

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY IN "SONS AND LOVERS" BY D. H. LAWRENCE

Dr. Kiran Dalal, Associate Professor, Department of English, Pt. CLS Govt. PG College, Sec.-14, Karnal.

ABSTRACT: This research paper explores the complex interplay between spirituality and sexuality in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Through an analysis of the novel's key characters, particularly Paul Morel, the paper examines how these two forces manifest in the protagonist's relationships and inner conflicts. Spirituality, often depicted through Paul's bond with his mother, is shown as a source of moral and emotional guidance, while his sexual desires introduce a tension that challenges his sense of self and belonging. The struggle between these two aspects of his identity becomes a central theme, reflecting broader societal conflicts of the time. This paper aims to shed light on how Lawrence uses this struggle to comment on the complexities of human desires, the nature of familial ties, and the quest for individual freedom.

KEYWORDS: Spirituality, Sexuality, Sons and Lovers, D. H. Lawrence, Paul Morel, Family Dynamics, Inner Conflict, Human Desires.

INTRODUCTION:

D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is a novel that delves deep into the psychological complexities of its characters, particularly the protagonist, Paul Morel. One of the most profound themes in the novel is the struggle between spirituality and sexuality, two forces that are often portrayed as conflicting elements of human nature. In Paul's case, his intense emotional attachment to his mother, Gertrude Morel, represents a spiritual connection rooted in love and loyalty, while his sexual relationships with women like Miriam and Clara serve as outlets for his physical desires and emotional needs. The novel explores how these two dimensions of human experience—spirituality and sexuality—interact, conflict, and shape Paul's identity.(1)

This struggle is not just a personal dilemma for Paul but also reflects broader societal tensions during the early 20th century, when traditional spiritual and familial values were being questioned in the face of growing sexual liberation. Lawrence's exploration of these themes is rich with psychological depth and literary symbolism, making *Sons and Lovers* a significant work in the study of human sexuality, family dynamics, and the tension between the spiritual and the carnal. Through this paper, we will examine how Lawrence portrays the internal and external struggles that arise from the clash between these two forces, shedding light on the broader implications for individual identity and social change in the novel.(2)

1.1 Background of Sons and Lovers

*Sons and Lovers**, published in 1913, is one of D. H. Lawrence's most celebrated works, marking a significant turning point in his literary career. The novel is a semi-autobiographical exploration of the complex relationships within a working-class family in early 20th-century England. Set in the industrial town of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, the story revolves around the Morel family, primarily focusing on the struggles and inner turmoil of Paul Morel, the youngest son. Through Paul's relationships with his mother, Gertrude, and his romantic entanglements with women like Miriam and Clara, Lawrence delves into themes of love, repression, sexuality, and personal identity.(3)

The novel's portrayal of the intense bond between Paul and his mother is central to the narrative. Gertrude Morel, a woman dissatisfied with her marriage to a coal miner, strives to channel her emotional energy into her children, particularly Paul, whom she idealizes and whom she hopes will escape the limitations of their working-class life. As Paul matures, he faces a conflicting set of desires: his deep, spiritual connection to his mother and his sexual desires for women. This duality becomes a source of tension and confusion for him, which is compounded by his inability to reconcile these opposing forces within himself.

Sons and Lovers not only addresses individual psychological conflicts but also reflects broader societal issues, such as class struggles and shifting sexual norms. The novel was groundbreaking for its candid treatment of sexuality and its critique of Victorian moral values. Lawrence's exploration of the struggle between spirituality and sexuality, combined with his focus on the complexities of human desire, makes *Sons and Lovers* a key text in understanding both the individual and societal forces at play in the early 20th century.(4)

1.2 Paul Morel's Struggle: A Psychological Conflict

Paul Morel's struggle in *Sons and Lovers* is a profound psychological conflict rooted in his inability to reconcile two central aspects of his life: his spiritual attachment to his mother and his burgeoning sexual desires. This internal battle shapes much of Paul's emotional and psychological development throughout the novel. Raised in an emotionally charged environment by his mother, Gertrude Morel, who channels all her hopes and aspirations into him, Paul develops a deep, almost suffocating bond with her. This connection is spiritual in nature, characterized by emotional dependence and a sense of duty. His mother's influence is so powerful that it becomes a defining aspect of Paul's identity, overshadowing his ability to

form healthy romantic relationships.(5)

