

## Ursula K. Le Guin'in *Karanlığın Sol Eli* Eserinde Genly'nin Öznelararası Karşılaşma ile Benlik Reformasyonu<sup>a</sup>

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### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Ursula K. Le Guin'in *Karanlığın Sol Eli* adlı eserindeki ana karakter Genly Ai'nin benliğinde ve kimlik algısındaki değişimi metin analizi yaparak göstermektir. "Lanet bir gezegen" dediği Gethen'de iki yıl geçirdikten sonra, Genly (efendi) başkasını (köleyi) yani Estraven'i daha yakından tanıma fırsatı bulur ve öznelararası karşılaşmayı deneyimler. Hegel'in diyalektiği açısından değerlendirildiğinde, Genly kendi benliğinin dışına çıkarak başkasını da kendisinden bağımsız bir benlik olarak kabul eder. Bu süreç onun benliğinde bir değişime sebep olur, ve Gethen gezegenine bağlılık hissetmesini ve kendini orada evde hissetmesini sağlar. Bu makale, başka bir gezegende uzaylı olan Genly'nin benliğini yolculuk, öznelararası karşılaşma, ve evde hissetme aşamalarıyla yeniden oluşturduğunu öne sürer.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Hegel'in öznelararası kavramı  
Efendi-köle diyalektiği  
Yolculuk  
Reformasyon

### Makale Hakkında

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## Genly's Reformation of His Self through Intersubjective Encounter in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to display the transformation in the self and identity of the protagonist Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Having spent two years on what he calls as a "damned planet", Genly (master) has a chance to recognize the other (the slave), namely Estraven closely, thus experiences intersubjective encounter. In the framework of the Hegelian dialectic, Genly comes outside of his own self on Gethen and recognizes the other as a self consciousness that is other than himself. This process makes him transform as a person, develop an attachment to Gethen, and feel at home there. Hence, this study claims that Genly, an alien on another planet, reconstitutes his own self in three stages: journey, intersubjective encounter, and feeling at home on Gethen.

### Keywords

Hegel's intersubjectivity  
Master-slave dialectic  
Journey  
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### About Article

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Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (1929-2018) is a renowned and prolific American writer whose oeuvre includes tens of novels, volumes of poetry, short stories, essay collections, children's books, and translations. Thanks to her anthropologist father and writer mother, as she grew up she had the chance of reading hundreds of books and listening to numerous mythological stories from his father, which embellished her stories and assisted her in world-building. As a highly popular writer in science fiction genre, she was called "a mythological fantasist" (Bloom, 1987, p. 1) and also was dubbed by her readers "the Queen of Science Fiction." Le Guin's widely acclaimed novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) was a breakthrough in science fiction, it was rewarded with two highly prestigious awards in science fiction: Hugo and Nebula, the former granted by the readers, the latter by writers. Unlike its contemporaries, the novel is an instance of social-science fiction novel which dwells on an alternate society and tells the psychology of the characters more than expostulating on the scientific developments. In the introduction of the novel, Le Guin writes: "This book is not extrapolative. If you like you can read it and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment" (2000, p. xii). *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a piece in the Hainish Cycle, a set of novels and short stories which are lightly connected and which take place in a future history in Hain cosmos.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* has been commonly studied as a work of genre fiction, it is read with respect to the organic unity formed through form and content (see Bickman, 1977), use of myth and language in representing utopia (see Adams, 1991), androgyny in the context of postcolonial literature (see Fayad, 1997), Taosim and androgyny (see Brown, 1980), as a commentary on the racism in USA (see Khader 2005), use of myth and history (see Walker, 1979) regarding its re-evaluation of gender roles (see Patnaik and Kumar, 2016). Unlike the bulk of critical articles on the work, the focus of this study will be the transformation in the self and identity of the protagonist Genly Ai after his intersubjective encounters (in Hegelian sense) and alienation process away from his home planet. As a result of his reconstructing his self, he adapts to another planet. When Genly and Estraven's relationship is read from the framework of Hegelian dialectic, why and how Genly feels at home on another planet will be better understood. Genly's reformation of his self can be examined in three stages: his journey to Gethen, his intersubjective encounters there, and his sense of being at home in Gethen.

