Enlightenment of Doris Lessing’s Ecological Ethics on College Students’ Ecological Civilization Education—Based on The Cleft

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Abstract. In the novel The Cleft, published in 2007, Lessing’s ecological ethics are presented, which provides reference and enlightenment for ecological civilization education in colleges and universities. The enlightenment including respecting the nature, sustaining the harmonious relationship between human beings and animals, revering for life and stressing the bisexual cooperation. Meanwhile, the novel’s ethical value in modern society and classic works’ impact in ecological civilization education are identified.

Introduction

Ecological crisis is a serious threat to human survival and health. How to solve this problem has become a global issue. The key to building a civilized society with good ecology lies in cultivating talents with ecological civilization consciousness, and the foundation of talent cultivation lies in education. Therefore, education of ecological civilization is an indispensable part of talent training in Colleges and universities.

Lessing, a famous writer in the 20th century, has paid close attention to the fate of women, ecological crisis and aged people’s ecology in modern society and so on. The Cleft, published in 2007, narrates the history of primitive people evolving from singular sexual reproduction to bilingual sexual reproduction, narrates the history of primitive people evolving from singular sexual reproduction to bilingual sexual reproduction, mainly focusing on the exploration of the relationship between human and nature and the relationship between male and female. The novel highlights Lessing’s ecological ethics, providing reference and enlightenment for ecological civilization education in colleges and universities. In view of this, the author will take The Cleft as an example to explore the ecological ethics contained in the work and its enlightenment to the ecological civilization education in colleges and universities.

According to Xiao Aiping, “ecological ethics refers to the ethnic relationship in the activities related to mankind’s interacting with natural ecology, covering the treatment of the relationships between man and nature, between people and people, and between society and society.” [1] In fact, the basic idea of ecological ethics is gradually expanded. In the 1920s, Albert Schweitzer published his book Philosophy of Civilization, coming up with the ethics of reverence for life. This offered a foundation for the western ecological ethics. The basic principles of moral of reverence for life proclaim “it is good to maintain and to encourage life, it is bad to destroy life or obstruct it”[2]. Paul Taylor proclaims a biocentric environmental ethics in his book Respect for Nature in 1986, emphasizing the respect for all living organisms. “Paul Taylor’s biocentric ethics expands moral reflection to include not only the sensible animals but also the insensible animals and plants.”[3] Further to Schweitzer’s ethics of reverence for life, Leopold conceives the land ethic by recognizing “all ethics so far revolved around a central premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts...The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” [4]. Lessing echos the thoughts of ecological ethics in the novel-The Cleft. She views that all lives are sacred, that nature should be respected, that human beings ,animal and natural environment should keep a harmonious relationship, and that man should reposition himself in relation to nature and woman.
Human and Nature - Advocating Respect for Nature

Ecological ethics calls for the establishment of the value orientation of ecological holism. It believes that “the seemingly contradictory nature is actually a deeper interdependence. In the ecosystem, all kinds of environmental elements are interrelated and interact, and they are combined into an orderly and stable organic whole, thus achieving a balance among competitors” [8].

Nature’s Closeness

As is known to all, the origin of mankind is water. At the beginning, The Clefts regarded themselves as sea people because they thought it was the sea that made them. Besides, they believed that they were hatched from the moon’s eggs. The female had trust in the thought that they were the children of sea, which may be the reason why they were unwilling to leave the seashore. They loved their beach and refused to leave. When The Cleft had been destroyed by male, Maronna shouted to Horsa, “It’s our place, you’ve destroyed our place” [6] 254. The menstrual cycle was consistent with the moon’s change. The Clefts believed if they cut down the red flowers on the hill when the moon is at its biggest and brightest, they are not going to give birth. In the Clefts’ mind, they were ecological object and the moon was the ecological subject. They thought they benefited from the nature, so they used to treat the girls as the sacrifice to the deep grave, which was their method to express appreciation and worship to nature. The close relation between the nature and the female were stressed on here.