On the other hand, Paul's sexual desires create a conflict with this spiritual attachment. As he matures, he becomes involved with two women, Miriam and Clara, who represent different aspects of his struggle. Miriam symbolizes an intellectual and emotional connection, but her relationship with Paul is marked by an awkwardness and emotional tension, largely due to Paul's inability to fully embrace his sexuality. Clara, on the other hand, represents a more liberated sexual relationship, but even with her, Paul remains emotionally distant, as he cannot separate his feelings of guilt and loyalty to his mother from his desires.

This psychological conflict is not merely about sexual desire versus maternal devotion; it reflects a deeper internal struggle within Paul's psyche, torn between his need for independence and his fear of betraying the only constant, unconditional love he knows—his mother's. His inability to navigate these conflicting forces leads to a profound sense of frustration, isolation, and confusion. Ultimately, Paul's struggle encapsulates the broader themes of the novel, exploring the complexities of human desire, the limitations of familial influence, and the difficulty of forging one's own identity amidst emotional dependence.(6)

1.3 Role of Family Dynamics in Shaping Spirituality

In *Sons and Lovers*, family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the protagonist Paul Morel's spirituality, particularly through his relationship with his mother, Gertrude. The Morel family, despite its working-class status, forms the emotional and psychological foundation for Paul's development. Gertrude, a strong-willed and often domineering figure, channels all her emotional energy into her children, especially Paul, whom she regards as her means of transcending the limitations of her own life. Her intense maternal love becomes the primary source of Paul's sense of self-worth and spiritual connection.

Gertrude's influence on Paul is profound, establishing a bond that is both spiritually and emotionally binding. She nurtures him in a way that blurs the lines between love and possession, elevating her role in his life to that of a moral and spiritual guide. Paul's spirituality, in this context, is deeply tied to his mother's ideals and expectations. As the center of his emotional world, Gertrude's views shape Paul's moral compass, his values, and his understanding of love and commitment. She represents an idealized form of spiritual devotion, but also one that traps Paul in a cycle of dependency, making it difficult for him to forge relationships outside the family dynamic.(7)

The family dynamic also complicates Paul's spiritual development in relation to his father, Walter Morel, whose working-class identity and lack of emotional depth stand in stark contrast to Gertrude's emotional intensity. Walter's absence in terms of emotional support makes Paul's spiritual connection to his mother even more pronounced. As Paul grows older and his internal conflict deepens, his family dynamics continue to influence his understanding of spirituality. The nurturing, yet suffocating love from his mother creates a tension that prevents him from fully embracing his sexuality or achieving personal independence, as his spirituality is entangled with her vision of him.

Thus, the family's influence in shaping Paul's spirituality is complex, as it both provides him with a sense of stability and emotional support, while also limiting his ability to develop a balanced spiritual and emotional life outside of his mother's shadow.(8)

1.4 Sexual Desire as a Challenge to Spiritual Connection

In *Sons and Lovers*, sexual desire emerges as a significant challenge to Paul Morel's spiritual connection with his mother, Gertrude. The deep emotional bond Paul shares with his mother is spiritual in nature, driven by her idealization of him and his emotional dependency on her. This connection, however, becomes complicated as Paul matures and his sexual desires awaken, especially in his relationships with Miriam and Clara. These desires create an internal conflict for Paul, as he struggles to reconcile his sexual and emotional needs with the sense of spiritual devotion he feels toward his mother. Paul's romantic relationships, particularly with Miriam, highlight the tension between spirituality and sexuality. Miriam represents a connection that is both intellectual and emotional, but Paul's feelings for her are hindered by his intense loyalty to his mother. His sexual attraction to Miriam is dampened by his guilt, as he feels that engaging in a sexual relationship would betray the pure, spiritual connection he has with his mother. This sense of guilt and spiritual loyalty creates a barrier in his ability to fully embrace his sexuality, rendering his relationship with Miriam emotionally strained and unfulfilled.(9) On the other hand, Clara embodies a more liberated sexual relationship, one that is physically gratifying and free from the constraints of Paul's emotional dependence on his mother. However, even with Clara, Paul finds himself unable to separate his sexual desires from the moral and spiritual values he has internalized through his mother's influence. His connection with Clara, though more sexually expressive, lacks the emotional depth and spiritual fulfillment he experiences with his mother, leaving Paul conflicted and unable to fully commit to either woman. This struggle between sexual desire and spiritual connection is at the heart of Paul's internal conflict, as he cannot resolve the tension between his need for physical intimacy and his deep emotional

