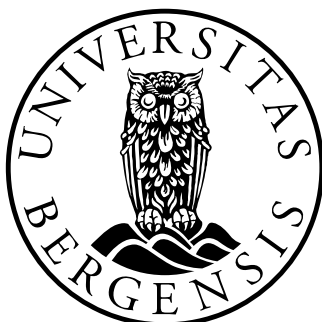# THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Connections between genre and feminism in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*

By

Stine Ellingsen

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Department of Foreign Languages

University of Bergen

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Sammendrag

I denne oppgaven vil jeg utforske de to romanene *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), skrevet av Ursula K. Le Guin, og *The Female Man* (1975), skrevet av Joanna Russ, og vise hvordan de, ved hjelp av egenskaper som er spesielle for sjangeren(e) de er skrevet i, utforsker kjønn.

Romanene ble skrevet i USA i den perioden som har blitt kalt «Second-Wave Feminism», altså en tid da feminismen blomstret opp på nytt. Samtidig med denne oppblomstringen ble også *speculative fiction* mer populært, og flere kvinner begynte å skrive i denne sjangeren og å benytte seg av det transformative aspektet for å utforske kjønn og skape et feministisk uttrykk på måter som ikke er tilgjengelige i andre sjangre. Blant bøkene som ble skrevet, er *Left Hand* og *Female Man* to av de mest kjente og innflytelsesrike.

Speculative fiction er en overkategori som inneholder blant annet sjangrene *science fiction*, *utopi* og *dystopi,* og jeg vil vise til elementer av disse sjangrene i romanene, og vise hvordan disse elementene knyttes opp mot romanenes utforsking av både biologisk og sosialt kjønn og kjønnsroller.

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Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) are novels that have been classified as science fiction, utopian fiction, and feminist fiction. They were both written during the period of Second Wave Feminism in the US, a period that saw an increase in speculative fiction written by women, and more specifically, *feminist* speculative fiction. The term "speculative fiction" as I use it here comprises science fiction as well as utopian fiction, and will be discussed further below. Le Guin and Russ's novels are highly influential works within the field of feminist speculative fiction, and have received considerable attention, both positive and negative, from the time when they were published and until today. Discussion regarding the novels is ongoing and still added to, and it is the general aim of this thesis to extend and hopefully contribute to critical debate through my own particular perspective, which I will describe later in this introduction. Before I do so, however, I will describe some of the generic concepts I will be discussing in my thesis, and their relevance in terms of feminism.

According to Anne Cranny-Francis in her book *Feminist Fiction* (1990), the Women's Movement had "regained strength and a high public profile" throughout the 1960s, and sought to raise awareness regarding the limitations of the stereotypical roles women were put in. Cranny-Francis writes that "[w]omen attempted to throw off the mental shackles of sexist ideology and see themselves and their role in society differently." (42)

One of the ways in which some of the female writers from the period "threw off the mental shackles of sexist ideology" and created alternate visions of women's role in society was through speculative fiction and its potential for experimentation with ideas. Speculative fiction has been defined in different ways, but is often used as an umbrella term that includes such genres as science fiction, fantasy, utopia, dystopia, and other genres with a transformative aspect in its world-creation; by this, I mean genres in which we find a world

that is somehow fundamentally different from ours (presented either as a different world altogether, or as an Earth that is significantly different from the real Earth. One reason one may choose to use this term is because many of the speculative genres often overlap and defy clear-cut definitions, as is the case with *Left Hand* and *Female Man*. In *Demand My Writing* (1999), Jeanne Cortiel states that "[f]ew critics feel comfortable with clear-cut definitions of science fiction," and that one of the reasons for this is that "the transgression of genre boundaries is […] part of its unique tradition. Fantasy, romance and elements from other forms such as utopian writing have always been used by science fiction writers." (3) Cortiel chooses to use another umbrella term that is related to speculative fiction in order to deal with the unclear generic boundaries: genre fiction. She points out that there is a difference in the emphasis of the two terms, and states that genre fiction is defined by "the characteristics which these forms all share: they are immensely popular and their readership is diverse, which makes them particularly useful for 'propagandistic' purposes." (3)

For my purposes the term "speculative fiction" is more appropriate, since my focus will be on the speculative, transformative aspect(s) of *Left Hand* and *Female Man*, and since it excludes such genres as for instance detective fiction, which do not contain this transformative aspect and which my conclusions will therefore not relate to. My use of the term does not mean that I will avoid terms such as science fiction, utopia, etc. in my discussion of the two novels – I will examine how the novels challenge generic definitions and boundaries, and will use the generic terms relevant in each case. The term "speculative fiction" will be used when I wish to emphasise the transformative aspect that these genres have in common rather than the defining aspects of a single genre. Some of the sources I will be quoting may not use the terms in the same way I do, and may use terms such as "SF" (which may be shorthand for either science fiction or speculative fiction), "science fiction," or "genre fiction" where I would use "speculative fiction".

Some of the specific genres or generic concepts that will be relevant in relation to *Left Hand* and *Female Man* are science fiction, utopia and dystopia. Science fiction, as I mentioned earlier, does not have a clear-cut definition, and Carl Freedman, in his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000), states that "[n]o definitional consensus exists." (13) By some definitions it may even include other genres such as utopia or dystopia, and as such, science fiction may be said to be a genre that in itself crosses generic boundaries. For the purpose of this thesis, I will consider the science fictional elements of the novel to be the elements that specifically address science or technology in some way, and I will consider utopian and dystopian elements as separate from the science fictional elements.

Utopia is a concept that comes from Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516). The word comes from New Latin and its literal translation is "no place". In her book about her relationship with speculative fiction, *In Other Worlds* (2011), Margaret Atwood states that in the case of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the term may mean "either 'no place' or 'good place,' or both," but that in general usage it refers to portrayals of "ideal societies or some version of them." (85) In other words, the word is primarily understood to mean "good place" rather than "no place", and it is often used to describe an imagined place of perfection (whatever one's ideas of perfection may be).

Dystopia is the opposite of utopia – its literal translation is "bad place", and it is "characterized by suffering, tyranny, and oppression of all kinds." (Atwood 85) According to Atwood, however, utopia and dystopia "each contain a latent version of the other." (66) "[S]cratch the surface a little," she writes, " and – or so I think – you see something more like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia." (85) This is something that I will touch upon in my discussions of *Left Hand* and *Female Man*.

Speculative fiction in general – or science fiction and utopia specifically – have been identified by many as suitable for exploring gender or the roles of women in society. In "This Shapeless Book" (2010), Ritch Calvin states that there were significant changes in the publishing industry – particularly within science fiction – in the late 60s and early 70s as a result of societal changes, and that the New Wave editors "explicitly wanted to include heretofore excluded writers and themes," leading to many female writers coming into science fiction. "As this new field opened up," he writes, "and since science fiction allows the writer to imagine alternative spaces, societies, and systems, it should not be surprising, then, that so many of the women writing SF turned to the utopian/dystopian form." (26) This possibility for imagining alternative spaces, societies, etc., is precisely what makes speculative fiction suitable for feminist purposes. Marleen S. Barr states in *Alien to Femininity* (1987) that "[b]ecause [speculative fiction] writers are not hindered by the constraints of patriarchal social reality, they can imagine presently impossible possibilities for women" and that the genre "is ideally suited for exploring the potential of women's changing roles." (xi) Cranny-Francis states that "generic fiction may be a site for the allegorical description of social injustices displaced in in time and/or place from the reader's own society, but still clearly recognizable as a critique of that society," (9) and Pamela J. Annas says something similar about science fiction (which may be expanded to include all speculative fiction) in her essay "New Worlds, New Words" (1978):

> Science fiction has always been potentially revolutionary […]. SF envisions, creates, an alternate world which comments on our own. […] The SF writer, in creating a new or future world, isolates one or a few variables – biological, technological, psychological, social – and performs an experiment, builds an

imaginative paradigm, peoples it, and works out the experiment within the
confines of this artificially constructed laboratory of the text.

The experiment so performed leads back to this world. The
extrapolation of or analogy to a present trend, for example overpopulation
[…], or conspicuous consumption […], or the idealization of the mediocre in
American politics […], or the oppression of women into a separate and inferior
class of human beings […], is an imaginative and ideal construct that
comments on the possibilities inherent in the here and now." (143)

This sort of experimentation is what Le Guin, in the introduction to *Left Hand*, calls the
"thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction," and which she states that the
novel's treatment of sex/gender is an example of (Introduction 4). My aim for this thesis is to
show how both *Left Hand* and *Female Man* draw upon the thought-experimental potential of
speculative fiction in order to explore sex/gender in ways that would not be possible in other
types of genres – in other words, how the creation of a world different from the real world
allows for experimental, feminist treatment of sex and gender. I also wish to show how the
novels challenge generic definitions or boundaries, and the role that this plays in the novels'
feminist exploration of sex/gender. I will do this through a close reading of the two novels,
with focus on narrative technique and the use of genre or generic elements. My discussions
will be based partly on ideas and concepts that were widespread at the time the novels were
written, and partly on newer ones, with my own perspective on them.

Sex and gender will be important concepts in my discussions on the novels, as implied
in the paragraph above, and I will therefore explain what I mean by these two terms. In *The
Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002), Justine Larbalestier, quoting Moira Gatens,
writes that "[t]he distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' has typically understood 'sex' as a

'biological given and gender as a social construction which overlays this biology." (9) Not all, however, consider gender a "social construction," as I will briefly discuss in Chapter One, but this is not particularly relevant in regards to *Left Hand* or *Female Man*, so unless otherwise stated, I will be using the above definition of the terms. However, the distinctions between the two terms are not always clear, and according to Larbalestier, "[c]harting the moment at which the one begins and the other ends has proven elusive." (9) Because of this, my own usage of the terms may vary somewhat, although I will try to keep to the definitions mentioned above as strictly as is possible. This also means that the terms may mean different things in the sources I quote, as well (both primary and secondary).

I have chosen to use *Left Hand* and *Female Man* for my thesis for several reasons: they were both written during the period of Second Wave Feminism when feminist speculative fiction began flourishing; they are both highly influential novels which have received considerable critical attention; and they utilise the thought-experimental potential of the genre in very different ways, allowing me to explore more of these experimental possibilities than if I had chosen two novels that were more similar in this regard.

According to Annas, criticism of *Left Hand* has mainly focussed on the use of male pronouns to describe the Gethenians, who are neither male nor female; on having a male main character (there are two protagonists, of which the male Genly Ai can be said to be the main protagonist); and on placing Gethenians (and specifically the Gethenian protagonist Estraven) in mostly masculine roles. (153) These concerns have been thoroughly described and discussed by other critics, and have also been addressed by Le Guin herself: in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987) she states that she regrets having used male pronouns and casting Estraven "almost exclusively in roles that we are culturally conditioned to perceive as 'male'." (15) I therefore feel that this discussion has come to a natural end, and will not pursue it further; instead, I will attempt to treat the Gethenians as the non-gendered beings Le

Guin intended them to be, and explore how this non-genderedness works as a feminist thought experiment regarding gender/sex.

There are of course also critics who see *Left Hand* in a different light from those mentioned above, and some of these see the novel as "the story of Genly's gradual coming to consciousness, his own conceptual transcendence of dualism and sexual polarization." (Annas 151) Lewis Call, in his 2007 essay "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin", claims that "Le Guin subverted the traditional binary concept of gender identity, to promote a[postmodern] *anarchy of gender*." (88) I agree that there is such a postmodern anarchy of gender to be found in *Left Hand*, and will show what I find to be examples of this in the novel, but I will also argue that Call has overestimated what he calls Le Guin's "sustained assault on binary thinking." (90)

The Female Man, like *Left Hand*, has also suffered harsh criticism, although it was well received among feminists when it was published (Calvin 27). According to Calvin, when Russ tried to publish the novel, "a great many publishers rejected the novel, saying, 'Well, you know, I don't like this sort of self-pitying whine.'" (26) Cortiel states that "the book caused a great deal of confusion and irritation in science fiction circles, both when it first came out in 1975 and when it was republished by The Women's Press ten years later." (58) According to Calvin, much of this confusion and irritation stems from the fact that Russ's anger can be felt in the novel: "Critics comment upon the anger; my students comment upon it, as well. Literary critics, from Aristotle to Woolf to Denby suggest that good literature should not be an expression of personal anger, but rather that it should consume all impediments and transcend the personal to the universal." (31) He cites criticism where the novel has been called such things as "an angry book that turns first to hate and winds up in fits of jealousy and hate. It's a wish dream of vengeance, a vendetta against all the male half

of mankind," (cited from Lester Del Rey) "self-indulgent", and "solipsistic" (cited from Alexei and Cory Panshin). (28)

Another of the reasons for the irritation with the novel is, according to Calvin, the lack of a single, cohesive, narrative thread:

> When critics "insist" upon a "story," they find TFM wanting[…].When fans insist that the novel fit into longstanding received conventions of the novel, they are disappointed. When my students, undergraduate and graduate, insist upon epistemological certainty, coherence, and resolution, they lose all interest. (Calvin 30)

It seems that, in the eyes of these readers and critics, this lack of a cohesive narrative is a failed aesthetic narrative. However, it is not merely an aesthetic choice; the disjointed narrative is, as I will show in my discussion on the narrative in *Female Man*, an important contribution to the novel's "thought experiment," and serves to destabilise notions of stable subjectivities and essentialist truths.

One recent critique of the novel, presented in Heather J. Hicks's "Automating Feminism" (1999), is that it contains both radical and liberal feminist elements, and that the radical, leftist elements in the novel leave the liberal "'women's work' a deeply fractured and open category in Russ's text." (par. 20) It is true that we find evidence of both radical and liberal feminist thinking in *Left Hand*, but I argue that these elements do not interfere with each other, and will show this through my discussion on work and technology in Chapter Two.

