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GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE CLEFT*

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Abstract

The Cleft by Doris Lessing skillfully combines the story of human origin with the evolution of gender relations, showing the author's concerns for gender issues. Based on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this paper analyzes the citation of gender norms, the discursive practices and performativity of gender identity in the novel *The Cleft* from the ritual, language and theatrical dimensions, thus injecting new vitality into the gender studies.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *The Cleft*, gender performativity

Doris Lessing, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2007, is widely regarded as one of the most important post-war writers in English. In its award speech, the Swedish Academy of Arts regarded Doris Lessing as an "epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny" (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2007). Lessing's works extensively cover a wide range of the most acute issues in the contemporary world. Through the narrative techniques of the novel, Lessing reveals her deep concern about the future of mankind and gender relations.

Doris Lessing's *The Cleft*, published in 2007, is a fable-like story showing the in-depth thinking of the gender relations between the male and the female. In *The Cleft*, we see an alternative view of

the origins of human beings. The novel begins with a world inhabited solely by the female, retelling the history of human creation from the prehistoric parthenogenesis to the bisexual reproduction by an old contemplative Roman senator. Lessing traces the construction of gender relations and gender roles back to the origin of mankind, which creates a new perspective to the consideration of the gender issue.

Since it came out, *The Cleft* has attracted wide attention. Many a scholar analyzes it from the narrative device. Sharon L. Jansen argues that the narrative strategy of Lessing's *The Cleft* is far more complicated in which readers encounter a historian who is compiling and theorizing the history with the partial and contingent nature (121). Genetics is another important perspective in the study of the

novel. Clare Hanson points out that in the speculative fiction *The Cleft*, Lessing offers “a myth of origin based on the idea that human beings were originally parthenogenetic, that is, produced by asexual reproduction” (181), because of the genetic mutation related to the increased environmental instability. Furthermore, it is believed that *The Cleft* with mythological significance is undoubtedly a classic study on ecofeminism, which metaphors the harmony between nature and human being, and that between male and female (Tian & Zhang 89-94).

Some scholar analyzes the novel from the perspective of post-modernism. After re-examining the themes of fate and certainty, feminism and sexual relations, time and history, separation and fusion of civilizations in *The Cleft*, Lessing deconstructs the certainty and history, and reconstructs the future picture of infinite possibility with the challenge to the formal logic of language and texts (Hu 122-126). In addition, the creation myth gives an archetypal significance to Lessing’s *The Cleft*, which is an intelligent rendering of contemporary female experience and male-female sexual relationship. Deconstructing ancient Greek and Roman myths, the novel offers a new creation story: the first men came along much later than the first women (Zhu 51).

From the above-mentioned discussions, it is clear that few scholars analyze the dynamic state of gender identity in the novel *The Cleft* from the perspective of gender studies. Based on Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, this paper will explore the gender norms citing, discursive practices and performativity in the novel *The Cleft* from the ritual, language and theatrical dimensions, thus injecting new vitality into the gender studies.

“Gender performativity” is the core of Judith Butler’s gender theory, which firstly came up in Judith Butler’s work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler constantly gave the further improvement for the theoretical composition of gender performativity.

Firstly, from the ritual dimension, Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory stresses the

citation of gender norms. For Butler, a performative action succeeds because it echoes prior actions and accumulates the force of authority through “the repetition or citation of a prior authoritative set of practices” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 172). Furthermore, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler proposes an idea that “the field of reality produced by gender norms constitutes the background for the surface appearance of gender in its idealized dimensions” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 52).

Secondly, from the language dimension, the gender performativity stresses the discursive practices of gender identity. Butler reckons that discourse is generative and produces gender identity. Butler said that “genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136).

Thirdly, from the theatrical dimension, Butler’s theory of gender performativity points out the core information of performativity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler considered “gender, for instance, as a corporeal style and an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177). According to Butler, gender is not a being, but a performative act.

In a nutshell, performativity, in Butler’s gender theory, is a citational practice through which discourse produces the effect it names. The repetition of norms is carried out in a ritualistic way, and constitutes the gender subject as time goes on.

