

Subverting Masculine Ideology and Monstrous Power Exertion in Doris Lessing's *The Cleft*

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ABSTRACT

Women's oppression and subjugation reflected in literature has always been a controversial issue for writers and critics and Lessing is a novelist whose long career of writing demonstrates her preoccupation with related issues. The present paper approaches Doris Lessing's novel, The Cleft, from a socialist feminist point of view to foreground Lessing's understanding of women in both past and present societies in which women are subjugated and oppressed by capitalist and patriarchal systems and ideologies. The author of this paper argues that characterising exploitative and dominating male characters Lessing tries to introduce them as naive and unsophisticated invaders who seem pathetic and inhumane simultaneously. She identifies an intellectual gap between males and females that can justify all the problems and miseries of female race until the twentieth century and afterward. Thus, as the author understands it, Lessing's novel is an attempt to subvert such long-established masculine ideology and defy the monstrous power exertion that has had women as its most important target. As Lessing shows in her novel, men's use of a fake history and male-defined ideology has led to women's domination and inferiority. However, she demonstrates that women's unique intellectual power can be their weapon in fighting against patriarchy and forceful power exertion, paving the way for women to achieve their true essence. The findings of this study demonstrate that The Cleft is Lessing's invitation to refresh women's historical consciousness, to understand and believe that most personal problems and suffering have their equivalent in others' lives, even in the lives of the ancestral mothers a long time before history begins.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; The Cleft; subversion; masculine ideology; power exertion

INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's novel, *The Cleft*, portrays an imaginary world in which men are depicted as beings endangering women with their overwhelming power exertion. The present paper approaches this novel from a socialist feminist point of view to argue that this forceful power exertion is a consequence of the masculine ideology that intends to oppress and subjugate women as a second inferior class of the society. As Lessing shows it here, while females are the real progenitors of human beings, males' use of a fake history and male-defined ideology has led to females' domination and inferiority. Relying on the world of fantasy and gothic and its subversive quality that is a result of its "potential for subversion of dominant discourses and their associated moral and cultural values" (Howard 1994, p. 3) Lessing tries to create a new ideology that justifies women's need to subvert the male-defined ideology and structures.

To achieve the aim of this paper –showing an intellectual gap between males and females and the way that males use monstrosity to exert power and oppress the other class - an exponential approach is adopted that is mainly based on close reading of the text and analysing the male and female characters that stand as representatives of two absolutely different and opposing classes of the novel's society. Looking from a socialist feminist point

of view and through an analytical perusal of the text we will be able to see how uncivilised beings exclude females from the power circle through the use of a self-made and male-defined ideology and how they dominate females and oppress them through a variety of facets of oppression such as reproduction and pregnancy, and domestic labour and housewifery.

From the very beginning Lessing reveals that she is not going to look at human history from a traditional perspective. On the contrary to critics like Wan Roselezam who believes that “One does not have to reject one’s own culture to be liberated” (2003, p. 11) Lessing changes her viewpoint to raise a new consciousness in respect of the beginning of the human race, history and culture. To this end, Lessing turns the male-dominated culture on its head and implies that the story of creation propagated so far is both falsified and fake. As Perrakis states Lessing’s historian’s acknowledgement of “the role of ideology in preserving historical memory” is her attempt to “[foreground] the cultural and ideological input in foundational records from the past” (2010, p. 120-1).

To Lessing, the human race starts with women who are the founders and real progenitors of mankind. As she insists, this is a fact hidden from the people by men who have tried to keep the power in their hands and keep women secondary and inferior. To “upset the Biblical story about creation”, as Sinha sees it, “*The Cleft* provocatively asserts that the primal humans are female psychic beings fused with the natural environment, the sea and the rocky terrain” (2008, p. 43). Therefore, Lessing believes that the ideologies constructed by men and disseminated among people need to be scrutinised, revised and corrected. As the historian confesses, the story of the Cleft has remained a ‘Strictly Secret’ period of history and Lessing shrewdly “adopts the perspective of a male Roman senator who endeavours to reconstruct the unwritten history of the human race” (Rubenstein 2010, p. 15) while he earnestly tries to remain as objective as possible to relate the truth his race has intentionally manipulated and distorted to its own benefit. This is admitting men’s inhumanity to women by concealing the truth and faking a history that is not correct.

