



Politics of Rereading the Contemporary World through Myth in Dorris Lessing's *The Cleft*

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Abstract

Background: Dorris Lessing (1919-2013) critiques conventional historical narratives in her novel *The Cleft* (2007). The novel interrogates the contemporary imbalance of power by examining prevailing gender relations and the narrative of human evolution.

Method: This study adopts a new historicist framework, drawing on the work of French philosopher [Michel Foucault \(1926-1984\)](#), who critically examines the relationship between power structures and established narratives.

Result: Lessing suggests a political objective in writing this contemporary history, aiming to demonstrate that the official version is merely one among many possible explanations of history.

Conclusion: Through a Foucauldian analysis of Lessing's novel, it becomes evident that her political aim is to challenge conservative interpretations of political order by illuminating alternative explanations of women's evolution in society.

Novelty: This study adds a new dimension to the study of reading fiction by exploring its social history. Lessing's creative intervention serves as a tool to decenter the prevailing discourse and push forward an alternative way of understanding the social reality.

Keywords: Myth, Gender, Rewriting History, Margin, Women, Sexuality



Introduction

British novelist [Dorris Lessing \(1919-2013\)](#) challenges linear historical narratives in [The Cleft \(2007\)](#), constructing an alternative account of human origins. The novel is frequently interpreted as a reinterpretation of the Bible's creation myth, offering a parallel narrative that positions women at the centre of human evolution. This analysis demonstrates how Lessing critiques the Genesis myth within a contemporary context and interrogates the political motivations underlying such a reinterpretation. In the modern era, issues of body and gender are central, as societies seek to move beyond patriarchal values. While women are often venerated as goddesses in religious texts, they are simultaneously relegated to inferior social positions. Lessing resists patriarchal conceptions that situate men as the origin of humanity and instead challenges contemporary power structures by proposing a gender-focused reading of history.

Critical Studies on Lessing's *The Cleft*

[Doris Lessing's *The Cleft* \(2007\)](#) has elicited diverse critical responses. Scholars have employed frameworks such as gender theory, myth criticism, and ecofeminism to analyse the novel's worldview and its impact on readers. The title's reference to female anatomy signals Lessing's intention to foreground women's experiences and reinterpret history from a marginalised perspective. [Filiz \(2024\)](#) offers a notable analysis of female energy in the novel, stating:

Taking the concept of female energy from both contemporary and ancient stories, women in some cultures were considered divinities because of their capacity to bear children, proximity to water, their femininity, fertility, and serving as the model for each of the various forms of divinity. ...The ocean is considered a womb that accommodates all things including the yet to be born. Fertile women are thus seen through an idealistic perception in the Cleft matriarchal society. [\(2024, p. 2185\)](#)

This analysis suggests that matriarchal consciousness is a central force shaping the novel's trajectory. Building on Filiz's insights, [Azzola \(2022\)](#) contends that Lessing sought to rewrite the history of human evolution from a female perspective. Azzola further asserts: "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" [\(2022, p. 9\)](#). Through *The Cleft*, Lessing challenges dominant narratives of human evolution.

Reading history has emerged as a key theme in scholarship on Lessing. The novelist challenges the traditionally held conceptions of history and intervenes with her own novel perspective to study the contemporary phenomenon. She is never carried away by the established notion of understanding herself. Rather, she approaches the ontology of the past through sources beyond the reach of the official annals. In this connection, [Brevet \(2009\)](#) also analyses, "According to the narrator of *The Cleft*, there are two types of history: the true, personal, oral memories told to selected people ... and the official written history which is biased by definition" [\(2009, p.122\)](#). Lessing argues for a new mode in reading and writing about history. Her reinterpretation of human evolution shows her conviction that the prevailing



history has always exposed the loopholes of bias against those who are never recognised in its offices.

Challenging the patriarchal vision of history, Lessing reinterprets the creation myth and places women at the centre to reread the whole political milieu. [Baysal \(2021\)](#) conducts a historical analysis of the novel and sees the forces of patriarchal history pushed to the margin in search of women's history. As he argues, "Subverting the patriarchal history with the creation of women before men, the novel indeed empowers women along with nature in the face of anthropocentric oppression and power struggle..." ([Baysal, 2021, p. 173](#)). Lessing develops a vision that brings both historians and women into the framework of fiction, where she questions the historians and raises the women to the centre of historical discourse. As [Eren \(2016\)](#) states,

Through the stories of the Clefts and the Roman narrator, Lessing may imply that gender is not culturally constructed, but gendered societies have been constituted because of the different biological characteristics of the man and the woman. All these discussions may point out that Lessing adopted sociobiological accounts of gender role differences. ([2016, p. 428](#))

This reading tends to view the novelist's position as conservative. However, [Azzola's \(2022\)](#) study explores the linguistic competence in the process of evolution. She writes that Lessing presents the "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" ([Azzola, 2022, p. 8](#)). Azzola's reading adds to a new dimension in the critical scholarship of Lessing's 2007 novel [The Cleft](#).

