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NON-CONFORMITY AS AN ANTI-CAPITALIST STANCE IN D.H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS
AND LOVERS* AND MOHAN RAKESH'S *HALFWAY HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

Starting with a nuanced representation of how capitalism affects the people of the middle class, the paper analyses that in the process of assessing the evil the counter-narrative/alternative becomes visible. This process of assessing the evil can only begin when you do not conform. Many theorists have suggested an idea of a "post work" world where there are no jobs. However, the aim of this paper is not focused on finding solutions but to rather look into the dialectics of the middle class and realise the oppressed state of the class where the system determines the choices and not the individuals even though they are made to believe to be free. The paper argues that the middle class holds the capability to be revolutionary if they choose not to conform.

Keywords: Capitalism, Middle Class, Work, Non-Conformism, *Sons and Lovers*, *Halfway House*.

Karl Marx's philosophy of anti-hegemonic revolutions in the industrialized economy of the West proved to be a great understatement of the looming danger faced in the form of Capitalism. Despite his historical approach, he could not anticipate the steep growth of the middle class that had only been visualized as a middle term extending support to the proletariat. But as we have seen, the middle class expanded its reach and became highly affluent rather than being squeezed into poverty. It subsumed the critical importance regarded to the working class, which was once envisioned as the only force capable of revolting against the constraints of the capital. In that case, the industrial proletariat was no longer the cultural functionary in the cyclical machinery of a Marxist world but a class that was now invisible.

And such a grave miscalculation is something more than it seems to be, that is, it points towards an internal error in the theoretical framework of Marx's thought. The economic determinism in the Marxian system of historical materialism is the major flaw to be blamed for such a tangential view of a rapidly evolving world. As it happens, the middle class far from joining the proletariat as Marx expected, felt superior to the class from whence they had been drawn and retreated into self-expansion, a quality eerily similar to the class above them.

The picture starts to clear up when Marx's theory is revised to suit the needs of the new era. Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci elaborated the concept of hegemony which explained why workers might no longer be revolutionary. Marx had emphasized that historical change must be explained in terms of the

economic substructure. But Gramsci replaced this deterministic value of 'economy' with deeper explanations of social change that lay in the superstructure, that is, in the realm of ideas and not economy. In other words, revolutions are born and carried away at the point where the relations of production are reinforced and reproduced: society and culture. Though this reconceptualization helped understand capitalism better, in terms of praxis, society and culture seemed too ideological and hence too ambiguously controlled. Pragmatically speaking, the idea of separation between ideological superstructure and materialistic base seems too wide and their relation somewhat disjointed. The changes made in the realm of ideas and institutions such as religion, law and culture remain productive until they are found materially non-existent and economically infeasible.

Economic changes determine changes of social value in the superstructure but not vice versa. And since economic measures are more finely controlled than its counterpart, the superstructure then seems to be appropriately advantaged in favour of those directly involved in the relations of production. Therefore, when capitalists increased wages, the newly-arising middle class resumed the former's influence over the reproduction of production. The middle class then became a nexus of relations connecting both the antagonistic classes. It also provided a large population of consumers who helped create a market of desire, thus not only keeping the economic base protected but proliferating it manifold.

Another aspect of this problem is that the middle class was so homogenized by the opposing forces of the class divide that they formed their own identity. But since this class was a later formation, it defined itself solely in terms of other two classes. Resting in the realm of ideas they formed opinions that aligned themselves with modern views of progress like that of proletariat class. At the same time, they were made to believe that the picture of life as presented by the powerful is safer and rewarding and they spread their roots in matters of investment which had more lucrative returns. Effectively, the middle class is the ground of contention between the capitalists and the proletariats. And for their protection they chase dreams produced, marketed and supplied to them for their price of submission, which is their own freedom of subjectivity. Though most of those people have the freedom to choose what to wear, what to eat, they still have no choice in the work they do to achieve such things. In the twenty-first century, it is jobs/careers that are the modern equivalent of feudal penance crushing human rights. But the irony of the situation is that work which is so alienating in itself, is shown to be a way of emancipation for the middle class. They are being sold this false dream of prosperity originally possessed by the capitalists only by scaring them through images of proletarian drudgery. In this way, the middle class is made to conform by an exhibition of airy ideals made to fool. If only, the middle class chooses not to conform in demands of their job/career prospects, capitalism as a hall of mirrors could very well shatter.