Lessing argues that men wrote history instead of simply reporting it. And this is a proof that the whole history of human beings is erroneous and male-defined. She suggests that, unlike what is always advertised and instructed in male-dominated Western culture, women existed before men and the idea that men preceded women in existence is not true and is just a made-up story. As such, *The Cleft* is the true story of the human race and a “tale which has little in common with what is taught our children as the truth. Which is, of course, that we males were first in the story and in some remarkable way brought forth the females. *We are the senior, they our creation*” (Lessing 2007, p. 25).

Putting it this way Lessing even questions religion by telling us that the idea of Eve being created out of Adam’s body is a false idea and absolutely wrong. The historian narrator of *The Cleft* reminds us that “[in] Rome now, a sect – the Christians – insist that the first female was brought forth from the body of a male. Very suspect stuff, I think. Some male invented that – the exact opposite of the truth” (Lessing 2007, p. 27). Somewhere else, this historian doubts the validity of the privileges given to men rather than women, arguing that “[males] are always put first, in our practice. They are first in our society, despite the influence of certain great ladies of the noble Houses. Yet I suspect this priority was a later invention” (Lessing 2007, p. 29).

However, the historian admits that as a member of the male society he cannot bring himself to report whatever truth there is in the women’s record because he is simply a man who is supposed to write history as it is (and has been) kept in men’s version of history

(Lessing 2007, p. 49). While this indicates that there is still some more truth to be kept ‘Strictly Secret’, the important thing that is revealed through the historian’s words is that it “was Maire [a Cleft] who gave birth to the First one [first monster]” (Lessing 2007, p. 102) and that there were women who “dandled, fussed over, fed, cleaned, slapped, kissed” men and taught them anything they needed to survive, “and this is such a heavy and persuasive history that I am amazed we don’t remember it more often” (Lessing 2007, p. 190).

Lessing’s historian in *The Cleft* reminds us of the fact that history is intentionally changed to the favour of males. This justifies Perrakis’s contention summarised by Raschke that “Lessing’s *The Cleft* dramatises a re-conceptualisation of the past that also transforms the present, including ourselves, our personal relationships, and our relations with the global community” (2010, p. 5). The historian narrator admits that males have omitted women as the progenitors of the human race. They have replaced a true and real story by a fake one that identifies men as the ‘earliest ancestors’ who were born from eggs hatched by eagles (Lessing 2007, p. 143). As the historian makes it clear here, history is the product of those who had the power in their hands, they decided which version should be concentrated on and favoured: “Then it must be agreed by whoever’s task it is that this version rather than that must be committed to memory” (Lessing 2007, p. 136). Making it clear that ideologies and people’s consciousness have always been manipulated by the possessors of power, Lessing attracts our attention to the ways in which women’s oppression and exploitation started and have continued. In the following section we will explain how Lessing compares men and women and will also show what kinds of oppression and exploitation she refers to as notable examples.

DISCUSSION

THE OPPRESSIVE POWER ENFORCERS

From the very beginning Lessing depicts the male characters as forgetful and irresponsible beings. In the historian’s house, Lolla, the maiden, has to compensate for the male servant’s forgetfulness and irresponsibility. It is “Marcus’s responsibility to make sure the oxen got their water as soon as they arrived,” but it is Lolla that fills the pitchers and pours the water into the animals’ troughs. However, instead of being thankful to Lolla who is helping him, all we see from Marcus is crossness and sullenness that are “not the result of a very hot afternoon” (Lessing 2007, p. 4). The crossness and sullenness are therefore the outcome of the contempt and enmity that he feels for her.

Going back to the time of the Clefts and the Monsters we find men in a state which is much worse than what we see in the character of Marcus. One important deficiency of men is their too shallow reservoir of words and their being strange to language, a symbol of their simplicity and unsophisticated minds. Lessing shows the Monsters as strangers to civilization and culture: “Their language was a child’s, and it was even pitched high, like children’s talk. Yes, they had new words, for the tools and utensils they had invented, but they talked together like children” (Lessing 2007, p. 49). Lessing identifies men as having a very limited and incomplete language that shapes their limited and incomplete understanding and consciousness: “And then they were more and more troubled by their speech. The Cleft’s speech was clearer and better. They tried to remember words used by Maire, and how she put them together. But they didn’t know enough, they knew so little” (Lessing 2007, p. 69).

