
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abjection and Exclusion in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

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| ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's 1988 novella *The Fifth Child* tells the story of Ben Lovatt, a so-called "monstrous child" in the eyes of his family. In light of Julia Kristeva's illustration of abjection, it can be seen that Ben's otherness has unsettled the conventional assumption about children, and his physical and behavioral differences, viewed as a threat to the idealized family life, accounts for his fate of being excluded and rejected. In consideration of the contextualized descriptions in the book and the political background in which the story is set, it is reasonable to assume that what happens to Ben is indicative of what the non-European immigrants went through in the post-war Britain. The exclusive attitude of the Lovatts towards Ben bears much resemblance to the nationwide rejection of the "dark strangers" who brought with them different customs and values. In this sense, the story of Ben, a heterogenetic other who challenges the fixed perception of what British children should look like, can be taken as a mirror which reflects, in the time of social change, how the British society tackled difference in culture.

| KEYWORDS

Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child*, abjection, exclusion, children, immigrants.

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1. Introduction

Doris Lessing's 1988 novella *The Fifth Child* presents a sad story of an unaccepted boy named Ben Lovatt. Still in his mother's womb, Ben is viewed as a "savage thing", an "enemy", and after his birth, he is believed to be an unwelcomed "alien" (Lessing, 1993, pp.51-62). Later, in his babyhood, he is rejected by his parents, siblings and relatives. Much of the criticism concerning Ben focuses on his destructive impact on the Lovatts. For instance, Sullivan and Greenberg use terror management theory to analyze the source of terror engendered by Ben. Emily Clark (2011) takes a similar stand and echoes the other critics by reiterating that "Ben's destructive force upon the family is seemingly relentless; the novel ends with the formerly happy couple and family scattered across England, its members having been both physically and emotionally traumatized by life with Ben." (p.175) Indeed, if we take Harriet and David Lovatt's position, Ben is undoubtedly a perpetrator or a destroyer of an idealized family life. But if we view it otherwise, we might yield an entirely different understanding. That is, if we read *The Fifth Child* from the perspective of exclusion, Ben could be seen as a victim of abjection in a community which does not tolerate difference. This is what Chia-chen Kuo (2014) touches upon in her juxtaposed reading of *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World* when she mentions that Lessing "wants to probe into the issue of difference and how we treat them." (p.11) Following the direction set by Kuo, this essay, in the light of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, expands further on Ben's suffering and examines the political implications behind the characterization of Ben by referring to the hostile attitudes towards the non-European immigrants in the post-war British society.

2. The Concept of Abjection

The term "abjection" used to be a buzzword in the 1980s, which was used predominantly in two forms, either as an adjective modifying a noun, for instance, an abject woman, or as a fixed term - the abject (Menninghaus, 2003). But if we trace its earlier usage, according to Krauss (1999), we might find it in the writings of the French philosopher Georges Bataille, who wrote an

unpublished article in the 1930s entitled "Abjection and Miserable Forms". Nowadays, the theory of abjection is mostly attributed to Julia Kristeva.

Kristeva's examination of abjection has been highly influential. It explores the triggering mechanism of repulsion, which is assumed to be a strong feeling of disgust. At the very beginning of her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva (1982) states that,

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (p.1)

The subject feels threatened due to the fact that there is something that blurs the set boundary, some force that cannot be contained and controlled. This threat is indeterminate, seemingly coming from outside, but also from within; it is banished, but it haunts the subject at all times. What frustrates and upsets the subject, as Kristeva (1982) explains, is the unknowability of the object: "If the object, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses." (p.2) For the subject, the previously functioning process of meaning-making is challenged, and hence, the order by which he or she understands this world is threatened. The object, due to its incomprehensibility, while fascinating the subject, repels and sickens the latter and therefore is strongly rejected.