The first stage of the reformation of Genly Ai's self is his journey. As a result of an intergalactic journey, Genly has been sent from the Terra (Earth) to persuade Gethenians to join the Ekumen, an Interplanetary trade coalition. Genly arrives on Gethen Planet, and as an "other" he feels estrangement there, for the Gethenians are different in their appearances, belief systems, calendar and clock, and their gender, which makes him feel more and more homesick although they might have a remote kinship, for "All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, from one world, Hain" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 35). Not only planet Gethen but also other planets had been colonized by the people of Hain, and some experiments were conducted on the people living there. Gethen is an androgynous society because of "Human genetic manipulation . . . practiced by the Colonizers" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 89). People of Gethen have different sexual physiology than those of living in Terra; Gethenians have the characteristics of both male and female and in the phase called kemmer, they are sexually active for six days in a month and they develop sexual organs depending on their partner, which grows Genly's sense of alienation.

That journey is a symbol of life, and a journeying protagonist journeys into himself and learns a lot through the process is highly common in literary texts. Genly is no different from the conventional heroes; this is also the story of Genly's re-constitution of his self and adapting to a new home. Bittner mentions the duality found in Genly Ai's name, "But as his name (containing puns on 'I' and 'eye') indicates, the real goal of his quest is a discovery of self, a discovery that his own existence as an I is a function of his relationship with a Thou" (1984, p. 24). Only when he builds a communication with a real Gethenian (a thou), can his mission be completed. It is also hinted that his mission is a process of personal relationship and developing his self, not merely a political event. Genly, one of the several volunteers for the mission, gave up his family and friends and his home world. Though being dedicated and brave, he is a typical Terran man who lacks the insight and understanding required to execute his duty. Although he had spent two years on Gethen, he still struggles to comprehend its inhabitants and is unable to overcome his traditional and Earth-like preconceptions and accept individuals who are different from himself. He just focuses on carrying out his mission which is to persuade Gethenians to join Ekumen, yet he is unaware of the fundamental necessity of the mission: understanding, befriending, and recognizing the natives of the planet.

The second stage of Genly's reformation of his self is intersubjective encounter within the framework of Hegelian dialectic. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was an eminent German philosopher whose *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) marks a turning point in his career, for it distinguishes him from his predecessors, and as a moment of truth for his philosophical writings, it is classified as his mature writing. As Hegel claims in the advertisement of the work, "It examines the preparation for science from a standpoint through which it constitutes a new, interesting philosophy" (2018, p. 468). There are three main parts in the work: consciousness; self-consciousness; reason, spirit, religion, and absolute knowing. He explains the experience of consciousness based on rational thinking by way of conceptual divisions and dialectical oppositions. In the part titled self-consciousness, Hegel expounds on the formation of self and identity.

For Hegel, the formation of identity is defined by a certain "desire for recognition," and "human Desire must be directed toward another Desire" (Kojève, 1969, p. 5) and there need to be multiple desires, so "human reality can only be social" (Kojève, 1969, p. 6). Furthermore, in Hegelian dialectic, "Self-consciousness is in and for itself while and as a result of its being in and for itself for an other; i.e., it is only as a recognized being" (2018, p. 108). This oft-quoted sentence needs explication. In the self-other dyad, there is the necessity of recognition, thus intersubjectivity; the separate consciousnesses need to recognize one another without merging in to a new existence. Hence, self is constructed in this process of recognition, yet this process should be reciprocal; it needs to recognize the one recognizing itself, for "Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another selfconsciousness" (Hegel, 2018, p. 107). Moreover, the self comes to be as the consequence of "an intersubjective relationship by way of which a subject must find out in another entity a quality of being it has itself but of which it is not yet aware" (ver Eecke, 1983, p. 121). In his eminent passage titled "Lordship and Bondage," Hegel expounds on the problem of the alienation of the subject in encountering with another consciousness, whose existence tends to put limitations on and to designate his own nature, inaugurating a struggle for absolute supremacy. The French Hegelian critic Hippolyte comments on this as an endeavor to display that "self-formation is only conceivable through

