

# The Utopianism of Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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## **Abstract:**

*Ursula K. Le Guin is an excellent American writer who is called "The Queen of Feminist Science Fiction". The Left Hand of Darknes, as her first well-known science fiction, published in 1969 and offered Le Guin both Hugo and Nebula awards in 1970. Numerous scholars and experts study it from different aspects, mainly involving in Taoism and androgyny while this thesis will mainly employ the view of utopianism to systematically analyze Le Guin's utopian thought of this novel and adopt a new point of view to explore her feminist utopian world.*

**Keywords:** Utopianism; Ursula K. Le Guin; *The Left Hand of Darkness*

## **1. Introduction**

Ursula K. Le Guin is regarded as "female ancestor" with English well-known novelist Virginia Woolf because of her deep concerns about gender relations. In order to explore realistic problems, she has often depicted futuristic or imaginary alternative worlds in politics, gender, and ethnography. *The Left Hand of Darkness*(abbr.LHD.) is such a kind of novel which made her for the first time receive wide recognition. She is outstanding for her fantastic imagination and exquisite description. In this novel, she conducts a "thought experiment" and creates a fantastic feminist utopia.

### **1.1. Brief Introduction of Ursula K. Le Guin and her *The Left Hand of Darkness***

Ursula K. Le Guin(1929-) was born in Berkeley, California on October 21, 1929. She is a daughter of American cultural anthropologist Alfred Louis Kroeber and famous writer Theodora Kracaw. Due to the liberal, academic family as well as the encouraging environment, she grows up as a distinguished contemporary feminist fiction writer in American.

Ursula K. Le Guin is a versatile and prolific writer. Her fantasy novels contain Earthen series, Hainish series, Orsinia series and West Cost series, of which Hainish series and Earthen series are two series to be well-known to the readers. She has won a variety of prizes including twice the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel for the same two books: *The Left Hand of Darkness*(1969), and *The Dispossessed*(1974).

All in all, owing to her great attribution to literature, in 2014, she was awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is part of the Hainish Cycle. Published in 1969, it wins both the Hugo and Nebula awards. It is Le Guin's thought-experiment novel which tells a story about bisexual aliens to make comment on sexual mores of human beings.

In this novel, Genly Ai, the protagonist, is a black Terran emissary from the human galaxy Ekuman, a loose confederation of planets, to Gethen, a snow-bound planet. Ai's mission is to persuade the nations of Gethen to join the Ekumen. Inhabitants in Gethen are androgynous which cause great barrier for Genly and Gethenians to trust each other. Only Estraven, the prime minister of Karhide, trusts Ai and saves Ai out of troubles. In the end Estraven sacrifices his life to help Ai completing his task, and Genly Ai finally understands his Gethenian companion, Estraven, and changes his attitude towards the nature of sex on Gethen.

This book was among the first books published in the feminist science fiction genre and the most famous examination of androgyny in science fiction.

## 1.2. The Factors Influencing Ursula K. Le Guin's Utopianism

Utopia, as a term represents ideal and perfect, exists for almost five hundred years in world literature. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin uses an imaginary utopia to further explore gender relationship, but hers has a style of its own due to specific historical and social background as well as her own life experience.

### 1.2.1. Historical and Social Background

Since 1960s, the second feminist movement has begun. In literature, numerous female writers like Doris May Lessing (22 October 1919 – 17 November 2013) and Margaret Eleanor Atwood(1939-) started to make their own voice and fight for more power of discourse; as a result, "feminist science fiction renaissance" or "mini-boom of feminist utopias"(Ou,2010, pp.5) appeared. The themes of their works change from politic, economy to ideology such as gender roles and female subjectivity. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is exactly a representative work under the influence of "New Wave Science Fiction" and the second climax of feminist movement. She creatively "eliminated gender, to find out what was left."(Cummins,1990, pp.71-74.) making a feminist utopia and wrote a science novel from a point of view of a free female to show women's further awakening at that time.

What's more, *The Left Hand of Darkness* was accomplished in 1969. At that time the cold war had reached its climax. Berlin wall, threat of nuclear war and arms race between Western Coalition headed by America and Soviet Bloc constantly increased the world tension. As a result, in her feminist utopia, readers can easily find the source of her "cosmopolitanism" thought which embodies in Ekuman, the coalition of humanoid worlds.

### 1.2.2. Life Experience

Born in a liberal, academic family, with both parents anthropologists, Le Guin has a keen observation about society and she develops a strong interest in Taoism. She even translates Tao Te Ching and names this book *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching, a Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (1997), so in her utopian world, the Taoism serves as an indispensable and meaningful theme.

