On Lessing’s Moral and Harmonious Concept in *The Cleft*

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**Abstract.** At the age of 88, Doris Lessing won Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. And in the same year, she published her fable-like novel *The Cleft,* in which Lessing told us that the first group of human beings emerged as females who had the ability of asexual reproduction. Moreover, she also described the evolution of the relationship between males and females and illustrated the gender similarities and differences. With the focus on Lessing’s neutral interpretation about male and female complementation and mutual dependence from the aspects of physiology and psychology, this paper explores what she would like to transfer to us. Through textual analysis and comparison of advantages and disadvantages of males and females respectively, the paper draws the conclusion that Lessing shows us her concept of harmonious coexistence between males and females, which gives us moral education to cultivate the awareness of a community of shared future for mankind.

**Introduction**

The story of *The Cleft* is narrated by a Roman historian. He tells us a secret history of humanity's beginnings that humanity was made up of solely females. They lived in the Clefts and reproduced asexually. These females called themselves “Clefts”. One day, a male child was born and he was thrown away as a "Monster" on a rock to die. The nearby-lived eagles carried the dying baby off and put him in a valley. Then more “monsters” were born and the eagles saved all of them. They grew up by suckling beneficent doe’s milk. Therefore, a male tribe emerged. It happened that a female was raped by the adult men and gave birth to a new mixed child. Then two tribes came into contact with each other and humanity really began.[1] This story in *The Cleft* is the subversion of human origin, which arouses heated comments and researches on this novel both at home and abroad. However, Lessing put her gender viewpoint in the novel, especially the idea of female and male harmonious coexistence. The novelist has interpreted the gender relationship from a new viewpoint and analyzed the gender's differences and similarities from the angle of physiology and psychology to educate readers to set up a moral value of harmonious coexistence between males and females. “Morality is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper. Morality may also be specifically synonymous with “goodness” or “rightness”. [2] This moral standard should be universal. Only harmonious coexistence accords with moral standards. Lessing’s novel has given us the instruction from new perspective.

**Gender Similarity and Difference in Physiology in *The Cleft***

To better comprehend Lessing's interpretation to gender similarities and differences, it is necessary to do physiological analysis on the novel. Therefore, two topics will be discussed or explored, including physiological similarity between men and women in terms of their common sexual dependence, and the different gender characteristics interpreted in the novel.

At the beginning of the creation described in the novel, the Clefts, community of women lived near to the sea and men in valley. The two groups have no knowledge about each other, so hostile attitude towards the opposite side is clearly presented. Primitive Clefts called the males as “Squirts” or “Monsters. The deformed ones, the freaks, the cripples.” [1: 8] The Squirts, in return, thought that the reproductive organ of those primitive females’ were disgusting [1: 29]. Something different
changed with a primitive woman wandering over the valley. “They thought often and with increasing urgency and curiosity about the Clefts”, [1: 42] which shows that some kind of unknown link exists between the two groups.

On the one hand, those primitive males themselves do not know exactly what makes them strongly yearn for the coming of the Clefts. And their original disgusting feeling towards the male’s body shape has been gradually replaced by their increasing curiosity and desire. As Lessing stated in the novel, “the boys seemed to be hungering for something, wanting something, needing- but didn’t know what it was their squirts wanting- forcing all the rest of themselves to want, to need.” [1: 62] Lessing further gives her statement that it is the reproductive organ that drove those primitive women across the mountains to visit men. All these information provided in the novel, to some extent, explained the common physiological nature for both males and females.

On the other hand, Lessing skipped from the narration of two groups’ physiological need. In contrary, she turned the plot into a conversation between a little boy and a little girl. They are naked and curiously observed each other’s private parts, comparing and arguing that their own one is more beautiful or more useful. [1] From the conversation of the two kids’, Lessing tended to convey us a message that the sexual curiosity is born with nature, no matter for males or females. And this common similarity in sexual curiosity and desire is the basis of mutual understanding and mutual attractions.