In Lessing’s *The Cleft*, the gender identity of the Clefts and Squirts, the two main gender groups, is not a behavior they can freely and deliberately control. It has gradually formed in the process of the constantly repeating gender norms. Gender norms and discursive practices generate the female and male gender subject. Furthermore, the Clefts and Squirts’ gender is not a being, but a performative act with the dynamic changes.

1. Ritual Dimension: Norm Citing of Gender Identity

As the main characters in the novel *The Cleft*, the Clefts and Squirts constantly cite the gender norms within the definition of masculinity and femininity. Butler believes that gender is an ideal construct which is materialized through time. It is not a simple fact of a body, but "a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* xii). The intrinsic nature of the Clefts and Squirts' gender is actually the repetition and citation of regulatory gender norms. Under gender norms, they are solidified into specific gender identities in the aspects of physical features and personality traits.

In Lessing's depiction of the Clefts and Squirts, there are familiar gender stereotypes: the women are gentle and vulnerable with long hair while the men are adventurous and careless with robust body. The construction of their gender by culture is maintained and carried out in the process of being constantly cited by individuals.

The Clefts, the females, are considered to have feminine qualities in terms of physical features. For instance, long hair is a typical feminine feature that distinguishes the Clefts from the Squirts. "The long hair is my invention, based on a mention of long hair from ages after this time. Perhaps the earliest Clefts were as smooth as seals, but then grew long hair in obedience to some imperative they were hardly conscious of" (Lessing 44). The Clefts' long hair is the citation and obedience of the unconscious gender norm to construct their female gender identity from the physical aspect. In addition, in terms of personality traits, they are gentle but vulnerable. "Something like a war developed between the eagles and the first females, who could not possibly win. Not only were they unused to fighting, or even aggression, they were unused to physical activity" (22). From the fight between the eagle and the female, the latter are not used to being aggressive. Furthermore, as the narrator Historian said that "my sister is ever ready to ascribe to herself the more delicate of female attributes - a not uncommon trait, I think" (7). The narrator and

his sister both agree that women are vulnerable, which is a common female gender trait under their gender cognition.

On the contrary, the Squirts, the males, are considered masculine in appearance with great energy. The males in Lessing's *The Cleft* are always presented to the reader as "tough well-muscled" (46) people. What is more, in terms of personality traits, they are adventurous and careless. "The big river and its dangers were seen as initiatory, and desirable for the boys' development. Soon all the boys had to leave the caves and learn to dare the dangers of the cold, deep, deadly river currents" (146). According to the custom, the children of the Squirts need to take risks to gain the power of the enlightenment. Furthermore, the male are often seen as careless, forgetful and incapable of taking care of children. "The histories of the females record their incredulity: they simply could not understand the carelessness of the boys who did dangerous and foolish things" (106). In the female's gender perception, men are careless with radical ideas.

2. Language Dimension: Discursive Practices of Gender Identity

The Clefts and the Squirts' discursive practices with each other generate their gender identity. The two gendered bodies are not only the material unit in the biological sense, but also the convergence point of power, knowledge and discourse. Therefore, their bodies cannot have pure materiality, which is inseparable from the discourse practice of the dominant society. Butler once said that "genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136). The Clefts' female discursive practice is closely related to the Squirts' gender identity, whereas the male discursive practice of the Squirts has produced the Clefts' female identity at the same time through the naming with constructive color and gender difference.

On the one hand, the Clefts' discourse practice generates the Squirts' gender identity through the contumelious language. In the initial stage, the Clefts maintained a hostile attitude towards the Squirts. The degrading expression used by the former to the

latter - "Monsters" is a naming discourse practice. "We put out all the newborn Monsters and watched as the eagles carried" (Lessing 12-13). The Clefts call the little boys as the Monsters with great disgust and hostility, due to the fact that the Squirts are different from them in the aspect of physiological structure. Therefore, the power of the naming generates the male gender identity of the Squirts in the normative discourse, which can hurt the named because of the meaning of the name "Monsters". The materiality of the Squirts' gender is divided into boundaries in human discourse (the Clefts are regarded as the human beings before the birth of the Squirts), and this boundary will produce the Squirts' illegal physiological gender field. The subjectivity of the Squirts is regarded as a process full of the contradictions and tension in which the external power exerts an influence on their mental space and promotes the birth of the subject in submission.

