



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Romanticizing the Primitive Cultures and Anti-colonial Vision in D. H. Lawrence's Post-war Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore Lawrence's preference for primitive cultures and his anti-colonial vision in his post-war fiction. His pre-war novels express his love for England. However, the onset of the First World War resulted in his disillusionment for European culture. In revulsion, he sought withdrawal from Europe and started idealizing the primitive modes of life. Thus, celebration of primitive societies is evident in his post-war novels. This discontent with deteriorating European civilization and glorification of foreign primitive cultures also led him to a decolonizing vision. Consequently, his post-War fiction presents a critique of colonialism and imperialism. This study has employed qualitative method, and textual analysis technique in order to trace celebration of Primitive Cultures and anti-colonial vision in Lawrence's Post-war Fiction. Postcolonial theory has provided the basic framework for this study. Their analysis proves that in Lawrence's later novels his predilection for primitive societies is accompanied by his anti-colonial vision. Future researchers can attempt an in-depth analysis of Lawrence's post-colonial and anarchist vision.

**KEYWORDS** Colonialism, Imperialism, European Culture and Primitive Cultures

## Introduction

The Lawrence's pre-War novels express his optimism and patriotism, but the Great War changed his vision and led him to denounce sterile Western life and idealize the vital and organic life of the primitive cultures such as Indian and Mexican cultures, which offered vitality that was lacking in European culture. His fascination with the primitive cultures in post war fiction is also accompanied by his anti-imperialistic vision. In these texts, along with romanticizing primitive modes of life, he also condemns imperialism and colonial practices. He idealizes pre-colonial unspoiled and untouched primitive cultures and considers colonial process as ravishing the virginity of these cultures. He had a great affection for the unravished indigenous lands as his quest for ideal colony (Rananim) shows. He detested colonialism because of its corrupting influence on the native cultures. Thus, his hatred of colonialism is directly linked with his quest for Rananim\_ pure and virgin colony.

Lawrence, being dissatisfied with modern European culture, is fascinated by the primitive cultures especially in his post war fiction. This changing preference has led him to a critique of imperialistic and colonial practices throughout his post-war fiction. To him colonialism is a common means of exploitation and, therefore, a threat to the vigour and vitality of the primitive cultures. His works are an attempt to make people cautious of such practices and to safeguard the traditional modes of life.

## Literature Review

### Critics' views regarding Lawrence's Celebration of the primitive

A number of critics have highlighted Lawrence's fondness for the primitive cultures. Ronald P. Draper (1964) talks about Lawrence's preference for the primitive societies and his idea of Rananim, an ideal colony of the selected people away from England. He writes: According to him Lawrence "was seeking a new community and a new land where he could put down new roots....he sought to identify himself with primitive communities, which were still relatively unspoiled by Industrialism (p. 26)."

Hugh Steven in his article "Sex and the Nation: *The Prussian officer and Women in Love*" also refers to Lawrence's inclinations towards organic primitive cultures. He observed that during the War years Lawrence started idealizing other cultures which, he believed, embodied "masculinity and organicity England had lost" (p. 52).

Alastair Niven (1979) refers to Lawrence's search for the alternative modes of life in post-war novels. He says: "The quest, which Birkin and Ursula embark upon at the end of *Women in Love*, was in essence Lawrence's quest too" (p. 143). Niven also points out that this quest continues in other post war novels like *Aaron's Rod*:

In *Women in Love* Lawrence had started to show, through the interest in African carved figures, an awareness of other civilizations than his own, and we can see a continuation of this in Rawdon Lilly's reading of the anthropologist, Leo Frobenius. (p. 141)

Having observed some of the representative views of the critics mentioned above it is to be noted that Lawrence's love for the primitive cultures is a dominant element in his post-war fiction. But these critics have not linked this preference for the primitive with the growing anti-imperialism which is prominent in Lawrence's post-war works.

