Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
September 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

The Struggle for Individual Freedom in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*

[1]Mr. N. Madhuranthagan, [2]Dr C. S. Senthil

[1]Ph. D. Research Scholar (Full-Time) Thiagarajar College, Madurai -9

[2]Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor PG & Research Department of English Thiagarajar College, Madurai -9

Abstract: The research paper adopts qualitative, interpretive approach to analyse the battle for individual freedom in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love,* with a focus on the conflict between personal independence and the need for intimate relations. The study examines how love functions as an arena for the negotiation of identity, authority and emotional dependency through a close reading of Ursula Brangwen, Gudrun Brangwen, Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. It focuses on the impact of feminist literary criticism on the characters' perception of freedom and their attempts at achieving meaningful relationships, using that lens to examine how gender expectations affect them. Specially emphasis is laid on the ways in which Ursula and Gudrun strive to maintain their own sense of self while experiencing a variety of competing demands for love, commitment, and independence. The research paper also looks at the different attitudes towards love and possession that are revealed through Birkin's vision of an independent yet intimate couple and Gerald's control over his beloved. It claims that individual freedom in the novel is not just freedom from others, but it relies on the potential of relating to others without being dominated or losing oneself. Meanwhile, the characters' antagonisms show how hard it is to keep this balance when one's ideals and desires clash with those of another individual. Therefore, the study is an examination of the precarious balance between intimacy and independence, and the sense of achieving freedom is an ever-evolving process rather than an end goal.

Keywords: Individual freedom, Agency of the female, Intimacy, Gender relations, Emotional dependence, Possession.

Women in Love, which was published in 1920, is D. H. Lawrence's examination of the challenge of intimacy in relation to maintaining one's individuality. The novel follows the story of the sisters Ursula Brangwen and Gudrun Brangwen and their respective relationships with Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. These types of relationships differ, but both ask the same question, can two people love each other without wanting to own them, give orders to them, or have total emotional reliance on each other? The novel explores this question in dialogue, conflict, physical contact and absence.

In the novel, individual freedom is more than just the freedom to reject social rules. It includes the power to make choices, to disagree, to have personal interests and to stand up against another person who is trying to impose his or her agenda on someone. But it is hard to be free when people want love and protection, too. The characters are not merely desiring to live alone. They desire relationships and have trouble with the circumstances of the relationships.

The main issue at stake in this paper is the distinction between connection and possession. Connection is what enables two individuals to be separate and united in the same life. Possession requires that one person become the solution to another person's problem. Both are trying to set up the first kind of relationship (not quite working for Ursula and Birkin). As Gudrun and Gerald dig deeper into the second, they feel more and more restricted. Their divergent experiences indicate that independence is not to be won only by individual effort; it is as well linked to the attitude of the people towards the freedom of the other people.

A feminist critical perspective is adopted to explore issues of gender, authority, choice and the differing expectations of women and men. It does not presume the female characters who are always free, nor are the male characters always oppressive. Instead, it examines how the need to control another person can manifest itself in various ways. It is all about the characters being able to see each other as a person, not as an object for emotional satisfaction.

D.H. Lawrence's masterpiece *Women in Love* takes the reader into the tangled issue of personal freedom from the very beginning, in a seemingly straightforward interchange between the Brangwen sisters, Ursula and Gudrun. The novel begins with a straightforward question from Gudrun to Ursula: "Do you really want to marry?" (Lawrence, ch. 1), to which she hesitantly replies, "I don't know… It depends how you mean." Rather than marriage being a fixed tradition or a universal hope, for Ursula it is an open question. She does not take marriage lightly; she has to learn what the life and emotional realities of marriage will be for her if she decides she wants it.

The two sisters have different perspectives on marriage, in fact, different philosophies of what a woman should do in the world. Gudrun sees marriage as a long-term arrangement of social status and experience of the world, implying a marriage would bring Ursula a better social standing and a more stable position in the world. Ursula, on the other hand, worries about personal stagnation. Gudrun celebrates marriage as a great life experience, while Ursula offers a disturbing alternative: marriage could be "the end of experience" (Lawrence, ch. 1). In this exchange, Ursula expresses a longing that is shared by many independent-minded women of her time: a fear of the traditional institution of marriage, which may limit, rather than broaden, a woman's horizons, keeping her confined within the walls of her home.

Ursula challenges the rigid social scripts of the era by asking what life looks like without marriage. To her, marriage is only valuable if the real bond with someone is truly worth the commitment. She takes the idealised romanticised fantasy of marriage away from the messy reality of sharing a life with another person. For Ursula, tradition, things such as financial security and social approval are not enough to warrant a proposal. As she takes a moment to consider these expectations, she practices some of the earliest forms of personal agency, asserting the basic right to make her own judgment about relationships.