It is the Monsters’ luck that they have the Clefts to teach and instruct them. Lessing portrays the Monsters as uncivilised uncommunicative beings that are taught by women how

to speak. The Monsters speak like little children and hate the single words they hear from each other. But they have the Clefts, especially Maire and Astre, around to teach them the real language and instruct them “how to keep their shelters clean...” (Lessing 2007, p. 75). Furthermore, the Monsters are incapable of logical thinking and reasoning. They do things impulsively, without thinking about the probable consequences. As the historian writes, “There are remarks in female’s records that the boys were clumsy, seemed to lack a feeling for their surroundings, and were inept and did not understand that if they did *this*, then *that* would follow” (Lessing 2007, p. 106-7). They are more like animals living “in their sheds and shelters, which were always full of rubbish and smelled bad, because they simply did not have the knack of keeping order” (Lessing 2007, p. 116). To this is added the fact that “men were, if not mad, then deficient in understanding” (Lessing 2007, p. 162), incapable of deep thought and sound calculations.

It is very interesting that women understand and are wary of the river’s dangers but the men do not care or think about it. It is “on the insistence of the Clefts, there were guards on the river banks, preventing the small children from going in” (Lessing 2007, p. 155), a fact that shows the men’s inability for analysis and deep thought. It does not occur to them that they might possibly have some guards among themselves to take care of the children that are always in danger of being destroyed because of various dangers and animals.

Lessing’s portrayal of men in *The Cleft* is the portrayal of creatures that are not even as clever as animals roaming in the forest. The monsters are incapable of locating their own place on the shore and do not have the necessary sense of navigation, though they arrange an expedition that ends up in being lost and getting confused. Worse than that is their pretention that nothing has happened and they are in fact on the right track. Ironically, the girls know that the band is aimlessly going around in a loop without knowing what course should be followed. What is known to the girls is unknown to the boys, and this is why the girls protest to the boys who are leading them nowhere:

What is the matter with you?” The girls wanted to know. “Why is it you never seem to know where you are?” They were remembering how a group of the boys, including two of the present group, had gone round and round in a certain loop of the tunnel, not recognizing the landmarks until a girl had said, “Can’t you see? We’ve been through this bit of tunnel more than once?” And now the boys really did not seem to know where they were. “Can’t you see the Cleft?” a girl pointed out. And indeed, the great cliff of The Cleft stood up above the trees, not so far off. The men stared. “Yes, it is The Cleft.” That meant ... Had Horsa seen it? The males said they were hungry, and would hunt. “I suppose you are going to make a fire,” said the girls. “What a clever idea, it will bring all the animals here to us at once.” (Lessing 2007, p. 247)

So whatever is unknown to the boys is absolutely clear to the girls. It does not occur to boys that making fire in the forest will bring all the animals to their camp. To make it worse, while the boys take responsibility for guarding the camp during the night they disappear by morning, leaving their promise to guard the camp unfulfilled, something that the girls correctly guess will happen: “One girl said they must keep an eye on the boys, because they would probably sneak off without them, if they could. And when the first light came the boys were gone” (Lessing 2007, p. 247). Going on an aimless expedition the men are wandering about without knowing where they are but, ridiculously, they think that they are progressing: “[the girls] reported to Maronna that men, still led by Horsa, were not too far away, but the girls mustn’t get their hopes up, because the men didn’t seem to know how near home they were” (Lessing 2007, p. 248).

Another important fact about Monsters is that whatever they do is based on an impulse and not on thinking or calculation. The boys in *The Cleft* do things just because they want to do something, just to see what happens next. Horsa, the only named male character who is considered to be the Monsters' leader, is a person who decides on impulse without figuring it out what exactly he is doing. And it is when things go wrong that he suddenly notices the disaster and goes to the women to get help (Lessing 2007, p. 197). It is ironic that Horsa plans an expedition without thinking about its consequences in advance. While arranging the expedition Horsa does not think that men, women and babies will get into trouble. These troubles are already known to the women, especially Maronna:

Well, what did you expect? Girls give birth and babies cry, and you have to feed the babes and wash them and keep them warm – had you not thought of that? Idiots, fools, oh you make us lose patience with you ... Horsa, do you mean to say you didn't know this was going to happen? Don't you remember we told you if you took girls with you they would get pregnant? (Lessing 2007, p. 203)

Intensifying the misery that Horsa brings to his clan is his omnipresent dream of the better place he intends to discover and conquer. All his thoughts about going on an expedition and a journey are because of this dream and the motivation to change it into reality. It is odd that he has never been to the dreamland he is trying to reach; yet, he speaks about it with an unbelievable zeal and admiration, such that one thinks that what he is saying is sheer truth he has witnessed himself. This is while Horsa cannot be sure that his dreamland will be any better or more desirable than their own shore:

He lay like a child with his arms across his face, and when he could speak and the others wanted to listen, he told about the wonders of the other shore. For while this land, their own, had noble trees and birds and animals, whose eyes gleamed at them from the bushes, the shore he had failed to reach and from which he had been ejected so fiercely by the tyrant wind, this land, the new one, was seductive and desirable in a way their own land could never be. (Lessing 2007, p. 217)

The interesting point here is that even the historian sympathises with his symbolic forefather, justifying his zeal and interest in his dreamland. He identifies himself with Horsa and justifies Horsa's plan to discover new lands. He says that there is a need for Romans (men in general) to conquer what they see:

I feel so much for that youngster there, Horsa, lying hurt on the sand and dreaming of that other place, which he could not reach. He did try, though ... I feel that he is my younger self, perhaps even a son. What was he longing for, when he saw that distant shore and wanted it ... I see him as an ancestor of us, the Romans. What we see we need to conquer; what we know is there we have to know too. Horsa was in himself a coloniser, but that was before the word and idea was born. (Lessing 2007, p. 216)

It is not a coincidence that the historian has the same dream as Horsa. He, too, thinks that new lands should be found and conquered and considers Horsa a dutiful real Roman who, "lying there on his patch of sand, crippled because of his need to know that other wonderful land – and I think of him, secretly, as a Roman. One of us. Ours" (Lessing 2007, p. 217).

Yet, the enthusiastic adventurer that Lessing portrays in her novel turns out to be an unforgivable failure. Horsa brings disaster to the people and his expedition leads nowhere. Daring to start the journey he is unable to see what the women see in advance. "He [does] not

know how to manage his expedition which the women [call] foolhardy, dangerous, ill-planned, stupid.” Eventually all these adjectives are proved to be applicable when Horsa’s adventure [turns] out to be all those things” (Lessing 2007, p. 200). The adventure Horsa starts and his uncalculated expedition fails, “and the smashed craft [is] only a confirmation of that” (Lessing 2007, p. 201). In the end he has nothing with which to answer Maronna who asks about children whom she knows are already dead on the expedition. Unable to answer Maronna’s questions and criticism Horsa stands “limp, guilty, in the wrong ... trembling ... and limp with the grief he now genuinely did feel, because her agony of grief was telling him what an enormity he had committed” (Lessing 2007, p. 257).

But what makes Horsa more pathetic in the eyes of Maronna and us is his decision to make the journey once more. After the expedition proves to be a failure we find Horsa thinking again about going on another expedition. This happens while he has forgotten all about whatever disaster he has brought onto the children and women. Immediately after he is emotionally and psychologically refreshed by Maronna he starts to think about this foolish idea, travelling to his desirable island but without a proper plan:

Somewhere in Horsa’s restless mind had started the thought: Tell her about the wonderful place I found, yes I will. She’ll want to see it too, I am sure of it. She will understand, yes, she’ll come with me, we’ll go together, I’ll make a ship better than we’ve made, and we’ll land together on that shore and... (Lessing 2007, p. 258)

This strikes us greatly when we remember him talking about himself, admitting that he is a failure. The historian senator writes that, “It is recorded that Horsa was furious because of his own delinquency, which he was hearing about as Maronna screamed at him. He had no idea yet just how lacking in forethought he had been” (Lessing 2007, p. 189).