### Critics' views regarding Lawrence's anti colonial vision

Two critics have pointed out Lawrence's anti-colonial vision in his selected novels. One of them is Mark Kinkead-Weekes, who in his article "Decolonising imagination: Lawrence in the 1920s," attempts a post-colonial assessment of some of Lawrence's writings of 1920s and examines Lawrence's attitude to racial and colonial issues. *The Plumed Serpent* gets Weekes's special attention, which according to him "anticipates anti-colonial writers like Chinua Achebe" by representing in it "an ancient pre-colonial culture and religion" and "growing hostility to the Christian church as an agency of colonialism" (p. 71). Weekes highlights the issues which later on attracted Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

The other critic focussing on Lawrence's anti-imperialistic vision is Alastair Niven (1979) who evaluates Lawrence's critique of colonial society in his novel, *Kangaroo*. According to Niven the novel occupies a "special place in the canon of imperial literature" and Lawrence's viewpoint in this novel "shares much with that of a writer who in our own time has interpreted colonialism with especial penetration, V.S. Naipaul. Both detect an essential fraudulence at the heart of it, an element of mimicry and even puppetry" (p. 153).

The above-mentioned critics have pointed out Lawrence's preference for the primitive cultures and his growing anti-imperialism. However, these critics have ignored

an important fact that these issues were the product of the First World War as it was the war that made him realize the barrenness of Europe and led him to idolize primitive cultures. Moreover, these critics have confined their studies to a few representative texts. Apart from the novels in which these critics have traced Lawrence's attraction to the primitive and his anti-imperialistic imagination, most of Lawrence's other post-war fiction also display fascination for the unexplored regions and make an analysis of colonialism and its effects on colonial life and culture. Lawrence's love for the local cultures and his assessment of colonialism, which is overt in *The Plumed Serpent* and *Kangaroo* in particular, can also be marked out in other post-war novels and short stories, especially the ones written in the 1920s. All these works should be taken into account to elucidate Lawrence's characteristic attitude to colonies and colonial issues.

### Material and Methods

This study for the most part uses comparative method. Its aim is to make a comparison between Lawrence's pre-war and post-war fiction to indicate how the direction of Lawrence's thought developed as a result of the Great War. Qualitative research method is employed. Lawrence's post-war fiction has been isolated for the application of the post-colonial theory. Content analysis is used as a technique for data collection and analysis. The study aims to explore the changes in Lawrence's approach and explains the role of the Great War in bringing about these changes. Along with post-colonial theory psychoanalytical theory is applied at some places to show how the war made Lawrence go through torturing and humiliating experiences, which filled him with bitterness and cynicism and thus affecting all his works written after the war.

Two aspects are traced in D.H. Lawrence's post war fiction i.e. Celebration of the primitive and anti-imperialism, the latter being the result of the first one. In Literature Review and Analysis these two issues are separately dealt with; however, an attempt is made to link these issues to each other

### Results and Discussion

#### Celebration of the primitive cultures in Lawrence's Post-war fiction

Lawrence's pre-War novels express his optimism and love for the English, but the Great War changed his vision and led him to condemn chaotic Western life and romanticize the organic life of the primitive foreign cultures such as Indian and Mexican cultures, which offered vitality that the European culture had lost. He started entertaining the idea of Rananim, an ideal colony away from England, which was his first move in his withdrawal from Europe and fascination for the primitive non-European lands. He wrote to Lady Cynthia Asquith in August 1915, "I feel like knocking my head against the War: or of running off to some unformed South American place where there is no thought of civilized effort" (Zytaruk & Boulton, eds. 1981, p. 378). Likewise, his search for the "Blessed Isles" in *Women in Love* is his denunciation of European civilization and it is in essence Lawrence's quest for vital primitive cultures.

This fascination for the primitive cultures can be traced in *The Rainbow* and continues in other novels and short stories written during and after the World War. In *The Rainbow* Ursula is thrilled by Skrebensky's account of the dark sensual life of the Africans. Here the word "fecund" and "fecundity" is repeated to represent vitality and potency of the Africans and their primitive culture. Ursula feels a dark richness in the African savages and she is sick of the sterility of white people who "think it better to be

clerks or professors than to be the dark, fertile beings that exist in the potential darkness" (Lawrence, 1986, p. 448). She is also excited by Skrebensky's account of the life of the Indians: "India tempted her-the strange, strange land" (p. 474). Hence Ursula feels embittered with the moribund existence of the whites and is fascinated by the potency of primitive races.

