

The Portrayal of Premodern Sensibility: A Reading of D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*

Dr. Soumitra Mukherjee

Abstract:

This paper deals with D. H. Lawrence's notion of premodern sensibility as depicted in his travel writing, *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). As a modern travel writer, Lawrence does not belong to the perfectionist mode of writing the genre of travel writing. But Lawrence really becomes impressive in his delineation of premodern life within modern life with an acute sense of observation in his travel writings. In fact, his travel writings are critiques of modern culture in their inclination toward a nonmodern or premodern consciousness. His travels through the secluded island of Sardinia provide such minute descriptions of the premodern lifestyle of the people which is absent in the modern life. As premodern people of Sardinia were characterized by spontaneity and naturalness, they certainly had the key to lead meaningful life. Lawrence found such instinctual impulses in the Sardinians that could bring peace and harmony in their life. In *Sea and Sardinia*, Lawrence spoke for the instinct and imagination of the premodern people around Sardinia. The same need of instinctual impulses is propounded by Freud in his work, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) where he suggested that the "irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization" (Freud, *Civilization* 6) is the cause of man's discomfort in the modern world. Thus, Lawrence's depiction of premodern sensibility in his travel writing provides a greater solution to have a better humanity.

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence, travel writing, modern, premodern

INTRODUCTION

D. H. Lawrence has been hailed as a modern writer. His literary productions analyze modern culture as a continuation of premodern culture. Lawrentian thought process delves into the premodern culture in order to take recourse to the spontaneous overflow of life often marred by the modern sensibility exemplified by artificiality, industrial progress and technological advancement. Lawrence's novels often exhibit such thoughts. The same is true of his travel writings where Lawrence wants to look back at premodern times only to experience peace and harmony amidst modern anxiety. Lawrence longs for the preservation of the past through the exercise of instinctual impulses of human beings. The application of the term "modern", however, varies with the passage of time. Modernity in Europe is traced back to the intellectual movement and cultural ambiance called "enlightenment" which flourished during the seventeenth century and reached its climax in the eighteenth century. Modernity was marked by human reason which is believed to open "the prospect of progress toward a life...of universal peace and happiness" (Abrams 89) But, ironically, the more human beings become modern the more they drift apart from spontaneity and naturalness. This dichotomy of premodern sensibility within the modern has been put forward by Lawrence in his travel writing entitled *Sea and Sardinia* (1921) For Lawrence, premodern is an essential word. In fact, Lawrence's notion of premodernity is found in,

[...] his laudation of the spontaneous instinctual life, his belief in an ancient, vanished condition of humanity's personal and social wholeness, his high regard for 'primitive' modes of life that still survive outside the bounds of sophisticated societies, and his attacks on the disintegrative effects of modern science and technology and on the economy and culture these developments have generated. (Abrams 245)

Lawrence also maintains that modern Western culture "has been formed in dialectical opposition to presumably nonmodern or premodern cultures." (Abrams 245) Lawrence is known for "his analysis of modern society and his search for a constructive and meaningful mode of living." (Janik 9)

Neil Roberts's book, *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (2004) is a very important study on the travel writings of Lawrence. His is a post-colonial study considering the travel writings and prose fictions of Lawrence. Fiona Becket, in her critical work, *The Complete Critical Guide to D. H. Lawrence* (2002) makes close study of the three travel writings of Lawrence. She makes it a point that Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* follows the conventions of the genre of travel writing. The book is all about the vibrant descriptions of the real places and people of Sardinia. But the concept of premodernity is not discussed here. Del Ivan Janik, in his critical study, *The Curve of Return: D. H. Lawrence's Travel Books* (1981) puts emphasis on 'the curve of return' in Lawrence's restless journeys in his four travel books. Janik argues that Lawrence's travels produced his interactions with the unknown world. Moreover, Lawrence's visit to Sardinia was full of disillusionment.

The mode of living that Lawrence delineates in his travel writing *Sea and Sardinia* is essentially premodern. It depicts the Sardinian people and places very beautifully. Here Lawrence gives the lively accounts of premodern Sardinian life. Early in the 1921 Lawrence visited the Sardinian region of Italy with his wife Frieda. The places such as Messina, Palermo, Etna, Cagliari and so on were very much attractive to Lawrence. His encounters with the countryside and the people of Southern Italy manifested the premodern sensibility in all sphere of life. Lawrence and travel go hand in hand. His visit to Sardinia was the product of an absolute necessity to move. In fact, the need of movement and change, for Lawrence, was the need of the hour. To know the unknown and to explore the unexplored was the creed of Lawrence. He was born and brought up in a modern industrial atmosphere of England. But when he experiences a premodern culture such as the Sardinian one, his sense of losing the premodern sensibility becomes acute. The Sardinians, according to Lawrence, confronted the rapid encroachment of industrial growth and technological expansion. The people of Sardinia still possess the premodern view of life. But they are in fear of passing away of the naturalness and spontaneity amidst modern industrial growth. Sardinia is that small part of the world which is still unaffected by the so called civilization. As Lawrence expressed thus:

But there is an uncaptured Sardinia still. It lies within the net of European civilization, but it isn't landed yet. And the net is getting old and tattered. A good many fish are slipping through the net of the old European civilization. Like that great whale of Russia. And probably even Sardinia. Sardinia then. Let it be Sardinia. (Lawrence, *Sea* 9)

In fact, Sardinia is that secluded island which embodied in its people and places the premodern qualities of spontaneity and naturalness inside the sophisticated cultures enjoyed by the people of the other parts of Italy. It was still uncaptured by the European civilization. It lies, according to Lawrence, "outside the circuit of civilization" (Lawrence, *Sea* 9). In other words, Sardinia is within the reach of European civilization, but stands apart from it in its premodern sensibilities. The countryside of the Sardinian

island in Italy is presented by Lawrence with his acute sense of the relationship between the nature and human beings. In fact, Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* delineates,

[...] his vivid account of the countryside and the men he met there – the coarse mountain-dwellers, belabouring with their beasts across the craggy hillsides, the wily townspeople feasting on wild boar and roast kid, the peasants in their colourful costumes – all coursing with hot Southern blood [...] (Lawrence, *Sea* cover page)

In this context, Lawrence's encounter with a Sardinian girl is to be mentioned. He met her in a railway compartment. The girl was unconscious of being seen by a stranger like Lawrence. Her unconsciousness seemed so interesting to Lawrence. Her spontaneity and naturalness remind of the premodern consciousness of the other Sardinians also. The modern artificiality is contrasted with the premodern impulsiveness by Lawrence thus: "Their naturalness seems unnatural to us. Yet I am sure it is best. Sympathy would only complicate matters, and spoil that strange, remote virginal quality". (Lawrence, *Sea* 22)

Lawrence is conscious of the difference between the Sardinian premodern culture and the culture of his own. His sympathy for the Sardinian culture is found in his eulogy of the same culture. The Sardinian region is filled with the spectacle of the colourful peasants toiling hard on the secluded landscape. The sense of a premodern culture is manifested through the sight of the peasants which is likely to be absent in the midst of modern mechanism. Lawrence's observation is articulated thus:

Here and there, in the distance, are peasants working on the lonely landscape. Sometimes it is one man alone in the distance, showing so vividly in his black and white costume, small and far-off like a solitary magpie, and curiously distinct. All the strange magic of Sardinia is in this sight. (Lawrence, *Sea* 78)

The reliance on instinct and intuition instead of reason is another prominent feature of premodernity. The intuitive instinct is present in most of Lawrence's travel writings. His emphasis on the instinctual impulses of the Sardinians is evident in his travel writing *Sea and Sardinia*. Every sight and scene of the Sardinian countryside is vividly conveyed here. Lawrence is acutely sensible to the hopes and aspirations of the premodern Sardinian community. The instinctual impulses of the Sardinians are nowhere so vividly written than in Lawrence's travel book:

And that also is how they are. So terribly physically all over one another. They pour themselves one over the other like so much melted butter over parsnips. They catch each other under the chin, with a tender caress of the hand, and they smile with sunny melting tenderness into each other's face. (Lawrence, *Sea* 13)

The Sicilian youths are "much less socially self-conscious". (Lawrence, *Sea* 13) They are very lively and handsome. They are spontaneous in their sexual activities. They even show "gay tenderness" with their male partners. In fact, the Sicilians, irrespective of whether they are slender or fat, they are all out to show their gay physicality even at the railway station. Moreover, the exuberant spirit of the Sicilians is ever more strong than that of the Neapolitans. They are, according to Lawrence, endowed with physical familiarity unlike other communities. Furthermore, this type of sensual culture prevalent among the Sicilians and Neapolitans make them happy in life. Again, the sexual quality of smell and touch is observed by Lawrence in his visit to the lemon gardens. The lemon trees are compared to the Italians. As Lawrence articulates thus:

Lemon trees, like Italians, seem to be happiest when they are touching one another all around. Solid forests of not very tall lemon trees lie between the steep mountains and the sea, on the strip of plain. (Lawrence, *Sea* 14)

Lawrence here puts emphasis on the physicality of the Sardinian people even at a railway platform. He is well aware of the premodern sensibility of the Sardinians through their exercise of sexuality. In fact, the inherent knowledge of sexuality among the Sardinian people made Lawrence think of the intimate domain of personal experience. Moreover, Lawrence thinks life as ever changing and fluid. His fresh experiences of life are to be found in his nomadic wanderings through the remote places of Sardinia such as Cagliari, Mandas, Sorgono, Nuoro and so on. In a way, Lawrence's penetration into the Sardinian parts of Italy is to discover the premodern past. As Lawrence observed:

So that for us to go to Italy and to penetrate into Italy is like a most fascinating act of self-discovery – back, back down the old ways of time. Strange and wonderful chords awake in us, and vibrate again after many hundreds of years of complete forgetfulness. (Lawrence, *Sea* 131)

