



SEMINARIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN DE  
GÉNERO Y ESTUDIOS CULTURALES

## ***The Left Hand of Darkness: A manifiesto against homophobia***

***La Mano Izquierda de la Oscuridad: Un  
manifiesto en contra de la homofobia***

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Fecha de recepción: 04/09/2023 Fecha de evaluación: 06/10/2023

Fecha de aceptación: 15/10/2023

### **Resumen**

*La Mano Izquierda de la Oscuridad* no es una novela feminista, sino un manifiesto contra la homofobia. El retrato defectuoso que Le Guin hace de la androginia, su uso del pronombre “él” para referirse a los personajes andróginos, y la narración del heterosexista y prejuicioso Genly traen el tema de la homofobia a la palestra. La obra es un manifiesto atípico, ya que no declara abiertamente sus intenciones y motivos, sino que se dirige a los lectores— y les pide que actúen— a través del viaje de desaprendizaje de Genly. La novela reeduca heurísticamente y transforma a los lectores en auténticos seres humanos capaces de amar más allá de las limitaciones de género. Además, al proveer a los lectores con una alternativa positiva y practicable a su contexto histórico de heterosexualidad y discriminación en contra de los homosexuales, *La Mano Izquierda de la Oscuridad* transforma la hostilidad social contra la homosexualidad en aceptación.

**Palabras clave:** Homofobia, genderización, prejuicios de género, heteronormativo, manifiesto, Úrsula K. Le Guin, *La Mano Izquierda de la Oscuridad*

### **Abstract**

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is not a feminist novel but a manifesto against homophobia. Le Guin’s deficient depiction of androgyny, her use of the pronoun “he” to refer to the menwomen characters and the narration of heterosexist, gender-biased Genly bring homophobia forward. Even if an atypical manifesto—for it does not openly declare its intentions and motives—

the novel addresses readers and asks them to take action through Genly's journey of unlearning. The novel heuristically reeducates and changes readers into real humans able to love beyond gender limitations. Also, it transforms social hostility against homosexuality into acceptance by providing readers with a positive, practicable alternative to their historical context of heterogendered discourse and gay discrimination.

**Keywords:** Homophobia, genderization, gender-biased, heteronormative, Manifesto, Ursula K Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

## Introduction

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is considered to be a feminist utopian fiction novel due to its attempt to show a "critical response to an unsatisfactory present condition...particularly addressing patriarchal problems in its critique...and offer[ing] some kind of imagined, an idealized society that is not characterized by male power and focus" (Marcellino, 2009: 203). Le Guin's novel, a thought experiment, attempts to create a society where gender does not exist "to find out what was left" (Le Guin, 1976: 160). However, even if Le Guin "manages to question the actual importance of gender and sexuality in society and explore a non-binary version of reality" she does not attain to fully erase gender (Andersson, 2020: 4) with her deficient depiction of androgyny. The novel has been accused of presenting gender issues that reinforce gender roles rather than eliminate them: First, the fact that it takes place "in two countries with governments similar to those of patriarchal hegemonic institutions" (Gleason, 1996: 7). Second, there is the invisibility of the female experience caused by the overtly masculine representation portrayed in the novel (Andersson, 2020: 4). What is more, the androgynes play roles that "we are culturally-conditioned to perceive as "male": a prime minister, a political schemer, a fugitive, a prison-breaker, a sledge-hauler" (Le Guin: 1976, 170). Third, using a standard male quest narrative structure reproduces patriarchal ideology (Libretti, 2004: 306). Fourth, Le Guin's linguistic choices. Using the pronoun "he" to refer to the menwomen characters is considered erroneous. Traditional English-gendered pronouns and nouns "come short when dealing with these aliens" (Lande, 2014: 17). Also, they reproduce the patriarchal discourse (Marcellino, 2009: 208) and cause "the reader to see the Gethenians as men rather than androgynes" (Gleason, 1996: 8). The author defended her choice of the pronoun "he" with an allegation of neutrality, as she was unconscious of the fact that it was affected "the implicit gender bias built into language" (Rashley, 2007: 24). Fifth, Le Guin unconsciously typecasts the characters in her novel within the female/male boxes: the fact that Estraven is encoded and interpreted by Genly as a woman does little to redefine gender categories since it drives the reader to project his<sup>1</sup> learned and biased gender identities (Lande, 2014: 19).

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin's audience was "almost exclusively young, male readers" (Marcellino 2009, 204).

Finally, the fact that Genly, the narrator, projects “his language and ideas onto these aliens and their alien culture” (Lande, 2014: 20) adds to Le Guin’s experiment failure, for Genly’s language and ideas are gender biased.

