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Subverting Gender in Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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By

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## Abstract

*The study examines the concept of resistance as articulated in Ursula K. Le Guin's novel The Left Hand of Darkness, focusing on the subversion of traditional gender identities through the experiences of the central character, Genly Ai. The writer uses a central character Genly Ai, who on Earth involves in discrimination on the basis of gender identity but after reaching on artificial earth (Gethen) does not find any gender identity and discrimination. This concept evokes the reader that gender discrimination only exists on the Earth. Ursula K. Le Guin experimental writing is a piece of work, directly subverts the patriarchal imposition to gender as woman are submissive to man. Thesis uses, Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity, uncovers the novel of Guian and explores the concept of subverting gender identity by criticizing the existed notion of patriarchy by the medium of artificial Earth. Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex ventures that the novel works as an evidences, illustrates the core concept of female breaking the boundary of male- dominated society. Likewise, Donna Haraway Cyborg reveals that the text uncovers the concept of dual identity. The findings reveal that The Left Hand of Darkness as a piece of evidence that vandalizes the patriarchy as it is falsifying the role of gender and identity.*

Keywords: Resistance, Subversion, Patriarchy, Gender identity, Fluidity

## Subverting Gender in Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

This research work explores the traditional practices of gender issues as one of the problems for social reformation. The text speaks against inequalities by subverting gender roles made by authoritative male dominated circle in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it is based in the perspective of feminist movement. It reveals the overshadowed movements that subverts gender concept and challenges the cultural domains the concept is projected in the fiction. The gender discrimination had been practiced and naturalized. In patriarchy, males dominate females, and as a result, the patriarchal system maintains these dominations and normalizes them as everyday life practices. Dominant groups create certain narratives and regard them as real. Such narratives often elevate the status of men while depicting females as mean and dependent on men. These stories play a significant role in making these suppressions seem final, fixed, and ultimate truths. To some extent, such narratives become akin to biological science in social phenomena. In other words, these patriarchal stories define the female body as weaker and more helpless. Making these falsehoods irrevocable became the weapons for men to dominate women for a long time. Consequently, the establishes gender binaries: male and female. Ultimately, habitualized dominations play a crucial role in political and cultural power sharing. Stereotyped social and cultural functions of gender roles fix females as other and different from males. However, this fiction shows the possibility of dual gender roles. In the present context, dominated females are searching for their identity and rights by subverting the preoccupied notions regarding gender and sexuality.

This thesis critiques the gender roles predefined by a male-dominated society by analyzing gender roles, politics, culture, and power relationships based on Ursula K. Le Guin's novel in which. Genly Ai, the envoy from *Ekumen*, an interplanetary

alliance, arrives on Gethen. Gethen's culture and gender roles are vastly different from Genly's. It explores the confusion and suspicion faced by Genly. He is perplexed and doubtful regarding the people's characteristics and roles on the planet, as there is a duality in gender roles on Gethen. Genly Ai, an envoy, reflects the collective attitude of the planet Terran. His attitude is also significant for exploring the social psychology of gender practiced in the present society. Gethen demonstrates the fluidity of gender roles. Characters of the novel are not fixed to body narratives. It is difficult for Ai to establish a relationship between *Ekumen and Gethen* in order to set up an alliance for trade and technology sharing. The people of *Gethen* find him as a sexual pervert. He is an alien in the same culture, and the people of *Gethen* are strange to him as there are no fixed gender roles. This confusion arises because his cognition is based on traditional gender roles.

Ursula K. Le Guin is a feminist writer who promotes issues related to gender, identity, and social structure in a patriarchal society through her writings. The primary text is part of her Hainish Cycle, a series of loosely connected novels set in a shared universe. In this novel, the novelist aims to critique and challenge the rigidity of gender roles as perceived in contemporary society. The Gethenians' ambisexuality serves as a thought experiment to explore the implications of a society where gender is fluid and changes with sexual cycles. This setup allows Le Guin to question the stereotypes and limitations imposed by fixed gender roles. The novel also delves into cultural anthropology and sociology. It examines how gender impacts social structures, politics, and relationships by presenting a society where individuals are neither distinctly male nor female except during their sexual cycles, known as Kemmering. Depicting a society without fixed gender identities, the novel challenges the cultural constructs of gender roles that define masculinity and femininity. The

protagonist, Genly Ai, is a human envoy who struggles to understand and communicate with the Gethenians due to his own ingrained gender biases. His journey as an investigative tool helps for the gender influence in interpersonal relationships in societal dynamics.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's seminal work the exploration of gender roles transcends mere narrative conventions to offer a profound commentary on societal constructs and human identity. Le Guin's radical departure from normative concepts of gender prompts a re-evaluation of the entrenched roles assigned to men and women in both literature and society. Through the protagonist Genly Ai's journey and interactions with the Gethenians, Le Guin navigates themes of fluidity, ambiguity, and the arbitrary nature of gender distinctions. Presenting a world where individuals can embody both traditionally masculine and feminine traits, Le Guin reconsiders the gender rigidity. Implications of such rigidity on personal freedom and societal harmony explores how Guin narrative serves as a critique of essentialist views of gender.

