

## **UN-LEARNING THE ANTHROPOCENE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS***

Fatemeh **Iganej**, Shiraz University, School of Literature & Humanities  
[a.ikanej@gmail.com](mailto:a.ikanej@gmail.com)

Alireza **Anushiravani**, Shiraz University, School of Literature &  
Humanities, [anushir@shirazu.ac.ir](mailto:anushir@shirazu.ac.ir)

Amirhossein **Vafa**, Shiraz University, School of Literature & Humanities,  
[a.vafa@shirazu.ac.ir](mailto:a.vafa@shirazu.ac.ir)

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**Abstract:** In the twenty-first century, environmental issues and climate change have found their way into mainstream discourse, wherein ecofeminism can act as a transformative project. The subversive and visionary science fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), with its focus on gender and nature, has imaginatively cleared the road for the reader to conceive an alternative to the world of capitalist modernity, a world that has led to the subjugation of women and nature not only for those experiencing modernity within the so-called West, but also for those—the Rest of us—at the periphery of this fragile world order. In order to tackle the dehumanization of women and the degradation of the natural world, Le Guin, while highlighting the impacts of the Anthropocene in her own world, deconstructs and rethinks the dualistic hierarchies, through her narrative world, which contribute to oppression, domination, and the reification of male dominance. In this article, we approach *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a fictional forum whereby the audience is given the chance to reinterpret and reflect on their relationship with nature against the backdrop of the unprecedented ecological crises we face today. Our ecofeminist reading of the novel foregrounds Le Guin's treatment of the nonhuman Other in her speculative narrative world, and sheds light on our angst about the current geological epoch known as the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, science fiction.

## 1. Introduction

Science fiction can be read as a medium that enables us to survive and thrive as a species facing our real-world problems and existential threats through “giving us emotional distance to see our current situation from afar, separated in our imaginations through time, space, or circumstance” (Vakoch xvii). Feminist and environmental issues have been a staple for science fiction since the dawn of the genre. Conflating science fiction and ecofeminism can help scrutinize the origins of human-induced climate change in the “twin oppressions of women and of nature, driven by patriarchal power and ideologies” (Vakoch xvii). The subversive and visionary fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, explores a continuum of social issues, particularly those that are associated with gender and the patriarchal domination of the nature as well as gender identities that do not identify with hegemonic masculinity. Le Guin’s fiction bears the capacity to counter the dual site of violence against women and nature. It helps the reader conceive an alternative to the world of capitalist modernity, not only for those experiencing modernity within the so-called West, but also for those—the Rest of us—at the periphery of this fragile world order.

Written in 1969, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which won both the Hugo and Nebula awards, has been greatly lauded as an intersection of ecofeminism and science fiction. Despite being hammered by many critics for its shortcomings in using mainly male pronouns to address an androgynous species, *The Left Hand of Darkness* foregrounds the agency of subjugated women and the land they dwell when read through the lens of ecofeminism. Le Guin, considering the impending environmental disasters in her own world, strives to blur the inequitable borders between human and nonhuman worlds by introducing a culture that is predicated on a unique ethics of care.

In this paper, we will try assess the extent to which the theoretical paradigm of ecofeminism has addressed the human/nonhuman inequalities, and the way we treat the environment. In effect, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is our primary reading for it creatively echoes the planet we, as readers, are inhabiting. The novel is of great significance because through it Le Guin has posed the two “ubiquitous” questions to the environmentalist movement: “What is nature?” and “what is a human being?” (Murphy, *Environmentalism* 373).

Our study thus tries to investigate how Le Guin’s imaginary world resonates with the contemporary debates regarding the Anthropocene, and to inquire whether the same dramatic alterations Le Guin carried out in her novel can act as magic pills to help resolve our present predicaments. Our less utopian, and more pragmatic, objective is this: If

we cannot resolve the environmental threats to our existence, at least we should learn, via literary and cultural engagement, to embrace the nonhuman world so as to cherish a more ethical life on the planet while we can. Before examining Le Guin's treatment of the human and the nonhuman world in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, we should define the epoch of the Anthropocene as we understand it, and foreground the significance of the nonhuman world and the redemptive role ecofeminism plays towards a more egalitarian future.

## 2. The Nonhuman in the Anthropocene

On this journey of awareness raising, it is important to concede that we, the human species in the aftermath of capitalist modernity, have gravely damaged our environment. Environmental problems and climate change are indeed the most glaring issues the world is faced with today; issues such as desertification, deforestation, the release of toxic waste, air pollution, acid rain, suppression of animal rights and so on, have been endemic to twenty-first century lived experiences, taking hold of our lives in this world regardless of our locality, and leading to mounting concerns about the long-term survival of our species. It is inexorable that having a better understanding of our present conditions will give us a small window of opportunity to ameliorate the ills that we have caused, and are suffering from.

