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**“THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS” BY URSULA K. LE GUIN AS A FEMINIST FANTASY
WRITING**

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ABSTRACT

A level of controversy is automatically involved whenever a novel concerns topics like feminism, sexuality, or gender. One such example is the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, where the writer is sparking a discourse surrounding her narrative choices, which includes the use of the pronoun ‘he/him’ as gender neutral, and the roles her androgynous race, the Gethenians, take on in their society. It is enlightening how the novel shows the human race, who fight over gender equality, what would be the condition of the world if everyone would be like the Gethenians. The present study will focus on certain aspects of feminist criticisms of the 1969 science fiction novel “*The Left Hand of Darkness*” by Ursula K. Le Guin and further examine the uniformity of Le Guin’s rendition of the genderless society of Gethen.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Criticism, Fantasy Fiction, Science Fiction

Published in year 1969, the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes place on a heavenly body named Gethen, which is in the kernel of an ice age. Gethen features a humanoid population, consisting almost exclusively of brown skinned, genderless, and people belonging to no particular sex. The difference between the humans on Earth and the Gethenians is the colour of the skin and by omitting light skinned people Le Guin annuls the racialized establishments which are painfully familiar to the humans on Earth.

The novel is about a man, Genly Ai, who is sent to a planet, named Gethen, or, more commonly, Winter, because of its climate of deep cold and constant snow, with the mission of convincing the terrene to enter the “growing intergalactic organization”. What makes the novel unique is that the society which Le Guin creates for the alien inhabitants, also known as the “Gethenians”, is very much like us that is they are humanoid but with one very key difference; they are completely androgynous, except for a few days of every month. For approximately three weeks of each month, that is twenty two days of twenty eight day cycle they are biologically neuter and this phase is called “Sommer”. They don’t even produce hormones that cause a sex drive during this time. Only during a few days two Gethenians bond, and become male or female. This phase is known as “Kemmer” and thus each individual can both sire and bear children. Often, in his lifetime, a Gethenian is both mother and father to children. There are Gethenians who are always male or female, but they are, ironically, seen as perverts, and openly referred to as such in their society.

This orb of convertible gender, unfastened from racial differentiation offers dormancy from the rigidly described and violently enforced structures of racism and binary gender encountered on earth. The novel focuses on a world with no societal gender norms, without racially stratified or sexualized bodies, and a world in which the living beings are inherently gender-fluid. Le Guin referred to the novel as a “thought experiment,” writing, “I eliminated gender to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human.” She uses her writing to reach beyond the constructs of gender and race, looking for the “simply human.” [1]

Le Guin also placed restriction on the anatomy of the human bodies of the planet Gethen. When entering the phase kemmer, the individuals only develop gendered traits within an either/or, male/female gender binary. Gethenians don't develop physical sexed attributes on a spectrum. The characteristics from disparate poles of the gender binary coexisting are not mentioned. This infliction reinforces social group norms discovered on Earth that claim solely two scientifically acknowledgeable sexes exist, erasing a fashionably high biological spectrum of chromosomal and hormonal difference. At intervals this strictly circumscribed physical construction of Gethenian bodies in kemmer, Le Guin also insists that these bodies only develop sexed characteristics in heterosexual pairings. Despite the instinctual naivete of the Gethenian biology, Le Guin deterrently omits any homosexual exchanges. The dearth of gendered social roles and also the chance that any individual can carry and give birth to a child has led family structures to require on a far additional communal form on Gethen.

The Left Hand of Darkness was printed within the second wave of feminism in the United States. The influence of this historical moment provides context for a few of the constraints of imagination found in the novel. Initially, *The Left Hand of Darkness* was received with ambivalent feelings, patriarchy belonging to the science fiction community and feminists alike were criticizing the novel. These critiques gravitated to focus on Le Guin's continuous use of male pronouns for the androgynous peoples and on her representation of the Gethenians as masculine, if not male.

Writer and feminist Joanna Russ in her essay “*The Image of Women in Science Fiction*,” was in dispute with the central narration of the novel, which was being told by a cis-gender man. She admits that Le Guin's use of the pronoun “he” is an unfortunate necessity, given that English lacks of a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, but Russ faults Le Guin for constructing Gethenians as “masculine in gender, if not in sex.” [2]

In response to the critiques of Russ and others who had leveled against the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin in 1976 wrote the analytical essay, “*Is Gender Necessary?*” which she opens by trying to distance herself from the politicized nature of the novel, stating that she “was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist, or a sociologist. I was and am a fiction writer.” Le Guin goes on to assert that “he” is English's singular gender-neutral pronoun, without naming the patriarchal power structure imbedded in such language. She does, however, state, “I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for “he/she.” [3]

The term feminism can be stretched into two: the traditional and the revolutionary. Traditional feminism developed in the late 1800's through the early 1900's, and the movement appealed for women to be treated as equal to men. Such political problems enclosed women's right to vote, equal pay, equal employment opportunities, etc. even when women were allowed to work in the 19th century they were still stripped off of some equal rights like: equal pay, high position within the work place and sometimes even equal treatment wasn't received by the women folk.

