

Emotional Enmeshment and Substitute Characters in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*: A Family System and Attachment Theory Perspectives

Rumana Chowdhury

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature

Premier University, Chittagong

chy.rmn@gmail.com

&

Shahnaz Parvin

Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature

Premier University, Chittagong.

sp_ctg@yahoo.com

Abstract:

In many studies of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Freudian interpretations, particularly the Oedipus Complex, are applied to the characters and their relationships. However, the novel portrays how emotional enmeshment reshapes intimate relationships and preserves certain character replacements and substitutes, with marital dysfunction as a major issue. Gertrude Morel is the novel's central character, whose emotional reliance on her sons displaces conjugal dissatisfaction, producing distorted familial boundaries and fostering dependency structures. Drawing on qualitative research, the study seeks to identify the writer's view that upholds the picture of the industrial and class tensions of early twentieth-century Nottinghamshire. The clash between Gertrude's intellectual and Puritan heritage and Moral's working-class sensuousness worsens emotional starvation and deepens maternal attachment. The study is grounded in Dr Murray Bowen's (1950) Family Systems Theory (FST) and in Attachment Theory, as articulated by Janusz Koezack (1878-1941). The study aims to reveal how emotional enmeshment alters intimate relationships and preserves certain character replacements and substitutes.

Keywords: Emotional enmeshment, Substitution, Replacement, Marital dysfunction.

Introduction:

In human relationships, significant bonds form among parents and children, married partners, and siblings, defining particular emotional and physical closeness. In response, if any of these bonds grow distant, the remaining connections become sources of dependence on the other. Moreover, it is said that litterateurs, consciously or subconsciously, portray their lives or real-life experiences through their literary reflections. All of D. H. Lawrence's (1885-1930) novels are more or less autobiographical in the sense that they deal with the events and emotions of his own life. However, *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is the most autobiographical of his novels. Here, he has mirrored his own life with utmost fidelity. While writing this novel, he chose characters from his own life, and that's why the parents in the novel closely resemble his own parents. Miriam, Paul's beloved in the novel, is the real lover of Jassy Chamber, and the main character, Paul, is Lawrence himself. These characters may also be called substitute and replacement characters. In this novel, to briefly discuss the substitute characters, it is important to focus on the relationships among the characters, specifically the husband-wife and mother-son relationships.

When discussing the text's title, many researchers interpret the mother-son relationship through the lens of the mother and son as lovers. Hence, motherly feelings can also be intensified by a dysfunctional parent-child or conjugal relationship. According to Bowen, the Family System Theory (FST) postulates two opposing basic life forces: "One is a built-in life growth force toward individuality and the differentiation of a separate 'self', and the other an equally intense emotional closeness" (Bowen, 1978, p.424). These two forces, essential for human family survival, create tensions in relationships, as is evident in the focus on tormented conjugal relations and the unusual attachment in mother-son relationships.

Background of the Study:

Although D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* has long been a subject of literary criticism and psychoanalysis, scholars offer varying interpretations of the novel's relationship to Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex.

Contemporary scholarship often emphasizes emotional enmeshment, in which boundaries within family relationships blur or become overly dependent, leading to psychological issues in male-female relationships. Sofe Ahmed (2012) critically evaluates Freudian theory, arguing that the mother-son bond is a partial, individual outcome of unsuccessful marital connections rather than a universal biological stage. Though twentieth-century researchers have interpreted the novel through the lens of the Oedipus Complex, it has become clear over time that *Sons and Lovers* not only dramatizes universal biological phenomena but also conducts a psychological autopsy of a dysfunctional marriage. The relationship first develops between Gertrude Morel and William, and then between Gertrude Morel and Paul, which can be considered a compensatory mechanism for a partial outcome of the mother's failed conjugal relationship.