The term Anthropocene "as a new geological epoch in which human activities have become a transformative force shaping our planetary systems" has enjoyed widespread appeal ever since it was proposed by Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen (TÜZÜN 171). Accordingly, humanity has become a knowing subject and dominating life force on the planet, leaving a consequential and lasting impact on the acceleration of global warming and anthropogenic changes. These global changes that are caused by human activity, are now so "large and ubiquitous" that one can consider human experiences as "geological forces, behaving like volcanoes, large meteors, earthquakes, that is, promoting large scale changes and long-term effects" (Savi 37). The mid-twentieth century witnessed "The Great Acceleration" as people started to consume a great deal of resources merely to "keep up with the then recently inaugurated Western model of production and consumption" leading to pernicious influences on the environment (37). Regrettably, "much of what we are causing is out of our control and cognitive grasp" (TÜZÜN 172). Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, nature has been exploited drastically and there is a burning need to have more critical discussions on the matter. To understand a fitting ecological niche as Patrick Murphy asserts in *Literature, nature, and Other:*

*Ecofeminist Critiques*, we have to come to realize that women and nature have to be regarded as “speaking subjects” (13):

What we must find a way to do, then, is incorporate the other people—what Sioux Indians called creeping people, and the standing people, and the flying people, and the swimming people—into the councils of government. This isn’t as difficult as you might think. If we don’t do it, they will revolt against us. They will submit non-negotiable demands about our stay on the earth. We are beginning to get non-negotiation demands right now from the air, the water, the soil. (Snyder quoted in Murphy, *Literature, nature, and Other* 13)

In “Rethinking the Relations of Nature, Culture and Agency”, Patrick D. Murphy sees the alienation from the natural world as the product of enlightenment, which is “enthroned” for the “modern rational existence” and is acting as a “dictator” towards the nonhuman (312). This viewpoint leads Murphy to see culture as the “glue cementing past, present and future humans together in a continuity of alienation from the rest of the world from which they arise, in which they participate with other entities, and to which they organically return through death.” Murphy sees the “Dominant culture” as the most powerful manifestation of this dynamic (312).

The nonhuman-turn in the humanities, a contemporary intellectual movement, builds on the representations of nonhuman referents emergence since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Darwin in his “theory of common descent” was the one who asserted that both the human and the nonhuman are operating based on the same “laws of natural selection” (Grusin ix, x). The turn, however, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has gone through great many theoretical and intellectual developments to decentralize the human hegemony, and to tip the balance in favour of the nonhuman. Philosophers such as Latour contend that “we have never been human” since humanity has always “coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by indistinction from the nonhuman” (Grusin ix, x). This to Grusin means that Latour sees the beauty in living at the time of the Anthropocene and presses for shattering the boundaries between culture and nature introduced in “Enlightenment philosophy” (Wybranowska 46). Grusin sees the paradigm of the Anthropocene as a product of the nonhuman turn because it posits humanity for their geophysical forces alongside all the other nonhuman factors leading to climate tampering, and catastrophe.

To Bennette, another leading scholar in the field, historical materialism, which was the product of the West laden with imperial agenda, was not capable of offering satisfactory responses to the ecological changes that were in the making, namely, the dawn of human-induced climate change (quoted in Savi 17). The nonhuman turn, Bennette points out, tries to remind us that this world is populated by the “active subjects and passive objects, ... by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman” (quoted in Savi 17). The nonhuman turn has, therefore, the liability of disclosing the participation of the nonhuman in our world to live more sustainably, and ultimately become less violent toward other bodies. Bennett brings up the concept of “thing-power,” meaning that *things* have the “vitality” which can get into human ways, blocking their “will and designs” (quoted in Savi 16). Bennette in her “Through Ecofeminist Eyes: Le Guin’s ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’,” genuinely believes that what happens to a part of this chain will ultimately leave its mark on all the other parts “in a way that all threads reverberate from movement at any spot in a web” (63). Humanity is not the only species on earth, and we must acknowledge this interconnectedness to the rest of the world; meaning that our deeds have repercussions that will surely manifest themselves in a “long, self-perpetuating chain of cause and effect” (64).