the mediation of alienation or estrangement. Self-formation is not to develop harmoniously as if by organic growth, but rather to become opposed to oneself through a splitting or separation" (qtd. in Wilden, 1968, p. 372). In other words, man divides himself into a subject, and recognizes himself in another, as seen by the perspective of another. In this framework, it can be argued that Genly Ai recognizes himself in Estraven, and as a result of his encounter with Estraven, he reforms his self.

The first Gethenian introduced in the novel is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, the King's Ear (vizier or prime minister) about whom Genly says "he often speaks, frank yet cautious, ironic, as if always aware that I see and judge as an alien: a singular awareness in one of so isolate a race and so high a rank" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 5). The events are mainly narrated by Genly Ai, though there are some chapters narrated by Estraven and some others including notes of other envoys, recordings and hearth-tales. Genly is suspicious towards almost everyone on Gethen, but he especially distrusts Estraven. When invited to dinner in Estraven's house, he ponders "I was alone, with a stranger, inside the walls of a dark palace, in a strange snow-changed city, in the heart of the Ice Age of an alien world." (Le Guin, 2000, p. 17). In Hegelian dialectic, a consciousness confronts an other, they may be involved a struggle for authority, and "To himself, his essence exhibits itself as that of an other; he is external to himself, and he must sublimate that being-external-to-himself" (Hegel, 2018, p. 112). That is why, Genly is indifferent to Estraven as a human being, he dislikes him and by so doing he negates his consciousness while reinforcing his own. However, there are "two opposed shapes of consciousness. One is self-sufficient; for it, its essence is being-for-itself. The other is non-self-sufficient; for it, life, or being for an other, is the essence. The former is the master, the latter is the servant" (Hegel, 2018, pp. 112-13). In the representation of these characters in the novel, Genly is the master while Estraven could be considered as the servant. While Genly is self-confident of himself and his mission, and he does not rely on anyone, Estraven accepted him as a being on its own and tried to support him and his cause from the very moment they confronted. In Hegelian perspective, "The man who wants to be recognized by another in no sense wants to recognize him in turn, if he succeeds, then, the recognition will not be mutual and reciprocal: he will be recognized but will not recognize the one who recognizes him" (Kojève, 1969, p. 10). Genly says about Estraven, "I don't trust Estraven, whose motives are forever obscure; I don't like him" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 7).

One reason why it took Genly to achieve his mission so long on Gethen may be his acknowledging his condition as a foreigner and an alien, he says "few foreigners are so foreign as I" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 8) without making any genuine effort to establish relationship with the Gethenians who are different from himself. It is true, he is an alien far away from his planet, his kind of people and his family, he is a loner. He depicts the way he is mentioned by the Gethenians "That's him, look, there's the Envoy. . . [and he says] more and more often I longed for anonymity, for sameness. I craved to be like everybody else" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 8). He seems to be disturbed by the othering process he has gone through. He also indicates that the level of alienation is not too extreme, for he says "They were curious, some more, some less. Few were frightened of me personally, or showed the xenophobic revulsion" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 97). Here, Genly may have experienced a shattering of his self, as

The psychology of the self is embedded in this fundamental dilemma, namely, that the sense of self needs to be affirmed by the other, and yet a response from the other that

is nonconfirming or unempathic can lead at best to a sense of depletion or at worst to the shattering of the self. This results in a defensive quest for an illusory self-sufficiency which is in conflict with the opposite wish to surrender the self to the other, to merge, to become enslaved. (Modell, 1984, p. 1311)

