

Feminist Ideas and Principles in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

**Sid Samberg
Hum-140-001
Reading Group Assignment Paper**

Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is awash in revolutionary feminist ideas, especially concerning the nature of gender and "gender roles" within both social and political society. In addition, because it was written during a time when the sci fi community was largely a boys' club, the publication and popularity of the book was itself a sort of revolution for female sci fi writers.

When starting the book, the importance of the story within feminist discourse quickly became clear. When I first learned the nature of the planet Winter's inhabitants- literally genderless, save for an extremely brief monthly mating period- it forced me to immediately reconsider my own fixed-gender perspective in order to attempt identification with the characters. This mirrors what the main (human) character, Genly Ai, is forced to come to terms with. In the first half of the novel, he continually struggles with such an existence. The longer he stays on Winter, analyzing their society and attempting to establish relations with their leaders, the more disillusioned he becomes with the lack of gender roles, or even gender rivalry, among the Gethenians (the name of Winter's inhabitants.) Genly inadvertently gets himself involved in a political struggle early on in the book. When attempting to sweeten relations with the King of Karhide, a country on Winter, he is rejected, and due to his status as a "pervert", or a fixed-sex, sexually driven being, he is rejected with disgust. This alienation worsens when the King

exiles a Gethenian named Estraven, who was one of Genly's only trusted friends, on terms of betrayal. The King suspects Estraven has been cooperating or bargaining with Orgoreyn, a neighboring country, and relations between Karhide and Orgoreyn are currently tense, almost to the point of war. Although Genly is of course familiar with struggles and conflict, he isn't entirely capable of understanding the motivations of the Gethenians. Because they all lack the primal, sexual instincts of power and dominance, they have never truly had a war, and thus the nature of the conflict seems even more alien to Genly (and the reader.) Eventually, Genly ends up in Orgoreyn, where after a series of shady political encounters he is imprisoned by the secret police, who run the state. Genly's imprisonment, for both himself and the reader, is the ultimate reminder of his status as "The Other" within the context of Gethenian society. Not only is he imprisoned, but he is treated with contempt by the prison guards, who like many others view him as being an abomination. Eventually Genly is daringly rescued by Estraven- it is possibly only due to Estraven's learned experience as an unwanted exile that he is able to truly sympathize with Genly's status as such. While Genly and Estraven make an escape through the frozen wilderness, they begin to understand each other's unique point of view. Genly attempts to educate Estraven on the nature of gender amongst humans, with the natural roles he feels men and women each play, while Estraven helps Genly let go of his internalized, "fixed" gender role, if even temporarily. One particularly important example of this was a matter of Genly's very survival. In a masculine showing of power, Genly refuses to stop for the night during a blizzard, but

Estraven realises Genly has frostbite. If he hadn't let go of his attempt at machismo and hardiness, he could easily have died.

The book ends with Genly completing his mission of forming an alliance between humans and Gethenians, but at great cost: Estraven is killed by Karhide agents, while protecting Genly. Through a butterfly effect, causes the dissolution of the Karhide/Orgoreyn conflict and allows an intergalactic alliance to be formed. However, there is an implied danger that comes with this: because the Gethenians have never truly known war, it is possible (or even likely) that the influence of humans, with all their internalized prejudices and conflicts, might eventually drive them to war.

Discussing this book in a group context was rewarding and beautiful. The story is interspersed with small anecdotes about ancient Gethenian history and culture, many of which take the form of their own spiritual myths and stories. These were particularly exciting to interpret and discuss, as they were written in an arcane, challenging style. Certain aspects of the political and personal battles taking place in the book were only made clear through a group analysis. Some of the group members were already fans of science fiction while others had never before read any. It was a truly exciting journey for all of us to unravel the mysteries of the Gethenians, and to follow Genly's path in re-evaluating his learned gender identity.

There are many stories which remind us not to make generalizations of or stereotype another person. Personally, one of the most important lessons I took from the story was avoid the pigeonholing of one's *self* as well, and to embrace all known and potential aspects of one's identity rather than cling to a preconceived idea of how one ought to

appear. To make a connection between Le Guin and Judith Butler: the performativity of gender is very real and can easily extend to performativity of many other aspects of the self. The experience of Genly Ai on a planet where gender performativity is rendered meaningless serves as a wake-up call to readers that our capacity for self-expression (particularly in terms of gender and sexuality) is limitless, and may extend far beyond what society traditionally expects of us.