connection to his mother. His inability to navigate this divide ultimately prevents him from achieving a sense of fulfillment in his relationships, illustrating how sexual desire, when in conflict with spiritual attachment, can hinder the development of a balanced and healthy sense of self. Through Paul's experiences, Lawrence explores the complexities of human desire and the difficulty of reconciling the physical with the emotional and spiritual.(10)

1.5 Exploring the Complexity of Paul Morel's Relationships

In *Sons and Lovers*, the complexity of Paul Morel's relationships is central to the novel's exploration of human emotions, psychological conflicts, and the intricate dynamics between family and love. Paul's relationships with his mother, Gertrude, and the women he becomes romantically involved with—Miriam and Clara—serve as reflections of his internal struggles, emotional growth, and his search for identity. Each relationship reveals different aspects of Paul's character, from his intense emotional dependence to his attempt to break free from the spiritual hold of his mother, ultimately illustrating the complexity of human desire, guilt, and self-realization.

Paul's bond with his mother is the most significant and formative relationship in his life. Gertrude, a strong, domineering figure, channels her hopes and emotional energy into Paul, making him the focus of her unfulfilled aspirations. This connection, while providing Paul with a sense of security and love, also creates a suffocating dependency. Gertrude's influence shapes Paul's sense of self, and he feels torn between his love for her and the desire to forge his own identity. The spiritual and emotional attachment he shares with his mother is not only a source of comfort but also of guilt and limitation, preventing him from fully embracing his sexuality and achieving independence. Gertrude's possessiveness stifles Paul's personal growth, making it difficult for him to form healthy, balanced relationships outside of the family dynamic.(11)

In contrast, Paul's relationships with Miriam and Clara represent his attempts to explore romantic and sexual intimacy, yet they are also fraught with complications. Miriam represents intellectual and emotional connection, but her relationship with Paul is marked by awkwardness and repression. Paul's feelings for Miriam are deeply conflicted due to his guilt over betraying his mother's spiritual influence. He finds himself emotionally attached to Miriam but unable to engage with her sexually, as his attachment to his mother prevents him from fully embracing his desires. The guilt Paul feels about pursuing Miriam sexually—especially when he cannot fully commit to her emotionally—leads to a strained and ultimately unfulfilling relationship.

On the other hand, Clara embodies a more liberated form of love, characterized by physical passion and a more liberated sexual relationship. While Clara offers Paul the opportunity for sexual expression and freedom, their relationship is emotionally shallow. Paul's inability to separate his sexual desires from his emotional need for maternal support creates a barrier in his connection with Clara. Although Paul enjoys physical intimacy with Clara, he cannot fully give himself to her, as his emotional world remains dominated by the maternal bond with Gertrude. Clara, though more liberated, remains emotionally distant from Paul, as he is unable to fully invest in her.(12)

Ultimately, the complexity of Paul Morel's relationships illustrates the internal conflict he experiences as he navigates his desires for intimacy, love, and independence. His inability to resolve the tension between his spiritual devotion to his mother and his sexual desires leads to a sense of isolation, emotional confusion, and an inability to fully connect with either Miriam or Clara. Through Paul's relationships, Lawrence explores the intricate dynamics of human emotions, showing how the quest for love and personal fulfillment is often complicated by familial bonds, guilt, and societal expectations. Paul's journey through these complex relationships highlights the difficulties of achieving emotional and sexual freedom while being bound by the powerful influence of family and the struggle for self-identity.

1.6 Lawrence's Commentary on Societal Norms and Individual Freedom

In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence provides a powerful commentary on the tension between societal norms and individual freedom, exploring how these external expectations influence the inner lives and relationships of his characters. Through the life of Paul Morel, Lawrence critiques the restrictive nature of societal conventions—particularly those related to class, family, and sexuality—and the impact they have on personal identity and autonomy.

