Breaking down gender binaries:

(Trans)gender experimentation in Ursula K. Le Guin's

***The Left Hand of Darkness* and Samuel R. Delany's**

Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

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Abstract

Within feminist theory, gender identity is established as a social construct that is created and maintained through language. The binary opposition male/female and its inner hierarchy of power are further conditioned by the dominant position of heterosexuality and the institution of the nuclear family in society. This literary analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* considers and compares the use of language and portrayal of sexualities for the purpose of subverting a binary gender position. Samuel R. Delany argues that science fiction literature possesses an extended range of language expressions in comparison to naturalistic genres. This dissertation shows that innovative language use is essential in order to challenge a reader's gendered perspective. The unique language capacity of science fiction is a defining part of this literary form's potential to explore difference.

The Doctor: You're a woman, Seven.

Seven of Nine: Is that an observation or a diagnosis?

Star Trek: Voyager (5:22, 1999)

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Introduction

In February of this year, Facebook launched a custom gender option containing over 50 gender categories including three options for preferred personal pronoun ('he', 'she', or neutral singular 'they') for US users to choose between. This feature received varying responses. While these options were meant to be more inclusive of users who do not identify with the traditional binary categories of 'male' and 'female', some pointed to the fact that this custom setting is in reality not completely custom as long as there exists a pre-defined list of terms. A number of these terms, such as "transgender", "bigender", or "non binary", are problematic because they are used differently between academic and non-academic communities. Unsurprisingly, this pre-defined list of custom gender terms has already been removed by Facebook. This example shows how complex the question of gender identity has proved to become, particularly in relation to language and the definition of terms.

This dissertation, titled *Breaking down gender binaries: (Trans)gender experimentation in Ursula K. Le Guin's* The Left Hand of Darkness *and Samuel R. Delany's* Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand, will explore the fact that language is not a simple tool used to communicate; rather, it actively controls our perception of the world, or gender identity in particular. Language constructs meaning through the comparison and negation of signs, and from this process a hierarchy of meaning and values is produced. Because it is such a basic component of our everyday lives, language's dynamic and artificial nature is often taken for granted. The consequence is that language is allowed freedom to construct and dictate the way we think about and relate to people and our surroundings. Gender identity, along with the very perception of 'self', is and will continue to be a product of social construction, created and conditioned by language. Samuel Delany argues that science fiction (SF) literature has a potential greater range of language expressions compared to the other naturalistic genres, because there exist language expressions and interpretations which are available only within a SF setting. SF is a speculative mode of fiction; it misrepresents the world deliberately in order to provoke questions about our present real-life conditions. Alien creatures and worlds, which readers have to actively construct from the text, are clever encodings of ourselves and our society. This construction of meaning in SF requires a set of reading conventions separate from those of naturalistic literature. SF literature invites the reader to consider contemporary issues from a different perspective, which is why it is important to ask the work real questions during the reading process.

Feminist critics argue that the existence and hierarchal nature of the binary gender opposition male/female are conditioned by heterosexuality's dominant position as the sexual norm. The heterosexual relationship with its nuclear family structure requires certain gender identities and sexualities to not exist, because the heteronormative position relies on fertile relationships between males and females where each family member fulfills their role. A transgendered lifestyle poses a threat to the traditional family ideal because it undermines its presumed natural position; it subverts the tradition and significance of life events such as birth, marriage, reproduction, and death which social and religious institutions have regulated for years using a heterosexual framework. Consequently, experimentation involving gender identity should include a challenge to heterosexuality's dominant position alongside a manipulation of language.

The Left Hand of Darkness and *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* invite the reader to explore gender identity in different settings. *Left Hand* introduces the idea of an androgynous hermaphroditic humanity. The Gethenians are biological hermaphrodites: while sexually mature they assume male or female sex only during a few days each month (period of "kemmer"). Gethenian individuals have no predisposition towards assuming either sexual role, meaning they normally get to experience both a male and female perspective on several occasions throughout their lifetime. Furthermore, a Gethenian that is outside kemmer will still have latent feminine and masculine characteristics and should not be thought of as gender-neutral but rather as an androgynous 'manwoman'. Because of the limitations within traditional language the idea of an androgynous humanity proves extremely challenging for the reader to relate to, in the sense that he or she is always inclined perceive a Gethenian character as either predominantly feminine or masculine. Ursula Le Guin chose a narrative voice that uses masculine terms as an intended neutral default and did not attempt to redefine any gendered terms as the reader knows them. This allows the reader to safely maintain his or her gendered perspective throughout the novel, and as a result it is impossible to imagine most of the Gethenian characters as anything else but male. In Le Guin's later revisit to Gethen, the short story "Coming of Age in Karhide", she is more careful about the use of personal pronouns and other gendered terms. This change proves important for the reader to experience the Gethenians as female as well as male, even if the experience of a truly androgynous humanity remains unavailable.

Stars in My Pocket has a different approach to language. In the novel's fictional language, Arachnia, the semantic meaning of certain key gendered terms such as the personal pronouns and 'woman' is changed in a manner which makes the reader struggle with his or

her own inner process of applying gender identities to characters. While the reader will feel inclined to inappropriately identify a Gethenian character as either male or female due to Le Guin's language expressions, Delany's approach subverts the position of biological sex entirely. The interruption of this inner labelling process encourages the reader to question his or her own gendered perspectives. *Stars in My Pocket* refers to several cultures and worlds which have different expressions and social norms related to gender, family structure, and sexuality. Some cultures are patriarchal in the sense that they value the nuclear family structure and stigmatize certain sexual behaviours. These are in contrast with social structures in the main narrator's home city known as "streams", family structures based solely on love or emotional bonds, and "runs", designated areas where humans and aliens participate in all kinds of sexual activities of preference. As Delany puts these different social attitudes and ideas side by side the reader is invited to question the presumed naturalness of the heteronormative gender identities and how these are influenced by a hierarchy of power within social relations (romantic relationships, family) and language.

Because I deal with several characters who cannot be identified as either male or female, and in spirit of exploring innovative language which aims at moving away from the binary male/female alternatives, I will adopt the neutral pronoun of singular 'they' throughout the rest of this dissertation when I refer to such characters or a general reader. Besides the fact that this choice of pronoun has practical purposes, it will serve as an additional example to underline the issue of how awkward traditional language can become in a setting where it is preferable to stay gender-neutral. Because this type of neutral form is as of yet not officially established in the English language, I have chosen to maintain the plural grammatical agreement forms ('they are', 'themselves') because my attempt at using singular agreement ('they is', 'themself') was simply too jarring.

The first chapter clarifies the theoretical framework connected to gender identity as a social construct, which is created and maintained by language, and SF's characteristics as a speculative genre with an extended range of language expressions. As the Facebook-example and my reading of *Left Hand* display, language can place limitations on our understanding of gender identity in the sense that we quickly find ourselves at a loss when trying to accurately define someone's gender position. There are several factors (such as biological sex, personality, or sexual preferences) that should be included, but some of these factors are easily neglected within a heteronormative tradition. On the other hand, Delany's manipulation of semantic meaning shows how language also can be used to work towards destabilising a reader's gendered perspective. In *Stars in My Pocket*, the personal pronouns are defined by

the speaker's object of sexual desire rather than biological sex. The reader has to make themselves accustomed to the dynamics of the speaker's sexual desire if the reader wants to make sense of the events and characters. Because the main narrative voice belongs to a homosexual male, the text creates a "queer space" where the reader has to assume a homosexual perspective, in contrast to a heteronormative perspective, as the dominant norm. Overall, my readings of the respective SF works in this dissertation confirm that SF literature has an extended capacity for language expressions and exploring difference which cannot be found in naturalistic literature.

Chapter 1: Gender, Sexuality, Language, and Science Fiction

Contemporary feminist literary criticism evolved from the women's movement which started its major political momentum in the late 1960s (Rivkin and Ryan, "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms" 765). This movement is often termed "the second wave"[1] and was organized around Women's Liberation. Women, unsurprisingly, ultimately proved a diverse group in terms of political interests. The feminist movement divided into several branches which grew in different directions (Tolan 319). Two main perspectives dominated the critics' discussions: essentialist and constructivist. The essentialists believed women to be psychologically different from men, due to the fact that they are biologically different. They wanted to celebrate these differences in order to strengthen the feminine position. To deny a fundamental emotional or psychological femininity could perpetuate women's assimilation into masculine society. On the other hand, constructivists believed the idea of gender to be a cultural construct. From this perspective the essentialists were taking an effect to be a cause, which potentially reinforces a misogynistic belief system that has traditionally excluded women (Rivkin and Ryan, "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms" 766-8; Tolan 322-5).

The idea of gender identities being constructed through language and social interaction comes from arguments within the fields of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer theory during the twentieth century (Hall 105-6; Rivkin and Ryan, "Introductory Deconstruction" 257-61; Tolan 332-8). This constructivist perspective on gender stands, due to its support from numerous theoretical fields, as the final most widely established feminist theory. Today's feminists, within the movement loosely organised as "third-wave feminism", are primarily concerned with the variety of ways to live as a woman and the differences between women. Because the idea of 'woman' is a social construct there is no universal way to live as a feminist. What emerges from these writers are not new theories of difference but descriptions of different possible lifestyles (Hekman 100). Based on these works' focus on innovative language use and inclusion of non-heteronormative sexualities and relationships, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) and "Coming of Age in Karhide" (1995) display a clearly established constructivist perspective on gender identity. *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) does not prioritise manipulation of language or undermine heteronormativity to the same extent. The experiences and growth of the novel's Terran narrator, Genly Ai, suggest a constructivist approach as his understanding of gender is shown to be culturally contingent and subject to change. On the other hand, the novel's focus on balancing dualisms,

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[1] The first wave dated from 1830 to 1920 and is best recalled for the suffragette movement (Tolan 319).

masculinity and femininity as different but complementary concepts, could be argued to support an essentialist perspective as this works towards maintaining dualistic oppositions rather than showing these binaries to be constructed.

The term "science fiction" has been commonly referred to as a literary genre since the 1920s (Roberts 2-3). Formulating a concise definition of SF has proven difficult. In fact, there "is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of [SF] will ever be established" (Clute and Nicholls 314). SF literature has been described as "speculative fiction" on the grounds that SF works often provide the reader with various 'what if?' scenarios, for example: what if people did not have permanent biological sexes (like the Gethenians)? The setting and/or characters often resemble real-life conditions but with certain crucial differences which serve as "cognitive estrangement"[2] for the reader. The estrangement or alienation encourages the reader to question the implications of the differences between the fictional and the real world. Since SF is speculative, a literature of anticipation or change, this may be precisely why it evades a concise definition: as a literature of change SF itself is continually changing (Mendlesohn 3-5; Roberts 5-10; Gunn, "Introduction" ix-xi).

The difference between *Left Hand* and *Stars in My Pocket* in terms of feminist approaches could be attributed to their 15-year gap. Neither of these works read as particularly concerned with the third-wave feminist idea of different lifestyles, even if the variety of cultures on the different worlds in *Stars in My Pocket* could be said to offer something in this regard. The sense of contemporary feminist lifestyles as diversified may overall be more prominent in more recent SF publications. For example, in Charles Stross's *Glasshouse* (2006) individuals in the twenty-seventh century are put inside an isolated dome to participate in a scientific experiment meant to study the period around the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In this project, certain social behaviours are awarded points while others subtract points. The male protagonist, whose consciousness is stored inside a female body, struggles with conforming to the experiment's social ideals which read as primarily heteronormative. Because the issue of language use and the position of heteronormativity are central to the experimentation with gender identity in both *Stars in My Pocket* and *Left Hand*, this dissertation is primarily concerned with constructivist feminism as a theoretical background.

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[2] A term established by Darko Suvin, Roberts refers to: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979).

