



## THE MADONNA-WHORE COMPLEX IN D.H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS AND LOVERS*

D.H. Lawrence'ın *Oğullar ve Sevgililer* Eserinde Madonna-fahişe Sendromu

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### ABSTRACT

Published in 1913, D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is one of the classics of English Literature. It narrates the struggles and economic problems of the Morel family, particularly focusing on the complex relationships among the members. Several critical analyses and theses have extensively examined the influence of Freudian psychoanalytical theories, particularly the Oedipus Complex, on the novel. However, not much critical attention has been directed towards the Madonna-whore complex, a conceptual framework articulated by Sigmund Freud and further elaborated upon by feminist scholars. The dichotomous portrayal of women characters in fictional texts by the dominant discourses has been a longstanding concern since ancient times. As the sufferer from mother-complex, the protagonist, Paul cannot feel free himself to find a healthy mutual relationship with the opposite sex due to childhood frustrations in his family. Throughout the novel, Paul vacillates between Miriam and Clara; however, neither can satisfy his "affectionate" and "emotional" needs fully, so he cannot get intimacy with a girl who is either entirely a virginal Madonna or a sinful whore. In the novel, Miriam is portrayed as the embodiment of Mary-like figure, representing purity and affection; on the other hand, Clara assumes the role of a whore figure that satisfies the sensual feelings of the protagonist. This study aims to examine how the Madonna-whore dichotomy has been prevalent during the protagonist's intimate relationship with the two female characters in *Sons and Lovers* (1913).

**Keywords:** The Madonna-whore Complex, *Sons and Lovers*, S. Freud, gender roles, purity and sensuality.

### ÖZ

1913 yılında yayınlanan D.H. Lawrence'ın *Oğullar ve Sevgililer* romanı İngiliz Edebiyatının klasiklerinden biridir. Roman, Morel ailesinin yaşam mücadelelerini ve ekonomik sorunlarını, aile üyeleri arasındaki karmaşık ilişkilere odaklanarak anlatmaktadır. Freud'un psikoanalitik teorilerinin, özellikle de Oedipus Kompleksinin, roman üzerin-

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de etkisi ile alakalı pek çok eleştirel makale ve tez yazılmıştır. Ancak, romanda Freud tarafından ortaya konulan Madonna-fahişe sendromunun etkisi ile ilgili çok fazla eleştirel metin yazılmamıştır. Dominant söylemler tarafından yazılan edebi eserlerde kadın karakter rollerinin ikili bir şekilde tasvir edilmesi antik çağlardan beri süregelen bir yazım şekli olmuştur. Annesi ile olan yakın ilişkileri ve ailesindeki var olan sıkıntılardan dolayı acı çeken ana karakter, Paul, karşı cinsle sağlıklı bir ilişki kurma konusunda kendini özgür hissedemez. Paul, roman boyunca yakın ilişki kurduğu Miriam ve Clara arasında duygusal anlamda gidip gelir; ancak ikisi de “şefkat” ve “cinsel” ihtiyaçlarını tam olarak karşılayamaz. Romanda, Miriam ruhani ve şefkat dolu Meryem Ana figürü olarak betimlenirken, Clara ise cinselliğini ön planda tutan ve ana karakteri bu yönüyle tatmin etmeye çalışan madun kadın olarak tasvir edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, *Oğullar ve Sevgililer* (1913) romanındaki ana kahramanın iki kadın karakterle olan yakın ilişkisinde Madonna-fahişe sendromunun nasıl yaşadığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Madonna-fahişe Sendromu, *Oğullar ve Sevgililer*, S. Freud, cinsiyet rolleri, saflık ve cinsellik.