**Women’s Creative Beauty of Body Structure**

Body structure is one of the obvious differences between males and females in physiological aspect, which is not only confined to be discussed on the outer reproductive appearance but also, on the aspect of reproductive function. In *The Cleft*, Lessing made no effort in hiding her compliments to the beauty of women’s body structure. “We are nice to look at, like one of those shells we can pick off a rock after a storm... I am beautiful, just like The Cleft with its pretty red flowers.” [1: 11] This narration comes out from a primitive female and “The Cleft” here actually refers to a fissure in a rock which is deemed as the most sacred and beautiful thing in those primitive females’ eyes. The real beauty of women’s reproductive organ is embodied on its function. For example, the Squirts felt anxious when the number of their member was decreasing because they know only too well that only Clefts can give birth and they began to wait for the Clefts bearing more little babies. “They were the mothers of Clefts and Monsters, mothers of us all, our ancient mothers.” [1: 16] Whether the first human came into existence as a female or a male, an undeniable fact goes that women possess the exclusive capacity to bear children, which is exactly the embodiment of women’s beautiful body structure. It’s creative and irreplaceable.

In addition, Lessing expressed in the novel that women’s breasts are useful because they are always full of milk, unlike the males’. [1] Here comes women’s nursing mission that is absolutely impossible to be shared by men. In the novel, the Squirts had no way to feed little boys but resort to a doe. Nevertheless, the failure of doe’s showing up drove those primitive men ran to the mountain where the Clefts lived, showing their urgent need for “life-saving breasts”. [1: 8] Again, women’s irreplaceable beauty and usefulness are clearly shown.

**Men’s Muscular Physical Features**

It is obvious that women enjoy the superiority when it comes to reproduction. However, it is only one of the gender differences in physiology. Similarly, there should be some muscular feature that women can never attain. According to Lessing’s description in the novel, “They were wild and restless, those first males, our so distant ancestors, and their nature took them long distances into the forests, and they began to know at least one part of their island, which was large, though they had no idea of that.” [1: 94]

Firstly, men were wild and restless. Before the new males born, all Clefts (females) lived in a slow and lazy life way. They were soft and never had the energy to walk about, or, to be exactly, to run. “Babies did not complain and agitate and become nuisances and flail about. Who behaved like that, all movement and energy, if not a Squirt? ” [1: 79] To some extent, the new feature of babies’
movement and energy never occurred in pure women groups. It is the result of, in science terms, inheritance.

Then, men were stronger, which made them live in forest to hunt and fight against wild animals. On social division of labor, men tended to engage more in physical activity than women. It was partly decided by men’s physical feature. Moreover, men seemed to be more suitable to be guards and soldiers, because Lessing repeatedly mentioned the two sons of Roman senator’s, who had sacrificed in a battle as soldiers. And, “The Guard is made up of handsome young men like him.” [1: 64]

**Gender Similarity and Difference in Psychology in the Novel**

Traditional feminism suggested that women should abandon the inferior role as a mother or wife in a family, even to seek their economic independence by fighting against men and getting rid of the tradition norm as a good mother or wife. However, Lessing has clearly showed her point of view on feminism, which would be different from the stereotypical one. She established and interpreted the different characteristics of men and women, and something that they had in common. From the description in the novel, Lessing gave us her interpretation about the gender similarities and differences in psychology.

**Mutual Dependence of the Two Genders**

When two girls began to leave their caves and lived with men, the original emotion of fearing the other side was still on the way. Despite of that, they still made contact with each other. “It was not that the men did not come to visit the women in their airy caves, or that the women did not go to see the men.” [1: 163] Girls found the place where men lived was “a filthy mess” at the sight of bones, fruits and other things scattering the ground. They began to clean up the mess that men had made, as if the traditional female role as a housewife was vividly presented. Meanwhile, such scene as men went out for catching fish and looking for food was deliberately carried out. Lessing didn’t give too much interpretation of this kind of role assignment as if the way was natural without too much suspiciousness, so that men went out for making a living and women stayed at home for housekeeping.

