

PG-Semester-II, CC-07, Unit- IV D. H. Lawrence

Critical examination of D. H. Lawrence's "Why the Novel Matters"

In the essay *Why the novel Matters* D. H. Lawrence makes an attempt to make the people understand life as a stream of feelings, sensations, beliefs, concepts and ideas. He uses comparisons between people of different knowledge like saint, philosopher or scientist and their ideas, and proposes that they are masters of different parts of 'man alive' but fail to see the whole picture. According to Lawrence the difference between body and soul is a superstition made by humans, he believes that there is not a particular bit that is more important but to understand and accept person as a whole, it can be seen in texts such as "Why should I look at my hand, as it so cleverly writes these words, and decide that it is a mere nothing compared to the mind that directs it?" (Lawrence, *Why the Novel Matters*). Lawrence approaches the fundamental structure of a being not by its existence, but by its knowledge of being alive. He says that a man alive is greater than his soul, body; mind or consciousness i.e. understanding oneself not as a body or a soul, but as a fusion of all the parts together makes a man truly alive. Lawrence further writes "We should ask for no absolutes, or absolute. Once and for all and for ever, let us have done with the ugly imperialism of any absolute. There is no absolute good, there is nothing absolutely right." (Lawrence, *Why the Novel Matters*). He considers that change is the true nature of life and change is necessary for life to go on. According to him defining one's ego by individuality and integrity is useless, as confining oneself to a particular mindset and refusing to change is against the nature of life, making us no better than a lamp post. In the end Lawrence writes, "To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point." (Lawrence, *Why the Novel Matters*) he believes that there is no absolute, there always right and wrong, good and bad, to him all these things are instincts of consciousness in a man, which together with knowledge, feelings, aspirations and all the other things makes a man truly alive.

We may half disagree with his thoughts and views on the nature of universe. On

reading the text I believe that Lawrence's views and beliefs are unscientific and he is proud of that. He rejects reason, and believes that being a novelist he is superior to a scientist, priest or philosopher because they confine themselves to studying a particular field and not look at life as an essence of many different things. In the text Lawrence keeps criticizing others for having a narrow look towards life and failing to understand the many factors that make a human being alive, but Lawrence himself fails to present facts and arguments in favor of his beliefs. He keeps on repeating throughout the essay how one needs to be truly alive, and understand a being not by its body but as a collection of characteristics that define one, but Lawrence doesn't tell what someone needs to do to become truly alive. On reading the essay it feels like Lawrence has convinced himself that his views are correct and everyone else is wrong, in the essay he constantly imposes his views and beliefs on the readers, without considering the ideologies of others.

Why the novel matters is about finding the true meaning of life and trying to understand the nature of life. In this Essay Lawrence puts forth his beliefs and ideologies on why life is very complex and how most of the people fail to understand its true nature. In this essay Lawrence tries to seek the truth, he questions and criticizes the ideas of scientists, philosophers and parsons and concludes that a novelist understands life better. Through this essay Lawrence wants the people to create a collective awareness, and contemplate about their existence and the meaning of life.

D. H. Lawrence's critical essay 'Why the novel matters' was published in the collection titled Phoenix in the year 1936. In this essay Lawrence speaks about the importance of the novel and tries to establish the superiority of the novelist above other professions.

In an attempt to illustrate the importance of the novel Lawrence explains the importance of life and the living man. He says that the whole living man, the man alive, is more important than his thoughts, ideas, his mind, or his stomach or liver

or kidney or any other parts of his body. Lawrence says that this is what scientists and philosophers fail to understand. According to Lawrence a novel shows life and its characters are nothing but man alive. The novelist understands the importance of life and the man alive. Therefore the novelist is better than the scientist or the philosopher.

Lawrence begins the essay by commenting upon the saying 'a sound mind in a sound body'. He calls it a funny superstition that people think of themselves as a body with a soul in it. He questions why one thinks of one's hand as something subordinate to the mind that operates it. The hand has a life of its own. It has knowledge and can think and act for itself. The hand is as much a part of the living man as the mind. The pen held by the hand however is not alive. A man alive extends only to his fingertips. Lawrence says that whatever in a man is alive constitutes the man alive. The hand, skin, freckles, blood and bones are very much alive and part of the man alive. The living body therefore must not be compared to inanimate objects like tin cans or clay vessels.

