Research Article

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

Kashfia Israt ⓘD ✉

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

Abstract

This article explores Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* which has had a significant impact on current gender discourse by challenging traditional binary conceptions of gender. Set in the fictional world of Gethen, inhabited by Gethenians with ambisexual traits, Le Guin questions the rigidity of gender categories and considers alternative understandings of gender. This study applies feminist and queer theories to analyse how gender is fluid and shaped by society, challenging widespread heteronormative concepts. More specifically, Judith Butler's concept of Gender Performativity has been taken as the theoretical framework of this study. The research aims to answer two main questions: How does the novel's narrative challenge traditional views on gender roles, and what broader cultural implications does this uncover? The findings mainly focus on how any person like Genly starts to think beyond his fixed and rigid heteronormative concepts of gender identity and what leads to his realisation of the necessity of embracing diverse gender identities in human society to ensure harmony and equality. This is significant because Genly's journey through the novel highlights today's critical issue: securing the rights and acceptance of individuals marginalised and stigmatised for not conforming to traditional gender norms. Overall, the study aims to advance our understanding of gender dynamics beyond the binary through the transformative power of literary and theoretical discussions.

Keywords: Ambisexual, Gender Fluidity, Cultural Identity, Heteronormativity, Queer Theory

Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* which "more than Tolkien, has raised fantasy into high literature" (Bloom 1987, p.1) has established her status as a major science-fiction writer (Spivack 1984, p.44). This novel has much to offer for reconsidering sexuality and gender. Wendy Pearson (2007) asserts that Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a "groundbreaking interrogation of gender" (p. 183) or it can be "read as interrogations of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between women and men" (p. 184). Le Guin's concept of androgyny plays a significant role in challenging societal norms and exposing biases, particularly in the context of the protagonist's imperialistic mission. Mona Fayad (1997) argues,

> In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, therefore, Le Guin presents us with an androgyny that escapes the "Empire of the Selfsame" which Ai tries to affirm through his imperialistic mission. Through providing us with an example of physiological androgyny, Le Guin exposes the "blindness" of scientific "neutrality" to its own cultural biases. (p. 72)

Le Guin's seminal science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be placed beside Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (White 1999, pp. 45-50) due to their exploration of themes like humanity, identity, and society's treatment of the "other". Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* explores a society where gender is fluid, challenging his own fixed perceptions. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's creation, despite being human-like, is rejected by society which highlights the themes of otherness and societal prejudices. Both novels explore the complexities of identity and the consequences of societal norms on individuals. Notably, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a significant work in gender studies since the 1969 novel questions conventional ideas of gender by examining an androgynous civilisation on the planet Gethen. Say (2021) reckons *The Left Hand of Darkness* "as a radiant manifesto" (p. 289) of "criticism of social and indeed, in a wider sense, ontological injustice preying on the confirmation and further exacerbation of dichotomies - at the bottom of which undeniably lies gender" (p. 289). Le Guin examines several issues pertaining to gender, including the impact of a non-binary, flexible outlook on interpersonal interactions and society. It is a cornerstone of gender studies in contemporary literature because it offers a radical viewpoint on how gender stereotypes and cultural norms might be deconstructed and transcended beyond the binary distinctions of man and woman.

Gender studies as an interdisciplinary field of study examines the complex relationships existing between gender, sexuality, identity, power dynamics, and representation in contemporary literature. This interdisciplinary approach looks at how gender and conventional ideas of gender identity affect every aspect of writing, reading, and interpretation of literature. The intention is to encourage diverse depictions of gender identities and experiences to challenge historical stereotypes and encourage diversity. An integral component of this field of study is feminist literary criticism, which looks at how literary works either reinforce or challenge sexist ideas, patriarchal structures, and conventional gender roles. Furthermore, queer theory has gained greater attention. In an attempt to highlight the diversity and fluidity of non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual orientations, it looks at how they are depicted in literature. Through the lens of feminist and queer theory, this study analyses *The Left Hand of Darkness*, with a particular focus on two key questions: How does the novel's narrative challenge normative gender performance and what broader cultural implications does this uncover?