Lessing criticises the Monsters for their sticking to vague and unclear future plans, leaving the present neglected. Her description of the Monsters introduces them as clumsy creatures, mutated women, the girls’ favourite topic in their discussions because of their clumsiness “so awkward much of the time” showing that they “lack a sense, or senses” (Lessing 2007, p. 248). Lessing contrasts the Monster’s clumsiness with the Clefts’ sound characteristics so that her reader can see for herself how the long propagated ideology of men’s superiority and dominance can be challenged and deconstructed. She raises a new consciousness, offering a chance for women to think of other possibilities in their relations with men.

WOMEN OUT OF THE POWER CIRCLE

One important problem for the Clefts is their exclusion from decision-making and the power circle. Being dishonest with women, the Monsters start to hide and conceal things from them, and this is while women know the Monsters are keeping things secret. An example is when the boys do not know the way back to the women’s shore but they do not say they are lost: They are “reluctant to show the girls they hardly knew where they were in relation to the women’s place. Yet the girls had guessed this. How did they do this? It was uncanny, the ways the females seemed to read your mind” (Lessing 2007, p. 246). Even the younger boys do not let women participate in decision-making and their reason is that they are Clefts and must shut up. “Some kind of central command or authority, it seemed, the girls were demanding and when they tried to assume control of the young boys, they were told they were just Clefts, and must shut up” (Lessing 2007, p. 221).

Maire and Maronna's (and other girls') ability to predict and foretell correctly is not valued or paid attention to by the Monsters. Maire is a prophet-like figure who can say what will happen next:

Maire knew she was in danger: the smell and tension of threat was strong. She knew there was a plot of some kind ... And now Maire heard the bones of the plot ... So, she was right: Maire's nerves had already told her. At some point she, Astre and the girls who were their friends would be enticed into the sea and killed. (Lessing 2007, p. 119)

However the women's gift to predict and see things in advance is not worth anything to the boys who desire to rule and command. That is why they do not let women participate in decision-making. They rely on what Ebert suggests is the mechanism of patriarchy. As she maintains, "Patriarchy works through a double move that, on [the] one hand, asserts and depends on binary oppositions of gender differences but, on the other hand, naturalises these necessary differences as biological and thus the inevitable effect of 'nature' thereby making them 'unnoticeable' and not in need of change" (1991, p. 888). But these bargains of patriarchy as Kandiyoti reminds us "are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders" (1988, p. 275). Lessing's focus on the ways that Monsters begin to exclude and limit the Clefs is, in fact, an attempt to pave the way for a regenerated struggle to subvert these relations.

REPRODUCTION AND PREGNANCY: POWER OR FACET OF OPPRESSION

The Cleft is a story in which one important quality of women is repeatedly mentioned and praised. To this quality men have no access and are very jealous. Women are able to give birth to new humans while men are incapable of doing so and this is a great danger to a community's survival. Not being equipped to reproduce themselves, and knowing that "they did not have the knack of giving life" (Lessing 2007, p. 41), the Monsters conclude that the only way to guarantee their survival is to take advantage of the Clefs' reproductive power. While Lessing's story of the Clefs' ability to give birth without men's contribution may, in Rupp's words, seem "all rather far-fetched", it can be considered a possible event that is, at least, equally as valid as men's version of the creation story with Adam and Eve. As Rupp argues, scholars "who argue that originally goddesses created and ruled the world and that the emergence of god-centered religions represented a kind of heavenly male revolution mirroring what went on in the material world" (2009, p. 12) can be support for the story Lessing narrates.

Therefore, Lessing considers women's ability to give birth as a quality, a power that they have in their possession. Without women "there would be no Monsters, there would be *no one at all*" (Lessing, p. 16). Ironically it is this very ability that makes women a target of men's jealousy and attacks. Desiring to continue their own race, men start thinking about a possible means of reproduction which involves dominating women and using them to enrich their treasury of the male race.

DOMESTIC LABOUR AND HOUSEWIFERY

Domestic labour and housewifery are other facets of oppression for the females populating the novel. As it appears in the story, women start to work for men out of their kindness towards these incapable creatures and because they find the monsters too pathetic to be left

alone. As Lessing puts it, the Clefts start doing house chores because they find men living in very unpleasant conditions, in dirt and filth. Men's inability to take care of themselves is what stimulates women to start cleaning, out of mercy:

The girls looked inside the shelters and found a filthy mess of bones, fruit rinds, discarded weed bandages. They tore branches from the trees and used them as brooms. This was in itself remarkable since there were no trees near the Cleft's shore. The rubbish was swept into a big pile and added to it were the bones and bits of flesh ... This pile was swept to the river's edge, then into the cleansing flow. (Lessing 2007, p. 75)

Yet, after some time of repeating this job, it becomes a part of their identity and they get entangled in a trap that is the result of men's inability to live in a civilised way.