Jobs are treated as answers to all the problems of life. Since capitalism as a system seems universally accepted, the problem of seeking jobs and keeping them becomes more insurmountable because they only appear to be necessary in theory but are highly reductive in actuality. The middle class especially, accepts the prospect of job to be the one way to conquer the capitalist model. Despite being familiar of their social status as merely a cultural mediatory between the two classes, the modern middle class aims to position itself higher through the simple act of earning too much money. Ignoring the fact that it is a quasi-aristocratic effect of the meritocratic society which is erected so by the capitalists for sustaining their position. While some people are made to feel proud and privileged by having a good career, there are many others who are oppressed under this mindless chase for surplus. Having a 'good' job/career was supposedly the push up above the ruins of one's place in the dirt of class-based existence. But the question still remains: a push to end up where? The philosophy of existentialism once encouraged youth to reinforce their existence above and beyond their essential conditions of sustenance, but it merely shifted that essence further towards a false, materialistic goal that created the essence of work culture. British historian Arnold Toynbee said 'High wages are not an end in themselves' as they are taken to be (Delany 79). The concentration of most of wealth is still with a few Capitalists while the rest are just pawns who feel free in few hopeful glimpses of being outside the ideology of work.

D. H. Lawrence is known for the kind of literature that challenged assumptions and approached the problems of the household from a new perspective. In his attempt to subvert expectations and uncover the modern psyche he created characters with an aim to make the subconscious conscious. In the 1920s, when

modern industrialization as we know it had taken root in the wealthiest economy of that time, Lawrence emerged as the preeminent modernist writer. This paper focuses on his singularly most character-driven text *Sons and Lovers*.

In an autobiographical fashion, Lawrence outlines the psyche of the small English family of the Morels. He showcases the intimacy, the fear and anxieties of people living in a community of workers. But the defining characteristic of the Morel family is that its inhabitants are not wholly consistent with the demands of their class-biased community. Mr. Morel is a compromising worker who has married a middle-class woman with ambitions of her own. They both fail to accommodate each other's consciousness and thus constitute a family with conflicted, alienated individuals divided internally. The atmosphere is suffocating and mostly because of the lack of freedom of movement within the larger social structure of progressive England which was a world outside their world of work-sleep-work routine. Lawrence expresses the fear of this extremely sensitive boy, born into squalor yet develops a parallel identity as an artist. However, when he grows up, he is forced by his real circumstances to look for a job that requires unreal skills. Paul is also shown to be unique as he looks for an emotional connection to his work, that is, he aims to make his vocation his work. And this consciousness of incompatibility between what he wants and what is wanted of him presents a challenging environment for his development throughout the novel.

Paul thinks about the coldness of the world of mechanical job and it makes him cringe with disgust. Such feelings are due to the humiliation and the uncertainty which the hunt for a job induces in an adolescent (Maes 27). Paul is not someone who does not know what he wants to do, but due to an essentially class-based identity he is forced to think what he 'should' do. There are many factors underlying the cause for his alienation from his surroundings. Paul feels satisfied working leisurely with the common folk which is something his mother does not approve of, as apparent in their conversation: She asks, "What do you want to be?" to which he replies, "Anything". What comes natural to Paul is strikingly alien to those around him, as if instead of Paul refusing his own call of duty it is the people who refuse to think for themselves. In his early years of development, he focuses on his interests rather than possessing a borrowed identity. Thus, Paul Morel is quite a unique character because he chooses despite the choices made for him and resists individuation into a steady format of display that works incessantly to mould him into his brother, William.

This act of non-conforming, as the paper aims to show, is a definitive step towards correcting the dehumanizing ideology of work spread mindlessly by capitalism. Upon Paul's unconditional defence of his freedom of choice Mrs. Morel retorts, "that is no answer" and immediately asks him to look for jobs in newspaper advertisements. But Paul being a man of free will, and as a man not to be tamed as "a prisoner of industrialization" he would instead choose to be "a big and brewer's Waggoner". Lawrence in this novel, highlights the crisis of the middle-class families by showing that young children are compelled to work in mines to help their families. It taught them how to earn money, but it robbed them of their childhood innocence. It also taught them that earning more money is the solution to their problems. By this logic, the claim that workers are being exploited through their work is simply an expression of an emotional feeling that a person happens to have when work becomes the thing that crushes them and also the thing which drags them further away from any kind of personal satisfaction.

