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Nature and Animals in the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence

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Abstract

D.H Lawrence was seen as par excellence novelist, but unfortunately his poetic achievement or sensibility was crushed by his prevalence as novelist. But throughout his literary career, he published poetry collections extensively with poems on wide variety and themes. Lawrence was nauseated by his ill health, poverty, war, suppression of his novels, and English morality, and somehow he believed that all these factors were created by humans, so to retain his sanity he turned towards the non human world of nature and animals. His poetry in his collection of "*Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*" 1923 is the best example of Lawrence's concern over modern humans' distance from the natural world; a world which once inspired poets, is now under the threat of Industrialism and materialism. This paper will use the poems from his collection "*Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*" 1923 as primary text to show the other side of Lawrence - a poet of nature and animals.

Keywords: Nature, Animals, Industrialism, Materialism, Modernism.

Introduction

D.H Lawrence's literary oeuvre or canon is huge mainly because of the extensiveness of themes and genres. But since his times, till today, he is ghettoized as working class novelist who represented the class he came from, who depicted the plight of colliers and due to his frankness with sex in writing was termed a pornographer. In the history of English literature such cultural stereotypes are only associated with D.H Lawrence, and not with any other writers. It is true that he was from working class, that he depicted the plight of colliers, sympathetic towards sex and

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sexuality but on deeper dwelling inside Lawrence's whole oeuvre, it was visible that he was not just a great novelist but also a great poet. More than that, his themes are extensive across genres.

Lawrence was the man of his time. He was not taken seriously in London literary scene, which made him utterly hopeless. He was poor and fearful, and thought WW1 as the creation of mankind. He nauseated humans for such deviltry and cried for the England's annihilation in war. He wanted to live England, which he did and spent rest of his life in exile. Lawrence in the letter to his friend wrote that, "this England, which nauseates my soul, nauseates my spirit and my body- this England. One might as well be blown over the cliffs here in the strong wind, into the rough white sea, as sit at this banquet of vomit, this life, this England, this Europe." (Bouttier, 2). Such milieu, eternal as well as internal, nauseated Lawrence. So he believed that all these factors were created by humans, so to retain his sanity he turned towards the non human world of nature and animals.

When Lawrence was in exile in Italy, Australia and America he wrote poems on the theme of nature and animals, which were later compiled by Lawrence in a collection named "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*"_1923. Many critics believed that his exile in warmer climates, helped him to understand environment with much closeness and there he got to meet animals, which were foreign to the natives of cold England. This paper attempts to understand and contemplate nature and animals in the poetry of D.H Lawrence, and show him as a poet of environment or non-human world, while taking his collection "*Birds, Beasts and Flower*"_1923 as the primary text, as all the poems from this collection directly addresses nature and animals.

In his essay "*D.H. Lawrence and Environment Consciousness*" Del Ivan Janik talked about the idea of post-humanism as a motivating force to ignite environmental consciousness in Lawrence's oeuvre. Janik wrote, "Lawrence's post-humanism looks at the human species as part of a larger living whole, valuing that whole in its complexity and integrity." (Janik, 359). Janik considered Lawrence's biographical journey to show how Lawrence was affected by the degradation and mutilation of environment by Capitalists in his native Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. He showed that Lawrence innately had the environment consciousness since childhood.

"*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" collection by Lawrence, established him as one of the best poet of nature and animals or of the non-human world. Before him, the great romantic poet of nature, William Wordsworth wrote on environment. But the way Wordsworth saw environment is totally different then of Lawrence. Wordsworth attached himself to nature subjectively and remained

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loyal to nature by not digressing, on the other hand Lawrence was more of a spectator, who through nature and animals questioned metaphorically history, sexuality, civilization, divinity, and the conflict of man and nature. Carol Rumes in an article in The Guardian wrote, "There are no prettily dancing daffodils in D.H Lawrence's flower poetry. He is the poet who stripped sentimentality and consolation from "birds, beasts and flowers" and restored their sexual drama." Inspired by Lawrence, Ted Hughes took ahead this nature and animals tradition in poetry further in the later part of 20th century.

