RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Eco Feminist Reading of Doris Lessing’s The Cleft

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ABSTRACT

The destruction and exploitation of nature and environment is a major threat for human existence. In this context, eco feminism becomes highly relevant. Eco feminism is a new way of approaching nature. This study attempts to study Doris Lessing’s The Cleft (2007) from an eco-feminist perspective. The article aims to depict the delineation in the history of gender discrimination and how labeling of gender became a means of exploiting women. Gender roles are based on norms and standards created by the society. This created a belief that males are superior and have ultimate authority and females are inferior and secondary beings. This gender discrimination is evident in The Cleft. In The Cleft, the ability of clefts to give birth shaped their social roles. The article also focuses on male domination over nature and women. It presents how man colonizes nature and women's body for their own benefits.

Keywords: Eco feminism, Gender, Ecology, Colonized nature, Feminism.

One of the major problems that man faces today is the destruction of nature and its consequences on human existence. The advancement in the field agriculture, medicine, science and technology has adversely affected the environment. Women, all over the world have started to take an active role in protecting the environment, as evidenced in various movements like Chipko movement in India, Green Belt movement in Kenya etc. This recent interaction between women and nature paved the way for the emergence of “Eco Feminism”. Eco feminists are mostly concerned about the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. They believe that domination of women over the years is directly connected to environmental exploitation of the earth. Nature plays a major role in this novel. Lives of the clefts are vividly tangled with nature, sea, moon, cave, tides etc. This study tries to analyze how power and domination directly affects both females and nature.

Eco feminism is a significant branch of eco critical studies. The term ‘eco feminism’ was derived from the Greek word ‘ekio’ meaning home. Eco feminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. Ynestra King defines eco feminism as a “critical social movement that represents the convergence of the most important contemporary movements, feminism and ecology” (102).

Francoise d Eaubonne coined the term ‘eco feminism’ in her book Le Feminisme ou la Mort (1974). Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker, Starhawk, Sallie Mc Fague, Luisah Teish, Paulo Gunn Allen, Greta Gáard, Karren Warren and Andy Smith are among the prominent voices in the philosophy of eco feminism. Eco feminism equates the repression...
and exploitation of women with the repression and exploitation of nature.

Women and nature have a bond between them. Women interact closely with nature than men do. They recognize and empathize with nature intimately. Women's concern for the natural environment is rooted in their concern for the health and wellbeing of their family and their society. Greta Gaard states that “women’s monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of child birth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things ground women’s consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature”(340).

Eco feminism is an attempt to call women to lead an ecological revolution to save the earth and to promote new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature. Eco feminism became popular in 1980 when the cultural feminists found how both women and nature can liberate together. According to Rosemary Ruether:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this modern industrial society. (204)

The attempt to liberate women will be successful only with an equal attempt to liberate nature. Many writers try to explore the relationship between women and nature in their works. The British writer Dorris Lessing is one among them. Lessing was a poet, novelist, playwright, biographer, and short story writer. She was born in May Tayler in Persia on October 22, 1919. She has written more than 17 novels and 8 collections of short stories and two plays. She was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 2007. Eco feminism offers a meaningful perspective for analyzing Lessing’s novel *The Cleft.*

*The Cleft* retells the history of human creation through an old contemplative Roman senator named, Transit. The novel presents a shore (cleft), which existed centuries ago. There were only women who procreated asexually without men. They lived in caves and were very friendly with nature. They called themselves the clefts after- The Cleft- a fissure in a rock which the females deemed sacred, and which had a resemblance to human vagina. The world of clefts was not at all polluted with the concepts like individuality, ego, jealous, beauty, old age, man and woman. Cleft is a mighty symbol that stands for female sexuality and power. However, with the birth of a strange new child- a boy- the harmony of their sexless community is suddenly thrown into jeopardy.

Women are often considered closer to nature than men. Women’s physiological connections with birth and childcare have partly led to this close association with nature. Women and nature have an age-old association between them. In our history, nature is always portrayed as feminine. The cleft presents the female community who lived in harmony and unity with nature.

The female community in *The Cleft* is very much attached to their shore. The cleft isn’t just the entrance to a cave. It is the most important thing in their lives. They lived in the eternal present. They called themselves sea people and are not afraid of the sea. They lived in the lap of nature. Lessing illustrates:

In the stormy seas you can stand on the cliff, look down, and think that water is everything, is everywhere, but then the storm stops and the sea sinks back into its place. We are not afraid of the sea. We are sea people. The sea made us. Our caves are warm, with sandy floors, and dry, and the fires outside each cave burn sea brush and dry seaweed and wood from the cliffs, and these fires have never gone out, not since we first had them. (8)
The origin of clefts is closely connected with nature. The story about their birth was hemmed in nature. The Clefts believed that their kind had crawled from the waves to breathe the air on the rocks. They also believe that they were hatched from the moon’s egg. And when moon laid eggs into the sea it was a fish that brought them from the moon. Lessing states:

The Clefts did not know when their kind had first crawled from the waves to breathe air on the rocks, and they were never inquisitive. They believed that a fish brought them from the moon. They were hatched from moon’s eggs. The moon laid eggs into the sea, it lost a part of itself, and that was why it was sometimes large and glowing and sometimes pale and thin. (31)

The clefts had the ability to reproduce without the help of monsters. They don’t have to depend on males for babies. Nature impregnates them. Babies were simply born and no one did anything to make them. They believed that the moon or a big fish made them. Like nature, every cleft was fertile. This shows the close connection between the Clefts and nature. However, with the close interaction between male and female communities, females lost their independent birth competence. They became male dependent creatures. Till then nature provided all the needs of the Clefts but now they have to beg to males for satisfying their needs. Male dependent clefts lost the close association they had with nature.

