

**MODERNITY AS THE OTHER:  
THE VISION OF D. H. LAWRENCE**

The liminal period between the nineteenth and the twentieth century was marked by a breach in the traditional, more or less hierarchic, terrestrial order of things. This breach has divided the god-ordained universe from what came to be known as human consciousness; or if we employ the diction of some Augustinian dualists it represented a separation of the space from the soul. This division came to be acknowledged as modernity<sup>1</sup>. D. H. Lawrence had a distinct perception of modernity as the other against which and through which personal identity was envisaged. For him the establishment of industrial society exemplified the chain of institutionalized patterns aimed at suppressing the burgeoning of individuality. Lawrence outlined the promulgation of new modes of social order which attempted the construction of collective identity via the checks of unassailable symbols, evaluations, and activities "of and for society"<sup>2</sup>. As against these assumptions he rendered modernity as the other – in the sense of the opposite, the alternative – of the controlling socio-cultural structures. The advancement of industrial collective identity entailed the definition of *the other* or *others* and the establishment of relationships with them. This effected the constitution of similarities and attributes of appropriate human types or "civilized" persons<sup>3</sup>. Lawrence's protagonists were *the others* who conceived institutionalized industrial society as *the other*. He grasped modernity as *the other of the other in the other's identity*. This put Lawrence among the first to probe the depths of the relational self of modern identity:

...[the] self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself... The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another<sup>4</sup>.

However, his reflections into the domains of social life did not lead Lawrence to suspicion. His work is seeped with a desire for transcendence that does not attempt to structure the new experience. Instead he was exploring the creative liberty of the modern self to promote a transformation based on a renewed and more accurate view of identity's nature. He saw in the freedom of individual experience the main asset of modern identity. The dissolution of the integrated and hierarchical society cleared the way for a multitude of combinations of equality and diversity, where *otherness* was not

suspicious. It is only by recognizing and acknowledging of *the other* that the individual can assert his or her *otherness*.

In this respect Lawrence was perhaps the first one to attempt bestowing new meaning to old concepts and assail the task of deciphering the new boundaries of the modern self. Lawrence has often been quoted as a proponent of a male self-consciousness, which underlies the language in his writings and this has usually been pointed out as his way of attempting to express the immediate feeling of life. In this study I would like to elaborate on this view and propound the thesis that in his works Lawrence was using notions and ideas which form the backbone of contemporary understanding of modern identity. It is my perception that Lawrence has conceived an alternative to the 'social being', which can only be defined as an underlying individuality. He virtually highlights the emerging trends on the intellectual horizons of his time and sets upon adumbrating the direction the major currents would take. Lawrence envisioned modern identity in its entirety and in his novels the characters strive to come to grips with it. He embarks on the task of depicting this new understanding of the self in its multifaceted diversity<sup>5</sup>.

One of his major contributions in depicting the modern self is describing it as inner, drawing its sources from within. Lawrence attempts at retrieving the richness of the inward gaze, and probing the depth of individuality. He achieves this by drawing boundaries of self-expression – regardless of what we try to articulate, there is always more within us, which will remain ineffable. Therefore, the idea of an inner realm is central to the concept of the modern self.

Another aspect of modern identity, as delineated by Lawrence, is the assertion of ordinary life. In this way he rejects all forms of authority and hierarchy and opposes all distinctions based on inequality of the self. However Lawrence's protest is, unlike others before and after him, purely on the individual level; he does not rally for a mass movement, but his is a private dissension to subordination. This is an essentially modern interpretation of human dignity and the individual's power of self-affirmation rejecting all forms of institutional or social hierarchy.

A third source of modernity in the works of Lawrence is nature. He provides a modern definition of nature which explains the feelings it generates in us. In the relationship we establish with nature and just by the mere fact of being in nature we are able to create a particular association with the surrounding environment. The expanse of this intercourse and its personal and detached perspective undermines the institutionalized social order. This particular communion stirs our sentiments and emotions, because it reflects what and how we feel; it either awakens, or intensifies our moral experience. Nature triggers the ability of modern identity to come to terms with itself. Thanks to it, the individual achieves clarity and fullness of self-presence that was lacking before. For instance Ursula's regeneration in *The Rainbow*, "She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture the old brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heavens"<sup>6</sup>. Nature can awaken the purposes within ourselves and Lawrence's characters try to recover contact with this pool of ideas, by breaking the limitations of social opinion. Lawrence depicts that the modern self declines to act as expected, and rather follows its inner impulse<sup>7</sup>.

In this way Lawrence prompts new modes of thought and thinking which trace the multifarious perplexity as well as richness of modern identity.