The theoretical framework I will be using in my thesis draws upon Simone De Beauvoir's and Judith Butler's theories of constructivism, found in their books *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 1949) and *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990); Jean-François Lyotard's definition of the postmodern in *The Postmodern Condition*; (1979) and Donna Haraway's discussion on the link between cyborgs and feminism in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." (1985)

Beauvoir's ideas about constructivism will serve as the basis for my discussion about constructivism in the novels, which I will then expand upon with Butler's additions and alterations to the concept. According to Beauvoir, gender is a social construct that is not dependent on one's physical sex: she writes that

> [o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (273)

The way in which civilisation determines "woman" is "by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself." (Beauvoir 681) In other words, it is through society's treatment of and interaction with women based on their sex that woman is made "woman" and different from "man". Beauvoir also states that

> [t]he abyss that separates the adolescent boy and girl has been deliberately widened between them since earliest childhood; later on, woman could not be other than what she was made, and that past was bound to shadow her for life. If we appreciate its influence, we see clearly that her destiny is not predetermined for all eternity." (681)

If woman's destiny is "not predetermined for all eternity," then it follows as a logical conclusion that without the societal influences on one's gender, a female-bodied person may be no more "woman" than a male-bodied person would be, and vice versa. As Butler writes, "[w]hen the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, […] 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." (9)

Butler builds upon the earlier constructivist discourse and adds to it, and the one aspect of her addition to it that I will be using as part of my theoretical framework is the concept of *gender performativity*. In the introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that it is difficult to define gender performativity precisely, due to the fact that her own views have changed over time, and that others have taken the concept and created their own definitions. Her original idea of gender performativity, she writes, was based on two things: that "the performativity of gender revolves around […] the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself," and that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." (Butler "Preface (1999)" par. 16) In other words, the anticipation of gender (by others) *produces* a performance of gender in individuals, and this performance is ritualised and naturalised through the culture that one is surrounded by. Butler also states that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (34) This means that the doing creates the subject, not the other way around – a woman does not perform her gender the way she does because she is a woman; rather, she is a woman because society's anticipation of her gender causes her to perform the gender "woman".

In my discussion of the novels' placement with regard to the postmodern, I will, as previously mentioned, use Lyotard's definition of the concept. "Simplifying to the extreme," he writes, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." (xxiv) What he calls "narrative" is not a narrative in the literary sense, but knowledge: he states that "[n]arration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge," (19) and that it "legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse […] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative." (xxiii) These narratives become a part of the metadiscourse or grand narrative, making it a discourse that is self-legitimating – it refers back to itself rather than to conclusive evidence of any sort. Lyotard states that he uses "the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind." (xxiii) The *postmodern*, then, distinguishes itself from the modern through its incredulity towards this kind of knowledge that legitimates itself through metanarratives.

When discussing the cyborgs in *The Female Man*, I will refer to Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," where she points to a link between cyborgs and women, and between (science) fiction and reality, making cyborgs and feminism closely related. She calls the cyborg a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," and states that "[b]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs." (149-150) In other words, she does not see the cyborg as something that is limited to the realm of science fiction, but rather as something that exists within both fiction and reality. The same, she finds, is the case with the concept of "women's experience," which she states is something that is constructed by international women's movements and "is a fiction and fact of the most crucial kind. […] The cyborg," she writes, "is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as

women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." (149-150)

Haraway also states that the cyborg breaches the boundaries between human and animal, and "animal-human (organism)" and machine, which undermines "the certainty of what counts as nature." (152) In the same way that the cyborgs have fractured identities, women as a group also consists of multiple identities – they are a heterogenous group and do not have a common "women's experience": "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices." (155) Despite this fractured "woman" identity, Haraway's cyborg myth has the capacity to unite women in a different way. She finds that the cyborgs are "potent myths for 'resistance and recoupling'," (154) and this "recoupling", then, is what changes the concept of "women's experience":

> I like to imagine LAG, the Livermore Action Group, as a kind of cyborg society, dedicated to realistically converting the laboratories that most fiercely embody and spew out the tools of technological apocalypse, and committed to building a political form that actually manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists long enough to disarm the state. Fission Impossible is the name of the affinity group in my town. (Affinity: related not by blood but by choice […]) (154-155)

We see that although women have very diverse experiences – "witches, engineers, elders, perverts," etc. – and not something that may collectively be called "women's experience," they may use their cyborg capacity for recoupling to relate to each other and unite for a common cause.

Through the use of the theoretical framework mentioned above, through genre discussion, and by positioning myself in relation to criticism of the novels, I wish to present my own perspective and extend the critical debate regarding them. I will dedicate one chapter to each novel; thus, Chapter One will contain my discussion on *Left Hand*, and in Chapter Two I will be discussing *Female Man*.

Chapter 1: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Introduction

In *The Left Hand of Darkness,* Le Guin has created a world – the planet Gethen – where the inhabitants have no concept of fixed binary sex or gender; they are all physiologically the same, and because there is no such thing as "male" or "female," there are no gender roles. Ellen Peel states in *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism* (2002) that "the implied author moves […] beyond gender altogether." (119) In this chapter I wish to explore how far the novel moves "beyond gender" and discuss what role generic and narrative properties play in the expression of feminism in the text.

Before I begin to examine these questions, I will discuss some of the terms that have previously been used to refer to the Gethenians' gender and sexuality, or gender/sexuality that is similar to theirs, while explaining and motivating my own choice of terms. In literary reviews, and in comments and writings by Le Guin herself, the Gethenians are often referred to as *androgynous*. This is perhaps an inaccurate term to use, as it indicates the presence of both male and female (or masculine and feminine) characteristics, while Gethenians have no concept of male, female, masculine or feminine at all. As Peel states: "Technically, […] Gethenians are not androgynes; from their point of view, the concept makes no sense." (119) However, the term functions as well as any other that exists within our vocabulary to describe the Gethenians: since no such race exists, we have no word that would accurately describe them. I will be using the term *androgyny* (and derivative forms of the word) in my discussion; however, because it is an ambiguous term and can refer to both mental and physical features, I have chosen to use it only to describe the mental aspect of non-genderedness (in humans as well as Gethenians). For the physical aspect, I will be using the word *ambisexuality* (and derivative forms) in order to differentiate the two, even though – from a biological point of view – the word hermaphroditism (which today is mostly not

considered medically accurate when referring to humans) is perhaps the most accurate word to use when describing the Gethenian physiology. One might think a more accurate term would be *intersex*, which is the term now used when referring to the condition in humans previously referred to as hermaphroditism, but while hermaphroditism is in most cases not an accurate term to use in reference to humans, it may more accurately describe the Gethenian physiology. *Intersex* is used in medicine to describe an individual (who, being human, obviously comes from a species with binary sex) who is born with a birth defect/abnormality where said person has some sexual characteristics belonging to one sex and some sexual characteristics belonging to the other, whereas hermaphroditism is used in biology to describe an organism or a species that has male and female sexual organs, either simultaneously or sequentially. Although the sexual organs of most sequential hermaphroditic species' sexual organs change only once in their lifetime, there are some species that can change multiple times during their lives. ("How Are Simultaneous and Sequential Hermaphrodites Different?") What makes these species different from the Gethenians, then, is that the Gethenians' sexual organs are in a third, neutral state most of the time – when they are in *somer*, their non-fertile period – and that it is only when they are in oestrus – or *kemmer* – that their bodies change into what we would know as either male or female. On this basis, *hermaphroditism* appears to be the most accurate term we have to describe the Gethenians' physiology. However, since this is now often considered a stigmatising and outdated word as applied to humans, I choose to use *ambisexuality* instead. This is a term that means androgyny or bisexuality, and since androgynous can, as I have already mentioned, refer to the physical as well as the mental, I find it suitable to refer to the Gethenians' physiology. It is also a term that Le Guin utilises in *Left Hand* about the Gethenians (used by non-Gethenians).

Despite the Gethenians' ambisexuality and androgyny, Le Guin consistently uses male pronouns to refer to them in the text – not only when it is written in the voice of the human male protagonist, Genly Ai, but also when written in the voice of or spoken by Gethenians. For the sake of ease and consistency, I have chosen to refer to them in the same way Le Guin does.

Utopianism

As I have already mentioned, *The Left Hand of Darkness* has often been described as a utopian work of fiction (as well as science fiction; however, the science fictional elements in the novel are not closely connected to the feminism in the text, and I will therefore focus on the utopian elements). What one chooses to include in the definition of utopia may vary (Freedman, for example, includes dystopias by calling them "negative utopias" [82]); however, the word utopia is typically understood to mean a place or state that is in some way perfect. A feminist utopia must therefore be a place or state that from a feminist perspective can somehow be considered to be perfect, and the feminism and the utopianism in the text are thus closely linked together.

It is true that utopian ideas are present in the story, and the Gethenian society may, from a feminist point of view, seem utopian in some of its aspects: for example, it is stated in the text that there is no such thing as rape on Gethen, and that there is no Gethenian word for war because there has never been a war on the planet. There are also, naturally, no differing gender roles or gender-based inequality since everyone is the same sex/gender:

> Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very
> simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone
> between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be [...] "tied down to

childbearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be – psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. [...]

Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. (94)

However, at a closer look, Gethen may not seem so utopian after all. Le Guin herself has stated that she does not consider *Left Hand* a utopian work, because "it poses no *practicable* alternative to contemporary society, since it is based on an imaginary, radical change in human anatomy." ("Is Gender Necessary?" 16) This indicates that Le Guin considers it a necessity for a utopian text to present an alternative to the present-day world that may be practicable someday. However, even if we do not accept this as a necessity for a text to be utopian (and indeed, utopia is sometimes even defined as unattainable) we may still question whether Gethen can be considered a utopia or not. For example, even though there is no war on Gethen, there is no lack of violent crimes, and it seems the only reason war does not exist on the planet is that the Gethenians do not have the ability to organise themselves in the same fashion that humans do:

Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals in that respect; or like women. (48)

We see that not only is the "feminine" trait that has led to the absence of war on the planet not peacefulness, but the lack of a capability to mobilise – it is also something that is portrayed negatively. This may be because the narrator at this point is the human male envoy, Ai, but in any case, the absence of war on Gethen seems much less utopian – especially from a feminist viewpoint – in light of the fact that it is not caused by an innate peacefulness in the Gethenians but an *inability* to do something.

The two remaining things that can be seen as utopian aspects of Gethen, compared to the Ekumen or the real world as the readers know it, are the absence of rape and the lack of gender-based inequalities. Considering the fact that inequality or discrimination on the basis of gender is impossible on Gethen, due to the Gethenians' androgyny, this is perhaps less powerful than it would be if the inhabitants of the planet were of two different sexes, yet still were perfectly equal. According to Le Guin, the androgynous Gethenians are a metaphor for real human beings:

> [I]ndeed the people in [The Left Hand of Darkness] are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. (Introduction 4)

As such, Gethen can be read as metaphorically portraying a world with male and female human beings that are all equal and are not constrained by gender roles. However, this does not change the fact that within this metaphor she has created, unlike in the real world, she has

not left any room for the possibility of gender inequality, and therefore the lack of it is not as powerful nor, perhaps, as utopian as it would be if the possibility was there.

The Ekumen (the alliance of planets that Ai represents) seems in many ways to be painted in a more positive light than Gethen. The Ekumen is consistently shown as technologically advanced, peaceful and with good intentions, and it seems – not only from Ai's viewpoint, but from the Gethenians' as well – that by joining the Ekumen, Gethen is saved from a bleak near future and what might even have developed into war between two of its nations, despite the fact that war has never taken place on Gethen before. And it may not be a far stretch to say that Ai – the only character not from Gethen and the only male in the story – is a sort of hero who saves Gethen and its androgynous inhabitants.

These facts raise the question of whether or not Gethen can be considered a utopia at all, and therefore also whether *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be considered a work of utopian fiction. Personally, I am of the opinion that Gethen is not a utopia in the sense of being a better, more perfect world, whether we compare it to the Ekumen or the real world. Therefore, I find that the feminism exhibited in the novel does not lie in presenting this other world as superior to the real world, as one might expect the case to be in a feminist utopian novel. However, that does not mean that the feminism in *Left Hand* is unrelated to its genre. In the quote from Le Guin on the previous page, she mentions the "peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction" (we may take this to mean speculative fiction as it does not directly relate to science in fiction, but rather fiction containing an alternative world where such thought experiments may be performed) – and it is precisely this thought-experimental manner that allows Le Guin's feminism to come through in the novel. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss elements that I consider to be such thought experiments and how they contribute to Le Guin's exploration of gender and expression of feminism in the novel.

Gender, or the lack thereof

The discussion of nature vs. nurture is an old one within feminism: is gender something one is born with (nature) or is it a construct (nurture)? Or to put in a different way, is a woman innately a woman (and therefore innately different from man) or does she become a woman? The belief that gender is a social construct, not something humans are born with, is the basic principle of constructivism in feminist theory. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir suggests the possibility that if men and women were to be made equal in society, gender differences would disappear:

> If [a] girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with women and men who seemed to her undoubted equals, the meanings of the castration complex and of the Oedipus complex would be profoundly modified. Assuming on the same basis as the father the material and moral responsibility of the couple, the mother would enjoy the same lasting prestige; the child would perceive around her an androgynous world and not a masculine world. (Beauvoir 681-682)

It is possible to read Le Guin's thought experiment as one where this kind of constructivist thought is taken to the extreme – where no one has any sort of innate gender. If we read the text non-metaphorically, of course, there may not be much of an argument for constructivism in the text, considering the fact that the Gethenians' androgyny is biologically based: they are androgynous because they are ambisexual. However, if we remember the earlier quote from Le Guin where she indicates that the Gethenians are a metaphor for human beings, the

constructivism becomes at once clear: the Gethenians represent humans, and their ambisexuality and androgyny represent the potential androgyny that Le Guin perceives in us.