As the poem in the chapter sixteen implies "light is the left hand of darkness/and darkness the right hand of light", Le Guin names her novel with an undoubted purpose of exploring the enlightenment of Taoism to the modern world. In this novel, every Gethenian is the represent of Taoism. They are

androgynous, in the other words; they are male as well as female just like the sign of Taoism: the unity of Yin and Yang.

### 1.3. Utopia and Utopianism

Utopia was first used by Sir Thomas More as the title of his new book in 1516. This book described an imaginary island and represented a perfect society. Word “Utopia” comes from New Latin “*Utopia*”. Literally it means “no place” because the Greek “ou” means “not” and “topos” means “a place”. in Greek, “u” also can be connected with “eu” which means “perfect”, so Utopia has another meaning “an ideal place”. Chronologically, the first recorded utopian proposal is Plato’s *Republic*.

Feminist utopianism was born with the counterculture movements from the 1950s to 1960s which includes feminist movement, left-wing civil rights movement, anti-war movement in America and ecologicalism movement. Feminist utopianism novel, as its name implies, is a kind of novel “to reflect feminist thought, to show utopian spirit and focus on the future of female and human beings.”(Liu & Li, 2006, pp.55)

## 2. Interpretation of the Utopianism in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Utopia represents an ideal state of society in every aspect, mainly including pristine ecology, equal economics, advanced science and technology and so on. For Utopian literature, In term of time, it usually points to remote future like *Woman on the Edge of Time*(1976) by Marge Piercy and *News from Nowhere* (1892) by William Morris. As for space, the utopian story always happens on an isolated, unknown and mysterious place which is far from our secular world such as an alternative universe in *Men Like Gods* (1923) by H. G. Wells or an imaginary island in the *Southern Hemisphere in Islandia* (1942) by Austin Tappan Wright. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin is of no exception and she uses her fantastic imagination to construct a totally new world.

### 2.1. Unreal Time and Imaginary Space of Gethen

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* the protagonist Genly Ai, a male Terran native, is sent to invite Gethen, a remote planet also called “Winter”, to join the Ekumen, the coalition of humanoid worlds. The time of this story, as a typical utopian novel may adopt, is surreal and ambiguous. As the description at the beginning:

“It starts on the 44th diurnal of the Year 1491, which on the planet Winter in the nation Karhide was Odharhahad Tuwa or the twenty-second day of the third month of spring in the Year One. It is always the Year One here. Only the dating of every past and future year changes each New Year’s Day, as one counts backwards or forwards from the unitary Now. so it was spring of the Year One in Erhenrang, capital city of Karhide.” (LHD.1-2)

So Gethen, this snow-covered planet has its own calendar and chronometry: “Gethen’s period of revolution is 8404 Terran Standard Hours, or 96 of the Terran Standard Year.”(LHD.327) “The period of revolution Gethen’s moon is 26 Gethenian days” (LHD.328)“There are 14 months in the year” “the day is divided into 10 hours.”(LHD.329)

Utopian novels always picture an ideal but inauthentic state. The time in *The Left Hand of Darkness* seems reasonable and logical but in fact it is just a sophisticated time net which Le Guin knits to increase the sense of reality of the novel. As a science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness* uses a fictional time to create a fictional utopia and lays a solid time foundation for the following story.

As for the space, the whole story happens on an imaginary planet Gethen. As our poles of the earth, Gethen is covered by permanent snow. In the article *Outline of Utopian Literature* written by YaoJianBin, 88

Doctor in Department of Chinese, Beijing Normal University, Mr. Yao mentioned “the utopian story usually sets on a isolated, unknown and mysterious land which is far from secular world.”(Yao, 2004, pp.60). In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Gethen is just such a planet. It is just at the edge of universe and far from the Ekumen, in another word, far from earth civilization, as is described by Genly to the king of Karhide “three thousand nations on eighty-three worlds, sir; but the nearest Gethen is seventeen year’s journey in ship that go at near lightspeed.”(LHD.36) The environment of Genly is so harsh that they have never thought about make connection with outside world. When the king of Karhide is asked to join the Ekumen he says “now you tell me why, on eagainst three thousand should have anything to do with all these nations of monsters living out in the Void?” (LHD.36)

Gethen is a fantastic planet which in the Ice Age, with perennial snow, rain and wind. This world created by Le Guin seems marvelous and inaccessible but it is exactly what a utopian world looks like since the sense of distance enables readers to understand the difference between reality and utopia as well as experience a totally new sensation.

## 2.2. Utopian System –Community “Karhosh” and Star Alliance “Ekuman”

As an indispensable part of utopia, utopian system in this novel is simple and obvious, and it is mainly embodied in community “Karhosh” and star alliance “Ekuman”.