From the perspective of individual psychological development, abjection is inextricably linked to the subject's self-formation. By setting oneself away from the object, the subject moves closer to the establishment of his or her identity. As McAfee (1993) explains, by "pushing one out of the chora (undifferentiated being) into the symbolic realm, it allows one to experience difference, where subjectivity becomes possible, where one enters into language and the economy of desire." (p.119) For a better illustration of this point, we can refer to the example of food loathing given by Kristeva in her book. According to her, the rejection of breast milk is a symbolically important step at the stage of identity construction for an infant. By separating himself or herself from the mother, by rejecting the breastmilk that represents one's parents' desire, an infant takes the first physical and psychological step out of the original chaotic state and draws a boundary for the self. In other words, by reacting strongly, and very often negatively, to the object, such as vomiting out the breast milk, the subject prepares himself or herself to enter the symbolic domain of the real world.

But the object does not go away by itself. As Kristeva (1982) clearly informs her readers, "It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the object does not cease challenging its master." (p.2) Confronted with the inability to understand the object, and agonized by the threatened collapse of order, the subject appeals to abjection as a way to fight the haunting fear and terror. Yet when the subject "radically" "excludes" the object, which could be breast milk, open wound, or corpse, to use the examples given by Kristeva in her book, there is no way for the subject to shed the impact of the latter. That is, no matter how much the subject loathes it, the object is there, being part of the subject's living experience, and never ceasing to "challenge its master".

Kristeva discusses the role that abjection plays in the formation of the subject's identity primarily from a philosophical and psychological perspective. Different from Kristeva, Bataille examines abjection in social life. As Krauss (1999) explains,

insofar as these [Bataille's] texts identify social abjection with a violent exclusionary force operating within the modern state - a force that strips the laboring masses of their human dignity and reproduces them as dehumanized social waste (its dregs, its refuse) - they map the activity of abjection onto that of heterogeneity which Bataille had developed elsewhere as another form of what a system cannot assimilate but must reject as excremental. (p.236)

If abjection at the individual level helps with the identity construction, at the societal level, it solidifies, to a certain extent, the basis for the constitution of social identity.

Throughout history, human societies have been rife with practices that are meant to purify the object. An examination of the history of religions reveals that, for pagans or monotheists, there have been exclusionary acts directed against those who were believed to be the alien other, no matter what forms were adopted - ritualized defilement activities or explicit forms of taboos. Similarly, for the secular life, a culture that believes in its superiority tends to lay down rules and regulations that serve both to constrain and limit the people it serves, and to draw boundaries and exclude others. As Menninghaus (2003) insightfully states, "All cultural rules and regulations had, first, to be read from the perspective of what they serve to rule out: that other—which they cannot or will not integrate—becomes in each case what is specifically object—whether it be women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, AIDS patients,

or even offensive artworks." (p.366) For the Lovatts in Lessing's novella *The Fifth Child*, this explanation also stands. Because of his difference, Ben is labelled as the abject, one who cannot and will not be integrated into a traditional British family. The Lovatts' abjection and exclusion of Ben, on the one hand, reveals their inability and fear of coping with a different child, and on the other hand, metaphorically speaks about the negative attitude of the British society towards the black immigrants in the post-war years.

3. The Abject Child

As mentioned above, abjection arises when the subject is horrified to find that the firm distinction between subject and object breaks down, leading to a failure of comprehension and a panic about his or her inability to guard the familiarized life. This is what happens to Harriet and David Lovatt. The moment when Ben comes to this world, Harriet finds herself facing "a troll, or a goblin" instead of a beautiful baby (Lessing, 1993, p.61). For her, this strange-looking newborn child, unlike his cute siblings, looks strikingly different, and his looks have totally shocked her. Her fear and abjection of her son is vividly revealed in the description:

He was not a pretty baby. He did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyes to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms. (Lessing, 1993, p.60)

