Feminine Domination in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

Hassan Moayad Hamid
Department of English / College of Education
University of Mosul

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Abstract

The present paper tackles the feminine domination which appeared in the female writings of the nineteenth century in the form of novels that delineated the feminist world which was marginalized for centuries. It studies this domination in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, its tools and its psychological effects on male characters. It consists of three sections. The first one gives a brief introduction to the feminine domination and the writings of mythology, sociology, anthropology and literature. The second section analyses the nature of feminine domination in *Sons and Lovers*, its tools namely; social state, attraction and education as well as its consequences like submissiveness, depression and humiliation. The last one presents the results; the most important of which is that feminine domination is fully embodied in female superiority and the male inferiority or subordination to it.
1. Introduction

Feminine domination is a social phenomenon dating back to the prehistoric ages. In this phenomenon, the leading role in a family is assumed by females, especially mothers.¹ This is called "woman governant". Social scientists and archeologists use this phenomenon as "matriarchy". The word "matriarchy" is composed of a Latin word and a Greek one; "mater" means "mother" and "archy" means "to rule".² Female domination occupies the intellectual schools of thought, departing from different points of view. It is natural like the flow of a river; it just happens. The idealist social evolutionist J.J.Bachofen of the nineteenth century has argued that female domination advanced humanity from barbarism to a higher evolutionary stage through the "mother-right" or the mother's bond to her child. It was the original primitive stage of culture everywhere before patriarchy, i.e. "father ruling". Bachofen has first used the term "matriarchy" in 1861 and now it has become a popular term.³ Several generations of scholars arguing usually from myths and oral traditions have suggested that many ancient societies were, prior to ancient cultures, women-governed. The Amazon society and the myth of women warriors, for example, emerged on the edges of the Greek cultural horizon. They lived at parts of the world to which the Greek had travelled, making them a kin to marvelous beings or monsters. Daniele Le Croy-Wilson states that:

> When nature is in harmony with culture, the divine (symbolic) motherhood extends over the universe and humanity which came into being through the birth. In human term; it means that society identifies governance with motherhood and motherhood with governance.⁴

Some contemporary post-Christian feminists associate feminine governance with the worship of the Great Goddess. Those spiritual feminists have sought to recover the power of a female divine principle in the conviction that will underpin the possibility of female social power and escape from revolving in the orbit of female dominance, i.e. patriarchy.⁵

> [It is] critically important for women and girls— and the men who stand shoulder to shoulder with them—to understand that patriarchies are recent, man-made social contrivances that draw their legitimacy from might, not divine or natural right...Patriarchies are neither immutable nor inevitable. They can be challenged, changed and replaced.⁶

Gender roles are fixed by biology. The male responsibility is food providing and the female responsibility is bringing up children and
household keeping. This view casts women as passive recipients of food brought home by the males. Women's primary work, then has been maternal. The biological link between the mother and the offspring is closer than that between the father and the offspring and therefore the mother is the natural custodian of the children.7

In their studies of foraging societies, female anthropologists have approved that the female supplied the predominant food source and they have worked together with males in procuring and processing food. In these societies, the grandmother was the central ancestress, with her children and grandchildren clustered around her in an extended family. Quite evidently, both men and women play complementary roles in everyday life and since these societies have been agricultural; they are described as egalitarian, i.e. they have no class hierarchy. Human prehistory from hominids through the Paleolithic and Neolithic worlds do not consist of what is called "food provider and recieptor". Most families, even in the modern times, have depended on the productive work of both men and women. What is noteworthy here is that Peggy Reeves Sanday has demonstrated that there are specific conditions associated with female dominance that flourished in stable environments and social harmony.8 The women's true function is civilizing the society through affection, self-restraint, self-sacrifice, fidelity and purity at home and in the social field.9 Only in a small sector of the middle class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the male "head of the family" has such a large income that he could afford to dispense with the productive work of women and children.10

Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor have presented a conception concerning woman's right. They have stated that "Women's sacred right is to control their bodies."11 This point is crucial since the woman's primary contribution to marriage is her sexual loyalty, without which there is no family. Woman's sexual disloyalty produces feminine domination. Disloyalty threatens and endangers the civilized society. Ammens remarks:

[Sexual disloyalty] makes the man's role in production meaningless and reduces the woman's role in production to what it is in the matriarchal ghetto. It forfeits the woman's right subsidization by the man within marriage ...her right to subsidization following marriage ...her claim to custody of the children.12

Woman does her best to achieve economic demanding freedom from responsibility and regulation. She does not want to be under obligation to husband. She wants to be economically and therefore sexually independent. She does not want to lead the same kind of life her mother led by being a doll-wife reducing fatherhood to
meaninglessness. It is the right of self-determination. Woman's social position cannot be ignored in this process. Women do have subjective class identification which is predicted from their own occupation and personal attributes such as class, origin and educational level.

