

# The Theme of Otherness in Select Short stories of Ursula Le Guin's *The Fisherman of the Inland Sea*

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**Abstract**— *Science fiction thrives on the art of crafting worlds that break away from familiar realities. This paper delves into the realm of science fiction with a focus on Ursula Le Guin's short stories, which deeply engage with the concept of "otherness." Through themes of gender, race, and ecology, Le Guin skillfully constructs narratives that challenge and destabilize established power structures. It examines how Le Guin's stories not only amplify women's voices in science fiction but also carved out a space for them to explore their identities, aspirations, and societal roles. An exploration into Le Guin's world of science fiction allow the 'others' in society to confront traditional norms, examine their desires, and redefine their place in both fictional and real-world contexts.*

**Keywords**— *Science Fiction, identity, gender, otherness, subversion of gender roles*

Science fiction, as a genre, is fundamentally driven by the idea of creating a world that is markedly different from the one readers are familiar with. According to Robert Scholes, science fiction is defined as "fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (2). This concept hinges on cognitive estrangement, which is deeply embedded in the genre's narrative techniques, style, and inventive language. Cognitive estrangement refers to the way in which elements of the fictional world appear alien or dissonant when compared to the reader's own reality, triggering a sense of unfamiliarity or difference.

Darko Suvin's theory further explores this idea by linking cognitive estrangement to the "what if" scenarios that are central to science fiction. These speculative questions prompt readers to consider alternative realities or possibilities, effectively creating a "thought experiment" that challenges their understanding of the world. According to Suvin, it is this blending of estrangement (the sense of difference) and cognition (the invitation to think about and understand that difference) that forms the core of science

fiction's appeal and its ability to engage with the known world in new and thought-provoking ways.

...a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.  
(8-9)

In science fiction, *cognition* refers to the rational and logical process through which readers make sense of the unfamiliar or alien worlds presented in the story. It's the cognitive engagement that allows us to understand the new or different elements of the fictional universe. On the other hand, *estrangement* pertains to the element of difference or unfamiliarity that creates a sense of disconnection from the world the reader knows. It is the quality that sets science fiction apart from other genres, making the reader experience a world that feels strange and other, yet is still accessible through the mind's ability to comprehend it.

Darko Suvin argues that both cognition and estrangement must be present in science fiction for it to function effectively. This dual presence allows science fiction to maintain its relevance to our own world, as it encourages us to question the ordinary and challenges the assumptions we often take for granted. Suvin's concept of "scientific fictionalising" encapsulates this process of combining speculative thought and imaginative narrative. In this framework, the *novum*—a term coined by Suvin—plays a critical role. The *novum* is the new or innovative element that distinguishes science fiction from traditional literature, whether it's a futuristic technology, a new societal structure, or a radically different way of thinking. This element of novelty pushes the boundaries of conventional narratives and opens up new avenues for exploring the human condition.

Ursula K. Le Guin is a celebrated figure in feminist science fiction, known for exploring complex ethical, moral, and social issues in her works. Her influence extends far beyond the genre, with her thought-provoking novels such as *The*

*Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), both of which won prestigious Hugo and Nebula Awards.

Born in Berkeley, California, to Dr. Alfred Kroeber, an anthropologist, and Theodora Kroeber Quinn, a psychologist and children's author, Le Guin was exposed to myths and legends from a young age. This background in anthropology and storytelling would influence her later works, which often address the intersection of culture, identity, and society. Le Guin attended Radcliffe College, earning her B.A. in 1951, and went on to study romance languages at Columbia University. She spent time in France on a Fulbright Scholarship, where she met her future husband, Charles Le Guin, a historian. They married in 1953 and settled in Portland, where Le Guin continued her academic career while teaching writing.

Le Guin's literary career began in 1956 with *Rocannon's World*, the first book in her Hainish Cycle. This series is set in a universe unified by the premise that an ancient civilization, the Hainish people, seeded habitable planets across the galaxy. The series explores themes of culture, identity, and interaction between alien civilizations. The Hainish Cycle spans multiple novels, including *Planet of Exile* (1966), *City of Illusions* (1967), and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which delves into the themes of gender and sexuality by introducing a world where inhabitants can change sex. The 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, another Hugo and Nebula winner, explores themes of utopia and dystopia, political systems, and personal freedom.

Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction stories not only transformed the genre but also played a pivotal role in bringing women into its mainstream. She challenged the traditional, often male-dominated narratives of science fiction, introducing complex female characters and addressing gender in ways that had not been done before. In her works, women were not relegated to passive or secondary roles, but were central to the exploration of profound social, cultural, and existential themes.

Le Guin herself commented on the role of women in science fiction in various interviews. She acknowledged that women writers had historically been marginalized in the genre, often sidelined in favor of male authors who dominated the landscape. However, Le Guin emphasized the power of science fiction as a platform for exploring alternative realities, where gender norms could be questioned and reimagined. Her creation of worlds where gender was fluid or structured differently, such as in *The Left Hand of Darkness* where the inhabitants could change sex, offered a radical departure from conventional portrayals of women in literature.

Le Guin's work provided women not only a voice in science fiction but also a space for exploring their own identities,

desires, and roles within society. By doing so, she helped pave the way for more inclusive and diverse storytelling in the genre, inspiring future generations of women writers to engage with speculative fiction and push boundaries. She says:

I think it's easier since I and my contemporaries began writing fantasy and science fiction novels that were not male centered. Obviously there is nothing inherently misogynist about fantasy on the contrary, modern imaginative literature offers the chance to imagine worlds and societies where women have a kind of power and freedom that they lack here. Girls and young women often read fantasy novels just for a glimpse of that power and freedom.

([www.swarthmon.edu/humanities/epschmidt/leguin.interv.html/](http://www.swarthmon.edu/humanities/epschmidt/leguin.interv.html/) )

*The Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (1994), a collection of eight science fiction stories by Ursula K. Le Guin, is rich with feminist metaphors, symbols, and images that critique cultural gender coding and the concept of 'otherness.' In these stories, Le Guin intertwines gender with ecology and race, using them as tools to expose the limitations of a male-dominated literary culture within science fiction. The stories explore how these themes interact and reveal the underlying societal structures that perpetuate inequalities.

Ecology in Le Guin's work is portrayed as an interconnected entity, not something to be dominated or elevated through technology or androcentrism. Her female characters maintain a deep connection to the environment, using it as a source of power and identity. This ecological consciousness reflects Le Guin's broader feminist perspective, where nature is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the shaping of gender roles and relationships.

Race is another significant issue in *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, where Le Guin addresses the concept of 'otherness'—often tied to racial identity—and its connection to gender. The stories suggest that the marginalization of women in literature mirrors the exclusion of racial minorities, with both groups being positioned as 'the other.' By drawing parallels between race and gender, Le Guin critiques how both forms of 'otherness' are treated in literature and society. The work, thus, becomes a powerful commentary on the intersectionality of oppression and the ways in which marginalized groups are depicted and understood.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's story "*The First Contact with Gornoids*", the juxtaposition of dichotomous figures, particularly through the characters of Mr. Jerry and his wife, highlights complex social and cultural conflicts. Jerry,

representing white machismo, symbolizes an insensitivity to both his wife and the world around him, including the environment and the indigenous people he encounters. His attitudes toward the natives of Australia reveal the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal systems, which are built upon the domination of women, nature, and marginalized groups such as the Aborigines.

Jerry's treatment of the natives is telling of his dehumanizing perspective. His language—"For fuck sake, you don't need fucking permission to photograph a bunch of natives"(17)—objectifies the indigenous people, reducing them to mere "crowds" or "objects" rather than recognizing their individuality and humanity. His casual, dismissive tone emphasizes the colonial mindset that perceives those outside the dominant culture as less than human, unworthy of respect or consideration.

His statement, "Going to shoot me some abos,"(15) further reveals his dehumanizing attitude toward the Aborigines, treating them as something to be hunted or conquered. This use of language reflects Jerry's sense of superiority and entitlement, mirroring the historical exploitation and degradation of native populations. Jerry stands as a cultural archetype of the arrogant, macho figure whose insensitivity and disrespect for both the environment and indigenous cultures symbolize broader patterns of exploitation. Le Guin uses Jerry's character to critique these intersecting systems of oppression, exposing how power dynamics operate through language, behavior, and cultural perceptions.

In "The First Contact with Gornoids," Jerry's colonizer attitude is not only directed at the indigenous Aborigines but is also mirrored in his treatment of his wife, Deborah. Jerry's dehumanizing perspective sees both Deborah and the natives as objects to be controlled or exploited. He views the Aborigines as little more than "show pieces to be photographed for *National Geographic*" (17), reinforcing the colonial mindset that treats marginalized groups as spectacles rather than acknowledging their agency or individuality. This objectification, however, is not limited to his view of the natives but extends to Deborah as well, as he disregards her autonomy and reduces her to a passive companion, much like the way the natives are commodified and exploited for his own purposes.