A survey of critical scholarship on [The Cleft](#) highlights recurring themes of gender, myth, language, history, human evolution, and reinterpretations of the creation myth. While the novel is often interpreted as a modern retelling of the Bible, few studies address the rationale for rereading the contemporary world through myth. This paper situates the novel within the context of contemporary history to investigate the aims underlying such reinterpretation in the early twenty-first century.

Politics of Reinterpretation of Myth

This paper analyses [Lessing's The Cleft \(2007\)](#) through a new historicist lens to examine the purpose of writing contemporary history through fiction in the twenty-first century. Official historical accounts are deemed insufficient, as objectivity is shaped by centres of power. Accordingly, this study applies a Foucauldian analytical framework. [Michel Foucault \(1926-1984\)](#) posits that social power networks construct specific narratives to explain situations, intellectual issues, and the complexities of individual identity across historical periods. Power, in his view, continually shapes the formation of the self. Mark Poster, in his critical analysis of Foucault, argues that history is a subjective explanation and a particular narrative form. As [Poster \(1982\)](#) notes,

He argued that the quest for truth was not an objective and neutral activity but was intimately related to the 'will to power' of the truth-seeker. Knowledge was thus a form



of power, a way of presenting one's own values in the guise of scientific disinterestedness. ([1982, p. 119](#))

Each explanation contains an embedded objective. For [Foucault](#), “the individual... is already one of the prime effects of power” ([1980, p. 98](#)). This study adopts Foucault’s framework to analyse the motivations behind such fiction, ultimately revealing the necessity of rewriting myth in the twenty-first century.

Rereading the Contemporary World through Fiction

[Doris Lessing](#)’s 2007 novel *The Cleft* rereads the existing world order, created and propagated, with special emphasis on the ethos of patriarchy. The novel is founded on the basic argument of a scientific paper that women are more mature than men, possibly because they were the first human species to appear in human evolution. Lessing rereads the evolution of humanity in the backdrop of the Bible and states that women were the first to emerge on the earth. She blurs the Christian theological understanding of men as the firstcomers and women as the latecomers, as narrated in the origin myth. However, she accepts that men have seized power from women and dominated them throughout history. Dissatisfied with the order of things, the novelist debunks the order of the world in her fictional world and searches for newer vantage points to examine the alternative positions to look into the explanations about our world.

The Bible has served as the source of contemporary myths in the Christian world. The novel rereads the Creation myth: it presents the story of Adam, the first human, and God's later creation of Eve to be Adam's companion. Lessing critically views why such myths are made and circulated in society. She explores the purpose of such a myth in serving the ethos of patriarchy. She narrates:

One of her captors stuffed the weed back, and another tied her hands with strands of weed – all this clumsily and slowly, because this was the first time hands had been tied, and never had there been a captive, or prisoner. ([Lessing, 2011, p. 47](#))

The brutality and violence imposed upon women are often normalised in society. The novel explores it as a recurring historical event because power seeks to have everyone at its service. In this context, [Roth \(1981\)](#) observes,

The historical and critical understanding of the traditional experience is made possible by our own position within the changes in the way persons interact with the world around them. Other historical approaches to this same subject resulted in other histories because of their own position vis-à-vis the structures of experience. ([1981, p. 33](#))

The interpretation of history is thus shaped by differing experiences, particularly along gendered lines. Besides, myths also serve political goals in society and make the functioning of the power network more comfortable. As a cog in the larger political setup, myth plays a vital role in establishing the hegemony of the dominant group.

