

Portrayal of Women Characters in Selected Short Stories of D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

It was during the Victorian period that one could truly and tangibly witness important developments in literary standpoints. D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham, who belong to this era, present an endearing panorama of themes, multitude of emotions and a stream of vivid characters - a sequential aftermath of war-torn country. With male members being lost to war by death and the so-called weaker sex emerging as bread winners of the family, this period saw the robust bloom of matriarchal society. In their short stories, D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham deal with the contemporary issues and complications arising over the ownership of changing familial roles of women across various spheres and relationship issues following industrial revolution. Back then, women were required to shoulder responsibilities much beyond their capacities and were also forced to fulfill them meticulously. Feminist theorists seek to probe inequalities constructed on the basis of age, "race", sexual orientation, class, economics, ability / disability and First / Third world citizenship. The champions of this movement contest inequalities of power, gender, class, age, religion, language, nationality, citizenship status, education, professional status, economics and other dimensions of differentiation associated with different distributions of power. The paper presents a comparative analysis on the portrayal of women in the writings of D H Lawrence and Somerset Maugham. Being effortless storytellers, both these authors bring out various themes that revolve around women handling different situations in their short stories. Feminist principles have been applied in this article to exemplify the treatment of women in the short stories of these two authors. D H Lawrence and Somerset Maugham captured the happenings of the society according to the contemporary standards of the Victorian era, gleefully addressing recurrent feminist themes such as the domineering presence of strong female protagonists and a critique of patriarchy. Fascinatingly, it appears that these female characters set themselves free from male supremacy, but not without experiencing their share of mental, physical and emotional traumas as consequence

Keywords

Matriarchal society, Feministic endeavors, patriarchy, Somerset Maugham, Lawrence

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Introduction

The term 'feminism' refers to the "cultural, political or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men (Hannan, 2002). Women characters in D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham, being new to shouldering responsibilities, oscillate between the two dichotomies of liberation from the entanglements of the society and their equally strong and powerful freewill to explore male power. These two authors portray devastated lives, destroyed relationships, disrupted work-life, unstable physical health and the resulting, bleak, uncertain futures arising out of retransformations women in war- wrecked, England. A new epoch of matriarchal society and the consequent privileges granted rolled out various changes in genuine adventure, further fueled by the desire to broaden horizons and to experience a totally new path of dauntless, reinvigorated stamina and independence (Hannan, 2002).

Feminist theory, which continues to be a widely-debated term, generally refers to theories of women's experiences and those of subordination of women by men. It includes 'positive' descriptions and explanations of how gender systems work, and 'normative' claims made while also answering philosophical questions about how gender arrangements ought to be. Feminist theory infuses the aura of thought in various directions - political, social, and cultural. Feminism, created by 'women of color' raises questions of 'difference' around such social axes as class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality, and the problem of global inequities. Debates that have emerged through political contestations both within and outside the movements of women focus on diverse concepts and themes such as slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and post coloniality in understanding contemporary gender relationships. These theories revolve predominantly and primarily around the inequalities of power. In addition, these feminist theorists also seek to probe inequalities constructed on the basis of age, "race", sexual orientation, class, economics, ability / disability and First / Third world citizenship. With dislocation eroding their active sense of self after the war, English men who were drawn to native women, face multifarious problems in the imperialized community (Alak, 2015).

Portrayal of Women: An Explication

Portrayal of women in colonized societies by D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham can be best exemplified by analyzing their short stories. Many of these short stories were set between the two World Wars and focus predominantly on women taking up top notch roles, both in family and society. Exploring a similar theme, this article hopes to provide insights into the impact of women empowerment on the fragile, male psyches of Lawrence, Somerset Maugham and other men, who might have felt threatened by the empowerment of women during the early 20th century, while trying to oppress their feminine solidarity in vain. Emmeline, in her book *Freedom or Death* conveys that the idea of controlling the other gender is flawed; The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, ... admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other (Bernick, 1992).