It is not hard to imagine how Harriet feels when she sees Ben for the first time. Both Harriet and her husband David are known to be "conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent; timid, hard to please" characters (Lessing, 1993, p.1). Although it is the mid-1970s, the period of time when the second wave of the feminist movement exerted its wide influence, and when Britain witnessed changes in social life politically and culturally, the Lovatts cling to the traditional understanding of life. As Sullivan & Greenberg (2011) argue, "Instead of embracing the cultural-symbolic mode of immortality striving through work and achievement, the Lovatts pursue the biological mode, investing their savings and energy in 'the dream' of six prospective children." (p.124) Before the birth of Ben, the couple have already got four perfect children who fit their imagination and expectation, so they wishfully assume that this pattern would continue and that more sweet, obedient little angels will be added to the family. For Harriet and David, a "radically" different child baffles and bewilders them, drawing them "towards the place where meaning collapses." (Kristeva, 1982, p.2)

Parents want angellike children, although "the popular view of children as innocent and good" is nothing but "a social construction that has grown in popularity in recent history." (Sullivan & Greenberg, 2011, p.113). Although they might have read depictions of contrasting images of children, either in anthropological studies or in literary works, Harriet and David are not willing to accept their new-born baby as he is. For Harriet, her puzzle and fear increase each day as Ben grows up: "With his yellowish stubbly low-growing hair, his stony unblinking eyes, his stoop, his feet planted apart and his knees bent, his clenched held-forward fists, he seemed more than ever like a gnome." (Lessing, 1993, p.89) To comfort herself that this sense of repulsion and apprehension does not come from her biased perception, she assures herself that Dr. Gilly feels the same, because she can see on the face of the doctor what she has expected: "a dark fixed stare that reflected what the woman was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal for what was outside the human limit. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben." (Lessing, 1993, p.128) As described in the story, this is purely Harriet's understanding, and the fact is that Dr. Gilly does not say anything like that. Apparently, Harriet is terrified by the in-between state exhibited by Ben's physical looks. He is a human child, yet he is distinctly animalistic, reminding her of the primitive image of human beings. To quote Kristeva (1982) again, "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder." (pp.12-13) Viewing Ben as a "gnome", an "alien", someone "outside the human limit", Harriet emotionally detaches herself away from Ben and removes herself from "the threatening world of animals or animalism" so that she can psychologically keep herself safe in the comfortable zone of humanity.

Distinguishing himself from other children not only in physical looks but also in behavior, Ben "challenges and parodies his family's myths", unsettling his parents' conventional perception of children (Rowen, 1990, p.44). When he is about two months old, Ben tries to steady himself and stand up on his own, instead of lying quietly in his cot and waiting for parents to take him out and cuddle him. Unlike other children who crave love, attention and care from adults, Ben seems to live in his own world, unaffected by people around him. This difference, as Clark (2011) opines, is a typical feature of "autism, a cognitive disability that has been increasingly identified and studied in the last few decades." (p.179) Children with autism hardly communicate and socialize, as they do not understand how to interact with others, and as a result, they do not respond to the outside world. Whether Ben suffers from autism or not, it still needs further research. But what is clear is that few people want to communicate with him. In his infancy, Ben is declared unwelcome and unworthy of love by his parents, because "he had willed himself to be born, had invaded their ordinariness, which had no defenses against him or anything like him." (Lessing, 1993, pp.70-71) The couple's distinct

rejection of their son is eye-catching in the story. As Ben's mother, Harriet is supposed to offer Ben unconditional love, yet in reality, as Harriet herself confesses in a remorseful way, Ben is the child "whom no one could love. She certainly could not!" (Lessing, 1993, p.73) As for David, "the good father" to other kids, he hardly touches him. Even worse, he resents him and denies the father-son relationship by declaring that "he certainly isn't mine." (Lessing, 1993, p.90)

