Part Three

An Ethics of Sexual Difference

Men and women should know that they cannot, absolutely, meet on earth. In the closest kiss, the dearest touch, there is the small gulf which is none the less complete because it is so narrow, so nearly non-existent.

--- D. H. Lawrence

The division into male and female is arbitrary, for the purpose of thought.

--- D. H. Lawrence

I think the absolutely contrary, whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine.

--- Emmanuel Levinas

Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through.

--- Luce Irigaray

The wholly other, who is not supposed to be marked by sexual difference, is found already to be marked by masculinity.

--- Jacques Derrida

The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise.

--- Jacques Derrida

The belief that “one is a woman” is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that “one is a man.”

--- Julia Kristeva
Chapter One

Feminist Ethics and the Question of Sexual Difference

One of the most useful dimensions of Levinas’s work to feminists is its contribution to a feminist ethics, which calls upon women to take up their definition of sexual difference by emphasizing the centrality of maternal thinking. Initiating his work with the notion of sexual difference, Levians nonetheless cannot get rid of gender stereotypes and he eventually reinstitutes sexual neutrality as the ethical paradigm. At the same time, a feminist ethics based on sexual difference is trapped in the double demand of enunciating simultaneously difference and equality. The interaction between ethics and politics, which takes into account the problem of justice, gives new impetus to the project of the feminist ethics.

I. Sexual Roles in Levinasian Ethics

As has been indicated above, Levinas, in his early works, develops the notion of alterity not in terms of the ethical relation, but under the heading of eros. In Existence and Existents, he says, “The plane of eros allows us to see that the other par excellence is the feminine” (EE 85). In Time and the Other, he specifically identifies alterity first and foremost with the feminine: “I think the absolutely contrary, whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the feminine” (TO 85). In this early account of the feminine, the decisive claim is that the feminine is not defined in terms of its opposition to the masculine; that is, it has its own positive essence and this positive essence is alterity.
Accordingly, Levinas’s conception of the feminine resists the framework of symmetry and opposition within which difference is usually thought. He appeals to sexual difference as that which runs up “against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides” (TO 85). Within this model, sexual difference is figured neither as contradiction nor as complementarity but as a fundamental alterity.

While in 1947 there is little hint of any clash of interest between eros and ethics, by 1961, with the publication of Totality and Infinity, the erotic relation has been relegated to the sidelines, due to its lack of ethical seriousness. The feminine is then reconceived either in the domestic realm of habitation, as a gentle discreet presence, or in the “vice of the clandestine” (TI 265), in the night of the erotic. On the one hand, Levinas designates the feminine presence as the gentleness of habitation which makes possible the ethical. Accomplishing the task of making the home more hospitable, the woman makes possible the “condition for recollection . . . and inhabitation” (TI 155). At the same time, the feminine is aligned with darkness and the nocturnal: “The feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face” (TI 260). The realm of the feminine is a dimension of uncertainty and postponement: “The essentially hidden throws itself towards the light, without becoming signification. Not nothingness—but what is not yet” (TI 256).

If eros still has a place in Totality and Infinity, it drops out of sight altogether in Otherwise than Being. The feminine here can be found only within the metaphor of maternity—“the gestation of the other in the same” (OB 75). The feminine, it seems, has already lost her carnality, which has been substituted for the unexciting and erotically purified trope of maternity:

The one-for-the-another has the form of sensibility or vulnerability, pure passivity or susceptibility, passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity in the same, the trope of the body animated by the soul,
Levinas uses the maternal figure as a symbol for the original asymmetry of the proto-ethical relation. The choice of the trope of maternity is an obvious one, given the already established cultural signification of the maternal as paradigmatic of care, nourishment, and responsibility. Beyond that, maternity becomes for Levians a metaphor for the suffering inherent in the ultimate responsibility of the one for the other as expressed through the tension between the Saying and the Said. In other words, what is crucial in terms of subjectivity is to avoid falling into the illusion of identity implied in taking up the position of the nominative “I” of the Said by remaining true to the accusative “me voice” – the maternal site of the subject of the ethical Saying.

The problematic gender implication of Levinas’s description of the eros initially aroused the ire of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, who accused Levinas of reducing women to passive objects of male sensual pleasure. But by the 1980s, due to a more nuanced appreciation of Levinas’s reversal of the normal hierarchy of self and other, the logic of his argument began to attract feminist supporters, among whom Irigaray is the one who takes the word of Levians very seriously. Levinas’s conception of alterity is central to Irigaray’s understanding of relations between sexually different subjects. In asking about the possibilities for women to be radically different or to be other in a radical way, Irigaray is influenced by Levinas’s critique of metaphysics as the systematic suppression of alterity. Philosophy has traditionally worked to efface sexual difference in its discourse as part of its power to reduce all others in the economy of the Same. Like de Beauvoir, Irigaray construes the fact that women have been systematically cast as the other of men as a major problem; but unlike de Beauvoir, Irigaray does not think that the solution lies in
eradicating the differences between women and men. On the contrary, for Irigaray, “sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through” (ESD 5). In her attempt to take into account sexual difference, Irigaray does not restrict the scope of her question to women’s differences from men; she also introduces the question of how to think sexual difference in terms of absolute alterity. Irigaray’s model of exteriority based on sexual difference demonstrates that there can be no absolute exchange—there is always a difference, a reste, a remainder. She imagines what the world might be like if women took themselves out of the existing systems of exchange: “Natures’ resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions” (1985:197). In this respect, both Levinas and Irigaray challenge the logic of metaphysic whereby one cannot conceive of otherness without referring back to the concept of the same as the guiding principle.

For all his contribution to a rethinking of sexual difference in terms of radical otherness, plenty could be said about the stereotypical restrictions on sex roles in Levinas’s texts. For instance, his phenomenology of eros in Totality and Infinity has been the subject of much debate concerning his treatment of the feminine subject. Levinas’s analysis continually uses language that presents the image of the (female) beloved aimee as cast below, while the (male) lover amant is taken to new heights. The beloved, characterized as “the virgin, is the ‘Eternal Feminine’” (TI 258). She profanes because she does not participate in the ethical. Yet it is because of her that he, the lover, the man, can transcend. It is the woman who makes such transcendence possible. In the name of sexual difference and the preservation of alterity, Levinas has cast each player in this love scene in a different but fixed role. It is in this sense that Irigaray, while admitting that Levinas’ philosophy of ethical desire has potential and radicality, considers that his account of eros ultimately falls
back on the familiar and traditional elevation of men at the expense of women.

Irigaray indicates that Levinas’s characterization of ethical transcendence is achieved by confining the female to the animality of desire: “The loved one would be relegated to the abyss so that the lover might be sent back to the heights. The act of love would amount to contact with the irrationality of discourse, in order to send the loved one back to the position of fallen animal or infant” (ESD 211). For Irigaray, to claim that “hiding is the way of existing of the feminine” and that “this fact of hiding is precisely modesty” (TO 87) reduces the feminine subject to an ontology determined by the needs of the masculine subject. While taking pleasure in caressing, Levinas “abandons the feminine other, leaves her to sink, in particular into the darkness of a pseudoanimality, in order to return to his responsibilities in the world of men-amongst-themselves” (Irigaray 1991a: 113). Irigaray claims that Levinas designates the feminine as “mystery” from the point of view of the masculine universe:

Relegating the feminine to the shadows, not even inviting it to participate in his light, man, in our tradition, has more or less explicitly constituted the feminine as the pole opposed to his becoming. The feminine is considered only as what is at stake in masculine eros and not as a possible other subjectivity, inhabiting another world, a stranger to the one proper to the masculine subject. (2004: 76)

In other words, while Levinas’s concern is to avoid “fusion” or “possession” in eros, the use that he makes of the other seems to be a very subtle, even transcendental appropriation of the other. For Irigaray, being-with-the-other should suppose the passage to another way of communicating, where light and transcendence are both shared and preserved in their singularity. Irigaray thus criticizes Levinas for his failure in the construction of the work of being-with-the-other: “If the avoidance of
‘fusion,’ ‘possession,’ or ‘knowledge’ in eros results in relegating one to animality and the other to the search for a transcendental horizon of its own, what human coexistence is possible between the two” (Irigay 2004: 79)?

Beyond that, for Irigaray, Levinas’s turn from eros to divine creativity, and to its earthly counterpart, the passionless motherhood, suggests its idealizing sublimation, which exists side by side with a certain hostility to the nonsublimated form of eros represented by femininity. As the obverse side of sublimated love, femininity in Levinas’s work is relegated to profanation, shame, indecency, irresponsible infancy, and so on, and is thus associated, as I have indicated above, with all terms that evoke and justify the Kantian exclusion of “pathological passions” from the domain of ethics. While the place reserved for the feminine in Totality and Infinity was that of the coquettish animality of eros, the feminine is admitted only as maternity in Otherwise than Being. In other words, being preoccupied by the primacy of ethics, Levinas limits the appearance of the feminine figure either to the realm of the erotic, or to the elevated heights of maternity. As a result, women are eventually defined according to their two functions in relation to men—i.e., as sexual partner and as mother—and are thus labeled as bad and good respectively.

Moreover, while the feminine as it appears in Levinas’s work up to Totality and Infinity is a term parasitic on an idea of sexual difference, the neutrality of maternity in Otherwise than Being seems to be fundamentally incommensurable with the specificity of the feminine qua feminine. Levinas maintains that humans are sexual beings, but their sexuality is secondary to a transcendental humanity. Therefore, for Levinas, woman is not secondary to man, but sexual difference, which is inaugurated by woman, is secondary to ethics. As I have mentioned earlier, Levinas designates “fecundity”—i.e., the production of the child—as the way of overcoming affective eros in the name of transcendence and ethics. Yet surely there is an inconsistency in
arguing for the essential asexuality of ethical relations while specifying fecundity in sexual terms. Although ethical subjectivity is first and foremost incarnate, it is not sexed. Accordingly, the subject of Levinas’s ethical theory is assumed to be gender-neutral and abstract; and hence universal principles are developed which can apply to both sexes indifferently. For Irigaray, Levinas’s ultimate indifference to sexual difference makes his ethical theory unethical: “This non-definition of the other, when the other is not considered to have anything to do with sexual difference, gives rise to an infinite series of substitutions, an operation which seems to me non-ethical” (Irigaray 1991a:112). Unlike Levinas, Irigaray insists that the defense of women’s Otherness must take priority over the assimilation of women’s subjectivity into a (masculine) transcendental ethical paradigm.

Some critics argue that maternity goes beyond the bipolarity of masculine and feminine, revealing the neutrality of the subject and an ethics above sexual difference. Yet Derrida reminds us to be cautious about neutrality and neutralization which might be masqueraded by masculinity. In Derrida’s view, Levinas assumes the stance of the male subject without acknowledging this position: “The wholly other who is not supposed to be marked by sexual difference, is found already to be marked by masculinity” (Derrida 1991: 40). In his designation of maternity as the paradigm for ethical responsibility, Levinas cannot get himself exempt from tradition of paternity which he has attempted to disrupt. The mother in Levinas is seen more as a site of asymbolic signification, the Dire, than as a speaking subject in her own right. Maternity, decidedly distanced from women as mothers, becomes a repository for that which can be neither said nor understood from the site of conscious comprehension of the reasoned logos (the Dit). The subject of maternal signification is neither the woman nor the mother but rather the martyrlike responsibility inherent in her condition. Levinas wants to insist on maternity as a philosophical category rather
than simply an empirical content; however, the problem has been the impossibility of separating one position from the other. If the maternal is to function meaningfully at all, some reference to women or to the female—i.e., to its empirical content—is necessary and inevitable.

In reference to this, Kristeva’s acknowledgment that the mother is also a woman—that the one does not necessarily exclude the other—allows her to advance much further toward an understanding of what it is about the experience of motherhood. In “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva defines the cultural meaning of the maternal as “the ambivalent principle that is bound to the species, on the one hand, and on the other hand stems from an identity catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body” (1986:161-2). In other words, what Kristeva calls the maternal heterogeneity “not subsumed under any present law” is an access to a space of different subjective possibilities, and yet there is still an appeal to the specificity of women:

If contemporary ethics is no longer seen as being the same as morality, if ethics amounts to not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable problematics of the law but giving it flesh, language and *jouissance*—in that case its reformulation demands the contribution of women.

(1986:185)

Put differently, the maternal experience, in all its uniqueness and universality, might have something to teach us for a post-Christian ethics; but it is important that the mother be recognized for who she is and not only in our idealized images of her. Indeed, for many feminists, the valorization of the maternal as feminine essence raises fears that women as individuals will become crushed under the weight of the stereotype of the mother as all-giving, all-suffering, and all-accepting martyr. Conversely, the neutralization of maternal subjectivity fails to make a meaningful
connection between the experience of maternity and the potential implications of that experience for a rethinking of traditional ethics. Though it is important to recognize that not all women are mothers and hence they should not be exclusively defined in terms of their biological capacity to bear children, it does not seem helpful to refuse then to acknowledge and explore the fact that all mothers are women and that they are born of women’s bodies wherein they have their first intersubjective experiences.

And yet, on the other hand, the maternal function and the body are the site of many essentialist critiques on French feminism. For instance, Iris Marion Young and Domna A. Stanton criticize French feminism for the biological essentialism that they think is entailed by their interest in the maternal. Young says, “Like their counterparts across the ocean, these French theorists tend to reduce women’s specificity to reproductive biology and the function of mothering” (241). Stanton warns that “the moment the maternal emerges as a new dominance, it must be put into question before it congeals as a feminine essence, as unchanging in-difference” (170). Aware of the difficulty of making more than one gesture, Irigaray poses the dilemma of a feminist ethics based on sexual difference: “How can the double demand—for both equality and difference—be articulated?” (1985: 81). On the one hand, the issue concerns whether or not a feminist politics based on the goal of equality falls into the trap of assimilating women to men by erasing sexual difference and constructing a gender-neutral society. On the other side lies the question of whether or not a feminist ethics based on the idea of sexual difference plays into the hands of a tradition that has used the notion of female difference to justify inequality, thus at odds with the aim of a feminist politics. A rethinking of the dialectic between ethics and politics in terms of the problem of justice should help deal with the unresolved contradiction.
II. (Feminist) Ethics and Politics—the Problem of Justice

As has been indicated above, Irigaray is one of the feminists who, employing Levinas’s proposition of sexuality as a model for openness to the radically other, assert that sexual differences—a type of nonoppositional and nonassimilable difference—are a primary confrontation with the absolutely other. In Irigaray’s opinion, the feminist ideology that privileges gender over sex has had the effect of casting suspicion on any discourse about the body, sexual difference, or biology. Many feminists are afraid that if we admit to significant differences between the sexes we risk losing the ground that feminism has fought so hard to win. To emphasize gender rather than sex has thus been an important motif in the struggle to achieve equality of opportunities and rights between men and women. However, as Irigaray raises the question—do we have to neglect sexual difference in order to emphatically reject gender-role stereotyping? Following Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz has also stated, “Only when each sex is recognized as an independent otherness by the other is an ethical relation between them possible” (xvii). In this sense, Irigaray’s position deviates from egalitarian feminism: “The purpose of feminism is not merely confined to seeking for women the same rights as those held by men” (Irigaray 1993a: 11). In other words, Irigaray is not merely concerned with equal rights for women, but with a critique of what passes for success according to patriarchal standards. In her view, while it is still necessary to fight for equal rights, it is even more urgent to be vigilant about reminding ourselves that the very necessity of the abstract idea of equality emerges from irreducible differences. Accordingly, for Irigaray, it is not a matter of “equal laws for all” but rather a requirement for a sexualized language and law to take into account women’s singularity as it is different from men’s:

With regard to this task, to desire to be equal to the man is a serious ethical error, for in so doing the woman contributes to the effacement of natural
and spiritual reality in an abstract universal at the service of a sole master—death. In so doing, in addition to her own suicidal loss of identity, she also deprives the man of the possibility of defining himself naturally and spiritually as man, that is, as a sexed/gendered person.

(Irigaray 1991b: 173)

Following the vein, the new feminist ethics, by taking sexual difference into account, challenges the abstract individualism of ethics and the validity of general moral principles. The discourse of individualism has been seen in this light as privileging values specific to the male-dominated public sphere of competitive self-interest and rational calculation and as correspondingly dismissive of the values native to the female-dominated private sphere of domestic affect, nurture, and obligation. In this respect, Levinas’s rethinking of ethics as infinite responsibility toward the other contributes a lot to formulating a feminist ethics based on sensibility and characterized by the reshaping of moral concepts in the light of feminist development of relational alternatives. Levinas construes sensibility as akin to vulnerability, an equation which disrupts the patriarchal hierarchy inscribed by the tyranny of an established reality. Sensibility is thus to be understood as distinct from cognition in that it does not direct itself at an object with the intention of mastering it but is rather characterized by a mode of openness and attentiveness. Levinas’s appeal to maternity and his feminized conception of sensibility points the way towards a feminist ethics of care advanced by feminists such as Carol Gilligan.

The impact of Gilligan’s works stems in part from her claim that there is a moral orientation, a “different voice,” which she discovered in the women she investigated. This voice was one of care and responsibility, of concern and connection with other people. Gilligan’s study showed that women tended much more than men to see the moral in terms of care rather than justice, in terms of
responsibility rather than rights. In other words, there is an essential tension between autonomy and interdependence, between absolute moral principles and situation-specific moral action, between reason and affect. Gilligan accepts the assumption of differences between the nature of man and woman. She further sees a paradox in the observation that what marks women as unique also marks them as inferior:

The very traits that have traditionally defined the “goodness” of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. The infusion of feeling into their judgments keeps them from developing a more independent and abstract ethical conception in which concern for others derives from principles of justice rather than from compassion and care. (Gilligan 312)

Naturally, the desire to avoid the paternalism of ethical rule is a principal motivating force behind much recent scholarship in the feminist ethic of care. Accordingly, an “ethics of care” forms one of the central planks of feminist debates about alternative social practices, founded upon receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness as opposed to “masculine” ethical preoccupations with property-rights, equality and duty.