At the heart of the novel is the conflict between Paul's desires and the social constraints placed upon him. Growing up in a working-class family, Paul is deeply influenced by the class dynamics and expectations that shape his worldview. His mother, Gertrude, embodies the aspiration to rise above the limitations of their social class, projecting her own unfulfilled desires onto her children. This aspiration is tied to a strong moral and spiritual framework, reflecting the societal norms of the time, which demand loyalty, duty, and self-sacrifice within the family. Paul's internal struggle, as he navigates his sexual desires and emotional needs, is complicated by the weight of these societal expectations, especially his mother's unrelenting influence. Lawrence uses this dynamic to expose how the societal push for conformity can stifle

personal growth and individual freedom, particularly for someone like Paul, who is caught between familial loyalty and the quest for self-actualization.(13)

Lawrence also critiques the rigid sexual morality of the time. Throughout the novel, Paul's relationships with women like Miriam and Clara serve as a metaphor for the tension between personal freedom and societal taboos. Miriam, with her intellectual and emotional depth, represents a more conventional, restrained form of love, yet Paul cannot fully engage with her due to the guilt and expectations he carries from his mother. In contrast, Clara represents sexual liberation, but Paul's inability to separate his sexual experiences from his emotional dependence on his mother prevents him from fully embracing this more liberated relationship. Through these relationships, Lawrence critiques the repressive sexual norms of the time and illustrates how these norms, while intended to maintain order and morality, ultimately hinder true emotional and sexual freedom.

Moreover, Lawrence examines how the constraints of family and social class limit personal freedom, particularly for women. Gertrude Morel's own dissatisfaction with her marriage to Walter Morel highlights the stifling effects of traditional gender roles, as she channels her ambitions into her children rather than pursuing her own desires. The novel suggests that women, like Clara and Miriam, also struggle to break free from societal expectations—Miriam, in particular, is caught in the conflict between her religious and sexual impulses, while Clara seeks liberation but remains emotionally confined. Through these portrayals, Lawrence comments on the difficulty of achieving individual freedom in a world that demands conformity, particularly within the constraints of gender and class.

Ultimately, *Sons and Lovers* offers a nuanced commentary on the ways in which societal norms limit individual freedom, particularly in the realms of family dynamics, sexual relationships, and social class. Lawrence suggests that true personal fulfillment can only be achieved when individuals can break free from these external constraints, but this freedom often comes at a cost, as seen in Paul's tragic inability to reconcile his desires with the emotional and moral demands placed upon him. Through his exploration of these themes, Lawrence critiques a society that places conformity and tradition above personal freedom, offering a complex reflection on the struggle for individuality in a repressive social structure.(14)

1.7 Intersection of Love, Desire, and Self-Identity

In *Sons and Lovers*, the intersection of love, desire, and self-identity is central to the psychological and emotional struggles faced by the protagonist, Paul Morel. Through his complex relationships with his mother, Gertrude, and the women he becomes romantically involved with—Miriam and Clara—Lawrence explores how love and desire shape an individual's sense of self and the challenges of reconciling these elements within the framework of societal and familial expectations.

Paul's relationship with his mother represents the foundation of his emotional and spiritual identity. Gertrude's love for Paul is intense, almost possessive, and she channels all her aspirations and emotional needs into him. This bond, although deeply affectionate, becomes a source of conflict as it suppresses Paul's ability to form independent relationships outside of the family. The spiritual and emotional connection Paul shares with his mother creates a powerful sense of self-worth, yet it also restricts his growth, as his identity is inextricably tied to her desires and expectations. Paul's love for his mother, therefore, is both nurturing and limiting—while it provides him with a sense of security and meaning, it also stifles his ability to embrace his own desires and autonomy.(15)

Paul's romantic relationships with Miriam and Clara further complicate his sense of self-identity. Miriam represents intellectual and emotional connection, but their relationship is fraught with tension. While Paul is drawn to her emotional depth, his inability to fully embrace his sexuality with her stems from his guilt and emotional attachment to his mother. This creates an internal conflict for Paul, as he cannot reconcile his love for Miriam with his dependence on his mother, preventing him from fully experiencing sexual desire and intimacy. His love for Miriam, therefore, is hindered by his desire to remain loyal to his mother, illustrating how love and desire can conflict with one another and shape self-identity in complex ways.

