

Feminist Science Fiction:
A Study of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*
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Abstract

This paper presents a study of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a text that comes under Feminist Science Fiction. This genre serves as a vehicle for promoting feminist thought by constructing realms in which the potentials of women are recognized and their participation and contributions are valued and appreciated. It raises fundamental questions about the way society constructs gender identities and offers instead a vision of a reality free of sexism and exploitation. The organizing principle of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the feminist theoretical vision of androgyny. Feminist androgyny is instrumental in restoring balance and reclaiming justice in a world disheveled by the patriarchal systems and gender ideologies. If men and women are ambisexual, they would become equally empowered in their roles; socially, politically, legally and economically. At this point, society would be crucially changed. Like all feminist science fiction, Le Guin's text endeavors to achieve the goals of feminist thought.

الخيال العلمي في الأدب النسائي: دراسة تحليلية لرواية أورسولا ليجوين، "
اليد اليسرى للظلام"
مها عبد المنعم عمارة
الملخص

يقدم هذا البحث دراسة تحليلية لرواية ((اليد اليسرى في الظلام)) التي قامت بتأليفها الروائية أورسولا ليجوين، ويندرج هذا النص في مجال الخيال العلمي في الأدب النسائي، والاهتمام في هذا النوع الأدبي ينصب على خلق عالم تسوده المساواة بين الجنسين ويتسم بالعدل والتكافؤ. وتساعد النصوص الروائية في هذا المضمار على تعزيز وتشجيع فكر ونظريات النقد النسوي. لقد قامت ليجوين بتكوين واقع خيالي يمكن من خلاله الاعتراف بإمكانات المرأة وتقدير مشاركتها ودورها الفعال، هذا إلى جانب إتاحة الفرص للمساهمات التي قد تقوم بها. وقد اعتمدت ليجوين نظرية الأندروجني كما تبناها النقد النسوي للتعبير عن عالم في جوهره يقوم على استعادة التوازن بين الرجل والمرأة اعتقاداً منها أن ذلك يضع حد لدوافع الإستغلال والتناحر والإشتباكات الدموية بين الشعوب. ان الواقع الذي قامت برتسيخه النظم الاجتماعية الأبوية والمذاهب التي تحبذ التمييز بين الجنسين قد أدى الى بؤس وشقاء الإنسانية، ولذلك تتبنى لوجوين عالم مغاير يمكن من خلاله إحداث تغييراً حاسماً في المجتمع والعلاقات الإنسانية. إن رواية لوجوين تسهم في المحاولات العديدة والمتنوعة التي يبتدعها النسويون لتحقيق الأهداف التي تربو إلي تحقيقها المدرسة الثقافية والفكرية التي انبثقت من الحلم بواقع يتغى بالمساواة والعدل

Feminist science fiction serves as a vehicle for feminist thought. It raises fundamental questions about the way society constructs identities, re-defines the dominant norms which represent women as marginal and subordinate, and establishes the unequal political and personal power relations of men and women. As feminist polemic, this genre embodies “the ultimate goals of feminism” (Helford 291). It unravels a reality free of sexism and realms in which the potentials of women are recognized and their desire and sexuality are valued. Feminist science fiction questions the restrictive social norms and cultural pressures which cage female individuality and stifle female creativity. Significantly, the focus on femaleness does not deny men the importance of their role since women narratives often end in the reunification of the masculine and the feminine, and the integration of male and female communities.

Feminist science fiction has its roots in pulp magazines which are a significant cultural production in the American tradition.¹ They constituted the main avenue for publishing science fiction until the emergence of the paperback novels of the 1950's. During the 1920's, science fiction by women writers such as Clara Winger Harris and Gertrude Barrows Bennett appeared in pulp magazines. For the most part, their fiction was set in a future alternate world, and tackled topics which amalgamate sensational, political and technological views of society, as well as critiques of gender and sexuality revealing an exaggerated view of masculinity and sexist portrayals of women.

The first widely popular female writer of science fiction is Mary Shelley. Her text, *Frankenstein* (1818), sowed the seeds of women's tradition of science fiction. Writers of the 1920's used the example of Shelley's *Frankenstein* to write for college science classes since their portrayal of alien life forms relied on scientific studies. Jane L. Donawerth states that they “formulated plots out of scientific puzzles,” and romanticized the “scientific principle that solved the puzzle-molecular chemistry” (138). In the hands of women writers, the genre achieved great strides as they contrived technological utopias to transform domestic duties re-envisioning housekeeping tasks and altering the circumstances of women's work at home.²

Using visions of the potentials of technology, they promoted the scientific homemaker that became a popular section in women's magazines at the time. Leslie F. Stone's "Women with Wings" presents "mechanized robots" (987) who took over the care of the house and the kitchen, and thus relieved women from the exhaustion of house chores. Similarly, they handled the labor and toil of pregnancy and abolished the dangers of childbirth by contemplating radical revisions of producing infants through mechanical agencies.

Freeing women from the impositions and fetters of traditional domestic obligations and conventional feminine duties was conducive to imaginings of new gender roles. Minna Irving offers women the role of social reformer. Her moonwomen, in "Moonwomen," "become rulers and saves people from disease and war" (753). Other writers such as Louise Rice and Tonjoroff Roberts broached the subjects of suffrage and education for women. Since gender is socially constructed, they sought "revised roles for women" (Donawerth 144) along the lines of equality. They invoked societies where men or women have an equal chance of governing. With the appearance of strong women characters, the Victorian cult of 'the angel in the house' became the target of attack and the butt of satire.

By the 1930's, women disappeared from the pulp magazines due to the presence of conservative editors and the 'masculinization' of science fiction. Women who wrote during this period published under male pseudonyms or used initials such as C. L. Moore whose contributions are particularly significant because she offered a model of the Amazonian hero. Moreover, she updated the Frankenstein myth by making the monster a woman in "No Woman Born" (1944). Although women writers of this period focused on macho male heroes in their texts, they contributed to securing a place for women writers in the science fiction publishing industry.

By the 1960's and with the advent of feminism, women's roles and gender relations were further questioned through the portrayal of Amazons and lesbians. In the 1970's, science fiction writers raised the questions of feminism and sexism within the science fiction culture. Throughout the 1980's, female science fiction gained widespread

popularity. Writers such as Clara Wings Harris exploited the freedom of future imaginings to conjure up worlds in which women's lives are unconstrained. They maneuvered generic barriers such as the cultural norms of masculinist science and the dominance of male narrators by rendering women the center of the narrative world. The resort to multiple narrations was often instrumental in disrupting the dominance of one perspective. Eventually, feminist theory and its critique of patriarchy became preoccupations of science fiction. Later writers of science fiction such as Melissa Scott and Janet Kagan, in the 1990's, continued former feminist trends with adventure stories some of which never identified the gender of the first-person narrator, and others criticized patriarchal society and envisioned utopian realms. Themes which became especially popular include reverse gender discrimination roles which occupied center stage in C. J. Cherryl's *The Pride of Chanur* (1981). The presentation of a society where, heterosexuality is a perversion and homosexuality the norm, appeared as in Eleanor Arnason's *Ring of Swords* (1993).³

A major constituent component of feminist science fiction is the androgynous vision. Women writers reveal the brain as sexless. Robin Roberts explains that they "depict worlds that are nonsexist, nonhierarchical, and centered on androgynous values shaped by feminist concerns" (92). Interdependence, mercy, and the benefits which sexual equality bring to men and women form the basic structure of the society which the writers imagine. In her attempt to define androgyny, Natalie M. Rosinky argues that for feminists who regard women's and men's abilities as equal, human potential is androgynous. "Nurture ... is the dominant influence on women's and men's mental as well as physical development ... the traditional divisions of labour into circumscribed feminine and broader masculine spheres are artificial constructs. It is determined by social prejudice rather than actual human capabilities" (ix). Proponents of androgyny assert women's encompassing innate superiority. The distinct traits women possess do not preclude the ability to fulfill traditionally male roles as well.

In twentieth-century writings of this genre, the notion of

female empowerment becomes a central focus. There is an obsession with female strength, and the physical prowess of women became a recurrent emphasis. Earlier, the pulp magazines provided writers with graphically depicted images of women's forceful presence and images of domineering matriarchs embodied in the figure of the female alien and the woman ruler. Both the portrait on the cover page and the stories inside the pulp magazines featured legendary women such as mermaids, the Medusa and the demonic women. On the cover, women were pictured as enlarged and gigantic, looming over the men and mesmerizing them through sexual allure. This version of femaleness implies the constraints of patriarchy which suppressed women's power and suggests alternatives based on a differently constructed notion of femininity. The presentation of femininity as both magical and reproductive emerges as threatening to men.

