

**Posthuman Perspective in Interstellar Encounters in Ursula Le Guin's
*The Left Hand of Darkness***

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an outstanding work of science fiction, destabilises the anthropocentric ethics and morality enshrined in the cultural, religious, philosophical, and political institutions of humanism. It demonstrates how a human-centric perspective engenders normativity by reinforcing the codes and rules that prioritise only the standard human subject, relegating all non-human categories as "others" and inferior. The novel offers a compelling paradigm shift through the alternative society in the form of the planet Gethen, by relocating the idea of equality and togetherness from the periphery to the centre. The narrative foregrounds the fluidity of gender and identity as well as the essential and participatory role of non-human actors such as nature, seasons, snow, flora, and fauna. The paper demonstrates how the novel problematises the idea of fixity in patriarchy, masculinity, othering, and identity formation. The interstellar interaction between the Ekumen (a larger human civilisation modelled on our real world) and Gethen (an isolated post-humanist world) offers a nuanced understanding of inclusivity and interdependence of all, by rejecting imposed binaries. The critical framework of posthumanism is employed to examine how the novel presents posthumanist ethics as an ideal state of egalitarian coexistence.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Ethics, Fluidity, Anthropocentric, Gender, Identity, Non-Human.

Introduction:

The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), an acclaimed award-winning work of science fiction, was authored by the famous American writer Ursula k. Le Guin. Her oeuvre in the genre of speculative fiction encompasses the wide range of themes including gender, sexuality, religion, politics, and environment. The panel at the Nebula Award said that Le Guin “has inspired four generations of young adults to read beautifully constructed language, visit fantasy worlds that inform them about their own lives, and think about their ideas that are neither easy nor inconsequential” (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, webpage). This novel serves as a critique of ideals of liberal humanism which exclusively centres on human subjectivity by othering the non-human subjectivity such as animals, trees, terrains, and environment as non-standard category. “Posthumanism does not see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life” (Nayar 6). In philosophical discourse of humanism, the “others” are attributed meanings and identity by the human; their position in universe is fixed by denying them freedom and autonomy. “The story of the earth centre is also a human-told story, but it does not have human at its centre” (Chakrabarty 3). This authoritative centrality of human is problematic as the women, vulnerable, and underprivileged are categorised as lower in hierarchy, debarring them and compromising their autonomy, rights, and selfhood. “Why should men want to exclude the very people who make their lives easier?” (Attebery 124). The codification of rules and norms in the form of ideology defines the existence of the “other category”. This other category is subjected to exploitation. “Posthumanism as a philosophical approach involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals. It also calls for a more inclusive definition of life, and a greater moral–ethical response, and responsibility, to non-human life forms in the age of species blurring and species mixing” (Nayar 13).

The advancement of science and technology at the turn of 20th century dramatically changed the patterns of human life by revolutionising communication, transportation, healthcare etc., but culminates in notorious and deadly World Wars at the cost of non-human agents. The philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to do good for humanity became a failure model to answer the fundamental questions about human existence. These frameworks “reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds

discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place” (Wolfe xvii). The authority of the philosophical discourse of humanism is questioned with the advent of the literary theories during 1970s. The catastrophic World Wars caused disillusionment to the edifice of humanism. Consequently, the previous centuries worldviews and theoretical formulations are found unjust, and dismantled in favour of the other subjectivities. The posthumanist turn “broadened the scope of the other to encompass women, nonhuman beings, racially diverse individuals, the impoverished, and even homosexuals” (Byrne 192). The modern science fiction during 1970s initiates a new kind of writing employing the scientific concepts for new metaphors in which the existence of the other form of life, and environ on different planets or universe beyond the real world is imagined. These alternative spaces, particularly in Ursula’s fiction, offer new dimensions where life is portrayed, functioning in an organic order way challenging the dominant ideology of humanism.

