

The Politics of Gender in Ursula Le Guin’s “The Dispossessed”

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Abstract

Ursula Le Guin is one of the most important and critically acclaimed science fiction writers. Her fiction is well-known for depicting various feminist themes: gender equality, the social construction of gender and gender roles, sexism, patriarchy, and motherhood. While Le Guin’s relationship with feminism developed and changed throughout her career as a mainstream author, *The Dispossessed* (1974) received much attention from feminist critics. Feminist critics were generally disappointed with the lack of feminist thought in relation to language, narration and portrayal of women. The aim of the article is to engage with feminist critique as well as to address such conceptual issues like the construction of gender and gender roles, the distinction between biological sex and gender, and finally, to re-examine gender politics in “The Dispossessed”. The article suggests that “The Dispossessed” portrays the social construction of gender and gender roles, gender equality and challenges gender norms. In doing so, the novel advocates feminist cause and promotes feminist values, most importantly – gender equality.

Keywords: Science fiction, feminism, gender equality, feminist criticism, Ursula Le Guin.

Introduction

Ursula Le Guin is one of the most significant and commercially successful science fiction writers. *The Dispossessed* (1974) won both the Hugo and Nebula awards – the most prestigious science fiction awards. Throughout her writing career, Le Guin has gained a wide readership and her work is still relevant today.

Le Guin is critically acclaimed not only for the quality of her science fiction, but also because her work encompasses a wide variety of feminist themes. *The Dispossessed* portrays such feminist topics as gender equality, women’s rights, social construction of gender roles, motherhood and criticism

of patriarchy. While Le Guin's complicated relationship with feminism changed and developed throughout the years (Le Guin, 1989), *The Dispossessed* received a considerable amount of feminist criticism.

Analyzing Ursula Le Guin's fiction in terms of feminist critique is still relevant, because her novels have multiple editions and are read by new generations. The readership is changing as well as the perception of the novels. Furthermore, Le Guin often speaks on matters such as feminism and literature.

While more radical feminists point out the contradictions in Le Guin's work, others appreciate her approach to gender politics as more promising compared to other female science fiction writers (Bassnett, 1991). The purpose of this article is to engage with such feminist criticism and to re-examine the gender politics in *The Dispossessed*. This article is an attempt to argue that the novel engages with feminist thought and advocates the feminist cause.

The Dispossessed was published when Second Wave Feminism was thriving. Women rights gained momentum and it was significant that literature reflected the developments of the women's liberation movement. Second Wave Feminism was concerned with structural gender inequality in society and the slow implementation of legal and institutional changes. According to Second Wave Feminists, gender equality could not be achieved simply by changing the law. Radical social changes regarding gender roles also needed to take place at the same time in order to achieve gender equality. Challenging the existing balance of power between women and men was a key to deconstruct the existing social order (Harrison & Boyd, 2003).

Feminism as theory and practice has evolved and changed considerably over the last decades. Some argue that the objectives and troubles of Second Wave Feminists are now obsolete. At least in the Western World, women have achieved institutional and legal equality with men; therefore, it is better to concentrate on identity politics. Now scholars and activists talk about different types of feminism, diversity and the politics of language. Moreover, many feminists get involved in discussions about the different understandings of feminism. It has become rather easy to overlook and forget the main and unifying objective of feminism – gender equality.

Feminism, Gender and Gender Equality

Activists and scholars are not able to agree upon one solid definition of feminism. A wide range of positions have been established within feminist criticism since the 1970s. Disagreements and debates have emerged in three areas: the role of theory, the nature of language and the meaning and value of psychoanalysis (Barry, 2009). The concept of feminism has many implications, some differ greatly from others. There have been different waves of feminism and at this point, there is no unifying consensus regarding the state of feminism.