## Introduction

The dichotomous perception of women and their representations in fiction have been prevalent since ancient times. The establishment of gender roles and the construction of the female body under the dominant discourse of mythology, morality, cultural norms, philosophy, and religion devalued female corporeality and reduced them to the well-worn female roles as either Mary-like or Eve-like. Mary-Eve dichotomy has been considered the original form, and it “has given a conceptual basis to what is known in psychology as the Madonna-Whore dichotomy: the tendency to categorize women in terms of two polar opposites” (Tumanov, 2011: 507). From the standpoint of Christian discourse, the Virgin Mary, who is stripped of her sexuality, is the representative of an idealized and virtuous mother figure; on the other hand, Eve’s vilification is due to her seduction of Adam by leading him to taste the forbidden fruit. While “Adam lacked any motive for the sin [...] the burden of Adam’s guilt was thereby lifted, and the blame placed on Eve” (Karlsen, 1987: 176, 177). The rhetoric of Saint Jerome, one of the ancient church fathers, which claims “Death came through Eve, but life came through Mary” (cited in Tumanov, 2011: 507) validates the portrayals of the two opposing female figures in the Biblical accounts of the first century.

Accordingly, the two key female figures – the Virgin Mary and Eve – have been adopted, reimagined, and developed in order to categorize the

roles of women in grand narratives, as the French theorist Lyotard called them. Similarly, in the Biblical story of the creation, it is stated that Eve was created by God from one of the ribs of Adam and Wolf notes that “God breathed life directly into Adam’s nostrils, inspiring his body with divinity; but Eve’s body is twice removed from the Maker’s hand, imperfect matter born of matter” (2008: 93). The projection of female uncertainty suggested in Christian ideology resulted in the reinforcement of the dichotomous discourses for women portrayals in fictional texts. Thus, the early construction of idealized or demonized female figures created the binary model with respect to the roles of women, portrayed in male-dominated literary discourses. Karlsen notes that “the belief that woman was evil continued to reside [...] in the biblical tale of human origins” (1987: 173). The continual comparison of the Virgin Mary and Eve leads to Eve’s “incarnation of the archetypal woman, who brought sin and more people into the world, [...]”. Thus sin, the force of evil in the world, becomes displaced from men and relocated in the female body alone” (Diede, 2010: 109). From this perspective, the contradictory construction of female figures as either perfect or imperfect is due to the ancient stories which have passed through the ages and continued to survive in the next centuries.

The symbolic representations of the two opposing female figures continued to survive in Medieval Period, which was characterized by the persecution of females as being witches. Lasted for nearly three hundred years, the infamous witch hunts were considered by many feminists “a systematic war on women” (Stringer, 2015: 1). Written by two Dominican clergymen, *The Hammer of Witches* was a manual that provided guidelines for identifying, prosecuting, and executing female witches. Godbeer, who has scrutinized the witchcraft of New Englanders in Salem, notes:

Women known for their magical skills were much more likely than men to be accused of witchcraft. The power [...] seemed especially threatening if possessed by a woman because it contradicted gender norms that placed women in subordinate positions. [...] Witchcraft was perceived [...] as a primarily female phenomenon. Around four-fifths of those New Englanders tried for witchcraft were women. [...] Though worthy of honor as Adam’s companion prior to their fall from grace, Eve’s disobedience to God at the Devil’s bidding made her the first witch (2005: 150–169).

Accordingly, the polarized categorization of women as perfect or imperfect, virgin or seductive, Angel in The House or Madwoman in the Attic,

Madonna or whore has been used to persecute, dominate, and subjugate women in the social, cultural ambits and literary representations. By highlighting the creation of binary models for the categorization of women, Adrienne Rich states:

In order to maintain two such notions, each in its contradictory purity, the masculine imagination has had to divide women, [...] as polarized into good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure. The asexual Victorian angel-wife and the Victorian prostitute were institutions created by this double thinking, which had nothing to do with women's actual sensuality and everything to do with the male's subjective experience of women (1995: 34).

Famous for his groundbreaking theories and approaches to the human mind, specifically males' psychology and personal development, Sigmund Freud formulated the Madonna-whore complex which arises "from an arrest or blockage of psycho-sexual development" (Doran, 2022: 363) of males during his sensual interactions with females. Thus:

the confluence of emotions often failed to occur [...] for social life and in particular for gender relations [...] men attempt to overcome these deep psychological contradictions by relating to and thinking of women stereotypically in terms of two separate types: asexual or completely sexual, Virgin Mother Mary or Mary Magdalene, subject or object (Doran, 2022: 363).