Significantly, feminist science fiction promotes women's participation in sciences but in their own female way and from their own point of view. The narratives evoke the dualities of masculine science as versus a matriarchal alternative science, and they juxtapose conventional rigid science with a feminine soft and artistic science. In a world of hard male science, women are alienated from their alternative sources of power; male technological forces thwart the matriarchal sciences. Women writers draw on the Demeter myth⁴ and rewrite it. They reveal the struggle of women in order to be reconciled with the maternal and dispel their sense of alienation. Like Demeter, women, in feminist science fiction, develop the power to blast the Earth and destroy male culture. Through the process of parthenogenesis, an asexual form of reproduction where growth and development of embryos in females occurs without fertilization by a male, women manage to survive without men using their reproductive capabilities to perpetuate themselves and to create an all-female communities.⁵

Moreover, revelation of the future through the Apocalypse as a favorite setting in science fiction is re-appropriated by women writers to their purpose. Their narratives reverberate with warnings of the fallen world suggesting that if male technology is given way

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unchecked, it would create destruction that would bring about the end of the world. Recurrent depiction of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic settings is an admonishment of the male hard science and its threat to humanity. However, it is clearly indicated that should an apocalypse occur, the brute patriarchal strength would prove futile, and women would find that they, by nature, are better equipped to survive.

The new feminist tradition in science fiction unravels realms where the opposing dichotomy of male and female, center and margin, and the hegemonic and the subordinate prevails. However, it privileges the marginalized female over the male center. The narratives deconstruct masculine science, and empower female alternative sciences to overrule and conquer. Witches and their imaginary skills are portrayed as scientific and their feminine magic figures as influential and overwhelming. In fact, feminist science fiction proposes that the reclamation of the powers of the imagination, which are embodied in magic and art, is what the world needs. Andre Norton (pseudonym of Alice Mary) and Joan Vinge subvert the traditional male-female binary oppositions and depict venerated women wielding witchcraft and defeating male-dominated technology. Norton and Vinge celebrate feminine values in order to force patriarchal society to re-evaluate the accepted and conventional concepts. In contrast to male sciences of technology and military power which brought destruction to humanity, enslaved indigenous populations and exploited their resources, the societies constructed by female mental powers produce benefits to both men and women and offer the human race much more contentment. Female scientists use their powers creatively to transform the world. In fact, the narratives are so compelling that even a potentially hostile audience develops a concern and sympathy for women's issues.

This study focuses on Ursula Le Guin's (1929-) *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1979) which is considered the hallmark of her creative writing. The text is acclaimed as "the essential gesture of science fiction." In this text, science fiction emerges as "an open system" (Olander and Greenberg 11). In a process and experience of distancing and pulling back from reality, Le Guin invokes a future

vision in another realm unfettered by social pressures and inherited cultural systems. The purpose of this investigation is to find out if *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as a feminist science fiction, ends radically and is forward looking; or it reverts to conservative stances and settles on a backward looking position and conventional perspectives.

The Left Hand of Darkness (Left Hand) explores a realm teeming with heterosexist assumptions. It maps out the liberal feminist dream of a world without gender differences and patriarchal norms of sexuality. The planet 'Gethen' or 'Winter' unravels constructed societies in which political power, as well as "the female roles as object of desire and as a giver of life" (Jacobs 198) are rights of citizenship shared by all the inhabitants of the planet. Traditional gender inequality is unknown. Differences between maleness and femaleness emerge only when an individual engages in sexual activity.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin creates an imaginary world with its own imaginary philosophy, cults, myths and legends all of which come into play throughout the narrative. At the outset, GenlyAi, the envoy of Ekumen/Earth, is sent to the planet Gethen on a mission to study its inhabitants and find out if they are ready to communicate with the rest of mankind. Thus, he can introduce this icy planet into the Ekumen which is composed of a loose consortium of eighty worlds that trade in knowledge as well as goods. Ai is the narrative consciousness of the text and the reader views Gethen from Ai's perspective. Gethen is a harsh and icy cold place where human survival is difficult yet it is a familiar place to the inhabitants of Earth. It has similar political systems, the seasons are similar, the landscape is ordinary by earth standards, and the cities are built the same way earth inhabitants build them to adapt to cold climates.

Unlike the earth inhabitants, Gethen is a planet of humanoid hermaphrodites who are sexually quiet except for a few days each month when they involuntarily assume the sexual functions of either gender. Four-fifths of the month, a Gethenian's sexuality plays no part at all in his social life and for the rest of the month, it dominates him absolutely. When a Gethenian has to make love, it becomes an

imperative and everybody expects him to do so as the Gethenian society accepts and approves of such act. There is no fear and guilt about sex because there is no rape. The Gethenians cannot rape or get raped since they cannot have sexual intercourse unless both partners are willing. Instead of continuous sexuality in which individuals have no choice in the matter, every twenty-eight days, the Gethenians enter an oestrus period called *kemmer*. When an individual enters the estrus state of *kemmer*, the heightened sexual urge produces male or female sex characteristics for the duration of *kemmer*. "Individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in *kemmer*, they do not know whether they will be male or female, and have no choice in the matter" (*Left Hand 91*). The individual who becomes pregnant retains female characteristics during pregnancy. When halfway through the text, it is declared that "The king [is] pregnant," it seems a perfectly natural phenomenon to the Gethenians and the cycle is depicted as a matter of fact. When the individual finds a partner in *kemmer*, hormonal secretion is stimulated until in one partner either male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role. If conception has not yet taken place, the individual returns to the latent phase and the cycle begins anew. If the individual is in the female role and is impregnated, hormonal activity continues, and for the gestation and lactation periods this individual remains female (*Left Hand 90*). *Kemmer* is a state of powerful arousal, but "permanent *kemmer*" is regarded as a perversion.

Gethen has two major cities: Karhide and Orgoreyn. Ai's arrival, with his promises of what the wider world can offer, feeds the rivalry and hostility between the two states. At first, Ai arrives in Karhide where he meets king Argaven XV, an androgynous who considers Ai's masculinity a perverse aberration. The king refuses joining the Ekumen but his Prime minister, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, is supportive of Ai's cause although he does not show it. Estraven's political standing is jeopardized when he opposes the king and declares his support of Ai's ideas. He is ostracized and is forced to leave the country. On his part, Ai is forced to leave Gethen as well,

and goes to Orgoreyn where Estraven is exiled. In Orgoreyn, Ai is regarded with suspicion as an alien and ends up in prison because the people considered him as a threat. Subjected to interrogations, Ai is on the brink of death but he is rescued by Estraven and both escape. They decide to travel across the glaciers from Orgoryn into Karhide, an 800-mile journey that will take them over three months. During their journey across the ice, Estraven and Ai become good friends and eventually feel a strong bond of love. Shortly after their arrival in Karhide, Estraven is mysteriously shot and dies as a result. Ai is taken to the King, who at this point becomes acquiescent to Ai's ideas and agrees to join the Ekumen. It is noteworthy that in the turns and twists of this plot, several prominent issues in feminist science fiction emerge and gather strength.

Left Hand won the Nebula and Hugo awards for best science fiction novel of 1969. George E. Slusser attributes its popularity to "a striking central idea, a world whose people are androgynous" (17). *Left Hand* is a social feminist science fiction. However, the focus shifts from worlds formed completely of women to androgynous worlds freed from sexual tension. In the cycle of reproduction which the Gethenians undergo, androgyny assumes a central importance:

In the first phase of *kemmer*, [the individual] remains completely androgynous ... in the culminating phase of *kemmer*, gender potency and the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality... It lasts from two to five days, during which sexual drive and capacity are at their maximum ... With the cessation of lactation the female becomes once more a perfect androgyny. No physiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more. (*Left Hand* 90-91)

The novel begins by announcing that it is set in the "Ekumenical Year 1490-97" and that the inhabitants are androgynous. They differ from those of earth in their sexual physiology. They are men but with two sexes instead of one. Le Guin explains: "I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will be androgynous ... I think we damned well

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ought to be androgynous ... if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are" (1979, 158). As androgynous beings, the Gethenians exhibit simultaneously the characteristics of both sexes without being firmly in either category. For Ai, the inhabitants of Gethen are alien due to their ambisexuality. He explains, "When you meet a Gethenian you cannot ... cast him in the role of Man or Woman ... In our world a man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated. On [Gethen] they will not exist" (*Left Hand* 94). In Gethen, a person is respected and judged only as a human being.

In *Left Hand*, Ai's reaction to the Gethenians and their bisexuality is a prominent issue. With his divisive patriarchal heritage, he finds it difficult to comprehend a world devoid of gender identity, sex roles and cultural stereotypes. Ai manages to survive on Gethen and reciprocate the friendship of Estraven, the alien other who is "woman as well as ... man" (*Left Hand* 234), only when he learns to accept the de-gendered and de-sexualized Gethenians. Eventually, he becomes so involved in the Gethenian androgynous reality that when he reconsiders his own species, he senses an essential incompleteness. 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*" (*Left Hand* 279). For him, traditional sexuality has become stifling and constricting. On the planet Gethen, Ai's encounter with human faces and souls who are neither male nor female is a liberating and expanding experience. In *Left Hand*, Le Guin embraces the concept of androgyny maintaining that "if men and women were ambisexual, they would thus become completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, responsibility and self-esteem" (Le Guin 1979, 169). At this point, society would be crucially transformed.