Equality of power and acceptance of disability will pave way for a better place to live in harmony. Therefore, a woman does not consider herself as a separate entity. Rather, she is strongly drawn to a masculine power, which eventually results in estranged familial relationships. Many instances of this can be found in Lawrence's and Maugham's short stories. Men and women are desperately caught in a relationship where they can never break free from the confinement of nuptial bonds that bind them, but continue to suffer helplessly amidst the oppressive conditions of their family (Klaus, 1980).

D.H. Lawrence's works are known best as part of the literary canon of Modernism. Lawrence fascinates readers with his peculiar way of describing the inner thoughts and inspiration of his women characters'. Lawrence himself experienced and recorded his thoughts through his writings. In the short story *None of That*, Ethelis described as a born-rich American woman who has all the energy and vigour of Americans. As the main character of this short story, she is projected as someone who is discontent with her life and experiences feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction. She feels ill at ease in the public and in strange crowds. When she meets Cuesta, the Mexican bullfighter, she is extremely fascinated by him and finds it difficult to avoid

his spell. As a strong-willed and a powerful person, Cuesta is a natural crowd puller. Ethel's attraction for Cuesta become all the more fierce when he directly meets the bull. At this juncture, it would be appropriate to recall Bulwer Lytton's letter on Jane Eyre which makes a reference to the intense men-worshipping tendency of British women, who make all the advances, thus humoring the "hoggish vanity of English men." (100). True to these words, Ethel considers Cuesta as a demigod and surrenders willfully to all his desires. This story provides the most violent depiction of female destruction in a cruel manner, similar to the following comment of Graham Houghin *The Dark Sun: Study of D H Lawrence*:

"If she is raped and killed by six Mexican bullfighter's assistants, we are left to infer that this is what she deserves(Blackburn & Arsov, 2014)" Ethel's entire life is colored by a sense of dissatisfaction for no valid reasons, true to most of Lawrence's heroines, as described by James Lasdun

"typically [...] well-off, 'liberated' in the old parlance, superficially content, but at a deeper level dissatisfied, and existing in a numb state of vagueness or detachment" (Brett & Wood, 2002)(12).

Lawrence repeatedly portrays the women in his stories as defying social regulations by making their own choices against that patriarchal society, or those that the protagonist's family or their lovers had intended for them. Toeing the line, Ether honors her carnal instincts and quenches the same quite unabashedly. Similarly, in the story *The Princess*, Dollie a robust woman of modest means, ardent convictions and guileless manners, encounters a more complex mixture of experiences with her guide Romero. Being a cosmopolitan, affluent girl, Dollie displays a selfish and stubborn attitude to uproot herself far away from her present condition, which offers a warm and cosy home atmosphere. It is evident that most of Lawrence's heroines are depicted as determined, independent, and sexually liberated women. In *The Art of Perversity*, Kingsley Widmer comments on Dollie's suicide as follows:

Apparently the lady's imagination is unable to over side the body and reality, and she kills herself, as she previously scored to do. The denial of actual life in the name of a sparing idolism collapses, and we see in melodramatic (Evans, 2006; Hannan, 2002).With her monotonous life creating a void in her mind, Dollie seeks to explore the beauty and the truth of life. Following her instincts, she sets out on a journey to New Mexico Mountains with the help of an Indian guide, Romero. Nevertheless, Romero, being a good mind-reader, is quick to fathom the unexplored parts of her mind. The new settings of the New Mexico Mountains and the Indian blood in Romero's veins evoke strong and genuine feelings of primitive sensation, aselaborated by Siegel in the following lines:

"In his high valuation of female sexual fulfillment, his sympathy with women's direct expression of rage against men [...], Lawrence is unlike novelistic forefathers whose use of female protagonists involves emphasis on the importance of virtues traditionally demanded of women in patriarchal societies"(Brett & Wood, 2002; Bricout, 2017; Consiglio, 2012). Siegel vividly describes the rape of Dollie by Romero, who brutally assaults her multiple times. Dollie's rage arises from her inability to defend herself from these savage, multiple attempts of rape, which eventually leaves her with a post-traumatic stress disorder. On the contrary, Isabel Pervin, in the short story *The Blind Man*is Lawrence's most powerful representation of the culmination of an illegitimate relationship and the consequent shattering of the matrimonial bond, when Maurice tries to put an end to life. Isabel Pervin is married to Maurice, who is blinded and scarred in World War I and is completely dependent on her. The focus of the story is not on their love, but on Maurice's sudden passion for his wife's cousin and former admirer, Bertie Reid. Beynon argues that Lawrence's female characters tend to be far more evolved in the stories when compared to their male counterparts:

"his female characters moving towards a level of self-determination, individuality and self-awareness that is far out of reach of most male characters(Searles, 1968)" (132).There is an underlying, but an all-pervasive sense of discontent in the female characters despite their sophisticated lifestyle. An undercurrent of infidelity prevails among men and women in all familial relationships, with an endless expectation on either in all aspects.

Unlike D H Lawrence, W Somerset Maugham depicts the ladies in colonized societies as being frivolous and shallow; women characters fail to ardently establish their self, both in their families

and in their societies. The men who marry them (natives of the colonized land) are neither able to identify themselves as English, nor as natives. Native women, who have been schooled by their parents not to trust strangers, consistently end up experiencing greater fear of intimacy and more loneliness when compared to those who haven't been groomed amidst this kind of parental training. Unfortunately, these English men end up marrying these native ladies just as a temporary respite to their loneliness, thus isolating these ladies from their race, resulting in self-destruction.

W Somerset Maugham illustrates the aforementioned concepts in the following stories *The Force of Circumstance* and *The Pool*. *The Force of Circumstance* touches briefly on the relations among the native population and the issue of half-castes. The story is narrated from the point of view of a newly married couple, Guy and Doris, who have been married hardly for nine months. During one of the luncheons together, Guy explains to her the way in which half-castes are usually treated. Instead of showing sympathy for them, Doris calls half-caste children "brats" and strongly indicates that she would never accept it if Guy has an affair ever, especially with one of the Malay girls. After some time, an unknown native woman, with a three-year-old baby is introduced to the story. Towards the climax of the story Doris observes how a few native boys in the kampong beat up this unknown woman. As Margaret Waters claims in her book *Feminism* (Přibáň, 2005):

"for a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures the most abject is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies (Otmani & Bouregbi, 2020)." (44)

The Malay girl in the story *The Force of Circumstance* is rejected by Guy just because she happens to be a native of the colonized land. Similarly, the theme of desolation is played out in the story *The Pool*, where Lawson is motivated strongly by his love for a 'native' woman, which drives him to migrate from London. In return, native women willfully surrender themselves to the authority of a supreme sovereign, to whom the natives submit themselves to get into the good books of the Britishers. The main feature of imperial aggression is the total control over the natives, thus dissipating the sense of unity that prevails among them (Lawrence, 1977).

The short story "The Pool" which deals with the notion of 'half-caste', introduces the entrenchment of racial purity sought by many settler communities of Maugham's stories. Though half-castes on Samoa accepted Lawson as one of their own, the other white inhabitants on the island look down on him with contempt. He virtually descends himself to the level of the half-caste population. As the relationship crumbles, Lawson started to drink heavily and falls rapidly down under, engulfing himself in self destruction. While women fight against the hostility or any antagonism between men and women, men tend to give in to pressure and crumble (Mehl & Jansohn, 2007).

