

# Depiction of Post-War Hegemonic Masculinity in D.H. Lawrence's Novel

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**Abstract**—This study is focused on the analytical examination on masculinity in the classic fiction of D.H Lawrence. Based on the narrative data from the novel *Aaron's Rod* (1922), this paper explores how and why hegemonic masculinity is conformed by the male protagonist. The consequences of social practices and socio-historical situation in which Lawrence scripted the novel is also examined. In view of the fact that the novel chosen is connected to Lawrence's own life encounters, the author's perception on masculinity is also studied. The discursive routes occupied by the male protagonist is examined established on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. As such, this analysis perceives the novel as supporting a postmodern situation highlighting numerous discourses which review the conventional concepts of hegemonic masculinity, but do not construct a contemporary representation of supreme masculinity in its place. This study may possibly postulate more profound perceptions into literary discourse that are fundamental for educators and social researchers to look beyond texts through the lens of masculinity studies.

**Index Terms**— Hegemonic, Masculinity, Dominant, Conformity

## I. INTRODUCTION

The formation of masculinity in societies throughout the word and intermittently in history is observed through masculinity studies which comprise the interdisciplinary fields of socio-cultural, political, historical, economic and psychology. Lawrence's work on the tradition of English literature is challenging to understand but worth examining. In view of several critics' notion of Lawrence's work, there is a balanced interpretation among them. These elucidate numerous ideas about Lawrence's novels which are worth noting. Some critics see him as the most powerful and significant author in the history of English novels. Meanwhile, there are scholars who perceive him as an author of pulp fiction, endorsing sex instead of literature (Kriegl 3). Sadly, there are also others who have hardly heard of Lawrence. Nevertheless, for the past number of decades of the twentieth century, Lawrence was ardently discussed and extensively read (Niven 186). Due to this reason, he has brought immense attention to critics who have been showing interest in his work that begun from the time he started his writing. In particular, the studies in gender related issues have played a vital role in the debate of Lawrence's work where, the later half of the twentieth century is where the peak of the tradition of criticism is definitely attained. The diverse views from the critics encourage further studies on Lawrence,

especially in relation to masculinity among his characters and the problems related to masculine power.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilises Connell's theory on hegemonic masculinity. In *Gender and Power* (1987), Connell directs to the domain of studies that present information on imbalanced relationships with regards to masculinities and femininities as a "state of play" and in this manner theorises the dominant concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (111). Connell puts forwards that "a hegemonic form of masculinity exists in each human society" and that it is "always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (*ibid*). Connell observes that the social conventions for instance marriage and fatherhood "often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority" (79). In fact, Connell affirms that the reason for maintaining the act of complicity, whether tacit or differently, "is that most men benefit from the subordination of women and thus render hegemonic masculinity as the cultural expression of this ascendancy" (184).

## III. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

*Aaron's Rod* which was set in post-war England and Italy and written after World War I brings into light a number of the recognisable social and political traditions of Lawrence's generation that promote affairs that are relevant to us during the present time as they were for the author.

The novel revolves around Aaron Sisson (Aaron), a knowledgeable young man who chooses not to educate, but in its place goes back to the coal mine as a secretary to a miners' union. He leaves behind the unjust obligation to take care of his wife and three daughters to become an orchestra flutist in London and then leaves London for Italy.

## IV. THE MALE PROTAGONIST

The protagonist of the novel, Aaron, a flute player and a mine worker from Nottinghamshire, departs on an expedition of breakthrough and exploration through post-war Europe after growing out to be disappointed with his family life and experience. Aaron escapes the damage in England and his waning marriage and who, similar to Lawrence himself, turns out to be engrossed in uncovering and accepting the condition of the political and religious principles that created western civilisation. Lawrence sets the novel within the atmosphere of social, cultural and political interest. He integrates political theories in addition to his intention into his work. Lawrence's character, Aaron is the progressive character representing the

changes in society who desires to experiment and utilise new tradition of believing and experiencing it in his daily life. Lawrence subtly created a constrained masculinity through Aaron because he sensed that England was experiencing a miserable growth in disillusioned masculine identity condition. More precisely, Lawrence considered that British men were undergoing a substantial deterioration in their own personal masculinity, specifically on the control over their families, and their position in the society.

On his journey, he befriended a number of characters who attempt to manipulate him on his stance on life. Eventually, Aaron battles with the actual objective of his life. In this novel, Lawrence works on reoccurring themes that include the connection between genders and the restraint perspective on the new post-war masculinities on marriage and individualism. Aaron's personality is grounded on his own experience and the countless incidents he experienced in London, Milan and Florence. *Aaron's Rod* is semi-autobiographical as it represents Lawrence's expression on gender crisis. This crisis is made evident as the analysis on Aaron's masculine identity is connected to Lawrence's life experience.