1.1 Language Speaks Us

Judith Butler argues that gender categories are "linguistically constituted, rather than naturally given", which in turn implies that "the way of approaching change and transformation is through language and signification" (Jagger 7). The idea that selfhood is an illusion produced by language is at the core of the poststructuralist perspective. Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism states that language is made up of signs that may be divided into a signifier (an acoustic or written image) and signified (the mental concept), and that a particular sign gets its meaning only because of its difference from every other sign. Children's language acquisition provides good examples of how this works. A child might point to a cow and apply the signifier 'dog' because they associate four legs, a tail, and fur (a signified) to the cow. However, once the child is corrected and given a more suitable signifier 'cow' they will start to notice specific elements which separate the signifieds (horns, hoofs, size). The terms 'dog' and 'cow' only make sense when we are able to tell the difference between their signifieds. Poststructuralism does not accept a distinction between signifiers and signifieds. This means that words are concepts, and concepts are words. Jacques Derrida, as the most prominent theorist within the poststructuralist perspective, argues that writing is the very origin of meaning. We do not simply use language as a tool to describe our surroundings. Language takes an active role in constructing our very understanding of the world, which includes abstract concepts such as the perception of 'self' or identity (Klages 88-9; Malpas and Wake 173-4; Scott 282-4).

Derrida still maintains that language rests on difference as the origin of sense. Meaning is established through implicit or explicit contrast, which means that a sign is frequently compared to other signs. Derrida believes this creates a system of binary oppositions where a sign is defined through the negation of a different sign, for example presence/absence. These terms are interdependent in the sense that one term is defined as part of the other term through negation. As meaning is made through negation and comparison this interdependence is also hierarchical: in a binary the first term is ranked as superior to the other term which is subordinate and secondary (Malpas and Wake 261; Scott 285-6). To provide a gender-related example: the work of Michel Foucault clearly outlines the existence and nature of a power hierarchy between sexualities, where the dominance of the heterosexual position is shown to be constructed and maintained through language use. During the nineteenth century the social sciences worked with classification systems in order to describe differences between people based on characteristics related to sexuality, race, or gender. Every individual was examined and valued against the presumed norm: the heterosexual

white man. In this way, science was working towards tracking down all causes and qualities of deviance. The social sciences labelled all non-heterosexual behaviour as perversions or diseases. Foucault wanted to make the social sciences recognise that the use of classification systems always produces a hierarchy where each category is valued against a dominant term. In reality, it was modern society's use of these categories which constructed the idea of perversions (Foucault 892-8; Hall 105-6; Purvis 433-5).

Hélène Cixous believes this system of binary oppositions in language has important implications for gender identity. She argues for a ripple effect in terms of our understanding of masculinity/femininity: as meaning is established through contrasting the signs we know, signs become connected in unexpected ways. Because of this, sexual difference becomes tied to signs that are literally unrelated to gender or the body. Meanings of gender become associated with cultural representations that in turn establish terms by which relations between men and women are organised and understood (Moi 102-3; Scott 285). In short, this argument explains why there are hobbies, occupations, and behaviours which are thought of as either feminine or masculine even if the terms themselves are unrelated to biological sex. A similar argument has been made concerning the heterosexual/homosexual opposition in language (Sedgwick 912-7).

Approaches towards destabilising these binary oppositions rely primarily on playing with or manipulating language in a way that reveals the interdependence between these "seemingly dichotomous terms and their meaning [as] relative to a particular history. It shows them to be not natural but constructed oppositions" (Scott 286)[3]. Julia Kristeva argues that there are two opposing states of language, which she terms the "semiotic" and the "symbolic". The semiotic is the only state of language present during a child's pre-linguistic period, while a child's acquisition of a formal language marks the establishment of the symbolic state. The symbolic is language as it is constructed within a social order, but the establishment of the symbolic state does not completely erase the semiotic. The semiotic, instinctive or innate language, is repressed and controlled but it also has the capacity to disrupt the symbolic (Moi 97-8; Tolan 334-5). Poetic language in particular allows the semiotic to surface, by "disrupting the normative system of signification based on communicability, and bringing forth the usually unintelligible semiotic energy, poetry cannot only create new and possibly subversive

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[3] Obviously, what people think of as masculine and feminine throughout history and even at present in different parts of the world is quite different. This underlines the fact that these categories are socially constructed and their meaning may be altered. Destabilising language by showing ambiguities and allowing the binary terms to collapse into each other is known as "deconstruction" (Klages 55-61).

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meanings, but can also encourage the reconfiguration of subjectivity" (Malpas and Wake 215).

Creative use of language is central to Cixous' concepts of *écriture féminine* and "other bisexuality". *Écriture féminine* is a feminine style of writing: because masculinity is dominant in linear and authoritative language the feminine voice has the possibility to express itself through a change of rhythm, silences, puns, and new images. Due to its irregularity, a text using *écriture féminine* may be frustrating to read because it often comes across as partly incomprehensible. Rather than exhausting yourself by trying to bring complete order to a text which is not meant to adhere to the rules of traditional language in the first place, *écriture féminine* should be valued as a political style in its attempt to challenge the way we think about and use language in literature (Tolan 335-7; Malpas and Wake 180). *Écriture féminine* is not meant for female writers exclusively. Cixous promotes "other bisexuality" as a position which is characterised by multiplicity as it is changing and non-exclusive of one sex. "Other bisexuality" does not annul gender differences, but stirs them up and explores them (Moi 106-8). In short, what Cixous seeks to advocate through her concepts of *écriture féminine* and "other bisexuality", is that writers should attempt to subvert the idea of masculine and feminine writing as connected to either male or female authors, and instead focus on creating a multitude of gender expressions in language. If this is achieved, the hierarchical structure between binary oppositions will collapse and our understanding of masculinity/femininity has to change (Klages 104). The foundation for working with language in innovative ways is argued to be particularly solid in science fiction literature. Because SF settings offer an extended range of language expressions in comparison to naturalistic fiction, Samuel Delany argues that SF as a form of literature occupies a creative position which is closer to poetry than other prose fiction genres within the context of a linguistically creative space (Cheney xxxii).

The prose genre SF is most frequently associated with is fantasy. The crucial distinction between the two is that works of fantasy literature create their own worlds and laws; the reader is aware that the events in a fantasy work 'could not have happened' in the real world. SF, on the other hand, accepts the real world and its laws and the events must be read as 'not having happened'. SF consciously misrepresents the world, "it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present" (Delany, "Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction" 291). Consequently, because SF applies to the real world it is important to ask the work real questions during the reading process (Delany, *Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* 44; Gunn, "Toward a Defini-

tion of Science Fiction" 9-12; Cheney xxii; Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* xvi). Delany uses the term "mundane fiction", from Latin *mundus* meaning 'the world', to describe other genres of prose fiction. Mundane fiction takes place in the reader's regular world while SF takes the reader's world and changes something in it, such as introducing aliens or advanced technology. The combination of realistic and fictitious aspects potentially presents a richness of possible interpretations[4]. Language expressions easily become untrustworthy in this context because the reader needs to decode the cultural norms and establish which laws of physics apply (Delany, *Starboard Wine* 68; Mendlesohn 5-6).

Consider the example 'then her world exploded': in a non-SF work this would be strictly read as a metaphor of an emotional experience, while in SF this sentence could be either literal or metaphorical because the character's planet could have exploded. Expressions appearing in mundane literature could potentially change its meaning in a SF work, but they would still convey *a* meaning. On the other hand, there are numerous sentences and language expressions which work in SF but that could never work in mundane fiction (Delany *Starboard Wine* 68-9). As an example, you would never see a sentence like this in a non-SF work: "Not another kemmering-son, of which he already had seven, but an heir of the body, king-son. The king was pregnant" (Le Guin *The Left Hand of Darkness* 80).

In short, SF literature possesses a greater range of language expressions compared to mundane fiction. This permits SF works to access the semiotic language state, which in turn challenges the reader's understanding of gender identity. My readings of *Left Hand* and *Stars in My Pocket* will show significant differences in creative language use connected to narrative perspective. *Stars in My Pocket*, along with "Coming of Age", is told from the perspective of a character who is either physically alien or who belongs to an alien culture. Because of this, new words and language expressions are naturally incorporated in the stories. Delany experiments with the use of gendered terms such as 'woman', 'she', and 'he' which frustrates the reader's accustomed method of assigning characters to specific gender categories. In *Left Hand*, Ursula Le Guin wanted to eliminate gender (Le Guin "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" 10) but due to her choices of perspective and language expressions, several critics are unable to see the Gethenians as truly androgynous. In their different ways, both novels show how 'language speaks us' in terms of gender identity.

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[4] The argument about SF having a greater range of expressions does not imply that it is superior to mundane fiction, only that they are different forms of literature (Delany, *Starboard Wine* 69).

1.2 The Heterosexual Hegemony

In modern culture sexual behaviour is often not related to reproduction, sometimes not even pleasure, but rather to forms of social dominance. Considering that there have traditionally been strong links between sexual activities and notions of morality (Klages 115) it becomes obvious that sexuality and biological sex should be understood as separate categories. Gender theory, theory about the way gender identity is structured, must therefore concern itself with both sexuality theory or queer theory[5] and feminist theory (Hall 102-3). The issue is that categories of sexuality and biological sex are frequently thought of as interchangeable because the social norm is to announce your sexual orientation based on your own and other people's biological sex. Today, "transgender" is the most commonly applied term to those who do not align themselves with the heteronormative definition of gender identity. As an umbrella term it is greatly contested because the individuals who use it to describe themselves often mean quite different things, and as a consequence the term is defined and used inconsistently between academic and non-academic communities. This is most likely the reason why Facebook developers felt it was necessary to provide as many as more than 50 other gender categories besides "transgender" in their ultimately unsuccessful attempt at creating a pre-defined gender list for their users (Bradic; Weber and Oremus; Williams). In this dissertation I choose to apply the term "transgender" in a very wide sense: "to refer to individuals whose gender identity or expression does not conform to the social expectations for their assigned sex at birth" (Love 149-50)[6]. In addition, I use the term "genderqueer" to specify how a reader's heteronormative perception might be challenged or queered by these SF works.

Exploration and experimentation are central parts of SF's core trope: the alien encounter, or the confrontation with Other. This direct access to exploring Otherness gives the potential to symbolically code marginal experiences, such as being female, homosexual, or any form of transgender identity (Mendlesohn 5; Roberts 16-30). The 70s witnessed an outbreak of a gender war within this genre which initially was perceived as strictly masculine. Since then feminist SF has evolved into being one of the most vigorous aspects of the mode both in terms of texts and criticism (Roberts 91; Nixon 219). Aliens in SF "are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one" (Suvin 25). As speculative fiction, the SF setting

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[5] The term "queer" is associated with non-heterosexual behaviour. However, queer theory as a field considers all categories, both normative and deviant, connected to sexual activities and identities (Klages 117).
[6] Love uses the definition from: Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang and Shannon Price Minter, "Introduction", in *Transgender Rights* (2006), Eds. Currah, Juang and Minter. p. xiv.

is meant to make the reader experience their own reality in a way that scrutinizes contemporary issues. With regard to gender identity in particular, the figure of the cyborg[7] has become an important boundary figure within cultural studies. As a hybrid of social reality (human or animal) and fiction (machine), the cyborg provides new ways to think about how the relation between culture and technology influences our understanding of gender identity (Kirkup xiii; Haraway 7-13). Donna Haraway refers to SF writers as "theorists for cyborgs" (31). As a hybrid figure the cyborg functions as a transgressor of the presumed boundaries in culture and language:

> they are not like us, and yet just like us. Formed through a radical disruption of otherness, cyborg identity foregrounds the constructedness of otherness. Cyborgs alert us to the ways culture and discourse depend upon notions of "the other" that are arbitrary and binary, and also shifting and unstable. (Balsamo 155)

Essentially, as an alien figure the cyborg is particularly concerned with the constructed nature of Otherness. As a literary device the cyborg proves the binary notion of Other to be arbitrary and unstable. However, even if the term "cyborg" brings up associations with machines the notion of constructed Otherness is in reality much more comprehensive and does not have to be explicitly related to any kinds of technology (after all, technologies are per definition objects of artificial construction). In both *Left Hand* and *Stars in My Pocket* there are characters with heteronormative identities (Genly Ai, members of the Thant family) and those who would be termed transgendered (the Gethenians, Marq Dyeth). The presence of conventional gender and transgender identities side by side questions the presumed naturalness and neutrality of what the reader associates with men, women, and sexuality. The transgendered characters function as cyborg figures who invite the reader to assume a genderqueer position.