Accordingly, the complex represents the polarized view of women, categorizing them into two distinct archetypes—the Madonna, symbolizing purity, virtue, and maternal qualities, and the whore, embodying sensuality, promiscuity, and forbidden desires. Explaining the condition for a woman to be the love-object in the eye of a man, Freud says that "a virtuous and reputable woman never possesses the charm required to exalt her to an object of love; this attraction is exercised only by one who is more or less sexually discredited, whose fidelity and loyalty admit of some doubt" (1963: 40). Describing the problems of men, who suffer from physical impotence in their erotic lives, Freud claims:

the sexual activity of such people shows unmistakable signs [...] he avoids all association with feelings of tenderness [...]. The erotic life of such people remains dissociated, divided between two channels the same two that are personified in art as heavenly and

earthly (or animal) love. Where such men love they have no desire and where they desire, they cannot love (1963: 52).

It can be observed in the above quotation that Freud points out two different types of women like heavenly and earthly in relation to a male's physical dysfunction in sexual life. Accordingly, "men suffering from the Madonna-whore complex are unable to reconcile sexual and romantic desire in a single female object. They divide women between pure, asexual madonnas and dirty, promiscuous whores and are unable to sexually function with the former" (Boryszewski, 2014: 216). The paper aims to examine how the Madonna-whore dichotomy has been prevalent during the protagonist's intimate relationship with the two female characters in *Sons and Lovers* (1913).

### **Miriam and Clara as the Representatives of the Madonna-whore Dichotomy**

Published in the first decade of the twentieth century, *Sons and Lovers* is Lawrence's third novel which narrates the struggles and economic problems of the Morel family, particularly focusing on the complex relationships among the members. In the novel, the events are narrated in the third person omniscient and from the perspective of a heterodiegetic narrator. The novel explores themes of love, family dynamics, class struggle, and the impact of industrialization on working-class communities. It is the social background; poverty, hard labour and low level of education, which cause many conflicts among the members of Morels. The novel is known for its psychological depth, vivid characterizations, and its exploration of the complexities of human relationships. Although the novel belongs to the twentieth century, it draws themes and character portrayals from Victorian thematic concerns. It can be said that when writing his novel, D.H. Lawrence was strongly influenced by Freud's scientific theories and concepts due to his deliberate references in creating the characters and their inner struggles.

Born into a family in which there has already been a continuous split and antagonism between the parents, Paul Morel's psychological and physical development has been supported but also obstructed by the existence of three women in his life: his mother, Miriam, and Clara. The unending quarrels and conflict in the Morels family are described as follows: "The pity was, she was too much his opposite. [...] At last, Mrs. Morel despised her husband. [...] There began a battle between the husband and wife—a fear-

ful, bloody battle that ended only with the death of one” (Lawrence, 1995: 16). It is during this barren atmosphere that Paul comes to the world but his coming to the family is not affordable because the father is just “serving beer in a public-house, swilling himself drunk” (Lawrence, 1995: 7). So, for Mrs. Morel “this coming child was too much for her [...] she was sick of it, the struggle with poverty and ugliness and meanness” (Lawrence, 1995: 7). However, when she gives birth to Paul, she holds:

the delicate baby. Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her un-blinking, seemed to draw her innermost thoughts out of her. She no longer loved her husband; she had not wanted this child to come, and there it lay in her arms and pulled at her heart. She felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail little body with hers had not been broken. A wave of hot love went over her to the infant. She held it close to her face and breast. With all her force, with all her soul she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unloved (Lawrence, 1995: 37).

Brought up by a strict Puritan mother, Paul cannot feel free to find a healthy mutual relationship with the opposite sex. It is because of the distressing relationship with his mother, and the domination of his mother that Paul fails to achieve a satisfactory love relationship with Miriam. Sacco and Laino state that:

within the first year of a baby’s life, the attachment they have to their mothers is extremely important, especially in forming secure relationships later in life. This early relationship between mother and son is extremely important for how men treat women and form relationships with them. Obviously, men who had ambivalent, anxious, disorganized or disoriented relationships with their mothers as babies/children are more likely to form carbon copy relationships with the women they meet (2011: 15).

