Construction of Femininity and Masculinity through Language in Doris Lessing's The Cleft

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Abstract

Gender behaviours of an individual are constructed via different elements, and language is an essential one. Language dictates male and female characters to remain within the boundaries of femininity and masculinity by building dichotomies between them. A female-only society depicted in Doris Lessing's The Cleft *(2009) presents that the feminine and masculine traits are attributed to the members of society through language. Furthermore, the "history," when presented from a male point of view, interprets women's stories through speech acts to sculpt feminine and masculine behaviours for genders. Analysis of the novel reveals that the characters use implicit speech acts to perform their gender to fit into society. This study aims to analyse femininity and masculinity in* The Cleft *from the lens of John L. Austin's speech act theory. Consequently, the findings of this analysis are used to shed light on how the dynamics of being a male and a female are constructed via language within the text rather than the sex of a person.*
Keywords*: Gender, speech act theory, The Cleft, femininity, gender*

Introduction

The concept of femininity and masculinity has been debated, studied, and examined for their crucial role in the formation of understanding human sexuality as binaries. Essentially, these concepts result from "the belief that masculinity is what males do and femininity is what females do" (Deaux 297). In this study, femininity and masculinity are examined through a linguistic perspective to offer a diverse point of view. Applying the speech act theory has recently been developed in literary analysis, especially in text analysis. This study reveals how speech acts, specifically implicit performatives, play a vital part in constructing the gender codes in literature and society using Lessing's (2007) *The Cleft*. It is argued that in the novel, the speech acts play a significant role in displaying how gender-based roles are constructed and how they force individuals to fit in the gender-based labels. Therefore, individuals are forced to perform their feminine domestic duties or masculine heroic duties in society through speech acts.

Lessing was born in Persia (Iran) in 1919 and grew up in Zimbabwe. Then she moved to Britain in 1949 and died in 2013. She was dramatically affected by the First World War and

the Southern Africa culture; therefore, her literary works generally reflect her experiences (Ridout et al. 23). In 2007, Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature with *The Cleft* that was regarded revolutionary with the retelling of human history. This novel portrays an all-female society" where men are depicted as beings endangering women with their overwhelming power exertion" (Lalbakhsh 17). In *The Cleft*, Lessing (2007) creates a myth that shows the origin of men and women by reflecting the norms of femininity and masculinity. According to this myth, women existed before men. The story narrates what happens after the first male is born in a society composed entirely of women. Hence, *The Cleft* provides a different point of view to examine gender relations from the beginning in literary analysis. This study aims to provide an inductive reading of the selected novel by revealing that the male language is constructed through speech acts in which mainly implicit performatives are foregrounded. The effects of these utterances allow masculinity to preserve its dominance over femininity by verbally restricting women.

In linguistics, speech acts are used for "asserting, giving warning, making promises, and even making commands depending on the scenes where they are used" and "[t]he speech act theory brings out the language as a kind of activity instead of a medium to pass on and express" (Muriithi 24). Influenced by Aristotle's (1979) division between "apophantic," declaratory, and "non-apophantic," non-declaratory, statements, Austin (1962) mainly divides the utterances as constative and performative in his work *How to Do Things with Words* and creates the speech act theory (cited in Chapman and Routledge). Relatedly, Austin (1962) states that "not all true or false statements are descriptions, and for this reason I prefer to use the word 'Constative'" (3). The term constative means declarative (or true/false) statements according to the speech act theory. Unlike the constative utterances, performative utterances lead to actions, and therefore, "to utter the sentence is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (Austin 6). According to Austin, making statements is not the sole purpose of utterances. Instead, they are tools that can lead to actions in many contexts. Hence, Austin (1962) claims that various social conventions influence the speakers' speeches.

Nevertheless, the distinction between constative and performative acts is not clear. Hence, Austin (1962) also divides utterances into 'explicit' and 'implicit' statements. The examples such as 'I do,' 'I promise,' 'I name' clearly perform the actions without any implications; on the other hand, the implicit utterances denote various meanings as in the statement. Infelicities are significant in Austin's theory since "it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate," so each speaker should perform further actions that are uttered whether physically or not" (Austin 8). If the acts of "marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, etc." through utterances do 'fail,' their results would not be false, but 'unhappy outcomes' or the infelicities (14). There are many types of infelicities such as "misfires, misinvocations, misexecutions, abuses, insincerities, etc." and all of them should be avoided, as he underlines in his study on the speech act theory (18).