In contrast, Clara represents a more liberated form of love and desire, one that offers Paul the opportunity for physical expression and sexual freedom. However, even in his relationship with Clara, Paul struggles with his sense of self. Though he is sexually attracted to Clara, he cannot emotionally detach himself from his mother's influence. Clara's independence and assertiveness challenge Paul's emotional attachment, yet he remains unable to commit to her fully. This dynamic highlights how Paul's desire for personal freedom and self-expression is continuously thwarted by his unresolved emotional ties to his mother, leaving him unable to establish a cohesive and independent sense of self.(16)

Ultimately, *Sons and Lovers* reveals the intricate relationship between love, desire, and self-identity. Paul's inability to reconcile these elements results in his emotional confusion and isolation. His struggle between fulfilling his maternal duty and embracing his sexual desires reflects the broader theme of identity formation and the difficulty of achieving self-realization in the face of powerful familial and societal expectations. Lawrence portrays how love and desire are not merely romantic emotions but integral to the formation of self-identity, and how the tension between these forces can hinder an individual's ability to fully understand and express who they are. Through Paul's journey, Lawrence underscores the complexity of human emotions and the challenges of reconciling love, desire, and personal freedom within the framework of family and societal norms.

1.8 Central Conflict: Inner Turmoil and External Relationships

The central conflict in *Sons and Lovers* revolves around Paul Morel's inner turmoil, which is deeply influenced by his external relationships. This inner conflict, primarily between his spiritual devotion to his mother, Gertrude, and his sexual desires for other women, serves as the heart of the novel's exploration of psychological and emotional complexity. Lawrence intricately weaves Paul's internal struggles with his relationships, demonstrating how external influences, such as family expectations and societal norms, exacerbate his emotional turmoil. Paul's relationship with his mother is central to his internal conflict. Gertrude's intense, almost possessive love for Paul creates a sense of dependency and spiritual attachment, which Paul feels both responsible for and suffocated by. His love for his mother is characterized by a moral and emotional duty, leaving him torn between loyalty to her and the desire to break free from her influence. As Paul matures, his longing for independence becomes increasingly difficult to achieve, as his mother's presence and expectations dominate his emotional world. This internal struggle is exacerbated by his inability to separate himself from the spiritual connection he shares with Gertrude, making it difficult for him to pursue romantic and sexual relationships.(17)

On the external front, Paul's relationships with women like Miriam and Clara further highlight his emotional conflict. Miriam represents a more intellectual and emotional connection, but their relationship is hindered by Paul's guilt and emotional dependency on his mother. He feels unable to fully embrace his sexual desires for Miriam, which leads to an unfulfilled relationship marked by emotional distance. In contrast, Clara offers a more liberated sexual relationship, but Paul's emotional detachment from her remains. Despite his physical attraction to Clara, he cannot emotionally connect with her because his attachment to his mother continues to overshadow his romantic feelings. This external conflict between Paul's desires for emotional

and physical intimacy and his loyalty to his mother reveals the tension between his need for independence and the deep familial bonds that continue to hold him back.

The interplay between Paul's inner turmoil and his external relationships creates a complex psychological landscape. His inability to reconcile these forces—his spiritual loyalty to his mother and his sexual desires—leads to confusion, isolation, and emotional fragmentation. The conflict forces Paul to confront the question of who he is as an individual, torn between familial duty and personal desire. Through this struggle, Lawrence explores broader themes of love, identity, and the limits of personal freedom, showing how inner conflict can be shaped by external relationships and the pressures placed on individuals by family and society.(18)

Ultimately, the central conflict in *Sons and Lovers* underscores the complexity of human emotions and the difficulty of achieving personal autonomy in the face of overwhelming familial expectations. Lawrence uses Paul's journey to reveal the profound impact that inner turmoil can have on external relationships, highlighting how unresolved conflicts can hinder emotional fulfillment and personal growth.