Although they both think rebelliously, neither Ursula nor Gudrun is completely untethered by society's invisible chains. Even while voicing her doubts, Gudrun refers to marriage as "the inevitable next step" (Lawrence, ch. 1). This revealing line reveals the great psychological stress of living the life scripted by others. It is a revealing statement about the conditioning of society: one person can raise critical questions about an institution and another person can still have no idea of an alternate future. The narrator mentions that the sisters' laughter is actually a way to cover up their fear of death. Their situation is much more complex than mere rebellion. They have the critical awareness to throw out the old solutions, but they do not yet have the blueprints to create an entirely new form of life.

In a modern feminist lens, the iconic opening shot reveals an interesting fact: choice on paper is not the same as the circumstances in which itis exercised with confidence. In a groundbreaking work *Sexual/Textual Politics*, critic and theorist Toril Moi writes that literature from this period often reflects women "trapped in the collision of desire and social structure, between a hostile symbolic order and a struggle for self-realization" (248). Ursula and Gudrun can exchange ideas and suggestions about what to do, but there are still serious limitations on freedom due to the pressures of family, public opinion, and their own conflicting emotional needs. Finally, Lawrence argues that freedom cannot occur in isolation, that a person's struggle for independence always starts inside the super-strength of what he is attempting to break free from.

Ursula's journey towards liberation unfolds as she refuses to accept ideas without questioning how they impact her life. She is quite captivated by Birkin, but not completely subservient. They are not just arguing about love,

marriage, and the type of relationship they should have, but these arguments are engrained in the fabric of their relationship. Ursula wishes for love to be more than just a feeling, and Birkin often tries to convey the relationship between them in abstract concepts and theories. The difference leads to a constant struggle for dominance over how to represent their common experience. On her own terms the meaning of a successful relationship would become solely the prerogative of Birkin, but Ursula's constant questioning prevents his theory from becoming the only account of their lives, as scholar H.M. Daleski explains in *The Forked Flame: A Study of D.H. Lawrence*, "the living touchstone against which Birkin's abstract doctrines must be tested" (156). It is not her resistance that makes her incapable of understanding him, but rather her insistence that ideas of freedom need to be constantly grounded in lived feeling.

In theory, a relationship may be equal and progressive, but one partner will eventually feel compelled to put aside the right to express their personal needs, and Ursula's incisive replies reveal this hidden menace. Her independence is also evidenced by her changing relationship with Gudrun. The sisters are initially together to discuss private matters and to resent the world, but they do not have identical lives and Ursula makes choices that gradually push her away from her sister's judgment. Her decision to enter into a life with Birkin is not a passive shift from women to men, but rather a difficult, lonely process of determining which worldviews she can take in and which she must choose out.

However, Ursula should not be portrayed as an idealized being who becomes totally and easily free. Her intense need for emotional intimacy can sometimes turn into a need for total emotional completion from the other person, as she is looking for Birkin's absolute commitment, so that the novel constantly asks how much can be reasonably demanded from the other person. Her real literary and feminist value is being completely capable of disagreeing and self-correcting, rather than being completely incapable of doing so. In *Sexual Politics,* cultural critic Kate Millett argues that Lawrence's female characters are often trapped by the ideology of their male lovers, but that Ursula succeeds in remaining independent because, "she refuses to be absorbed by her lover's ideology, maintaining a stubborn integrity of self" (254). Finally, Ursula's example indicates that personal freedom in intimacy is to be achieved only through an active, unyielding voice, a voice that refuses to be settled on the terms of the relationship, which insists that intimacy is a living, breathing exchange and can never be a mere agreement.

Birkin provides one of the best illustrations of a healthy relationship in the novel. His vision of love is that of "two single equal stars balanced in conjunction" (Lawrence, ch. 13). That is, two people can be near without getting lost. They have a mutual life, but they are each independent. This notion challenges the concept of the pre-romantic myth of 'oneness' that was prevalent. It is good to 'merge' together but it typically results in one person taking over and the other person losing his/her freedom. Birkin does not want to fall into this trap; he wants to prove that there is independence in both directions. If one wants to be free, then let one's partner be free. But Birkin's noble thoughts are difficult to put into practice. He is always the one explaining these theories and so often assumes she will just agree with his definition of freedom. This demonstrates that it is easy to have a great idea of love, but very difficult to put it into practice.

The novel gives one the opportunity to admire Birkin's vision while not assuming he is always correct. This is more evident in his past with Hermione. Both Hermione and Birkin were concerned that marrying each other would solve their trust issues and make them happy, completely disregarding Birkin's right to refuse. This shows that women can also try to control others, proving that the struggle for freedom is not just about men versus women. It is about the bad habit of owning another person. In the end, Birkin's ideal is a lovely, but unfulfilled one. His words offer us an excellent alternative to possessive love, but his real relationships illustrate the ease by which a freedom theory can become yet another demand.

