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Abjection and Sexually Specific Violence in Doris Lessing's *The Cleft*

ABSTRACT

The article applies selected concepts from the writings of Julia Kristeva to the analysis of a novel by Doris Lessing entitled *The Cleft*. Published in 2007, *The Cleft* depicts the origin of sexual difference in the human species. Its emergence is fraught with anxiety and sexually specific violence, and invites comparison with the primal separation from the mother and the emancipation of the subject in process at the cost of relegating the maternal to the abject in the writings of Julia Kristeva. Lessing creates an ahistorical community of females (Clefts) from which the male community (Squirts) eventually evolves. The growing awareness of sexual difference dovetails with the emotional and intellectual development, as the nascent human subject gradually enters linear time viewed from perspective by the narrator of the novel, a Roman senator who hoards ancient manuscripts with the story of Clefts and Squirts. The article juxtaposes the ideas of Lessing and Kristeva, who have both cut themselves off from feminism, and have both been inspired by psychoanalysis. Primarily, Lessing's fictional imaginary can be adequately interpreted in light of Kristeva's concept of abjection as an element that disturbs the system. My interpretation of abjection is indebted to Pamela Sue Anderson's reading of Kristeva, notably her contention that violence as a response to sexual difference lies at the heart of collective identity. Finally, the imaginary used by Lessing and Kristeva is shown to have stemmed from the colonial imaginary like the concepts of Freud and Jung.

ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing has always objected to *The Golden Notebook* being called “the property of the women’s movement” (*The Golden Notebook*, Introduction ix), and has repeatedly repudiated any connection with feminism. Interestingly, the reception of “the Bible of the Women’s Movement” was initially very hostile, as emphasized by Lessing in the second volume of her autobiography (*Walking in the Shade* 338, 342). However, the sudden shift from denigration to ecstasy was too much for the writer: “[a] book that had been planned so coolly was read, I thought, hysterically” (*Walking in the Shade* 342). The last word stresses how much Lessing distances herself from feminism. In this she resembles Julia Kristeva, whose texts are so often analyzed by feminist scholars, and yet her famous *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* states that feminism “is jealous of conserving its power—the last of power-seeking ideologies” (208). While femininity is central to her discourse, “Kristeva has consistently refuted dominating feminist traditions” (Sjoholm 38).

Interestingly, Lessing’s novel *The Cleft* invites many comparisons with the ideas of Julia Kristeva. Inspired by a scientific article stating that women were first to appear on the face of earth, while men came as an “afterthought” (*The Cleft* ix), the writer created a community of “Clefts,” from whom “Squirts” eventually evolved. The two sexes set up separate camps: that of placid, passive and conventional females and that of restless, inventive, risk-taking males. A contribution to essentialist thinking, Lessing’s novel can be read as an illustration of some concepts of Julia Kristeva, primarily the notion of abjection, sexually specific violence, the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic as well as the birth of the subject in process.

Recounted by a Roman senator who collects ancient manuscripts, the story gains an additional framing, as it is commented on by a worldly man who cannot but sympathize with the Squirts and adopt their point of view. The story within a story is another binary arrangement, where the chaotic, rowdy and violent world of Clefts and Squirts is offset by the triumphant Roman civilization, its legions warding off barbarian hordes, its urbane citizens screaming to their hearts’ delight around the arenas where the wild beasts tear human bodies apart. The irony of this juxtaposition is that when the narrator ponders the primitive human community he is now and again confronted with the similarities between the forgotten dawn of humanity and its lustrous sequel. His presence and remarks offer the reader the same perspective, for Lessing’s fantasy about the beginnings of the human kind seems disturbingly close to us, when the first thing we uncover

is her fidelity to stereotypical constructions of femininity and masculinity, entrenched with the advent of psychoanalysis and its inspired followers such as Julia Kristeva.