Feminists either took up with excitement the seemingly new valuation of “feminine” morality or reacted against the gender differentiation and possibly even biological determinism underlying Gilligan’s claim—hence the question of whether care ethics is a “liberated space” or a “familiar ghetto” for women. One important strand in the feminist critique of care ethics comes from the concern that too ready an acceptance and promotion of an ethics of care will simply reinforce women’s traditional care-taking roles. In other words, feminist critics have worried about the undesirable implications concerning Gilligan’s focus on the “womanly virtues” that
have traditionally been used to keep women in the “private” sphere. Without providing a convincing account of how sexual difference is produced and maintained within patriarchal social relations, the essentialist practice of celebrating specifically feminine characteristics tends to fortify existing gender stereotypes and the constraints they impose. Beyond that, essentializing the difference between men and women at the expense of differences among women or of similarities between some men and some women necessarily hardens a broad distinction whose very construction is hierarchical. With all women grouped under the ethics of care, individual women could be assimilated into the model of the archetype Woman. The myth of the Eternal Feminine, which might have conditioned such a misinterpretation, would be vindicated in turn by that misinterpretation.

As one of the most large-scale discourses of oppression, feminism has raised in different ways all the theoretical and political problems posted by the reinscription of the ethical and the just. Hence, in the field of feminist ethics, one of the points of contention hinges on whether or not re-valorizing woman’s singularity such as maternity and virginity will lead to positive change for women. Feeling themselves oppressed, feminists cannot be indifferent to questions of how transformations are to occur. Yet, throughout its history, women’s liberation has been seen sometimes as the right to be equal, sometimes as the right to be different. It appears that women have always been forced to choose between the two. As Joan Scott has commented: “When equality and difference are paired dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable” (172). What is even worse is that both the ideas of equality and difference can be, and have been, used against women—while formal equality has all too often been defined in male terms, appeals to female difference continue to be used to justify
inequality between sexes. Advocates of each side of the debate therefore run certain recognized political risks.

Therefore, the project of developing a theory which is able to meet requirements of feminist ethics based on sexual difference is not yet complete. Among the feminists who attempt to relocate ethics from a traditional identification with the impersonality and abstraction of the Law to a revalued maternity as the site of caring and an opening to a different conception of otherness, Kristeva is the one who is much more careful not to identify the “feminine” with biological women. While she insists that all mothers are women, the danger of essentialism propels Kristeva away from a simple valorization of sexual difference. Kristeva aligns the pre-Oedipal mother’s body with her notion of the semiotic chora (Kristeva 1984: 27), which is a fluid and undifferentiated realm. She therefore posits motherhood as different kinds of time, a different notion of identity, and a possible irruption or interruption of the Symbolic. Nevertheless, recognizing that no meaningful communication is possible without separation and violence, Kristeva warns that feminists do not promote rejection of the patriarchal symbolic in favor of a harmonious before or outside. The simple repudiation of identification with the Law fails to acknowledge women’s desire for the Law. The mother does not exist outside the social order. Rather, it is the mothers’ relation to the symbolic order that provides the child with a mode of entry into that order. So, the mother can participate in the symbolic order while maintaining heterogeneity, rather than playing the part of subversive mother trapped in the semiotic chora. Accordingly, instead of refusing the father and turning to mother (or, in Kristeva’s term, refusing identity within the symbolic order and turning to nonidentity within a semiotic order), we need to expose the ways in which the order of patriarchy is constructed and sustained.

Kristeva suggests in “Women’s Time” that feminists should not exile women to
“an a-topia, a place outside the law” (202), i.e., to a foreign land outside patriarchal society. Certain forms of feminism, she says, “revive a kind of naïve romanticism” in which the belief in an essential female identity leads to the utopian dream of a distinct place for women, a countersociety based on the essential difference of women from men. As Kristeva sees it, such romantic forms of feminism are problematic, not only because they posit an unrealizable telos but because they reinstate a binary opposition of difference:

As with any society, the countersociety is based on the expulsion of an excluded element, a scapegoat charged with the evil of which the community duly constituted can then purge itself; a purge which will finally exonerate that community of any future criticism. Modern protest movements have often reiterated this logic, locating the guilty one—in order to fend off criticism—in the foreign, in capital alone, in the other religion, in the other sex. Does not feminism become a kind of inverted sexism when this logic is followed to its conclusion? (1986: 204)

Kristeva’s conception of the feminine as a position rather than an essence does not mean that she is indifferent to the harm done to women brought about by a theory of equality which seeks to construct a gender-neutral society. What she adheres to is the notion that “woman as such” is a viable concept politically, but not philosophically. Kristeva clarified this position in an interview:

The belief that “one is a woman” is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that “one is a man.” I say “almost” because there are still many goals which women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centers for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use “we are women” as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot “be”; it is something which
does not even belong in the order of being.\textsuperscript{6} Put differently, while it’s urgent to recognize that monological and militantly certain discourses are strategically necessary if women’s lives are to be bettered, feminists’ political commitment should be cautious of leading to its own version of “phallocentric mastery.”

Kristeva’s position reminds us of Levinas’s reflection on the problem of justice and his attempt to build a bridge from ethics, understood as a responsible, non-totalizing relation with the Other, to politics, conceived of as a relation to the third party. According to Levinas, the passage from ethics to politics is synonymous with the move from the proximity of the one-for-the-other to a relation with all the others where the question of justice can be raised. As Levinas puts it, “Justice is the way in which I respond to the fact that I am not alone in the world with the other” (1988: 174). Ethics, for Levinas, is the very encounter with the Other. And because any ethical dilemma involves more than one Other, there is always a plurality of ethical imperatives. Once there is a plurality of imperatives, one has entered into “politics,” where politics is understood, in contrast to ethics, as the realm of decision-making. If ethics concerns the unique imperative arising from a unique Other, then politics concerns the negotiation of multiple and competing imperatives. The fact that the third is also an other necessitates justice, which is unethical in the pure sense, doing violence to one of two parties. Nevertheless, without justice, ethics cannot be pursued in this world. Even eternal ethical principles, should they turn out to exist, would require a politics.

Irigaray claims that Levinas’s ethics, based on infinite responsibility toward the other, is “an ethics which does not know its limits” (1991a: 113).\textsuperscript{7} In other words, in his respect for radical difference, Levinas’s indifference to the differences between faces seemingly results in a tendency not to do justice to faces that are specifically
other. Nonetheless, Levinas clarifies his position by providing a differentiation between charity (or love) and justice: “Justice differs from charity in that it allows the intervention of some form of equality and measure, a set of social rules established according to the judgment of the State, and thus also of politics.” Yet justice alone cannot sustain our obligation to attend to others. Love informs justice by contributing something to the meaning of justice, namely, a consciousness of its transitory nature. Put another way, love corrects justice by inundating the self with the feeling that it should repent for having resorted, albeit necessarily, to the use of coercive means—means that are potentially the very same instruments of injustice. Levinas poignantly articulates the consequences of the modern tendency to employ a justice that fails to be critically reflexive in this regard: “The hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture” (1990: 155). It is unfortunate that we would ever need to resort to justice, but it would be tragic, notes Levinas, if we forgot that justice is a last resort. By appealing to the virtue of patience, Levinas reminds us that we are not to believe that love is rendered defunct when violence is made necessary.

In Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida retrieves and clarifies Levinas’s thought on the relation between ethics and politics. Following Levinas’s thought of hospitality—an unconditional and infinite hospitality that does not return to itself—Derrida raises the question: If ethical hospitality is infinite, how could we regulate it in a determinate politics or judiciary? Insisting on the irreducible heterogeneity between the two, Derrida thus develops the theme of ethics as an interruption of the political, which for Levinas always leads to tyranny. Between ethics and politics there is a “hiatus,” which, far from leading to some paralysis of political action, becomes the possibility for an ethical perfectibility of politics and law:
It does not whisper silence over the necessity of a relation between ethics and politics, between ethics and justice or law. This relation is necessary, it must exist, it is necessary to deduce a politics and a law from ethics. This deduction is necessary in order to determine what is “better” or “the least bad,” with all the requisite quotation marks: democracy is “better” than tyranny. (Derrida 1999: 115)

It is precisely because the hiatus has made any ready deduction impossible that politics becomes an exercise of making a decision without the assurance of an ontological foundation. “Without the hiatus,” explains Derrida, “which is not the absence of rules, but the necessity of a leap at the moment of political or juridical decision, we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing would be more irresponsible and more totalitarian” (1999: 117). Derrida thus analyzes the peculiar logic or double bind that knots together ethics and politics. Marking their heterogeneity, Derrida nonetheless indicates that from such a gap, ethics and politics “call each other” and are engaged in a kind of perpetual negotiation.9

One dominant vein of political criticism in recent years has been hostile to ethics.10 Undeniably, one of the valuable legacies of the political literary theory of the 1970s and 1980s has been to keep reminding us of the historically and culturally contingent basis of formations like ethics and the so-called literary canon, which therefore cannot be unproblematically conceived of as timeless or universal. Nonetheless, without returning to ethics, what begins as a just project for the proper political recognition of difference can easily tip over into a zealous intolerance of it. It is this intolerance that has come to be called “political correctness.” The assault on historical (patriarchal) oppressor sometimes degenerates into an intellectually stifling atmosphere of judgmental self-righteousness which makes any disagreement
at best vexed. Therefore, the recent return to ethics is not a plea to abandon political vocabularies in the study of literature, but an argument for a complementary ethical language adequate to the ethical explorations of literature.

The above reflections on the relation between ethics and politics reveal that, for Levinas, as it is for Kristeva and Derrida, the political realm risks contracting into an uncritical complacency if we give up the infinitude of (ethical) responsibility. It is in this sense that Diane Elam regards feminism as an ethics:

Feminism is more aptly called an ethics than a politics, if by politics we imply the instrumental articulation of social forces towards a determinate end: the attempt to build a just society, for example. Thus, feminism is concerned with social justice, certainly, but that is not the same thing as the notion that a society could achieve a status as just, once and for all . . . . Ethics reminds politics that no social form can be instituted that will put an end to the problem of justice. (105-6)

In other words, justice is best understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed set of procedures or a pre-given standard to which we must conform. Indeed, on some local fronts, feminists need to believe that there are wrongs to be righted and real forms of progress to be achieved. Yet feminism as a totalizing cultural project is problematic in its link to teleological notions of progress that imply an impossible capacity to speak for history and truth. In fact, feminism has radically differed from itself since its inception in all of its discursive and political incarnations at different historical moments. Thus Elam summaries her position as the one which “explores the ways in which ‘women’ is a permanently contested site of meaning” (33).

Consequently, if feminists are to remain “envoys of otherness”— certainly, the plural, textually rich otherness that Irigaray and Cixous had evoked, rather than the vacant otherness of male fantasy— the notion of sexual difference they advocate needs to
“deconstruct” the ontology of presence in the discourse of the “they” rather than rely on what may emerge from its refusal (if such refusal were possible).

Put more precisely, it is as necessary to be critical of the notion of “woman” as it is to be critical of that of “man.” Hence Kristeva asserts: “The very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics” (1986: 209). With the same concern in mind, Derrida distinguishes between opposition and difference, speaking of sexual difference as a “gift”:

Opposition is two, opposition is man/woman. Difference on the other hand, can be an indefinite number of sexes and once there is sexual difference in its classical sense—an opposition of two—the arrangement is such that the gift is impossible. All that you can call “gift”—love, *jouissance*—is absolutely forbidden, is forbidden by the dual opposition. (1989: 198)

Derrida’s and Kristeva’s conceptions of sexual difference serve as a good start for our study of Lawrence’s fiction. The feminist question about Lawrence has been hinged on whether his work belonged to the misogynous literary tradition, which attempts to silence women in favor of a male-defined feminine, or whether Lawrence could be considered part of the ongoing revolt of the marginalized women. This anti-/pro-feminist approach fails to recognize the fact that Lawrence, when writing of the relations between men and women, is forever knocking in nails, only to prise them out again. Instead of getting everything right, Lawrence makes his novels as a series of tries or trials. Therefore, his engagement with the question of sexual difference is neither a simple acceptance nor a total rejection of the binary system of gendering. Like Derrida and Kristeva, Lawrence acknowledges the presence and operation of the polarities of masculine/feminine while at the same time undermining the unquestioned
acceptance of the categories thus created. As such, he adheres neither to the essentialism that presupposes sexual difference carved “in stone or flesh,” nor to the opposite position that argues all sexual differences are socially and culturally constructed as a kind of masquerade. While his conception of sexual difference cannot avoid falling occasionally into the trap of gender stereotypes, its contribution to the thinking of the following questions should not be ignored—i.e., how can women maintain their multiple differences from men productively, how to mark women’s differences from men without marking them as if they were mere deficiencies, and how can we use those differences to challenge the systematic power imbalances.
Chapter Two
Ethics of Sexual Difference in Lawrence’s Fiction

Lawrence’s texts ambivalently assert and deny sexual difference. In his emphatic insistence on the irreducibility between sexes, Lawrence simultaneously calls into question any fixed and essentialist conception of masculinity/femininity. The demythologization of motherhood he provides, though implicitly revealing his fear of women, may have some contribution to our reflection on a feminist ethics of care based on maternal thinking. Lawrence’s exploration of the question of sexual difference is inseparable from his concern with the inequality between sexes and hence cannot be subsumed into any entrenched feminist ideology.

I. Encounter between Men and Women

As has been indicated above, Luce Irigaray is the contemporary theorist who has probably argued most forcefully and eloquently for the importance of sexual difference. She insists that what we need to recognize is the fact that “the ultimate anchorage of real alterity” is to be found in the difference “between man and woman” (Irigaray 1991a: 181). In her view, so long as we have not yet adopted an ethics of sexual difference, all talk of otherness is suspect and we risk discovering that “it is not the other we are really dealing with but the same” (Irigaray 1996: 61). In spite of their different cultural and sexual background, Lawrence and Irigaray share a common interest in one of the most important issues of modern civilization—i.e., how do we acknowledge the other sex’s singularity and difference. They both grant in principle how important the irreducible “sexual difference” plays in the encounter between the
sexes. Irigaray thus asserts: “I will never be in a man’s place, a man will never be in mine. Whatever the possible identification, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other—they are irreducible one to the other” (ESD 131). In like manner, Lawrence appeals to the theory of radical sexual difference:

You are yourself, a woman, and I am myself, a man: and that makes a breach between us. So let’s leave the breach and walk across occasionally on some suspension-bridge. But you live on one side, and I live on the other. . . . We’re neither better nor worse than each other; we’re an *equipoise in difference*—but in difference, mind, not in sameness. (P 664)

In the following passage from *Fantasia*, Lawrence’s obstinate insistence on radical sexual difference even yields a tone of biological determinism:

A child is born sexed. A child is either male or female; the whole of its psyche and physique is either male or female. Every single living cell is either male or female, and will remain either male or female as long as life lasts. . . . The talk about a third sex, or about the indeterminate sex, is just to pervert the issue. (FU 96)

Hence Lawrence represents men and women as inhabiting radically different spheres, divided by mutual incomprehension: “Woman will never understand the depth of the spirit of purpose in man. . . . And man will never understand the sacredness of feeling to woman” (FU 103).

To begin to understand the importance Lawrence attaches to sexual difference in his fiction, one should perhaps turn first to the opening of *The Rainbow* where we are told that the Brangwen “women were different” (R 10). Whereas their men “faced inwards to the teeming life of creation, which poured unresolved into their veins,” the women “set out to discover what was beyond, to enlarge their own scope
and range and freedom” (R 11)—that is, the women need “the wonder of the beyond . . .
before them” (R 13). In *Women in Love*, Birkin’s notion of love more eloquently conveys his resolute insistence on the extreme difference between men and women.

Birkin holds that men and women should balance as sun and moon balance:

> There is now to come the new day, when we are beings each of us, fulfilled in difference. The man is pure man, the woman pure woman, they are perfectly polarized. But there is no longer any of the horrible merging, mingling self-abnegation of love. There is only the pure duality of polarization, each one free from any contamination of the other . . . . Each has a single, separate being, with its own laws. The man has his pure freedom, the woman hers. Each acknowledges the perfection of the polarized sex-circuit. Each admits the different nature in the other. (WL 225)

Against the ancient theory that men and women are but broken fragments of one whole, Birkin insists that men and women have been singled out from an original mixture into pure individuality; accordingly, they must polarize rather than merge in love.

In fact, most of Lawrence’s fiction suggests that the incompatibility of men and women is at the core of any heterosexual relationship. For instance, a kernel of irreconcilable difference exists between the husband and wife in *Kangaroo*. Within the husband lies a hard element of masculinity which cannot be shared by the wife:

> “The pure male activity should be womanless, beyond woman. No man was beyond woman. But in his one quality of ultimate maker and breaker, he was womanless” (K 108). The woman’s knowledge of her inevitable exclusion from one part of the man’s life even leads to pain and mistrust: “Bitter the woman was, grieved beyond words, grieved till her face was swollen and puffy and almost mad or imbecile,
because she had loved him so much, and now she must see him betray her love” (K 108-9). Additionally, in The Plumed Serpent, the notion that men and women are absolute alterity toward each other is also explicitly stated in the narrator’s comment on the relationship between Ramon and his wife: “Men and women should know that they cannot, absolutely, meet on earth. In the closest kiss, the dearest touch, there is the small gulf which is none the less complete because it is so narrow, so nearly non-existent” (PS 265). Carlota has violated her relationship with Ramon in her attempt to close up the impassable gulf.

It is his insistence on this “impassable gulf” between men and women that has made Lawrence treat the woman as a mysterious “Other.” In this respect, Lawrence is more akin to Levians than to Irigaray in that they both designate the feminine as “mystery” through which the male subject seeks his transcendence. In a letter to Bertrand Russell in 1915, Lawrence writes: “The great living experience for every man is his adventure into the woman. The man embraces in the woman all that is not himself” (LII 61). In his early work, Lawrence specifically sets out his concept of duality in terms of the male and female principles:

In woman man finds his root and establishment. In man woman finds her exfoliation and florescence. The woman grows downward, like a root, towards the center and the darkness and the origin. The man grows upwards, like the stalk, towards discovery and light and utterance. (P 514)

Accordingly, the female impulse grows “downwards” toward a sensuous, indivisible, unselfconscious rapport with the fundamental processes of life. It seeks “meaning at-oneness, the state of being at one with the object” (P II 605). Conversely, the male impulse grows “upwards” toward an intellectual, individual, and self-conscious expressiveness. In referring to the different temperaments of men and women, Lawrence describes his “women’s” initiatory function in a letter to Arthur McLeod:
“And my ‘women,’ Esther Andrews, Hilda Aldington (H. D.) etc., represent, in an impure and unproud, subservient, cringing, bad fashion, I admit—but represent none the less the threshold of a new world, or underworld, of knowledge and being” (LII 179-80). Regarding the Female as the Underworld, a dangerous but alluring realm where mystery and intuition are privileged over conventional wisdom and reason, Lawrence here is comparable to Orpheus, the archetypal male poet, who descends into that Underworld in hopes of capturing and bringing to utterance all the secrets of the unknown.

