

## An Analysis of the Female Image in *The Fifth Child*

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* tells the story of a middle-class family falling apart from the birth of the fifth child, and it is also a novel about feminism and motherhood, describing a mother's strangeness. And painful pregnancy, production and parenting experience. This article analyzes the maternal experience in the novel from the perspective of feminist theory, and Lessing's serious thinking on this subject. The study found that the maternal experience of Lessing subverts the traditional motherhood mythology, challenges the consciousness construction of the motherhood under the patriarchal system, and opens up new ways for the mother to realize the subjectivity. At the same time, the author also implies the female subjectivity. The construction cannot be limited to the value of the mother.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, The Fifth Child, Feminism, Motherhood.

### INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing was a British novelist who was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. In awarding the prize, the Swedish Academy described a "that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny [5]". Lessing was the oldest person ever to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. As a female writer she has created many classic female images in her works. This thesis will focus on the female characters in Lessing's *The Fifth Child* which published in 1988. *The Fifth Child* is a masterpiece of his return to realism after the creation of a series of space novels. It tells the story of a "horror" that a middle-class family fell apart from the birth of the fifth child.

In the turbulent Britain of the 1960s, young middle-class couples, David and Harriet, had ample economics and had four children in a row. Life was full of happiness, but the birth of the fifth child destroyed the original happy family. Ben was extremely restless in his womb, punching and kicking, so that the mother suffers a lot during pregnancy. After birth, Ben is extremely huge baby who is a deformed childlike "monster". His temperament was rude and difficult to control, and he was disturbed by the family. Apart from Harriet, no one dared to get close to him. Gradually, the whole family fell apart because of this, only Harriet still stayed with him to take care of him, struggling with the role of the mother. At the end of the story, Ben got to know a bunch of evil and gradually became a juvenile offender.

In *The Fifth Child*, according to David's standards, Harriet is indeed a perfect choice. She is a traditional woman with motherhood instinct. She believes that family happiness is based on the division of labor between the traditional male and female leaders. Harriet immediately quit her job after marriage, and the question of whether she wants to be a professional woman has never bothered her, because

she naturally assumes that "family life is the foundation of a happy life." She readily accepts patriarchy. The system gives her the role and is so immersed in this traditional model that she completely determines her self-worth from her mother's function. From beginning to end, Harriet's life revolves around pregnancy, production and parenting. At the beginning of the story, Lessing described the beginning of their sweet marriage and the upbringing of the first four children in a highly concise language. They established a kingdom based on the ideal mother's role, a place ruled by the value of patriarchal power, but such a social order was disrupted by the arrival of the fifth child, and his appearance proved the ideal of motherhood. Cultural construction is fundamentally illusory. The identity of Ben is defined by the difference. His appearance smashed the motherhood ideals of the Lovats, and the break he represented also revealed the unpleasant and even horrible side of the maternal experience. When Ben was still in the womb, he was extremely restless, and Harriet suffered and was restless. He repeated "she repeatedly and painfully walked back and forth for a long time." After the birth of this, it is even more difficult for the mother to sleep at night and night. This birth scene can be said to focus on the pain in the mother's experience.

Unlike the peaceful and happy atmosphere of the previous births, this birth can be said to make the mother extremely painful: "When she arrived at the hospital, she felt severe pain and she knew that it was more harmful than before." Unlike his brother and sister, there are "golden hair, blue eyes and pink face", the shoulder of the newborn is thick and hunched, and the forehead is inclined. Cut hair frenzied. The surrounding atmosphere is not at all like celebrating the birth of life, but with tension and fear. The next series of events proves that parenting is more painful than childbirth. Ben has been punching and kicking since birth, and he has to eat an amazing amount of food. He always bites his mother's breasts blue and purple. Not only that, the care of the book also took up most of Harriet's time. "After a day, I feel that there is nothing else in the world except him [2]." By describing this dilemma, the author emphasizes the difficulty of being a mother. As a mother, Ben takes up all the time and energy of Harriet, she can't take care of other children, and the fourth child Paul even becomes so weird.

This is a description of the mother's experience from the perspective of the mother Harriet. It is a picture of tension, exhaustion and loneliness. This real picture is in sharp contrast with the beautiful picture that David just began to imagine. The cultural imagination of the patriarchal culture on the mother's image restores the fertility experience of the spiritualized and noble mother to the female individual life experience full of physical pain, emphasizing the mother's subjective feelings and thinking, breaking the routine, and also the mother's image. The true face, the excavation of mother diversity and the writing of individual emotions make the mother's image more complete. Harriet took Ben home, and with her efforts, she gradually learned how to control herself. She also insisted on maintaining the right to life as a "other" and trying to get him a place at home, but she could do nothing. With the return of this book, other children have left the family, David is getting farther and farther away from her, and the husband and wife are in a stranger. Finally, the family has completely collapsed. Her failure, as Lessing hinted, is what this society has caused. But from another perspective, she actually destroyed this family based on maternal ideals. The mainstream society attempted to achieve its own stability by rejecting others, but the strength of the mother formed a resistance and eventually led to the collapse of the family order. When Harriet bravely assumed the responsibility of taking care of the book, she recovered her position as the subject, and her mother role at this time transcended the patriarchal sphere and became a powerful force. To a certain extent, this represents the self of the mother who is also excluded by the patriarchal culture, or that Harriet is the alliance of the other. Because of their gender differences, mothers constitute the "dissidents" of the

patriarchal society, and also represent the unabsorbable others. They are rejected by the mainstream society and form a kind of counterbalance. At the end of the novel, Harriet and Ben occupied the house that belonged to the Davids and other children, which also hinted at the victory of the other. The end of the novel does not depict a picture of happiness. Harriet is unable to maintain the original family, and she wants to defeat the desire to grow up.

Lessing's *The Fifth Child* also reproduces the social values of the British conflict between the 1960s and the 1980s: one party set off the women's liberation movement, the other side defended the "female mystery" outlook on life, resisting feminism: "They first realized to the punishment of feminism and to take actions against it." The Searie family is a conservative example of the feminist movement. Harriet and David have realized the impact of the rising feminist wave of the 1960s on their old-fashioned lives: "The news broadcast on the radio all day is even worse, and bad news is everywhere." The bad news is the feminist borrowing. The momentum created by the civil rights movement made the opponents feel great fear: "Maybe we should be born in other countries. You know that in a country other than the earth, a family of six children is basically normal, nothing amazing. --- They will not treat you as a criminal [3]." "If we don't look normal, it's because we are in Europe." They suggest that Western feminism and women's liberation movements are too strong, causing them to become increasingly isolated. They dismiss women's demands for their rights as greedy and selfish, sticking to their old-fashioned lifestyle: "They can be patient with long tests. It's not easy. The greedy and selfish 60s are ready to condemn, isolate, and dwarf them. On the best side, David and Hai Rui adhere to their convictions and struggle hard."

At the end of the novel, Harriet was confused and helpless because she was caught in a dilemma. She not only had a hard time but also aging, so that few people could recognize her. Here, Lessing reveals the limitations of female subjects seeking self through the role of mother. Harriet's confusion seems to imply that over-reliance on mother's role is not conducive to the establishment of female identity. That only when women no longer use the fertile body and find a role other than the mother, can they construct a true identity?

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