The critique attacked *The Left Hand of Darkness* for failing to construct an androgynous world. Le Guin made several attempts at changing some parts of the novel to meet the criticism. Indeed, she spent most of her career trying to enhance the understanding of her novel, either by giving explanations of her intentions in “Is Gender Necessary?” and “Is Gender Necessary (Redux)?” or in the introductions to the diverse Anniversary Editions of a book which was indefectibly “haunted and bedeviled by the gender of its pronouns” (Le Guin: 1994, 287). According to Gleason, “it is impossible to be sure that one’s “androgyny” is free from any vestiges of one’s early enculturated gender identity” (1996, 10). Le Guin was unaware of her enculturation and did not succeed in erasing gender, which “is used both as a plot device and a motif for character development through the novel” (Andersson, 2020: 4). Although Le Guin claimed that “the real subject of the book is not feminism or sex or gender or anything of the sort; as far as I can see, it is a book about betrayal and fidelity” (Le Guin: 1976, 157), genderization takes control over Genly’s –and the reader’s– interpretation of the events and characters. For Marcellino, the choice of a masculine narrator displaying his masculine point of view is positive, for it engages the readers “into a rhetorical process of challenging gender-essentialist assumptions” (2009: 207) that persuades them to abandon their heterosexism.

The social context of the 60s must indefectibly have influenced Le Guin’s psyche: heterogendered discourse pervaded society and homosexuals were not only discriminated against but also considered second-class citizens because of their sexual preferences.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there were political campaigns of discrimination against gay people conducted in the United States at the federal, state, and local levels of government. In each of these campaigns, attempts were made to portray homosexuals as abnormal and dangerous to society. This ideology fueled and justified the discriminatory practices advocated by the campaigns, which were carried out in part to reassert traditional values and prevent social change (Sullivan 1987, Qtd. in Sullivan, 1990, 203).

Homosexual sex was illegal in every state but Illinois, and not one law—federal, state, or local—protected gay men or women from being fired or denied housing (Carter, 2004: 1). Gays, social pariahs, were forced to disguise their inclinations to dodge prejudice and job dismissals. Police harassed and arrested gays, and the FBI and other law enforcement agencies kept files with persons of interest—suspected homosexuals (Sullivan, 1990: 203). Homosexuality was considered a sickness and criminalized through sodomy laws—not repealed until 1975. Also, reports appearing in the press contributed to the stigmatization of gay people (Sullivan, 1990: 203). The gay rights groups—which began in the early 1950s—had great difficulty in maintaining a supporting membership because of the homophobic environment of the period, which strongly discouraged the

expression of homosexuality (Sullivan, 1990: 204). In 1968, the article “U.S. Homosexuals Gain in Trying to Persuade to Accept Them”<sup>2</sup> exposed the abuses and discrimination posed on the gay community together with signs of changing attitudes—a timid move toward repealing the laws on homosexual conduct, and a growing political, ecumenical and heterosexual support. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in March 1969, right before the Stonewall riots<sup>3</sup>—a series of protests involving homosexual and heterosexual demonstrators against the police that routinely raided the Stonewall Inn for being a gay bar.

## 1. A manifesto against homophobia

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a manifesto is “a written statement publicly declaring the intentions, motives or views of its user”. A manifesto addresses an audience and asks them to take action and change something. It is born from the desire to eliminate injustices and ignorance<sup>4</sup>.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is a manifesto against homophobia, but not a typical one: instead of publicly declaring its intention of transforming social hostility against homosexuality it uses exemplification. Through the character of Genly—a conventional gender-biased male with whom readers can identify—Le Guin subverts the traditional notions of gender and heterosexism. The author's failed experiment on gender re-educates readers from homophobia into acceptance through Genly's “painful and gradual discovery of love” (Le Guin: 1976, 171).

As a manifesto, the novel addresses and transforms the reader, whose homophobic point of view evolves as influenced by Genly's evolution. As Pearson states, “It is clear in *The Left Hand of Darkness*...that Le Guin does indeed posit that one person can change a world and that change, once begun, cannot be undone”(188). *The Left Hand of Darkness* exhorts and guides the audience in the “reversal of a habitual way of thinking” (Le Guin: 1976, 159). Le Guin's work, a “heuristic device” (1976, 158), teaches about tolerance and equality, about freedom from sexist roles: It demonstrates that gender binary norms are futile constructs and that it is humanity in its most profound meaning that matters; that “whatever was left [after eliminating gender] would be, presumably, simply human” (Le Guin: 1976, 164).

Finally, Le Guin's manifesto desires to eliminate injustice and ignorance, so it provides readers with a practicable alternative to a historical context of

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Homosexuals Gain in Trying to Persuade Society to Accept Them. The Wall Street Journal <https://outhistory.org/items/show/4525>

<sup>3</sup> Stonewall riots are widely credited with being the motivating force in the transformation of the gay political movement and with inspiring gays and lesbians to join the movement for gay civil and human rights (Carter, 2004: 1, 2). On the year anniversary, there was the first gay pride parade. Read about the success of the parade as a commemorative vehicle in Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Suzanna M. Crage. “Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth.” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 71, no. 5, 2006, pp. 724–51. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472425>

<sup>4</sup> British Library Social Science Blog: <https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2019/07/manifesto.html>

heterogendered discourse and gay discrimination that stigmatized homosexuals, who suppressed their sexuality, and heterosexuals, who suppressed any “non-masculine” behavior for fear of being considered effeminate. *The Left Hand of Darkness* came ahead of Carl Whittman’s outline of imperatives for gay liberation, *The Gay Manifesto*[1]. Le Guin’s proposals include some ideas for fighting homosexual oppression that later appeared in the 1971 *Gay Liberation Front: Manifesto*[2]: homosexuals are not inferior; no attributes are masculine or feminine; stereotypes and traditional gender roles should disappear; discrimination should end.