From the perspective of the Madonna-whore complex, the Madonna figure is generally associated with a mother figure who is the embodiment of a consecrated and idealized image in the sufferer’s mind. As Boryszewski notes “the Madonna-whore complex is a kind of sexual/personality disorder which affects the way men perceive women” (2014: 216). In this context, Paul’s sexual and personality disorder manifests during his visit, with his mother, to the Leivers family at Willey Farm, where he encounters Miriam, who subsequently becomes emblematic of the Madonna figure in his

mind. When they arrive at the farm, they see Miriam, who is “fourteen years old, [who] had a rosy dark face, a bunch of short black curls, very fine and free, and dark eyes; shy, questioning, a little resentful of the strangers” (Lawrence, 1995: 124). Introduced as the first beloved of the protagonist, Miriam is a spiritual girl, living on a semi-divine level. The narrator presents that according to “Miriam, Christ and God made one great figure, which she loved tremblingly and passionately [...] That was life to her” (Lawrence, 1995:144). Following the first visit, Paul begins to visit the Willey Farm frequently “where everything took a religious value, came with a subtle fascination to him” (Lawrence, 1995: 151). Throughout the novel, Miriam is very much associated with spiritual and religious images and descriptions: her eyes are depicted as “dark as a dark church”, she touches the flowers as if she is “worshipping”, she stands near Paul as if she wants to make “a communion” with him, even she “might have been one of the women who went with Mary when Jesus was dead” (Lawrence, 1995: 162–163). Although she is brought up on a farm, she is so hypersensitive and shy that she cannot bear hearing the continual conversations go upon every farm such as “birth and of begetting” (Lawrence, 1995: 175) which torments her soul.

Though she has inclinations toward Paul, she is unable to desire him with common feelings which cause Paul’s emotional split in his inner world. Her religious intensity is indicated by the narrator as follows: “She seemed to need things kindling in her imagination or in her soul before she felt she had them. And she was cut off from ordinary life by her religious intensity which made the world for her either a nunnery garden or a paradise, where sin and knowledge were not, or else an ugly, cruel thing.” (Lawrence, 1995: 152).

So, Paul resists forming a carbon copy relationship which reminds that of his mother; and begins to despise Miriam because he does not “want another mother” (Lawrence, 1995: 296). His teenage years go through a difficult period due to the ill mood persistent in the family, so Paul has emotional dilemmas regarding his sensual and physical necessities. Freud states that “the bad relations between the parents [...] stimulate the emotional life of the child, and cause it to experience intensities of love, hate and jealousy while yet in its infancy” (1963: 28). Accordingly, what makes Paul dismiss Miriam’s sexuality is her reserved, pure, and spiritual nature. Miriam epitomizes attributes of maternal warmth, care, and affection that Paul denies insistently. He laments her spirituality and religious devotion:

You make me so spiritual! [...] ‘And I don’t want to be spiritual.’ [...]. Frequently he hated Miriam. He hated her as she bent forward and pored over his things. [...] When he was with her, he hated her for having got him, and yet not got him, and he tortured her. [...] she gave no living warmth. She was never alive, and giving off life. [...] She was only his conscience, not his mate. He hated her violently, and was more cruel to her (Lawrence, 1995: 254).

When they grow up to adulthood, Paul becomes more conscious about his needs for sexual desires; however, Miriam is unable to offer such emotional and physical support for Paul since she denies her femininity due to her purity, spirituality, and morality. Her asceticism is so disturbing for Paul that Miriam thinks that “He would be disappointed, he would find no satisfaction” (Lawrence, 1995: 330) even if she would let him have her. Paul blames Miriam for being “a nun. I have given you what I would give a holy nun—as a mystic monk to a mystic nun” (Lawrence, 1995: 129). She is deprived of fulfilling the active wishful feelings of Paul. Accordingly, Miriam is the embodiment of the Madonna figure due to her role as a pure, fertile, religious, and affectionate woman. Freud states that “to ensure a fully normal attitude in love, two currents of feeling have to unite [...] the tender, affectionate feelings and the sensual feelings” (1963: 49). Thus, as the sufferer of the Madonna-whore complex, Paul’s inability to combine his “tender” and “sensual” desires within a single female (Miriam) results with the end of the relationship.