As for other two characters in the novel, Horsa and Maronna, Lessing similarly set a conflict between them at the first contact. Horsa was typical brave man with adventurous spirit. He, together with a dozen of boys, left Maronna to get rid of Maronna’s nagging and seeking for a wider world. Confronting with difficulties that lacked the company of women, they gradually became restless and even missed women’s scolding and nagging [1]. So their trip ended with coming back and living with women again. Their reunion has showed that the two genders cannot live on one’s own because they need each other.

Instead of claiming that women should break the shackle of depending on men and even struggle to surpass them, Lessing described their living with each other harmoniously. “They were 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.” [1:76] The two groups, girls and boys, tasted pleasure that they both never had. Actually, original attitude of inadaptability gradually developed into the common realization of the need for the other side, indicating the harmonious way suitable for the gender development should eventually come into being by mutual dependence. Neither of them could live without the company of or the complement for the other side. This is Lessing’s different feminist idea. From previous analysis of the text, it is not hard to see that Lessing opposes to the extreme female independence by separating themselves from closeness between males and females. Instead, the two genders have one obviously common nature: they need to be dependent on each other.
Explorative Men and Conservative Women

“Man does, women is.” is quoted by Lessing in the first page of the novel. It seems a clear arrangement because in a sense this word exactly revealed Lessing’s view towards the gender differences in psychology.

In the novel, before the occurrence of men, women led a lazy and peaceful life without any bother of changing. Everything was slow and easy, and all their routine life centered on lying on the cave, waiting for the coming of full moon and giving birth to the new Clefts. They carefully limited their new born babies but they didn’t know why it always was, and they never thought to change things. [1] They stick to the convention so much so that they are incurious about their capacity to give birth. Again, “That was how things had always been.”[1:31] When boys suggested women should find a bit of shore for more space, they replied reluctantly that they would never thought of moving out from their eternal living place. Distinct enough, women acted more conservative towards life. They would rather seek a sense of security or mental attribution, than give way to unknown change that they cannot be hundred percent assured. Men, in contrary, showed their intention or action to exploration as “…..They found great airy forests, deep and swift rivers and their tributaries, the little streams, pleasant hills, peaceful shores—this was what those earlier explorers found. They learned the ways of the wild animals and how to avoid them, and then, soon, how to kill them for food…”[1:31]

From the quote above, men seemed to be born with explorative nature. Firstly, in the face of unfamiliar surroundings they were apt to behave more active to seek out questions and settled them. In other words, they tended to take actions to figure out what their surroundings were in order to use or change them. For example, they invented knives for cutting fish, they used wood to make vessel for holding water. Furthermore, they built shelter to protect themselves from invasion of wild animals. Secondly, Horsa was strongly anxious to seek for a lager place where it would be more suitable for accommodating more women and men. Unlike women’s refusal to change, he was the one that would love to pursuit a better life. We may say, he was the typical man character who dared to take adventure and explore the unknown future.

It is not that the conservative women should be worth more compliments, or the explorative men should receive more dominant place. It is just the matter of gender difference in one aspect of psychology, and the harmonious way lies in looking upon those differences objectively.

Shortsighted Men and Predictive Women

In The Cleft, men seemed to fail to make a thoughtful plan when they made some decisions. By contrast, women behaved more predictive because they tended to think further such as what might cause if they took some actions. This can be proved by the quarrel between Horsa and Marronna.

Horsa and Maronna shared different ideas when Horsa insisted to explore new place for all the women and men to live by way of the long distance trip. However, in Maronna’s eyes, this was not applicable, even a foolish idea. She tried to make herself understand by giving several reasons why she strongly rejected the trip. Firstly, children were too young to follow adult men taking a unknown and risky adventure. Secondly, Maronna made a prediction that women “if the girls went along they would be pregnant, and then they would be a burden to the travelers.”(Lessing 181) Finally, the departure of men made it impossible for those women in valley to generate new babies, for women had lost the original capacity of asexual reproduction. They now held it clear that they should deeply be depending on men.