A new perspective was given by Christopher Heywood's essay "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers: The Evolutionary Context And Lawrence's African Literary Sources*" in which Heywood claims that an important African literary text, "Specimens of Bushman Folklore" by W.H. I. Bleek and Lucy L. Lloyd., inspired Lawrence and also provided Lawrence a visionary mythical world imagery which he used in his collection. Heywood claims that the imagery of nature and animals, that are depicted in "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" are not European but African.

Poems of "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" explore a vast range of experience. They are dramatic confrontations between the human and non-human and potent evocations of the spirit of places he visited while in self imposed exile. They are brimming with vitality and awareness, humour and wisdom of environment. In "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" nature and animals are united. "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" is divided in sections within which many poems are written on that theme. All these sections are part of nature and animals themes.

Nature

In "Fruits" section, poems are written on fruits such as Pomegranate, Medlars, Sorb Apples, Figs and Grapes. These fruits are metaphorical through which Lawrence ascends to evoke larger questions. In the poem "**Pomegranate**," Lawrence showed himself a traveller who was writing of his travel experiences of eating pomegranate in three exiled cities, Syracuse, Venice, Tuscany. Pomegranate for Lawrence is a metaphor for love and heart which is broken by a "fissure." Through the fissure in pomegranate, Lawrence compares his broken heart and his deliberate will for broken heart:

"Do you mean to tell me you will see no fissure?

Do you prefer to look on the plain side?" (Lawrence, 93)

Lawrence created the nature fruit pomegranate as metaphor to evoke the idea of importance of broken heart.

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In “**Medlars And Sorb- Apples**” and “**Figs**” Lawrence very aesthetically described the beauty of these fruits, in wider sense he was appreciating nature for creating such beautiful art. In “**Medlars And Sorb- Apples**” Lawrence describe the fruits as such:

“I love to suck you out from your skins

So brown and soft and coming suave...

What a rare, powerful, reminiscent flavour.” (Lawrence, 94)

In “**Figs**” Lawrence was so mesmerised by the taste of fruit that he tells his readers by creating an image of how to eat a Fig:

“It just to put your mouth to the crack, and take out the

Flesh in one bite.” (Lawrence, 96)

But these poems are also metaphorical, as within the guise of these fruits Lawrence in “**Medlars And Sorb- Apples**” showed the journey of soul and afterlife, and in “**Figs**” he showed the sensuous catalogue of fig’s symbolism as woman’s vagina. He gendered the fruit through historical myths, “you agree with the Romans, it is female.” He further says:

The Italian vulgarly says, it stands for the female part; the

Fig-fruit:

The fissure, the yoni.” (Lawrence, 96)

Lawrence because of this poem was termed as pornographer and misogynist but it was not Lawrence who compared the fig with vagina, rather the myth and symbol of fig fruit has been created by Italian society long before. Lawrence just represented the symbolism of this gendered fruit, researching the history. In the poem “**Grapes**” Lawrence credited grapes as a source of wine. In the fruit section of “**Birds, Beasts and Flowers**” Lawrence appreciated nature for creating such ornaments for itself.

In “Trees” section of “**Birds, Beasts and Flowers**” Lawrence wrote poem on the tree “**Cypresses**” and evoked an image to show triviality of man in front of nature, because man dies but nature (tree like Cypresses) stood as an immortal in the pages of history. Lawrence in “**Cypresses**” admired the tree by calling it a “monumental” and questions the tree about the Etruscan civilization of the ancient Italy. Throughout the poem Lawrence alludes the idea of nature provides a link to the past.

In the section of “Flower”, through “**Almond Blossom**” poem, Lawrence showed the sympathetic and emotional side of nature which since ancient times, assist humans by suffering itself for humans, as if nature is real mother:

Trees suffer, like races, down the long ages

They wander and are exiled, they live in exile through long ages.” (Lawrence, 95)

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In the poem “**Sicilian Cyclamens**” Lawrence set the poem at the time of two pre-Hellenic savages perhaps Adam and Eve. This flower was used by them to cover them up. Lawrence tried to show origin of the primitive harmony between man and nature.

Animals

In the other sections of the “*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*” Lawrence wrote poems on animals. Unlike the relationship of man with nature, relationship of man with animals was depicted as not harmonic. Constantly in every poem, Lawrence evoked the theme of conflict between man and animals. Man was shown brutal by Lawrence and by the end of every poem there was an evocation of pity and fear for the poor animals.

