Ursula Le Guin and the Left Hand of Feminism

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Abstract: *Feminist SF starts with Ursula Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), a novel about a planet on which sexuality is constructed completely differently and where androgyny is the norm. Unaffected by the gender characteristics which shape human lives, this society without fixed gender strikes the reader by its harmony and lack of aggression, which makes it far superior to our own. The book is one of the first serious analyses of gender to be attempted in all literature.*

Key words: *science fiction, feminism, gender, androgyny, utopia*

Although, thanks to her novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley is the acknowledged "mother" of SF, most historical analyses do not dwell at any length on a single woman writer until the publication of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). In the intervening years, as Patricia Monk points out, women have often written "under the cover of initials or ambisexual pseudonyms," therefore "women writers of SF have often tended to be invisible, even when they did exist." Monk identifies what she calls the "androcentric mystique" of SF, "a literary mystique characterized by gadgetry, adventure and androcentric thinking," and finds it unsurprising that "women writers who have broken into the genre have, on finding it dominated by this androcentric mystique, shown a tendency to succumb and to incorporate the mystique into their own writing." (qtd by Debra Benita Shaw in Cunningham, 2002: 65-66)

Not that Le Guin has never shown that tendency. As she explains in her essay "The Fisherwoman's Daughter," her change was evolutionary and for a long time she was not aware that she needed to change: "I was free – born free, lived free. And for years that personal freedom allowed me to ignore the degree to which my writing was controlled and constrained by judgments and assumptions I thought were my own, but which were the internalized ideology of a male supremacist society." (Le Guin 1989: 233–4) Re-examination of these assumptions came in 1969, when Le Guin published *The Left Hand of Darkness*, her "first contribution to feminism" (Bucknall, 1981: 9) and "undoubtedly the most widely read of all the feminist SF canon" (Jane Donawerth in Bould et al, 2009: 485).

The plot is easily summarized: On the distant icebound planet of Gethen, also called Winter, an envoy named Genly Ai has the task of persuading its rulers to join the interstellar federation known as the Ekumen. Like Genly, the inhabitants of Gethen are human. Unlike him, they are of indeterminate sex. Only during the period known as 'kemmer' do they become sexually active and each individual can be either male or female. Indeed, any one individual experiences periods of maleness and periods of femaleness throughout life. Accustomed to the strict gender demarcations of his own world, Genly finds the fluid sexuality of Gethen disconcerting, even disturbing, but he is most concerned with his diplomatic mission. His greatest ally appears to be a high-ranking politician in the kingdom of Karhide named Estraven, but Estraven is summarily dispatched into exile by his king. Genly soon follows him out of Karhide and arrives in a rival political state. There he is imprisoned but eventually, after meeting Estraven once again, he escapes. Together the envoy and the exiled politician make an epic voyage back to Karhide, through the frozen and wintry landscape of Gethen. En route Genly and Estraven, who enters 'kemmer' during the journey, form a deep and loving relationship which is only ended, in tragic circumstances, when they approach their goal.

Obviously, the novel wrestles with one of the key tenets of feminist thought: the cultural construction of gender that is at once coercive and contingent. It is through this lens that Le Guin takes on one of the premier questions of SF: What does it mean to be human?

How much is one's humanity shaped by gender? What if gender could be removed from the social equation?

As a result of their ambisexuality, Gethenians are much less prone to the dualistic perception that is related to the permanent male/female split characterizing most other forms of humanity: "There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive" (Le Guin, 1969: 93-4). Estraven, for instance, is "more occupied with the likenesses, the links, the whole of which things are a part," which makes Genly conclude, "You're isolated and undivided. Perhaps you are obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism." (Le Guin, 1969: 222)

This Ghetenian peculiarity is epitomized by the book's title, which is taken from "Tormer's Lay":

> Light is the left hand of darkness
> and darkness the right hand of light.
> Two are one, life and death, lying
> together like lovers in kemmer,
> like hands joined together,
> like the end and the way. (Le Guin, 1969: 222)

David Ketterer calls it "a reversed correlation of light with the left hand, given the sinister associations of left, and of darkness with the right hand," which further points to "the traditional association between the female and the left and between the female and primal darkness" (Ketterer, 1974: 81).