## **1. From Karhide to Pulefen farm: homophobia, prejudice and rejection**

### **1.1 Genly Ai and gender-role stereotypes**

*The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts how Genly Ai, envoy of the Ekumen—an interplanetary coalition of humans—is re-educated from homophobia into love. The campaigns of stigmatization and prejudice against homosexuals undoubtedly influenced the building of the character of Genly Ai, who acts according to his masculine heterosexual role. As Blumenfeld states: “males in our society are saddled with the heavy burden of masculinity” (1992, 37). Genly is locked in his virility. Despite being a Terran from an advanced future civilization, he adheres to traditional, old gender role stereotypes:

If men or boys step too far afield and violate traditional gender roles, they may become targets of harassment and ridicule. If they are too gentle and sensitive, or cry too often, or choose to work in a nontraditional (that is, women's) field, their sexual/affectional orientation may be questioned. If they choose to not fight or participate in other violent activities, or if they do not play organized sports, they may at any point be called a “faggot” or “queer” (Obear, 1995: 49).

For Barrow and Barrow “Genly Ai is a conventional male with whom masculine readers can identify” (1987, 85). As Blumenfeld states: “Gender roles teach males to hold in contempt anything within themselves hinting at ‘femininity’” (1992, 38). To adhere to his masculine role, the envoy suppresses what he considers to be any feminine quality, attitude or reaction—discouraged for men who meant to show themselves as genuinely masculine—which may classify him as effeminate.

First, during this part of the novel, Genly does not allow himself to cry, for “boys don’t cry”, and crying is supposed to be part of the feminine stereotype. Therefore, Genly not only represses his tears but also resents that Estraven—a weak, effeminate man to his eyes—is prompt to tears. Apart from repressing his tears, the envoy tries to hide his feelings as virile men are not allowed to show any sign of weakness: “We cannot get too close to our feelings, and if we do, we certainly cannot show them. We must

“keep it all together”; we cannot show vulnerability, awkwardness, doubts” (Blumenfeld, 1992: 37).

Second, Genly’s masculinity has the standard “traditional masculine traits (courage, strong will, ambition, independence, assertiveness, initiative, rationality, and emotional control” (Murray, 2001: 248). As a virile man, Genly disapproves of what he considers Estraven’s feminine pliability, patience, and caution.

## **2.2. Gender-biased obstinacy and failed androgyny**

Through Genly’s tendentious narration of events — which cannot help but consider Gethenians as male — it is proved to what extent we are unconscious of how the traditional notions of gender influence our choices and opinions from the instant we are born (Blumenfeld, 1992: 38).

The novel portrays the planet Winter’s androgynous cultures, as seen largely through the eyes of a young black male from Earth, Genly Ai... Ai’s perceptions of the people of Winter provide the initial descriptions of the people and planet, and he has a pronounced tendency to read these people through his own gendered lens as men or women, according to his own preconceptions. Ai’s tendency to see androgynous characters as primarily male and his use of masculine pronouns to represent them in the narrative, tends to affect the reader’s interpretation of those characters as well...the use of the masculine pronoun tends to influence readers to perceive these characters as male ( Rashley, 2007: 23).

Genly, the gender-biased narrator, has an obstinacy to classify and perceive Gethenians as male despite their androgyny. What is more, the envoy interprets the feminine traits that Le Guin periodically embeds in the aliens to support her badly-designed concept of androgyny as ridiculously effeminate. Due to Genly’s partial narration, readers perceive Gethenians as masculine beings tainted with effeminate characteristics. In Ai’s narrative, the concept of a pregnant king is not only hilarious but also insulting since we, gender-biased readers, cannot understand how a male character can conceive. Heterosexist readers associate negative gender preconceptions about unstable, effeminate men with Gethenians instead of perceiving them as androgynous. Le Guin’s biased narration serves to prove how unconsciously affected by gender preconceptions we all are. As Le Guin herself states: “The *Left Hand of Darkness*, is the record of my consciousness, the process of my thinking” (Le Guin: 1976, 156), and so she unconsciously exposed our prejudiced point of view. Only in the twenty-fifth edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness* was Le Guin conscious of “how I was controlled when I wrote the book, by the hidden force, the real dominance, of that false-generic he” (1994, 292). Initially, the author had defended her choice of the pronoun “he” by giving an explanation of neutrality and she refused to explore “the implicit gender bias built into language” (Rashley, 2007: 24). Le Guin was unconscious that she herself was affected by that gender bias. Also, Estraven plays roles that “we are culturally conditioned to perceive as “male”: a prime minister, a political schemer, a fugitive, a prison-breaker, a sledge-hauler” (Le Guin: 1976, 170), which does not contribute to

a better understanding of him as an androgynous character. As Blumenfeld explains, it is our own training in the acceptance of the traditional notions of gender that makes us draw erroneous conclusions about the androgynous aliens: “in western culture, concepts of masculinity and femininity promote the domination of males over females and reinforce the identification of maleness with power” (1992, 24).