In *Women in Love* Lawrence's fascination with pure primitive cultures, is represented by a carved figure of a savage African woman in labour. Birkin appreciates the "pure culture in sensation, culture in physical consciousness" (1995a, p. 79) that the figure represents in comparison with dead European culture. Birkin's appreciation of this carved figure and the culture and mode of life it signifies reflects Lawrence's fantasy for the vital, organic and potent culture of primitive races.

*Aaron's Rod*, like other post-war novels, also exhibits denunciation of England and Europe and an awareness of other cultures. Lilly, a Lawrentian figure, in the novel, expresses his belief that the real centre and sap of life, which the white races have lost, can be located in the Indians of South America. He prefers primitive Indian life: he expresses his love for the Red Indians and Aztecs who, according to him, hold the element in life and have a "living pride." (1995a, p. 97).

In *Kangaroo*, Somers is shocked by the "horrible staleness of Europe," (Lawrence, 1955, p. 153). He has preferred to live in a colony, Australia. He appreciates the Australian Bush, it being a symbol of primitive cultures. The richness, virginity and pristine darkness of the Bush terrify him. His admiration for the immaturity, naivety and mystery of the Australian Bush is actually the idealization of non-European primitive cultures. Somers thinks that Australia has not yet made "the horrible human mistake of Europe" (p. 354). He also idealizes primitive Indian culture when he appreciates the human bonds of love and duty, submission and loyalty observed in primitive races; the bonds we can "still feel in India: the mystery of lordship" known to the dark races. The same bond and mystery is "clue to the life of Hindu" (p. 105). Similarly Kangaroo (leader of the Diggers), comparing the vitality of Australian people with the sterility of European people, tells Somers, "Generous men....You can get a blaze out of them. Not like European wet matches that will never again strike alight" (p. 131). At the end of novel Somers leaves for America because he does not want to return to Europe. Thoroughly disgusted by the white man's vacuity he finally desires to return to the old pagan gods as embodied in the Australian Bush. This move signifies his search for primitive religions, cultures, and modes of life.

This return to the old dark gods and the appreciation of the mystery of the Australian Bush leads Lawrence to romanticize the primitive Mexican cultures, which is dominant in his Mexican fiction of the 1920s (*The Plumed Serpent* and Mexican stories). In this connection Salgado (1982) believes that Lawrence's inclination for the primitive had always been an important aspect of his attitude to life, but it found its real "expression during his period in New Mexico" (p. 51). In his Mexican fiction the vitality and potency are associated with the primitive races.

In *The Plumed Serpent*, Kate Leslie, (her husband being dead) disillusioned with European ideals escapes to the potent culture of Mexico. The novel makes a contrast between European civilization and primitive cultures and expresses preference for the latter. Don Ramon's old pagan religion, which he wants to revitalize in Mexico, is presented as a necessary alternative to the western diseased civilization and outworn Christianity. The novel makes a quest for better modes of life than those of the whites;

quest for vital life in primitive races. The images of Dragon and Eagle symbolize potency of the primitive people. 'The plumed serpent' is compounded of snake and eagle, which symbolize potency and energy.

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Mellors appreciates the purity of the colonies, but he also feels a threat to these primitive cultures, a menace of the corrupting influence of the dead European culture. He says, "When I feel the human world is doomed ... then I feel the colonies aren't far enough" (Lawrence, 1968, p. 238). It means that the European culture is doomed while the primitive cultures are fresh and virgin. But dead western culture can corrupt them by ravishing their virginity and destroying their mystery. The sterility and impotency of the white people and the European culture are conveyed through the image of impotent Male (degenerated, crippled and sexually impotent males) in post-war novels such as *Gerald, Clifford and the dramatist lover of Connie*. The primitive people on the other hand are pictured as having energy, vitality and potency.

