

READING *WOMEN IN LOVE* BY D. H. LAWRENCE AS A POLYPHONIC NOVEL

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Abstract

Regarded as the masterpiece of D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love (1920) is a highly poetic and philosophical novel that provides us some of the clearest statements of Lawrence's ideas and beliefs on love, marriage and life. This paper attempts to analyze Women in Love through the prism of critical strategies developed by the Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin. Traditional criticisms of Women in Love have more or less pronounced that the novel adopts a monologic discourse in that it adopts the convention of an omniscient narrator in an unproblematic way. Deviating from this dogmatic approach to the novel, this paper attempts a Bakhtinian reading of the novel as a polyphonic text. In Lawrence's handling of the plot, setting and character delineation, we see an unmistakable urge to push away authorial intervention allowing the reader a more active role in the meaning-making or interpretive process. Lawrence's Women in Love fits into Bakhtin's idea of a dialogic or polyphonic novel as it exhibits a plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices, and lacks a definite resolution into a monologic truth.

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence, Bakhtin, polyphony, dialogic, discourse, voice

“Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.”

-Mikhail Bakhtin

Women in Love (1920) by D. H. Lawrence is a sequel to his earlier novel *The Rainbow* (1915). The novel depicts a wide range of British society before the outbreak of the First World War. The book, as soon as it was published, created quite a storm for its alleged portrayal of sexual depravity and vice. But Lawrence himself considered it to be his best

book and later critics also concur that it is Lawrence's masterpiece. Equally poetic, philosophical and passionate, the novel provides us some of the clearest statements of Lawrence's ideas and beliefs on love, marriage and life. The present paper attempts to analyze D. H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love* from the point of view of the Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and dialogism.

Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas have had astounding influence on Western thinking in general including the fields of cultural history, linguistics, literary theory and aesthetics. Bakhtin's concept of a dialogic or polyphonic novel is widely known. He discusses his ideas of "polyphonic" novel in his two important critical texts *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination*. He explains that in a polyphonic novel, authorial interventions remain while revealing details regarding the history, background, social class and standing, environment and personality of the characters, and all this information is primarily foregrounded through dialogue. Bakhtin promotes Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels as the most remarkable examples of a dialogic or polyphonic form. Bakhtin emphasizes the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses in a polyphonic novel (1984, 6). The dialogic structure is created through the influence of one voice on another. The primacy of dialogue over authorial interventions is what makes the text truly polyphonic.

Bakhtin does not discuss *Women in Love*; but his theories form a paragon to demonstrate the polyphonic qualities of Lawrence's *Women in Love*. In Lawrence's handling of the plot, setting and character delineation, we see an unmistakable urge to push away authorial intervention allowing the reader a more active role in the meaning-making or interpretive process. This characteristic of bringing into play the whole range of polyphonic voices is quite apparent in Lawrence's major novels—*Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) as well as in *Women in Love*. In most of his writings, Lawrence displays a keen urge to reconcile or yoke together conflicting or warring elements. This is seen in his non-fiction essay "The Crown" (1915), where he brings together in a very interesting and intelligent manner the figures of the lion and the unicorn, both of them narrating an allegorical fight between the two opposing forces.

Traditional criticisms of *Women in Love* have more or less pronounced that the novel adopts the convention of an omniscient narrator in an unproblematic way. One of the most perceptive critics of Lawrence, F. R. Leavis wrote that Lawrence's "penetration is incomparably deep and his perception of significance keeps everything duly functional to the development of his themes" (181). Leavis also emphasized that even though Loerke is not a major characters in the novel, Lawrence has given him the function of preparing the ground for Gerald's suicide (179). It is an undisputed fact that Leavis's criticism was highly influential in establishing Lawrence as one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century. But it must also be admitted that Leavis' approach to Lawrence is too dogmatic and it allows very little breathing ground to the readers to form their independent critical judgments. Like

Leavis, Allan Ingram also bases his criticism of the novel on the ground that the author is omniscient and that the strategy of authorial commentary is utilized by Lawrence to instill a strong realism in the narrative. For instance, Ingram opines that it is through the use of authorial commentary that Lawrence sets and sustains the mood of irritation permeating the conversation between Ursula and Gudrun at the beginning of the novel (111). Thus, both Leavis and Ingram hold the view that since the author assumes privileged position in the novel from which he dictates the plot, characters and language, the role of the reader in forming judgments on these things is automatically marginalized. But, if we read the novel through the critical strategies advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin, we can see that despite the presence of a strong narrative voice, it does not take up a dictatorial position and allows the reader to get involved in an active process of interpretation on the basis of the evaluation of the different kinds of information presented. The Bakhtinian model foregrounds the idea that the novel is not a closed form and it is a unique, open-ended, and extremely complex literary genre.