### **2.3. Homophobia**

Le Guin regrets not being “clearer at showing the “female” component of the Gethenians characters in action” (Le Guin, 1976: 170). As we already mentioned, Genly’s usage of the pronoun “he” to refer to the Gethenians’ hermaphroditic neuters forces them into a masculine sexual category. Genly’s understanding of the aliens is tainted, and so he admits himself: “The very use of the pronoun [he] in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman” (LHOD 101). As a consequence of the author’s failure at representing the androgynous aliens, neither Genly nor us readers “see Estraven as a mother, with his children, in any role that we automatically perceive as “female” and therefore we tend to see him as a man” (Le Guin, 1976: 170). From Le Guin’s blunder derive the homophobic feelings that arise in Genly Ai, a character filled with masculine mannerisms, an insecure heterosexist whose attitude represents our gender bias as he affirms:

Unless he [the envoy] is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and admiration. On Winter they will not exist. One is judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience (LHOD<sup>5</sup> 101).

To Ai’s gender-biased eyes, male Gethenians are tainted with disgusting effeminate traces. Genly, a character created in the atmosphere of the ideological and psychological attacks exerted toward homosexuals in the 60s, can only feel rejection towards the aliens. Genly’s heterosexist, homophobic attitude is shown when he describes the characters that he considers masculine as being effeminate intriguers and ridicules their feminine, shrill voices or fat asses. Genly’s reaction to Gethenians is hostile, even though several of them try to make him feel welcome on different occasions. We cannot find any other motivation for the envoy’s attitude except his homophobia, “an emotional or affective response including fear, anxiety, anger, discomfort, and aversion that an individual experiences in interacting with gay individuals” (Adams and Wright, 1996: 440). Estraven is aware of Genly’s hostility —although he ascribes it to his being considered a traitor in Karhide, not to gender issues for Gethenians are gender-unbiased — and, even though he tries to help him from the shadows, he keeps out of his way when they are at Orgoreyn:

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<sup>5</sup> All references to the quotes in *The Left Hand of Darkness* will be made to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of 2019, abbreviated as LHOD in bracketed references.

His obtrusiveness is ignorance. His arrogance is ignorance. He is ignorant of us: we of him. He is infinitely a stranger, and I a fool, to let my shadow cross the light of the hope he brings us. I keep my mortal vanity down. I keep out of his way: for clearly that is what he wants. He is right. An exiled Kardidish traitor is no credit to his cause (LHOD 161).

Readers learn to resent and distrust Estraven, whom Genly considers an enemy. Through Genly's homophobic narration, effeminate Lord Estraven appears as an unreliable character, a political schemer, an intriguer, and an impostor. Genly feels his masculinity so threatened that he shows his discomfort through the negative description he makes of the only person in Gethen who believed in him:

Estraven's performance had been womanly, and charm and tact and lack of substance, spacious and adroit. 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 his own attitude towards him? (LHOD 13)

Genly blames Estraven for the unsuccessful development of events: "Everything had gone all right, I thought, until Estraven had appeared shadowlike at my side last night" (LHOD 155). Virile Ai feels continually threatened by the dual sexuality of Gethenians, which generates strong homophobic feelings in an envoy that should have been tolerant, unbiased, and unprejudiced to understand the alien Gethenian culture and do his job. When transported to Pulefen Farm, a Gethenian in kemmer —oestrus period — changes into a girl and intends to have sex with Genly. His virility is insulted by the mere thought of having intercourse with her. In the envoy's words, we can read not only the disgust he feels but also the control his prejudices exert over him:

I saw a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, looking for solace. The young Orgotta was in kemmer, and had been drawn to me. The one time any of them asked anything of me, and I couldn't give it. I got up and went to the window-slit as if for air and a look out, and did not come back to my place for a long time (LHOD 184).

Genly suffers from interpersonal homophobia, manifested "when a personal bias or prejudice affects relations among individuals, transforming prejudice into its active component-discrimination" (Blumenfeld, 1992: 4) since he not only rejects and acts distantly towards Estraven, his only ally on the planet, but also towards his compatriots. Genly strives to keep Gethenians physically and mentally segregated from him because homophobia "inhibits one's ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of one's own sex" (Blumenfeld, 1992: 8). The envoy cannot trust any Gethenian, let alone form any relation of friendship or camaraderie with him. The coldness that Genly continually feels, despite sources of heat such as fireplaces or warm clothes, is not only physical but also psychological since it represents his distant attitude towards the inhabitants of the planet who "tended to be stolid, slovenly, heavy, and to my eyes effeminate-not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge" (LHOD 189). During Genly's stay



at the nations of Karhide and Orgoreyn, the frigidness he feels is symbolic of his isolation and alienation:

Two years I had spent on this damned planet, and the third winter had begun before autumn was underway—months and months of unrelenting cold, sleet, ice, wind, rain, snow, cold, cold inside, cold to the bone and the marrow of the bone. All that time on my own, alien and isolate, without a soul I could trust (LHOD 142).