As in the novels, so also in later short stories Lawrence employs foreign settings. His Mexican stories-such as *The Princess*, *The Woman Who Rode Away* and *St. Mawr*, also romanticize vital life of the primitive races and denounce sterile life of the whites. In these stories he idealizes the mystery and potency of the primitive cultures. These post-war stories express his desire to find alternatives to collapsing western culture. Alastair Niven (1979) holds, "Lawrence had been seeking an alternative in several of his last stories "where settings are "deserts far from modern society" (p. 175).

*Woman Who Rode Away* describes a woman's sense of boredom with European culture and her desire for pagan Red Indian religion and mysteries. Her search for and submission to the primitive life is actually her preference for this primitive culture. She is even ready to die at the hands of the Red Indians than to return to the Whiteman's world. Her quest for pagan gods and primitive religions is because of her dissatisfaction with the existing Christian religion. It is the recognition of the failure of European life, culture, ideals and values.

Lawrence bewails the lack of the Indian / the African (i.e. the vital sensual part) in the white men. He wants them to have contact with the primitive cultures to recover the Indian or the African in themselves. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, in his article "Decolonizing imagination: Lawrence in the 1920s," rightly observes that Lawrence makes "a psychic quest, novel by novel, to discover the Indian within the self, a dimension of being that the defective white man desperately needs to recover, in order to achieve wholeness again" (p. 67). Lawrence wants that the European people should keep the horse alive and revitalize themselves by resorting to the primitive modes of living and absorbing the warmth and vitality of the primitive cultures and races, because European culture is dead and it cannot give them revitalization. Once he wrote to Willard Johnson in January 1924: "It would be a terrible thing, if the horse in us died forever, as it seems to have died in Europe" (1962, p. 768). Lawrence exhorts the Americans to "catch the pulse of the life which Cortes and Columbus murdered" (1936, p. 90). Here Lawrence defends uncharted and unexplored pre-colonial life and culture before it was corrupted and trampled by the explorers and travelers.

Thus, Lawrence in his post-war novels and short stories shows his disillusionment with English and European culture and is attracted to the alternative and vital modes of life in primitive lands. Most of his post- *Women in Love* novels have foreign settings, signifying his withdrawal from England and idealization of non-English and non-European cultures. In post-War novels the implied message is that the dead Europe

must be exchanged for the virgin freshness of new continents such as Australia and Mexico.

### **Anti-colonial vision in Lawrence's Post-war fiction**

Lawrence's celebration of the vitality of primitive cultures in post-war fiction is closely linked with his anti-imperialistic vision. In these texts, along with idealizing primitive societies, he also presents a critique of imperialistic and colonial practices.

After War, absolutely disillusioned by the barrenness of European culture, Lawrence left England and started his worldwide wanderings. In this life of exile, he went to different countries. Some of these regions were under colonial rule. Thus, he had a chance to see the clash of colonial realities with indigenous cultures. He was fascinated by the vitality of non-European cultures especially Indian and Mexican cultures. But he also felt that ambitious colonizers from Europe were ravishing the freshness and virginity of these local cultures. His personal experience of living in alien regions and knowing imperial realities gave him an acute understanding of the colonizing process and the complications it created in local cultures

Lawrence's anti-imperialistic vision starts with *The Rainbow* and continues in his fiction written during and after the World War. In *The Rainbow* Lawrence mocks at the so-called civilizing mission of colonizers. Ursula rejects colonizers' educating venture as an impudent sense of supremacy. She chastises Skrebensky: "You think the Indians are simpler than you.... And you'll feel so righteous governing them for their own good" (Lawrence, 1986, p. 462). Here Ursula being a spokesperson of Lawrence condemns the insolent sense of superiority of the colonizers to whom the natives are uncultured and should be taught the enlightened ways of living. Ursula is thrilled to listen about India. "India tempted her –the strange, strange land" (p. 474). Here Lawrence idealizes mystery of the colonies before the colonizers unveiled it. Ursula rejects colonial rule for its corrupting influence on the colonies. She tells Skrebensky that in India the British rule makes "things as dead and mean as they are here" (P. 428).

