Rethinking Binary Oppositions: Non-Binary Gender Identities from Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* to Today's Social Media Platforms

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the paper is to explore the notion of gender as a spectrum as opposed to a fixed category, with special focus on the importance of language for establishing gender identity. Relying on Judith Butler's concept of gender and performativity, we determine the constitutive power of language. Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* presents its readers with a postgender society on the planet of Gethen. This planet stands in stark opposition to Le Guin's heteronormative contemporary society, deconstructing gender norms and eradicating binary oppositions such as male/female. We may consider the inhabitants of Gethen as non-binary individuals who raise questions about the entire system of gender representation. Le Guin's novel was ahead of its time and thus paved the way for today's freedom in expressing one's gender fluidity. Connecting Le Guin's novel and our contemporary society, we shall explore the rise in the number of adolescents and young adults who identify as non-binary. Non-binary gender identity is not a novelty, but its rapid growth can be attributed to the widespread popularity of social media platforms such as TikTok. Consequently, this platform may be viewed as a

norm-defying space in its own right where the correct usage of pronouns when referring to non-binary individuals is one of the main tools for establishing one's gender identity.

1. Introduction

When contemplating a fictional universe that critically reflects the binary gender system, Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, published in 1969, first comes to mind. It was only in the 1960s that female authors began to write in the previously male-dominated genre of science fiction due to the revolutionary potential it holds. In the Introduction for the novel, Le Guin states that science fiction is a metaphor, an experiment "not to predict the future [...] but to describe reality, the present world. Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive" (Le Guin, 1993, p. 151). Le Guin's (1993, p. 155–156) motivation for writing *The Left Hand of Darkness* was, as she comments herself, a desire to "understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society". It is a "thought-experiment" (Le Guin, 1993, p. 151) created out of curiosity about what "truly differentiates men and women" (Le Guin 1993, p. 159) and what is left of society when gender is eliminated from the equation. Although feminist critics had already begun challenging the gender binary and language which was phallocentric, gender fluidity was not yet on the horizon for discussion at the time of publication of Le Guin's novel, making her truly an author ahead of her time.

Le Guin's novel is not a utopia, but an exploration of an alternative viewpoint and space where there is no gender in the conventional term. While there are males and females (following the basic biological principles of males making children and females giving birth), these genders are all to be found in one body. In studies about *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the Gethenians – a race of androgynous neuters – are presented as androgynes, hermaphrodites and intersex individuals. Although there is no

mention of the Gethenians as non-binary beings, recent developments in the study of gender identity have called for a reinterpretation of their unique sexual/gender roles.

A non-binary reading of *The Left Hand of Darkness* allows for more complex understandings of sex, gender and sexuality as a spectrum rather than a binary set. Le Guin allows us to envisage a world without boundaries, stereotypes and social roles based on sex; a world without judgment where gender fluidity is the norm. By considering the inhabitants of Gethen as non-binary individuals who raise questions about the entire system of gender representation, we explore Le Guin's novel as a work ahead of its time that paved the way for today's freedom in expressing one's gender fluidity.

2. A Non-binary Reading of Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness

Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is considered a pioneering work in the genre because it is among the first to attempt to imagine an alternative universe that critically reflects the gender system. Many feminist writers at the time were looking for "new tools for investigating and challenging gender assumptions" (Attebery, 2002, p. 129) and the concept of androgyny seemed like an appropriate method to eliminate gender distinctions and societal unfairness. Brian Attebery (2002, p. 130) views Le Guin's novel as an investigation of gender paradox that shows "no contradiction between the vulnerability of pregnancy and the arrogance of kinghood, no moiety of humanity debarred from one or the other".

The protagonist of the novel, Genly Ai, a human from the planet Terra, is on a mission to persuade the inhabitants of the planet Gethen to join Ekumen, a coalition of humanoid worlds. The Gethenians appear human at first glance, except their bodies do not overtly display any distinctly male or female gender characteristics. Genly Ai is the only human on Gethen, or as the Gethenians view him, a being in a state of permanent kemmer. Readers are given a rich background about Gethen and a thorough scientific explanation about their sexual cycle:

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days (they tend to speak of it as 26 days, approximating it to the lunar cycle). For 21 or 22 days the individual

is somer, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters kemmer, estrus [...] When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by tough–secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge of shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role. (Le Guin, 2017, p. 90)

The Gethenians are represented as an androgynous species which "suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; it suggests, further, a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom" (Heilbrun, 1973, p. x–xi). The androgynous body as a combination of both male and female can stand as a symbol of redefining gender roles, eliminating boundaries and creating a safe space of equality. While the biologically modified image Le Guin has presented is implausible, a society populated by people without a gender is not impossible to imagine. There are people today living without a gender, or rather, without identifying as either gender in the binary system. Such identification is sometimes termed genderqueer, agender, or gender fluid, but new research in the field of gender studies adopted the term "non-binary".

