

Ursula Le Guin's Refutation of Gendered Traits in 'The Left Hand of Darkness'

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ABSTRACT

In her novel 'The Left Hand of Darkness', Ursula Le Guin challenges the idea that certain human behaviors are fundamentally feminine or masculine, or that gendered traits exist. Firstly, she cleaves gender and personality apart by setting the novel on a planet of androgynes. Secondly, she creates complex characters that exhibit both stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviors. Thirdly, she presents an allegory that criticizes the idea of gendered traits as irrational and unnecessary. Finally, the novel is peppered with subversive images like that of a pregnant king, which are designed to challenge gender roles.

Introduction

Ursula Le Guin's 1969 novel 'The Left Hand of Darkness' (Le Guin, 2017) imagines a society of androgynes on the planet Gethen. Out of the 26 day lunar cycle on Gethen, the Gethenians are asexual and androgynous (in the *somer state*) for 24 days, and develop gender and sexuality (in the *kemmer state*) for the other two days. A Gethenian is equally likely to become male or female during kemmer, and the same Gethenian may take on different genders in different kemmer cycles.

Thus Le Guin presents the Gethenians as a confounding people, for one cannot look at a Gethenian and surmise, leaning on stereotype, that that Gethenian is a submissive, nurturing, emotional woman or a rational, belligerent, agentic man. We are denied gender heuristics. Indeed Gethen subverts the very premise of gender heuristics, which is that gender and character are fundamentally related, and that there are characteristics that are essentially feminine and essentially masculine.

Le Guin further cleaves gender and character apart by presenting Gethenian characters who display a cocktail of both stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine traits. For instance one of the protagonists, Estraven, has the feminine traits of evasiveness, cowardice, and a tendency to cry, and the masculine traits of rationality and physical strength, as well as having sired a son. Similarly the King of Karhide, the Orgota politicians, and various minor Gethenian characters exhibit mixed characteristics that challenge the reality and sense of gender stereotypes. Le Guin seems to be saying that anyone can possess any traits, and to claim women and men have specific and distinct traits is reductive and incorrect.

Alongside her attack on gendered traits, Le Guin also ridicules society's attachment to gendered traits through the character of Genly Ai. Ai is a sexually 'normal' alien exploring Gethen. He is deeply uncomfortable being surrounded by androgynes, and finds it difficult to empathize with Gethenians or understand their society since he cannot use gender roles as a frame of reference. Through Ai, Le Guin acknowledges how deeply entrenched gendered traits are.

This paper examines how Le Guin invalidates the concept of gendered traits through the allegory of Gethen as well as the characterizations of Estraven and Genly Ai.

Gendered Traits

It is widely held that there are feminine and masculine characteristics. For example, docility is widely considered a feminine characteristic and aggression a masculine characteristic. The difference in characteristics attributed to the sexes is ascribed to a controversial motley of social, cultural, political and biological reasons.

Before delving into the causes of differences in characteristics between genders, it is important to establish whether such differences actually exist, or whether they are just stereotypes with little empirical basis. A Scientific American review of studies on sex differences in personality (Kaufman, 2019) found that men and women do indeed differ. Across cultures, numerous studies have found that:

'On average, males tend to be more dominant, assertive, risk-prone, thrill-seeking, tough-minded, emotionally stable, utilitarian, and open to abstract ideas. Males also tend to score higher on self-estimates of intelligence, even though sex differences in general intelligence measured as an ability are negligible [2]. Men also tend to form larger, competitive groups in which hierarchies tend to be stable and in which individual relationships tend to require little emotional investment. In terms of communication style, males tend to use more assertive speech and are more likely to interrupt people (both men and women) more often-- especially intrusive interruptions-- which can be interpreted as a form of dominant behavior.'

The causes of these differences are contested. Evolutionary psychologists posit that since men and women performed different survival functions (men typically hunted, while women foraged and nursed children), they evolved differently to have the traits which suited their separate survival functions best (Crane-Seeber & Crane, 2010). Varying levels of sex hormones like testosterone also explain some differences in behaviour (Marrocco & McEwen, 2016). In addition both sexes are socialized differently, for example being given different toys and taught different behaviors. It is unclear whether biological factors like hormones or cultures and hence changeable factors like socialization are the dominant reason for the differences in characteristics between the sexes.

The discussion of gendered traits is further complicated by the fact that gender is a spectrum rather than a binary so explaining the differences between the two sexes may be a nonsense endeavor. Furthermore summarizing a man or woman as a list of masculine or feminine traits is not only dehumanizing but also misleading because even if there is such a thing as a man and a woman and even if they differ in certain ways *on average*, it is unlikely that any individual is the paragon of the male or female stereotype. In addition, to presume to understand someone solely on the basis of their gender is almost insulting because it invalidates their formative experiences, background, and uniqueness.

Thus even though there are empirically demonstrated differences in the average characteristics of the sexes, the finding seems irrelevant because the categorization of humankind into man or woman is outdated, and furthermore the finding is useless in understanding any individual person. Le Guin uses her androgynous Gethenians, with their complex and nuanced personalities, to demonstrate that a person is defined by more than their gender, and that gender is an inadequate heuristic for judging character.

Estraven

Therem Harth rem ir Estraven is the most exquisitely developed character in this book. They demonstrate a range of charming characteristics that endear them to the audience: Strength, grace, compassion, intelligence, selflessness, courage, determination, resourcefulness, idealism. But what makes Estraven such a revolutionary character is that they have no gender, and for most of the time, no sexuality either. Despite being unsexed, Estraven is an extraordinary and very human person. Estraven is Le Guin's way of undermining the importance of gender, and encouraging a culture where gender is not such an irrationally important part of one's identity.