Helen Sword, echoing Irigaray’s critique of Levinas, indicates that, by employing women as guides to the realm of the unknown, Lawrence reinforces gender ideologies, and leaves women in the underworld in his male quest. “Though Lawrence as Orpheus might emerge from the Underworld in possession of all its secrets . . . Eurydice was to remain locked in her role of archetypal female, associated, if not with trivial emotionality, then with the mute, inactive otherness of passivity and death” (413). Put another way, while the woman acts as bridge, she herself cannot cross from nature to culture, from body to mind or from private to public. Or at least, she cannot enjoy both sides of the dichotomy since there is no one, and no concept, to act as her bridge. The male-centered structures place women as the other, in a place which is not a place—i.e., women always for those structures but never really in them. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir maintains that woman’s otherness defines her as a necessary tool for the attainment of man’s transcendence, his realization of his true subjectivity: “The Other is Evil; but being necessary to the Good, it turns into the Good; through it I attain to the Whole, but it also separates me therefrom; it is the gateway to the infinite and the measure of my finite nature” (175). Of the many myths with which man has chosen to burden woman, none, according to de Beauvoir, “is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine ‘mystery’”
And as Cixous points out, the idea of feminine mystery has often been expressed as an equation between women and darkness: “woman is in the shadow. In the shadow he throws on her” (67). Woman has traditionally been defined as night to man’s day, Cixous maintains, “black to his white. Shut out of his system’s space, she is the repressed that ensures the system’s functioning” (67). Levinas defines the very mode of being of the feminine as a “withdrawal into mystery” (TO 87); Lawrence here similarly views the relation to the feminine as a relation with the unknown world. In this sense, both Levinas and Lawrence hold the paradoxical view of women as being both there and not there, both “for” the structures and also disavowed by them.

Indeed, in some of his text, it seems that woman is defined in terms of man’s aspiration for his own fulfillment and hence the real importance of the female lies in the completion of the male. As a mysterious Other, the woman animates the man for his leap into the unknown. Consequently, as we have seen in Sons and Lovers, Clara is for Paul “only a woman, warm, something he loved and almost worshipped, there in the dark” (SL 429). In this way, Clara helps Paul attain in their physical love the impersonality of transcendent experience. Nevertheless, the woman who motivates man’s transcendence is left unconcerned and insignificant as soon as her initiatory function is realized. Shaped by Paul’s male fantasy, Clara is expected “to be something she could not be” (SL 431). What Paul is really concerned is not Clara as a real-life woman, but as an anonymous presence of Woman, which functions to initiate him to a true aesthetic experience. In this sense, Clara has reason to complain that Paul never “really loves a woman” (SL 435). For Paul, Clara serves nothing more than, in de Beauvoir’s words, “the gate to the infinite” (175). As a matter of fact, it is the Infinite that Paul loves; and hence in its impersonality, the “beloved” has been devalued.
The notion of the male adventure into the feminine mystery is especially manifest in Lawrence’s description of the Tom-Lydia relationship in *The Rainbow*. In their encounter, Tom is prostrate before the “mystery” of Lydia, Lydia the Unknown: “He looked down. Her face was shining, her eyes full of light, she was awful. He suffered from the compulsion to her. She was the awful unknown” (R 57). Indeed, Tom and Lydia’s relationship has been described as a time of exploration principally for the man, “when the secrets within the woman are game for the man, hunted doggedly, when the secrets of the woman are the man’s adventure” (R 61). Abasing himself in his woman-worship, Tom sees Lydia as a manifestation of the divine, as “the unknown,” as “not human.” Like what resulted from Paul’s impersonal configuration of Clara, Tom’s male fantasy of the feminine unknown bears no direct or even necessary relation to Lydia as a concrete and living woman. In other words, his relationship to Lydia is so distant, except physically, and so clouded with fantasy that he does not perceive her as another human being.

And yet, it should be noted that Lawrence is not ignorant of the problem of appropriating the feminine mystery. His text also reveals that, for him, insisting on the “mystery” of woman gives rise to a predatory relationship between men and women. In his depiction of Tom-Lydia relationship, Lawrence exposes at the same time the narcissism and reverential selfishness inherent in Tom’s love. From the beginning of the novel, Lydia is mostly presented from the point of view of Tom’s consciousness, and it is not until their first quarrel that Tom’s image of Lydia, a false conception, cracks, revealing to Tom, and to the reader, that she is not at all as he has seen her. The release is brought on by an argument in which Lydia accuses Tom of being distant and animalistic toward her: “Why do you want to deny me” (R 89)? Tom is abruptly forced by his wife’s accusations to see not only her otherness but her human likeness: “Suddenly in a flash, he saw she might be lonely, isolated, unsure.
She had seemed to him the utterly certain, satisfied, absolute, excluding him. Could she need anything” (R 89)? As a result, Tom is made to understand that, in order to gain access to his wife’s ultimate otherness, he must first recognize that she too is a human subject. In other words, only when he knows that she has needs like his own can Tom be given access both to Lydia and to the further experience which she represents. No longer “always in shadow”, Lydia then, in her relationship with Tom, emerges into the light: “In herself she now walked strong and clear” (R 91). After the “transfiguration,” both lovers are reborn: “At last they had thrown open the doors, each to the other, and had stood in the doorways facing each other, whilst the light flooded out from behind on to each of their faces” (R 91). Their “consummation” implies what Irigaray calls the “double desire” or “double pole” (ESD 9) of motion and stability in both man and woman, which means for both man and woman “a possibility of unhindered movement, of peaceful immobility without the risk of imprisonment” (ESD 12).

Lawrence’s treatment of the lovers’ rebirth reveals that his major concern is not the exploitation of the one sex by the other, but the enriching effect brought about by the interaction of sexual difference. In other words, Lawrence concerns himself not merely with each sex’s singularity and limit, but also with the possibility of making a new male-female relationship in sexual difference. For Lawrence, the fundamental difference and irreducibility between sexes bring about not only how to acknowledge the singularity of the other sex, but, more important, how to communicate or love across sexual boundaries. While arguing that the polarization of the sexes at the start of human evolution was a condition of human development, in the late essay “We Need One Another”, Lawrence said:

We may as well admit it: men and women need one another . . . . We are all individualists: we are all egoists: we all believe intensely in freedom,
our own at all events. We all want to be absolute, and sufficient unto ourselves. And it is a great blow to our self-esteem that we simply need another human being. (P 188)

For Lawrence, as the following discussion of his text may show us, the consummation of male-female relationship cannot be attained by merely juxtaposing the two, or “synthesizing” them into a higher one, or dissecting one to two, or holding two in one, but only by attuning the two to each other in such a way as to fertilize the distance, difference, and tension between them. In such a sense, difference is not a matter of defining the female “as such,” or the male “as such,” or even their relation “as such,” but of experiencing without consuming the indefinable otherness in one’s changing relationship with the other.

Accordingly, for all his insistence on sexual irreducibility, gender roles and sexual relations for Lawrence are not so much “natural” categories against which literary interpretation takes place as cultural constructions that literature in part appropriates, in part helps to construct, and in part challenges. As he himself declares: “The division into male and female is arbitrary, for the purpose of thought” (STH 60). In this respect, Lawrence echoes Derrida in attempting to problematize the unquestioned binarism and essentialism of man/woman in the discourse of identity. In an interview, Derrida makes clear his attitude toward the concept of sexual difference:

What if we were to approach here (for one would not arrive at this as one would at a determined location) the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition masculine/feminine, beyond bisexuality as
well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. (1982: 76)

Derrida’s claim here is not that dichotomous thought is bad or oppressive per se, but rather that it can covertly promote social and political values by presenting a conceptual division as if it were a factual or natural division. Put more specifically, Derrida’s attack is on “phallogocentrism”— “the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness” (Derrida 1982: 69)— which operates by way of dichotomous thought, where one central term defines all others only in terms relative to itself. Otherness has thus always been linked to inferiority. With the recognition that sexual “neutrality” frequently involves the reduction of sexual difference to a masculine paradigm, Derrida certainly does not envision a discourse in which masculine and feminine would no longer exist, but one in which they would “no longer be discriminating.” By liberating difference from binary opposition, Derrida disconnects the reciprocal link between sexual difference and sexual discrimination.

By the same token, in the world of male and female, day and night, conscious and unconscious, Apollo and Dionysus, Lawrence does not employ the terms linked to the lesser rational traits as sexually discriminating tools. While respecting sexual differences, Lawrence does not simplify them by creating allegorical figures to embody them. On the contrary, in his work, he from time to time subverts the socially and historically established gender ideologies. For instance, his first novel, *The White Peacock*, leaves more room for indeterminacy and play than an imposed structure of binary oppositions would allow. Femininity/inertia/passivity and masculinity/mobility/activity are treated as dynamic subject positions in the text, no longer regarded as traditional notions of maleness and femaleness as essences or entities. What Lawrence does here is to de-naturalize entrenched sexual differences, uncoupling man and activity, woman and passivity. Cyril’s subject position in this
novel is rendered effeminate by his own foregrounding of himself as vulnerable. His posture is passive, as Margaret Storch indicates, “Cyril Beardsall, a narrator of marked passivity who typically responds to the experience of others rather than acting directly himself” (117). Though he has figured himself as a traveler, or a wanderer, Cyril seems, instead, a nestling, longing for someone to nurse his vulnerability, as he himself said: “In my heart of hearts, I longed for someone to nestle against, someone who would come between me and the coldness and the wetness” (WP 220). Lettie, in stark contrast to her brother, is depicted as a figure who, in her envy at masculine mobility, has a sense of transformative potential in movement. While Cyril’s feminine impulse is manifest in his desire to feather his psychic nest in Nethermere, Lettie’s masculine impulse is revealed in her urge to travel, to move, and to cross the bar.

Correspondingly, in Sons and Lovers, the binary oppositions of male/female, father/mother, power/powerless, utterance/silence have been subverted and turned upside down. The cross-gendering of language especially provides one of this text’s most fascinating constructions. In this novel, Mrs. Morel controls the language in the household and Mr. Morel is characterized by his verbal impotence. While her decent language represents the agency of power, his dialect is a language of powerlessness. In other words, while the father is positioned as vulnerable under his wife’s patriarchal mastery of language, the mother is the one who prepares the way for the Light and the Word for the son. Mrs. Morel’s womanhood, relativized by her intellectual articulacy, is as questionable as Mr. Morel’s manhood, which is undermined by his emasculate reticence. By problematizing the unquestioned paternal masculinity and maternal femininity, Lawrence demonstrates how “gender” is more a textual continuum than a structuralist binary. Moreover, in the process of bringing the male and the female encounter each other, Lawrence does not
one-sidedly depreciate one in favor of the other. At one time, Mrs. Morel is approved as an autonomous (male) individual, while Mr. Morel is condemned for his (emasculated) incompleteness. At another, the father’s (feminine) vitality is valued over the mother’s (patriarchal) moral restrictions.

Cixous claims that the most powerful ways in which women have been subordinated to men have been in terms of traditional associations such as the idea that women are (or ought to be) passive and belong to the realm of nature while men are (or ought to be) active and belong to the realm of culture (Cixous 64-5). Indeed, in the Hardy study, Lawrence’s accounts of the distinction between male and female, as has been quoted above, function to keep women tied to the natural body and men to cultural spirit. By equating femininity with darkness, passivity, and the Will-to-Inertia, while holding men to represent light, action, and the Will-to-Motion, Lawrence establishes a sexual cosmogony in which only the male can claim power and utterance. Yet in his fiction, Lawrence more than often seeks to disrupt normative dualistic understandings of masculinity and femininity. For instance, in Sons and Lovers, as we have seen, it is Mr. Morel who is aligned with nature and instinct, while Mrs. Morel stands on the side of cultural will. Besides, in The Rainbow, it is the Marsh men who are described as leading a life of profound “blood-intimacy” with the natural and animal world, whereas it is the women who long for culture and knowledge. While the Brangwen women want to actively participate in “another form of life,” in “the spoken world beyond” (R 11, 10), the Brangwen men are so richly satisfied by their relation with nature. In this novel, the men and women characters at first seem to be mere renderings of sexual essences—the women living to bear children, and the men to work. Yet gender characteristics change over three generations. In the second generation, Will happens to be “female,” predominantly a refined, emotional, and instinctive nature, and Anna
“male,” critically conscious and intellectually curious. In the third generation, Ursula, a female, becomes the inheritor of the traits of the Brangwen men. Hence this novel to certain extent presents gender assumptions more as dynamic formations than as natural essences. Lawrence has long fought to break down the assignation of fixed gender roles to biological men and women and claimed for women as well as men the possibility of oscillating between masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity.

As such, Lawrence’s fiction reveals his venture to redefine maleness and femaleness in distinction from stereotyped sexual codes. What is more, Lawrence not only disrupts normative dualistic understandings of gendering, his handling of the binary male/female is far from predictable, consistent, or seamless, not only in his fiction but also in his expository writing. For instance, the theory of sex-gender complementarity troped by two converging streams in the Hardy study is later replaced in Fantasia by a metaphor of the male and female as two banks of the river, always separate. Lawrence even makes some “reversion of the old poles,” by transvaluing the sex-gender categories he had elaborated in the Hardy study. He relabels as male those categories which he had previously labeled as female, and vice versa. His fiction especially performs his changing and inconsistent attitude and valuation of the concept of sexual difference. If the novels up to Women in Love valorize the female principle, or at least the enriching effect of encounter between the sexes, the leadership novels find Lawrence’s advocacy of a turn to the male as a way out of “a rotten, idealistic machine-civilization.” That is, by the time of writing Aaron’s Rod and Kangaroo, Lawrence has emerged as the defender of malehood against women. Lawrence has thus been severely accused as an irrecoverable misogynist. Nonetheless, shortly after his death, Lawrence reversed his position, turning once again toward a more positive view of womanhood by reaffirming some
of the “tenderness” and other feminine values that he had a few years earlier so strenuously rejected.

Undeniably, however inclusive Lawrence may have intended his projects to be, at times it was difficult for him to write without thinking primarily of his own sex or gender. We might criticize Lawrence for placing emphasis on the phallus, rather than on the female genitals.\textsuperscript{14} And the literal association of phallus with penis is so embedded in our language that it seems impossible to deny outright the powerful connotation. However, we should be cautious not to equate too assuredly Lawrence’s phallic preoccupations in his fiction with the suggestion that he is anti-woman. First of all, if we take the word “phallic” too literally, as meaning just male sexual organ, we run the danger of reducing the multi-layered meaning of the word. As we have seen in Part One, Lawrence usually attempts to employ an image with inherited meaning in the context of an original scene which broadens the symbol’s range of reference. In view of this, Lawrence’s unconventional use of the word might be perceived in \textit{John Thomas and Lady Jane}, wherein the narrator makes a distinction between penis and phallus: while the former is “a mere member of the physiological body”, the latter has “the deepest roots of all,” through which “inspiration enters the soul” (JTLJ 233). Judged from the unique role it plays in his text, the notion of “phallic consciousness” is for Lawrence, in the words of Carol Dix, “the key to the instinctive world, the key to the force that will bring passion and energy and the life force back into the world” (117). In other words, Lawrence wants to revivify those aspects of consciousness that modern Western life has repressed in men—a sensual, intuitive, and nonrational living.

Moreover, by means of conceptualizing the phallus in such a unique way, Lawrence in fact redefines masculinity in terms of qualities which have conventionally been gendered feminine. Put differently, Lawrence feminizes the
phallus, especially in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which Lawrence himself described as “a nice and tender phallic novel,” in which “the phallic consciousness . . . is the source of all real beauty, and all real gentleness” (LII 328). In this novel, it is Mellors’s “female elements” which have initiated Connie’s restoration. Partly female himself, Mellors is able to transfer back to Connie the femaleness she has lost. His feminine qualities of being “patient and withdrawn” have enabled a more vital Connie to emerge (LCL 92-3). Unlike most other rebellious heroines in Lawrence’s fiction, Connie does seem to submit to Mellors, but it should be noted that the message Mellors preaches throughout the book is that of tenderness, not control. Connie gradually perceived the bedrock values of nurturance and tenderness embodied by Mellors:

‘Shall I tell you?’ she said, looking into his face. ‘Shall I tell you what you have that other men don’t have, and that will make the future? Shall I tell you?’

‘Tell me, then,’ he replied.

‘It’s the courage of your own tenderness, that’s what it is, like when you put your hand on my tail and say I’ve got a pretty tail.’ (LCL 346; Emphasis added)

Maleness is thus redefined by discovering its instinctive primitive power, and the way to that is for modern men to admit to the femaleness within themselves. In such wise, Lawrence’s sense of phallic consciousness is “something which passes across and between male and female desire” (Williams 94). In other words, the phallus is used subversively and uniquely to convey the vital connection between the life force of man and that of woman.

Accordingly, even though at times he still ends up falling into the trap of favoring one side over the other, Lawrence deserves credit for his often admirable
efforts to stretch and problematize the categories of gender. Moreover, in his using the term “phallic consciousness,” which strikingly connotes a male consciousness, Lawrence in fact seeks roughly the same goal as proponents of a “feminine consciousness”—i.e., to subvert and dismantle the present thought system of dominance and control. In other words, even when Lawrence celebrates the symbol of the phallus, he does so by challenging the way in which it is ordinarily understood (as the “huge stone erections”), celebrating it for its opposition to “empire and dominion.” It is partly on account of this that Lawrence advocates a simultaneous rejection of the maternal domination. Yet Lawrence’s exploration of motherhood is ambivalently motivated and diversely based. At one time, his suggestion is that the feminine stereotypes—wife, mother, nun, servant—are at odds with the achievement of female selfhood; at another, his objection to motherhood is motivated not by his sympathy that it hinders women, but by his fear that it harms men either in excluding or dominating them. In his leadership novels, Lawrence even offers an idealization of male comradeship to replace the idealization of mother-love. Therefore, it would be inadequate to argue that Lawrence’s repetitive, hysterical attack on mothers constitutes a feminist critique of maternity. For all that, his demythologization of motherhood may provide some contribution to our rethinking of maternity and a feminist ethics of care.

