

CHILD-REARING AS MONSTROSITY IN *THE FIFTH CHILD*

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Abstract

Lessing has thus written a compelling critique of marriage as an institution in the Fifth child. Indeed with Ben Lovatt it is seen that not all children will bring you marital bliss and harmony, they could be the very reason the marriage falls apart. Harrier suffers all the blame and responsibility for the freak that Ben turns out to be with David hardly suffering any such liability. It is thus shown that marriage is the ultimate burden for women- they are tasked with the painful act of childbirth and then the entire journey of bringing up children becomes almost solely theirs with their husbands taking on minimal responsibilities and burdens for bringing up the children. It is shown that women take on a burden beyond their husbands while they are expected at the same time to manage their careers and contribute financially. The modern marriage thus seems to be a plight for women- they are first burdened with painful childbirth and almost total responsibilities for bringing up and answering for the well being and outcomes of their children- whether or not these children's defects are their fault at all. Lessing is thus feminist to the extent that she does not paint a utopian view of marriage- viewing it as an unequal partnership with a suffocation of women's autonomy and rights- in her novels the women seem to be victims of their marriages. The women in Lessings' novels marry although they do not really see a need to and subsequently suffer heavily from the marriages as they are burdened financially, emotionally and psychologically beyond the mens' share of burden.

In Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, Harriet's child Ben is used as a metaphor for the monstrosity of child birth and rearing as well as the ugliness and deformity that is brought into the world by the act of childbirth. The myth of the bliss of child rearing and heterosexual family life is thus brought into question after Ben's arrival distorts the idea of the loving heterosexual nuclear family as it is not clear quite what Ben is- an alien, a monster, a deformity- what is clear is that Ben's arrival throws the Lovatt family into chaos and destroys the idea of marital bliss between Harriet and David Lovatt. The idea of woman as child-rearer, mother, child-bearer experiencing the domestic bliss of bringing up a family is thus brought into question by Lessing's *The Fifth Child*.

The fifth child is essentially a speculative novel, which surmises on what it could be like if your child turned out hideous, ugly and freakish rather than normal and good looking. At the same time there is some sympathy for the freak that Ben turns out to be- he is mistreated, abandoned and ostracized because he does not conform to norms of what a child should turn out to be. David is dismayed to find that Ben looks rather like a 'funny looking chap' and Harriet thinks Ben resembles a goblin with his long limbs and yellowish green skin. *The Fifth child* is thus speculation of what it is to produce a monster rather than a normal child, but alternately the monstrosity could also be a metaphor for the fallen nature of being altogether, all children are less than perfect in some way or other, just that Ben represents this to the extreme and as such the novel speculates on what it would be like to be an utter monster in the eyes of the world, not fitting in at all and appalling all the people whom you come into contact with.

The fifth child thus extends the metaphor of childhood deformity in Ben to speculate what it would be like if out defects were not merely superficial but glaring to the extent that it renders one a

total misfit in the world. Ben's deformities could be read as a metaphor of the necessarily imperfect nature of human being, we are all less than perfect and beautiful in some ways, but *the fifth child* meditates on what it would be like to have such qualities magnified and have a child who is not just slightly less than perfect but an utter monster and abomination to the world. Indeed, the mongoloid child of Harriet's sister begins this meditation on what it would be like to have a less than normal child and extends this with a full blown example of human deformity and imperfection in Ben who is so antisocial and hideous that it renders him a total freak in the world he inhabits. Ben is not merely physically ugly but morally ugly, as his killing of animals and his later crimes committed with his teenage gang show. Not merely is Ben an abomination physically, but he is also devoid of humanity as his killings of dogs and humans show. That he is capable of rape and murder reveal him to be an utter sociopath who is not merely ugly to look at but also morally devoid of any sense of human compassion or ethics.

The fifth child thus distorts the idea of the heterosexual nuclear family being the model for marital bliss and happiness- it is a speculation on the idea of childbirth as an act of monstrosity and bringing ugliness into the world, we are all less than perfect but the fifth child speculates on what it would be like to have flaws and imperfections taken to the extreme and to be an utter freak. Ben Lovatt is in every sense a monster, he is physically, morally and mentally inferior and ugly in every sense to the average human being. The novel is thus a meditation as well on the notion of normalcy- do we as humans only prize what conforms to certain standards of normalcy in a human being and balk when there are deviations from the norm? To be a freak is to fall below what is expected of human looks and behaviour according to society – is it true that we as human beings are not tolerant of ugliness in general, not merely physically but also mentally and morally? Who defines ideas of beauty and standards of normalcy? To not be beautiful is shown by Lessing as being one who deviates from a certain standard or idea of beauty- that held up by society. Indeed Ben Lovatt is construed a monster but only because he is being measured by society's standards. Ben is defined as a freak, monster and alien only because he does not conform to commonly accepted ideas of what passes for normal in society. Hence Lessing's novel is a profound meditation of what it means to be normal in society. Ben Lovatt falls into the category of freak because he does not physically conform to ideas of beauty and ideas of how a normal child should behave.

