

THE LEAP INTO DARKNESS AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING: TRANSCENDENCE IN D.H. LAWRENCE AND IBN 'ARABI.Dolat Khan¹, Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood^{*2}, Sami Ullah Khan³**Original Article**

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Abstract

English novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence and Sufi master (shaikh) Ibn 'Arabi's writing have very little common purpose. They write in different ages, in different cultural and religious background and in different genre. Therefore, this paper is not about common purpose and similarity of themes in their writings. This paper addresses one fundamental ontological issue which fascinates both writers the most and that issue is experiencing the spiritual source of human soul. This source, which is transcendental and without human reach, has a medium of its expression in human love, the finest human emotion God has put in the world. In this paper we will try to understand Lawrence's transcendental leap through Ibn 'Arabi's concept of experiencing the divine reality in this world.

Keywords: Transcendent, Love, Aesthetic, Mystic, Flesh, Mysticism

Introduction

Critics link D. H. Lawrence's aesthetic sensibilities and his thought to different mystical and religious traditions (Delavenary, 1971). The common theme, in most of the studies is the emphasis on either a European solution to Lawrence's metaphysics or biblical connotation of his religious symbols and metaphors (Bell, 1992; Meyers, 1985). Therefore, the question of reading and understanding his work in the light of a Muslim Sufistic parallel never arises in Lawrence's scholarship. However, I argue that D. H. Lawrence's spiritual explorations and quest for meaning in the unknown realm of being are similar to Medieval Muslim Sufi thought. Lawrence's claim about the relationship between his art and his ideas, his ontological position on the complex, obscure and unknowable existence of the essence and its relation with the sensory being bring him very close to Ibn Arabi's mystical ideas. Especially, when his writings suggest that the flesh or any fragment of sensual self represents the source in the process of realization of the spiritual knowledge of the transcendent.

Transcendent and human love in Lawrence and Ibn 'Arabi

Lawrence keeps artistic expression particularly fiction in high esteem because such writings for him come "unwatched out of one's pen" (Lawrence, 2005), which give precedent to passionate speech from rational inferences. It is a very Sufistic thinking, Ibn Arabi, for instant, says that his writings are not the fruit of his theological pursuits and his writings are not aimed to solve the issues of religious interpretations as these were the hot pursuit of the scholars of the time. Rather, for Ibn Arabi his work is the expression of his own spiritual experiences and only those

can benefit from his writings who follow the path to divine experience (Izutsu, 1984). Lawrence's own claim about the relationship between his ideas and his art is similar to what Ibn Arabi insists about his spiritual writing, Lawrence says that he has 'deduced' his 'pseudo-philosophy' from his imaginative writings which Lawrence insists are passionate and instinctive. From where these passionate and instinctive impulses come for Lawrence it is the concrete self or the flesh and blood where life exists in its true form. Although Lawrence's emphasis on concrete reality bring him closer to Nineteenth-century realism and material rationalism but he avoids such connotation by making religious and spiritual traditions as the basis for his interpretation of the reality of being. He first elucidates his idea of spiritual realism in his foreword to *Sons and Lovers*. In the *foreword*, Lawrence proposes that the transcendent which is unknown and may not be approachable as far as rational senses are concern, but at the same time it is not abstract and hollow as for Lawrence, it is suggested in the Bible as the 'Word'. Designating the transcendent which is the creative force or father as an utterance – a 'word' for Lawrence creates a broken chain of the relationship with cosmos and also such an idea will make human relations meaningless. For example our love for our neighbour becomes a meaningless utterance and our own physical being becomes dead to our senses because if we think the only relation we have with the God or transcendent is the word of God as Bible has it 'The Word was made Flesh' then we are what we say not what we are. In this case, for Lawrence, the life in our being will remain absent; if we say we love our neighbour then that would be enough we are not actually going to experience the pain of the neighbour. This for Lawrence is the lifeless form of religious sensibility and abdication of the transcendent from the physical world, which he like Sufis rejects.

