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What If Yin and Yang Were One? Feminism Seen through the Prism of Alternate Sexuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin

Abstract

I am writing this article in a retrospective response mainly to radical feminists such as Adrienne Rich, who in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” (1980) sees man as the greatest enemy and advocates taking a critical stance towards heterosexual feminists, thus campaigning for lesbianism. The article also addresses the precarious state of gender in the light of the rising far right worldwide discussing ideas proposed by Judith Butler against criticism based on the bland world of the neuter androgynous society of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula Le Guin who in her novel anticipates unisexism and prospectively addresses this matter.

Keywords: feminism, lesbian, androgynous, unisexism

The unexpected is what makes life possible
Estraven

Who would have thought before the Covid-19 pandemic that there would be so much *gender trouble*, to use the catchy playful phrase from Judith Butler’s eponymous book from 1999, in the years immediately following the greatest disease challenge to humanity after the AIDS pandemic? Yet, this is the sad reality today, not without its elements of tragicomedy, tragedy undoubtedly having the upper hand. As the same renowned critic knowledgeably summarizes in her latest work, *Who Is Afraid of Gender* (2024), the term itself in its complex nature is being reduced by conservative institutions such as the Catholic Church and fascistic formations as the far right to a threat of “sexual perversities, including bestiality and pedophilia” (Butler 1999: 9), thus its practitioners – transgender people, gays and lesbians, as well as the scholars engaged in an academic debate as to what it signifies, are likewise being stigmatized for alleged sympathies to *inhuman unnatural* practices. Still, *gender* has a definite duality, even ambiguity¹: it can be deemed identical with

¹ Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* cites “a feminist view [that] argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women” (Butler xiii). – a. n.

sex or a deviation from the biological sex of the individual – a socially determined construct. It is the latter whose existence is coming under attack by the above-mentioned institutions and fractions, and this retroactively challenges some of the claims of the radical feminists from the 1980s whose work has been considered instrumental in the formation of the Western liberal societies and third and fourth waves of feminism, which for lots of people nowadays already means that *sex* and *gender* are two different terms, the first being associated with what is natural, the second – with something artificial, dangerous, even inhuman, sacrilegious, blasphemous, satanic, as already is the case in some of today’s states such as Russia, Belarus, and Rwanda, with laws enforcing traditionalist sexuality on school level already being enacted in some European countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria.

Forty years after Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality” was written things have changed drastically and the atrocities committed by men to women in certain societies used as an argument in the feminist campaigns for changes in legislation and for raising women’s awareness of patriarchal injustice have borne good fruit bestowing to the petitioners all the rights they did not have before, the legislation in the first and second world countries having been adjusted accordingly assuring women with extra protection so they can feel more secure as single mothers if so they choose or if so happens to be the case.

Foucault’s pendulum nowadays has swung with full force in the opposite direction and feminism, which was established and developed as a somewhat belated reaction to history as in *his* story in the 17th through the 19th and early 20th centuries, has long ceased to be written in white ink (Cixous 1976: 881). Poststructuralist feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet have performed feats of groundbreaking critical thought establishing feminism as a method of literary analysis deconstructing patriarchal myths and offering a fresh perspective of reading writers like Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller.

We must admit, however, that as a movement concerning social structure and mentality, feminism has passed the critical point which would grant equal rights and opportunities to both men and women, which goes to show that living in a gendered (sexually binary) society innately presupposes a perpetual imbalance, the scales weighing in one direction or the other at any given point in time.

If we were living in a patriarchal society until recently, we can now safely say that lots of countries have established feminist legislation and that it not only favors women over men but is equally detrimental to both sexes inhibiting them in their relationship with each other and, in fact, resulting in the emergence of the *third sex* – gay culture and unisexism. Far from opposing homosexuality in any way, I do believe that people should have the freedom to realize their own sexuality unrestrained by any form of imposition by the state or a particular institution².

² Another way of expressing this idea is Judith Butler’s stated conviction in *Gender Trouble* that “heterosexual normativity ought not to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed” (Butler xiv). – a. n.