### V. THE DOMINANT AARON SISSON IN AARON'S ROD

The first chapter of the novel opens with the description of Aaron as a good looking man, who is "fair" and "pleasant" and is about thirty-two years old. The physical description of Aaron given by the author conforms to the ideal masculine macho man. In the beginning of the novel, Aaron's children are depicted as feeling excited and cheerful as they prepare to set up their Christmas tree. Although, the war is over, the egoistic Aaron settles into his mind that nothing is new in his life. Hough in his book, *The Dark Sun* (1957) remarked that:

The theme that seems to be announced in the opening pages is Aaron's attempt to find himself or more broadly, the situation of the established man who finds that what he has achieved means nothing to him, and is irresistibly impelled to throw it all up and start again (95).

Although Aaron has achieved materialistic success in his life, has a great family and holds a good job, he is far from being satisfied with his life. For this Heroic character, his achievement is nothing to him. He avoids getting into any emotional attachment with his wife Lottie and his children, as it would affect his portrayal of a masculine man. The hint of bitter dissatisfaction from his good wife and the squabbling competitiveness of the well brought up children left Aaron with a feeling of dread. He does not enjoy quality family time as he feels that he should not be domesticated and get involved in their activities. His one and only domestic resource is his solitary flute which he plays at the back kitchen and also outside the distraction of his family, that is his regular pub which has the masculine atmosphere.

The Heroic Aaron is in particular a prosperous worker in the mining community, with adequate savings in the bank and holding a superior post which requires more responsibilities than his colleagues. Besides, Lawrence ensures there is also proper recognition given to the father figure in the family where the children show respect to Aaron. Lawrence provides Aaron the opportunity to depict his male authority within his family unit by generating the characteristics of a male authoritative man. Power permeates in *Aaron's Rod*, and it is bestowed as problematic and a troubling force in the social practice and human psychology. Through hegemonic masculinity, power represents elements that are problematic and disturbing to the characters especially among the family members. However, it does not imply that Lawrence is unable to celebrate dominance by discovering some of its multidimensional features. The novel projects a digression on the notion of masculinity. Aaron is forced to leave his wife Lottie because of her sacrificial vow on marriage where she believes that a husband and a wife should stay together no matter what problem they endure. She firmly believes that Aaron should feel the same too. However, as a dominant man who is influence by his male ego, Aaron displaces marriage from its central position by leaving his family to seek a perfect life in other places which in his mind should be more fruitful and rewarding.

Aaron and his wife Lottie are inventive depictions of people who have to endure the pain of relationship that is pushed to its boundaries. Lottie criticises Aaron for the reason that, "He kept himself back always kept himself back, wouldn't give himself" (201). In contrast, Aaron feels that he is "forced to love" where in reality he hungers "to have a bit of free room to round me — to loosen myself" (72). Due to Aaron's yearning for freedom and space, their relationship results in mistreatment of love. In the beginning Lottie blames Aaron for not being understanding but later makes emotional plea to him to admit his mistakes but "he himself had not the faintest feeling at the moment, of his own wrong" (139). Lottie's appeals and sentimental blackmail make him sick with dismay. In Aaron's experience, his wife coldly horrifies and repels him. He sees himself as the dominant victim, falling to a vulnerable woman. Although Lottie is his wife, his sense of authority reminds him not to bow to her pleas. As a man with reputable masculine identity, he has the final say and the decision maker. He looks at the whole domestic scene with his wife, with uncaring repulsion. His soul went black as "he looked at her" (137). He silently releases himself, "and in a black unconscious movement he was gone" (137).

Although, Aaron is portrayed as courageous and a patriarchal character, he suffers inner constraints which he does not share. He suffers under his wife's demands "that can press like a flat sheet of iron against a man" (169). Lawrence in his essay on morality discussed that there is a need to have courage and discipline. Being the subordinate character, Lottie neither has the courage nor the discipline. Instead, Aaron declares the existence, "of two people at a deadlock... there is not one only wholly at fault. Both must be at fault" (169). With regards to his problem with Lottie, he is able to ascertain the actual reason for the failure:

He and Lottie had loved one another and the love had developed almost at once into a kind of combat... both he and Lottie had been brought up to consider themselves the first in whatsoever company they found themselves... first and single he felt and as such he bore himself. It had taken him years to realize that Lottie, also felt herself first and single. (AR 169)

As a wife, Lottie's wishes is to be with her husband who initially promised to protect her. Therefore, she becomes possessive with:

all her instincts all her impulse, all her desire, and above all her will, was to possess her man is very fullness once, just once and once and for all (172).

