

Beyond Gender and Heteronormativity: Negotiating Androgyny in Ursula k. Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness

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Abstract:

In a dominant heteronormative construct, gender tends to refer to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman and the way in which human beings are differentiated and assigned certain distinctive gender-specific socially accepted roles and behaviours. According to popular belief, it serves as a distinguishing critical category between biological sex differences and how they influence behaviours and competencies that are categorized as either masculine or feminine (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004). In contrast, the gender order adverts to an institutional framework of material and ideological patterns carried out by members of a particular group that shapes the meaning of power dynamics between men and women (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004). In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir examines this distinction, stating, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). She also discusses how gender differences are set in hierarchical oppositions, with the feminine being positioned as the "other" and the masculine principle always being the preferred "norm". Beauvoir's argument on gender as a social construct forms the basis for what Judith Butler refers to as "gender performativity". Butler writes, "Gender is constructed through a series of compulsory performances" (Butler 1990). Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, offers a model for how gender roles are assumed by arguing that gender and sexual identity are learned through identification and language. These numerous ideas and popular perspectives thus seem to question and challenge the preconceived notion of the sex-gender binary. Another important conception that seems to challenge and give a totally different perspective to the whole notion of gender and identity is the idea of androgyny, a concept that talks about a particular method for participating in the "masculine" and the "feminine" aspects as a single entity. Androgyny breaks through the preconceived binary model and considers the existence of both male and female in oneness or wholeness.

In reference to the premise mentioned above, this paper intends to critically examine Ursula k. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which addresses gender and identity issues while challenging the heteronormative binary gender fixation. In the process of redefining how gender and identity are said to be culturally and socially constructed, the attempt would also be to present an argument regarding the fact that gender is an insignificant component of people's identity but rather an simulated divergence in an androgynous world that accommodates the presence of the opposites.

Keywords: Androgyny, Femininity, Gender, Identity, Masculinity, Sex.

Gender, in a dominant heteronormative society, tends to refer to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman and the ways in which they are differentiated and assigned certain distinctive gender-specific socially accepted roles and behaviours. According to popular belief, it serves as a distinguishing critical category between biological sex differences and how they influence behaviours and competencies that are categorized as either masculine or feminine (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004). In contrast, the gender order adverts to an institutional framework of material and ideological patterns carried out by members of a particular group that shapes the meaning of power dynamics between men and women (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004). The book, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir examines this distinction, stating, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1949). She also discusses how gender differences are set in hierarchical oppositions, with the feminine being positioned as the “other” and the masculine principle always being the preferred “norm”.

However, popular perspectives and various ideas have made attempts to provide significant arguments regarding the fact that gender is an insignificant component of people’s identity rather than a simulated divergence challenging the pre-conceived notion of the sex-gender binary. In tune with Beauvoir’s idea on gender as social construct Judith Butler comments, “Gender is constructed through a series of compulsory performances” (Butler 1990) which she refers to as “gender performativity.” Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, offers a model for how gender roles are assumed by arguing that gender and sexual identity are learned through identification and language. Another important conception that seems to challenge and give a totally different perspective to the whole notion of gender and identity is the idea of androgyny. Androgyny as a concept talks about a particular way of bringing the masculine and the feminine facet as a single entity breaking through the preconceived binary model and considering the existence of both male and female in oneness or wholeness.

With reference to the above, the paper intends to make a critical analysis Ursula K Le. Guin’s work *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) that Problematizes the presence of both the masculine and the feminine characteristics within an individual, exploring the issues of gender and identity while questioning the heteronormative binary and gender fixation. Intending to go beyond the societal norms, the paper tries to represent a world without fixed gender norms and behaviours which would make us rethink about the preconceptions about gender and identity presenting an androgynous world which pictures a world beyond acceptance rethinking the way in which gender and identity are built.

The novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts the tale of a solitary who travels to a different world named Gethen whose residents are unique in their psychology. The people here are androgynous in nature and remain sexless and genderless for most of the time. The envoy, Gently Ai’s mission is to facilitate Gethen’s (nicknamed Winter) incorporation in an increasing intergalactic advancement. However, in order to accomplish his mission he must understand the view between his own culture and those of the totally dissimilar society that he experience.

Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* refutes that gender is irrelevant to be institutionalised but is “instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990). This self-fashioning of human sexuality is represented by Le Guin in the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* where she pictures a world without fixed sexual characteristics which can rather change throughout a person’s life. This change in a person’s sexual identity implies that the masculine and the feminine characteristics are not integral to human identity but something which is unstable and an artificial distinction. The “somer-kemmer” cycle of the Gethenian civilization can be seen as a demonstration which breaks the

heteronormative gendered norms or what Stephen Greenblatt states “fashioning the self” or Butler writes “stylized repetition of act”. The “somer-kemmer” cycle states:

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days.... For 21 or 22 days the individual is in *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters *Kemmer*, estrus.... When the individual finds a partner in *Kemmer*, hormonal secretion is further stimulated... until in one partner either a male or a female dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role.... (Guin 1969)

Another important argument in regard to the present analysis is the ‘role of human psyche’ which also helps in understanding the free flow of gender and identity. The Gethenian civilization lacks gender differentiation where each person in the society has the potential of becoming either male or female, a break from the general construction of sex-gender distinction. This somer-kemmer cycle which Le Guin pictures in the novel can be interpreted as representation of the androgynous concept, a break from the general construction of sex-gender distinction. Androgyny, in its wider sense may be defined as something that consists of the male (andro-) and the female (gyne) (Singer 2000). It is an archetype inherent in human psyche (Singer 2000). In her work, *Androgyny: the opposites within*, June Singer observes,

We speak of the fact that the bodies of men and women all produce both male and female hormones, so in that sense we are all androgynes. But we are born as male or female, and society reinforces the dichotomy due to which the other tendencies get repressed. The recognition of the androgyny represents “the return of the repressed” and offers the potentiality for wholeness. (Singer 2000)

Le Guin raises another important issue related to gender fixation where she questions socially assigned gendered occupation and positions. Generally, the dominant heteronormative society at large from time immemorial has seen occupation and its position as a means of gender domination where male are assigned higher position to their female partners. However, Le Guin’s Gethenian sexless and genderless lives bring in a society with zero restrictions, a society which demonstrates androgynous lives with equal opportunity. “My landlady, a voluble man, arranged my journey to the east”, the line itself raises an interesting argument for how the two words “landlady” and “voluble man” are used to represent a single individual without any gender specification. For Butler, gender is not contemplated as inherent in one’s body but performed through an individual’s action and is set by characteristics which are considered external in nature. Butler writes, “the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 1990). Due to the genderless nature, the concept of pregnancy is not seen as a characteristic inherent to women only since, on Gethen, each and everyone has the potential to become pregnant. There is no limitation of men being tough and aggressive while women as meek and docile. This is possible because the Gethenian society does not practice what Butler says “gender performativity” where thoughts are not subjected by sex and behaviour are not ordered by gender roles.

Carolyn Heilbrun, an American based feminist critic contemplates “androgyny to be something inherent, rather than something that is created” (Heilbrun 1993). Being a “male” or a “female” in the Gethenian society is considered to be a temporary state, and no one is locked into either one; neither there is the concept of psychological “masculinity” or “femininity”. Le Guin has clearly portrayed this psychological understanding of androgyny from the very onset of the novel arguing androgyny as a part

of real human occurrence. Gently's mission is to enable communication between the worlds, however, even if he is fluent in the languages of the Gethen, he cannot grasp the meaning of the words in relation to the Gethen's culture since he has been brought up in an heteronormative patriarchal society. Gethen writes in his logbook, "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes" (Guin 1969).

Sandra Bem in 1981 introduced the Gender Schema Theory, where she talked about how the behaviour of an individual is influenced by society's pre-conceived notions from a very young age which is seen as unnecessary. Considering the present discussion, Lois Gould provides a real world experiment of linking androgyny and psychological health in his work *x: A Fabulous Childs' Story*, a narrative about a government "Xperiment". The editor opines in the introductory chapter to the story, Gould "fantasizes about a scientific 'Xperminet' in which the Jones family attempts to raise a child rather than a boy or a girl" (9).

