



## **The Manifestation of Cultural Identity and Transculturation in D.H. Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico***

**Soumitra Mukherjee**

PhD Student of English, Seacom Skills University, Birbhum

The author is a research scholar at Seacom Skills University, Birbhum. He has been pursuing his PhD in English Literature since 2015. He has presented papers in national and international conferences and seminars. He has obtained his Bachelor and Master degree from the University of Burdwan. He has been teaching English in a govt-aided school in West Bengal since 2007.

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the issues of cultural identity and transcultural spaces in the travel writing of D. H. Lawrence. The travel writings of Lawrence are important analyses of modern culture. They definitely give opportunity to study the role of cultural identity in the genre of travel writing. Travel writing as a genre primarily deals with the experiences of a travel writer travelling to different unknown cultures or places and most of the travel writings of Lawrence document the meeting of two alien cultures. The strange meetings represented by the travel writer's own culture and the culture of the people of the country travelled by him make a transcultural space. The strangeness produced out of the encounter of two different cultures is the most important issue here. The strangeness between the self and the world brings with it the issues of 'cultural identity' and 'transculturation'. Lawrence's Mexican travel writing, *Mornings in Mexico* (1927) is built on the notion of cultural identity. His encounter with the Mexicans reminds of the vast gulf of difference between his European culture and the native Mexican culture. As transculturation is a transition from one culture to another, Lawrence's encounter with the Mexican culture definitely produces a transcultural space that is only translated through the strangeness existing between the two cultures.

### **Keywords**

D. H. Lawrence, travel writing, identity, cultural identity, transculturation

D.H. Lawrence was not only a prolific novelist, but his greatness also lies in his undoubted technical skills of a prose writer. As a travel writer, he does not belong to the perfectionist mode of handling the genre of 'travel writing' (Birch 1005) strictly within its rules. But they definitely raise a question as to how they represent a certain part of cultural identity of an individual or of a place or its people. His travel writings provide important analysis of modern culture. In fact, most of Lawrence's travel writings deal with the meeting of two alien cultures. The strange meetings between the narrator's own culture and the culture or cultures of the people of the land visited by the narrator himself make a transcultural space. The 'strangeness' (Donaldson and Kalnins 39) produced out of the clash of two different cultures becomes the most important issue here. The strangeness occurred between the self and the world brings with it the issues of 'cultural identity' and 'transculturation'. (Pratt 7) In this pretext, the travel writings of Lawrence can be discussed in the reformation of the terms called 'cultural identity' and 'transculturation'.

In fact, Lawrence belonged to place and age that has the past experiences of the idea of colonizer's homeland. Better to say, Lawrence's own country contributed much to the colonizer's aim to rule almost each and every continent. Lawrence departs from the other writers of the imperial legacy in his humanistic approach towards the cultures other than his own. He also thought that the imperialist travel writers have decolonising effect on the cultures of the colonized people. Although, Lawrence was always sympathetic to the people belonging to other cultures, he could not escape the cultural clash at the time of his travel. In the middle of things, there occurs a cultural transition. This cultural transition is a product of the transcultural space. Therefore, the cultural transition takes place at the very meeting point of two alien cultures. This meeting point or the transcultural space existing in between two different cultures is called by Mary Louise Pratt as the 'contact zone'. Transculturation is a product of the contact zone in between two different cultures. In this context, the terms like 'cultural identity' and 'transculturation' need to be explained.

In his book, *D. H. Lawrence's Border Crossing: Colonialism in His Travel Writings and Leadership Novels* (2009), Eunyoung Oh observes that Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico* is mainly about the "friction between different species or races" (42). It is obvious that Oh explains Lawrence's work as a postcolonial text where there is a sense of clash between the 'self' and the 'other'. Oh does not explain the notion of

transculturation here. Mary Louise Pratt, in her famous critical work, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2008), ponders on the travel writings of women travel writers from the postcolonial perspectives. She has done an impressive study on the travel writings written by the female travel writers and the process of transculturation. But the travel writings of the male travel writers are not dealt with here in respect of the concept of transculturation.

A travel writer from an imperial legacy may be thinking from time to time that his writings from the travel experiences can have a 'civilizing mission' (*Imperial Eyes* 168). This untruth has gone a long way to be conceptualized as a correcting method in the thoughts of the imperial people. Though, Lawrence departs from the other travel writers belonging to the imperial expansion in his humanistic vision, his travel writings somehow relate to the concept of 'transculturation' on the part of the travel writer. The term 'transculturation' was coined by the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. "Transculturation encompasses more than transition from one culture to another. It does not consist merely of acquiring another culture or of losing or uprooting a previous culture. Rather, it merges these concepts and additionally carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena." (Wikipedia)

On the other hand, transculturation is an important term in the postcolonial perspective also. Because, the concept of culture here comes from the cultural encounter of the traveller or travel writer. In fact, travel writing and transculturation are related with each other. In a sense, the culture that the travel writer encounters through his travel writings is factually different from his own culture, but the irony is that the travel writer wants or imagines to control and to regulate, at any rate, the culture of a particular community or communities through his travel writings. In other words, the travel writer has the intension of extending his imperial thoughts through his travel writings. In fact, the European travel writers had a colonizing mission to apply on the cultures encountered by them through their travel writings. Mary Louise Pratt, a renowned culture critic, has called transculturation a phenomenon of the 'contact zone'. According to Louise Pratt, contact zones are,

Social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and

subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. (7)

As transculturation is a transition from one culture to another, Lawrence's travel writings can be explained in terms of cultural encounter. In fact, Lawrence's idea of creating a new culture out of the cultures that he encountered through his travel writings has been formed out of the cultural clash. In other words, most of the travel writings of Lawrence are the products of the cultural encounter which is a phenomenon of the contact zone.