One of the dominant symbols in *Left Hand* is winter and the extended metaphor of ice, snow and cold. The deathly emptiness of the ice where "nothing grows and no beasts run" (*Left Hand* 24) is described as an antithesis to and a refutation of the civilized world of cities, governments, institutions, rivalries and hierarchies. Ai and

Estraven are involved in a complicated love/hate relationship that culminates in a journey over the ice and snow of winter. The trip undertaken across a frozen wasteland creates a bond of brotherhood between the earth envoy and his alien counterpart. A truly authentic meeting of individuals develops amidst such icy vastness. Ai remarks, "up here on the Ice, each of us is singular, isolate [d]... equals at last" (*Left Hand* 221). This infinite expansion of ice is a place of joy and rebirth. Attempting to understand the sense of contentment and euphoria he found in that winter journey, Ai remembers nights in the tent after days of grueling struggle, "We are inside, the two of us, in shelter, at rest, at the center of all things. Outside, as always, lies the great darkness, the cold, death's solitude" (*Left Hand* 227). Cut off from social restraints and struggling for survival against harsh and inimical nature, Ai and Estraven create and inhabit a womb of balance, security and comfort. For Ai, this is a place of refuge not only from sex roles but from sexuality itself which would endanger a relationship of equality and equilibrium.

Estraven and Ai come at the center of the narrative world and constitute the catalysts of the narrative events. All the critical issues that the narrative encompasses are evoked by these two figures. Ai follows Estraven first to Orgoyen and then both embark on a journey through the Ice Crossing. Isolated between the two kingdoms of Karhide and Orgoyen, the Ice Crossing is situated in an Arctic landscape. Ironically, it is midst such drab environment that Ai and Estraven discover that they are equal despite their alien-ness. With such realization, Estraven dies and Ai is left to mourn him. By understanding and loving Estraven, Ai recognizes and embraces the feminine side of himself. Symbolically, Rosinsky explains that "acceptance of Estraven's female component is equivalent to Ai's acceptance of his own female characteristics" (30).⁶ Ai is reconciled to the feminine side of his physical entity. Estraven dies so that Ai, the masculine figure, can accept and integrate his feminine side in his being. In this respect, Ai's mission to Gethen as explorer-scientist-investigator is also a journey of self-understanding and self-revelation, during which he discovers the feminine side of his character.

The emphasis on the female components of the characters of the Gethenians is reiterated throughout *Left Hand*. Thus, the choice of the pronoun 'he' triggers questions. Le Guin has been criticized for the consistent use of a male-oriented figure, and the use of the pronoun 'he' to describe the biologically androgynous inhabitants of Gethen. She writes, "The Gethenians seem like *men*, instead of men-women" (1979, 168). Estraven, the Gethenian protagonist, does not figure as a mother with children or performing any role which traditional culture perceives as typically female. He is seen as a man who is cast into roles which are culturally perceived as male, such as a prime minister, a political schemer, a fugitive, a prison-breaker and a sledge-hauler. Le Guin observes, "I think I did this because I was privately delighted at watching, not a man, but a man woman, do all these things, and do them with considerable skill and flair" (1979, 168). Moreover, referring to Estraven as Ai's intimate friend and using a male pronoun removes sexual possibilities from their friendship. Le Guin invites the readers to use their imagination and participate in her experimentation with the male –female roles. She points out that they need to "see Estraven as [she] saw him, as man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human" (1979, 169). One of the essential functions of science fiction, as Le Guin explains, is the "reversals of [the] habitual way of thinking [and carrying out] experiments in imagination" (1979, 163). The experimentation with peculiar people is a rational process. By focusing on androgyny, and on an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles and where there is no physiological sexual distinction between its members, Le Guin disrupts lifelong social conditioning. It is the means to reveal the areas that are shared by men and women once gender is eliminated.

Life on Gethen is regulated by disciplines and creeds which draw on thoughts and concepts from philosophy and psychology. Androgyny as the predominant mode of life and thought contributes to the endeavor to restore balance in existence after it has been toppled in the world by the patriarchal systems and hegemonic institutions. In Gethen, ritual and parade have been far more effective agents of instituting order than the forces of the armies and the police. In an

androgynous state, class structure and social hierarchy have been flexible. There is no wide gap between rich and poor. "There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, the protective/protected, the dominant / submissive, the owner and chattel or the active and passive (*Left Hand* 93-94). Status is not rank; it is indicative of the ability to maintain equality in any relationship. There is an elimination of masculinity that rapes and femininity that is raped. There is "no unconsenting sex, no rape ... coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible. Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed" (*Left Hand* 93). There is no slavery or servitude. Nobody owns anybody. There are no chattels and economic organization is communistic. It is noteworthy that such a constructed society as Gethen is inhabited by quarrelsome, competitive and aggressive people who have feuds, fights and assassinations, yet there has never been war and the concept of exploitation is unknown to the people. An equilibrium is maintained and rivalries are channeled into a socially approved form of aggression called *shifgrethor*, "a conflict without physical violence ... ritualized, stylized, controlled ... There might be a king and a parliament, but authority was not enforced so much by might as by the use of *shifgrethor* ... and was accepted as custom, without appeal to patriarchal ideals of divine right, patriotic duty" (Le Guin 1979, 164-165). Instead of practicing war, the Gethenians have traditionally expressed their competitiveness through the practice of *shifgrethor*. The Gethenians use the notion of *shifgrethor* to identify a sublimation of man's primitive fears and anger. *Shifgrethor*, according to Slusser, represents "the 'pride relationship' between individuals which shapes life on the planet" (20). Tibe, the successor of Estravan as the Prime minister of Karhide, is corrupt. When he abandons *shifgrethor*, he seeks, in his demagoguery, to drag his people into a morass of elemental disorder and chaos.

It is noteworthy that Ai, in his investigations of the Gethenians, has found out, that there is a casual relationship between Gethenian ambisexuality and the fact that Gethen has never had a war. Ai speculates on "continuous sexual capacity and organized social aggression, neither of which are attributes of any mammal but man ...

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[they] are cause and effect ... war [is] ... a purely masculine displacement-activity a vast Rape” (*Left Hand* 95). It is by virtue of their peculiar sexuality that the Gethenians have been endowed with inherent immunity and resistance to war. In fact, as the narrative develops, the suggestion reverberates that Gethenians might have been the result of a human experiment seeking to create a non-militant race.

When one of the communities, during the time span of the novel, establishes state capitalism and centralization of power, authoritarian government and a secret police, it is on the verge of achieving the world’s first war. There is struggle for dominance and insistence on divisions. Interdependence is denied. The two pictures of balance and chaos are juxtaposed. Le Guin explains that she included such episode “because [she] was trying to show a balance-and the delicacy of a balance” (1979, 165). The most intractable problem is to maintain the balance. The concept of balance is the axis of *Left Hand*. It is manifested most predominantly in androgyny. On Gethen, the male and female principles are in balance. The linearity, logicity and boundlessness of the male are juxtaposed with “the circularity of the female the valuing of patience, ripeness, practicality, livableness“(Le Guin 1979, 165-166). For Le Guin, the female principle “values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force” (1979, 165). The male enforces laws then breaks them. The concept of time in the planet operates according to the male-female balance. Instead of the chronological traditional male linearity, Le Guin explains that “their calendar calls the current year always the Year One, and they count backward and forward from that” (Le Guin 1979, 165). In fact, the restoration of balance and integration is the only cure of social malaise and the only defense against chaos. It results in a healthier, sounder and more promising modality of integration and integrity. Dualism of values, in which the superior is pitted against inferior, ruler against ruled, owner against owned, and superior against inferior, is destructive.

Androgyny is rooted in a long tradition of myth and literature⁷. The parallelism evokes significant insights. Le Guin depicts the ambisexuality of the Gethenians as an extension of its

conceptualization in tradition. Androgyny in myth, legend, and history is ambivalent, and in *Left Hand* it is equally ambivalent. In *Left Hand*, androgyny manifests “a double valence: it represents ... an intrusion and a consummation” (Hayles 97) as well as disruption and fulfillment. Androgyny is both a promise and a threat. In this respect, with the androgynous Gethenians, sexuality is ambivalent. On the one hand, it can be seen as augmentation or completion of the self, which stands as a symbol of wholeness and a state of perfection to which individuals aspire. It is the lost primordial state of being. The positive aspect of androgyny views the other as the lacking part of the self and yearns for the incorporation of the other within the self. On the other hand, a downside to this concept appears when the conscious mind becomes aware that it is not the totality of the psyche, it might be driven into permanent insanity or death by this realization. Moreover, the awareness of androgynous transformation arouses uneasiness because it threatens the security of selfhood since it proposes to change the nature of one's being. Thus, androgyny can be regarded as a form of self-annihilation; the recognition of elements from the other sex is an intrusion of the alien into the self. Androgyny can be threatening; the approach of the other to the self is alarming as it represents the encroachment of the disturbingly alien.