In terms of subverting the binary gender opposition, a genderqueer position is essential because it undermines the heterosexual position which Butler argues to be the main force behind the construction and maintenance of binary gender identities (male/female). Butler believes that the concept of gender identity has relied on the heterosexualisation of desire to become intelligible: it requires certain kinds of sexual identities to not exist (*Gender Trouble* 24). Judith Halberstam writes that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather

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[7] Introduced in Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" essay first published in 1985, *Socialist Review*.

than as a way of having sex"[8]. Alternative gender identities and their sexualities are threatening because they destabilise the presumed natural order of a person's life experience; specifically by rejecting conventions around life events such as birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (2). These are markers which connect "the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability" (Halberstam 5). To question the presumed natural order of human existence around which national, religious, and other social institutions have constructed their own laws and regulations is deeply unsettling to many. This is why transgendered people experience persecution: there is still fear of a destabilisation which will lead to some kind of social anarchy.

By rejecting any connection between the categories of masculine and feminine as an articulation of biological sex (known as the essentialist feminist position), Butler severs the presumed natural connection between sexuality and gender. By implication, heterosexuality is turned into a fictional ideal (Jagger 1-4). Like Foucault, Butler argues that when sexuality becomes implicated in social norms "it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognisably human and who does not" (*Undoing Gender* 2). The history of labelling homosexuality as a disease or perversion resulted in a dehumanisation of homosexuals. SF literature revolves around provoking questions about the human condition in the form of the alien encounter or the use of cyborg figures, which is why the SF genre has grown popular among writers who wish to explore the marginalisation of specific groups of people.

At the same time, the mere "inclusion of gay and lesbian characters or issues does not make a text queer". A text should work towards re-writing "the assumptions within the show of the naturalness, endurance, and fixity of our current understandings of sexuality" (Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer" 2). Despite the explosion of feminist SF works since the 70s, in terms of sexuality most SF works read as overwhelmingly 'straight'. Without challenging the heterosexual ideal a work's critique often maintains the masculine/feminine divide (Hollinger 24-5). The possibilities of queering the text are constrained only by the logic of extrapolation and the limits of the author's imagination (Pearson, "Science Fiction and Queer Theory" 149-56). Underestimating the heteronormative ideal's influence on the reader's gendered perspective, particularly in terms of language and sexuality, proves to be Le Guin's most significant flaw in *Left Hand*. Sex acts were excluded

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[8] Halberstam cites this from Foucault. "Friendship as a Way of Life.". *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984* (1996). Ed. S. Lotringer, p. 204-12.

from the novel; and, more importantly, because Genly Ai has the dominant narrative perspective, we see the Gethenians through his masculine perspective which makes it impossible to imagine even Estraven, as the lead Gethenian character, as anything else but male. "Coming of Age" takes the reader to the inside of a kemmerhouse, where Sov participates in a larger spectrum of homosexual and heterosexual activities. A bisexual approach has the advantage of countering the heterosexual/homosexual binary of sexual orientation (Latham 555). The Gethenians as portrayed in *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age" combined prove to a certain extent to be true representatives of Cixous' "other bisexuality": non-exclusive of either sex or sexual orientation. I will argue that even if the reader learns to relate to the Gethenians as both feminine and masculine, they are still inclined to think of a specific Gethenian character as either female or male. In *Stars in My Pocket*, the combination of Marq Dyeth's narrative perspective as a homosexual male and the Arachnian language makes it possible for Delany to create a "queer space" that subverts the heteronormative position to an extent where the reader is unable to decide whether they experience characters whose gender identity is not revealed as either male or female. This displays a different example of "other bisexuality", in the sense that Delany manages to be non-exclusive to the point where the reader is left undecided.

1.3 Summary

The constructivist feminist perspective establishes gender identity as a social construct. Because a sign has to be contrasted with other signs in order to gain meaning, language constructs meaning within a system of signs. In this system terms, especially abstract concepts such as 'masculinity' and 'femininity', become linked in unexpected ways that potentially creates a power hierarchy between them. A binary (male/female) gender position is created by the heterosexual ideal: in order to establish its dominant position in society, heterosexuality requires certain gender positions to not exist. To make the reader question the validity of the heteronormative position as an innate part of human nature, a literary work can undermine the heterosexual position by using language in innovative ways and assume a genderqueer position. Science fiction literature is speculative fiction: through confrontations with Otherness the reader is invited to consider social issues from new perspectives. As a form of literature SF occupies a position closer to poetry than other mundane fiction, because the SF setting offers an extended range of language expressions. My reading of Le Guin's works shows how language might trap the reader to inappropriately identify characters as either 'man' or 'woman', which proves the significance language has in relation to our

understanding of gender. In comparison, *Stars in My Pocket*'s approach to language should be seen as more aggressive. The reader is denied immediate access, traditionally given by personal pronouns and gendered nouns, to a character's biological sex. Delany's establishment of a "queer space" in the text proves that he is able to practice what he preaches in relation to SF as distinguished from mundane fiction.

Chapter 2: *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Left Hand (1969) is a pioneer feminist science fiction novel which has undergone a remarkable journey in terms of criticism, ranging from dismissal to admiration from a feminist literary point of view. As Christine Cornell puts it, "varying critical responses are nothing new, but with this novel there is no agreement on central themes or even the basic trajectory of the plot" (317). This chapter includes differing critical responses in order to pinpoint what Ursula Le Guin wanted to achieve with her hermaphrodites and how the reader ultimately perceived this idea. The Gethenians have a unique physiology which make them people who are without gender for more than three quarters of their lifetime. As sexually mature they have a monthly cyclic hormone phase which is called "kemmer". During this period of estrus an individual may assume either a female or a male sexual role. No Gethenian has any natural predisposition to either role, but is likely to be influenced to take on the opposite role if they interact with someone already in kemmer and who has assumed a sexual role (*Left Hand* 72-3). The Gethenians[1] are cyborg figures, their nature allow them to transgress the boundaries of gender identity which potentially challenges a reader's understanding of gender. In terms of language, traditional English gendered pronouns and nouns come short when dealing with these aliens.

The two main points of discussion are first, the novel's masculine language as projected by Genly Ai, the dominant narrative voice, and second, how this in combination with the lack of bisexual expression contribute towards a heterosexualisation of the Gethenians. In later years, Le Guin stated that underestimating the effect of her choice of perspective and not exploring the Gethenians' sexual nature was regrettable ("Redux" 14-15). To provide another glimpse of the Gethenians she published "Coming of Age in Karhide". In this short story, we follow young Sov's entry into adolescence and their[2] first visit to a kemmerhouse. In "Coming of Age", the emphasis on Gethenian language terms and the usage of pronouns along with the inclusion of Gethenian sexual culture inside the kemmerhouse, prove essential for the reader to experience the Gethenians as feminine as well as masculine.

Genly's journey from Karhide to Orgoreyn and back again across the Gobrin Ice and his relationship to Therem Estraven display a growth process comparable to that of a

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[1] Gethenians are part of the Hain, an originary (human) race that has spread out across the galaxy, and this novel belongs to Le Guin's Hainish cycle (Bernardo and Murphy 19). Gethenians are referred to as "human" several times in the novel, but I will only use the term "human" about human beings with gender. "Person" and "people" include both regular humans and the Gethenians.

[2] As the Gethenians are neither male nor female, I will, as stated in the introduction, refer to any individual as 'they' in the third person. This is regardless of Le Guin's particular choices in either of the two works.

Bildungsroman (Bickman 42). In combination with the movement between these three main locations the novel draws on two dominant image patterns, Warm (darkness, fire, Karhide, Handdara) and Cold (light, ice, Orgoreyn, Yomesh), which is related to Gethen's cold climate and the differences between the two nations and their religions[3] (Lake 156-60). Through Genly's gendered perspective, the Warm pattern is associated with femininity while the Cold is associated with masculinity (Bickman 43-4; Marcellino 206-7). Karhide and the Handdara are loosely organised institutions which reside in the shadows (*Left Hand* 2-5, 9, 44, 57, 235), while Orgoreyn and the Yomesh are strictly united, totalitarian, and strive to eliminate darkness (38, 49, 65, 93, 131-3). Because all meaning within language is constructed through negation and comparison of terms which are consequently structured into a hierarchy of values, the reader will perceive the nation of order as masculine while Karhide becomes its opposite: the feminine nation of disorder[4].

Furthermore, David Lake argues that Yomesh Orgoreyn is not simply Handdara Karhide's opposition but its negation. Karhide and the Handdara do not demand complete darkness even if they lean towards darkness in the light/darkness dualism, while Orgoreyn and the Yomesh do not accept darkness at all (156-9). This rejection of balance, of Other, nurtures conflict which is not over until the Other is eliminated. The need for balance is an important theme in the novel (Bernardo and Murphy 30), and this includes the balance of femininity and masculinity which the Gethenians are an embodiment of. In her response to her critics, Le Guin emphasises the lack of interdependence as the ultimate curse between men and women:

> Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin and the moralization of yang as good, of yin as bad. Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. ("Redux" 16, brackets and emphasis removed from original)

Genly and Estraven are finally able to reach an understanding as they must cooperate to survive while crossing the Gobrin Ice. The Gobrin Ice is geographically set between the nations of Karhide and Orgoreyn, and in more metaphorical terms it is the location where the opposing forces of volcanic fire and glacier ice (*Left Hand* 179, 88), Warm pattern and Cold pattern, exist side by side. As Estraven enters the hormone phase of kemmer inside the tent,

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[3] For details on how to trace these patterns in the novel, see Lake's article in its entirety.
[4] It is important to note that these patterns are not absolute, even if dominant. For example, there are feminine aspects to the Yomesh religion. Meshe, their Messiah figure, is referred to as having breasts and milk (*Left Hand* 68, 94, 112, 17). Such androgynous twists should be expected when dealing with a hermaphroditic species.

he is drawn to assume the female gender because of the presence of Genly. For the first time, Genly has to face his companion as a female and acknowledge Estraven as a 'manwoman'. Their new bond is enforced by their overlapping narrative voices, and the two characters display a physical and mental need for interdependence (Bickman 44-5; *Left Hand* 189-91, 201-3, 06, 08, 15; Marcellino 205-6).

As an alien figure, who even transforms into something quite similar to a human female, Estraven becomes encoded as 'woman' in the text. To overcome the division between 'man' and 'woman' the two characters have to figure out how to balance their differences. However, maintaining dualist patterns in order to advocate interdependency does very little to escape or redefine gender categories. Drawing on a reader's associations with masculinity and femininity makes the reader project gender identities on to a text where gender as they know it is supposed to be absent. This could be considered a strength and a weakness of the novel at the same time. The reader experiences the same difficulties as Genly does as an envoy to this strange world. They relate to him and follow his development. When Genly returns to Karhide and the Ekumen disembark he realises that his own people seem alien to him: the men and women look like animals of two different species (*Left Hand* 241). After being isolated on a planet with hermaphrodites, Genly acknowledges how unnaturally defined and removed from each other the two genders are. On the other hand, prioritising Genly's experiences and perspective throughout the novel is likely the main reason why the bisexual nature of the Gethenians remains anonymous. Genly's language and gendered projection on the Gethenians make it difficult to think of them, even Estraven who is a central character assuming female form, of anything else than male. In addition, their bisexual nature seems passive or is perceived as strictly heterosexual because there are no actual sexual activities in the novel. The significance of masculine language and passive sexuality in terms of exploring transgender identities becomes clear in comparing *Left Hand* to "Coming of Age", and later *Stars in My Pocket*, where we benefit from the Other's perspective, which uses playful language expressions, in combination with a clearer focus on sexualities which undermine the heterosexual norm.

