

Understanding Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*

(An Excerpt from the Thesis: A STUDY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS
IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF D.H.LAWRENCE)

Anshu Raina Verma

Asst. Professor
Lovely Professional University,
Punjab.

anshu.raina712@gmail.com

(**Abstract:** Miriam's role in the novel *Sons and Lovers* has been questioned widely by critics and readers, as the character is supposed to have links with its creator D. H. Lawrence's real life. This paper, an excerpt from the Thesis - A STUDY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF D. H. LAWRENCE is an objective approach to understand the character of Miriam. Psychological and textual evidences have been used to build up the character. Key words: Romantic, Mystical, sexuality, gender, passion, jealousy, autobiography)

Miriam is introduced for the first time when Mrs. Morel and Paul go to Willey Farm. At that time she is a girl, "about fourteen years old, had a rosy dark face, a bunch of short black curls, very fine and free and dark eyes; shy and questioning ..." (S&L 150). She is a shy, timid and introvert girl who doesn't go off well with her brothers, who always make fun of her. Her hesitation in letting the hen peck from her hand suggests the direction that her nature would take in the future. She would never wish to try anything new and if ever she were made to she would put her whole heart and soul into it and still be afraid of the thing. Paul offers to teach Miriam Algebra, but he could feel that she is not ready for it and is backing off. She needs time to prepare herself for everything and this trait of her can even be seen in her sexual relations with Paul. She has a streak of boldness; but in reality was timid. Also she is a late-starter and cannot get things in her mind fast enough, even though she may put her whole heart and soul into it. Miriam listens to Paul quietly even though he shouts at her. She has immense tolerance power for she loves him in a kind of worship. She loves Paul and does not want to hurt him in any way. "Paul accuses Miriam of being "always sad," "bitter," and virginal. In Hebrew, "Miriam" means bitter and plaintive. It is also in Hebrew the virgin's name" (Farr 17).

On the other hand she is a hopeless romantic, and always thinks about the heroines of Walter Scott. She also thinks herself to be a princess who has been turned into a swine-girl. In her imagination she thinks Paul to be a Walter Scott hero and is afraid that he may regard her as lowly.

During her growing years, her mother has been her main companion who turns her into a mystical person. Either she worked in her house or dreamed sitting alone in her room when it snowed. According to Jung's typology, Miriam can be said to be an introverted feeling type character. Like this character type, Miriam too lives in her own world of emotions and feelings. She is a "daydreamer or the silent person who is at peace with the

world” (Wolman 313). Miriam does not like being a swine girl. She wants to read and become learned so that everyone considers her wise and looks up to her. She wants to have respect and a position of her own. “She could not be princess by wealth or standing. So she was mad to have learning whereon to pride herself...Learning was the only distinction to which she thought to aspire” (S&L 178).

Miriam always remains absorbed in herself, always thinking about something, always dreaming. She mainly lives in her imagination and for her the world is either a nunnery garden or a paradise and she cannot feel she has a thing until it has made a place of its own in her imagination or soul. “Miriam seemed in some dreamy tale, a maiden in bondage, her spirit dreaming in a land far away and magical” (S&L 180– 81).

Miriam has an elder sister, Agatha but she does not get on too well with her. She thinks that Agatha is worldly but at the same time she also wants to be a school-teacher like her. In her bedroom, Miriam has put up a reproduction of Veronese’s ‘St. Catherine’, in which a woman sat in the window, dreaming. This to Miriam seems like herself except that her own windows were too small to sit in. The implication is that her knowledge and the view of the world are limited.

According to psychologist Karl Abraham, oral fixation results in oral-character traits, due to abundant or insufficient oral satisfaction. Miriam has a “swallowing” (Wolman 264) tendency, because she wants lots and lots of love from each and every one she comes in contact with.

She hates males, but still wants Paul to notice her. When Paul falls ill, Miriam’s heart goes out for him. The powerful male streak in Miriam wants to tend the weak female streak in Paul as if in a role reversal Paul being a tender girl and Miriam a strong boy to help the delicate one.