To be more precise, I will give two examples from a country where the term *sexual harassment* dominates social discourse. On 6th December in 1989 at L'École Polytechnique in Montreal, Canada a troubled young man, Mark Lepine, a second-generation immigrant, entered the main building and singled out nine women of whom he shot six to death on the pretext that they were feminists. Their objection that they *were not* feminists but only women did not stop the killer as he responded by saying that one equaled the other. He then proceeded to kill eight more women to the total of fourteen after which he shot himself dead as well. To this moment Canadian society has provided no sensible explanation of the tragedy. Twenty Years later the Quebecois film *Polytechnique* (2009) was released based on this massacre. Unfortunately, all that the film does is show, very graphically, what happened still providing no answers as to why it happened.

Society in Canada has advanced and established feminist laws and we might even say that that is all very well. However, this law advancement has happened at the expense of all women and men living there, some, if not most of the women being rather traditional in their approach to the male sex: for example, a woman there believes that she should reject the initial advances of a man before she may eventually establish a relationship with him even though she may like him very much. The problem with this arrangement is that no man, who is sensible enough or aware of the law, will risk pursuing the matter any further after the first rejection for fear of being accused of *sexual harassment*, which, as Judith Butler mentions in *Gender Trouble*, may be conducive to producing gender³ (Butler 1999: xiii). As a result, this may turn out to be the end of his career and if so, he would be guilty until proven innocent and proving the latter may leave us with the conundrum from Mark Twain's short story "Running for Governor" where the narrator has to prove it was not him who entered in a drunken state a certain hotel the previous night and upon his failure to do so, is subsequently labeled by the papers *delirium tremens*.

What follows from the aforesaid is that women increasingly find fewer urban men willing to engage in a heterosexual relationship, let alone go for a commitment, an idea explored humorously in the novel *My Life as a Whale* (1992) by Dyan Sheldon where a single straight unattached man proves hard to find on the entire island of Manhattan. Men, unprotected in any way by the law, feel exposed and turn to other men just like, not finding a male partner, heterosexual women turn to other women and so both sexes are pouring in great numbers into the ever increasing gay community (The Gay Village in Montreal – *Le Village* – takes up 2 km of central city area from one end to the other) where they can consume their assumed sexuality without feeling threatened.

³ Butler means sexual harassment to anyone, especially someone gay, but the article argues that normative gender distinctions, as a direct result of aggressively implementing a sexual harassment law in any given society, tend to blur into the formation of yet another (sex) gender – the neuter unisex urban human being. – a. n.

We must say that the situation thus outlaid is becoming typical of all so-called developed countries, unlike the ever-increasing examples to the contrary in countries considered authoritarian in the West, especially in the urban environment where the gray concrete of the high-rise buildings creates a feeling of alienating uniformity and the perceived full equality of the two sexes in everything realizes itself in the establishment of uniformity in their appearance as well as in the norm of the indistinct unisex city dweller sporting loose casual clothes completely closing all sex-revealing body curves or shapes. It is also true that urban men have become more apathetic and effeminate lest they should be perceived as aggressive (one of the chief accusations against men by feminists) and urban women more assertive and masculine (assertiveness being one of the main urges for women propounded by feminists) competing with men for well-paid positions in business corporations.

In response to the polarized gendered (sexually divided) society we have been living in since the dawn of time, Ursula Le Guin imagined a world where gender has no meaning on the planet Winter seen through the eyes of the Earth Envoy Mr. Ai whose trisemic name standing for *I*, *eye* and the interjection of *pain*, expresses his complex perceptions of the ice-covered world and its inhabitants many light years away from Earth. While trying to negotiate an agreement between the Ekumen – an association of eighty-three planets and the Gethenians – the inhabitants of Winter, Ai undertakes to document his observations of their sexuality functioning in an inverted order of the female period on Earth – the *somer-kemmer* relation where *somer* is the period of time in which they act as bisexual *neuters* or eunuchs – twenty-four days a month and *kemmer* (from five to six days a month) where they can develop sexual traits alternatively activating their male and female sexuality. When in *kemmer*, they mate with the result that “the mother of several children may be the father of several more” (Le Guin 48). When in *somer* they are neither men nor women, or as Ai calls them *menwomen*. Ai’s sexuality is perceived by the Gethenians as a state of *permanent kemmer* which automatically categorizes him as *pervert*.