2.1 Projecting Genly Ai's voice

Genly Ai arrives alone on Gethen because his position as Envoy is a "one-*man* job [...] the first news from the Ekumen on any world is spoken by *one voice*" (22, emphasis added). This is the principle he assumes when making his report, the novel, about his stay and experiences

while evaluating the Gethenians as future allies. He presents the reader immediately with a warning to remind them of how choice of perspective influences 'truth':

> Truth is a matter of the imagination. [...] 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)

Genly has assembled reports from other characters, notably Estraven and Oppong, along with various mythical stories from Gethenian culture, which together with his own personal accounts make up *Left Hand* (Bernardo and Murphy 28-9*)*. This allows him to colour the story, or more specifically, to project his language and ideas onto these aliens and their alien culture. Despite having opportunity to edit himself when narrating through the mode of retrospection, Genly chooses to use terms and a point of view he is more familiar with. He does not introduce Gethenian-specific pronouns or change gendered nouns:

> I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian *first as a man*, then as a *woman*, forcing *him* into those categories so irrelevant to *his* nature and *so essential to my own.* (9-10, emphasis added)

Genly explicitly admits that he is at a loss in trying to relate to and comprehend these hermaphrodites. He is compelled to apply the gender categories he is familiar with in order to make sense of his new surroundings. But of course, those categories and the social implications they contain are meaningless to the Gethenians. This is equally difficult for Oppong, the only female narrator in the novel:

> I must say 'he', for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me to continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman. (76)

What is crucial to take note of in this quotation is that Oppong slightly contradicts herself. She claims the masculine pronoun is less specific than the feminine or neuter alternatives, but next she admits that it controls her thinking because she starts seeing the Karhiders as men. This suggests that the use of masculine terms is far more specific than what Oppong claims.

Interestingly, Le Guin went through the exact same arguments in her response essays to critics regarding *Left Hand*. In the original "Is Gender Necessary?" (1976) essay, Le Guin

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rejected using generic 'he' as important but agreed that the feminine elements of the Gethenians were disappointingly absent. In the revised "Redux" (1987) version of the essay, however, she has a change of heart regarding the pronouns: "If I had realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been 'cleverer'" ("Redux" 15). Nearly 20 years later, Le Guin echoes her own character. She admits to having been a victim of patriarchal discourse: unable to break free from or even be conscious of its forces. This displays a direct connection between gender identities and language. It is an example of how central and yet hidden gender implications may be, as both reader and writer prove to be conditioned by their gendered perspectives.

The masculine preference is clear because all gendered terms, pronouns, and nouns which should have been neutral, due to the Gethenians bisexual nature, instead are masculine. The defaults are "he", "him", "his", "brother", "son", "man", "king", or "workmen" (*Left Hand* 2-4, 18, 244). Unless a Gethenian is a female in kemmer, Genly uses references to the feminine in order to describe personality characteristics which are often negative: "Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him [Estraven]?" (10); "[The king] laughed shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused" (25); "I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature" (39). Similar masculine preference is also present in Estraven's chapters and in Oppong's report (58-61, 72-8). The fact that Genly uses feminine terms in negative settings underlines the extent he feels removed from the female. He admits to be conscious of his own awkward relation to the feminine, as he admits to Estraven that "women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow" (191). In this scene Genly explicitly articulates the concept of the feminine encoded as alien. Even if he never encounters a regular human woman before the end of this story, he must still face his own gendered perception by learning to know the Gethenians.

Despite its implicit misogynistic nature, Genly's language and narrative voice are not static throughout the novel. Genly's relationship to the Gethenians as a whole may be traced down to his personal understanding of Estraven, who is the single Gethenian representative in charge of evaluating and taking care of the Envoy. Initially, during their interactions in Karhide and then Orgoreyn, their relationship is affected by a number of misunderstandings which can attributed to differences in codes of communication (*Left Hand* 69-71, 121, 29-30, 60-2). Estraven as a Karhider has a social code, "shifgrethor", which makes it rude to give another person direct advice (11, 202) and this results in an indirect communication pattern. Victoria Myers conducts a speech-act analysis of the novel. In all communication, under-

standing between speaker and listener is achieved when the listener comprehends the speaker's intention behind the speech-act. Myers underlines the fact that Genly does not have shifgrethor nor does he fully grasp its function in communication. As a consequence, he is frequently annoyed at Estraven because of their vagueness which makes it difficult for Genly to trust them (307-10). In the communication between Genly and Estraven there are discrepancies because they belong to cultures which are ruled by different codes. Both characters are inclined to think that they understand the other person simply because they speak in a language both understand; however, in this case "language is not the barrier, but the barrier [manifests] itself in language" (Myers and P 311). This is another good example of how social norms affect communication and general use of language. Words on their own have no meaning; their meaning is constructed by the social context they are used in.

Because meaning in language is constructed it is also possible to alter it. For Genly and Estraven, their barrier of communication is ultimately lowered as they gradually learn to accommodate each other. While observing Genly in Orgoreyn Estraven takes notice of how his speech has become simpler and subtler (*Left Hand* 127), which suggests that Genly has started to internalize shifgrethor to aid his cause. After Genly is rescued from the Pulefen Voluntary Farm, Estraven is able to put shifgrethor aside and give direct orders, advice, and admit fault (Myers and P 311-2). Myers points to how Genly rephrases his questions during their escape by not forcing Estraven to give advice directly. After witnessing his companion in kemmer as female, Genly is also able to accept a "female speech behavior" for himself through admitting fear (313-4). Genly's codes of communication are part of his culture's ideas about gender identity, and because Estraven does not share these but has different codes they are bound to misunderstand each other.

It is important to emphasise that it is not Genly alone, as representative of a human masculine perspective, who is at a loss when dealing with the Gethenians. The female Terran scientist, Oppong, becomes equally frustrated when she tries to relate to these herma-phrodites. In fact, the Gethenians are equally disturbed by the alien visitor who is in permanent kemmer (*Left Hand* 29-30). This underlines a constructivist understanding of gender identity: gender norms and expectations related to gender are relative to point of view. If gender identity is a social construct, it is further implied that gender identities are subject to change which Genly ultimately proves to be true. As shown above, by the end of the novel Genly has grown so accustomed to the Gethenians that meeting his own people is exhausting; his former masculine role is now alien.

Despite Genly's development, critics Sarah Lefanu, Jewell Parker Rhodes, fellow SF author Joanna Russ, and others (Cornell 317-8; Marcellino 208; Pennington n.p.) have emphasised the general masculine preference as problematic because this serves to reinforce patriarchal discourse rather than challenging it. An earlier attempt at challenging patriarchy is Charlotte P. Gilman's *Herland* (1915) which is comparable to *Left Hand* in the sense that there are male protagonists entering a world with unconventional gender roles. However, *Herland*'s world is a "separatist" utopia where women alone have thrived removed from male influence. The three men respond in different ways to this culture, and only those willing to adopt female norms have a place in this world (Marcellino 203). Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) was meant as a response to *Left Hand* and in this novel Russ reverses dominant male power by introducing dominant female power; instead of a masculine preference there is a feminine one. William Marcellino terms this approach "countercolonial" because the novel is concerned with reversing power rules through raping, conquering, and enslaving men (Jones xi-xii; Marcellino 203-4). Even if flipping the coin of dominance is an interesting way to explore gender identities, Marcellino argues that Le Guin's approach represents a different alternative. The novel avoids the kind of feminist approach which might replicate that of the male oppressors (204). Even if the novel reads as masculine due to linguistic choices the Gethenians are still bisexuals.

John Pennington points to SF as an oxymoronic genre: "SF plays the game of the impossible but by necessity uses common language and largely conventional narrative structures to describe an alien fictional world that the reader can participate in" (n.p.). By necessity, Le Guin is required to use familiar and conventional language terms to construct her alien world and convey meaning to the reader. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that *Left Hand*'s 1969 audience consisted almost exclusively of adolescent males[5]. These readers were likely to identify more closely with Genly and his re-mapping of gendered assumptions in comparison to a female or Gethenian narrator. Through identification with Genly, the reader is inclined to undergo the same persuasions about the nature of gender identity in society and consider the gender binary's artificial construction (Marcellino 204-7). Genly narrates his journey through retrospection, but does not censor his own misguided ideas and misunderstandings when dealing with Estraven or the Gethenians in general. He needs the reader to go through the same experiences as he did himself in order to achieve growth. In this

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[5] Regarding Le Guin's impact on the SF market in this period, Marcellino refers to Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005).

context the novel may be considered as a kind of *Bildungsroman* as the reader follows and takes part in Genly's process of growth (Bickman 42).

Le Guin's original thought experiment was to eliminate "gender, to find out what was left" ("Redux" 10). Then why do many readers find gender in the novel? Pennington believes this is because male and female readers cannot escape their own gendered perspectives. The novel demands "a double exorcism: [it] asks that both male and female readers become resisting readers, who must identify against the gendered selves and critique those stereotypes" (n.p.). As seen above, both Genly and Oppong are equally unsuccessful in understanding the Gethenians' nature. Pennington refers to literary theories[6] which argue that men and women will read a text differently based on their sex, and because *Left Hand* "resides in a no-(wo)man's-land-it [sic] is a simultaneously androcentric and feminist text" (n.p.). As writers and readers, we are only able to interact with worlds through text, but never fully capture nor create those worlds. The male/female opposition is built into our language and consequently into our thought, and in this manner language traps us (Pennington n.p.). In support of this notion, Cornell turns Lefanu's critique of there being no women on Gethen upside down and claims that "the problem is that there is only one man on the planet" (318). Genly is the only human on the planet and he presents his experiences using the language he is familiar with. He assigns gender to the people around him and connects their personalities to masculinity or femininity based on his subjective point of view. Cornell believes that changing the masculine pronouns and nouns would not be useful because this would undermine Genly's tendency to 'masculinise' the world around him which greatly affects the reading experience (318-25).

Putting an experimental language system into Genly's mouth would undoubtedly undermine the experience of identifying with him and his change of character. However, the Gethenians could have gained a significant dimension of bisexual identity if Estraven were allowed to use some of their language expressions. The reader is introduced to various Gethenian words related to the weather (*Left Hand* 137, 55, 71) because traditional English has a much poorer vocabulary in that area. Gender, on the other hand, is disappointingly left on its own. Due to Genly's dominant narrative voice the reader is inclined to experience the text as masculine. They will become aware of some associations with gender dualism within

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[6] Patrocinio Schweickart's "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1994) and Robert Scholes' *Textual Power* (1985, p. 112-5).

language but are not offered any linguistic alternatives to their consolidation[7]. In "Coming of Age" we are introduced to a range of Gethenian vocabulary such as "sib", "hearthsib", "mothersib", "wombchild", "getter", "clitopenis", and "halfdead" ("Coming of Age in Karhide" 2-4, 6, 8, 17) in addition to a more careful use of pronouns. These innovative language expressions give a stronger sense of interacting with an alien environment: "they took our young *king* offworld [...] and then brought the same *king* back sixty years later to end *her wombchild's* disastrous reign" (2, emphasis added). This time the king is not only briefly pregnant; she has given birth[8].

It has been argued that SF literature has the capacity to play with language in a manner that allows it to explore issues in ways "mundane" fiction is unable to. In terms of gender identity, *Left Hand* does not prioritise exploiting this language capacity. Estraven could potentially have contributed with terms and expressions similar to those Sov uses in the short story. Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket* proves to be more conscious of these possibilities. When facing similar issues regarding gendered personal pronouns, Delany chooses to redefine the meaning of 'she' and 'he' entirely. Instead of referring to biological sex they signify sexual desire. Because of this, these terms become dynamic and may suddenly change mid-sentence because the character gains or loses sexual interest. This deliberate manipulation of meaning sends a clearer signal regarding the position of gender categories in language to the reader, who is left to be confused and even frustrated because their need to assign gender identities, in the same way that Genly Ai does, is not accommodated.