In fact, Le Guin manipulates concepts in psychology as well as theories in philosophical thought to illustrate her vision, and to provide the constructed world of Gethen with rationale and solid basis. Effectively, *Left Hand* draws on the philosophy of Taoism⁸ to reinforce the androgynous vision of the narrative realm. Taoist thought, in this context, reveals more of the problems as well as the potential of androgyny. The Taoist vision of inclusiveness and wholeness embodied in *Left Hand* offers a way to admit the ambivalence of androgyny and transcend it. The Taoist believes that wholeness derives from a creative tension between dualities. This suggests a way for the ambivalence inherent in androgyny to become the basis of a new synthesis. The ambiguous reaction that the sexually bifurcated race has toward androgyny, the yearning towards it and the repulsion from it, become, in the context of the holistic vision of the Tao, another set of dualities which are encompassed and transcended

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by an emergent whole. This new wholeness does not imply either the incorporation or obliteration of alien-ness. N. B. Hayles suggests that “although the alien remains the other, once its otherness is admitted and understood, it can come into creative tension with the self, and from this tension a new wholeness can emerge” (100). In fact, androgyny is crucial to any relationship yet it is transcended by the relationship. The sense of tension between dualities provides a means of recognizing as well as transcending the ambivalence inherent in androgyny. Hayles adds that “the choice is not between admitting the other as part of the self or excluding the other from the self, but recognition of the other as other, and recognition of the self in a creative tension with the other” (109). In fact, the alternations of the ambivalent elements inherent in androgyny become the organizing principle of Le Guin’s text. Such dialectical relationships qualify the parts of the narrative and the mode of narration.

As a rubric, *The Left Hand of Darkness* elicits several deliberations. The old Gethenian “Tomer’s Lay” from which Le Guin derives the novel’s title applies as much to Ai’s psychological structures as it does to Gethenian popular culture and folkloric nature.

*Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way. (Left Hand 222)*

This folk song echoes the Taoist thought in its suggestion that unified opposites such as light and darkness; life and death; male and female lovers; are necessary and integral component elements of human existence. The narrative consistently employs light and/or dark imagery in order to reflect and elaborate on this theme of unified opposites. The fabric of Gethen’s institutions and culture is made up of light and darkness, as well as shadow and snow. For the most part, they are ambiguous and inscrutable and yet they are essential, since they are interwoven solidly into Gethen reality reinforcing the constantly shifting valence.

In Gethenian culture and to an androgynous race, the end and purpose of the systems is the establishment of a sense of the holistic vision,⁹ out of the conjunction of opposites. Essence of emerges from a creative tension between dualities. Throughout the narrative, the scope of the dualities coming into creative tension with one another increases. In the central relationship, between Ai and Estravan, the fundamental duality emerges as 'I' and 'Thou', as well as the self and the alien. The relationship, between Estraven and Ai, elaborates and expands on the holistic vision stemming out of duality as a notion that informs the entire text, and incorporated in their personal relationship. In fact, *Left Hand* explores a series of dual forces identified by Hayles as "maleness and femaleness, light and shadow, myth and reality, and progress and stasis" (100) and their impingement on Ai and Estravan. In fact, *Left Hand* is informed by the motif of dualities; of Gethen and the Ekumen, of Karhide and Orgoreyn, of Ai and Estraven. The relationship between Ai and Estraven, with its tension between self and other, becomes an embodiment of the holistic vision. The intensity of this vision permeates almost every aspect of the narrative. It is necessary to see things whole in order to see clearly. In his relationship with Estraven, Ai comes to recognize underlying similarities in the manifestation of differences. Through such paradox, he achieves a deep understanding of and a profound respect for Estraven. In fact, the thrust of Le Guin's *Left Hand*, as Hayles puts it, "is toward the inclusion of dualities into a greater whole" (105). From the bringing together of the dualities and coming to terms with each other, the process of discovery comes about. Wholeness is meaningless unless it appreciates and celebrates the differences of its constituent components.

It is noteworthy that the Gethenian institution of the Handdara¹⁰ cult embodies the holistic vision of the Tao. The creative tension of light and shadow, and order and chaos, is central to the Handdara way of thinking. The Handdara prayer, "Praise then darkness and Creation unfinished" (*Left Hand* 216) is one expression of the Handdara belief that seeing requires not only light but shadow, and existing requires not only the ordering of creation but the potentiality of chaos and anarchy. In naming objects, the Handdara

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adopt a process that implies that a thing can be known only through its opposite. The names of objects reflect cultural assumptions in the community. The Handdara call their ritual of physical immobility the “untrice.” Likewise, Estravan calls Orgoreyn his “uncountry.” For the Handdarata, paradox is a philosophy and a mode of living. Hayles maintains that “the highest state of knowledge to which the Handdarata can aspire is ignorance, and the goal of their learning is to ‘unlearn’” (101). Such paradoxes are instrumental in highlighting the emphasis on dualistic wholeness; no one position or one philosophy or perspective is qualified all by itself.

Left Hand sets up an opposition between Handdara or Tao and Yomesh or Meshe cults. The philosophy of the Karhidish Handdara and the beliefs of the Yomesh are opposed. The Yomesh Canon renounces the sense of creative duality that underlies Handdara philosophy. An excerpt from the Canon of Yomesh concludes: “In the Sight of the Meshe there is no darkness” (*Left Hand* 157). The Yomeshta do not accept the uses of darkness and the negative aspects of creation. The Canon tells that “those that call upon the darkness are made fools of” (*Left Hand* 157). For the Yomesh, the forces of darkness are evil; they do not possess any strength, blessing or benefit. By becoming a servant of darkness, they engage in hideous plans of villainy and destruction.

Evidence in the narrative indicates that the Handdarata are preferred over the Yomesha. First and foremost, the Handdara is associated with Karhide and the Yomesh with Orgoreyn. Throughout *Left Hand*, Orgoreyn is diametrically opposed to Karhide. Orgoreyn is a less pleasant place to be in as it lacks the holistic vision of the Karhidish Handdara. Ai senses the dark side of the Orgota life. Despite the impressive grand public buildings and the corpulent figures he encounters, the environment in the city seems to him vague and insubstantial. Ai explains the intuitive uneasiness that overwhelms him in metaphorical terms by commenting that life in Orgota “did not cast shadows” (*Left Hand* 142). The Orgota practice of considering its citizens as units and interchangeable parts without individuality or a unique identity precludes all possibilities of their being able to cast a

shadow; a word which bears affinity to the honorable concept of *shifgrethor*. Slusser explains further that, in Gethen, the belief goes that “what casts no shadow has no substance” (23). In *Left Hand*, the shadow image is used repetitively to focus on the identity by which a man wishes to be recognized by his peers. Estraven tells Ai that *shifgrethor* is “an old word for shadow” (*Left Hand* 234) implying that which is attached to a person like his name or reputation.

Ai's intuitive perception provides a moral contrast through metaphor between the Handdarata who praise darkness and know the uses of shadow, and the Orgota state whose official religion insists that truth comes only from light. While the Orgota may not cast shadows, Orgoreyn has its dark places such as the blackness of the cellar and the pitch-black interior of the prison truck where Ai, is imprisoned after he has fallen out of favor in Orgoreyn. However, Orgota darkness does not possess any benevolence. Hayles remarks, “Darkness of Orgoreyn is linked with the treachery of its politicians, its secret police, its extensive and inhuman system of prison camps” (102). Darkness is a source of horror in Orgoreyn whereas in Handdara, darkness and “the primeval chaos of night can be fecund” (*Left Hand* 61). This is a central belief of the old Handdara religion flourishing in Karhide, but has been supplanted by a new sect in Orgoreyn. Its basis is the saying: “Praise darkness and creation unfinished” (*Left Hand* 232). Moreover, when Estravan points out that the Yomesh “cult of dynamic, aggressive, ecology-breaking cultures” (*Left Hand* 221) celebrates singularity, the authorial voice makes clear that this is to deny that man is part of a complex network of relationships. The Orgota renounce duality and praise singularity and, in urban Orgoreyn, as in Orgota prison camps, the people control their ambisexuality artificially through the use of drugs. On a global scale, this would lead to a breakdown of ecological balance, and on a national scale, it would lead to war.

In fact, Le Guin's bias towards the Handdarata and their ambisexuality looms large. A pattern emerges; on the one hand, “shadows, *shifgrethor*, absence of war on Gethen, and the Handdarata with their appreciation of dualities” are associated with Gethenian

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ambisexuality. It is needless to say that the absence of war on Gethen is a natural outgrowth of the prevalence of androgyny. On the other hand, “the perversions of darkness, honor, war, and the bureaucratic government of Orgoreyn” (Hayles 104) are understood as the result of denying androgyny. When Tibe seeks to convert Karhide into a nation capable of war, he stops talking about *shifgrethor* and starts talking about aggression.

Ai’s mission coincides with a turning point in Gethenian history. Gethenian cultural matrix of androgyny which precludes the possibility of war is menaced by the Orgoreyn threats to deny the old ways and create a new cultural configuration in which war is inevitable. Estraven guesses that once the forces which Orgoreyn represents are set free and launched, the imminence of war cannot be stopped. To Estraven, Ai’s mission represents a way to avoid war and a proposition that offers an entirely new direction. The Ekumen has much in common with the Handdara. It enjoys a philosophy full of paradoxes, and a vision that relishes complexity as rewarding and delights in the sense of life’s diversity. However, they differ in an essential doctrine; the Handdara expresses truth as a conjunction of opposing dualities, while Ekumen philosophy embraces a matrix of multiples. Significantly, when Ai explains to King Argaven why the Ekumen wants an alliance with the planet Gethen, he resorts to terms of multiplicity such as “Material profit,” “Increase of knowledge,” and “the augmentation ... of the field of intelligent life” (*Left Hand* 37).

