity and his individual identity. The definition of exile is the state of being excluded from one's natural or native space. This means that Lawrence's characters and Lawrence himself are exiles but not just in the physical sense. They are exiles not because they are excluded from their native or natural space but because they are excluded from their native/natural personal identity. In a sense they are metaphysical exiles. The poetics of exile that emerges from Lawrence is a metaphysical one. It is the exile of man from his personal identity. Lawrence's work during the 1920s is a testament to this fact. According to Lawrence, man is an exile from his natural self in modern times with nowhere to escape. This endeavour to escape is evident in Lawrence's own personal life and his writing.

The novels of the 1920s demonstrate the effects of Lawrence's increasing isolation from his audience and his withering rhetorical aims. If these novels are re-examined in a postmodern context, they seem self-conscious texts which expose the artificiality of the novel as a genre and the emotional vacuity of contemporary life (Wexler 15). Lawrence is not exempt from the metaphysical exile that his characters undergo. Lawrence tried to depict his own social reality through his work. The people of Lawrence's time were being alienated from their natural selves. This alienation was in the form of a surrender to utilitarian principles. Everything needed to have a use. This utilitarianism led to the instrumentalization of all things in the modern worldview. The instrumentality carried to its logical extreme began to instrumentalise human beings and even art. When human beings began to become reduced to mere instruments, they lost their essence. This loss in essence resulted in the loss of an objective basis for man's personal identity and his being. The loss of an objective basis stranded man as a metaphysical exile in pursuit of an essence

that was his own. Lawrence answered this exile, in pursuit of an objective basis for essence, with a personal identity, that was biologically essential.

In their joint Preface the three authors of the Cambridge Biography of D. H. Lawrence raise certain important issues regarding his perception of identity, especially the ambiguous relationship between what they see as its continuities and its changes. They suggest that a specific idea of identity—a personal core or centre, an "essential self," out of which character grows in a process of development—is central to our culture, whereas Lawrence's work has a more powerful emphasis on fluidity and change (Harrison 1). Lawrence's personal identity was based on a biological essence from which the ego, character or any other aspects of his being arose as a functional state. The biological essence of man would stay the same while all else changed. This notion of identity based on biological essence gave human existence a native/natural metaphysical space. Lawrence's poetics of exile seems to give man a metaphysical personal identity that ends his exile in part. His biological essentialism gave man a fixed physical existence and the notion of a fixed personal identity but it could not stop the alienation of man's being. Man, still lived in an environment that constantly alienated him from himself and his natural self. Lawrence's answer was to nuance identity with a reconceptualization.

Lawrence wrote of himself that it would be an absurdity to be one thing today and another tomorrow, which would be to "deny identity": "One may seem very different from one's past, but one is nevertheless the new child of one's yesterdays." (Harrison 2). Lawrence's identity was reconceptualised with an immutable core, formed with an essence that had an objective basis in man's physical existence. Man's ego or being on the other hand was constantly changing in response to external stimuli. This changing ego or being was important to Lawrence's conception of the human being. The being part of the human being, was conceived as malleable and susceptible to change. Whether this change was oriented to what man ought to be or what he was forced to be by socioeconomic factors formed the heart of Lawrence's Poetics. In Lawrence's opinion if man was not becoming what he should be, he was being alienated from his natural/native being. This alienation would metaphysically exile him from his native/natural being.

Lawrence differentiated between the ego, which he defined as the ready-made mental self, conscious and self-assertive, and identity, something deeper and infinitely more complex and obscure (Harrison 2). Lawrence contrasted identity with ego, and physical existence with being. He termed the immutable physical existence as flesh and the mutable being as word. In doing so he predicated man's being on his physical existence. He gave flesh primacy over the word. Man's being could be exiled from himself but not his physical existence. The characters in Lawrence's works are exiled from their native land either voluntarily or due to circumstances. The being of these characters undergoes a transformation in the exiled land. Their existence remains more or less the same but the being that arises

out of this existence is shaped by the change in environment. Kate from *The Plumed Servant* momentarily finds her natural/native self in Mexico while Lady Chatterley and Ursula Brangwen from *The Rainbow* merely leaves her town to find their natural/native self. Lawrence's poetics of exile is one that tries to reconcile human beings or characters to their native natural self through exile from the social conditions that alienated them. Lawrence's poetics when read in conjunction with his metaphysics produces evidence of a narrative that develops the two from polarising ends.