Lawrence in this essay tries to explain why the novelist is better than the philosopher or the scientist and in order to do so he explains the importance of the man alive. According to Lawrence the novelist possesses an intricate understanding of the man alive more fully than a parson, a philosopher, or a scientist. The parson speaks about souls in heaven and the afterlife. But for the novelist heaven is in the palm of his hand and the tip of his nose which are alive. The novelist is not concerned about life after death. He is wholly concerned about life at present and with the man alive. The philosopher speaks about infinite knowledge possessed by the pure spirit. But for the novelist there is no knowledge beyond what the living body can perceive. For philosophers nothing but thoughts is important. These thoughts Lawrence says are nothing but 'tremulations on the ether'. They are not alive. They are like radio signals floating in the air which are meaningless until they reach the receiver – a radio device that decodes the signals into a meaningful message. Similarly when thoughts are

received by a man alive they become meaningful and can alter the man's life. But the thoughts nevertheless are not alive. It is only because the man alive receives them that they become alive. Only a man alive can be stimulated by thoughts. Thus the living body is more important than the message conveyed by thoughts. According to Lawrence nothing is more important than life. Living things are more valuable than dead objects. A living dog is better than a dead lion but a living lion is better than a living dog. Lawrence says that scientists and philosophers find it difficult to accept the value of the living. For the philosopher nothing but thoughts matter. For the scientist a living man is of no use. He only wants a dead man whom he dissects and observes under the microscope. For a scientist a man is a heart, a liver, a kidney, a gland or a tissue. But for the novelist the only thing that matters is a whole living man. Lawrence refuses to believe that he is a body or a soul or a brain or a nervous system. He considers himself to be a complete whole made up of all these parts, a whole that is greater and more significant than the individual parts. And for this reason he is a novelist and he considers himself superior to the saint, the scientist or the philosopher. Having established the importance of the man alive and the novelist Lawrence proceeds to explain the significance of the novel. Lawrence calls the novel a book of life. According to him books are like thoughts - nothing but 'tremulations on the ether'. They are meaningful only when a man alive receives them. But he says that the tremulations of a novel are more powerful than any other book and it can make a whole man alive tremble. This means that the novel has the capacity to influence a man more effectively than any other book. For example the ideals of Plato makes the ideal being in a man tremble. Similarly the sermons or the Ten Commandments affect only a part of a man alive. But a novel is capable of shaking the whole of a man alive. This is because a novel deals in nothing else but man alive. In this regard Lawrence calls the Bible a 'great confused novel'. All its characters – Adam, Eve, Sarai, Abraham, Isaac – including God are nothing but man alive. For Lawrence, the Bible, Homer and Shakespeare are all great

novels because they communicate to the reader. Their wholeness affects the whole of man alive. They do not stimulate growth in a particular direction but shake the whole man alive into new life.

According to Lawrence the strength and appeal of a novel lies in the dynamic nature of its characters which reflects the importance of constant change in the life of a man alive. Nothing is constant and if something is forced to remain constant it loses its value and power along with the passing of time. There are no absolutes. There is only a constant flow and change and even change is not absolute. A man today is different from what he was yesterday and tomorrow he will be different from what he is today. A man loves a woman because of the constant change in her. It is the change that startles and defies and keeps a man and woman in love with each other. Loving an unchanging person is like loving an inanimate object like a pepper pot. But even amidst change one needs to maintain one's integrity. However Lawrence says that putting a finger on one individual trait makes one as fixed as a lamp post. It seems as if a man has made up an idea about himself and is trying to trim himself down to fit into it. Lawrence says that one can learn about the importance of change from a novel. In a novel the characters do nothing but live. But if they begin to act according to a fixed pattern – always remaining good or bad – the novel loses its life force. Similarly a man in his life must live and not try to follow a pattern or else he becomes a dead man in life. Lawrence however says that it is difficult to define what is living. Different men have different ideas about what they mean by living in life. Some go to seek God while others seek money, wine, and women, yet others seek votes and political reforms. In this Lawrence says that the novel is a guide which helps to differentiate between a man alive and a man who is dead in life. A man may eat his dinner like a man alive or merely chew his dinner as a dead man in life. A man alive shoots his enemy but a dead man in life throws bombs at people who are neither his friends nor foes.

Finally Lawrence says that the most important thing is to be a whole man alive

and the novel provides guidance in this matter. A novel helps a man to see when a man is alive and when he is dead in life. The novel helps to develop an instinct for life. This is because the novel does not advocate a right path or a wrong path. The concept of right and wrong vary according to circumstances. A novel portrays this unpredictable and varying nature of life making the reader realize that life itself is the reason for living. The end result of the novel is the whole man alive. Thus Lawrence asserts that the novel is a book that can touch the life of a whole man alive and that is why the novel matters.