Val Plumwood, another trailblazer in the field, sees “a gendered reason/nature contrast” in the blueprint of western thought that is elaborated in dualistic constructions such as “culture/nature, mind/body, male/female, subject/object” (quoted in Hawkins 158). Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, sees reason in the western tradition has been set up as the “privileged master” who with a fiddled outlook dualistically conceives nature as a “wife or subordinate other,” which is radically discontinuous with the self, and thus can be colonized by the “master” (Plumwood 3). Considering the tight bond between the domination of humans and the domination of nature, Plumwood insists that the West’s dualistic treatment of nature, and its subsequent “construction of human identity as outside nature” induces a lot of environmental crises. As a result, Plumwood claims “a virtue-based” account will surely help us solve great many problems that affects both the human and the nonhuman world today (2).

According to the abovementioned scholars, humanity is a “serious trouble” and “can no longer be taken as an all-inclusive category at a time when the planet is also facing various forms of existential risk” (TÜZÜN 173). This remark invites us to hold ourselves accountable for what has happened to the planet, and what fate it is going to face in the not-so-distant future. Fortunately, in order not to take part in this

complete annihilation suggested by unfettered capitalism, posthuman and nonhuman theories, material feminism and ecofeminism in particular, have been producing and offering interesting insights and ways. Interestingly enough, while scientists were underestimating the power of humans to bring about detrimental damages to the earth, leading ecofeminist scholars have been pronouncing theories on the ecological front. More pertinently, ecofeminists and writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin had already turned to address humanity's impact on nature, calling for a battle for the liberation of both women and nature from all the oppressions imposed on them by the male-dominated mindset. The most viable solution for them is to decentralize Anthropocentric attitudes and apply more non-hierarchical and egalitarian measures. These activists started criticizing problematic social hierarchies and power structures along with promoting "alternative lifestyles and ethics" for the humans to see their dependent status in the natural world, and learn to respect alterity in "his/her/its uniqueness" (Alonso 4).

### **3. The Ecofeminist Paradigm**

In 1974, the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism to capture "women's potential to instigate an ecological revolution entailing new relations between women and men and between people and nature in the name of ensuring human survival" (Buell, et al. 412). Ecofeminism or environmental feminism, as a sub-branch of ecocriticism bridges ecological criticism and feminism. The members of this tenet argue that the utter devastation of nature is not only androcentric, it also stems from, and contributes to, the ubiquitous gender inequality within the human society. As a result, "women's conventional association with the natural world is exalted by some ecofeminists who seek to promote a mirror opposite of patriarchal constructions" (Buell, et al. 424). They also seek for "women's spirituality grounded in female biology and acculturation, one that takes account of the holistic proclivities of women" to be acknowledged (424). To ecofeminists, this liberation is possible when nature and women merge together to demolish hierarchal masculine mindset for the sake of equality for all the human and non-human.

This discourse considers the exploitation of women and that of nature as closely linked, and stresses that these unfair repressions are mainly carried out by a patriarchal mindset that is based on subjugation, power and control viewing and devaluing women as subservient and inferior identities, and the nature as a non-human object; an objectification that clears the way for all the persecution of women and

destruction of the nature. Salleh sees this subjugation as “a parallel in men’s thinking between their ‘right’ to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other” (quoted in Hay 75).

Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, through giving examples from notable authors who connect women and nature, such as Hegel, Swift and Freud, concedes that women have been traditionally associated with nature as the “excluded and devalued contrast of reason,” which to her “includes everything that reason excludes” (19). This “relic of the past assumes”, should be, therefore, wiped out, and men and women should “simply, unproblematically, and fully” see themselves as “*human*” (22). Birkeland in “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice”, defines ecofeminism as a theoretical paradigm that pinpoints “androcentric” dualism of men and women as a primary source for anti-ecological motives. “Androcentric” is what Birkeland calls this “legacy of the history of male dominance,” which is still prevalent in contemporary thinking, and which is an “interpretation of human nature that assumes the universality of a masculine model of Man and its associated values” (24).

Ecofeminism with its fresh and timely look at literature can open new windows to understanding our physical world way better; however, it is not simple bandages. Warren and Cheney in “Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology” are of the opinion that the “ethical nature of human relationships to the nonhuman natural world” is a pressing concern for ecofeminist scholarship (180). Ecofeminist ethics go beyond the twofold ethics of the feminist critique of “male bias” and offering analyses that are not “male-biased,” and “extends feminist ethical critiques of sexism and other social ism of domination” at the heart of the “unjustified domination of nonhuman animals and nature by [the] human” (180). This means that the ecofeminist ethics denounce “androcentric” and “naturist bias” (180).