The Left Hand of Darkness constructs such parallel universe and temporal dimensions in the imaginary Hainish Cycle with several planets in it. The Ekumen is an association of many planets in the Cycle, symbolising the planet of Earth in terms of their culture, philosophy, politics and religion, whereas the planet of Gethen is modelled on alien society characteristically different from the Ekumen in all respect. The narrative of the novel is told by Genly Ai, a human envoy from the Ekumen civilisation to build the coalition with other planets like Gethen, which is situated at a distance of many lightyears. Gethen is also known as Winter and almost in the ice age since mighty glaciers, cold waves and harsh snowstorms dictate and shape the life and culture of its citizens. Genly is an embodiment of humanist ideals who endeavours to form a meaningful alliance for constructive future engagement with Gethenians. The paper highlights that how traditional social expectations and normative heterosexuality shape the understanding of Genly AI, who perceives the Gethen society from his biased perspective formed in conventional. The novel critiques this traditionality by dismantling it and constructs the Gethen society in entirely different way. Nature is a vital and overpowering force, and Gethenians do not intervene in the natural environment, respecting the autonomy and agency of it. Another remarkable difference that Genly notices is the fluidity of gender and identity as they are a bisexual society. The neutrality of binary and absence of gender in this androgenous society poses a challenge to Genly as the patterns of his learning and subsequent formation of worldviews in Ekumen are found inappropriate and

incompatible to the world he has come to form an alliance. It causes confusion and fear as he is utterly shocked and unable to approach them.

The planet of Gethen has two nations with their own culture and political systems namely Karhide and Orgoreyn. The portrayal of the other subjectivity with their autonomy and agency proposes to inverse the wrong inherited in Genly's worldview. Nature's portrayal as invincible and vehement force that shapes the whole system of Gethen life signifies that Nature unlike in the union of Ekumen is an uncontrollable and autonomous entity with its agency. Even the power dynamics on Gethen is entirely different from those of the Ekumen. "Power has become so subtle and complex a thing in the ways taken by the Ekumen that only a subtle mind can watch it work; here it is still limited, still visible." (Guin 05) The planet Gethen is a dual land, split mainly between the feudal kingdom of Karhide and the bureaucratic collective of Orgoreyn. But as the source text presents it, these two nations are, in many ways, the result of the splintered political and socio-economic evolution of the human nations on Earth, filtered through Gethen's unique biologies and post-humanist conditions. Karhide is a country of fiefs and hearths, bound together by a shifgrethor, and its politics reflect the same organic contingency as the planet's wild, massive glaciers, mountain ranges, and sudden, savage blizzards. It is not a system that seeks to impose its structure onto the environment, but to adapt to the conditions of the Ice Age planet, while humanist political structures seek to carve humanity's edge into everything in sight by dividing the land into provinces, imposing laws, and conquering ecosystems. Orgoreyn, conversely, represents the height of human administrative humanism but in the form of collectivism and strange social experiments of the Commensals, who gather in the capital city to create a more efficient, rational, and egalitarian structure of society. Yet, Genly Ai soon learns the hard way that all nations, even the most enlightened ones, have their dark underbelly. For all their ideals of equality and rational organization, the Orgoreynese operate power through secret police, prisons, and forced labour camps to police their citizens and to deal with disloyal. Thus, the contrast between Orgoreyn and Karhide highlights the potential for human societies to develop around different economic and political structures and how these structures affect the position of the individual in society, and the means used by a nation to reach its goals.