Also the novel is thus a meditation on how very conventional the idea of marital bliss and heterosexual family bliss is when this is all taken away with the birth of Ben Lovatt who does not conform to ideas of human and mental beauty. Ben is physically ugly and mentally deficient, it is shown that the idea of the heterosexual loving human family is predicated on certain human norms and expectations. When a child produced within such a context does not meet such expectations, the entire family is thrown into disarray. The nuclear family unit, so typically shown to be the building block of a society, is shown to be a profoundly normative conception. The stereotype of the heterosexual nuclear family is loving parents and happy normal children. *The fifth child* is a meditation on what it would be like to fall outside this norm, to have a child that is a monster to society and as such bring disgrace to the family to the extent that the entire fabric of the family is torn apart. The fifth child is thus also a meditation on deformities of various kinds, mental, physical, we all desire happy, healthy and normal children but there is no denying there are children with physical deformities, mental disabilities and Ben Lovatt embodies this to the extreme.

The fifth child is thus a profound meditation on the expectations of society for people to marry and have a heterosexual nuclear family as a kind of convention or norm. There is stigma for people who do not marry, as is seen from Harriet's initial stigma from not sleeping around with men and her illiberal attitudes towards sex. Society expects its members to marry and reproduce, but this idea that having a family will ultimately produce some kind of marital bliss is brought into question by the novel as it speculates on what it would be to not have a normal child which would kill all the joy in

the family and throw it into disorder just because the child fails to meet society's expectations for normalcy. Ben is indeed deformed, but it is essentially society which rejects him by its standards of physical and mental normalcy and conventionality.

The fifth child is thus a meditation on human society as a society of norms, conventions and expectations and the cruelty of society for members of humanity which fall outside these norms and expectations. When Harriet visits Ben in the institution she has abandoned him with, she finds along with Ben children with all kinds of physical deformities that have led to their abandonment. Society is cruel to those who do not meet conventional ideas of beauty or normal looks. Society is cruel to those who are unable to conform to behavioural norms, as Ben's outcast nature as a criminal and murderer show. The entire idea is that society upholds certain physical and moral or intellectual standards of what passes for normal in society, and Ben, falling short of these standards, is ostracized and rejected by society. Society is thus shown to be a place of rules, norms and conventions, and anybody who falls short of these norms and conventions is punished and rejected, as Ben's rejection by his parents and all of society shows.

The fifth child then distorts the stereotypical view that marriage results in marital and domestic bliss for women- it is seen that childbirth instead of being an act of joy only results in bringing monstrosity, pain and ugliness into the world. The stereotypical view of marital life is that children bring you joy and love. But what Ben ushers into the world is anything but joy and love but the reverse, indeed Ben embodies hate and bitterness against the world because he does not seem to fit in to it. He is a freak by the standards of society, and because he is born so vile looking, ugly and violent the world rejects him because he falls short of the society's standards of normalcy. The fifth child is thus a speculation of what it is to have an abnormal child. Foucault has defined the abnormal not as a clinical aberration but a deviation from the standards and norms of society defined by those who have the power to constitute a norm, and in this case Ben falls short of how society expects a child to look as well as behave. He is also mentally deficient or less intelligent than the average child and flounders and struggles in school. The only place he seems to belong with is with his gang of teenagers who are sociopaths and rejects like him- murder and rape are among the things Harriet suspects them of doing.

The fifth child is then essentially a speculation on society's expectations of women to get married and have children and whether there is any real joy to be found in this exercise. It is shown that getting married and having children does not necessarily bring about domestic bliss, as Harriet's fifth child, Ben, is a freak who throws the entire Lovatt family into turmoil. Indeed, having children is supposed to be a joy and for the most part the first four children of the Lovatt household manage to bring this kind of satisfaction. But by the time they reach the fifth child, Ben turns out to be an utter monstrosity which the family as well as all of society rejects because he falls short of society's expectations. The cruelty is thus seen to originate from society- it is essentially society which rejects Ben because he is too different- different to the extent that he is regarded as a freak and a monster. First it is his looks that turn his parents off because he resembles a goblin with his yellowish greenish skin. Then his violence in murdering animals and people turns the entire household against him. It is thus his antisocial behaviour as well as his monstrous looks that lead to him being rejected by his family and all of society.