However, Natalie Rosinsky argues in her book *Feminist Futures* (1982) that *Left Hand* is, instead, essentialist. Essentialism is the contrasting view that gender is biologically based – that it is something essential to our nature – and that men and women are innately different from each other, not just in terms of our bodies/sexual characteristics, but in terms of "innate psychological differences between the sexes". (Rosinsky 1) There is little in the text to support this, and part of the reason for Rosinsky's misinterpretation, it seems, stems from an unwillingness to see *Left Hand* as the metaphor it is (despite her mention of the text as a "thought-experiment"). We see this when she mentions "the depiction of an alien population whose androgyny results from physical hermaphroditism" (32): she sees the androgyny as something innate in the Gethenians – almost as a sort of biologically conditioned gender, or more accurately "non-gender" they are born with resulting from the "non-sex" they are also born with. It may be possible to argue that the text could be seen as more constructivist and that it would make for a more effective metaphor if the Gethenians had two separate sexes yet still no concept of gender, but one cannot say that the text is essentialist – and purely so – without refusing to accept the Gethenians as a metaphor for human beings.

There are, however, other issues concerning essentialism that Rosinsky brings up that may be worth taking a look at. One of these is the presence of what she sees as essentialist concepts in the novel:

> Le Guin's reconsidered alternative to this novel's "thought-experiment" is
> similarly biased by essentialist concepts. Androgyny "appear[ing]

conventionally and overtly, as a couple. Both in one; or two making a whole...
Yin does not appear without yang, nor yang without yin" is, as many feminists
would note, a heterosexist definition. (33)

The quote she has used comes from Le Guin's introduction to *Planet of Exile*, which is
another book in the Hainish Cycle, the same series that *Left Hand* is from. This idea of the
combination of two different sexes to create one whole – the idea that the Gethenians are both
male and female, although by nature they are neither and have no concepts of male, female,
feminine and masculine – appears in *Left Hand* as well, but this is through the thoughts of
Genly, who comes from a society where people are either male or female and who struggles
with how to define the Gethenians in terms of sex and gender. However, it seems that the
turning point – the point at which he finally understands the Gethenians – is when he starts
thinking of them as both male *and* female rather than trying to see them as either male *or*
female:

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and
had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any
need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left
with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him,
refused him his own reality. (Le Guin 248)

This insistence on keeping the binary may, as Rosinsky noted, be seen as an essentialist
concept: using binary gender terms to describe the Gethenians implies that they have some
traits that are inherently masculine and some traits that are inherently feminine, when in fact
it makes no sense to speak of a Gethenians' masculine and feminine traits – they simply have
certain traits that are not, and cannot be, gendered. Combining the "two" into the "whole",

however, may be seen as an attempt to represent man and woman as the same and therefore equal: if they are combined, they must necessarily become the same, and this could therefore also be read as constructivist.

Overall, there seems to be a constructivist impulse in the text rather than an essentialist one, and even though Le Guin has stated that the text describes the present world, it is possible for a reader to see it as a metaphor for a future world such as the one Beauvoir imagines, in which "woman is 'the same' as her male" (684):

> In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. [...]
>
> I shall be told that all this is utopian fancy, because woman cannot be transformed unless society has first made her really the equal of man. Conservatives have never failed in such circumstances to refer to that vicious circle; history, however, does not revolve. If a caste is kept in a state of inferiority, no doubt it remains inferior; but liberty can break the circle. Let the Negroes vote and they become worthy of having the vote; let woman be given responsibilities and she is able to assume them.
>
>   (Beauvoir 684)

What Beauvoir sees as a possible future and imagines that other people consider "utopian fancy", Le Guin has, in a way, created in a text that is often described precisely as a utopia. The transformativity inherent in speculative fiction has thus allowed Le Guin to create a world that is (although perhaps not perfectly) representative of constructivism.

Beauvoir's early brand of constructivism is not the only one, however, and if we look at Judith Butler's constructivist ideas, we see that she considers gender not only a construct, but something that is *performed*, a "doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (Butler 34) It is not a performance in the sense of putting on a role, but rather, gender is "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." (Butler "Preface (1999)" par. 16) Although the Gethenians have no concept of gender, Ai does, and his observations of them and the "gendered" associations he makes to their actions can be seen as examples of this: the Gethenians do not actively perform a gender, but through their actions they still perform what Ai considers to be representative of one gender or the other (or both). There are several examples of this in the novel, such as when Ai notes that "I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit" (Le Guin 12), or when he sees one of the Gethenians as his landlady, "for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature." (48) Thus, the Gethenians' behaviour becomes a sort of gendered performance, despite not being active subjects performing gender.

Le Guin's feminism in *Left Hand* can be seen not only as constructivism, however. In his essay "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin", Lewis Call describes it as an "*anarchy of gender*". (88) He is not the first to find anarchist themes in Le Guin's fiction, and he points to others who have also commented on the anarchism in some of Le Guin's works, among others Dan Sabia, who finds what he identifies as "anarchist communism" (or "anarcho-communism") in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). In his essay "Individual and Community in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*" (2005), Sabia states that "[a] key attraction of [anarcho-communism] has always been its stress on the equal and paramount value of both individualism and community, personal autonomy and social solidarity,

individual freedom and responsibility to others." (112) Le Guin herself has, according to Sabia, made it clear that she has "considerable knowledge of anarchism, as well as […] strong sympathy for the central ideas and ideals of the communist or communal versions of anarchism." (111) She has not, to my knowledge, stated it in relation to *Left Hand* in particular, but considering that she has indeed been influenced by these ideas and considering some of the aspects of Gethenians and Gethenian society in *Left Hand,* it is likely that this novel, too, has been influenced by some of the same ideas.

If we combine the idea of anarcho-communism with what Call said about the anarchy of gender in Le Guin's novels, we see that we can find both in the novel. As I have noted earlier, there is no gender-based inequality on Gethen – no possibility of power relations on the basis of gender – which allows for greater freedom on one level. There are, of course, still other ways in which equality or freedom may be hindered, but in certain respects the freedom of the individual is very important: Genly notes, for example, that "Karhiders, having no institutions of slavery or personal bondage, hire services not people" (18). Partly because of the lack of gender roles and partly because of the fact that sex is always consensual, there is also a greater sense of sexual freedom during the Gethenians' kemmer period: "Kemmer is not always played by pairs. Pairing seems to be the commonest custom, but in the kemmerhouses of towns and cities groups may form and intercourse take place promiscuously among the males and females of the group." (Le Guin 91-92) The only restriction on sexual relations is regarding certain types of incest. We see that the freedom in their sexuality also influences the way their society is built and the way it functions:

> The structure of their societies, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer-kemmer cycle. Everybody has his holiday once a

month; no one, whatever his position, is obliged or forced to work when in

kemmer. No one is barred from the kemmerhouse, however poor or strange.

Everything gives way before the recurring torment and festivity of passion. (Le

Guin 93)

And while *Left Hand* is not set on a world that is explicitly created as an anarcho-communist

world, such as Anarres in *The Dispossessed*, it is possible to see some influence from

communist – or at the very least communal – thinking in *Left Hand* as well. If we take a look

at society on Gethen, it seems to be built around smaller communities:

Karhosh, island, the usual word for the apartment-boardinghouse buildings

that house the greatest part of the urban populations of Karhide. Islands

contain 20 to 200 private rooms; meals are communal; some are run as hotels,

others as cooperative communes, others combine these types. They are

certainly an urban adaptation of the fundamental Karhidish institution of the

Hearth, though lacking, of course, the topical and genealogical stability of the

Hearth. (Le Guin, notes)

There are also examples of communal work, such as when Ai spends time with the

Handdarata: "Time was unorganized except for the communal work, field labour, gardening,

wood-cutting, maintenance, for which transients such as myself were called on by whatever

group most needed a hand." (Le Guin 59) We also find evidence of anarchy among the

Handdarata: "The Handdara is a religion without institution, without priests, without

hierarchy, without vows, without creed; I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not."

(Le Guin 55) In other words, we can say that the Handdarata form an anarcho-communist community.

There is one aspect of the Gethenian society that does not seem at all influenced by anarcho-communism, and that is the world of politics and government. Le Guin has stated that "I think I took the easy way in using such familiar governmental structures as a feudal monarchy and a modern-style bureaucracy for the two Gethenian countries that are the scene of the novel. I doubt that Gethenian governments, rising out of the cellular hearth, would resemble our own so closely." (14, "Is Gender Necessary") She thus suggests that because of the community-based hearths, which are (as I have shown) a result of the Gethenians' ambisexuality, it would be more likely that other types of organisational systems would have developed instead. She does not offer any alternatives, but it is not hard to imagine that something more in line with the anarcho-communist influence we see in other parts of the society might be a more likely type of system to have developed on the planet, especially because anarcho-communism seems to be well suited for feminist purposes: its focus on community sets it apart from and offers an alternative to other organisational systems – including traditional anarchism – that are typically seen as androcentric and patriarchal, while maintaining a focus on personal freedom (unlike other types of communism, which are often authoritarian), which is an important aspect of feminism. Remembering again that the Gethenians are metaphors for humans, we may imagine that in our world with our sex/gender binaries, this would mean that freedom is not dependent on sex or gender but available for everyone.

Call argues that *Left Hand* not only shows anarchism, but *postmodern* anarchism. He claims that "the truly radical legacy" of some of Le Guin's works, thereamong *Left Hand*, is

that these works transgress the boundaries of conventional anarchist thinking

to create new forms of anarchism that are entirely relevant to life in the

postmodern condition. Le Guin updates the conventional anarchist project and

positions anarchism to move into the third millennium. (89)

The term *postmodern condition* is taken from Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* In it, Lyotard describes the postmodern condition as "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts," and identifies the defining aspect of this condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives." (xxiii-xxiv) Lyotard states that "[n]arration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge," (19) and uses the word "narrative" to describe knowledge "that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse" (xxiii) rather than with scientific evidence. He appears to point to a criticism not only of the metanarratives that are used to legitimate other narratives, but of this entire process and of narratives in general.

Call does not specifically mention metanarratives in his discussion, and his own definition of postmodern anarchy (which I will return to later) does not involve narratives; however, his use of the phrase "postmodern condition" suggests that it may be possible to relate parts of *Left Hand* to this "incredulity toward metanarratives" that Lyotard describes, and I wish to explore the presence of postmodern anarchy in the novel not only by Call's definition, but by Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as well.

One of the things Call mentions as an example of postmodern anarchy in *Left Hand* is the "spirituality" that is "approximately Taoist," (92) i.e. the Handdara religion. Taoism has often been linked to anarchism – according to Call, "the connection between Taoism and

anarchism is well established, and has been noted by writers working in both traditions," (95) and as I mentioned earlier we find anarchist elements in the Handdara as well.

In addition to being linked to anarchism, Taoism has also been endorsed by many postmodern thinkers, partly because it is not presented as a narrative, like most Western religions are. In *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (1995)*,* J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh state that "[a]phorisms are […] the genre of choice in […] Taoist thought, exemplified in the Tao te Ching and the I Ching. This helps explain why numerous postmodern thinkers who are suspicious of narrative are attracted to […] Taoism." (75) We do not know the "genre of choice" in the Handdara religion, but we do know that knowledge is not valued among the Handdarata – instead, ignorance is, as we see in this exchange between Genly and Goss: "'I'm not sure. I'm exceedingly ignorant—' The young man laughed and bowed. 'I am honoured!' he said. 'I've lived here three years, but haven't yet acquired enough ignorance to be worth mentioning.'" (56) Later, Faxe says that "my business is unlearning, not learning." (69)

Since knowledge is a key element of Lyotard's concept of narratives, there can be no narratives of this sort without knowledge. As such, it would be logical to assume that the Handdarata do not generally pass along knowledge in the form of narratives, which may explain why Le Guin has chosen to create myths from two other religions on Gethen, but none from the Handdara. Even the foretellings contain no narratives; the asker is given a short answer to his question, but no more information than that, which is why the asker has to be very careful when phrasing the question: "The more qualified and limited the question, the more exact the answer. […] Vagueness breeds vagueness." (60) Not even the Foretellers gain access to additional knowledge related to the question – they do not know how events will unfold, they know only the exact answer to what was asked:

> The Foretellers gathered and went together into the darkness. At the end of
>
> darkness Odren spoke the answer: You will die on Odstreth (the 19th day of
>
> any month).
>
> 'In what month? in how many years?' cried Berosty, but the bond was
>
> broken, and there was no answer. (43)

In the Handdara, therefore, we see an emphasis on lack of knowledge or narratives. This sort of "unlearning" may, from a feminist viewpoint, be a way to avoid narratives that legitimise themselves through reference to a learned patriarchal metanarrative. In the novel, we see that Genly has to "unlearn" many of his preconceptions of the Gethenians that are based on his patriarchal worldview. The Gethenians' combined ambisexuality and androgyny is very different from any sex/gender metanarratives that Genly or the readers are familiar with, and as Genly slowly comes to realise that his assumptions regarding the Gethenians are inaccurate, readers may be forced to question the accuracy of the metanarrative that they have been basing *their* assumptions on alongside Genly.