The question of the firstcomer vs. the latecomer has always guided the European mindset as a window into their contemporary world. For instance, Africans and immigrants are latecomers to the modern world. A classic case of the latecomers is the women who were created after Adam came into existence. The Christian myth of Genesis systematically explains

the issue of the first human being. Lessing rejects the idea of the Genesis by presenting women at the centre of her explanation in modern times. [The Cleft](#) portrays a world in which women are seen as deformed human beings. Later, an eagle collects the abandoned boys in a valley. She annihilates God as the creator of men. Her male characters know that they are the children of the Eagle. The novel narrates the event in the following words:

We are the Eagles, the Eagle, the Children of the Eagle. The Eagles bore us on their wings, they bear us on their breath, they are the wings of the wind, the Great Eagle watches us, he knows us, he is our Father, he hates our enemies, he fights for us against the Clefts. ([Lessing, 2011, p. 27](#))

Like Darwin's explanation of human evolution, Lessing's world expels God and supplants the Eagle as the saviour. Often, the Eagle is taken as the symbol of patriarchy as well. Presenting a new way of perceiving reality, the novelist develops a world of her own. Her vision redraws the line between the world in the Bible and the world in fiction. As [Lessing](#) describes,

The boys in their flimsy shelters by the forest's edge found themselves helpless as the wind tossed them over and over, or threw them into the river. They could not find any place in their lovely valley where they could be safe. Up on the mountain no eagles could fly – most were killed or hurt in those long days and nights of the Noise. ([2011, p. 139](#))

The Bible cherishes the birth of Adam in the Garden of Eden. God expels Uzikel, who refuses to bow before the first human, thereby giving birth to the first evil force, Satan. In Lessing's world, the boys suffer the most in the forlorn, dismal place. The novel shows a new possibility of an unwelcoming birth that men had to undergo at their creation.

The Christian myth shows that men are self-sufficient, while women depend on their men for survival, pleasure, and fulfilment in life. However, Lessing's women are self-sufficient, independent, and resourceful. The boys desire the elderly woman's body for biological satisfaction. The novel thus describes the situation:

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. ([Lessing, 2011, p. 46](#))

Lessing's reinterpretation of the Genesis myth exorcises the Bible's absolute vision that celebrates men as the centre of the world. She challenges the fixed position as she knows the arbitrary nature of knowledge that merely serves the chain of power in network society. Analysing Foucauldian ways of approaching history, [Rajchman \(1983\)](#) argues,

No single episode, no single network is historically necessary or irreversible, and in all episodes and networks there is always revolt and rebellion, both actual and potential. If in no particular instance is power ever necessary or assured, it never changes at all, once or is eliminated once and for all. ([1983, p. 17](#))

Lessing's description undermines the divine ways of understanding the relationship between men and women in the Bible, showing that the first men had to endure hardships to survive, while the resourceful women had all the comforts at their disposal.



The biological drive that guides the relationship between women and men is seen as bodily union and the resultant pleasure. Men's fascination with women is presented as guided solely by this force. In the long run, the women become commodities for the men. They divinise the women and erect their statues in the form of the Goddess. As [Lessing](#) writes, "I have always found it entertaining that females are worshipped as goddesses, while in ordinary life they are kept secondary and thought inferior" ([2011, p. 27](#)). Like bodily desire, men devise the means to politically control the source of physical pleasure, i.e., the women (the cleft) in general. Foucault describes the relationship between power and knowledge as complementary, serving each other. The men also invent the discourse of divinity to serve their interests in Lessing's world. Analysing Foucauldian perception of the nexus of power and knowledge, [Power \(2011\)](#) states:

His construct of power-knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*) is intended to conceptualise the embeddedness of knowledge in practices of control and their related forms of resistance. The historical starting points for thinking about power-knowledge are not the institutions of law or the state and their abstract capacities and intentions, but rather what Foucault calls the ignoble archival foundations of local and specific forms of disciplinary knowledge that are progressively materialized in documents. ([2011, p. 39](#))

The men invent a new discourse of divinity to serve their immediate goal of biological need. Later, the discourse gains momentum and begins to self-propagate through other discourses, such as myth and religion. It was actually a trap that the men created to dominate the women and justify their authority over the cleft.

Lessing peoples her world with women who are born with biological resources to sustain their lives. In other words, they give birth and nurture their offspring. For instance, Lessing's women point out men's nipples that produce nothing. She writes:

Have you ever thought how strange it is that you have nipples on those flat places in front there? You can't call them breasts, can you? Why have nipples at all when they aren't good for anything? You can't feed a babe with them, they are useless. ([Lessing, 2011, p. 17](#))

This reinterpretation directly challenges the mainstream reading of history. Lessing redefines the position of women within a broader understanding of human evolution. She knows the goal of her act, which demands that the dominated write their own explanation of the world. Analysing the Foucauldian approach, [Roth \(1981\)](#) writes: "Similarly, he does not exclude the possibility of writing a 'history of the referent,' but only wants to carve out a space for the legitimate operation of his own methods of investigation and description" ([1981, p. 40](#)). Lessing brings the uterus of women to the centre by writing off the phallus as a logos in mainstream history.