In *Women in Love*, Gerald, who had been an explorer of the savage regions, tells Minnette that he was never afraid of savages of Amazon. Minnette, representing the stereotypical picture of savages in the European mind, exclaims, "Oh, I thought savages were all so dangerous, they'd have your life before you could look round" (1995a, p. 66). But Gerald rejects this biased view that the savages are uncivilized brutes. He asserts that these savages "are over-rated" and that they "are too much like other people, not exciting, after the first acquaintance" (p. 66). The novel implies that colonialism is an intrusive activity. In chapter three Gerald asks, "why should you allow one nation to take away living from another nation" (p. 29). Hence, Lawrence considers colonialism as an interruption in the affairs of independent countries. He believes in the right of the native people to rule themselves and be accountable for their actions.

In *Aaron's Rod*, Lawrence candidly rejects colonialism and advocates the right of the natives to govern themselves. The Hindu doctor in chapter two condemns colonial interference and demands, "India should be allowed to rule herself because people can only be responsible to themselves" (1995b, p. 52).

*Kangaroo* offers a direct denunciation of civilizing mission of the colonialists. Somers referring to colonizers' encroachment tells Jaz, "The world is sick of being bossed .... You may as well sink or swim on your own resources" (1955 p. 58). Thus, the natives

can live their life according to their clannish rules. They know how to live; they do not need be taught the so-called civilized way of living. Jack criticizes the colonizers who look down upon tribal way of living. He rejects their unjustified impertinence to think that their way of life is superior to that of the natives. He tells Somers, "You come out from the old country very cocksure, with lot of criticism to you" (p. 296). Colonizing process is here described as an infringement. Somers refers to the mystery of the Australian Bush, which stands for the richness of the primitive cultures. As the Bush resists intrusion, in the same way these cultures oppose corrupting influence of the colonizing process. The Bush terrifies Somers as if it was alive and wanted to kill him: "It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, watching the myriad 'intruding white men'" (p. 9). Describing White man's colonialism as intrusion Somers here justifies the right of the Bush to defend its mystery and pristine darkness and save it from being tainted by the intruders.

The novel also criticizes the exploitative ends of the colonizing process, which is to Lawrence as it was to Conrad, a means of pillaging of the colonies' resources. Lawrence thinks that colonizing practice is a leechlike activity. To him colonizers are bedbugs feeding upon the resources of the colonies. Somers fears the danger of parasites to Australia: "A wonderful country .... The land that invites Parasites now" (p. 313). The colonizers make use of the wealth of the natives for their own ends. They do nothing for the benefit of the natives; they do what could serve their political and economic ends, as in the novel the commercial life of Australia is thriving "because it is the other end of English and American business" (p. 22). Jack, a native of Australia, is conscious of the fact that the countries' resources are being plundered by the foreigners. He is against the bloodsucking presence of "Jew capitalists and bankers" (p. 190) in his country. Willie Struther also criticizes colonial encroachment over the liberty of the natives. He bewails the slavery of the colonized. He links Australian labour with Indians and Africans and considers them common victims in "this Empire Business....slaving to keep this marvelous Empire going, with its out-of-date Lords and its fat arsed hypocritical upper classes" (pp. 319-20).

In *Kangaroo* Lawrence's views also bear a resemblance to the representative post-colonial writers like Achebe and Naipaul who also maintain that colonies can administer their affairs without the dictation of the colonizers. In the novel Jack is irritated by the intervention of the colonizing English people in the affairs of Australia; he complains: "We want to do our best for Australia, it being our own country. And the Pommies come out from England to upset us" (p. 296). He further protests: "I hate the thought of being bossed and messed about by the old Country.... Leave us Australians to ourselves; we shall manage" (p. 190).

Mellors, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, refers to the corrupting influence of colonialism on colonies which are pure like moon before they are despoiled and adulterated by the doomed western culture. He expresses his fear in these words, "When I feel the human world is doomed...then I feel the colonies aren't far enough. The moon wouldn't be far enough" (1968, p. 238).