Lawrence, in the Foreword, seems to argue with the Bible by implying that if 'The Word was made Flesh' is a true statement then why Adam the first creation is made in flesh by God with his own hand and after that he becomes able to speak (Lawrence, 1981b). Lawrence seems to argue that flesh represents our essential being because concrete self is the mark of God's creative force and without making a true connection with the physical reality of our being we remain hollow, meaningless and what remain in us is a thinking animal not a living being. Lawrence says, 'Adam was the first Christ: not the Word made Flesh, but the Flesh made Word.' And then he goes on saying 'The Father is the flesh, the eternal and unquestionable, the law-giver but not the law; whereas the Son is the mouth [...] the Word is a graven image that is worn down, and forsaken, like the Sphinx in the desert.' (1969, p. 30) Lawrence in a way rejects the commandment culture in the understanding of religious thought and opts for a real connection with the transcendent. Father, who is eternal and unknowable in the rational sense, has created us or all being in flesh before speaking the Word through Jesus; therefore, in our physical existence we have a real connection with the Father who is our unknown essence. These ideas come to life in Lawrence novels *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* where through physical association Lawrence's characters try to go beyond their ordinary being sometimes in the manner of slow awakening and sometime in a moment of revelation. So much so that Lawrence's characters seemed to have a Sufi quest of spiritual awareness through their sensual relationships (Zangenehpour, 2000). Tom Brangwen in *The Rainbow*, for instant, spiritually the most ambitious character of all, absorbs the proximity of the natural world of his farm. He becomes sensuously more alive. He passes through many stages of wonder and shock until he finds spiritual and physical transformation in his relationship with Lydia. His experience with Lydia is as spiritual as physical, when he first embraces her 'foreign' figure; he passes away into a new level of consciousness. "He had her in his arms, and obliterated, was kissing her. And it was sheer, blenched agony to him, to break away from himself" (1981, p.81).

Tom's self-annihilating embrace of Lydia's body is similar to Sufi symbolic reference to prophet Moses' experience with divine at Mount Senai, this for many Sufis including Mawalana Rumi is one of the occasion when man become conscious of his essence that is the highest level of being, the experience on the Senai is intense both spiritually and physically that the prophet cannot bear it, Moses becomes unconscious and then wake up a new man. The people who do not come back after being conscious of divine, they do not matter because they are not the awaken one, they are the lost one. Tom in *The Rainbow*, however, "returned gradually, but newly created, as after a gestation, a new birth, in the womb of darkness" (1981, p. 81). After this sensuous and spiritual communion, Lawrence informs that 'the voice of her (Lydia) body had risen strong and insistent' telling her that Tom is the man who have come to 'her for her awakening' and Tom's desire for her change into a 'sort of worship.' (1981, pp. 91-93) *The Rainbow* reveals the mute language of experience, the 'voice of the body' which is dark like the womb turns Tom's desire for love into a 'sort of worship. In *The Rainbow* as rightly observed by Moynahan "salvation does not refer to the rewards of heaven but to a wholeness state of being attainable here and now" (1956, p.208).

Similarly, in Sufi discourse it is a common theme that the fragmentary existence in the material world is a part of a greater reality and one can reach to that greater cosmic truth through its fragmentary sensory being. As Levisohn rightly observes, "The Sufis do not separate the realm of Existence from that of God's Existence" (Levisohn, 1999, p. xvi). It is a fundamental ontological position in Sufism that not only distinguishes Sufism from rationalistic deconstruction of the world; it also distinguishes Sufism from doctrinal faith's abstract view of God as the alienated source of being. Sufis do think God is unknowable in his essence; however, we can experience divine through our spiritual and physical senses. Romantic love, in many Sufi literary writings, is celebrated as one such occasion when a man and a woman transcend their ordinary existence and reach to a higher level of being which brings them closer to divine experience. Sensuous love stories of Laila Majnun and Yusuf Zulika are common theme in Sufi spiritual poetry. In such medieval Sufi discourse it is hard to distinguish religious sensibility from aesthetic pleasure, laughter from spiritual humility and experience from observation. The beloved is human in one instance and god in another instance. In one very famous medieval Sufi anecdote Majnun the lover of beautiful Laila once passes in front of a pious Muslim who is praying. The man who is praying reproaches Majnun for his insensitivity and disregard for prayers. Majnun says to him while you are remembering God, you still noticed me passing in front of you than what is the quality of prayer. While on the other hand, I could not saw you praying because I am lost in Laila's love. This anecdote makes a distinction between an abstract view and an aesthetic and sensory view of the divine reality. If you are praying to an abstract view of God then your prayers and relation with God are devoid of the passionate experience of the divine presence (Izutsu, 1984).

The Sufi path which appears in Ibn Arabi's writing is a path not a word because it does not inform of the transcendent but it connects with the transcendent and it is Sufi's quest to realize and know God. For Ibn Arabi the way truth exhibits we ought to know it which is leading towards God and reality. Therefore Sufi gets to closer God with most intimate way.