Another important issue is the services that women provide for men without gaining anything in return. All the nursing and motherly care for the Monsters remains uncompensated and unpaid. Unfamiliar with motherly love men are reported to be "hungry for touch and tenderness; and the girls, who on their own shore did not go in much for this kind of affection, were surprised and pleased" (Lessing 2007, p. 76). We cannot forget that the Monsters are always coming to women to tend to their wounds and injuries caused by their carelessness and stupidity. As the historian narrator writes, "There are suggestions that the men enjoyed the fighting, pitting their wits against each other. When there were wounded, they were taken to the women's shore to mend" (Lessing 2007, p. 172). And again this is a quality, the Clefts' kindness and mastery of things, their power that fixates them in a role, making them vulnerable to the Monsters' domination.

Lessing shows that the Clefts are preoccupied with care and attention towards children and men; they are very much like Ngugi's women in *Weep Not, Child* that as Maleki and Lalbakhsh argue "understand education as a means of indoctrination and socialization" (2012, p. 73). This is a quality that men do not have and it is the result of women's exceptional awareness of and sensitivity to the world around them. The ability that the Clefts have in mending wounds and injuries proves their mastery of a knowledge that, later on, is confiscated by the Monsters and their type. This is a nullification of the socially-constructed ideology that associates men with knowledge and women with domestic labour and house chores. Women's mastery of mending wounds and using medication comes from their powerful feminine minds where

...were images or mental maps of these boys, their boys, and ghostly maternal hands slid over ghostly limbs, testing, measuring; though the bodies in question had grown beyond permitting others to handle already fiercely touch-me-not limbs-grown beyond their mothers, and far beyond babyhood. Perhaps, some were dead? Premonitions darkened the thoughts of the women, who would weep for no reason, or wake suddenly from bad dreams. Of Brian, Big Bear, Runner, White Crow. (Lessing 2007, p. 240)

CONCLUSION

While *The Cleft* is a representation of the long history of oppression and exploitation imposed on women, and although it touches on the fact that Western culture and history are falsified and manipulated in men's favour, it shows off all women's abilities and qualities that have never been given due respect and attention. Lessing emphasises that women's ability to reproduce is a power at their disposal. She emphasises that women are far more sophisticated and cleverer than men. And she argues that the identities are socially constructed and determined by the prevalent ideologies and definitions. Lessing's novel is an invitation for

women (and men) to look at the history of the human race differently and to recognise the truth: the power of the female race. Yet, *The Cleft* also shows all men's inabilities and flaws that have always been misrepresented and camouflaged by patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. The Monsters' blind expeditions are associated with their lack of knowledge and discovery while their impulsive and miscalculated actions have always been interpreted as their daring and ability to take risks. Lessing's *The Cleft* is a portrayal of men's selfishness and limited power of understanding. It is an attempt to uncover the history of women that has been manipulated and distorted for so long. It is a call for women to understand themselves; not according to long-established Western culture and history but to find for themselves the female history that has been kept 'secret' by the male-dominated ruling powers.

What Lessing does in *The Cleft* is to demystify history as the objective narrative of the human race and to demarcate literature as an equally reliable narrative that, as Sikorska argues in her editorial to a collection of articles on history, can stand "as a par with history recording the politics, culture and philosophy of a given literary period" because, as he reasons, our world's "truth is relative, and every reported utterance contains its own interpretation" (2010, p. 8). *The Cleft* thus is an invitation to refresh our historical consciousness, to understand and believe that most personal problems and suffering have their equivalent in others' lives, even in the lives of the ancestral mothers a long time before history begins. Lessing argues that first there were women who started the human race, then there were men who revolutionised and changed everything, causing ideologies to rule and dominate. *The Cleft* is Lessing's call for women to repeat history, to revolutionise things and change their own lives.

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