Reflecting on how front runners of ecofeminism, who see the connection between feminism and ecology as the ultimate goal of ecofeminism, encapsulated their perspective by a moral issue, helps us to assume the critical stance as a subject compelled to mull over all our interactions with the environment, and of course to act accordingly as a citizen and literary critic. We concur that the nature/human relation has always been treated as a dualism in Western culture leading to the current environmental crises. Here in this article, we embrace any attempt to explore our continuity with the nonhuman paradigm, which can lead to collapsing the nature/culture dichotomy. As such, we maintain that Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has made a significant contribution to this ecofeminist project. Le Guin, following

Bennett's conviction, has seen a compelling urge to explore the "vitality of nonhuman and not quite-human" (quoted in Savi 16). An ecofeminist reading of her narrative world bears promising results since ecofeminist ethics view the domination of women, nature, and the nonhuman category as morally wrong, and instead provides a concrete ethical theory that as Warren and Cheney moot "treats woman's moral experiences and human interactions with the nonhuman natural world respectfully" (Warren and Cheney "Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology" 181).

#### **4. *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Science Fiction as Ecofeminism**

Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has disallowed the traditions of focusing on sciences found in most of acclaimed science fiction. She, instead, has tailored new social issues to this genre and has taken stock of alternative economies, brand new sexual relations, and alien encounters. The novel opens the floodgate and immerses us into a Hanish universe that is at odds with our world, hoping to find answers to the burning what-if questions regarding human and nonhuman relationships. "Le Guin described *The Left Hand of Darkness* beginning life as a thought experiment, a story that grew out of a series of 'what ifs'" (Yuen, par1). One of those hypotheticals concerned place: What if a world was in the midst of an ice age? The result: Gethen, in all its frozen splendour" (Par 1)

Informed by ecofeminism, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* gains ground in ecofeminist movement. Through thinning the borders between the nature/culture, human/nonhuman, the fiction manifests the pernicious power of human activities and offers alternatives while probing what it means to live in the epoch of the Anthropocene. The present and future of several species on earth have been threatened by human activity; Le Guin's imaginary world is thereby significant to study, for she has criticized the power relationship in this "descriptive" (Le Guin 9) alternative scenario. Every element in this story is equally treated to the extent whereby humans are no longer enjoying Anthropogenic privileges. This means that there is no trace of domination over women or any other nonhuman species, while all are portrayed as equal in power and privilege.

Le Guin tries to explore how shattering the present value system, especially in relation with the others and nonhumans, replaces the discourse of domination and oppression by respect and understanding. Unlike our earth, Gethen, Le Guin's imaginary world, adheres to prime tenet of ecofeminism in a way that the integrity of all living things is discernible. In particular, in her narrative Le Guin stresses the beauty of



care and the ethics of co-existence of nonhuman life forms since she fervently believes that the oppression of the marginalized will come to an end after, and in the process of, ceasing the destruction of the planet. Read responsibly and collectively, *The Left Hand of Darkness* “contribute[s] to the process of envisioning more ethical relationships for the Anthropocene, along with its implications for current and future human and nonhuman lives on Earth” (Savi 6).

The story is made up of two main accounts of Estraven’s journal entries, Genly-Ai’s report to Ekumen, all of which is interspersed with “shorter, self-contained stories, ranging from ethnological musing from the first Ekumen observers to Karhidish tales and legends” with an account of “Orgota creation myth” (Yuen, par.12). It takes place in a universe called Hain, which was previously presented in her novel, *Rocannon’s World*, published in 1966. The people who evolved in Hain then scattered in different inhabitable planets such as Terra and Gethen. The overall plot of the story revolves around the protagonist of the piece Genly Ai, a solitary human emissary from Terra, who is appointed to visit Gethen, an alien planet alternatively called Winter for its perpetual harsh weather of ice and snow. Ai’s mission is to coax Gethenians, androgynous humanoids, into joining the Ekumen, an alliance between eighty-three worlds. Estraven, the prime minister and senior counselor to the mad king of Karhide, Argaven XV, is the only individual in Karhide who tends to assist Genly Ai to promote The Ekumen and fulfill his mission. His contribution to Ai’s mission, leads to his fall; he is labeled as a traitor, stripped of his title as a prime minister and brutally exiled from his home land. The narrative then follows the series of events unfolded to the two characters’ harrowing adventures while travelling the length and breadth of Karhide, Orgota and traverse Gorbin ice sheet.