The Left Hand of Darkness is a demonstration of a similar world where gender is not considered as an established notion rather something which operates independently of sexual activities. Le Guin comments:

Yes, indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality.... (Guin 1969)

In her influential work, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes,

The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her... (Woolf 1929)

Contrary to the Gethenians, whose sexual self may vary, Ai being permanently male is considered unusual, which in his own planet is considered normal. This sheds light to the fact that gender roles and behaviour are arbitrary and are determined by the heteronormative society which is not a fixed but one which has been practiced from ages.

In the 7th Chapter of the book titled "The Question of Sex", Le Guin suggests how the world would be like without gender fixation. Le Guin suggests that if gender norms and the sex disparities blaming those norms are stripped off from the society, then one can determine what can be said as "truly human". She further suggests an understanding of life where she talks about people longing to meet not only outside but also inside ultimately making them a complete being. The best example to this explanation is the idea of *Ardhanarishvara*. According to the Hindu mythology, *Ardhanarishvara* is a representation of an androgynous form where Lord Shiva (the male form) includes Shakti (the female form) becoming a complete entity where right half represents male and left half represents female. In the novel the writer herself brings in this idea where the lack of many social problems, including war, misogyny, aggression, and rape in Gethenian society is linked with the lack of gender distinction.

Carl Jung's theory of analytic psychology also draws an important role in discussing the issues related to gender and identity. Le Guin's Gethenian lives are seen as living, walking, talking version of Jung's anima and animus. According to Jung the human psyche is composed of both the feminine and the masculine traits where women has a contra sexual masculine nature called animus and men has a

contra sexual feminine nature called the anima. The presence of the animus and the anima is considered as inherent in human psyche and seen as an androgynous entity present in each individual. Ai's outlook towards Estraven as "womanly" illustrates the idea of gender distinction which is socially created and is not supported by a person biologically. Ai elucidates, "Estraven's performance has been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance...his voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either..." (Guin 1969). After Estraven was exiled from his territory as a traitor both Estraven and Ai live the rest of their life traveling together during which they also formed a close friendship between them. When Estraven reaches Kemmer and Ai sights his female form, Ai confess, "And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man" (Guin 1969).

In her work, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf discusses the theory of androgyny where she writes, "an author should incorporate both man and woman part of the brain" (Woolf 1929). She further mentions that, "it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly..." (Woolf 1929). This experience of being woman-manly or man-womanly is what Le Guin tries to argue in the novel which questions the general conception on gender and identity in a heteronormative society.

Towards the end of the novel, Ai's suppressed emotion unconsciously pours out while holding Estraven as he lays down dying: "They shot to kill him. He was dying when I got to him, sprawled and twisted away from his skis that stuck up out of the snow, his chest half shot away. I took his head in my arms and spoke to him, but he never answered me [...] I held him, crouching there in the snow, while he died. They let me do that" (Le Guin 1969). Ai tries to express his emotions, but finds it difficult to exhibit because of his repeatedly practiced social roles. Thus, one can hardly say about the soul what gender it belongs to. But if one observes it keenly, it can be realized that the absolute masculine man bears a feminine soul, and the absolute feminine woman bears a masculine soul (Singer 2000).

Summing up, the novel is an attempt to reconsider the preconceptions related to gender and identity questioning the dominant heteronormative society, intending to go beyond the already constructed notion of gender to reveal a human characteristic which is androgynous in nature. Le Guin through her creation of an androgynous universe tries to unfold a society which has been enshrouding under the age old dominant patriarchal notion of sex, gender and identity. The lack of gender identification blurs the entire idea of categorizing individuals as male or female. Le Guin aims at interrogating what lies beyond gender, "I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by both men and women alike." Thus, it can be said that androgyny is a movement/concept beyond sexual division and the gender confinement towards a world where people can have their free will on the patterns of behaviour being in a particular society (Heilbrun ix-x). Thus, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is probably a fine example that demonstrates and supports the idea of androgyny and the realization in regard to the fact that gender is not a fixed component in a human body but an imitation which has been culturally and socially created.

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