Deborah, though passively accepting of her role in the relationship, has a unique position. She holds an intuitive understanding of the world around her, which might allow her to perceive the deeper implications of Jerry's actions, both towards her and the natives. As a woman subjected to Jerry's male ego, she is herself a victim of the patriarchal system that Jerry represents. In a sense, Deborah and the indigenous characters become symbolic of the same larger

struggle—both are subject to the dominance and control exerted by Jerry's colonial and patriarchal attitude.

In contrast to Jerry's oppressive stance, the alien beings in the story, who are dressed as natives, react to the encroachment and exploitation in a way that reflects resistance to colonization. They represent the voice of the oppressed, challenging Jerry's worldview. Deborah's awareness of this, while not overtly expressed, is suggested through her silent recognition of the injustice at play. She understands, on a deeper level, that the natives' response is a reaction to the intrusion that she, too, experiences as Jerry's wife. This subtle connection between Deborah's situation and the oppression of the natives underlines the story's critique of colonialism, patriarchy, and the silencing of marginalized voices.

Le Guin herself comments on the question of the various 'others' in her essay "American Science Fiction and Others" thus:

The question involved here is the question of the other- the being who is different from yourself. This being can be different from you in its sex; or in its annual income; or in its way of speaking and dressing and doing things; or in the color of its skin, or the number of its legs and heads. In other words, there is the sexual Alien, and the social Alien, and the culture Alien, and finally the racial Alien.

([www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/title.cgi?1234.html](http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/title.cgi?1234.html) par 4)

In "Newton's Sleep," Ursula K. Le Guin explores the theme of 'otherness' through the explicit depiction of race, gender, and cultural hierarchies. The Black characters in the story are labeled as the "other," positioning them as outsiders within a society that has turned space into a domain for the affluent, predominantly white elite. The Space Program for the Elites (SPES) becomes a metaphorical space where only the privileged few—those who fit the mold of a white, affluent, and rational society—are allowed to venture, leaving marginalized groups, particularly Black people, at the periphery.

The "gut wrenching women" in the story represent another layer of alienity, as their presence in space symbolizes a kind of intrusion into the previously inaccessible realm of the elites. These women, in their physical discomfort and emotional alienation, embody the struggle of those who are relegated to the margins of society. In many ways, these women can be seen as the "space aliens" of the narrative—foreign to the hegemonic norms of the affluent society and bearing the mark of difference in their gender and race. Their discomfort, both physical and psychological, reflects

the harsh realities of living as an "other" in a world that seeks to define itself through exclusion and domination.

By linking alienity to color, gender, and the hierarchical construction of reason, Le Guin critiques how cultural, racial, and gender-based distinctions are used to assert power and maintain social structures. The narrative challenges the notion of a singular, rational "normal" identity, suggesting instead that 'otherness' is a socially constructed category that is used to dehumanize and marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant cultural, racial, or gender norms. In this way, *"Newton's Sleep"* deconstructs the very foundations of what it means to be "alien" or "other," exposing the ways in which society enforces exclusion and inequality.

The ghost figures, perceived as 'black old lady', with swaggering feet and torn up skin are described by Tresse as gut wrenching women, having an African ancestry,

She was like burned all over; shiny even her clothes burned off except a sort of a rag thing. Her breasts were like hanging there and they were weird. That used to live in Africa, that's what she looked like. Like those famine people. (37)

In *"Newton's Sleep,"* when Ike attempts to escape the powerful ecological images of "the weird old woman and the umbilicus" (28), he is essentially rejecting the deep, interconnected relationship between humanity and the environment. These images symbolize the primal and organic forces of life, which the patriarchal, racially superior society (often represented by the white characters) seeks to distance itself from in order to maintain its dominance.

The concept of 'otherness' is integral to this escape. Ike's refusal to confront these ecological images reflects a larger societal tendency, particularly within patriarchal and racially hierarchical systems, to define 'otherness' as a means of reinforcing the boundaries of identity. By labeling something or someone as 'other,' society can assert its own superiority and maintain a sense of control and separation. In this case, the environment, women, and marginalized groups (such as non-white people) are constructed as 'other'—alien, separate, and inferior to the dominant group.