For the purposes of showing how complicated it is to define feminism, some of the biggest disagreements of feminist theory and practice are pointed out. One of those is how to define ‘a woman’, womanhood and everything that follows from such notions. Is one born ‘a woman’? Does one ‘become a woman’? Does ‘a woman’ simply mean a set of biological characteristics? Can ‘a woman’ be only understood in relation to ‘a man’?

Other great disagreement among many feminists is over the purpose of feminism. Some feminists argue that the sole purpose of feminism is the empowerment of women without much thought to the deconstruction of the notion of ‘a woman’. It is said that women are equal to men and the only thing that needs to be done is to reclaim power (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). Other feminists strongly believe in the deconstruction of gender binary in general, because such binary does not represent all genders and does not empower anyone (Hines, 2015). Therefore, different types of feminism emphasize different commitments, and gender equality is not necessarily the most important one. The reasons for different commitments include different social and political issues, different traditions, environments and multiple contexts in which the need for feminism arises (Rooney, 2006) Furthermore, any attempt to define feminism as theory ends up criticized of further reproducing gender binary (Rooney, 2006), and it is related to the argument that gender as a concept should be abolished.

Most feminists agree that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their biological sex, meaning, *because they are women*, therefore, a commitment should be made to achieve equality between the two sexes (Whelehan, 1995). However, one of the main disagreements comes from understanding and identifying the source of oppression (Whelehan, 1995). Different feminists identify different sources of oppression and patriarchy. Some argue that the system is the enemy, while others concentrate on oppressive language and history. There are serious conceptual problems with such terms as ‘politics’, ‘equality’, even ‘oppression’, and many conflicts among feminists arise because of different perceptions of those terms both in theory and practice.

Moreover, there is a huge gap between theory and practice in feminism. Feminist theory does not do activism, it does not lobby in the corridors of government buildings, protest against inequalities, and does not provide help for women who survived domestic violence. Feminist activism, on the other hand, pays very little or no attention to theory or development of theory.

It may simply be that theory and practice in the case of feminism serve different purposes but, what the author calls a side-effect of this dichotomy, is that it weakens both theory and practice and leaves no solutions for major disagreements. While some scholars are working on deconstructing the

concept of 'a woman' using theories of postmodernism and language, in some parts of the world women's rights movements only gain momentum, and that would not happen if those people did not identify themselves as women.

Many feminists agree that gender is socially constructed. The term 'gender' is used in this article because it is not the purpose of this analysis to deconstruct the term but to re-value the novel that relies on this term. Gender is:

A social construct; a cultural phenomenon that assigned different roles to women and a whole apparatus of imposed behaviour patterns, expectations, thoughts, aspirations and even dreams. It is not 'biological' or 'natural' that women should take the bulk of childcare responsibilities; this has occurred as a result of social and cultural developments that should be changed to the benefit of women and, most feminists believe, men. (Harrison & Boyd, 2003, p. 301).

Despite all the difficulties and inconsistencies in both feminist theory and practice, 'feminism' in this article is defined as 'gender equality'. It may seem like a simple definition, but the author believes it is helpful in analyzing literature. Feminism evaluates the power dynamics between men and women, and the focus on sexism, patriarchy, private and public spheres of life (Harrison & Boyd, 2003). It is worth acknowledging that both terms 'gender' and 'equality' carry some 'philosophical weight' and may become the subjects of endless discussion. The definition of 'gender' is outlined above, and equality is defined as equal opportunities, treatment, rights and responsibilities for all genders. This definition includes the analysis of power relations which is an essential purpose of feminism. Therefore, the definition can be broadened: *feminism's main objective and value is gender equality, and it concentrates on the analysis of power relations and patriarchy in existing societies.*

Second wave feminists were the first ones to talk about the social construction of gender (Lefanu, 1988). Feminist criticism in the 1970s concentrated on exposing "the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural mind-set in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality." (Barry, 2009, p. 117). It was also very concerned with the representation of women in media: television, films, books, magazines (Barry, 2009)

The analysis of the novel is going to be carried out in relation to the portrayal of gender equality, social construction of gender and gender roles, and criticism of existing power relations and patriarchy. The article also examines how gender equality is understood, achieved and exercised in *The Dispossessed*. These research questions are listed below:

- Is gender equality portrayed in the text?
- Is social construction of gender portrayed in the text?
- Are gender roles challenged and questioned in the text?