In a close analysis of Le Guin's narrative techniques, character development, and thematic exploration, this thesis demonstrates how Guin's writing subverts a traditional gender roles and challenges readers to envision a more egalitarian and liberated future. Examining the implications of Le Guin's literary choices within the context of her time and our contemporary understanding of gender, this study seeks to illuminate the novel's enduring relevance in shaping discussions on gender politics and identity in speculative fiction.

The thesis work explores innovative concepts of gender roles and identity. The study examines various scholarly perspectives on how Le Guin subverts traditional gender roles through the unique society of Gethen. She focuses on gender identity

with cultural implications, and psychological dimensions. This experimental fiction reflects contemporary Cold War tensions of the feminist movement. It anticipates future worlds and their cultural civilization. It envisions a new world of equality where gender roles are absent. Genly Ai also discusses the sharing of technology and the development of entrepreneurship. Similarly, the feminist movement, at its peak, influences the narrative. All aspects of human life become cumulative forces to understand and address appropriately. In this way, the writer imagines a fictional world without discrimination, aligning with the expectations of the feminist movement. Different cultures are shaped by social norms. Genly Ai struggles to understand the sexuality culture of the nation. He is confused about the people, unable to distinguish. He cannot identify them according to gender roles. The fiction projects a clear picture of gender roles and social activities. It suggests that the gender roles are not natural but constructed by males.

The novel highlights as an allegory of Cold War tensions and it discusses on political diplomacy. It uses gender role as a metaphor for cultural and ideological differences. The context of the Cold War provides insights into political differences stemming from ideological variations. The Cold War between capitalism and communism led to a re-evaluation of people's identities. Similarly, ideology influenced culture, and gender played a crucial role in shaping identity and political dynamics in Ekumen. In contrast, the fluidity of Gethenian gender roles highlights the arbitrariness and constructed nature of many societal norms and divisions. Social norms and rules are not fixed to one gender on Gethen. The cultural differences between the planets are vast. Genly's culture is based on gender roles, while on Winter, there are no such roles. There is no gender-based discrimination. Understanding and cognition about gender are beyond their concerns. All these

aspects are based on performative discourse. Guin's work encourages readers to reflect on their own perceptions of gender and consider alternative possibilities beyond binary definitions. Le Guin challenges the notion that gender must dictate behaviour, roles, or capabilities, suggesting instead that these are socially constructed and can vary widely across cultures.

There are multiple reviewers who wrote their finding right after the publication of Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Mona Fayad, in her research topic "Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin's Critique of Representation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*," Le Guin exposes, "The "blindness" of scientific "neutrality" to its own cultural biases. Ai as anthropologist, observer, and envoy exemplifies the limitation of a discourse" (72). In this way, the Ai-created body used in Guian's experimental narrative functions as a vehicle for illustrating traditional society's perceptions and gender roles. She claims, "Guin reveals Ai for what he really is - not a "neutral" observer, but rather, a story-teller, one that invents, and in inventing, reveals, not the other, but himself" (73). It suggests that portraying the feminine as benign or nurturing represents a positive shift from the traditional depiction of women as dangerous temptresses in science fiction. It reflects an evolution towards more nuanced and less negative portrayals of female characters in the genre.

Martin Bickman, in his research "Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Form and Content," explores that "The whole scheme of the work consisted in the opposition of the two worlds: the unreal world of books of chivalry, the ordinary everyday world of the seventeenth century" (45). In this regard, K. L. Guian's writing resists the conventional notion of gender identity by subverting gender through the representative character Genly Ai to show the real body narrative in modern society.

Kayla B. Stephenson, in his article entitled “One’s a Crowd: Gendered Language in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*,” examines how the science-fiction novel deals with the idea that there is no such thing as a gender in traditional society. The role of domination and exploitation based on one's gender subjectivity does not exist on the margins of society. He claims, “The left hand of darkness was meant to be an exploration of society without gender constraints, yet the result still constraints to our perception of reproduction” (32). In this respect, women are criticising their identity and position that existed in traditional society by writing and creating a new gender identity. It reveals the reality of Ursula’s writing that explores an imaginative society where the role of gender does not foreshow any individual in the name of sex.