Clara Dawes is another woman with whom Paul’s relationship will be carried on a sexual dimension without love. Introduced by Miriam as an alternative for herself to test Paul’s feelings/choices regarding to find the best partner in his life, Clara Dawes can be associated with whore figure. Since Paul cannot find equilibrium in his “tender” and “sensual” feelings towards Miriam, he is captured by Clara’s sensuality. Paul meets Clara, one of the friends of Miriam, by chance in the town:

‘Hello!’ he said, ‘you didn’t tell me you were coming to town.’

‘No,’ replied Miriam, half apologetically. ‘I drove in to Cattle Market with father.’

He looked at her companion.

‘I’ve told you about Mrs. Dawes,’ said Miriam huskily; she was nervous. ‘Clara, do you know Paul?’



'I think I've seen him before,' replied Mrs. Dawes indifferently, as she shook hands with him. She had scornful grey eyes, a skin like white honey, and a full mouth, with a slightly lifted upper lip that did not know whether it was raised in scorn of all men or out of eagerness to be kissed, [...]. Her neck gave him a sharp pang, such a beautiful thing, yet not proud of itself just now. Her breasts swung slightly in her blouse. The arching curve of her back was beautiful and strong; she wore no stays (Lawrence, 1995: 184).

Paul's primary attraction to Clara resides predominantly in her sensuality: her white skin, her eyes, her parted lips, her breasts, etc. Since his instinctual desires are unsatisfied by Miriam, he looks for a compensation that will be gratified by Clara, who is described as attractive and sensual. Contrary to the religious mysticism and purity of Miriam, Clara is bold and has an extrovert disposition in sensual matters. She is married to Baxter Dawes, but they live separately due to the problems in their marriage. Though she is five years older than him, Paul falls under the spell of Clara's sensuality easily. As soon as he gets a sensual attachment with Clara, Paul makes a comparison between Miriam and Clara on the level of sensuality. For Paul, Miriam "lay to be sacrificed for him because she loved him so much [...] There was something he could not bear for her sake [...] The sense of failure grew stronger" (Lawrence, 1995: 198) and he hated Miriam again. Then, he seeks out Clara once again because he "grew warm at the thought of Clara" (Lawrence, 1995: 268) for she meets the requirements of love-object in the eye of Paul. In contrast to Miriam, who embodies the archetypal mother/Madonna figure for Paul and the cause of abomination for him, Clara offers freedom of love without devotion to him. Within the rhetoric of Freud, the sexual fascination for the sufferer is represented by a female figure, who lacks societal respect and whose commitment is on the quest. Accordingly, Clara is represented as a woman who is outside of the established boundaries and ethical frameworks of societal norms and standards. She never considers her bad reputation within the society. She just meets the enjoyment of sexuality and intimacy without love for him. In one of their conversations, Paul asks her whether she finds herself guilty or not, she unhesitatingly replies that she does not care about the rumours of the society:

'You don't feel criminal, do you?'

'Criminal!' she said. 'No.'

‘But you seem to feel you have done a wrong?’

‘No,’ she said.’

‘Not sinners, are we?’ he said, with an uneasy little frown.

‘No,’ she replied. He kissed her, laughing.

‘You like your little bit of guiltiness, I believe,’ he said. ‘I believe Eve enjoyed it, when she went cowering out of Paradise.’ (Lawrence, 1995: 315).

