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**Gender and Female Sexuality: The Prism of Social Discourse in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness***

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**Dr. Humaira Khanji**

*Department of English, Bhagwant University, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India.*

*Email: [khanjihumaira@gmail.com](mailto:khanjihumaira@gmail.com)*

**Corresponding Author- Dr. Humaira Khanji**

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**Abstract**

Ursula K Le Guin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is a textual representation of the concept that she often talked about the paradox of gender. The idea here was to examine the society in which the whole concept of gender is erased. What will be leftward in such a society, without the gender binaries? She sheds light on the society in which social constructs will be reconstructed and gender norms will also be restructured when the society is moved away from the dichotomy of gender. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the idea of genderless society by examining Ursula K Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* through linguistic markers. Guin uses linguistic models and talks about the social constructs in which even though society is androgynous or genderless, the femininity of the female gender is still considered to be sidelined. This paper focuses on exploring and analyzing how society tries to negate or make female experiences invisible through linguistic and social discourse.

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**Keywords:** Gender, Sexuality, Androgynous, Social Discourse, Science fiction.

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Science fiction is a literary genre in which the author tries to create a world that is different from the world in which readers live. Authors try to do away with the social constructs and present society to readers in such a manner that even though the setting is seemingly unreal it does not appear to be too contrived. This seeming different yet similar world comes across as the great opportunity in which social constructs, economic, political, and rhetorical discourses can be examined. By feeding readers, different information the author can challenge the habitual mode of thinking of readers. In such a scenario, the reader can explore a multitude of ideas without getting uncomfortable and by being in his safe environment (Guin 150). To keep such thought experiments relevant and to keep readers' interest in the novel intact, the touch of reality becomes the necessity of science fiction. Guin has taken the most debated and controversial topic

such as gender dysphoria, of the time in which she wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She tries to problematise it and ventured upon various possibilities regarding the outcome of the issue of gender dysphoria and gender identity.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the change in various societal norms such as women had started claiming for legal rights and civil rights movements in America. As society was changing in the era, the progressing field of science and technology has emerged. Science fiction was earlier deemed to be too farfetched; people were seeing it slowly making its way into reality. However, even with all the progress in the technological field, people were becoming vary of the mundanity of things. There was an enormous shift in the genre of science fiction, with the distinguished presence of the shows like Star Wars and Star Trek. Science fiction enthusiasts witnessed the

sight of the behavior of characters that were humane in an otherwise rational environment and human relationships were more explored by science fiction writers. Societal issues made their way into science fiction. In addition, a genre that was synonymous with male authors and was largely crammed with male-dominating characters and witnessed demographic change when women authors and characters paved their way. Women writers challenged the rules set down by the male authors and questioned the stereotypical gender roles. Also raised voices and resisted the rules of patriarchy practices.

Ursula K Le Guin's seminal work *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) was published in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminists were focusing more on smashing the patriarchy, questioning the gender role, and challenging the social discourse around it. Even when male authors were writing science fiction, they displayed society was changing but presumed the gender roles will remain intact. Guin through her novel has challenged the ideology and issue of gender dysphoria and gender identity. She instead presented a society where gender norms were not only questioned but were erased.

Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* sought to propagate ideologies of the second-wave feminists. They began by questioning the society completely downgraded and delegitimized female experiences. These experiences made women feel like an invisible entity. Feminists wanted the world to know what the experiences of women were facing and going through the practice of patriarchy. It ultimately led to the bigger question of what is a woman. Feminists like Simone De Beauvoir had presented the argument that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. Feminists believed like "gendered" in everyday life (Grant 299). Gendered language dominated every

aspect of life from the polity, society to private matters. The discriminatory gendered language apart from the lives of women from all facets of society. Hence, Guin wanted to create a society in which all the gender norms were erased. She wanted to examine how society will structure itself in absence of a dichotomy of gender. Guin wanted to document 'record consciousness, the process of thinking' while exploring what "truly differentiates men and women" (159).

Henceforward to examine such a world, she has created Gethen, a planet some light years away from Terra (Earth). The name Gethen finds its origin in the word, which means winter. Planet Gethen is inhabited by Gethenians and has a society where gender does not play any role in social construct. The species of Gethenians are ambisexual and androgynous. Since society does not have any societal bifurcation based on gender or any other aspect, all the people on the planet are truly equal. The first visitor from the earth was considered to be Genly Ai and it is difficult to believe in the society. Ai is a heterosexual man from Terra or Earth. Owing to the fact, that Gethenians' ambisexual and androgynous nature Genly finds it extremely hard to trust them.