Lessing draws a line between the worlds of women and men. The first woman did not want any communication between these two worlds. The women hated the men and rejected those clefts who visited the men and gave them company for their bodily satisfaction ([2011, p. 76](#)). The men viewed the women as unique from themselves and tried to explore every means to dominate them. For instance, [Lessing](#) narrates:



One after another she held those stiff tubes in her hand until they emptied themselves, and then just as she had been brought here by a need, now she had to leave . . . had to, and followed by them all, she walked towards the mountain. She did not run. Running was not what Clefts did. But it was a fast walk, propelled by fear. ([2011, p. 66](#))

The novelist also describes the union as coveted by both the women and the men. The clefts now develop a new way to take pleasure in their bodies. The novelist critically examines the propagation of history and the first encounter between women and the banished men. For instance, [Poster \(1982\)](#) analyses Foucault's perception of history and states,

Whether one writes history under the guise of objectivity or for the explicit purpose of an ideological cause is not the heart of the matter. What is at issue instead is the act of individual claiming to contain within his or her consciousness and to represent in writing a certain truth about past. ([1982, pp.119-20](#))

The dominant and the dominated have a biological basis in Lessing's world. The men seek the company of the women and inculcate a new taste for pleasure. The women fall prey to their new habit and accept men's domination.

Lessing offers a distinctive perspective on human evolution by depicting a revolution among the clefts, wherein some young women form relationships with the boys. Rebellion emerges when groups act in opposition and hold divergent beliefs ([Lessing, 2011, p. 120](#)). The tension between the old and the new reaches a new height; however, the new win in the conflict. Among the clefts, the development of intimate relationships between young women and boys becomes normalised, leading to childbirth. Discussing Foucauldian understanding of control, [Curtis \(2002\)](#) writes, "Contemporary societies continue to contain struggles against direct domination and against capitalist exploitation, but increasingly they manifest social struggles against the forms of subjection themselves" ([2002, p. 527](#)). In the world of the clefts, the men offer them fish to entice them to have physical intercourse ([Lessing, 2011, p. 15](#)). However, the older clefts perceive these actions as violations of tradition and culture. Resistant to change, they contemplate drastic measures against both young women and men. Consequently, a once harmonious community becomes deeply divided between those who want to go with the air and those who want to live in their own old ways.

A new spirit was forming from the interaction between men and women. Lessing calls it a point of shift from the world of the clefts to the world of men. In ancient society, food was a tool of power that men in the world of the clefts used to bring others under their control. As [Lacombe \(1996\)](#) states, "Following Foucault, Cohen describes modern penal reform as a 'technology of power', a mechanism producing a type of control that becomes more and more difficult to grasp, that blurs the boundary between formal and informal control" ([1996, p. 335](#)). The human brain often searches for technology to power even when only a few means are available. In search of both food and a new way to entertain themselves, the women frequently reached the caves of men. As the novel further tells the story, "This visit went well, the boys were delighted, and the girls too, before they suddenly and as far as the boys were concerned inexplicably, took themselves off back to their shore" ([Lessing, 2011, p. 90](#)). The women were divided into two camps: one group welcomed the change, while the other rejected it. At the



heart of the interaction between the women and the men was growing the first seed of patriarchal domination, which reinstated the idea of men as rational and more civilised than the women.

The first glimpses of patriarchy challenge the harmonious and peaceful settlement of the clefts. The matriarch controlled childbirth in their society. Now, the new mode of physical union led to reproduction beyond the control of women. The women were independent in conceiving their babies before the men had entered their lives. The novel explains it thus: “By now the eagles screamed around her, and flapped down close to her and away. She screamed at them, they screamed at her, these enemies who had wanted to kill each other” ([Lessing, 2011, p. 109](#)). The deformed children were left on the stones, where she would see the eagles catch in their claws and fly towards the valley beyond the mountain. As a symbol of patriarchy, the bird carries them to their haven. The clefts wanted the deformed babies (boys) to die on the rock; accidentally, they survived, forming into a community of men later.