II. (De)Mythologization of Maternity

Like feminist ethicists, Lawrence designates maternity as one of the most obvious markers of sexual difference. In *Mr. Noon*, Lawrence considers the polarized otherness between sexes in terms of the foreign elements in motherhood:

“And there is something in woman, particularly in *motherhood*, in which man has no
part, and can have no part” (N 212). In *The Rainbow*, Tom’s greatest difficulty in accommodating himself to his wife’s “unknown” occurs when she is pregnant, when she is most adamantly “other”: “She was beautiful to him—but it was not human. He had a dread of her as she lay there. What had she to do with him? She was other than himself” (R 76). But unlike feminist ethicists’ re-vvalorization of maternity, Lawrence’s attitude toward maternity is more antagonistic. Still unlike liberal feminists’ rejection of motherhood, which is starkly motivated by the attempt to liberate women from maternal roles, Lawrence’s repudiation of motherhood is deeply related to his ambivalence toward the female. The shifting patterns within the male psyche, moving between grudging dependence on women and ideals of male strength, are intrinsic to the affective texture of Lawrence’s art. In most of his novels, the male aggressively asserts independence from women, and yet also feels intimately drawn into or even pathologically dependent on the feminine perspective and sensibility. The “barn scene” in *The Rainbow* reveals brilliantly the husband’s deep anxiety over the wife’s indifference during her pregnancy. In the scene Lawrence presents the moment at which the woman, Lydia, is simultaneously in the process of bearing one child while withdrawing support and care from another. That is, in becoming a mother to her newborn child, Lydia at the same time becomes unavailable as nurturer to both her husband and her older child. During the course of his marriage, Tom is frequently disturbed by Anna’s crying at her mother’s absences. He thinks: “There was something heartrending about Anna’s crying; her childish anguish seemed so utter and so timeless, as if it were a thing of all the ages” (R 65-6). The words used to describe the little girl can be similarly applied to express Tom’s sense of insecurity over the awayness and aloofness of his wife.

Naturally, women’s pregnancy does bring with it a peculiar form of self-absorption. But far from an intentional apathy or hostility directed against men,
it is rather the doubts and fears as well as contentment of pregnancy directed in favour of the coming child. Lawrence has certainly overestimated and misconceived the power of motherhood in his depiction of the pregnant female body as an impregnable fortress. Put pointedly, the problem for Lawrence’s heroes is that, while men still need women as they did when they were mother’s sons, women no longer seem to need them in the same way as did their mothers or their childless wives. In other words, the female, once fertilized, turns on the male and ills him. She turns all her love and care towards the child while excluding the man, who is “put away, quite alone, neglected, forgotten, outside the glow which surrounded the woman and her baby” (WP 231). Thus George in *The White Peacock* complains about his wife: “Meg never found any pleasure in me as she does in her kids” (WP 139). Eventually George comes to realize that “marriage is more of a duel than a duet” and that the woman generally wins because “she has the children on her side” (WP 278).

In *The Rainbow*, as was the case with Tom and Lydia, the strained relationship of Will and Anna deteriorates when Anna becomes pregnant. Anna’s pregnancy exacerbates Will’s fear of obliteration almost to the point of insanity: “His need, and his shame of need, weighed on him like a madness” (R 179). Anna’s dancing nakedly when she is pregnant symbolizes that her whole life is given completely to the rich fecundity of motherhood. The dance is aimed against Will: “She would dance his nullification” (R 187). Giving up her journey into the unknown, Anna lapses into a continuous rapture of motherhood: “She was willing now to postpone all adventure into unknown realities. She has the child, her palpable and immediate future was the child. If her soul had found no utterance, her womb had” (R 249). Anna is to have nine children altogether and her house is to be a house of children, in which she will reign as the supreme mother. In Will’s (and the narrator’s) view, Anna excludes the male in her pregnancy because she requires no more from him.
Will’s resolve, which was always a shaky thing, is severely broken by these reiterated assaults, and his attempt to recover a sense of his potency leaves him frustrated.

Along these lines, men in Lawrence’s fiction rage at women for being indifferent and for not being mothers. Yet on the other hand, in Lawrence’s writings we find repeated suggestions that women, especially the mother, desiring to possess the men (the son) they love, constitute a threat to masculine independence. In the essay “If Women Were Supreme” dealing with the matriarchy, Lawrence wrote: “To satisfy his deeper social instincts and intuitions, a man must be able to get away from his family, and from women altogether” (P 549). The destructive power of smothering maternal love is manifest in Lettie’s account about her home: “things don’t flower if they’re overfed . . . . There is always a sense of death in this home” (WP 280). Lawrence’s fear toward maternal domination is also suggested in the scene of Birkin’s stoning the moon. If the moon is interpreted as a symbol of Ursula herself, then Birkin’s vehement attack on its integral purity might be read as an assault on the matriarchal female. Besides, in the chapter “Man to Man,” Birkin blames the Great Mother, insisting that “the old way of love seemed a dreadful bondage.” He then shifts the blame to the Woman:

It seemed to him, woman was always so horrible and clutching . . . . She wanted to have, to own, to control, to be dominant. Everything must be referred back to her, to Woman, the Great Mother of everything, out of whom proceeded and to whom everything must finally be rendered up.

(WL 199)

The destructive force of overwhelmingly womblike security is brightly illustrated in the relationship between Gerald and Gudrun. In the passage describing their first sexual consummation, Gerald is presented as both a foetus and an infant:

And she, she was the great bath of life, he worshipped her. Mother and
substance of all life she was. And he, child and man, received of her and was made whole . . . perfect as if he were bathed in the womb again . . . .

He was glad and grateful like a delirium, as he felt his own wholeness come over him again, as he felt the full, unutterable sleep coming over him, the sleep of complete exhaustion and restoration. (WL 389-90)

Gerald’s attraction to water, implied by the womb-imagery, includes a desire for womblike security that is not only regressive but destructive, since what is life for the embryo is death for the man. Eventually, Gerald moves toward extinction, being tortured by his own fatal need for the comforting maternal flood.

To certain extent, Lawrence’s ambivalence toward the “devouring mother” was part of the prime motivating factor behind the works of his leadership period. For instance, Aaron’s emotional illness is caused by the iron pressure of his wife’s persistent will. Aaron’s wife insisted that woman in her maternal role is “the center of creation” and man a mere “adjunct” (AR 56). She was certain there was nothing greater for Aaron than “to be perfectly enveloped in her all-beneficent love”; it was “written in eternal letters, on the iron tablet of her will” that he must yield to her (AR 157). Repudiating the idea of being the husband of a mother, Lilly declares: “Sacred children and sacred motherhood, I’m fed stiff by it” (AR 79). Aaron agrees and expounds what has been mentioned above as a Lawrentian theme: “They look on a man as if he was nothing but an instrument to get and rear children . . . . Children are their chief weapon” (AR 80). Unlike his explicit attack on maternity in Aaron Rod, Lawrence seems at first sight to stress positively the motherhood of the kangaroo in his succeeding novel Kangaroo. The kangaroo is solid, weighty, as though married to the gravity of the earth, unlike the swift and small animals of the north. Throughout the novel, Kangaroo is presented as a womb and is made not only “the First” but “the Highest”—in Kangaroo’s eyes, there shines “a queer, holy light” amid
the features of “the kangaroo face” (K 186). Yet in the end the novel does not endorse Kangaroo’s maternal values, paralleling Lilly’s rejection of sacred motherhood. In an attempt to assert the importance of respect for integrity, Lawrence goes so far as to offer male comradeship in place of the idealization of mother love. Inciting his readers to march under the slogan, “Down with mothers! A bas les meres!” (P 621), Lawrence takes Birkin’s rejection of the Magna Mater a stage further in a fierce denunciation of motherhood and mothers.

If Lawrence’s solution to the problem of maternal domination is suspect, his analysis of the problem of maternal love is no less significant. In other words, his exploration of motherhood, while exposing the male psyche, also discloses the illusion of ideal maternity, which may provoke our rethinking of “care-giving” proposed by some feminist ethicists. The feminist ethics of care suggests that somehow women can offer culture a kinder, gentler world on the basis of some inherent feminine goodness, especially that of motherhood. In addition to Gilligan whom I have mentioned earlier, Nel Noddings is one of the feminists who have articulated the earliest descriptions of an ethics of care. In Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, Noddings claims that caring “is feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (2). As she sees it, empathy is of crucial importance in an ideal caring relationship. In this trend, many feminists view the willingness to nurture and a ready capacity for emotional involvement inherent in women’s experiences with care-giving as essential to a human moral in a world of injustice and alienation. For instance, Sara Ruddick argues that maternal thinking that arises from women’s traditional experience with childcare can be transformed into “a liberating political and ethical stance of global significance” (144).

Though a feminist ethics based on women’s experience of childcare has the
liberating force in its attempt of calling into question male-centered moral
perspectives and seeking to construct moral views more congenial to women, there
are also some substantial grounds for caution. First of all, such an ethics of care fails
to acknowledge the potential for violence and harm in a caring relationship. While
based on the intention of caring for and nurturing others, maternal care can
nonetheless be corrupt or coercive by means of its psychological imperialism. In
other words, practices of maternal caring may have many pathological forms. One
of the questions frequently raised against an ethics of care is—From whose
perspective is the act of caring “desirable” and “respectful”?; the care-giver’s; or the
cared-for’s? Said another way, what passes as protectiveness in the care-giver’s eyes
may look like a harmful projection to the cared-for party. We need an ethic that
preserves the idea of a respectful and responsive self but that does not construe the
self as so constructed by intimate relations that an agent lacks any freedom to contest
or resist other people’s practices and assumptions. On similar account, Lawrence
mistrusts the idealism of maternal love, of pure sympathetic communion and
understanding: "Our children drink a decoction of ideal love, at the breast” (FU 87).
Modern mothers, Lawrence claims, initiate their children into the love-mode by
demanding a self-conscious acquiescence in their demands and by repressing the
normal violent expression of their children’s sensual will. Bullying is “a desire to
superimpose my own will upon another person” (FU 52). But for Lawrence the
more dangerous and less recognizable type of bullying is “ideal bullying” which he
defines as “bullying people into what is ideally good for them. I embrace, for
example, an ideal, and I seek to enact this ideal in the person of another” (FU 52).
This leads to the enforced suppression of the natural growth and development of an
individual human personality, a process that Lawrence sees as beginning with the
mother-love control.
Lawrence connects the “ideal bullying” characteristic of maternal love to the sacrificial quality inherent in motherhood. Lawrence’s formulation of maternity is, like that of Levinas’s, closely related to the notion of “sacrifice” and powerful feelings associated with it. Yet, while Levinas designates maternity as the ethical model of “the one-for-the-other” (OB 67), Lawrence associates in most of his work the notion of “sacrifice” with judgments which are against it. In this sense, what Lawrence repudiates is not the maternal role per se, but the destructive potency of “sacrifice” deeply associated with maternal love. Lawrence’s consideration reminds us the fact that self-sacrifice is usually the necessary result of any ethics of care. Though feminists of an ethics of care usually warn of the temptation to maternal self-sacrifice, the selfhood of the mother seems to be effaced in most of their work, according to which the mother is usually regarded as essentially giving, responding, receptive, and patient—qualities that Levinasian sensibility has represented. And yet there is something missing from the picture.

In opposition to Levinas’s appreciation of maternal love as selfless devotion to the other, Lawrence demythologizes the institution of motherhood by debunking the notion of unadulterated and wholly beneficial maternal devotion. In Fantasia, Lawrence attacks the mother-love control, wherein mothers fail to take “a brave responsibility” for themselves:

I must absolutely act according to my true spontaneous feeling. But moreover I must also have wisdom of responsibility for myself and for my child. Always, always the deep wisdom of responsibility. And always a brave responsibility for the soul’s own spontaneity . . . . Love is, in all, generous impulse. But wisdom is something else, a deep collectedness in the soul, a deep abiding of my own integral being, which makes me responsible, not for the child, but for my certain duties towards the child.
In Lawrence’s opinion, the plight of all people is owing to their failure to assume their own responsibility. For instance, Lettie in *The White Peacock* has failed to take up responsibility for her own life and has ignored her own potentialities. Married to Leslie, Lettie determined “to abandon the charge of herself to serve her children” (WP 281). Withdrawing herself into the shelter of mothering, Lettie gradually becomes resigned and resentful. There is a “touch of ironical brutality in her” (WP 282) when she describes her occupation or career as “Mother,” and her business as a flourishing one. While Lettie makes her own comment on her life, the narrator adds his:

Having reached that point in a woman’s career when most things in life seem worthless and insipid, she had determined to put up with it, to ignore her own self, to empty her own potentialities into the vessel of another or others, and to live her life at second hand. This peculiar abnegation of self is the resource of a woman for the escaping of the responsibilities of her own development. Like a nun, she puts over her living face a veil, as a sign that the woman no longer exists for herself: she is the servant of God, of some man, of her children, or may be, of some cause. As a servant, she is no longer responsible for her self, which would make her terrified and lonely. Service is light and easy. To be responsible for the good progress of one’s life is terrifying. It is the most insufferable form of loneliness, and the heaviest of responsibilities. (WP 283-4)

Like so many women of her generation, Lettie has bartered her self-responsibility for security, comfort and freedom from anxiety.

Lettie’s choice mirrors thousands like it; in particular it looks forward to Mrs. Morel in *Sons and Lovers.* Indeed, the pernicious effect of self-sacrifice is an insistent theme in the novel. What is certain is that most of the women and men
either make sacrifices of themselves or are sacrificed: sometimes they know it, and sometimes not. What Mrs. Morel sacrifices first of all is herself, but she also wants to sacrifice Paul Morel, without necessarily knowing or meaning it. For her, her sons operate merely as agents of her ambition, realizing her aspiration for larger experience: “she had two sons in the world . . . . She could think of two places, great centers of industry, and feel that she had put a man into each of them, that these men would work out what she wanted” (SL 127). Yet her ambition for her children—“perhaps her son would be a Joseph” (SL 49)—could be a destructive force. Instead of feeding her sons, Mrs. Morel feeds on them. In her fear of losing Paul during his love relationship with Miriam, Mrs. Morel criticizes Miriam severely: “I can’t bear it. I could let another woman—but not her. She’d leave me no room, not a bit of room” (SL 261). And then the mother perversely lays bare her own engulfing attachment to Paul: “And I’ve never—you know, Paul—I’ve never had a husband—not really” (SL 261). The fact that she has never had a husband is of no relevance to her son’s love-affair, yet Mrs. Morel sees it as crucially relevant, employing it as a weapon for her maternal domination. The attitude of self-sacrifice, which results in a sense of void in the care-giver and hence her perverted dependence on the cared-for, makes Mrs. Morel alienated from her role as a mother. Paul is thus in a cruel dilemma: there can hardly be peace or satisfaction for him in a possessive relationship with his mother, yet neither can he find fulfillment outside his perverse connection. He has no other choice than playing the unhealthy role because he is so strongly encompassed by his mother’s pain of deprivation.

In his scorn for Christian meekness and self-sacrifice, Lawrence is obviously unlike novelistic forefathers whose use of female protagonists involves emphasis on the importance of virtues traditionally demanded of women in patriarchal societies: docility, receptiveness, self-sacrifice for family, and selfless love of children. In
contrast to the socially established model of the virtuous woman which falls squarely within the normative model of gender and sexuality, Lawrence’s high valuation of female sexual fulfillment is pervasive in his fiction. In a sense, Lawrence’s opposition to traditional valuation of woman-as-mother is related to his insistence on the importance of the non-generative, or non-reproductive, function of sex. In referring to this point, Spivak indicates that woman’s reproductive function has been traditionally placed over the rights of woman as an individual. She connects the “official view of reproduction” (i.e., women are only the guardians of the father’s children) with the “privileging of marriage, the Law that appropriates the woman’s body over the claims of that body as Law” (1983: 174). Opposing the “official view of reproduction”, Lawrence insists that the sexual act, as has been argued in Part Two, is not “for the depositing of the seed,” but for “leaping off into the unknown” (P441). In other words, for Lawrence, procreation is always “just left over” from the communion of man with woman. For a man to love a woman is for him to understand her as “purposeless.” In other words, for Lawrence, woman’s significance is not in her reproductive function—neither as a child-bearer nor as a care-giver. In her attack on Clifford’s appreciation of the “virgin mother” (LCL 121), Connie is shown to have a proper respect for herself as a sexual being in addition to being a wife and a (would-be) mother.20

In this sense, Lawrence highlights an important strand in the feminist critique of care ethics—i.e., while feminist ethics of care draws on women’s experiences as mothers and on the mother-child relationship as another paradigm for ethics, yet of course not all women are mothers, and not all caring roles are played by women-mothers. In other words, it is questionable whether one ought to tie women’s experiences so closely to the experiences of mothers, and whether care-givers ought to be confined to women. As I have mentioned earlier, care ethics
has been severely accused of reinforcing women’s caretaking roles. Traditionally, women have been socialized into caring roles, yet of course men can be caring. Nonetheless, families, friends, workplaces and social policies all assume that women are naturally capable of and thus primarily responsible for care. Men too are confronted with gender-symbolism that caring responsibilities are not expected from them or that they are “not real men” for engaging attentively in any caring work.\(^{21}\)

Will’s situation in *The Rainbow* is described as such: “He served the little matriarchy, nursing the child and helping with the housework, indifferent any more of his own dignity and importance . . . . He was not what is called a manly man” (R 208).