While gender is a tricky theme to handle, Le Guin cannot completely negate the existence of gender and sexuality in society. However, she indeed manages to question the binary nature of gender and its importance in society. The novel has been presented in different narratives. Genly Ai and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, a Terran and Gethenians both have narrated their chapters respectively and by applying, narrative method, Le Guin has tried to put forth perspective from the mutually edges. A heterosexual man from Terra and a human from Gethen where gender roles do not exist. Their experiences and the way they perceive society differ greatly because of the

upbringing they have received. Genly has been described by Le Guin as a “conventional, rather stuffy young man from Earth” (169). He had been sent on the planet Gethen with the mission to pursue Gethenians to join Ekumen, an intergalactic trade federation. Although Genly had prior knowledge about the culture of the Gethenian, it was limited knowledge of the limited amount of time travelers before he had to spend on the planet. Estraven, on the other hand, is a native to Gethenian, having already been positioned as the Prime Minister to the King of Gethen when he was introduced. He is one of the only Gethenian who agrees with Genly and genuinely wants to help him in fulfilling his mission. Still, Genly has his reservation regarding Estraven because of his genderless identity. Le Guin’s deliberate use of “He” and “Him” or masculine pronouns for a gender-fluid population talks volumes about revealed the role of society has been shaped up by patriarchy. It also serves as the linguistic marker through which she tries to highlight the seriousness of the situation wherein the female gender was erased even in a genderless society.

Le Guin though created a seemingly genderless society it was not too out of touch with biological reality. Gethenian, born ambisexual, turned into biologically male or female so randomly that it was difficult to assume who will be what in the course of events. Le Guin called the development of the stage of Kemmer, in which Gethenian are becoming sexually active and could turn into one particular gender. This gender dysphoria or gender fluidity was not consistent as well, as Gethenian could develop the traits of either male or female gender. One can give birth as well as can also sire children depending upon the biological sex, he turns into during the time of Kemmer. Some Gethenians witnessed genetic mutation, where they stayed in the one assigned gender

throughout. Gethenian addressed them as ‘Perverts’. Gethenians affirms pervers were always under the stimulus of their sexual desires. This process and their situations are called perversion. The state that led to Gethenian needed to be in constant one sexual identity. Le Guin tries to draw an inverse parallel here, what Gethenian assumes is perversion is on Earth considered as normal. These pervers are not ostracized from society for their sexual inclination similarly; homosexuals are not completely ostracized in some societies. They are somewhat tolerated with disdain (Guin 63).

Gethenians found it hard to trust Genly because of him being in a constant state of Kemmer. They often wondered what it would be like to live in a society where everyone is in a state of “perversion”. The reason for this disdain towards sex or sexuality is that Gethenian society is largely genderless. They come under sexual urges only during the time of Kemmer. For them, it is an animalistic tendency. Just because it is a once in a few years event for them, they treat it with banality. The Gethenians describes their ways of perceived sex:

The kemmer phenomenon ... fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, Dominates them. The structure of their society, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, ... Room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it was, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily function and its continuity, is without sex. (93)

Although sex is considered to be a mundane activity it is open for discussion among the Gethenians. They do not treat it as extraordinary or something different. For them, it is just an urge or a phase, which everyone has to pass through at least once in their lifetime. They indulge in sexual activities with each other without any disgrace in the process. However, perversion is deemed as a weakness in Gethenians society. Le Guin never

explains directly what it felt to be in the state of Kemmer. Even when Estraven is narrating, he never narrated the stage where he is in Kemmer. Here, Le Guin is relying upon the notion that humans already know what it feels to be like under the influence of one's sexual desire. She instead reveals Estraven's Kemmer period through Genly towards the end. Lack of description about the sexual activities shows the banality through which Gethenian viewed acts of sex.

Le Guin by portraying an almost genderless world tried to open dialogue regarding masculine and feminine sexuality. The world after the 1960s went through gender identity and sexual revolution along with the rise of feminism. Intellectuals and gender theories tried to do away with the gender dichotomy. They wanted people to embrace their sexuality and be comfortable in their skin. The discussion about sex also turned in the direction of the men who used sex as a tool to assert their power over women. Women were always taught to protect their virginity. Virgin women were always portrayed as the motif for purity ever since biblical times. Men on the other hand were taught to boast about their sexuality. Male virility was treated as some sort of power or achievement. Rape is one such example where the victim is often shamed than that of the perpetrator. In the Gethenian society, sexual urges between two people were treated a general way and rape was absent in Kemmer. There was no shame in going into the Kemmer houses. Gethenian treated sex as something normal and considered it as their right to fulfillment of pleasure. They are not treated sex as a weapon. Furthermore, Le Guin tried to present a world where sex and sexuality were completely different things. Sex was just another physical activity that Gethenians performed while in the state of Kemmer.