The Christian Worldview views women as beings beyond rationality and ethical codes set by men. The political goal of such a vision is to justify men as just, rational, and ethical beings. The myth of Genesis also presents a narrative about the fall of man, resulting from Eve’s temptation to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Lessing's vision of a world in which men and women physically unite, causing the fall of women. She writes:

When the boys appeared on the mountain top the girls had already begun their descent away from them. Then, taking a good look, they stopped in surprise. The boys wore their narrow aprons of feathers and leaves. If some of the girls had visited the valley before they would have seen the boys naked, perhaps just come from the river – seen them in their Monster guise. ([Lessing, 2011, p. 125](#))

The women have developed a sense of culture, while the men are still wild. The forlorn humans in the valley do not know the proper way to live a human life. Lessing rewrites the women as the cause of the fall of men in the Bible in a new light by depicting the advancement of women.

The men invent their technology of rule in the valley beyond the mountain. Lacombe (1996) examines Foucault’s conception of power and knowledge and concludes that the knowledge one derives from specific circumstances of power exercise ultimately curtails the people's freedom. He concludes that “every attempt to reform society, to give people more freedom ineluctably becomes its opposite - a technique of domination. No matter where or when, it is the same as it ever was-social control” ([Lacombe, 1996, p. 336](#)). Lessing depicts her women as falling into the trap of their newly acquired taste, deriving from their own bodies. The men invent their own stories about the origin of humanity and convince the women of their narrative. Lessing thus presents the narrative of the man about the origin of human evolution: “A tale expressing ... deep psychological truth. It is now believed that the earliest ancestors were male, and if it is asked how they reproduced themselves, then the reply is that the eagles hatched them out of their eggs” ([2011, p. 142](#)). Patriarchal societies readily accept myths that position men as descendants of animals or birds. However, they often reject the narratives suggesting women as the origin of human evolution, since the factors challenge men’s self-



esteem. Lessing confronts such biases by presenting biological evidence supporting the primacy of women.

Lessing dramatises the men's need and the women's position as a resource to address the former's quest. The men were self-centred, always seeking their gratification of the carnal desire: they could think about only one thing, which was the body of the women. As the first teachers for the men, the women helped the men learn language and form coherent thoughts. As the novelist asserts, "Yet these accusations of her always, and always had, made him stubborn and resisting, but he could not today tell her he wasn't listening, and that she always nagged and complained, because he was secretly thinking that she was right" ([Lessing, 2011, p. 191](#)). Lessing aptly understands that she must delve deep into men's consciousness and uncover the intentions embedded in power relations. Women turn into a means of realising and fulfilling men's needs; however, the patriarchal cultural representation elevates women to the status of divinity. In the study of social history, one must be able to decode the embedded implications. As [Joyce \(2010\)](#) argues, "There remains a powerful understanding of cultural history as essentially about representations, and thus in some sense primarily about 'texts'..." ([2010, p. 222](#)). Lessing depicts these men who ignore the women's wisdom even when they know the women were right. Rejection serves the masculine agenda by allowing them to stand in a position from which they can dictate their own ideology to the women.

Such dictation enables the men to assert their superiority over the women and establish their own system of rule. The men ask the women to take care of the babies and the ailing persons, thereby delineating women as healers and caregivers. The women cannot discipline the youngsters who have an uneven attitude. The novel further states, "Some kind of central command or authority, it seemed, the girls were demanding and when they tried to assume control of the young boys, they were told they were just Clefts, and must shut up" ([Lessing, 2011, p. 221](#)). Under the patriarchy, women are treated as the weaker sex. The novel imagines the origin of such mistreatment in the history of human evolution. Lessing objects to the perception of women in the contemporary world by rewriting the myth of Genesis through her novel, *The Cleft*. She debunks the established narratives which inferiorize women's position in the history of human evolution. By proposing a powerful narrative, she asserts that new interpretations always emerge to challenge the unilinear understanding of gender relations.

Politics of Writing History through Fiction

Doris Lessing's *The Cleft* (2007) critically interrogates the injustices embedded in the biases of the political, historical, and social discourses that the patriarchal order has promoted even in the twenty-first century. The novel offers a fresh perspective on human evolution by placing women at the centre of the world order. By dramatising the relationships between women and men at the beginning of the world, Lessing seriously challenges the hegemony of the established discourse and argues that it remains one of the myriad possibilities of interpretation. The novelist intervenes in the prevailing power order that celebrates men's achievements over women, relegating them to the margins. Lessing sees the need to intervene in the ways explanations about women are created and circulated in the evolution of human



beings. Such interventionist writing decenters the prevailing knowledge of the origin of human beings and offers an unheard-of alternative. It implies other further possibilities as well.

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