Embedded in the senator's narrative we find a story of the Clefts, who regularly ascend the rock called the Cleft in order to witness the flow of red petalled flowers along the crevices, which apparently brings on the females' menstrual flow, and makes them ready for conception and parthenogenesis. The first thing that the Clefts are associated with is their gift of creating new life, their perennial maternity, which follows from unthinking obedience to instinct. They are pre-cultural in their motherhood, like Kristeva's construction of the maternal, which relies on the elements connected with nature, and, to follow Judith Butler, it precludes any analysis of cultural variability (103). In Lessing's novel the baby cannot become separate from the mother because there is no "third party" to mediate subject formation (Anderson, "Sacrificed Lives" 213), and save her from the miasmatic, archaic maternal. Motherhood in *The Cleft* implies togetherness and communal being. Younger Clefts do not consider themselves separate individuals. They are all a collective body regularly giving birth to a new generation of passive females.

The Clefts live in the caves which are metaphorically wombs, where their children are kept. As Carl Gustav Jung had it: "The cave is the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed" (135). In Lessing's novel rebirth is literal and connected with collective life. Apart from inhabiting the caves the females often reside half in water, half on the land, their seal-like bodies partly submerged in the primeval ocean, the amorphic *mer* and *mère* of Kristevan discourse (Ramsay 52). Lessing's description recycles another Jungian association between water and the unconscious (Sobrinho 227), for the Clefts are caught in the stage where intellectual reflection has not yet arrived. They are still submerged in the amniotic fluid of the earth. Lessing's perspective could be called "naturalistic," a word Judith Butler uses in her analysis of Kristeva's concept of maternity (103). The language of Kristeva and Lessing about the maternal stresses the colonial association in psychoanalysis between a woman and a primitive indigene who is always inferior to a civilized man in her or his animalistic drives. The females in *The Cleft* are the first and hence the more primitive link in evolution that finally gave rise to a race of men. They have only just come out of water, which is their element. They enjoy swimming from infancy, but they find it hard to run or even wander on the land that stretches from the beach into the interior. Lessing does not care much about the scientific support for her fantasy. However, the Clefts have something in common with those kinds of fish that reproduce by parthenogenesis. It is to fish that they are

compared, when the sophisticated male narrator sums up their biological and mental condition:

They did not think to wonder or ask questions. . . . Their minds were not set for questions, even a mild interest. They believed—but it was not a belief they would defend or contest—that a Fish brought them from the Moon. The Moon laid eggs into the sea, it lost a part of itself. . . . When was that? Long, slow, puzzled stares. . . . They lived in eternal present. (31)

The passage invites comparison with Mircea Eliade's concept of "eternal return" applied to the life of indigenous communities caught in cyclical repetition, as opposed to the linear time of rational western men. The Clefts are not aware of time. They seem to have originated from cosmic eggs, which bears affinity to Mediterranean myths, such as the myth of Aphrodite who was born out of foam that contained the sperm of a male god whose testicles had been cut off and dropped into water. In light of biological theories about parthenogenesis or gynogenesis, some fish can reproduce as a result of their coming into contact with the sperm of a different species that the water carries. So the mythical "Fish" from the quotation above can be translated into a phenomenon that is familiar from scientific observations (Kowalska, Rembiszewski, and Rolik 204–05).

A startling moment comes when one of the Clefts gives birth to "a Monster," i.e. a baby with ugly lumps instead of a cleft and a pipe-like organ. "Old Shes" decide to bring the baby to normal condition and cut off the bodily elements whose meaning they do not understand. Recycled here is the Freudian image of a castrating mother, and the scene invites comparison with Kristevan theory of abjection because the baby who is anatomically different "disturbs system" and "order" (4). Violence as a response to sexual difference "lies at the origins of collective identity" (Anderson, "Sacrificed Lives" 217). The peace in the Clefts' community is shaken when more freaks are born. Their genitals are maimed, and they are left on the rock to die. Here a greater fantasy intervenes, for the little boys are carried into the forest by eagles and miraculously fed by a doe, all of this perfectly understandable to the Roman narrator structuring the book with reference to his own myths.