An analysis of the industrial and social class conflict in early 20th-century Nottinghamshire can help explain the novel's emotional enmeshment. Mr. and Mrs. Morel embody the clash of classes and temperaments. Gertrude belongs to a refined, intellectual, and Puritan background, whereas Morel comes from a working-class coal-miner background and is more sensuous, earthy, and ultimately volatile. The couple's romantic vivacity is corroded by poverty and alcoholism, which instigate emotional starvation in Gertrude's mind. Under these circumstances, the suffering soul tries to navigate a healthy psychological ecosystem toward the fulfilment of life through channels such as career, social connections, or personal hobbies. Hence, restricted by the patriarchal structures of Gertrude's time, she redirects her life force into her sons.

Though technically a work of fiction, the novel substitutes the Morel family for the Lawrence family, mapping the real family's psychology onto the fiction. The volatile marriage of Gertrude Morel and Mr. Morel, Lawrence's parents, Walter Morel and Lydia Beardsall, mirrors the central conflict of the Morels. Arthur was a coal miner, barely literate, who preferred the pub to the parlour. In contrast, Lydia was a schoolteacher from a middle-class background who, as Gertrude Morel considered 'beneath' her, gradually sought emotional and intellectual vindication through her sons. William Morel is the replacement for Ernest Lawrence, and both sons were objects of intense

devotion from their mothers. The sudden death of the sons devastated the family and shifted the mother's dependency onto the younger son. Again, Paul represents Lawrence's role, who struggled to balance his sensitive soul with the overwhelming influence of his mother. Paul's love life with Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes mirrors that of Jessie Chambers and Alice Dax. Like Miriam, Jessie was the childhood sweetheart who also helped revise the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*, but their relationship later suffered, creating the 'spiritual vs physical' tension between Paul and Miriam, as in the real-life relationship. Furthermore, Clara Dawes serves as the substitute for Alice Dax, who represents the physical awakening that his mother and childhood friend cannot provide. As "Miriam was impatient of men. It took so little to amuse them-even Paul" (Lawrence, ed. Mukherjee, 2023, p. 279), whereas Clara looked at Paul "heavily, dumbly, and laid her head on his shoulder" (Lawrence, ed. Mukherjee, 2023, p. 366). Thus, twenty-five-year-old Paul achieves fulfilment of his manhood, shifting from his spiritual bond with Miriam to physical nearness with Clara.

Research methodology:

To conduct the literary study, a qualitative research methodology has been followed, including an in-depth analysis of the characters and relationships. As the discussion proceeds towards the goal of identifying family system theory and attachment theory, the passages focus on the characters' correspondence and behaviour as they align with the theoretical components. Regarding interpretive procedures, the researchers immersed themselves in the collected texts and articles to understand the novelist's and critics' perspectives, underlying assumptions, and the historical and cultural context in which they wrote and analysed. The theories were operationalised by identifying the fundamental purposes of human behaviour through the lens of individual connectivities. This also refers to understanding family members' regular correspondence, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. The primary tool used here is a close study of the novel's descriptive narrative, with a detailed exploration of the themes and issues connected to the characters, as well as a good understanding of the author's viewpoints. For evaluation purposes, this

article uses several books by critics, topic-related documents, library sources, and online references.

Theoretical framework:

The study's theoretical framework is grounded in the idea of 'Beyond Freud,' which refers to the evolution of psychoanalytic theory. While Freud emphasizes biological drives and sexuality, this framework also describes social, interpersonal, and cultural influences. Modern psychoanalytic thought is more concerned with relational psychoanalysis, focusing on relationships, developmental psychology, and personality styles. Many Neo-Freudian thinkers, such as Alfred Adler (1927), Karen Horney (1939), and Erik Erikson (1968), emphasize the social environment, culture, and interpersonal relationships in shaping personality and relationships. Theorists like Melanie Klein (1920-1940s) and Donald Winnicott (1940s and 1950s) established the idea of Object Relations Theory, which showed that early relationships with caregivers play a significant role in shaping a person's personality and internal world. Moving away from biological endowments, as in Freudian theory, they believe that human psychology is driven by a need for personal relationships rather than by biological drives alone.