In *Postmodern Anarchism* (2002), Call defines postmodern anarchy not by Lyotard's definition of the postmodern, but by concepts he finds in Nietzschean philosophy:

> Nietzsche's philosophy creates an *anarchy of the subject*, violently
>
> destabilizing the post-Enlightenment concept of subjectivity which is the
>
> underlying basis of all modern political philosophies, including liberalism,
>
> Marxism, and conventional anarchism. Subject-centered reason is a collateral
>
> casualty of this critique. In the space created by this radical critique of modern
>
> subjectivity, Nietzsche unleashes another kind of anarchy, an *anarchy of*
>
> *becoming*. By teaching us that we must pursue a perpetual project of self-

overcoming and self-creation, constantly losing and finding ourselves in the river of becoming, Nietzsche ensures that our subjectivity will be fluid and dispersed, multiple and pluralistic rather than fixed and centered, singular and totalitarian. These twin anarchies, the critical anarchy of the subject and the affirmative anarchy of becoming, form the basis for a postmodern Nietzschean anarchism. (33)

These two anarchies combined, then, are the basis of the postmodern *anarchy of gender* that Call finds in the novel. The Gethenians defy any kind of fixed subjectivity, gender-wise and sex-wise. Their physical sex is in a state of fluctuation, where they at times take a male form, at times a female form, and at times a form that is somewhere between their male and their female form. As such, they are also in a constant state of *becoming*. Every time they change between the three forms, it is an instance of becoming something else. Their gender – although in reality, they have none – is interpreted by Genly, and perhaps the reader, as something that constantly changes: there is a fluidity in the exhibition of "masculine" and "feminine" (as we interpret them) traits in the Gethenians. This, again, points to a sort of constructivism, and Call points out that

> "[i]n many ways, […] Gethenian gender corresponds to the postmodern gender theories developed by anti-essentialists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. For Gethenians as for postmodern feminists, gender is no absolute category, but rather something that must be viewed as flexible and fluid." ("Postmodern Anarchism" 92)

By pointing out how the novel breaks down binaries or dualism – both in terms of gender and in its narrative structure (I will return to how the narrative structure helps break down binaries later) – Call argues for this postmodern anarchism and against the modern, dialectical interpretation of Le Guin upheld by some critics. "[T]he attempt to describe Le Guin as a dialectical thinker," Call writes, "must find a way to account for the sustained assault on binary thinking that is such a fundamental feature of her work." ("Postmodern Anarchism" 90) However, not everyone sees the same "sustained assault on binary thinking" that he finds in Le Guin's writing: "Tom Moylan [argues] that the utopia of *The Dispossessed* was locked into a series of binary oppositions, and that the text thus 'expresses the continued closure of the current social formation.' […] Remarkably, Moylan found Le Guin's work to be insufficiently postmodern." ("Postmodern Anarchism" 89) I choose to place myself between these two: I agree with Call that *Left Hand* in many ways does attack binary thinking, particularly in terms of gender. However, as Tom Moylan found in *The Dispossessed*, I find that there are still many binary oppositions in *Left Hand* and that the attack on the binary could have been even stronger. We have, for example, the oppositions between Gethen and the Ekumen and between Karhide and Orgoreyn (the two countries on Gethen that Ai visits), and despite the fact that the Gethenians all have the same physiology when they are in *somer*, Gethenians turn into one out of two different physical forms – or sexes – during their *kemmer*, and there must be one of each in order to reproduce. There are also several binary oppositions that function as symbols, as we see in the poem Tormer's Lay, which Estraven quotes to Ai:

"Light is the left hand of darkness

and darkness the right hand of light.

> Two are one, life and death, lying
>
> together like lovers in kemmer,
>
> like hands joined together,
>
> like the end and the way." (233-234)

We also see it in what Ai says to Estraven in the tent when they are crossing the Gobrin Ice: "It is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of darkness … how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow." (267) These symbols show that the opposites or binaries, combined, make one whole, and that both are needed, and it is also made explicit through Ai that they symbolise the dualism of Gethenians – that they are both "male" and "female" at the same time and that the two – "both" – are also "one". This is, perhaps, Le Guin's way of bringing the readers from their binary way of thinking about gender, to seeing gender as something that can be "both and one", but it does not change the fact that she still uses binary terms to describe or symbolise the Gethenians, which in my opinion makes it seem like Call has overestimated the "sustained assault on binary thinking".

Narrative mode

I will continue the above discussion by looking at the narrative mode of the novel, which contributes partly to a destabilisation of subjectivities through an "anarchy of the subject," and partly to the concept of two opposites creating one whole. In other words, I will use the narrative mode to support my argument that there is evidence of the postmodern anarchy that Call finds in the novel, but also that Le Guin does not attack binaries to the degree that Call claims.

The novel has two main narrators, Genly and Estraven, and the main narrative largely revolves around these two characters. The majority of the chapters are narrated by one of the two, but interspersed between these there are also chapters that have other narrators and deviate from the main narrative, such as myths, field notes and historical events. Even so, it may be possible to argue that Genly is the primary narrator for the entire novel. The first chapter begins by introducing Genly as a narrator: "From the Archives of Hain. […] To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/ Winter." (1) The report begins:

> I'll make my report as if I told a story. […] The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story. (1-2)

Since Genly does not indicate whether there is only one other voice in addition to his own, or whether there are several, it may be open to interpretation whether the story he refers to is solely the main narrative where he and Estraven act as narrators, or the entire novel. If the first is true, then his report is made up of the chapters that he and Estraven narrate (making Genly the primary narrator even when the story reads as if Estraven is narrating), while the other chapters are not part of the report. If the second is true, then the entirety of the novel comprises Genly's report, which means that he has included the myths, etc. because they, too, are part of the story. In any case, I believe the above extract is meant to encourage the reader to read the entire novel as one communal story where authorship of the individual narratives – and indeed stable subjectivities – is disregarded.

Certain parts of the novel encourage this reading, by showing parallels between otherwise seemingly unrelated persons and events. One example is the hearth-tale about the two brothers, Getheren and Hode, who have vowed kemmering to each other. Hode commits suicide after having given birth to their child because siblings are not allowed to "vow kemmering, nor keep kemmering after the birth of a child to one of the pair," (92) and they have been commanded to break their vow. Later in the novel, clear parallels between Estraven's story and this one are made. Estraven and his brother Arek were in a relationship once and had a child, and although they did not vow kemmering for life such as the two siblings in the story, they had an unspoken vow, as Estraven says in conversation with Ashe: "The only true vow of faithfulness I ever swore was not spoken, nor could it be spoken, and the man I swore it to is dead and the promise broken, long ago." (75)

Not only was Estraven separated from Arek because it was illegal for them to keep kemmering after the birth of the child, but we learn that Arek is also dead, like one of the siblings in the hearth-tale. And like him, it is possible that Arek also took his own life because he and his brother would be separated. We are not told how Arek died, but we see that Estraven received what may seem like a final farewell from him:

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

> My voice shook as I said the lines, for I remembered as I said them that
> in the letter my brother wrote me before his death he had quoted the same
> words. (233-234)

Another chapter that shows parallels to the main story is the tale of Arek of Estre and Therem of Stok (whom I will refer to as Arek I and Therem I) – a tale that gives the impression of being semi-historical. Arek I and Therem I are possibly the ancestors of, and share their first names with, Estraven (whose full name is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven) and his brother, and Arek I shares his landname – Estraven – with them, coming from the Domain of Estre. Like their "contemporary" counterparts, Arek I and Therem I fall in love with each other and produce a child, and Arek I dies (although in this scenario, Arek I is murdered because there is a blood feud between Stok and Estre). The child is named Therem Estraven, combining names from the two clans – "[the lord] ordered that the child [...] be called Therem, though that was not a name ever used by the clan of Estre," (128), and later we learn that "his name, Therem, is still given to children of that Domain." (129) When the child grows up and becomes Lord of Estre, he ends the blood feud between the clans, and is called Estraven the Traitor (like the contemporary Estraven, who is also declared a traitor because he wants to end a feud) partly because of this. This "combining" of the two clans through bloodline, names, and ending the feud goes into the pattern of combining opposites or binaries into one whole that we find elsewhere in the novel.

The two narratives mentioned above and their parallels to the main narrative remind the reader that "it is all one story" and that all the narratives have relevance to the overall story. Moreover, the parallels between the characters show the similarities between them – they show that different people can have the "same" experiences, placing an emphasis on shared human experience. An implication of this is that Estraven, as one of the two

protagonists, represents not only one (i.e. himself), but many. This is perhaps reflected in his surname – Harth – which is a homophone of "hearth", the fundamental type of community that Karhidish society is built upon. Genly also uses the concept of the hearth to describe the sameness of people(s) from different planets: "We are all men, you know, sir. All of us. All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, from one world, Hain. We vary, but we're all sons of the same Hearth…'" (35)

This idea of people being the "same," if we look at it from a feminist perspective and remember that Gethenians are a metaphor for present-day humans – men and women – may be taken to point to the sameness of human beings, regardless of gender. In this respect, it is especially interesting that there is also a parallel between Estraven's brother and Genly: when Genly mindspeaks to Estraven, Estraven hears it spoken in Arek's voice. Estraven and Genly also develop a "profound love" (249) for each other, which, although they don't act on it, mirrors the love between Estraven and Arek. When Estraven dies, he confuses Genly with Arek: "only in a way he answered my love for him, crying out through the silent wreck and tumult of his mind as consciousness lapsed, in the unspoken tongue, once, clearly, 'Arek!'"(284) Through Estraven's death, it is also possible to see a parallel between Genly and Estraven himself (and the two other characters I have mentioned that mirror Estraven in their loss of their partner). The fact that it is not only the androgynous Gethenians who share these common experiences, but Genly – the human male – as well, shows that the "shared human experience" is universal and not related to gender. As such, the postmodern "anarchy of the subject" or destabilisation of subjectivities here represents a postmodern, anarchist, feminist destabilisation of gender dichotomies.

Some of the narratives serve mostly to describe yet another duality, namely that of the two religions we are introduced to: Handdara and Yomesh. The East Karhidish story about the Lord seeking an answer from the Handdarata foretellers about when he is going to die

seems to be a cautionary tale about the consequences of wanting to know too much, and in the main narrative, we learn that the Handdarata aspire to be ignorant. The Yomesh religion, on the other hand, is described (in the narrative that is presented as an excerpt from a book of Yomesh Canon) as being based on the seeing, or knowing, of: "Nothing is unseen. […] The life of every man is in the Center of Time, for all were seen in the Seeing of Meshe, and are in his Eye. We are the pupils of his Eye. Our doing is his Seeing: our being his Knowing." (162-13) This book links the Yomesh religion with light and the Handdara religion with darkness:

> Darkness is only in the mortal eye, that thinks it sees, but sees not. In the Sight of Meshe there is no darkness.
>
> Therefore those that call upon the darkness [i.e. the Handdarata] are made fools of and spat out from the mouth of Meshe, for they name what is not, calling it Source and End.
>
> […] There is neither darkness nor death, for all things are, in the light of the Moment, and their end and their beginning are one. One center, one seeing, one law, one light. (164)

As we remember from the poem Tormer's Lay, "light is the left hand of darkness, and darkness the left hand of light." A person needs both his/her left and right hand in order to be complete and function optimally, and the two hands often work together as a unity. And when Estraven and Genly walk over the ice, Estraven remarks that "[i]t's queer that daylight's not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk." (267) In other words, light and darkness belong together and are in fact both needed in combination with each other. Reading this in relation to Handdara and Yomesh, we may infer that both seeing and not seeing is needed – knowledge and the lack of knowledge, combined. Again, we see that Le Guin combines

several dual opposites into one whole – the right and the left hand, light and darkness, the "unknowing" of the Handdarata and the "knowing" of the Yomeshta. Despite the fact that these dualities come together in some sort of unity, I still maintain that it is evidence of binary thinking, not an attack on it, and one may question whether or not it is logical to use such binaries to symbolise beings with no binary gender and to see them as the combination of two opposites coming together.

What I have described so far are narratives that bring additional meaning to each other in ways that are relevant in terms of feminism – meaning that would not be apparent if one were to read each narrative as a separate story without making the connection between them. The remaining narratives do not do this to the same degree, but they, too, are part of the story as a whole. The narratives all interact with each other despite telling what may seem like different stories, and just like the numerous other examples involving duality, the entire novel is yet another example of disparity being not only disparity, but also unity at the same time – of differences that create sameness and a united whole.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, I set out to investigate how far *Left Hand* moves beyond gender, and what role generic and narrative properties play in relation to this. With reference to genre, although *Left Hand* is often classified as a utopia, I find that Gethen is not a true utopian world. Thus, the feminism in the novel does not depend on presenting Le Guin's fictional androgynous world as superior to the real world; instead, it is found in the "thought experiments" Le Guin performs and that are typical of SF. For example, because the Gethenians are metaphors for male and female human beings yet have no gender binary, they may be said to exemplify gender constructivism taken to the extreme. In the eyes of Genly

and the reader, they perform gender according to Butler's definition of gender performativity, but this gender performance is unrelated to their sex.

Another thought experiment Le Guin has performed is that of presenting a postmodern anarchy that is anarcho-communist, resists metanarratives, and destabilises subjectivities and gender dichotomies. Its anarcho-communist qualities avoid the androcentrism of traditional anarchy while keeping a focus on personal freedom – in our world, this would mean that freedom is available to everyone regardless of gender/sex. The resistance towards metanarratives may serve to make the readers question their own knowledge – particularly, as Genly does the same, regarding gender – and the metanarratives that their knowledge stems from. The destabilisation of subjectivities and gender dichotomies is present to a large degree in the novel, partly through the Gethenians' ambisexuality and androgyny, but also through narrative choices that show parallels between different characters in the various narratives. However, while the novel seems to set out to break down the gender binary, it also contains many dualisms and uses the unification of binary opposites as symbols for the Gethenians. In other words, the novel does not completely avoid dualism in relation to the Gethenians' gender, as might be appropriate, and the destabilisation of the gender binary is a partial one. Because of this, we may say that while the novel does move somewhat beyond gender – due to the fact that the Gethenians do not have gender identities and that the "performance" of gender that Genly observes is not gendered to the Gethenians, nor is it related to their sex – it does not move entirely beyond binary gendered thinking.

Chapter 2: Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*

Introduction

This chapter will be a similar sort of exploration to the one in the previous chapter, where I will identify some of the various strategies that Russ uses to explore gender and to express feminism in *The Female Man,* again with some focus on the generic and narrative elements. I will try to interpret what Russ is saying about gender through the use of these strategies and examine which type(s) of feminism she presents in the novel.

Before I begin this discussion, I will briefly introduce the novel's protagonists, of which there are four – all of them from Earth, but from four different timelines/alternate universes: Janet, from a future Earth renamed Whileaway, where men have become extinct due to a plague and women have the technology to reproduce without them; Joanna, from a world that is similar to the real world of the time when the novel was written; Jeannine, from a world that seems to be contemporary with Joanna's world (although in a different universe), but has more in common with the real world's 1930s; and Jael, from a future where men and women are at war with each other and are divided into Manland and Womanland.