The whole enterprise of the narrator, Genly Ai, in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is an exercise in overcoming the biases of the human subject for which only a

posthumanist lens offers “the understanding of the plurality of the human experience; the human is not recognized as one but as many, that is, human(s)—thus undermining the humanist tradition based on a generalized and universalized approach to the human” (Ferrando, 54). Ai comes to Gethen as an agent of the Ekumen, meaning he is supposed to bring the world to the light of the galactic republic. Yet, throughout his time on Gethen, and especially his travels with Estraven, he undergoes an intense process of unlearning the categories of thought and speech that human and especially Hainish minds have constructed around their unique biology as a testosterone-based, ovulation-less, and sexually dimorphic species. They are like the cyborg “a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (Haraway 150). Because the Gethenians are ambisexual, with their sex hormones surging every month during the Kemmer change, they are potentially both genders throughout their life and only one of them, depending on the cycle, may actually become sexually mature at any given time. Therefore, when Genly Ai first encounters the Gethenians, he finds their appearance and manner extremely unsettling and even repulsive, as he has no frame of reference in his human experience to relate to it. This sense of superiority emanates from the normative subjectivity of humanism i.e., the “ideal of man as a symbol of classical humanity is a male, a he. He is a white, European, handsome and able-bodied” (Braidotti 24). Throughout the early interactions with the locals, he keeps asking them to identify themselves as men or women, but they refuse, insisting they are neither. “To Erhenrang I came as to a city of eunuchs,” writes Ai about his first meeting with the people of Erhenrang. This reveals the main theme of the novel: the limitations and delusions of the human self-conceptualization. Ai, as the humanist protagonist, represents the school of thought that considers man to be the most perfect and desirable form of existence because of his superior intellect. He considers himself and his fellow Hainishmen to be universal judges of value in the galaxy, which is why he keeps insisting the Gethenians should choose one sex or the other so that he can judge them as man or woman. Later, when stranded on the Gobrin Ice Cap with Estraven, and with all his technology failing him, Estraven teaches Ai the manners and methods of surviving in the Gethenian landscape, which involve both of them sharing food and following Estraven’s preparations. Yet, to truly live up to these new conditions, Ai has to unlearn much of his previous assumptions. He needs to become posthumanist. “To become posthumanist literary objects used to exist independently, separated from the human meaning of plot. They need to be there

without being reduced to narrative tools” (Chattopadhyay 131). This kind of journey becomes a revelation for him, as he realises how little he knew about the world and how much he had mistaken for knowledge.

Perhaps one of the more innovative parts of the novel, and the one that subsequent critics have overlooked, is that Le Guin presents non-human environments as truly post-human, fully integrated into the ethical and existential concerns of the protagonists and the Gethenian people. On Gethen, nature is not an object of the human will, to be conquered and turned into raw materials and resources, but a subject with its own will that needs to be bargained with. The planet is a frozen wasteland, its land covered in glaciers, and its landscape dominated by the Gobrin Ice Cap. The cold climate and the wind bite at the bones of the Gethenian travellers, who have to prepare meticulously for every expedition lest they risk certain death. Gethen's nature, therefore, has a will of its own, and the Gethenians respect that will. Their buildings are low to the ground and constructed in a way that offers insulation from the cold. Their technology is primitive and ineffective against the elements. Compared to the humanist environments of Earth, Gethen represents a kind of material ecocriticism, the kind that contemporary thinkers such as Jane Bennett write about when they discuss the strange agency of the non-human matter. Post-humanism seeks to “dismiss the centrality of the centre in its singular form, both in its hegemonic and resistant modes” (Ferrando 56). Gethen's landscapes, weather patterns, plants, and animals all contribute to the overall atmosphere of a world that is alien to humans, but fully deserving of respect. In fact, the survival of the Gethenian protagonists depends on their ability to understand and respect the local conditions. The way they navigate the perilous landscape is similar to the way Estraven talks to the wind — not commanding it to obey them but asking it to let them pass. Le Guin depicts this kind of thinking as the superior alternative to the human-centred arrogance of conquering and conquering everything in the name of resources and expansion.