Though the emotional realization of such alienation plays a part, it does not end there. It is more than necessary to bring it to action. This paper focuses on such an aspect of resistance towards capitalism through exhibition and analysis of the act of non-conformism with regards to the work one chooses to do and also the way one chooses to do it. A major aspect of this exploration of this subject is assessing the impact of socially constructed stigmas surrounding the paramount importance given to paid work.

Ileana Cura-Sazdanic states that Lawrence's social writing raises some important questions about modern industrial society and its consequences for genuine human living. The prominent fear regarding industrialization lies in 'the base forcing all human energy into competition of mere acquisition which eventually, destroys the very core of our being' (Phoenix 138). Paul had many skills but none of them had any 'commercial value'

(Lawrence 112). On the other hand, his father Mr. Morel, is ideologically not controlled by the bourgeois instincts but due to lack of any personal skills tries to escape through drinking. ‘The kind of community they live in has nothing to offer except hard work and the pub’ (Maes 41). If the hard work does not dominate every moment of waking life, if labour can be chosen freely and performed with personal motivation, it is not a curse. And this is where capitalism poses a serious problem to human society. It forces work upon the individual with incentives that further propel them into admission that only more hard work can be a salvation.

The personal predicament of such a trapped individual is shown through Paul himself who gets a job at Nottingham which he hates but cannot quit, due to financial insecurity for his family. Moreover, the artist within him was slowly dying due to lack of artistic freedom that is required. Paul’s brother, William, who finds a well-paid job and conforms is shown to slowly fade in the background behind Paul’s persevering persona. Paul does not care about the window of social mobility which is exploited by the likes of his brother. Mrs. Morel is another “prisoner of industrialization”. She “could not be content with the little he (Mr. Morel) might be, she would have him the much that he ought to be. So, in seeking to make him nobler than he could be, she destroyed him” (Lawrence 25). The excessive materialism dehumanizes the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Morel completely as a result of which there never develops any understanding between the two. Their interpersonal conflicts, which are due to bourgeois expectations, are never resolved only maximized due to lack of social currency. Thus, a state of alienation, estrangement and discord always remains in the house.

All the discord is direct or indirect result of frustration caused by industrialization. The fundamental opposition is between the wife’s bourgeois assumptions of a comfortable life and the husband’s inability to provide an alternative. This opposition replaces the more original opposition of people against machinery. Invisible barriers are built in the minds of people which alienates them from one another though they live together as parts of the same family. This is the plight of the modern man who is entangled in the web of materialistic compulsions leading to a deserted life. Just as production has fragmented and dispersed so we also think in more fragmented and dispersed ways of seeing the world. The most important reason for the man to be ‘good for nothing’ is undoubtedly his unemployment and the ideology of work remains to be a problem of grave concern.

Similarly, In Mohan Rakesh’s play, *Halfway House*, the father is unemployed and that becomes a characteristic feature of his and earns him the title of ‘good for nothing’ by his wife. Rakesh was writing this in 1950s when the independent modern middle-class families of India were beginning to integrate themselves with the outer, bigger world of freedom. Mohan Maharishi in “Experimentation and Innovation: Possible Directions” talks about how Rakesh’s *Halfway house* touches the very nerve of insecurity and anxiety felt by the middle class coping with post-colonial modernised lifestyle. There seems to be something in their house that keeps them from attaining any sense of satisfaction, which is due to lack of self-fulfilment, something unattainable due to imbalance between expectation and reality. There is a sense of awareness which exists somewhere in the mind of the family, but they tend to ignore it and remain caught in their cycle of trauma and distress. The play presents a harsh critique of the unsatisfactory and incomplete nature of bourgeois existence. The son, Ashok, is unemployed who has no intention to look out for a job. Unlike Paul Morel, he does not wish to get a job which does not interest him even if his family needs it. But as we know what alternative he has even if he chooses not to conform?