The way that David and Harriet treat Ben, without doubt, has affected how Ben's siblings think of him. At a very young age, Ben is held captive like a beast in a zoo. For the most time, he is locked inside his room and kept away from his siblings, as he is viewed as "a psychological outsider", a hostile and terrifying force that might wreck the Lovatts' happy family life (Brock, 2009, p.11). By appealing to spatial isolation, Harriet and David establish a separation between the "normal" self and the abject other. But this deprivation of interaction opportunities limits and weakens Ben's socializing ability. As Killen & Rutland (2013) state, for children, they "have expectations about group norms that members of groups need to adhere to, and they will often exclude someone who does not conform to the group norms." (p.4) But some of these norms could be biased and often lead to exclusive attitudes, thus the proper intervention and guidance by parents is important for children to have a correct understanding of group identity. For Ben's siblings, after they are informed of Paul's injury, their parents make no effort to explain to them why Paul's arms are sprained and who has initiated this incident, and their silence reinforces the biased perception directed against Ben, as a result, they "stood silent, heads bent. This told the adults that the children's attitudes to Ben were already formed: they had discussed Ben and knew what to think about him." (Lessing, 1993, p.71) In a family, sibling exclusion could be lessened or enhanced by their parents' reaction. In early childhood, parents or adult family members should "communicate messages to children to convey the idea that everyone should be included in all activities regardless of merit, shared interests, or group goals for achievement." (Killen & Rutland, 2013, p.2) Instead of trying to teach Ben how to show his feelings and teach Ben's siblings how to deal with difference in an inclusive way, Harriet and David do the opposite. The exclusive signs from Ben's parents are readily picked by his siblings, further strengthening the isolation and exclusion of Ben.

While the first four children satisfy Harriet and David's imagination and fulfil their expectation of a happy family life, the arrival of their fifth child, Ben, disrupts the smooth progression of their habitual life, and destroys the beautiful illusion which has sustained their narcissistic indulgence. Viewed as the other in his family, Ben is believed to have threatened the illusory happiness that the Lovetts have so carefully constructed. As Kristeva (1982) asserts, abjection and narcissism form an interdependent relationship, "Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a precondition of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle." (p.13) The couple's narcissist view of their family life can be clearly felt as the story unfolds. In a sense, the strong feeling of abjection for Ben strengthens their craving for a narcissist happiness, although the former causes the latter to "be permanently brittle".

Before the birth of Ben, Harriet and David have boasted their conventional big-family life, immersing themselves in a state of intense contentment. As described in the novel, they are happy to live in a "perfect" place, "a large Victorian house in an overgrown garden", and their house is made alive by their four lovely kids and the big parties that they frequently throw, attracting relatives near and far (Lessing, 1993, p.13). This is the fascinating life they have enjoyed and have been used to. More than once, the word "happy" is mentioned to describe how they feel. After their marriage, Harriet and David enjoy each other's companionship in this big house, "their hearts thudding with happiness" (Lessing, 1993, p.14); after the birth of Luke, Harriet enjoys the routine rite when David kisses her goodbye and strokes Luke's head "with a fierce possessiveness that Harriet liked and understood, for it was not herself being possessed, or the baby, but happiness" (Lessing, 1993, p.24); in time of family gathering, knowing that their relatives would sit "through long pleasant meals", talking and laughing all the time, and kids would be playing and running around, "Harriet and David in their bedroom, or perhaps descending from the landing, would reach for each other's hand, and smile, and breathe happiness" (Lessing, 1993, p.25). In the depth of their hearts, Harriet and David are thankful for what they have insisted, and enjoy the feeling that happiness permeates their entire house: "A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family." (Lessing, 1993, p.28) Even when Harriet is struggling with the fetus Ben, she is contented with happiness: "Happiness had returned and sat at the table with them — and Harriet's hand, unseen below the level of the table-top, was held over the enemy: You be quiet." (Lessing, 1993, p.54). Leaving Ben at home with Dorothy, Harriet and David bring the other four children to France. Again, the couple is overwhelmed by happiness: "For Harriet it was all happiness: she felt she had been given back her children. She could not get enough of them, nor they of her. And Paul, her baby whom Ben had deprived her of, the wonderful three-year-old, enchanting, a charmer — was her baby again. They were a family still! Happiness [...] they could hardly believe, any of them, that Ben could have taken so much away from them." (Lessing, 1993, p.78) For a long time, Harriet and David have immersed themselves in a simple, bounded form of happy family life where they could display "their best selves", yet with the arrival of this "alien" child, they have been burdened by loss, frustration and fear. It is no wonder that they bear such abjection to Ben who forces them to face a chaotic world (Lessing, 1993, p.29).