2.2 Frigid bisexuality

Mona Fayad argues that androgyny provides an alternative to the traditional binary gender opposition: it "functions as a third term that neutralizes the gendered way in which the subject is constructed [...] [and creates] a space of resistance that redefines the ways in which gender identity is constructed" (n.p.). The Gethenians' bisexual nature counters the heterosexual/homosexual binary of sexual orientation and allows for the exploration of other dynamic relationship models that do not rely on gender to the same extent (Latham 555)[9]. However, this unification of sexes into one individual suffers from its linguistic indeterminacy as the previous section has shown. Critics and authors associate different

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[7] Oppong speculates about the possibility of change in the gendered binary pattern of thought (*Left Hand* 76). Certain cultural aspects, such as their code of communication, are utilised to show difference but in terms of language there is much left unsaid.
[8] "The king was pregnant" (80) is probably the novel's most famous line.
[9] Latham refers to Kate Bornstein's work: *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (1995).

meanings with the term "androgyne". Interpretations range from pure biological hermaphroditism to spiritual bisexuality or a combination of these, while others reject the usefulness behind the idea of androgyny entirely. Cixous contends that the androgyne's function has the potential to fulfill "other bisexuality": which involves true unification in the sense that neither gender identity is excluded and differences are explored rather than annulled (Fayad n.p.). Alexis Lothian considers Le Guin's political feminist development by examining works from different decades, and she points to the depiction of the Gethenians in "Coming of Age" as "almost utopian" (n.p.). Even if the Gethenians' bisexual nature remained quite anonymous in *Left Hand*, scenes from "Coming of Age" show them to be representatives of "other bisexuality". The differences between these two works exemplifies how the mere "inclusion of gay and lesbian characters or issues does not make a text queer", but rather, that a text should work towards re-writing "the assumptions within the show of the naturalness, endurance, and fixity of our current understandings of sexuality" (Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies" 2). The Gethenians also introduce a slightly more flexible family pattern which is not concerned with an authoritative father figure as head of the house.

The absence of sex in the *Left Hand*, particularly Genly's and Estraven's rejection of a sexual relationship, evoked responses from critics who accused Le Guin of being homophobic. Again, we return to the issue of the reader being unable to resist a gendered reading by thinking of Estraven as a man (Pearson, "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexualty/ies and the Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*" 193; Pennington n.p.). Wendy Pearson points out that if Le Guin had chosen to include a sex scene it is unlikely that it would have done any good due to the fact of Genly's masculine language preference: "there is no way in which Genly, still locked in his assumptions about binary gender, can imagine such a thing without reifying the performance of gender by the temporarily sexed bodies of the participants" ("Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*" 195). In light of this, a sex scene between Estraven and Genly would most likely work towards reinforcing gender oppositions rather than exploring or breaking them apart. The representation of alien sex scenes will never be truly alien because the imagination and language of both writer and reader are always deeply informed by a human model, whether this is a non-heteronormative model or not (Rogan 455). Even if certain hermaphroditic species like starfish, jellyfish, or snails reproduce in entirely different (or even alien) ways, we cannot psychologically relate to this as 'sex'. The alien species of *Stars in My Pocket*, evelmi, are reptiles with scales, claws, and multiple tongues and even their sexual encounters with humans follow a human model (*Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* 226-8). The descriptions concerning evelm-human sexual

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interaction never reach a point of alienation where the reader cannot imaginatively replace the evelm with an ordinary human being. This underlines the fact that the evelmi and Gethenians serve to represent or encode human Other rather than something actually alien.

Based on their depiction in *Left Hand* alone, the Gethenians would more appropriately be referred to as "bigendered" rather than as "bisexuals" because there is nothing to suggest that they have any widespread bisexual culture. Le Guin made another attempt at depicting a bisexual character, Shevek in *The Dispossessed* (1976), who has love affairs with both men and women. However, Delany[10] points to the lack of a sense of psychological texture to the experience of these relationships (Latham 556-60). This is radically changed in "Coming of Age", as Sov's visit to the kemmerhouse displays a greater range of a hermaphroditic sexuality. The 14-year-old Sov is brought into kemmer by their own getter, biological 'father', as their hormonal states cause them to become sexually aroused by each other. The taboo of incest remains in Gethenian culture, so Sov is released once transformed into a female and subsequently spends her time with both females and males: engaging in homosexual and heterosexual activities ("Coming of Age" 18-22). As Sov's cousin Sether comes into kemmer the two over the years make "love in every combination" (22). The Gethenians have no hetero- or homosexual preference because they are beings of "other bisexuality": neither man nor woman but both at the same time. "Coming of Age" purpose-fully avoids the issues of language and heterosexual preference from *Left Hand*. As Lothian writes, in this short story "neither the figure of Genly Ai nor the impossibility of nonsexist language stand in the way of the powerful trope of an androgynous humanity" (n.p.).

Even if "Coming of Age" successfully integrates a genderqueer perspective, the reader's gendered perception is likely to make them inappropriately identify Gethenian characters as either male or female. Just like Estraven in *Left Hand* is considered male, Sov and Sether in "Coming of Age" read as female and male respectively. Because Sov enters kemmer as a female and has sex from a female point of view, the reader is inclined to think of Sov as primarily feminine. Sov names four male Gethenians they sexually interact with, one of which they explicitly state reminded them of Sether, and refer to one, possibly unnamed, female Gethenian they have sex with along with one or two Gethenians of unknown gender. The female moves on to having sex with a Gethenian male right after Sov. Finally, because there is a suggestion of Sov and Sether pursuing a close, romantic relationship over the years, a heteronormative perception constructs Sether as male by default. Ironically, while sexual

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[10] Latham refers to the 1978 edition of *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, p. 234-5 of the essay "To Read the Dispossessed".

behaviour and relationships in "Coming of Age" work towards destabilising heterosexuality's dominant position, the very sex acts themselves, due to the dominant presence of heterosexual activity in this particular kemmerhouse visit, trigger the reader's imagination to assign traditional gender identities to these characters. In theory, the Gethenians read as true representatives of "other bisexuality" as they are inclusive and dynamic in relation to a multitude of gender positions. In practice, language expressions and sex acts in *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age" serve to undermine the Gethenians' bisexual position because they fuel the reader's gendered perspective.

Besides sexual culture, "Coming of Age" provides further insight about the Gethenian family structure. Sov's hearth, equivalent to house or family, with its numerous children is taken care of by mothers and grandmothers. The Thades do not "vow kemmer", which means that they do not make an arrangement which binds them to one partner permanently. If we choose to project conventional family gender roles on to the Thades, this means that the father figures are completely removed from their family situation and their household is a type of matriarchy where the mothers and grandmothers discipline and raise the young ("Coming of Age" 4, 8-9). Even in hearths that do vow kemmer there would not be a father and a mother in the conventional sense simply because both parents have the potential to fulfill both roles. The Gethenians present a flexible alternative to the nuclear family ideal. There is still a power hierarchy in terms of generation where adults project their values on to the young but the issue of gender is taken out of the equation. Marq's stream in *Stars in My Pocket* takes this flexibility to another level by almost abandoning the concept of "family" entirely. The members of his stream, who are both evelmi and humans, are not related through egg-and-sperm; they are either created by manipulating DNA and using cloning technology or simply adopted. Their family is a social community based on an informal sense of belonging which subverts all the nuclear family's concepts of hierarchies between generation and gender.

Le Guin set up a feminist "thought-experiment experiment to encourage the reader to think about how gender works in the world and how its workings might be changed" (Pearson, "Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*" 196). Reader, critic, and writer have all been shown to be unable to escape their gendered perceptions. The Gethenians in *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age" are meant to question the gender binary by offering a transgender position; however, readers and critics insist on identifying Gethenian characters as either male or female. Writer and reader need to use a common language in order to communicate, and when a hierarchy of values connected to gender and sexuality is part of this common language it becomes complicated. Le Guin admits to have been unconsciously influenced by the

heteronormative position when writing *Left Hand*. The following chapter will show how even Delany, despite his evident agenda in terms of subverting the binary gender opposition, might have slipped while using his alternative language system. *Left Hand* proves that the presence of transgendered characters alone is not sufficient to destabilise the reader's perception of gender identity. In "Coming of Age", the use of Gethenian language expressions and the introduction to their bisexual culture inside the kemmerhouses prove to be vital in order to be able to think of them as representatives of "other bisexuality".

2.3 Summary

Genly Ai's perspective greatly affects the reader's perception of the Gethenians as he categorises their behaviour and personalities as masculine or feminine. As a result, the reader is allowed to maintain their gendered perspective. It becomes easy to forget the fact that the Gethenians are neither men nor women, but both at the same time. By the end of the novel, when the Ekumen disembark and Genly feels alienated from his own colleagues, it is clear that Genly no longer identifies with his original masculine identity. In this manner, gender identity is shown to be a social construct. Furthermore, the (mis)communication between Estraven and Genly shows how meaning in language is socially contingent. Estraven and Genly are both inclined to think the other person understands simply because they use a language both are familiar with, but because they are part of separate cultures they gravely misunderstand each other. In terms of language, *Left Hand* proves how a masculine preference controls the reader's perception of these hermaphrodites. Combined with the absence of sex in the novel, the reader is unable to think of the Gethenians as anything else but male. The potential of language and the Gethenians' bisexual nature are briefly displayed in "Coming of Age". In this short story, the reader is more directly invited to question issues related to the use of gendered personal pronouns, in addition to exploring the Gethenian family structure and sexual culture. Throughout the course of "Coming of Age", the Gethenians evolve from cold and colourless 'men' into vibrant androgynes and true representatives of "other bisexuality".

Chapter 3: *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*

Samuel Delany argues that science fiction literature has a greater language capacity compared to "mundane" fiction. According to him, the sense of wonder in SF is closer to the vision of poetry in terms of expression, which means that SF requires reading conventions separate from those applied to mundane works (*Starboard Wine* 68-9; *Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 10-3). In *Stars in My Pocket*'s fictional language Arachnia, the semantic meaning of certain key gendered terms such as the personal pronouns and 'woman' is changed in a manner which makes the reader struggle with their own inner process of applying gender identities to characters. Using gender categories is something the reader is compelled to do, just like Genly Ai in *Left Hand*, in order to make sense of situations and the interaction between characters. The interruption of this labelling process encourages the reader to question their gendered perspective.

The novel refers to several cultures and worlds which have different expressions and social norms related to gender, family structure, and sexuality. Some cultures are patriarchal in the sense that they value the nuclear family structure and stigmatize certain sexual behaviours. These are in contrast with Morgre's social structures known as "streams", family structures based solely on love or emotional bonds, and "runs", designated areas where humans and aliens participate in all kinds of sexual activities of preference. As Delany puts these contrasting cultures side by side the reader is invited to question the presumed naturalness of the heteronormative gender identities and how these are influenced by a hierarchy of power within social relations and language. Compared to *Left Hand*, *Stars in My Pocket's* approach to gender or feminism is distinctly more constructivist because the novel concerns itself directly with the manner which language and sexualities influence a reader's heteronormative perception.

The universe of the novel is dominated by two separate factions, the Family and the Sygn, which each promote a different set of values. The Family wants to establish social conditions similar to those on Earth in order to achieve what they consider to be cultural stability (*Stars in My Pocket* 80, 330-1). The Family, which the Thants and the Rhyonon culture are supporters of (203, 315), is associated with conservatism: it works towards maintaining the nuclear family structure which in turn makes it favour heterosexuality and patriarchal gender roles. As a system, it "leans toward stasis, the end of dynamic possibility, [and] ultimately death" (Bray n.p.) because it wants to maintain social structures that are meant to evolve into something different. In contrast, the Sygn believes cultural stability will

establish itself if individuals are encouraged to interact, acknowledge, and respect their differences (*Stars in My Pocket* 80). The Sygn system is "inclusive, dynamic, [...] and life sustaining" (Bray n.p.). The meaning of a 'sign' is always constructed and contingent to change. From this perspective, cultural stability cannot be understood as stasis but has to rely on change, even if the term "stability" suggests otherwise. The Family only supports one particular way of life while the Sygn supports all lifestyles, including the Family's. This shows how the Family is concerned with maintaining a oppositional gender binary while the Sygn advocates a multitude of gender positions.