After the appearance of monsters difference crops up in the life styles of males and females. For example, the monsters lived in a valley, which was very different from the ‘cleft’, the dwelling place of the females. The Clefts lived in bare nature whereas the males lived in huts. When Maire saw a hut for the first time she says that they “had never seen a hut or any shelter because they had always had their caves. The hut seemed like some kind of strange animals and very nearly frightened them into running back home” (Lessing 15).

The females opposed the idea of moving to the valley, which was unfamiliar to them. And “most females lived in the caves because they did not like the valley, and most males lived in their valley. The women did not like the children to be in the valley” (Lessing 89). The females considered their shore as their home so they did not want to leave their shore. The females lacked the colonizing sprit the males had. Lessing states:

The men would make a new home for the women, every bit as good as what they had, and with much more space. But as Horsa was against a stubborn predilection for what the clefts were used to, what they knew. Their shore, said the women, was there for every one of them, clefts and males had originated. And they were not going to leave their shore. (181)

When the Clefts visited the monsters’ valley for the first time the scene down there was disappointing. Everything they saw there was hostile to them. When the first Cleft visited the valley, Transit explains:

She was here, after that awful journey up the mountain; she ‘had seen for herself’, but there was nothing to see. She did not like the look of that fast wave topped river; nor the fire, which was fed by dead trees from the forest and was enormous, sending up a column of smoke almost to the height where she stood. She could not make herself go down into the valley, now seemed hostile to her (Lessing 111).

The males had a colonizing spirit. They always tried to colonize nature. For them the land turns out to be an object to be destroyed and possessed. The males felt no qualms about abusing nature much same way they abused women. Transit states:

It was the trees that seduced them into thinking this place was altogether better, richer, more beautiful than their own. The trees as described by people who had never seen anything
like them sound like palms, and there were great white birds in them, with trailing feathers like the fronds of the palms. Everything they looked at seemed remarkable and new, and all they wanted was to land their flimsy craft, which was ready to fall apart after so long over the waves much taller than they had become used to, and then a new life would begin. (Lessing 214)

The males colonized the virgin land by violent acts such as destruction or exploitation of nature and animals. Lessing explains how males set watchers at night to see any animals coming out of trees, “and made piles of weapons where they could be easily reached. These were stones to bring down even birds, or small animals. They could throw clubs and sticks; several of them together could out run a small beast” (90). They killed animals for food and women were against this. For their own sake, males destroyed the nature. However, nature reacted against this exploitation, which is parallel to the eco feminist idea that nature is a “living organism”. When monsters reached the forest, they witnessed the power of nature. Lessing illustrates:

A great space in the forest full of men and boys and youths was not what they saw when they arrived there. The trees stood, so many, so tall, so powerful, as if watching them. And there was something more. The vacated sheds and shelters had been invaded, some knocked down. Large black beasts were rootling and grunting, tuskers, with teeth like sharpened knives. We know they were pigs, pokers, not like the ones we breed…in a moment the herd had charged, and two of the little boys had carried off…what they seemed to be saying though was, ‘This is our place, keep out’. (184)

Like nature the female body also became a site of exploitation and domination. It is clearly portrayed in the novel. That is, when men learned that they were incomplete; in order to overcome his deficiencies they tried to reshape history. He began to portray woman’s secondary position in the society and through that he attempted to prove man’s superiority. By writing ‘males and females’, Transit explains that “males are always put first in our practice” (Lessing 6). This is only to show man’s priority in society though this priority was a later invention.

Man’s inability to accept women’s power of birth is also evident in Transit’s urge to hide or alter the beginning of human history. He also admits that man alters history by creating another pseudo- history. In this pseudo- history, man is presented as the creator. They hide the details about the Clefts, the first creatures. The males cannot accept the fact that females were the founding stock of human society. Monsters believe that the “males were first in the story and in some remarkable way brought forth the females. We are the senior, they our creation” (Lessing 26).

Transit’s emphasis on secondary position of women in society is parallel to the idea that man fears women’s birth power and, therefore, wants to subjugate woman. In The Cleft because of their power to give the birth Monsters keeps the Clefts away from them by assigning certain roles.