The embodiment of gender, the notion that one is shaped in particular ways by one's sexual biology, is fundamentally challenged by the Gethenians in ways that are profoundly linked to the question of normativity and the problem of recognition. The ways they fail to do gender – since biological sex, for them, is a temporary state rather than a permanent identity – makes them seem inhuman to Genly, while the ways in which Genly does gender, as a being in a state of permanent 'kemmer,' a state seen by Gethenians as a form of perversion, renders him less than human to most Gethenians. Genly, therefore, almost invariably misrecognizes the Gethenians by trying to impose a normative Terran gender pattern onto Gethenian behavior, stereotyping particular traits as 'masculine' or 'feminine' in ways that are meaningless on Gethen. Consequently, Genly's talent for misrecognition works on both macro and micro levels, as he misunderstands both Gethenians in general and individual Gethenians, notably Estraven. As the novel traces Genly's slow assimilation into Gethenian culture, it also tracks a kind of "undoing of gender" (Pearson in Pearson el al, 2008: 77) – or at least of Genly's perception that gender is immutable and immanent – and an alteration in Genly's perception of who is and who is not human.

Le Guin marks the novel's emphasis on Genly's function as a perceiving subject through the pun in his last name, Ai/eye/I. "The eye that sees and the I that sees cancel each other out for most of the novel" (Pearson in Pearson et al, 2008: 77) as Genly's assertion of his particularly Terran subjectivity prevents him from recognizing others as human, first Estraven and the Gethenians, then his own shipmates and colleagues, who appear to him at the end of the novel as aliens, as perverts. If seeming to have two genders but only one sex renders the Gethenians inhuman at the start of the novel, at the end it is still gender and, especially, sexuality that humanize or dehumanize for Genly Ai: "But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals…" (Le Guin, 1969: 296)

The basic point about Gethenian sexuality is that the sex role does not color everything else in life, as is the case with us, but is rather contained and defused, reduced to that brief period of the monthly cycle when, as with our animal species, the Gethenians are in 'heat' or

'kemmer.' So Genly underscores this basic 'estrangement effect' of Gethen on 'normally' sexed beings:

> The First Mobile, if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience. (Le Guin, 1969: 95)

Far from eliminating sex, Gethenian biology has the result of eliminating sexual repression:

> Being so strictly defined and limited by nature, the sexual urge of Gethenians is really not much interfered with by society: there is less coding, channeling, and repressing of sex than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare. (Le Guin, 1969: 177)

If Gethen does not do away with sex, it may do away with everything that is problematical about it. Essentially, Gethenian physiology solves the problem of sex, and that is certainly something no human being of our type has ever been able to do owing largely to the non-biological nature of human desire as opposed to 'natural' or instinctual animal need. "Only a makeup of the Gethenian type, with its limitation of desire to a few days of the monthly cycle, could possibly curb the problem" (Jameson, 2005: 274). Such a makeup suggests that sexual desire is something that can be completely removed from other human activities, allowing us to see them in some more fundamental, unmixed fashion.

Le Guin's attempt to imagine human biology without desire is of a piece, structurally and in its general spirit, with her attempt to rethink Western history without capitalism. Take the description of the opening cornerstone ceremony:

> Masons below have set an electric winch going, and as the king mounts higher the keystone of the arch goes up past him in its sling, is raised, settled, and fitted almost soundlessly, great ton-weight block though it is, into the gap between the two piers, making them one, one thing, an arch. (Le Guin, 1969: 4-5).

Or that of the departure of the first spring caravan towards the fastnesses of the North: "twenty bulky, quiet-running, barge-like trucks on caterpillar treads, going single me down the deep streets of Erhenrang through the shadows of morning." (Le Guin, 1969: 49) Here the premise is clearly that of a feudal or medieval culture that knows electricity and machine technology. However, the machines do not have the same results as in our own world:

> The mechanical-industrial Age of Invention in Karhide is at least three thousand years old, and during those thirty centuries they have developed excellent and economical central-heating devices using steam, electricity, and other principles; but they do not install them in their houses. (Le Guin, 1969: 28)

What makes all this more complicated than the usual extrapolative projection is the immense time span involved, and the great antiquity of Gheten's science and technology, which tends to emphasize not so much what happens when we thus combine or amalgamate different historical stages of our own empirical Earth history, but rather precisely what does not happen. That is, indeed, what is most significant about the example of Gheten: namely that nothing happens, an immemorial social order remains exactly as it was, and the introduction of electrical power fails to make any impact whatsoever on the stability of a basically static, unhistorical society.