The difference between the Family and Sygn mindsets becomes clear when they are confronted by Otherness. Marq Dyeth, who is raised on a Sygn world, and the Thants are all space travellers who encounter strange cultures and people on a regular basis (*Stars in My Pocket* 106-14, 203). Marq has the dominant narrative perspective in the novel, and as an Industrial Diplomat (ID) he interacts with foreign cultures on a professional level. He is conscious of how his off-world experiences have made him develop greater acceptance of the unknown; he even describes how his own sexuality has become more liberal (97, 198, 329, 37). The Thants, on the other hand, are less interested in learning to know and interact with alien cultures. They know Velm customs well enough to hijack the formal dinner party by exploiting conflicting formalities connected to social behaviour in this setting (115, 286-94). Their motive for doing this is their negative feelings towards the evelm species, who socially bond and have sex with humans, and towards the polyamorous lifestyle on Velm:

> Not only the males with the females, but the males do it with the males, the females do it with females, within the race, across the races – and what are we to make of neuters – as if they had not even reached the elementary stage of culture, however ignorant, where a family takes it appropriate course. (302)

The Thants experience transgendered sexual activities as a threat to their appropriate family life. In contrast to the Dyeth stream, which is a family structure based entirely on love and not biological relations, the Thants are a family in the more traditional sense. Thant children are born from a womb and have one set of parents where the father, Thadeus, is the family's main authority (*Stars in My Pocket Like* 188-9). This is a nuclear family structure which relies on a fertile heterosexual relationship.

Because they are infertile, interspecies and non-heterosexual relationships contradict a nuclear family structure. There is no obvious father or mother figure because there are no children. Reproduction and gender identity as central parts of a romantic relation are either

removed or altered in the equation. To the Thants, the evelm neuter is an underdeveloped life form, comparable to something like bacteria, because it does not assume any established gender category. To them, the nuclear family structure with its hierarchy of power between males, females, and generations is the only civilized order of life. At the same time, even if the Thants generally follow the direction of Thadeus they have internal conflicts. Most notably there is Nea Thant who wants to warn the Dyeths about her family's plan to become the world Nepiy's Focus Family (*Stars in My Pocket* 179-90). Despite his position as ID, Marq does not seem to comprehend the Thants' motives for ruining the dinner party, which shows how removed the philosophies of the Sygn and the Family are from each other. For once it is Rat who becomes the expert because he recognises the social stigma produced by the Family's philosophy on his former world Rhyonon (203, 311-2).

Overall, *Stars in My Pocket* reads as highly conscious of how culture and individual identity function as social constructs that are subject to change. The differences and conflicts between the cultures remind the reader that meaning in language and expressions is relative. Marq actively contemplates how "words, the Web, woman, world – all of these have their nebulous position in a cloud of shifting meanings" (339). As an ID, he recognises more than most people the interdependency within the familiar/alien dichotomy (*Stars in My Pocket* 120-1, 29, 84). Even if they appear to be oppositional terms, they are in fact defined through the existence of the other term. In reality, the "alien is always constructed out of the familiar" (133). Meaning is contingent on point of view; because we construct meaning by using what we are familiar with as a point of reference, concepts which are in fact completely alien to us are incomprehensible. This is probably why Delany chooses to subvert the binary gender opposition by manipulating the semantic meaning of terms the reader already knows and uses a narrative perspective that offers a genderqueer position (homosexual) that at the same time is accessible for the reader to relate to (human male). As a human male Genly Ai provides a point of view that is easily accessible to the reader, but he does not offer a genderqueer position and this results in an overwhelming weight of masculinity. Sov's perspective eases down the masculine tone, but because they are a hermaphrodite the reader is unable to fully connect with Sov's point of view and is thus prone to inappropriately label the Gethenians as either male or female. Marq, as a human male raised within an alien culture, functions as a hybrid (cyborg) point of view: he engages with the possibilities to transgress social boundaries from a human perspective.

3.1 The Meaning of Day

From the beginning of *Stars in My Pocket*, Rat is seriously deprived of language and the main reason he wants to become a RAT[1] is because he thinks the process will help him to master language (4). Ironically, from the moment he states 'yes' to give consent, he becomes fully enslaved to language because RATs are unable to do anything, not even ask for food, but what they have been commanded to do (5-9). The acronym itself creates associations with the rodent, emphasising how these individuals are not considered human. In all civilized societies, those who master language are more likely to take care of their own interests and assume control of their own life and possibly the lives of others. In Rat's case, it is his father who is responsible for his deprivation of language. Rat was rejected and scolded whenever he asked or failed to answer questions (29-31). In Rat's experience, fathers are hoarders of knowledge: "'I think,' he said, 'in this world it is very important not to have a father if you want ... to know anything.'" (32). By using the glove to access General Information[2] (GI) Rat is able to read, and the experience of finally understanding language is ecstatic to Rat. It is more interesting to him than sex, suggesting that the potential of power in language exceeds sexual power (*Stars in My Pocket* 34, 40-56, 248). Sexuality is a significant element of a person's gender identity. As gender identity is understood as a social construct, defined and maintained by language, it becomes clear that the power of language does indeed surpass sexual power. Even if Rat seems to barely understand anything, he knows that mastering language is important for his independence and general life experiences.

In terms of arguments concerning SF's extended language potential, Delany practices what he preaches in *Stars in My Pocket* (*Starboard Wine* 68-9). Firstly, there are constant disruptions in the text in the form of parentheses, incomplete sentences, digressions, and gaps, among other things. Secondly, Delany redefines the semantic meaning of certain gendered terms and the personal pronouns. The following is an example for the first point. It includes evelm speech which is characterised by this species having several tongues, and the evelmi may articulate different things simultaneously because of this:

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[1] Individuals on Rhyonon who have gone through Radical Anxiety Termination or synapse-jamming in their brains. The treatment is typically used on criminal or disturbed individuals (150-4).
[2] Comparable to the Internet, a user may mentally make search inquiries to get encyclopaedia or dictionary entries.

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> One of my earliest memories –
>   But I must interrupt to ask: does the above disorientation [...]
> "The sunlight falling, oh, my goodness!
> You're not
>   { a shell, oh never! You're not my goodness either!
>   { "A house? Never will you taste like
> {Ha! Ha! ... That's called laughter, and this is sun, and this is sand..."
> {a shell or good either!"
> (How many dozen evelm playwrights have used the speech of the nursery to
> lend poetry, poignance, and whimsy to politics and passion?) Crawl a little. Sniff a
> claw (or a hand); sit back and laugh. Listen. Look. Crawl. (74)

These disruptions halt the flow in the reader's accustomed reading processes. They prove how language, in a playful manner, may be used to express meaning in unexpected ways. On its own, this passage is largely incomprehensible and is a textbook example of the fact that certain sentences or expressions in SF literature can never work in mundane fiction. Given its SF setting, with the multi-tongued and clawed evelmi who are raised side by side with humans on Velm, the passage conveys an image of infant evelmi and humans in a nursery.

As a literary device, the use of interruptions and irregularities in order to subvert the existing structures and hierarchy in language is a strategy quite similar to Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*. By taking the position she termed "other bisexuality", Cixous argued that writers should attempt to subvert the idea of masculine and feminine writing as connected to either male or female authors, and instead focus on creating a multitude of gender expressions in language. By assuming this experimental mode of writing, Delany displays a conscious wish to confront traditional language use. In "Coming of Age", Ursula Le Guin breathes life into the Gethenians as biological and (bi)sexual hermaphrodites by introducing new words and expressions. Experimenting with language is an important part of exploring the possibilities of destabilising a binary gender identity. Deidre Byrne connects Julia Kristeva's theories about the pre-linguistic semiotic state and the symbolic order, which constructs the individual's gender identity, to Delany's style of experimenting with language in *Stars in My Pocket*. She states that this novel "gestures provisionally towards a future where the mechanisms that generate and regulate desire and gender could be, if not transcended, shown to be contingent and, therefore, subject to re-visioning" (162). The idea is to reveal the presence of binary oppositions within language and their relation to gender identity.

By redefining the semantic meaning of certain terms Delany brings the reader's attention to how language controls their thoughts and associations during the reading process. Furthermore, by allowing the personal pronouns 'she' and 'he' denote sexual desire rather

than biological sex he also shows how arbitrary the language system can be. In traditional English, personal pronouns assign a biological gender to a person; they represent a linguistic link between personal identity and a defined gender role. In Arachnia, the language spoken by Marq and on Velm, 'she' is the default pronoun for all sentient beings and carries no semantic meaning connected to gender at all. The same applies to the term 'woman', or 'mother' if the individual is a parent. This means there are male, female, neuter, or other categories of 'women' (*Stars in My Pocket* 62-5, 70, 175-6). 'He' does not refer to any specific gender either, but is the sexual object of 'she'(73). This means that an individual only uses 'he' to refer to someone whom she (or he, in biological terms) desires. Even if this system reads as strange, once you get used to it this alternative it makes perfect sense, especially in a transgendered setting. This system could have been applied perfectly to *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age", and it would have changed the whole discussion about the awkward use of personal pronouns. While Le Guin demonstrates the limitations of the personal pronouns, Delany offers a solution to these. Byrne emphasises the importance of Delany's choice of turning the tables rather than attempting to invent original pronouns:

> the choice of pronoun is not arbitrary, as some linguists would have it, but articulates an agenda that is concerned with meaning and power. By resituating the unit of language that is most often cited as a site of sexism – the pronoun – Delany makes explicit the power-relations between gender-positions. (166)

This begs the question whether a binary gender separation is necessary or practical in a modern culture. Modern grammar books advise against the usage of the generic pronoun 'he' because of its sexist nature. Instead, 'they' poses as a generic genderless option (Curzan 58-60). By using 'she' instead of 'they', the Arachnian system becomes more aggressive about making the reader face their own associations between language and gender. Even if we decided to change the pronouns we would still maintain the categories of male and female, which when required could be used to describe an individual along with other categories such as ethnicity or personality. The third personal pronoun illustrates both how arbitrary language as a system can be and how deep the human binary gender categories reach into our culture. This underlines how easily we think of the masculine/feminine difference as our prime point of reference in terms of gender identity. In contrast, the Arachnian pronouns are dynamic and personal, in the sense that feelings of desire continuously change and are different between persons (Delany, *Stars in My Pocket* 71-72). These pronouns are in agreement with Cixous' concept of "other bisexuality", as no sex is excluded and they are subject to change over time.

By using 'she' and 'he', which the reader associates with the feminine and masculine genders, and stripping them of gender semantics, Delany effectively frustrates his reader. Rat, who is accustomed to the old language, describes taking away the distinction between male and female as a kind of "persecution" (200) which has to be understood as a persecution of binary gender categories. At each encounter with a new character referred to as 'she' or 'he', information about the individual's gender, which the reader is accustomed to learn immediately, is often withheld or never revealed. This results in detective work where all other aspects, such as behaviour, relationship to other characters, or name, must be analysed in order to form an idea about the character's gender identity. As the reader goes through that process a couple of times, it becomes obvious how many different traits we associate with gender identity. One of the most intriguing examples is Japril, who is a major character in the novel but whose gender is never revealed. Interestingly, Byrne acknowledges that Japril's gender is never confirmed, but still chooses to make them a representative of the feminine who is silenced by Marq's masculine discourse in the novel's epilogue (169). Besides the fact that Japril could be male or something entirely different, they dominate Marq through their own soliloquy during three monologues earlier in the novel (*Stars in My Pocket* 143-70).

