

Exploring a New Mythology in Doris Lessing's The Cleft

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In her wide literary work, Doris Lessing investigated the social, political, historical, psychological and even ecological dimension of the world, in many cases by anticipating ideologies and phenomena as an attentive observer. Criticized for moving away from what was considered an adherence to the realism movement, her speculative fiction often stands out, urging human community to develop a wider consciousness that would ensure greater harmony in the event of a catastrophic future. In her heterogeneity of themes and narrative forms we discover that no viewpoint alone is complete because mankind has to face a multifaceted reality in which the human species is only one of the elements at stake.

In *The Cleft* Lessing shifted her attention to the past, analyzing the evolution of the human species starting from a community of women living on an imaginary island, attempting to re-create the creation myth.

A fictitious Roman historian, a male, senator during Nero's reign, leads the novel's framing narrative. Now in his old age, he has doubts about the history commonly taught to the Romans ("Very suspect stuff, I think. Some male invented that." Lessing 2007: 27), and his purpose is to read and retell us – readers from a distant future? – the suppressed and controversial scrolls reporting the oral records of an ancient society, the Cleft, which appears to be nothing less than the first human community to have lived on earth. The Clefts are a one-gender society made up of females lazily living on an island, giving spontaneously birth to their children thanks to the influence of both the moon and the sea. They call themselves Cleft after The Cleft, a rock in a vagina shape which the females regard as sacred and which regulates the menstrual cycle, life and death in the community.

The oldest and most powerful Cleft are called the Old Shes: these early women are closely linked to natural cycles, love being close to the sea and are not at all interested in the world outside the beach. Moreover, the Clefts have the disturbing habit of abandoning on the Killing Rock every newborn baby boy, called Monster due to their physical differences. They do not know that

magnificent eagles then swoop down to take the babies to the other side of the island where they grow suckling doe's milk. The eagles struggle to save and protect the Monsters who would not survive and exist if not for them, as they gratefully express in an eagle song. In a faraway place not accessible to women, among the trees and the dangerous wide animals of the forest, men develop their own community.

We also read the story from the novel's second narrator, a young Cleft named Maire, who alternates with the Roman historian. At some point in unrecorded time Maire ventures beyond the beach and discovers the boys' community. She begins to mate and quarrel with them, involving more and more girls in her expeditions far from the conservative control of the Old Shes, who totally reject physical differences and the masculine principle. In the early days the discovery of the boys' community generates a lot of tension and even disgust because each side of the island defends the different functions of its body apparatuses, described by Lessing in the rough terms of *tubes* and *lumps*. The women start to change their corporal practices: no longer being able to produce children independently, they now have sexual relations and look for new food. Males are presented as the explorers, the discoverers, and they are renamed Squirts in recognition of their most visible anatomical difference. Children who are born after first sexual relationships are regarded as the first humans in the novel. These babies have a different nature from the Cleft ones: they are restless and unpredictable babies, needing both parental forms of care.

After Maire's story there is a lapse of time in the novel and two loose communities are constituted on the island, one led by Maronna, for the female side, the other by Horsa, for the male one. Over time relations between Clefts and Squirts become less barbaric, women and men learn how to depend on each other to survive and so they try to overcome differences, to normalize mating, which becomes less impulsive. When gender roles begin to differentiate and establish, Lessing depicts scenes in which men are building huts or hunt while the cleanup tasks are left to the women. An important consequence is the change in their mythology, in their network of meanings: it is now believed that the earliest ancestors were male and that the eagles, not the moon, hatched them out of their egg.

A strange wind, The Noise, puts fear into people who before had not known it. It is difficult to live together, men and women. Their space being that of harmony and nourishment, feminine practices correspond to those of life cycles by the beach; the males instead prefer to live in the forest, in groups, and to go in search of danger. If a woman is pregnant, the males send her back to the beaches. Lessing foregrounds the aggressive nature of males in the story: "they fought each other, for no good reason, and invented games where they competed, sometimes dangerously" (Lessing 2007: 88) while "the females were associated, for the boys, with criticism and complaint" (Lessing 2007: 167). When a small child results dead, killed by wild animals, women accuse boys of thinking only about competition, despising safety.

In the end Horsa, the male leader, splits the community in two and leads an expedition by sea in search of new lands to live in, while the remaining women wait on the beach. But the expedition fails, and the returning men throw boulders into the Cleft Rock, destroying it. Eventually, when Horsa understands what he has done, he repents and a *baby boy* returns to Maronna's arms.