The parade in Erhenrang, the opening scene to the story, is Le Guin’s point of departure from all the traditions and stereotypes of our world, as she finds her liberation to celebrate and exercise a new culture, namely “Culturopoeia,” a culture of care (Murphy, “Rethinking the Relations of Nature” 311). Patrick D. Murphy claims, Le Guin unassumingly takes the future as a “clean slate” on which to create a new world for the inhabitants of the old (313). In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin’s “clean slate” (Murphy 313) unfolds under the guise of an ice planet is very new to Ai, an old-school male from the planet Terra, the Earth itself: “I see and judge as an alien” (Leavenworth 143-144), describes Genly Ai, the “I” who is known as an “outside subject studying the civilization he cannot fully understand,” and who needs alternative voices to be able to report truthfully and to “complete the picture” he gets from “multifaceted nature of reality he faces” (143-

144). Ai's alien encounter, which leads him to perceive himself and Gethenians as "Self and Other" suggests that Ai has traits "associated with colonial exploration" (142). This alienation becomes more evident whenever the Gethenian's behavior is atypical compared to his own lived experience.

The juxtaposition between this ecofeminist planet and Western society is specifically apparent when Ai, who as a product of patriarchal social order engaged in "capitalistic, paternalistic and militaristic" disciplines, travels around the planet Gethen and recounts what he undergoes as he is confronted with his instilled prejudices (Rose and Bartoli 142). Genly-Ai—a strong, tall, and heterosexual man for whose gender identity Gethenians have no word but "pervert"—is clearly distinguished from the rest of the inhabitants who are typically "stocky" and "dark" (Le Guin 18), with a layer of fat that protects them against the cold. This defenseless solitary "messenger boy" wanders around Gethen desperately to achieve his political objectives: "I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself pose no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere messenger boy" (Le Guin 312). In effect, Ai enters a world that Le Guin tries to keep away from the anthropogenic changes of our contemporary Terran lives. Ai's coming alone to this planet is Le Guin's initial indication of her ecofeminist tendencies; a lonely envoy shows no thread of colonization, thus inflicts no harm upon that planet. Le Guin asserts that colonizing a place will inevitably lead to anthropogenic changes and exploitation based on patriarchal behavior—not unlike the real world of Western industrial capitalism. Le Guin wholeheartedly concurs with ecofeminist advocates, who also see the interdependence between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women's rights, exposing the intersectional roots of mastery and domination.

As Ai chinks up, for exploring the impacts of Anthropocene Le Guin has gone to great length and has created a new social, sexual and political world; the outcome is thus a new fully-fledged world that is disparate from the known world of ours. To do so, she firstly instigates a new calendar. As Diamond and Orenstein argue, "For some, the power of ecofeminism derives from the way in which it articulates new stories of origins and the place of humans in the world" (quoted in Power 39). Following this potentially ecofeminist ethos, she foregrounds a planet in which "it is always the Year One. 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" (Le Guin 20). Hoping for the creation of a new culture, a culture which transcends the limits of the Anthropocene, Le Guin shakes the pillars of the Enlightenment in the West based on the

“logic of domination” which as Warren in “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism” asserts “has functioned historically within patriarchy to sustain and justify the twin domination of women and nature” (128). Le Guin is adamant to deconstruct the tradition of historiography and fashion a world with no written historical account. Instead, she augments cultural complexity of her narrative world through myths narrated by Estraven and the accounts of the first investigator from Terra. Through such collective tales and lived experiences of the Gethenian, these myths emerge to both identify the problems and offer solutions.

According to Messer, the creation of this ahistorical land is the reflection of Le Guin’s ecofeminist ideas on history, that is “dominated by androcentrism,” and is to justify human “maldevelopment” in which “humanity begins to commodify people and nature” (24). Hence, the remedy for these underdeveloped cultures can be the “subversion of historical development” and repudiating the history which acts as a step towards “subverting dominant power structure that have pursued the subjugation, control, and abuse of nature and people” (24). No one, therefore, can resort to history as a “moral compass” to avert the discourse of dominance, because it is the existence of history that helps to perpetuate the dualisms and justifies atrocity.

Le Guin’s second shot at achieving her goal of wearing Anthropocene down, is undoubtedly choosing her setting. Significantly enough, we do not consider Gethen, Le Guin’s imaginary world in the novel, as a perfect future society with elaborate depictions of the sort that is the backbone of many utopian works of fiction by William Dean Howells, Robert Owen, Karl Marx, to name but a few. If anything, Gethen can be viewed as the plagued land formed as a consequence of all the human activities. Life on Gethen is so bleak that one can see it as if the nonhuman is revolting against us and as Snyder counts it has submitted “non-negotiable demands about” its inhabitants’ “stay” (quoted in Murphy’s *Literature, Nature, and Other* 13).