Yet, in analyzing Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*, if the study moves away from the Freudian Oedipus Complex to examine the relationships between the mother and the sons, Family Systems Theory (FST) can be explored. As a pioneer of the FST theory, Dr. Murray Bowen (1950) explored families as emotional units rather than just individuals, focusing on anxiety management, triangulation, and differentiation as interlocking principles of family relationships. According to the theory, the family is the emotional unit in which a change in one relationship affects all other relationships, as we can see in the novel, where the husband-wife interdependence shifts to the mother-son relationships, and the gap in spiritual and physical attachment becomes the cause of the shift toward love life. The mechanism the characters use to resolve anxiety with their partners or other relations is by cutting off emotional contact. Moreover, the 'triangulation' of William or Paul between their parents can be considered a classic example of dysfunctional family relationships. Whenever tension arises in the conjugal attachment, Paul, the third person, is pulled in to stabilize the Gertrude-Walter relationship.

However, the tension is relieved at the cost of the child's psychological upheavals in his love life with Miriam and Clara. Therefore, the study aims to investigate the emotional entanglement that has created replacement relationships, both through projecting the writer's biography and through the characters' shifting of emotional dependency among the couple, parental roles, or romantic relations.

Literature Review:

Challenges in emotional regulation reduce emotional dependence on a partner, which, in turn, accelerates emotional attachment to children with that partner. Marital emotional detachment promotes intolerance between partners, leading to negative feelings. Generally, a person's personality develops through attachment to their parents. Children grow up since birth; the question is, what happens when one parent becomes more dependent on the child or children than the other parent does? Attachment theory examines this practice in a context where "attachment has become almost shorthand to signal the importance of relationships" (Smith et al. 2017, p. 2). Although emotional attachment is often viewed through the lens of the Oedipus Complex, where the failure of the marriage creates a vacuum that the sons are forced to fill, in Gertrude Morel's case, the 'attachment theory' can also be implemented in this case. The term 'attachment theory' was first coined by Polish social pedagogue Janusz Koezack (1878-1942) and first elaborated theoretically by child psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. Bowlby referred to "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment" (Bowlby, 1951, p.4). The usual thought of Mrs. Morel's attachment to their sons as romantic partners, as Lawrence mentions, "Already William was a lover to her" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 41), is a Freudian complex-based thought. The emotional bond between the mother and sons can also be viewed through the lens of attachment, given the conjugal detachment of Mr. and Mrs. Morel.

Research by psychologists Sam Osherson, Dan Kiley, and Ken Druck; psychotherapist Anne Grizzle; and researchers Carole Klein and Shere Hite suggests that "the majority of men in this culture have unresolved

problems concerning their mother” (Gurien, 1994, p. 5). As shown in the novel, Mrs. Morel channels all her fluid dreams, intellectual ambitions, and emotional intimacy into her sons, “As she had no life of her own, but was busy from morning till night cleaning, cooking, nursing, and sewing, she had to put her own living aside, put it in the bank, as it were, of her children” (Lawrence, 2023, p.40-41). Over time, William and Paul, the infants, become men in her life who actually listen to her and uphold all the values she believes in, as her “thought of being the mother of men was warming to her heart” (Lawrence, 2023, p.39).

The mother's emotional burden causes Paul to hate his father. He is always aware of his mother's feelings. He strongly dislikes his father, along with his mother, as the father continues to bully them and remains drunk most of the time. His mother's swollen, discolored eyes from Morel's misconduct bring the boys closer to her; even William once considered fighting with his father for the sake of the mother's constant humiliation. The departure of Morel from home makes the children happy, and Paul prays very often, “Lord, let my father die” (Lawrence, 2023, p.83). The negligence, abuse, and abandonment of Mr. Morel to Mrs. Morel has psychological impacts on the sons. Whatever the sources, the mother's problem invades the sons' individuation. Paul, as her son, lives out his adulthood as he rarely concentrates on his problems and deals with them “in a fog of low self-image, relationship anxieties, and family tension” (Gurian, 1994, p. 6). Gurian finds that, “Mother-son issues that arise in boys and later affect a son's adult self-image and relationships are hard to admit, hard to imagine, and hard to define” (Gurian, 1994, p.6). The objective of a healthy family life is to ignite the children's individuation. In adulthood, the son's individuation leads him to confront his love life. However, in this novel, Mrs. Morel's pervasive influence casts her as a ‘third party’ in Paul's every romantic encounter, serving as a psychological barrier. Paul, as a son and lover, splits between a sense of responsibility for his mother's spiritual or intellectual love and romantic as well as physical love for Miriam and Clara.