Theoretical Framework

This study, based on close textual analysis, draws on feminist theory in a multidisciplinary approach and addresses the social, political, and cultural factors that support gender inequalities and discrimination. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was written during the second wave of feminism. Andersson mentions, "Anglo-American feminists" during this time focused on the "women's experience as a way to identify and combat patriarchy" which led to "considerable focus being put on personal politics, private lives…" (3). This social shift made Le Guin feel a certain unease that made her want to "define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender", which was why she began writing *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Andersson 2020, p. 3).

Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity has been used as the theoretical framework to analyse the selected text, which emphasises the fluid and performative nature of gender, contrasting it with the notion of a stable and fixed identity. That means gender is dynamic and subject to change over time as Butler (1988) contends,

> In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Performative Acts, p. 519).

It is evident that Butler's concept of Gender performativity rejects the idea that gender determines an individual's capacity to act or make choices. Instead, it suggests that agency is not inherent to gender but rather a product of social and cultural contexts. Gender identity is "tenuously constituted", meaning it is not being inherent or permanent but rather constructed and maintained through ongoing processes of repetition and performance. This echoes Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (*The Second Sex*, 1949). In other words, gender is a social construct that is continually negotiated and reinforced through everyday practices and interactions.

In the "preface" (1999) of *Gender Trouble* (1990), one of the founding texts of queer theory, Butler asserted her position in writing this book which "sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity" (p. vii). She further clarifies that her approach "doesn't mean that all minority practices are to be condoned or celebrated, but it does mean that we ought to be able to think them before we come to any kinds of conclusions about them" (Preface, p. viii). Butler disagrees "with the division and treating gender and sex as two completely separate concepts, in her opinion it helps to preserve the differences between the binary gender system, which because of that, is supposed to be rejected" (Ratyńska 2019, pp.24-25). To overthrow the repressive system of patriarchy and forced heterosexuality, Butler's conclusion emphasises that we must attempt to disrupt the gender binary by causing gender troubles. These insights can further be explored in the light of queer theory with more dimensions on sexuality and gender.

Traditional conceptions of sexuality, gender, and identity are questioned and deconstructed by the queer theory's critical framework. By examining the complexity and fluidities of human sexuality and gender expression, it aims to dismantle binary notions of gender (male/female) and sexual orientation (heterosexual/homosexual). Beyond conventional norms and expectations, queer theory promotes tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of various sexual and gender identities challenging the "heteronormative system of sex and gender" (Minton 1997, p. 347).

Questioning Assumptions about Gender and Identity

Androgyny and Gender in Gethenian culture

Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness questions the traditional gender ideas and their cultural implications through the portrayal of ambisexual Gethenian society. Genly Ai's observations and interactions with the Gethenians, particularly with Estraven, reveal how gender perceptions change our way of thinking and actions in every sphere of life. The genderless society of Gethen is a place without gender discrimination due to the absence of the typical gender notion of heteronormativity in their culture. Genly struggles with rigid cultural prejudices and gender preconceptions as he traverses the intricacies of the androgynous Gethen.

In the novel, Gethenians are androgynous beings, and their society operates without fixed gender identities for most of the time. Exceptionally, during the 'kemmer' period, individuals on Gethen temporarily express sexual characteristics of male and female based on their relations with other Gethenians. However, outside of the 'kemmer', they have no gender, and hence, their society is devoid of gender-based discrimination and biases. Genly who has come from a society with fixed gender roles and expectations, struggles to understand and adapt to Gethenian androgynous culture. His difficulty in comprehending the lack of a binary gender system serves as a reminder of his own deeply embedded cultural biases toward gender and identity which emerges through repeated performances of gendered behaviours, gestures, and expressions. These performances are stylized in the sense that they are shaped by cultural norms and expectations surrounding gender (Butler, Performative Acts, 1988, p. 519). Genly's abhorrence towards making friendships with the Gethenians, highlights how "culture so readily punishes or marginalises those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism" (p. 528). This punishment can take various forms, including social stigma, discrimination, or exclusion. Genly's prejudices are evident in the following lines,

> "Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, lunar, metamorphosing under the hand's touch, changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us." (Le Guin 1969, P. 229)