For creating this setting, she is thoroughly fired up by Rebecca Solint’s idea on the “power of blending nature writing with anthropology, stating that to truly understand a place requires an understanding of a people’s connection to that place” (quoted in “*The Left Hand of Darkness, Nature, Culture, and the Other*”, Yuen, par 6). Le Guin has practiced crafting her abiotic nature in Gethen where the biting cold weather intimidates its own inhabitants. As reported, Gethen is awfully cold and barren, with very little vegetation; the only mammals are the Gethenian race doing with scarce resources of food and energy. Being exquisitely sensitive to the exceptionally harsh climate of the

Gethen, Genly-Ai draws the reader's attention to the temperature of the two countries and how the people deal with their climate.

We can say that Le Guin takes to great pains to show the immediate relationship between the inhabitants and the landscape. Indeed, the Gethenians have one shared enemy and that is their environment. Her landscape is not "dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (Foucault quoted in Gordon 177), neither is it merely a frame for the story for the landscape can implicate the life of the inhabitants. It is in this setting, which is truly indifferent to its inhabitants, that the fate of each individual unfurls. As Gethen represents people, and the Gethenians, as subjects at the perils of this environment, the planet embodies the sense of place. The Gethenians are "appallingly alone in this world. No other mammalian species. No other ambisexual species. No animal intelligent enough even to domesticate as pets" (Le Guin 282). This "uniqueness" will surely touch on the entire "outlook" of the Gethenian as Ai points out, "philosophically, emotionally: to be so solitary, in so hostile a world: it must affect your entire outlook" (Le Guin 283). The climate has greatly impacted different aspects of the inhabitants of Gethen, colored their personal, political actions, culture and life style.

First and foremost, these inhabitants have not mastered the technological know-how much; they move languidly and unhurriedly, and they lack the ability to mobilize. This leisurely speed of life mingled with the strong inclination of the Gethenians to survive on the marginal world, can be blamed for the sluggish development of Gethen. Gethen has never gone through an industrial revolution and has never achieved "in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades" (Le Guin 126). This clearly shows that the Gethenian mindset is merely focused on their presence and surviving, which clashes repeatedly with progress. Surviving in this climate is thereby a priority to the inhabitants leaving them no space to mull over the mastery of their environment.

This grudging move reminds us of Daniel Elam's anticolonial thought in his *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics*, in which Elam recounts Fanon who believes that anticolonial thinkers endorsed unknowing and collective inexperties. The outcome was thus a "palimpsestic" inaccessible utopia where "the wretched form the mass that will endeavor to create a new man on the basis of their wretchedness" (2). To retain this "wretched world," the "ground-down," anticolonial thinkers started to refuse mastery and authority, the building blocks of the West. Le Guin's icy land can represent what Leela Gandhi calls "the rudimentary schoolroom of ethics" (quoted by Elam 23). This

“schoolroom of ethics” becomes Le Guin’s lab of practicing her anticolonial imagination; the world, however, is wretched, that politics “accountable to regimes of ‘success’, ‘sustainability’ or ‘attainability’” cannot be applied here. It requires a politics of the “present”; “the time being, the passing moment, and the present” (3).

The above-mentioned laments crystalize why Le Guin prefers a land with only little progress since aligned with *The Wretched of the Earth*, she is of the opinion that “there will likely never be a world ‘after colonialism’”. “Egalitarianism” is hence the best fix for the “horrors” of the oppressive rule around the world” (Elam 3). She is not seeking “revolutionary outcomes,” but rather she offers “a political aesthetics centered on commitment to ‘inconsequence’ as a way of refusing future mastery and expertise” (Elam 5). The nature in her mindset is un-masterable, so the only alternative is withdrawal which requires coexisting not progress. The Gethenian are, very similar to Fanon’s anticolonial’s call of a “new man” (Elam 2), therefore, not the masters in this nature, but a part it.

These inhabitants do as little as possible to interfere in the balance of the nature, as Lindow points out, “within the LeGuiniverse, the greatest suffering is caused by doing” (249). This is a self-evident fact showing Le Guin’s care; Le Guin is seeking for the ethical care through creating an imaginary land within which the inhabitants are not doing much because they have already taken the importance of the interests of the nature on board and preferred to live with harmony and empathy with them; a kind of empathy which has long been taken for granted in the Western societies. Here man and culture and androcentric conventions are not positioned at the top dominating women and nature for their weakness.