Imprisoned in gender ideologies, many men either repress their caring emotions or neglect their caring ability. Lawrence’s demythologization of motherhood offers a reassessment and revaluation of fatherhood, freeing the male to assume parenthood of his children and to show his nurturing side without being considered “womanish.” Tom Brangwen’s relationship with his step-daughter Anna stands as an obvious example of a meaningful father-child relationship. Accordingly, Lawrence’s condemnation of motherhood does not imply that he repudiates the caring ability of human being. In fact, in most of his fiction, he emphasizes human being’s longing for being cared. His point is that the nurturing ability in men and women should both be valued. In his leadership novels, Lawrence stressed especially the importance of the father in the family constellation (perhaps, for him, as an alternative to the mother and her smothering love). Men can serve as care-givers as well—such as Lilly in *Aaron’s Rod*, and Cooley in *Kangaroo*.\(^{22}\)

In his valuation of the male as care-giver, Lawrence at the same time calls into question conventional association between womanhood and motherhood. As I have indicated, it is inadequate to group all women under the maternal thinking in an ethics of care. Women without children, especially those opposed to having children, have
complained that the emphasis on mothering in current feminist ethics does not resonate with their own moral experience. In their view, as it is so for Lawrence, to be a woman does not necessarily mean to be a mother. As a matter of fact, motherhood is often seen in Lawrence’s fiction as a positive hindrance to a woman’s self-realization. As we have seen, by elevating motherhood to a position of central importance, both Lettie and Anna turn out to be slaves to motherhood, which is seen to have restricted their personal growth. This point is developed into a central theme in *The Rainbow*—i.e., woman’s significance is not the bearing of children; her “supreme and risky fate” is to “bear herself” and “drive on to the edge of the unknown” (R 441). At the end of *The Rainbow*, finding herself pregnant, Ursula is tempted to accept her mother’s mode of life—i.e., fecund immersion in sexual and reproductive rhythms. “For what had a woman but to submit? What was her flesh for but for childbearing, her strength for her children and her husband, the giver of life? At last she was a woman” (R 485). In such a moment of weakness, Ursula not only finds a nobility in this simple mode, but feels guilty about the egotism of continually striving for something better:

> She had been wrong, she had been arrogant and wicked, wanting that other thing, that fantastic freedom, that illusory, conceited fulfillment which she had imagined she could not have with Skrebensky. Who was she to be wanting some fantastic fulfillment in her life? Was it not enough that she had her man, her children, her place of shelter under the sun? Was it not enough for her, as it had been enough for her mother? She would marry and love her husband and fill her place simply. That was the ideal.  

(R 486-7)

As she is tempted to accept the life society has prescribed for women, Ursula in the long run realistically and symbolically acts out her purgation of the flesh through her
encounter with the horses. Her terror caused by the horses made her conveniently lose the baby, which continues as a nightmare all through her sickness because it would have reduced her to the cycle of the flesh which her mother welcomed.

As Lydia Blanchard points out, *The Rainbow* is primarily about difference, about the fact “that it is possible for a woman to be someone other than her mother” (1978: 80). Ursula resents her mother’s “superficial authority,” and despises her “trance of motherhood” (R 241). In her resentment of the circularity of motherhood, Ursula criticizes her mother for the oblivious fecundity of her married life: “She knew as a child what it was to live amid storms of babies, in the heat and swelter of fecundity. And as a child, she was against her mother, passionately against her mother” (R 265). After being frightened (and enlightened) by the horses, Ursula casts off the past, realizing that she belongs neither to Skrebensky nor to her parents, but to nowhere and to no one. At the end of the novel, Ursula does not achieve new knowledge through her body in the experience of childbirth, as her mother had. Instead, from the miscarriage and death of the fetus comes the birth of her independent self. Her abortion signifies the problematization of the notion of woman as primarily a child-bearer.

Feminist critics of this novel continue to admire Ursula for her supposed opposition to traditional values of marriage and fecund motherhood that are apparently contrary to modern spirit of female freedom. In this respect, Ursula represents “the independent woman” proposed by de Beauvoir, who explains women’s subordinate position by referring to their reproductive functions. De Beauvoir claims that women who are continually pregnant are “fertile organisms, like fowl with high egg-production. And they seek eagerly to sacrifice their liberty of action to the function of their flesh: it seems to them that their existence is tranquilly justified in the passive fecundity of their bodies” (513). Anna in *The Rainbow* is a
ready example of women who feel triumphant in their acceptance of female anatomy as a destiny. De Beauvoir rejects the assumption that maternity is the “natural,” biological role of women and the embodiment of all the positive values associated with the feminine. Instead, she regards the sacred role of motherhood as “an illusion” (513), identifying maternity as the obstacle to the development of women. Far from valorizing maternity, she imagines a society in which the role of motherhood is freely chosen and, when undertaken, reduced to a minimum. To a large degree, Ursula’s resistance to patriarchal marriage matches de Beauvoir’s proposition of the necessity to transcend the female body and its reproductive capacities. Unlike her mother Anna, Ursula definitely rejects the maternal role involving the bearing, caring and rearing of children and the provision of the emotional and physical well-being of her husband.

In a sense then, Lawrence, like de Beauvoir, suggests that marriage and domesticity could dill women, mar their potential, and turn them into charred fragments. By confronting the myth of motherhood as selfless devotion to the family, they both denaturalize maternity, which certainly contributes a lot to the emancipation of subordinated women. Yet, unlike liberal feminists, who tend to diminish the significance of mother’s work, Lawrence, given his performance in homely skill, certainly does not devalue mother’s domestic work, though he recognizes with sympathy the female’s scorn on housework. As the biographer Cynthia Asquith puts it, Lawrence seems “preternaturally alive” because he “dignifies women’s traditional tasks by performing them as if they were religious rites” (147). On the contrary, some feminists’ failure to recognize domestic work as a social or cultural activity constitutes and helps to perpetuate the undervaluing of women’s and mother’s cultural contributions. Put another way, a simple denial of biological maternity ignores the fact that biology in and of itself is neither oppressive nor liberating; it is the values
associated with maternity that have made motherhood one of the primary sources of women’s oppression. The devaluation of the domestic realm made it difficult to raise questions about the justice of the domestic division of labor, and obscured the far-reaching social significance and creativity of women’s work in the home.

Moreover, for women to become otherwise than one’s mother is not as easy as Blanchard has elaborated. Kristeva stresses the difficulty for women in “killing” the maternal body. Kristeva argues that the male child is able to split his mother in order to take up his socially sanctioned sexual identity (1982: 157). In this scenario, the mother is split into the abject and the sublime, allowing the male child to separate from the maternal realm and achieve autonomy. Contrastingly, if the female makes her mother abject in order to reject her, she makes herself abject, thus rejecting her own femininity. As a consequence, the premature rejection or valorization of conventional understandings of the maternal aspects of women’s experience may allow such determinations to be incorporated into existing structures. Kristeva’s warnings of the dangers of becoming “either militant or victim” (1982: 161) are attempts to confront such potential incorporation. The celebration of motherhood (Lettie, Anna) as a positive aspect of women’s experience, which omits consideration of its constraints, may yoke it to the patriarchal reduction of women to mother. Conversely, the rejection of motherhood (Ursula) may position a woman as apparently counter or marginal to the central social and economic forces, leaving her trapped in the very oppositional structure which profits from this dichotomous form of dissent.

Anticipating Kristeva’s warning, Lawrence, for all his endeavor to expose the fallacious association of motherhood and woman, at the same time insists on and valorizes irreducible difference between the sexes and rebukes the women who are contemptuous of their own womanhood. His assumption is that if difference is erased, then subjectivity cannot be defined. In this respect, Lawrence has been often
accused of neglecting the social constraints on women. However, as I hope to show in the following discussion, Lawrence is concerned not only with the singularity of each sex, but also with how a transformation of the social system is possible through a full recognition of sexual difference. In other words, we must not ignore his belief in a female essence as well as his vehement rejection of the social practices and cultural ideals that prescribe its containment.

III. Sexual Difference or Sexual Equality?

In the past few decades, feminist theorists have been divided on the importance to be attributed to sexual differences. On the one hand, “equalitarian feminists” seek to minimize the impact of sexual difference in order to remove all obstacles to full female participation in the public sphere. On the other side of the debate, “difference feminists” focus on women’s special needs (e.g. pregnancy as an obvious biological difference between men and women should not be ignored), highlighting the need to challenge current social, economic and political structures based upon the male standard. While the former stand fails to account for the influence of inequalities and gendered divisions of labour in the private sphere on women’s participation in the official labour market, the latter position, by over-stressing women’s differences, also leads to a ready acceptance of some kind of standard normality.24 Put differently, while the denial of any natural female essence seems antithetical to the idea of a gendered speaking position, the argument for essential sexual difference does not adequately address the process of cultural and social construction of women. The question that follows might be summarized as such—is equality best served by sex-blindness or by sex-responsiveness? As Toril Moi puts it, “the feminist struggle must both try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes
femininity intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending precisely as women” (1985: 82). Lawrence’s fiction, in its ambivalent treatment of sexual difference, is broadly relevant to this dilemma unresolved for women—i.e., if the feminine stereotypes are at odds with women’s achievement of selfhood, their achievement of selfhood must at the same time entail the achievement of womanhood, which so often leads to the formation of feminine stereotypes.

Though Lawrence’s Ursula in The Rainbow anticipates de Beauvoir’s “independent woman,” Lawrence is certainly against de Beauvoir’s demand that “girls be brought up with the same expectations as boys” (735), given his urgent insistence on irreducible sexual difference. As has been mentioned above, de Beauvoir maintained that feminine traits and those aspects of the female body that were seen as debilitating should be transcended in order that woman could emerge unshackled. According to her formula, in order to become the (masculine) One, woman must not only definitely renounce her femininity but also embrace the distinctively masculine qualities that define the One. In this respect, Lawrence is more related to French feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous, who reverse de Beauvoir’s strategy by re-instating the female body and the feminine essence and treating both as sites for exploration in feminist ethics and politics. As Diana Fuss explains, in a defense of Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference, Western philosophy has followed Aristotle’s view that “only man properly has an essence” because of his unique claim to subjectionhood, while “woman is the ground of essence, its precondition in man, without herself having any access to it” (76). Lawrence’s writing, in its affirmation of a female essence accessible to women as individuals, generally opposes this Aristotelian position.

For Lawrence, to lead a true living is to approach one’s own self with a deep respect, even reverence, for one’s own sexual difference. That being the case, in
most of his fiction, the denial or degradation of sexual “otherness” in oneself is regarded as a sin (though ambivalently and with certain reservation). For instance, in *Sons and Lovers*, while Paul tries to argue from what he regards as the elemental facts of life, Miriam is presented as escaping the responsibility of her sexual existence with complaints like “men have everything” or “because I’m a woman” (SL 183). Paul has some difficulty in comprehending Miriam’s bitterness: “Paul wondered. In his own home, Annie was almost glad to be a girl” (SL 184).  

Miriam here is criticized for her lack of healthy organic roots—i.e., she has been cut off from her courses of female sexual passion and sexual self-respect. For Paul, Miriam has denied the primacy of her womb for the specious satisfaction of getting a nine-to-five job. As a result, she is dead and empty inside and her compulsion for work has contributed to the denial of her fulfillment as a female.

Similarly, Clara in this novel is presented as reducing sexual essentiality to a function of job discrimination. Looking with anger at institutions and collective “men” as the primary cause of her malaise, Clara is characterized as a “lost girl,” whose interest in the women’s movement is made representative of her incompletion as a woman. As Paul Morel puts it, “she lives separate from her husband, and talks on platforms” (SL 383). The following is a conversation between Paul and Clara on Margaret Bonford, the prominent feminist leader of the time:

> He rubbed his head, rather perplexed, rather annoyed.

> “I suppose it matters more than her cleverness,” he said; “which after all, would never get her to heaven.”

> “It’s not heaven she wants to get—it’s her fair share on earth,” retorted Clara. She spoke as if he were responsible for some deprivation which Miss Bonford suffered.

> “Well,” he said. “I thought she was warm, and awfully nice—only
too frail. I wished she was sitting comfortably in peace—“

“Darning her husband’s stockings,” said Clara scathingly.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind darning even my stockings,” he said.

“And I’m sure she’d do them well. Just as I wouldn’t mind blacking her boots if she wanted me to.” (SL 230-31)

Accordingly, while Clara responds with a materialist ideology, Paul considers the escape from the petty inhibitions of ego through sexual transcendence as more important than the demands, ambitions, or political complaints articulated by Clara. For him, the movement for female suffrage will result only in women making more laws, which are mechanical and life-destroying substitutes for female self-fulfillment.

Correspondingly, in Women in Love, Gudrun’s bitterness is ultimately a declaration of self-contempt toward her femininity. In the chapter “Diver,” the Brangwen sisters, walking on a wet autumn morning, come upon Gerald swimming naked. Ursula’s instinctive comfort with her own womanhood is played off against Gudrun’s vindictive dissatisfaction with her own lot in life. Gudrun envies Gerald strongly for his freedom as a man, not merely to swim naked but to accomplish any number of things without any hindrance:

“God, what it is to be a man!” she cried.

“What?” exclaimed Ursula in surprise.

“The freedom, the liberty, the mobility!” cried Gudrun, strangely flushed and brilliant. “You’re a man, you want to do a thing, you do it. You haven’t the thousand obstacles a woman has in front of her . . .

Supposing I want to swim up that water. It is impossible, it is one of the impossibilities of life, for me to take my clothes off now and jump in. But isn’t it ridiculous, doesn’t it simply prevent our living!”

She was so hot, so flushed, so furious, that Ursula was puzzled. (WL
Being confident in her own female self, Ursula, though sympathetic, is puzzled by the excessive emotion in Gudrun’s exclamation. Where Ursula depends on her own best instincts for guidance and achievement, Gudrun looks toward the organization of society for excuse or motivation. In a sense, the text suggests that the extent of Gudrun’s petulance is more rooted in her own organic dissatisfaction and less in the social structures that impose constraints on women.26

Contrary to de Beauvoir’s assertion that women renounce their femininity in order to achieve equality, Lawrence’s claim is that women should valorize and cultivate their female essence because notions of sexual equality often involve little more than women “becoming-men” or mimicking men. Critically commenting on Hermione’s intellectuality, which makes her give her soul up to “the public cause, a medium for the culture of ideas” (WL 16), Birkin remarks: “But she was a man’s woman, it was the manly world that held her” (WL 16). Birkin’s ironic comment on Hermione suggests Lawrence’s opposition to the recommendation that women be brought up to the level of the educated bourgeois male consciousness. It should be noted that the deprecatory tone in the statement on Hermione does not imply that Lawrence is against the woman’s social and intellectual interest as such. What Lawrence calls into question in Hermione is rather its unrecognized corruption into sham, and the ensuing subjection of her mind to the gaze of “the manly world.” Unable to make herself different from men in productive way, Hermione reproduces men’s ideas and adopts men’s standards. Ironically, the more she tries to make herself invulnerable by aping men, the greater her vulnerability and her subjection becomes (WL 16). In this sense, Lawrence’s position is that women should value their own innate difference from men, rather than defining themselves in terms relative to men.27
As has been quoted above, Lawrence recognizes that we are all born as bodies which are essentially sexed, male or female, and to doubt or deny biology amounts to denying the fact of our bodies, the fact that we are bodies at all. And so, unlike some feminists who suggest that the female body is the “iron grasp” which should be overcome, Lawrence contends that both men and women should valorize the “female belly.” Certainly, the precondition is that the female body should not be used to justify the restraint that society expects from feminine behaviour. In view of this, feminist criticism on The Rainbow concentrated approvingly on the liberated nature of Ursula, while condescended about Anna’s consuming involvement in marriage and motherhood (Heilbrun: 102-10; Simpson: 37-42; Millet: 257-62). Yet what should not be ignored is Lawrence’s depiction of the mother’s profound power. In other words, while the existential strength of Anna is indeed confined to domestic and maternal setting, the life force of the mother remains admirable and authentic precisely because it is derived from the unharnessed expression of the (female) self. All throughout the novel, Anna is proud to use her innate connection to the feminine sexual essentiality to assert an impressive and fertile “maximum self” (though the titanic expression of her femaleness is presented as nearly smothering her typically insecure mate). Accordingly, while Ursula resents her mother’s “superficial authority” (R 241), and the narrator regards Anna as living only in her upper, daylit self, the mother (no less probably the female reader) might not necessarily think of her maternal self as superficial and insignificant.

Following the vein, in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Connie felt that she needed a man who was kind to her as a female. And it is Mellors who is able to respect her female womanhood. Mellor’s kindness to Connie’s womb, which is his ultimate tribute to her as a woman, is seen as the place from which any honest communication between the sexes should begin. In the following passage, Connie contemplates on
the inadequacy of her former admirers and on Mellors’s eminently male appreciation of her womb:

And after all, he was kind to the female in her, which no man had ever been. Men were very kind to the person she was, but rather cruel to the female, despising her or ignoring her altogether. Men were awfully kind to Constance Reid or to Lady Chatterley; but not to her womb they weren’t kind. (LCL 129)

Repeatedly in this novel, the term “womb” embodies the full force, the secrets, and the source of Connie’s instinctual self as a woman. Conversely, the titles and slogans are acknowledged by Connie as easy social indices, which have no relation to Mellor’s basic recognition of her sexual otherness as a woman. Mellor’s “wonder,” in contrast to Clifford’s contempt, makes Connie accept that her female identity is the most important element of her being, and that she knows men and women before she knows the jargon of “persons”. The men at Wragby are so “kind to Constance Reid or to Lady Chatterley” that they treat her as one of the guys. Such is the sexual distortion implicit in their veneer of gender egalitarianism.

However, Lawrence’s (male) appreciation of essential femininity and his insistence on manhood and womanhood seem to be, in certain ways, at odds with feminine aspiration for liberation. In “Love Was Once a Little Boy,” Lawrence claims that the idea of equality is itself an abstraction, and he argues that it is even more impossible for any man and woman to be treated as equals.

Still more difficult is it to put male man in one scale and female woman in the other, and equilibrate that little pair of opposites. Unless, of course, you abstract them. It’s easy enough to balance a citizen against a citizen, a Christian against a Christian, a spirit against a spirit, or a soul against a soul. There’s a formula for each case. Liberty, Equality,
But the moment you put young Tom in one scale, and young Kate in the other: why, not God Himself has succeeded as yet in striking a nice level balance. Probably doesn’t intend to, ever.  

In another essay “Blessed Are the Powerful,” Lawrence goes so far to claim: “In living life, we are all born with different powers, and different degrees of power: some higher, some lower. The only thing to do is honorably to accept it” (RD 155-6). Lawrence’s recognition of the impossibility of equality (however true it might be) is obviously undesirable for any woman who, in practice, attempts to argue for the principle of equality in treatment with men. Moreover, by using gender driven rhetoric, Lawrence is inevitably made to fall into the double bind of Western binary thinking. Certainly, the binary model serves Lawrence’s purpose of formulating a sexual theory that is based on an essentialist notion of sexual difference. On the other hand, it also presents obstacles to the aspiration for a truly egalitarian gender relations.