Nature’s Menace

However, nature is not always the character with mercy. Anyone who goes against nature will be punished by nature. In the histories, the first mention of the catastrophe was the word “Noise”. “The ‘Noise’ was in fact a wind, coming from what must have been the east, one so strong, so irresistible, that they all believed at first in all kinds of supernatural intervention” [6] 138. After The Noise, the depletion of both the communities was severe. The suddenness and surprise of the Noise force them to find out the way to resist the disaster. What’s more, the great river ran so swiftly and strongly that children may be at risk. In fact, some children had ever drowned in the river. Knowing water as an enemy to the children, there were guards on the river banks, preventing the small children from going in. People thought it necessary to take action to get rid of the danger of nature. People’s physical force to endure natural disaster, avoid and decrease loss is the base of the further development of production capability [9].

By the description about the relationship between human and nature, Lessing expresses the idea that in the process of exploring nature, people should respect nature and keep a balanced relationship with nature, avoiding fierce behaviors to destroy the balance of nature. Considering current ecological crisis, it is urgent for contemporary college students to cultivate an ecological concept of respecting and loving nature. High education should shoulder the responsibility of cultivating students to respect and treat nature kindly through various approaches. Reading the classic works and appreciating the ethical thought from the text will be the best way. According to The Cleft, human beings should maintain a rational and humble attitude towards nature, rather than seeking to control nature, so as to truly realize intimate coexistence and harmonious coexistence with nature.

Human and Animals - Advocating the Harmony between Human Beings and Animals

Ecological ethics hold the view that human being is not the only species in the world, requiring that all the living things should live together harmoniously. In the novel, besides stressing the harmony balance between human and nature, Lessing also focuses that human being must live harmoniously together with animals.

Human Beings, Eagles and Does

In the novel, the story of the Squirts rescued and saved by the eagles tells us that people should stay with other animals harmoniously. At the beginning, the Clefts threw the Squirts babies out for
eagles. They believe that eagles will kill the babies. To their surprise, eagles not only didn’t kill them but also carried them down to the valley where there are huts. In the Squirts’ mind, eagles are the father of them and it was delivered generation to generation and finally formed a custom of respecting eagles. In fact, a majority of the Squirts knew that it was the Clefts who gave birth to them. But in their mind, the Clefts were the enemy who did harm to them but eagles protected them and brought the new babies for them. Thus, the Squirts proudly called themselves “the son of eagles”. The harmonious relationship between the Squirts and does also tells us that human should live friendly together with other living things. Lessing relates the situation at that time, “the second wave of Monsters, or Squirts, were not mother-deprived, but were licked and nuzzled and fed by the kindly does, who sometimes played with the fawns as if they were fawn themselves” [6] 38.

**Human Beings and Other Animals**

There also are many dangerous animals staying around and the menace of them cannot be neglected. At that time, the importance of safety inserted everybody’s mind. It was known that many dangerous animals lived alongside and hid in somewhere, which aroused the concern. Due to the conditions, people started to take notice of the surroundings and considered the other animals as the neighbor. Residents thought it necessary to let the well-armed guards to keep off the marauding pigs and the creeping felines. Lessing describes the dangerous animals in detail and the reaction of human, stressing that people are supposed to learn how to live with the animals.

“Ecological world view requires people acknowledge the character and right of the member of ecological family.” [9] Current college student should have an ecological world view. Only when they treat the animals as their ecological families can they live with other animals harmoniously. Understanding and acceptance are the necessary steps to realize the ecological harmony.

**Human and Individual Life - Advocating Reverence for Life**

According to Schweitzer, “he is ethical only when people have the awareness that all lives, including human life and life of all creatures, are sacred” [5]. Thus, the Clefts’ attitude and behavior toward the Squirts deviated from normal and reasonable ecological ethics. Lessing showed strong criticism and condemnation on their behavior.

At the beginning, the prejudice had been formed between the Clefts and the Squirts, impairing the moral principles of reverence for life. It was universally believed that the sexual organ of women was more beautiful and superior than that of men, which was the origin of the name “Monster”. The first Monster was seen as an unfortunate birth fault. The birth and existence of the Monster was regarded as a mistake, or even a sin. Because of these, the Squirts suffered from the mistreatment from the Clefts. These behaviors eventually brought war to human, just like a war chant of the Very First Men: “Kill the Clefts, Kill them, kill them, They are our enemies, Kill them all” [6] 28.