On the other hand, the Squirts' male discursive practice produces the Clefts' gender identity at the same time. The birth of the Squirts makes the Clefts begin to examine the differences between them. Therefore, the names of the "Clefts" and "Squirts" come into being. The Cleft refers to female external genitalia, while the Squirt refer to male external genitalia. "Males, females. New words, new people" (13). Males and females have become new words, because there is a gender difference between the Clefts and Squirts only after the birth of the latter.

In addition, the naming of "the Old Shes" (13) is the way that the Squirt call the cruel old Clefts, which therefore generates their female gender identity. "That time went on, we believe, and it went on, because the Old Shes (your name for them) were worried because there were so many fewer in the caves, so many Monsters had been born, more than babes like us, the females" (ibid). In other words, the Squirts' discursive practice such as the naming of "the Old Shes" for the Clefts fosters the female gender identity. At the same time, the emergence of male gender identity of the Squirts threatens the original living situation of the Clefts. Therefore, because of the discourse in gender identity, people need to understand the subjectivity in language dimension.

3. Theatrical Dimension: Performativity of Gender Identity

The Clefts and Squirts' gender identities are performative acts which experienced dynamic changes. "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and women and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6). In other words, because gender itself is a free-floating artifice, the male and female genders not only signify themselves independently, but also both of them with feminine and masculine traits.

The female gender identity of the Clefts are not fixed. Their maternal characteristics are not innate, but dynamic and performative under the impact of the time, place and other factors. For example, at first, the Clefts did not understand tenderness and maternal care, hating and even hurting the little boys of the Squirts.

We must remember the first little males were badly mutilated, in ways I for one would rather not dwell on. Their 'squirts' had been so mishandled, pulled and played with, and their sacs had sometimes been cut off for the game of extracting the stones, and above all, they had never known tenderness or maternal care. Their mothers had fed them, on the orders of the Old Shes, but reluctantly, and never enough. (Lessing 36)

As mothers, the Clefts destroy male babies because of their physiological differences without motherly feelings and maternal love. As time goes by, some Clefts' thoughts and behaviors have changed, showing their concern and love for their children.

She thought a good deal about the children and, too, about the boys in the valley. What she felt was, in fact, pity, a tender protectiveness, though these ideas – and the words – were not available to her. Those poor Monsters, the poor boys, she was so sorry for them. What she felt for them was the equivalent of putting her arms round them

and holding them safe – as she did with the New One. (116)

Unlike what they did in the psat, as a representative of the Clefts, Maire shows their changing attitude towards the newborn male babies from hostility to hospitality. She brings a sense of security to the children through the embrace of her limbs, representing her female tenderness and attention to them. This further shows that the female's tenderness and maternal characteristics is a kind of performative act. As Butler said, "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; identity is performatively constructed by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25). Butler reckons that gender identity is constructed through the repetition of performative acts, thus being a dynamic, unstable and complex act. As the female, the Clefts' gender identity has undergone dynamic changes with the construction of motherly feelings such as tenderness and maternal love.

The Squirts' parody of the female identity in turn shows the performativity of gender by feeding the male infants at birth and licking the girl, which are the acts representing the maternal love. "When the new babies howled and screamed and the little boys knew they had to be fed, what could have been more natural than for the babes to be taken to the does, who had soon to learn to lie down, the babes beside them" (Lessing 37). The Squirts play the role of mother, in part as a parody of female gender by feeding the new male babies. Besides, the Squirts lick the girl by mimicking the does' licking of the male babies, because the act represents maternal love.

In the records nothing much is made of this continual copulation, much more of how the young males tried to be close to the girls, nuzzling and hugging and even licking them, as they had watched the doe licking the babies—which was what their experience of mother love had been. (76)

The Squirts tried to be close to the girls through licking which transfers the meaning of mother love that they had experienced. The Squirts' practice of parody reveals the performativity of gender identity

and the instability of the heterosexual norm, opening the re-signifying space of gender.

Conclusion

As a female writer, Doris Lessing shows her deep concerns for the gender issues, especially the citation of gender norms, the discursive practices and the performativity of gender. In the novel *The Clefts*, the Clefts and Squirts' gender is actually the repetition and citation of regulatory gender norms and the performative act which experienced dynamic changes. In summary, the gender identity is not fixed but unstable, which breaks the thinking mode of dualism.

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