Through these inflexible views of Genly, Le Guin exposes the biases of heteronormativity which holds that heterosexuality is the "correct" or "default" orientation of sexuality. It assumes that there are "normal" interactions only between men and women. Anything that deviates from these standards is viewed as aberrant or substandard in a heterosexual culture. Queer theory challenges these rigid perceptions of gender identity while emphasising fluidity and multifaceted gender identities with the view to eliminating any kind of marginalisation and the culture of othering due to being different in society based on the conventional narrative. Butler (1988) asserts,

> "Regardless of the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given". (Performative Acts, p. 531)

Genly Ai's Cultural Biases and Transformation

Genly's experiences and interactions with Gethenians force him to confront his cultural biases and re-evaluate his preconceptions about gender and identity. Initially, he tries to interpret Gethenians through his own cultural lens, often misinterpreting their behaviours or assigning gendered

characteristics where they do not apply. As he spends more time on Gethen and immerses himself in their society, he begins to recognize and challenge his own biases.

Except for sexual orientation, the Gethenians are biologically like the Terran (Genly's society) which is stratified based on gender. In the patriarchal society of Terra, women are responsible for most childbearing responsibilities since they are the sole ones capable of giving childbirth. Due to this discrepancy, women are underrepresented in government and World affairs which suggests that, for the most part, males rule the world. In Gethen, however, anybody can conceive, and anyone could end up raising a child. Le Guin argues in Gethen, that everyone is treated only as a human being without any gender-based discrimination. For that reason, when Genly gets to know about the pregnancy of the King of Karhide, Argaven Harge XV, he is shocked and unable to understand their culture and nature. For Genly, it is very absurd to find out about king Argaven's pregnancy, whom Genly views as a conventional man unable to conceive. Moreover, throughout the novel, Genly addresses all the Gethenians as 'he', though the Gethenians themselves are devoid of such concepts of being addressed as he or she. Many scholars have criticised Le Guin for her constant usage of 'he' in the novel. However, this is necessary to point out Genly's perceptions of gender identity which is deeply shaped by the typical gender narrative of patriarchy of Terran culture just like humans. Say (2021) states,

> Le Guin conjures away this corrupt male-dominant 'order of things' by introducing a utopian realm where masculinity, linearity, overwhelming progress-orientedness, and dualism as essential attributes of 'Earthly' existence fade into oblivion and are supplanted by androgyny/femininity, cyclicality, process-orientedness, and wholeness, respectively. (p. 287)

According to Ekumenical Investigators, perhaps because Gethenians lack aggressive masculinity, there is no war in their culture except mere competition and political manoeuvring. This corresponds with Freud's concept of Phallus which represents masculinity or male power. Here phallus (pennis) is the metaphorical pen of an author, which conforms to authority. Thus, a lack of this means to be in lack of masculine power or aggressiveness. This sense of inferiority stems from the belief that having a penis is associated with power, status, and privilege as Freud states,

> "This means, therefore, that as a result of the discovery of women's lack of a penis they are debased in value for girls just as they are for boys and later perhaps for men" (1933, p. 4728).

On an additional level, Gethenian individuals are not bound by heteronormativity as in Gethen, "Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make" (Le Guin 49). Since there is no distinction between men and women, neither group can be categorised as being soft or aggressive, and weak or strong. It is evident in the comment of Ekumenical Investigator,

> There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter" (Le Guin 1969, p. 49).

Genly, on the other hand, exhibits a chauvinistic tendency for domineering behaviour and a distaste for vulnerability being preoccupied with the stereotypical gender stereotypes. Estraven observes that crying is either evil or shameful to Genly, and he notes Gently's face is turned away from him when he is crying as if he is embarrassed (p. 86). Moreover, Genly stands out from most

Gethenians in terms of physical strength, risk-taking tendency, and temperament, according to Estraven. Genly, on his side, notices that "most Karhiders cry easily, being no more ashamed of tears than of laughter" (87). His masculine modesty is a stark contrast to their facile crying. Le Guin again raises questions on the conventional idea of the feminine and masculine body through Genly's narratives of Gethenians' physical appearances. The Gethenians' physical characteristics are typically short and robust in order to survive the severe and frigid Gethen environment (Guin 8). For instance, Gentle claims that due to "his' physical attributes and feminine character, he views his lessor as a landlady,

> "I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature. ... He was so feminine in looks and manner that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four" (p. 48).