The appearance of little males who are carried out of the Clefts' community even before they are maimed brings about a major change. The turning point is thus summed up by Lessing's Roman senator:

changelessness of an existence like those fish that wash back and forth on the tides, responding to the moon's change. And then the real change, the defining change, the birth of the deformed ones, the Squirts, the

Monsters. The beginning of squirming, emotional discomfort, unrest, discontent: the start of awareness of themselves, their lives. The start only, like an affront the stranded fish must feel at the probing stick. (34)

Lessing reverses the Aristotelian comparison of a woman to a “defective man” (Anderson, *Feminist Philosophy* 7); here the men are seen as defective women. At the same time Lessing plays into the patriarchal imaginary dutifully. It was natural for women to laze around and be carried by the tide before men came along. “The defining change” is the change that the male babies bring about; the Clefts define themselves in opposition to the other, that is “the Monster,” but this mechanism will come back with a vengeance when the Monsters eventually subdue the females and impose abjection on them. Lessing also turns around the traditional interpretations of the Yahwist story of creation. It is not Eve who comes as an “afterthought,” or as derivative material; it is Adam who is born by Eve. In other words, the unnatural birth of the second sex is rectified here. Man comes along as a freak of nature, but also as its bonus paving way for consciousness, linear time and culture.

As the two communities grow side by side, one on the seashore, the other in the forest, the boys’ curiosity prompts them to spy on the creatures from the shore. They come upon a solitary Cleft, whose behaviour is unusual because the Clefts are always together. Her lonely ramble along the shore signifies that she has separated herself from the group. The process of her acquiring nascent subjectivity is slow, painful, and eventually lethal. She is chased into the valley by lithe and strong boys, much to her anger and terror. There she comes upon a group of males who immediately register her anatomical difference and, prompted by the behaviour of their “squirts,” they gang-rape her to death, joined by all the other males from the community. The anonymous Cleft may have been a mother of some of the Squirts. Her death comes with the discovery of sexuality, and it is a catalyst of the Squirts’ mindless unity in the act of killing. To follow Anderson (“Sacrificial Lives” 219), her maternal body becomes a scapegoat, which is closely connected with sexual difference. The moment she realizes she is other than the Squirts, she is savaged. If Kristeva associates the birth of the nascent subject with violence and tearing away from the mother’s body, the scene in Lessing’s novel might be a rather sinister illustration of the process. The men realize what they have done, and their abject crime generates both the feeling of shame, which they eventually repress, and the awareness of sexuality. They impose abjection on the raped Cleft, who smells of their excretions, is defiled, dead and removed from their lives not only as a dead body, but also as a sexual body. The forgotten murder is an image of matricide, and of unwitting incest. However, there is

no kinship structure yet, so Oedipus' complex does not apply here. There are no fathers in the group; there are only descendants of the collective maternal that was desecrated. The first physical contact of the Squirts with the body of the (m)other years after birth is lethal violence which repeats what happened to the first male baby.

Flanked by hypersize eagles, their protectors, the Squirts soar high in comparison with the Clefts who lie on the ground or are literally pinned down to it like an errant one who ventured out of her role. The scene invites disturbing associations with Kristevan semiotic mastered by the symbolic that is phallic and violent but also transcendent. In this the rape scene rings with Freudian and Jungian echoes. Men inflict sadistic and fatal sex on a female who is reduced to silence and passivity. This is how they return "home," that is to the body of the mother who in Jungian psychoanalysis represents the home that the man will depart from and return to.

The murder is partly forgotten, and yet it lives on in a story that apparently had its roots in an old man's memories of mass rape. The contacts between the camps are resumed some generations later. Two adventurous girls cross the valley of their own will, and this time the encounter with the males is different. Each of them "plays" with a Squirt, until they satisfy the whole group of men, leave them hungering for more "ease," and come back home irrevocably altered. Interestingly, their sexual initiation through collective sex gives rise to the emergence of their identity. One of the girls declares: "My name is Maire," and the other responds: "My name is Astre" (68). These are the first acts of assuming names among the Clefts; they used to be nameless, and they did not cultivate relations between mother and daughter. Motherhood was a biological act in accordance with Freud's concept of anatomical destiny. The children, passive like all Clefts, grew up left to their own devices and merged into the rest. But now Maire and Astre have separated from the collective maternal on the shore, which is perceived as evil, cruel and animalistic. The girls become thinking subjects, and begin to fight for their autonomy as a result of being exposed to the community of Squirts who had to be torn out of the deadly maternal clutch into freedom and separateness. Interestingly, the girls' identity is born as a result of their contact with the so-called "third party," which lets them detach themselves from what Kristeva calls "the black lava," i.e. the mother.