Having drawn the habitat, Le Guin then starts to populate it with characters reflecting her own thought process of gender and sexuality. Le Guin reckons the intrinsic nature of men way more violent than that of the women, thus she crafts a world inhabited by an androgynous population. This with all its shortcomings could be perhaps the boldest move of Le Guin in which she goes for melting the capitalistic goal of creating a hierarchal structure that empowers men to be more influential to dominate women and nature. Le Guin’s tenacity to deconstruct all the traditional gender roles represents a challenge to the dualistic notion of gender and the tyranny of genders leaving the readers to ponder how gender roles arising from Western ideology govern our world. Indeed, Gethen is teemed with androgynous people as Le Guin’s heuristic tool of exercising the impacts of excluding genders. She disputes “all the naturalized assumptions about what it means to be

human and less than human, particularly when human is taken to mean white and male” (Pearson 185-6).

Hence, Le Guin manipulates gender subtly; the gender identity in Gethen is “provisional, temporary and arbitrary” and through Genly Ai, Le Guin tries to show how this brand-new gender system might look like to an outsider. Ai as a “naïve human male locked in his own preconceptions about the alien and their world” is forced into bridging the gulf between his own ideology and that of the weird, yet intriguing culture he faces (Pearson 184). The people Ai encounters have no gender roles, sexed identity is here temporary and the inhabitants based on their shifting social surroundings emerge into either male or female embodiments and they are mostly in “somer,” (Le Guin 118) i.e., sexually inactive. This hermaphroditic race has a culture that “at the first glance looks as if it should have either more or less in common with ours than it does,” and it “overtly refute[s] the (Euromerican) human insistence on duality and binary thinking” (184).

The fact that an individual can either be a man or a woman in a single body during the period of “kemmer” (Le Guin 25) can clearly support the equality of both sexes and Le Guin’s egalitarian purposes; the mother of some children can be simultaneously the father of several other children:

The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be tied down to childbearing, implies that no one is quite thoroughly tied down here as women elsewhere, are likely to be-psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore, nobody here is quite as free as a free male anywhere else (Le Guin 122).

Le Guin’s egalitarian purpose comes to the limelight when the figure of the king is similar to all the other androgynous characters in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The king falling pregnant articulates Le Guin’s intention of shattering all the inherent biological disparities between men and women and highlighting the inherent worth of women and reaffirming their birth giving power. As a result, this dichotomy, which is a negative legacy of Western thought, has broken down and the path for a more equal society has been paved.

Ai’s alien encounter can be interpreted as the “reversal of the cultural expectation that sex reveals the truth of the self” (Pearson quoted in Bertek 45). Ai disputes the humanness of this androgynous population and mainly uses masculine pronouns to masculinize these inhabitants; the population is, therefore, mostly bracketed in to male category, however, as soon as encountering distinctive, “deceitful”

(Bertek 45) or despicable behaviors, he tends to consider them women-like. This sense of devaluing women and seeing them as “deceitful” and weak roots from Ai’s mindset, which has been fostered by Western thought and ideology. He develops a sense of exasperation and distrusts Estraven for his “soft supple femininity” (Le Guin 27). Ai harbors the same ambivalent feeling when picturing several other Gethenians including King Argaven: “He laughed shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused (Le Guin 48). The King’s laughing then signifies nothing to Ai but an embodiment of femininity and “insubstantial” traits (Le Guin 182).

We can finally say that Le Guin is immensely benefiting from her application of a transnational perspective within which Ai is experiencing his selfhood. She has indeed provided a means to conceptualize how it feels like wandering among and dealing with disparate groups of people. Ai tends to place the Gethenians into the pre-established sex categories applying mainly male pronouns, but he fails since he is oblivious to the fact that Le Guin has challenged the male-female binary and destabilized the way humanity is conceived. Through psychological progress, Ai as an outsider comes to realize that this characteristic of the population leads to a representation of undivided halves and these complementary halves together equal humanity. Le Guin has, actually, removed the veil of gender in order to let humanity shine. This perception helps Ai to leave the darkness behind and embrace the light of seeing a bigger picture in which the Gethenians are not “Other”; in this new picture, Ai is just “another” (Murphy, “Rethinking the Relations of Nature” 311), and the Gethenians are all human.