The narrative mode in the novel is quite complex, and all four protagonists function as first-person narrators in different parts of the story (and in addition, there is also sometimes a third-person objective narrator). It is often difficult to ascertain which of the four protagonists is narrating, partly because this is usually not made explicit and the reader has to infer this for him/herself, and partly because the narrators sometimes refer to themselves in the third person rather than the first. The novel acknowledges the difficulty in knowing who is narrating: "When I – not the 'I' above but the 'I' down here, naturally; that's Janet up there," (88) and as we can also see from this quote, the narrator sometimes communicates with the reader. Joanna narrates more of the text than the other characters do, perhaps because she is from a world similar to the reader's, which may make it easier for the reader to relate to her

world view and her observations about the other protagonists and their worlds as well as her own. It is worth noting that Russ has given this character her own first name, which is clearly intentional. In addition, this character suspends the fiction not only by addressing the reader but also by acknowledging the existence of the novel itself and identifying herself as its writer; she even acts as an omniscient narrator at times, stating that she is "the spirit of the author and know[s] all things" (205). These things signify that Joanna is based on Russ herself (though I do not suggest the two are exactly the same, and I will use the name Joanna only in reference to the character), and may also be a way of making a connection in the reader's mind between the events of the novel and the real world, making the reader consider how the novel relates to what is happening in the real world.

Utopianism

Female Man has been classified both as a work of science fiction and as a utopian work, and both the utopian and the science-fictional or technological aspects of the novel are relevant to discuss in terms of the feminism we find of the novel. This part will deal only with utopianism, and I will return to the technological aspect later.

In the novel, we are presented with four different worlds rather than just one, and all four protagonists travel between these four worlds. As such, *Female Man* is more complex than a typical utopian text, where, according to Anne Cranny-Francis in *Feminist Fiction*, there is either one character who acts as "traveller/guide" and one character in the role of "contemporary citizen" (in the tradition of Thomas More's *Utopia*) (Cranny-Francis 112), or one traveller and one character from the "foreign" world who acts as a guide. (Cranny-Francis 115) The four protagonists in *Female Man* can all be said to inhabit more than one of these roles. The two characters who stand out most as guides are those from the worlds that are the most different from the reader's own: Janet, who is a combined "traveller/guide" (as

mentioned above) who travels to Joanna's and Jeannine's worlds and tells them about how life is lived on Whileaway, and Jael, who acts as a guide in her own world after she has brought the three other women there.

Out of the four worlds in *Female Man*, Janet's world (Whileaway) is the one that seems more traditionally utopian: it is technologically advanced, yet also agricultural, and nothing that can be used as food is wasted for other things – Janet expresses shock when she learns that people drink alcohol on Joanna's world, since it is made from food like grains and potatoes: "'*Ethyl* alcohol?' She puts her hand over her heart in unconscious parody. 'It is made from grain, yes? Food? Potatoes? My, my! How wasteful!'" (36) Average intelligence on Whileaway is high (Janet's IQ of 187 is below average on her world) due to genetic surgery, and imperfections in human bodies are uncommon for the same reason: "no rheumatism, no sinus trouble, no allergies, no appendix, good feet, good teeth, no double joints, and so forth and so forth." (155) The world is described as "pastoral" (13), and the name itself – Whileaway – indicates that it is a place where you can while away the time. Child-bearing is described by Janet as "a vacation" – everyone has a five-year hiatus during which they can do what they wish after giving birth to a child. And because there are no men on Whileaway, no one has to conform to any kind of notion about what a woman should be like or regulate their behaviour according to men's expectations (unlike in Joanna and Jeannine's worlds). This is illustrated by the fact that Janet does not understand the social norms in Joanna's world regarding interaction between a man and a woman: during a party they attend, Janet keeps interacting with men in a way that Joanna finds socially unacceptable and embarrassing. Janet does not attempt to seem ladylike or show the men any extra respect simply because of their gender, and she eventually ends up in a physical fight with one of the men, and wins the fight.

In contrast to the safe, orderly Whileaway, there is Jael's world, which is chaotic and at war, and can be classified as a dystopian world, which makes the question of genre more complex. Jael is the darkest character out of the four protagonists: she is an assassin and has steel teeth that she uses for biting covering her real ones, as well as several injuries: "the ends of her fingers (she says) were once caught in a press and are growing cancerous – and to be sure, if you look at them closely you can see folds of loose, dead skin over the ends of her fingernails. She has hairpin-shaped scars under her ears, too." (153) She refers to men and women as "Them and Us" – "the Haves and the Have-nots" (158-159) – illustrating the division and the inequality between men and women on her world. There is some trade between men and women – especially to ensure reproduction – but as most of them do not have access to "real" members of the opposite sex to have sexual relations with, yet still have sexual urges, both the Manlanders and the Womanlanders have developed each their (perhaps equally horrifying) method of solving the problem. If a boy in Manland "fails" to become a true man, he is forced to undergo a sex change:

> There, in ascetic and healthful settlements in the country, little boys are made into Men – though some don't quite make it; sex-change surgery begins at sixteen. One out of seven fails early and makes the full change; one out of seven fails later and (refusing surgery) makes only half a change: artists, illusionists, impressionists of femininity who keep their genitalia but who grow slim, grow languid, grow emotional and feminine, all this the effect of spirit only. Five out of seven Manlanders make it; these are "real-men." The others are "the changed" or "the half-changed." All real-men like the changed; some real-men like the half-changed; none of the real-men like real-men, for

that would be abnormal. Nobody asks the changed or half-changed what they like. (160-161)

The Womanlanders have managed to create their own "men" that they can control fully:

"Stay, Davy." This is one of the key words that the house "understands"; the central computer will transmit a pattern of signals to the implants in his brain and he will stretch out obediently on his mattress; when I say to the main computer "Sleep," Davy will sleep. You have already seen what else happens. He's a lovely limb of the house. The original germ-plasm was chimpanzee, I think, but none of the behavior is organically controlled any more. (191-192)

The reader is given to understand that it is not certain that these men, despite being controlled by a computer, are completely mindless: "It is theoretically possible that Davy has (tucked away in some nook of his cerebrum) consciousness of a kind that may never even touch his active life – is Davy a poet in his own peculiar way? – but I prefer to believe not." (192) In other words, it is possible that these men are sentient, yet are trapped in a life where they cannot control their own actions.

However, despite the seemingly obvious utopianism of Whileaway and dystopianism of Jael's world at first glance, one may question the definition of utopia and dystopia and whether Whileaway is a true utopia and Jael's world a true dystopia. In *Partial Visions*, Angelika Bammer writes that "utopia, both as a concept and as a model, has been decried as totalitarian, even proto-fascist, in structure." (17) And indeed, there are some unsettling aspects of Whileawayan society that may seem somewhat totalitarian in nature, such as the control society has over the individuals' lives: for example, everyone is to bear a child at

thirty and every child is to be sent away from their mother at five years of age. There are also fairly strict rules regarding work, such as the specific age at which one has to join the work force and the fact that one cannot work more than three hours at a time at the same job. In addition, no one is allowed to withdraw from society and quit working – if they do, they are tracked down and killed.

All in all, the Whileawayan society seems to be very ordered, and this permanent order, Bammer says, is "one of the mainstays of the fantasy of utopia." (17) However, she also points out that this order can be repressive. Too much order in a society may work to minimalise individuality, and we see that there is a certain uniformness among the Whileawayans: physical flaws are practically eliminated, they are all highly intelligent, and the overall structure of their lives are the same. Although there is nothing to indicate that this is a result of decisions made by some higher authority, it is still eerily reminiscent of part of fascist/totalitarian thinking. The genetic surgery performed on everyone on Whileaway, for example, may easily be associated with the eugenics promoted by Nazi Germany during WWII. Bammer points out that the ideals of order found in traditional utopias are the very same ideals that the Nazis embraced: "As Freud laid out his vision of utopia as a state in which everything would be orderly, rational, and communally purposeful, he paid a last tribute to the very ideals of the German Enlightenment that Nazism would for all time pervert." (19) It is possible that Russ was conscious of this perversion of these ideals as she wrote the novel, and used it as a tool to make the reader question the supposed perfection of Whileaway.

In the essay "Towards an Open-Ended Utopia" (1984) Bülent Somay states that "impatient intellectual visionaries" in the late 1960s to the 70s move away from the utopia because of its totalitarian nature, instead embracing dystopian fiction (25), and that

when utopias themselves became objects of study, […] their affirmative syntax,
designed to persuade the audience into an acceptance of the stable, closed, and
"ordered" structure of the utopian locus, became a source of unease both from the
intellectual bourgeois point of view and from that of someone taking a
materialist-critical approach to utopia. […]

The SF writers who turned to utopian fiction out of varying degrees of
ideological sympathy with the protest movements of the '60s were painfully
aware of the dystopian critique of utopias. They thus had to deal with the problem
of how to disarm that critique. (25)

I believe that *Female Man* is also a result of this dissatisfaction with the traditional utopia;
however, Russ does not move away from the utopia, but rather takes it in a different
direction, presenting both utopia and dystopia at once, and blurring the lines between the two
concepts. The dystopian world, Womanland, is at least as important in terms of women's
liberation in the novel as the utopian world – perhaps even more so. Towards the end of the
novel, Jael reveals that what Janet thinks she knows about her own world is a lie:

Let me give you something to carry away with you, friend: that "plague" you
talk of is a lie. I know. The world-lines around you are not so different from
yours or mine or theirs and there is no plague in any of them, not any of them.
Whileaway's plague is a big lie. Your ancestors lied about it. It is I who gave
you your "plague," my dear, about which you can now pietize and moralize to
your heart's content; I, I, I, I am the plague, Janet Evason. I and the war I
fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand

> years of peace and love and the While-awayan flowers nourish themselves on
> the bones of the men we have slain. (205)

This shows that Whileaway has risen out of a history similar to what Jael's world is going through – that Janet's utopia could not have existed if not for its dystopian past. It also shows that Jael's world is not a static world with no hope for a better future – it is a world going forward, a revolutionary world, whereas Whileaway, being a utopia – an "end condition" (Bammer 17) – has come to a standstill. It is Jael's influence that causes Jeannine to start doing what she wants rather than obsessing over trying to live up to society's expectations of her – it is Jael's way of thinking that is beneficial to Jeannine because it revolves around progress, around obtaining freedom, whereas Janet cannot offer any such ideas. What she has to offer to the other women is hope:

> Janet, whom we don't believe in and whom we deride but who is in secret our
> savior from utter despair, who appears Heaven-high in our dreams with a
> mountain under each arm and the ocean in her pocket[…]. Radiant as the day,
> the Might-be of our dreams, living as she does in a blessedness none of us will
> ever know. (206)

She shows them what their worlds can become, but she has no way to show them how to obtain this because she herself doesn't know; she has lived in her static world her entire life and does not know what it means to have to fight for a better world, a better life. And while hope is important, action is required in order to bring about change. In relation to the real world and utopian thinking, Bammer writes, "Revolutions have not had time for dreamers, while utopias have not had room for change." (17) This is, perhaps, why both Jeannine and

Joanna seem to be partial to Jael at the end of the novel – because she represents change and the way to obtain it. Joanna states that she "would like to be Jael," (205) and in a way, she is – the four women are, according to Jael, the same person in different universes:

> [W]e started the same. […] We ought to be equally long-lived but we won't be. We ought to be equally healthy but we're not. […] We ought to think alike and feel alike and act alike, but of course we don't. […] Between our dress, and our opinions, and our habits, and our beliefs, and our values, and our mannerisms, and our manners, and our expressions, and our ages, and our experience, even I can hardly believe that I am looking at three other myselves. (155-156)

It is only because of their different experiences in life, the different societies they have grown up in, that they are different from each other. At the same time, Joanna calls the four protagonists Everywoman, suggesting that not only are they the same person, but they also represent every woman, and perhaps that every woman is essentially the same as every other woman in regards to wanting to be free from oppression and to be an equal member of society. This includes not only the women in the novel, but the women in the reader's world as well: at the ending of the novel, Russ ties the world of the novel together with the real world (even more than she already has by "casting" herself as one of the characters) by having the narrator – Joanna – address the novel itself and predict the different receptions it will receive by its readers, which is certain to make readers reflect on their own reaction to the novel and (at least the female readers) how the lives of the women in the novel relate to their own lives. And, since in the end, Jael, with her ideas of revolution, is the one who is presented as a sort of role model, it is possible that Russ wishes to encourage female readers

not only to sit idly by and dream of a better future for women while following all the rules and norms of patriarchy, but to take action in some way. If Jael is Everywoman, then every woman can be Jael, so to speak.

Narrative mode

The Female Man is, as mentioned earlier, a highly complex narrative. The novel is divided into nine parts that are subdivided into smaller sections of various numbers and lengths, the shortest consisting only of a few words. These sections are not always chronological, nor is there necessarily any obvious connection between each section and the next, and they may be different types of narratives (one may take the form of a transcription of an interview, for example, and the next may be a third-person narrative). The narrative tense may change several times within a single section, as may the identity of the narrator. It is often hard to ascertain who is narrating at any given time, which is partly a result of, and partly a contributing factor to Russ's obfuscation of the protagonists' identities. This is one way in which Russ destabilises subjectivities, like Le Guin did in *Left Hand*. Russ uses various devices throughout the novel to blur the lines between the four protagonists. For example, in some instances it may seem like a narrating protagonist places herself in the role of one of the other protagonists temporarily through pronoun usage, or alternatively is temporarily replaced as narrator, such as in the following extract, where Joanna is the initial narrator:

> All this time he was nuzzling [Janet's] ear and I was showing my distaste by shrinking terrified into a corner, one eye on the party. Everyone seemed amused.
>
> 'Give us a good-bye kiss,' said the host, who might have been attractive under other circumstances, a giant marine, so to speak. I pushed him away.