Paul has begun to take a special place in Miriam’s life, she does not know since when. She likes Paul but is afraid to talk to him for she is afraid that he would also make fun of her or her things like her brothers. This shows how pathetic the condition of Miriam really is. Even in her own home she does not have the freedom of speech or expression. Now in her tender age, when she gets the attention of Paul who does not insult her or laugh at her on every small thing like her brothers, it was obvious that she would get attached to him and would like to shower her care on him. When Paul says something, however insignificant the thing might be in her life, from then on it became significant. Miriam has never got real love in her life. She wants to give all her love to someone and this deficiency in her personality makes her to smother anyone with her love. The next time when we come across Miriam, it is nearly two years later, for now she’s nearly sixteen, “very beautiful, with her warm colouring, her gravity, her eyes dilating suddenly like an ecstasy” (S&L 179)

With the passing of years she has grown more romantic; her inner life is vaster than her outer one. Firstly, it is her age of dreaming for she is growing up and this is a sensitive age when the personality develops. It is the lack of care and attention at home that is turning her into what she is going to become. Neither her brothers nor her father, care for her as a sister or daughter. For them she is only a person who has to do the household work along with her mother. Yes, if she does something wrong she is sure to be scolded for it and then too she is

expected to be very quiet and take it in as a good girl. Her mother has not been able to carve out a position for herself or for her daughter in the family, and on top of that she has made her daughter a deeply religious girl. So on the one side are the conflicts of her age, her growing up, the household conditions and on the other side is her religion, which has taught her to reflect on everything very deeply. All these things form the basis of her personality which is of a decent girl, who is timid, shy, loving and caring and wants to give all that she has to the other but in return she would want the soul of the other person. She is a dreamer and a romantic and has not got the attention she should have had got to make her a stable personality. So when she gets Paul, she wants him whole, his whole soul should be hers, his undivided attention, for she has not got anyone's attention and love in her life and when she gets it, she doesn't want to lose it.

Miriam seems to be suffering from 'inhibiting anxieties' because "her mother is struggling with unresolved feelings about her own sexuality" (Donelson 223). It is Miriam's mother who had complicated Miriam's feelings about sex by telling her that it was the only horrible thing in marriage. Miriam can be said to have become what she was due to her mother. "Mothers with high levels of babying, protectiveness, and warmth generally have daughters who later tend to be passive and conforming and to withdraw from achievement tasks" (Donelson 176).

Her mother has taught her that sex is unbearable, maybe it was she who has thought like it, but when a child is in constant touch with the mother and she is always telling the same thing, it is bound to get ingrained into the mind that whatever she is saying is true, for Miriam does not have any friend (peer group) to tell her the other version of the theory. Then it is the society, and if she thinks so much about conscience, religion and moral values, then she must also be thinking that pre-marital sex is wrong. This must also be the cause of her frigidity, that she was not able to give herself fully to Paul. She might have wanted him too in the same way he wanted her, but because she was a deep thinker and a loner so there must have been a lot of things going on in her mind about the sexual context and there was no one to solve it out and help her. Paul came to her because he desired her and not that he needed her. Perhaps if he had understood what Miriam wanted and who she really was, and her problems, the relationship would not have been a failure.

The scene of the swing between Paul and Miriam reverberates with sexual overtones: She felt the accuracy with which he caught her, exactly at the right moment, and the exactly proportionate strength of his thrust, and she was afraid. Down to her bowels went the hot wave of fear. She was in his hands. Again, firm and inevitable came the thrust at the right moment. She gripped the rope, almost swooning. (S&L 188)

On the other hand this scene may be seen as a pointer to the nervousness of a young girl coming in physical contact with a young boy for the first time. Miriam is shy and timid, and is nervous in talking to Paul and when he touches her to swing her forward, she fears. She had come there to show the swing to him, to gain his attention, but when she fully gets it, she begins to fear it. This scene cannot be certainly then, taken as an indicator of her sexual frigidity. There were many other things in Miriam's nature which led to her sexual coldness.