In *The Plumed Serpent* Lawrence looks like post-colonial writers in his appraisal of colonialism. He rather anticipates such post-colonial writers as Achebe and Naipaul. The novel, like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, exposes clash or hostility between local and foreign cultures, religions and modes of life. As in Achebe's novel so also in *The Plumed Serpent* there is depicted a growing antipathy among the natives towards the Christian church

as a tool of colonialism. The novel exhibits, like Achebe's one, idealization of pre-colonial or indigenous culture, pagan religions and tribal traditions.

Lawrence's post-War short stories also offer a critique of colonialism. *The Woman Who Rode Away*, *St. Mawr* and *The Princess* display his liberal decolonizing ideas. In these stories he appears to idealize the vital primitive life of the colonized and reject the sterile life of the colonizers. These stories represent an escape from the European world into the virgin and unspoilt world of the primitive regions and cultures.

Lawrence attributes vitality, energy and potency to his savages. The natives, in his novels, enjoy full and passionate life unlike the dead life of European people, as Somers observes in *Kangaroo*, "There is one thing ... when these colonials do speak seriously, they speak like men, not like babies" (1955 p. 26). By idealizing the manliness and confidence of the natives in comparison with the sterility of the white men, Lawrence rejects the distorted picture of the natives as brutal savages, represented in European history and literature.

Lawrence rejects not only British colonialism but all colonizing attempts of the past. As Marlow in Conrad's *The Heart Of Darkness* links British imperialism with that of the Romans and condemns all imperialist intrusions, similarly Lawrence also denounces all imperialist activities. He condemns Romans who exercised brute force in wiping out the "Etruscan existence as a nation and a people" (1938, p. 1). Lawrence, like some of the imperialist writers, does not favour colonial rule and agenda. To him it is an exploitative activity. He agrees with Jack in *Kangaroo* that the colonizers have let the colonized down when Jack tells Somers, "you have let us down" and Somers (and also Lawrence) "was silent. Perhaps it was true" (1955, p. 296).

Lawrence, like Achebe, pictures the conflict between obtrusive foreign culture and local culture during the colonizing process. This clash of imperialism and primitive native life leads to cultural disintegration in the colonies. His novels, like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, depict the things falling apart in native cultures due to the invasion of the foreign culture. Thus, in *Kangaroo* he describes the unsettling influence that the colonialism can leave on the primitive culture. His novels offer criticism of the brutal devastation of colonies' culture by the colonizers. If the Arab Mare in *Women in Love* is taken as the representative of sensual, primitive and vital life and culture of the Arabs or colonies, then Gerald's attempt to crush life in the Mare represents colonizers' attempt to squeeze vital life of the colonies.

## Conclusion

This research paper was undertaken to trace Lawrence's fascination for primitive cultures and his anti-colonial in his post-war fiction. The research also tried to prove that these two elements are closely linked to each other. The analysis has proved that Lawrence post-war fiction demonstrates disillusionment with contemporary European culture and a consistent preference for the unexplored primitive regions. He identifies vitality, potency and warmth with these primitive cultures as opposed to barrenness, sterility and decay of the European culture.

The analysis has also shown that this idealization of the primitive in Lawrence's post-war fiction is also accompanied by anti-imperialistic attitude. Lawrence is just like post-colonial African and Indian writers, defending like them, pre-colonial traditions and rejecting colonial expansionist mission. He expresses the main concerns and pre-

occupations of the representative post-colonial voices like Achebe and Naipaul, sharing their distinctive celebration of the richness of pre-colonial cultures, post-colonial feeling of resentment against colonial activity and tracing the upsetting influence of the colonialism on traditional ways of life.

### **Recommendations**

Future researchers can take start from this paper as a clue to make in depth analysis of Lawrence's position and relation in/with the post-colonial theory and literature. Research can also be conducted to show how Lawrence as a predecessor of anti-colonialism might have influenced the post-colonial theory and writers. Future researchers can also compare Lawrence with other western writers making critique of colonialism such as Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster etc. He can also be compared with post-colonial writers from Africa and India like V.S Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and the like.

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