The idea of having an alternative in our actions becomes almost impossible since every form of action gets appropriated and deepens the roots of capital consciousness in our lives. Both Paul and Ashok are non-conforming characters, merely for the special reason that they do not want to have jobs but most importantly for the general cause behind work being needlessly exterior to the individual. The implication is that this non conformity can be a way out to many other possibilities, including that of a ‘post work’ world which Lawrence could not have thought of in the aftermath of the Great War and during periods of recession. The Post Work theory has been established in two books which put forth coordinates for thinking through this ‘end of work’ moment.

In *The Refusal of Work*, David Frayne writes against the culture of over-working we encounter in the current scenario of multi-national corporations. And in *Inventing the Future*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams propose a radical programme for bringing about a ‘post-work’ future in which everybody is sustained by the fruits of digital technologies and a Universal Basic Income. Both books are rigorous in their arguments proposing for the desire to an end to this glorification of paid work. Frayne ends up questioning the ways in which economic needs control our lives and priorities, while the needs of the mind and the heart takes severe blows from hyper-consumerism.

If employment is a human necessity then why only a certain kind of job is given priority and if one does choose to a kind of job out of sheer interest and not under compulsion to improve one’s social status it counts as a hobby, or freelance, and not work per se. What is the alternative for them? And what is the alternative for those people who do not want to stick to one job? It is easily found that the people who even try to have such a lifestyle find themselves often denied a social integration, a state of acceptance, of normalcy in their lives. Revolution is possible if there is an alternative worldview which is accepted by the widest range of exploited group. The irony is that a lot of ‘subjects’, in Althusserian terms, in that room for movement are unaware that they are being exploited. And as the symbolic construction of subjectivity seems to explain, they have been ‘individuated’ in precisely those terms which express their position with respect to an authority. In this case, the authority is the corporation which makes the employees feel privileged and villainizes the unemployed, the rogues, the freelancers and even farmers. This is how capitalism clutches the masses. Though liberal democracy has provided some sense of security to the downtrodden through globalization of resources, it has robbed them of their right to assemble its own resources, the ones which it actually owns. This is echoed in Derrida’s protests towards our current social condition, ‘...never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity’ (Bevernage 113).

This is where fictional characters can truly present solutions of critical concern to predicaments that cannot be even viewed looking outside the walled-garden that our globalized world has become and the stories like Lawrence’s and Rakesh’s can be seen as mirrors reflecting lives of truly conflicted individuals ready to deform the moulds they were put to settle. Maes-Jelinek writes, “Lawrence’s ‘heroes’ do not seek fulfilment in harmony with society but by drawing away from it” (Maes 11). Characters like Paul and Ashok are conscious of their internal conflicts and also aware of the source of the anxieties, tracing the outlines of a whole community of people driven mad. What is more significant is that these characters are not rebellious outrightly. They are always in a dilemma of choice which stops them from taking some straight and clearly revolutionary steps. The capitalist society as the quintessence of this division of people only increases the alienation. That is to say they are stuck in the dialectics of materialism which forces one into one of the pre-formed classes of being based on their choice of work so much so that towards the end of the novel Paul walks away from the dark, uninhabited country fields and one begs the question where does Paul go from here? Is there a life out there for him that demands nothing more than his satisfaction? Admittedly, there is no established alternative to a life within this dialectic of being, however in the process of not conforming to any of the antithetical sides a counter narrative becomes visible. Thus, the inconclusive ending of the text opens avenues of interpretation for the kind of life which integrates the two divided spheres of living.

A possible attempt is made by Walter Benjamin in his essay “Program for a proletarian children’s theatre” where he proposes the idea of a children’s theatre (201). He writes that children have a revolutionizing potential since they are too young to be non-hegemonized and due to lack of understanding about the empty symbolic terms of satisfaction like money, progress, profit etc they are originally driven by actual means of growth and pleasure. He suggests having a children’s theatre with minimal effects of the outside world of the adult.

“In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity... society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, herdsman or critic” (Marx 168).

One of the ways to achieve this is by not conforming to the institutionalised idea of merit and careers since the merit of the individual is also appropriated by the capitalists. The capitalists decide the value of your skill, work, merit, art. Why? The possibility of an alternative will be there only when the people are conscious of their contradictory worker-owner relationships and choose to stand against it keeping aside their respective privileges.

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