There no longer exists any gender distinction in this society, women and nonhumans may not suffer the constraints associated with patriarchal societies. Humanity in Gethen is interpreted as a “commonly accessible and shared set of values, attributes and behaviours tangibly separated from arbitrary and shifting notions of the self-based only on a sexed embodiment” (Merrick 247). Consequently, Ai plainly admires the gender system in Gethen and sees the merits of this androgynous society, which is profoundly challenging the binary system dominating the modern West and many other countries. “There is less coding, channeling, and repressing of sex there than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare” (Le Guin 217). Le Guin’s decolonial attitude to us reaches its climax when Ai, who earlier in the story found it difficult to trust Estraven while proceeding through Gorbin Ice, falls in love with him. However, Le Guin is loath to let the two couple because she is mindful that the outcome of

this relationship is producing a generation of single-sexed males or females on Gethen which is boldly against her egalitarian opinion and her reluctance to mastering the planet for its Anthropogenic consequences.

### 5. Conclusion

It is high time that we, who are left in the margins and are facing inequitable consequences of the Western Enlightenment, seek a “culturopoeia,” the new culture Murphy coins in an effort to build a more “natured culture” because our fate is linked to that of nature (“Rethinking the Relations of Nature” 311). Anyone living in the Middle East, one of the most vulnerable places in the world to climate change, should heed the evidence on water supply depletion, ecological degradation, temperature increase, deforestation, the shrinking of the lakes, drought, etc., and strive towards the emergency of fostering a culture including human-nature interrelationships rather than nature-alienated one. We need to note that we are part of the natural world, and in order to survive we need to look for ways to coexist with our own nature. As Murphy suggests, we have to practice becoming something more “another” instead of “Other” to the rest of the world, thus we are enabled to form relationships with “a vast array of entities constituted as alien others by the current dichotomy of human versus nature” (“Rethinking the Relations of Nature” 315). This “anotherness,” that is nonhierarchical, is only feasible through embracing a “cultropoeia” volitionally. An ecofeminist dialogue on how to live with the rest of the world can, therefore, act as an actant to transform us into non-hierarchical another. Of course, we are going to have complications with the Western patriarchal thought, which through its historical manifestation, has always considered women and nature as alienated others. However, replacing the alienation of others by the relation of the human/nonhuman will surely lead to a better conversation between the two and thus between men and women.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is not the typical science fiction laden by adventure; it is rather a journey to a land of ice and sun. This journey makes the reader ponder about the ground they are standing on, and see how life would be different if Western capitalistic attitudes regarding the nonhuman treatment and gender issues were not observed. I believe that the parade scene in the novel “with no soldiers, or not even imitation soldiers” with the king himself installing a keystone painted by the “blood of animals” as a sacrifice on the bridge (Le Guin 16-19) underlines Le Guin’s awareness that this harmony between the human and nonhuman will not last long, as Ai the embodiment of



Western capitalism has stepped on this pristine planet. The king is in fact bridging this relation with Terra as a route for globalization, which will ultimately bring about further complications.

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**وا آموختن آنتروپوسن: مطالعه اکوفمینیستی «دست چپ تاریکی» اثر اورسولا کی لو گوئن**

در قرن 21 مسائل زیست محیطی و تغییرات آب و هوایی در شاه راه گفتمان رخنه کرد و فلسفه اکوفمینیسم را عامل تغییر و دگرگونی ساخت. اثر علمی و تخیلی اورسولا لو گوین، دست چپ تاریکی (1996)، توطئه گر و رویا گونه با محوریت جنسیت و طبیعت، دست تخیل خواننده را برای تصور جهانی فرای دنیای مدرنیته و سرمایه داری که زن و طبیعت را به سلطه گرفته، باز گذاشته است؛ نه تنها برای کسانی که مدرنیته را در جهان به اصطلاح غرب تجربه کرده اند، بلکه حتی کسانی که در حاشیه سلسه مراتبی شکننده آن هستند. برای مقابله با انسانیت زدایی زنان و تحقیر طبیعت، لو گوین ضمن برجسته کردن فواید عصر آنتروپوسن، سلسه مراتب دوگانه جهان که منجر به ظلم، تسلط و تجسم در این مقاله، رمان سمت نفوذ مردانه می شود را در جهان روایی خود تخریب و بازاندیشی می کند. چپ تاریکی، مکانی خیالی است که در آن به مخاطبان این فرصت داده شده تا با وجود بحران های زیست مح عیطی بی سابقه، درباره رابطه خود با طبیعت تأمل و باز نگری کنند. خوانش اکوفمینیستی ما از رمان بازتاب نگاه لو گین به آن دیگری غیرانسان در جهان روایی گمانه پردازانه اش است که نگرانی ما را درباره عصر زمین شناسی کنونی به نام آنتروپوسن برطرف می کند.

**کلمات کلیدی:** اکوفمینیسم، اورسولا کی لو گوئن، دست چپ تاریکی، علمی تخیلی