The Sardinian landscape is premodern in the sense that it is mostly unaffected by factories and industrial advancement. Moreover, it is known for its natural beauty all around. The Sardinian countryside is full of lemon trees with heaps of lemons under them. In some places Lawrence saw many women picking lemons from the lemon gardens. The cluster of lemon trees looked very beautiful. The strange sensation of premodern landscape looms large in Lawrence's imaginative mind when he travels through the beautiful coasts of Sicily. As he articulates with joy,

Strangely large in mass and bulk Monte Pellegrino looks: and bare, like a Sahara in heaven: and old-looking. These coasts of Sicily are very imposing, terrific, fortifying the interior. And one gets the feeling that age has worn them bare: as if old, old civilizations had worn away and exhausted the soil, leaving a terrifying blackness of rock, as at Syracuse in plateau, and here in great mass. (Lawrence, *Sea* 33-34)

Furthermore, the island of Levanzo was fascinating for Lawrence. There he saw the fortress castle, a little lighthouse and many other things. Beyond the harbor, there were palm trees, dark trees and many other trees. All those premodern landscapes were eulogized by Lawrence thus: "It all has a stately, southern, imposing appearance, withal remote from our modern centuries: standing back from the tides of our industrial life". (Lawrence, *Sea* 42)

Besides being fascinated by the landscape of Sicily, Lawrence also looked at the faces of the Sicilians and the Cagliarese. Indeed, the Sicilians have beautiful faces. They are endowed with big and bright dark eyes. But the eyes in the faces of the people of Cagliari are more beautiful to look at. As Lawrence put it,

There are fascinating dark eyes in Sicily, bright, big, with an impudent point of light and a curious roll, and long lashes: the eyes of old Greece, surely. But here one sees eyes of soft, blank darkness, all velvet, with no imp looking out of them. And they strike a stranger, older note: before the soul became self-conscious [...] (Lawrence, *Sea* 74)

Really, the Sardinian soul was unselfconscious. There is, inside them, a creature which is both dark and potent. They are always remote and their intelligence lay deep, as if, inside the cave. This is also true of the Sardinian peasants. When Lawrence came across a crowd of peasants for the first time at a little station, he was at once moved by their costumes and other belongings. As Lawrence depicts, [...] almost every man has a pair of woven saddle-bags [...] So that these striped zebra bags, some wonderful, gay with flowery colours on their stripes, some weird with fantastic, griffin-like animals, are a whole landscape in themselves. (Lawrence, *Sea* 76)

Lawrence here vividly portrays the Sardinian peasants with their colourful costumes. He found the colourful peasants as the strange magic of Sardinia. Thus, in *Sea and Sardinia* Lawrence laments of

losing away the premodern sense of life in other parts of the island of Sicily. In other words, Lawrence is conscious of the premodernity of the inhabitants of Sardinia who are characterized by spontaneity and spirituality of life. Moreover, the agrarian life-style of the Sardinian peasants is also a premodern phenomenon.

The premodern ways of life that Lawrence depict in *Sea and Sardinia* have psychological basis in the sense that Lawrence's travel writing deal with the basic instincts of the premodern people of Sardinia. It has a greater impact of Freud. In fact, the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) have paved the way for judging the travel writings of Lawrence in a new way. Lawrence was greatly influenced by Freud's notions regarding the human anxiety in the modern world. In fact, Lawrence's travel writing *Sea and Sardinia* is based on the feelings of discontent in the moderns unlike the premoderns in Sardinian island of Italy. The need for premodern sensibilities within the modern culture is certainly one aspect of Lawrence's appraisal of such instinctual life as portrayed by him in his travel writing, *Sea and Sardinia*.

Lawrence's concept of premodernity comes in close relation with the Freudian explanation of civilization in his important work, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) where Freud laid stress on the exercise of instinctual impulses for leading a meaningful mode of life. Modern human beings, Freud thinks, are devoid of instinct and imagination which are at the core of premodern view of life. To sum up, Lawrence's travel writing *Sea and Sardinia* makes a greater expectancy in his eulogy of the premodern consciousness in sharp contrast with the anxiety and unhappiness of modern mechanized life just as presented by Freud.

Works Cited

1. Abrams, M. H. and Galt Harpham, Geoffrey. Eds. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
2. Becket, Fiona. *The Complete Critical Guide to D. H. Lawrence*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
3. Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1988. Print.
4. Birch, Dinah. Ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
5. Blanton, Casey. *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
6. Fernihough, Anne. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
7. Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. Inc., 1962. Print.
8. Fussell, Paul. *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Print.
9. Hall, Stuart and Gieben, Bram. Eds. *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge and Oxford: The Open University, 1992. Print.
10. Hulme, Peter and Youngs, Tim. Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.
11. Janik, Del Ivan. *The Curve of Return: D. H. Lawrence's Travel Books*. Victoria: ELS Editions, 1981. Print.

12. Lawrence, D. H. *Sea and Sardinia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968. Print.
13. Roberts, Neil. *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference*. Basingstoke and New
14. York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.