



Coexist with Differences--A Study on Ursula K. Le Guin's Eco-feminist Thinking in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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Abstract— Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the greatest writers in the world literary scene. Analyzing her works from different perspectives has different manifestations. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of her famous fictional stories. This paper, talking from the Eco-feminist perspective, aims to explore her considerations of the two genders, taking the main character Genly Ai as an example. Studying her Eco-feminist thinking in her works can help people understand better gender relations in modern society.

Key words— Eco-feminism, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin, Coexistence

I. INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) is one of the greatest American writers who is best known for her tales of science fiction and fantasy. She is a distinguished novelist who has been awarded the Hugo and Nebula Awards. Le Guin's contribution to literature is noncontroversial. As one of the greatest fictional stories of Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) talks about a new planet called Gethen, where Le Guin's Taoist views toward all relationships on Earth are manifested, for example, humans in Gethen can change their sexual roles, which is different from the intricate relationships between the two different genders--males and females on Earth. Ursula K. Le Guin, one of the great fiction and feminist novelists, has always been the focus of literature reviewers. Many scholars have done researches on Le Guin and her works. Some scholars analyze *The Left Hand of Darkness* from the perspectives of the themes manifested in the novel. For instance, Kathy Rudy holds that the novel makes it clear that we should try to make the world less oppressive for those beings known

as women today. For Keith N. Hull, Le Guin's greatness as a novelist "partially hinges on the fact that she often poses fundamental questions, then does not offer easy answers; in fact she may not answer at all" (70). And others discuss them from the angles of the main characters and the reality they have manifested of the then society. For example, Rebecca Adams thinks that Genly Ai's interpretation is unreliable. While this paper talks about Ursula K. Le Guin's Eco-feminist thinking, taking *The Left Hand of Darkness* as an example and analyzing it from the eyes of Genly Ai, so as to offer a new perspective for further study of Ursula K. Le Guin's Eco-feminist thinking.

In order to have an overview of Eco-feminism, this paper introduces Eco-criticism first. Eco-criticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology"--the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. "Eco-criticism" (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates critical writings which explore the

relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities. Eco-feminism is the analysis of the role attributed to women in fantasies of the natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature writings by female authors (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 96-98).

For Eco-feminists, women, similar to the status of nature, are also representatives of the weak. They also suffer from domination and oppression and are the inferior under the patriarchal society. Eco-feminists then advocate an establishment of a healthy and balanced ecological system. As an Eco-feminist writer, Ursula K. Le Guin feels more about the relationship between males and females. Many of her works reveal her Eco-feminist thinking. Typical text for exploring Le Guin's Eco-feminist thinking is *The Left Hand of Darkness*. "MYTHS," believed by Le Guin, "are profoundly meaningful, and usable—practical—in terms of ethics; of insight, of growth" ("The Child and the Shadow" 62). The paper will be divided into four parts: the first part is a brief introduction to the writer's life and her work, and a review of researches on the novel. The second part is about Genly Ai's modern dualism educated on Earth, and this part will put a comparison on modern dualism on Earth and androgyny in Winter. Then in the third part, how the process of Genly Ai's hierarchical binary thinking beginning to weaken is shown. The last part is about Genly Ai's Enlightenment.

II. GENLY AI'S MODERN DUALISM

According to Foucault, discourse is involved in power, and the body is the major target of penal repression. Power should be visible and unverifiable. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson 85). But in Winter, there is no so-called "modern dualism". They are androgynes.