Non-binary is an umbrella term that includes those whose identity falls outside of or between male and female identities; as a person who can experience both male and female, at different times, or someone who does not experience or want to have a gender identity at all. (Monro, 2019, p. 1)

Whichever term we choose to use, they all have in common "dis-identification with rigid gender binaries" (Monro, 2019, p. 1) and present a challenge to the institutions that create and further perpetuate gender norms. Gethenians can be described as non-binary individuals who dis-

mantle boundaries and present gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed entity.

By choosing the perspective of a gendered being, Le Guin shows how the majority of society would perceive and react to the Gethenians. Although Genly is aware of the Gethenians non-binary nature, he "unconsciously participates in the production of 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities" (Fayad, 1997, p. 59). In this manner, Le Guin presents her readers with the root of the problem – the male perspective that imposes meaning and a culturally conditioned view of the gender binary. Despite being on the planet Gethen (Winter) for almost two years, Genly is "still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 11). Genly Ai represents the heteronormative male in a patriarchal society and is in contrast with the society Le Guin constructs. Estraven, Genly's helper and the Prime Minister of Karhide perhaps best shows Genly's confusion and discomfort with the androgynous nature of the Gethenians:

> Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 12).

Similar stereotyping occurs with Genly's "landlady, a voluble man" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 47) who "had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignolble, kindly nature" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 48) but has fathered four children while birthing none. Unable to see the Gethenians for what they truly are, he imposes gender roles that are "centered on a heterosexual norm that assumes a division between masculine and feminine identities, one that is specifically implicated in relations of power and domination" (Fayad, 1997, p. 59). Genly Ai thus ex-

poses common stereotypes and causes the readers to confront their own gender bias. On Gethen "there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 94). In this context, we view the Gethenians as breaking the gender binary and emerging as today's notion of non-binary gender identity – an identity that is both male and female, while simultaneously being none. This destruction of gender binaries can be viewed as "a space of resistance that redefines the ways in which gender identity is constructed" (Fayad, 1997, p. 59). Using sentences such as "[t]he king was pregnant" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 99) not only renegotiates gender roles but their impact on determining social positions and attitudes. One person, who does not identify as either male or female, or feels that gender is a fluid category susceptible to changes on a daily basis, is indeed able to carry out an act of "being a pregnant male".

Le Guin uses the pronoun "he" to refer to the Gethenians and mainly shows them in their masculine form and taking on typically male positions in the society (Prime Minister, King), for which she was harshly criticized by feminists[38]. The explanation for the novel is that the pronoun "he" is used "for the same reasons we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 94). Having initially defended her decision to use "he" as the gender-neutral variant by refusing "to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for 'he/she'" (Le Guin, 1993, p. 169), Le Guin later revised her statement to say that using invented pronouns would have been a better solution than using "the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse" (Le Guin, 1993, p. 169). However, Cornell (2001, p. 323) argues that any gender-neutral pronoun that Le Guin could have chosen would have altered

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38 Brian Attebery (2002, p. 131) notes that the two main objections raised against *The Left Hand of Darkness* are using masculine pronouns when referring to the Gethenians and always representing Estraven in stereotypically male social positions rather than participating in housework or child care.

the focus of the novel by implying a level of awareness that is not present. Namely, Genly is quite aware that he is using inaccurate pronouns, as are the readers, but he continually chooses to do so as he succumbs to the "misleading perceptions and misconceptions created by our language" (Cornell, 2001, p. 323).

Le Guin (2017, p. 94) asks: "What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?" Society has strictly determined gender roles and inflicted the habit of raising a child in accordance with the rigid gender division that determines everything from the color a child wears, to toys they play with and activities they can participate in. Gender in Le Guin's novel is presented as being artificial; a dominant discursive construct of Genly Ai and his own previously set perception of the world. The sex vs. gender debate is thus raised, along with the question of gender construction, i.e. performance.

2.1. Performing Gender through Language

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, first introduced in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, presents gender as a "performative accomplishment" that is manifested through repetition, thus creating countless possibilities for gender transformations due to the arbitrary nature of gender performative acts (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Through these acts, gender is constructed, pointing to the notion that there is no essence that determines gender; "[g]ender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). By stating that sex is always gender, Butler erased the sex/gender distinction. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, we observe that "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, 1999, p. 10). The Gethenians have no biological gender and the aforementioned distinction, as well as any gender roles in society, are completely eliminated. Genly Ai is the one that is attempting to force the Gethenians into gender roles using his language. What limits Genly in his perception

of the Gethenians is the "hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (Butler, 1999, p. 13).