This portrayal from Lottie infuriates Aaron. Lottie's possessiveness seems to be a familiar situation and readers may wonder what is wrong here. Why are the rules set by the married couple ignored and why should there be a situation like this that ends in a dreadful deadlock between a man and a woman? Spilka states that:

for Lawrence, the source of life lies beyond love, and therefore the individual soul, with its root in that source, takes precedence over love, it submits to the yoke and leash of love, but never forfeit its own proud "individual singleness, even while it loves and yields." (The *Love Ethic* 126)

The above extract supports the view that life's satisfaction does not depend on love alone but there are other external factors that are more important that could bring contentment. Supporting this view, ultimately, Aaron walks out of his wife and children on one Christmas Eve and becomes a flutist in the Covent Garden orchestra:

He knew well enough that the thought of any loving, any sort of real coming together between himself and anybody or anything, was just objectionable to him. No-- he was not moving towards anything: he was moving almost violently away from everything. And that was what he wanted. (174)

Aaron's personal need to depart from his home permanently and not providing financial support has a context which is the breakdown of a culture supported by the concepts of hegemonic masculinity. Aaron walks out from his family to free himself and to avoid his wife's stifling love and most

importantly to be left alone. There requirements are in reality symptoms of post-war depression on Aaron. His constraint is caused by "the violence of the nightmare released now into the general air" (5). The earlier chapters of the novel are pervaded with biblical allusion. Prior to Aaron's decision to abandon his family, he replies ironically to his daughter's demonstration of love from their Christmas tree decoration, "Look, Father, don't you love it?" "Love it?" he re-echoed, ironical over the word love"(10). His daughter, Millicent, soon after crashes another decoration piece which implies, a re-enactment of the principle of man killing others. The "little splashing explosion' of the blue ornamental ball foreshadows the blast of the bomb at the concluding part of the novel. Aaron's daughter's connection to the significant ornament embodies the deceitful power of greed that Aaron subsequently confesses, "It's money on both sides: it's money we live for and money is what our lives are worth"(21). Aaron's stubborn male dominant character is exposed in the above incident. Knowing very well that his child wants him to be a father figure in his home, he still chooses to abandon his family due to his persistent dominant nature and male ego.

In another instance in the novel, due to his masculine self-importance and stubborn sense of individuality where before he abandons his wife, Aaron deliberates on his relationship with Lottie for a few seconds. If he should return to Lottie, he would lose himself and if he leaves her she would be devastated. Neither outcome is appealing to Aaron and in the end he preferred to hold on to his decision rather than wreck himself just to make Lottie contented with her life. In his hegemonic view, only *the women should* sacrifice and ruin themselves to make their men happy. Lottie feels overpowered by Aaron but decides against sacrificing "her terrible implacable cunning will" (169). In response, Aaron chooses to avoid yielding to the illusion of love, "in which each party strove for the mastery of the others soul" (137).

Aaron is determined to enjoy his own freedom and be his own master. That would depend on his conscience and action. He gazed at the sky and acknowledged the universe for the joy of existing alone on the earth. "To be alone, to be oneself, not to be driven or violated into something which is not oneself, surely it is better than anything" (138). Aaron depicts himself as being a courageous man and praises himself for his selfish decision. Preceding these thoughts, Aaron intends to attempt for, "clean and pure division first, perfected singleness that is the only way to final living unison through sheer, finished singleness" (138). Aaron visualise a better possibility for understanding his deepest existence through harmony with another person because he feels that he is essentiality honest and open in his communication.

## VI. CONCLUSION

*Aaron's Rod* provides a fascinating combination of modernism and existentialism, striving to understand different principles of the "modern post-war world" of 1922. The final chapter "Works" expounds Lawrence's concept of human presence to Aaron. This context existence can be

either love-oriented or power-oriented, where the major part of human history is pushed by a "love-goal," and that it is essential to accept that the "power-goal" philosophy is more successful in generating a long-lasting society. This mistreatment of love abuses the sacredness of the revered person. It is equal to a sin outside restoration. Lawrence creates an elaborately intricate relationship between the political and the individual in *Aaron's Rod* as he attempts to increase his perception of love by the presence of power and dominance. The Nietzschean notion of power remains a point of reference for Lawrence in *Aaron's Rod* but amended by a likely allusion to an additional early impact on Lawrence. Based on Aaron's controlled emotion, the masculine spaces in his psychological mind become the sanctuary for healing and opportunities for transformative liberties where the character and the author explore what it means to be men in a new era. These new settings depicted in the novel provide ways for Aaron to recover from the destruction of the war and commence a more dynamic life as the Heroic man.

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