The patriarchal society, in its efforts to define and regulate these 'others,' often uses them as a contrast to assert its own identity and power. The alienation of the environment, women, and racial minorities is not just about physical separation, but about conceptualizing them as 'other' to affirm the identity of the powerful. By distancing themselves from these "other" elements, characters like Ike uphold the societal structure that privileges whiteness, masculinity, and rationality, and suppresses those things deemed irrational, feminine, or nonwhite.

In this way, Le Guin critiques the role of 'otherness' in the maintenance of patriarchal and racial dominance. The very act of defining and categorizing others as inferior or separate allows those in power to reinforce their own status and privileges. The struggle against the ecological imagery, and the desire to escape it, thus becomes a metaphor for the refusal to confront these power dynamics and the ecological and social interconnectedness that threatens them.

Le Guin comments on this issue in her essay:

The white man speak with forked tongue, white man speak dichotomy. His language expresses the values of the split world, valuing the positive and devaluing the negative in each redivision: subject/object, self/other, mind/body, dominant/submissive, active/passive, man/nature, man/woman and so on. (LON 101)

In *"Shobies' Story"* and *"Dancing to Ganam,"* Ursula K. Le Guin uses the imagery of spaceships in a way that diverges from traditional depictions of space travel in science fiction. Instead of using rockets or missiles, which are often associated with technological power and military dominance, Le Guin evokes the image of a spaceship as a symbol of the female body. This metaphor carries with it connotations of bodily experiences, such as conception, childbirth, and the nurturing aspect of motherhood.

The spaceship, in this sense, is a metaphorical womb that offers warmth, comfort, and safety to the crew members as they travel to an unknown destination. It is a vessel that not only transports them physically but also shapes their emotional and psychological experiences during the journey. As they approach their new planet and prepare to land, the crew feels as though they are emerging from a maternal space into a new world—like a newborn baby coming into existence.

This metaphor highlights the connection between the spaceship and the female body, emphasizing themes of rebirth, transformation, and the continuity of life. In *"Paradise Lost"* and *"Shobies' Story,"* characters experience this profound and complex journey. As Luis describes it, the experience is "terrifying, exciting, absolute, an act of transgression, of defiance, of affirmation" (348), encapsulating the dual nature of birth—both a moment of vulnerability and immense strength. The landing on the new planet, like a child's birth, marks a new beginning, where the crew members are re-born into a different existence, linked to the cosmic journey and the physical experience of female fertility and birth.

Le Guin's use of this symbolism in feminist science fiction underscores a deeper connection between the cosmos and the body, presenting space travel as not just a journey across physical space but also a journey of personal and collective



transformation. The spaceship, as a metaphor for the womb, challenges the traditionally masculine symbols of space exploration, offering a new way to envision the relationship between bodies, technology, and the cosmos.

The science fiction written by women celebrates the freedom of expression that the genre offers, using its broad metaphoric possibilities to explore new and transformative ways of thinking. Women science fiction writers are particularly attuned to the ways in which language, when controlled by patriarchal structures, can lose its meaning and become a tool for oppression. They are conscious of how patriarchal systems distort or restrict language, stripping it of its true power and potential.

A striking example of this theme can be found in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where the Nurobls experience a direct encounter with the phenomenon of language's loss of meaning. The word "freedom," for instance, becomes "extinct" in their world, symbolizing how oppressive forces can erode and manipulate language, leading to a loss of individual and collective agency. This erasure of meaning highlights the disempowerment that results when language is co-opted by systems that seek to control and silence marginalized voices.

In response to this, feminist science fiction authors rebel against the suppression of meaning and instead attempt to reveal and reclaim the "gaps" where meaning has been repressed or lost. Through the use of metaphors, alternative linguistic structures, and creative storytelling techniques, these writers aim to reawaken the repressed psyche of women and challenge the conventional ways in which language has been shaped to reflect patriarchal power dynamics.

By inventing new linguistic tools and metaphors, feminist science fiction becomes a space for the reinvention of identity, freedom, and agency. It offers a means to break free from the constraints imposed by traditional language and opens up new possibilities for expressing experiences, desires, and worldviews that have historically been marginalized or silenced. This kind of narrative experimentation allows women writers to explore not only the social and political dimensions of gender but also the very structures of communication and understanding that shape our realities.

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