> 'What'sa matter, you some kinda prude?' he said and enfolding us in
>
> his powerful arms, et cetera – well, not so very powerful as all that, but I want
>
> to give you the feeling of the scene. (45)

We are under the impression that it is Janet who is being nuzzled by the host while Janet shrinks into a corner, until the narrator (who is, or at least moments before was, Joanna) states that "I pushed him away." We cannot know for certain who is being nuzzled, and who pushes the host away. In the next paragraph the narrator is a combined Joanna/Janet, fusing them into one entity by using the pronoun "us." This merging of the two characters is facilitated by the fact that Joanna appears here partly as a physical character, partly as a sort of spirit. We see all four protagonists appear as spirit-like characters at some point (and they often refer to themselves as "spirit" or "ghoul"), in varying degrees of "spirit" versus "physical being". Janet appears physically in Jeannine's place when Jeannine's brother comes to fetch her:

> He took her by the arm and pulled her toward the door. 'Come on, Jeannie.
>
> We're going to introduce you to someone.' Only the woman revealed under the
>
> light was not Jeannine. A passerby inside saw the substitution through the
>
> doorway and gaped. Nobody else seemed to notice. Jeannine is still meditating
>
> by the rail[…].
>
> 'Huh,' says Bro. He's about to expostulate. 'What are you doing here?
>
> Who are you?' […]
>
> Janet jeers.
>
> 'You just—' Bud Dadier begins, but Janet anticipates him by vanishing
>
> like a soap bubble. […] The woman in front of the door is Jeannine. (112-113)

However, very often the characters seem to have very little to no physical presence in their spirit-like state, sometimes remaining undetected by other characters and operating mainly as observers, and sometimes being sensed by other characters but still appearing almost ghost-like:

> [S]omebody I suspect[ed] was Miss Dadier appear[ed] in my bedroom late one night.
>
> 'I'm lost.' She meant: what world is this?
>
> 'F'godsakes, go out in the hall, will you?'
>
> But she melted away through the Chinese print on the wall, presumably into the empty, carpeted, three-in-the-morning corridor outside. […] I woke at about four and went to the bathroom for a glass of water; there she was on the other side of the bathroom mirror, semaphoring frantically. […] Dismissing the whole thing as the world's aberration and not mine, I went back to bed.
>
> 'Janet?' she said. (24-25)

In this extract, Russ uses Jeannine's spirit state to show her as Joanna's mirror image. At the same time, Jeannine sees Joanna from the other side of the mirror, thinking that she is Janet. In other words, each of them sees the other as a mirror image of herself, and neither is certain of the other's identity (we understand from the first line that Joanna is not certain that it is Jeannine she is seeing), which complicates the identities of the characters and suggests (as Jael states later in the novel) that they are the same person.

It is not only the four J's whose identities are complicated in the novel, but some of the other female characters as well. For example, it seems that Laura may also be considered the same person as Janet (and therefore also the rest of the four J's): "There is this business of

the narcissism of love, the fourth-dimensional curve that takes you out into the other who is
the whole world, which is really a twist back into yourself, only a different self." (69-70) The
love in this case is between Laura and Janet, which means that they are both "other" to each
other, but also "a different self," i.e. the same, but different, like the four J's. Laura is also
presented as what may be seen partially as two different characters – there is the Laura that
has an affair with Janet (and whom Joanna does not appear to have met before), and then
there is the Laura whom Joanna met for the first time a few years earlier and who is Joanna's
best friend and has an affair with her. (200-201) This shows that the deconstruction of
identity and subject is not only limited to the Js, but may potentially apply to any/-everyone,
and that there is potential for anyone to be the same as other people. Even the female God
may be seen as the "same" as other women:

> There is an unpolished, white, marble statue of God on Rabbit Island, all alone
> in a field of weeds and snow. She is seated, naked to the waist, an outsized
> female figure as awful as Zeus, her dead eyes staring into nothing. At first She
> is majestic; then I notice that Her cheekbones are too broad, Her eyes set at
> different levels, that Her whole figure is a jumble of badly-matching planes, a
> mass of inhuman contradictions. There is a distinct resemblance to Dunyasha
> Bernadetteson, known as The Playful Philosopher (ac 344 –426), though God
> is older than Bernadetteson and it's possible that Dunyasha's genetic surgeon
> modelled her after God instead of the other way round. Persons who look at
> the statue longer than I did have reported that one cannot pin It down at all,
> that She is a constantly changing contradiction, that She becomes in turn
> gentle, terrifying, hateful , loving, 'stupid' (or 'dead') and finally
> indescribable. (103)

The comparison to Dunyasha Bernadetteson hints at a sameness between the two, and the fact that the statue's features do not fit well together shows that she is a sort of "composite" female figure – that she is a single entity, but at the same time composed from several different entities. She is also described as a mass of "inhuman contradictions" and "a constantly changing contradiction," which one may also say of the Js, who are also both one entity and several at the same time. In addition, the passage reads as if the statue is not just a physical, artistic representation of God, but God herself (for example when it is stated that God – not the statue – is older than Bernadetteson), which means that God is three different things at once: god, human and statue.

Another "creator" whose identity is at once "one" and "several" is Joanna/Russ. Joanna is a character, but she is also at times a representation of Russ, in varying degrees throughout the novel. This is illustrated in different ways; for example, there is the presence of a narrator that sometimes refers to herself as the author or the "spirit of the author." This narrator sometimes seems to be Joanna, but cannot always be positively identified as her, and it may therefore be argued that this author persona fluctuates or gradually changes between being Joanna as the spirit of the author and a self-inserted Russ (although it may also be argued whether there is any difference between the two). Part nine – the last part – begins: "This is the Book of Joanna," which is an ambiguous statement. The "Book" in question may refer both to part nine (as it seems to be narrated almost exclusively by Joanna and to tell part of her personal history) and to *Female Man* itself; part nine ends with Joanna/Russ addressing *Female Man*, and it is therefore not unlikely that the beginning of the chapter could also refer to the novel itself. Again, this conflates the identities of Joanna and Russ: it is the book of Joanna the character, and also the book of Joanna Russ. This demonstrates for the reader that

there is a connection between the world(s) of the novel and the real world, no matter how unrealistic the concept of the multiple universes and travel between them is.

One way in which the narrative serves to aid the fracturing of identity is by taking on a fractured or "multiple" identity itself. There are many different types of narration throughout the novel; some parts are written in prose form, others are written as transcripts of interviews or questionings, while still others are written similarly to a play, with only dialogue and "directions." By refusing to take on a single form, the narrative does what the characters do.

Just like it is hard to grasp some sort of definitive truth concerning the identities of the characters in the novel, it is also hard to find a definitive truth concerning certain other things. For example, at times Janet is said to have one child, (14, 41) at other times two, (10, 72) and Joanna states she was in three different places when she turned into a man: mid-Manhattan, (5) Chicago and Los Angeles. (19-20) Joanna meets Janet in two different ways: one at a parade in Janet's honour, (17) and one on a dark road. (20) Due to the novel's universe's capacity for multiplicity, it is possible, in fact, that these seemingly contradictory descriptions and happenings are not contradictory at all, but that they in fact take place in different, but similar universes:

> [T]here must be an infinite number of possible universes[…]. Every displacement of every molecule, every change in orbit of every electron, every quantum of light that strikes here and not there – each of these must somewhere have its alternative. It's possible, too, that there is no such thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, as long as we

keep within the limits of a set of variations that really make no difference to us. (6)

This means that the characters in the novel may be "blurring" from one world to another without knowing it, and that the "variations that really make no difference" are the contradictions we find in the narrative. The different parts and sections of the novel, where we jump back and forth in time rather than progress chronologically, may be a representation of this blurring from one world to another: with the infinite number of possible universes in the novel, it is not impossible that each section may take place in its own universe, and that the reader's "travel" between different times and truths is a travel between different universes. In any case, there are certainly several truths at play at the same time.

The novel's refusal to present unambiguous, uncontestable facts (concerning identity and otherwise) may cause the readers to question "absolute truth" and essentiality, which in turn may cause them to question the truth of gender stereotypes or gender itself, and the necessity of gender roles and norms.

Gender performativity

The fact that the four protagonists are, essentially, the same person but act very differently from each other based on the role gender plays in their society and their ideas of how women should act makes Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity very relevant for this text. All things being equal in the four universes, we are given the impression that the four Js would be identical – it is the differences between their worlds that cause the four of them to, as previously mentioned, have different "opinions, […] habits, […] beliefs, […] values, […] mannerisms, […] manners, […] expressions" (155-156) etc. In other words, although there is some kind of core essence to them that they all have in common, they have still become four

very different women, and they perform their gender – perform "woman" – differently due to the different circumstances (the expectations, the limitations, the freedoms, etc.) in their lives.

Joanna, who lives in a world similar to the real world of the 70's, is influenced by the patriarchy of her world, and acts in accordance with the expectations that are made of her: at one point, she states that all she did before she met Janet was:

> dress for The Man
>
> smile for The Man
>
> talk wittily to The Man
>
> sympathize with The Man
>
> flatter The Man
>
> understand The Man
>
> defer to The Man
>
> entertain The Man
>
> keep The Man
>
> live for The Man. (29)

One could argue that some of these may seem like such conscious actions that it seems like Joanna is putting on a role, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is not what Butler means by gender performativity. Indeed, it often seems like Joanna is very conscious of her own actions around men and how to act in order to appear "ladylike"; however, this is not a role she has personally made the choice to play (as any reader, or at least any female reader in the 1970s is likely to have known), and she is in fact frustrated with being in this role. Although she is conscious of her actions, they may be more second nature to her than resulting from any truly conscious choice – this "role" has been imposed upon her by the

society she lives in, and is simply a result of her having internalised the expectations that are made of her as a woman. If we look back at the quote from Butler that I included in the previous chapter, where she says that gender is "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration," (Butler "Preface (1999)" par. 16) and compare this with the situation in Joanna's world, we see that there are repetitions and rituals not only in what Joanna does, but what women in general do, such as the "round of 'his little girl'" and the "round of 'aint it awful,'" (35) which are clearly recurring occurrences. Russ presents these rituals in a parodic manner, highlighting them and drawing the readers' attention to them as a part of the patriarchal culture of Joanna's world, parodying the cultural element that influences Joanna's performance of her gender.

Similarly, the other protagonists' performance of gender is largely due to their own cultures and societies. Janet, who has never met a man before she travels across dimensions, does as she pleases and does not take gender into consideration. She is completely unaware of the gender roles and conventions in the other dimensions, and does not act according to them; she acts with the same freedom as a man would in these worlds. Because she fails to comply with the cultural expectations of her as a woman in Joanna's world, she ends up insulting men just by being herself and performing her gender the way she does.

Jael is very much a product of the world she lives in: she is strong and fierce and can be ruthless if she needs to, and does not hesitate to resort to murder if it is needed or she is sufficiently provoked by a man. She is politically active (in a very direct, hands-on way) and plays an important part in the revolutionary war on her world. She purposefully feigns respect for men when it is in her – or Womanland's – interest to do so:

She smiled gracefully but remained modestly silent. This seemed to please

him. He enveloped her further, to the point of vanishment, and said in a low

voice with a sort of chuckle: "Don't you dream about it? Don't all you girls

dream about us?" "You know that, Lenny," she said. (161-162)

This may at first glance seem to be the same type of interaction that we see a lot of in

Joanna's world, where women show deference to men because that is what the cultural norms

dictate. The difference between the two is that Jael only pretends: she *acts* meek, but she is

not. In that sense, one may say that Jael consciously plays a role and that this particular

behaviour is not an example of gender performativity. However, this behaviour stems from

her political/strategic thinking and the fact that she has not internalised any notions of women

being "less" than men, both of which are due to Jael being shaped by the particular

circumstances of her life in Womanland.

Jeannine is the most stereotypically feminine of the four Js: she is concerned with her

appearance, she plants seeds and nurtures living things (her cat and her ailanthus tree), and

she prefers nature (which is often associated with the feminine) over urban environments.

Accepting a feminine role, or performing one's gender as woman in a feminine manner, may

be seen by some as acquiescing to the patriarchal system of men behaving stereotypically

masculine and women behaving stereotypically feminine. However, despite being content

with her femininity, Jeannine is not content with the life she lives: she is stuck in a simple

existence, consisting of living with her boyfriend and her cat and doing chores. Because she

is unhappy with this existence, she is a dreamer – she longs for something better:

The Depression is still world-wide.

(But think – only think! – what might have happened if the world had

not so luckily slowed down, if there had been a really big war, for big wars are

forcing-houses of science, economics, politics; think what might have

happened, what might not have happened. It's a lucky world. Jeannine is lucky

to live in it. She doesn't think so.) (27)

Yet she is unobtrusive and passive, because there is no opportunity within her world for a

satisfying way of improving her situation. The fact that she dreams of war as a solution for

bringing about change shows her to have a revolutionary streak, and this is later shown when

Jael tries to make a deal with the three other Js involving building bases on their homeworlds

to use in her own world's war: "'Oh, sure,' says Jeannine. 'I don't mind. You can bring in all

the soldiers you want. You can take the whole place over; I wish you would." (204) She sees

Womanland's war against men as a possibility for change both in Womanland and in her own

world – a change for the better.

All this goes to show that gender is not a stable concept in the novel and that it is

dependent on the environment the characters have grown up in rather than an inherent trait.

We see especially through Jael and Janet, who act in ways that the reader (and Joanna and

Jeannine) may think of as masculine rather than feminine, that "woman" in one society may

be practically the same as "man" in another.

Russ plays with the concepts of "man" and "woman", and the words may mean

different things throughout the novel. For example, when Jael says that "[a]t twelve I artlessly

told one of my teachers that I was very glad I was being brought up to be a man-woman, and

that I looked down on those girls who were only brought up to be woman-women," (181) she

(or rather, her twelve-year-old self) indicates that the words "man" and "woman" can be used

as qualifiers to describe or limit the meaning of "woman" (in the sense of either those who

are physically female, or those who are given the label "woman" by society, which in most cases conflate anyway). The words before the hyphens – "man" and "woman" – refer to stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes, behaviour or abilities, so what Jael means by "man-woman" is a female behaving in a masculine manner, and by "woman-women" she means females who behave in a feminine manner.