Shu-yuan Chang, in his review article “A New Genesis: Rethinking Gender Expression in Ursula K. Le Guin’s, *The Left Hand of Darkness*,” presents the world from the perspective of heterosexual identity. The homogeneous nature of man on the earth are falsifying the nature of domination, suppression, and social narrative. The writer creates a planet like earth to observe the reality of traditional society. Evidently, he contends, “Ai observes everything on Gethen from an Earth-like perspective; in other words, he tends to judge the society from a heterosexual perspective” (77). The aforementioned line reflects Genly Ai’s views regarding the sex-centred disparities in Gethen and Ekumen. It is clear how gender and identity shape the society from male perspective. He elaborates, “Eve is created in accordance with the image of submission and obedience. She is not allowed to be smarter or more brilliant than her male partner Adam. Accordingly, woman is considered inferior and is defined as the other to man” (2). In this respect, the mythological story from the Bible also blames Eve for eating the forbidden apple. This concept shows that women are inferior from

the period of gods and goddesses. Eve is not allowed to make decisions by herself and stays under the shadow of Adam. After the distinctions in sex and gender expression between men and women are resolved. Women struggle to uncover their true selves beneath gender norms.

Virginia Kashyap, in her article “The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin as feminist fantasy writing,” shows that there is no any fix gender in human life, this only the perception of the society. She contends:

Humanlike 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 human can be seen from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through to this day, which includes women being labelled as the weaker gender. (4)

This shows that society presents gender according to the environment in which they live. In Ursula’s work, the character Genly Ai is from earth, so he was surprised and got confused by seeing the Gethenian sexual cycle *Kemmer*. Another main character on the Gethen planet, called Estraven, is also confused about the sexual nature of Terrain.

Emre Say, in his book review title *Defiance of Patriarchy in LeGuin’s The Left Hand of Darkness*, argues the instabilities in gender and the imposition of patriarchy through the non- masculine concept. Evidently, he says, “There is no stability in sexual identities, patriarchy’s bid for the subjugation of the non-masculine on the basis of imposed gender roles is inconceivable- let alone be blatantly insolent” (295). This way, the Ai-created body used in Guian's experimental narrative functions as a vehicle for illustrating traditional society's perceptions and gender roles. Further he argues, “The imposed sexual edict involves heterosexuality in the novel’s context and

relevant gender roles issuing from this ‘officially acknowledged and approved’ heterosexuality” (85). It suggests that the fluidity of Gethenian gender makes readers rethink their gender biases. The novel presents a society where gender does not determine identity or roles.

Mascha Helene Lange, in his article topic emphasizes, the reader attention to provoke the concept of male and female. It shows the concept of gender to widen in broad lenses. He says, “The Left Hand of Darkness provokes readers to deliberate on the necessity of categories such as male and female, but it is not free from discourses that naturalize sex itself and needs to be read critically. A critical reading can be achieved, as explicated in this essay, through an ‘intersex lens” (136). In this aspect, the novel also delves into the psychological and emotional aspects of gender fluidity, particularly through the relationship between the protagonist, Genly Ai, and the Gethenian, Estravan. Their evolving bond highlights the potential for deeper connections when freed from conventional gender constraints and this is the pillar to critically evaluate the term.

Roy Schwartzman, in his research paper entitled “Engenderneered Machines in Science Fiction Film,” claims the face value of individual aligns with the view of masculinity and femininity: “At face value, the alignment of the feminine with the benign seems an advance from the role of the feminine temptress that has plagued science fiction novels, stories, films, and series” (82). It points out that showing women as caring is a change from how they were often shown as dangerous in science fiction. This shift brings a fairer and more balanced view of female characters.

William Sims Bainbridge publication of research title “Women in Science Fiction,” says though traditionally science fiction was used to promote science and technology, women authors have chosen this genre to analyze current sex roles and

advocate for change. He reveals, “Women authors have made science fiction a medium for analysis of current sex roles and for advocacy of change. But, traditionally, the effect of science fiction was to promote positive attitudes toward scientific and technological progress” (1091). In this respect, women are criticising their identity and position that existed in traditional society by writing and creating a new gender identity.

Darkon Suvin, asserts in his article “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” asserts science fiction is popular nowadays because of its persuasion of new sets of values and its significance for the cultural effect, which goes beyond statistical data and follows the subjective meaning. He illustrates:

Thus, it is not only the basic human and humanizing curiosity that gives birth to science fiction. Besides an undirected inquisitiveness, a semantic game without a clear referent, this genre has always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence, or other aspect of the Supreme Good or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary. (374)

It suggests that science fiction is driven by two primary forces: curiosity and the search for deeper meaning. It arises not only from a basic, undirected inquisitiveness but also from a hope to find an ideal whether that be a perfect society, intelligence, or form of goodness in the unknown. At the same time, it reflects a fear of encountering the opposite of this ideal, revealing a tension between hope and revulsion that shapes the genre. Thus, science fiction goes beyond traditional boundaries in terms of content and style.