### **3. The Gobrin ice sheet: repressed homoerotic tension, the lock of virility, pride, fear and friendship**

#### **3. 1. Repressed Homoerotic Tension**

Lord Estraven is perceived by Ai as outstandingly feminine, even when he is not in kemmer. Physically, he is “a head shorter than I [Genly], and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle” (LHOD 235). His voice “did have much the timbre of a woman’s voice, husky and resonant” (LHOD 295). Psychologically, he is accused of possessing an “effeminate deviousness” (LHOD 15); of being prompt to tears; of having “patience and stubborn resolve” (LHOD 297); of being methodical, “house-wifely” (LHOD 259) with food and cleaning; of writing a diary, a literary gender which is considered “a literary tradition of female serial writing” (Shiffman, 2001: 93); of being gifted with the feminine talents of intuition, patience, and resolve. What is more, Estraven is capable of “dothe” — an unusual capacity for strength and endurance — and thange — a period of sleep, recovery, and weakness. According to Barrow and Barrow (1987: 92) those qualities correspond to women’s capacities— especially in times of stress— and Estraven’s clever plotting and derringdo are also feminine. Remarkably, Estraven controls dothe —hysterical strength. Hysteria has traditionally been considered a feminine medical condition: “Throughout its history, of course, hysteria has always been constructed as a “woman’s disease”, a feminine disorder or a disturbance of femininity” (Showalter, 2020: 286). Last, but not least, Estraven takes on the role of caregiver of Genly, a role usually ascribed to women “who accept their role as a cultural obligation because of their sex” (Ruiz, 2018: 434). Le Guin describes Estraven as feeling blessed to be helpful in her typically feminine role or carer of Genly: “then my heart lifted up. I would reassure him, and see to his needs; and that night we both slept well” (LHOD 209).

Genly’s rejection of Estraven originates from the fact that he feels sexually aroused by him, an effeminate man in his eyes. In the 1960s, campaigns of discrimination against homosexuals “strengthened the norms of heterosexuality and marriage and encouraged compliance with these norms” (Sullivan, 1990: 212). Those campaigns not only discouraged the expression of homosexuality but also repressed one’s own homosexual inclinations (Sullivan, 1990: 212). According to Adams and Wright, “homophobia is apparently associated with homosexual arousal that the homophobic individual is either unaware of or denies” (1996, 440). There are no hints in the novel that indicate that Genly is a homosexual, for he does not make such

a confession in his part of the narrative. However, according to Sullivan, the devaluation of homosexuals and the stigmatization of homosexual identity in the 1960s caused different responses, including “internalization, passing, and other adaptations individuals make to express and suppress their homosexuality in a non-accepting society” (1990, 204). We cannot discern whether the envoy is a heterosexual man following the dictates of social discrimination towards homosexuality or a gay man striving to camouflage his sexual preference through his homophobic ideology as “to help conceal their identities, gay people have sometimes been the first to endorse homophobic ideology” (Sullivan, 1990: 214). Undoubtedly, the sexual attraction that “virile” Genly involuntarily feels towards a “man” with effeminate traits makes him reject him.

From this repressed sexual attraction arises the homoerotic tension felt during the trek through the Gobrin Ice Sheet; their physical awareness; the fact that Genly needs to establish “a certain amount of self-restraint, of manners” (LHOD 224) to feel safe when sharing a tent with Estraven. When Estraven enters his kemmer, Genly feels “rueful and uneasy” (LHOD 252): even though Estraven has transformed into a full woman with feminine sexual organs, Genly cannot help but consider her as an effeminate impostor intending to ensnare him into his homosexual trap. Sexual desire triggers a crisis that brings about shame and suffering for Estraven and Genly, so they decide to obviate their strong allure

There are several erotic images inserted into the narration of the travel through ice, hints of virile strength, of pushing and pulling, “Estraven pulling in harness and I as pusher and rudder at the stern” (LHOD 229); “strong, virile Genly who when they “hailed together I [Genly] had to shorten my pace to his, hold in my strength so as not to out-pull him [Estraven]: a stallion in harness with a mule” (LHOD 235). The most sexual of them all describes when Estraven opens Genly’s frozen eye with his tongue:

My left eye froze shut one day, and I thought I had lost the use of it: even when Estraven thawed it open with breath and tongue, I could not see with it for some while, so probably more had been frozen than the lashes (LHOD 261).

That is the only occasion when Genly permits Estraven physically to approach and “penetrate” him—even though it is with his tongue. Estraven’s opening Genly’s eye is an anticipatory metaphor that represents Estraven’s opening Genly’s mind and healing him of his homophobia.