Because he is unable to establish a deep relationship with the Gethenians, or even comprehend them and feel closer to them, he is despondent at times, and this hinders him from accomplishing his mission. He also declares "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 12). His incapability of understanding his own mission leads into his failure. In an ignorant and pompous manner, he claims that his mission takes precedence above personal ties. He is unaware that his mission is also a personal discovery. Genly is still in his early thirties. He has yet to realize that his political goal, alliance with the planet Gethen, is dependent on his ability to overcome his estrangement, promote efficient communication, and relate to the Gethenians on a personal, even spiritual, level. His capacity to learn to trust, care for, and accept the Other is critical to ending his isolation and completing his goal.

After Genly's outer journey from Terra to Gethen, he journeys within the planet Gethen: from Karhide to Orgoreyn where he is suspected and sent to "Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency" with a group of guilty people. Realizing the unjust treatment, Estraven, who is also in exile in Orgoreyn, goes there to rescue Genly. Together, they journey across eight hundred miles of isolated wildness of ice and snow. During this journey Genly has a chance to know Estraven closely, thus experiences intersubjective encounter and sees the need to recognize Estraven better. Until then, they have never spoken to one other as individuals regardless of their formal political responsibilities. "We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone" says Estraven (Le Guin, 2000, p. 232), and Genly comments, "Estraven and I had simply arrived at the point where we shared whatever we had that was worth sharing" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 247). This is indeed their first encounter outside of organized community, alone in the immense, largely uninhabited, bitter cold Hinterlands, nestled together inside a small tent almost covered with snow. The forced intimacy they experience, provides them with a genuine opportunity to build reciprocal acceptance and understanding, which will serve as the foundation for the interplanetary alliance.

Before the recognition of Estraven (slave) by Genly (master) as a consciousness, Estraven had already recognized him as the Master, and

Hence, he is recognized in his human reality and dignity. But this recognition is one-sided, for he does not recognize in turn the Slave's human reality and dignity. Hence, he is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize. And this is what is insufficient . . . he can be satisfied only by recognition from one whom he recognizes as worthy of recognizing him. (Kojève, 1969, p. 19)

Thus, the Master needs to recognize the Slave as a human and attribute a value to him for his own good, and hence Genly recognizes Estraven as a human being. As a result of this process, his attitude and perspective to Estraven changes, and he depicts him as follows:

He wore nothing but his breeches; he was hot. The dark secret face was laid bare to the light, to my gaze. Estraven asleep looked a little stupid, like everyone asleep: a round, strong face, relaxed and remote, small drops of sweat on the upper lip and over the heavy eyebrows. I remembered how he had stood sweating on the parade-stand in

Erhenrang in panoply of rank and sunlight. I saw him now defenseless and half-naked in a colder light, and for the first time saw him as he was. (Le Guin, 2000, p. 201)

In comparison with the first time he sees Estraven, now his attitude is sympathetic and positive. Finally, Genly fully accepts Estraven as he is, and in this acceptance he recognizes himself. He comments,

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. For he was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty: and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid to give it. (Le Guin, 2000, p. 248)

In the framework of Hegelian dialectic, Genly comes outside of his own self on Gethen, and constitutes the other as a self consciousness that is other than himself, and lastly reconstitutes his own self by way of destroying the otherness in his own heart. He also underlines the significance of difference in their intersubjective relationship by saying, "But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 249). Ultimately, this process of recognition makes him transform as a person, develop attachment to Gethen, and feel at home there.