All the reviewers make a critical review with insightful meaning and the message. They deal with the issue of gender roles. Women are often portrayed as

having limited roles and are defined by characteristics such as submissiveness, shyness, inferiority, weakness, and helplessness. They are seen as dependent on men for support. Such attributes are imposed on the female body and used to define what it means to be a woman. Men exhibiting characteristics traditionally associated with femininity are assumed to be female. Masculine traits are typically defined as bravery, power, boldness, and intellectual capability. However, this thesis explores the proposition of a society without gender roles and the end of gender bias through Ursula K. Le Guin's experimental fiction *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin's subversion of traditional gender roles through the society of Gethen challenges readers to rethink their perceptions of gender and its impact on identity and society. Despite some criticisms, the novel remains a crucial text for exploring the possibilities of a world without rigid binary gender distinctions.

This thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines feminist theory and literary analysis. It examines how Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, critiques conventional gender norms. Judith Butler's theory of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the study shows how Le Guin challenges readers to reconsider social constructions of gender identity. It explores the implications of these constructions for individual agency and societal structures. This methodology integrates theoretical frameworks to analyse how Le Guin's novel contributes to discussions about gender, identity, and societal norms. It offers new insights into the complexities of gender representation and critique in speculative fiction.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* uncovers the text *The Left Hand of Darkness* a clear framework and its challenges

traditional gender roles and identities by subverting the gender notion. Butler argues that gender is not a natural phenomenon rather it has been created by male-dominated society in order to show woman as inferior to man. She states, “The language of usurpation. . . denaturalized and fluid possibilities” (128). It means that gender is not an inherent trait but a performative act shaped by social norms. Detaching gender categories from the assumed permanence of biological sex allows them to become more fluid and flexible. This challenges traditional views of fixed gender roles and opens the door for redefining gender through individual and social actions. In Ursula K. Le Guin book it contends, “Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in *Kemmer*; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter” (48). This matches with the concept of Butler’s, notion of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, using term *Kemmer* depicting Gethen, where individuals are mostly fluid and only adopt gendered characteristics temporarily during *Kemmer*. This portrayal supports Butler’s theory by showing that gender roles are performed rather than innate, thereby challenging the essentialist view of fixed male and female identities. Butler criticizes the patriarchal system, she claims, “Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted” (142). Butler’s theory emphasizes how social norms and expectations shape gender identity. On Gethen, the fluidity of gender during *Kemmer* reflects a society where individuals are not bound by fixed gender roles. This fluidity allows Le Guin to explore how social norms influence behaviour and identity. The book depicts, “They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?” (49). Same is with Butler concept, as she contends, “The

possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (1). It means that the potential for gender transformation lies in the arbitrary and varied nature of gender performances. She suggests that deviations, failures to conform, or parodic repetitions can reveal the constructed and unstable nature of gender identities. Genly the central character of K. Le Guin says, “I was set apart from those nameless ones with whom I had fled down a dark road” (57). This perspective highlights how gender identity is not fixed but rather a politically contingent and socially constructed phenomenon. Estraven’s roles as a politician and parent are shaped by societal expectations during different phases of Kemmer. Butler critiques binary gender views and calls for deconstructing these categories. In the book writer challenges traditional male/female binaries. This prompts readers to reconsider their assumptions about gender and explore alternatives beyond binary classifications. Butler suggests:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (180)

This statement suggests that the idea of having an essential, unchanging sex or fixed masculinity/femininity is constructed through repeated social performances. It argues that these notions mask the fact that gender is performative and flexible. Doing so, they limit the potential for diverse gender expressions and maintain existing power

structures like male dominance and heterosexual norms. Butler's theory also considers how individuals can challenge and resist dominant gender norms through their performances.

In the novel, characters like Estraven and Genly Ai navigate Gethenian society while both challenging and conforming to its gender and political norms. Their interactions and choices illustrate how individuals negotiate and sometimes subvert societal expectations, demonstrating agency in performing gender roles. Butler's work critiques how power operates through norms and institutions to regulate and control gender identities. In her book, Le Guin critiques patriarchal power structures by presenting a society where gender roles are not rigidly enforced. Butler states, "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible" (180). It explains that gender is not inherently true or false, real or apparent, or original or derived.

