

Modernity and the Alienated Self: A Critical Reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod*

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Abstract

The period of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed various forms of transformation that impacted, very effectively, on the self of the modern individual. The ramifications of the two World Wars pervaded not merely the social milieu, but also encroached on the private life, thereby leading to an acute sense of existential crises and demoralisation. Modern man confronted a kind of dilemma as he could not embrace the shifting discourses of his immediate present completely, nor could he fall back on the former patterns of life. This is probably why the enigma of the fragmented self in the post war scenario turns out to be a crucial area of scholarly enquiry.

The present paper would renegotiate the idea of the modernist angst as reflected in D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* (1922) in order to highlight manifold problematics of the modern self. It would question the very notion of modernity and present it as an idealistic (also, cerebral) construct which apparently disseminates the narrative of releasing humanity from the cobweb of traditionalism, but actually leads man into a claustrophobic world of simulation, multiplicity and disintegration. *Aaron's Rod* captures the sense of ennui, emanating from the invisible shackles of modernity that destabilise the idea of a rational, unified selfhood and individual autonomy.

Keywords: Modernity, self, alienation, fragmentation



Introduction

Modernism is often marked with the emergence of an unprecedented sense of novelty that was manifested in the socio-economic, political, literary and other fields of life. This customary association of Modernism with the idea of innovation and novelty also celebrated the rise of capitalism and the belief in progress and productivity, leading to massive industrialisation, technological changes and global expansion. The period, following the two World Wars, was significant and crucial enough to debunk the established notions, associated with the social, the individual and the natural. The eventual disillusionment with the existing definition of the individual and the society added a different kind of frisson to the very understanding of modernism. The paper takes recourse to textual analysis method and examines *Aaron's Rod* to decode the problematics of the modern self with regards to the claims of modernity.

Navigating the Self: Alienation, Fragmentation and Social Crises

Dan Jacobson's essay titled "D. H. Lawrence and Modern Society" (1967) can be taken as a conceptual reference to initiate the discussion. Jacobson writes, "Any discussion of the social and political thought of D. H. Lawrence is bound to be largely a discussion of his hatred of modern society" (81). He describes Lawrence as the "most intense" and "unremitting" among the twentieth century writers who invested themselves into exposing the dark undercurrents of the modern society. *Aaron's Rod* lays bare the anomalies of such a society by foregrounding a radically incoherent selfhood, primarily in the presentation of the eponymous character "Aaron" and also in other characters who perpetually strive to preserve a niche for themselves in the transiency of the post-war world.

The novel opens with a contrastive imagery by referring to the "half frozen" earth, lying under the "large, brilliant" evening star. The incompatibility underlying the imagery is suggestive of the fact that there is a sense of "menace" even during the time of Christmas. The novel describes, "Also the War was over; and there was a sense of relief that was almost a new menace. A man felt the violence of the nightmare released now onto the general air" (7). What we can see is that the perilous atmosphere has not merely jeopardised the spirit of the festival but also infused a threat into the social life. The sense of unrest and severity of the War continue to loom large over the individuals. By making frequent reference to the surrounding atmosphere ("dark, frosty, electric") the author points to its resemblance with Aaron's unenterprising psyche. This is how the setting of the novel is employed to introduce the sense of futility and inadequacy within the self. We see Aaron Sisson, the secretary of the Miner's Union, returning home after attending a meeting with the men in the colliery. Whereas his children are excited and jovially welcome him to set the Christmas tree, he keeps his face "averted" and reluctantly follows their requests. He remains inattentive even to his wife's queries and refrains from arguing with her when the latter reprimands him for his aloofness and negligence of familial concerns. Lawrence writes, "He did not talk much, but seemed to think about something. His wife resumed her sewing. She was acutely aware of her husband, but he seemed not very much aware of her" (10). Aaron's inertness alienates him and debars him to respond to his wife and children. The novel suggests that his thinking is prevented by the "acute familiarity" of the house and its "changeless pleasantness" that make Aaron feel claustrophobic and inimically exhausted in his own house. This is the paradox of the modern life where individual assumes his self to be free but is unable to comprehend a stable selfhood and a wholesome impression of life.