The third stage of Genly's re-construction of his self is feeling at home on another planet. Home can be defined as a "place but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived" (Mallet, 2004, p. 63). In addition, according to Michael Jackson's book *At Home in the World*, home arises from a broader intellectual project to "describe how in different societies, people work-in reality and through illusion, alone and in concert with others – to shape the course of their own lives" (Jackson, 1995, p. 123). As such "[h]ome is grounded less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place" (Jackson, 1995, p. 148). In his conceptualization, home is a collection of the activities performed by the person. He further comments that "we often feel at home in the world when what we do has some effect and what we say carries some weight" (Jackson, 1995, p. 123). Considering the emphasis put on the relationships and activities needed to feel at home, and the importance of one's actions, it may be concluded that it is possible to feel at home in different places.

Home is studied as one of the most significant elements in shaping an individual, and it also "plays a crucial role in people's definition of their self identity" (Despres, 1991, p. 101). Additionally, for the critic Kuang-Ming Wu, home is connected with the intersubjective relationships that call a self, person or I into existence or being. Thus, home can be thought as the main necessity of existence. It should not be conceptualized as a certain space or as a physical place. Basing his argument on Sartre's work, Wu claims that "home is being-with-other(s)" (1993, p. 193). This process of "being with others" brings the personhood into existence. Wu sees the "I" as relational. It enables the expression of a relation, and it also develops a relation simultaneously. As such "I" comes into being in relation to an other and the other can become my hell and my home. Hence, "Home is where I both was born and am being continually born, within that womb called other people, in their being not me" (Wu, 1993, p. 195), and the one is born in this "reciprocal acceptance" of being accepted as he is. This

strain of thought can be related to Hegelian understanding of the necessity of dyadic interaction for the self to be constructed.

As a result of Genly's experiences on Gethen, what he called an "alien world" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 17) and "damned planet" (ibid, p. 132) once, becomes home for him so much so that the penultimate chapter, Chapter 19 (though they are returning to Karhide from the Gobrín Ice) is titled "Homecoming" and narrated by Genly like the most chapters in the novel. However, unlike the other chapters narrated by Genly, the first person plural pronoun "we" is used in the narrative of this chapter from the beginning to the end, for instance "In a dark, windy weather, we slogged along, . . . the first thing not ice or snow or sky that we had seen for seven weeks. . . And we were getting very tired" (ibid, p. 263), while in the other chapters Genly speaks on behalf of himself saying, for example, "I woke. Until now it had been strange, unbelievable, to wake up inside a dim cone of warmth, and to hear my reason tell me that it was a tent, that I lay in it, alive" (ibid, p. 201). The replacement of the pronoun "I" with the plural "we" in the narrative of Genly is another indication of his acceptance of Estraven as a human being worthy of recognition. Indeed, their voices intermingle, because for some time whether the narrator of Chapter 19 is Estraven or Genly is dubious, and this is a result of their intersubjective encounter and mutual recognition of one another. Hegel states in *The Philosophy of Right*, "'I' is at home in the world when it knows it, and even more so when it has comprehended it" (qtd in. Stern, 2013, p. 12). It seems that Genly has comprehended and accepted that he is at home on Gethen.

In his re-constitution of his self, he is transformed into someone else, thus the people coming from his home planet, Terra, are now strangers to him, when he meets them after approximately two and a half years, he says about them, "But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. 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" (Le Guin, 2000, p. 296). It seems that he has internalized his new self so well that his previous home is now unfamiliar and people from his initial home world are aliens to his new identity.

To conclude, a Terran person, Genly Ai transforms his self in three stages, through a journey, intersubjective encounter, and feeling at home on another planet. He has a chance to know a Gethenian, Estraven closely, thus experiences intersubjective encounter and recognized him as a human being. In the framework of Hegelian dialectic, Genly comes outside of his own self on Gethen, and constitutes the other as a self consciousness that is other than himself, and lastly reconstitutes his own self by way of destroying the otherness in his own heart and recognizing the other. While at the beginning of his mission he feels homeless and an alien on Gethen, when Genly feels that he will accomplish his mission, his sense of being at home heightens. And ultimately, his intersubjective relationship and the process of carrying out his mission transform him as a person, develop attachment to Gethen, and feel at home there.

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