To prevent Ben from further jeopardizing their happy life, the adults in the family send the 3-year-old baby to an institution, which "recalls the other side of that world, the dark and hidden side on which its domestic comfort and security was based." (Rowen,

1990, p.44) This is a nightmarish place where all sorts of “freaks”, the unwanted human beings are kept and treated as “social waste”. By quieting them in drugs and leaving them uncared, smeared in excrements, this institution deprives the unappreciated other of their human nature, legitimately carrying out the task of cleaning the society. As Rowen (1990) claims, this place stands for “the ‘other race’ in England that the Lovatts have so determinedly been trying to shut out: the race of the unemployed, the ill-educated, the drifting, and the violent with whom Ben starts to incur from his local, secondary, modern school and to broach the walls of the Lovatts’ family fortress.” (p.45) Similar to Ben, the “other race” is deprecated and devalued. Also like Ben, they symbolize a strong force that is going to change the British society to a greater degree.

4. The Abject Immigrants

In *The Fifth Child*, the characterization of Ben symbolizes difference, which functions as a catalyst, triggering different reactions and bringing out negative emotions that are hidden deep within one’s psyche. These negative emotions are similar to the attitudes held by some Britons towards the immigrants - “[c]ondemnation, and criticism, and dislike” (Lessing, 1993, p.72). If Ben is seen by his parents as an “alien”, an “enemy” who should be removed from their house, the immigrants settling in the U.K in the 1960s and 1970s were generally viewed as unwelcomed groups that disrupted the normal social life. Metaphorically, the separation or border between self (Harriet and David) and other (Ben) can be read as the built-up boundary between the native Britons who upheld their Britishness and the immigrants in the post-war British society who were deemed to “invade their ordinariness” and corrupt the European culture.

Firstly, the time setting of the story corresponds to the waves of immigration in British history. In the story, the Lovatts move to a small town on the outskirts of London in the 1960s. Five years after they have bought the house, they start to witness some unpleasant disturbance in their life: “Brutal incidents and crimes, once shocking everyone, were now commonplace” (Lessing, 1993, p.29). There are reports of theft and robbery, vandalized utilities like telephone boxes, and townspeople can see “[g]angs of youths” hanging around street ends (Lessing, 1993, p.29). As described in the novella, the whole country seems to be divided, inhabited by “two peoples [who] lived in England, not one — enemies, hating each other, who could not hear what the other said.” (Lessing, 1993, p.30) This description resembles the situation in the post-war U.K. From the 1960s onwards, there was an influx of colored immigrants into Britain, and “by the 1980s, Blacks and Asians had become more numerous than at any other time in their history in Britain” (Holmes, 2016, p.4). Like Ben who is physically different from his siblings, these foreign immigrants were distinctly dissimilar from the local residents who were mostly white Europeans. They spoke their own languages, worshipped their own religions, and tended to live together in their own ways. For some conservative Britons who were accustomed to their homologous culture in the “fortressed kingdom”, these newcomers aroused in them a negative reaction. Faced with the increasing number of immigrants, some local Britons, similar to the Lavatts, viewed the new force as a threat to the social order and worried that the latter might jeopardize their life. In his 2016 monograph devoted to the discussion of immigration in the UK, Holmes reports the widespread hostility that “filtered into the currency of everyday talk in areas where Black and Asian communities had been formed” and he exemplifies this negative response by featuring on “an old man in Bradford [who] in an undisguised ‘spasm of hatred’ directed against Pakistanis, exploded with the observation, ‘Contaminating the country, that’s what they’re doing - contaminating us all! We all think they’re horrible - no one likes ‘em. Live on filth they do - take my advice and keep well away - catch anything off them you could.’” (p.7) This old man’s strong reaction towards the colored immigrants, in this case, the Pakistanis, is strikingly similar to how Harriet and David respond to Ben who is identified as a contaminating force that needs to be contained and controlled.

