

Contemplating the role of gender development: Doris Lessing's, '*the Cleft*'

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Abstract

In the novel *the Cleft*, creation of myth has been revered by Doris Lessing. She has depicted women as the first humans. A great extent of traditional gender stereotype and gender roles have been displayed by the writer in the novel. The main purpose of this paper is to determine the role of gender development in *the Cleft* and to discuss the patriarchal implication in the last decades of Doris Lessing's life. Lessing has provided history of humans in three periods. First being the laziness of clefts, second and third provide the establishment of gender roles and its differentiation. Different innate nature of males and females is presented as a consequence of this gender role. Lessing indicates that gender stereotypical traits are characteristics which are inherited by males and females.

Keywords: Lessing, Cleft, gender role, stereotypes, patriarchy

Introduction

Doris Lessing was awarded with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007 for expressing her power for dividing civilisation to scrutiny. However, Lessing is seen rejecting the title of 'feminist' as she says that she has written a lot about men too. After declaring her hatred for feminists of 1960s, makes an attempt to change the myths that first creation is human. Some readers develop misconception that this novel is based on feminism; however, the close reading of the novel clarifies that it is associated with the gender roles assigned to males and females in patriarchal societies. This paper investigates either sociobiological accounts of gender development are adopted by her or she is seen adopting theories which is based on cultural construction of gender.

With the beginning of the novel, Lessing suggests that her main focus in the novel is to present the relationship between the women and the men from different periods of history. Therefore, a Roman senator

and historian watches Marcus and Lollla, the two slaves in the novel while they flirt with each other. He comes back and continues reading the manuscripts based on early humans.

Early humans believe that they do not require a man to give a birth. They call themselves as "sea people." The birth of a baby is explained by narrator as follows:

And, of course the babies being born. They were just born, that's all, no one did anything to make them. I think we thought the moon made them, a big fish, but it is hard to remember what we thought, it was such a dream" (Lessing 2008:11)

Clefts lose their capacity of becoming pregnant without man after they give birth to their first child. However, the first male baby of the Cleft changes the life of clefts along with history of humans.

The clefts take it as their responsibility to kill the first male babies. They kill these babies on "the killing rock", thinking that eagles will kill them. This way the cleft-narrator would satisfy her instincts that "they did not kill the babies, the eagles did it" (Lessing 2008:12) She defends her cruelty by saying that they cannot leave the beach as they have been staying there since ages. That is why they need to leave male babies on the killing rock.

Lessing describes these women as the lazy creatures because they are not concerned about the world outside the beach. They did not prefer to work outside home rather stayed at home because of its peaceful atmosphere. Here, Lessing provides a strong contradiction with the contemporary females.

As the old Clefts have never wondered about the outside world, they are unaware of the fact that eagles do not kill their male babies, rather they take these babies and put them at a safe place. Eagles are seen fighting with cleft narrators when their male babies cry. This struggle is named as "war" (Lessing 2008:22), in the quotation below:

Something like a war developed between the eagles and the first females, who could not possibly win. Not only were they unused to fighting, or even aggression, they were unused to physical activity. They lay around on their necks and swam. That was their life, had been for--ages. (Lessing 2008:22).

Two crucial facts are displayed by this quotation: first, females are not shown in any fighting or physical activities. Second, that the first male babies are guarded by the monsters. Protection of these male babies has been described by the Roman narrator in following words:

"Those eagles,..., the persecutors of the first females, the saviours of the first males" (Lessing 2008:27)

Therefore, eagles have been given position of "King of birds" in the novel.

Community of males has a mysterious history. The Roman narrator in the novel displays his astonishment by saying: "How did the community of males begin?" (Lessing 2008:34) However, he is not able to solve the mystery of the community of males. We may infer from the discussion in the novel that there may be some Sun-god or Zeus who protected the male babies. Therefore, Lessing must have left a

question for readers what the eagle stands for. This way Lessing has brought sacredness to the males. Hence, males are given birth after the females in the novel, the males have been shown as superior to the females.

When Clefts first becomes aware of the creation of male babies. The same moment, readers distinguish between lazy females who have never thought of living islands, on the other hand, are the male monsters who have started exploring the island.

Similarity with traditional gender stereotypes is presented by the male explorers. As John Ruskin writes in his book titled *Sesame and Lilies* first published in 1865 that "The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision" (1906-144-145)

The community of males and females constitutes when females make sexual relationship with male monsters at the island. Lessing has shown Horsa, the leader of the males as an explorer and Maronna, the female leader who has never fancied to explore the island. Moreover, adjectives used by Lessing for males are 'restless', 'brave.' However, for females she has used adjectives like 'lazy.' Therefore, they could not keep the high ground on island because of their laziness.

Lessing has shown difference between young and old females. If old women too lazy to explore the island, a young woman from cleft dares to visit squirts; however, she is raped and murdered over there. The rapist is not known because people did not have any names in those times. However, one day a young cleft says "My name is Maire" and the other says that she is "Astre." This can be named as beginning of individualization. Earlier they were called with names such as Cleft Watchers, the Water Carers. We can say that individualities were not important in the past, their functioning in the community was important. Therefore, these two women are shown struggling for the changes in the society.

After sometime, Squirts give birth to a baby and give the baby to the squirts. Astre and Squirts go to live with squirts for some time. Lessing exhibits typical patriarchal gender roles when Maire and Astre uses trees as brooms. Lessing clarifies that gender roles are not learned, rather than innated.

This novel describes the evolution of humans without a plot. Two milestones are presented by the writer. The first is the birth of the monster, as the emergence of the two sexes. The other one is Maire's baby who becomes the first member of the race. After this, clefts start visiting squirts, because they have lost the capacity of giving birth to babies without men. On one hand, evolution of human race is shown and on the other differentiation in gender roles.

Gender roles and stereotypes become apparent as the novel progresses with the constitution of two communities on the island. "The Noise" a kind of wind destroys the place of squirts and they end up coming to the shelters of the clefts.

Lessing implies that in the course of the emergence, the gender roles differentiated due to the biological characteristics of the man and the woman. Similarly, Roman narrator thinks about his own life while reading

the manuscripts. Moreover, gender stereotypes are used widely in the novels. Males are seen making weapons with the sharp shells, on the other hand, females make necklaces from sea stones. The narrator has also mentioned the fights amongst the males. The daily life of the males is described by the cleft-narrator as follows: "They fought each other, for no good reason, and invented games where they completed, sometimes dangerously." Aggressive and competitive nature of males have been displayed.

When the male babies are hurt, males ask females to heal them as they are considered healers, caregivers. At the end, Horsa, the leader of female, asks the volunteer girls to meet the sexual needs of the men and give birth to babies. Also, these girls express their interest in being with the men. A quote in the novel 'they are just clefts and must shut up' gives us the notion that women in patriarchal societies are considered inferior throughout history.

Conclusion

Three phases in the beginning of the history are presented by Lessing in this novel. The first phase has only female Clefts and lazy creatures are presented with the origin of male babies. In second phase, emergence of gender roles is shown. This phase also elaborates how male babies are saved by eagles. Lessing has provided sacred meanings to eagles by associating it with Zeus. Females are portrayed as cleaning the shelters of the males; however, males are represented as hunters. Lessing emphasizes that traits or characteristics of men and women are not learnt but these are consequences of the intrinsic values of males and females. Readers witnesses a male-dominated society in the third phase. Male dominated societies have been constituted no matter women were created first. Therefore, Lessing advocates the sociobiological accounts of gender stereotypes in the last decade of her life.

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