Analysing implicit performatives in a literary text may provide a diverse perspective for the traditional gender behaviours. The naming process, insults, and gender stereotypes construct and maintain gender behaviours such as femininity and masculinity in heteronormative societies. To 'fit in' a heteronormative society, individuals perform their gender through speech acts, and they tend to stay within the gender limitations from birth. Therefore, such theoretical constructs emphasise the significance of language since it establishes dominance by regulating the norms to strengthen heteronormativity.

The novel opens with the narrator Transit describing an incident between a slave girl and boy by commenting on relationships in general. Then, as a historian and the narrator of the story, Transit compares women and men in the Roman and the first heteronormative society, the latter being composed of the Clefts, who were the first women, and Squirts, the first men. Transit, by collecting and commenting on the descriptions of the Clefts, narrates the origin of people. In the society of Cleft, the women condemn the male babies they do not reconcile to death by putting them at the tip of the hill they live. However, these babies are picked up by an eagle and taken down a valley. For this reason, two different societies, unaware of each other, continue their existence for a while. Then, the Clefts and the Squirts gradually form a heterogeneous structure that has not been seen before in the Cleft. This process starts with bodily differences and continues with language and sex. After the unification of these two societies, under the command of Maronna and Horsa, this society, once again, is divided into two categories: women and men. By rejecting the commands of the Clefts, the Squirts aim to keep the distance; thus, they lay the foundations of a tradition. In order to join the Squirts, the boys run away from their mothers at a certain age and risk their lives to join the men's community; hence, the dispute between the two societies escalates. However, after the Squirts destroy the Cleft, these two societies have to compose a new one using the old collective behaviours created by men.

Findings

In the novel, the speech acts play a significant part in displaying how gender-based roles are constructed and how they force individuals to fit into the gender-based labels while pushing women to depend on men. There are few dialogues in the novel; therefore, the narrator's comments throughout the plot are significant, and the limited direct quotations are worth a closer examination. Although evaluating the results of the implicit statements in the literary texts is relatively challenging since they are based on the implied and/or hidden effects, their outcomes generally construct gender dynamics between sexes. For instance, the novel starts with a line from Graves' (1964) poem "Man Does, Woman Is" to signify the gender dichotomy. This statement is a verdict or judgement with an implicit meaning. While naming women passive and stable and men active and unstable, this line also labels sexes by constituting a dichotomy and boundary. As seen in male-dominated societies, the systematic desire to maintain power creates a language in which men are relatively active.

Accordingly, "male-authorised history" preserves masculine power by claiming women's dependency on men in various circumstances (Jansen 29). The term "male-authorised history" is significant since the origins of women and men are narrated by, commented on and illustrated by Transit who is authorised to narrate the story as a wealthy Roman man. The story of the Cleft is narrated by Maire, the Squirt's ancient verbal records are narrated by Transit as he states, "The female kept records and I cannot bring myself to write down all that is there; and the male kept records: and I do bring myself to write down what is there" (Lessing 49). In this statement, Transit distinguishes the female and male's narration of history. Hence, the masculine heroism mentioned throughout the novel results from the male-authorised history's implicit utterances.

The novel opens with Transit's statement "I saw this today," to describe an event between a girl, Lolla, and a boy, Marcus (Lessing 3). In this example, Transit values his narration while implying to the reader that he is a wealthy Roman man. The narrator's

masculine confidence behind the 'I' voice is observed throughout the novel. In the novel, the 'I' voice cannot be separated from the existence of the cumulative and commonly masculine, 'we' voice. Hence, Transit's narration and commentaries on the incidents also present how speech acts maintain gender behaviours.

In *The Cleft*, the men dominate society and limit women by ordering and stereotyping them with negative connotations and imperatives such as commands. Transit's commentaries on gender are usually constructed upon declarative structures of implicit statements. For instance, Transit says, "[m]y sister is ever ready to ascribe to herself the more delicate of female attributes a not uncommon trait, I think" (7). In this example, the narrator expounds his views by uttering that his sister's attitude is "a not uncommon trait." In this way, Transit indicates that normally and naturally, women have/should have feminine behaviours. In addition, the gender-based stereotypes in society sustain the continuity of the gender norms by indicating the points that demarcate femininity and masculinity.