The story line of *Women in Love* traces the lives of Ursula Brangwen and her sister Gudrun. Ursula is in love with Rupert Birkin, a self-portrait of Lawrence and Gudrun is attracted to Gerald Crich, the son of the local colliery owner. Basically, the novel studies the lives of these two women, Ursula and Gudrun, in relation to their men, respectively Birkin and Gerald. While Ursula and Birkin move towards a real tenderness, Gudrun and Gerald become purely destructive until finally in despair, Gerald wanders off into the snow and dies. However, this simple story line illustrates the clash and contrast of a multiplicity of unmerged voices of different characters that represent various points of view lending the novel a 'polyphonic' dimension. The plot of the novel is arranged in such a manner that various characters come into contact and conflict with each other.

In a polyphonic novel, the authoritative discourse of the author does not subordinate the voices of the characters to the fulfillment of his controlling purpose. Bakhtin writes, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel" (1984, 263). Lawrence's narrator in *Women in Love* does not undertake to suppress the multiple voices of different characters but emerges as a distinguished kind of dialogic voice within the narrative. Bethan Jones asserts that in the novel "the act of perception is filtered through the consciousness of each particular character without the intervention of a presiding authoritative narrator" (207). The influence of distinct voices makes Lawrence's *Women in Love* a heteroglossic exhibition. The narrator's voice in *Women in Love* merges with the voices of the characters. The absence of an omniscient narrator renders the novel its dialogic form.

What is important in a polyphonic novel is "the dialogic angle at which these styles are juxtaposed and counterposed in the work" (1981, 182). This dialogic angle is established

in the very opening scene of the novel in which the two sisters, Ursula and Gudrun, have a discussion regarding marriage:

...Again Gudrun paused, slightly irritated. She wanted to be quite definite.

‘You don’t think one needs the *experience* of having been married?’ she asked.

‘Do you think it need *be* an experience?’ replied Ursula.

‘Bound to be, in some way or other’, said Gudrun, coolly. ‘Possibly undesirable, but bound to be an experience of some sort.’

‘Not really’, said Ursula.

‘More likely to be the end of experience.’ Gudrun sat very still to attend to this... (1, 2)

In the context of the above discussion, both ‘Ursula’ and ‘Gudrun’ are individual voices whose dialogues bring about various world-views to the surface regarding the issue of marriage. The family backgrounds or economic status of the protagonists are not highlighted in this novel. Rather, what is foreground in this novel are various discussions on debatable issues. At the very opening pages of the novel, we have a description of the sisters. But the reader is not provided any information about who they are or what kind of a place they live in. The author gives very little clue about the history or background of the characters—whatever we learn about them comes from their dialogues which express their opinions and attitudes as they discuss matters of love, life, marriage, society and other subjects in general. For instance, we learn about Gudrun’s educational background from Birkin’s dialogue with Gerald. They unfold themselves through the arguments and interactions with other characters throughout the novel. Each and every character is attributed with numerous dimensions which are difficult to be captured fully.

The ambiguity of the self is one prominent issue with Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic form of a novel. In Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, the characters do not reveal themselves fully at once. Like a true polyphonic novel, Lawrence’s *Women in Love* portrays the relationship between the self and other groups of people. Each character interacts with every other character on certain issues and resultantly the novel contains a series of debates and arguments in relation to theory of love and human relationship, abstract philosophical speculations, dark sensuality, sexual vitality, self-annihilation of human civilization and so on. In this process of interaction, the characters influence each other and the readers are offered with unresolved interaction of diverse discourses representing diverse attitudes and values within the same speaking subject.