The Fifth Child was published in 1988. As history has it, the 1980s was the period when the Conservative Party headed by Margaret Thatcher was in power, and Thatcher herself took a hard line on immigration. Actually, before it came to power, in order to win the votes of those who felt strongly against colored immigrants, the Conservative Party in its 1979 election manifesto “promised to introduce a number of policy initiatives relating to immigration and race relations” (Holmes, 2016, p.5). Against this political backdrop, populism, in this case, “which could easily be interpreted as ‘white Britain first’”, was embraced by some Britons (Holmes, 2016, p.5). After Margaret Thatcher came to power, the politicization of racial issues was more evident in policy regarding the immigration. As explained by Lynch (1999), “Within Thatcherite thought are two distinct outlooks, a strong state emphasis on culture and nationhood plus a neo-liberal emphasis on individuals and markets. The language of the former informed a populist approach which politicized ‘race’ issues and potentially excludes some ethnic minorities from full membership of the national community.” (p.131) Believing that “immigration and multiculturalism had contributed to a crisis of national identity”, the Conservative Party proposed to reemphasize the superiority and importance of British values and “sought to promote a homogenous British identity” (Lynch, 1999, p.132, p.131). In other words, there was a spreading worry that a multicultural and plural society where immigrants in the U.K maintained their difference in culture, religion and outlook would undermine the social cohesion and shake the foundation of a white-predominant British culture, and thus threatening the nationhood.

Just like the Lovatts in *The Fifth Child* who are unwilling to accept the fifth child who is physically, physiologically and behaviorally different from the other four kids, the Conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s discouraged “the easy integration of ethnic minority

groups with distinct identities into the Conservative nation" (Lynch, 1999, p.131). The political discourse during this period of time was characterized by an emphasis on "a homogeneous common culture, shared history and traditions, patriotic allegiance and a sense of kinship or belonging", which clearly indicates an exclusive attitude towards what they believed to be the racial other (Lynch, 1999, p.131).

Also similar to what the Lovatts do to Ben – protecting "their kingdom" by first locking Ben inside his room, then sending him to the institution, the British Conservatives prioritized the protection of British culture and tradition as "an essential moral and political task", the purpose of which was to guard the Britishness (Lynch, 1999, p.132). To put it in a different way, those non-European immigrants who had brought with them their own cultures and values were believed to be unwelcome and undesirable, and consequently, need to be ostracized and rejected. An examination of the historical fact might explain why "cultural difference" became an issue. In the opening paragraph of his book, Hansen associates the British Nationality Act of 1981 with the increasing number of ethnic minorities: "The United Kingdom began the post-war years with a non-white population of some 30,000 people; it approaches the end of the century with over 3 million, whose origins extend from Africa, the Pacific Rim, the Caribbean, and the Indian Subcontinent." (Hansen, 2007, p.3) Immigration was not a new problem troubling the British government in the 20th century, but cultural issue became a concern for them when the number of non-white immigrants rose from about 30,000 to over 3 million. If the U.K around the 1950s was largely a homogeneous society which welcomed and wanted immigrants who came mostly from other European countries, since the 1970s, there rose the fear that British national identity might have been challenged because the origin of immigrants changed. What deserves attention is that, the U.K had long claimed to be the "mother country" of former territories within the British Empire, and the British King had been embraced as the father of the "Commonwealth of Nations", but "when the colonial encounter was reversed through black and South Asian migration to Britain", those colored immigrants were seen as "dark strangers", and viewed as a threat to Britishness (Webster, 2014, p.292). The worry about cultural integrity is hinted in Lessing's story, as revealed by the response of the Lovatts.