Because the Gethenians are androgynous, they are alien to Ai. His reaction to the sexual ambiguity of the Gethenians is Xenophobia. It is a reminder of the recurrence of the motif of xenophobia which operates as a catalyst in the narrative. The significance of Ai as an anthropological participant-observer is underlined when he transcends his egoism and the boundaries, both cultural and psychological, that separate him from the others are broken down. Only when Ai overcomes his own discomfort among the Gethenians does he turn both inward to examine himself and outward to appreciate the hitherto unnoticed strength of Estraven.

For Ai, the fear of the alien emanates from the negative

implications of androgyny and adds to a general distrust of the alien. Hayles explains; "For [Ai], Estraven is an odd combination of the alien and the familiar, the other who contains within himself both maleness and femaleness, the same sex as Genly and the opposite sex"(106). Of all the Gethenians, Estraven is the most threatening to Ai because Estraven is the only one who relates to Ai as a person and who therefore forces Ai to consider him as a person. Ai finds in Estraven a reflection of himself as a human being and, at the same time, he deems him a member of an alien race.

One of the characteristics of feminist science fiction is its emphasis on personal relationships. In *Left Hand*, the fate of Gethen and the success of Ai's mission as Envoy for the Ekumen depend on the relationship of two men, Ai and Estraven. Ai suggests that the concentration on the personal and concrete at the expense of the abstract is a feminine characteristic. When Ai asks Estraven if he hates Orgoreyn, the latter replies, "How does one hate a country, or love one ... Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain of Estre (the place which gave him his name), but that sort of love does not have a boundary line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope" (*Left Hand* 201). Estraven does not understand abstract concepts like patriotism, and love of one's country is not hate of one's "uncountry". In Gethen, it is characteristically feminine to refuse the abstract and the ideal. Ai's initial resistance to manifestations of the feminine principle in Estraven is linked to his uneasiness about Gethenian ambisexuality.

The antipathy Ai feels instinctively toward Estraven has its source in Estraven's ambiguous sexuality. It is at its clearest when the two men are forced into intimate contact during their journey across the Gobrain Ice. From the beginning, Le Guin points out Ai's sense of unease, distrust and disgust with Estraven's latent femininity. When Tibe engages Estraven in verbal parries at the keystone ceremony, Ai is annoyed at the "sense of effeminate intrigue" (*Left Hand* 13) which the exchange imparts. That evening, at dinner, he notices that Estraven "had been womanly, all charm and tact ... specious and adroit." Ai speculates about the effect of Estraven's sexual ambiguity, "It was

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impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the fire lit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture” (*Left Hand 17*). In fact, androgyny, with all the complex implications it connotes for an ambisexual race, is central to understanding what is happening in Gethenian society. Moreover, androgyny, with all the ambivalence traditionally associated with it, plays an indispensable role in the development of the relationship of Ai and Estraven.

The linearity of the development of the relationship of Ai and Estraven moving from an initial distrust and dislike of Estraven to a grudging admiration and ending by accepting him completely is presented through a complex narrative technique. It is Ai who has arranged the fragments that make up the manuscript of the narrative. Hence, according to Hayles, Ai’s role is twofold. As a character, “his perceptions are fragmentary, often wrong, continually changing and evolving,” and as the structuring consciousness, “he insures the unity of the story and implicitly provides a unified perspective from which to view the various parts of the novel” (107). Thus, Ai, as the puns on his name suggest, represents both an ‘I’, the self and the eye of the story.

In collecting the documents that comprise the book, Ai provides us not only with the first-person accounts of Estraven and himself but also with a collage of other documents which portray distinctive aspects of the Gethenian mindset and culture. Two distinctive modes emerge from this collage. One includes the central narrative and the sections written by earlier ‘Investigators’ and it takes place in a context that is consistent with everyday reality. The other mode includes the myths and legends, and it takes place in a sphere outside present time. As the narration progresses, the two modes merge into one another.

The structured pattern which Ai’s eye provides incorporates Estraven’s first-person accounts. As the two lie in the tent, Ai sees Estraven writing notes in a journal. After Estraven dies, Ai takes the journal to Estraven’s household where it will be incorporated in the records of ‘the Domain of Estre’. It is this journal which comprises

Estraven's first-person narrative. When the two comrades are on the Ice, the shifts between Ai's first-person account and Estraven's journal give us two different perspectives on the same events. This provides a richer, more complex multi-dimensional view of the events than either account alone would convey. Hayles, hinting at the central theme of the text, adds that the two accounts serve a more important purpose, "The interactions between them. The way they reflect on one another ... give us the sense of a greater whole" (107). Thus, the form embodies the creative tension between dualities which constitutes the underlying principle of the different episodes of the narrative.

The interconnections among the accounts elicit Ai's evolving perspective. When Ai comes to an awareness of Estraven's commitment to him, he still cannot completely come to grips with what Estraven is. In their trip through ice, the two companions get into harness for the first time to pull the sledge, Ai thinks himself as a "stallion in harness with a mule" (*Left Hand* 207). It is not until Estraven comes into *kemmer* as a woman that Ai is finally forced to confront and emotionally accept that Estraven is not merely neutral like a mule but feminine as well as masculine.

The two accounts of this evening, one from Estraven's journal and the other from the retrospective account of Ai, emphasize opposite sex traits in the other, which have gone unnoticed before. Estraven comments that Ai "spoke with a gentleness that I did not know was in him" (*Left Hand* 221). For Ai, Estraven's emerging female sexuality precipitates a crisis of recognition, he remarks, "Until then I had rejected him, refused him 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." (*Left Hand* 234) In fact, Estraven is the only Gethenian who accepts Ai as a human being. Accordingly, Estraven expects an equal degree of recognition from Ai yet the latter has not been willing to give it. Ai declares, "I had been afraid to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man" (*Left Hand* 234). With this recognition, Ai admits the sexual tension that exists between them, and the feeling between them that, as he states, "might as well be

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called ... love” (*Left Hand* 235). Ai seeks to explain their decision not to consummate their relationship in a sexual union: “It was from the difference, that the 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 alien” (*Left Hand* 235). In a world in which wholeness comes not from the union of opposites but from dualities in tension with one another, the two friends do not have sex. The androgyny of Estraven began by arousing antipathy in Ai. When the femaleness of Estraven becomes explicit and can no longer be ignored, it becomes the catalyst that allows the relationship to move on to another level. In fact, none of the component elements of the relationship namely; the sexual tension, male camaraderie mutual trust and passionate erotic love is allowed to be the only defining factor of the rapport.

During the crossing of the Gobrin Ice, in which the diffusion of light over every surface causes ice, sky, and horizon to blend together in one unvarying whiteness, Estraven falls into a crevasse and is saved only because Ai does not let go of the sledge. The place which Estraven calls the “Unshadow” is treacherous because the ‘crevasses’ in the rotten ice cast no shadows and is not detected until one falls into them. Ai has been taking the lead yet, after several hours, he becomes paralyzed with fear and cannot force himself to take another step. He states, “I stood there in the middle of nothing. Tears came out and froze My eyelids together. I said, ‘I’m afraid of falling’” (*Left Hand* 250). Ai’s admission of fear indicates that he has stopped insisting on what he called “the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect” (*Left Hand* 208). Estraven retorts in a meaningful metaphor, “Fears are very useful. Like darkness; like shadow” (*Left Hand* 251). This episode indicates that Ai has sensed, all along, his own emotional androgyny, and the presence within himself of the feminine qualities he suppressed and denied, given the imposition and predominance of the traditional masculine side of his life.

In *Left Hand*, several instances manifest creative tension in which opposites fuse with one another, and end in complete indistinguishable oneness. When Estraven and Ai finally come off the

Ice and enter the village, they merge into one being. Ai hears Estraven ask, "Will you look to my friend?" Yet, Ai thinks that he is the one who uttered those words. Ultimately, the oneness of Estraven and Ai is consummated when Estraven is killed. With his death, the narrative focuses on the attempt to define the significance of that death to Ai. In his grief, Ai thinks that Estraven, by allowing himself to be killed, has betrayed him. As the acuteness of his grief subsides, Ai comes to see Estraven's death as a final sacrifice to insure the success of Ai's mission. His death serves as a focal point for the convergence of the different levels of meaning.