From her seminal study on gender, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler poses the key question that holds our human world sexually divided but mostly assembled together in the shared desire of the two sexes for complementation and completion, sometimes antagonism: “Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?” (Butler viii). The latest Eurovision winner, the Swiss citizen Nemo with his song “The Code” (2024), his striking looks and his declaration to be *nonbinary* fed additional fuel to the fire in the accusation of far-rightists from around the world that Europe has been moving towards an endorsement of the third sex (homosexuals, non-binaries, transgenders) as completely equal to the biologically normative male and female, even fashionable, trendy and appealing as a possibility to the young generations; according to them, Europe wants everyone to be gay. The answer Le Guin gives is that alongside with

the positive characteristics an androgynous society seems to guarantee like shared burdens and privileges such as: childbearing and child-raising, housekeeping, it also additionally features suppressed aggression – lack of cases of rape or war (Le Guin 1969: 49). There are also others, not so pleasant such as: elimination of gender and the consequent lack of reciprocal appreciation of *virility* in men and *femininity* in women (Le Guin 1969: 49). Ai, as an extended human proboscis from the Earth, finds the only available option of one to be judged *only as a human being*, unclouded by gender bias, *an appalling experience*. (Le Guin 1969: 49).

One of the things impressing Ai the most is the total lack of compulsion in the sexual relationships between the Gethenians as they have no way of knowing when they will develop male or female sexual traits in *kemmer* from month to month. By contrast, if we return to “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” we will find there what Adrienne Rich identifies as means of *enforced heterosexuality* on women operating on a physical and subconscious level (Rich 1980: 640). It is obvious that the Gethenians studied by Ai are in a lower state of their evolution as a civilization – feudal, pre-capitalist times, a gender-free race immersed in and shrouded by legends and myths as compared to ours – gendered society, corporate capitalism, deconstructed myths and legends, only revealing the abyss separating urban realities from primordial myths with the evidence that the idea of practicing homosexuality has not yet entered their minds.

On the other hand, a considerable number of gay movies and books in different languages have been produced in the last twenty years celebrating gay and lesbian culture. The relationships portrayed there are shown to be just as romantic as in their heterosexual counterparts. Some of the books turned into movies are *Les Nuits fauves* (1992), *Les Chansons d’amour* (2007), *Legături bolnăvicioase* (2006) (*Love-sick*), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), all of them winning prestigious film awards.

Another important argument for Adrienne Rich is *sexual harassment* exercised by the *allegedly* men-dominant capitalist world; an issue addressed above showing that the phenomenon has been mythologized in certain countries (e.g. Canada) with devastating effects on both sexes arising from that. In the wonderful world of Winter, the issue is non-existent as the society there is not gender-polarized and consequently, its members can be men and women alternatively (only in *kemmer*) so their internal antagonism towards the other sex is neutralized within themselves as individuals.

The third argument Adrienne Rich’s essay is based on is *lesbian existence* as a historical phenomenon and as a reaction to patriarchy. According to her, it can be viewed as a “direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (Rich 1980: 649). In the same line of thinking it could also be viewed as women’s access to men *denied*, which should subvert her claim unless we assume that it is done out of women’s free will while heterosexuality is imposed on women by patriarchy, but that, of course would leave out all heterosexual women who enter

a man-woman relationship of their free will in their conscious or subconscious desire to fulfill their role determined by their sex embracing heterosexuality and mothering.