Indeed the novel may be regarded as a satire of the idea that child rearing is a joy because the Lovatts are initially determined to have as many children as physically possible. They never cease making love and reproducing to come up with as many children as possible- which ought to result in a large, gregarious family but with the arrival of Ben this dream of a large convivial family has come to naught. Ben, by his freakish looks and behaviour, gradually tears the fabric of the entire family apart. The children of the Lovatt family fear Ben and wish to attend boarding school to be away from him. Harriet and David eventually contemplate leaving the country to escape Ben. Hence the novel is a

speculation on what it might be if the children turn out less than normal and what the consequences are for having a freak and monster in the family. The family is seen to be essentially a social structure. It breaks down with the arrival of a highly antisocial specimen like Ben, who induces fear and resentment in anyone he comes into contact with. Even the staff of the hospital where Harriet deserts him wish to resign with immediate effect after coming into contact with Ben- so frightening is their encounter with this monstrosity that they cannot tolerate their occupation at the hospital any longer.

The novel is thus a satire of the expectation that child-rearing will be a happy and blissful exercise. The novel speculates on what it would be like if the child produced turned out to be a freak by society's standards. The result is that the Lovatts are alienated many times over by society with the production of such a freak in the family which even the other children and Harriet and David themselves shun. The novel satirizes the expectation for women to marry and have children as it is seen that child-rearing may not be as blissful and productive a task as it initially seems when it turns out that the child is a monstrosity. Ben Lovatt experiences the rejection of his family and eventually society because he does not conform to their ideas of normalcy. Indeed the novel is an extrapolation of what it is to have an essentially flawed child, which all of us essentially are but Ben's embodiment takes to the extreme as he is extremely flawed to the point of being hideous and freakish. Ben is thus a metaphor for the essentially flawed nature of human being. Childbirth does not necessarily bring beauty into the world but ugliness, monstrosity and evil. Ben is Lessing's metaphor for the essentially fallen nature of humanity and all the ugliness and evil that is produced with the act of childhood. We are all ugly and depraved in some way or other, just that Ben embodies this characteristics to the extreme.

Lessing thus seems to be commenting ironically that childbirth is not an act of bringing beauty and joy into the world but ugliness and monstrosity. We are all essentially flawed, ugly and innately disposed to sin and evil, just that Ben embodies this to the extreme.

"He's extraordinary," said David, giving her the support she needed.

"Yes, he is, he's absolutely not ordinary".

"But he's all right, he's just..."

"A normal healthy fine baby," said Harriet, bitter, quoting the hospital.

David was silent: it was this anger, this bitterness that he could not handle.¹

It is this frustration Harriet has with Ben being normal, but not quite that causes her suffering throughout the novel. Ben is not abnormal enough to be left permanently in an institution but not normal enough to be accepted by the rest of his family members and his peers.

The new baby had of course been offered to everyone to hold, when they asked, but it was painful to see how their faces changed confronting this phenomenon. Ben was always quickly handed back. Harriet came into the kitchen one day and heard her sister Sarah say to a cousin "That Ben gives me the creeps. He's like a goblin or dwarf or something. I'd rather have poor Amy anyday."²

Indeed Ben gives people such shudders that Sarah who has a mongoloid child declares that she would rather have poor Amy than Ben. Ben is essentially a reject and outcast from the time he is born. Later when deposited in an institution for child rejects he does not even fit in there and is found naked and in an extremely decrepit state which Harriet cannot bear to leave him in.

The chief response that most people have to Ben is thus essentially rejection. From the time he is born, Ben is rejected from society because he does not look or behave normally. Indeed Ben ushers in what becomes the destruction of the Lovatt family because he is so disruptive and different from the rest of the society.

¹ Doris Lessing. *The Fifth child*. Harper classics. London, 2007. p.63

² Lessing , p. 68

On the other hand while Lessing uses Ben Lovatt to satirize family bliss there is some sympathy for Ben as well because he is essentially an outcast and reject because he does not conform to societal norms. It seems the real cruelty comes from society because Ben does not conform to its expectations or norms, with every encounter rejection is swift because Ben is so physically ugly and not endearing. When the Lovatt family, having been brought to destruction at the novel decides to abandon Ben in the country and leave for another country altogether there is some sympathy sensed: Ben is an outcast who belongs nowhere, not even in his family because he is so different. The real crime of Ben is to be different and not fit in with the rest of society who view him as an abomination because he is physically ugly and antisocial as well as intellectually deficient. Lessing seems to be commenting that society only has a place for those who do not look too ugly or deformed, or behave antisocially, or are less than intelligent. Society in short only has a place for normal people. To be extremely intelligent or less than intelligent renders you an outcast because you will not fit in with the average people who are concerned with mundane and social activities such as family life and child rearing. On every front then, the novel satirizes this idea of normality for people: getting married and having children seems to be the topic on everyone's mind for conversation, but what happens when the child produced turns out to be an absolute freak?