What can, thus, be sensed is a conflict between the private and the public version of the self. Interestingly, narrating the self, inflicted by these two contested ideologies, is an alternative way for the author to represent the socio-political reality of the time concerned. In his desperate attempt to reduce visibility from the public milieu, Aaron “never went with the stream, but made a side current of his own” (17). He is constantly oppressed by a sense of “terrible” obstinacy and “diabolical” consciousness that border on sheer idiosyncrasy. The novel projects him as a “special man” with “peculiar” understanding who is “non-committal” towards everything that concerns social life. That is probably why the lady in the pub is quite startled to hear about his Christmas shopping which he does out of familial obligation and not from filial care or emotion. When enquired of his family, Aaron acknowledges his family but expressly denies to go back. Instead, he joins the Bricknells on the Christmas party but there too he seems to be “inwardly absorbed”—“Though he kept the appearance of a smile, underneath he was hard and opposed. He did not wish to be with these people, and yet, mechanically, he stayed” (42). This implies the duality of the modern self which is inwardly averse to the public concerns but outwardly appears to be in tune with the public discourses. We might perceive the split selfhood as the expression of the fragmented psyche that leads to the emergence of confused personality in T. S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915). The poem opens with the reference to “You” and “I” who may not be two different individuals but split personalities who talk to each other. This is how the concept of divisionism comes in and the self is broken into various subjectivities, culminating into an impoverishment of emotional vitality.

Aaron, thus, becomes the isolated, ennuiridden persona through whom the novel showcases the tribulations modern life. We can sense the social crises in the form of insecurity, ambivalence, tediousness that mislead the self about its own identity. The “deep-rooted” inertia of Aaron is actually the outcome of the problematic social intercourse that emerges as the aftermath of the Wars. *Women in Love* (1920), too, projects the inconsistency and self-contradictory impulses in Hermione and gives a glimpse of the “darkness” embedded in her unconscious desire. This is how the novel describes the psychological struggle of the modern self quite aptly, “Her whole mind was a chaos, darkness breaking in upon it, and herself struggling to gain control with her will, as a swimmer struggles with the swirling water” (104).

Scrutinising the Self: Love, Power and Physicality

Lawrence’s novels are distinctive in their portrayal of physicality that redefines the conventional understanding of love and the psyche. In *Aaron’s Rod* the discourse of power politicises the concepts of love and sexuality with a view to critiquing the disintegration in the social bonding. In his essay titled “The Duality of Love and Power in D.H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*” (1999) Michael Ballin explains that the interrelations between love and power provide Lawrence with a scope to bring out the “difficulty of reconciling individual psychological development” (1) with the social consciousness. Ballin thinks that Lawrence “strives to attain a vision of life possibilities by a culture so seriously damaged by the great war” (10). It is at this juncture the crises of the self with regards to love, power and physicality become crucial. While confronting the clutches of social anomalies, individuals in this novel are found to be deeply moved by a sense of personal quest or liberation. In his letter to Edward Garnett in 1914 Lawrence writes:

You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is *another ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a *deeper sense* than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single *radically-unchanged* element. (183; emphasis added)

Speaking about his experimental treatment of the characters Lawrence seems to endorse the “unrecognisable element” of the self that is layered and unconscious. He deliberately refrains from giving a “stable ego” to his characters. Aaron's urge for personal liberation appears to be radically impacted by what Lawrence calls “another ego” and the former eventually embraces illicit relationship to unshackle the marital boundaries. As a person who vehemently tries to escape the “horror” of responsibility, Aaron undergoes extreme psychological crises while being part of any kind of normative institutions like marriage. He ends up being a wanderer who finds solace in the company of the strangers instead of staying with his own wife and children. Thus, marriage as an institution is conceived as oppressive, leading not only to a truncated selfhood but also towards frustrative sexuality. The idea of love, when seen through the prism of marriage, is tampered with a sense of power. This power develops a kind of egoistic combat between the sexes where none of the partners submits to the other. This is exactly why Aaron's marriage with Lottie never succeeds as the latter starts resisting the patriarchal authority that Aaron wants to exert in the guise of love:

The illusion of love was gone for ever. Love was a battle in which each party strove for the mastery of the other's soul. So far, man had yielded the mastery to woman. Now he was fighting for it back again. And too late, for the woman would never yield. But whether woman yielded or not, he would keep the mastery of his own soul and conscience and actions. (150)

Hence, love becomes a highly gendered idea. Resisting this misogyny becomes a sign of modernity where the active male/passive female binary somehow collapses, projecting “manhood as an uncertain, tenuous social status” (Vandello 2). Aaron's masculinity is questioned by the stout feminine intervention found in the voice of his wife. Realising that his stranglehold on the conjugal bonding of love is challenged, Aaron embraces an alienated life because “recklessness is almost a man's revenge on his woman. He feels he is not valued, so he will risk destroying himself to deprive her altogether” (181) as mentioned in *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Becoming a “nobody” gives Aaron the power of anonymity and self-effacement. This is how the arrival of modernism reorients the concept of love and places human bonding into utter precarity and indecisiveness. We can see how the marital tie between Lilly and Tanny demonstrates hardly any sense of depth, commitment or solidarity. Whereas the former leaves for Novara and the latter starts for her relative's house, leaving no intimation of their return whatsoever. Julia, too, leaves Robert and engages herself with Cyril and this random shifting of relationships is itself a satire on modernity where the solidarity of human bonding is affected by dissatisfaction, depression and uncertainty. In such a scenario, the stability of forming a unified selfhood is as evasive as the retention of a fixed social identity and bonding.

Amidst the discourses of love and power the idea of physicality becomes fundamental to the mechanism of the modern self. In *Aaron's Rod* the notion of personal liberation, very effectively, merges with sexual liberation, regulating the self to transcend the constrictive sexual mores in the society, at least temporarily. This essential dynamism



of the modern self is depicted in Aaron's physical encounter with Marchese. James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) delineates this radical dynamism in the personality of Stephen who epitomises the complex assimilation of the sexual and the spiritual. This internalisation acted as a kind of enlightenment for Stephen to transgress the boundaries of nationalism, religion and family which overshadow personal identity. In the novel Aaron's apathy towards the quotidian life is somehow averted when he gets physically involved with a married woman named Marchese. This is where he listens to his self, his consciousness without being affected by any constraints. The self, which was so far suppressed by normative discourses of identity and marital responsibilities, finds a shelter in the love, derived from an unrecognised, yet an extremely private bonding with an unknown woman, "all he felt was stark, naked desire, without a single pretension" (313). Physicality, thus, is shown as a constructive force and not as obscenity. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) also articulates this understanding, "Obscenity only comes in when the mind despises and fears the body, and the body hates and resists the mind" (11).

The relationship between love and power is portrayed differently in Jim's wistful yearning for love. Here, love provides the "respiration" for life instead of typifying the masculine ego. The conversation between Jim and Lilly reflects on the ways love is perceived to heal the pangs of an unhappy manhood:

"Why are you such a baby?" said Lilly. "There you are, six foot in length, have been a cavalry officer and fought in two wars, and you spend your time crying for somebody to love you. You're a comic."

"Am I though?" said Jim. "I'm losing life. I'm getting thin."

"You don't look as if you were losing life," said Lilly.

"Don't I? I am, though. I'm dying." (68)

One can understand how love is portrayed with an advocacy to provide the self a feeling of adequacy and integrability even in the midst of demoralisation, eeriness and dilemmas.