As I’ve mentioned earlier, Lawrence’s assertion of “incomparability between sexes” has much to do with Irigaray’s advocacy of an ethics of sexual difference based on the notion of radical otherness. Yet, as a male writer concerned with woman’s question and man-woman relationship, Lawrence is situated in a predicament—i.e., the insistence on sexual irreducibility easily slips into indifference toward the other sex—which is in certain respects relevant to the difficulty inherent in an ethics of alterity. Facing the widespread inequality and injustice of our contemporary world, Levinas acknowledges that “there’s a direct contradiction between ethics and politics” (1989: 292)—i.e., a contradiction between an ethics of alterity and a politics of justice. Considering the tendency that ethical inquiry has occluded political engagement, many critics have warned that the turn to ethics should
not be made a turn away form the political. For instance, Harpham observes that too much difference puts you uselessly at the margins.29 Similarly concerned with the potential dangers inherent in the discourse of difference, David Parker insists on the importance of the “politics of recognition” (1999: 154). He exposes the dark side of a non-prescriptive ethics—i.e., a mode of ethical thinking that is all about not presuming to speak for others because one cannot necessarily know them, and hence one should not colonize another person’s truth.30 As Parker sees it, the problem with such an ethics is that it risks not merely the politeness of a refusal to trespass across boundaries, but the enforcement of an absolute perception of the difference, raising mere boundary-markers into high walls, behind which ignorance and fear may fester. Therefore, in Parker’s opinion, to really have respect for others must involve some kind of identification. We need to regard others as both like ourselves and different. Along the lines, the sexual other might be different, but there is a commonality between the sexes such that one can begin to understand the harms of misrecognition of the other by putting oneself in his or her place.

It is in this sense that we might interpret and appreciate Lawrence’s attempt to write from a female’s point of view, for all his insistent affirmation of sexual difference. In his fiction, Lawrence continually makes himself into a “man-and-woman”, exploring with great boldness the female mode of being. Against Millet’s claim that Paul Morel is simply Lawrence’s mouthpiece, Alison Light asserts that Lawrence’s novels are “attempts at ‘ungendering’ and at dispersing or even transforming the gendered experience of an author and its usual restraints” (176). Anais Nin also insisted that “the intuitional quality in Lawrence resulted in a curious power in his writing which might be described as androgynous,” noting that Lawrence “had a complete realization of the feelings of women. In fact, very often he wrote as a woman would write” (59).31 Indeed, despite his urgent insistence on “the
incomparability between the sexes,” Lawrence’s fiction exposes the process of gender construction caused by sexual inequality which in turn results in more established gender stereotypes. In his deep concern with women’s subordinated position, Lawrence’s work exhibits “an extremely sympathetic feeling for the problems of the modern woman” (Nin 50). Put another way, if Lawrence appears as advocate of gender difference it is not to deny his belief in equality of opportunity to people of different sexes. It is rather to emphasize his warning against equality of expectations from separate individuals who are essentially different, not only in gender, but also in their capacity to achieve moral response through their own instincts and emotions.

As we have seen in the above, central to Lawrence’s fiction is his appreciation of the “female principle”—those elements which make up “womanhood” and which women must retain and cultivate as what distinguishes them from men. Lawrence’s somewhat essentialist view of woman, nonetheless, does not prevent him from exploring the reality of women’s oppression within social relations, such as their economic status and their actual exploitation as child-bearers and labour force.

Actually, in his fiction, Lawrence from time to time make plain his concern with sex role constraints imposed by and within class, family, and financial boundaries. He is especially concerned with the destructive elements of family institution, of the constraints that social conventions impose upon women. In The While Peacock, after getting married to Leslie, Lettie gradually loses the spark of life. Some sympathetic observations stand behind Lettie and Emily when they condemn Mrs. Annable’s situation:

“Ah, it’s always the woman who bears the burden,” said Lettie bitterly.

“If he’d helped her—wouldn’t she have been a fine woman now—splendid?

But she’s daggered to bits. Men are brutes—and marriage just gives scope to them—,” said Emily. (WP 35)
Meg also complains against George: “Meg complained very bitterly of her husband. He often made a beast of himself drinking, he thought more of himself than he ought, home was not good enough for him, he was self to the backbone, he care neither for her nor children, only for himself” (WP 298). Though Lettie’s choice of life on the upper plane harms not only George but Leslie, she at least insists on doing her duty as mother and wife. But George cannot accept his and neglects or ill-treats his family.

Lettie and Emily’s statements quoted above ring out as some feminists’ indictment of the asymmetrical organization of parenting. Nancy Chodorow argues that the present social organization of parenting produces sexual inequality; and so she claims that “it is politically and socially important to confront this organization of parenting” (214). With a focus primarily on the factor of socialization, Chodorow suggests that the elimination of exclusive female mothering would be a “tremendous social advance” (219). The sexual division of labor requires the female both to bear and to raise children, thus leading to very different experiences of individuation for the girl and the boy. In Chodorow’s opinion, if motherhood is indeed socially constructed, then the legislation should not merely acknowledge women’s special needs, which will simultaneously reconfirm women’s role as home-maker and care-giver. In addition to protecting women’s rights as workers through the implementation of comprehensive maternity legislation, the social policy should also strive to promote a new definition of parenthood.

The asymmetrical labor division in parenting also leads to the assumption of “mother-blaming,” according to which mothers are held responsible for all “bad” behavior of their children. Traditionally mothers are held accountable for the health, actions, and appearance—i.e., the construction and maintenance—of their family. For all that, mothers, women who bear or adopt and raise children, have virtually no political or economic power in this culture. Moreover, for a long time, the political
and social significance of domestic work has been neglected. It is not a task analogous to other forms of employment governed by a market economy and thus it cannot be measured in terms of capitalist calculations of labour time. Being engaged in an unpaid job, women are doubly restrained by the demands of private sphere. Perceiving the harm done to women (especially to mothers) by the gendering of labor division, Lawrence reveals in his fiction empathy with and sympathy for women and mothers, in spite of his male psyche against feminine dominance and maternal authority.

Referring to *Sons and Lovers*, Simpson writes that this novel “betrays little appreciation of the relationship between the personal and the political” (29). Yet, if Lawrence in this novel holds more account of sexual energy in individual men and women than in the institutional realm of reform, he certainly does not ignore the relationship between the personal and the political. While harshly reproaching those women who escape self-responsibility by adopting the established maternal role, Lawrence at the same time notes with true insight the effect of the marriage trap upon women, a sympathy he shows most evidently for Mrs. Morel. Moreover, Lawrence’s condemnation of women’s choice to plunge into motherhood is undermined by the fact that such a choice is exclusively for bourgeois women (like Lettie); women of the working class do not have the luxury of any better choice than to be confined in the domestic sphere. Their customary activity has not always been freely chosen commitment, as Simon de Beauvoir has thought it to be. As a woman trapped in a marriage she does not want and hemmed by a world that allows her no positive outlets for her talents and energies, Mrs. Morel has no other choice but to live her life through her children, her main source of joy and strength: “The world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her—at least until William grew up. But for herself, nothing but this dreary endurance—till the children grew up”
In *Sons and Lovers*, if Lawrence shows us Mr. Morel as being crippled in marriage, the pattern of thwarted life is continued in his handling of Mrs. Morel. Lawrence describes clearly the combination of economic and social factors that constrain and construct Mrs. Morel. As a woman of great personal power, she cannot, however, as her sons can, employ those qualities in an effort to rise, to climb, and to leave “the Bottoms”.

Correspondingly, Miriam is trapped by the restrictive society in which she lives: “I’m all day cleaning what the boys make just as bad in five minutes. I don’t want to be at home . . . I want to do something” (SL 191). Late in the novel, Paul is shown to be not so confident in his own insistence on the transcendence of womanhood. The following is a conversation wherein Miriam tells Paul she intends to become a teacher.

“Oh, I don’t think it won’t be a great deal. Only you’ll find earning your own living isn’t everything.”

“No,” she said, swallowing with difficulty. “I don’t suppose it is.”

“I suppose work can be nearly everything to a man,” he said, “though it isn’t to me. But a woman only works with a part of herself. The real and vital part is covered up.”

“But a man can give all himself to a work?” she asked.

“Yes, practically.”

“And a woman only the unimportant part of herself?”

“That’s it.”

She looked up at him, and her eyes dilated with anger.

“Then,” she said, “if it’s true, it’s a great shame.”

“It is. But I don’t know everything,” he answered. (SL 486)

Paul gets stunned at Miriam’s question. He himself cannot understand, not even
expose, the social restriction on women. Paul has more power and freedom in the world, once he grows up, than any of the women in the novel. He can be educated, but Miriam cannot. He can make a good salary, and rise in the world, but Clara cannot. He can move into the middle class, but his mother—who must accept the class level of her husband—cannot. The women around him turn out to be his stepping stones, among whom his mother is above all the rock on which he is grounded. If Paul cannot figure out Miriam’s bitterness of being a woman, Lawrence certainly is not ignorant of gender prerogatives owned by Paul.

A scene in Women in Love describes the fatally vile state of women. In the chapter “Flitting”, Ursula and Gudrun return to their house in Willey Green. Looking at the hearth, a symbolic site in the home, Ursula finds herself drawn toward the pieces of paper she sees lying under the gate. Suddenly she realizes that she is looking at pictures of women, charred representations of her own sex:

In the hearth was burnt paper, and scraps of half-burnt paper.

“Imagine that we passed our days here!” said Ursula.

“I know,” cried Gudrun. “It is too appalling. What must we be like, if we are contents of this!”

“Vile!” said Ursula. “It really is.”

And she recognized half-burnt covers of “Vogue”—half-burnt representations of women in gowns—lying under the gate. (WL 372)

Both Ursula and Gudrun recognize that marriage and domesticity could suppress women’s potentiality because women have devoted their lives to tending the hearth and keeping the home fires burning. Though the novel opens with a domestic scene of two sisters chatting about marriage, which makes the novel seemingly of the marriage-plot tradition, the opening scene is immediately undermined by Ursula’s remark that marriage is “more like to be the end of experience” (WL 7). The home
and hence marriage, which have been traditionally held to be women’s sphere and
sanctuary, are traps Ursula and Gudrun wish to escape. Lawrence here gives the
fictional initiative to the “self-responsible” Brangwen sisters, yet an undertone of
“fright” and “bitterness” haunted the blank prospect before women who choose not to
marry. Lack of a means of continuity and identity causes the “void” felt by the
modern women—while home is where one escapes from, marriage is further what
one avoids as impossible and undesirable. What is more, plunging into a world
outside of home and marriage, modern women are offered neither exits nor loopholes
for their feminine potentiality in man’s world.

The predicament of modern women who aspire to “equality in difference” is
more pointedly elaborated in The Rainbow. Here Ursula, as an independent woman,
struggles to free herself from her family to go out to work. “I shall be proud to see
one of my girls win her own economical independence, which means so much more
than it seems. I shall be glad indeed to know that one more of my girls has provided
for herself the means of freedom to choose for herself” (R 357). However, the
description of the humiliating and brutalizing events through which Ursula moves in
her experience at St. Philip’s is a brilliant description of a woman trying to survive in
the man’s world. Her lesson is ultimately that success in the man’s world means
transforming oneself into another unit of that world founded on patriarchal power:

She had her place as comrade and sharer in the work of the school, her
fellow teachers had signed to her, as one of them. And she was one of all
workers, she had put in her tiny brick to the fabric man was building, she
had qualified herself as a co-builder. (R 425)

Ursula’s perplexity is a manifestation of the adversity of modern women confronted
with the unresolved dilemma between sexual equality and sexual difference. If
women can only participate as would-be men, there won’t be transformation of the
system based on male standard. Gender-neutral rules can perpetuate gender inequality. To transform the unequal system can be accomplished only on the basis of a full recognition of sexual difference. Yet on the other hand, glorifying female difference falls short of reinscribing women to the familiar ghetto. Put another way, while the constructivist feminists value the masculine side and want to turn women into men, the essentialist feminists value the feminine side and argue for the superiority of feminine values. In the first stand the feminine is seen as a deficiency, and thus as something to be erased and subsumed under the masculine. In the second stand the feminine is seen as an asset, and thus must be emphasized and valorized. Both stands presuppose essential or culturally imposed differences between men and women; both presuppose a hierarchy of those differences. The two stands differ only in their valuations of the two sides of the dichotomy.

The problem with the equality-difference debate is that equality and difference have become dichotomized. In effect, equality does not necessarily preclude difference, and difference should not constrain the pursuit of equality. The problem of dualism can be addressed not by reversing the hierarchy inherent in the oppositions but, rather, by questioning the gendering of conceptual oppositions and simultaneously destabilizing them to show their necessary interdependence. Thus, a double strategy comes into play: a deconstructive reading of the equality/difference distinction as philosophically unstable and internally interdependent, only to be combined with a pragmatic analysis of the political utility and social reform adhering to each side of this dialectic. Therefore, as Kristeva’s warning quoted above has shown us, feminism, rather than endorse a metaphysical vision of woman, should seek to make itself a form of interference with the purity of those categories that are variously and contingently actualized. As I hope I have made clear in the previous discussion, in his writing, Lawrence moves beyond the dualistic opposition between
essentialism and constructivism and hence beyond the danger of reinstating those potentially blinding symmetries. While valorizing feminine qualities that distinguish women from men, Lawrence does not ignore the process of social and cultural construction in the formation of womanhood. On the other hand, though he calls into question gender stereotypes imposed on women by social conventions, Lawrence never abandons his belief that men and women should be respected as separate individuals essentially different in sexuality. In his treatment of the problem of sexual difference, binary terms such as men/women, light/darkness, culture/nature, father/mother, public/private, are seen inevitably contaminated by each other, each inwardly disturbed by the other. That being the case, while acknowledging he cannot “know” women, his respect for “untranslatability” between different sexed beings neither prevents him from exploring the realm of female experiences nor makes him hesitate to speak for women who are oppressed by sexual inequalities.

In this respect, Lawrence however has been accused of distorting or appropriating female experiences, which raises the issue of male-feminism or men in feminism. In criticizing male appropriations of women’s experience and feminist theory, many feminists fall into stereotypes of both sexes by conceiving men as a unified body set against women as another unified body. In other words, having precluded an exploration of the differences within and between men and women, the feminist ideology has reconstituted “man” and “woman” respectively as a homogeneous entity. Just as the dichotomization of equality/difference has brought a dead end, the appeal to dichotomization in dealing with the issues of men’s relationship with feminism cannot work with the multiple and mutable concerns of feminism. Accordingly, in reading Lawrence’s fiction, we must be aware of the danger of lumping all “men” together as a unified category. His novels especially require the reader acknowledging the possible plurality of male feminist voices, given
that he has been a male writer extremely concerned with the feminine. For all his controversial representation of women, Lawrence might offer something beyond functional “appropriation” of female experience, at least when he allowed himself to be read through femininity and femaleness, rather than seeking to become the authorizer speaking on behalf of it. Therefore, his exploration of women’s question cannot be readily subsumed by any pre-determined feminist ideology.

IV. Lawrence as a Male Feminist—The Patriarchy of Feminist Ideology

The question of men’s presence in feminism has always been a controversial one. Many feminists regard men’s involvement with feminism as an act of penetration, violence, coercion, or appropriation. For instance, Showalter gives expression to the fear of the “raid” of feminist criticism by male critics (Showalter 129). Ruth Klein has portrayed men’s intrusion in feminism as an attempt to appropriate women’s experiences and discursive spaces to sustain patriarchal representations of women as “other” (418). Indeed, there might be suspicion that how can a man implicated in patriarchal speak for a woman constrained by it. Yet attempts to excommunicate men from feminism pose some troubling issues for males who engage in feminist critical discourse. Denying men the promise of feminism does not only evoke an essentialist argument, but also falls into the trap of the imperialist tendencies of a Eurocentric male discourse of binaries. In other words, while some feminists recommend the rejection of patriarchal theory and patriarchal philosophy in favour of “woman-centred” theory, they fall into the same trap of the patriarchally uncontaminated theory. For instance, some radical feminists assume
that their targets—i.e., men—possess a given and unvarying essence which is identified as the source of the ills of the world. Mary Daly’s derogatory descriptions of male nature imply a naïve morality which assumes that those who suffer have moral purity, simply by virtue of their suffering. Evil is thus given a Manichean status where men are associated with the demonic powers of darkness and the “True Self” of women with “life-loving energy” (Daly 355). Gyn/ ecology merely reverses the traditional associations between the dualisms such as good/bad, light/dark, man/woman. Alfred Kazin has perceptively identified women’s narrow ideological attacks as the symptom of cultural disease “at a time when Freud’s Victorian illusion that women have penis envy has been replaced in up-to-date America by penis hatred” (44).

Grounding on biological essentialism, Bart et al. (1991) assert that “one must inhabit a female body to have the experience that makes one a feminist” (191). Given the fact that biologically men cannot be in the place which women experience, it’s understandable that Stephen Heath admits: “Men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one” (1). However that may be, while the relationship between women and feminism is clearly more possible than that for men, it is also, in various ways, an impossible one because our lives as “social” men and women are heterogeneously composed of an array of subject positions. Therefore, the stand advocated by radical feminists that women are equally oppressed by patriarchy is problematic, given that the experience and life chances of poor and minority women are at least as much shaped and limited by class oppression and racism as they are by their sex. For instance, while women of color have challenged the sexism within their own communities, they are less likely to see masculinity per se as the enemy or to assume a self-evident connection between men and oppressive cultural power. Obviously certain women have more luxury of perceiving the male/female divide as the
foundational division, simply because their own (privileged) class or race position remains unmarked and hence invisible. Therefore, the vision that the female is “pure oppressed otherness” fails to recognize how the social constructions of race, class, and sexuality profoundly alter the status of gender, complicate identity, and fundamentally pluralize and particularize the meaning of “women.”