Even a small thing as jumping over a stile could make Miriam lose her mind. On the one hand she was so nervous and on the other there was a storm of anger in her due to her incapability to do something in the world. She wanted to be different and wanted to be recognized by the world. In some ways Miriam can be compared to Mrs. Morel in her desire to learn more, and break the gender's limitations that society had imposed on her. Mrs. Morel's jealousy of Miriam, is therefore not only a product of her ever-present hatred for any girl who shows an interest in one of her sons, the fact is that Mrs. Morel envies Miriam's independence which she herself had forsaken for a family. Miriam gave Paul, a rare kind of support, which his mother was unable to offer. A born introvert, Miriam very rarely talks with any other boy except Paul. Paul's family members and friends feel repulsed by Miriam, due to her introvert nature and also because she was too intellectual and other worldly even to know how to hold an ordinary conversation. She is averse to the simple and normal joys of living. Her life is an extreme of agony or ecstasy. This lack of normalcy and plain fun is one of the things which Paul hates most about her.

In her outward appearance Miriam had made herself look so pure that Paul could not think of physically ever loving her. Sometimes in hidden undertones she offered her other kind of love to him but her words and appearances could not match and he could not even dare to kiss her. She had made her feelings regarding Paul very complex. It had become more or less a tug of war, each pulling the other to oneself, neither able to live together, nor apart.

Paul had begun to feel, that she wanted the soul out of his body, and not him. All his strength and energy she drew into herself through some channel which united them. "She did not want to meet him, so that there were two of them, man and woman together. She wanted to draw all of him into her" (S&L 239). But still Miriam was his inspiration. When he talked about his work with Miriam it began to take form. "All his passion, all his wild blood, went into his intercourse with her, when he talked and conceived his work. She brought forth to him his imaginations"(S&L 249). Lawrence has used explicit sexual tones in these lines thereby showing the young man's passion that Paul had for Miriam, and due to this even plain words were like love-making for them, and her bringing forth to him his imagination was like her giving birth to his child i.e. his work through this intercourse.

Miriam wants everything to shower its love on her, and this beggar like quality in her nature, irritates Paul. Perhaps it was Paul who had really understood Miriam's real nature. She has never got love in her life and it has created a sort of vacuum in her life. She has now unconsciously started forcing things, flowers, etc anything she came in contact with to give their love to her.

According to psychologist Erich Fromm's theory, Miriam can be said to have a receptive orientation towards love. Like a receptive person she feels herself inadequate to obtain what she wants i.e. Paul's love. So she hopes to receive his love by submitting to his every desire. "One who has a receptive orientation to life cannot truly love, and in fact cannot even be an appropriate object of love"(Dicaprio 447). She also has a hoarding orientation because she tends to keep what she has and at the same time is suspicious of trying anything that is new and known (can be used in the context of her fear of sexual relations with Paul). She has built up a wall between herself and the outside world and lives mostly in her dream

world. “Often the hoarding person’s life is permeated by a fear of losing what he has – a desperate attempt to bring about security, order, and control” (Dicaprio 448).

Miriam cannot acknowledge to herself whether she wants Paul or not. She feels afraid if she wanted him for herself, for that meant that she wants him sexually. How could she do it, want Paul as a lover? She feels ashamed of herself thinking that if Paul knew she wants him sexually, this will be an embarrassment. She loves him and wants him, but cannot bring herself to acknowledge that she desired him that way. Religious as she was, she prays to God, “O Lord, let me not love Paul Morel, keep me from loving him, if I ought not to love him” (S&L 212). Then in an instant her heart tells her that how it could be wrong to love Paul if love was God’s gift. But still she feels ashamed because she wants Paul in the other way and not in sort of prayer and this is wrong for she has been taught to abhor sexuality. Her heart is in conflict. She desires one thing, but it should not happen. It is then that she decides that she will sacrifice her feelings, and will not love him sexually but religiously, as if in a prayer.

But still she cannot control herself and sometimes slips her arm timidly into his. This causes a conflict in him for he too was controlling his emotions for her. In this way it can be said that Miriam had made a hell of Paul’s life and her own too because of her thinking and due to her decision of sacrificing her love. Miriam idealizes love to purify it from “the faintest suggestion of such intercourse”(S&L 201). Otherwise she felt as if her whole soul coiled into “knots of shame”(S&L 212). She prays “make me love him-as Christ would, who died for the souls of men” (S&L 212). All this prepares us for the ultimate failure, when Paul goes back to Miriam to try to break down her spirituality through a physical consummation, and achieves, instead only a ritual slaughter:

Her big brown eyes were watching him, still and resigned and loving; she lay as if she had given herself up to sacrifice: there was her body for him; but the look at the back of her eyes, like a creature awaiting immolation, arrested him, and all his blood fell back ...It is the dead hand of the mother once more upon Miriam: Mother said to me: There is one thing in marriage that is always dreadful, but you have to bear it. And I believed it. (S&L 355)

At the bottom of her heart, Miriam knows what she is doing is wrong for Paul and for her relation. She would not be able to keep him for her whole life, if she did not give herself to his love the way he wanted. She knows him so well, as to know what is going inside him and that things were to go wrong if she did not loosen her hard-willed emotions. There is something lacking in her that Paul wanted.