Language is much more than a tool used for communication; instead, it continuously controls our perception of the world and plays a significant role in the production of gender. Wilchins (2004, p. 71) reminds us that the cultural discourse about females, homosexuals, transgender individuals, etc. did not appear as a response to their existence, but it was the discourse that created them. Consequently, language is "both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression" (Butler, 1999, p. 148). The artificial nature of language allows it to be a source of power that not only establishes gender identity but also conditions it.

> Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language as well as by nonabstract language. For there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real. (Wittig, 1992, p. 78)

According to constructivist feminist theories, gender identity is a social construct and the terms "femininity" and masculinity" are simply categories established to divide, differentiate and create a hierarchy. A binary model of gender (male/female) promoted by a distinction in language between third-person pronouns he/his and she/her, is established in society. Le Guin herself admits to having remained in the confines of patriarchal discourse when writing her novel as she was not even conscious of the implication of her choice to use only male pronouns in reference to the Gethenians. Le Guin writes: "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man–man I must say, having said he and his–the man answers" (Le Guin, 2017, p. 5), showing that the choice of pronouns establishes the gender one is assigned and viewed as. As Wittig (1992, p. 78) points out, "gender takes place in a category of language that is totally unlike any other and which is called the personal pronoun" that "engineer[s] gender all through language". Thus the first step of establishing gender identity would be to solidify the use of per-

sonal pronouns for said gender. Whether we are discussing a transgender individual who wishes to change their personal pronouns or a non-binary individual who wishes to free language of any gender markers, the path towards acceptance and legitimization is to be found in language. "Words are real; bodies are not. There is no pretext of transparency here: We don't fit the words to the bodies; instead, it is the bodies that must fit the words" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 76).

3. A New Virtual Space for Expressing Gender

Colloquial dialogues about non-binary gender identities are increasing; however, research in this field is lacking and still promoting archaic and binary conceptualizations of gender identity. As many influential individuals in today's society continue to bring attention to the issue of binary categories, the scope of research and discussion in academic circles is starting to expand. July 14th is now recognized as International Non-binary People's Day, which is dedicated to raising awareness about the issues non-binary individuals face all around the world. Around one-in-five (18%) of Americans have expressed that they personally know someone who identifies as non-binary and uses gender-neutral pronouns. When asked whether they would be comfortable using such pronouns about six-in-ten (61%) of the younger population (ages 18 to 29) say they would feel comfortable addressing somebody in this manner (Geiger & Graf, 2019). Due to multiple celebrities using their platforms to openly discuss the journey of coming out as non-binary as well as the struggles they have faced[39], more attention has been paid to this gender identity. McNabb (2018, p. xv) states that there is a significant increase in the promotion of gender nonconformity in all spheres of popular culture which is creating more representation, providing information and enabling questioning youth to find role models to aid them in their journey of discovery. With non-binary youth, one of the main problems seems to be that their ex-

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39 Some famous non-binary individuals are the Australian model and actor Ruby Rose, Jaden Smith, the son of actor Will Smith and David Bowie. Celebrities who recently "came out" as non-binary include singers Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato and Sam Smith.

ploration of gender identity seems to have been delayed due to "a lack of information and resources (i.e., societal awareness, role models, supportive spaces, educational materials) regarding non-binary gender" (Fiani & Han, 2019, p. 10).

Many individuals opt to keep their gender identity hidden so as not to create a stir within their families and communities, thus feeling like they do not have a safe and accepting space of their own. This is especially the case with non-binary identities as there was not enough representation until recently[40] and a majority of people are still uneducated regarding the proper use of pronouns for these individuals. Social media today is playing the role of a parent figure – a supporting figure in one's life that acknowledges the search for their identity. The community on social media, particularly TikTok, thus provides an entirely separate world where one may freely express themself and find information, share experiences and negotiate meaning and identity through interaction with like-minded individuals. This interaction can range from communication in the comment section of the platform or simply viewing videos one can relate to. Non-binary identities and gender expressions seem to be increasingly common among youth perhaps due to the freedom and safety provided by social media, as well as the support of a growing online community that allows the younger population to openly discuss and break the gender binary. "Since the introduction of participatory social media, nonbinary culture has exploded, with the creation and evolution of identity terms and ways of communicating about these identities" (McNabb, 2018, p. 23). Social media has played a huge role in educating people and establishing the non-binary gender identity as not only valid but one that is becoming more widespread. Having become a space not only for seeking out acceptance but for activism as well, social media allows information to be disseminated quickly thus reaching an enormous amount of people in a short period of time.