For a woman the call of the mother is not only a call from beyond time or beyond the socio-political battle . . . this call . . . generates . . . madness. After the superego, the ego founders and sinks. It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of this love which had bound the little girl to her mother, and which then, like black

lava had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order . . . death quietly moves in. (qtd. in Adams 157)

Maire and Astre refuse to heed the “call from beyond time.” They never forget who they have become as a result of their physical contact with the Squirts. Although they have not experienced love from the collective maternal, they are definitely urged to merge back into the shapeless, atemporal womanhood, which they now resist. Maire gives birth to a girl who is restless and different from the previous babies of the Clefts. Both girls return to the male camp where they are greeted, fed and copulated with. The paradigm resembles a Jungian structure, to which Kristeva seems to be indebted. According to Jung’s passage about “nothing but daughter,” the daughter has to be stolen from the mother (97). This no doubt makes her attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order less dramatic.

Maire’s first partner recognizes the connection between himself and her baby, which is the earliest manifestation of the family life. He takes Maire and the baby to his hut. Interestingly, the Squirts live in the huts of their own making unlike the Clefts who inhabit natural forms of the caves. What distinguishes Squirts from Clefts is that they are inventive even if their huts smell foul. Lessing demurely unfolds the scenario of role division, for the Cleft visitors to the Monsters’ camp do not now restrict themselves to collective sex, but they make brooms with which to clean the men’s foul abodes. While this is a rather pathetic intervention of a housewife image, it also undermines Lessing’s concept of the Clefts’ utter lack of inventiveness. Still, as Lessing’s view of human evolution would have it, the Clefts serve the purpose connected with the first male construction; they can improve its appearance but not the technical condition. The structure remains the male prerogative, even if it is Maire who teaches the men the complicated language of the Clefts, an inconsistency of Lessing’s that feeds into Kristevan imagery. The boys supposedly invent names for utensils, but they talk like children. It is the Clefts who have developed a more mature language, but its character is not really explained. Thus Maire, one of the narrators of a story within a story, is not only a sexual partner for men but also a maternal teacher; they yearn for communication with her, which apparently makes them aware of what they did not realize earlier. The Squirts yearn for the contact with the maternal, since they have only been touched by eagles and doe, but they were not caressed or spoken to in their childhood. Thus Maire becomes a replacement for the Cleft whose first contact with the Squirts was lethal. It was through their violation of her maternal body that the former generations of Squirts cut themselves off from all the gifts, which Maire

offers to the new Squirts through her sexual, reproductive and linguistic powers.

The Old Shes who detect treason and division in their unisex community decide to trap Maire's and Astre's male followers onto the rock called the Cleft. Inside the Cleft there is ossuary connected with former sacrifices that the Clefts used to offer to the power of nature. The rock in the shape of female genitalia exudes poisonous fumes which might intoxicate the boys and make them fall in, if they are enticed on to it. The Old Shes send a group of young inexperienced Clefts to beckon boys to the Cleft, but the plan misfires because Maire, the teacher, manages to attract the boys' attention and save them from the fall into the Cleft. As a result of the ensuing conflict, its instigator, that is, the Old She, is killed by the males, which works as a narrative repetition of the gang rape on the anonymous Cleft generations earlier. The female is hit with a stone and her head is cleft. The intended cruelty of the Old She mirrors the literal cruelty of her predecessors who maimed and killed little boys by violently inflicting a cleft on them in an act of castration. The fall of the boys into the Cleft was supposed to have been an act of collective castration for the boys lost in the stony and poisonous vulva of the rock, a visual equivalent of Jungian devouring mother. But the boys regain control; the anarchic, seditious semiotic is overpowered, and gradually the Clefts lose not only their cruel instincts but also their complicated speech and independence.