For Ibn Arabi the Koran, can lead one to a certain level of intimacy with God as Jesus does according to Lawrence, but it does not show the intimacy itself. Although Quran mentioned guidance about every aspect of life, but it is not mentioned how divinely act in every occasion (Izutsu, 1984). The Sufi want a direct correspondence with God through concentration on one

thought and that is *zikr* or remembering God. And, he his every action with the will of God which for Lawrence is the creative force in our flesh or physical existence.

The finding of God for Ibn al-`Arabi is the realization of the `Oneness of Being' or the `Unity of Existence' (wahad al-wujud), which is, "simply stated, there is only one Being, and all existence is nothing but the manifestation or outward radiance of that one Being" (Chittick, 1983, p. 79). Despite hundreds of volumes on ontology inspired by Ibn al-`Arabi's works, his main concern was to experience, or taste (dhawwq) God's being. The realization of Oneness is something divine. The purpose of knowledge is to know the creator in Ibn al-`Arabi's doctrine. Through consciousness and self-reflection human being have the capacity to know the creator and himself. This potentiality of knowing God or creating an intimate connection with the divine is lies in the true and intimate relation of love as obvious in many stories of the lover and the beloved in Sufi poetry. When Lawrence says, "there operates throughout creation the force of God the Son [man], which is Love. Love however does not mean what we expect it to mean. It is the impulse to move from being to knowing" (Kinkead-weekes, 1996, p.382) he seems to encapsulate the Sufi quest.

In *Women in Love*, Lawrence's characters go through the process of being to knowing in physical association and in love to each other. For instance, Ursula, as many other characters in the Lawrence's novels, is like a traveller of the Sufi path. In chapter called Excuse which means travelling and potentially symbolizes Ursula and Birkin's journey into the unknown realm of their physical experience. The potential for their union is developed as they travel up the road and pass by the Southwell Minster. The setting evokes a paradisaal and holy feeling between them. At the inn, Birkin suddenly appears to Ursula as an original son of God, who has metamorphosed into a sacred yet sensual presence. The sexuality between them now appears to be blessed, and they consummate their relationship under the trees. Lawrence's setting may implies at the first glance that Ursula and Birkin's union aims to build a new paradise that recalls the original union of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But more importantly it suggests merging the sacred and the profane in here and now through the meeting of the flesh and connecting with the essence of being - the transcendent through the sensation of love. Before her consummation in physical love with Birkin, Ursula despises Birkin's words. For Ursula, Birkin's words are too explicit and painful; she feels 'a sense of violation in the air, as if too much was said'. She becomes 'pale' and 'abstracted' as if too much has been reveal. However, Ursula becomes aware unconsciously of something which is not verbal. Ursula "watching him [...] not really aware of what she was seeing." She is sensually aroused and her body has become in contact with his body. She without mental understanding becomes aware that "There was a great physical attractiveness in him – a curious hidden richness [...] the powerful beauty of life itself, something like laughter, invisible and satisfying. Also the magic of his thighs had fascinated her" (2008, p. 43-44). The dark voice of the body which we saw in Tom and Lydia's relationship above once again consume and 'obliterate' Ursula's ordinary being and when she make physical love with Birkin she feels that 'this was neither love nor passion. It was the daughters of men coming back to the sons of God, the strange inhuman sons of God who are in the beginning.' (2008, p. 325) The golden light on Ursula's face shows that she has transcended the stage of her life when in the beginning of novel she is characterised as somebody who finds herself helpless between the chasm and the sordid ordinariness of homely life. She seems to have made the real connection with the essence of being 'the strange inhuman sons of God who are in the beginning'.

Lawrence finds something transcendent in the 'powerful beauty of life itself' which is invisible like laughter but satisfying and complete. I think Lawrence share this conviction with the Sufis that the divine force in this world is love and love is an experience not a word. Saying I love my neighbour is not enough, you have to live through it.

Conclusion

Both Lawrence and Ibn 'Arabi have a mystical vision of transcendent and a view that universal and phenomenal existence is basically a revelation of the great creative force of God. Both give a sacral meaning to human love in which through love one can transcend one's base instinct and reach in a higher stage of living. Although they do not share a common religious and cultural purpose, their belief in purity of soul and human emotions and desires can have similar connotation. In this paper I have shown that there is a larger debate of sensual experience and spiritual world in both Lawrence and Ibn 'Arabi's writings. In their writings body and soul, experience and abstract are imagined in a profoundly different way than our common understanding allows us.

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