This gender discrimination is evident in The Cleft. In The Cleft the ability of the Clefts to give birth shaped their social roles. Interaction with monsters and formation of patriarchal society caused the association of Clefts with motherhood. This restricted their freedom. The Clefts were confined to household works and child care while the Monsters explored power outside political sphere. They neither appreciate a woman’s value nor treated her fairly in the social and economic grounds. Males always had a tendency to make distinction between rationality in man, versus irrationality in woman. Horsa, for example labels woman as emotional and overprotective, rather than intellectual. Moreover, he does not want females to join with them in expeditions. Males categorize females as sensible and affectionate and consider themselves as independent and powerful. Females were identified with domesticity, motherhood, and males with discovery and
power outside political sphere. Because of their identification with domesticity, the girls are engaged in household tasks and childcare. They began to organize the shelters, because they find the boys dwelling place “messy” and “smelly” (Lessing 141).

Males were hunters and breadwinners, whereas girls, who previously caught fish, now only fetch fruits, which the males consider as an easier task. Lessing states:

All of them depended on the hunters for their food, to bring in animals to cook over the fires. But the young men did not hunt enough: they preferred the exploration of the caves and hills where they always found new systems of caves. The girls fetched fruit from the forest, task boys found too tame, so there was always fruit. (Lessing 235)

The mass rape of a young Cleft by the Monsters is the most notable example for the man’s intervention in the female body. The young Cleft does her best to escape from a group of monsters who chased her but she fails. Lessing describes:

Then she was standing in the middle of a large group of Monsters, whom she had seen as babes, mutilated, or in the few moments between birth and being snatched away by eagles. All of them naked, and seeing them there, the monsters with their squirts pointed at her, she spat the weed out of her mouth and screamed, and this time it was a real scream, as if she had been doing it all her life. (46)

The rape was so cruel that when she screamed they stuffed the weed back to her mouth and tied her hands. Even some children also participated in the rape. One after the other every one raped her and it eventually lead to her death.

Men always try to oppress and dominate women for their benefits. For this men assert their power and control over women. This male desire for power and control is evident among the Monsters in The Cleft. The Clefts bodies served as an object to satisfy the sexual desires of Monsters. The Monsters consider their body and existence as superior and believed that the clefts are incomplete without them. But men didn’t have the power to give birth. Then they learned that they were incomplete. And they began to portray women as secondary to establish their own superiority. This is evident in Transit’s urge to alter the beginning of human history in order to present man as the creator. This is parallel to eco feminist idea of womb envy. That is man has envy towards women’s primary role in sustaining life.

The nature is portrayed as feminine throughout history and women are often thought to be closer to nature than men. Women’s physiological connection with birth and childcare has partly led to this association with nature. Eco feminists focus on these connections and analyze how oppression of women and exploitation of nature are interconnected. Eco feminists believe that domination of women over the years was directly connected with the environmental exploitation of the earth. They believe that both nature and women have been controlled, manipulated and denied expression and self-determination.

Both women and nature share a bond. In The Cleft, the female community depends on nature for their survival and their existence is incomplete without nature. This shows that the Clefts had a complex relationship with nature. In the novel, the Cleft’s interaction with male has caused the exploitation of female community and the destruction of nature. The monsters tried to make Clefts submissive by confining them to private space and attributing domestic roles to them. This is parallel to the eco feminist theory that man uses labeling of gender as a means for exploiting women, while allowing themselves to grow socially and economically.

Men used female body as an object to attain pleasure and satisfaction. Even woman’s cries and agonies are taken as a pleasure by men. Woman’s body is considered as man’s property. In the novel Cleft’s body served as an object to satisfy sexual hunger of monsters. Rape is a way men adopted to dominate women’s body. This is an example of man’s exploitation of female body in order to fulfill his sexual hunger. In The Cleft,
Transit states that he married Julia to make use of her body and her birth power for his own benefits.

The woman’s power to give birth, which is a gift that nature granted to her, caused the womb envy in men. Therefore, men began to portray woman’s secondary position in society. Women were associated with domesticity, motherhood and irrationality while men were associated with scientific thoughts, power, exploration and rationality. In the cleft, monsters attribute these fixed gender roles for women. This is similar to the eco feminist idea that, identification of women with nature due to her capacity for caring and nurturing is problematic for women. These stereotypes freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings. According to social eco feminism, this stereotyping is one of the biggest handicaps in liberating women from public realm and it transforms them to mere objects or the other. In *The Cleft*, like women, nature is also exploited by men. The monsters were interested in exploiting and colonizing new territories. They tried to colonize nature. For them, land turns out to be an object to be destroyed and possessed. Like women, nature and trees attracted and seduced the monsters. They cleared the forest. They deprived the females’ home by causing volcanic eruption in the cleft. Men destroyed the nature that guarded and protected them like a mother.

It presents the nature and women as helpless victims of the exploitation of men. Men in the novel are endowed with a belief that they are superior to all life forms. It is this belief that gives them sovereign over nature and women. The novel highlights woman’s relationship with nature and, how nature and women are directly oppressed by man. Woman’s bond with nature plays a key role in the novel. *So The Cleft* can be read from an eco-feminist perspective. The novel’s major concern is to investigate the relationships between man, and nature which makes it viable for eco feminist criticism.
References