Both characters alike feel the unresolved sexual tension. Genly hints that homoerotic tension is the real reason behind Estraven’s support of his case. Initially explained as his intention to widen the horizon of Gethenians and serve Mankind, it is after the kemmer incident takes place that it is clear that Estraven supported Genly because he felt attracted towards him:

He loved his country very dearly, sir, but he did not serve it, or you. He served the master I serve.”

“The Ekumen?” said Argaven, startled.

“No. Mankind.”

As I spoke I did not know if what I said was true. True in part; an aspect of the truth. It would be no less true to say that Estraven’s acts had risen out of

pure personal loyalty, a sense of responsibility and friendship towards one single human being, myself. Nor would that be the whole truth (LHOD 315).

## **2.2. Trapped in the Lock of Masculinity**

Genly has been imprisoned at a labor camp after, due to his gender-biased attitude towards Estraven, he took no heed of his warning against the Orgotta. Arrested by the Sarf—the secret police of the country—the envoy is transported to Pulefen Farm where he is forced into hard labor, drugged, cold, malnourished, and taken severely ill. Estraven blames himself for Genly's arrest and decides to liberate him by spending the money that Foreth, a person to whom he had sworn kemmering (married), had handled to him through Genly. Estraven designs a perfect escape plan, helps weakened Genly break his imprisonment, and saves his life. When the envoy regains consciousness, he cannot believe that Estraven, the man he had repeatedly demeaned and rejected, has saved him. Genly cannot understand why Estraven has returned good for evil: "All right, he said with peevish haste. "I see, I believe you-what can I do but believe you. Here I am, here you are...But I don't understand. I don't understand what you did all this for" (LHOD 211). After Estraven's deed, the envoy can forget his prejudice, and listen to the politician. Le Guin teaches readers that the camaraderie between a heterosexual and a homosexual man does not damage heteromascularity. Genly's impartial listening triggers a subtle change in his opinion about Estraven.

After the conversation finishes, there is a moment for apologizing and admitting fault. Genly asks Estraven for forgiveness, although, trapped in the lock of masculinity, he still refuses to trust the former prime minister. The following morning, when Genly wakes up in the warm tent and sees half-naked Estraven on his sleeping bag, the envoy has his first revelation. To the envoy's eyes, the politician does not seem deceitful but vulnerable:

I looked at Estraven, stretched out sound asleep in his sleeping bag a couple of feet from me. He wore nothing but his breeches; he was hot...I saw him now defenseless and half-naked in a colder light, and for the first time saw him as he was" (LHOD 216).

It is a small step in the process of Genly's evolving into a new type of man, an authentically human one, and there will be some other steps scattered all over their trek through the ice.

Genly masterfully expresses the evolution of his feelings from homophobia to acceptance through his portrait of Estraven. When Genly and Estraven converse and work together, when they can reach an agreement and start making plans for crossing the ice, the envoy timidly starts including some praise honoring Estraven's political career and his readiness to face unfavorable situations into the narrative. Genly starts feeling "warm clear through for the first time in —how long?" (LHOD 219). The envoy's warmth is physical and psychological. The feeling of coldness will intermittently appear until Genly completes his transformation. Genly, afraid of effeminate Estraven, resists using his first name to address him when the politician asks him to do so, the coldness he had been feeling returns: "Cooled, I climbed

into my fur bag” (LHOD 229). However, despite Genly’s regression to his cold, distant state, he is now conscious of the fact that he is locked in his own virility:

A friend. What is a friend, in a world where any friend may be a lover at a new phase of the moon? Not I, locked in my virility: no friend to Therem Harth, or any other of his race. Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, lunar, metamorphosing under the hand’s touch, changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us (LHOD 229).

There is still a long way for Genly to go before evolving into a real Human. After being locked in his masculinity for so long, Genly resents the politician’s femininity: “There was in his attitude something feminine, a refusal of the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given, which rather displeased me” (LHOD 228). His virility feels threatened when Estraven peremptorily orders him to lie still and rest when he thinks Genly seems sick. Genly’s macho part resents Estraven’s supposing him to be weak—which he was—and trying to help him. As a virile man, Genly resents showing signs of fragility and taking orders from an effeminate man. However, after dialoguing on the situation, the characters come to an understanding, and Genly, again, comes to recognize the problem he has with his pride:

I was galled by his patronizing...

“You’re no longer ill, then?”

“No. Of course, I’m tired. So are you.”

“Yes, I am,” he said. “I was anxious about you. We have a long way to go.”

He had not meant to patronize. He had thought me sick, and sick men take orders. He was frank, and expected a reciprocal frankness that I might not be able to supply. He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride (LHOD 235).

Le Guin teaches the readers that dialogue and unbiased active listening are the keys to reaching an understanding; to suppressing homophobia and the hatred related to it. Readers, who see through the eyes of Genly, notice that the envoy’s attitude has altered: his patience, the fact that he “spoke with a gentleness that I [Estraven] did not know was in him” (LHOD 251). Genly is also aware of a change in himself, and he feels it in the shape of a warmth he had never felt all over the years he has spent on the planet: “A marvelous thing surrounded us: warmth. Death and cold were elsewhere, outside. Hatred was also left outside. We ate and drank. After we ate, we talked” (LHOD 264).