Human beings are in dire need of companionship, be it is legitimate or illegitimate. The short story "Rain" articulates this need with a pained eloquence. Class discrimination is highly prevalent even among the Christian Missionaries and Maugham captures this in all authenticity and spontaneity. Miss Sadie is initially labelled as a prostitute, only to be used later to quench lascivious fantasies. A close study of Maugham's celebrated short story "Rain" is usually considered by John Brophy as

"The tragedy of a missionary's suppressed sexuality shows that the tragedy is the outcome of the reaction of a prostitute subjected to love (Klaus, 1980)" (140). The passengers of a ship in the Pacific are quarantined for ten days on the island of Pago Pago owing to an outbreak of measles. It so happens that (Doroshov, Gambino, & Raz, 2019) Mr. Davidson and his wife, an American missionary couple and Miss Sadie Thomas a prostitute, are lodged under one roof. David warns her, but is thrown out and mocked at. A renowned writer Jane describes herself as:

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will (Joseph, 2019)."

Miss Sadie is a girl who inhales the air of freedom and recklessly disregards money and class. She is also ordered not to entertain any customer like David; if the order is violated, what awaits is a penitentiary for three years.

[...] a woman of loose morals, is accustomed to music, dance and the company of pleasure seekers. Now she's not only deprived all these but also threatened with punishment (Glicksberg, 1973).

He succumbs to his suppressed sexuality the night before she is to set sail for San Francisco and kills himself. The tragedy of Mr. David could have been averted if he had not driven Miss Sadie from love to despair, from which she sought to escape with his spiritual help. David could neither overcome his carnal desires through courage and determination in the pursuit of his goal nor make Miss Sadie turn a new leaf by making her stick to spiritual regulations. Overcome by guilt, he is totally unable to face the aftermath of the spiritual deviation by breaking the bonds of a husband and wife, or pacifying his wife. It is quite obvious and evident that the nuptial bonds in both the authors' short stories are very vulnerable to any external influence. D H Lawrence's heroines are affluent with discontentment in the feminine bond and liberate themselves by choosing the untrodden path; on the contrary, Somerset Maugham's heroines are belittled by their husbands and society. Nevertheless, it is surprising to find that in both the authors' short stories sexual infidelities take their toll on marital bonds and grudges are greeted with retaliation. With their strong power of intuition, they are successfully able to fathom the ocean of emotional needs of their readers. In both these writers' works, female characters are powerful and authoritative, as articulated by Lawrence:

Your idea of your woman is that she is an expansion, no, a rib of yourself, without any existence of her own. That I am a being by myself is more than you can grasp (Evans, 2006). Though the female characters are pressurized by the calls of duty expected to be performed by them, they come across as relentlessly energetic, extremely sentimental, and powerfully intelligent to break themselves free of the social and nuptial fetters. D H Lawrence's and W Somerset Maugham's heroines are self-centered and self-absorbed, with little interest in their children, spouse, neighbours or communities at large. They follow their instincts and desires effortlessly without any second thoughts. Once they suffice their desires, ruthless as it may appear, they transform into cool and composed individuals, even if it costs their own families. Despite all their follies, these women fail to come to terms with the core issues of their very many problems – in fact, as women of substance, they feel compelled to continue to champion the cause of women's liberation with all verve and conviction.

Conclusion

Since both Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham happen to be contemporaries and social commentators who observed life in different parts of the world in the first half of the twentieth century, we have been able to establish parallel themes. However, it is important to take note of the fact that both these writers differed greatly in their outlook and the depiction of characters and the manner in which their characters resolved the issues they face. Works of D H Lawrence and W Somerset Maugham contain the recurrent theme of feminism. Their heroines are never one-dimensional – all of these women invariably indulge in a broad range of adventures and adulterous affairs, gradually degenerating into paranoia and self-destruction. Their education does not pave way for a better lifestyle – rather it aerates them with a sense of comfort, without actually escalating their social stature in the true sense of the term. Finding themselves entrapped in the boredom of marital relationship, these women repel the inevitable feminine bonds, without any qualms for their children. Absolute loyalty is an alien concept to them and they do not think twice about unfettering themselves from their conjugal obligations. Lacking more serious and worth-while goals, they end up creating a revolution by living a life on their own terms, though it endangers their entire life in the long run. Education, in the true sense of the term, is the only panacea to this superficial knowledge of life and career of these female characters.

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