The result is that Horsa and his followers met a lot of difficulties during their journey. “The first day showed that Horsa had had no idea of what he was taking on.”[1:197] Little kids died accidentally one after another; pregnant women complained that they were physical exhausted; poor management of the journey cannot make children and women see any hope and they gradually lost their patience. All of these exactly manifested Maronna’s prediction and Horsa’s shortsighted view with impulse.
Careless Men and Careful Women

In this novel, Lessing stated clearly that it is more suitable and more efficient for females to record history because they are careful and cautious to repeat what has real happened. Women, in Lessing’s eyes, are born with a nature of carefulness and thus can take the responsibility to pass down comparative intact history to a younger generation.

In female’s recorded history, the Clefts were careful and the mails were careless. Therefore, the Clefts were careful to everything. For example, the Clefts kept complaints about the dangerous results that the great river may bring about. They insisted that little kids be too vulnerable to be exposed near the great river and strongly commanded that guards should be asked to keep an eye on those little babies. Men simply neglected women’s complaints. Not until a little boy died accidentally did men come to realize their carelessness. They didn’t notice at all that another boy cut his knee and bleed badly on his toe. As is stated in the novel, “It was not that they didn’t know how to look after small children, they were rather too casual, the females complained; the boys were forgetful.”[1: 156]

Careless men and careful women, to some extent, are decided by their different characteristics, which evolves into nowadays’ role assignment. That is to say, the female role as looking after children in a family is actually a need for human development. The female nature of carefulness requires them to pay more attention on family care. Although traditional feminists insisted that women should fight for free from merely focusing themselves on family, Lessing seems to be against such idea. The different role distribution is targeted as the best development for human being even for a more harmonious society.

Men’s carelessness and women’s carefulness are also reflected in the role to nature. The Clefts carefully protected nature and kept their close relationship with environment. But males showed their careless to the environment. They made the Clefts explode at last and the boys destroyed the forest during their trip. Lessing here shows clearly her awareness of ecofeminism that women are closer to the nature and more possible to protect nature. Eco-feminist thinkers set up theories about the relationship between humans and the natural world according to the concept of gender. They use “the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women as a way to highlight the idea that both must be understood in order to properly recognize how they are connected.”[3] As Tian and Zhang interpreted that most eco-feminists admitted women’s intimacy to nature because both women and nature shared the common feature of breeding new life. Lessing gave a further verification on the close link between women and nature and tried to reveal that women played a more moderate role in nature [4].

Conclusion

In the novel The Cleft, Lessing has used the fable story of human origins to interpret her idea of harmonious coexistence between men and women according to the aspects of physiology and psychology. She believes that women’s reproductive ability can never be replaced. Through the interpretation of female and male characteristics and nature, Lessing has praised female creative beauty, their carefulness, predicative and the close relationship to the nature. She has also praised male muscular, stronger, explorative nature. Lessing has analyzed that female is conservative with too much dependence. However, males are careless, shortsighted and destructive to nature. At the same time, the novelist explores that both men and women should have different responsibility according to their characteristics from physiology and psychology. It seems that Asa Briggs’ idea about social life is correct, “Men plow, while women cook. Sword is for men, while needle and thread are for women. Men have a mind, while women have a nature. Man give order and woman obey.” [5] Therefore, role assignments are normal because of gender difference. The novel tries to tell us that both male and female are similar in some fields. They can attract each other and they have mutual need. They can compensate for each other’s deficiency. Hence, we can say Lessing has conveyed her harmonious awareness which is different from traditional feminist idea. This is her moral instruction reflected in the novel. As Professor Nie says, “literature without moral instruction
is nothing.”[6] This moral instruction will benefit us to treat different gender correctly. If we have correct universal values, the harmonious society and community with a shared future for mankind will be set up in the world.

Although the eco-feminist idea reflected in the novel has been mentioned in this article, in-depth study will be done further in future.

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