Because of these tensions men and women are forced to leave the Cleft rock and find a new place where they would try to live together.

Maire's and the Roman historian's account tell the events from a different gender perspective: the first ascribes to men the cruelty and lack of interest in the future of the community when some children left without supervision die; the second accuses women of naivety when they claim they were hatched from the moon's eggs.

The Roman's aim to restore the truth of the origin of mankind is therefore threatened by a series of questions: who writes History? And which history? "Self consciousness does not only cleave the text but stretches the readers' willing suspension of disbelief" (Brevet 2009: 123). The story of the Clefts had been memorized by young Clefts called the Memoirs, spread by word of mouth from one generation to the other, and written down only much later. The Roman inserts his own conjectures, naming "whispers from the past," which "we have to interpret by what we know, what we have experienced. For us late people our imaginations do not stretch so far back" (Lessing 2007: 184-85). Gender influences one's vision and interpretation of history, of the past and the present, because each side tells only the part which each wants to remember:

A community, a people, must decide what sort of a chronicle must be kept. We all know that in the telling and retelling of an event, or series of events, there will be as many accounts as there are tellers. An event should be recorded. An oral history must be the creation and then the property of a people. (Lessing 2007: 168)

The Roman historian wonders where humanity's real past hides, but no truth is displayed for us. According to Catană, "historical truth is to be discovered by considering both the females and the males' stories and perspectives and by putting them together in order to create the big picture of the past" (Catană 2017: 27). In the world feminine and masculine essence often alternate with each other, and it is in their balance that we can find the best answers: "Without males, or Monsters, no need ever to think that they were Clefts; without the opposite, no need to claim what they were" (Lessing 2007: 78).

The novel also offers a particular vision on the way sexuality and gender have marked the evolution of males and females' linguistic competence. The language and the vocabulary evolve by being together, females and males, from raising children, fishing and dealing with life's difficulties. At the beginning of the story, in fact, the Clefts called themselves after their activity: the fisher, the repairer of fishing nets. They are "sea people" (Lessing 2007: 8). When they meet the boys on the other side of the island, they feel themselves for the first time as individuals and begin to use a first name, such as Maire and Astre. This is made possible only by women's curiosity and their encounter with men. At that time, from their relationship new thoughts – unthinkable ones – and words arise that were not needed before; surely the most outstanding is "father". The boys' language cannot evolve unless they overcome their state of existence dominated by sexual impulses. It is the females' gender, the female experience that broadens the perspective on life, which promotes connections and allows the development of language.

Lessing shows how human relationships evolve in this imagined society. The materiality of the bodies, their natural differences, are expressed within the inhabited spaces and the relationships

between sexes. Gender and roles differentiation derives in the first place from these differences in bodies, but then it is culturally constructed within the community. Maternal care, for example, it is not a women's prerogative but can be extended to men through discussion and reflection. Confrontation and dialogue are powerful human tools, to be used to evolve together. If our domination models shape all of our relationships starting from those between children and parents and those between us and nature, a change is always possible, but it demands action, awareness, when not struggle. Caring is emotion and action, it is taking responsibility to the planet and an ability rooted both in human biology and in evolution.

The Cleft is certainly not Lessing's most acclaimed novel: it was criticized because the language lacks depth, description uses the most general terms, and because women are too much or too little feminine. Sure, it is not a feminist novel, it is not a science fiction novel: this book is difficult to approach, it is not fair for women nor for men. Ursula Le Guin, who was Lessing's admirer, was annoyed by the novel and wrote that *The Cleft* is "a tale of Sleeping Beauties – only they aren't even beautiful. They're a lot of slobbering walruses, till the Prince comes along" (Le Guin 2007). Probably her statement is overblown. It is not true that men are the princes here, because alone they are worth nothing: they roam around the island in search of new interesting territories but are destined to disappear without women, for they cannot reproduce. Alone they cannot evolve. In turn, women are not purely maternal and passive, but question themselves about the roles that fathers should have. Neither men nor women here, taken alone, give the right answer to life's challenges.

Approaching the end of her literary life, Lessing's purpose was not that of re-writing the past by sticking an improbable patch on it, but to create and fill an empty imaginative space. The intervention can be annoying and unsettling, but its aim is to undermine the naive way in which we are used to rely on narratives, or on how "official History" is told. Lessing inquires readers on important issues walking them with ease through different temporal planes, a multiverse – her so-called *space fiction* or even *inner fiction* – where past and present communicate, because:

The storyteller is deep inside every one of us (...) for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. (Lessing, 2007: Nobel lecture.)

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