Besides, the Old Shes, as the ruling class, became a destructor of ecological harmony because of the lack of ecological awareness. The Old Shes controlled the destiny of little Monster by the young Clefts. The Old Shes decided whether the Monster should live or die. In their eyes, it was the Monsters that changed the old ways, and caused such division and malice between the different parts of the Clefts. Therefore, the Old Shes planned a murder. They wanted to kill Marin, Astre and the girls who were their friends. At this point, Lessing points out a more horrible and evil thought that the Old Shes attempted to kill anyone who was against her, including the Squirts and some of the Clefts. In the end, when everybody knew the Old Shes’ pitfall, the murderer was killed by a Squirt. “There Maire told them the Old Shes could not expect to live for very long if there were any more killing, or even talked about killing” [6]134. Marie’s word expressed the injustice of murder and a kind of correct ecological awareness—the murder should not take place again in the future, human beings are supposed to get along well with each other. Lessing expressed her moral condemn about the Old Shes, “a threat continued worse than the dangers of the forest, the river, the fires—it was the animosity of the Old Females and a section of the Clefts who supported them” [6]107.
Some scholars pointed out that the high development of social material civilization has brought good opportunities for the development of college students, but the excessive pursuit of material life in modern society has also brought negative impact on college students, which makes them lack the sense of belonging, blindly worship sensory stimulation, pay attention to the enjoyment of life, and cannot obtain spiritual sustenance[7], which has led to a phenomenon of indifference to life, which must arouse our attention. Therefore, the education of ecological civilization in colleges and universities can absorb the nutrients from Lessing's thought and educate students to respect life.

**Men and Women: Advocating Bisexual Cooperation**

Since ancient time, there were big difference between men and women, especially the thinking model and the attitude toward nature. Lessing takes Horsa and Maronna as an example to explain the sex difference and complementation of their characters. It is not what is stressed by a minority of radical feminists that men and women must be treated equally in every aspect, or even hostile. Horsa acts as representative of men while Maronna represents women. When men and women got together, they cannot forgive the shortage of each of them and produce lots of conflicts. In women’s opinion, men cannot take care of children well, which is the reason why men are seemed to be careless and irresponsible. In the view of men, women love to punish and complain, which causes the displeasure of men. Men cannot tolerate the intention and control of women, which is the reason why they desire to leave. Lessing describes a lot of discord between men and women. She shows the truth that the difference of two genders is the hindrance to make them reach a harmonious situation.

In addition, Lessing writes down the event that almost makes mankind extinct: expedition. Expedition is biggest contradiction between men and women. Men are crazy about adventure, and hope to find out a new world for widen their living situation. Women are in love of their home shore and hope to stay with the field they live in. However, expedition makes men far away from women, the problem of producing offspring nearly destroy the human species. During the expedition, a great number of boys lost their life, which let men start to memorize the life with women and even the suggestion and punishment of them. At that time, men started to change themselves and paid more attention to children. Meanwhile, women began self-criticism and they were in desire of men’s return. In the end, men went back to the shore. Women forgave men and men understand women. This ending explains the ecological awareness. Correct ecological awareness requires that men or women shouldn’t live alone; otherwise, human will become extinct. Only by understanding and forgiveness can people reach the real harmony. Lessing successfully arouses readers to think about ecological problem by the story of Horsa and Maronna. By means of the fluctuating storyline, she tells the college students that ecological awareness is not a person’s philosophy, and the real ecological harmony needs cooperation, which is the responsibility of everyone in the society.

**Conclusion**

Through the interpretation of the novel, Lessing's ecological ethics are shown. In the novel, Lessing praised human dependence on nature and human respect for nature, the feedback of nature to mankind, and the animal nurturing for human, and set up the storyline of the Cleft and the squirts from conflict to harmony, suggesting that at the beginning of the human beings, a harmonious ecosystem means survival, and a split and hostile ecosystem means extinction. She tries to reveal her voice through the novel—that human in modern society should go back to their own position, promoting the harmony between human beings, between man and nature. Promoting the harmony and integrity of the ecosystem means promoting the good of the various components of the system.

Absorbing ecological ethics from classical literary works will facilitate to strengthen the education of ecological civilization of college students and guide college students to love nature and animals, so as to learn how to respect life and learn to how to build harmonious and cooperative relations with others. It is necessary to integrate classical literary works with ecological ethics and it
will be a long-term important subject for colleges and universities to integrate the concept of ecological protection into their daily life and form good habits of ecological civilization.

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