In “*Hell On Earth: Birds, Beasts and Flowers as Subversive Narrative*” Sandra M. Gilbert shows that Lawrence was dealing with animal myths in his collection. Not only the poems are mythical but also behave as essays on zoology and environmental botany. She placed Lawrence’s poetry as apt to fit in anthologies that are dealing with environmental issues.

Lawrence in “Evangelistic Beasts” section wrote poems on Christian myths, the animals that represented the four evangelists. In “**St Matthew**” “**St Mark**” “**St Luke**” “**St John**” Lawrence through modern yet Christian lens depicted the animals as represented by the four evangelists. St Matthew was depicted by winged man, St Mark by winged lion, St Luke by a calf and St John by Eagle, in evoking animal characteristics to demi-gods Lawrence blurred the boundary of animals and celestial beings, and presented animals in these poems as better than the modern human of Lawrence’s time.

In the “creatures” section of the “*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*” Lawrence came to the horrific theme of man and animals conflict. This section showed the conflict and sadist nature of man who wants to kill innocent animals. In this section all creatures’ mosquito, fish, and bat were killed by humans. This section is very violent, filled with deadly images. In the poem “**Mosquito**” Lawrence showed humans disgust against the poor mosquito as humans do not understand that mosquito bites for survival and not out of malice or hatred. At last in this poem, mosquito was killed by the man by smashing the slap at the wall:

Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes...

Queer, what a dim dark smudge you have disappeared into!” (Lawrence, 124)

In the poem “**Fish**” Lawrence drew marine experience. Fish was killed while fishing but Lawrence contemplated the idea of fish as a metaphor of loneliness and individuality in love.

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Lawrence evoked the image of grief but with astonishment after seeing the fish. Lawrence aesthetically appreciated the fish and say:

“And my heart accused itself

Thinking: I am not the measure of creation.

This is beyond me, this fish.

His God stands outside my God.” (Lawrence, 129)

In the poem “**Man and Bat**” Lawrence showed the perversity of man, as he could not tolerate a “disgusting bat” hiding in his room. The presence of Bat (in myths, representative of darkness, gloom and ill omen) made the man violent. Lawrence showed that man follow racism outside the human society too. Poet chose very harsh words like “out you beast,” “Impure even in weariness” and “out you brute.” At last out of fear, the Bat died. The man put him in a “flannel bag” like garbage and defenestrated him out of the window.

In these poems under the section of Creatures, all the creatures were killed by man. Lawrence depicted the plight of animals and hatred of man in a very realistic canvas. Lawrence’s tone was sarcastic and comical which made human society look devilish and pervert.

In the “Reptiles” section of “*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*” Lawrence wrote one of his best known poems, “**Snake.**” In “**Snake**” Lawrence showed the encounter of man and snake at the water-trough. Snake came first and drank water, and the man was watching it drinking the water and contemplated to kill the snake for no obvious reason.

“The voice of my education said to me

He must be killed.....

And the voice in me said, If you were a man

You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him

Off.” (Lawrence, 137)

Lawrence showed that animals like snake were stereotyped by the cultures and religion. Lawrence depicted snake not cunning but rather a placid serene reptile, as it was falsely depicted in myths and legends, rather Lawrence showed man more cunning and pervert than a snake. The man threw a log at the snake to intimidate it.

“And immediately I regretted it.

I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!

I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.” (Lawrence, 137)

Lawrence in these poems from “*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*” showed the theme of conflict between man and animals. Lawrence despised the human society for not caring these animals who

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are not threat to humans rather humans are threat on them. Lawrence wrote in Lady Chatterley's Lover that "the cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins." (Lawrence, 1) .Maybe Lawrence was depicting the sadist and pervert nature of man that ruined the humans in all respect.

Conclusion

Lawrence without a doubt was amongst the great poets of 20th century, but his poetry on non-human world made him the greatest environmental poet of 20th century, as many recent environmental anthologies are being inspired by Lawrence's collection "*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*" in which Lawrence explored the world of nature and animals; a world which Lawrence found far better and real than the savage human world which was mutilating itself with Industrialism and WW1.

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