There is, however, a disproportion between the struggles non-binary people may be presented within the real world and the acceptance they

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40 McNabb (2018, p. 55) attributes the rise in visibility to three factors: the Internet and popularity of social media, an increase in the numbers of people who are coming out as non-binary and the multiple famous "allies" joining the cause.

feel in the virtual world. In reality, it is not customary to introduce one-self by informing people of your preferred pronouns and gender identity or whether or not you are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. On social media platforms, this is the standard practice which does not strike those belonging to the virtual world as odd. Due to the "availability of information about gender diversity, younger individuals are more likely than youth of previous time periods to adopt nonbinary rather than binary gender identities, and parents, educators, and clinicians need to understand this growing population" (Diamond, 2020, p. 2).

The social media platform that has proven to be most valuable in spreading awareness and information about the non-binary gender identity is TikTok. Having been the most downloaded social media platform of 2020, TikTok's rapid growth enabled a large community to be formed. The TikTok community is further divided into various spaces that allow for freedom of expression, a feeling of inclusion and for one to be surrounded by people with the same gender identity. One such space is the so-called "queertook". One of the best indicators that TikTok is being used for such purposes is perhaps the fact that the #nonbinary hashtag and any hashtags pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community are the most used on the platform. The hashtag #nonbinary currently has over 6.8 billion views, while other related hashtags such as #nonbinarypride and #non-binarytiktok have 89.3M and 60M respectively. Their popularity is not a temporary trend, seeing that it is always among the most frequently used hashtags. While support for the non-binary is always present on this platform, there have been trends to certain sounds which at times completely took over TikTok. These trends included a "pronoun check" in which non-binary individuals expressed their preferred pronouns by rating all of the most frequently used pronouns and declaring their favorite, that is, the one they feel most comfortable or "euphoric" with. Other common videos include "transformations" from a feminine to a masculine appearance thus showing that one can indeed present as both. Another popular trend included a filter that added masculine features to one's face upon blinking and it was used to lip-sync to a male-female duet, switching be-

tween genders as the song calls for. However, the most noticeable manner in which TikTok has proven to be a safe space for gender-nonconforming and queer individuals is the fact that it is customary to openly state one's pronouns in the description with the aim of emphasizing the spectrum of gender identity. The pronouns used to express the non-binary gender identity are they/them and an increase in the number of people who identify as such may be seen through the fact that the American Dialect Society (2020) has recognized "they" as the word of the decade (2010–2019) in the category "(my) pronouns". The most prominent usage of the pronoun "they" is to replace one's personal pronouns (he/she) and refer to an individual who identifies as non-binary. Rarely can we see a profile that does not state gender pronouns on TikTok. "Language play is especially evident on the Internet, where communities innovate, disseminate, and evolve pronoun sets, identity terms, and etiquette practices" (McNabb, 2018, p. 23), making it easier than ever to perform one's gender and establish identity through language.

4. Conclusion

TikTok, along with most social media platforms, is often not taken seriously or believed to have the potential to inspire change in society. TikTok allows users to express themselves freely, find communities which they feel they are a part of and connect with others sharing their feelings for an exchange of experiences and, more importantly, support (Jennings, 2021). But this platform has evolved from its initial stages of lip-syncing and dancing to a place of education, self-discovery and claiming one's gender experience. What was commonly used by teenagers to learn viral dances has become a haven of LGBTQ+ solidarity: "what TikTok reflects is a growing tendency toward more fluid definitions of gender and sexuality" (Jennings, 2021). LGBTQ+ content creators have championed queer education, which is still clearly lacking in the public school systems as many educators are not equipped to create safe learning environments about these taboo topics such as gender fluidity and the freedom to be one's authentic self (Dawson, 2021). Many teens learn about the LGBTQ+

community from TikTok and how to accept, welcome and support these individuals. "[S]tudies suggest that the most beneficial intervention approaches involve creating safe and supportive spaces for all youth to give voice to diverse experiences of gender identity and expression" and this is precisely what TikTok has enabled (Diamond, 2020, p. 4). TikTok is a safe place for LGBTQ+ people to express themselves, connect with like-minded individuals, share experiences and promote acceptance and kindness. The "queertok" community is its own society built on principles of gender nonconformity, fluidity, gender affirmation. TikTok thus creates a new space for gender expression, discovery and respect, a space with no norms, expectations and imposed gender roles.

If we take a look at TikTok today, we may find that it can be seen as a modern world Gethen. It presents a space different from the one we are accustomed to which functions according to different rules and standards as compared to ours. In this world announcing one's pronouns at the onset of a conversation or as the first fact one discloses about themselves is considered the norm. This space is complex, as it has an unlimited number of "rooms" in the form of hashtags dedicated to certain topics, an entire atmosphere that differs from reality – not as escapism, but as a model for what may be improved in reality.

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