Gethen is modeled on the material reality of the planet Earth. It has a past with a history of its own, as well as legends and myths dealing with ancestors and heroes that serve as fundamentals to the worldview of the inhabitants of Gethen. Their popular beliefs and ancient stories are associated with a person, an institution or an occurrence which explain aspects of their natural world, delineate the traditions and customs of their society and illustrate a cultural ideal. Throughout the narrative, the interplay between the mythic and everyday Gethenian reality provides a sense of wholeness. The two modes bring into a suggestive tension the opposed dualities of the abstract and archetypal on one level as well as the material and concrete details of life on Gethen, on another level. There is a mirroring between the Gethen legend of Therem of Stok and Arek of Estre, which is also entitled "Estraven the Traitor,"¹¹ and the storyline of the central narrative. The legend portends reality and reality reverts to the legendary incidents. In the legend, Estraven the Traitor is actually a hero since he brings to an end the blood feud between his Domain of Estre and the enemy Domain of Stok, and achieves a lasting peace. His accomplishment is "recognized and, as Hayles indicates, his name, *Therem*, is thereafter used as a hearth name for the children of Estre" (113). However, he is announced by his people as a traitor for giving away part of their land to the Domain of Estre. In fact, the Prime Minister of Karhide, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, is named after that legendary figure, and like him, he is labeled by the diminutive epithet of 'traitor' for refusing to comply with the King's wishes and turn down and even condemn Ai for his propositions and

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demands. In fact, Estraven is an honourable man who is dutiful and loyal to Gethen, and he is wise and sagacious and these qualities provide him with insight to realize the value of Ai's mission and the benefits of adapting the ideas of Ai in Gethen. He is able to discern the gains which Gethen would accumulate from joining the Earth. As a matter of fact, he is ultimately instrumental in bringing the Ekumen to Gethen.

The structural organization of *Left Hand* illustrates the dualism endemic to Le Guin's holistic vision. Almost every statement is juxtaposed with a counterstatement. No single truth is allowed to represent the entire truth, and every insight is presented as partial and subject to revision by another perspective. Ai's report intimates a connection between aggression and heterosexuality and discriminatory sexual roles on the one hand, and the Gethenian ambisexuality and the absence of war on Gethen, on the other. On the other hand, Ai insists that joining in sex would bring him and Estraven no closer, since it was from their differences that their bond grew. However, he infers, "We left it at that. I do not know if we were right" (*Left Hand* 235). Moreover, the contrast between the Handdara and Yomesh cults furthers the dualism germane to the narrative and provides another example. Le Guin favors the Handdara philosophy, yet Ai explains to Estravan, "Your Handdara fascinates me ... but now and then I wonder if it isn't simply paradox developed into a way of life" (*Left Hand* 238). Alternations of Ai's account and Estraven's journal serve a similar purpose. Both provide diverse perspectives on the same events. When the two friends come to the place where the volcanoes pit their fire against the Ice, Ai sees the blackened surface as "'DEATH' written across a continent" (*Left Hand* 209), while Estraven sees it as "the dirty chaos of a world in the process of making itself" (*Left Hand* 216).

Left Hand confronts men with impalpable social realities. Despite the social analysis that Le Guin offers, she has no social program and her purpose is not censure or reform. She provides no panaceas and solutions for social malaise or chaos. She does not bring any lasting order to the political mess. Slusser observes that Ai and

Estraven who undertake their journey to renew society “are forced by society to cross the ice; there is no other way. They do not flee one society to return to another ... nor do they take refuge in each other” (20). Estraven’s banishment and disgrace remain stigmas to his reputation. After the conquest of the ice and after forging a bond with Estraven and with nature, Ai must return to diplomacy and bargaining. Orgoreyn is a socialist system which dehumanizes its citizens. Karhide, like its neighbor, moves toward greater centralization under dictatorship. Karhide is a culture where individual achievement and the brother-bond remain the soul that moves the collective body. To Estraven, Karhide is not a government but a place, and a better one only because it is closer to basic realities of his culture and world. Despite differences in governments, Karhide and Orgoreyn share “common roots” and “the deeper stratum of custom, myth, religious practice” (*Inheritance* 135) of Gethen. Its institutions are reflected not in monarchy and socialism, nor even in anarchism, but in Handdara ‘fastness’ and *shifgrethor*. Both Estraven and Ai make a journey to the East of Orgoreyn, and find that the high point of this progressive nation is, ironically, the concentration camp.

One of the central motifs in *Left Hand* is rootedness versus rootless-ness. The narrative figures are drifting aliens who are cut off from their roots. Ai is denuded of any family members or friends. Estraven is banished and cut off from any familiar roots. What unites Ai and Estraven is their solitariness and the fact that their alone-ness has its roots in the nature of their positions. Thus, Ai and Estraven travel in quest of new roots: the roots Estraven seeks are collective, those of his race and culture. He explains, “Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of Estre” (*Left Hand* 201). Estraven follows the Handdara in rejecting abstractions and clutching to objects. Ai, on the other hand, is led astray. Illusion is widespread in Karhide and perversion corrupts Orgoreyn. It is with Estraven that he goes to the roots.

Another prevalent motif in *Left Hand* is embodied in the sense of isolation and alienation. Alienation is examined from different angles. Ai is the alien ambassador to the planet Gethen. Estraven is a native of Gethen who surmounts the ethno-centrism of his society.

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The extreme solitariness of both positions is mitigated as they come to discover a fellowship and camaraderie that exceeds their bond and their attachment to their own kind. Darko Suvin states that in *Left Hand*, Le Guin's "opposed discords - forgiveness and identity, loneliness and togetherness, fragmentation and connection, and a number of others all rooted in the split between I and Thou, Self and Other -emerge" (265). Oppositions constitute a central dimension of Le Guin's vision. Thomas J. Remington adds that this is prevalent "thematically and metaphorically" (162). In fact, the Gethenian race that inhabits the wintry world on which the action of the novel takes place "is appallingly alone in its world." It is the only mammalian species on it (*Left Hand* 221). Because of their ambisexuality, the Gethenians are "isolated, and undivided" (*Left Hand* 221), and their physiology is "unique among human beings" (*Left Hand* 44). Moreover, Ai who is sent to establish contact with Gethen, arrives alone. He infers, "the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal ... Not We and They; not I and It, but I and Thou" (*Left Hand* 245).

Estraven, the Gethenian with whom Ai establishes such "I-Thou" relationship is an isolate, banished from his homeland as a traitor and is mistrusted in the country of the exile. Yet, Ai and Estraven share their exile and their isolation. Ai tells him, "you for my sake-I for yours" (*Left Hand* 211). Estraven stands apart from society because of his marked past and his present exile. Yet, there is affinity with Ai in their aloneness that is metaphorically expressed in their journey over the ice. In Estraven's journal, there are comments which elaborate on their solitary condition: "There is no world full of other Gethenians here to explain and support my existence. We are equal, alien alone. He did not laugh, of course. Rather he spoke with a gentleness that I did not know was in him. After a while he too came to speak of isolation, of loneliness" (*Left Hand* 221). For Ai and Estraven who become closely related, the distinction of I and thou, of myself and others is bridged and eventually obliterated by an underlying unity which is articulated in the words of the Handdara: "the likeness, the links, the whole of which living things are a part" (*Left Hand* 222).

In *Left Hand*, telepathic contact offers a solution to the problem of isolation that is most intensely felt at the moment of death. It is assumed that if the dying Estraven is present in Ai's mind, Ai must also be in Estraven's mind. Telepathy features as a narrative device the author uses to solve the thematic problems of shared pain and death loneliness. Remington remarks sagaciously that "the touching which Ai notices between himself and Estraven is a touching of minds rather than an actual physical contact, since, due to Estraven's sexual receptiveness, all touching between their bodies must be avoided" (166). Thus, "Touching of minds" takes on a literal meaning. Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin note that "one advantage science fiction has over many other fictional modes is that it can attribute metaphors literally" (229). Similarly, in her introduction to the 1976 Ace edition of *Left Hand*, Le Guin declares that, in itself, "science fiction is metaphor." In this respect, the first connection between the minds of Estraven and Ai comes about through the force of empathy and telepathy.

When Ai first arrives in Gethen, he suffers the difficulty of his inability to accept the ambisexuality of its inhabitants. Moreover, he experiences the ordeal of seeing himself through their eyes as a pervert. Le Guin illustrates as Karen Sinclair states, "the development of cultural relativism by permitting the reader to witness the maturing of the ethnographer" (55). Ai has two foils in the narrative Estraven and the Foretellers. On his way to Orgoreyn, Ai stops at a place called Fastness where the Foretellers live, they follow the Handdara. Ai asks Faxe, the Weaver, if Gethen will join Ekumen after five years, and Faxe's answer is yes. Estraven and the Foretellers "foster in Ai the rather unpleasant task of self-examination" (Sinclair 55). In the early stages of his visit to Gethen, Ai is involved in his own psychic and physical discomfort; appears pompous and hostile. While the appearance of Karhides is somewhat revolting to his sensibilities, Ai is upset by the realization that on Gethen, he is an anomaly. He reflects on his condition, "Of course that was part of my job, but it was a part that got harder not easier as time went on; more and more often I longed for anonymity, for sameness. I craved to be like everybody else" (*Left Hand* 13-14). His claim to be like the others is

ironical since he is persistently contemptuous of the Karhides; he regards them nervously as different and prefers to keep them at a distance.