Gudrun is not a conventional housewife, but is also seeking to find her freedom through art and living in an alternate environment away from her hometown. But moving away is not always a path to happiness. She finds

herself utterly out of place and isolated when she returns to her family. Her journey is a reminder that one cannot just drop the old rules, one has to decide what kind of life one really want to live in order to be truly free. Her attraction to Gerald is complicated by a great sense of fear, because she does not want to be his comfort zone. However, her need for protection puts the relationship into a power struggle rather than a healthy partnership. Gudrun is not an easy-going feminist hero or a simple villain, but an intricate character who shows the readers that it is not so easy to build walls and defend oneself, it is not so easy to live in the world; it is quite another thing to live in the world.

The fight for freedom is connected to Gerald being a potent industrialist who has experience in organizing and controlling the world around him. But this public authority brings difficulties in his private life because he expects to run his relationship with Gudrun the same way he runs his business. His need for closeness becomes a demand which Gudrun must satisfy his emotional needs in total. As she refuses to be the comforting, predictable object, his outward strength begins to crack, and he realizes that his need for absolute order is actually a profound vulnerability. Gerald's demise from a feminist standpoint is the risk of assuming that a partner's emotional needs are their rights. He perceives Gudrun's independence as a stab in the dark of his authority and turns their relationship into a never-ending power game. Finally, Gerald demonstrates how the old way of doing things for men does not make men secure. He has failed to learn that freedom is not possible if one person sees another's freedom as one's own loss.

The novel delves into the actual meaning of freedom, comparing its principal couples. Gudrun and Gerald play out a conflict while Ursula and Birkin continually negotiate the conditions of their relationship. This is not just a tidy contrast of a happy relationship and an unhappy one, though: there are some issues about the nature of being close to someone and staying true to oneself in both relationships. Ursula and Birkin's willingness to continue talking means that they have an ongoing, active negotiation, while Gudrun and Gerald's link fades and becomes a defensive battle with independence employed as a weapon, not a mutual sharing. This contrast shows that freedom does not exist in just one person but it is intrinsic to the relationship. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that authentic self-determination is achieved by maintaining personal responsibility and self-respect, that love is only viable when it respects both individuals as whole persons.

The novel also raises questions about personal freedom by suggesting that one relationship might not provide the emotional fulfilment that is needed. The relationship between Birkin and Gerald is so strong that it threatens to undermine Birkin's relationship with Ursula, thereby challenging the notion of a self-sufficient emotional sphere in a heterosexual relationship. When one person needs to be everything to another person, there is an impossible burden placed on both of them and the person who is demanding it is set up for disappointment, while the person who is being demanded is expected to take an unrealistic role. But just acknowledging several emotional requirements does not necessarily mean that the issue is resolved, because partners can also disagree about what it takes to stick with someone. Freedom requires more than asserting your rights; one person's healthy independence may be considered an absence of love by the other. It calls for recognizing that one's partner may see the relationship with a different perspective, and see that the uncertainty and incompleteness are not flaws, but rather the very ingredients for both of you to continue to remain open to growth.

In *Women in Love* the struggle for individual freedom evolves as the constant conflict between the intense need for intimacy and the underlying fear of giving away oneself. Ursula, Gudrun, Birkin, and Gerald are not united by a single, simple definition of freedom, but rather by a range of experiences that show that there are many forms of freedom, from questioning marriage, being opposed to possession, to maintaining an artistic identity, to resisting emotional control, to maintaining meaningful connections outside of conventional love. These characters bring to light a different aspect of this battle. Ursula is important because she is determined to affect her own relationship, to control her own luck, to decide her own love for Birkin, and to deny him his theories even when she does love him.

Through Gudrun's story, one can come to understand how much it takes to break free of confinement, and how hard it is to create a life worthy of living by resisting confinement. But Birkin envisions a perfect bound relationship between distinct selves; his vision is fragile because he dictates its terms. At last, Gerald reveals the ultimate failure of control, that power can never create emotional security.

The novel's central contrast is the boundary between true connection and possessive control. Possession says another person's existence is a threat to be conquered, while Connection acknowledges another person's independent existence which cannot be completely absorbed in our needs. D.H. Lawrence makes this distinction visible through the comparison of his two principal couples, but he does not provide an unattainable or a fairy tale image of happiness. True freedom in *Women in Love* is neither complete isolation nor a total, suffocating union. It is the hard, daily work of staying true to yourself and also giving one's partner the same right. Lawrence's freedom is forever fragile and incomplete, because the only way it can be achieved is through learning to coexist with difference, not as a struggle of dominance.

References:

[1] Daleski, H. M. *The Forked Flame: A Study of D. H. Lawrence*. Faber and Faber, 1965.
[2] Lawrence, D. H. *Women in Love*. 1920. Project Gutenberg, 1997.
[3] Leavis, F. R. *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*. Chatto & Windus, 1955.
[4] Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1970. University of Illinois Press, 2000.
[5] Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
[6] Nafi, Jamal S. I. "A Critical Study of the Form and Structure of D. H. Lawrence's Novel
[7] *Women in Love*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2015, pp. 933–938. https://doi.org/10.3968/6547.
[8] "Women in Love Essay Questions." *GradeSaver*, 18 June 2021, www.gradesaver.com/women-in-love/study-guide/essay-questions.