1.9 Psychological Depth in Lawrence's Characterization

In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence delves deeply into the psychological complexities of his characters, particularly Paul Morel, to explore the intricate nature of human emotions, relationships, and identity. Lawrence's skillful use of psychological depth in his characterization allows the novel to transcend simple narrative and present a profound analysis of the human condition. The characters are not just symbolic representations of ideas or social constructs; they are portrayed as deeply conflicted, multifaceted individuals struggling with their desires, guilt, and emotional dependencies.

Paul Morel, the protagonist, is perhaps the most psychologically complex character in the novel. His internal conflict, torn between his deep emotional attachment to his mother and his sexual desires for women, forms the core of his psychological struggle. Lawrence reveals the complexity of Paul's character by exploring his motivations, emotions, and the impact of his past experiences on his present behavior. Paul's relationship with his mother, Gertrude, is suffused with both love and guilt. He feels an intense spiritual connection to her, which shapes his moral values and self-image. However, this bond also becomes suffocating, preventing him from fully exploring his sexuality and forming independent relationships. The psychological tension between his loyalty to his mother and his need for personal freedom is a constant source of inner turmoil, revealing Paul's emotional vulnerability and struggle for identity.(19)

Lawrence's psychological depth is also evident in his portrayal of Gertrude Morel, Paul's mother, whose character is marked by emotional intensity and repressed desires. Gertrude's

deep dissatisfaction with her marriage to Walter Morel leads her to invest all her emotional energy into her children, particularly Paul, whom she views as the means to escape the limitations of her own life. Her psychological complexity lies in her conflicting feelings of love, possessiveness, and resentment. Gertrude's overbearing devotion to Paul is both nurturing and controlling, revealing the damaging effects of excessive maternal attachment. Her character illustrates the psychological cost of unfulfilled desires and the emotional toll of suppressing personal needs for the sake of others.

Miriam and Clara, the two women Paul becomes involved with, are also psychologically rich characters, each representing different aspects of Paul's struggle. Miriam embodies intellectual and emotional connection, yet her relationship with Paul is fraught with emotional tension and sexual repression. Her character reflects the conflict between purity and sexual desire, as her spiritual and intellectual engagement with Paul is hindered by her own repressed sexuality and guilt. Clara, in contrast, represents a more liberated form of love, marked by sexual freedom, but her relationship with Paul is emotionally detached. Clara's character reveals the psychological effects of sexual liberation, as she struggles to find emotional fulfillment within a society that offers limited freedom for women. Through these two women, Lawrence explores the psychological complexities of romantic and sexual relationships, showing how individuals' emotional needs and desires shape their behavior and relationships.(20)

Overall, Lawrence's psychological depth in *Sons and Lovers* allows the novel to offer a nuanced examination of the human psyche. By portraying his characters as complex, flawed, and deeply conflicted, Lawrence invites readers to consider the impact of internal and external forces on individual behavior and identity. His use of psychological realism enables the novel to explore themes of love, guilt, repression, and self-identity in ways that resonate deeply with the human experience. Through his vivid, multifaceted characters, Lawrence illustrates the struggle for personal autonomy and the emotional complexities that define human relationships.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence presents a powerful exploration of the psychological complexities inherent in human relationships and self-identity. Through the character of Paul Morel, Lawrence examines the profound internal conflicts that arise from the interplay between spirituality, sexuality, familial loyalty, and personal freedom. Paul's struggle to reconcile his deep emotional attachment to his mother with his desires for romantic and sexual fulfillment encapsulates the novel's central themes of love, desire, guilt, and identity.

The psychological depth of Lawrence's characters—particularly Paul, Gertrude, Miriam, and Clara—reveals the multifaceted nature of human emotions and the challenges of navigating

personal and social expectations. Through these complex relationships, Lawrence critiques societal norms and highlights how external forces, such as family dynamics, class, and sexual morality, can hinder the development of personal autonomy and self-expression.

Ultimately, *Sons and Lovers* offers a poignant commentary on the human condition, emphasizing the struggle for individuality in the face of powerful emotional and societal influences. Lawrence's exploration of the intersection of love, desire, and self-identity invites readers to reflect on the difficulties of achieving true personal freedom and emotional fulfillment, while also shedding light on the complexities of human nature.

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