2.1 Modern Dualism on Earth

On Earth, a modern dualism between males and females is popular. For a long time, women have been in a weak position in capitalist society, and they have been subjected to all kinds of discrimination and oppression from the male

power. People's opinions towards things in Winter and Earth are different. On Earth, people often hold the idea of modern dualism and people on Earth are dualists. They think of things from the perspective of dualism. As Alison Jaggar says:

Male-dominant culture, as all feminists have observed, defines masculinity and femininity as contrasting forms. In contemporary society, men are defined as active, women as passive; men are intellectual, women are intuitive; men are inexpressive, women emotional; men are strong, women weak; men are dominant, women submissive, etc.;.....To the extent that women and men conform to gendered definitions of their humanity, they are bound to be alienated from themselves. The concepts of femininity and masculinity force both men and women to overdevelop certain of their capacities at the expense of others. For instance men become excessively competitive and detached from others; women become excessively nurturant and altruistic. (316)

Genly Ai is a man from Earth with the conception of dualism so that he views every person in Winter as abnormal. But with his getting along with Estraven, he begins to accept the concept in Winter that there is no obvious difference between males and females because everyone can be a male and a female at the same time. And his binary thinking also changes.

2.2 Androgyny in Winter

In Winter, things are different. People there think that everyone is an androgyne and there are no females and males.

In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter...On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. (122-23)

Gender identity is not obvious in Gethen. Winter is an androgynous planet where not a man or woman is the dominated power because they are androgynes, thus everyone is equal. There is no gender discrimination. Males and females are unified, and they are in a balanced state. What's more, Ursula K. Le Guin is a female, but Genly Ai is a male, which can also be seen as an androgyny of the work. Though Le Guin says in "Is Gender Necessary?" that

she feels *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not thorough enough to bring people into a completely gender-free world, she is ahead of her time because she has tried to present such a balanced society.

I quite unnecessarily locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality. It is a naively pragmatic view of sex that insists that sexual partners must be of opposite sex! In any kemmerhouse 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. (27)

III. THE PROCESS OF GENLY AI'S HIERARCHICAL BINARY THINKING BEGINNING TO WEAKEN

In this gender-free world, there is no power discourse centered on males or females. People there are in an equal position. After entering into Winter, Genly Ai begins to reconsider his hierarchical binary concepts.

3.1 Taoism

Western culture emphasizes binary opposition, while Taoism pays more attention to the wholeness and unity of the two. Le Guin is influenced by Taoism strongly. In Taoism, human beings and nature are equal, and there is no binary opposition because Taoism believes that everything in the world is from "Tao". "Two in one, three in two, three in all". Taoism is manifested in *The Left Hand of Darkness* through a religion called Handdarata, which is very similar to Taoism. As the words in Chapter 16 say about Handdarata:

Maybe they are less aware of the gap between men and beasts, being more occupied with the likenesses, the links, the whole of which living things are a part. (283)

And the poem in Chapter 16:

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. (283-84)

All the words in the poem show the concept of yin and yang of Taoism. Le Guin feels worried about the then American society, a vanity fair, and tries to sober people through the book.

3.2 The Process of Hierarchical Binary Thinking Beginning to Dissolve

Though Genly Ai has lived for nearly two years in Winter, he still sees a Gethenian from the perspective of dualism on Earth. Consequently, he can hardly consider Estraven a woman because some of Estraven's qualities are not of women's. But some of Estraven's other qualities belong also not to men's qualities. So Genly Ai feels confused about genders in Gethen at first.

Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either. (27)

Later on, Genly Ai begins to think of his landlady as feminine in looks and manner; from then on, he judges a Gethenian from the look and the manner, which can be seen as his beginning to change his view--judging a person from mainly the physiological feature.

I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything.

Equality is not the general rule, then? Are they mentally inferior?

I don't know. They don't often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers. But it isn't that they're stupid. Physically they're less muscular, but a little more durable than men. Psychologically—. (285)

At first, Genly Ai could tell the importance of gender differences during his conversation with Estraven. Then when Estraven asks Genly Ai what women look like, Genly Ai speaks more about it at first, but he gradually speaks no more about women. On the one hand, he has lived in Gethen for two years and contacts little with women; on the other hand, he knows little about women, so he cannot tell more about them. He also starts to think about the equality between men and women from then on, which is of great

importance for his binary opposition thinking resolving fully. "...that he was a woman as well as a man...what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was" (297). Genly Ai begins to accept Estraven though there exist differences between them. "But it was from the difference between us...but from the difference, that that love came" (298).