Lawrence's metaphysic deals with first principles, including being, substance, essence and identity; it is what he called a "theory of being and knowing," or more specifically an attempt to reconcile such a theory with his "living sense of being." (Harrison 2). Lawrence believed that the social conditions of his time exiled man from his native/natural being in his native land and that an exile from those social conditions might end the exile of man from his being. This restoration of man's being was achieved either through a reconnection to Nature through a change to more natural environments or as a realisation of man's natural/native self through sex and one's own body as a consequence of the absence of alienating factors.

His first attempts at such a theory were the Foreword to *Sons and Lovers*, written after the novel and completed by January 1913, but which he never intended for publication, and his "Study of Thomas Hardy," which he had begun by June 1914 (Harrison 3). This does not mean that Lawrence's poetics and his metaphysics are results of his thinking. In Lawrence's case his writing preceded his philosophy.

There is a tendency to assume a consequential relationship between metaphysical ideas and imaginative writing. Lawrence, however, in his Foreword to *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, claimed the reverse, that his "pseudo-philosophy," as he ironically called it, was "deduced" from his imaginative writings, which "come unwatched out of one's pen." (Harrison 3).

Lawrence's imaginative and theoretical concerns regarding the question of identity had both a personal and a universal dimension: the need to confront the divisions within his own identity, and the imperative to create a new identity for the age, for both men and women. Fundamental to all of Lawrence's thinking on such issues is the concept of polarity: female and male; body and spirit; impulse and ideal; blood-consciousness and mental consciousness; organic and mechanical principles, and so on (Harrison 5). Lawrence's conception of personal identity is applied both in his own social reality and to his characters. Lawrence evolves a poetics of exile for his own social reality and a rhetoric of exile for his characters. This rhetorical exile was depicted using polarities in the fictional being of the characters. Lawrence used a disproportionate polarity in the characters as a means of presenting the character's exile and alienation from their own being. This contention between polarities was the defining feature of Lawrence's

narrative and his philosophy. He unified these polarities in the Foreword to *Sons and Lovers* by presenting his metaphysics of the flesh and the word.

“Since the Flesh is also called God the Father, the Almighty, "the Inscrutable, the Unknowable" (p. 471). it has been interpreted as the creative life energy of the universe, the source of physical existence, which is independent of, and infinitely more powerful than, human consciousness and the human will; while the Word has been defined as the products of this creative life energy-nature, humanity and civilization, conscious and intellectual endeavour, and spiritual and ethical values.” (Harrison 6).

Lawrence’s conception of man as constituted both by the word and the flesh. Lawrence’s conception of human beings seems to have evolved from the assumption that the essence of human beings is first and foremost substantial. By substantial we mean that the essence of human beings arises from substance and not the properties of that substance. Lawrence’s terminology for substance seems to be a theological allusion, ‘the flesh’. In *Resurrecting Biological Essentialism*, Michael Devitt argues

I start by saying something about essentialism in general and about the essentialism I shall defend in particular. A property P is an essential property of being an F if anything is an F partly in virtue of having P. A property P is the essence of being an F iff anything is an F in virtue of having P.” (Devitt 345).

Here the property P, for Lawrence seems to be the property of existing as Flesh and F seems to stand for human. As stressed before in this paper Lawrence’s essentialism is biological. Human beings possess the property of being human by virtue of their biological existence. Biological essentialism displaces the modern idea of man as a being of the mind and translocates body as the centre of man’s metaphysics. The primacy of the flesh determines Lawrence’s mind-body relations.

Lawrence’s mind-body conception is normative in addition to being materialistic. He says that there is a specific instinctive function (an activity that is natural to or the purpose of a person or thing). that individuals were designed to execute, which he calls the Real nature of man (in *The Rainbow*). and the Flesh (in *Sons and Lovers*). Lawrence says “So the man comes home to his woman and his God so God the father receives his son again a man of the undying flesh so God expels him forth to waste himself in utterance in work which is only God the father realising himself in a moment of forgetfulness, thus the eternal working.” (Lawrence 6). Man, here is seen as a conduit for God’s eternal work. About women Lawrence says ‘And in