Reorienting the Self: The *Rod* and Symbolism

One of the key themes in the novel is Aaron's intimacy with sounds. He can locate the underlying symphony amidst the apparently chaotic sounds. When "everything is so awful-so dismal and dreary" (75), Aaron "heard the familiar sound of water gushing from the sink in to the grate, the dropping of a pail outside the door, the sound of voices" (47). What is interesting is that even in the midst of social upheaval and psychological ordeals the self of the modern man procures his own creative recession. Music holds extreme importance in this novel primarily because of its ability to act as an outlet for the self to survive the onslaughts of war. Music releases the angst, thereby uplifting the self of the modern man from the poignancy, bafflement and claustrophobia. Aaron's profound association with music unravels "the inaudible music of his conscious soul" (193) which he fails to communicate to others. The art of music in reflecting the psychological state of the character is prominent also in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Vera Stegmann, in her review of John A. Hargraves' book titled *Music in the Works of Broch, Mann, and Kafka* (2002), states that Grete's violin emanates the music that resemble Gregor's state of loneliness and alienation. In *Aaron's Rod* the magnificence of music is portrayed as indomitable and the man who plays the instrument also gleans the irresistibility in his appeal to others, "The shrill, rapid movement of the piccolo music seemed to possess the air; it was useless to try to shut it out. The man went on playing to himself, measured and



insistent” (17). Thus, music becomes the “pure, mindless, exquisite motion” (16), a therapeutic domain where the “methylated spirit” of Aaron registers a space of its own. Not only in Aaron’s life, but also in the life of Marchesa and Marchese—the couple whose life was devastated by the wars. They are harping on music to restore the sense of solidarity, prevailed in their life during the pre-war period. Music, in a way, survives war.

Therefore, what we can see is that in a world where love tussles with lust, where the depth of human relationships is questionable, where morality is replaced by extreme materialisation, the *Rod*, symbolised by the flute, becomes a powerful symbol of emancipation. Aaron is not only a keen listener, he is an adept and devoted flautist as well; he never succumbs to the allurements of material gain by aiming to earn money from music. One might say that the *Rod* dismantles the conflict between art and materiality and revives a redemptive quality, convincing Aaron the ephemerality of physical love. In fact, sexual love is transient, but the love for the *Rod* does not, it is a perennial happiness for Aaron which is devoid of guilt, inhibition, and withering. The *Rod* or the flute, thus, becomes a metaphor for Aaron’s very own selfhood which he tries to keep intact from the rampant unrest in the surroundings, “His flute, his Aaron’s rod, would blossom once again with splendid scarlet flowers, the red Florentine lilies” (313). One can understand the Biblical allusion to the miraculous power and regenerative quality that Aaron’s (Moses’ brother) rod possessed.

Lawrence, however, does not glorify the celestial quality of the *Rod* unquestionably, he brings in the challenges of modernity that threaten to desecrate the *Rod* and debilitate the impassioned spirit of the flautist. The explosion of the bomb and the subsequent destruction of the flute make the readers apprehensive of the sustainability of Aaron’s creative instinct in the coming days. The novel describes:

Aaron was quite dumbfounded by the night’s event: the loss of his flute. Here was a blow he had not expected. And the loss was for him symbolistic. It chimed with something in his soul: the bomb, the smashed flute, the end.

“There goes Aaron’s Rod, then,” he said to Lilly.

“It’ll grow again. It’s a reed, a water-plant-you can’t kill it,” said Lilly, unheeding.

“And me?”

“You’ll have to live without a rod, meanwhile.”

To which pleasant remark Aaron made no reply. (331)

This excerpt is highly thought-provoking in the sense that it also leaves a question about the onus of Aaron’s existence. The *Rod*, that touched the chord of his intimate feelings, leaves an invisible void in the selfhood of this modern man. It is at this juncture the question of the regeneration of the self comes in and the demolition of the *Rod* becomes symbolic.