Correspondingly, “man” is not a universal but a gendered category inflected further by race, class, sexual orientation, etc. Examining the radical feminist’s claim that all men have a shared interest in the subordination of women, Jaggar argues that “most men, in fact, are victims of a small, white ruling class that maintains its domination through the interrelated structures of racism, imperialism and class society” (118). In other words, not all men are white, European, let alone empowered. Even as a white European, Lawrence himself was still marginal to the world of men because of his class, his temperament, his preoccupations, even his health state. His hero Somers in Kangaroo is not recognized “as a man among men” (K 124) because he was rejected on health grounds for military service. Men’s minority position in the categories of race, class, religion, and ethnicity regularly place them in some respects in the situation of women and these are usually the experiences that have made them empathy with feminism. Retaining an equation of power with the phallus, some feminist theorists, however, uphold the convenient fiction that power is an exclusively male phenomenon. In the process of their argument, heterogeneity inherent in the idea of “men” has vanished altogether insofar as “men” are transformed into an army of indistinguishable, unnamed “they’s.” As a result, the so-called “political correctness” has made the work of male-feminists somehow distorted and misread due to some ideological presuppositions.

As a male writer dealing with female sexuality, Lawrence becomes a significant case in the question of men’s relationship to feminism. As Simpson has asserted,
“Attacks on Lawrence’s misogyny and praise for his sensitive portrayals of femininity have co-existed since the inception of the critical debate” (13). The Second Sex was one of the first works to raise the contention that Lawrence celebrated the phallic at the expense of woman’s reality and being. The central concern of de Beauvoir’s book is with the male representation of woman as the Other. She accuses Lawrence for using his characters to promote and justify the “Myth of Woman” that has been for so long a feature of the relations between men and women in most cultures. She argues that “the very expression ‘phallic marriage’ means that Lawrence passionately believes in the supremacy of the male” (248-9). On the other side, Lydia Blanchard holds quite a different view from that of de Beauvoir, calling attention to the gap between Lawrence’s non-fictional and fictional writing. While Lawrence’s non-fiction spouts much nonsense about the subjugation of women, Blanchard suggests, his fiction “presents a very different kind of picture, one illuminating for any person seriously interested in exploring the myriad relationships possible between man and woman” (1975: 432). While Blanchard’s neat division of fiction and non-fiction is arbitrary, her argument is inspiring in an age in which Lawrence is often read to see whether he fits into the straitjackets of feminist ideology. For instance, Kate Millet displays scant concern for subtle nuances in Lawrence’s fiction. Like the radical feminists mentioned above, she is avowedly on an ideological hunt for male demons, as she concludes determinedly that Lawrence’s work is reactionary and unwholesome for its “absorption in phallic consciousness” and a “doctrinaire male-supremacist ethic” (257), paying little attention to the artistic quality of Lawrence’s fiction. The weakness of Millett’s approach is that her ideological view of Lawrence’s fiction has been allowed to override her aesthetic response to them as art.

There is, of course, no point in denying that Lawrence is sometimes sexist and
politically reactionary in his adoption of plot arrangement and male images associated with patriarchal implication. But in some respects and to a certain degree Lawrence matches Boone’s assertion that “men participating in feminism should make their own oppressive structures present for critique” (24). More than often Lawrence’s fiction both builds its plot on the hidden structure of patriarchy and criticizes it at the same time. For instance, at first sight, *The Rainbow* seems to be based on a patriarchal notion of a family unit and patrilineal inheritance—the division of labor according to the sexes, the division of the spheres of life between the home and the workshop. Patriarchy structures the relationship of individuals in this novel. However, while depending upon patriarchy, this novel paradoxically challenges male dominance in its final vision. Forced toward change by physical and spiritual rupture, Ursula throws off the old pattern of marriage—i.e., childbearing and submission to the man. It is the institution of patriarchy that the end of the novel implicitly repudiates. Instead of following the footsteps of his patriarchal precursors who depicted women either as timid victims or as perverse fiends, Lawrence created female characters who are naturally enraged by their subordinate situation, and rebel against male authority. In this way Lawrence’s novel enters into a dialogue with its own sub-text and is made to interrogate its own ideology and the systems of values underlying its themes and variations.

Likewise, though the phallus image predominates in his fiction, rather than presenting us with women lying helplessly in the grasp of a hermeneutics of male supremacy, Lawrence’s fiction presents us with female characters who consistently undercut, rather than affirm, the doctrinal pronouncements of the (male) hero, narrator, and author. As I have shown in Part One, much of the power and originality of Lawrence’s fiction lies in the ways it invites readers into “the thick of the scrimmage” among the multiplicity of voices, attitudes, feelings, thoughts, disagreements and
quarrels which it dramatizes. Put more precisely, Lawrence’s writing often uses different techniques to make “what is said” a problem, to break up our perception of any noncontradictory meaning-of-the-text, and to deconstruct our illusion that the text nonideologically mirrors or expresses what is generally accepted as true. One of the most effective techniques is Lawrence’s designation of female voices to compete with the dictatorial male voices. Through female voices, Lawrence tries to articulate female resistance to the male definition of their world, including his own creation of it. Therefore, at the moment when Lawrence attempts to interpret woman’s experience or even to prescribe a course for her, such interpretation and prescription are then challenged and undercut by the conviction that her inevitable rejection and criticism must be heard. For instance, as has been mentioned in Part Two, while Paul sees Miriam as a “Dreaming Woman” and reproaches her for being such, Clara’s interrogations of Paul serves as a female corrective to contest Paul’s male fantasy that Miriam wants “soul communion” rather than physical love. Clara’s insight is confirmed by Miriam’s later complaint about Paul: “It has always been you fighting me off” (SL 297). Female presence in Lawrence’s fiction more than often deconstructs the discourse of the teller and the male protagonists.

Certainly the most evident example of the female corrective to male doctrines is Ursula in Women in Love. With their preformulated indictment of sexism, Millett and other ideologues, ignoring the dialectical balance in this novel, view Ursula merely as “Birkins’ wife and echo” (Millet 265) and as the “satellite to Birkin’s star” (Heilbrun 102). As I have mentioned in Part One, Lawrence urges the pattern of dialectical opposition as the necessary component of a truly moral novel. Birkin’s “system of morality” is continually submitted to the scrutiny of Ursula’s skeptical antagonism, which is a skepticism rooted in the instinctual essence of her being as a female. After listening to Birkins’ explanation of star-equilibrium, Ursula argues her
position as the feeling female while she indicts his brand of blindness and conceit:

“‘You are very conceited, Monsieur,’ she mocked. ‘How do you know what my
womanly feelings are, or my thoughts or my ideas?’” (WL 139)? From her
perspective Birkin’s doctrine becomes his evasion and his means to avoid honest
commitment. Far from being “the epitome of passivity” (Millett 264), Ursula is used
skillfully by Lawrence to fashion a sustained and effective critique of Birkin’s most
cherished theories. Millett’s discussion of this novel has demeaned Ursula’s
strenuous interrogation of her lover.

Females’ eloquent voices are adopted in such ways to undercut especially
Lawrence’s misogynistic doctrinal pronouncements. On the above account, even if
we want to believe that Lawrence wrote his fiction with misogynous intentions, the
text confounds us by presenting patriarchal discourse not only within what Booth calls
“a chorus of voices, each speaking with its own authority” (446), but also within a
femininized cosmos that most often seems to affirm a female character’s point of view.
On that ground, we should attend very carefully to the wide variety of the author’s
speaking positions on gender politics. For example, in the chapter “Carpeting”,
Birkin asserts that there are two innate wills in horses and in women—the will to
subjection and that to revolt. Although Birkin attacks Hermione for her “obscene
will,” he describes Gerald’s mare in “the dominant principle”:

‘And of course,’ he said to Gerald, ‘horses haven’t got a complete will, like
human beings. A horse has not one will. Every horse, strictly, has two
wills. With one will, it wants to put itself in the human power
completely—and with the other, it wants to be free, wild.’ (WL 132)
Ursula objects: “Why should a horse want to be put itself in the human power” (WL
133)? Birkin replies that the impulse to do so is “perhaps the highest love-impulse:
resign your will to the higher being” (WL 134). When Ursula jeers, he adds, “and
woman is the same as horses” (WL 135). Referring to this passage, Kate Millett condemns Lawrence for his concern to subjugate the woman: “Birkin is full of opinions and ideas and holds forth all through the book while Ursula puts docile leading questions to him . . . . Birkin will play as the Son of God, Ursula revolving quietly at his side” (263-4). As common sense shows us, to identify Birkin with Lawrence is an oversimplification. Moreover, Ursula’s response to Birkin is far from flattering or docile. As has been mentioned several times in this study, Birkin’s authority is from time to time ironically undermined by other characters, especially by Ursula. So Ursula sees in Birkin not only “an utterly desirable man” (WL 89) but also “a prig of the stiffest type” (WL 245). All throughout the novel, the narrative records Ursula’s resistance as well as Birkin’s assertion. As such, far from following Birkin “in apostolic faith” (Millet 262), Ursula’s sentiment at this point when Birkin makes his misogynistic assertion is that “Birkin seemed to her almost a monster of hateful arrogance” (WL 141).

As we have learned in Part One, Lawrence’s full meaning (if there could be one) emerges only after the arguments are carefully weighed, not only against the known biases of the speakers but against each other. In the chapter “Woman to Woman,” we come to see Birkin’s former juxtaposition of horses’ will with women’s will as a reflection of his experience with Hermione in their love affair. Hermione is the kind of woman who desires to be made subservient to her lover. As Ursula tells her about Birkin’s suspicious demand for her “submission,” Hermione is made in the following scene to expose her slavish mind which matches Birkin’s description of “the will to subjection”:

“He wants me really to accept him in marriage.”

Hermione was silent for some time, watching Ursula with slow, pensive eyes.
“Does he?” she said at length, without expression. Then, rousing,
“And what is it you don’t want? You don’t want marriage?”
“No—I don’t—not really. I don’t want to give the sort of submission he insists on. He wants me to give myself up—and I simply don’t feel that I can do it.”

Again there was a long pause, before Hermione replied:

“Not if you don’t want to.” Then again there was silence. Hermione shuddered with a strange desire. Ah, if only he had asked her to subserve him, to be his slave! She shuddered with desire. (WL 294)

Ursula’s contemplation following closely behind calls upon us to distinguish
Hermione’s servile desire and what Birkin wants of Ursula:

After all, the tiresome thing was, he did not want an odalisk, he did not want a slave. Hermione would have been his slave—there was in her a horrible desire to prostrate herself before a man—a man who worshiped her, however, and admitted him as the supreme thing. —He did not want an odalisk. He wanted a woman to take something from him, to give herself up so much that she could take the last realities of him, the last facts, the last physical facts, physical and unbearable . . . . Hermione was like a man, she believed only in men’s things. She betrayed the woman in herself. (WL 295)

This passage elaborates that Birkin’s demand for Ursula’s submission is tantamount not to a self-centered instrumentalization but to her faithfulness to her female self, or “the woman” in herself, which alone will give finality to their relationship. As one of the few women in Lawrence who ask for male domination, Hermione is usually the subject of ridicule, far from being used to justify women’s subordinated position. Therefore, any ideologically orthodox expression of feminist sentiments fails to
constitute Lawrence’s fiction true value as a potential site for the articulation of promising femininity.

It is in this sense that Gilbert indicates that “Lawrence, even at his most overtly masculinist, did not quite fit into the so-called ‘patriarchal modes’” because Lawrence the author is akin to Birkin the character in that they always have had “two aspects” (42). The glorification of masculine power and the phallic mystique of many of the middle and later works testify to animosity against female dominance, yet Lawrence continues to create strong and independent females. He offsets his male argument for domination by positing the female characters to parodize the male characters’ ideological statements. For example, Harriet, in Kangaroo, restates ironically and critically her husband’s proposal that she act as a nest to his dominant male phoenix-self thus: “So that he could imagine himself absolutely and arrogantly It, he would turn her into a nest, and sit on her and overlook her, like the one and only phoenix in the desert of the world, gurgling hymns of salvation” (K 178). The didactic Lawrence hero Richard Lovat, who argues the desirability of male domination, is thus made to admit: “I am a fool”, and this “was the most frequent discovery he made” (K 285). In addition, just like Ursula often finds Birkin ridiculous, Kate Leslie in The Plumed Serpent often thinks Cipriano, her husband, as an absurd figure. Kate, as skeptical a heroine as Ursula and Harriet, cries out at one point: “I am Kate Forrester, really. I am neither Kate Leslie nor Kate Tylor. I am sick of these men putting names over me. I was born Kate Forrester, and I shall die Kate Forrester” (PS 387). After undergoing rites in which she kisses her husband’s feet and allows herself to be celebrated as a female principle, Kate eventually learns that “she loved to be alone,” that she is “not going to submit” even to being ruled by sexual desire (let alone by the man who arouses it), and that “I want myself to myself” (PS 465, 478, 486). Within stories about women’s enactment of exaggerated male
worship, the inclusion of such articulations by female characters of their awakening to a passionate sense of autonomy works against Lawrence’s occasional suggestions that female consciousness can be or should be subsumed into male purposes.

Lawrence’s representation of women as autonomous subjects with critical thinking is especially significant to feminists in an age in favor of the “monolith of anonymous textuality.” The encounter of feminism with poststructuralism in the 1980s called into question feminism’s certainties and generalizations. The aim of “deconstructing” the category of women, according to Judith Butler, is liberating because it is a “denaturalization” of gender and a proliferation of “cultural configurations of sex and gender” (1990: 78). With the demise of the male, humanist Author, new possibilities for challenging the male-dominated discourse emerge. But ironically, just at the time when different voices were being heard, the Author’s death denied authorship precisely to those who had only recently been empowered to claim it. Put differently, it is paradoxical to deconstruct, dismiss, or displace the notion of subjectivity at the very historical moment when women are beginning to have access to the use of discourse, power, and pleasure. Granting that the construction of female subjectivity is necessary in order to bring women’s reality into existence, Butler rethinks her position in Gender Trouble, and acknowledges in Bodies that Matter that “identity” is a “necessary error” (229).

Recognizing the indispensability of female identity and agency to women’s self-realization, Lawrence frequently presents his female characters as moving towards a level of self-determination, individuality and self-awareness that is far out of reach of most male characters. In a letter discussing his proposed project he called The Sisters, Lawrence said that he was working on the idea of woman “becoming individual, self-responsible, taking her own initiative” (LII 549). Lawrence exalts what Ursula calls the “gorgeous female self” in challenge to a
patriarchal society. As Carol Dix notes, *The Rainbow* is “a quest for the coming out of feminine consciousness” (15). In the story of the Brangwen sisters, Lawrence argues for sexual liberation and personalized morality, while questioning such widely held concepts as gender roles. Ursula stops waiting. She goes to college, becomes a schoolmistress, and is able to reject one man’s proposal on the strength of a distinctively anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian philosophy. In this novel, Lawrence even reverses the gender dichotomization of sexually passive females and active males, specifically focusing on women as more active in initiating sex. Martin Green thus observes: “In Lawrence’s version of the world of Women, for example, it is the women who are the sexual agents and the men who are called upon to surrender to them . . . . Thus it is Anna Brangwen who undresses and caresses Will” (78). Ursula, with Skrebensky, is also described as the active one in lovemaking. She is choosing to love, rather than to be the passive object of love. She took the redistribution of female activity in desire even beyond gender reciprocity. She actively caressed Skrebensky and made love to him. Here Lawrence anticipates Irigaray’s critique on Levinas. Levinas describes “the epiphany” of feminine difference in the experience of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman (TI 203). And yet his philosophy, as Irigaray sees it, stills falls short of an ethics of sexual difference:

The description of pleasure given by Levinas is unacceptable to the extent that it presents man as the sole subject exercising his desire and his appetite upon the woman who is deprived of subjectivity except to seduce him. So the woman’s pleasure is alienated to that of the man, according to the most traditional of scenarios of temptation and fall. In my opinion, if there is a fall, it is located in the reduction of the feminine to the passive, to the past tense and to the object of man’s pleasure, in the identification of
the woman with the beloved. (1991a: 185)

As Irigaray sees it, the implication in Levinas’s philosophy seems to be that women do not have access to the passionate for their own enjoyment but rather they embody the passionate only for the enjoyment of men. Contrary to Levinas’s depiction of female roles, female subjectivity has been a central postulate of Lawrence’s work. The ability and the courage to come forward and make one’s claim, if only in a gesture, are explored in most of his works. The female characters in his work are encouraged to assert, rather than to renounce, their desires.

On the other hand, recognition of the need of female agency and identity for women should not lead to the result of essentializing and ontologizing this concept. Instead, as I have elaborated earlier by quoting Kristeva’s recommendation of the feminine as a position, we should regard female subjectivity as both a fictious concept and a political fact. Women’s subjectivity is not an absolute, a given, but a construct with important political implications for feminism. Therefore, what is also at stake is to think about feminism’s capacity to use the critique of subject and analyses of discursive instability as much for the critique of patriarchal power as for the critique of feminism. Put another way, what is also important is to displace impasses between the critique of feminist identity and feminist critiques of patriarchal ideology with direct connections between the two. In this respect, post-structuralism, though inevitably leading to the dissolution of female subjectivity, does provide us with valuable ways to rethink difference and to represent otherness in ways it maintains the “openness and resignifiability” of the term “women.”

Throughout this study, I have mentioned from time to time Lawrence’s disruption of any rigid and binary categorizing in human thinking. Continuing in something like the same, it is impossible to say unequivocally how women are represented in Lawrence’s fiction precisely because he works towards complicating
the referents of “woman.” Not only do single images have many possible referents, but the idea of woman or female is diversely portrayed. For instance, the moon as an image of “woman” represents both the immense feminine potentiality and the destructive force of domination. Woman is presented as a sexual being, a mother, a helpless victim, an active agent, or even the embodiment of patriarchal power. However that may be, women are presented as a group in contrast to men: “women were different” (R 10). Moreover, as subjects suffered from conventional gender prerogatives, women are sometimes viewed as a social collective. Put differently, on the one hand, there is a similitude of experience shared by women in virtue of being female rather than male. On the other hand, there is a diversity of experiences among women. While something weaves women together, the distinctiveness of each figure suggests a plurality of unique backgrounds and viewpoints. Lawrence’s female figures show a heterogeneity due to, among other things, class, race, nationality, economic status, and sexual preference. His work thus problematizes any unquestioned assertion of women “as such.”