Feminist criticism of Le Guin's work

Feminism in the 1970s was divided into two different factions. Liberal feminism was often viewed as elitist and ignorant towards non-white, lower social class women. Black feminists questioned white privilege and challenged liberal feminism. On the one hand, Le Guin could be perceived and describe herself as a feminist, while on the other hand, she could be criticized by radical feminists for discrepancies in her work (Bassnett, 1991).

The most prevalent criticism of Le Guin is that her novels are not feminist enough, (Marcellino, 2009) because they do not question gender binary and male privilege, heterosexuality and the monogamous, nuclear family (Lefanu, 1988). One of the most important questions feminist critics ask is “why Ursula Le Guin's ‘people’ are always men” (Lefanu, 1988, p. 136), and women only have a marginal role (Bassnett, 1991). Men are the ones who travel to the unknown planets, go on adventures, and solve theoretical and political problems: “because the novel features a male protagonist it necessarily replicates the standard male quest narrative and thus reproduces patriarchal ideology” (Libretti, 2004 p. 306). Women in *The Dispossessed* do not come across as independent, empowered or even likeable characters (Lefanu, 1988).

Some critics suspected that the lack of radical gender politics in Le Guin's novels had to do with her popularity as a mainstream author. However, Le Guin does not use her popularity to challenge the content, form or style in the literature of science fiction. She does not exploit the possibilities that science fiction offers her; instead she chooses to portray a male character going through a crisis (Lefanu, 1988).

On the contrary, some critics defended Le Guin's choice of male protagonists by arguing that: “There was no way to write about women doing things. If you wanted to write adventures, it had to be the men who were having them. That was just one of the hard facts of the marketplace” (Zimmer Bradley, 1985, p. 29). What is more, in 1960s and 1970s most of science fiction audience consisted of male readers and Le Guin's narrative introduced them to the concept of gender equality (Marcellino, 2009).

The Gender Politics in *The Dispossessed*

In *The Dispossessed* a scientist, named Shevek, is leaving his home planet Anarres to visit a world unknown to him – the planet Urras. He had read about Urras and talked to people on Urras, but never imagined going to a planet so alien to him. Both planets in the novel are portrayed as opposites: they are juxtaposed to highlight and problematize political systems and gender inequality.

In the first chapter, Shevek is leaving Anarres in a spaceship and encounters an Urrasti doctor. They engage in a conversation about the

differences between two planets. Shevek is surprised to notice that there are no women working on the spaceship, and asks Dr. Kimoe why that is, and he replied that “running a space freighter was not women’s work.” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 17). Dr. Kimoe then asks Shevek: “Is it true, Dr. Shevek, that women in your society are treated exactly like men?” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 17).

Shevek and Dr. Kimoe are shocked to realize the differences in treating the opposite gender on both planets. The author argues that the fact that Le Guin mentions gender equality and portrays such a scene in the very first chapter of the book makes it one of the most important themes throughout the novel, and the author states, it was intended this way. With this particular scene, Le Guin emphasizes the different treatment of women in sciences, technology and academia, and presents an alternative vision – the planet of Anarres, which sustains gender equality, where women are treated equally. Later, Shevek contemplates the institutions of marriage and prostitution, which do not exist on Anarres, because they are oppressive. The text then continues to criticize marriage and prostitution and treats them like the results of patriarchy that creates gender inequality.