Making assumptions about an individual's gender identity proves tempting and dangerously easy. This displays the exact same tendency of making false assumptions as some of the critics reading *Left Hand*. Because they were trapped by their gendered perception, they were unable to see the Gethenians as anything else but male. This is not a question of being a good or bad reader; it is evidence of the hidden force of a gendered perception which we are all subjects to. There are traces in *Stars in My Pocket* which suggest that even Delany, despite his good efforts at subverting gender identity within language, is subject to making similar mistakes. While the Arachnian language uses the generic pattern of "she", "woman", "mother", and "sister", there is no generic "daughter". Instead, Marq uses the term "son" alongside "child" or "children" (119-20). It is possible Marq applies the term "son" in that particular conversational setting to accommodate the Thants' understanding of a family structure; however, there are no such circumstances that explain the later slip of the term "guy" where it should have said "woman" (230). If Delany wanted to plan a deliberate slip in order to bring attention to how such a shift between gendered terms affects the reading experience, it certainly seems like a good spot to put it. In the latter half of the novel the reader has grown accustomed to the use of generic woman, which means the slip is more likely to be noticed. Regardless, *Stars in My Pocket* has inconsistencies which contribute to showing how readers, and possibly writers, are affected by their gendered perspectives.

The position of the nuclear family, as represented by the Thants and the world of Rhyonon through their allegiance to the Family (22, 188-9), is challenged by the stream. A common denominator between Zetzor and Rhyonon family structures is the presence of a power hierarchy. These cultures' families have "a structure of strong powers, mediating powers, and subordinate powers, as well as paths for power developments and power restrictions" (*Stars in My Pocket* 119). As mentioned above, Rat's father had a strong, negative influence on Rat during his childhood, and is most likely responsible for Rat's poor general knowledge and language skills. The Thants also follow an age-based hierarchy (294) where children are expected to obey their parents. Marq's stream does not have roles or a power hierarchy similar to that of the basic family unit. There is no direct egg-and-sperm relation between the ripples (generations) of parents and children in the Dyeth stream. These human and evelm individuals have come together through adoption or using cloning technology. Marq himself was adopted and names at least eight different 'mothers', which is a stark contrast to the dualistic concept of two parents: one mother and one father. The stream connection is based on love between its members. Rather than parents enclosing their children by protecting them from society, the stream philosophy is that the children function as a link between the parents and the community (116-20, 75-6, 89, 202-5). Similar to the redefinition of terms like 'woman' and 'she', the use of water-related terms to describe this alternative family structure seems deliberate. Instead of the hierarchical family tree, with static branches signifying an individual's position in the home, there is instead a fluid, dynamic stream which lives a life on its own.

3.2 Perfect Erotic Object

Delany robs the reader of easily accessible gender categories, but supplies them with something else instead. The Arachnian pronouns make sexuality an open, explicit subject of conversation. They also demonstrate how sexuality and gender categories may be two entirely different things. In the patriarchal tradition, 'she' was the male object of sexual desire. By using 'she' and 'woman' as the generic terms while 'he' is the sexual object, the hierarchy within the masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual oppositions are reversed: the opposite, subordinate term becomes the dominant one. Le Guin worked with dualisms in *Left Hand* to advocate interdependency between oppositions rather than assuming a "counter-colonial" position like Russ's *The Female Man,* which displayed a power reversal where women rape and enslave men. In comparison, Delany constructs a power reversal within language but this reversal does not imply any enslavement of either men or women. The

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reversal simply points to the existence of values and hierarchy within language; by playing around with gendered terms the reader comes face to face with their gendered perception as they try to process the information they are given, or not given, in *Stars in My Pocket*.

"Coming of Age" showed the Gethenians' sexual culture as bisexual, which contradicted the heterosexual vibe that was established in *Left Hand* due to the absence of anything else but heterosexual physical attraction. However, the question of an interspecies relationship, between a human and a Gethenian was still left out. The evelmi species in *Stars in My Pocket* also deviate from the human norm in terms of biological sex; they have a neuter, third gender, as a product of their evolution. All three biological evelm genders are capable of childbirth, though male births are uncommon (*Stars in My Pocket* 216, 27-8, 44). The burden of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing is a key argument within the patriarchal tradition to limit women to the domestic sphere. The idea is that women are designed for this purpose. From a theoretical feminist perspective, this idea of biological difference conditioning gender identity is central to the essentialist perspective. When reading about an alien species like the evelmi in a SF work, the reader always relies on their own experiences and human point of view to construct a sense of understanding. Because of this, it follows that the evelm potential to diversify childbearing roles will provoke the reader to question, in essentialist terms, the traditional human norms connected to rearing children. After all, today's medical technology used to facilitate the conceiving process would have seemed quite alien to people 50 years ago[3]. The biological side to family life is clearly not static, which makes its social side, particularly the gender roles, even less so. The idea of replacing the old nuclear family unit with a flexible stream family structure with its cloned and adopted children certainly does not seem all too alien 30 years after *Stars in My Pocket*'s publication.

While Genly and Estraven chose not to establish any sexual relation, the evelm-human relationships on Velm are sexual as well as romantic. The Thants associate the evelmi with animals. To them, a human-evelm sexual relationship is equivalent to bestiality which is a disturbing taboo. The Thants' mistake of associating intelligent, but physically different, beings as animals is quite similar to the approach of nineteenth century scientists who attributed the average difference in skull sizes, among other things, to explain why civilized white men were more intelligent than the socially inferior women and the strange, savage human races in other areas of the world (Stepan 44-5). Given this context, a human-evelm-relationship would more fittingly be associated with an inter-racial or bi/homosexual

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[3] For example, the first successful test-tube baby was born in 1978 (Nesheim). As *Stars in My Pocket* was published in 1984 it was probably something people were curious about at the time.

relationship. These are relationship categories which have been, and might still be, victims of discrimination. In this manner, interspecies relationships in SF texts move a step beyond encoding gender identity alone in their representation. The most important point is that a SF interspecies relationship will always encode some type of human relationship, whether it is of mixed ethnicities and/or unmixed biological sexes. As previously explained, a sex scene between Genly and Estraven would most likely work towards reinforcing gender oppositions rather than exploring or breaking them apart. This is because writers and readers rely on common language and sexual experiences which are deeply informed by a human model. Despite descriptions of scenes involving sexual interaction between evelmi and humans (*Stars in My Pocket* 226-8) their details never reach a point of alienation where the reader cannot imaginatively replace the evelm with an ordinary human being. Rather than as another reminder of the limitations to a person's imagination, this should be seen as bringing validity to the use of the alien, or cyborg, in SF works to explore the transgression of boundaries related to gender identity. If an alien figure was capable of encoding a gender position completely removed from a human model, the reading experience would not include any valuable interrogation of gender identity from the reader's perspective.

Because Marq's and Rat's perspectives dominate the novel, the reader learns a lot about their sexualities compared to what the established norm is in their respective cultures. Both are homosexual males, and their individual preferences in terms of physical appearance at one point reveal them to be each other's "perfect erotic object" (166-8). The combination of evelm-human relationships and Marq's and Rat's sexual mappings establishes a clear decentralisation of heterosexuality and traditional heterosexual desire. As undermining heterosexual behaviour disrupts a binary gender opposition, GerShun Avilez believes the nature of desire and sexuality in *Stars in My Pocket* creates a "queer space". The queer space is meant to solidify and describe the nature of gay and lesbian communities:

> queer space is in large part the function of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified: a seduction of the reading space where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape. (126)[4]

By focusing on marginalised forms of desire, the text constructs this queer space. The space is meant to prove that there are several dimensions of desire outside the heteronormative one.

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[4] Qouted from Jean-Ulrik Désert's "Queer Space", from *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Residence* (1997). Eds. Gordon Bent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter. p. 17-26.

While Rhyonon legally persecutes homosexuals, among others (35-6, 198-9), Marq's home city Morgre conducts an inclusive gender or sexual politics (Rogan 449). By law, each neighbourhood is required to have at least three different "runs". These runs are areas where humans and evelmi gather to watch or participate in all types of sexual activities (*Stars in My Pocket* 224-8, 75-8). The combination of the Arachnian language system and the low level of sexual discrimination through governmental sanctions makes members of Morgre society liberal about their sexual desires. Even if there may be occasions where there are conflicts of interest, for example when a female follows Marq and Rat into a male-only run (277-8), the atmosphere on Velm comes off as considerably less hostile than the Thants' attitudes or the system of persecution on Rhyonon. Just like the kemmerhouse in "Coming of Age", the runs of Morgre undermine desire as purely heterosexual.

The combination of choosing the masculine alternative as the object of sexual desire with the persistent focus on male homosexuality, given Marq's and Rat's preferences, makes female sexuality disappointingly absent. As this masculine homosexual approach challenges the patriarchal objectification of the feminine and the marginalisation of homosexuality, there is no reason to accuse Delany of being intentionally deprecatory against female sexuality. A bisexual position[5] has the advantage of disrupting the male/female distinction entirely. The concept of homosexuality relies on a male and female separation to the same extent as a heterosexual position. Delany himself has stated that the reason he writes about homosexuality is simply because it has "been the site of most of [his] own sexual experience" (*Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction and Some Comics* 219). To him, male homosexual activities and relations are part of the natural order of things. Tim Dean argues that this is exactly the way Delany portrays homosexuality in writing[6]: not as an transgression intended to shock readers but showing male homosexual sex as a natural way of pursuing pleasure (75-6). Dean's observation seems to be accurate in Marq's and Velm's case. Even if Marq's encounters and the activity in the runs are primarily non-hetero-normative, they are never alienating or deliberately shocking, even in the cases where they include evelm participants. At the same time, Rat's perspective maintains the issue of social stigma related to certain sexual preferences in the situation where Marq is at a loss why the Thants are behaving rudely. If an individual truly does not have any sexual inhibitions, like Marq, it follows that they would not be able to relate to the idea of those either.

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[5] Rob Latham applauds Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) as, in his opinion, SF's first and only bisexual epic (558).
[6] Dean refers to *The Mad Man* (1994) and *Hogg* (1995) specifically.

The narrative perspective of Marq creates a queer space in the sense that the reader has to acknowledge a male homosexual, rather than a heteronormative, position as the norm in order to understand the events and learn more about the characters. In practice, if a character with unidentified biological sex, due to the Arachnian twist to the pronouns, is referred to by Marq as 'he', the reader immediately assumes this character to be male. Sov, as opposed to Genly, could potentially create a queer space characterised by a bisexual position. Unfortunately, the portrayal of Gethenian sexual culture in the kemmerhouse scenes reinforces the reader's gendered perspective in an unfavourable manner because the characters are temporarily occupying either a female or male sexual role. The frequency of heterosexual activity during the kemmerhouse visit supports the reader's heteronormative perception and makes the reader inclined to relate to the Gethenian characters as either male or female. After all, the reader relies on their own life experience as they try to relate to the Gethenians as cyborg figures. Because the reader (probably) has no personal experience of living as an hermaphrodite, they will cast characters into a male or female role as soon as they are given the opportunity to do so. Meaning that if a writer assigns a biological sex or gender identity to a character temporarily, or even just implicitly, this gender identity is likely to stick permanently. Le Guin's reason for focusing on heterosexual behaviour in the kemmerhouse might be the same as Delany's reason for focusing on male homosexual behaviour: heterosexuality could be the site of most of her own sexual experience[7].

Neither readers nor writers can imagine aliens or alien sex without relying on their personal point of reference. For writers pursuing the position of "other bisexuality", the goal is to take advantage of these pre-existing ideas and perceptions in a way which makes the reader aware of their existence and makes them question why this particular gendered perception controls their reading. Because gender is removed from the language in *Stars in My Pocket* in one sense, its absence makes the position of gender identity within language quite obvious. Arachnia undermines the centrality of making distinctions between male and female, which makes the reader recognise how habitual the process of assigning gender categories is. By establishing male homosexuality and interspecies relationships as the norm, the novel destabilises the heterosexual position and creates a different point of view: a queer space which the reader has to assume in order to make sense of the text. Certain characters,

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[7] Le Guin's husband is male and they have three children ("Ursula K. Le Guin: Biographical Sketch"). Of course, the existence of a heterosexual marriage and/or children does not determine the full nature of a person's sexual experiences. Even Delany has been married to a woman and has a daughter ("Samuel Ray Delany - Biography"). Delany shares several details about different sexual encounters in his autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1988).

like Japril and Alsrod Thant who are never confirmed as either sex nor who participate in any sexual activities, successfully remain indeterminate in terms of gender identity. While following these characters throughout *Stars in My Pocket*, the reader will from time to time feel inclined to categorise them as either male or female (as Deidre Byrne does with Japril), but ultimately the reader cannot justify it.