The key to the enduring touch that binds human to human in Le Guin's vision is love, and physical contact is its metaphor. In *Left Hand*, ways of reaching out to the "not-self" and the stranger appear in the "fear of the other." Estraven says, "Its expressions are ... hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us that fear" (*Left Hand* 24). The pain and fear involved in meeting the alien and the sacrifice involved in embracing the 'Other' are motifs integral to *Left Hand*. Remington writes that "the joining of fragmented parts into union, like the setting of a broken bone, involves pain and suffering" (163). It is only through feeling pain and sharing their suffering that Ai begins to understand the Gethenians whose physiology and culture are alien to him. This thematic strain evinces through the Gethenian's fear of being swallowed up by the Ekumen, the mutual distrust and animosity that separates Karhide and Orgoreyn, and the misunderstanding that threatens to block Ai from Estraven. Furthermore, it emerges in the symbolism at the outset of the novel. The parade celebrates the placing of a keystone uniting "two piers, making them one, one thing, an arch" (*Left Hand* 10). Ai notices that each keystone that he sees in the city of Erhenrang is joined by red cement to other stones. He is told that "Very-long ago a keystone was always set in with a mortar of ground bones mixed with blood. Human bones ... Without the blood bond the arch would fall, you see. We use the blood of animals, these days" (*Left Hand* 11). "These days" suggests that arches are weaker than they once were. At any rate, the episode intimates that human bone and blood are needed to cement a permanent arch that would join Gethen to the Ekumen.

In *Left Hand*, strong emphasis is placed on the touching of hands which bears direct relevance to the title of the novel. In the sexual episodes, the touching of hands encompasses and goes beyond the sexual physical contact. Touch is very important to the Gethenians since it is through touch that the sexual role of a Gethenian is determined at the time of *kemmer*, the time of sexual activity.

Remington states that "sexual contact is merely one manifestation of human love, the touch of which is even more intimate than sex" (166). In the scene in which Estraven enters *kemmer*, he tells Ai: "I must not touch you" (*Left Hand* 234). Ai agrees that sex between them should be avoided, although their friendship by that time is cemented.

In the legend of "Estraven the Traitor," Heir of Stok warms the frozen body of Heir of Estre, who was also known as Therem Estraven, with his own hands and heated him by *kemmer*. The Heir of Stok "put out his hand and touched Estraven's hand... Both held still, their hands touching... their hands were the same in length and form, finger by finger, matching like the two hands of one man laid palm to palm" (*Left Hand* 122). The scene is replicated years later when young Estraven, the son of the union, meets his parent, Therem Estraven, who "felt the young man's pulse and hand for fever," for an instant, he "laid his palm flat to Estraven's palm; and finger by finger their hands matched, like the two hands of one man" (*Left Hand* 122). When Estraven gives an account of the attempt of the Orgota, Gaum, to seduce him, he states, "He put his hand on mine...and held on to my hands" (*Left Hand* 150). The notion of touching hands to *kemmer* is central in the lines from the lay which Le Guin uses for the title of the novel.

In fact, the significance of touch on Gethen transcends the implications of sexuality. The warmest form of Karhidish salutation is to grasp both hands of the person being greeted. For Ai and Estraven, who are too distant at first and got closer later, this gesture is not as meaningful. In a Karhidish "hearth tale," "The Place Inside the Blizzard," the ghost of a man's brother finds him in a storm and "reaching out his arms to hold him ... seized him by the left hand" (*Left Hand* 29). Later, the hand is found to have been frozen and is amputated.

The touch in the narrative realm of *Left Hand* draws people together, connects and "transcends difference" but only when "voluntarily offered and voluntarily accepted" (Remington 165). When Ai is arrested in Orgoreyn, he is placed in the back of metal prison truck with a group of fellow prisoners. One of the Gethenians who has been kicked in the abdomen, dies with his head on Ai's

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knees. Such contact and shared suffering of the prisoners in the van is not voluntary, for Ai as well as the Gethenians. Ai remarks that nothing can be done to relieve the suffering. However, he and the prisoners “formed a whole, I among them; each felt it, and it was a refuge and true comfort in the night, that wholeness of the huddled group each drawing life from the others. But ... it was headless, passive” (*Left Hand 166*). No deep human relationship can develop from the involuntary contact in the van. When a young Gethenian in *kemmer* grasps Ai’s hand, Ai pulls away from the touch. During the day, when cold does not force them together, the prisoners crouch, “each in his own place, his territory, his Domain” (*Left Hand 163*). Despite their shared suffering and contact, Ai senses that they “remained strangers. I never learned the name of any of them in the truck” (*Left Hand 163*). In fact, the suggestion is that true sharing of pain and touch must be willingly given and knowingly received.

At the moment of Estraven’s death, Ai holds the dying Estraven’s head on his knees. But the boundary of difference has been crossed, and the touch between them transcends the mere contact of their bodies. In death, Estraven identifies Ai, the alien “with the sibling he had known from birth and the spouse with whom he had begotten his child, *Arek*” (Remington 167). Estraven’s identification of Ai with *Arek* takes on additional meaning since Ai himself has begun to identify with the alien Gethenians. Thus, when the Ekumen’s space-ship lands, he experiences a revulsion at his single-sexed fellows from earth. Ai recognizes that his dread of touching and being touched by the Other is an absence of delight in difference which is “most admirable in the Karhidish spirit-and in the human spirit” (*Left Hand 279*). This willingness to reach out to the unknown other is emphasized by the end of the text.

The relationship of self with the other is a constant in the human condition. In *Left Hand*, the relationship of Ai and Estraven achieves maturity when Ai reaches the recognition and acceptance of Estraven who is a woman as well as a man; a man who was a woman and a woman who was a man. Ai’s acceptance of Estraven leads to a strong realization of his own limitations. He declares “He was the

only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being; who had liked me personally ... who therefore had demanded of me equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it... I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship" (*Left Hand* 234). Ai admits to a love for the being who has shared his exile and who endowed him with personal loyalty. He comes to the acceptance of the fact that the bond that unites them is one of differences not of similarities. Ai confronts a troubling paradox that their sexual union would reaffirm, rather than lessen or even expunge, their separateness. Ai says, "It was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likeness, but from the difference, that that love came" (*Left Hand* 235). Ai relishes the paradox and has learned that a recognition of solitariness underlies all unity. Friendship and even love arise from sexual tension and separateness. Such a realization forces a reevaluation of his role as an envoy. Ai has a sudden insight into the purpose of his solitary mission. He addresses the inhabitants of Gethen: "Alone, I cannot change your world" (*Left Hand* 245) since reciprocity of the responsibility is necessary. Ai has changed from the aloof contemptuous observer at the outset of the narrative to an envoy ready to show his commitment by offering Estraven friendship and acceptance, and by undertaking a "pilgrimage" to Estraven's home after the his death.

In fact, the process of adjusting to an alien way of life is riddled with pitfalls. After his acceptance of and adaptation to Gethenian reality, when members of the Ekumen arrive in Gethen, Ai stares at them in disgust. His affinity to the Gethenians aggravates differences between himself and his fellows which in turn increases his own isolation. Thus, the closing pages of the narrative unravel further paradox; the elimination of differences that separates people from each other results in increasing one's seclusion and deepening the sense of isolation.

In conclusion, *Left Hand* opens up new vistas for speculating a reality alternative to the rigidly constructed patriarchal symbolic order. Pulling back from traditional and conventional socio-cultural experience allows Le Guin to see reality better. The imaginary society

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of the planet Gethen defies conventional hierarchies, and dwarfs the hard patriarchal apparatus. *Left Hand* scrutinizes and analyzes a realm without fixed gender. The invention of Gethenian sexuality disrupts the categories of male and female resulting in a new psychology, new sociology and a new morality. Thus, life on Gethen with the radical change in human condition widens the imagination. With her predilection towards gynocentrism, Le Guin embroiders Gethenian reality with traits and values traditionally associated with women's essential nature, and assumptions which dominate female physiology. Le Guin points out that the predominant 'female principle' on Gethen has led to an absence of war and of social or ecological exploitation.

The imaginary world that has been contrived by Le Guin draws on themes derived from the fields of psychology and philosophy in order to present rational basis for the world of Gethen. In portraying human relationships, Le Guin resorts to familiar earthly concepts such as friendship, loyalty, love, gratitude as well as betrayal.

Le Guin's *Left Hand* presents a configuration of the feminist theoretical vision of an androgynous society. By constructing an androgynous society, Le Guin extrapolates the egalitarian possibilities of the genre. In *Left Hand*, the Gethenian sexual setup emerges as a device and a vehicle of the narrative as well as a way of thinking. The ambivalent physicality of such mode of existence raises questions but offers no answers. Men and women are differentiated in physiological form and function as well as temperament, capacity, talent and psychic processes.

The sexless society of *Left Hand* and the freedom of embracing ambivalence are the liberal's dream come true. In the new world order, the boundary lines of the binary oppositions become impalpable, and enclosed systems and ideologies are defied. The portrayal of the androgynous Gethenians is central to the process of founding a new reality in which the biological system makes it impossible for society to entertain sexual roles and think of human beings in sexual terms. However, such a fact does not preclude thinking of them as persons. As Ai learns to penetrate the way of

thinking of the Gethenians, so does the reader. Estraven leads Ai to the point where he understands the Gethenians and develops the capacity for tolerance and adaptability. In order to establish a basis for communication, he learns that differences must be recognized and accepted before any real common ground can be reached.