### **2.3. Acute Chronic Fear**

Genly still has another vital revelation. On their second night together, when Estraven is in kemmer, he becomes aware of the attraction that he had been repressing because of his homophobia. Genly understands the origin of his anger, discomfort, and aversion towards Estraven:

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. 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. Until then I had rejected him, refused him in his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted... I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man (LHOD 267).

Estraven, a full woman because of kemmer, had been avoiding the envoy, refraining from touching him so as not to importune him. Even though she strongly feels attracted to Genly, she respectfully states “I must not touch you”. She is conscious of Genly’s rejection. Heterosexual Genly agrees with her in repressing the sexual tension they both feel at that moment: even though he is aware of his gender-essentialist limitations now, he cannot break the barriers of heterosexism. Le Guin depicts the fact that they do not act on their desire as an activator of loyalty, friendship, and love:

For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey that it might as well be called, now as later, love. But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us. For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch. We left it at that. I do not know if we were right (LHOD 267).

Le Guin’s heteronormative education must have influenced on her choice not to include homosexuality as an acceptable practice in the Gethenians’ kemmer. Therefore, despite her attempt at attacking gender stereotypical roles, she does not attain to build a model of homosexuality as an acceptable practice. In 1986, Frazer and Vieth detected Estraven’s homophobia. They argued that the novel was about “two characters who both appear to be male and who come to love one another, sexually as well as fraternally” (222). It was not until 1988 that Le Guin was aware of her mistake in locking the characters into heterosexuality:

I quite unnecessarily locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality. It is a naively pragmatic view of sex that insists that sexual partners must be of the 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 (Le Guin, 1988: 169).

Genly cannot have sex with Estraven because his prejudices control him. According to Pearson, “There is no way in which Genly, still locked in his assumptions about binary gender, can imagine such a thing without reifying the performance of gender by the temporarily sexed bodies of the participants” (2007, 195). Heterosexual Genly, incapable of breaking the barrier of his fixed gender specifications, takes pains to make clear that Estraven and he shared nothing but words. Preserving his masculinity is vital for him: “The only thing I [Genly] had to give Estraven, out of all my civilization, my alien reality in which he was so profoundly interested. I could talk and describe endlessly, but that was all I had to give” (LHOD265). Genly,

incapable of breaking the barrier of his fixed gender specifications, continuously remarks that they had no sex:

I expect that it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and Hainishnorm one-sexed human beings, though such intercourse will inevitably be sterile. It remains to be proved; Estraven and I proved nothing except perhaps a subtler point (LHOD 266).

According to Call, Le Guin could do no better, for she was working “from the limits of the largely patriarchal, heteronormative culture of the United States in the late twentieth century...she could not hope to overcome the entire history of binary gender thinking in a single novel” (95).

After Estraven and Genly decide not to have sex during the politician’s kemmer, they try building a new type of intimacy: a conversation of friendship. At this point of Genly’s transformation, Genly and Estraven start communicating in paraverbal speech— a mental language that prevents speakers from lying. Genly and Estraven build an emphatic bond, an intimate asexual mental relationship that Genly— and heterosexist Le Guin— erroneously deduced would bring them closer than having sex:

Whenever I spoke to him something in him winced away as if I touched a wound. So that intimacy of mind established between us was a bond, indeed, but an obscure and austere one, not so much admitting further light (as I had expected it to) as showing the extent of the darkness” (LHOD 274).

From this point onward, Genly will call Estraven “friend” and use the exile’s first name when addressing him; Genly will become aware of his “acute, chronic fear” (LHOD 286). It is just another step in his transformation into an authentic human. With the help of their friendship, Genly has come to consider the exile as being on equal terms with him. Equality is of capital importance when fighting homophobia:

Equality is more than tolerance, compassion, understanding, acceptance, benevolence, for these still come from a place of implied superiority: favors granted to those less fortunate. These attitudes suggest that there is still something wrong, something not quite right that must be overlooked or seen beyond. The elimination of homophobia requires that homosexual identity be viewed as viable and legitimate and as normal as heterosexual identity. It does not require tolerance; it requires an equal footing (Pharr, 1993: 4).

Genly teaches readers how friendship and equality can substitute prejudice and hostility towards homosexuality. Genly and Estraven learn to pull together, and they need the support of each other in the same way that light needs shadows to exist. The soul friends have become yin and yang, complementary, both and one, for “*light is the left hand of darkness*” (LHOD 287).