The relationship between Estraven and Genly Ai is based on their differences, which provides references for harmonious coexistences between males and females in modern society, that is, they can coexist with their differences and it is under their mutual understanding that a non-dominant and harmonious world can be built successfully.

It's found on Earth, and on Hain-Davenant, and on Chiffewar. It is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of darkness... how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow. (320)

From then on, Genly Ai's prejudice towards Estraven is dissolved. And his male-dominated thinking also collapses, which is a manifestation of the balance and unity between yin and yang in Taoism. Yin and yang cannot live without each other and they need to gain balance to keep harmony in Taoism.

IV. GENLY AI'S ENLIGHTENMENT

After staying a long time in Winter, Genly Ai's binary thinking has changed fully. And this part will talk about Genly Ai's enlightenment and provides references for gender relations in modern society through his experiences in Winter.

4.1 Being a Woman

Genly Ai cannot tell what a woman is and what it means to be a woman after staying so long in Winter, which enables people to think about the meaning of gender actually. For a long time, women have been asked to bear children and stay at home doing housework only because women are in the lower position such a long time in the male-dominated society. Nowadays, many feminists try to speak for women in many ways. But some of them emphasize more about women's rights only and advocate that women should be in the upper opposition compared with men. But for many Eco-feminists, women and men are equal and women only want to be in equal status with men in society. Though *The*

Left Hand of Darkness is a fictional book, it manifests the current reality of modern society. For Le Guin, the essential difference existing in society is the difference between the two genders. Le Guin expresses her thoughts toward the two genders in "Is Gender Necessary?" that people should not focus on women and the weak, but something else:

If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. (29)

As Le Guin says in the introduction of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing." (13). She is not denying the differences existing between the two entities, but admitting their differences and trying to make those differences coexist with each other. To use Val Plumwood's "non-hierarchical concept of difference" to explain this further:

The denial of difference leads theory to the attempted elimination of the distinction between mind and body (via reductive physicalism, for example), between masculine and feminine (via androgyny), between sex and gender, between human and nature, and between self and other (nature), and similarly for other pairs in the list of dualisms. But in general such a merger strategy is neither necessary nor desirable, because while dualism makes difference the vehicle for hierarchy, it usually does so by distorting difference. The attempt to eliminate distinction along with dualism is misconceived on both political and philosophical counts. (60)

The normal difference is reasonable, but what we should do is to acknowledge that the status of the other is equal to the self, which offers people in dualist society a new perspective in pursuing equality between males and females. We need to coexist with each other and accept differences existing between the two genders. Only by this, can our society be in a balanced state.

4.2 Another Social Phenomenon: Homosexuality

Back in modern society, homosexuality is deserved to be noticed by people. IDAHOBIT--International Day Against Homophobia is on the 17th of May. Nowadays, more people say for homosexuals because they are difficult to exist in current society. So what are sex and sexuality? As Michel

Foucault says in *The History of Sexuality* that homosexuals are also one of the species existing in the world and as Jung says that everyone has both animus and anima, then does a man really be a man and does a woman really a woman? Opinions differ from person to person on that question. Anyhow, there needs more diversities in society. Like the androgyny in *Winter* that Le Guin has depicted, people think no more about the genders and dualism there, so many problems do not exist in *Winter*. As the song for homosexuals "We Are One" shows, we may be more tolerant of them, and be tolerant of the diversities of society.

V. CONCLUSION

In modern society, women and men are in an unbalanced state. Lots of feminists have done great efforts to speak for women and win back women's rights in many fields. Lots of Le Guin's works reveal her thinking about the relationships between the two genders from the perspective of Eco-feminism. And *The Left Hand of Darkness* is such a great work manifesting her Eco-feminist thoughts. Though gender relations could not be resolved fully only by a novel, Le Guin's novels spark our attention "by helping us imagine how to rise above current, oppressive constructions of gender and reproduction" (Rudy 37). Women and men should coexist with each other because differences between them are unavoidable as many other dualist things in the world. As the title of the paper shows: Coexist with Differences. What people should do is to try to accept their differences and to push for a new global order predicated on mutual understanding.

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