In other parts of the text we may find a different meaning of the words, for example when Joanna says that she has become a female man: "I had just changed into a man, me, Joanna. I mean a female man, of course; my body and soul were exactly the same." (5) We see that the change that has happened is neither of the body nor the soul, and thus it must be something else that makes someone a man: the moment Joanna becomes a "female man" is when she begins the change from being an object to gaining agency and becoming a subject. Joanna has lived her entire life as an object in a world where only men are the subjects and all women are objects; Janet's arrival in Joanna's world heralds the beginning of Joanna's transformation into a subject, i.e. a "man".

The "subject" was a debated term in the 1970s, and many rejected the subject in its original form. In "Postmodernism and the 'Death of the Subject'" (2002), James Heartfield writes that "a number of different thinkers started to question the validity of the human Subject [in the 1960s and 1970s]." According to him,

> The critics pointed to the promiscuous way that the
>
> postmodernists *deconstructed* each and every scientific and moral certainty as
>
> if these were no more than big stories, meta or grand narratives. But according
>
> to the postmodernists, such metanarratives tended to eradicate differences,
>
> imposing a lifeless uniformity. Where metanarratives reduced complexity to

self-sameness, the method of deconstruction restored the fundamental

difference of things. (par. 3)

It can therefore be argued that "subject" may not be the right term to use here; however, what

Russ does in the novel is to challenge and revise the concept of the subject rather than

conform to traditional ideas about it; therefore, I choose to use this term.

If being a subject is what makes someone a man, Davy also becomes interesting to

take a closer look at. Physically, he is a man (or rather, male), and Jael refers to him as a man.

However, he has no agency at all, and is an object in more than one sense of the word: he

cannot act on his own, but is only acted *towards* and is controlled by Jael; he is a sexual

object, and he is a physical object in the sense that he is practically a piece of furniture – he is

"a lovely limb of the house." (192) In other words, Davy is – though not an actual man – an

image of a man that is not a subject but an object, subverting the gender roles that the readers

are most likely familiar with.

Another example of Russ's experimentation with gender in the novel is the biological males

in Manland who have been transformed into "the changed" and "the half-changed". This full

or partial sex change brings to mind, of course, sex change (or "sex reassignment") in the real

world, and therefore also transsexualism. According to Boulter in her essay "Unnatural Acts:

American Feminism and Joanna Russ's *The FemaleMan*," (1999) "When Russ began writing

The Female Man in 1969 the phenomenon of sex-change surgery was gaining greater

scientific and medical recognition. […] This greater medical recognition corresponded to an

increased media interest." (159) It is therefore likely that Russ had this in mind when she

wrote *Female Man*. The changed and the half-changed are not true transsexuals, since the

changes that are done to them (surgical or otherwise) are not done because of the gender they

identify as; since a relatively large proportion of the population – two out of seven

manlanders – are changed or half-changed, it is likely that a large majority of them would have identified as male had they not been rejected as "real-men". However, it is interesting to discuss their gender identity nonetheless. Their gender performance is an exaggerated imitation of women, and they act and look more feminine than the four Js:

> [S]uch a vision was he, so much he wore, such folds and frills and ribbons and buttons and feathers, trimmed like a Christmas tree. Like Garbo playing Anna Karenina, decorated all over. […] There must be a secret feminine underground that teaches them how to behave; in the face of their comrades' derision and savage contempt, […] somehow they still learn the classic shiver, the slow blink, the knuckle-to-lip pathos. […] My three friends and I pale beside such magnificence! Four lumpy parcels, of no interest to anyone at all, at all. (165)

In a way, this shows – as Boulter states – that "*Female Man* demonstrates the way in which femininity is not natural but is constructed within a heterosexual sex-role structure." (160) However, Anna and other half-changeds – although they have female names and play the role of women in their society – insist that they be referred to by male pronouns, not female: "'Her?' says Jeannine, confused. 'Him!' says Anna in a strained contralto. The half-changed are very punctilious – sometimes about the changeds' superiority and sometimes about their own genitals. Either way it works out to Him." (165) This could be interpreted in two different ways (that I can identify): one possibility is that the half-changed insist on male pronouns because they *feel* like men and identify as such, despite having to look and act like women. This would imply a sort of essentialism – in order to *feel* like a gender in any other capacity than that of how society interprets and influences your gender performance, there

needs to be a fundamental, essential difference between being a man and being a woman. This essentialism contrasts with the constructivism found elsewhere in the text, and many would perhaps say that it contrasts with accepted feminist beliefs: essentialism has been rejected and decried as "un-feminist" by many due to the fact that it may so easily be used to excuse oppression and non-equal treatment of women.

However, reading the text from a present-day perspective with recent gender research in mind, essentialism may be a valid explanation for the half-changed's desire to be referred to by male pronouns; a study from 2010 shows evidence that the cognitive differences between the male and female brain decrease with age during childhood and adolescence, rather than increase, as one would expect the result to be if gender was purely a social construct. ("Longitudinally Mapping") It is perhaps unlikely that this reading was what Russ intended, considering that the rest of the novel seems to insist that "man" and "woman" are not intrinsically linked to sex and that, as Martins states in her essay "Revising the Future in *The Female Man*," (2005) "Russ's novel attempts to revise the definition of subjecthood." (407) Instead, I find it more likely that she intended it to be read like my second interpretation: that the half-changed reject female pronouns because they are conscious of and sensitive about the fact that they were born with the potential to become men, or subjects, but have been forced into the role of women, or objects. Their insistence on being referred to in the same way that men are may be their way of making a claim to the subjecthood they feel they have a right to in the only way they can, and justifying it with the fact that they have male genitals.

Work and technology

In "A Dialogue" (1984), Russ states that "[s]cience fiction is a natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought." (29) Discussing the importance of automated, cybernetic technology in

Female Man, Heather J. Hicks, in her essay "Automating Feminism", identifies it as evidence of post-industrial, radical thought. According to Hicks,

> automation, specifically, and postindustrialism, generally, was a consistently recurring issue in New Left thought from the very beginning of the Movement. Indeed, what one sees in reviewing the documents of […] New Leftist groups, is a gradual embrace of automation as a route to utopia. (par. 21)

At the same time, however, Hicks argues that it is important to read the text for "its engagements with liberal feminism" (par. 10), specifically the importance it places on work for women, and she states that "Russ's mixture of New Left post-scarcity politics with her liberal feminist enthusiasm for work […] yields strange results indeed" (par. 30) and that "postindustrial, cybernetic technologies leave 'women's work' a deeply fractured and open category in Russ's text." (par. 20)

It might seem logical that the combination of automation and the importance of work would yield "strange results"; after all, automation is a way of lessening work, and in the 1960s a post-work or "zero-work" politics that engaged with the idea of automation emerged in the New Left – people saw in automation the potential to supply everyone with what they needed while reducing or eliminating work and increasing the amount of leisure time. (Hicks par. 24, par. 32) However, while the radical concept of automation and the liberal feminist importance placed on work are certainly both prominent in the text, they are not brought into conflict with each other. In my reading, automation is not presented in the novel as the New Left "route to utopia" and consequently does not compete with the liberal feminist view regarding what would be more beneficial for women – work or "zero-work". I

will begin my discussion of this point by showing some instances of leftist and liberal feminist thought at work in the text.

Some of the most obvious instances of liberal feminist thought are found in the novel's treatment of work in the two worlds that are the least technologically advanced (and the most similar to the real world at the time the novel was written). For example, in line with liberal feminist views the novel appears to equate work with visibility in society in Joanna's world:

It's very upsetting to think that women make up only one-tenth of society, but

it's true. For example:

My doctor is male.

My lawyer is male.

My tax-accountant is male.

The grocery-store-owner (on the corner) is male.

The janitor in my apartment building is male.

The president of my bank is male. […]

I think most of the people in the world are male. (197-198)

We are shown that while men are visible – i.e. working – women are mostly invisible in the public sphere because they have to stay at home and sacrifice themselves for their children instead of working. (198) In another part of the novel (which may take place in either Joanna's or Jeannine's world), work and the ability to earn money is equated with taking "a fruitful part in the life of the community" and "adult independence" for women. (115) Since Joanna's and Jeannine's worlds are not technologically advanced, there is no evidence of New Leftist thought shown in relation to these worlds, and it is thus the other two worlds,

with their automation and other types of technology, we must look to in order to find out

what the relationship between New Leftist and liberal feminist thought is in the novel.

The automation in the novel is prominent particularly on Whileaway, where – through

the use of "induction helmets" – the inhabitants can perform difficult tasks more easily and

efficiently:

> They […] oversee food factories (with induction helmets on their heads,
> their toes controlling the green-peas, their fingers the vats and controls, their
> back muscles the carrots, and their abdomens the water supply).
>
> They lay pipe (again, by induction).
>
> They fix machinery.
>
> They are not allowed to have anything to do with malfunctions or
> breakdowns […] in one's own person and with tools in one's own hands,
> without the induction helmets that make it possible to operate dozens of
> waldoes at just about any distance you please.
>
> […] [I]n old age the Whileawayan woman – no longer as strong and
> elastic as the young – has learned to join with calculating machines[…]. In the
> libraries old hands come out from under the induction helmets and give you
> the reproductions of the books you want; […] old ladies chuckle eerily while
> composing The Blasphemous Cantata (a great favorite of Ysaye's) or mad-
> moon cityscapes which turn out to be do-able after all; old brains use one part
> in fifty to run a city. (51-52)

As shown here, automation *is* connected to work in the novel, but this is only in the sense that it makes work easier for the Whileawayans, and not (as I will show in the following paragraphs) as a liberal feminist promotion of work as the key to liberation and equality.

Based on her reading of Whileaway, Hicks maintains that "feminist utopia [in the novel] is in some sense epitomised by, even the equivalent of, the necessity to work." (par. 34) Indeed, it is emphasised over and over again in the novel how much the Whileawayans work, and much of the structure of their society is built around work. Their families, non-biological family groupings consisting of twenty to thirty people, are centred on farms because farm work requires "day-to-day continuity" (Russ 88), and when children are sent off to school at four or five, they begin a practical education that prepares them for work life. As they advance in their readiness for work, they achieve higher dignity: when they reach puberty and leave school they achieve what is called Middle-Dignity; when they join the work life at seventeen they reach Three-Quarters Dignity, and when they turn twenty-two and gain access to previously forbidden jobs and can have their learning certificated, they achieve Full Dignity and are allowed to join a family. We thus see that work on Whileaway is closely intertwined with family life, and that dignity is measured by one's ability to work. However, the text seems self-contradictory concerning work on Whileaway. Despite the insistence that Whileawayans hardly do anything but work, the narrative also makes a conflicting claim: that they work only sixteen hours a week and never work for more than three hours on one job except in emergencies. (Russ 53, 55)

Based on this description Whileaway is, in fact, close to the "zero-work" societies Hicks describes, not only in their highly automated technology and the way that everyone has access to all the resources they need, but also in the small amount of work they do. Considering that Hicks herself addresses the lack of work on Whileaway and the similarity to zero-work societies, I find it strange that she insists that "[i]t is not just any work that is

happening in Whileaway […], but a version of 'work' that has its roots in the liberal feminist appropriation of this category in the 1960s." (par. 32) Even taking into account the explanations she suggests for the contradictions concerning work on Whileaway – that "every female activity has been colored by a pervasive work ethic" or that the text presents "two alternative visions of Whileaway" (par. 31) – we cannot pretend that the Whileawayans do not, in fact, work very little (in one of the two possible alternative visions of Whileaway, at least). If Russ had wanted Whileaway to display a truly liberal feminist attitude towards work, she could have simply left uncontested the claims in the text that Whileawayans work all the time. It could possibly be argued – if we accept that there are two alternative visions of Whileaway – that one of them shows a liberal feminist attitude towards work; however, since most of the statements claiming that Whileawayans work a lot are complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction with work, I reject this possibility. Thus, I do not agree that work on Whileaway has its roots in liberal feminism; on the contrary, Whileaway (or one of the visions of it) seems to be based on zero-work societies.

The situation concerning (non-)work on Whileaway, I would argue, is related to the presentation of Whileaway as an imperfect utopia that does not hold the solution for improving women's situations (in societies such as Joanna and Janet's, or that of the real world). We see several examples of the imperfection of Whileaway in relation to work. For example, although there is no doubt that the amount of work that the Whileawayans do (combined with their automated technology) manages to provide all the inhabitants of the world with the resources they need, there is, as I have mentioned, a certain dissatisfaction associated with work on Whileaway. For example, it is stated that when children are sent off to school, mother and child "both howl, the child because it is separated from the mother, the mother because she has to go back to work," (49) that Whileawayans "work too much" (52) and that children who are eager to begin working are considered foolish by older children

who are already a part of the labour force: "Fools! (say the older children, who have been through it all) Don't be in such a hurry. You'll work soon enough." (50) This discontent is especially apparent by the fact that some Whileawayans choose what essentially amounts to suicide rather than to continue working:

> A Belin, run mad and unable to bear the tediousness of her work, flees above the forty-eighth parallel, intending to remain there permanently. "You" (says an arrogant note she leaves behind) "do not exist" and although agreeing philosophically with this common view, the S & P for the county follows her – not to return her for rehabilitation, imprisonment, or study. What is there to rehabilitate or study? We'd all do it if we could. And imprisonment is simple cruelty. You guessed it. (55)

It is made clear later in the text, when we see Joanna pursuing Elena Twason, who has fled in this manner, that the women who do this are aware of their fate – they know that they will be killed for leaving their (non-)work and society, and yet they choose to do it. Since, as I have argued, Whileaway is not a perfect utopia and does not present a solution for improving life for women elsewhere, in my opinion it also illustrates that "zero-work" as a result of automation is not a solution within feminist politics. Thus, although Russ shows evidence of radical thinking elsewhere in the text, her depiction of Whileaway as a post-work society does not support the New Left's "embrace of automation as a route to utopia."