Instead, gender is a construct that can be questioned and deconstructed, revealing its fluid and arbitrary nature. Butler argues, "The conclusion here is not that valid and demonstrable claims cannot be made about sex-determination, but rather that cultural assumptions regarding the relative status of men and women and the binary relation of gender itself frame and focus the research into sex determination" (139). The lines made about sex determination, but they are influenced by cultural assumptions about gender. The same is with Guin's text, she contends, "They are not excluded from society . . . homosexuals are in many bisexual societies" (34). These assumptions shape the research by framing it within the binary relation of gender and the relative status of men and women. Further, Butler says the question of locating 'agency' is usually associated with the viability of the 'subject,' where the 'subject' is

understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates” (182). Evidently, she argues “Agency is often tied to the notion of a stable ‘subject’ existing before interacting with cultural norms” (182). This perspective encourages readers to consider how power structures influence gender norms and to envision more equitable social arrangements but do not serve as a powerful agency to give voice to other.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been seen as the “Other” in relation to men, defined in contrast to men and often oppressed as a result. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Gethenians challenge this binary notion of gender by embodying both male and female characteristics. This challenges the concept of “Otherness” by presenting a society where gender is not defined in opposition to another gender but exists fluidly within each individual. De Beauvoir claims, “What peculiarly signals the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (27). The book reveals, “It is a marginal world, on the edge. Out beyond it towards the South Orion Arm no world has been found where men live” (145). In this regard, the situation of women is marked by their inherent freedom and autonomy. Despite this, societal structures force them to assume the status of “the Other,” in contrast to men. This illustrates how gender-based hierarchies create a marginalized and secondary status for women. *Gethenians* ability to shift between genders during *Kemmer* reflects this ambiguity, as individuals are not confined to fixed gender roles. This challenges traditional notions of gender identity as static and predetermined, promoting a more fluid and open understanding of identity. Similarly, Beauvoir claims, “Males and females are two types of individuals which are differentiated within a species for the function of reproduction; they can be

defined only correlatively. But first it must be noted that even the division of a species into two sexes is not always clear-cut” (33). The lines highlight that while males and females are differentiated primarily for reproduction, this binary division is not always clear or straightforward. It emphasizes that sex distinctions within a species are not always rigid and can be complex.

De Beauvoir argues for existential freedom, the idea that individuals are responsible for defining themselves and their identities. In Guan novel, characters like Genly Ai and Estraven navigate Gethenian society and its gender norms, confronting their own assumptions and biases. Their interactions reflect existentialist themes of freedom and choice in shaping one’s identity, rather than being constrained by societal expectations. De Beauvoir critiqued the myth of woman as a monolithic category imposed by patriarchal societies. Genly asserts, “I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own” (10). In Gethenian culture, the fluidity of gender challenges such essentialist views by demonstrating that gender identity is not fixed but contextually dependent.

Beauvoir says, “In the vast majority of species male and female individuals co-operate in reproduction” (39). It asserts that in most species, both male and female individuals work together for reproduction. It emphasizes the collaborative nature of reproduction across different species. De Beauvoir’s theory also aligns with the idea that gender is a social construction, shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. While the ownership of the property goes under the control of men, then women become powerless. Guian writes, “Our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is non-existent here. They cannot play the game they do not see one another as men or women.” (49). In this aspect, the writer subverts the concept of reproduction is the

results of both male and female relationship and says reproduction can be made by genetic modification. The primary text explores how Gethenian society constructs gender through its cultural practices and rituals surrounding Kemmer. This invites readers to critically examine their own understandings of gender and to question how societal norms influence the construction of identity.

Simone de Beauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex* critiques traditional concepts of gender identity. This theory excavates gender issues in Ursula K. Le Guin's writing as it subverts traditional gender identities and highlights misconceptions. Depicting a society where gender is fluid, contextual, and performed, Le Guin challenges essentialist views and invites readers to reconsider how identity is constructed and transformed within cultural and social contexts. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* critiques traditional gender roles and societal expectations placed on women in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century United States.

Donna J Haraway in her book, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature* clearly uncovers the primary text as fluidity of gender identity. The Left Hand of Darkness, the Gethenians' lack of fixed gender roles reflects Haraway's idea that gender is a social construct rather than a biological truth. Haraway states that "the cyborg is a creature in a world without gender, a world outside dualisms" (65). This concept of Haraway parallels the ambisexual nature of Gethenians and their freedom from gender-based societal expectations as like that in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

The way of understanding the identity and relationships is shaped by the societies. It remains a seminal work in the science fiction genre for its innovative exploration of gender. It also discusses on its insightful commentary of the human condition. It is a deeply philosophical and introspective science fiction that delves into

intricate themes through its richly imagined world and characters. Through the lens of Gethenian society, *The Left Hand of Darkness* offers a powerful critique of the rigid gender binaries that shape human societies. Le Guin's imaginative exploration of a world without fixed gender roles challenges readers to rethink their understanding of gender and promotes a vision of a more harmonious and equitable society.