Secondly, the characterization of Ben, particularly the description of his looks reminds readers of a metaphorical reference to non-European immigrants. In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva provides a revealing description about how one feels about foreigners. Usually, the first sight of a foreigner strikes one with a strange feeling,

one is struck by his peculiarity—those eyes, those lips, those cheek bones, that skin unlike others, all that distinguishes him and reminds one that there is someone there [...] Furthermore, the face that is so other bears the mark of a crossed threshold that irremediably imprints itself as peacefulness or anxiety. Whether perturbed or joyful, the foreigner's appearance signals that he is 'in addition.' The presence of such a border, internal to all that is displayed, awakens our most archaic senses through a burning sensation. (Kristeva, 1991, pp.3-4)

Upon her first sight of Ben, Harriet is shocked and frightened by this "muscular, yellowish, long" baby who, as Harriet confesses, does not look like a baby at all (Lessing, 1993, p.60). Unlike his siblings whose fair hair and blue eyes indicate a clear feature of genetic inheritance, Ben does not bear physical resemblance to his parents. For Harriet, his "focused greeny-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone" are not soft at all, and "his heavy, sallow lumpishness" which supports his "strange" "sloping" head, ostensibly distinguishes him from his siblings (Lessing, 1993, p.60). In her eyes, Ben is a total stranger, "someone there" who pricks her sensation. These descriptive lines suggest the identity of Ben as a racial other. As revealed in the story, these features of otherness are not welcomed, favored, or accepted. To start with, Harriet dislikes him and degrades him as a "beast", "a troll, or a goblin", and emotionally detaches herself from him (Lessing, 1993, pp.60-61); David goes even further by declaring that Ben is not his child. As for the other relatives who visit the Lovatts, similar reactions can be detected. For instance, Harriet's sister Sarah once says to a cousin, "That Ben gives me the creeps. He's like a goblin or a dwarf or something." (Lessing, 1993, p.68) As can be seen here, their response is no different from the opposing stance of those Britons who did not want dark-skinned strangers to live in their community.

For Harriet and David, Ben stands for an alien force that puts their safe and comfortable life in peril. The same can be said of the response of some local Britons to non-European immigrants. Heterogeneity means a challenge to the comfort zone, but accepting difference might broaden one's perceptive horizon and open the door to another possibility to know oneself better. In this sense, learning to live with racial, cultural, or religious minority groups provides a means to overcome one's limitations, to step across the fettering barriers. Yet for most people, it is habitual to cling to an unchanging life pattern rather than embrace the unfamiliar and the new, because "it is precisely the commonplace that constitutes a commonality for our daily habits." (Kristeva, 1991, p.3) For the Lovatts, they refuse to accept Ben, because they fear stepping out of their comfort zone, and changing their "daily habits". Similarly, for the conservative Britons in the 1970s and 1980s who were not willing to live with other cultures and values, the influx of immigrants, particularly colored foreigners, became a source of fear, a threat to their core values and national identity. In this case, hostility to the new force became a ready choice.

Finally, the word “kingdom” frequently mentioned in this story functions as a metaphorical representation of a microscopic British society. Before her marriage, Harriet imagines her future as the wife of someone who “would hand her the keys of her kingdom, and there she would find everything her nature demanded” (Lessing, 1993, p.13); on the afternoon after the successful purchase of their house, Harriet and David go from one room to the other, and on the landing, “they turned to marvel at the great room that would be the heart of their kingdom” (Lessing, 1993, p.14). When the world outside their big house has changed, they are reluctant to know “what went on outside their fortress, their kingdom, in which three precious children were nurtured, and where so many people came to immerse themselves in safety, comfort, kindness.” (Lessing, 1993, p.30) Indeed, in the eyes of their relatives, Harriet and David have constructed a “miraculous kingdom of everyday life” (Lessing, 1993, p.74). The illusion of an everlasting kingdom is so alluring that the Lovatts would fight anything that do not fit their idealized vision. They stubbornly believe that they can live happily forever in this fortress, raising kids and throwing parties behind closed doors. To quote Lessing (1994) in her interview with Tomalin, “we don’t notice things that we can’t cope with: we decide not to see them, or we smooth them over.” (p.178) However, the arrival of their fifth child Ben shatters this dream. By the end of the novel, their kingdom disintegrates and their fortress is metaphorically invaded by a group of “uneducable”, “unassimilable”, and “hopeless” teenagers that Ben brings home (Lessing, 1993, pp.144-145). This “gang of youths” come from different social backgrounds, some with ostensibly racial features, as can be discerned in their skin color “dark, fair, or redheaded” (Lessing, 1993, p.145). Ignoring the “civilized” family manner, these teenagers gather in the sitting room, talking “in their style, which was loud, raucous, jeering, jokey”, and enjoying exotic meals originating from foreign countries: “Pizzas, and quiches; Chinese food, and Indian; pita bread filled with salad; tacos, tortillas, samosas, chili con carne; pies and pasties and sandwiches.” (Lessing, 1993, pp.146-154) Observing what is going on inside her house, Harriet cannot help but wish that this “alienated, non-comprehending, hostile tribe” would vanish from her house, her city and her country, and “disappear into any number of the world’s great cities, join the underworld there, live off their wits.” (Lessing, 1993, pp.154-159) Here, the phrase “hostile tribe” clearly betrays Harriet’s attitude towards Ben and his friends, and in parallel, alludes to the conservative Britons’ rejection of the “various racial, social or national others perceived as invading the English national-as-familiar space in the latter decades of the twentieth century.” (Clark, 2011, pp.176-177)