At the heart of Lessing's criticism is thus the utter banality of what it means to be normal. To be normal is not to be different. Not to look ugly. Not to be too antisocial. Not to be less than intelligent. To be normal is to fit in, but to absolutely mundane and banal in the process. Normal people are people who get married and have families and children who are all in some way flawed or evil but people don't realize this: it just takes Ben Lovatt who embodies ugliness and flaws or moral evil to the extreme for us to be utterly horrified by humanity and all the ugliness and banality that is brought into the world by the act of childbirth. Being moral is also a socially acquired norm, it is society that teaches us to be good, but for someone as asocial as Ben it seems he cannot acquire morality or learn to behave in a socially desirable manner because society has rejected him on every other front because he is hideous and depraved. The hypocrisy of this is that in some ways all of us are hideous and depraved. It just takes a Ben Lovatt to show to true extent of all of this.

The fifth child is thus a criticism of society as being a society constructed of norms and conventions. It is conventional to get married as a female and have children. It is conventional then to have normal healthy babies who will fit in to society and contribute to society by having jobs and then having their own families and babies. But the fifth child speculates, what would it be like to have a child who defies all these conventions? To have a child who is utterly antisocial and physically ugly that the idea of marriage becomes something of a joke and impossibility? Lessing's novel thus questions the intrinsic value of these norms- especially for females to marry and have children. It is shown that getting married and having children does not naturally produce domestic bliss- first the children have to be accepted by society and fit in to society. Society is cruel to those who are not physically attractive. Society is cruel to those who are less than intelligent. Society is cruel to those who are antisocial. The whole idea is that society is only accepting to those who meet certain standards of physical beauty and normal conventional behaviour. To the rest, it hands them rejection and abuse. Society is the real criminal here and Ben is the real victim. Being normal is just a euphemism for being mundane, ordinary, banal, and not different. It is criminal in society to be different, physically or mentally. Hence society places these less desirable people in institutions and prisons and shuns them. Society is a place only for the beautiful and the normal. This is shown in the institution Ben is abandoned in by Harriet. Those who do not conform are put away in prisons and mental institutions.

The fifth child is then a critique of society as a place of laws, norms, conventions. It is shown that the convention of getting married and having children is not the ultimate ticket to bliss as children are not always bundles of joy as Ben shows. Ben shows that a child will not always endear to its

parents. There are instances in which children are not grateful for being brought into this world by their parents, especially when the world seems so hostile to them for being different. At the heart of the novel is the claim that society expects its members to conform to its expectations of what it means to be normal. When people like Ben fail to meet these requirements, the major reaction of society is fundamentally rejection and exile to places like mental institutions and prisons. Hence one cannot afford to be too ugly or physically unattractive like Ben as society is superficial and judges one based on one's appearance. Society also judges one on whether you will adhere to the expectations of what it means to be normal- committing crimes is antisocial and will land you in prison because you have fallen short of society's expectations of normal and sociable behaviour. The real tyrant here is essentially society, punishing anyone who is too different or deviant from the norm.

Hence Lessing seems to be commenting that society is superficial as it judges one based on one's appearance and whether one can conform to norms such as getting married and having children. Lessings' novels also essentially question the idea of marriage as the surest path to happiness. Many of her novels comment to marriage bringing more misery than happiness.

The fifth child thus seems feminist in the sense that it does not view a woman's place in society as solely a mother and child rearer as it is shown how dystopian this turns out to be with the birth of Ben Lovatt, the ultimate mother's nightmare. Ben Lovatt is used to embody ugliness and freakishness that may occur in a child so much so that childbirth and child rearing does not bring about domestic bliss but indeed, misery and horror. Ben Lovatt is every mother's nightmare. Physically, mentally and socially deficient, he just brings Harriet shame wherever he goes. To be the mother of such a monster does not bring one any pride. Indeed, it brings Harriet profound stigma, to the point that she has to leave the country in order to escape the shame that Ben has inflicted on her.

Hence Lessing seems feminist in the way she views marriage as a kind of trap for women because they are so heavily subordinated and responsible for all the child rearing. Harriet gets all the blame for Ben's deficiencies, David gets hardly any blame. Harriet is tasked with bringing up the monster that is Ben and David takes on a very small role in Ben's upbringing. It is shown how heavy the maternal responsibility is and how small a role men play in bringing up children- the task seems to be solely Harriet's and she has to suffer all the blame for how Ben turns out when the child is equally David's.