Revolutionary feminism also referred to as radical feminism is another perspective within feminism that involves a complete reordering of the society during which male supremacy is eliminated altogether through the social and economic contexts. According to the radical feminists the society is fundamentally a patriarchy which is dominated by men and the women are oppressed, for this reason they delve to annihilate the patriarchy and liberate everyone from a biased society by challenging the ongoing social norms and institutions. This includes voicing against women being sexually objectified, creating public awareness about issues like rape and violence against women, and questioning the very idea of gender roles. Early radical

feminism which rose within the second-wave feminism during the 1960s, typically reckoned patriarchy as a "transhistorical phenomenon" before or deeper than other sources of oppression, not only as the oldest and most universal concept of domination but also as the first and therefore the model for all others.

In the early days of second-wave feminism, also known as the women's liberation era of the '60s and '70s, the feminists were keen to inform everyone that there were no basic differences between men and women and they were very serious about this. They wanted everybody to believe that men and women were only physically different. Their thesis was that differences in the male and female behavior were due to cultural training and nothing more. Such differences were merely *constructed*. Therefore, this school of feminist thinking was called "constructivism".

In opposition to this theory was *essentialism*, which highlighted that men and women were different in their essence, that is, that they were psychologically different for reasons that cultural training could not fully explain. But the feminists did not believe in this theory and insisted on constructivism more as they wanted to create more opportunities for the female population. The feminist narrative pointed out that women are "oppressed", and that this has persisted for a very long time. According to the feminists, women were forced, by men, to ply certain roles in society: wife, mother, homemaker, and so on. That is why the feminists opted for constructivism, because if men and women were naturally different in their psychology, they would automatically gravitate towards the different functions within the body-politic and there would be no need to "oppress" anybody into doing anything. So essentialism was repugnant to the feminists because it would introduce many doubts and questions into the patriarchy theory as to affectively dismantle it.

Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be labeled as a Revolutionary or Radical feminist text. Though there is no eradication of the male sex from the society, the absence of gendered people on the planet Gethen highlights the elimination of male superiority which is the key factor of Radical feminism. By creating a society devoid of gendered people Le Guin tried to project the reasons behind male dominance in our society. There is also the utilization of the two main feminist theories, essentialism and constructivism in the novel. Essentialism vocalizes that females are inherently infused with attributes that the society identifies as "feminine," whereas Constructivism says that these attributes are completely forged through the patriarchal society, and the differences between the male and the female extend only till the biological differences. Le Guin seems to take the constructivist idea to the extreme, by creating a society that is completely equal when it comes to gender. In doing so, she seems to concurrently point out the pros and cons when it comes to constructivist theory. Certain aspects of the human nature, like war, do not exist on that planet and one half of the Gethenian species is not under subjugation. By removing such aspects, a much more peaceful society is projected. Still, it is a completely alien society, one that the humans find disconcerting when encountering it. The best way to illustrate whether something is good or bad is to often examine the opposite, and Le Guin presents a complete opposite of our dualist society. To simply put forward the sentence, male and female duality makes us who we are.

In Le Guin's novel the idea of dualism plays an outsized role. The society is one that is completely integrated into this idea of having an entry into both worlds, neither of these male/female worlds truly exists, and so becomes a completely different world that can't even comprehend what a despotic duality would entail. Le Guin, when imagining what a world without male and female duality would be like, comes to several interesting conclusions. As a previous human explorer of Winter takes note on Gethenian culture in Le Guin's novel, "*There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive.*"[4] Because of this, the Gethenian culture is one that is not preoccupied with ideas of femininity and masculinity, and so certain things are not taboo for them. They are a very sexually open people, in that they freely discuss, and even have, sex. Monogamy is a much rarer thing on Winter, though not non-existent. There is no shame in crying. The protagonist has a particularly hard time accepting this, as he hides himself when crying several times; whereas his Gethenian companion of course doesn't understand his shame. And most interesting of all is that there is no war on Winter. There is murder and conflict between individuals, but no war in particular. Though Le Guin never explicitly mentioned,

this would seem to suggest that she believes war to a masculine construct, as the male is usually the sex that feels the need to dominate.

Even with all these discrepancies created from the dualistic ideas, Le Guin does not entirely move away from what one may think of as normal. As for example, she has introduced the concept of the “mother” of a child, the Gethenian who takes on the role of the female in Kemmer becomes pregnant if a child is conceived, will be the primary care-giver of the child and the reason behind her doing so seem to be mostly biological. The simple physical closeness of mother and child make the mother the primary child raiser, because the Gethenian who takes on the role of the mother is the one who carries the child during pregnancy and also breastfeeds. The “father” is not so closely involved, but just because the child is more closely attached to his “mother” does not mean he takes any feminine traits from being reared by “her”, as after the process of nursing is over, the child-bearer immediately reverts to the androgynous state. This seems to go in line with the constructivist theory, since it is purely due to the biological reasons the mother raises the child, and not a norm imposed by a patriarchal society.

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin depicts human like creatures which are neither male nor female; with no sexual differences between the inhabitants, there can be no prejudice against the male or female. The prejudices that are present among the humans can be seen from the 19th Century, through to this day, which include women being labeled as the ‘weaker gender’, and males who are expected to be more emotionally stable and physically strong, to name a few. The introduction of a new kind of novel along with the implementation of the feminist ideas can be considered as a success in the part what Le Guin wanted to attempt and this can be noted as Marxist theorist, Frederic Jameson, entails Le Guin and her works to be: “a fundamental contribution to feminism and gender studies.” [5] Le Guin’s choice of using fiction to convey her personal opinions can be considered as visionary and it has contributed to the feminist movement as well as the acceptability of actions such as romantic relations between two men or women which were previously frowned upon.

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