Firstly, people in Karhide live in a kind of “island” called “Karhosh”. It refers to the apartment-boardinghouse buildings that “house the greatest part of the urban populations of Karhide.”(LHD.10) This is a form of community in utopian world. People share resources and live a public life, as is mentioned in the novel: “Islands contain 20 to 200 private rooms; meals are communal; some are run as hotels, others as cooperative communes, others combine these types.”(LHD.10) In Gethen, children are raised by public so parents do not need to shoulder the responsibility for their own child rearing; in addition, there is no institution of slavery or personal bondage in Karhide.

Secondly as for economy, they have industry, but it develops slowly and even stays stagnant. Because weather in Gethen is too harsh to make Gethenian do extra work such as building big factories or developing new technologies. “the mechanical-industry Age of Invention in this country last at least three thousand years.”(LHD.29) Many details in *The Left Hand of Darkness* implies the backwardness of Karhide: rough stones which serve as main building material, foray guns, relics of a more barbaric past, and simple and limited food. This implies a key feature of utopia where people in this society live in a more traditional way just as their ancestors did before industrialization and keep harmony with the nature.

Thirdly, there is no war on Gethen so they even have no word “war”. A state of peace is an important feature of utopia and in Gethen war has never happened. Le Guin says that Gethenians are competitive but not very aggressive. At the same time, in this novel, there is a viewpoint held by Tumass Song Angot that goes: “war is a purely masculine displacement-activity. Another decisive factor for this phenomenon is rigorous weather.” (LHD.102) “People use up their fighting spirit fighting the cold” leaving no strength to fight with each other. So in Gethen, “they kill another readily by ones and twos; seldom by tens or twenties; never by hundreds or thousands.”(LHD.109)

Another significant utopian feature in the *The Left Hand of Darkness* finds expression in Ekuman, an alliance made up with eight-three habitable planets on which three thousand nations or anthrotypic groups live. The purpose for Ekuman’s request for alliance is “Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the great glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight.”(LHD.35) This alliance reveals “cosmopolitanism”, that is to say “Ekuman is based on human creature and surpasses race, nationality and stars”(Chen,2015,pp.114) . Members strive for common benefit, pursue human advancement. This ideal

state of society is exactly just the same as a utopia.

In a word, Community “Karhosh” represents a utopian society and Star Alliance “Ekuman” is on half of a utopian universe. Both of them consist of a utopian system for this story. This is also Le Guin’s inheritance from traditional utopian novels.

### 2.3. Feminist Utopianism

Born with a variety of counterculture movements from the 1950s to 1960s, which includes feminist movement, left-wing civil rights movement, anti-war movement in America and ecologicalism movement, feminist utopianism opened a new point of view of writing, especially in science fiction. Ursula K. Le Guin, as one of the most influential feminist writers in the world, first adopted this way in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and laid a solid foundation for following writers, especially for female writers. In this marvelous novel, Le Guin creates a androgynous world, a feminist utopia, and explores gender problem through Genly Ai’s changes of attitude.

#### 2.3.1. Androgyny of Gethenian in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Feminist utopianism novel, as its name implies, is a kind of novel “to reflect feminist thought, to show utopian spirit and focus on the future of female and human beings.”(Liu &Li, 2006,pp.55) Androgyny, as the most amazing conception of this novel, is the most important key to understand Le Guin’s Feminist utopianism. “It was a heuristic device, a thought-experiment.”(*Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1990,)

In chapter seven of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “The Question of Sex”, Le Guin explains the Gethenian sexual physiology. At that planet, everyone can choose to be a male or female during a special period “The sexual cycle average 26 to 28 days(they tend to speak of it as 26 days, approximating it to the lunar cycle). For 21 or 22 days the individual is somer, sexual 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.”(LHD.96) If conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the somer phrase and the cycle begins anew. If one is impregnated, she will maintain female for gestation period and lactation period.

As a result of this strange sexual physiology, as the author says “no physiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more.”(LHD.97)

Through this point Le Guin explores dualism, which dominates our social development, structure and division of labor. People are used to seeing the world, everything around them as two parts: male and female, right or wrong, white or black, and advance and backward. Especially in sex, women were thought to be the “weaker” ones in the last century but Le Guin tried to break up this “balance” and do a “thought experience”.(Ye, 2009,pp. 32) In her article “Is Gender Necessary”(Dancing at the edge of the world 8) she says““The question for my experience is that we do not know, due to the social conditions which restrict us for a whole life, what’s the difference between man and woman except purely the physical form and function. What is the true distinction between them in characteristic, ability, and mentality? I destroy gender to see what is left.”