This thesis explores how Ursula K. Le Guin uses science fiction to challenge and deconstruct traditional gender norms. Featuring a society where gender is fluid and non-binary, Le Guin prompts readers to reconsider their own assumptions about gender identity, roles, and societal expectations. The novel remains a powerful example of speculative fiction that engages with complex social issues and encourages critical reflection on the nature of gender in our own world. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a landmark in science fiction literature, notable for its imaginative and thought-provoking exploration of gender. Haraway challenges the notion of biological determinism, suggesting that "Postmodernist identity is fully political," (15). Le Guin's portrayal of Gethenians, whose gender changes based on need and circumstance, exemplifies this idea, as their identity is not dictated by fixed sexual characteristics, but rather by their social roles and context. Presenting a society free from fixed gender roles, Le Guin challenges readers to reconsider their own assumptions and biases about gender.

Ursula K. Le Guin imagines a world without gender. Gender divides us into two different poles. A world without gender can create unity. Similarly, culture and politics are also affected by gender roles. Suspicion and doubt create a situation that cannot be easily resolved. Ai from Ekumen is seen as a sexual pervert. He encounters a very different culture in Gethen, leading to confusion and suspicion. There is no fixed truth in politics and sexuality. We cannot identify people by their gender.

Haraway describes the cyborg as “a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (5). Similarly, Le Guin’s Gethenians embody ambiguity, existing between conventional categories of male and female, thus challenging Genly Ai’s understanding of identity and showing the constructed nature of gender. They are hermaphroditic neuters. Sex is a matter of their choice. It ends the binary of gender. There is no focus on gender and sexuality. The preoccupied gender role concepts and power dynamics in Terra put Ai in a perplexing situation. In this way, the novel subverts established gender roles in society. It questions the roles of men and women. It is not necessary to assign tasks based on male and female bodies. Roles and functions are performative and functional, not fixed. Ai tries to learn Gethenian culture.

The identity of females imposed by a patriarchal society undermines their rights. The fourth wave of the feminist movement found gender to be an artificial construct, created to dominate the female body. They decided to erase this system. Subverting gender means eradicating all forms of domination rooted in gender roles. The Gethenians gender fluidity directly challenges the binary gender system, aligning with Haraway’s statement that “The cyborg rejects ‘the separation of mind and body, animal and machine’” (9). Le Guin’s depiction encourages readers to move beyond simple dualisms and embrace a more integrated and fluid understanding of identity. Depicting the female body as weak, feeble, tender, incapable of brave deeds, and not intellectual but guided by emotion positions women lower in the hierarchy compared to men. In this novel, there are no predefined roles based on sexuality. There is neither male nor female; there is no gender. The feminist movement desires a world without gender.

The novel highlights on literary and social contexts. It stands as a pioneering

work in science fiction for its profound exploration and subversion of traditional gender roles. Through the depiction of the ambisexual society of Gethen, Le Guin challenges readers to critically examine their preconceived notions of gender identity, roles, and societal expectations. The fluidity and variability of gender among Gethenians serve not only as a narrative device but also as a powerful allegory for the constructed nature of gender norms in our own society. Through the character of Genly Ai, the novel illustrates the difficulties and misunderstandings that arise when one culture attempts to comprehend and interact with another culture that does not conform to its own norms.

Judith Butler's theory of gender subverts conventional gender roles and identities in Guan's work by presenting a fluid and performative approach to gender, challenges essentialist views and encourages readers to reflect on the construction and potential transformation of gender norms. Thus, the novel serves as a powerful example of speculative fiction that engages with feminist theories to critique and reimagine possibilities for gender and identity.

Betty Friedan depicts the clear picture of post-World War II American society promoted a narrow view of women's identity centered on domestic roles and motherhood. In contrast, Gethenian society in Le Guin's novel does not have fixed gender roles tied to domesticity. Instead, individuals are fluid most of the time and only adopt gender characteristics during Kemmer. Friedan claims, "Marriage, which used to be a woman's only way to social function and economic support, is now a choice for most women as well as for men. It no longer defines a woman completely as it never did a man; she often keeps her own name now or husband and wife take each other's hyphenated" (22). It shows that marriage, once the primary source of a woman's social and economic identity, has become a choice rather than a defining

role, reflecting greater gender equality in contemporary society. This challenges the notion that identity must be tied to specific roles or activities traditionally associated with one gender. The primary text contends, “The whole structure of the Karhidish Clan-Hearths and Domains is indubitably based upon the institution of monogamous marriage” (48). In this sense, the writer of the novel creates an imaginative earth and provides concept of marriage is a matter of choice, divorce and remarriage. It also matches with the Friedan concept of hyphenated husband- wife interrelated to lead a society.