The fifth child thus shows how females have been hypnotized by society to believe their natural status is to be mothers and wives when these roles may not be as fulfilling as one is lead to believe. Indeed, in Harriet's case, her status as mother and wife turns out to be tragic the moment her child turns out to be less than normal, and a freak. Lessing thus debunks the myth that marriage is the ultimate bliss, as many marriages in her novels are failed marriages, with the men failing to protect to women they are sworn to protect and the women been overly burdened with the domestic responsibilities. Harriet takes all the blame for the freak that is Ben Lovatt and all the responsibility for his upbringing- to the very end when she has to leave the country to escape the shame that Ben has brought her. While a child is equally a husband and a wife's, with the novel's depiction the responsibility of bringing up a child and answering for the child's well being or character seems to be the mother's, even when it seems Ben is just plain evil and not responding in kind to any ill treatment by Harriet when he becomes a criminal. Hence the novel seems to be commenting that the yoke is heavy and the burden unequal when it comes to child rearing for men and women, indeed men are satisfied sexually with women who then reproduce and have to take on the heavy responsibility of bringing up children for them when the child is equally theirs.

The burden on women as wives and mothers thus seems heavy according to Lessing. It takes both males and females to copulate and reproduce but Lessing seems to be commenting that child rearing and domestic responsibilities seem to burden women unequally. It seems that the mother her to answer for every outcome for the children they produce while men do not have a heavy burden

domestically or when it comes to bringing up children. Lessing thus seems to be commenting that men really have it easy when it comes to bringing up children- their role in the raising of the children seems to be minimal and it seems to be the mothers who attend to every need and burden that the child imposes.

At the heart of Lessing's *fifth child* is thus a debunking of the myth that marriage is fulfilling and child rearing is rewarding. Indeed marital bliss seems to be something of a joke once Ben Lovatt comes into the picture, because he is an utter freak by society's standards. Lessing thus seems to be claiming that not all children will be rewarding to bring up because they might turn out to be punished by society for being different and deficient and the burden and responsibility for their plight then becomes solely the mother's responsibility. Marriage thus seems to be an unequal partnership for women on every count, women are expected not only to contribute financially to the household but to raise the children that the marriage brings about and to serve their husbands in attending to all the domestic chores. Women thus seem to be at the losing end in marriages, and it seems that not even the birth of a child is a necessarily rewarding affair as Ben's rejection by all of society shows because he turns out to be some kind of monster and freak.

Lessing has thus written a compelling critique of marriage as an institution in *the Fifth child*. Indeed with Ben Lovatt it is seen that not all children will bring you marital bliss and harmony, they could be the very reason the marriage falls apart. Harriet suffers all the blame and responsibility for the freak that Ben turns out to be with David hardly suffering any such liability. It is thus shown that marriage is the ultimate burden for women- they are tasked with the painful act of childbirth and then the entire journey of bringing up children becomes almost solely theirs with their husbands taking on minimal responsibilities and burdens for bringing up the children. It is shown that women take on a burden beyond their husbands while they are expected at the same time to manage their careers and contribute financially. The modern marriage thus seems to be a plight for women- they are first burdened with painful childbirth and almost total responsibilities for bringing up and answering for the well being and outcomes of their children- whether or not these children's defects are their fault at all. Harriet is just unfortunate that her child turns out to be a freak and sociopath. She did not in any way ill treat Ben to make him the monster he turns out to be though she disliked him from the start. He was just ugly and unsociable from the moment he was born, and if anyone had to answer for it David should also take some blame for creating Ben the monster but it turns out that Harriet is on the receiving end for all of the blame for Ben and for ensuring his welfare and upbringing.

Lessing is thus feminist to the extent that she does not paint a utopian view of marriage- viewing it as an unequal partnership with a suffocation of women's autonomy and rights- in her novels the women seem to be victims of their marriages. The women in Lessing's novels marry although they do not really see a need to and subsequently suffer heavily from the marriages as they are burdened financially, emotionally and psychologically beyond the men's share of burden. It seems women are disproportionately burdened in marriage and suffer as a consequence of the unequal standing between males and females with females turning out to be little more than domestic slaves to men. In so doing, Lessing has written a compelling treatise on women's rights and how marriage stifles women to the extent of them being little more than slaves to the men they are married to.

Works cited:

Lessing, Doris. *The Fifth child*. Harper classics. London, 2007.