The limitations based on gender are drawn through speech as Transit states, "[m]ales are always put first, in our practice. They are first in our society, despite the influence of certain great ladies of the noble Houses," and he adds, "Yet, I suspect this priority was a later invention" (28). The narrator states the masculine and feminine norms in his society by identifying their dichotomy as passive/active. Hence, this assertion implies that men have superiority over women no matter what women accomplish. Through Transit's narration, the women are limited in both the social and linguistic spheres within masculine domination. For instance, this incident is also significant: "She had asked her mother why she was always ordered to feed and wash the babies, but her brothers were not. Her mother simply said that this was how things were" (58). In this example, the mother convicts her daughter that she should obey the duties. Also, she ranks children's social positions based on gender. The statement's implicit meaning displays that women ought to perform their domestic duties and not question these orders.

In the novel, the men's responsibility is associated with heroism as Transit comments, "He gave three of his sons to die for the empire, he was a true Roman" (64). Here the narrator adheres to or affirms the normative standards of being a true Roman. The implied meaning of this sentence is that men are expected to put their masculine duties over their self-interest. The implicit performatives constitute and normalise feminine and masculine behaviours in the long term. Therefore, the microcosmic story of femininity and masculinity in the novel displays how language provides a collective identity on gender while dominating one side in social positions based on bodies. While male-authorised history determines women's social and individual roles with femininity, masculinity is associated with men's powerful and even heroic positions to rule society. As a result, the speech rewards men and masculinity through active social empowerment while limiting women with passive domestic duties.

The separation between the Squirts and Clefts occurs via speech acts with the Squirts' statement "back to your own place" to the women (162). However, the implied meaning of the Squirts' expression "back to your own place" eventuates in social splitting in time (162). Even though both the Clefts and Squirts use speech acts in the novel, their implicit meanings differ in usage. With this statement, the women are commanded to go back to their places, and they are obligated to obey the men's orders. The implied meanings of the statements such as Transit's narration and the characters dialogues often justify men's supremacy in the novel. For instance, a girl questions her domestic duties while comparing herself with her brothers. Her mother, on the other hand, attempts to convict her daughter for the justification of male

supremacy by claiming that "this was how things were" (58). Moreover, a boy dictates his superiority over his sister by displaying his genitalia and stating "I am a boy" at the same time. Therefore men's superiority is preserved and maintained since men exercise power to dominate social positions while drawing social boundaries and giving orders or claiming power to women that internalized in time. Hence, the Squirts frequently use implicit performatives to exert and claim power for putting restrictions on the Clefts. Accordingly, the Squirts' survival actions, or their carelessness for the babies and children to be injured or even killed, are mainly embedded in their consciousness.

Masculine domination and masculine perception of history are conveyed and transmitted as trustworthy. In *The Cleft*, language use indicates the adverse effects of implicit performatives on individuals by forcing them to fit into feminine and masculine gender behaviours. Hence, the implicit statements maintain the constructed gender roles transmitted by that specific male-authorised history. The social dichotomy of femininity and masculinity can be observed from infancy. Both females and males are forced to perform their feminine domestic duties or masculine heroic duties in society.

Conclusion

In *The Cleft*, women's stories are narrated by male narrators who emphasise and legitimise masculine dominance over femininity via speech acts. The implicit meanings of these speech acts function as constant reminders in society. In the novel, the emergence of men in an all-female society is illustrated. The construction of femininity and masculinity, which is shaped by dichotomies, is exercised through speech acts. *The Cleft*, which describes the transition from a female-dominated society to a male-dominated society, reveals how gender stereotypes restrict women to maternity and domestic responsibilities while associating masculinity with heroism. As a result, the male characters frequently use speech acts to describe, make decisions, and expound their views to normalise their masculine domination over femininity in the selected novel. They also legitimise their dominant presence in society by narrating and commenting on the women's stories. The implicit meaning of these utterances functions as a reminder that maintains masculine domination. Hence, femininity and masculinity are constructed by performative speech acts that entail gender performativity on individuals.

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