Since the mid-nineteenth century feminism has sharply challenged patriarchy as a primary injustice to be remedied by women's educational, professional and political emancipation from the familial sphere. By the end of the 1970s patriarchy has been judged not only to be the primary and general cause of female suffering, but the appropriation, accumulation and consumption of all bodily and natural territory and resources.

Due to the conservative nature of the Victorian society, feminine domination in literature has emerged in the late nineteenth century. The true feminist writings were reflected in Olive Schreiner's and George Egerton's novels. Feminist literature pinpoints that women may be the victims of patriarchy; but can also be the agents of their own spiritual and practical resistance. Elian Showalter specified three phases of female writings. The first phase dated from about 1840 to 1880. Women writers wrote in an attempt to make equality with the male literary achievements. This period showed a national characteristic of English women writers. Those writers used pseudonym as a way of coping with the literary standards of that age like George Eliot (Marry Ann Evans), Currer Bell (Charlotte Bronte), Ellis Bell (Emily Bronte), and Acton Bell (Anne Bronte).

The second phase dated from about 1880 to 1920. Feminine novelists of this stage, like Elizabeth Gaskell and Francis Trollope expressed a personal sense of injustice, class-struggle and factory life. The period witnessed the redefinition of women's artistic role in terms of responsibility to wronged womanhood. Its best examples are the Amazon Utopia of the 1890's which are fantasies of perfect female societies in England and America.

The third phase started in 1920. The women writers of this phase included Virginia Woolf, Muriel Spark, Jane Rhyce and Dorothy Richardson. They rejected imitation and protest. They turned to female experience so as to extend the feminist analysis of culture to the literary forms and techniques. Their experience has been characterized by the celebration of the human consciousness. Woolf’s Room of One's Own is a prominent example of this phase.

Besides, there has been the appearance of a group of male writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose writings present the feminine world with its experiences. They are divided into supporters and attackers of the female issue. The supporters have included Thomas Hardy, George Moore and George Meredith, whereas the attackers included George Gissing, Henry James and D.H. Lawrence. It is worth
mentioning that Lawrence has criticized the feminine possessiveness. He disapproved the equality and independence of woman. He has been a consistent enemy of feminism. In his novels, the women who have achieved personal development, have been depicted as misguided individualists.  

2. Feminine Domination in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

Feminine domination in Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is incarnated in the relationships between the central female characters and their male counterparts. It takes the aspect of feminine powerful action versus masculine submissive reaction. The tools of the powerful action include social state, attraction and education, whereas those of the submissive reaction included desire and emotion. Social state, attraction and education provided the central female characters in Lawrence's novel with control and superiority over the male ones.

Mrs. Morel exploits her conservative education and her marital state in her treatment of her husband. Descending from a conservative educated family, she despises her husband. She remains detached and alien to her surrounding, quite unable to see the values of the working-class environment. Demanding a higher standard of culture and despising the husband seems to be the facet that has coloured women's image in the late Victorian age. Women sought a new dignity and even a potential freedom for themselves as women. As a matter of fact, for Mr. Morel, a miner married to a woman with higher social standing, home is not the place where he can freely rest and dictate as a master of the house as the patriarchal idea of home usually presumes. On the contrary, he is the most isolated figure in the house. The house, in which the family of Mr. Morel lives, is built by Mr. Morel himself. However, he feels "the only real rest to be when he was out of the house". The house exacerbates Mrs. Morel's suffering and self-denial. She feels buried alive. Alastair Niven notices that Mr. Morel has an emotional power far beyond her husband's, as the verbs Lawrence uses to show how great the conflict is between her and her husband. Lawrence narrates:

*There began a battle between the husband and wife—a fearful, bloody battle that ended only with the death of one. She fought to make him undertake his own responsibilities, to make him fulfill his obligations. But he was too different from her. His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him Morel, religious. She tried to force him to face things. He could not endure it— it drove him out of his mind.*

(I,I,14)

She sees herself intellectually superior to him. She was friends with a congregational clergyman, Mr. Heaton, who shared the same
intellectuality. Mrs. Morel's cool feeling to her husband makes him weak in spirit and deprives him of manhood. Mrs. Morel used to spend hours when she talked to Mr. Heaton. She devoted her feelings and emotions to her third son, Paul. She hated her husband:

*In her arms lay the delicate baby.*
*Its deep blue eyes, always looking up*
*at her unblinking, seemed to draw her .... Was*
*there a reproach in the look ?She felt*
*morrow melt in her bones, with fear and pain.*

(I,II,37)

Mrs. Morel casts off her husband. She is aloof from him. She feels his presence in her life subordinate. She practices her maternal power over her husband's idea of employing their son, William, in a coal mine:

*Now, with the birth of this third*
*baby, herself no longer set towards*
*him, helplessly, but was like a tide ....*
*feeling him so much part of her circumstances,*
*she did not mind so much what he did, could*
*leave him alone.*

(I,III,46)

Paul is the crux of his mother's domination. Mrs. Morel exploits her matrimony in determining Paul's way of life and future. She herself submits the requirement of his employment in a manufacturing firm of "surgical appliances". She even accompanies him to it. She realizes that he could not manage anything without her. She facilitates his admission to the firm. Mrs. Morel talks to Mr. Jordan, the manager, when Paul feels embarrassed to read a letter in French. Paul's presence in the interview with Mr. Jordan is marginalized by his mother:

*Mrs. Jordan looked at the pale, stupid, defiant boy ...*
*"And when could he come?" he asked.*
*"Well, said Mrs.Morel,"as soon as you Wish. He has finished school now*
*"He would live in Bestwood"*
*"Yes; but he could be in –at the station- at quarter to eight".*

(V,I,95-6)

Mrs. Morel's power over Paul is reflected in Paul's inability to have any feeling for a girl. Her love for him is eventually crippling. He seems quite blind to his mother's real culpability in malformed his psychological state. She feels irritable at Paul's relationship with Miriam Leivers. Hoping to continue her dominant relationship with her son, she rejects his relationship with Miriam without giving any explanation. She feels jealous of Miriam:
Always when he went with Miriam, and it grew rather late, he knew his mother was fretting and getting angry about him- why, he could not understand ....She could feel Paul being drawn away by this girl. And she did not care for Miriam.

(II,VII,160)

Her jealousy extends to Clara; she rejects Paul's physical relationship with Clara. She feels him unnatural, cold and unloving. Her rejection of this relationship turns Paul miserable and dead in life. Her presence chains and imprisons Paul within himself; it increases his agonies. It makes him think of getting rid of her when she is on her death bed. Paul and his sister Annie decide to accelerate their mother's death through giving her an overdose of morphine pills:

"She'll live over Christmas," said Annie. They were both full of horror.
"She won't," he replied grimly. "I'll give her morphia."....That evening he got all the morphia there were, and took them downstairs. Carefully he crushed them to powder.

(III,XIV,393-4)

Mrs. Morel's maternal feeling would have destroyed Paul if she had lived longer. However, Paul's freedom after his mother's death is coloured with alienation and isolation from the world. It reflects the intensive effect of Mrs. Morel's despotic feeling on her son even after her death. It leaves Paul unable to interact and communicate with anybody. It is argued that while Mrs. Morel appears as an agent of repression, Miriam is depicted as life-giving. However, Miriam's religious education governs Paul's relationship with her. She controls Paul's feeling for her through her spiritualistic power over him. Her religious character hinders his attempt to make a love relationship with her. Paul finds himself drawn to endless religious discussions with her. Miriam's spirituality is an obstacle in Paul's passionate feeling for Miriam. She takes up much for Paul's time. Her walks and religious discussions exhaust him. They fill him with agony:

He was not home again until a quarter to eleven. Paul entered rather breathless. He was very uncomfortable.

(II,VIII,209)

Miriam's spiritualistic power over Paul makes him realize the hopelessness of making a love relationship with her. Paul is unable to give up visiting the Leivers, because of this power. Ronald Draper states that Miriam and Mrs. Morel exercise their power over Paul's love. They compete to win his love on the same ground. They have motherly
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possessiveness over him.\textsuperscript{28} It seems that both are unwilling to let him stand on his feet. Both wish to win him in their own ways and to see him as they wish him to be. However, he strongly feels his belongingness to Miriam. He cannot find satisfaction with any woman. Miriam still has an influence on him:

\begin{quote}
He was now about twenty-three years old, and, though still virgin....but he belonged to Miriam. Of that she was so fixedly sure that he allowed her right.
\end{quote}

(II,IX,252)