Furthermore, the religious beliefs of the Gethenians also reflect this particular set of values. Unlike any human theist philosophy, Handdara does not place humans at the centre of the universe or present them with the notion of a creator God. In fact, it is a dark and dreary faith because it presupposes that the universe is somehow empty, that there is no God or higher power that watches over mortal life and experience. The only thing the mortals can do is try to connect to the vast and empty cosmos during their brief time on the material plane. This is similar to the concepts

of materialist religious experiences that scholars have observed among superstitious peasants. The Gethenian spiritualists who practice shifgrethor avoid sex and engage in voluntary drug-induced trances as a way of transcending their physical bodies to experience this connection to the void. Handdara is thus a dark faith, but it also presupposes a kind of egalitarian cosmic order that is evident in the way the Gethenian societies function.

Perhaps the overarching theme of the novel, and the reason why it has endured up to the modern day, is the depiction of the relationships between the planetary societies of the Ekumen. As mentioned, this collection of seventy-eight planets is the product of human history and, therefore, carries all the implications of human civilization with it. But human history also means there are alternatives, and the relationship between Gethen and the Ekumen is a kind of microcosm for the interactions between different societies and cultures within and on the brink of human history. The whole enterprise of Gethen being accepted into the Ekumen highlights the themes of inclusivity and diversity, as well as the ways in which human societies have historically struggled to incorporate the foreign into their existing frameworks.

Genly Ai is the human agent tasked with making Gethen part of the light, but he is also the one who learns the most valuable lessons about humanity and the nature of human society. Gethen joins the Ekumen, but it does so on its own terms. The long and gruelling journey of Gethen's representatives to the capital of the Ekumen and the time spent with Estraven and later Ai are meant to show the readers the kind of cultural exchange and experience that these two societies have gone through. They are both different in almost every aspect, but they both cherish certain virtues and consider themselves to be united by them. The Gethenian concepts of shifgrethor and Handdara are similar to humanist ideals of morality and virtue, but they are applied in different ways. In this way, the whole novel provides us with a kind of blueprint for building relationships between different human cultures and societies in a post-human future. It shows how the members of the Ekumen, who are united by their appreciation of plurality and diversity, have to adjust their thinking in order to incorporate new information and adapt to new conditions. It suggests that true unity can only be achieved when all parties recognize their differences and the right of the other to exist differently. "It condemns the marginalization caused by the incorrect definition of humans and proposes an egalitarian society that values the plurality of human voices" (Kd and Jeevaraj 179). The Gethenian biology and culture, therefore,

become a kind of lesson for the human representatives of the Ekumen. The novel suggests that humanity and all its accumulated knowledge and wisdom are not the centre of the universe, but only one possible way of existing among many. "Ecology and non-human forms of existence are not a mere background for humans to live, but necessary for a sustainable future. It recommends zoe-centred egalitarianism" (Kd and Jeevaraj 179). It teaches us to be humble in the face of other possibilities, other ways of life, history, and culture.

Conclusion:

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a monumental work of art that encapsulates the struggles of post-humanist ethics in a single, poignant story about one man's journey through a strange land. Le Guin captures the spirit of humanist epistemology, which holds that man is the most perfect achievement of creation, but she also shows the cracks in this school of thought. Her work demonstrates the importance of overcoming the biases of human history and human biology to truly understand our place in the universe and the nature of our relationships with others. Only in the complete overcoming of the human will to power we can develop new and better ways of living together in peace and prosperity. Through the depiction of the Gethenian landscape as one of cold, unforgiving beauty, Le Guin suggests that the eradication of gender tyranny and sexual violence is intimately connected to the general egalitarian ethos that is necessary for building harmonious and lasting relationships within communities. Only by becoming aware of the ways in which the human mind and body have imprisoned us, we can begin to move towards true freedom and an egalitarian society. Le Guin's Gethenians are both proud and humble before the majesty of their world and its environment. They live in the Ice Age planet but have been able to adapt their manners and customs to thrive in it. By presenting the Gethenian life as a human model, Le Guin inspires her readers to rethink their own relationship with their local environment, their fellow men, and their bodies as biological prisons.

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