3.3 Summary

Stars in My Pocket shows the reader how the signification of words, expressions, and traditions is relative and shifting between cultures. In terms of gender identity, the hetero-normative perspective is represented by the Family while the members of the Sygn pursue a greater multitude of gender positions. Rhyonon culture and the Thants value the nuclear family structure which relies on a fertile heterosexual relationship. Non-heterosexual or interspecies relationships, which are embraced by the Sygn, are threatening to the Family because they undermine the rigid nuclear family structure. Marq's family structure, the stream, does not rely on biological egg-and-sperm relations or distinct mother, father, daughter, and son positions. This structure subverts a binary gender opposition because the positions of men and women in society are made fluid. Delany uses language in innovative ways, through assuming a style of writing that resembles *écriture féminine* and manipulating the semantic meaning of traditionally gendered terms, that prove how science fiction literature is closer to poetry than mundane fiction. The novel's fictional language, Arachnia, is the language of "other bisexuality": representing a dynamic and non-exclusive position towards gender identity. This linguistic focus on desire combined with Marq's and Rat's dominant narrative perspectives, create a queer space which establishes male homosexuality as the norm. Because of this space, the reader has to assume this point of view in order to make sense of the text. The manipulation of semantic meaning reminds the reader about the nature of their gendered perspective, which compels them to assign gender identities to characters even in cases where the sex is unconfirmed. Writer and reader rely on a common language and previous experiences to construct meaning, which is why alien sex is never truly alien but it encodes some kind of human relation. Through its innovative approach to language and establishment of a queer space, *Stars in My Pocket* shows that SF has the opportunity to re-invent and play with language in a way which goes so far as to establish an alternative set of reading conventions.

Conclusion

Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) stands as a pioneer feminist SF work in spite of negative responses from critics and from the writer herself. As a thought experiment, the hermaphroditic Gethenians proved to be a considerably more ambitious project than Le Guin anticipated. SF writers and readers depend on a common language and point of reference, even when they try to imagine something alien. This makes the narrative perspective of Genly Ai, the Terran Envoy, a quite natural choice. Through identification with Genly, the reader has a useful filter to gradually process the idea of an androgynous humanity and by the end of the novel Terran masculinity and femininity have become alien concepts to Genly. Does not this suggest that the reader is likely to also experience this change in relation to gender identity? Based on critical responses to the novel, the answer is no. The problem with this narrative choice is that the reader is permitted to lean back as Genly guides them through the world of Gethen and acts as their interpreter. He freely projects his masculine perspective on to these aliens, using masculine pronouns and gendered terms, regardless of how inappropriate he knows it is. Oppong's chapter suggests that a female Terran Envoy would most likely assume a similar role. The reader is allowed to maintain their gendered perception; they are not challenged by language expressions which disrupt the binary gender opposition. Christine Cornell suggests that the problem in *Left Hand* is that there is only one man, rather than no women, on the planet. I support her observation with a small modification: the problem is also that there is only one man editing the report about the planet.

Genly's presence on its own is not a problem. Even if characters like the Thants project their patriarchal point of view in *Stars in My Pocket* the reader follows them from Marq's perspective, which makes it natural to consider this position from an outside, or alien, perspective. Genly's warning on page one does little to prepare the reader, they are likely to become aware of gender dualism within language but are not challenged into ridding themselves of their gendered perception. In "Coming of Age in Karhide" (1995) Sov is allowed the liberty of narrating their own account, which leads to a natural incorporation of new language expressions. Instead of a trained foreign diplomat, the reader enjoys a guided tour led by a native alien. The invented language expressions give a stronger sense of interacting with an androgynous alien environment. Sov takes the reader where no one, certainly not Genly, has gone before: inside the kemmerhouse. The exclusion of sex between Estraven and Genly prevents further reinforcement of the heterosexual position through

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Genly's masculine perspective. However, an actual union on the Gobrin Ice could have realised Estraven's character as something closer to an androgyne compared to the position of 'curious deviant' which the reader remembers them as. Because Sov takes female form and engages in mainly heterosexual activities with male Gethenians, the reader is inclined to think of Sov as a primarily feminine character. In combination, the Gethenian language expressions and insight into their sexual culture contribute towards depicting the Gethenians as vibrant androgynes who are by default beings of "other bisexuality". However, the reader's gendered perception is not strongly subverted; Sov is depicted as distinctly feminine when they are supposed to be both masculine and feminine at the same time.

It is an interesting question whether Le Guin's new approaches related to language and sexuality in "Coming of Age" would have subverted the reader's gendered perception further if Sov or any Gethenian were to influence the perspective of an entire novel about Gethen: by visiting a kemmerhouse as both male and female and raising a family as neither 'mother' nor 'father'. Hermaphroditism and bisexuality are the categories which completely disregard all dualisms connected to traditional gender identity; these are the only positions which do not rely on the binary distinctions of male/female or heterosexuality/homosexuality. The Gethenians as cyborg figures aim to transgress the boundaries of a reader's understanding of binary gender identity and sexuality. This is why the Gethenians make such an incredibly intriguing object of study in terms of transgender experimentation. In theory they represent the holy grail of gender identity subversion; however, in practice they prove how ridiculously difficult it is to comprehend and relate to a lifestyle without the distinctions between male and female which the reader is imprinted by. The Gethenians may provoke the reader to reflect on how arbitrary and shifting the roles of men and women in society have been and are likely to continue to be in the future. The reader cannot put aside their binary gendered perspective entirely, but this should not be the point or goal of any novel either. SF writers encode humanity and the world as alien figures and cultures in order to make a reader question aspects of their present real life situations. The Gethenians prove the extent to which the reader's imagination is controlled by a gender dualism.

In *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), Samuel Delany does not pursue a bisexual or androgynous path but instead creates a "queer space", where a genderqueer position dominates the heterosexual norm, which exploits the reader's dualistic gendered perception. Marq Dyeth is a male, human interstellar diplomat like Genly; however, that seems to be where their similarities stop. Marq is raised in an alien culture on Velm alongside evelmi; his ideas about family, sexuality, and gender are different from a heteronormative

position. As a narrative perspective Marq is a hybrid, or cyborg, alternative: a mixture of Genly (human) and Sov (alien). The reader gets to rely on a human model but is still forced to adjust to Marq's language and culture. Arachnia manipulates the semantic meaning of terms to focus on desire rather than biological sex which results in two main effects. Firstly, while the reader is effectively frustrated by the withheld information regarding biological sex they are made to realise how essential and habitual their process of assigning gender categories is. When the information about a character's sex is withheld, the reader tries to analyse everything else about the character and, in particular, the character's relation to other characters. This is where the second effect kicks in: because the personal pronouns denote desire instead of sex the question of sexuality and sexual interest take precedence and contribute towards the establishment of a queer space. Because Marq is a homosexual male the reader has to accept this position as the norm in order to make sense of the text. From Marq's perspective, a 'she' could be either male, female, or something else but a 'he' is definitely male. The reader is still using their gendered perception but they have to apply gender categories in a way which is appropriate within the queer space of the text. In contrast to *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age", there are characters (notably Alsrod Thant and Japril) whose gender remains indeterminate throughout the entire novel. This displays a different example of "other bisexuality": Delany manages to be non-exclusive of gender identity to the point where the reader is left undecided. The Arachnian system could have been applied perfectly to *Left Hand* and "Coming of Age"; it would have changed the whole discussion about the awkward use of personal pronouns.

From a feminist point of view, *Stars in My Pocket* demonstrates a constructivist position in particular. Language constructs and maintains the binary gender opposition: we are only able to subvert the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual patterns by re-inventing language. *Left Hand* reads as mixed in its feminist agenda. Genly's character development reads as constructivist in the sense that his understanding of gender is shown to be socially contingent. On the other hand, the balancing of dualisms (Warm and Cold patterns), femininity and masculinity as distinctly different rather than socially constructed, points to an essentialist understanding of gender. In "Coming of Age", Le Guin appears to have assumed a more clear constructivist approach based on her focus on language express-ions and gendered terms. Le Guin's development towards a constructivist understanding of gender can also be traced in her 1976 and 1987 response essays. Keeping the timeframe between these different publications in mind, the writers' consciousness about the role of language and sexuality in connection to the construction and maintenance of gender identity

in the two latest works suggest how SF truly is in tune with contemporary issues and discussions in society. Of course, none of these works should be thought of as strictly constructivist or essentialist even if one of the positions reads as dominant. For example, *Stars in My Pocket* contains traces of an essentialist position that establish gender as biologically contingent. The evelmi with their unique biology, where all three sexes have the capacity of child-bearing, play an important part in the liberal Morgre society's attitude to gender roles and family structures.

The stream family structure and Morgre's runs do not rely on fertile heterosexual relationships or a social hierarchy between members in order to survive. These structures refute the idea of the nuclear family as the natural continuation of human existence. Those termed as third-wave feminists today have diverted from strictly theoretical positions because there is no universal way to live as a woman (or a man). Descriptions of different feminist lifestyles have replaced theory, and these descriptions prove to show how many diverse ways gender identity may be experienced and realised. The nuclear family is far from dead, a great number of people still religiously adhere to it. The most accessible example to prove this is to simply access any of the commercial blog databases or social media. Even if they do not consciously think of themselves as feminists, people share details and events from their everyday lives and often wish to project the ideals that are most important to them. Stay-at-home mums, fitness queens, career women, single fathers and numerous others – all of these are seeking confirmation for their lifestyles. The technological revolution, particularly the growth of the Internet, has made the division between private and public spheres less defined. In this context, Donna Haraway's idea that we are living as cyborg figures is quite sensible: we are re-inventing our 'selves' by transgressing the boundaries of social reality and fiction, through the textual representation of new gender identities, using technological innovations. These new technologies should be expected to affect our understanding of self and gender identity in profound ways. Facebook's list of gender choices proved to be far too limiting for their target users, which underlines the importance to many people of being able to self-identify in unique ways. This current explosion of projected lifestyles is in agreement with the Sygn's position: cultural stability will be established on its own if individuals are encouraged to interact, acknowledge, and respect their differences. The nuclear family, or any other family structure, is unlikely to contribute towards discriminatory binary oppositions within language unless it insists on assuming a dominant position by rejecting other lifestyles. This is where Le Guin's ideals of interdependency and balance come into the picture: being inclusive of transgendered lifestyles does not equal the end of the nuclear family; acceptance of

difference creates a balance which makes it possible for seemingly conflicting positions to co-exist peacefully. Even if the Family might become buried, the family will still live on.

By manipulating language in *Stars in My Pocket*, Delany shows in practice how SF can use language terms and expressions in ways that are unavailable to mundane fiction. Mundane fiction deals with social issues and questions at a direct level in the sense that there is no alien encoding. The SF setting, produced by alien encodings and encounters, offers an extended range of language expressions which equips SF as the ultimate form of speculative fiction; it allows SF writers to interact with contemporary issues in innovative ways that are inaccessible to other literary genres. The extent to which a novel relates to the real world is important in terms of reading conventions. A SF work must be asked real questions in contrast to fantasy works that do not have to answer to the reality of the reader at all. Even if I am still a relatively new reader to SF novels and short stories, the experiences I have made throughout this dissertation along with its results makes me inclined to agree with Delany: SF should be understood as a literary form separate from other mundane fiction genres. SF eludes a straightforward definition because it contains such a wide variety of potential settings, characters, themes, narrative structures, and language expressions. Like all types of literature, SF cannot move completely beyond a reader's comprehension of language or social existence; however, SF proves to have the capacity to redefine and play with language in a manner that alters the reader's interpretative space. As speculative literature, concerned with 'what if'-scenarios and the idea of change, SF as a form continues to change, because in order to explore difference the text itself has to evolve into something different.

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