### **3. Back in Karhide: love, elegy and lament. The ultimate transformation**

#### **3.1. Elegy for a Lost Friend**

The last part of the novel starts when the friends arrive at Karhide and ask for the hospitality of the Domain of Odsordny Annen. Genly has come to appreciate Genly and does not consider him an effeminate threat anymore. Now, he feels completed by his friend and is afraid to be left alone: “I was

uneasy among strangers and constantly missed Estraven's presence beside me" (LHOD 300). The envoy provides the reader with positive examples for referring to homosexuals when he substitutes the denigrating words he had used at the beginning of the novel. The praise honoring the exile that Genly had inserted into his narration in the former stage of their travel becomes more intense now. Genly celebrates Estraven's loyalty, gentleness, steadiness, and patience. Here starts the elegy—the lament for the dead friend and the lost time. The envoy regrets the misunderstanding that had occupied much of their relationship and tries to make up for past events. Genly is determined to claim the character of his friend—his loyalty and his honor before his family; to show the worth of Estraven, who was no traitor and did not commit suicide—a shame for Gethenians for suicide "is not to them, as to us, an option. It is the abdication from option, the act of betrayal itself" (LHOD308). Genly strives to prove that Estraven gave his life for a higher cause, that he never was the traitor he was supposed to be when accused of treason and exiled by King Argaven, but a hero. Genly's bitter regret makes him travel to Estre—Estraven's native town—to find peace of mind:

I had come on a fool's errand to Estre, hoping for solace. There was no solace; and why would a pilgrimage to the place of my friend's childhood make a difference, fill any absence, soothe any remorse? Nothing could be changed now (LHOD 322).

### **3. 2. Really Human**

After Estraven's death, Genly's transformation is fulfilled. First, according to Barrow and Barrow, he has recovered his suppressed female qualities (1987, 85). The envoy has learned the art of patience, for he has come to accept the uncertainty of his ship's receiving his message to come down "with a quiet heart" (LHOD 301). Second, Genly, whose virility would not allow him to show his feelings, becomes aware that the reason for not crying was not shame "so much as fear" (LHOD 307), the fear that had invalidated him as an envoy and as a human. Genly shows himself as a person capable of shedding tears. Nothing can console Ai, who cries the death of his friend and finds that there is no relief in crying, for "you can weep all you like, but there is no good in it" (LHOD 307). The envoy admits being able to experience strong feelings and does not try to hide them behind his bravado anymore: he feels pity and wrath for being left alone, for being ignorant of Estraven's plan to give his life to obtain a second interview with King Argaven. He is not an unfeeling strong macho now, and he is not afraid to show it when he narrates the dreams of his lost friend and expresses that he "would wake up fool of rage, a feebly shaky rage that turned into feeble tears" (LHOD 307). Third, he understands to what extent he needs his friend, his counterpart. Genly feels devastated, "all in pieces, disintegrated" (LHOD 310). He has learned to love the hard way.

Circumstances have changed Genly, who has reached a new understanding of reality: it has dawned on him how primitive humans are; how abhorrent our gender roles are. When Genly's team disembarks the

Ekumens' ship, he is so estranged from humanity that he feels like an alien. In Genly's opinion, the real humans are Gethenians. Terrans are just intelligent apes because of gender limitations:

They all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer...They took my hand, touched me, held me. I managed to keep myself in control...I had to get to my room at once. The physician from Sassinoth came in. His quiet voice and his face, a young, serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's, a human face, these were a relief to me, familiar, right...(LHOD 318-319).

Genly resents being touched by humans. He has transformed into somebody different, able to appreciate Gethenians beyond gender, sexuality, and stereotypes. The epithets that he uses when referring to the aliens are not derogatory anymore. He describes Faxe's face as "kind, handsome" (LHOD 311), and he alludes to the king with tenderness: "He looked unwell and old. He looked like a woman who has lost his baby, like a man who has lost his son" (LHOD 313). The envoy can finally "make some response" (LHOD 311) to the warm and friendly greeting of the Foreteller of Otherhord. He can be happy in Karhide. Genly has evolved into a new type of man—really human—and so have we, readers, who have not only been taught about how futile gender preconceptions and homophobia are but have also learned to love on equal terms, beyond differences.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is not a feminist novel but a manifesto against homophobia. Le Guin's deficient depiction of androgynous Gethenians and the flawed use of the pronoun "he" to refer to the menwomen causes genderization to appropriate the narrative. Even if the novel does not publicly declare its intentions of transforming social hostility against homosexuality, it does it didactically. Le Guin's manifesto addresses readers through the character of Genly Ai— a conventional gender-biased male with whom they can identify— and asks them to take action. *The Left Hand of Darkness* heuristically transforms readers through Genly's metamorphosis: as Genly reaches a new understanding of reality, so do readers, who are transformed into real humans, able to love beyond differences.

The novel re-educates readers from homophobia into acceptance and provides them with a practicable alternative to the heterogendered discourse of gay discrimination of the 1960s: praise can substitute denigrating vocabulary; friendship can replace hatred, prejudice, and hostility. Even if Le Guin cannot build a model of homosexuality as an acceptable practice, she succeeds in teaching about tolerance, equality, and freedom from sexist roles. Le Guin's manifesto aims at eliminating injustice and ignorance by demonstrating that gender binary norms are futile constructs, that the only thing that matters is humanity in its most profound meaning, and that what is left after eliminating gender is simply human.



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