In Chapter 18 (On the Ice), Ai observes how Estraven estimates both their 'metabolic rate[s]', 'height', and 'weight' and incorporates this information into 'food-ration calculations'. Ai thinks this can be described 'as either house-wifely or scientific'. One adjective is feminine, one is masculine. One is condescending and

even insulting, one is appreciative and respectful. Le Guin juxtaposes two words with very different connotations to demonstrate that the genderization of traits is a reflection of misogynist and patriarchal beliefs rather than a reflection of reality. If the same task can be characterized as a routine, unnecessary house-task or a logical, intelligent scientific calculation, obviously both descriptions are myopic. When Estraven, a genderless Gethenian, performs a task, the audience, like Ai, does not know whether to characterize the action as 'house-wifely or scientific'. The choice of the words 'house-wifely' and 'scientific' drives home that society tends to judge behavior based not only on the behavior itself but also based on the gender of the person demonstrating that behavior.

Furthermore Le Guin calls out how behaviors that are regarded as feminine tend to be undesirable. For instance, in chapter 15 (To the Ice), Ai asks Estraven what patriotism means to him. Estraven replies that patriotism for him is a love for 'people', 'towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks'. He dismisses 'love of one's country' as an abstraction that he is ignorant of. Ai thinks 'There was in this attitude something feminine, a refusal of the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given, which rather displeased me.' Le Guin explores three gendered traits here: women are simpletons who cannot think abstractly, women are submissive, and men are intelligent. The latter is conveyed implicitly, with Ai, a man, denying Estraven's grounded definition of patriotism as displeasing and narrow because Ai thinks he knows a loftier and intelligent definition.

Estraven the Traitor

In Chapter 9, 'Estraven the Traitor', Le Guin presents an allegory about the senselessness of gender norms in the guise of a piece of ancient Gethenian folklore. The tale begins with the Romeo and Juliet-esque premise of a 'blood feud' over a land dispute between the Domain of Stok and the Domain of Estre. One day, the son of the Lord of Estre, Estraven, was skating across a lake when he fell in. He fished himself out and, on the brink of hypothermia and frostbite, struggled to 'a small house set by itself in a forest', the nearest and only shelter he could see. The house belonged to Therem of Stok, a member of the Domain of Stok and thus an enemy of the Lord of Estre.

However, instead of killing Estraven, Therem took care of him, and the two fell in love. A few days later, some of Therem's friends came to his hut. When they saw Estraven, they killed him immediately. Therem was devastated. A few months later, he skied to Estre and gave Estraven's father a baby. It was Therem and Estraven's. Estraven's father named the baby Estraven as well, and the baby grew up to become the new Lord of Estre.

One day, while ice-skating, the new Estraven discovered Therem's house. Therem recognized Estraven as his son, and told him about his parentage. When Estraven returned to Estre, he settled the land dispute between the Domains of Estre and Stok by giving the Domain of Stok half the disputed land. Forever after, the people of Estre called Estraven 'Estraven the traitor' because he betrayed his domain by giving Stok their land. However, the people of Estre also continued to name their children Estraven, and the two Domains never fought again.

The allegory of Estraven the Traitor has been recounted in detail here because it illustrates some powerful ideas about gendered traits. Firstly, the blood feud between the Domains of Estre and Stok represents the division between the genders. The feud is described as being promulgated by 'proud men and umbrageous men', suggesting that the division is an artifact of male pride rather than a rational division made based on facts. This impression is further reinforced when the second Estraven is able to single-handedly end the feud, apparently without any opposition, simply by conceding some land. Thus Le Guin hints that the division between the genders can also be erased simply through a change in mindset.

That is not to say that Le Guin is trivializing gender inequality. Instead, she is saying that it is the basis for gender inequality that is trivial and flimsy. Since there is no real basis for saying that some traits are masculine and some are feminine, or that one gender is better than another, society will not face some catastrophic upheaval if gender roles were to be removed.

Gethenian Society

In addition to the specific instance of Estraven, the entire Gethenian society is also a challenge to the idea of gendered traits. Gendered traits imply a certain division of labor between the sexes and certain gender roles, which are often justified by the claim that such divisions are necessary for society to function. However, Gethenian society is politically, technologically and socially advanced despite not having any gender roles.

Le Guin continues to undermine the validity of the concept of gendered traits by subverting gendered symbols. For example, she subverts the masculine symbol of the king by concocting a scenario where the ‘king is pregnant’. Kings symbolize stereotypically masculine traits like physical strength, intelligence, and virility, while pregnancy symbolizes weakness and delicateness. The subversive image of a pregnant king challenges gender norms because it creates a situation where someone who is supposedly weak, impulsive and moody because of pregnancy is also a powerful head of state.

Secondly one of Ai’s colleagues notes that in Gethenian society ‘One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.’ A representative of Earth’s society finds it ‘appalling’ to be judged purely meritocratically instead of through the biased lens of gender. This reflects how deeply entrenched gendered ideas are, and how socialization has made them a part of most people’s identities. However Le Guin maintains that gendered ideas are just that-ideas, with no real basis. The humanistic, idealistic vision of everybody being ‘respected and judged only as a human being’ represents Le Guin’s hopes for the future of our society.

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