The characters in the novel strive to express their unspoken, conscious and unconscious experiences. Linguistically, *Women in Love* “addresses itself to a greater range of problems and puts those problems in clearer perspective than any of his other novels” (Miko 216). In the chapter of the novel named “Class-Room”, Birkin enters into a discussion with Hermione regarding the education of children. Hermione is of the opinion that no formal education for children is necessary and they should be allowed to grow spontaneously like

animals. But Birkin criticizes Hermione's belief in animal instincts as only a form of intellectualism. The conversation between Hermione and Birkin acts as instance of unmerged voices giving different worldviews regarding a certain issue:

...do you really think it is worthwhile? Do you really think the children are better for being roused to consciousness?... Passion and the instincts—you want them hard enough, but through your head, in your consciousness. It all takes place in your head, under that skull of yours... (Lawrence, 45-47)

The narrative voice does not support anyone to win the debate regarding the education of children. A part of the dialogic novel, the narrative voice may “exist on the same plane” (Vice, 112). The existence of the narrative voice does not seek to establish a single worldview regarding the matter of education of children. In a dialogic novel, the utterance and the speaking subject always receive the primary position and this privilege to ‘utterance’ and ‘speaking subject’ is embedded in the philosophy of language and subjectivity of the novel which build up the dialogic essence of the novel. In Lawrence's *Women in Love*, in the chapter named “In the Train”, Birkin's utterance on humanity incorporates a kind of subjectivity which places Birkin and his discourse on humanity at the centre:

...if mankind is destroyed, if our race is destroyed like Sodom, and there is this beautiful evening with the luminous land and trees, I am satisfied... Let mankind pass away—time it did. The creative utterances will only be there. Humanity doesn't embody the utterance of the incomprehensible any more. Humanity is a dead letter. There will be a new embodiment, in a new way. Let humanity disappear as quick as possible. (Lawrence, 68)

Dialogicity is an inherent property of language and it is manifested in specific utterances to different degrees. Bakhtin “develops his view that the novel is constituted by a multiplicity of divergent and contending social voices that achieve their full significance only in the process of their dialogic interaction both with each other and with the voice of the narrator” (Abrams & Harpham, 88). Lawrence's *Women in Love* does not deal with any finality of an issue, nor, too, does the authorial discourse between the characters. There is no conclusion or resolution on problems raised by the characters in different contexts. The characters' dialogues bring out the argumentative dimension because the underlying ideas expressed through them generate and sustain continuous arguments and counterarguments. In the chapter named “Gladitorial”, when Birkin tells Gerald that he had gone to Ursula's house and proposed marriage to her, Gerald is surprised to know this. Here, Gerald and Birkin's conversation regarding ‘love’ achieves dialogicity as this conversation is not attributed with any conclusiveness and hence remains ambiguous. Gerald tells Birkin that he has never felt love and adds, “I've never felt it myself—not what I should call love. I've gone after women—and been keen enough over some of them. But I've never felt *love*. I don't believe I've ever felt as much *love* for a woman as I have for you—not *love*. You understand what I mean?” (349). Birkin's final reply to Gerald is “I don't know',... ‘I could not say’” (350).

And the author does not interfere to give any certified clue to the readers in the course of the conversation. In this context, Bakhtin's remark that nothing "conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken; the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future" (1981, 166) is quite applicable.

It is impossible to conceive of any being outside of the relations that link it to the other. The existence of the 'self' and the 'other' is made possible through a dialectic interdependence between them. In Lawrence's novel, the chapter named "Breadalby" contains a little conversation between Gerald and Birkin. Gerald learns from Birkin that both Ursula and Gudrun live in Beldover, that they are teachers in the Grammar School and that their father is a handicraft instructor in schools. The 'other' is here conceived not as an object in the outside world, but as another subject:

'Who are those two Brangwens?' Gerald asked.

'They live in Beldover.'

'In Beldover! Who are they then?'

'Teachers in the Grammar School.'

.....

'Both—Gudrun art mistress, Ursula a class mistress.'

'And what's the father?'

'Handicraft instructor in the schools.'

'Really!'

'Class-barriers are breaking down!'

Gerald was always uneasy under the slightly jeering tone of the other. (113)

The conversation goes on. And the whole conversation reveals that the dialogic self approaches the other as a different personality with the full realization that the other is a personality in its own right.