As several critics have mentioned, the Whileawayans' interconnectedness with technology and machines makes it possible to see them as a type of cyborgs (cybernetic organisms). This can also be said of Jael, who has steel teeth and retractable claws and has had her physical appearance altered through the use of technology, and as I have argued

before, she is the one who has the key to the solution for a better future for women. And Jael, unlike Janet, is described as hard-working with no conflicting accounts: she states that "the record of my life is the record of work, slow, steady, responsible work," (185) and she believes that "[w]ork is power." (163) In other words, it is the work we find in Womanland that may lead to a better future for women, not the zero-work that we see on Whileaway. Automation has remarkably little to do with it, as it exists in both worlds.

However, while the novel does not present automation or cybernetics as a route to utopia, it does not reject technology as a possible source of liberation in certain areas. Technology on Whileaway does not only make work easier to perform, but also plays an important part in other aspects of Whileawayans' life. According to *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, some feminists "identify patriarchy as the principal and universal cause of women's oppression via its control of [amongst other things] women's reproductive capacity [and] sexuality." ("Radical feminism") Both reproduction and sexuality are aided by technology on Whileaway. Everyone on the planet owns vibrators – young girls receive them as gifts in some sort of ceremonial celebration, but they are "available to everybody long before this." (144) In other words, the women on Whileaway are in charge of their own sexuality. It liberates them in a way that is socially unacceptable on Joanna's and Jeannine's worlds:

> 'What it does to your body,' said I, choosing my words with extreme care, 'is nothing compared to what it does to your mind, Jeannine. It will ruin your mind. It will explode in your brains and drive you crazy. You will never be the same again. You will be lost to respectability and decency and decorum and dependency and all sorts of other nice, normal things beginning with a D. (143-144)

Reproduction would be impossible for Whileawayans without the technology to merge ova; they rely on technology for their very existence. It allows them to reproduce without men, and must in fact be one of the things that allowed the Whileawayan women of the past to wage war on men and eradicate them. And because there are no men involved in reproduction, the role of being a mother becomes more liberated: unlike in Joanna or Jeannine's world (115), there is no father to control what a mother may or may not do with her life, no patriarchy to decide what a mother's role may or may not be.

In her essay "SF And Technology" (1978) Russ writes that:

> Hiding greyly behind that sexy rock star, technology, is a much more sinister and powerful figure. It is the entire social system that surrounds us; hence the sense of being at the mercy of an all-encompassing, autonomous process which we cannot control. If you add the monster's location in time (during and after the Industrial Revolution) I think you can see what is being discussed when most people say 'technology.' They are politically mystifying a much bigger monster: Capitalism in its advanced, industrial phase. […]
>
> It is because technology is a mystification for something else that it becomes a kind of autonomous deity, one that can promise both salvation and damnation. ("SF And Technology")

Although Russ says that what hides behind technology is the "sinister" force of capitalism, she also states that technology can promise both salvation and damnation – in other words, it can be both positive and negative. Donna Haraway says something similar about cyborgs in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto":

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war (Sofia, 1984). From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. (154)

If we are to look at the cyborg worlds – Jael's and Janet's – in *Female Man* with this double vision, we see that Russ has not presented them in only one way – positive or negative. In Janet's world, the "grid of control on the planet" is the totalitarian-like control over people's lives, in Jael's world it is Manland's (for the time being) control over Womanland and the impending war (although it will most likely not be an apocalypse, but rather a new beginning for women). In neither world are people afraid of joint kinship with machines, and Jael is not afraid of "partial identities" – she has altered her identity through surgery that has made her unrecognisable, and she is, quite literally, part human, part machine. Through the concept of the cyborg, identity boundaries are broken down. Haraway suggests two different boundaries that are breached where the cyborg appears. One of them is the boundary between human and machine:

[Pre-cybernetic] machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous.
[...] They were not man, an author to himself. [...] To think they were
otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century
machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural
and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and
many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. (153)

In *Female Man*, this boundary is breached on Whileaway and Jael's world. The inhabitants of
these worlds – the cyborgs – are part natural, part artificial. They are humans living on Earth,
just like the people from Joanna's and Jeannine's worlds, but they have been altered by
technology/cybernetics to the point where they cannot claim to be natural. Whileawayan
philosopher Dunyasha Bernadetteson states that "[h]umanity is unnatural!" (11) and Jael,
referring to her own altered appearance and prosthetics, also says that she is "not natural."
(155)

The mind/body distinction is ambiguous on Whileaway, where induction helmets
allow inhabitants to control robot limbs (that function as prosthetic extensions of their bodies)
with their thoughts. Whileawayans are also both self-developing and externally designed at
once: they are externally designed in the sense that they have all, as individuals, been
conceived artificially and performed genetic surgery upon. At the same time, however, they
have not been designed by other, more "natural" entities – it is the Whileawayans themselves
that "design" and develop themselves as a race.

The other boundary Haraway mentions is the one between human and animal:

The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and
animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other

> living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling.
>
> Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange. (153)

We see this transgression in David's character, and in Jael's relationship with him. David is the result of the manipulation of chimpanzee genes to make him resemble a human. Because of his genetic ancestry, he may partially be considered to be an animal, which makes Jael's sexual relationship with him reminiscent of bestiality. However, the reader is given to understand that there is a possibility that Davy also has something resembling a human consciousness or soul. We see this in the following extract where Jael acts as an unreliable narrator:

> His consciousness – such as it is and I am willing to grant it for the sake of argument – is nothing but the permanent possibility of sensation, a mere intellectual abstraction, a nothing, a picturesque collocation of words. It is experientially quite empty, and above all, it is nothing that need concern you and me. Davy's soul lies somewhere else; it's an outside soul. Davy's soul is in Davy's beauty; and Beauty is always empty, always on the outside. Isn't it? (192)

The possibility that Davy has a human consciousness may make readers consider what it means to be a human and whether he, at his core, is any different from regular humans (i.e. whether he would be different from humans if he were not controlled by a computer); after all, humans have descended from apes – should Davy be less human because he descended from chimpanzees? Or to turn the question around: are humans really anything but animals (that have gained a certain degree of consciousness)? Davy is also part machine, which

means that he epitomises the transgression of the boundaries between human and machine, and human and animal; he embodies all three identities at the same time.

The cyborgs, then, contribute to the novel's overall deconstruction of stable subjectivities and identities.

Summary

My aim for this chapter was to identify some of the various strategies that Russ uses in her exploration of gender and expression of feminism in *The Female Man*, as well as the types of feminisms we can find in the novel. One of the generic strategies of this novel is to make it far more complex than a typical utopian text, with its four different worlds and the four protagonists that travel between them. The four worlds range from dystopian to utopian, and as such, we find aspects from the dystopian genre as well. The novel contains a multiplicity and a blurring of distinctions between genres that takes the utopia in a new direction and creates opportunities for other ways of exploring gender than those available in the traditional utopias.

The complexity and multiplicity of the novel helps destabilise concepts such as subjectivity, truth and gender dichotomies. Le Guin makes the distinctions between the four protagonists unclear through certain narrative choices, thus challenging the concept of the subject. The narrative also presents several possible "truths" that oppose each other, and as such, truth is not a stable concept in the novel. Gender is deconstructed through, among other things, the subversion of gender roles and by making the four Js the same person. The latter showcases the gender performativity in the novel: the four Js all perform gender differently due to the different environments they have lived in. Because of this, it is clear that gender in the novel is not innate, but a construct.

Two of the elements we may look at in the novel to find out which type(s) of feminism we are dealing with, are work and technology. The liberal emphasis on work and the radical emphasis on technology are both present, and although it might seem that these two concepts would be in conflict with each other, I find that they are not, due to the fact that technology is not shown as the "route to utopia" and therefore does not compete with the liberal feminism also present. Liberal feminism and its enthusiasm for work is shown as what is needed in order to improve the situation for women. This implies a critique of zero-work, but it is not a critique of automation; automation and other forms of technology are seen as potentially liberating and empowering, and are not necessarily either positive or negative, but can be both at the same time.

Conclusion

The first part of my aim for this thesis, as stated in the introduction, was to "show how both *Left Hand* and *Female Man* draw upon the thought-experimental potential of speculative fiction in order to explore sex/gender in ways that would not be possible in other types of genres – in other words, how the creation of a world different from the real world allows for experimental, feminist treatment of sex and gender." (5) As argued through my readings of these novels, I find that both texts portray gender constructivism in ways that are made possible through the transformativity of the speculative genre: *Left Hand* achieves this through the androgyny of the Gethenians, which is a metaphor for the androgyny of human beings in the real world, while *Female Man* achieves it through its multiple protagonists who are all the same person, yet perform their gender differently due to the different environments they have been brought up in.

In the case of *Left Hand*, we also find that Le Guin presents elements such as anarcho-communism and a "postmodern anarchy of gender" involving resistance towards metanarratives, an "anarchy of the subject" and an "anarchy of becoming," thus destabilising subjectivities and gender dichotomies. She does this partly in ways that may be possible in other genres, such as through her use of several narratives that parallel each other in various ways. As such, we may say that it is not *only* the speculative aspect of the novel that allows Le Guin to explore sex/gender in the way she does; however, some of the ways she presents the elements mentioned above are made possible only because of the alternative world that she has created. For instance, it is partly through the Gethenians ambisexuality and androgyny that she creates an "anarchy of the subject" and an "anarchy of becoming." Thus, the transformative aspect allows Le Guin to explore gender in additional ways, making for a more thorough deconstruction of subjectivities and gender dichotomies.

In *Female Man*, the multiplicity of the novel's universe(s) allows for destabilisation of subjectivities and essentialist truths through its four protagonists whose identities are often unclear and shift throughout the novel, as well as through the multiplicity of the narrative. Here, as in *Left Hand*, we find that part of this is possible in other genres: the disjointed narrative with its multiple truths (although in this case such multiplicity may be tied up to the fact that each "truth" could be happening in different universes) is not an impossibility in other genres. However, while the disjointed narrative does its part to destabilise subjectivities, it does not do so on its own: it is the combination of this narrative structure and the fact that Russ has made the four women the "same" person and lets them switch identities (which is only possible because of the universe Russ has created) that creates such a solid deconstruction of subjectivities in the novel.

The other part of my aim for the thesis was to "show how the novels challenge generic definitions or boundaries, and the role that this plays in the novels' feminist exploration of sex/gender." (5) *Left Hand* does not do this to the same extent as *Female Man*, but it does exhibit both utopian and science fiction elements, even if the science fiction traits are not particularly relevant in terms of the feminism in the novel. In addition, the "utopian" world is not a true utopia – it has its flaws and cannot be claimed to be a perfect society, whether from a feminist point of view or otherwise. However, although the world Le Guin has created is not a utopia, it is still unquestionably a world that relies on the transformativity of speculative fiction, which allows her to explore gender in various ways, perhaps more nuanced than if the objective was simply to create a world that would seem ideal from a feminist point of view.

Female Man combines elements from utopian fiction, dystopian fiction, and science fiction, and in a perhaps more complex way than it might seem at first: the utopian world contains what may be seen as dystopian elements (or at least elements that are similar to what

one might find in a dystopia), and the dystopian world contains what may be seen as utopian elements. It thus blurs the distinctions between utopia and dystopia, and brings us back to the quote from Atwood that I used in the introduction: "within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia." (85) In *Female Man*, both the utopian and the dystopian world play an important role; Janet, the protagonist from the utopian world, brings hope, while Jael, the protagonist from the dystopian world, offers a solution that may call an end to patriarchy. The science fiction aspect of the novel is also important, in a different way: it shows evidence of radical, leftist thought, and presents us with the concept of the cyborg, which through its fractured identity serves to further deconstruct subjectivities, and which (through Jael) shows its capacity for resistance.

I have shown that many of the strategies for exploring gender/sex in *Left Hand* and *Female Man* depend on the transformativity of speculative fiction; however, I have also found that some of the strategies do not depend on this. It is not impossible to use for example disjointed narrative or characters that mirror each other as a way to deconstruct subjectivities in other genres, in similar ways to *Left Hand* and *Female Man*. This indicates, to me, that while genre plays an important part in the novels' ability to explore gender, we can just as easily see it the other way around: since we find a feminist treatment of gender in elements of the novels that are not genre-specific, the underlying feminist ideal works as a shaping force on the text. Feminism, then, motivates the author's choices regarding how to explore sex and gender, and the transformative aspect of speculative fiction allows them more choices.

Reading *Left Hand* and *Female Man* from a 2014 perspective, I find that the thought experiments in them are still relevant and may resonate with today's readers. Although newer research indicates that gender may not entirely be a construct, constructivism still has an important part in feminism, and society has not yet reached a point where men and women

are treated the same way. In *Left Hand* we find an anarchy of gender that we have not achieved in real life, and which many feminists long for, and in *Female Man* we find an anger expressed – notably – in ways almost identical to numerous expressions of anger by women that I have personally observed in social media the past few years. Feminists are still protesting many of the same injustices that the feminists of the 1960s and 70s were, and while social media may be a popular and effective way of doing this today, it does not render feminist speculative fiction obsolete: social media may have taken over the role of speculative fiction as a popular "genre" through which one may reach out to a large readership, but it does not (usually) contain the transformative aspect of speculative fiction, and does not create a full-fledged thought experiment that allows for an anarchy of gender or deconstruction of subjectivities to the same degree that *Left Hand* and *Female Man* do.

It is my belief that as long as feminism is needed and equality is not achieved between the sexes/genders, there will always be some aspects of *Left Hand* and *Female Man* that will be relevant. As Russ writes in *Female Man*:

Go, little book, […] recite yourself to all who will listen; stay hopeful and wise. […] Do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned[…]. Do not get glum when you are no longer understood, little book. Do not curse your fate. Do not reach up from the readers' lap and punch the readers' noses.

Rejoice, little book!

For on that day, we will be free. (206-207)

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