The episode mentioned above also presents a critique of gender roles and suggests that they are socially constructed. For Shevek, it is unimaginable that women should not work in science or technology. He does not suppose that women have lower intellect and fewer abilities compared to men. The text suggests that gender roles are socially constructed and not a result of biology, and does not have an objective reasoning. It is an unpleasant surprise for Shevek that women are not allowed to participate in the same activities as men on Urras, because he comes from a society which treats women and men equally. Shevek simply does not know of a reality which treats women and men differently. He does experience a similar conversation with Pae, another Urrasti, about women in science. Shevek asks whether all scientists on Urras are men, and Pae answers: “Scientists. Oh, yes, certainly, they’re all men. There are some women teachers in the girl’s schools, of course. But they never get past Certificate level.” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 63). When Shevek asks why, he says: “Can’t do the maths; no head for abstract thought; don’t belong. You know how it is, what women call thinking is done with the uterus. Of course, there’s always few exceptions, God-awful brainy women with vaginal atrophy.” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 63). Here, the text highlights the sexism and gender stereotypes in the Urrasti society: women cannot do calculations, they are irrational, and reduced to their reproduction system. Smart women are met with disgust and suspicion because they are not considered to be feminine enough. Shevek then says to Pae that about half of the scientists on Anarres are women. Pae responds with a statement that women do not belong in the labs; you “have to keep ‘em in their place.” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 64). Women’s place on Urras is a domestic sphere. Pae asks Shevek if he finds “any women

capable of original intellectual work” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 64) and Shevek reveals to Pae’s surprise that the two most significant heroes and theorists on Anarres were women. Pae points out that you cannot tell the sex of a person from their name on Anarres because there is no drawing of “distinction between the sexes” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 63).

Women have the same jobs as men on Anarres: they are scientists, teachers, they work in the mines, they farm the land – there is no gender division regarding occupation in Anarres. Such a portrayal of gender equality regarding occupation is very important, because it suggests an alternative to what many women experience in real life. Women on Anarres can also choose to stay with their babies or take them to a nursery after it is born. Women can choose not to participate in raising a child that is theirs, and men can choose to participate. Shevek is raised by his father and in the nursery with other kids. Shevek’s mom, Rulag, decided to keep working instead of raising him, and in Anarresti society this is a norm. Motherhood is not perceived as something that is destined for every female to experience. Motherhood is a choice. So is fatherhood. Women give birth, but they are not expected to take all the responsibility of taking care of their children. They are not expected to participate in this private sphere of life, and leave the public sphere and science to men. Such a portrayal of gender equality in relation to domestic life criticizes and deconstructs the existing social order when women stay at home with the kids and men are the only ‘bread-winners’.

Shevek also has an interesting encounter with an Urrasti woman, Vea. She is glamorous, rich, and provocative. They meet several times, and their conversations portray other feminist concerns – the objectification of women and the implications of such objectification. Women on Urras are treated as something (not someone) radically different from men. Society on Urras has a very clear distinction between the two genders and this distinction seems reasonable and unquestionable for Urrasti people. One of the first questions Vea asks Shevek is “How do you tell men from women?” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 165). For Vea, the difference comes from the looks, clothes, bodies, occupations. Shevek does not differentiate between two genders based on those categories. In fact, throughout the novel, the only difference between women and men on Anarres is that women give birth and even though they are not treated differently. Vea and Shevek talk about the institution of marriage and family. She asks whether Shevek is married and he says that he has a partner. As it has been mentioned before, marriage on Anarres is considered to be the oppressive institution that disadvantages women, therefore, women and men treat each other as partners in case they choose a long-term partnership. Shevek and Vea have dinner together and she expects him to pay, while he finds it difficult to even accept the concept of money (that does not exist on anarchist Anarres), let alone that she expects him to pay for

her: “Vea did not take charge of the ordering, making it clear that Shevek was in charge of her” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 176).

The novel criticizes the objectification of women and female body. On Urras, Vea is only a body. Women are not people; they are bodies that can only gain power exploiting them. The text emphasizes the difference between how women are treated on Urras and Anarres and criticizes the Urrasti way of seeing women as objects of sexual pleasure.