Discussing the erosion of British moral beliefs during the Thatcher era, Richard Brock (2009) posits that “Lessing utilizes the xenophobic paranoia characteristic of Britain in the aftermath of the Falklands War as a departure point for a comprehensive satirical dismantling of the contradictions and paradoxes that render Thatcherism unsustainable and doom it to collapse.” (p.7) Indeed, it is futile to deny the existence of a “new being” (Lessing, 1993, p.45). As the ending of the story indicates, the Lavatts fail to guard their kingdom, and have to adapt to the change inside their house. Likewise, the conservative government had to tackle the immigration problem. The impact is unavoidable, both for the Lavatts in the story and for the average Britons from the 1960s to the 1980s. As Hansen (2000) has noted, in British society: “Even the dietary habits of the English have changed greatly (one shudders at the thought of eating out in England before migration); a curry is among the most common of English meals.” (p.4) Food is part of culture, a powerful tool to express culture. When different sorts of food is consumed in the sitting room of the Lovatts, the influence of the immigrant culture is already there, no matter Harriet likes it or not.

5. Conclusion

As the upholders of conventional values, as the fighters who obstinately guard “that stubborn individuality of theirs”, Harriet and David choose to go against “the spirit of the times”, and refuse to accept a changing world (Lessing, 1993, p.29). They treat Ben, a new and different life, as an alien force that devastates their peaceful and happy life, as an unwanted being whose presence darkens their shiny dinner table. Although banished as the abject child, Ben does not “agree to” or act on his parents’ “rules of the game”, and as a matter of fact, he has changed the trajectory of the Lovatts forever (Kristeva, 1982, p.2).

For Harriet and David, Ben is the “alien” other in their kingdom who has disrupted their stable life, and ultimately destroys everything; for the conservative Britons, the immigrants who are racially and culturally different from them threatened the British values and challenged Britishness. If the abjection at the family level makes Ben unhomely, the exclusion of immigrants at the national level could be more devastating. As McAfee (1993) states, “National(istic) abjection breeds the worst kind of violence and inhumanity. Racism, fascism, and genocide are the extreme dangers, but even the lesser abjections, such as attempts to legislate a national language, are no more humane.” (124) In the age of globalization when varying kinds of migration, whether due to political reasons or climate changes, is a common occurrence around the world, how to deal with ethnic minorities becomes an urgent issue awaiting to be addressed. In this regard, Kristeva’s (1991) reflections on how to cope with foreigners might provide us some wisdom: “Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity [...] By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself [...] The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.” (p.1) In this quote, Kristeva associates the foreigner with something deep inside each of us. That is, only when we accept foreigners the way we accept our own unconscious which could be unsettling and uncomfortable, can we live in peace and in harmony with strangers around us. To put it another way, meeting foreigners is an encounter with the other within us. If we can accept the other within us, we

should be able to break through the enclosed space where we have been walled, and enrich our lives by accepting strangers who live by different values and cultures.

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