Feminists have always argued that gender is a social construct. It is very hard

to define what constitutes actual gender, because societal constructs may change with time and place. However, Oxford Dictionary presents its definition, "the state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences... the collective traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex". However, it is still arguable whether gender and sex are two different things or not? By definition, Gethenians are an absolute gender-neutral society. Nevertheless, if one assumes that gender is a social construct or "Free-floating artifice" then it appears that gender is very much present on the Gethen. Le Guin was often criticized for her claim that she wanted to create a genderless society instead her linguistic choices made the world more masculine. It was presumed that masculinity is neutral than femininity (Calvin 188). Her linguistic choice of using "he" pronoun for the whole Gethenian population. In addition, their state head was called "King" again asserting the power of masculinity. Genly even refers to people from other planets with masculine forms of address such as "men", "sons", "sir", etc. so not only overtly ambisexual society Gethen but on other societies as well male prowess came across as a stronger element. Even Estraven, a Gethenian, gives insight by using male appropriate words. In chapter six he calls his children "his sons". This usage of overtly masculine language insinuates that Gethenian society is masculine rather than being ambisexual or a mixture of both masculinity and femininity.

Ritch Calvin, Professor of Gender and Literature, argues that by making such language choices Le Guin had negated female experience and asserted a more historically predominant chronicle of males. Calvin argued that in the context of the patriarchy male appropriate pronouns equate to universality. The only time Le

Guin resorts to using gender-neutral pronouns is when the King's new ear is talking over the radio "pride of country and love of the parent land" (Guin 100). Thus, the word parent land is used instead of the motherland. The distinction and stress towards to male-oriented rather than female.

Gethen had many different words to describe the various events on the planet. Their time and calendar were also different from what it was on Terra (Guin 301). Yet, their language was largely male-dominated instead of being gender-neutral which could have been appropriate for the ambisexual society. Androgyny is often described as the perfect balance between masculinity and femininity (Atterbery 133). Androgynous people because of this trait can be whatever they want to be, without actually ever being any one particular thing. However, from a patriarchal perspective being androgynous can be problematic. As masculine traits would always be deemed worthy whereas feminine, traits would face struggle. Le Guin's usage of male appropriate pronouns asserts this idea of masculinity is more desirable than femininity. Le Guin has also given descriptions about Gethenians' appearance. Genly when hears a feminine voice for the first time in ages he appears to be a bit shocked and uncomfortable inferring that more Gethenians have masculine appearances than feminine appearances. It in a way explains Le Guin using male appropriate language.

Apart from all the contradictions, as the novel progresses Le Guin is quite successful in putting forward the idea of gender fluidity. Genly's character development his perception of the world changes and nearsighted the world away from the gamut of gender binaries. Throughout the novel, he is constantly in the duality of his existence. He could not decide whether he is more male or more female. Estraven also confuses him because of his sexuality. Because of his

ambiguity of sexuality, he could not decide whether he can trust him or not. "For it was impossible to think of him as a woman...powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man, I felt a sense of falseness of imposture: in him..." (12).

Towards the end of the novel, when Genly and Estraven set out on their journey across the ice they understand each other more and more. Genly and Estraven both learn not to judge anyone based on their appearances and sexuality. Throughout the time Genly seems to admit the circumstance that Estraven's sexuality does not define his identity. It stops bothering Genly with the absence of sexuality in Estraven. For him, their emotional experience matters most. They even though they grow to love and care for each other they have what could be described as a platonic relationship. In *Undoing Gender* (2006) Judith Butler talks about how emotional; the connection between two individuals matters more. She looked at gender from the perspective of philosophy. Asking some to change their way of thinking about gender could be challenging which Le Guin put forth quite beautifully through the character of Genly. Le Guin through this thought experiment proves that though it may not be possible to change gender binaries it is possible to "habitual way of thinking" through gender discourse.

In concluding remarks, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin did not want to create a new possibility but wanted to restructure the "possibility that already exist" (Butler 148). Le Guin draws a parallel between humans and Genly, by projecting the mannerism that forbade him from looking beyond gender norms that were imprinted on his mind because of him being raised by patriarchal society. She also asserts that even in the genderless society female experiences were constantly negated and sidelined by using male-centric discourse.

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