Revisiting “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” we must admit that the feminist campaign has been won at least in the European countries, the United States and most members of the Commonwealth despite the resurgent traditionalist claims by the conservative forces of the same societies. This has been done not without its taking a heavy toll on men and women alike as countries with advanced feminism well incorporated in their mode of government and legislation have gone well beyond the initial claim for equality of the two sexes (still unachieved elsewhere) and have severely limited the possibilities for interaction of the latter, having given rise to the emergence of the *third sex* – gay practice as a vogue broadly publicizing the lives of gay artists such as Elton John and the late George Michael. Bisexualism (hermaphroditism) has not been left unobserved, either lying at the core of the immense success of Lady Gaga.

We can quote Ursula Le Guin in her saying that, we should consider science fiction not as *prescriptive* but *descriptive* (Le Guin 1969: 8), as a quest for self-knowledge and the questions we pose about our lives today may find their answers in a projection of our society in another space and time where we could make a study of a problem unimpeded by the extant norms or directives society is imposing on us.

If we do so, a certain number of rather unpleasant similarities can be established between a Gethenian and a unisex city dweller by quoting some of the observations Ai makes of the indigenes: in appearance – *stolid, slovenly, heavy, effeminate* – not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: “a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge” (Le Guin 1969: 87); in personality – double-dealing with pronounced ambivalence: “a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (27); in behavior – “Estraven’s performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit” (10); in manner of speaking – “His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man’s voice, but scarcely a woman’s voice either...but what was it saying?” (10).

It will not be hard to recognize here the average office worker from a concrete-and-glass skyscraper in a modern metropolis. Bound by the necessity to work hard to be able to pay the exorbitant rent, utility bills, bank loans, credit cards, the city dweller, unless s/he is lucky enough to work from home as a post-Covid-19 practice, is confined (wired) to a chair eight or nine hours a day and not infrequently many more, the eyes glued to the computer screen, the brain busy calculating thousands of mechanical operations, the clothes loose enough (already a standard dress code in most companies) to cover the lack of a typical male or female shape due to a lack of sports activities, junk food consumption in the short lunch breaks (thirty minutes is

a standard), and last but not least, blended gender roles⁴ that often presuppose a lack of love life in the heart of the city. The modern city dweller has all the right to envy the Gethenians, who, at least once a month, can experience love.

In their extreme forms, feminism and nonbinarism hamper heterosexuality, blunt sex distinctions, and in combination with the smothering effect of the metropolis, the city resident is heavily restrained in acting according to his or her sex, thus being gradually transformed into an amorphous unisex creature, self-contained, but money dependent, languishing *its* life away within lifeless concrete walls to the indifference of the metropolis. The far right has not yet caused much change in the social practice of sexuality in Western societies although dangerous tendencies are being observed such as voices for the abolition of abortion, thus denying women the right to govern their own bodies as they see fit, which, with the calls for more visible patriarchy, could lead to lapsing into a fascistic *The Handmaid's Tale*-like world.⁵ The ongoing fifth season of the Emmy-winning TV series for outstanding drama with the same title based on Margaret Atwood's 1985's chilling dystopia is yet another proof of the relevance of 1980s fictional and nonfictional propositions regarding our dealing and coping with our own sexuality. It would be a terrible mistake to allow the conservative Western institutions, Islamic states and the far right to claim that they are the only true proponents of *sexual normality*. Western societies (liberal democracies) should do more to highlight that while not imposing heterosexuality on their citizens, still this remains the mainstream. Also, blending gender roles should be done with caution, without resulting in blunting sexual distinctions to the point of the individual questioning his or her own sexual identity.

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⁴ Joan K. Peters in her “Gender Remembered: The Ghost of “Unisex” Past, Present and Future” argues that blending gender roles is inevitable in the gender revolution of any given liberal democratic country (Peters 82) and sees it as mostly positive for both men and women while still preserving certain gender (sexual) distinctions. The author of this article, by contrast, argues that excessive imposition of blended gender roles leads to the formation of an apathetic asexual urban individual. – a. n.

⁵ During the rule of the Islamic State, it had happened; similar practices were established in David Koresh's Branch Davidians as well as other sects, which means that different religions could be used as a foundation for the sexual enslavement of women. – a. n.

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