Dropping the remaining fragments of the flute into the river, Aaron, in this dream encounters the fragments of his own selfhood and distinguishes his two selves:

His invisible, conscious self, what we have been called his second self, hovered as it were before the prow of the boat, seeing and knowing, but unseen. His other self, the palpable Aaron, sat as a passenger in the boat, which was being rowed by the unknown people of this underworld. (333)

The submersion of the flute into the river is followed by the dream in which Aaron, too, journeys to the underworld river. With his diving into the oneiric world, he comes across “grey” people who are about to eat a naked man, children having flower wreath besides their beds, the boatman with his strange cry, the lake city and the idol of Astarte (goddess of sexual love and war). Lawrence employs the epical journey to the underworld as a trope to weave an array of meanings. The very glimpse of Astarte idol might be emblematic of Aaron’s prospective foundation of living-a living which will be rooted to the earth, entangled in the eternal forces of love and war. The dream has a psychological acuity too; it reveals to him the strong presence of his unconscious self which might remain as a rebel to question the tyrannical forces of the earth, but can never escape those realities. The *Rod* attains eternity and transcends the terrestrial circuit, thereby defining the temporality of Aaron’s existence. That is why the novel describes, “His flute was broken, and broken finally. The bomb had settled it and everything. It was an end, no matter how he tried to patch things up. The only thing he felt was a thread of destiny attaching him to Lilly” (335). Aaron finally yields to the “incalculable little individual” and feels “a peculiar delight in giving his soul to his mind’s hero” (337). This transition of the self from isolation to reconciliation might allow to us to consider the shift (from “radical humanism” to “radical communalism”) that Hochman perceives in Lawrence and explains in his book titled *Another Ego: The Changing View of Self and Society in the Works of D. H. Lawrence* (1970).

It is with his association with Lilly that Aaron is able to comprehend a new mode of life. Lilly, “a protagonist seen as Lawrence’s mouthpiece” (Arai 27), introduces a new worldview to Aaron. Being a man who feels “caged” in Europe and tries to embrace his own way of living, Lilly dismisses love and religion as “disease”. He is antithetical to the idea of setting a definite goal in life, rather believes into the urges of the self and the endeavour to answer to the call of the self. We can understand the importance of this message in the post-war Europe where people have nothing to fall back on rather than their very own self. He emphasises the need to listen to the pulse of the self, instead of following any prescription. Lilly’s emphasis on the self as integral to a healthy living and as the only steady companion throughout the whole life is revolutionary. He counters the prevalence of materialistic mentality when he says, “You’ve got an innermost, integral unique self, and since it’s the only thing you have got or ever will have, don’t go trying to lose it [...] you can only stick to your very own self, and never betray it” (343). Lilly’s conviction is probably reminiscent of the Lawrencian defence of the individual self – a defence that is “largely composed of an attack on everything that would restrict the freedom of the self” (Casey 16).

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be said that modernity was not only about liberation, radicalism, challenging the dogma, it also had a dark side of it and one of the direct ramifications is notable in the fragmented subjectivity – a jolt to the unified idea of selfhood. Lawrence’s reading of modernity is not merely a critique of contemporary civilisation, but also reflects on the probable means to survive the decay and anarchy. In *Aaron’s Rod* a transition can be perceived from the alienation of the self to the very realisation of the self as the only empowered space for the individual. The artistic and intellectual energy, embodied in the self, is meant to be preserved for the liberty of the psyche and for keeping the internal dynamics alive. However, Lawrence keeps certain



open-endedness in determining the ultimate shelter of Aaron. When he (Aaron) asks, Lilly says, “Your soul will tell you” (347). This is a deeply philosophical reply and it anticipates further research to respond to the question of culmination so far as the idea of psychological journey is concerned. The research possibilities lie in the making of a nuanced reading of the evolution of consciousness and the way it adds new insights to Lawrence’s morphology of selfhood. Therefore, the self is not absolute, and the novel ends in a sense of indecisiveness and non-finality, a salient (post)modernist angle, where the narrative of survival is never static, rather it mobilises the self, pursuing the spirit of equanimity, continuity and inevitability.

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