Lawrence’s complicated treatment of female subjectivity and man-woman relationship takes us back to the problem of how much importance to be attributed to sexual difference in feminist project. On the one hand, feminist’s appeal to decentred subjectivity, though liberating as well as subversive, might lead to women’s loss of the bases of essential sexual difference, which are the grounds of political action for women (Moi 1988: 6). From a feminist point of view, the call to reflect on women’s essential experience is politically indispensable. Said differently, there is a political point in revalorizing what has been conceptualized as the feminine. On the other hand, a radical conception of sexual difference can quickly become not difference but a gulf, as though between two species, and hence the implications of men in feminism are cut short. Moreover, an exclusive focus on the category of
sexual difference must inevitably gloss over some fundamental differentiation between and within men and women. While Irigaray’s assertion that the Other is that which “differs sexually from me” (1991a: 181) may appear more preferable to some patriarchal ethics founded on sexual indifference, there is a potential danger and insufficiency in according sexual difference such a privileged role. Sexual difference is one difference among many; it is neither the only nor always the most important one. Accored an ontological privilege, sexual difference must inevitably extenuate the significance of class, race, ethnic, or other differences.

Lawrence’s work, in its concern with sexual difference and its involvement with the problem of men’s relationship to feminism, provides feminists a way to open up a space within the discourse of feminism where a male voice professing a feminist politics can have something to say beyond “impossibilities.” By highlighting the value of sexual difference, Lawrence, rather than making that difference an unbridgeable gap, situates himself in a position from which to speak that neither elides the importance of feminist issues to his work nor ignores the specificity of his gender. As Boone rightly asserts, many male feminists “are learning to speak as . . . body-coded males precisely in order to re-imagine men. Which is inevitably to change the shape of patriarchy and its discourses as well” (24). In like manner, while acknowledging the “me” in “men” as gendered male, as belonging after all to the biological and social group “men,” Lawrence has let femaleness transform, redefine, relativize and complicate his (male) text. Lawrence’s position on gender issue is as quick and untidy as the way in which he defines art—i.e., art always contains something over and above any straightforward political message. Regarding the public politics of ideology as inevitably despotic and totalitarian, Lawrence has tried to recast it through fiction whose form allows him to cast a skeptical and distanced eye on his own dogmatism. His subtle treatment of sexual
difference related to the notion of ethical alterity demonstrates the ways through which his fiction, which can never separate itself from (gender) ideology, appropriates ideology, reflects on it, reacts against it, and puts it to work, instead of a mere expression of it. Birkin’s remark in *Women in Love*, giving a hint to Lawrence’s conception of both art and sexual difference, may serve to offer feminism a warning not to become a totalizing project: “You have to be like Rodin, Michael Angelo, and leave a piece of raw rock unfinished to your figure. You must leave your surroundings sketchy, unfinished, so that you are never contained, never confined, never dominated from outside” (WL 356). Likewise, the dialectic between ethics and politics makes feminist work an unfinished project, though it is not without its moments of achievement—that is, while attempting to seek political justice in singular cases, it can never be sure the ethical responsibility is completed and hence, in Levinas’s words, we can never say “Quit.”
NOTES

1 In an article from the same period titled “Judaism and the Feminine,” Levinas, taking over from the Talmud the equation of woman and the house, construes women as “mothers, wives, and daughters” who make the world “habitable” (1990: 31).

2 Though similarly critical of the conception of the feminine in Levinas’s project, Irigaray’s position differs distinctively from de Beauvoir’s criticism. Quoting a passage from Levinas’s Time and the Other, de Beauvoir accuses Levinas of refusing to construe the relation between the sexes as reciprocal: “Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and the Subject, he is the Absolute—She is the Other” (xxii). The problem with de Beauvoir’s straightforward dismissal of Levinas’s conception of women as other is that it fails to engage with Levinas’s overall philosophical project, which is to elevate the notion of alterity above the notion of totality. Therefore, as Tina Chanter asserts, “when Levinas associates the feminine with alterity, he cannot be unproblematically assimilated to a tradition that has figured women as other” (3). Rather than requiring the feminine to conform to the canons of reciprocity and complementarity that refer ultimately to a totality, Levinas’s notion of the feminine functions to disrupt the primacy of totality, sameness, system, and concept. Put differently, the Levinasian Other is that which exceeds and subverts the self, not the Hegelian other who desires a reciprocity of recognition and who is ultimately considered a counterpart to the self. Both Irigaray and Levinas use the term Other in the sense of what is radically Other and irreducible to the master consciousness. For all that, Irigaray is critical of Levinas’s subordination of sexual difference to ethical difference. In sum, where de Beauvoir worries that the Other is the feminine, Irigaray worries that Levinas does not sufficiently take sexual difference into account with his conception of ethical alterity.

3 Irigaray’s concept of the “two lips” might serve as a useful illustration of an approach to ethics which takes sexual difference into account (Irigaray 1985). The problem Irigaray addresses through this concept is the way sexual difference is represented dualistically such that woman is viewed either as the same as man or as a lack. Irigaray’s representation of a woman’s sexuality as plural and multiple, as indeterminate form, and as symbolized by the two lips that are really neither one nor two, but which are in continuous contact, breaks with the phallic tradition of representing a woman’s body as a complement to the male body or as a potential provider of human offspring.

4 bell hooks makes a similar argument when she says: “It is difficult to involve women in new processes of feminist politicization because so many of us think that identifying men as the enemy, resisting male domination, gaining equal access to power and privilege are the end of any feminist movement. Not only is it not the end, it is not even the place we want revitalized feminist movement to begin. We want to begin as women seriously addressing ourselves, not solely in relation to men, but in relation to an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part” (191).

5 Ann Jones’ comment on Cixous speaks directly to this point: “I myself feel deeply flattered by Cixous’s praise for the nurturant perceptions of women, but when she speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries” (368).

Indeed, any advocate of a feminist ethic of care based on Levinasian sensibility will need to address the similar questions, “What are the appropriate boundaries of our caring?” and more important, “How far should the boundaries of caring be expanded?” While the motivating vision of this ethics is “that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt”, how to make sure that the web of relationship is spun widely enough so that some are not beyond its reach remains a central question.


Critchley takes up in detail the issue of how the deconstructive, ethical conception of justice translates into political judgment. He indicates that the central aporia of deconstruction concerns the nature of the passage from undecidability to the decision. See especially Critchley (1999): 254-86.

For instance, Jameson holds that ethics legitimates by universalizing into a system of binary moral oppositions the characteristics of one group or class versus another, so that “evil” inevitably denotes imagined characteristics of those who are Other to the hegemonic group (59-60). Thus ethics is an ideological mask of the will-to-power of the dominant class. David Parker claims that the signal weakness of Jameson’s enterprise lies in his formulation of ethics as “nothing but the masks of ideology” (1998: 5).

Certainly, the motivation behind their defense of sexual difference might be quite different. While Irigaray attempts to speak the feminine as the radically other in order to preserve its unassimilated otherness, Lawrence undeniably insists on rigid sexual difference partly due to his fear of the feminization of men and the masculinization of women which he thinks was characteristic of his time. Yet unlike some male precursors arguing for sexual difference, such as Rousseau, Lawrence seeks to dissociate women from their socially and culturally established roles as wife/mother. While Rousseau contributes to feminists’ rethinking of a different morality and reason for the two sexes, he leaves women to be confined to the primitively organized patriarchal family by “naturally” associating women with domesticity and childrearing.

It is worth noting that the alleged scarcity of great women philosophers, artists and writers throughout history can be partly explained by the invisibility of (women’s) private services to the (men’s) public eye. Recently, feminist researchers have shown how many wives, sisters and daughters have been private assistants to great male artists, writers and philosophers. The relationship between Lawrence, Jessie Chambers, and Frieda is one of the examples.

Daleski suggests that for Lawrence his father is identified with “blood-consciousness, which is a property of the female principle; his mother, in turn, is identified with mind-consciousness, a property of the male principle” (1965: 36-7).

In fact, in his description of the Etruscan dance, Lawrence provides the equitable symbology of sexual passion and the human body, which might undermine feminists’ complaint about Lawrence’s lack of celebration over female sexuality: “They are just dancing a dance with the elixir of life. And if they have made a little offering to the stone phallus at the door, it is because when one is full of life one is full of possibilities, and the phallus gives life. And if they made an offering
also to the queer ark of the female symbol, at the door of a woman’s womb, it is because the womb too is the source of life, and a great foundation of dance movements” (SLC 44).

Lawrence’s letter to Katherine Mansfield in 1918 shows how ambivalence towards “the devouring mother” occupies him in his life as well as in his works: “Beware of it—this mother-incest idea can become an obsession. But it seems to me there is much truth in it: that at certain periods the man has a desire and tendency to return to the woman, make her his goal and end, finds his justification in her. In this way he casts himself as it were into her womb, and she, the Magna Mater, receives him with gratification. This is a kind of incest . . . . I have done it, and do struggle all my might to get out. In a way, Frieda is the devouring mother. It is awfully hard, once the sex relation has gone this way, to recover. If we don’t recover, we die” (LIII 452).

This insistence calls to our mind a scene in The Rainbow when Anna asserts her maternal self-sufficiency by mocking Will’s woodcarving of Adam and Eve. Anna jeered at the Eve, because it looks like a doll while Adam is carved “as big as God.” Anna said: “It is impudence to say that Woman was made out of Man’s body when every man is born of woman. What impudence men have, what arrogance” (R 163)!

Scott Brewster claims that this novel, driven to recuperate a lost plenitude, yet beset by a crisis of identity, is a study in what Kristeva proposes as “abjection.” Despite its impetus to express autonomous selfhood, the text gravitates towards an archaic nurturing realm that threatens to engulf or dissolve subjectivity. See Brewster (1995): 217-31.

In a letter to Else Jaffe, Frieda’s sister, Lawrence makes some argument concerning the destructive potency of “sacrifice”. Lawrence and Frieda, in love and living together, had to contemplate the hurt they were doing to Frieda’s husband, and especially her children, whom she grieved for, and who were grieving for her. Else had presumably been saying “renounce your love for the sake of these others.” Lawrence replies: “I think you ask us to throw away a real apple for a gilt one. Nowadays it costs more courage to assert ones desire and need, than it does to renounce. If Frieda and the children could live happily together, I should say ‘Go’—because the happiness of two out of three is sufficient. But if she would only be sacrificing her life, I would not let her go if I could keep her. Because if she brings to the children a sacrifice, that is a curse to them. If I had a prayer, I think it would be ‘Lord, let no one ever sacrifice living stuff to me—because I’m burdened enough.’ . . . The worst of sacrifice is that we have to pay back. It is like somebody giving a present that was never asked for, and putting the recipient under the obligation of making restitution, often more than he could afford” (LI 486). In addition to the association of sacrifice and maternal love, Lawrence’s attack on self-sacrifice is also manifest in his letter describing Cornish conscripts in 1916: “Yet I liked the men. They all seemed so decent. And yet they all seemed as if they had chosen wrong. It was the underlying sense of disaster that overwhelmed me. They are all so brave, to suffer, but none of them brave enough, to reject suffering. They are all so noble, to accept sorrow and hurt, but they can none of them demand happiness. Their manliness all lies in accepting calmly this death, this loss of their integrity” (L II 625).

Here Lawrence’s disapproval of women’s choice of the maternal role gives a hint of Sartre’s “bad faith” or de Beauvoir’s “moral fault.” de Beauvoir claims that
many women mistake "maternity" as the only possibility by failing to recognize it as a result of one's free choice. The implication is that some women do not assume the status of subject because they are "often well pleased with their role as the Other" (de Beauvoir: 21). Lawrence, in this respect, like Sartre and de Beauvoir, might be accused of not paying enough attention to social and political forces in his account of human freedom. But as I'll elaborate it in more detail in the following chapter, Lawrence in his fiction is simultaneously deeply concerned with the social constraints on women.

Connie's attack on the notion of "virgin mother" calls to our mind Lawrence's emphasis on the carnality of woman-mother, which differentiates his position from that of Levinas, though both attempt to disconnect the association between motherhood and womanhood. While Levinas disembodies maternity in formulating its idealized sublimation, Lawrence insists that women's experience as mother cannot be dissociated from her biological experience with a maternal body. For instance, in The Rainbow, Tom's anxiety in face of Lydia implies the situation in which a man cannot comprehend the suffering grin of his pregnant wife, for hers is the painful joy that belongs to an anatomy unlike his own. Moreover, when Anna got pregnant, she finally drove Will out of her bedroom: "I sleep so well when I'm alone, and I can't sleep when you're there" (R 186). Anna did need sleep, but her request was primarily a cover for refusing sex. As a biologically maternal subject, Anna is made to refuse sex forthrightly when she needs rest in her pregnancy. Unlike his predecessors, Lawrence is not timid to describe female sexuality in pregnancy. In this sense, Lawrence has something to do with French feminists who relate closely mother's experience to the biologically female body: "Apparently man wants woman only as mother and virgin, or sometimes, rather ambiguously, as sister—but not as woman, as other gender" (Irigaray 1993b: 121).

It has been widely known that Lawrence himself, in addition to his tender ways with children, was both good at and interested in housekeeping. Jessie Chambers mentions Lawrence's unusual willingness to help both his own mother and hers. Chambers does not criticize Lawrence for this effeminacy. On the contrary, she praises his efforts as expressive of conventionally feminine aesthetics (Chambers 30-31). Yet, as Siegel indicates, Lawrence's preferring the company of girls and his fond of domestic work make him never seem able to "transcend his need to define himself first as a man" (45).

Certainly, in a sense, the misogynist tone is evident from Lilly's advocacy for men to cultivate male solidarity and together stand up to women. Thus, for Lawrence, to assert men's nurturing ability might also imply that men no longer need women since a man has done a mother's job as well as any woman. Likewise, being characterized by his womb-like abdomen, Kangaroo might be seen as exemplifying a male fantasy of womanhood, a fantasy which is based to certain extent on unadmitted envy.

de Beauvoir uses the category "the independent woman" to draw a distinction between woman as "other," as placed in a position of subordination to man, and woman as an agent in pursuit of freedom, taking responsibility for her life and confronting the world by herself and in collective struggles with others in defiance of prevalent gender norm (de Beauvoir 755).

For instance, the association of women's employment rights and child-care is one example of how the role of care-giver continues to be associated with women (Chodorow 5).
Certainly it is Paul’s inability, neither ours nor Lawrence’s, to comprehend Miriam’s complaints about her confinement to domestic realm. And certainly we should not identify unproblematically Paul with Lawrence, who is, as I’ll show in the following, surely not ignorant of the social constraints and restriction on women.

Referring to the passage quoted from Lawrence’s text, Kate Millet is irritated by Lawrence’s positive depiction of Ursula who passively accepts “their poverty, pointless employment, and close supervision within their father’s home” (Millet 268). In a sense, it is justifiable for Gudrun to envy Gerald’s “wealth, freedom, mobility and masculine privilege” (Millet 269). As I hope to show in the following, Lawrence is apparently sympathetic with women’s self-realization and their oppression within social relations. Therefore, it is less likely that Lawrence is indifferent to institutional reality of Gudrun’s argument concerning the prerogatives of gender. It is more likely that he is suspicious of the cynical apologia inherent in sexual politics, which might have made up Gudrun’s complaint.

Though Birkin’s comment on Hermione might be seen as revealing Lawrence’s insistence on essential sexual difference, it might at the same time serve to betray the banal opposition of “the manly” and “the womanly.” That Hermione is a woman “full of intellectuality” (WL 16) challenges traditional association of men with cultural idea and women with natural instinct. Moreover, Lawrence’s treatment of Hermione demonstrates that his critique on modern intellectual consciousness discussed in Part One of this study is beyond gender boundaries. In other words, Lawrence’s battle against women was often a battle against exactly the same force he excoriated in men: the fixed will, the “nerve-brain” consciousness that would subordinate flesh and blood to an idealized authority. In this sense, Birkin’s comment should be understood in the light of an attempt at the renewal of the whole of the being of both sexes.

Throughout this novel, Lawrence designates a visionary magic in Connie’s womb, which, I contend, should not be interpreted as a statement that sex has no meaning for him outside procreation. Lawrence’s description of a moment of orgasm between Connie and Mellors tells more about metaphysical faith than it does about the clinical fact of conception: “As the seed sprang in her, his soul sprang toward her too, in the creative act that is far more than procreative” (LCL 348).

Concerned with the limitations of marginal thinking, Harpham urges contemporary intellectuals, who were obsessed with “power-phobia”, not to discover means of resisting power but to begin forming some more confident and productive relations with them. With a more general willingness to “imagine” the center, the intellectuals should learn to “see things from the point of view of a democratic and plural polity that needs on occasion to act as if it were a single integrated entity, to grasp the moment of identity and normativity that secures and dignified culture’s differences” (1999: 51).

Summarizing the conflicts in the recent turn to ethics, Rainsford and Woods point out: “The ongoing rift is between an ethics that is designed to further the good through consensus or commensurability (which requires that we are not all, ultimately, entirely ‘other’), and an ethics that hesitates to say what someone else’s good might be, for fear of misconstruing and oppressing them” (15) – i. e., “the universalist and the differentialist” ethical approaches (5). What Parker designates as a non-prescriptive ethics belongs to the latter form of ethical approach stated
above.

Carol Siegel has further indicated that Lawrence strongly identified with the women’s literary tradition, sought out the literary advice and response of women, and sometimes encouraged women to write. See Siegel, 21-52.

By the way, we should not forget the fact that Mrs. Morel came from a middle-class family. However, as a woman she can never be a class member in her own right, so at marriage she is pulled down into the working class. While a man could inherit as well as attain class rank and therefore sustain his own inherited position, a woman could not really inhabit any class of her own.

Here we should at the same time avoid sentimentalizing Mrs. Morel into a martyred victim of social injustice and an inadequate husband. We are not to deny simultaneously the fact that her inherent Protestant ethic and self-righteousness have been partly responsible for her own and her family’s plight.

Iris Young, for example, cautions that emphasizing the superiority of the feminine can be “quieting and accommodating to official powers” (239). Concurring with Young’s fears, Claudia Card labeled Gilligan’s position “conservative,” because it promotes the revival of traditional, middle-class conceptions of femininity (17).

Gilbert explains what she calls the “two aspects”: “One was a sermonizing ‘Salvator Mundi and a Sunday-school teacher’ who excoriated women when they didn’t submit to the powers he heralded. The other was a being with ‘wonderful, desirable life-rapidity,’ who himself submitted, eagerly and joyously, to the forces of otherness in all creatures and things” (42).