Vea asks Shevek if she is very different from Anarresti women: “Are they all terribly strong, with muscles? Do they wear boots, and have big flat feet, and sensible clothing, and shave once in a month?” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 178). To Vea’s disgust Shevek answers: “They don’t shave at all.” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 178). Vea even seems incapable of understanding other women without referring to their looks.

Shevek finds it difficult to understand Vea’s position regarding gender roles. He then states that Vea only pretends to be happy with the social norms on Urras: “you know that in the eyes of men you are a thing, a thing owned, bought, sold. And so you think only of tricking the owners, of getting revenge” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 179). Their conversation uncovers one more important way to socialize females into gender roles: females are socialized into believing that existing social norms are beneficial for them. They grow up to believe that men may run the governments, but women control men. They grow up to believe that their bodies are not owned and that they can take control any time. They grow up to believe that the system sustains gender roles because it advantages everyone in the system.

Shevek’s partnership with Takver portrays gender roles, expectations and social norms regarding reproduction and motherhood. One evening, Shevek comes back from work and finds Takver on the edge of a nervous breakdown. She is tired from pregnancy: “I’m sick of crying all the time. Damned stupid hormones! I wish I could have babies like the fish, lay the eggs and swim off and that’s the end of it. Unless I swam back and ate them...” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 198). Feminism is concerned with reproduction rights, pregnancy and motherhood, because the existing system creates many inequalities because women bear children. Takver does not think of pregnancy as natural, enjoyable or mandatory. She wished she could change the way the reproduction works. It does not have to be personal. Takver is a strong woman who understands how the system uses motherhood to control women: “I think that’s why the old archisms used women as property. Why did the women let them? Because they were pregnant all the time – because they were already possessed, enslaved” (Le Guin, 2002, p. 273). Feminism is very critical of the notion that all women want to become mothers and that motherhood is natural, inevitable thing. Motherhood as a biological fact is used to construct a social role for women. The text here portrays exactly what feminism is concerned

about – not all women want to go through pregnancy. However, the existing social norms and politics pressure women into becoming mothers.

The Dispossessed portrays a society which treats both genders equally. On Anarres, all women and men share the same responsibilities, are treated equally, and moreover, there are no gender roles. There are no expectations based on gender from any of the individuals. Females give birth, but motherhood is understood as a choice rather than an obligation. Rulag, Shevek's mother, chooses to continue her career instead of raising him, and does not necessary for this reason she was given an unpleasant character. The representation of a free choice is much more important in this text than the impression of the certain character. Rulag is strong, independent and determined. Such a portrayal of a female character is significant in science fiction, and challenges the stereotypical representation of a woman as submissive and controlled by her biology. Takver, the author suggests, is also portrayed outside the boundaries of gender stereotypes. She is a scientist and does not hesitate to leave Shevek and their common household when the famine hits Anarres, and everyone struggles to survive. Her education and expertise are needed in one of the parts of the planet and she decides to leave. Takver is not portrayed as a fragile, scared woman. She takes matters into her own hands and is not afraid to lead a life without a man. This is another important portrayal of a female, the researcher proposes – independent, educated and brave.

The main protagonist in the novel is a man, but it does not undermine the feminist representation of female characters. In addition, Shevek is quite a feminist himself. He does not understand or justify the gender roles and inequality on Urras, and he does not reinforce them.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Dispossessed* portrays gender equality, the social construction of gender, and gender roles. The novel challenges such constructions and questions the necessity of gender roles, and is highly critical towards gender inequality. Therefore, the author proposes that gender politics in *The Dispossessed* engage with feminist thought and advocate feminist cause. They promote feminist values – most importantly – gender equality. In addition, the readers are encouraged to rethink their own perceptions of gender, and, consequently, the space needed for changes in gender politics is created.

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