The old Cleft, just like the first victim of gang rape, becomes a repudiated and abject body. This time she is not destroyed by means of sexually specific violence but as a potential head of a vengeful team, an incident mimicking sexual violence nonetheless. The Old She, like Kristevan black lava, did not allow the young Clefts to escape her influence. With the huge rock as her natural ally, she put up resistance against the inventive but careless Squirts, adept at building shelters, hunting and wielding weapons. In Lessing's war of the sexes female dissenters have to ally themselves with Squirts, offer them sexual "ease," children and regular sweeps of a broom in their dirty abodes. In return, they will emancipate themselves from the mother who has shown cruelty and tendency to dominate and enslave her daughters.

The Cleft that gives the title to the book is a very powerful symbol of female abjection. Filled with the poisonous odours, it is the site of death with dead bodies piled up and decomposing to finally ossify into the depth of the vulva-shaped pit. At the same time the Cleft is the primal landscape offsetting the female maturing towards maternity. Visited regularly by the red flurry of petals of endemic flowers, it is a symbol of menstruating, and hence potentially life-giving body. The Cleft, solid as it is, becomes the site of fluidity connected with the sacred rite of collective menstruation

and the unclean process of decomposition of the bodies in the pit. Hence the Cleft loses its well defined edge; it dissolves the boundary between the solid and the fluid; it metamorphoses into the abject, to finally become one with the Old She who arrived to witness the spectacle of the boys' annihilation in the pit of death. The blood shed from her cleft head is another marker of abjection in the course of the story. The rock loses its sacred dimension connected with female fertility, while the Clefts lose the power to give birth by parthenogenesis. The death of the Old She who belonged to the parthenogenetic camp puts an end to the female control over fertility. The Clefts are now offered the sexual use of squirts, and the better offspring, but their fertility is now at the mercy of men. In generations to come men become even more restless and look for new places by themselves, leaving women with the sense of outrage and question: "who is going to fill our wombs?" (190).

The narrative framed by the commentary of the Roman narrator eventually takes us to the stage when Clefts and Squirts form one community, but there is continual conflict between the sexes. The female side is led by Maronna, whose priorities are connected with biological survival and stability. Her antagonist, Horsa, disdains these values opting for adventure, exploration and search for better places to live in. Maronna and Horsa are often shown in verbal clashes, but it is Horsa who makes decisions for the whole of male camp, and these decisions affect the female camp. Again Lessing recycles a familiar Jungian association between the woman and home, for indoor and outdoor activities are projected on women and men respectively. Lessing, like Jung, Freud and Kristeva, is ahistorical and unlocated in her portrayal of the binary world of sexes. Or else, her male narrator makes it obvious that the hegemony of men in the Mediterranean world originates from their seizure of power over women in the past. The debt to the mother is obliterated in his culture. Men owed their survival to the assistance of animals. The story of eagles looking after the Squirts sounds very convincing to the citizen associated with Rome, whose foundation legend speaks of the male twins suckled by a she-wolf. The denial of maternity puzzles the reader of manuscripts:

The women standing here beside Maronna, were all mothers, and every male there had been dandled, fussed over, fed, cleaned, slapped, kissed, taught by a female . . . and this is such a heavy and persuasive history that I am amazed we don't remember it more often. (190)

Superimposed on the more ancient manuscripts are remarks of the man who stressed how Romans measured and controlled everything, and how they had brought their women under submission, even if goddesses were

still celebrated in the Empire. The female potential is freely dissipated by Horsa and his followers as they march on in anticipation of new discoveries, get their female companions pregnant and stop caring about their condition, neglecting the hazards to the lives of small boys who joined their team out of rebellion against the women. Thus the story from the beginnings of the narrative about Clefts and Squirts is repeated. The Clefts need togetherness and companionship but the boys will emancipate themselves from the mothers' embrace and will join the male ranks even if there are perils to overcome. A special initiation ritual into adulthood is invented and duly practised by the boys. The challenge is to ascend the rock called Cleft and endure the experience of being exposed to its fumes. This apparently signifies the change of status. Any boy who has endured this rite of passage has also mastered the toxic maternal in a sublimated repetition of the test that the Old She unwittingly exposed the Squirts to before she was killed. Separation from the maternal, denial of maternal qualities and abhorrence of the maternal body produces even greater rift between the sexes:

The girls who had lost their infants became listless, and wept or lay about, their arms over their faces, silent, suffering . . . and milk dropped from their breasts. Oh, horrible, unseemly, and the boys showed their dislike, and yet these were girls who had shared their adventures and were comrades, like the boys—but then they spoiled everything by getting pregnant and then all the rest of the unpleasant sights and sounds. As for the little boys, they were revolted. (205)

The women are already removed out of sight when they stop being “comrades,” and show their reproductive potential. Their bodies are subject to change, which upsets the perspective of males whose bodies do not undergo similar changes. Women are relegated to the realm of the abject, their breasts secreting milk. In response, they turn to melancholia, which is the only manifestation of their displeasure with male insistence on their being and behaving like the males. Even if Horsa returns from his expedition crippled, and faces Maronna's anger about the loss of many children by his team on its way to success, still the story repeats itself in the history of the narrator who mourns the loss of his two youthful sons in the legions. He tries to atone for this by begetting two other children whom he looks after during the absence of his new and faithless wife. What his wife shares with the Clefts is that her act of giving birth is purely biological; there is no emotional connection between her and the children now taken over by a caring father, a representative of the law and symbolic order whose role is after all to help the children sever the ties with the maternal: “The greater the capitulation to the female, the greater there will be the recoil” (258) are the final words on the history of Maronna and Horsa.

Essentialist constructions of femininity and masculinity are petrified in the narrative of Maronna and Horsa, where men build rafts in order to cross the sea, while women look after the children. Horsa's first marine structures are unsuccessful, but he keeps on trying and dreaming. Huts on the land will eventually be replaced by constructions that navigate towards progress and prosperity of the Roman Empire and its narrator. To quote a sentence from a Peirce scholar (Blasco José Sobrinho): "‘rationalism of world mastery’ could only have emerged within a culture—Hellenic-to-Western European—that repeatedly found itself grappling with problems of navigation" (227). Lessing's primitive females lose their innate ability to swim and move around in the waters better than on the land. Her more advanced males acquire the ability to "master" water due to navigation. The nascent subject moves on from Kristevan chora shared by the maternal and its descendants towards the triumphant Symbolic.

As an afterthought at the end of the novel comes a passage about the eruption of Vesuvius, compared to the explosion of the Cleft, which erases the last trace of matrifocal community. The immolation of the Cleft is total, even if it does not harm the people in its vicinity, unlike Vesuvius. The imaginary connected with the archaic maternal will never be recovered. The narrator states that it is impossible to identify its location. Only the story remains, or the myth. The fetish of female genealogy turns to dust, while Lessing's message remains correct and demure, punctuated by the perspective of the male narrator who offers the right framing for the narrative of the maternal semiotic brought under the control of the paternal symbolic, both being as unlocated as Lessing's binary world. While Kristeva's theory loses sight of cultural variability or ethnic difference, it still echoes the sweeping generalizations of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis which apply their instruments to the study of anarchic depths of human mind the way the colonial empires in their day applied themselves to the study of "primitive" people. Lessing's Roman narrator is a very good mediator of the colonial perspective. He imagines the archaic community in the way that suggests indigenes. The narrator is a very convincing spokesman for Doris Lessing herself, raised as she was in the peripheries of the British Empire, and influenced by entrenched colonial attitudes, which she later rejected. The binary world from *The Cleft*, whether primitive or civilized, testifies to insurmountable difference between the sexes, a construction familiar from psychoanalysis, which Julia Kristeva also dutifully followed despite her rejections of essentialist stereotyping and her pleas for singularity.


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