Sari discussed the relationship between a man and a woman, their daily tussle in real life, and the novelist's aim to “challenge and expose the constructive and oppressive cultural norms of modern culture” (Sari, 2014,

p.5). Though the novel's problem begins with the routine conflicts of a middle-class couple, it gradually "enlarge, enrich, and enlightens the readers' point of views with its insights and honesty of its vision" (Sari, 2014, p.5) by exploring the psychological and social aspects of life that shape human relationships.

For analysing *Sons and Lovers*, Freudian 'Oedipus Complex' has attracted more attention from many researchers since the time of literary interpretation. Theories such as "Attachment Theory" and "Family System Theory" stand in contrast to the Oedipus complex between the mother and the sons, in that the attachment between them grows due to the deprivation of the conjugal relationship. Moreover, the longitudinal study of marital couples shows that family system theory strongly determines the interplay of emotion and intellect in shaping the family pattern (Brown & Errington, 2004, p. 149).

Research Gap:

After reviewing the literature, it is clear that the mother-son relationship cannot be fully explained by the Freudian lens of opposite-sex attraction alone. It also involves perspectives such as emotional imprinting, in which patterns of attachment and dependency transfer from the partner to the son. This aspect is difficult to acknowledge, conceptualise, and define with care. Hence, in many cases, when emotional dependency on partners decreases, it often shifts towards children. Maternal attachment does not necessarily evolve alongside physical attraction to the opposite gender. In a typical family system, emotional attachment deeply shapes the characters' relationships. Emotional regulation helps reduce reliance on a partner, yet many men in the western cultural context continue to struggle with unresolved issues related to their mothers. Based on this idea, the study seeks to investigate emotional enmeshment and substitute characters in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, reflecting interpretations from Family System and Attachment Theory perspectives.

Discussion:

Emotional enmeshment occurs when a relationship parameter is characterized by personal boundaries being replaced by an inextricable emotional link between two or more people. Gertrude sees her two sons as extensions of her ego rather than as separate identities. She invests herself in them in such a manner that their success speaks of her triumphs, and their interests become her fixations. Again, the children feel reflexive and overwhelming responsibilities towards the mother's happiness, which, in turn sow the seed of replacement character syndrome.

Let's discuss the relationship between William, her eldest son, and Mrs. Morel. Because of the disturbing relationship between her and her husband, Mr. Morel, Mrs. Morel clings to William. As William grows into a young man, he begins to take his father's place and becomes almost her sweetheart. That is why she becomes very sensitive about his relationships with other women. Though she is cautious about his becoming a dancer like Mrs. Morel, she does not want to see any girl dancing with William. When William leaves his family for a job, his departure creates a mixture of pain and pleasure in Mrs. Morel, as clearly described in chapter three: "She loved him so much! More than that, she hoped in him so much. Almost she lived by him...now he was going slowly. She felt almost as if he were going as well as out of his heart" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 72-73).

The more Mr. Morel develops a bitter relationship with Mrs. Morel, the closer William becomes to his mother's heart, almost like a partner. That is why we find William seeking Mrs. Morel in Lily Weston, his beloved. Ironically, he finds that she is just the opposite of Mrs. Morel. This discovery puts William in a frustrating relationship with his beloved, Lily. As a result, like his parents, Lily's relationship with him becomes bitter, cold, and lifeless. It may also be said that the intellectual taste William receives from his mother is not found in Lily. There is doubt whether he will find a substitute in any other woman at all, as he is unconsciously and psychologically obsessed with his mother. This might be called mother fixation: his mind is fixed on his mother and cannot be placed elsewhere.