When Miriam makes Paul meet Clara, she thinks that he was only hers, even if they were not together; he could not love someone else. Also she was wrong in her thinking that Paul would overcome his sexual desire for anyone and it would thus be finally proved that he was hers only. This was why she made him meet Clara. But time was to prove her wrong! If she failed in her test with Paul, Paul failed his.

Miriam could see him getting intimate with Clara and ignoring her. She feels hurt at this, even Paul feels hurt, but in over-refining his spirit over the sexual aspect it was Miriam who was doing both of them wrong.

Miriam does suffer. She is not built up completely as a character and we tend to see the unfinished, rather bitter side of her. She was actually further ahead, in her growing up, than Paul. Later when Paul is involved with Clara Dawes, the girl says to Paul: 'It's so unjust...the man does as he likes....' (Dix 31)

She is referring to the gossip about Clara, who has left her husband and is now living as a married woman on her own. Miriam sees the social injustice, if Paul does not. He is still a crass young man, wondering why women do not get on with things, instead of grumbling. Miriam knows why:

'Then let the woman also,' he said.

'How can she? And if she does, look at her position.'

'What of it?'

'Why its impossible! You don't understand what a woman forfeits.' (Dix 31)

When Miriam was 21, Paul wrote her a letter telling her that she is a nun and all he could give her was what a mystic monk would give a mystic nun. This letter of Paul hurts Miriam as nothing has hurt her ever before and she replies to him saying: "Our intimacy would have been all beautiful but for one little mistake," she quoted "was the mistake mine?" (S&L 308)

Now at this point a question arises in one's mind, as to why was Miriam trying to shift the blame? Did she again want to gain Paul's sympathy and win him back? Previously it had been her mother, who had taught her that sex was a burden, but now she had grown up and could decide for herself, what she wanted!

But she was still sticking to the old pre-set notion of her mind, so why did she ask Paul 'was the mistake mine?' Did she want that Paul forcibly take her, so that she would not suffer the blame of doing such a thing and it could be shown that Paul wanted physical relations and not she, whereas the truth was that she also desired him in the same way as he desired her, and the desire had been in her long before it had come in Paul!

Her lament, "it has been one long battle between us-you fighting away from me," recall Mrs. Morel's resentful cry that Paul is growing away from her, indeed discarding her for Miriam. But Miriam is also "normal" enough to want her lover to behave like a responsible adult: she regrets that he is "not a man"; and her words "infant" and "child" score Paul's irrational egoism. (Farr 11)

It is Clara, who being a woman herself, understands what Miriam has been hiding from herself and sends Paul back to her. When Paul comes back to Miriam she lets him love her, but inside in her heart of hearts she knows that he will find no satisfaction in her and eventually will go away, again. She then prepares herself for the ultimate sacrifice: There was something divine in it; then she would submit, religiously, to the sacrifice. He should have her. And at the thought her whole body clenched itself involuntarily, hard, as if against something; but life forced her through this gate of suffering, too, and she would submit. At any rate, it would give him what he wanted, which was deepest wish. She brooded and brooded herself towards accepting him. (S&L 347)

When at last Paul makes love to her, she accepts him and gives herself up as if to a sacrifice, she lay as if she had given herself up to sacrifice: there was her body for him; but the look at the back of her eyes, like a creature awaiting immolation, arrested him, and

all his blood fell back....She only realized that she was doing something for himbecause she loved him so much. (S&L 354)

All her mother's teaching and conservative values came out after their love-making, which eventually leads to the end of the relation. The way Miriam fingers Paul's body makes one feel that she desires him, but when he loves her, she is unable to respond and even when she responds, it is as if in a sacrifice. It could have been better if she had sacrificed her love altogether than let it end in such a bitter way!