Guin challenges the traditional- notion of structure by reverting the coherence existed, and promoted the matter of choice. Further, she argues, “The old separatism—women vs. men—is no longer relevant, is in fact being transcended” (25). It employs the traditional division between women and men is becoming outdated and is being surpassed. Friedan coined the term “the problem with no name” to describe the dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment experienced by many women constrained by traditional gender roles. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin portrays a society where individuals are not limited by fixed gender roles, thereby challenging the restrictions and expectations that can lead to such dissatisfaction.

The novel invites readers to question the limitations imposed by societal expectations based on gender. Friedan advocated for women's freedom to pursue self-actualization and personal fulfillment beyond traditional roles. In Gethenian society, individuals have the freedom to express themselves and participate in various roles and activities regardless of their gender during Kemmer. This challenges readers to consider how societal norms can either enable or restrict individual freedom and self-expression. Friedan critiqued how societal expectations shape identity and limit individual potential. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin’s portrayal of Gethenian

culture invites readers to reflect on how gender norms influence identity formation and interpersonal relationships. Betty Friedan adds, “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique” (39). It points to a gap between real women's experiences and societal expectations of femininity, which Friedan terms the ‘feminine mystique’. Guin asserts, even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing...” (116). This depicts a society where gender is fluid and not determinative of one’s role or worth, the novel prompts readers to consider alternative ways of organizing and valuing human experience. Friedan mentions, “Females stretch to some extent to show who they are” (95). This is how possibility of gender role cannot be fixed within the realm of patriarchy and cultural phenomenon.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin is a science fiction novel set on the planet Gethen, where inhabitants can shift between male and female genders. The story follows Genly Ai, a human envoy sent to persuade Gethen to join an interstellar alliance. He faces political intrigue, cultural barriers, and personal challenges as he navigates the complex society and forms a bond with Estraven, a Gethenian politician. The novel explores themes of gender, identity, loyalty, and the nature of human relationships in a thought-provoking and beautifully crafted narrative. Ursula. L Guin writes, “The King was pregnant” (51). In this sense it challenges the earth people notion of gender by making contradiction. The story is set on Gethen, also known as Winter, where the inhabitants are ambisexual, able to shift between male and female genders during their reproductive cycles. A representative from the Ekumen is sent to Gethen to persuade its leaders to join the alliance. He faces the challenge of understanding and navigating the intricate social and political

landscape of Gethen, where gender plays a fluid and central role in society.

Throughout the novel, Le Guin explores themes of gender fluidity, the nature of human relationships, and the socio-political dynamics of power. The unique fluid nature of the Gethenians means they have no permanent gender identity, which challenges Genly Ai's understanding of gender and social roles. He initially struggles to comprehend a society without fixed gender distinctions, leading to misunderstandings and cultural clashes. Gender stability is not seen in the planet so called Gethan.

The novel challenges conventional notions of gender and identity, offering a profound commentary on the human condition. Le Guin illustrates that the absence of fixed gender roles in Gethenian society contributes to a more harmonious and egalitarian community. The book contends, "They were all hidden away on the long beds . . . like babies in wombs, invisible and indistinguishable" (93). This absence of gender-related conflict fosters harmony among the people, as there is no opposition between male and female roles.

In this novel, the protagonist experiences confusion between gendered and genderless societies. His previous perceptions and knowledge about gender discrimination change through his travels in Gethen. The narrative primarily focuses on Genly's interactions with Estraven, a Gethenian politician who becomes his ally and guide. Through their journey across the frozen wilderness of Gethen, they develop a deep and complex relationship that transcends cultural differences and challenges their own preconceptions about gender and identity. Genly Ai observes that the lack of fixed gender roles in Gethenian politics leads to a more stable and cooperative society. The absence of a "king-of-the-hill mentality" fosters a political environment based on consensus rather than competition (53). Le Guin uses the novel