In *Left Hand*, sexual tension and the debate about sex roles which in contemporary Western culture constitute a source of anxiety, evoke in the planet Gethen fecundity and creative powers. *Left Hand* is a dynamic interweaving of pairs of tensions such as unity and diversity, duality and wholeness, mythic material and everyday modes into complementary relationships without collapsing changing the important distinctions between them. Every aspect of the narrative, from the personal relationship between Ai and Estraven to the larger social and political relationships participates in this process of understanding. The scope of the dualities coming into creative tension with one another increases and expands. The relationship between Ai and Estraven with its tension between self and other is an embodiment of the holistic vision. The interplay of the two modes brings into a suggestive tension the dualities, and the intensity of this dualism permeates every aspect of the narrative. The questions elicited in every turn of the narrative trigger several responses from several perspectives. However, such multiple answers subsume into one holistic vision. All are true, but each is only part of the final truth.

In Ai and Estraven, Le Guin investigates the loneliness of the self, the impossibility of understanding the self except through its relationship with the other, and the human need to establish relationship through reaching out to the other in love. Le Guin explores the sense of solitude and alienation from two different angles that of Ai, the alien ambassador to the planet 'Gethen' and that of Estraven, a native of Gethen whose perception of social life sets him apart. Their apartness precludes their complete membership in or commitment to their society. However, the distance and separation from their people endow them with a privileged critical perspective on social and political issues and the insights they develop elude their fellow citizens.

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The extreme solitariness of the positions of Ai and Estraven is mitigated by their mutual discovery of fellowship and camaraderie. As the two share their suffering on the glacier, they cease to be alien to one another. Ai represents an 'I', an ego that accomplishes his being only when he enters into the most personal of relationships with Estraven. In fact, the fundamental human problem that the narrative exposes appears in the agony suffered by human beings seeking to overcome their alienation from each other, and the drama of their finding the wisdom, courage and compassion to communicate honestly with, and love, one another.

In *Left Hand*, the narrative development is informed by a complexity of relationships and interconnections among seemingly disparate modes. Ai, the structuring consciousness of the narrative, tells his own version of the events of the story through his selection and arrangement of the myths, legends and excerpts from Estraven's diary. The necessity to see things whole determines the intricate narrative process. A unified structure is erected out of intermingled elements of the editorial framework, interpolated tales, documents, diary fragments, the constant shifts back and forth in narrative time, official documents recording Gethenians historical events, tape-recorded legends and myths from different Gethenians groups, and multiple first person narratives.

It is worth mentioning that Le Guin has been faulted for the consistent male-oriented use of the generic 'he' to describe the biologically androgynous inhabitants of Gethen and for her depiction of narrative figures belonging to the traditionally male spheres of politics and adventure. The male perspective through which the narrative realm is presented implies that Le Guin privileges the male model. The fluctuating sexual dominance of the Gethenians is investigated through male reactions. In fact, the danger that threatens the imaginary realm of the novel at every turn and in every crisis is the inclination to favour/revert to the old gendered roles of hero and victim. This elicits questions about the extent to which *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as a feminist science fiction, has succeeded in achieving a radical and forward looking society of which feminists dream and aspire to establish.

Notes:

1. They are so called because of the cheap and pulpy paper on which they were printed. Feminist science fiction erupted from the confines of the pulp magazines and the paradigms they delineated constituted a legacy bequeathed to feminist science fiction writers. The pulp magazine played an influential role in the golden era of science fiction in the 1940's and 1950's. In his extensive investigation of feminist science fiction, Robin Roberts states that "prominent feminist science fiction writers were introduced to the genre through the pulps" (41). Many women science fiction writers acknowledged that they were introduced to science fiction through the pulps, and began reading them in the 1940's and 1950's. The stories provided the material that feminist science fiction writers were influenced by and subsequently reworked in their narratives. Pulp science fiction itself was an important part of the historical development of the genre which was particularly helpful to feminist writers. Le Guin declares that she "read science fiction magazines as a child" (qtd. in Bucknall 5).
2. In 1836, Mary Griffith proposed refrigerated produce in the markets, and Mary E. Bradley Lane imagined that in the future food will be chemically produced.
3. This survey of the tradition of feminist science fiction relies on the entries by Davidson and Martin, 780 – 782. Clute and Nicholls, 1344, 1386.
4. In the Greek myth, Demeter and her daughter are powerless victims of ruthless and whimsical males. Demeter, in the myth, symbolized fertility. Trouble began when Hades, the Master of the Underworld fell in love with her daughter Persephone and abducted her. Demeter was very sad, abandon her divine role and retired in a temple where she forbade seeds to sprout and infertility spread. Zeus sent to Hades, in the Underworld, to give up his wife Persephone. Hades agreed but before she left, he tempted her to eat few pomegranate seeds and thus bound her forever to his dark empire. Demeter realized that her daughter would spend only two thirds of the year with her. The legend explains why each year in winter the fields are fruitless and drab. It is the time Persephone left her mother and lived with her husband. (Paker, 218-220).
5. Considered a threat in mainstream science fiction, reproduction is transformed into a power controlled by women. In *Snow Queen*, Joan Vinge combines the patterns implied in the Demeter myth and the recent vision of it, the fairy tale "The Snow Queen" to re-assert the primacy of woman through her reproductive capacities.
6. In psychology, androgynous individuals develop balanced characteristics because they have a high incidence of complementary characteristics.

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According to Sharon C. Nash (1979), androgynous individuals report high levels of stereotypical masculine and feminine personality traits and, as a result, they are more capable of coping with, and behave more appropriately in, a wide variety of life situations. Moreover, Micheal S. Kimmel and Army Aronson (2004) add that, “psychological androgyny correlates with high degrees of emotional independence and self-esteem. A balance is created by the integration of a sense of the other; males are less likely to be self-centered, self-absorbed or selfish. The androgynous female is less likely to be completely self-sacrificing and easily victimized. Her sense of the “other” (communion) is balanced by a sense of self (agency) (31). According to Allan Guggenbuhl (1994), psychic maturity is conditional upon integrating a balance of psychological traits that are stereotypically masculine and feminine. He draws on Jung’s concept of anima/animus as the quest for the soul-to integrate the feminine part of the soul (for men) in order to achieve “psychic maturity” (22).

7. In cultural tradition, androgyny appears in Eastern and Western myths. they imagine the great entities that existed before the world began as sexually undifferentiated. The division into male and female marks the end of mythic time and the beginning of everyday reality. In the fable of Aristophanes, spherical, eight-limbed creatures are cut in half because they are powerful enough to threaten the gods. The severed halves become the human race, and each fragment spends his life pathetically searching for his severed half. In pity, the gods rearrange the genitals so that the two halves, when they meet, can join sexually in an attempt to regain their original unity. In this sense, androgyny is a condition of a lost primordial unity entered Christianity through a mystical tradition in which Adam was imagined as an androgynous being, made in the image of an androgynous God. The division of this first androgynous human being into Adam and Eve was associated with the Fall and subsequent expulsion from Eden. Interpretations of the myth share a belief in wholeness and completion. The fallen man yearns after lost wholeness, spending his life, as Plato says, in the desire and pursuit of the whole. The discipline of alchemy has been regarded as an attempt to restore, through a combined material and spiritual refinement, the lost androgyny of the incarnate Spirit. Ovid’s account describe a metamorphosis from man to andogyne, the transformation of Hermaphroditus into a bisexual being, neither man nor woman, but both.(Hayles, 99-100. Cogel ,153-173.)
8. Taoism is a strong force behind Le Guin’s work. She adapts creatively this spiritual oriental philosophical system to a literary genre dominated by the harshly materialistic western of technological progress. Taoism is defined as an experience of a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. In her extensive survey of the Taoist philosophy, Elizabeth Cummins Cogel states that “The Tao regulates natural

processes and nourishes balance in the Universe. It embodies the harmony of opposites (i.e. there would be no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female.)”(154). The founder of Taoism is believed by many to be Lao-Tse (604-531 BCE). He was searching for a way to avoid the warfare and conflicts that disrupted society during his lifetime.

9. Le Guin bases the holistic concept that governs the structure and the meaning of the narrative on the philosophy of Taoism.
10. In an imaginary world, Le Guin coins new words that would embody her imaginary conceptualization of cultural ideas.
11. One of the myths in Gethen tells that long ago, before the days of King Argaven I, who united Karhide into one kingdom, there were wars between two enemy countries, the Domain of Estre and the Domain of Stok. On one of his trips on the borders between the two domains, Estraven, the heir of Estre, was severely wounded and was saved by Stokven, heir of Stok. Although both realized they were enemies, they became close friends and vowed kemmer. Their child was appointed the heir of Estre which aroused the jealousy of other brothers who laid an ambush for him when he was hunting in the borderlands between the Domain of Stok and the Domain of Estre. In their fight, the heir of Estre killed two of his brothers and he was seriously wounded and reached the verge of death. He was found by the heir of Stok who nursed him back to life. In his gratitude, the heir of Ester gave the Domain of Stok half of the disputed lands and they both vowed peace and thus long years of war came to an end. However, for abdicating his land and for the murder of his two brothers he was branded “Estraven the Traitor” (*Left Hand* 125).

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