But in breaking off with Paul, Miriam comes face to face with some truths about herself which till now she had not acknowledged even to herself, but which had been the root cause of her behaviour:

She knew she felt in a sort of bondage to him, which she hated because she could not control it. She had hated her love for him, from the moment it grew too strong for her. And deep down she had hated him because she loved him and he dominated her. She had resisted his domination. She had fought to keep herself free of him in the last issue. And she was free of him, in the last issue. And she was free of him, even more than he of her. (S&L 362)

The problem with Miriam was that her womanly physical desires were always in conflict with her religious notions, one side of her was driven towards Paul and the other resisted it:

... the chief "split" between Paul and Miriam comes from the abstract nature of their love, and not from the mother's hold upon the young man's soul. And the final responsibility for this split belongs with Miriam She decides to submit herself religiously, as if to a sacrifice. Even as their love-making becomes more frequent, she continues to clench herself for the "sacrifice" as she had clenched herself on the swing in earlier days Miriam frigidity is rooted in her own nature and not in mere ignorance of sex. Her purity is nullity rather than innocence; she lacks real warmth ... she has strength of will to spare. She endures Paul's insults, his cruel probing, his wrongheaded arguments; she lets him go, time and again, out of the conviction that she holds the ultimate key to his soul. And she does have the ability to stimulate him in his work, to arouse his own spiritual nature to fever pitch, and to serve as the necessary "threshing floor" for his ideas. (Farr 54-55)

Miriam's youth bloomed only for Paul and after he leaves her a sort of stiffness, woodenness comes upon her. After his mother's death, Paul once again comes back to Miriam, and she is still there ready to sacrifice herself to him, but again wants him to take her, so that the responsibility would be his. Paul does not want this, so they finally break-up this time, with again Miriam being the root cause of this failure:

... she felt that now he lay at her mercy. If she could rise, take him, put her arms round him, and say, 'you are mine,' then he would leave himself to her. But dare she? She could easily sacrifice herself. But dare she assert herself? She was aware of his dark-clothed, slender body, that seemed one stroke of life, sprawled in the chair close to her. But no; she dared not put her arms round it, take it up, and say, 'it is mine, this body. Leave it to me.' And she wanted to. It called to all her woman's

instinct. But she crouched, and dared not. She was afraid he would not let her. She was afraid it was too much. It lay there, his body, abandoned. She knew she ought to take it up and claim it, and claim every right to it. But-could she do it? Her impotence before him, before the strong demand of some unknown thing in him, was her extremity. Her hands fluttered; she half lifted her head.

Her eyes, shuddering, appealing, gone almost distracted, pleaded to him suddenly. His heart caught with pity. He took her hands drew her to him, and comforted her. ‘Will you have me, to marry me?’ he said, very low.

Oh, why did not he take her? Her very soul belonged to him. Now he was straining her again. It was too much for her He wanted something else. She pleaded to him with all her love not to make it her choice. She could not cope with it, with him, she knew not with that....It was the end between them. She could not take him and relieve him of the responsibility of him. She could only sacrifice herself to him – sacrifice herself everyday, gladly. And that he did not want. (S&L 507-8)

Miriam’s sexual failure is all due to her own emotional/mental setup, because it is she who is unable to free herself in any simple, pleasure giving moment. Her body is always tense and lifeless, her intense spirituality is always afraid of anything that is physical.

Thus Miriam is a nun, in Paul’s eyes, who would reduce the world to a nunnery garden: on the one hand, her excessive spirituality smothers his spirit; on the other, it destroys her own capacity to respond, sympathetically, to his newly awakened need for sensual love. And so she defeats herself in the struggle for Paul’s heart, by thwarting his deep male instinct to be loved, impersonally, as a man, rather than as a mind or soul or personality. (Farr 55-6)

Viewed in terms of psychologist Henry Murray’s list of needs, Miriam has a need for deference, nurturance, abasement, blamavoidance and infavoidance. According to her deference, Miriam has always accepted a subordinate position in her relationship with Paul. She has always done what he has asked her to and has always tried to please him. This quality can also be said to have come in her from her mother, who also did everything according to her husband’s and son’s needs. Miriam’s nurturing need shows her attitude of care towards others. When Paul is ill she feels how nice it would be if she could mother him. The same attitude is towards her younger brother and flowers, though it is in excess, and hence counterproductive. In reality Miriam has lots of love in her, which she wants to give to others. She herself yearns for lots of love, which she wants to accomplish by doling out love and care to others.