to explore themes of cultural relativism, the nature of power, and the impact of societal norms on individual freedom. The fluidity of gender on Gethen allows her to delve into questions about how gender influences social roles, relationships, and political dynamics. The novel also touches on broader themes such as loyalty, betrayal, and the complexities of communication between different cultures.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* can be analyzed through various feminist theoretical frames, enriching our understanding of how Ursula K. Le Guin subverts gender identity within the novel: Queer Theory and Androgyny: Queer theory challenges binary notions of gender and sexuality, focusing on fluidity and fluid beings who only manifest gender during Kemmer. This challenges the heterosexual matrix, a concept in queer theory that posits society's organization around heterosexuality as normative and privileged. Presenting a society where gender is fluid and not fixed, Le Guin critiques the rigidity of gender binaries and opens up possibilities for queer identities and experiences. This discussion highlights how Le Guin uses the relationship between Genly and Estravan to delve into the complexities of gender and identity, challenging readers to rethink normative assumptions about these concepts. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* explores the intricate relationship between Genly Ai and Estravan on the planet Gethen, where inhabitants are fluid and only adopt male or female sexual characteristics during their Kemmer cycle.

Estravan, initially seen as an enigma by Genly due to their fluid nature, becomes crucial in his journey toward understanding and acceptance. Their relationship transcends physical and cultural barriers, allowing Le Guin to explore themes of empathy, identity, and the impact of rigid gender norms on society. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* subverts traditional gender norms by

presenting a society where gender is fluid and non-binary. The novel is set on the planet Gethen, where inhabitants are fluid and only adopt gendered characteristics during brief periods of sexual activity known as “Kemmer.” This unique characteristic of the Gethenians challenges the binary gender constructs prevalent in most human societies. As the protagonist, Genly Ai, navigates this unfamiliar world, the narrator reflects, “Your mission here is to . . . alliance between Gethen and Ekumen” (12). This statement highlights the initial difficulty for an outsider to comprehend a society without fixed gender roles. Initially, he tries to distinguish gender differences as in Ekumen but fails, leading to confusion. Later, he realizes that a society can exist without gender and such a society can be sustainable in terms of politics and harmony.

Gethenian society’s lack of permanent gender distinctions leads to a community where gender-based discrimination and power imbalances are non-existent. This setting provides a stark contrast to the gender hierarchies on Earth. Le Guin questions, “The women looked like pregnant Gethenians, but with larger breasts. Do they differ much from your sex in mind behavior? Are they like a different species?” (115). Depicting a society where gender fluidity is the norm, Le Guin critiques the rigid gender roles and power dynamics that dominate human societies. Le Guin’s depiction of the Gethenians’ Kemmer, during which individuals can become either male or female, underscores the fluidity of gender and the potential for a more egalitarian social structure. The novel states, “Kemmer is not always played by pairs. Pairing seems to be the commonest custom, but in the Kemmer houses of towns and cities groups may form and intercourse take place promiscuously among the males and females of the group” (82). This biological process disrupts the concept of fixed gender identity and suggests that many societal norms related to gender are culturally constructed rather than biologically determined.

Genly Ai experiences different political situations in Gethen and illustrates the profound impact on culture while encountering a society without fixed gender roles. He notes, “Yet the very lack of fixed and determined roles, the absence of the king-of-the-hill mentality, made their politics stable, and their lives harmonious” (146). Genly’s gradual understanding and acceptance of Gethenian gender fluidity reflect a broader theme of personal and societal transformation when traditional gender norms are questioned and redefined.

Le Guin uses the interactions between Genly Ai and the Gethenians to explore the performative nature of gender. Depicting a society where individuals are not confined to specific gender roles, she invites readers to consider the ways in which their own perceptions of gender influence their interactions and relationships. The novel suggests that embracing gender fluidity can lead to a more inclusive and equitable world. In one poignant moment, Genly reflects, “Put my head in my hands a moment. Brought up in the wide-open, free-wheeling society of Earth, I would never master the protocol, or the impassivity, so valued by Karhidiers” (13). In this moment, Genly realizes that Estravan’s identity transcends gender, recognizing him as a person rather than a mere gendered individual. This shift in perspective enhances Genly’s understanding of both Estravan and the broader Gethenian society, fostering deeper empathy and insight. This realization marks a significant shift in Genly’s understanding of gender and humanity.

In conclusion, this thesis encourages contemporary society to envision alternative possibilities beyond rigid gender binaries, inviting us to reconsider how we define and perceive gender in relation to identity, behaviors, and societal roles. Le Guin’s narrative underscores the importance of empathy, understanding, and flexibility in navigating cultural and gender diversity. The achievement of this thesis

lies in its compelling storytelling, vivid world-building, and profound exploration of gender as a social construct. It encourages readers to reflect critically on the limitations of fixed gender roles and consider the potential for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of gender in both fiction and reality. Through *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin leaves a lasting legacy of challenging norms, pushing boundaries, and inspiring conversations about the complexities of gender and identity that resonate far beyond the pages of the novel.

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