As it is seen in the conversation, Clara is the female who is associated with Eve symbol in his mind. Amidst the fervent ardour shared between the lovers, they “felt small, half-afraid, childish and wondering, like Adam and Eve when they lost their innocence and realised the magnificence of the power which drove them out of Paradise” (Lawrence, 1995: 356). Once more, their depiction in the scene is intertwined with Clara’s association with Eve-like figure; that is, the archetypal whore figure.

However, as time passes, his experience with Clara becomes troublesome due to the split and repression in his soul and mind. Even in their close intimacy, Clara “did not know what was the matter with him. She realised that he seemed unaware of her. Even when he came to her, he seemed unaware of her; always he was somewhere else” (Lawrence, 1995: 399). When he considers his relationship with her, Paul’s dilemma becomes clearer as he says: “But no, mother. I even love Clara, and I did Miriam; but to give myself to them in marriage I couldn’t” (Lawrence, 1995: 351). As a man, full of neurotic complexities in his soul, “the naked hunger [...] something strong and blind and ruthless in its primitiveness” (Lawrence, 1995: 355) begin to disturb him. Although he attempts to continue his passion for Clara, he becomes restless and inclines towards severance. He no longer feels discomfort in Clara’s absence and no longer relies on her constant presence as he once did. Clara assumes the role of a female figure, who just compensates for Paul’s sexual desires, so her role is confined to indoor encounters. She never goes beyond the limits, assigned to her by Paul.

Thus, unable to combine his “sensual” and “affectionate” feelings, he begins to feel uneasiness and restlessness. Freud notes that “when the original object of an instinctual desire becomes lost in consequence of repression, it is often replaced by an endless series of substitute-objects, none of which ever give full satisfaction” (1963: 58). The following paragraph, taken from the last chapters, describes how Paul’s neurotic complexity troubles him finally:

He felt as if his life were being destroyed, piece by piece, within him. Often the tears came suddenly. [...]. Often he could not go on with his work. The pen stopped writing. He sat staring, quite unconscious. And when he came round again he felt sick, and trembled in his limbs. He never questioned what it was. His mind did not try to analyse or understand. He merely submitted, and kept his eyes shut; let the thing go over him (Lawrence, 1995: 382).

In the concluding chapters of the novel, Paul endeavours to become a man and wants to remove all women from his life. His mother suffers from cancer, and he hastens her death by adding an overdose of morphine to her night milk. Sacco and Laino claim that “misogyny is another aspect of the Madonna complex” (2011: 29). From this view, Paul sets himself free from all women in his life and walks towards “the city’s gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast [...]. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly” (Lawrence, 1995: 492).

### **Conclusion**

The Madonna-whore complex can be traced back to ancient mythologies and religious narratives that depicted women in dichotomous roles frequently. The dichotomous portrayal of women as either Mary or Eve serves as a framework through which they are depicted as saintly or entirely sinful. In canonical texts, reducing women to either the consecrated, virginal Madonna or the sinful, promiscuous whore indicates the attempts of the patriarchal norms to ignore their identities and personalities. Formulated and developed by the Austrian psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, the conceptualization of a binary division of women as either a mother or lover is frequently termed as “The Madonna-whore complex” within scholarly discourse.

While numerous critical analyses and theses have explored the impact of Freudian scientific theories, notably the Oedipus Complex, on the works of D.H. Lawrence, not much critical attention has been directed towards the Madonna-whore complex, a concept formulated by Freud and expanded upon by feminist critics. As one of the important early modernist writers, Lawrence adeptly interwove Freudian theories into his novel by providing the readers with insights about the psychological and sexual complexities of the characters, particularly of Paul. As the sufferer from mother-complex due to childhood frustrations in his family, Paul cannot maintain emotional and physical arousal to the opposite sex in the novel. He vacillates between Miriam and Clara; however, neither can satisfy both his “af-

fectionate” and “emotional” needs fully. In conclusion, Paul cannot get intimacy with a girl who is either entirely a virginal Madonna or a sinful whore due to the psychological and sensual dilemmas in his mind. At the end of the novel, Paul emancipates himself from all the women in his life and directs purposefully towards the lights of the city which may offer alternative women with whom he would satisfy both his affectionate and the sensual feelings.

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