A dialogic novel is constituted of discourses which can be described as a medley of voices, social attitudes, and values that are not only opposed but irreconcilable with the result that the work remains unresolved and open-ended. Like a true polyphonic novel, *Women in Love* also provides equal space and freedom for all kinds of ideas to circulate freely in the narrative without giving primacy to any single idea regarding any issue. The characters go on either agreeing or disagreeing among themselves and there is no attempt to influence the reader's judgment. The unfettered circulation of ideas and exchange of opinions in the text renders it dialogic. Lawrence's *Women in Love* ends with the debate between Ursula and Birkin. In the last chapter of the novel named "Exeunt", when Ursula asks Birkin if he needed Gerald, he replies "Yes" and when she asks him if she is not enough for him, he replies "No". When Ursula emphatically argues why she is not enough, and why he should need someone else when she does not need anybody else, then Birkin argues that Ursula is enough for him so far as his relationship with a woman is concerned but he wants an eternal union with a

man, too, in order to make his relationship complete. The debate between Ursula and Birkin ends without any conclusive remark:

‘I don’t believe it’, she said. ‘It’s an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity.’

‘Well...’ he said.

‘You can’t have two kinds of love. Why should you!’

‘It seems as if I can’t’, he said. ‘Yet I wanted it.’

‘You can’t have it, because it’s false, impossible’, she said.

‘I don’t believe that’, he answered.” (616)

Lawrence’s novel refutes the idea of a ‘plot’ in narrative forms as propounded in Aristotle’s *Poetics* that evolves coherently from its beginning to an end in which all complications are resolved. The plot is episodic and the temporal sequence is not strictly followed. David Lodge asserts, “...the narrator never delivers a finalising judgemental word on the debate or its protagonists” (64). Most importantly, there is no final resolution and it ends with the collision between the two voices. The conflict between the two “unmerged voices” bars the novel from having any definite conclusion. The ending of the novel is provisional and tentative.

The novel mattered to Lawrence because of all the forms of human discourses and cognition, the novel was the only one which could embrace the totality of human experience. Thus, a novel is capable of doing justice to the inherent polyphonies of life. In Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, Birkin, Ursula, Gerald, Gudrun, Hermione and many others are individual voices whose arguments and utterances create a ‘real polyphony’ in the novel. The polyphonic nature of the novel is apparent from the fact that the narrative of the novel incorporates a diversity of speech types. There is an orchestration of different types of language, e.g., the language of the aristocracy, the language of the intelligentsia, the language of the miners etc. The different threads of the narrative, themes and ideas and world-views find their expression by means of a free flowing interaction and assimilation of these socially diverse linguistic registers and individual voices including that of the narrator.

In a monologic novel, the authorial voice provides most of the information regarding the backgrounds of the characters, the setting and theme, and it guides the reader in making judgments and interpreting the characters and ideas in certain ways. But in *Women in Love*, as Holderness suggests: “The narrator is not a reliable acquaintance communicating necessary information, staking out the moral perimeters and guiding the reader’s judgment” (9). Therefore, the reader has greater autonomy in these matters—without authorial interventions, the reader can get involved actively in making sense of the setting, in evaluating the characters, in reinterpreting and assimilating the utterance of the characters to understand their motives. The polyphonic nature of Lawrence’s novel becomes most apparent in this constant interaction of the interlocutors. Elizabeth Sargent and Garry Watson’s remark that “Lawrence’s theory of the novel is in many ways uncannily close to Bakhtin’s” (410) is quite convincing in this regard.

In fact, this novel is quite unique in the entire oeuvre of Lawrence's work—it shows a distinct shift in his style and ideas regarding the writing of fiction. That he was desperately looking for a new technique during this time, is apparent from a letter he wrote to Edward Garnett. He wrote to Garnett, "I shan't write in the same manner as *Sons and Lovers* again, I think—in that hard, violent style full of sensation and presentation" (15). And he found the polyphonic or dialogic style most suitable to his artistic sensibility as a result of which, *Women in Love* reflects the main traits of Bakhtin's theories. Lawrence's *Women in Love* fits into Bakhtin's idea of a dialogic or polyphonic novel as the novel exhibits a plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices and lacks a definite resolution into a monologic truth.

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