the woman is the eternal continuance and from the man in the human race comes the exclamation of joy and astonishment at new self-revelation, revelation of that which is woman to man.' (Lawrence 6). Woman here has become a source of rebirth for man, giving him new strength. Lawrence's philosophy relies on a circle of eternal work renewed in eternal continuance where men and women perform a fixed instinctive function in their shared material being. According to Lawrence Man and Woman possess a fixed instinctive function in their natural environment that can be executed only in unison (natural here has theological connotation as Nature originates from God)., thus men and women recognise the Real only in this union. This recognition of the Real is ultimately achieved only through sexual union. The sexual union of the body is the ultimate expression of the Lawrence's normative materialism and it becomes the basis for his Metaphysics. It is this normative materialism that is demonstrated in the characters in *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The changing environment of Industrialisation displaces men and women characters from Nature rendering them incapable of performing their instinctive functions, inevitably restructuring their human experience to suit industrial interests, taking them further away from the Real.

In conclusion the flesh is instinctive, spontaneous, physical, purely organic, unconscious, and non-intellectual life, which has no purpose other than its own efflorescence, its fullness of being. But the flesh is not one man. It is the union of man and woman. Lawrence proceeds to revision social relations in terms of the flesh, starting with marriage (Harrison 7).

For Lawrence no marriage service can declare a man and a woman to be "one flesh"; the Word can only confirm what the Flesh decrees. The deepest impulse of attraction is beyond choice, consciousness, will or ceremony; it is a manifestation of the cosmic life-energy. In the Foreword to *Sons and Lovers* he claims every woman demands that a man shall come home to her as simply her man of flesh to be "restored," "nourished," "re-born of her" (p. 472).; if he does not, it is a universal law of the Flesh that she will reject him and both will be destroyed. In Lawrence's early fiction such a law seems to apply universally; there are virtually no such revivifying relationships. Both in fiction and in reality, Lawrence envisaged contemporary male female relationships as a total failure and saw the exploration and the establishment of a new relation between men and women as the critical issue of the age, and as such central to both his theory of being and his literary mission (Harrison 10).

The ontological dichotomy of Word and Flesh is not so much a meta physical concept as the imaginative realization of fundamental aspects of Lawrence's own identity and, more importantly, of the deep divisions within that identity which he recognized and confronted at an early stage but which continued throughout his life and work (Harrison 11). The dichotomy between word and flesh and the division of flesh as man and woman also inform the emergence of a poetics of exile and the rhetoric of exile from his work. The poetics of Lawrence makes him a man escaping the alienation of industrialisation and modernity through exile and his rhetoric makes his characters do the same. Both Lawrence and his characters end their exile only through the fulfilment of their normative materialistic instinctual function either through sex or self-realisation and fulfilment. He wished to end his and his character's exile through a reintegration into the cosmic unity.

The sense of the need for this reintegration of personal identity and the cosmos that became so striking and pervasive in Lawrence's work is here rooted in the feeling that it was generated in him and subsequently nurtured by cosmic forces. This was not adopted literary concept but deeply ingrained in his psyche, and while a product of the intense, sensitive response to the living forms and rhythms of nature that he shared with his father, it is often expressed in feminine terms and imagery (Harrison 13).

## CONCLUSION

Lawrence's poetics of exile produces a framework in which there is a pull between two opposite forces. One of alienation and the other of integration. The alienation sends man into exile while the integration seeks to end it. Lawrence's poetics of exile and the rhetoric employed with his characters depict these contradictory forces through his work. In Lawrence's A Propos of "Lady Chatterley's Lover," he would later attempt to bridge the distance between man and the cosmos. It is a question, practically, of relationship. We must get back into relation, vivid and nourishing relation to the cosmos and the universe ... This is an affair of the individual and the household... Then the ritual of the seasons, with the Drama and the Passion of the soul embodied in procession and dance, this is for the . . . whole community, in together? ness. And the ritual of the great events in the year of stars is for nations and whole peoples. Such passages explore aspects of human identity which are both intensely personal and universal, an expression of Lawrence's sense of a cosmic creative life energy, of the profound meaning the natural world had not only for him personally, but which he believed it held for everyone (Harrison 14). The poetics of Exile in Lawrence is an exiled man's effort to reconcile identity as something he can carry on his own person at all times.



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Foreword to *Sons and Lovers*,