To some degree, Le Guin creates a utopia for female in Gethen. “ the fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be (as Nim put it) “ tied down to childbearing,” implies that no one is quite so thoroughly “ tied down” here as women, elsewhere, are like to be-psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; herefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else.”(LHD.100) Through protagonist Genly’s observation and thinking, Le Guin finishes her “thought experience” and makes remarkable a conclusion that once gender becomes unimportant, “there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive,

owner/chattel, active/passive.” (LHD.100)

Once gender difference has been diminished, in this novel, at least three aspects in traditional society can be improved: war disappears, no plunder and sex which drives society on is dispelled.

More importantly, she does not regard the dualism as a “curse”, or destruction, Le Guin uses androgyny to achieve a kind of balance between male and female, and Yin and Yang, so Le Guin’s utopia in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a more comprehensive “syncretic utopia”. Just as the poem which implies the theme goes:

“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”

(LHD.252)

So in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in Gethen, Le Guin creates an androgynous world, a feminist utopia to rebuild rather than break down a totally new binary world.

### 2. 3.2. Understanding about the Gender of Gethenian

As an important thread of this novel, Genly Ai’s change of attitude towards Gethenians reveals Le Guin’s appealing for gender equality.

Genly Ai, main narrator of this novel, is a black man of gender discrimination. As a pure man from the Terre on an androgynous planet Gethe, Genly and Gethenians see each others as “perverts”. For Gethenians, Genly is a pervert, which in Karhidish slang is “halfdeads”.(LHD.67) while for Genly, who is used to bisexual society, cannot shake off his male chauvinism and see all things according to their genders, as Genly admits at the first chapter when he has dinner with Estraven “ 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.” (LHD.12) so distrust among Genly and Gethenians seems inevitable and deep-rooted.

Even to Estraven, the only who really trusts him and helps him on Genly, Genly also hold despite because of Estraven’s “sense of effeminate” he refuses to accept Estraven’s suggestion, suspect his loyalty and even hates his “womanly performance”.

While despite Genly’s distrust, Estraven saves him out of the prison and help him go through an 80-day trek across the Gobrín ice sheet back to Karhide, during which process Genly gradually realizes the parochialism of his prejudice and learn to accept Estraven and others like him. “...that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was.” (LHD.266)

So Genly accepts Estraven not because of his gender or his statue but of his nature, his toughness and his persistence just as feminists advocate that woman should be treated equally and they are what they are not for their gender but for their accomplishment.

All in all, through the changes of Genly’s attitude, Le Guin inspires readers to rethink the statue of woman and the right way to deal with sexual relations so as to express her wish of a feminist utopia.

### 2.3.3 Feminist Innovation in Writing Structure of Science Fiction

In the aspect of writing structure, Le Guin also breaks traditional way of science fiction writing which male dominates and female modeled or belittled. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she makes innovations of story-telling in order to express her feminist utopianism.

She waves omniscient perspective with the first-person point of view to diversify narrative angle. There are 20 chapters in all including 10 Genly Ai's reports, 4 Estraven's diaries, 1 report written by first Terran emissary and 5 folklores about Gethen. As for legends, Le Guin adopts omniscient perspective while for Genly's and Estraven's stories, she uses first-person point of view. Le Guin employs different points of view to narrate so readers have to jump from one role to another, which is obviously different from male science fiction writers. She tells story in a subtle and gentle way so as to show female's uniqueness on science fiction writing.

So in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin uses her strange twists of imagination, elaborate arrangement, and beautiful description to conduct her "thought experience" and create a female utopia. The utopian time and space, system and feminist utopianism, every detail show Le Guin's innovation and endeavor. "*The Left Hand of Darkness*, no matter in terms of form or content, shows Le Guin's effort to get rid of discourse hegemony of male, to build female narrative and to promote gender equality." (Li, 2012, pp.242)

### 3. Conclusion

Ursula K. Le Guin, as a versatile and prolific writer, uses her unique female view to observe life and society. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as one of Le Guin's master points a new way to think the dualism, the gender relations and to keep exploring a more effective structure for the function of the whole world. The novel was at the center of a feminist debate when it was published in 1969. American famous science fiction author, editor, and critic Algis Budrys praised the novel as "a narrative so fully realized, so compellingly told, so masterfully executed." (*Galaxy* 1970) He found the book "a novel written by a magnificent writer, a totally compelling tale of human peril and striving under circumstances in which human love, and a number of other human qualities, can be depicted in a fresh context." (*White* 1999 45-50.) In 2010, Le Guin was awarded the Lyman Tower Sargent Distinguished Scholar Award by the North American Society for Utopian Studies. And just in 2014, Le Guin was awarded the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters by the National Book Foundation, a lifetime achievement award. Until now her Taoism, her feminist thought, utopianism and other profound thoughts still have significant meaning for gender equality and deepgoing enlightenment for female liberation and utopianism, as a tool of thinking, is complex and interesting which need our further study and exploration.

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