The individual who has a need for abasement may passively accept criticism, blame, or punishment; he submits without a struggle to the demands of others; he gives up easily and surrenders and resigns himself to fate; he may readily admit his mistakes and failings and take defeat as a matter of course; he may seek out those to whom he can confess his sins, he wallows in self-criticism; he seeks and even enjoys pain, punishment, and hurt from others. The element of self-depreciation is always present in the person who has a need for abasement... Some of the emotions that go along with the need for abasement are guilt, shame,

depression, helplessness, and despair. A self-abasing person is described as meek, humble, service, submissive, spineless. (Dicaprio 213-14)

This character trait fits Miriam perfectly. Mrs. Morel, Annie and others also, leave no occasion to humiliate her, but still she takes in everything, without saying anything. Even when Paul says so much to her, she does not retaliate in any way:

The old feeling that she was to be a sacrifice to this love, which she had had when she prayed was mingled in all her emotions. She did not at the bottom believe she ever would have him. She did not believe in herself primarily; doubted whether she could ever be what he would demand of her. Certainly she never saw herself living happily through a lifetime with him. She saw tragedy, sorrow, and sacrifice ahead. And in sacrifice she was proud, in renunciation she was strong, for she did not trust herself to support everyday life. She was prepared for the big things and the deep things, like tragedy. (S&L 265)

Miriam has a need for blamavoidance, (according to Henry Murray's list of needs) because she has a tendency to live with people who have the power to judge her conduct, like, for example, Paul and her mother, Mrs. Leivers. She also can be said to have infavoidance needs, (according to Henry Murray's list of needs) because she tries to avoid humiliation, embarrassing situations, and belittlement from others, tries to quit situations that were threatening to her, rejects anything that is new to her because of her fear of failing (like in her relationship with Paul), feels inferior about herself, lacks self-confidence due to which she feels unworthy. "After calling for Paul regularly during the whole spring, a number of trifling incidents and tiny insults from his family awakened her to their attitude towards her, and she decided to go no more" (S&L 213).

According to psychologist Adler's theoretical formulations, Miriam may be classified as a person of melancholic temperament. She is always worried about something and keeps brooding. She also lacks self-confidence and does not have the courage to take any risks. She is even afraid to swing on the swing and is afraid of letting the hen peck grains from her hands. She is not a social interacter and her social circle is limited to a few persons. Miriam can be said to be a gastric kind of personality according to Franz Alexander classification, because she has a tendency to "receive, to take in" (Wolman 329).

According to psychologist Erich Fromm's classification, Miriam can be said to be symbiotically related to the world, due to which she is dependent on others for fulfilling even the smallest wishes of her life, especially on Paul. She tries to swallow everyone in her love, be it Paul, her younger brother or flowers and plants.

Miriam can also be classified as hetaira and medium type of woman in her positive aspects. This is evident from the way Paul's perception of his art is affected by his relationship and interaction with Miriam:

There was for him the most intense pleasure in talking about his work to Miriam. All his passion, all his wild blood, went into this intercourse with her, when he talked and conceived his work. She brought forth to him his imaginations. (S&L 249)

Miriam in real life was Jessie Chambers, Lawrence's childhood friend and lover. The character even though independent in itself is yet not independent enough, for it has been

portrayed in the light of what Mrs. Morel (Lawrence) and Paul (Lawrence) see it. Miriam desires so much in life, yet she wants everything to come her way, as if in her dream, thereby fulfilling her fantasies. She does have an all absorbing personality, for she has not got love and attention from her family, which has made her a parasite. In a sense Lawrence is cruel towards her because of her desire (as he sees it) to absorb the other person's individual. Her sexual failure can be said to be due to her emotional make-up and what her mother has taught her, but still all the blame cannot be attributed to her, because she has been brought up in a Victorian set-up and her thinking that pre-marital sex is wrong is rooted in her upbringing.

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