Additionally, Genly portrays Estraven's appearance as follows, "He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, with more fat than muscle." (p. 219), and defining the character of Estraven, as "womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit ..." (p. 12). Because of these gendered assumptions towards the Gethenians, Genly initially struggles hard to adapt to a fluid and non-binary concept of gender. Andersson (2020) asserts,

> So when Gethenians project a gender that does not match with their physical appearance, or simply project what Genly would think of as a mix between male and female, he finds it difficult to deal with and it confuses him at first, which is especially clear when it comes to Estraven...[whom] he cannot seem to decide on whether "he" is more female or male, contradicting himself throughout the story, questioning what it actually is with Estraven that makes him not trust "him." (p. 16)

Genly's encounter with the genderless Gethen culture posits him in an ambiguity, and his fixed and rigid perceptions of gender identity are challenged by the fluidity of Gethenians. In terms of gender and socioeconomic structure, Gethenian society is significantly different from Earth's society. The Gethenians have developed biologically identical traits unrelated to sex just like humans. Nevertheless, rather than taking gender into account, their harsh, arctic environment has significantly affected their social structure. Terran societies, as based on Le Guin's observations from mid-century America, exhibit gender segregation, and a significant burden of childbearing duties is placed on women due to their ability to become pregnant. Gender disparities impact power dynamics and representation in politics as well, as men are disproportionately occupying positions of authority. Conversely, Gethenians are remarkably androgynous, allowing anybody to become pregnant. Since gender norms are nonexistent in this society, people are respected and valued as human beings without regard to their gender.

However, despite the initial struggles, Le Guin shows Genly's plight of navigating a genderless society eventually making him acknowledge the fluidity of gender perceptions going beyond the binary. Genly discovers Estraven as the only companion in his risky and difficult mission regardless of his different sexual attributes during the long journey of Gorbin glacier from Orgoreyn to Karhide. He realises that beyond the binary concept of heteronormativity, there can be relationships that matter in life. Eventually, he manages to understand and accept the diverse and complex identities of the Gethenians who are not shaped by the binary distinctions of male and female perspective. Genly's friendship and acceptance of Estraven despite being different highlights the fluidity of gender identities and the significance of non-binary spectrum of gender roles in our society for equality and harmony.

Throughout the novel, Genly Ai undergoes a transformation, gradually shedding his preconceived notions about gender and embracing the androgynous nature of Gethenian society. He learns to appreciate the beauty and harmony in their unique way of life, free from the limitations imposed by rigid gender norms. Through Genly's journey, the novel encourages readers to rethink the rigidity and inflexibility of heteronormativity in the case of defining human identity. Additionally, it challenges traditional societal norms and prompts reflection on how cultural perspectives influence individual behaviour and understanding. By presenting a world where gender is fluid and only temporary, the novel challenges readers to envision a society without rigid gender constructs and contemplate the implications on human identity.

Conclusion

Gender attributes and acts are performative rather than merely expressive. This means that gender is not something inherent or fixed within individuals, but rather something that is actively constructed and enacted through social performances. Gender is not a reflection of an underlying essence or identity; instead, it is constituted through the repeated performance of culturally specific behaviours, gestures, and roles. Performing gender "well" provides reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity—that conforming to gender norms validates one's identity, whereas, performing gender in a way that deviates from societal norms- "wrong" initiates a set of punishments, both obvious (such as direct criticism or discrimination) and indirect (such as social ostracization or internalised feelings of inadequacy) (Butler, Performative Acts, 1988, p. 528).

Genly's internalised feelings of inadequacy towards the Gethenians showcases the cultural rigidity of societal norms of heteronormativity and his struggles to understand and accept the fluidity of Gethenian gender. Le Guin's story about the androgynous Gethenian society makes us question what we think about gender and pushes against the usual ideas in the way Genly learns to question and reveal the performative nature of gender - the construction of gender identity through performance. The flexible and non-binary view of gender in Gethen makes Genly, including us, rethink the ways "gender reality is created through sustained social performances"(p. 528). Therefore, in the words of Butler,

> Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (p. 526)

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