The cultural identity of a travel writer plays a very important role in the process of transculturation. But, to understand one's cultural identity, one should know first what self or identity is. Really, identity is an important word to understand one's inner and outer self. The concept of the self is built on a simple question, 'Who am I?' Here arises another question regarding the nature of the self. Again, as self is primarily constructed by the mind and the body, the connection between the mind and the body can be questioned. Philosophers and thinkers have different approaches to this issue. Plato is of the view that the soul and the body are distinct. David Hume's explanation of the self is different from that of Plato. For Hume, "the self is not an entity independent of the sensations a body is capable of feeling, but is produced by them". (Edgar and Sedgwick 303) On the other hand, Rene Descartes opined that every human being possesses a certain piece of knowledge that constitutes his self. This thought is beautifully expressed in the phrase 'I think, therefore I am' (*cogito, ergo sum*). It can be said, in line with Nietzsche, that "the self is always to be comprehended as being situated within particular contexts and, indeed, as the product of human culture, rather than an ontological category which grounds the basis of experience and therefore knowledge." (Edgar and Sedgwick 305)

Identity is defined as the sameness one bears only to oneself. It is related with one's culture in many respects. In fact, in the field of cultural studies, identity is explained as "response to something external and different from it" (Edgar and Sedgwick 167). In other words, identity is a concept which is involved in the relationship between self and others. According to Kath Woodward,

The formation and establishment of identity involves both locating and transgressing boundaries; there is a constant attempt to establish boundaries which may be impossible to secure. (xii)

The term identity has a different connotation in the field of psychoanalytic theories. Here, identity and the unconscious become closely related to each other. In this context, the

Freudian concept of the unconscious plays a very important role. For Freud, identity has the interrelationship between ‘what I feel inside and what is known about me from the outside.’ (Woodward 16)

Again, the question of one’s cultural identity is central to the concept of transculturation. Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a particular group sharing the same cultural traits. The personal identity of every human being is constantly fashioned by the culture he or she belongs to. Cultural identifiers like skin-colour, ethnicity, language, etc. affect the identity of a person. Thereby, a sense of cultural identity emanates from this interface between the individual and the culture or cultures.

If transculturation becomes a phenomenon of the contact zones where two different cultures meet each other, the ‘self’ – ‘other’ conflict in D. H. Lawrence’s travel book, *Mornings in Mexico* (1927) certainly bears some qualities of transcultural effects in it. As Lawrence projects his western European identity to the Mexican cultural identity, he realizes that there is a vast gulf of difference between them. This cultural clash produces in the imaginative mind of Lawrence the idea of a new culture which he calls ‘Rananim’.

In *Mornings in Mexico*, Lawrence depicted this cultural clash very beautifully. The cultural encounter is enacted here between the traveller and the native folk. The very first chapter of the book, “Corasmin and the Parrots” bears witness to that. Lawrence relishes the bright winter mornings by seeing the playful contest between a dog and parrots. Lawrence’s encounters with the unselfconscious peoples of Mexico could somehow resolve the incompatibility between Lawrence and them. The meeting of two different cultures is enacted here between Lawrence, the traveller, and the Mexicans. The cultural difference between the Mexicans and Lawrence is very beautifully depicted by Lawrence: “Between you and him there’s a cataclysm and another dimension. It’s no good. You can’t link him up. Never will. It’s the other dimension.” (21)

But there is also hope of reconciliation in the imaginative mind of Lawrence. Lawrence’s meeting with the Mexican Indians and immediate acceptance of their culture is seen in the chapter called “Market Day”. According to Lawrence, the real hope of life lies in the intermingling of two different voices: “An intermingling of voices, a threading together of different wills. It is life. The centavos are an excuse.” (87) Lawrence’s enjoyment of the mornings in the *patio* garden is reminiscent of his own longing to live in

unspoiled country which is totally strange to others. This sense of belonging produces a new cultural identity in Lawrence.

The Mexican encounter of Lawrence is remarkable in his feelings of negotiation. Lawrence knows very well that there is a vast gulf of difference between their culture and his own. But he was an active observer to respect their culture of mystery and darkness. The only possible way to bridge the gap between him and them was through the 'spark of contact' (Lawrence 92). Furthermore, Lawrence's encounter with the Zapotec race reminded him how the bond of relationship was to be made. He observed that the people belonging to Zapotec culture were small men with lifted chests and lifted knees. They were quiet, peace-loving people whose only way to commingle with other men was through market or religion:

In the old world, men make themselves two great excuses for coming together to a centre, and commingling freely in a mixed, unsuspecting host. Market and religion. These alone bring men, unarmed, together since time began ... to exchange, above all things, human contact. (Lawrence 85)

From the above discussion it has been observed that though there is transcultural effect on the travel writer, the formation of a new cultural identity is purely a construct of the travel writer. In *Mornings in Mexico*, Lawrence is seen as watching an alien culture through the eyes of a humanist. Such a humanistic approach is countered by Lawrence's own cultural consciousness that he thought to be superior in comparison to the Mexican culture. The Mexican cultural community, on the other hand, can never accept the western European culture as their own. They could hardly identify Lawrence as a person of their community, but a strange or alien being. Here is the case of cultural clash that has become the real womb of a totally new cultural consciousness. So it is not 'transculturation' but 'strangeness' that has produced a new cultural identity. The new cultural identity is formed out of the cultural encounter between Lawrence, the travel writer and the Mexicans through his travel writing.

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