> Along in those four millennia the electric engine was developed, radios and power looms and power vehicles and farm machinery and all the rest began to be used, and a Machine Age got going, gradually, without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all. (Le Guin, 1969: 98-99)

As the author will later state:

> The Gethenians do not rape their world. They have developed a high technology, heavy industry, automobiles, radios, explosives, etc., but they have done so very slowly, absorbing their technology rather than letting it overwhelm them. They have no myth of progress at all. (Le Guin, 1989: 141)

The existence of modern technology in the midst of an essentially feudal order is the gauge by which the latter's success can be measured (Jameson, 2005: 277). The miraculous presence of this emblematically quiet, peacefully humming technology is the proof that in Gheten we have to do with an alternate world to our own, one in which capitalism never happened, one in which there is precious little tension and thus no war. Le Guin herself has said that one of the initial impulses to write this novel came out of a desire to imagine a world that knew nothing of war.

> At the very inception of the whole book, I was interested in writing a novel about people in a society that had never had a war. That came first. The androgyny came second. (Cause and effect? Effect and cause?) (Le Guin, 1989: 141)

Le Guin suggests that the warlessness of Gheten is possibly the ultimate function of a genderless society and, by implication, that war is nothing but a result of the fixed-gender nature of our own world. But, as Adam Roberts points out, "without the sexual distractions of gender, always referring us back to our corporeality, we too could acquire a more spiritual outlook on life." (Roberts, 2000: 117)

Is Gheten a utopia? The term 'utopia' causes Le Guin much difficulty, the author discussing it in an essay entitled "A non-euclidian view of California." According to her, utopia has been "euclidean, European and masculine," but she is perplexed as to what a non-euclidean, non-European, non-masculine utopia might be. It might, she says, possibly be imaginable by women, though it would certainly not only be inhabited by women. Using the terminology of yin and yang, she contrasts two versions of utopia:

> From Plato on, utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip. Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot…. What would a yin utopia be? It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold. (Le Guin, 1989: 90)

The conclusion that she comes to leads her to the title of her collected essays, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989). Rejecting the alternatives proposed to utopian writers, either to expose the brutality of the present world or to write escapist, consolatory fiction about a different society, she states simply that she has no idea what utopia might be. The image she uses is a metaphorical one, that of descending into the abyss, the darkness, and ultimately emerging into the unknown, "a form of spiritual death and resurrection" (Susan Bassnett in Armitt, 1991: 62).

> I have no idea who we will be or what it may be like on the other side, though I believe there are people there. They have always lived there. It's home. There are songs they sing there; one of the songs is called 'Dancing at the edge of the world.' (Le Guin, 1989: 98-9).

To speak of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a feminist text, however, is not as self-evident as it may first appear. Unfortunately, *The Left Hand of Darkness* has not gone without criticism. While many have hailed the text as an important feminist text, many have also criticized the novel for its evasions. Specifically, while the text ostensibly depicts an androgynous society, some critics contend that Le Guin has effectively eliminated the female altogether and presented nothing but a male society. This assessment stems, in part, from Le Guin's use of language and, more specifically, the masculinized language of 'he' and 'him' when referring

to Estraven and other Gethenians. For instance, when Estraven is first introduced, Le Guin writes, "He is lord of a Domain and lord of the Kingdom, a mover of great events. His name is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven" (Le Guin, 1969: 5). Le Guin did anticipate this criticism and addresses this gender derivation in the novel: "I must say 'he,' for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter of the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman." (Le Guin, 1969: 94–5)

In addition to some of the negative feminist commentary, the novel does nothing to challenge heterosexuality; in other words, 'straight' relationships are still advocated as the normal sexual condition. This is clearly evident in 'kemmering,' as Gethenians default to male/female binaries and pair up in that fashion; although there are incestuous partnerships, there apparently are no homosexual relations. Le Guin uses her essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" to apologize for this omission: "*In any kemmer house homosexual practice would, of course, be possible and acceptable and welcomed—but I never thought to explore this option; and the omission, alas, implies that sexuality is heterosexuality. I regret this very much.* " (Le Guin, 1989: 14)

In spite of its oversights, *The Left Hand of Darkness* remains "one of the most graceful, intelligent and thought-provoking examples of SF written from a feminist perspective" (Andrews & Rennison, 2006, 84), challenging the reader to think of gender notions in a new light, because, after all, light is the left hand of darkness, and the other way round.

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