Now, an argument arises about how the love for a mother can be confused with the love for the beloved. The expression for the two feelings is quite different. Yet William is very confused and fails to distinguish between

these two kinds of love. Here, 'Oedipus Complex' can be perceived as working in the absence of knowledge that springs from the distressing disturbance of a child's relation to his parents. William has become psychoneurotic due to the disturbed relationship between his parents. As a result, he takes his mother's side. It is said that most of the time, sons take their mother's side. William, being no exception, loves his mother as much as he hates his father. His love for his mother extends to nearly covering the wound the father had left in his mother. He is close to becoming a substitute for the father in response to the distinct psychological support. This is obviously an unconscious feeling. However, the readers are very clear about his psychological attachment towards his mother through his failure to love truly any other woman besides his mother. After William's death, Paul takes the place of his brother dramatically through pneumonia, which has brought the mother and the younger son together.

Though Gertrude and Walter were closely tied by love, a wall gradually grew between them, leaving Mrs. Morel frustrated and compelling her to hold on to Paul after William's death. She began to rely on him as a partner relies on her husband. Paul also began to think of himself as the head of their family, even though their father was present and alive. Paul also joyfully played the role of the head of the house, and this became clear when he said, "I'm the man in the house now" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 112).

Whether Lawrence had been influenced by the Freudian 'Oedipus Complex', believing a son's sexual desire for his mother and the resulting conflict with the father, or critiques of *Sons and Lovers* have brought forth the idea, is a matter of investigation regarding the substitution and replacement of dependency in the relationships. The Oedipus complex is central not only to the novel *Sons and Lovers* but also to his life history.

In 1910, while his mother Lydia Lawrence was dying, Lawrence wrote to his friend Rachel Annand Taylor describing the unusually intense bond he shared with his mother, calling it "we have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love..." (Lawrence, 1981, p. 69). This personal communication is a key biographical source for understanding the emotional foundation of the novel *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence admitted that his

relationship with his mother was so close it resembled marital love, and he acknowledged that this attachment had made him “abnormal” in some respects. This confession directly influenced the themes of *Sons and Lovers*, where Paul Morel’s bond with his mother Gertrude dominates his emotional life and relationships.

Actually, Lawrence was a victim of a deep-seated Oedipus attraction. His mother, Lydia Lawrence, had a very strong hold on him, and he treated her also like a lover. Middleton Murray, Lawrence’s friend, has emphasized that because of this mother fixation, Lawrence was unable to make a happy emotional adjustment with another woman in his life. That is why we find Lawrence cannot help but reflect himself in Paul. Thus, like Lawrence, we find a deep bondage between Paul and Mrs. Morel. Mrs. Morel, dissatisfied with her husband, like Lawrence’s mother, turns to her sons for emotional fulfillment, making them husband substitutes, if not physically. This affection, which she should have reserved for her husband, is first transferred to William, her eldest son, and then to Paul, her third child.

Paul’s childhood is laced with incidents that show his possessive love for his mother and hers for him. In fact, throughout the second half of the novel, his relationship with his mother takes on the character of a husband-substitute. His admiration for his mother knows no bounds; her presence is absorbing always. He feels happy when he is alone with her. At the same time, he hates his father’s presence in the house:

“make him stop drinking,” He prayed every night. “Lord, let my father die”, he prayed very often, ‘Let him not be killed at pit,’ he prayed, when, when, after tea, the father did not come home from work. (Lawrence, 2023, p.79)

When Paul becomes a painter, he uses his painting as a means of communicating, chiefly with women, and he likes to paint especially for his mother that pleases his mother. As a result, he fails to fulfill the mother’s wish to become a real artist or a middle-class man away from the low-class miners. The potential that Mrs. Morel had seen in Paul is totally destroyed by her possession over her son. During Paul’s initial difficulties in finding a job, he seems completely dependent upon his mother’s strength and conviction. After

getting a job, they spent a fine noon in Nottingham. It seems that they are not mother and son, rather they are husband and wife. Mrs. Morel fully depends on her son, just like a wife whose husband has recently gotten a job. Her eagerness for Paul's arrival is betrayed through the lines:

She waited for his coming home in the evening, and then she unburned herself of all she had pondered, or of all that had occurred to her during the day. He sat and listened with his earnestness. The two shared lives. (Lawrence, 2023, p.144)

The Oedipal relationship between them destroys Paul's capacity to love and form emotional relationships with other women. That's why we find that, though women like Miriam and Clara enter his life as his beloveds, Paul himself fails to continue a romantic relationship with them. At first, when Miriam enters his life, Mrs. Morel does not like it, as she thinks Miriam is just taking her son away from her. She hates Paul's spending time with Miriam. Her comments prove that her intense yet unnatural relation with her son: "Yes, I know it well, I am old. And therefore, I may stand aside, I have nothing more to do with you. You only want me to wait on you- the rest is for Miriam" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 261).

In chapter VII of the novel, Lawrence writes in detail about how a deep love grows between Paul and Miriam. Mrs. Morel's resentment of Miriam is further expressed in this chapter: "She watched Paul growing irritable, priggish, and melancholic. For this, she puts the blame on Miriam." (Lawrence, 2023, p. 221). Therefore, Mrs. Morel is not ready to let Paul develop a relationship with any other woman. Though she tells Paul, "You haven't met the right woman," (Lawrence, 2023, p.222). when Paul expresses his grief over his fragile relationships with other women, we know that the real problem is not his failure to find the right girl; it is the mother's reluctance and possessiveness that always prevent him from having an actual relationship with a girl.

Paul leaves Miriam because he believes she will never satisfy his physical desires. He then turns to Clara for physical satisfaction. But her love seems inadequate as well, because she cannot satisfy his soul. In fact, it is Clara who

uses Paul as a substitute for her husband to satisfy her own physical desire in his absence. Hence, Paul becomes an easy victim because of his weakness toward his mother, and Miriam, though she fulfills his mental desire and satisfaction, fails to satisfy his physical needs. Paul remains an unsuccessful lover throughout his life because he fails to satisfy his thirst for love with Miriam and Clara. His Oedipal complex toward his mother probably prevents him from ever marrying. His speech with his mother in chapter xiii supports this truth:

...But no, mother. I even love Clara and I did Miriam; but to give myself to them in marriage, I couldn't. I couldn't belong to them. They seem to want me and I can't ever give to them. And I never shall...while you live (Lawrence, 2023, p. 427).

It is undeniable that Mrs. Morel replaces Paul in the husband's place. That is why she becomes nearly hysterical whenever she finds Paul with another woman. At one point, she even dares to reveal herself to Paul in an argument about Miriam: "...You know, Paul. I've never had a husband, not, really" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 262). Even after the mother's death, Paul fails to escape his mother's clutches and free his soul. At the mother's deathbed, he looks at her as his beloved, and it seems the corpse is not his mother's but his beloved's: "She lay like a maiden asleep...she would wake up. She would lift her eyelids. She was with him still. He bent and kissed her passionately" (Lawrence, 2023, p. 485).

Conclusion:

Although the study depicts intense mother-son bonding, the Oedipus Complex cannot be the sole explanation. In personal relationships, physical attraction is one of the crucial factors; yet, none can ignore the psychological attachment that might strengthen the familial bonding. Again, if any dependency emerges in the mother-son relationship, it is never a physical attachment like a lover-beloved; rather, according to Family Systems Theory (FST), it results from both physical and mental displacement within the husband-wife relationship. Paul's spiritual connections with Miriam and his fulfilment of physical desire with Clara are based on the novelist's real-life connections, which are renamed and presented in a literary manner. The

characters choose replacements to paint their thwarted dreams. This study seeks to present emotional enmeshment as the reason for replacement in the lives of the characters in the novel *Sons and Lovers*. By situating Lawrence's narrative within both psychoanalytic and systemic frameworks, the analysis underscores how unresolved maternal attachment shapes adult intimacy. Ultimately, this approach broadens our understanding of the novel as not only autobiographical fiction but also a profound exploration of intergenerational emotional patterns.

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