Mrs. Morel despises Miriam's soulfulness and she strongly influences her son in sharing with her the feeling of despising Miriam.\textsuperscript{29} They share the same strictness of character. She says of Miriam:

\begin{quote}
She is one of those who will want to suck a man's soul out till he has none of his own left ...and he is just such a gaby as to let himself be absorbed. She will never let him become a man; she never will.
\end{quote}

(II,VII,160)

Miriam believes that Paul will eventually be hers. Her mentality spoils any physical love between her and Paul. This causes misery to Paul and makes him lose the sense of life. It also makes him withdraw to the darkness. Miriam makes him act like a child. She despises him after his mother's death. She recognizes his spiritual emptiness and restless instability:

\begin{quote}
Suddenly she saw again his lack of religious, his restless instability. He would destroy himself like a perverse child. Well, then, he would!" I think I must go," she said softly. By her tone He knew she was despising him.
\end{quote}

(II,XV,218,19)

Clara Dawes influences Paul more than Miriam. She looks aloof. She preoccupies his feelings and emotions. Her influence makes him hate Miriam. It even tortures Miriam. Miriam feels that Paul will lose his soul with Clara. Paul begins to feel physical passion with Clara. Miriam guesses that somebody is influencing him:

\begin{quote}
He hated her bitterly at that moment because he made her suffer ....she guessed somebody had been influencing him. She felt upon him the hardness, the forgiveness of another influence.
\end{quote}

(II,IX,222)
Clara attracts Paul physically. She diverts his attention from Miriam. Nevertheless, Paul believes that Miriam possesses his soul. He sees Clara superior, "queen of Sheba". Clara possesses him as well as Miriam. Paul's feeling is split between Clara's physical attraction and Miriam's possession of his soul. Paul finds himself bound to Miriam as well as being infatuated by Clara's charming features:

He loved Miriam with his soul. He
grew warm at the thought of Miriam,
he battled with her ...He believed
himself really bound to Miriam. If
ever he should marry ...it would be
his duty to marry Miriam.

(II,X,276)

Mrs. Morel and Clara's self-characters drive Paul's feeling and emotion away from Miriam. Clara has the liberty of speaking harshly about Miriam. She is unscrupulous; Paul is unable to prevent her from doing that. He is only furious from within. Clara pressurizes him into giving up Miriam. She tries to retreat from him silently. Her silent retreat enrages him; it makes him angry:

Clara drew a way from him, leaning away
contact with him....She did not answer,
but drew farther from him....Still there
was no answer. She walked resentfully,
hanging her head.

(II,II,327)

Clara's presence with Paul wipes his consciousness and existence. In her presence, Paul loses his existence. He can no longer feel himself. He only sees himself in her physical existence. She leaves a nihilistic feeling in him. She has her force on him:

He was Clara's white heavy arms, her
throat ...that seemed to be himself ...
There was no himself. The grey and
black eyes of Clara ...were all that existed.
Then he felt himself small and helpless,
Her towering in her force above him.

(II,XII,331)

Paul is mean and small in Clara's view. Her experience with men provides her with a great deal of courage; she realizes that he lacks manhood. She even feels shocked and terrified by his submissive nihilistic character. For her, he looks like a person who does not exist before her. It fills her with horror:

"Take me!" he said simply.
Occasionally she would. But she was afraid.
When he had her then, there was something in it that made her shrink away from him, something unnatural. She grew to dread him. He was so quiet, yet so strange. She was afraid of the man who was not there with her, whom she could feel behind this make-belief lover; somebody sinister, that filled her with horror.

(III,XIV,387)

**Conclusion**

Feminine domination is reflected in the emotional side of characters. Feminine suppression and masculine submission crystallize feminine domination. The factors that help the female control and practice power over the male ones are social state, attraction, and education. The emotional side of the male characters is exploited by their female counterparts for certain ends. These ends include humiliation, needs-fulfillment, possession and outletting repressed feelings and emotions. The masculine passive role cultivate the land for an authoritative feminine role. The feminine role drives its power and vitality from the masculine passivity. The social state, attraction and education turn means rather than hopeful ends for the female characters. They make the male characters subordinate to the powerful female ones. They grant the feminine world superiority over the masculine one. In short, feminine domination is fully embodied in the female superiority with its means of social state, attraction and education and the male inferiority or subordination with its submission and passivity.

**Notes**

12) Amnens, p.25.
16) Showalter, p.127.
17) Showalter, p.127.
18) Showalter, p.127.
19) Showalter, p.128.
20) Showalter, p.128.
29) Draper, p.47.
References

12) "*N.A*"."*Matriarchy*" URL: www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/369468/Matriarchy.